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Thomas Seddon
The Marabout's Tomb, 1854

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THOMAS SEDDON

(London 1821 – 1856 Cairo)

THE MARABOUT'S TOMB

Signed and dated lower left: "T. Seddon / 1854"

Oil on canvas

46 x 35.5 cm (18 1/4 x 14 in.)

Provenance

Private Collection, Norfolk;

TW Gaze, Diss, 11 October 2024, lot 4129 (as an 'oleograph after Thomas Seddon')

Bonhams, London, 26 March 2025, lot 25.

Exhibited

London, 52 Conduit Street, June 1856;

London, *Society of Arts*, 1857.

Literature

The Saturday Review, 12 July 1856, p. 247;

J.P. Seddon, *Memoir and Letters of the Late Thomas Seddon, Artist*, London 1858, p. 36;

The Illustrated London News, 16 May 1857, p. 461;

The Athenaeum, 10 July 1858, no. 1602, p. 41.

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In a letter dated 8 January 1854, Thomas Seddon (1821-1856) described a new painting he had begun in Cairo:

*“In Ibraheem Pasha’s garden there is a white marabout’s tomb, with a mimosa tree over it, and three fine palms; on the other side, a hedge of fine cactuses. Some ropemakers in blue gowns and white turbans, and their boys, are always at work there, and, with the little figures, I think it will be pleasing.”*¹

In the resulting picture, the modest marabout’s tomb is bathed in golden light. All the elements Seddon noted are present: the palms, mimosa, cacti and ropemakers. To these, he added a devout, contemplative figure fingering his prayer beads beside a group of white pigeons - symbols of peace in Islam, traditionally, associated with the Prophet Muhammed. It is a quiet, thoughtful scene, reflective of Seddon’s fascination with everyday life and his dedication to topographical accuracy.

The painting was first exhibited in a small, semi-private show on Conduit Street in June 1856, and again the following year in Seddon’s acclaimed posthumous exhibition at the Society of Arts, where the press singled it out as one of his most significant works.² After that, it disappeared from public view and, as far as is known, remained untraced until its recent discovery - making it only the eighth oil painting by Seddon to surface on the market in the past forty years.

Seddon had arrived in Cairo in December 1853 on his first journey to Egypt. He was soon joined by William Holman Hunt, and the two artists set up camp near the Pyramids (Fig. 1), working side by side until May 1854, when they continued on to Jerusalem. Seddon spent five months in the Holy Land, sketching and developing what would become his most ambitious work: *Jerusalem and the Valley of Jehoshaphat from the Hill of Evil Counsel*.

Born into a family of cabinet-makers on Gray’s Inn Road in London, Seddon initially trained in furniture design. He turned to painting in the late 1840s, studying drawing under Charles Lucy and later working in the studio of Ford Madox Brown, where he made copies of Brown’s paintings, including *Chaucer at the Court of Edward III*. In 1850, he spent a season at Barbizon, painting alongside the French and British landscapists who gathered there.

These early influences—Barbizon naturalism and the Pre-Raphaelite circle, including Holman Hunt—shaped his distinctive style. His work from Egypt and the Holy Land combines clarity of form, vibrant colour, and a commitment to faithful representation of nature. *The Marabout’s Tomb* exemplifies these qualities, uniting botanical precision, architectural detail, and human presence in a carefully balanced composition.

Seddon returned to England via France in 1854. He married Emmeline Burford the following year, and the couple had a daughter. Despite new family responsibilities, he

¹ J.P. Seddon, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

² *The Illustrated London News*, 16 May 1857, p. 461.

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remained drawn to the East. Encouraged by fellow artists who believed his future lay there, he departed again for Cairo in October 1856. He died shortly afterwards of dysentery, aged just 35. After his death, friends and colleagues raised a subscription to acquire *Jerusalem and the Valley of Jehoshaphat* (Fig. 2) for the nation.

John Ruskin, writing at the time, praised Seddon's Egyptian and Middle Eastern works as "*the first landscapes uniting perfect artistic skill with topographical accuracy*", noting that they sought to convey "*trustworthy knowledge*" to those unable to travel.³ *The Spectator* echoed this sentiment in its obituary of the artist, noting that "*it is on the supreme quality of truth that Mr. Seddon's excellency depends*".⁴

³ *The Athenaeum*, no. 1534, 21 March 1857, p. 379.

⁴ *The Spectator*, 27 December 1857, p. 1386.

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Fig. 1 Thomas Seddon, *The Pyramids at Giza*, 1855. Oil on canvas, 35 x 47cm, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.



Fig. 2. Thomas Seddon, *Jerusalem and the Valley of Jehoshaphat from the Hill of Evil Counsel*, 1854-55. Oil on canvas, 67 x 83 cm, Tate Britain.

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