

# COLNAGHI



David Roberts,  
*Circular Temple at Baalbek, 1839*



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DAVID ROBERTS

(Stockbridge 1796 – 1864 London)

*CIRCULAR TEMPLE AT BAALBEK, 1839*

Signed lower middle and inscribed and dated lower left

Watercolour with touched of bodycolour on buff paper  
22 x 31 cm; 8 1/2 x 12 1/4 in.

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This original watercolour by David Roberts (1796–1864) depicts the temple at Baalbek with the ruined palace behind, seen from the opposite bank of a brook, where a group of figures are seated and kneeling around a table, with an arched bridge nearby. David Roberts was the first professional British artist to travel independently to the Middle East in 1838. He was the first British artist to draw the ruins of Ancient Egypt and Roberts produced a series of finished watercolours, including the painting, which he had worked up from sketches made during his tour.

Like many British artists, he used the familiar visual language of European landscapes to capture the unfamiliar scenery. By using architectural motifs to provide structure to compositions like this he is able to present a dramatic scene of classical grandeur, illuminated by sunlight complemented by a large area of shade in the foreground. The dramatic scene is enhanced by the three groups of figures, which convey the sense of scale. The figures also give the picture richer, darker and redder tones that contrast with the sandy colours of the architecture. This painting uses a lot of the essential ingredients that make up a picturesque scene: distant mountains, classical ruins and figures for human interest and to convey motion.

David Roberts visited Baalbek near the end of his travels around Egypt and the Middle East. Roberts and his party rode to the site of Baalbek on 2nd May in a heavy-rain storm. He was miserable, totally drenched and feverish. But the sight of the ancient Roman settlement rallied him. Despite his physical debilitation, 'I was... so much struck with the magnificence of the temple, that I could not resist visiting and examining it'. The storm then continued through the night, pummelling the traveller's tents. In the morning, Roberts felt extremely ill and sought the help of a Greek priest, who found him dry shelter in a cowshed. For the first time on his gruelling journey, Roberts devoted the whole day to bed rest. On May 4th, regaining some strength, Roberts explored the site. With obscure origins connected with the god Baal, the city of Baalbek had grown to importance in Hellenistic times, when it was known as Heliopolis ('The City of the Sun'). In the first century B.C. the Romans had established a cult of the Heliopolitan Jupiter there, and both Josephus Flavius, in 64 B.C. and Strabo mention the city as a centre for worship of the solar incarnation of the head deity of their pantheon. The city remained prominent through the seventh century, when the Arab residents of Baalbek turned the temples into fortresses. Conquered by Saladin and plundered by Tamerlane, the city saw its glory finally reduced to rubble in a series of earthquakes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But what remained on the site testified to Baalbek's former grandeur. Roberts marvelled at the mastery of Roman architects and masons, claiming that their stones were cut and laid with such accuracy that mortar was not needed. Despite his ill health, Roberts worked for four days, finding the grand ruins of Baalbek as wondrous as anything he had seen along the Nile.

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