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Richard Dadd,
Study of Middle Eastern Heads, 1848

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RICHARD DADD

(Chatham 1817 -1886)

STUDY OF MIDDLE EASTERN HEADS, 1848

Signed lower left: "R. Dadd."

Pencil and watercolour on paper.

43 x 37.5 cm (16 3/4 x 14 3/4 in.)

Provenance

Daniel Katz Gallery, London.

Literature

Alleridge, Patricia, *The Late Richard Dadd 1817-1886*, London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1974.

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Lippincott, Louise, Murder and the Fine Arts; Or, a Reassessment of Richard Dadd, *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* , 1988, Vol. 16 (1988), pp. 75-94

Tromans, Nicholas, *Richard Dadd: The Artist and the Asylum*, London: Tate Publishing, 2011.

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This study sheet of thirteen Middle Eastern heads was created by Richard Dadd in 1842 during a lengthy tour of Europe and the Middle East with Sir Thomas Phillips (1801-1867), a Welsh lawyer and former Mayor of Newport. Dadd was commissioned to document Phillips's travels on the recommendation of David Roberts, establishing him the official artist for the expedition. Their itinerary included the Rhine Valley, Venice, Athens, Constantinople, Asia Minor, Tripoli, Damascus, the Holy Land, Thebes, Alexandria, Malta, and the Italian west coast. It was a transformative journey for Dadd, providing him with abundant material which he documented in sketchbooks, aiming to develop these initial studies into finished paintings upon his return to England.

The present watercolour demonstrates Dadd's exceptional skill in documenting forms of Middle Eastern headwear, particularly elaborately folded turbans, featured throughout the composition. Such ethnographic studies were characteristic of many artists who travelled to the East during this period, including Horace Vernet, John Frederick Lewis, and James Rattray. Dadd's mastery as a colourist is evident in his vivid palette and meticulous rendering of fabric textures, capturing the complex folds and pleats with emphasis on rich red and terracotta tones. While some writers have suggested that this work may relate to Dadd's later series illustrating human passions (1853-1855), following a tradition established by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Charles LeBrun (1619-1690), and informed by Dadd's own experience in confinement, the relaxed expressions of the faces suggest these are genuine studies of regional dress rather than portrayals of extreme emotion. The sheet dating to 1842-1843 aligns with a comparable example in the collection of Winchester College (Fig. 1).

Richard Dadd was born in Chatham, Kent, in 1817. He was the fourth of seven children. His father, Robert Dadd, was a chemist, lecturer in chemistry and geology, and also involved in the arts through a framing, gilding, and bronzing business on London's Suffolk Street, near The National Gallery and Haymarket. Dadd's mother,

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Mary Ann Martin died when he was only seven years old. Dadd demonstrated remarkable artistic talent from a young age, beginning to paint at thirteen and gaining admission to the Royal Academy at twenty — notably younger than Turner, who was elected at twenty-six. Dadd was tutored by several distinguished academicians, including Maclise, Landseer, Etty, and Turner, under whom Dadd's talent flourished.

The Egyptian phase of the artist's journey was crucial in ways that went beyond artistic inspiration. Dadd suffered a severe mental breakdown worsened by environmental factors and possible substance use; writing to fellow painter William Powell Frith in 1842 that his mind was "*so full of wild vagaries that I have really and truly doubted my own sanity.*"¹ His condition deteriorated into paranoid delusions, culminating in the tragic murder of his father after he returned to England in 1843. This crisis occurred within a broader context of family mental instability, affecting three of his siblings. After his father's death, Dadd fled to France, where he attacked a traveller in Fontainebleau during an attempted journey to assassinate Emperor Ferdinand I of Austria. French authorities detained Dadd and admitted him to a hospital at Clermont de l'Oise before he was repatriated to England ten months later.

In 1844, Dadd was admitted to Bethlem Hospital, and he was transferred to Broadmoor in 1864, where he remained for the rest of his life. Throughout his forty-two years of confinement, he was permitted to continue painting, and his artistic practice was encouraged as part of his treatment. His superintendents and carers recognised his exceptional talent, and various individuals collected his works and commissioned new pieces. Although his paintings were not publicly exhibited following his imprisonment, they were admired within the institutional environment for their remarkable skill and detail.

¹ Archives of Dadd's letters are held at the Bethlem Museum of the Mind and the Wellcome Collection.

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Dadd's complex legacy has garnered significant scholarly and popular interest, inspiring novels, theatrical productions, and even Freddie Mercury's song "The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke", which was inspired by Dadd's painting in Tate Britain. Despite the tragic circumstances that marked his later life, Dadd's artistic output from both before and during his confinement shows consistent technical excellence and imaginative power, establishing him as a fascinating figure in Victorian art.



Fig. 1. Richard Dadd, *Portrait Studies of Figures in Eastern Costume*, pen brown ink and watercolour. Winchester College, [AW.108].

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