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ANTIQUES



Emile Claus
The Afternoon Rest

EMILE CLAUS

Waregem 1849–1924 Astene

THE AFTERNOON REST, C. 1900

Signed and inscribed upper left: "Emile Claus Tlemcem"

Oil on canvas

65.5 x 100.5 cm; 25 3/4 x 39 1/2 in.

Provenance

Anonymous Sale, Palais de Beaux-Arts-Servarts, Brussels, December, 1998, Lot. 759/a;
Private Collection, Spain.



The Afternoon Rest features two *Gnaoui* musicians resting against a whitewashed wall in the fierce heat of a North African afternoon. The figure on the left reclines languidly on a striped carpet, his cream-coloured *djellaba* falling open to reveal bare arms and feet, a small coffee cup held loosely in his right hand. His companion sits upright beside him, arms folded across his knees, his expression alert and self-contained. Between and around them lie the tools of their craft: a *guembri*, the long-necked lute central to *Gnaoui* music, hangs against the wall, its metal *qraqeb* castanets suspended nearby, while a drum rests to the left, and additional pairs of *qraqeb* are scattered on the carpet at the reclining figure's feet. A small red object and a pair of babouches complete the foreground. The setting is minimal to the point of austerity: whitewashed wall, striped carpet, hard ground, and it is this starkness that highlights the two figures, their instruments, and the overwhelming midday light, making them stand out vividly.

What distinguishes *The Afternoon Rest* from the generality of Orientalist figure painting is the light. Claus does not flatter or romanticise; he observes with the precision of a painter for whom light is not atmosphere but fact. The North African midday sun falls with absolute uniformity on everything it touches: the whitewashed wall, the striped carpet, the instruments and the two figures. There is no drama here; Claus gives us the flat, unrelenting illumination of a Mediterranean afternoon, in which shadows are sharp-edged and colours bleach toward white at their centres. It is exactly the quality of light he spent his career pursuing on the banks of the Lys in the Flemish countryside, intense and enveloping, albeit transferred to an entirely different latitude. The skin tones of the two figures are handled with particular care and sensitivity, built up with the same patient attention to tonal variation that characterises his finest Flemish work. The composition is rigorously simple: two figures, a wall, a carpet, a cluster of instruments, and it is that simplicity that gives the painting its authority.

The painting is signed and inscribed "Emile Claus, Tlemçen," locating it precisely in one of Algeria's most ancient and culturally significant cities. Situated in the far northwest of the country, close to the Moroccan border, Tlemçen had been for centuries a centre of Islamic scholarship, Andalusian culture and artisanal craft, its medieval mosques and gardens earning it the epithet *the Pearl of the Maghreb*.¹ By the time Claus visited in 1879, it had been under French colonial administration for nearly three decades, yet retained a distinctly Moorish character that drew European artists and travellers seeking an authentic encounter with North African life.

¹ The epithet derives from Tlemçen's exceptional heritage of Andalusian-Islamic architecture, scholarship and craft traditions, developed during its period as capital of the Ziyyanid sultanate (1236–1554).

The two figures at rest are *Gnaoui*, members of a musical and spiritual brotherhood whose origins trace to West and sub-Saharan Africa, their ancestors brought north through the trans-Saharan trade routes between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Over time, *Gnaoui* culture evolved as a richly blended tradition, weaving together Islamic devotion, Sufi mysticism and African spiritual practice into a distinctive ceremonial world. Their most sacred ritual is the *lila*, an all-night ceremony of music, incense and possession intended for healing, spirit appeasement and communal cohesion in which their instruments play an indispensable role.²

The instruments are rendered with a painter's curiosity and an ethnographer's precision. The *sintir*, or *guembri*, hangs against the whitewashed wall behind the figures, a three-stringed bass lute with a characteristically rectangular body of hollowed wood covered in camel skin, its sound deep, buzzing and hypnotic, as much percussion as melody. Suspended beside it are the *qraqeb*, large iron castanets played in pairs, their metallic clatter providing the rhythmic spine of *Gnaoui* performance. To the left of the reclining figure sits the drum. Together, these instruments are not merely musical tools; they are sacred objects, carriers of a spiritual tradition that stretches back centuries. That Claus has painted them with care, observing their construction, their texture, the casual intimacy with which they are set aside during a moment of rest, suggests a genuine curiosity that goes beyond the picturesque.³

The Afternoon Rest is a surprising painting. Émile Claus is not an artist one instinctively associates with North Africa. His reputation rests on the flat, luminous landscapes of the River Lys in his native Flanders, the meadows, waterways and agricultural rhythms of rural Belgium painted in a light that is soft, diffuse and northern. He was, above all, a painter of place, and that place was unequivocally home. Yet in 1879, before he had settled at his beloved cottage *Zonneschijn* in Astène, before he had founded *Vie et Lumière* and before the world had quite decided what kind of painter he was, Claus travelled to Spain and North Africa, and Tlemçen stopped him in his tracks.

What connected Flanders and Algeria for Claus was not subject matter but light. The quality he pursued his entire career, intense, enveloping and transformative, exists in North Africa in its most extreme glare. The Algerian midday sun is simply the Flemish summer sun pushed to its logical conclusion. In painting these two *Gnaoui* musicians against their whitewashed wall, Claus was not abandoning his sensibility but testing it against a new and more demanding set of atmospheric conditions. The result is a

² For the *Gnaoui* tradition and the *lila* ceremony, see Cynthia Becker, 'Gnawa Music and the *Lila*: Trance, Healing, and Transformation', in *The Garland Handbook of African Music*, ed. Ruth Stone, New York, 2008.

³ The *sintir* is recognised by UNESCO as an element of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, inscribed in 2019 as part of the Gnawa music of Morocco.

painting that sits slightly apart from the main body of his work, neither typically Flemish nor typically Orientalist, and is all the more compelling for it. It is the work of a painter momentarily freed from his own established identity, looking at an unfamiliar world with fresh and receptive eyes.

Émile Claus was born on 27 September 1849 in Sint-Eloois-Vijve, a small village on the banks of the River Lys in West Flanders, the twelfth of thirteen children. His father, a grocer and publican, had no ambitions for his son beyond a respectable trade, and the young Claus was duly dispatched as a baker's apprentice to Lille, where he learned French but little else that interested him. He subsequently worked for the Belgian Railways and as a representative in the flax trade, occupations that left him ample time to nurture his aspiration to become a painter. It was the composer Peter Benoit (1834-1901), a family acquaintance, who finally persuaded his father to allow him to study, and from 1869 to 1874 Claus trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp under the landscape painter Jacob Jacobs (1812-1879) and Nicaise De Keyser (1813-1887), paying for his studies himself.

After graduating, he remained in Antwerp, painting portraits and genre scenes, before travelling to Spain and North Africa in 1879, the journey that produced *The Afternoon Rest*. In 1883, he settled permanently at a cottage he named *Zonneschijn*, Sunshine, in Astène, near Deinze, where he would live and work for the remainder of his life. From his living room, he looked out across the River Lys, and it was that view, in all its seasonal and atmospheric variations, that would define his mature work. Stimulated by his friend, the writer Camille Lemonnier (1844-1913) and increasingly influenced by the French Impressionists, above all Claude Monet (1840-1926), whose work he encountered during winter visits to Paris between 1889 and 1892, Claus developed the luminous, light-saturated style that became known as Belgian Luminism. In 1904, he founded a group of artists known as *Vie et Lumière*, Life and Light, and became known as the *Painter of the Sun*. His circle was remarkable: Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), Émile Zola (1840-1902), Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) and Emile Verhaeren (1855-1916) were among his friends, and in 1887 the Belgian royal family purchased his painting *The Picnic*. He was elected a member of the Royal Academy of Science, Letters and Fine Arts of Belgium in 1911.

The First World War interrupted his settled, sun-drenched life. Claus fled to London, where he painted a celebrated series of Thames views in the manner of Monet, among his most purely Impressionist works. He returned to Belgium in 1918 to find his fame diminished by the rising tide of Expressionism but was honoured with a retrospective exhibition in Brussels in 1921. He died at Astène on 14 June 1924.⁴

⁴ Claus, Emile." *Grove Art Online*. 2003

The Afternoon Rest occupies an ambiguous and fascinating position within Claus's career and the Orientalist tradition. These two *Gnaoui* musicians, observed with technical precision and so little sentiment, remain on one level types rather than individuals with histories. And yet the instruments set carefully beside them, the coffee cup, the quality of absolute stillness in the afternoon heat; these details insist on something more. Claus may have been an unlikely witness, but he was an honest one.

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