

COLNAGHI



Antonio Fabrés
A Palace Guard Smoking

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ANTONIO FABRÉS

Barcelona 1854–1938 Rome

A PALACE GUARD SMOKING

Watercolour on paper

126.5 x 95.3 cm (49 3/4 x 37 1/2 in.)

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Antonio Fabrés (1854–1938) was born in Barcelona in 1854, where he demonstrated an early aptitude for both painting and sculpture. He began his formal training at the Escola de la Llotja and, in 1875, was awarded a scholarship to continue his studies in Rome. Arriving in the Eternal City only a year after the death of Mariano Fortuny (1838–1874), Fabrés encountered an artistic milieu still profoundly marked by the celebrated painter's legacy. Captivated by Fortuny's orientalist compositions, he settled in Via Margutta, a vibrant centre for the Spanish artistic community in Rome, and soon devoted himself to drawing, painting and watercolour, following in the footsteps of what may be termed his spiritual mentor.

After nearly a decade in Rome, the Catalan painter moved to Paris, where his extraordinary technical skill and alignment with contemporary bourgeois taste for exotic imagery brought him increasing commercial success. This international recognition eventually led to a five-year appointment in Mexico City, where he served as director of the Academia de San Carlos. In 1907, he returned once again to Rome, where he would remain until his death in 1938. Celebrated for his refinement and virtuosity, Fabrés is today recognised as a significant figure within the tradition of nineteenth-century Orientalist painting.

A Palace Guard Smoking is a testament to Fabrés's remarkable ability to compose some of the most special Orientalist scenes. Executed in watercolour on paper, the work depicts a solitary Moorish guard in traditional attire, leaning at ease within an opulent Islamic interior. The guard inhales from a long-stemmed pipe held in his left hand, while his right hand delicately grasps a scroll. His dark teal kaftan, sumptuously embellished and secured at the waist with a striped sash, is complemented by a turban, flat slippers, and jewels that accentuate the elegance of his appearance. The overall look blends elements of historical accuracy with artistic license. Similarly, the presence of the scroll, an object largely supplanted by the codex in the Islamic world by the nineteenth century, may serve either as a deliberate anachronism or as a visual device suggesting the guard's engagement with a more ancient text. The surrounding shelves are indeed filled with bound codices. Whatever the intention, the tranquil and contemplative scene offers an intimate glimpse into the world of the Moorish guard.

This masterfully executed watercolour exemplifies Fabrés' refined and sophisticated style. The monumentality of the human figure, whose sculptural presence remains palpable beneath the heavy folds of drapery, reflects a hallmark of the artist's oeuvre and pays homage to his early training as a sculptor. The tall, vertical format is another feature that is common to other works by the artist, such as *A Thief*, ca. 1887 (Fig. 1) and *A Slave Girl*, ca. 1886, in the collection of the Prado Museum, Madrid.¹ In contrast to the plain plaster walls that serve as backdrops in such works, however, *A Palace Guard Smoking* features a dreamy palace interior. The soft palette of pastel tones used throughout the composition fosters a visual cohesion between the guard and his surroundings, subtly linking the figure to the architectural space he inhabits. The intricate architecture of the interior invites comparison with that of Henri Regnault's celebrated *Exécution sans jugement sous les rois maures de Grenade*, 1870 (Fig. 2),

¹ Antonio Fabrés, *A Thief*, ca. 1887. Watercolour on paper; *The Slave Girl*, Ca. 1886. Oil on canvas. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

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which depicts a towering Moorish executioner cleaning his sword beside his decapitated victim.² Although portraying different subjects, the two scenes could plausibly unfold within the same palace, united by their Alhambresque settings. By the mid-19th century, photographs of the Alhambra in Granada were widely circulated among tourists and artists, providing rich inspiration for Orientalist compositions.

Like numerous painters drawn to the Near Orient, Fabrès and Regnault likely worked from such photographs and thus shared a similar visual repertoire of Moorish architecture and Islamic décor. The tiles covering the lower half of the walls in Fabrès' watercolour, along with the checkered floor, stucco ornamentation, and the muqarnas adorning the arches, are recurring elements found in the Moorish palace of Granada and were later replicated in various Islamic buildings across Spain and North Africa. The Sa'di mausoleum in Marrakech, built in the seventeenth century, is directly inspired by the Alhambra and, interestingly, an almost perfect replica of the backdrop in Fabrès' *A Palace Guard Smoking*. Fabrès likely travelled to Morocco and North Africa, although the details of his journey remain uncertain. He also drew on firsthand knowledge of Fortuny's work and on frequent exchanges with fellow artists. This vibrant environment proved transformative, prompting him to dedicate his career to the creation of meticulously executed and richly detailed Orientalist scenes. In *A Palace Guard Smoking*, Fabrès draws on established Orientalist motifs, readily recognisable and appealing to contemporary audiences, using the scene as a pretext to showcase both his artistic imagination and technical virtuosity.

² Henri Rengault, *Exécution sans jugement sous les rois maures de Grenade*, 1870. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

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Fig. 1. Antonio Fabrés, *A Thief*, ca. 1887. Watercolour on paper. Oil on canvas. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

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Fig. 2. Henri Rengault, *Exécution sans jugement sous les rois maures de Grenade*, 1870. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

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