

COLNAGHI



Narcisse Berchère
Mosquée du Sultan Baybars II au Caire, 1878

COLNAGHI

NARCISSE BERCHÈRE

(Étampes 1819–1891 Asnières-sur-Seine)

MOSQUÉE DU SULTAN BAYBARS II AU CAIRE, 1878

Signed and dated: "Berchère / 1878";
also titled on the reverse.

Oil on panel
81.3 × 64.3 cm (32 × 25 1/4 in.)

COLNAGHI



LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

BRUSSELS

COLNAGHI

Painted by the French artist Narcisse Berchère (1819–1891), *Mosquée du Sultan Baybars II au Caire*, 1878 exemplifies the sustained engagement with Egyptian subjects of a traveller-artist who extensively explored the region during the 1850s and 1860s. Following his first journey in 1849, the artist returned repeatedly, producing a varied and invaluable record of the country's landscapes and culture.

Mosquée du Sultan Baybars II au Caire, 1878 offers an evocative glimpse of nineteenth-century Cairo, with its bustling streets, slender minarets, and warm Mediterranean light. Signed and dated 1878, the painting depicts the Mamluk Mosque of Sultan Al-Jashankir, also known as Baybars II. Situated in the heart of old Cairo, the mosque stands as a landmark of fourteenth-century Islamic architecture. Its monumental silhouette is rendered with the crisp clarity of an eyewitness record yet combined with a soft tonal palette that situates the monument within a poetic evocation of the Egyptian light.

The view of the mosque is seamlessly framed within its urban context. A lively street, overhung by projecting upper stories and punctuated by traditional *mashrabiya*s with intricate wooden patterns, evokes Cairo's quintessential image as an Arab city, as recorded in *Murray's Handbook of Egypt*.¹ A travel guide first published in 1847, this book was popular and widely read throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The crowd animating the alley is varied yet harmonious: men, women, and animals coexist as small figures beneath the monumental walls that enclose the central portion of the painting. As is often the case in Berchère's work, the figures are minimally detailed yet retain a vivid presence, conveyed through their spontaneous poses. A camel, positioned in the foreground of the street, moves slowly among the people, emphasizing the convergence towards the mosque. At times, Berchère exaggerated the size of animals, but this does not seem to be the case here. The animal's scale seems deliberate, set against the minaret's imposing presence, which provides structural balance to the composition. The verticality of the scene, evident in other urban life compositions by the artist, such as *A procession in Cairo*, lends a monumental quality to this depiction of daily life.² This is not merely a stylistic choice but reflects a typical mode of urban construction in North African cities, designed to modulate sunlight and offer relief from the desert haze.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this painting is its dramatic interplay of shadow and light. Sunlight divides the composition in two: below, the passage is dark and shaded, offering the promise of a coolness much praised in the Egyptian heat; above, light falls on the mosque and only partially illuminates the upper floors of the building on the right. The artist's masterful handling of paint, conveying the vibrancy of shadow beneath the blazing sun, gives the scene a singular quality. While Berchère and his contemporaries documented North African landscapes, emerging travel photography turned its lens toward the region, becoming an important medium in the

¹ Murray, J. *Handbook for Egypt and the Sudan*, Stanford, E., Ed.; Yale University Press, 1907.

² Narcisse Berchère, *A Procession in Cairo*. Oil on Canvas.

COLNAGHI

visual representation of the Orient. Yet the monochrome photographs of the period, often depicting the same subjects, cannot rival the dynamism and subtle interplay of light and shadow achieved in the painting.³

Exhibited at the Exposition de Bordeaux in 1878, the painting reflects both contemporary fascination with Islamic architecture and a broader shift in Orientalist painting toward architectural studies as autonomous subjects, not merely stage-settings for narrative purposes. Berchère's position as an artist-traveller lent authority to his depictions; his illustrated travel journals and friendship with Maxime du Camp positioned him at the intersection of art and early photographic documentation.

Despite recurrent official appointments and institutional duties, the artist's longing for Egypt goes far beyond his institutional duties as a reporter. Berchère is deeply captivated by the allure of the travel lifestyle and the delight of the unforeseen. Within his long-standing relationship with Egypt, Berchère bears witness to the country's transformation, modernisation, and colonisation, processes that gradually unfold during the second half of the nineteenth century. Amid this rapid change, Berchère's paintings become invaluable snapshots of a world at risk of vanishing under the power of the West, not only commercial and political, but also cultural.

³ An historical photo shows a similar view: along a busy street towards the minaret of Sultan Baybars al-Jashankir's funerary complex, by photographer Jean Pascal Sébah.

COLNAGHI

COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com