

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Richard Dadd
(Chatham 1817 – 1886 Broadmoor Hospital)

Study of Middle Eastern Heads

Signed lower left: R. Dadd
Pencil and watercolour on paper
19 x 14 cm. (7 ½ x 4 ½ in.)

Provenance:
Daniel Katz Gallery, London;
By whom sold, Sotheby's, London, 25 June 2020, lot 34;
Private Collection, UK.



*'I tell you that their dresses are picturesque and bright in colour - if I tell you that their faces are handsome and full of expression, that the old men look like patriarchs, that the young have almost feminine beauty, that the pipes are bubbling and the smoke wreathing about in fanciful curls, and on this the fire throwing a ruddy glare, you may indeed form a general notion, but you will certainly want the exquisite individuality of all around ...'*¹

This kaleidoscopic sheet of head studies is a beautiful record of Richard Dadd's time in the Near East and an important watercolour by this singular artist. It comes from a moment when Dadd's life was descending into a mental abyss, believing himself to be the under the influence of the god Osiris and pursued by devils. This breakdown eventually led to permanent insanity, murder and incarceration. The watercolour demonstrates that despite his growing paranoia of those around him, Dadd was still capable of producing highly insightful and sensitive studies of humanity.

Born in Chatham, Kent, Dadd moved to London with his family in 1834. Showing a talent for drawing, he enrolled at the Royal Academy Schools in 1837. In July 1842, on the recommendation of the Orientalist painter David Roberts, Dadd was chosen by Sir Thomas Phillips (fig. 1), the former mayor of Newport, to accompany him on a tour through Europe to Greece, Turkey, Southern Syria and finally Egypt. By the time Phillips' party embarked on a trip up the Nile in late December, after having spent a gruelling two weeks passing from Jerusalem to Jordan the prior month, Dadd underwent a dramatic personality change, becoming delusional and increasingly violent.



Fig. 1, Richard Dadd, *Sir Thomas Phillips in Arab Dress*, 1842, 26 x 17.8 cm, watercolour, Private Collection

¹ Letter of 26 November 1842 to William Powell Frith.

On his return to England in the Spring of 1843, Dadd was taken by his family to recuperate in rural Kent. However, on 28th August, having become convinced that his father was the Devil in disguise, Dadd committed patricide. Fleeing to France, Dadd attempted to kill a fellow passenger with a razor but was overpowered and arrested. Returned to England, the artist was committed to Bethlem psychiatric hospital and later to Broadmoor until his death by consumption in 1886. Encouraged to keep up his artistic endeavours, Dadd produced a diverse, and often bizarre, range of paintings and watercolours over his forty-two years of confinement.

Dadd's fascinating *Middle Eastern Sketchbook*, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, is full of vivid figure studies and contains several sheets of accumulated head studies, though none are in watercolour and none have the dense groupings of faces seen in the present work. A comparable work in Dadd's oeuvre, similarly combining crisp drawing with finely controlled washes of colour and bold strokes of shadow, is a striking watercolour in the collection of Winchester College (fig. 2). The present work was likely done around the same time, either at the end of the Egyptian or soon after Dadd's return.



Fig. 2, Richard Dadd, *Study of figures in Eastern costume*, 1842-3, 17 x 25 cm, watercolour, Winchester

Clearly the figures in the *Middle Eastern Sketchbook* were drawn on the spot, from life, as were perhaps the three most worked up heads in the Winchester sheet. However, the heads in the present work, though highly individualised, lack the physiognomic accuracy of a true portrait. Perhaps this unstructured jumble of heads corresponds instead to one of Dadd's visions. Detailing his elation and confusion in a letter written from Jaffa to fellow artist William Powell Frith, Dadd expressed that he had 'often lain down at night with my imagination so full of wild vagaries that I have really and truly doubted my own sanity'.