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Eugène Fromentin

La Chasse à la Gazelle/The Gazelle Hunt

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EUGÈNE FROMENTIN

(La Rochelle 1820 – 1876 La Rochelle)

LA CHASSE À LA GAZELLE / THE GAZELLE HUNT

Signed lower right: "Eugène Fromentin"

Oil on canvas

27 cm x 40.5 cm (10 1/2 x 15 3/4 in.)

Provenance

Noël Bardac, by 1910;

Monique Uzielli sale, Sotheby's, New York, May 4, 2012, lot 29;

Acquired at the above sale by the present owner.

Exhibited

Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, Vingt Peintres du XIXe siècle, Exposition au profit de la Croix-Rouge Française, May 2 -31, 1910, p. 24, no. 97 (lent by Noël Bardac).

Literature

Fromentin, Eugène. Benezit Dictionary of Artists. October 31, 2011, Retrieved 16 Sep. 2025.

Benjamin, Roger, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism and French North Africa: 1880-1930*.

Fromentin, Eugène, *Oeuvres Complètes* ed. Guy Sagnes. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1984.

Thomson, James & Wright, Barbara, *La Vie et L'Oeuvre d'Eugène Fromentin*, Courbevoie: ACR Édition, 1987.

John Zarobell, *Empire of Landscape: Space and Ideology in French Colonial Algeria*, University Park, Penn., 2010, ch. 4, "Eugène Fromentin and Laughton: Artistic and Colonial Frontiers."

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Eugène Fromentin's (1820-1876) *Gazelle Hunt*, skilfully captures the intensity and primal beauty of North African desert life, rooted in the artist's personal experiences in Algeria. Amidst the vast, wind-swept terrain, horsemen press forward in relentless pursuit of their quarry with practised accuracy.

The composition's dramatic tension centres on a commanding figure in the middle distance, whose dynamic pose epitomises the fierce elegance of the hunt. Above this scene of ancient ritual, brooding clouds gather across the sky, their heavy presence transforming the landscape into a scene of impending drama. This meteorological turbulence heightens the painting's power, suggesting the unpredictable forces, both natural and human, that govern life in this wilderness.

What sets this work apart within the Orientalist canon is Fromentin's observant eye, unlike studio fantasies of some contemporaries, this painting vibrates with the lived experience of someone who knew his subject. The lively brushwork and subtle palette reveal an artist working from a memory enriched by genuine encounter, resulting in a piece of both ethnographic importance and aesthetic power.

Eugène Fromentin was born in La Rochelle on the Atlantic coast of France. The artist's father, Toussaint Fromentin-Dupeux (1786-1867), was a doctor and amateur painter; Fromentin's mother was Jenny Billotte Fromentin-Dupreux (1796-1879). Although Fromentin initially pursued a career in law, he became increasingly attracted to the arts and studied in Paris under the landscape painter Jean-Charles Rémond (1795-1875) and Nicolas-Louis Cabat (1812-1893), whose style—loose brushwork combined with atmospheric landscape qualities, profoundly influenced Fromentin's developing artistic vision.

Fromentin established his studio in the 9th arrondissement of Paris, specifically in Place Pigalle, the heart of artistic activity in the City of Light during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This painting, which bears a close resemblance to a picture of the same subject made in 1864, is probably dated to the same period and was therefore executed in the artist's Paris studio. Significantly for attribution purposes, the backboard of the painting includes Jérôme Ottoz's stamp, Fromentin's framer and paint merchant from 1863-1876, whose business operated on the rue la Bruyère, also in the 9th arrondissement.

Fromentin's artistic development was fundamentally shaped by his four journeys to North Africa. He first travelled to Algiers and Blida in 1846 with Armand du Mesnil (1819-1903), a civil servant and poet who was a close friend of the renowned symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). Following this initial journey, Fromentin made his salon debut with two Algerian landscapes that received positive critical reception, particularly his landscape *Gorges de la Chiffa*. He returned to Algeria in 1847-1848 with his friend, the photographer Auguste Salzmann (1824-1872), and again in 1852-1853 in the company of his wife Marie Cavallet de Beaumont (1830-1900). His final journey in 1869 was undertaken for the inauguration of the Suez Canal.

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These transformative experiences not only informed Fromentin's visual art but also established him as an accomplished writer. His 1852-1853 sojourn inspired his celebrated travel narratives *Un Été dans le Sahara* (1857) and *Une Année dans le Sahel* (1859), while his literary output also included the novel *Dominique* (1862) and the influential art historical work *Les Maîtres d'Autrefois* (1876) on seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish schools was published in the year of his death. The Goncourt Brothers particularly admired Fromentin's travel writings, praising his unique ability to translate his visual sensibilities into literary form, using words to 'paint' magnificent landscapes.

The artist's Orientalist œuvre primarily, though not exclusively, depicted landscapes and male figures, with subject matter focused on Algeria, featuring nomads, encampments, and Arab horsemen in desert settings, while masterfully capturing the distinctive light and atmosphere of North African environments.

Fromentin's approach was marked by cultural sensitivity, as he himself noted: *"It might have been possible for me to enter the mosque, but I did not try. To penetrate further into Arab life than is permitted seems to me misplaced curiosity. The people must be seen from the distance at which it chooses to reveal itself: 'men close up, women from afar. To describe a women's apartment or to paint the ceremonies of the Arabs' religion is graver than fraud: it is to commit, in the matter of art, an error of point of view."*¹

Fromentin's 'respectful distance' partly explains his preference for landscape and male figure subjects, establishing him as one of the more sensitive Orientalist painters of his generation.

¹ The citation comes from Fromentin's book *Sahara*, 1857 and is quoted in Benjamin, Roger, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism and French North Africa, 1880-1930*, University of California Press, 2003, p.19.

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