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Alberto Pasini
In Front of the Mosque

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ALBERTO PASINI

(Busseto 1826 – Cavoretto 1899)

IN FRONT OF THE MOSQUE

Signed lower right: "A. Pasini"

Oil on canvas

27.8 × 35 cm (10 3/4 x 13 3/4 in.)

Provenance:

Private Collection, Italy.

Exhibited:

Galleria Manzoni, 1975.

Literature

(2011, October 31). Pasini, Alberto. *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*. Retrieved 17 Sep. 2025, from <https://www.oxfordartonline.com/benezit/view/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.001.0001/acref-9780199773787-e-00136600>

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Aleksandra Medic (ed.). *The Art of Italian Painters from the Shafik Gabr Collection*, (The Shafik Gabr Collection, 2012).

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Alberto Pasini's (1826-1899) evocative canvas presents a masterful picture of daily life unfolding before a magnificent mosque, showcasing the artist's understanding of Islamic architecture and Oriental genre painting. The composition centres upon an imposing archway rendered in the distinctive Moorish style, its surface animated by an elaborate interplay of geometric patterns and flowing arabesque motifs executed in luminous turquoise, emerald green and vermillion, punctuated by delicate gold and ivory scrollwork that catches the light.

The architectural detail reveals Pasini's keen eye for Islamic decorative arts: the supporting column is crowned by an elaborate capital of composite design, its carved surfaces displaying the complex floral and abstract patterns characteristic of Islamic architectural ornamentation, a deliberate departure from the classical Western orders that speaks to the artist's commitment to authentic cultural representation. Beyond the ornate threshold, a heavy door opens onto mysterious shadow, inviting contemplation of the sacred space within.

Pasini populates this architectural stage with figures that breathe life into the scene. To the left, a dignified figure in pristine white robes and crimson fez stands sentinel beside his tethered horse near a screened window, while another robed figure in rich scarlet maintains his vigil by the mosque's entrance. Most poignant is the bearded elder seated upon the threshold steps, his head supported by a weathered hand in an attitude of contemplative repose, surrounded by a flock of pigeons. This touching vignette embodies the Islamic tradition of charitable acts and spiritual devotion through kindness to all living creatures.

The right side of the composition reveals a lively scene of a traditional café, where figures gather around a large kazan (a traditional metal cauldron) in the foreground, their presence offering a contrast to the mosque's solemnity and completing Pasini's detailed portrayal of Islamic urban life. Through this interaction of sacred architecture and everyday ritual, the artist achieves that rare blend of ethnographic precision and poetic vision that marks his finest Orientalist works.

This mastery of Islamic architectural detail and cultural authenticity stems from Pasini's unique artistic journey and extensive travels. Pasini was born in Bussetto, in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy, the youngest of five children to Giuseppe Pasini, a government commissioner, and Adelaida Clotti Balestra. Following his father's death when Alberto was only two years old, his mother relocated the family to Parma to live with her brother-in-law, Antonio Pasini (1770-1845). A distinguished painter, manuscript illuminator, and Professor of Miniature Painting at the Accademia di Belle Arti in the Duchy of Parma, where Antonio had served as portraitist to the local court from 1816. It was under his uncle's guidance and inspiration that young Alberto discovered his artistic calling.

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Following his formative training at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Parma under the guidance of Paolo Toschi (1788-1854), the renowned engraver and teacher who recognised his protégé's exceptional promise, Pasini embarked upon the requisite Parisian sojourn that would prove vital to his artistic development.

In the cosmopolitan studios of Paris, Pasini encountered Théodore Chassériau (1819-1856), the celebrated painter whose own Oriental subjects had captivated Salon audiences. It was through this mentor that the young Italian first glimpsed the artistic possibilities of the Islamic world. This encounter proved to be a catalyst for a series of life-changing journeys: his seminal expedition to Egypt in 1860, followed by an extended residency in Constantinople from 1867 to 1869, and subsequent travels through Asia Minor and Syria.¹ These journeys provided Pasini with an unparalleled visual archive of Islamic architecture and daily life, which he would mine throughout his career to create works of remarkable authenticity and atmospheric power. His mosque scenes, set against the sun-bleached walls and azure skies of North Africa, became particularly celebrated for their seamless integration of architectural grandeur with the intimate human drama of street life. This synthesis places him among the most perceptive chroniclers of the Islamic world in European art, and this particular work exemplifies the sophisticated cultural observation that distinguished his finest Oriental subjects.

¹ *The Art of Italian Painters from the Shafik Gabr Collection*, ed. Aleksandra Medic (The Shafik Gabr Collection, 2012), p. 28.

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