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Ludwig Deutsch
The Coffee Maker

LUDWIG DEUTSCH
(Vienna 1855–1935 Paris)

THE COFFEE MAKER, CAIRO, C. 1896

Signed lower left: "L. Deutsch"

Oil on canvas
46 x 33 cm; 18 1/4 x 12 3/4 in.

Provenance

Art d'Orient Tableaux Orientalistes, Tajan, Paris, November, 2000, Lot. 140;
Private Collection, Spain.



A *qahwaji*, a maker and server of traditional Arabic coffee, tends his brazier in the doorway of a Cairo building, absorbed in his work, leaning forward with quiet concentration as his hands move over the heat. Before him stand the implements of his trade: a small metal coffee pot, ceramic cups arranged on a low slatted wooden stand. He wears a deep teal tunic, a rich crimson-rose headscarf wound loosely around his head, and cream babouches on his feet. He is entirely at ease, occupying his threshold with the unhurried authority of a man who has sat here many times before.

Deutsch has built the composition around the architecture framing the figure. The Mamluk-period stonework, ochre, warm and deeply weathered, fills the left of the canvas with a geological presence, its carved surfaces revealing intricately worked geometric and foliate ornament of considerable refinement. Above the arched doorway, a mashrabiya screen of turned wood casts its latticed geometry against the stone, filtering what lies within from what lies without, the architectural embodiment of the threshold the *qahwaji* himself occupies. To the right, a monumental door of ancient timber dominates, dark with age, iron-studded along its upper edge, its surface a palimpsest of peeling plaster and paint that has flaked away over decades, revealing layers of ochre and rose beneath. The doorway itself opens into complete shadow, a darkness so absolute it reads as a void, the interior world sealed against the viewer's gaze.

The light in this painting is its true subject. Deutsch has flooded the stone walls with a golden Egyptian sun that illuminates every irregularity of the masonry with the precision of a scholar's examination, while the interior retreats into impenetrable shadow. It is this contrast, the blaze of the exterior against the mystery of what lies within, that gives the composition its stillness and its depth. The figure at the threshold is poised between these two worlds, belonging equally to both.

Deutsch's technique in *The Coffee Maker* is characteristically exacting, with every surface rendered with a precision that approaches the photographic and every object described with patience. Yet the painting's formal intelligence lies not in what it reveals but in what it withholds. The most meticulously painted surfaces, including the carved Mamluk stonework, the ancient door, and the gleaming coffee vessels, all, in their different ways, deflect or conceal. The eye moves across them with pleasure and finds, at the centre of the composition, an absolute darkness. Deutsch has structured the whole painting around that void.

The vertical format is intimate in scale and reinforces the sense of containment. The figure does not command the space; the architecture does. The *qahwaji* is held within it, framed by stone and shadow as if the building itself has claimed him. The palette is restricted and precisely calibrated. The warm ochres and ambers of the stonework, the deep green-black of the ancient door and the brown of the slatted stand, these

earth tones establish a unified warmth against which three notes of colour are placed with care: the deep teal of the tunic, the crimson-rose of the headscarf, and the bright gleam of the silver coffee pot. It is a small constellation of colour and light in a painting that is otherwise content to let stone and shadow speak.

The figure at the centre of this painting belongs to one of the great social institutions of the Islamic world. Coffee arrived in Cairo from Yemen in the sixteenth century, brought north by Sufi mystics who had discovered its power to sustain wakefulness during the long hours of nocturnal prayer and meditation. It spread rapidly through the city, and by the time Deutsch was painting, Edward Lane had counted over a thousand coffee shops in the city alone. Such establishments functioned less as places of mere refreshment than as the defining forums of urban public life, where men of all classes gathered to exchange news, debate politics, hear poetry, and play chess.¹ The qahwaji, the maker and server of coffee, occupied a specific and respected place within this culture. To offer coffee was an act of hospitality so fundamental that to withhold it brought social shame; Edward Lane, observing Cairo in the 1830s, noted that among the city's elite, coffee served with a pipe was the mark of civilised leisure, as essential to the proper conduct of daily life as any more conspicuous act of generosity.² Deutsch's qahwaji tends his brazier not merely as a tradesman at his work but as a participant in a ritual of hospitality that had been practised in the streets and courtyards of Cairo for three hundred years.

The architecture that frames the qahwaji is not merely a backdrop. The mashrabiya screen above the doorway, its turned wood lattice filtering light and air, enabling the occupant within to observe the street without being observed, is one of the defining elements of traditional Cairene domestic architecture, reaching the peak of its refinement during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. Its etymology is suggestive: *sharaba* in Arabic means to drink, *sharafa* to see.³ The mashrabiya is simultaneously a means of looking and a means of concealment, a surface that admits the world while withholding the self. Positioned directly above the qahwaji, it doubles the threshold he already occupies. He sits in the doorway, between inside and outside, between public and private, between the blaze of the Egyptian sun and the impenetrable shadow within, and above him, the screen enacts the same negotiation in wood and geometry. Deutsch has constructed a composition of layered thresholds, each one a variation on the same question: what is visible, and to whom?

¹ See Hattox, Ralph S., *Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1985.

² Lane, Edward William, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, Charles Knight and Co., London, 1836.

³ The etymology and functions of the mashrabiya are discussed in: Yeomans, Richard, *The Art and Architecture of Islamic Cairo*, Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2006.

Deutsch's ability to render the stonework, metalwork and woodwork of Cairo with such conviction was not accidental. Like his close friend and fellow Austrian émigré Rudolf Ernst, Deutsch assembled an extensive collection of objects during his travels in Egypt, including tiles, textiles, ceramics, architectural fragments and metalwork. He transported these back to his Paris studio to use as props and references for his paintings. It was a practice common among the Orientalist painters of his generation, producing a particular kind of image: meticulous in its surface detail, authoritative in its material culture, but constructed at a distance from the world it depicted. The Cairo of Deutsch's paintings is real and imagined in equal measure, assembled from authentic objects in a Parisian studio.

Deutsch made at least three visits to Egypt: in 1886, 1890 and 1898. It was during these trips that he gathered both the objects and the direct visual experience that would sustain his practice for decades. He was part of a remarkable Parisian circle of Orientalist painters that included, alongside Ernst, Arthur von Ferraris (1856–1936) and Jean Discart (1855–1940), artists who shared not only a subject matter but an approach: the patient, almost obsessive accumulation of material knowledge in the service of an image that would feel, entirely convincing to European audiences. In *The Coffee Maker*, every vessel and worn surface has been observed, handled, and understood before being committed to paint. That knowledge is what gives the painting its authority.

Ludwig Deutsch was born in Vienna on 13 May 1855 and received his early training at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste under the neoclassical painter Anselm Feuerbach (1829–1880). On Feuerbach's retirement in 1877, Deutsch entered the class of Leopold Carl Müller (1834–1892), the founding figure of the Austrian school of Orientalist painting, before subsequently moving to Paris, where he studied under the academic painter Jean-Paul Laurens and settled permanently, establishing a studio on the rue Le Pelletier. He began exhibiting at the Salon des Artistes Français from 1879 and made at least three visits to Egypt in 1886, 1890, and 1898, which provided direct visual experience and the collection of objects that would sustain his practice for the remainder of his career. His meticulous depictions of Cairene life brought him considerable critical acclaim, including a gold medal at the Salon des Artistes Français in 1892 and a gold medal at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900. He was subsequently made a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur by the French government in recognition of his contribution to the arts. He died in 1935.

The Coffee Maker is a painting of stillness and accumulated knowledge. Deutsch has taken one of the most familiar figures of Cairene Street life, a man tending his brazier in a doorway, as qahwajis had done in the streets of Cairo for three centuries, and rendered him with a precision and a patience that amount to a form of veneration.

The ancient stonework, the iron-studded door, and the mashrabiya screen above are not exotic props but the fabric of a living city, observed and understood. In the qahwaji's unhurried absorption in his work, and in the layered thresholds that frame him, Deutsch has found something that resists the merely picturesque. This is a painting that rewards looking.

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