

# COLNAGHI



David Roberts,  
*Great Gateway, Leading to the Temple at  
Karnak, Thebes*



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DAVID ROBERTS

(Stockbridge 1796 – 1864 London)

*GREAT GATEWAY, LEADING TO THE TEMPLE AT KARNAK, THEBES*

Signed and inscribed lower left: "Leading to the Temple of Karnak. Thebes."

Pencil and watercolour on buff paper

37.5 x 29.5cm; (14 3/4 x 11 1/2 in.)

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On his trip around the Middle East David Roberts (1797–1864) arrived at Karnak on the 26th November 1838. He stayed there and worked for four full days, from dawn to twilight. The colossal ruins provided a spectacular subject for Roberts, and he sketched them from every possible angle: near and afar, above and below. To convey the gigantic scale, he included tiny figures in colourful Turkish garments. It is clear that the ruined state of Karnak's temples sparked his romantic sensibility. The composition of this original watercolour offers one of the most impressive views of the ruins of Karnak. At the centre we see the stupendous gateway that is situated on the western side of the grand enclosure that surrounded the whole of the sacred buildings. This vast gate was one of two in that wall by which the enclosure was formerly entered; they were of immense height, from seventy to eighty feet, and were, from the richness of their sculptured decorations as well as brilliancy of colour, most striking and impressive.

Beyond this gateway, on the right, we see the great Propylon and vast Obelisks. Through the centre of the gateway is a smaller gate, on the side of which is recorded, in the language and character of the Egyptians, the taking of Jerusalem by Shishak, king of Egypt during the reign of Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. In the foreground we see the double line of ruined Sphinxes that lead to the gateway itself. Roberts was a Scottish painter, the son of a shoemaker, he was apprenticed to a housepainter. From 1816 until 1830 he was employed in the theatre to design and paint stage scenery, first in Edinburgh and Glasgow and after 1822 in London. While in Scotland he met and worked with Clarkson Stanfield and later collaborated with him in London on dioramas and panoramas. Roberts exhibited his first easel painting in London in 1824 and at the Royal Academy in 1826 (*View of Rouen Cathedral*, no. 221; untraced).

In common with other contemporary painters of picturesque topography and architecture, such as Stanfield, J. D. Harding and James Holland, Roberts undertook journeys abroad in search of exotic or impressive subjects. He made his first visit to Spain in 1832-3, one of the first British artists to travel there. From Spain, Roberts briefly visited Morocco; later he made watercolours from sketches by other artists for engraving in T. H. Horne's *Landscape Illustrations of the Bible* (1836). These encounters with the oriental world, in the context of contemporary interest in exotic places, especially the lands of the Bible, encouraged him to undertake a tour of the Near East in 1838. He was one of the first independent and professional British artists to experience the Orient at first hand. Roberts arrived in Jerusalem at Easter 1839, having travelled from Egypt via Sinai and Petra; later he continued north to Lebanon and departed from Beirut in May. His drawings show his ability to create visually effective compositions from a variety of subjects. Roberts' eastern compositions reached a wide audience through 247 lithographs made by Louis Haghe. Originally published in parts, these were later bound into six volumes as *The Holy Land, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt and Nubia* (1842-9). He was elected ARA in 1838 and RA in 1841.



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## COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL  
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY  
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

[contact@colnaghi.com](mailto:contact@colnaghi.com)

## COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9  
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.  
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY  
BY APPOINTMENT

[spain@colnaghi.com](mailto:spain@colnaghi.com)

## COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065  
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY  
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

[newyork@colnaghi.com](mailto:newyork@colnaghi.com)

## COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30  
1000 BRUXELLES  
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

[brussels@colnaghi.com](mailto:brussels@colnaghi.com)