



Gustav Wertheimer
The Halt of the Caravan

GUSTAV WERTHEIMER

Vienna 1847–1902 Paris

THE HALT OF THE CARAVAN, CAIRO, C. 1883

Signed lower right: "G. Wertheimer."

Oil on canvas

73.5 x 122.5 cm; 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

Publications

The Austrian Art Chronicle, no. 30, vol. VII, 1883.



The Halt of the Caravan captures a moment of stillness in the desert at what Wertheimer renders as the blue hour, that liminal interval between day and night when the quality of light is neither one thing nor the other. At the centre of the composition stands a figure in a white *thawb* and red turban, his hand resting on the halter of a large laden camel beside him. Nearby, a second figure crouches to tether the animal to a stake in the ground, a gesture of quiet purposefulness that anchors the scene in the practical rhythms of caravan life. Around them, camels are scattered across the middle ground, some kneeling, others standing, their dark forms silhouetted against the luminous sky. In the far distance, barely visible through the haze, the white minaret of a mosque and the pale outlines of a city mark the caravan's destination, while a cluster of palm trees to the right suggests the presence of an oasis.

The composition is wide and cinematic, its pronounced horizontal format emphasising the immensity of the desert and the smallness of the human figures within it. Wertheimer arranges his figures in a staggered recession, drawing the eye from the precisely observed foreground, the texture of the camel's hide, the folds of the central figure's robe, towards the softer, hazier forms of the caravan dissolving into the middle distance. The palette is one of warm ochres and siennas in the sandy ground and the camels' coats, set against the cool mauves and blues of the sky above. The brilliant white of the central figure's robe acts as a visual anchor, the single point of pure light in a composition otherwise suffused with the muted tones of dust and distance.

In the upper right corner, a slender crescent moon hangs in the deepening sky. It is the painting's most eloquent detail and its central ambiguity. Is this dawn, the caravan preparing to move off towards the city before the heat of the day? Or dusk, the travellers pausing after a long desert crossing as the light fades? Is the moon waxing or waning? Wertheimer offers no answer. The painting holds its moment suspended between journey and destination, between commerce and rest, rendering what might have been a straightforward record of Trans-Saharan trade as something closer to a meditation on time, distance and the timeless rhythms of desert travel.

Cairo had served as the great terminus of trans-Saharan trade for centuries, its great caravanserais, the khans and wikālas that lined the streets of the Fatimid city, built precisely to receive desert convoys, to house their merchants, stable their animals and store their goods before the final transaction. By the 1880s, the age of the great desert caravan was already drawing to a close, displaced by the railway and the steamship. There is no documented evidence that Wertheimer himself travelled to Egypt or the Near East; like a number of his Viennese contemporaries working in Paris, he constructed his Oriental subjects in the studio from reference materials, photographs and the accumulated visual culture of the Orientalist tradition. His painting captures not a scene directly observed but an imagined world on the cusp

of disappearance, and it is perhaps precisely this imaginative distance that gives *The Halt of the Caravan* its peculiarly dreamlike quality.¹

The caravan halt was among the most frequently painted subjects in the Orientalist repertoire. Gérôme, Fromentin and Léon Belly had all depicted it, typically emphasising the visual drama of massed animals and robed figures against an expanse of desert. What distinguishes Wertheimer's interpretation is its mood, contemplative, suspended, suffused with a quality of longing that owes as much to German Romanticism as to French Orientalism. Trained in Vienna and Munich before he arrived in Paris in 1882, Wertheimer was steeped in the tradition of Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), whose paintings return obsessively to the figure dwarfed by immensity, the human presence diminished but not extinguished by the vastness of landscape, and to the liminal moment, dawn or dusk, the crescent moon, as a space of spiritual ambiguity. These preoccupations flow directly into *The Halt of the Caravan*; its central figure stands at the threshold between journey and destination, while the crescent moon above refuses to declare whether the day is beginning or ending. The result is something the French Orientalist tradition rarely achieved: a caravan painting that functions simultaneously as a documentary evocation and as meditation on time, solitude and the infinite.²

This fusion of Orientalist precision and Romantic mood was recognised by Wertheimer's contemporaries. The painting was published in the *Austrian Art Chronicle* as no. 30 in volume VII in 1883, placing it at the height of his Orientalist period.

Gustav Wertheimer was born in Vienna on 28 January 1847. He received his early training at the Akademie der bildenden Künste under Joseph von Führich, before continuing his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich under Wilhelm von Dietz. In 1882, he moved to Paris, where he would spend the remainder of his career and achieve his greatest recognition. He exhibited regularly at the Salon des Artistes Français and at the Société des Artistes Français. He was awarded medals in Amsterdam, London, New Orleans and Paris, receiving an honourable mention at the Exposition Universelle of 1889, the year to which the present work is dated, and a further honourable mention at the Exposition Universelle of 1900.

¹ On Cairo as caravan terminus: Nelly Hanna, *Making Big Money in 1600: The Life and Times of Ismail Abu Taqiyya, Egyptian Merchant*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1998. For the broader context of trans-Saharan trade and Cairo's role as terminus see also André Raymond, *Cairo: City of History*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, pp.1–30.

² German Romanticism and Friedrich: On the Rückenfigur and Friedrich's influence on nineteenth century European landscape painting see Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, London: Reaktion Books, 1990. On the relationship between German Romanticism and French Orientalism see John MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995, pp.45–72.



Gustav Wertheimer in his studio, Paris, c. 1887-92
Albumen print, 25.4 × 30.5 cm

Wertheimer worked across history painting, portraiture and genre scenes, but it was his Orientalist subjects and his paintings of lions that attracted the most sustained critical attention. His 1886 Salon submission, *Le repas des lions chez Pezon* (Lions Eating at Pezon), was singled out for widespread praise and established his reputation in Paris. His work is described in Benezit as taking on "a fantastic character, seeming to belong to the realm of dreams", a quality that places him at the intersection of academic Orientalism and the emerging Symbolist movement with which he was increasingly associated in the 1890s. In 1897, he participated in the last Salon de la Rose-Croix, the exhibition series organised by the writer Joséphin Péladan that stood at the heart of French Symbolism, confirming the dual character of an art that moved between observed reality and interior vision.³ His works entered the collections of the Belvedere in Vienna and the Indianapolis Museum of Art, and

³ On the Austrian Art Chronicle and the Salon de la Rose-Croix: *Oesterreichische Kunst-Chronik* (Austrian Art Chronicle), vol. VII, no. 30, 1883. On the Salon de la Rose-Croix see Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France: Joséphin Péladan and the Salons de la Rose-Croix*, New York: Garland, 1976.

were represented in significant private collections devoted to nineteenth-century Orientalist painting. Wertheimer died in Paris on 24 August 1904, aged fifty-seven.⁴

The *Halt of the Caravan* remains among the most accomplished of Wertheimer's Orientalist works, bringing together the academic discipline of his Viennese training, the atmospheric subtlety of his Paris years and the Romantic sensibility that would increasingly define his mature practice.

⁴ Wertheimer, Gustav, ' *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*, Oxford Art Online, Oxford University Press, 2011.

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