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Georges Clairin
*The Noble Lady (Sarah Bernhardt) visiting
an Antiques Shop*

GEORGES CLAIRIN

Paris 1843 – Belle-Île-en-Mer, 1919

THE NOBLE LADY (SARAH BERNHARDT) VISITING AN ANTIQUES SHOP, C. 1889

Signed lower left: "G. Clairin"

Oil on canvas

111 x 161 cm; 43 ¾ x 63 ½ in.

Provenance

Anonymous Sale, Galerie Georges Petit Paris, March, 1920, lot 26;
Eastern Encounters: Paintings of Greece and The Middle East, Sotheby's London, October 2000,
Lot. 27;
Private Collection, Spain.

Exhibitions

Harem: Geheimnis des Orients, Kunsthalle Krems, Krems-Stein, Austria, 14. 08 . 2005 - 13 . 11 . 2005.

De Delacroix À Kandinsky, L'orientalisme en Europe:

Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique (15. 10. 2010 – 09. 01. 2011);

Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung München (28. 01. 2011– 01. 05. 2011);

Musées des Beaux-Arts de Marseille (Réunion des Musées Nationaux de France, rmn) (27. 05. 2011 – 28 08. 2011).

Publications

Harem: Geheimnis des Orients, Tayfun Belgin, Kunsthalle Krems, 2005, p. 87;

De Delacroix à Kandinsky: L'orientalisme en Europe, Odile Cavalier, Hazan, 2010, p. 307.

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The scene is set in the interior of an antique dealer's shop in the Near East, its walls and surfaces crowded with the accumulated luxury of the Islamic world: embroidered textiles in scarlet and turquoise heavy with gold thread, brass vessels, a tiger pelt whose head rests near the central figure's feet, and an elaborately adorned saddle that is apparently the object of her attention. That central figure is Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), the most celebrated actress in late nineteenth-century France, here cast as an elegant noblewoman absorbed in the pleasures of acquisition.

Bernhardt is dressed entirely in white, a flowing tunic of patterned silk catching the light, a white veil framing her face, and the contrast between this luminous stillness and the saturated colour of the objects surrounding her is the painting's central visual argument. Clairin deploys a pronounced chiaroscuro, placing his subject against a shadowed interior that renders her radiance all the more absolute. To her left, the tall dark-skinned figure of an attendant holding a staff faces the viewer, his head turned to his left so that his face is visible only in profile, his expression inscrutable. Between this figure and Bernhardt, a sleek black greyhound stands close against her, its face tucked beneath her right hand and resting against her thigh, a gesture of quiet intimacy. Behind Bernhardt, a turbaned merchant leans forward from the shadows, alert to the transaction in progress.

The composition is asymmetric and deliberately theatrical. The strong vertical of the attendant's figure anchors the left of the canvas, while a receding diagonal of heaped textiles draws the eye rightward and inward towards the merchandise, inviting the viewer to linger over its surfaces as Bernhardt herself appears to do. Beyond the shadowed interior, a glimpse of whitewashed architecture and brilliant blue sky establishes the North African setting with economical precision.

Clairin's particular gift as an Orientalist was his ability to render texture with almost tactile conviction, the sheen of silk against velvet, the warmth of embroidered gold, the roughness of the tiger pelt, and nowhere is that gift more fully deployed than here. The painting offers its European audience a compounded fantasy: the sensory abundance of the Orient, mediated by the presence of the most famous woman in Paris. Bernhardt was herself a voracious collector of exotic objects, costumes and curiosities,¹ and the painting operates simultaneously as Orientalist fantasy and as an oblique portrait of the woman at its centre.

¹ Stéphanie Cantarutti et Cécile Champy-Vinas, *Sarah Bernhardt: Et la Femme Créa la Star*, Paris Musées, 2023. An exhibition held at the Petit Palais in Paris, 14 April to 27 August 2023, featuring around 400 objects including works from Bernhardt's personal collection.

The Noble Lady visiting an Antiques Shop belongs to one of the most celebrated artistic partnerships of the Belle Époque. Georges Clairin and Sarah Bernhardt first met in 1869 and remained inseparable companions for the rest of their lives. He was among her closest confidants, most devoted admirers and, for a time, her lover. Over the course of their friendship, Clairin painted her more than a hundred times, in character and out of it, in costume and in repose, becoming in affect her official portraitist and one of the principal architects of her visual legend. He designed costumes for her productions, created posters for her performances and illustrated her 1878 memoir *Dans les Nuages*, an account of a hot air balloon voyage over Paris that perfectly captures the spirit of a woman for whom the boundaries between life and performance were permanently dissolved.²



Sarah Bernhardt and Georges Clairin (undated).
Anonyme BnF, Département des Arts du Spectacle, Paris, France.

² Sarah Bernhardt, *Dans les Nuages: Impressions d'une Chaise*, Paris: G. Charpentier, 1878, illustrated by Georges Clairin.

Bernhardt's own relationship with the East was direct and deeply felt. She performed in Constantinople on multiple occasions, in 1888, 1893, 1904 and 1908, including a celebrated performance of *La Dame aux Camélias* for Sultan Abdulhamid II, for which she received a medal from the Sultan himself. In 1888, she also travelled to Egypt, where she played to packed audiences, and her appetite for the material culture of the Orient was legendary. Her Paris home and studio were filled with exotic textiles, antiquities, animal skins and collected curiosities from her travels, the very world that Clairin recreates with such loving precision in this painting.³

Yet the painting itself was almost certainly not made on location. Clairin's Eastern travels, Morocco between 1868 and 1871, and Egypt with the composer Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) in 1895, did not coincide with Bernhardt's own journeys. The props, textiles, saddlery and objects that fill the canvas were most likely drawn instead from the accumulated collections of painter and subject equally, assembled in the studio with the meticulous care of a theatre designer constructing a set. This was common practice among Orientalist painters of Clairin's generation; in this case, the studio construction carries an additional charge: the woman at the centre of the scene had actually been to the places it evokes, had actually performed before the Sultan whose world the painting imagines. The fantasy is grounded, however obliquely, in lived experience.

That grounding gives the painting a particular richness within the context of *Beyond the Threshold*. Where many of the works in this exhibition document what Western artists could observe from doorways and commercial margins, Clairin's painting reverses the dynamic: here it is the European woman who has crossed the threshold into the Eastern world, and the painter who reconstructs that crossing from the comfortable distance of a Parisian studio.

Georges Clairin was born in Paris in 1843 and received his early training in the studios of Isidore Pils (d.1875) and François-Édouard Picot (1786-1868) before entering the École des Beaux-Arts in 1861. The most formative influence on his development, however, was neither of these masters but his fellow student and closest friend, Henri Regnault (1843-1871), under whose guidance Clairin first encountered the subjects that would define his career. The two travelled together to Brittany and Spain before making their first journey to Morocco in 1868, returning in 1869 to establish a studio in Tangier. In 1871, Clairin spent several months in Morocco, visiting Tétouan in the

³ For Bernhardt's tours to Constantinople and Egypt see Chapter 26 of *Sarah Bernhardt as I Knew Her: The Memoirs of Mme Pierre Berton as told to Basil Woon*, London: Hurst and Blackett, 1923. <https://www.mirror-service.org/sites/ftp.ibiblio.org/pub/docs/books/gutenberg/5/9/5/1/59511/59511-h/59511-h.htm>

company of the Catalan painter Mariano Fortuny y Marsal (1838-1874), whose mastery of colour, surface, and the rendering of exotic textiles left a lasting mark on his practice. That same year, the Franco-Prussian War claimed Regnault's life, a loss that affected Clairin deeply and deprived French painting of one of its most gifted younger voices.

Clairin made his debut at the Paris Salon in 1866 with *Épisode d'une razzia dans le désert* (Episode of a raid in the desert) and *Un campement de nomades* (A nomadic camp), reflecting an early interest in Orientalist themes. He went on to exhibit regularly at both the Salon des Artistes Français and the Salon des Artistes Algériens et Orientalistes in Algiers, building a reputation as a painter of exceptional decorative gifts and meticulous attention to surface and texture. He was awarded a silver medal at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889, the year to which the present work is dated, and named Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur in 1897. Alongside his easel paintings, Clairin received some of the most prestigious public commissions available to a French painter of his generation. Charles Garnier engaged him to paint three ceilings and six panels for the Opéra Garnier and to complete the monumental staircase left unfinished by Pils at his death. Further commissions followed for the Paris Bourse, the Sorbonne, the Hôtel de Ville and the Eden-Théâtre, establishing Clairin as one of the leading decorative painters of the Belle Époque.

His subsequent travels took him to Italy, Spain, Algeria and, in 1895, to Egypt in the company of the composer Camille Saint-Saëns, visiting Luxor, the West Bank of the Nile and Thebes. These journeys sustained a lifelong fascination with the cultures and material life of North Africa and the Near East that recurs throughout his oeuvre, from intimate genre scenes to the sumptuously dressed Oriental figures for which he became particularly celebrated.



Georges Clairin, *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt as Cleopatra*, 1893,
Oil on panel, 234 x 140 cm.

Inscribed "À Sarah Bernhardt, son ami", G. Clairin, 1893.

National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana, Cuba, accession no. 91-302.

It was through his friendship with Sarah Bernhardt, however, that Clairin's reputation has proved most enduring. He painted her more than a hundred times over the course of their long companionship, in her most celebrated roles and out of them, designing costumes for her productions and posters for her performances, and illustrating her 1878 memoir *Dans les Nuages*. He was, in every sense, the principal visual chronicler of the most famous woman of his age. In later life, Clairin divided his time between Paris and Brittany, where Bernhardt maintained her beloved property on Belle-Île-en-Mer. It was there that he died in 1919, aged seventy-six.

The Noble Lady visiting an Antiques Shop is many things simultaneously: an Orientalist fantasy assembled with theatrical precision, a portrait of the most famous woman of the age, and a testament to one of the most creatively fertile friendships in the history of nineteenth-century French art. That Clairin chose to place Bernhardt at the centre of this richly imagined Eastern world was not merely a gesture of admiration. It was an act of portraiture that understood its subject perfectly, a woman who had actually crossed into that world, and who carried its textures and colours back to Paris.

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