

# COLNAGHI



Benlliure y Gil, José  
*Study for Inside a Coffee House*



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BENLLIURE Y GIL, JOSÉ  
(Cañamellar 1855 – Valencia 1937)

## *STUDY FOR INSIDE A COFFEE HOUSE*

Signed and inscribed bottom left: "J. Benlliure / Túnez"

Watercolour on paper  
35 × 44 cm (13 1/2 × 17 1/2 in.)

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### Provenance

Acquired from Setdart, Lot 21, 10.11.2021

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### Literature

(2011, October 31). Benlliure y Ortiz, José. *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*. Retrieved 23 Sep. 2025, From <https://www.oxfordartonline.com/benezit/view/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.001.0001/acref-9780199773787-e-00016430>

Eduardo Dizy Caso, *Les Orientalistes de l'école espagnole*, Paris, 1997.

José Benlliure Gil (1855-1937), exh.cat., Centre del Carme, Valencia, 2008.

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José Benlliure y Gil's vivid watercolour, probably a preliminary study for a larger oil painting formerly in the Najd Collection, captures the lively atmosphere of a Tunisian café. The composition invites viewers into this bustling social space, alive with patrons and filled with the rhythmic sounds of traditional North African music. At the centre of the musical ensemble, a figure draped in a green cloak plays the gimbri (or sintir), a three-stringed Moroccan lute, while fellow musicians accompany drums and tambourine, their performance forming the heart of this convivial gathering.

The artist demonstrates remarkable attention to architectural authenticity, rendering the traditional North African interior with meticulous care. The background showcases the sophisticated artistry of Islamic design through intricately patterned windows and wall panels. The musicians sit on a platform covered by a magnificent Oriental carpet, possibly of Persian or Ottoman origin, displaying detailed geometric motifs in warm shades of red and orange. These ornamental textiles and decorative elements transform the coffeehouse into an opulent sanctuary of leisure and cultural exchange.

Through this evocative scene, Benlliure offers viewers an authentic glimpse into the social spaces of North African life, celebrating the coffeehouse as both a meeting place and a cultural crossroads where music, conversation, and community converge.

Born at Cañamelar, Valencia, José Benlliure y Gil came from an artistic family. His father, Juan Antonio Benlliure Tomás (1832-1906), was a painter-decorator, while his younger brother Mariano (1862-1947) became a celebrated sculptor. From an early age, Benlliure studied at Valencia's prestigious San Carlos School of Fine Arts and in the private studio of Francisco Domingo Marqués (1842-1920), who would prove a lasting influence on his artistic development.

In 1872, a grant allowed the young artist to travel to Paris, where he encountered the sophisticated art market of the French capital, including the influential dealer Adolphe Goupil (1806-1893), one of the most important art dealers and publishers in nineteenth-century France and the father-in-law of Jean-Léon Gérôme. This exposure to international dealers would prove significant for Benlliure's career.

Upon returning to Valencia, Benlliure concentrated on creating works for Spain's National Exhibition of Fine Arts, the country's leading artistic showcase held annually in Madrid since 1856. His efforts earned him third-place medals in 1876 for *Descanso en la marcha* ("Rest on the March") and in 1878 for *El Gólgota* ("Golgotha").

In 1879, Benlliure embarked on what would be the most significant phase of his career by settling in Rome. The following year, he married María Ortiz Fullana, and the couple made the Eternal City their home. He resided there until 1896, when he took a break to travel and work elsewhere, returning in 1903 to serve as Director of the Spanish Academy of Fine Arts until his departure in 1913. Rome offered Benlliure both artistic inspiration and vital commercial opportunities that contributed to establishing his international reputation. The year 1882 marked a pivotal moment in Benlliure's career when he signed a distribution contract with the distinguished

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London dealer Martin Colnaghi (1821-1908), alongside other prominent European figures, including Adolphe Goupil and several German dealers. This network of international representation spread Benlliure's works throughout Europe and America, establishing him as one of Spain's most commercially successful artists of the period.

These dealer relationships shaped Benlliure's artistic style. The commercial demands of the international market urged him to adopt a style reminiscent of the popular Orientalist approach of Mariano Fortuny and his former master Francisco Domingo Marqués. This combination proved highly attractive to collectors throughout Europe and America.

Benlliure's fascination with North African subjects was fostered through three key journeys between 1888 and 1897. He visited Tunisia in 1887, Algeria in 1888, and Morocco (including Tangier) in 1897. These travels gave him genuine insights into North African life, which influenced works such as "Inside a Coffee House, Tunis." Interestingly, while the painting is based on the artist's direct experience of Tunisian culture, its composition may also have been influenced by a photograph published in 1892 in *La Ilustración Española y Americana*, which shows Spanish artists in Middle Eastern costumes during carnival celebrations at Rome's Circolo Artistico Internazionale. This blend of observed reality and artistic interpretation demonstrates Benlliure's refined approach to Orientalist themes.

Benlliure's success in Rome extended beyond his individual artistic practice. He became the acknowledged leader of the Spanish art colony in the city and was appointed director of the Spanish Academy of Fine Arts, serving from 1903 to 1913. During his tenure, he oversaw important public commissions and state decorations, reinforcing his reputation as a significant cultural ambassador for Spanish art in Italy. After returning to Valencia, Benlliure continued his distinguished career in his homeland, serving as director of the Museu de Belles Artes de Valencia and, in 1930, as president of the San Carlos Academy. He died in Valencia on 5 April 1937.

Through works such as *Inside a Coffee House, Tunis*, we can appreciate not only Benlliure's artistic vision but also the sophisticated international art market of the late 19th century, in which Colnaghi played a crucial role in bringing Spanish Orientalist painting to discerning collectors worldwide.

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Fig. 1. An etching after the photograph illustrated in the 1892 *La Ilustración Española y Americana*

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