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Eugène Pavy
The Marabout and The Sacred Lion, 1883

EUGÈNE PAVY

1850–1905

THE MARABOUT AND THE SACRED LION, 1883

Signed and dated lower left: "Eug. Pavy. 1883".

Oil on canvas

89 x 155 cm / 35 x 61 inch

Provenance

Anonymous Sale, Sotheby's New York, 1996, Lot. 91;

Private Collection, U.S.A;

American and European Art, Barridoff Auctions, Maine, August 2001, Lot. 107;

Private Collection, Spain.

Exhibitions

The Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1883, no. 82.

Publications

The Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1883, no 82, *The Royal Academy of Arts; a complete Dictionary of contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904*, Algernon Graves F.S.A. vol. VI, p. 82;

The London News, double page spread, 25th of August 1883.



Eugène Pavy sets his scene in an outdoor space in Algiers that carries an unmistakable sacred charge. In the left background, a white-domed qubba, the tomb of a revered marabout, stands against the ochre wall, its presence establishing this as a site of Sufi devotion as opposed to a public thoroughfare. From a deep archway at the centre right, its interior swallowed in shadow, a man emerges leading a large lion on a rope. This is Sidi Belyout, the marabout of Casablanca known as the father of lions, and the animal beside him moves with a loose, unhurried authority that makes the crowd's reaction all the more eloquent.

That reaction is the painting's drama. The group of figures pressed against the wall to the left, men, a woman and a child in traditional robes and headscarves, range from wary attention to open alarm. A standing figure holding a staff regards the lion with studied composure, while a kneeling man closer to the animal has raised both hands to his head, his eyes wide and his mouth open in an expression that sits precisely between awe and fear. At their feet, a ceramic vessel lies broken and scattered on the ground, the painting's most quietly human detail, ordinary life literally overturned by the lion's passage.

Pavy organises his composition around a shallow arc. The figures curve from left to right across the canvas, drawing the eye towards the lion and its handler, who occupy the right of the centre ground. The deep darkness of the archway behind them serves simultaneously as a framing device and threshold: the lion has crossed from shadow into light, from the sacred interior into the public world. The contrast between that absolute darkness and the brilliant warm light falling on the figures gives the painting its dramatic intensity.

The palette is one of rich warm earth tones, ochres, siennas, muted reds and cream whites characteristic of Pavy's academic Orientalism and of the light of the Maghreb. His handling is precise and confident, attentive to the textures of woven cloth, worn stone and the lion's tawny coat. The faces are individually characterised, each responding differently to the animal's presence.

The sacred authority that Pavy depicts is not Christian but Sufi. In the Maghrebi tradition, a marabout is a holy person, typically a Sufi saint, scholar or ascetic, believed to possess *baraka*, a spiritual blessing or grace that flows from God through the holy person into the world around them. Baraka was understood to extend not only to human supplicants but to animals, to places and to objects associated with the holy person. The marabout's tomb, marked by a white-domed qubba, visible in the left background of Pavy's painting, became a site of pilgrimage and communal identity, the baraka of the deceased saint continuing to radiate outward after death. Marabouts occupied a central role in the religious, social and political life of North Africa, functioning as mediators between the divine and the community, arbitrating

disputes and offering healing and moral authority particularly in regions where state power was limited.¹



St. Jerome and Lion in the Monastery, 1501-1509, Vittore Carpaccio
Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice
Oil on canvas
Bridgeman Images. Image no. XIR60932

¹ On the marabout tradition and baraka in North African Sufi culture see Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998.

The subject of a holy man leading a tame lion through a community of frightened bystanders has a long history in Western religious iconography. In Vittore Carpaccio's *Saint Jerome Leading the Lion to the Monastery*, c.1502, one of nine paintings from the Jerome cycle at the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni in Venice, the saint walks calmly forward with the lion padding beside him while the monks scatter in undignified flight. The compositional parallel with Pavy's painting is striking; in both works, a figure of spiritual authority leads a docile lion through a threshold into a communal space, and in both, the bystanders' reactions range from studied composure to open panic. Pavy almost certainly did not know Carpaccio's painting directly; the Venetian master's rediscovery as a major figure was only beginning in the 1880s through the advocacy of Ruskin. Yet both artists independently reached the same compositional solution to the same narrative problem: how to paint the coexistence of the sacred and the dangerous in a single space. The convergence suggests something universal about that subject that transcends culture and century.²

The figure leading the lion is identified in the title as the marabout of Casablanca, acting in the tradition of Sidi Belyout, the city's patron saint and protector, known as *Abu al-Liyuth*, the father of the lions. According to legend, Sidi Belyout lived during the Almohad era of the twelfth century as a shepherd and hermit in the forest of Ain Sebaa, whose name means "the source of the lion", where he communicated with and was guided by lions, who guarded his flock and led him when he became blind. His baraka over the lion was understood to persist through those who inherited his spiritual authority. The koubba marking his tomb in Casablanca had been built just two years before Pavy painted this work, in 1881, suggesting that the artist may have witnessed or heard of the renewed veneration of the saint associated with the shrine's construction. The living lion that the marabout leads through the crowd is thus not merely an exotic spectacle; it is a demonstration of inherited sacred power, the baraka of a twelfth-century saint made visible in the streets of nineteenth-century Casablanca.

By the time Pavy exhibited this work at the Royal Academy in 1883, the Barbary lion, *Panthera leo leo*, once indigenous to the forests and mountains of the Maghreb, was already a species in dramatic decline, its population reduced by habitat loss and intensive hunting. The lion in the painting was thus already a rarity, its presence in the street all the more charged for being so. Selected for reproduction as a double-page wood engraving in the *Illustrated London News* of 25 August 1883, a distinction reserved for the most notable works of the season, the painting was captioned *The Marabout (Sacred) Lion, Algiers*, confirming that its London audience understood the

² Vittore Carpaccio, *Saint Jerome Leading the Lion to the Monastery*, c.1502, oil on canvas, Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice. On the Jerome cycle see Peter Humfrey, *Carpaccio*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991. On Ruskin's role in rehabilitating Carpaccio see John Ruskin, *St Mark's Rest*, London: George Allen, 1877.

sacred dimension of the subject even if the specific traditions behind it remained unfamiliar.³

Eugène Pavy was born in 1850 and trained as a painter in Paris, where he and his brother Philippe, also an artist, developed a shared practice rooted in the Orientalist tradition. The two brothers travelled extensively together during the 1870s and 1880s, visiting Spain, North Africa and Egypt, and their work from this period reflects a close and sustained engagement with the peoples, architecture and street life of the Mediterranean world. A review in the *Magazine of Art* of January 1883, noting both brothers' contributions to the Exhibition of the Society of British Artists, praised their "careful and eminently successful studies of Eastern life and character" for their "unobtrusive style, thorough but nevertheless artistic treatment of details, and marked richness and variety of colour."⁴

Between approximately 1878 and 1883, Eugène was based in London, where he exhibited at the Royal Academy, the Royal Society of British Artists and the Grosvenor Gallery. The present painting was shown at the Royal Academy's 115th Summer Exhibition in 1883, the year of his departure from London. Works by Pavy subsequently entered the collection of the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow in 1889. He continued to exhibit on the Paris Salon circuit, and his paintings are represented in significant private collections devoted to nineteenth-century Orientalist art. He died in 1905.

Signed and dated 1883, *The Marabout and the Sacred Lion* is among the most ambitious and original works of Pavy's career, and one of the most compelling paintings in the present exhibition. Where many Orientalist painters sought the picturesque in the surfaces of North African life — the textures of a souk, the architecture of a gateway — Pavy reached for something deeper: the living intersection of sacred authority and animal power, witnessed by a crowd that responds with the full range of human emotion from reverence to terror. That the painting earned a double-page spread in the *Illustrated London News* in the year of its exhibition confirms the impression it made on its first audience. It has lost none of its force.

³ *The Illustrated London News*, vol. 83, 25 August 1883, double-page wood engraving after E. Pavy, titled *The Marabout (Sacred) Lion, Algiers*. The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1883, no. 82. See Algernon Graves F.S.A., *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and their Work from its Foundation in 1769 to 1904*, vol. VI, London, 1906, p. 82.

⁴ "Some careful and eminently successful studies of Eastern life and character, by Eugene and Philip Pavy, attract by their unobtrusive style, their thorough but nevertheless artistic treatment of details, and their marked richness and variety of colour," *Magazine of Art*, January 1883, p. [page number not yet confirmed]. Cited in Emily M. Weeks, catalogue note for Philippe Pavy, *Girl in a Courtyard, Algiers*, in *19th Century European Art including The Orientalist Sale*, Sotheby's, New York, 23 October 2008, Lot. 183.

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