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Ludwig Hans Fischer
The Simoom, c. 1878

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LUDWIG HANS FISCHER
(Salzburg 1848 – Vienna 1915)

THE SIMOOM, C. 1878

Signed lower left: 'Ludwig Hans Fischer.'

Oil on canvas
176 x 117 cm; 69 1/4 x 45 3/4 in.

Provenance

19th Century European Art, Sotheby's New York, November 2001, Lot. 44;
Private Collection, Spain.

Exhibitions

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

Du Maroc aux Indes Voyages en Orient aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles, Lynne Thornton, Courbevoie, ACR Editions, 1998, p. 153;
The Orientalists: Western Artists in Arabia, The Sahara, Persia and India, Kristian Davies, Laynfarah, 2005, p. 76, pp. 96-97;
De Delacroix à Kandinsky: L'orientalisme en Europe, Odile Cavalier, Hazan, 2010, pp. 186-187;
THE SAHARA: A Cultural History, Eamon Gearon, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 127.

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Ludwig Hans Fischer (1848–1915) was one of the most travelled artists of the Austrian Orientalist tradition, a painter, engraver and ethnologist whose work was grounded not in imagination but in sustained, direct observation of the lands he depicted. Trained at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts under the distinguished landscape painter Eduard Peithner von Lichtenfels, Fischer demonstrated from the outset a wanderlust that would take him far beyond the studio. In 1875, supported by a scholarship from the Vienna Academy, he made his first journey to North Africa and the Middle East, a formative experience that ignited not only his artistic vision but his ethnographic curiosity, drawing him into the costumes, rituals and material culture of the region. Subsequent journeys took him to Tunis, Palestine and Egypt in the late 1870s, and later to India, where he compiled meticulous documentary studies of local customs, jewellery and architecture.¹ Back in Vienna, his reputation earned him prestigious state commissions, among them a celebrated series of landscape paintings for Vienna's Natural History Museum. Fischer's work is held in important Viennese public collections, including the Weltmuseum and the Belvedere.

It was from his Egyptian travels of the late 1870s that *The Simoom* emerged, and the authority of that direct experience is everywhere felt in the canvas. That the subject held a lasting grip on Fischer is confirmed by his later painting *The Khamsin* (1891), which revisits the same elemental confrontation between human vulnerability and desert wind.²

Fischer's *Simoom* is a large, vertical canvas; in the upper section, one of the Colossi of Memnon looms through the haze, its massive body not yet consumed by the advancing storm, which is travelling horizontally across the landscape. Beneath the Colossus's eternal gaze, the human figures seem achingly vulnerable. A caravan is crossing the desert before the Colossus, moving towards the viewer, desperately trying to shield itself from the heat and dust of the storm. The viewer's eyes are drawn to the khabir leading the riders, dressed in vivid blue robes with his arm crooked over his eyes, responsible for guiding the caravan safely across the desert while simultaneously driving three goats whose heads are turned away from the storm. Behind and above, a figure on a camel carrying a lance is dissolving in the particulate matter, while figures on a donkey and camels in the background are being consumed by the atmosphere. Fischer understood that the Simoom accumulates rapidly, and by the time its full force is felt, visibility has failed.

¹ One example is *Indischer Volksschmuck und die Art ihn zu tragen*. 1890. Indian Folk Jewellery and how to wear it.

² The Khamsin dated to 1891 was sold at the Orientalist Art sale, auction no, 18806, Lot 18 at the Orientalist Art Sale, Christie's London, 18 November 2020. <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6289125>.

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The painting's atmosphere is achieved almost entirely through light, or rather through its systematic withdrawal. The sky offers no blue, no horizon, no depth: it is that dead, ochre-yellow that anyone who has witnessed a desert storm will recognise. The French painter and writer Eugène Fromentin (1820-1876), travelling in the Algerian Sahara, recorded this precise quality of light when he encountered a similar storm: the sky, he wrote, had turned to "a dull, dirty yellow," the sun reduced to "a pale, rayless disc which could be looked at without blinking."³ Fischer's palette is almost monochromatic, a sustained orchestration of ochre, amber and pale gold, broken only by that single note of teal in the central figure's robes, a stroke of chromatic concentration that simultaneously draws the eye, measures the warmth of everything around it, and gives the human presence in this elemental scene its one point of insistent colour. The effect is not picturesque. It is, for anyone who has experienced a sandstorm, uncomfortably realistic.

The Simoom (Arabic samum) from the root meaning 'to poison' is a distinct meteorological phenomenon defined not simply by flying sand but by the extreme, suffocating heat that causes it. Temperatures can reach 55°C, and humidity can fall below 10%, due to intense ground heating under a cloudless sky. The American Meteorological Society describes it as causing heatstroke because the wind carries more heat to the body than perspiration can dispel. Because the storm travels in a cyclonic form, it can lead to suffocation in extreme cases, causing lung damage and asphyxiation in humans and animals.⁴ A Simoom is a sandstorm, but not all sandstorms are Simooms.



Approach of the Simoom, Desert at Gizeh, 1849
Colour Lithograph by Louis Haghe (1806-1885) after David Roberts R.A.,
published by F.G. Moon. 43.6 x 60.4 cm.
Bequest of John Bonebrake, 2012.263. The Cleveland Museum of Art.

³ Fromentin, Eugène, *A Summer in the Sahara*, Trans. By S.A.Rhodes, New York, Howard Fertig, 1987, p.114.

⁴ A description of these meteorological phenomena can be found in The American Meteorological Society's (AMS) Glossary of Meteorology. <https://glossary.ametsoc.org/wiki/simoom/>

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By contrast, the Khamsin, depicted by Fischer in the aforementioned 1891 painting, is a related but separate phenomenon, and can blow continuously for three days at a stretch. It is a Sirocco wind, its name comes from the Arabic word for fifty, as it blows sporadically for fifty days in the spring. Apparently, in nineteenth-century Egypt, the plague was worse when the Khamsin was blowing.⁵

It is in Islamic tradition that Fischer's subject acquires its most remarkable resonance. The word *samūm*, the Arabic root from which the Simoom derives its name, appears in the Qu'ran not just as a meteorological term but as a cosmological one. In Surah Al-Hijr (15:27), one of the fundamental verses of Islamic creation theology, Allah states: "*And the jinn We created before, from the fire of a scorching wind.*" The Arabic is *nār as-samūm*: the fire of the *samūm*. The djinn, those most unpredictable and perilous of supernatural beings, were formed from the very same scorching, penetrating force that Fischer's caravan is struggling to survive.⁶

The classical Hadith collected in Sahih Muslim describes the three orders of creation with clarity: "*The angels were created from light, the jinn from a smokeless flame of fire, and Adam from that which has been described to you*", that is, from clay.⁷ Light, fire, and earth: three substances, three orders of being. Fischer's figures, made of clay, are moving through the elemental birthplace of the djinn. The great medieval Qur'anic commentators Al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir, analysing the precise Arabic of Surah Al-Hijr, noted that *samūm* here denotes not simply wind but a penetrating, pervasive heat that passes through the body rather than merely surrounding it. It is the most intimate and inescapable of fires.

Whether Fischer was conscious of this layer of meaning, we cannot know. But for the Egyptian travellers and desert peoples he observed and depicted so carefully, the Simoom was never merely a weather event. It was an encounter with the element of the unseen world, with the very substance from which djinn are made. That the khabir in his vivid blue robes is leading his caravan past the Colossus through such a wind gives Fischer's canvas a dimension no purely meteorological reading can exhaust.

The choice of the Colossus as backdrop is far from incidental. By 1878, the Colossi of Memnon at Thebes had become one of the most potent symbols in European visual imagination, a fascination ignited by Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1798 and the deluge of archaeological publications, travel accounts and visual records that followed in its wake, among them the monumental *Déscription de l'Égypte* (1809–1828), which brought ancient Egypt into European drawing rooms with unprecedented detail and authority.⁸ The Colossus, inscrutable and ageless, became the presiding emblem of this Egyptomania: a monument that had kept its watch over

⁵ See 'Local Winds', The Royal Meteorological Society. <https://www.metlink.org/resource/local-winds/>

⁶ Quran, Surah Al-Hijr, 15:27. Translation: Sahih International.

⁷ Sahih Muslim, Hadith 2996.

⁸ *Description de l'Égypte, ou Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'armée française*, Paris, Imprimerie Impériale, 1809–1828.

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the desert for more than three thousand years, gazing across the desert with an impassive expression that offered neither comfort nor menace. Fischer, however, does something quietly subversive with this familiar icon. His Colossus is not triumphant. It does not dominate the composition so much as endure within it, its massive form already softening at the edges, its base dissolving into the same ochre haze that is swallowing the caravan below. The storm does not respect antiquity. In Fischer's canvas, one of the ancient world's most enduring monuments and the most vulnerable of human travellers share the same predicament; they are both at the mercy of a force that precedes them.

The Simoom has attracted consistent scholarly attention as an outstanding example of Austrian Orientalist painting. It was included in the major international touring exhibition *De Delacroix à Kandinsky: L'Orientalisme en Europe* (2010–2011), which travelled to Brussels, Munich and Marseille, and has been reproduced in several standard reference works on Orientalist art. Its appearance in Eamon Gearon's *The Sahara: A Cultural History* (Oxford University Press, 2011) further attests to its standing beyond the art-historical canon, as a document of cultural and geographical imagination.

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