

ELLIOTT FINE ART

Nineteenth Century to Early Modern

Maison Bonfils
(Beruit 1867 – 1918)

Portrait of the guardian of the mosque at Damascus

Signed lower right, in the print: *Bonfils*
Inscribed lower right: *Musulman gardien de mosque*
Albumen print
27.6 x 21.6 cm. (10 ¾ x 8 ½ in.)

Provenance:
Private Collection, Netherlands.



This beautiful image is one of Maison Bonfils' most compelling portraits. A mastery over light and shade, combined with extraordinary detail, has created a memorable image, giving the sitter a real presence. As the inscription notes, the man depicted is the guardian of a mosque. Other versions of the photograph, such as that in the Fine Arts Library at Harvard University, carry the fuller inscription 'Musulman gardien de mosquée à Damas'.

Initially a bookbinder, Félix Bonfils opened a studio in Beirut in 1867 with his wife Marie-Lydie. Though the early years were a struggle, by 1871 it was reported that Bonfils had 15,000 prints and 9,000 stereo views for sale. Over the next thirty years, Félix, Marie-Lydie and their son Adrien, plus various assistants, created one of the most successful photographic businesses in the world. They photographed most of the important sights in the Middle East and their views were widely distributed.

Though it is difficult to attribute images to a single family member with any certainty, the 'Bonfils' signature in the negative was most commonly used in the 1880s. As Félix had returned permanently to Alés in 1876, this portrait is likely therefore to be by either Marie-Lydie or Adrien.