

# COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Gustavo Simoni  
(Rome 1846 – 1926 Palestrina)

*Portrait of a man, wearing a pink cap and orange burnous*

Signed lower right: *G. Simoni*  
Oil on canvas  
41.6 x 29.9 cm. (16 ½ x 12 in.)



A leading late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Italian Orientalist, Gustavo Simoni is best known for his large-scale watercolours depicting caravans, souks and carpet dealers, the type of North African scenes favoured by his European clientele. This penetrating bust-length painting is therefore a rare example of portraiture within Simoni's *oeuvre*, though still corresponds with the artist's interest in documenting the unvarnished daily life of the people of the Maghreb.

The sitter, with his distinctive pink cap and voluminous cloak, was very likely the model for the figure bending over to attend to a camel in Simoni's painting of 1885, formerly in the Najd Collection, showing a caravan at rest (fig. 1). In the portrait, texture and surface are depicted skilfully, and the impact of the sitter's weathered face is enhanced by the vibrant colours of his cap and cloak. The sitter gazes uncompromisingly at the viewer, his direct stare conveying a sense of the hardship of his life. Here Simoni demonstrates his ability to capture the human physiognomy, and indeed psyche, and the highly successful result makes one wish the artist had tried his hand at portraiture more frequently.



Fig. 1, Gustavo Simoni, *The Halt of the Caravan*, oil on canvas, 61 x 90 cm, Private Collection

Born to a Roman barber, Simoni studied at the Academia di San Luca in 1861. From 1877 Simoni travelled widely, first in France and Spain, and then in North Africa, visiting Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. Simoni first visited Algeria in 1879, eventually buying a house in the city of Tlemcen, where he settled for a few years, regularly welcoming artists and friends from Italy. In his own lifetime, Simoni was highly acclaimed, winning the gold medal at the Paris Salon of 1889 for his monumental *Fire of Persepolis*. He received patronage from the highest circles, counting King Umberto of Italy as a client, eventually setting up a studio in Paris and a school of Orientalist painting in Rome.