

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Jean-Léon Gérôme
(Vesoul 1824 – 1904 Paris)

Study for Moorish Bath

Pencil on paper
32.3 x 20.3 cm (12 ¾ x 8 in.)

Provenance:

Suzanne and Aimé Morot, the daughter and son-in-law of the artist;

By descent to their son, Aimé-Léon Morot;

By whom sold, Sotheby's, Paris, 27 June 2002, lot 187;

From where acquired by the present owner.



This energetic pencil sketch is a preparatory study for *Moorish Bath* (fig. 1), now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The painting shows a seated nude bather on tiled steps, attended by a richly adorned Black servant carrying a brass basin, against the brilliant setting of an Islamic hammam.



Fig. 1, Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Moorish Bath*, 1870, oil on panel, 51 x 41 cm, MFA Boston

The drawing reveals Gérôme's process of working out the arrangement of figures before refining his composition on canvas. The seated nude occupies the same central position as in the finished painting, her body angled sideways on the bath steps. Around her, Gérôme experiments with the positioning of attendants, sketched in multiple overlapping outlines, suggesting his search for balance between the figures. The architectural setting is indicated only in broad strokes - the curved arches and framing recesses that would later become the distinctive Moorish backdrop.

What emerges is Gérôme's acute concern for gesture, proportion and spatial rhythm at the preliminary stage. The quick, nervous lines and pentimenti emphasise movement and possibility, in contrast to the polished finish of the final canvas. This dynamic working process reminds us that Gérôme, often remembered as the supreme arbiter of the academic tradition, relied on a foundation of exploratory drawing in which invention and adjustment were constantly at play.

In *Moorish Bath*, exhibited in 1870, Gérôme exploited the Orientalist theme of the harem and bathhouse, long popular in European art. Yet as well as sensuality, the finished painting stresses surface, pattern and contrast: the gleam of flesh against ceramic tiles, the bright fabrics draped on the ledge and the shimmering basin of water, not to mention the differing skin tones of the two attendants. The present study gives rare insight into how Gérôme built

such tableaux, beginning with swiftly sketched figures in flux, later anchored within a richly detailed architectural frame.