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Gustavo Simoni
With His Favourite, 1888

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GUSTAVO SIMONI

(Rome 1846 – Palestrina 1926)

WITH HIS FAVOURITE, 1888

Signed and dated lower right: "G. Simoni. Roma 1888."

Pencil and watercolour

91 × 61 cm (35 3/4 x 24 in.)

Provenance

Private collection.

Literature

Simoni, Gustavo. *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*. October 2011.

Gian Francesco Lomonaco. *Acquerelli dell'Ottocento, La Società degli Acquarellisti a Roma*, 1987

Renato Mammucari, *Acquerellisti romani: suggestioni neoclassiche, esotismo orientale, decadentismo bizantino, realismo borghese*, Edimond, 2001

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In 1888, Gustavo Simoni (1846-1926) created a painting that explored a popular Orientalist theme, *The Favourite*. Traditionally, the central figure is a voluptuous woman in a passive or alluring pose. She was typically depicted with fair skin to appeal to the Western male gaze. Her elaborate costume and jewellery were meant to evoke a sense of mystique and opulence.

Rather than depicting the conventional passive odalisque that dominated Western Orientalist art, Simoni presents us with a dynamic scene of musical performance. The composition centres on a reclining male figure positioned on an ornately decorated divan. At the same time, a young woman sits gracefully on the floor beside him, her skilled fingers drawing melody from a mandolin. This distinctive, almond-shaped stringed instrument holds significant symbolic importance within European artistic tradition—symbolising connections to poetry, artistic creation, and serving as a visual metaphor for romance and emotional expression. Simoni's technical mastery is evident throughout the work, especially in his exceptional use of colour. More notably, the painting demonstrates the artist's cultural refinement by echoing the Venetian Renaissance tradition of the 'musical courtesan'—a figure admired not just for beauty, but for artistic skill and talent. This refined reference elevates what might have been another Orientalist fantasy into a reflection on musical craftsmanship and authentic intercultural dialogue.

Simoni's journey towards this societal understanding began with his transformative trip to North Africa around 1877. Born in Rome into modest circumstances—his father Antonio was a barber—Simoni came from a family that produced two artists, as his younger brother Scipione also pursued an artistic career, as did three of Simoni's sons. He received formal training at Rome's prestigious Accademia di San Luca from 1861 to 1866. There, he studied under Salvatore Betti (1792-1883), Giuseppe Ferrari (1840-1905), and the Orientalist painter Enrico Tarenghi (1848-1938). However, formal training alone could not have instilled the cultural sensitivity evident in his mature works.

The decisive moment arrived in 1879 when Simoni set up a permanent studio in Tlemcen, northwestern Algeria, near the Moroccan border. This strategic location offered close access to the region's diverse traditions and customs. His extended stay, lasting nearly two decades, truly set him apart from European contemporaries who usually undertook brief sketching trips to exotic locations. By maintaining long-term engagement with North African society, Simoni developed a nuanced understanding that would transform his artistic approach.

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The evolution of Simoni's artistic vision becomes markedly clear when comparing his 1888 *Favourite* with his earlier 1874 treatment of the same theme. While both were painted in his Roman studio, the earlier picture was made three years before his first Eastern journey, and it adheres to Orientalist conventions. A young woman reclines in classical odalisque fashion on luxurious textiles, her flowing robes of pale blue and coral pink cascading around her. Her direct gaze engages the viewer as she lounges against diaphanous fabric and silks embodying the traditional Western fantasy of Eastern sensuality. The richly decorated interior creates an atmosphere of harem luxury, crafted specifically to meet European expectations of Oriental exoticism.

The 1888 interpretation demonstrates a significant artistic change. While the earlier work focuses on the female figure as an object of contemplation, the later painting shifts emphasis to musical performance and cultural exchange. This change from passive beauty to active musicianship reflects not only Simoni's artistic growth over fourteen years but also his deeper understanding of cross-cultural encounters gained through extended residency in North Africa.

Upon returning to Rome near the end of the century, Simoni instituted his own Orientalist school and became a founding member of the Associazione degli Acquerellisti Romani. His distinguished patronage, including King Umberto I of Italy, testified to the high regard in which his work was held. Through his Roman school, he influenced a generation of Italian artists, including Maria Martinetti (1864-1937) and Filiberto Sbardella (1909-1983). Simoni's mature Orientalist works occupy a crucial position within 19th-century European engagement with the East. Unlike many of his contemporaries who perpetuated Western stereotypes, his extended residence in North Africa enabled him to adopt an authentic and respectful approach to his subjects. His paintings featured mosques, festivals, markets, and scenes of everyday life, all rendered with the accuracy born of careful observation rather than exotic fantasy.

The 1888 *Favourite* stands as a masterpiece of evolved Orientalist painting, a work that transcends exoticism to offer genuine intercultural dialogue. It represents not only Simoni's artistic maturation but a pivotal moment in the broader evolution of European artists' engagement with Eastern societies. In this achievement, Simoni positioned himself as a crucial bridge between traditional Orientalist fantasy and the more socially sensitive approaches that would emerge in the twentieth century.

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