

# COLNAGHI



John Varley The Younger,  
*The Quran School*, 1882-1883



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JOHN VARLEY THE YOUNGER  
(1850 – 1933)

*THE QURAN SCHOOL*, 1882-1883

Signed and dated lower left: “JP Varley 1882-83”

Oil on canvas  
50.8 x 69.3 cm (20 x 27 1/4 in.)

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This charming and colourful observed depiction of young boys learning to recite the Quran was painted by John Varley the Younger (1850-1933), during his travels to Egypt in 1882. Inspired by the Middle East, like Ludwig Deutsch and the other great Orientalist painters of their time, Varley the Younger was compelled to accurately recreate paintings of *madrasa* (Quranic schools), landscapes, traditional customs and daily activities of the residents of the places he visited. The history of the Quranic school dates to the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE and is the religious guidance of the *Ummah* (the Muslim community) during the lifetime and after the passing of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). As Islam spread beyond Arabia into the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and parts of Europe, the need for a more centralised educational system was required. Mosques (*Masjid*) continued to provide an important role in the teachings of the Quran, however, the scope for learning expanded and by the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, the term *madrasa* had become closely associated with Islamic education. These institutions were established to offer structured learning in key Islamic disciplines such as jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalam*), Quranic interpretation (*tafsir*), and the study of the Hadith. Over time, the *madrasa* system spread widely, from Spain in the west to India in the east, becoming the foundation of Islamic educational culture. *Madrasas* were typically supported by charitable endowments (*waqf*), which helped ensure their long-term operation. Many of them also provided boarding for students and teachers, fostering an environment of focused learning.

Set at the entrance of a *madrasa*, one of the most distinct features of this painting is the inclusion of the *taqiyah* (white skullcaps) and *fez* (red headdresses – known as *tarboosh* in Arabic) which the boys are wearing. The *taqiyah* holds great significance within the history of Islam and was worn across the *Ummah*. The *fez* came into popularity in 1827 by the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II, who mandated the headdress to be worn by his new army, the *Askari-i Mansure-i Muhammediye*. The exact origin of the *fez* is mysterious and is believed to have come from ancient Tunisia and Morocco. Although, popularised during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II, after an Ottoman naval mission to the city of Fez in Morocco, the *fez* headdress was a part of Turkish culture since the 15<sup>th</sup> century and at the start of the Ottoman Empire. The scarlet and merlot dyes of the *fez* were initially achieved through the extraction of cornel; a type of shrub berry which could produce the rich tones utilised in the making of such headdresses.

John Varley the Younger (1850–1933) was the grandson of his namesake and the renowned artist, John Varley (1778–1842) and the son of Albert Fleetwood Varley (1804–1876), who was also a painter. Between 1870 and 1895, Varley the Younger exhibited landscapes and genre scenes at the Royal Academy, London and other notable galleries. In 1891–92, he traveled to India, but the artist is best remembered for his depictions of Egypt, which he visited in 1882. A substantial group of his landscape and topographical works are held in the permanent collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



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