

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Jean-Léon Gérôme
(Vesoul 1824 - 1904 Paris)

Portrait of a woman (Fatme)

Inscribed lower left: *Fatme*

Inscribed lower right: *Assouan / (1855)*

Inscribed lower right: *dessin de J.L. Gerome / Aimé Morot*

Pencil on paper

26.7 x 16.1 cm. (10 ½ x 6 ¼ in.)

Provenance:

Possibly Aimé Morot (1850-1913).



This portrait of a woman named Fatme was drawn by Jean-Léon Gérôme on his first visit to Egypt in 1855-56 and forms part of a series of about a dozen sensitively observed studies of men and women encountered by the artist on his journey down the Nile.

In the winter of 1855, already celebrated and famous, the thirty-one-year-old Gérôme arrived in Egypt, beginning the first of six extended visits made over the course of his life. In December at Damietta, on the eastern mouth of the Nile, Gérôme rented a sailing boat with some friends and for the next few months they journeyed over one thousand kilometres down the river to Aswan, passing the time hunting, fishing and drawing. On their return up the Nile, the group stopped at Cairo for four months, before returning home via the Holy Land. Gérôme's companions were the dramatist Émile Augier, the artists Léon Belly and Narcisse Berchère, and the sculptor of Eiffel Tower fame Auguste Bartholdi, whose numerous photographs of Egyptian sites proved to be extremely useful to Gérôme as artistic prompts back in Paris.

This trip would prove to be highly significant for Gérôme: not only did it foster a deep-seated love for Egypt but it also turned him, almost overnight, into the leading Orientalist of his day. The dozens of sketches and studies, and the impressive collections of photographs and local goods amassed by the artist, allowed Gérôme to create in his Paris studio a group of meticulously detailed and highly polished Orientalist paintings exhibited at the Salon of 1857 to great acclaim (fig. 1). As Gérôme himself wrote of this preparatory material, 'I did not know beforehand what I was going to do with these studies...brought back from travels. It is only later that ideas come: there is an unconscious labour in the brain and, suddenly, they are born!'.¹



Fig. 1, Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Camels at the trough*, 1857, oil on canvas, 75 x 120 cm, National Gallery of Canada

Amongst these studies are the group of beautifully refined portraits, quite documentary and almost ethnographic in nature, of which the present work is a particularly fine example. Others include a turbaned man from Aswan, looking downwards, at the Met (fig. 2) and a man in profile in the collection of the Getty (fig. 3). Their merit was immediately recognised by Théophile Gautier, an ardent support of Gérôme, who wrote in 1856 that 'these pencil

¹ F. Field Herring, *Gérôme, his Life and Works*, New York 1893, p. 143.

portraits of different types...are so well observed that they could serve as anthropological essays'.²

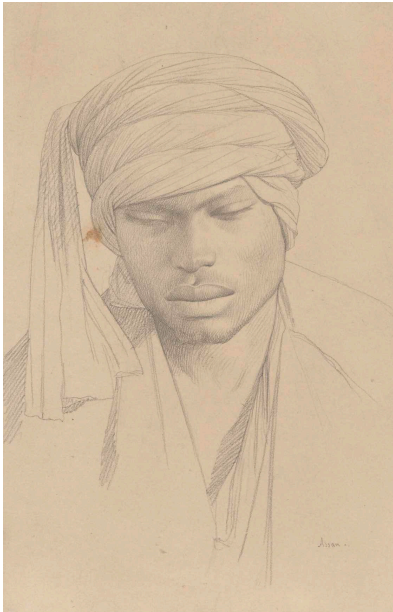


Fig. 2, Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Portrait of Assan*, 1856, graphite on paper, 26.6 x 16.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art



Fig. 3, Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Portrait of a man*, 1856, graphite on paper, 26.7 x 16.2 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum

Thanks to two inscriptions, we know that the sitter in the present work is named Fatme and she was drawn at Aswan, site of the famous Philae Island and Temple of Isis. Though we know nothing else of her biography, Fatme was likely a *Fellah*, a term used in Egypt to signify native villagers and agriculturalists, who were believed to be descended from the indigenous Egyptians present before the Arab conquests. Coincidence or not, Gérôme's depiction of Fatme is reminiscent of a study of a *Fellah* woman by John Singer Sargent (fig. 4), painted by the American artist on a trip to Egypt nearly four decades later in 1890-91.



Fig. 4, John Singer Sargent, *Fellah woman*, oil on canvas, 56 x 46 cm, Private Collection

² T. Gautier, 'Gérôme, tableaux, études, et croquis de voyages' in *L'Artiste*, vol. 3, 1856, p. 23: 'l'artiste voyageur a fait à la mine de plomb plusieurs études-portraits d'après différents types caractéristiques: il y a des Fellahs, des Cophtes, des Arabes, des nègres sang-mêlé, des hommes si bien observés qu'ils pourraient servir aux dissertations anthropologiques'

Though each of these portraits demonstrate Gérôme's elegant and exacting draughtsmanship, Fatme is a particularly beautifully rendered example. The artist has scrutinised his sitter very carefully, conscientiously detailing her striking features. Yet whilst this meticulousness is apparent throughout the drawing, one can quickly discern, even without the contextual inscriptions, that it is a rapidly executed study, done on the spot and far from the comforts of the studio. This combination of detail and spontaneity amplifies the impact of the portrait, giving Fatme a tangible presence, which is magnified by her satisfyingly volumetric head covering.