

Depicting the prayer call



"Le Muezzin" by Jean-Léon Gérôme.



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By **Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt** June 3, 2010, 4:35 pm

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On June 2, Sotheby's, the world's most prestigious auction house and art-related financing company, sold one of the most celebrated Orientalist paintings ever created, "Le Muezzin," by Jean-Léon Gérôme.

The painting, which shows a man calling for prayer, has been in the same private collection for over 30 years and it was put on the market with an estimate of £350,000-500,000.

The Orient, as our region was called, which included Turkey, Greece, the Middle East, and North Africa, has extended its allure on the Western artists' imagination centuries prior to the turn of the 19th century. Figures in Middle Eastern dress appear in Renaissance and Baroque works by artists such as Bellini, Veronese and Rembrandt; the lavish eroticism of the harem was a major attraction to the French Rococo aesthetic.

Of these Western artists, and in fact one of the few who have actually visited 'The Orient' at the time, was Jean-Léon Gérôme. A French artist with an impressive number of medals, commissions and genres of painting under his name, Gérôme visited Egypt for the first time in 1856. It was that trip that would pioneer the start of many Orientalist paintings depicting Arab Muslim traditions and North African landscapes.

Of these works is the painting in question "Le Muezzin," painted in 1865. The piece is beautiful, with an unmistakable background of old Cairo, filled with the dusty buildings and multiple minarets. A particular aspect of that landscape is a high dome, suspected to be the dome of the most famed mosque of Sultan Hassan.

For many of those who are not distinctly aware of the Orientalist school of art, or at the least attentive to the nuances that distinguish one Orientalist painting from the other, this particular piece is a beauty. The attention to details, both in the impeccable approach to the Islamic architecture as well the intricacies of the Muezzin's spirituality in his call to prayer, is truly captivating.

Gérôme had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Middle East, gathered from his many visits to Egypt and the region, all of which were recorded in sketches he made on location. The loving attention with which he depicts the minaret is striking; his utmost respect to and fascination with the geometry and architectural spaces of Islamic architecture is instantly visible in the meticulous details.

Anyone who has spent merely a day in Cairo will have difficulty describing its sunny yet dusty air. The sky is a gray shade of blue, not cloudy but most certainly unclear. Not to wax poetic, but it feels as though it's a concoction of the city's smog, palpable heat and passionate breath of its people combined.

Gérôme, however, has managed to capture that perfect shade of sky color that can only be recognized in Cairo. The contrast of the shaded minaret in the foreground and the brightly lit heat of old Cairo in the background shows the skill of a master artist. It also shows the reverence that the artist held for the subject matter at hand.

Rarely have Orientalist painters not portrayed their subject in a decidedly exotic light, making the Orient appear like a scene from Aladdin. Despite their consistent magnificence, Orientalist paintings were not always true to what the Orient really was, adopting an inherently western point of view. Only a few artists managed to capture the true essence of Cairo, which is why

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"Le Muezzin" is held in quite a high regard.

Gérôme, a strongly anti-clerical Frenchman himself, admired the clergy-free independence of prayer that he encountered on his journeys to Egypt, and it shows in how he has treated the Muezzin in his painting.

With a firm stance, head held high and thrown back in calling, eyes closed in genuine faith of what he's calling for, the Muezzin is a beautiful portrayal of both the Islamic religion and its practitioners.

The emergence of this painting at auction is most timely, given the planned retrospective on Jean-Léon Gérôme at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles between June and September and then at the Muse d'Orsay in Paris later in the year. The retrospective, titled "The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme" will be the first major comprehensive exhibition of the artist's work in nearly 40 years.



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