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Marie Lucas-Robiquet

*Taking Refreshment at Ain Sefra, Algeria, c. 1892 - 1904*



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MARIE ELISABETH AIMÉE ÉLIANE LUCAS-ROBIQUET  
(Avranches 1858 - 1959 Saint-Raphaël)

*TAKING REFRESHMENT AT AÏN SEFRA, ALGERIA, C. 1892 - 1904*

Signed lower left: "M. Lucas-Robiquet"

Oil on Canvas  
55 × 70.5 cm (21 3/4 x 27 3/4 in.)

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## Provenance

Rachel Liberman, Paris.

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## Literature

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Kelly, Mary, *French Women Orientalist Artists, 1861-1956, Cross-Cultural Contacts and Depictions of Difference*, Routledge, 2021.

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A group of male figures pause to enjoy refreshments at Aïn-Séfra, known as ‘the gateway to the Sahara’; an oasis town in northwestern Algeria situated in the Ksour Mountains, south of Oran. The scene was painted by Marie Lucas-Robiquet, who lived in North Africa between 1891 and 1904. Of her paintings, which were regularly exhibited at the Paris Salon, Lucas-Robiquet’s Orientalist subjects received the most critical acclaim. Her plein-air studies were praised by the critic René Morot as “*vibrating with light and sun.*”<sup>1</sup>

In the immediate foreground of this light-infused scene, a man serves food in front of what appears to be a dwelling—a structure made of mud and straw, typical of traditional homes in rural Algeria of that time. A small table is set with bowls and utensils, along with what might be a plate of brik or bourek, a regional savoury pastry introduced to Algeria during Ottoman rule (1516-1830). In front of the table stands a tin receptacle, possibly for washing the bowls, with a piece of fabric draped over the corner of the table. The cook may be serving couscous (semolina with stew), a regional favourite, to the youth patiently waiting with his donkey. Two figures, one reclining and the other standing, are positioned to the left of the picture, accompanied by a group enjoying their meal in the mid-ground. In the background, the dome or qubba of a mosque and the minarets are visible above the foliage. The sky is of a pale pink and blue hue, a scattering of light creating a soft, ethereal glow over this scene, characteristic of many of Lucas-Robiquet’s plein air compositions—those “*very sunny scenes so full of attraction, of poetry, which belong to an artist of the highest order.*”<sup>2</sup>

This painting may have served as a preliminary study for a larger composition in the collection of the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Nancy. The brush strokes on this version are more loosely applied than those in the Nancy painting, and the lighting differs. Lucas-Robiquet probably painted en plein air early in the day to avoid working in extreme heat, and she adjusted the sky’s tonality in the larger canvas to a vivid blue, beneath which the gathering enjoys its noonday repast.

Marie Lucas-Robiquet (1858 – 1959) was born in Normandy on 18 October 1858, to Henri Sébastien Robiquet, a retired naval officer, and Honorine Doublet. She refined her artistic skills under the mentorship of the history painter Félix Joseph Barrias (1822-1907), as women were not allowed to attend formal classes at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts before 1897. Lucas-Robiquet practised as an artist from 1880 to 1934; her work can be divided into three periods: 1880-1890, Portraiture; 1891-1909, Orientalist Period; and 1910-1934, French and Breton Genre painting. However, it was her Orientalist paintings that brought her the most recognition. Paris was the epicentre of creative life, and for over fifty years, Lucas-Robiquet exhibited just under a hundred paintings at the Salon as well as at regional fine arts societies in Nantes and Lyon; with a Union of Women Painters and Sculptors and at a Society of French Orientalist Painters’ Salon in Paris alongside esteemed

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<sup>1</sup> Morot, René, *Parisian Illustrated Review*, volume 2, 1897, pp.59-60.

<sup>2</sup> Morot, op cit. p.6.



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contemporaries such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), Étienne Dinet (1861-1929), and Léon Carré (1878-1942). The latter was founded in 1893 by Dinet and its president Léonce Bénédict (1859-1925). Salons were held annually until 1914 and sporadically thereafter until 1943.<sup>3</sup>

Although it was uncommon for women to travel alone during this period, Lucas-Robiquet journeyed to Algeria after meeting her husband in Paris, whom she married there in September 1891. Lieutenant Maurice Édouard Lucas (1862-1895) was born in Constantine, Algeria, to a French military family and served in the army with the Algerian Rifle Corps. The French had been present in Algeria since the conquest of 1830, which ended nearly four hundred years of Ottoman rule. Algeria remained a French colony until 1962.<sup>4</sup> Maurice Lucas returned to Algeria with his wife in 1891, where they settled in Biskra, a city in northern Algeria. She began painting Orientalist subjects in 1892. Sadly, her marriage was brief: in 1895, her husband died during military service, leaving her childless. She remained in North Africa until 1904, during which time she painted the people and cultures of the Maghreb, sending her paintings to Paris for annual exhibitions and sales. Her last Orientalist subject was displayed at the Paris salon in 1914. Lucas-Robiquet's Orientalist compositions primarily featured portraits, pictures of children, military scenes, market views, women at work, and plein air genre scenes. Paintings such as *Taking Refreshment in Ain-Sefra* became fascinating historical records, for the way of life depicted in them was being superseded as a consequence of colonisation and modernisation.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, artists began to move away from urban centres in Algeria, influenced by French town planning and architecture designed to attract foreign settlers. Instead, they explored the Algerian interior, where traditional lifestyles and indigenous cultures were still prevalent. When Lucas-Robiquet painted this scene, Ain Sefra was a garrison town and a supporter of popular resistance against colonisation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, Roger, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism and French North Africa 1880-1930*, University of California Press, p.292, footnote 38.

<sup>4</sup> For further information on this period in Algerian history, see McDougall, James. *A History of Algeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> <https://collections-mba.nancy.fr/fr/notice/1129-restaurant-en-plein-vent-a-ain-sefra-435edaac-d1ae-4604-8175-1cc7aa4f4a06> Accessed 22 June 2025.



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Fig. 1 Marie Lucas-Robiquet, *Restaurant en plein vent à Ain-Sefra*. Oil on canvas, 85.5 x 125 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy, accession no.1129.



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