



Gustav Bauernfeind

At the Door of the Umayyad Mosque, Damascus

GUSTAV BAUERNFEIND

German, 1848-1904

AT THE DOOR OF THE Umayyad Mosque, Damascus. C. 1889–91

Oil on canvas

109.2 x 83.8 cm; 19 1/2 x 14 3/4 in.

Provenance

The Travel Sale, Sotheby's London, October, 2003, Lot. 49;
Private Collection, Spain.

Literature

Gustav Bauernfeind - Gemaelde Und Aquarelle: 5 (Monographien Zur Bildenden Kunst), Petra Versteegh-Kühner Frankfurt/M, 1995, p. 218).

Publications

Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts, John M. MacKenzie, Manchester University Press, 1995, p. 60;
Les Orientalistes peintres voyageurs, Lynne Thornton, ACR Edition, 2001, p. 198;
Camillo Sitte: The Birth of Modern City Planning: With a Translation of the 1889 Austrian Edition of His City Planning According to Artistic Principles (Dover Architecture), Camillo Sitte and Christiane Crasemann Collins, p. 371.



Gustav Bauernfeind's painting depicts an elderly gatekeeper seated at the entrance of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. Its power lies in its architectural precision and the quality of attention Bauernfeind brings to every surface: stone, tile, textile and light.

The composition is structured around thresholds. The stone archway in the foreground draws the eye towards the brightly-lit courtyard beyond, while the contrast between the shadowed interior and the sun-drenched *sahn* beyond creates a powerful sense of depth and distance. A seated figure, the gatekeeper, is positioned on the right, surrounded by the objects left by worshippers at the threshold: shoes, a staff, a sword and muskets resting against the wall, each one marking the boundary between secular and sacred space. The open doorway frames a glimpse of activity in the mosque's sun-flooded *courtyard*: distant figures, columns, the animated life of a space the viewer cannot enter.

On the left, a ledge holds small dishes and a coffee pot, quiet evidence of daily life at the threshold; nearby, a figure crouches, absorbed in counting prayer beads. Bauernfeind uses a rich palette dominated by earth tones, ochres, browns and reds, which convey the warmth and particular quality of Damascene light. The vibrant red boots discarded beside the warden provide a focal point, light and shadow emphasising the roughly hewn stone of the portal and the soft drapery of the gatekeeper's robes.

Bauernfeind was known for his meticulous attention to architectural detail, a quality inseparable from his training as an architect and nowhere more apparent than in his rendering of the geometric tilework above the inner portal, decorated with multi-pointed stars and interlocking squares, and the *ablaq*¹ masonry of alternating light and dark stone. Yet for all its formal richness, the painting holds a structural argument: we are positioned, with the painter, at the entrance. The courtyard is visible but unreachable. This is precisely what Bauernfeind was permitted to observe, and no more.

The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus was one of the most renowned and frequently visited holy sites in the Islamic world, celebrated for the scale of its building and the beauty of the mosaic decoration in its prayer hall. The site carried the weight of three millennia of consecrated use: an Aramaean temple in the ninth century BCE, a Roman temple dedicated to Jupiter in the first century CE,² a Christian Basilica dedicated

¹ *Ablaq* refers to the technique of alternating courses of light and dark stone, typically limestone and basalt, characteristic of Levantine Islamic architecture and particularly associated with Mamluk-era buildings in Damascus and Cairo. See Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), p.146.

² Burns, Ross, *Damascus: A History*, London: Routledge, 2007, p.16.

to St John the Baptist in 391 CE, before it became a mosque following the Islamic conquest of Damascus in 634 CE. The mosque itself was completed in 715 CE. The building's authority rested not only in its antiquity but also in its role within Islamic devotional life. An eighth-century tradition, attributed to the Sunni Islamic scholar Sufyan al-Thauri (716-778 CE), ranked the efficacy of prayers offered at the mosque at thirty thousand, third in sanctity after Mecca and Jerusalem alone.³

The mosque was built under the Caliphate of al-Walid I (r. 705-715 CE), a ruler who was, by all contemporary accounts, consumed by the ambition to build, his reign defined as much by its monuments as its conquests. Its gilded glass mosaics, which once covered the entirety of the prayer hall and courtyard porticos, shimmered and glittered in the Syrian light, producing an effect that medieval visitors struggled to find words adequate to describe. For Bauernfeind, trained as an architect before he became a painter, the mosque would have represented an encounter unlike any other on his Eastern travels. Throughout its history, the mosque was intermittently ravaged by earthquakes and fires, from 1069 through to the great fire of 1893, just five years after Bauernfeind stood at its threshold.

Bauernfeind arrived in Damascus in December 1888, during his third journey to the Middle East. His first visit to the region, which had included time in Palestine, ran from 1880 to 1881; his second, between 1884 and 1887, took in Beirut, Damascus and Jaffa, where he met his future wife. It was on this third journey, travelling from Jaffa by steamer to Beirut and then inland to Damascus, that he encountered the subject that would produce some of his most celebrated work.

He quickly became a well-known figure in the city, travelling its streets and sketching every day, weather permitting. On 2 December 1888, pausing sketching in the cotton bazaar, he visited the Umayyad Mosque for the first time. The encounter was immediate and decisive. In his diary, he recorded: "*Between the various stalls of a covered bazaar street, there opens up a small side entrance of a mosque, inviting the faithful to its luminous court and playing fountain....*"⁴ The architectural eye is unmistakable. What arrested him was not merely a picturesque scene but a compositional and structural problem of the first order: how to render, in paint, a threshold that was both visually compelling and socially absolute.

³ See Walker, Bethany J., *Commemorating the Sacred Spaces of the Past: The Mamluks and the Umayyad Mosque at Damascus*, *Near Eastern Archaeology*, March 2004, Vol. 67, No. 1, pp. 26-39 (entire article), reference to al-Thauri, p. 27.

⁴ Versteegh-Kühner, Petra S. *Gustav Bauernfeind: Gemälde und Aquarelle*. Monographien zur bildenden Kunst, Band 5. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996. p. 218.

As a non-Muslim, Bauernfeind was forbidden from entering the mosque. Access to one of Islam's great sacred sites was not a matter of charm or persistence; it required negotiation of a particular and delicate kind. He resolved this by bribing the gatekeepers, who granted him informal permission to sketch from the mosque's portals. He invested considerable sums engaging his dragoman, identified in his diary as Daud, to help him navigate the social and religious sensitivities of the city, and in recruiting figures from the streets to serve as models for the paintings he was assembling.⁵

What emerged from this sustained campaign of access was not a single painting but a series. The present work is one of several in which Bauernfeind systematically documented the accessible thresholds of the Umayyad Mosque, each depicting a different portal and the particular view it afforded of the forbidden interior. Taken together, they constitute a remarkable architectural survey of what a non-Muslim observer could see, and no more, of one of Islam's great sacred monuments. On 22 December, he returned to make a watercolour of one of the entrances; the finished paintings were worked up after his return to Germany, dated 1890.

⁵ Christie's, London, *Orientalist Art*, Sale 17698, 29 April 2019, lot 10. The catalogue entry draws on A. Carmel and H. Schmid, *Bauernfeind: Ein Maler aus Württemberg im Heiligen Land* (Stuttgart, 1982) for the diary details concerning Bauernfeind's movements in Damascus in December 1888.



Gustav Bauernfeind (1848-1904)
Damaskus (North Gate of the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus), 1890
Oil on panel, 121 x 97 cm
The Lusail Museum, Qatar Museums, Doha, OM.699.

The present work is the most intimate of the known series. Where other versions command a broader view of the mosque's forecourt and *sahn*, here Bauernfeind places us at the narrowest of thresholds: a single portal, a seated guardian, a scattering of discarded shoes. The courtyard is glimpsed but unreachable. It is a composition of disciplined restraint, shaped as much by what the artist was refused as by what he was permitted to see.

Gustav Bauernfeind was born in 1848 in Sulz am Neckar in Baden-Württemberg, the son of Johann Baptist Bauernfeind, a pharmacist, and his wife Anna Maria Adrion.⁶ He trained as an architect at the Stuttgart Polytechnic Institute, subsequently entering the practice of Adolf Gnauth (1840--1884), architect and professor at the Nuremberg School of Design. It was during this period, and on a formative trip to Italy in 1873-1874, that Bauernfeind's artistic ambitions began to take shape. His early work, depicting landscapes of German, Swiss and Italian provincial scenes, found little commercial success, and he was advised to look elsewhere for his subject matter.

The advice proved transformative. Encouraged by his sister and brother-in-law, who were living in Beirut, Bauernfeind made his first journey to the Middle East in 1880-1881, taking in Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. A second trip followed in 1884-1887, during which he met his future wife, Elise Bertsch, in Jaffa. His third journey, from 1888 to 1889, was his most extensively documented and would produce some of the most celebrated works of his career, including the present series of paintings of the Umayyad Mosque. His son Otto Heinrich was born in January 1889, possibly during this third Eastern journey. Bauernfeind returned to Munich in 1890.

He could not stay away. In 1896, Bauernfeind left Germany permanently, settling first in the German colony in Jaffa before moving to Jerusalem in 1898 with Elise and Otto. It was a decision that set him apart from virtually every other Orientalist painter of his generation. Where contemporaries such as Rudolf Ernst and Ludwig Deutsch reconstructed the East in their Parisian studios, Bauernfeind chose to live in the world he painted. Yet the move came at a cost. He was, by all accounts, ill-suited to the business of self-promotion, and his final years in Jerusalem were shadowed by financial hardship. He died on Christmas Eve 1904 while decorating the family Christmas tree, aged fifty-six. Elise survived him by just three years, leaving their son Otto an orphan.

Despite the painful circumstances of his early life, Otto Heinrich Bauernfeind went on to distinguish himself in his own right. Repatriating to Germany, he received his father's remaining estate of artworks in 1913 and pursued an academic career that culminated in a professorship in New Testament Studies at the University of Tübingen. His teaching license was revoked by the Nazi regime in 1939 for his

⁶ Versteegh-Kühner, op.cit.

opposition to it, but reinstated in 1945. He died in 1972. The Gustav Bauernfeind Museum in Sulz am Neckar, dedicated to his father's life and work, was opened in 1990, eighteen years after Otto's death.

At the Door of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus occupies a singular position within *Beyond the Threshold: Orientalism Revisited*. Many of the painters represented in these galleries worked, to varying degrees, from imagination as much as observation: assembling plausible Oriental scenes from studies, props and collected fragments in European studios. Bauernfeind's working method was not entirely different in its final stage: the finished works of the Umayyad Mosque series were painted in Munich from studies made on the spot. But the studies themselves were something categorically different. They were made at the threshold of one of the great sacred monuments of the Islamic world, through access that was contested, negotiated and paid for, access that extended no further than the portal itself. Bauernfeind could not invent or rearrange what lay beyond the doorway, because he had never seen it. What we see in this painting is therefore not a constructed Oriental scene but a documented restriction: the precise boundary of what one determined, architecturally trained, non-Muslim painter was permitted to observe. The threshold in this painting is not a metaphor. It is a fact, and Bauernfeind has painted it with the exactitude of an architect and the honesty of a witness.

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