



Charles Robertson, RWS
The Shoes of the Faithful, 1879

CHARLES ROBERTSON, RWS

b. 1844 –1891 Godalming

THE SHOES OF THE FAITHFUL, 1879

Signed, monogrammed and dated lower right: "CR 1879"

Oil on canvas

107 x 78 cm / 42 ¼ x 30 ¾ inch

Provenance

Anonymous Sale, Christie's London, November 1979, Lot. 273;

The Alef Collection;

The Alef Collection of Orientalist Pictures and Drawings, Christie's London, November 1984, Lot. 131;

Antiques and Modern Sale, Kunstauktionshaus Schloss Ahlden GmbH, Ahlden, Germany, May 2001, Lot. 1275;

19th Century European Art Including Ottomans and Orientalists, Christie's London, June 2002, Lot. 8;

19th Century European Paintings, Sotheby's London, June 2004, Lot. 111;

Private Collection, Spain.

Exhibitions

The Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1879, no. 954.

Publications

The Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1879, no. 954; 1882, no. 1278, *The Royal Academy of Arts; a complete Dictionary of contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904*, by Algernon Graves F.S.A., vol. VI, p. 328;

Victorian Painters, Christopher Wood, Christopher Newall and Margaret Richardson, 1995, Woodbridge, Suffolk : Antique Collectors' Club, p. 442;

No Day Without a Line, Martin J.Hopkinson, and Claire Tilbury, Ashmolean Museum, 1999, p. 56.



Charles Robertson's *Shoes of the Faithful*, 1879 opens in the foreground, among the shoes. Fourteen pairs are scattered across the worn stone step, rendered with an exactitude that borders on portraiture: open-backed leather babouches in ochre and brown, a pair of elaborately embroidered slippers. Most arresting of all is a pair of scarlet-heeled slippers whose elevated heel, gold embroidery and fine leather speak unmistakably of wealth and rank. The heeled shoe had deep roots in the medieval Persian and Ottoman world, originating with Persian cavalry, whose riders used the raised heel to secure their stance in the stirrup when drawing the bow, and the form had long carried associations of military prowess and aristocratic status in the cultures of the Near East.¹ Robertson has not painted generic footwear. He has painted a social document. The yellow babouches signal Muslim men of means, yellow being the colour traditionally associated with status in Ottoman dress; the plainer, more worn pairs tell a different story. Taken together, the scattered shoes compose something close to a portrait of the congregation within, a community rendered in leather and colour in the absence of faces. Most suggestively, propped against the outer tiled wall to the right, a curved shamshir rests with quiet authority. That the owner of the cavalry sword and the owner of the scarlet-heeled shoes may well be the same man seems entirely plausible: a military figure of rank, his weapons and his finery alike surrendered at the threshold.

At the centre of the composition stands a barefoot figure, holding a pair of bright yellow babouches, with care and deliberation. His outer cloak is respectable, but his inner robe is worn and fraying at the hem: a man of modest means tending the footwear of men considerably richer than himself. Whether he is a mosque attendant, a *khādim* whose role included the custody of worshippers' belongings, or a worshipper himself preparing to cross into the sacred interior, Robertson leaves unresolved. The ambiguity is not a weakness but a precision: in either case, the figure occupies the exact threshold, physically positioned between the world of the shoes and the world of prayer, belonging fully to neither.

Behind him, the architectural detail accumulates with the meticulous attention of a painter who has looked long and hard. Blue and white Iznik tiles line the outer wall, their Ottoman character sitting in quiet historical tension with the Mamluk stonework of the building itself.² Beyond them, turquoise tiles draw the eye deeper into the entrance hall. A calligraphic band runs above the tiled section, of the kind commonly

¹ On the Persian cavalry origins of the heeled shoe and its cultural history in the Islamic and Ottoman world, see Elizabeth Semmelhack, *Standing Tall: The Curious History of Men in Heels*, Toronto: Bata Shoe Museum, 2015.

² Iznik tiles were exported to Cairo during the seventeenth century: the Mosque of Aksunkur was remodelled by Ibrahim Agha in 1651 to 1652 and decorated with Iznik tiles, providing a documented precedent for their presence in Cairo's Mamluk-era buildings. See Walter B. Denny, *Iznik: The Artistry of Ottoman Ceramics*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2004.

found in the transitional spaces of the more richly decorated mosques of Cairo. The stonework around it shows the weathered decay of centuries. Further still, in the space before the latticed wooden grille, three figures sit cross-legged on the floor while a fourth stands among them; to their right, a large, gilded candlestick rises from its brass base, its candle unlit, a detail that speaks of the devotional richness of the interior. Beyond the grille itself, more figures are visible in the interior courtyard, absorbed in prayer. Robertson has structured the painting as a sequence of receding thresholds: the stone step, the tiled entrance, the intermediate space before the grille, the courtyard beyond. We are admitted as far as the shoes. The guardian travels one step further. The worshippers occupy a space that remains, for the viewer, permanently out of reach.

The shoes Robertson has painted are the physical evidence of a practice rooted in scripture: in Surah 20:12, God commands Moses to remove his sandals on holy ground, a moment shared across the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, and one that became embedded in Islamic devotional life as an act of bodily purification required before prayer. Before crossing the threshold, each worshipper would also perform *wudu*, the prescribed ritual of ablution: a carefully ordered sequence of washing the face, hands and arms, wiping the head, and washing the feet and ankles with clean water, preparing the body, as the shoes have prepared the threshold, for the act of prayer.³

Charles Robertson's early life remains elusive in its details. By 1862, he had settled in Aix-en-Provence, from where he made his first journey to Algeria, captivated by the possibilities of the Islamic world as a subject. His Royal Academy debut followed in 1863, the first step in a career shaped by repeated and sustained travel to the East. The watercolourist Myles Birket Foster (1825-1899) was a close friend whose sensitivity to light and atmosphere left a discernible mark on Robertson's developing practice. In 1865, he married Alice Mary Lonsdale in Cheltenham, the eldest daughter of Captain William Lonsdale, who had overseen the founding of Port Phillip, the settlement that would become Melbourne. The couple would have six children, among them Percy, born in Bellagio, Lombardy, in 1868, who later became an artist in his own right.

By 1870, Robertson had settled the family at Bay Cottage, Common-Side, Walton-on-Thames, placing himself near his mentor and friend, the artist John Frederick Lewis (1804-1876), who had lived there since 1854 and would remain until his death.⁴ The two men shared more than just a neighbourhood: the architecture and devotional

³ The Quran, Surah 5:6.

⁴ Emily M. Weeks, catalogue entry for Charles Robertson, RWS, *The Street of the Ghoreeyah, Cairo*, in Bonhams, Orientalist Art, London, 26 October 2020, Lot. 16.
<https://www.bonhams.com/auction/26561/lot/16/>

life of Cairo, the quality of Egyptian light, and an appreciation of the expressive precision of watercolour. Where Lewis gravitated toward the interior, the domestic world of the harem and the private courtyard, Robertson positioned himself at the entrance. The present work, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1879, is the most focused expression of that difference. Painted in his Surrey studio from sketches made during his 1872 journey to Jerusalem and Cairo, and refined through subsequent visits in 1876, it reflects his skill in transforming direct observation into a contemplative image of faith and daily ritual. Robertson also collected Lewis's work: he lent a watercolour by Lewis, *Study of Egyptian Birds*, to the Surrey Loan Exhibition in 1884, demonstrating the depth of his admiration.⁵ Throughout the early 1880s, Robertson increasingly shifted from oil to watercolour, a medium in which he achieved mastery recognised by his election as an Associate of the Royal Society of Painters in Water-Colours in 1885 and his full membership in the year of his death. He also served as Vice-President of the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers. Robertson died in Godalming in November 1891, aged forty-seven. The following year, the Fine Art Society held a posthumous exhibition of 130 of his watercolours of Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, a measure of the reputation he left behind.

The Shoes of the Faithful was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1879, the first of what would become a sustained preoccupation.⁶ Robertson returned to this motif repeatedly, exhibiting two further works under the same title in 1882. That he kept coming back to the same threshold suggests a painter for whom this particular boundary carried a meaning he could not exhaust in a single work.

Of all the painters represented in this exhibition, Robertson stands at the furthest remove from the sacred interior. He does not reach the portal. He remains with us, among the shoes, on the wrong side of the threshold. And yet this is precisely what makes the painting so affecting: in the absence of the worshippers themselves, their abandoned possessions speak for them with a clarity that no painted face could match. Robertson has found a way to document the inaccessible through what it has left behind, and in doing so has created something rarer than a record of exclusion. He has painted an act of faith through its most intimate visible evidence: the shoes left at the door.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Royal Academy of Arts, *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts. MDCCCLXXIX. The One Hundred and Eleventh, exh. Cat.* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1879), 42, no. 954.

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