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Tomás Moragas
Camels

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TOMÁS MORAGAS
(Girona 1837–1906 Barcelona)

CAMELS

Signed lower right: “T. Moragas”

Oil on canvas
34 × 44 cm (17 × 26 in.)

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In *Camels*, Tomás Moragas (1837–1906) focuses on the depiction of the camel, an animal central to Arabian and North African daily life. The composition presents three camels caught in distinct postures, set within a neutral natural setting. The central camel in the foreground stands in profile, outlining the species' unmistakable silhouette. To the left, a second camel is seated on the ground, its legs folded beneath its body, showing a further visually distinctive position. In the background, the third camel is shown from behind, with its head turned, revealing the curve of its neck and the outline of its face.

These are dromedaries, or Arabian camels (*Camelus dromedarius*), a species native to the arid environments of the Middle East and North Africa and characterised by their distinctive single hump. Throughout the nineteenth century, knowledge of this animal gradually spread across Europe, largely due to the growing Western presence in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Early travellers and explorers played a key role in this process, documenting their expeditions through written accounts, sketches, and photographs. Publications such as Elijah Walton's *The Camel: Its Anatomy, Proportions*, published in 1865, and travelogues contributed to shaping European knowledge and imagery of the camel in the 19th century.¹ Lady Blunt, a British aristocrat, accomplished traveller, and co-founder of the Crabbet Arabian Stud in Sussex, travelled extensively through the Arabian Peninsula. In her account, she offers practical observations on the criteria for selecting camels: "*In choosing camels, the principal points to look at are breadth of chest, depth of barrel, shortness of leg, and for condition roundness of flank. I have seen the strength of the hocks tested by a man standing on them while the camel is kneeling. If it can rise, notwithstanding the weight, there can be no doubt as to soundness*".²

Often referred to as 'ships of the desert,' camels began to appear in Orientalist art as exotic elements in both genre scenes and heroic depictions of warfare. Despite their extraordinary appearance to Western eyes, camels represented an essential and ubiquitous presence in the daily lives of the indigenous populations of North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Genetically adapted to survive the extreme conditions of arid environments and capable of carrying heavy loads over long distances, camels were the primary means of transport across the challenging desert terrain. As one moved deeper into the Sahara, they increasingly replaced horses, whose characteristics were less suited to such harsh conditions.

Camels were employed for a variety of purposes by both indigenous populations and colonial powers. Some were bred for their strength and used as beasts of burden, while others, of a lighter build, were trained for riding. The functional distinctions between these types, their corresponding harnesses and decorative attire, are beautifully illustrated in a series of watercolour drawings by Frederick Goodall, a frequent and meticulous portrayer of these animals. Adopting a different, though no

¹ Walton, E. *The Camel: Its Anatomy, Proportions, and Paces*; Day & Sons: London, 1865

² Blunt, L. A. *A Pilgrimage to Nejd. The Cradle of the Arab Race.*; John Murray: London, 1881; Vol. 1,6.

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less faithful, approach, Moragas depicts the camel in its natural state, without saddles or ornamental trappings. His focus lies not in the traditional equipment of richly decorated saddles and bags that typically accompanied the animal, but rather in its anatomical structure and the variety of postures it can assume.

This small-scale work fits into a century-long art tradition of representing animals and demonstrates Moragas's ability to adapt academic methods of animal study to Orientalist subject matter. The forms are carefully constructed, with attention to anatomy, fur texture, and natural movement. Such studies were essential to larger compositions like *Rest of a Moorish Caravan*, in which animals played both practical and symbolic roles. They also served, in the hands of collectors, as more immediate examples of Orientalist themes without the theatrical embellishment sometimes present in larger canvases.

Within Moragas' broader oeuvre, which is characterised by refined academic realism and a recurring focus on Orientalist subjects, *Camels*—possibly conceived as a preparatory study for more elaborate narrative compositions—reflects the artist's commitment to imbuing even imagined scenes with a heightened sense of realism. Through the meticulous rendering of animals, he demonstrates a careful observational approach that lends authenticity and depth to his evocations of the Orient. The work illustrates Moragas' systematic method in approaching North African subjects, combining field observation with a controlled studio practice that ensured both accuracy and appeal for a European audience.

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