

ELLIOTT FINE ART

Nineteenth Century to Early Modern

Isidore Pils
(Paris 1813 – 1875 Douarenez)

The Barber

Signed and dated lower right: *I. Pils 1860*

Oil on canvas

55.9 x 46.6 cm. (22 x 18 ½ in.)

Provenance:

Private Collection, France;

Geoffrey Philippe, Royan, 5 December 1998, lot 12;

Sotheby's, London, 17 October 2001, lot 178;

Frayse et Associates, Paris, 13 April 2016, lot 64;

Private Collection, France, until 2023.



The soldier's in Isidore Pils' painting are members of the Zouave regiments, part of the French colonial army, known for their loose-fitting uniform in white and blue. Recruited primarily from the Kabyle Berber tribe from Algeria's mountainous region of Zouaou, these soldiers were renowned for their bravery and effectiveness in combat. Alongside their Tirailleur counterparts, who were drawn from other North African colonies, the Zouaves served as light infantry, developing a fearsome reputation.

Pils captures what must have been a familiar scene in a Zouave encampment during a moment of repose: a simple haircut. One Zouave sits smoking a cigarette, intently examining his reflection in a small hand-held mirror, while his comrade carefully trims around his ears, shaping his hair into the distinctive Kabyle style—shaved on the sides with a fuller top. Pils was clearly intrigued by this unique hairstyle, as seen in several of his other studies (fig. 1)

A watercolour of the same subject, with slight alterations in composition, was with Stephen Ongpin Fine Art in 2021 (fig. 2) Although one might assume it to be a preparatory sketch, it was clearly painted in 1863 - three years after the oil painting – and was perhaps completed by Pils as a memento of the oil painting.



Fig. 1, Isidore Pils, *Head study of a Kabyle, seen from behind*, oil on canvas, 25.5 x 21.5 cm, Private Collection



Fig. 2, Isidore Pils, *The Barber*, 1863, watercolour, 22 x 15.6 cm, Stephen Ongpin Fine Art

In 1860, Pils travelled to Algeria to prepare studies for a monumental painting commemorating Emperor Napoleon III's visit to the country, which had been under French rule since 1830. While in Algeria, Pils focused primarily on the northern region of Kabylia, where he sketched the landscape and people. His efforts produced a vast number of oil sketches, finished paintings, drawings, and watercolours, many depicting scenes involving

the Algerian colonial army. The final painting from this project, completed in 1867, measured nearly fifty feet in length. Though sadly been lost, its composition is known from an oil sketch in the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 3).



Fig. 3, Isidore Pils, *Reception of Emperor Napoleon II and Empress Eugenie by the Kabyle Leaders at Algiers on September 18, 1860*, c. 1862-67, oil on canvas, 64 x 110 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Pils had begun exploring military subjects in the early 1850s, a departure from his earlier focus on genre and religious scenes. He worked in a large military encampment at Vincennes, near Paris, likely motivated by Napoleon III's substantial government commissions, which sought to glorify military achievements. This shift in focus allowed Pils to get ahead of his contemporaries, as he began work on military-themed canvases even before the outbreak of the Crimean War. One of his most notable works from this period is the vast *Passage of the River Alma* from 1854, a nine-metre-wide canvas that required numerous preparatory sketches. Although the painting was completed in 1857, it wasn't exhibited until the 1861 Salon. Today, it resides in the Château de Versailles. While it's unclear if Pils personally witnessed the battles he depicted, the immediacy of some of his studies suggests he may have been present.

Born into a family of artists, Pils became a student of François-Édouard Picot at the École des Beaux-Arts. After winning the Prix de Rome in 1838, Pils spent five formative years in Italy, an experience that greatly influenced his early choice of subjects. His transition to military themes was a strategic move that earned him significant government commissions, including *Soldiers Distributing Bread and Soup to the Poor*, exhibited at the Salon of 1852. Unfortunately, this painting is now lost, but it earned Pils the considerable sum of 4,000 francs. In 1864, Pils, now one of the major painters of his time, was appointed professor at the École des Beaux-Arts, a well-deserved recognition of his artistic contributions, which included the decorative scheme of the Parisian Opéra and multiple Salon successes.