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Narcisse Berchère
Campement Arabe

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NARCISSE BERCHÈRE

(Étampes 1819–1891 Asnières-sur-Seine)

CAMPEMENT ARABE

Signed: "Berchère"

Oil on panel

16 × 29.3 cm (6 1/4 × 11 1/2 in.)

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This intimate oil on panel, *Campement Arabe*, by Narcisse Berchère (1819–1891), reflects the painter's continued interest in North African landscape, as observed during his numerous journeys across Egypt and Algeria. As a critic already remarked in 1860, "*Berchère has penetrated deeply into the mysterious poetry of Egypt. He strikes two notes with rare precision: that of the terrains and that of the skies*".¹ Unlike his monumental depictions of mosques or sweeping Nile landscapes, this composition focuses on a moment of repose in a desert encampment, or douar. Figures and tents are arranged in a sparse foreground, their forms harmonising with the surrounding arid terrain.

Though small in scale, *Campement Arabe* conveys the full breadth of the landscape, setting it apart from Berchère's urban scenes, which often employ a vertical composition to emphasise the imposing yet protective presence of tall walls and edifices, as in *Mosquée du Sultan Baybars II au Caire*, 1878 and *Café Interior*. In the present work, grand mosques and cafés give way to the sober tents of the nomads. Gathered around three large tents, typical of Bedouin encampments, figures in coloured tunics and their camels share a moment of calm repose, perhaps following a long march through the desert. Beneath the vast sky, the silhouettes of the men are tied to the ground, low, almost extensions of the earth. A dense layer of clouds looms on the horizon, while the sky above the camp remains almost clear, awaiting the first stars of the night. Touched by light, the clouds take on shades of pink and violet, softly echoing the warm tones of the earth below. In the distance, the dark mountain ridge traces the horizon and forms the sole, imagined boundary to the boundless dwelling of the nomads. "*Days pass by, oblivious as I am of their swift flight, entirely devoted to what surrounds me, this vast uniform horizon, this tawny sea of sand stretching indefinitely, this ever-changing sky crossed by great flights of birds or travelling clouds.*"²

So wrote Berchère in a letter to his friend and fellow painter Eugène Fromentin, recounting the months he spent in the Isthmus of Suez documenting the construction of the canal and travelling across Northern Egypt. The artist's words resonate in *Campement Arabe*, where clouds, birds, and nomads alike are on the move, sharing

¹ *Catalogue Illustré Des Œuvres de N. Berchère*; Baschet, L., Ed.; Artistes Modernes; Librairie d'Art: Paris, 1885, 18. Original text: « M. Berchère a pénétré profondément dans la mystérieuse poésie de l'Égypte. Il a deux notes d'une justesse rare, la note des terrains et celle des ciels. »

² *Berchère, N. Le Désert de Suez: Cinq Mois Dans l'isthme*; Hetzel, 1863, 47. Original text : « Les jours se passent, oublieux que je suis de leur fruité rapide, tout entier à ce qui m'entoure, à ce grand horizon uniforme, à cette mer fauve de sable qui se déroule à l'infini, à ce ciel mobile traversé par de grands vols d'oiseaux ou des nuées en voyage. »

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the same timeless space. A space in which the Western traveller seems to rediscover ancestral bonds and values.

Campement Arabe also resonates with the nineteenth-century European fascination with images of nomadic life, which symbolised freedom, tradition, and a connection to a world seemingly alien to the rapid transformations Modernity was bringing to Victorian Europe. In his lyrical simplicity, the painting encapsulates Berchère's role as a mediator between first-hand observation and European artistic conventions. Berchère's Orientalist contemporaries, such as Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876) and Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904), often dramatised desert life with theatrical embellishments. By contrast, Berchère adopts a much quieter, more observational approach. Devoid of added rhetoric or narrative filters, the painting convinces us that we are seeing the landscape as the artist himself perceived it. His eye for light and space transforms the apparent simplicity of the subject into a study of atmosphere and cultural presence.

The douars, camels, and Bedouins with their turbans, elements unmistakably 'Oriental', carried a particular significance for a European audience eager for discovery and exoticism. Although widely regarded as an Orientalist, Berchère was never obsessed with depicting Islamic costumes, nor with imparting the historical, or at times mythical, dimension characteristic of earlier generations of Orientalist painters. Instead, shaped by his early encounters with the Barbizon painters, he sought to capture fleeting, poetic impressions through bold patches of colour. Freely and expressively applied, these imbue his scenes with an enduring sense of naturalness and confer a unique character on his work.

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