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Georges Washington
Horsemen crossing a Wadi, c. 1855

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GEORGES WASHINGTON

(Marseilles 1827 – 1901 Douarmenez)

HORSEMEN CROSSING A WADI, C. 1855

Signed lower left: "G. Washington"

Oil on canvas,
55.3 × 65.1 cm (21 3/4 x 25 1/2 in.)

Provenance

Anonymous Sale Tajan, Paris, 3 April 2000, Lot 366;
19C European and Orientalist Art, Christie's, Sale 1567, London, 9 December 2014, Lot 66;
Private Collection, London.

Literature

Washington, Georges. *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*. Retrieved 3 Aug. 2025, from <https://www-oxfordartonline-com.lonlib.idm.oclc.org/benezit/view/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.001.0001/acref-9780199773787-e-00194735>

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Georges Washington's (1827-1901), *Horsemen crossing a Wadi*, c.1855, depicts a group of tribesmen crossing a river in a valley with grassy plateaus near Algeria's Atlas Mountains. These river valleys, known in Arabic as *wadi*, are wetbeds that only flow when heavy rain occurs, usually between November and March, and would otherwise be dry riverbeds.

In the foreground, a group of horsemen ride Arabian horses, distinguishable by their small, finely chiselled heads. One figure, possibly the tribe's leader, wears a distinctive red broad-brimmed hat and leads the group. Beside him, his companion, a standard bearer, carries a yellow flag, which may be used to mark territory, signify his tribe's identity, or possibly represent the desert. To the right, a man on foot wades through the water, preceding a line of horsemen. In the mid-distance to the left are two travellers riding camels, while a third traveller pauses while his camel takes refreshment. The mountain range extends out in the background against an opalescent mountain summit and limpid blue skies.

Although Washington's date and place of birth are known, he was born out of wedlock, and his parents' names were not recorded. However, it later emerged that his mother was Marie Besse. His father's name remains unknown, but he named his son Georges Washington after America's first president, George Washington (1732-1799), whom he greatly admired. Washington pursued an artistic career, training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he studied under the history painter François-Édouard Picot (1786-1876). Picot's highly finished academic style was very different from that of his pupil. Washington was inspired by the Romantic style: the use of colour, loose brushstrokes, and the subject matter of fellow Orientalists Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) and Eugène Fromentin (1820-1876). Delacroix and Fromentin both spent time in Algiers;¹ they did not overlap with Washington, whose first visit was in the mid-1850s. All three painters were renowned for their poetic depictions of Bedouin life and dramatic equine subjects. Washington first exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1857 with his view of Plaine du Hoina and regularly exhibited thereafter for fifty years.

On returning to Paris, Washington married into an artistic family, marrying Anne-Léonie Philippoteaux in 1859. His father-in-law was the famous battle painter Henri Félix Philippoteaux (1815-1844), and his brother-in-law was the Orientalist Paul Dominique Phillippoteaux (1846-1923).

Washington continued to travel extensively, returning to North Africa in 1879, and subsequently to Eastern Europe, via Turkey and the Caucasus, to make studies as he was collaborating on a large panorama with the painter Édouard Castres (1838-1902), which was presented to the Tsar of Russia in 1881.

¹ Algeria was not known as a country prior to the French conquest of 1830; it was the Regency of Algiers, a part of the Ottoman Empire that comprised most of the coast of present-day Algeria. The area was first referred to as Algiers (Alger in French) until 1839, after which it became known as Algeria, following a decree by Antoine Virgile Schneider (1779-1847) on behalf of the French Ministry of War.

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Washington's paintings primarily depicted scenes from Algeria and Morocco, including fantasias,² desert encampments, and hunting scenes. His artistic focus captured the mystique of the Orient, emphasising themes such as nomadic life, desert landscapes, and exotic rituals that resonated with 19th-century European fascination with Eastern cultures.

² A Fantasia in this context is a traditional exhibition of horsemanship in the Maghreb during festivities. The Arabic term is *lab el baroud*.

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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