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Narcisse Berchère
Boats along the Nile, 1867

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BOATS ALONG THE NILE, 1867

Signed and dated: "Berchère / 1867"

Oil on panel
46 × 55 cm (18 × 21 3/4 in.)

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In *Boats along the Nile, 1867*, Narcisse Berchère (1819–1891) turns his attention to the timeless rhythms of the Nile River, a subject that became central to the artist's oeuvre following his extensive travels in the region. A companion of Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876), Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) and several other artists, diplomats and explorers on expeditions to North Africa and the Near East, Berchère's enduring connection with the Nile and its surroundings was deeply rooted in his extensive stays.

In 1860, Berchère was appointed by Ferdinand de Lesseps as the official artist for the Suez Canal Company. Over the course of six months spent in the region, Berchère documented his observations and reflections in a series of letters addressed to his friend, the painter Eugène Fromentin. These accounts were subsequently published in 1863 under the title *Le désert de Suez: cinq mois dans l'isthme* (*The Suez Desert: Five Months in the Isthmus*).¹ He returned to Egypt in 1869, this time as part of Empress Eugénie's entourage for the inauguration of the Suez Canal. In this oil on panel, an intricate forest of leaning masts, recalling branches moved by the wind, rises along the sinuous banks of the Nile. The white-sailed feluccas are moored along the riverbanks, as women with amphorae advance in silent procession to draw it. Berchère's treatment of atmosphere is especially notable: the soft diffusion of light across the sky and water transforms what might have been a purely ethnographic view into an evocative meditation on the setting. His sensitivity to the subtleties of river life: fishermen, boats, and the gentle lapping of water, reflects the growing taste among European collectors for scenes that emphasised the picturesque and contemplative qualities of the Orient.

The women in the foreground, wielding the amphorae on their heads and wrapped in traditional garments, resemble caryatids in the artist's eyes. As Berchère recalled in his account *Le Désert de Suez: Cinq mois dans l'Isthme*: "*The body reclined backwards, with that arch of the hips that accentuates the chest, draped in a garment with long, straight folds, the veil floating over the head, all composed in a line so sculptural as to evoke the bas-reliefs of Phidias.*"² The deep and precious indigo of the women's garments, echoed in the gentle ripples of the river, contrasts with the gleaming white of the turbans wrapped around the heads of men. They sit in small groups on the gentle rise just behind or attend to their tasks aboard the feluccas. Anchored and with their sails lowered, a sign of a break from navigation, the wooden boats lie laden with goods, ready to set off once more.

¹ Berchère, N. *Le Désert de Suez: Cinq Mois Dans l'isthme*; Hetzel, 1863.

² Berchère, N. *Le Désert de Suez: Cinq Mois Dans l'isthme*; Hetzel, 1863, 35. Original text: « La distribution de l'eau commence : la cruche pleine passe des mains sur la tête où elle oscille un instant, et, pareilles à des cariatides, les femmes s'éloignent, le corps rejeté en arrière avec cette cambrure de reins qui fait saillir la poitrine, enveloppées dans la robe aux longs plis droits, le voile flottant sur la tête, le tout dans une ligne si sculpturale, qu'elle fait penser aux bas-reliefs de Phidias. »

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Nimble navigators of the Nile for centuries, the feluccas imbue the landscape with an authentically Egyptian atmosphere, extending beyond mere realist depiction to enrich the scene with symbolic and cultural resonances. The painting, therefore, does not simply document a lived moment but engages with a collective imaginary. With their presence, the boats immediately evoke the traditional image of this emblematic river. The Nile, the vein of Egypt, here appears as an essential resource and a fascinating chimaera. A river both real and legendary, the Nile offered nineteenth-century explorers a glimpse of a land at once accessible and yet not fully known. It offered a space for the pursuit of the unknown and novel exploration. It is no coincidence that the nineteenth century coincided with the age of organised expeditions to trace the river's sources, ultimately identified by Speke in 1862 at Lake Victoria. Executed on panel, *Boats along the Nile, 1867* embodies Berchère's duality as both artist and traveller and attests to his profound fascination with the Nile and its sweeping landscapes.

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