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Max Friedrich Rabes
Portrait of Mehemed Hassan

MAX FRIEDRICH RABES

(Posen 1868 – 1944 Vienna)

PORTRAIT OF MEHEMED HASSAN

Oil on board

39 x 27 cm.; 15 1/4 x 10 1/2 in.

Signed, located and dated lower right: Max Rabes. Cairo. 1890

Inscribed upper left: محمد حسن

Provenance

Private collection, Düsseldorf.

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Max Rabes was among the most celebrated German painters of the Wilhelmine era and is widely regarded as the principal representative of the Berlin school of Orientalist painting. Born in Posen in 1868, he trained in Berlin under the architectural and landscape painter Paul Graeb before embarking upon the extensive travels through Southern Europe, North Africa and the Near East that would define his artistic career. Egypt proved a particularly fertile source of inspiration, and over the following decades Rabes established a reputation for luminous depictions of Cairo, the Nile and the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean. Although frequently described as an Orientalist painter, he resisted the label, preferring to be recognised for the breadth and versatility of his artistic achievement.

Dated 1890, the present work belongs to the earliest phase of Rabes's engagement with Egypt. Painted in Cairo when the artist was only twenty-two years old, it offers a rare glimpse into the formative years of a painter whose career would become closely associated with the region. The sitter is identified by an Arabic inscription at the upper left of the panel reading *Muḥammad Ḥasan* (محمد حسن), while a further inscription on the reverse records the name as Mehemed Hassan and notes that the portrait was painted in Cairo. A partially legible additional inscription appears to refer to the Red Sea region, suggesting a possible geographical origin for the sitter.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Rabes's Orientalist practice was his tendency to preserve the identities of his sitters. Whereas many contemporary Orientalist painters exhibited anonymous "Arab heads" or ethnographic "types", Rabes frequently recorded personal names. In the present work, the sitter's identity is preserved both in Arabic and German, transforming the painting from a conventional Orientalist study into the portrait of a specific individual. A related watercolour executed in Cairo on 29 December 1890 appears to depict the same man (fig. 1), suggesting that Mehemed Hassan sat for Rabes on more than one occasion during the artist's Egyptian travels.

Artistically, the portrait displays a remarkable economy of means. Against a neutral ochre background, Rabes directs attention to the sitter's face, which is modelled through confident brushwork, subtle tonal transitions and warm reddish-brown passages that convey an immediacy characteristic of painting from life. The broad handling of the turban and drapery contrasts with the more careful treatment of the features, creating a balance between spontaneity and control. Equally compelling is the portrait's psychological presence: the furrowed brow, direct gaze and reserved expression suggest dignity, experience and self-possession. Rather than emphasising picturesque costume or exotic setting, Rabes focuses on the individuality of the sitter, producing a work of unusual humanity that rises above the conventions of Orientalist genre painting.

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The present work is also noteworthy within Rabes's oeuvre for its medium. While the artist produced numerous Orientalist portraits and figure studies in watercolour, oil portraits of this type appear comparatively rare. The painting therefore occupies a distinctive position within his Egyptian production, combining the immediacy of a portrait painted from life with the richness and permanence possible with oils.

A contemporary photograph of Rabes in his Berlin studio (fig. 2), published in 1905, shows the artist surrounded by Egyptian and Oriental subjects, alongside objects and furnishings acquired during his travels. The image provides a vivid illustration of the central role that the Middle East played within his artistic imagination and confirms the extent to which his studio functioned as a repository of experiences gathered during repeated journeys to Egypt and the wider Orient. Painted fifteen years earlier, the present portrait belongs to the beginning of that lifelong engagement. As both an early Egyptian work and a portrait of a named sitter, it offers a compelling insight into the formative years of one of Germany's most accomplished Orientalist painters.



Fig. 1. Max Rabes, *Portrait of Mehemed Hassan*, 1890, watercolour, 27.7 x 23 cm, Private Collection



Fig. 2. Zander & Labisch, *Max Rabes in his atelier*, 1905

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COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com