

# COLNAGHI



Jules Joseph Lefebvre  
*Odalisque*, 1879



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JULES JOSEPH LEFEBVRE  
(Tournan-en-Brie 1836 – 1911 Paris)

*ODALISQUE, 1879*

Signed and dated lower right: "Jules. Lefebvre. / 1879"

Oil on panel  
81 x 96 cm (31 3/4 x 38 3/4 in.)

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Provenance

Private Collection, Paris, until 2024.

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Jules Lefebvre was one of the leading painters of his time. A *Prix de Rome* winner and a *commandeur* of the *Légion d'Honneur*, he exhibited dozens of paintings at the Salon over nearly fifty years. As a jury member for the Salon and a professor at both the École des Beaux-Arts and the Académie Julian, Lefebvre played a significant role in shaping the Parisian art scene.

Best known for his sensual female depictions, Lefebvre distinguished himself from his primary rival, William Bouguereau, by working with a wide variety of models rather than a select few. This approach likely broadened the appeal of his paintings. His most celebrated early work, *La Verité* (Fig. 1) earned critical and public acclaim at the Salon of 1870. The model, renowned actress Sophie Croizette, was depicted holding aloft a glowing sphere symbolizing truth.

Following this success, Lefebvre continued to focus on female nudes, masterfully blending the classical female ideal with the naturalism of live observation. The present work, previously unknown, is a noteworthy addition to this oeuvre, and was painted in 1879 when Lefebvre was at the height of his career.

The painting depicts an odalisque reclining on a large cushion, dressed in Ottoman costume, with a plate of oranges at her side. Unusually for Lefebvre, the striking painting is characterised by its unfinished quality, which contrasts with the refined, highly polished compositions for which the artist was known. Yet Lefebvre must have considered it complete, as he signed and dated the painting for sale. This unfinished state makes the work particularly intriguing, offering insight into Lefebvre's working process and revealing a freer, looser painting style distinct from the meticulous finish that defined the artist's reputation. His technical brilliance remains evident throughout, from the porcelain-like softness of the model's skin to the shimmering fabrics of her attire.

Though Lefebvre never travelled to the East, odalisques and Eastern women featured prominently in his work. Notable examples include *Odalisque* of 1874 (Fig. 2), now in the Art Institute of Chicago, and *La Servante* (fig. 3), housed in the Pera Museum, Istanbul. The term odalisque originates from the Turkish '*odalik*', meaning chambermaid, and came to denote an artistic genre depicting reclining women in harem settings. By Lefebvre's time, following the fame of Ingres' *Grande Odalisque*, the subject had become a favourite among French artists drawn to both the Orient and to the female form.

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Fig. 1 Jules Joseph Lefebvre, *La Verite*, 1870. Oil on canvas, 265 x 112 cm, Musee d'Orsay, Paris.



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Fig. 2 Jules Joseph Lefebvre, *Odalisque*, 1874. Oil on canvas, 102.5 x 207.5 cm, Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 3 Jules Joseph Lefebvre, *La Servante*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 128 x 82.5 cm, Pera Museum, Istanbul.

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