

# COLNAGHI



Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
*Restaurant, Algiers (Dedicated to Gérôme), 1866*

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FREDERICK ARTHUR BRIDGMAN

(Alabama 1847–1928 Rouen)

*RESTAURANT, ALGIERS (DEDICATED TO GÉRÔME), 1886*

Signed with initials and dated:

“FAB. Alger / 1886: also dedicated à mon cher maître et ami/ J.L. Gérôme souvenir affectueux / F.A. Bridgman”

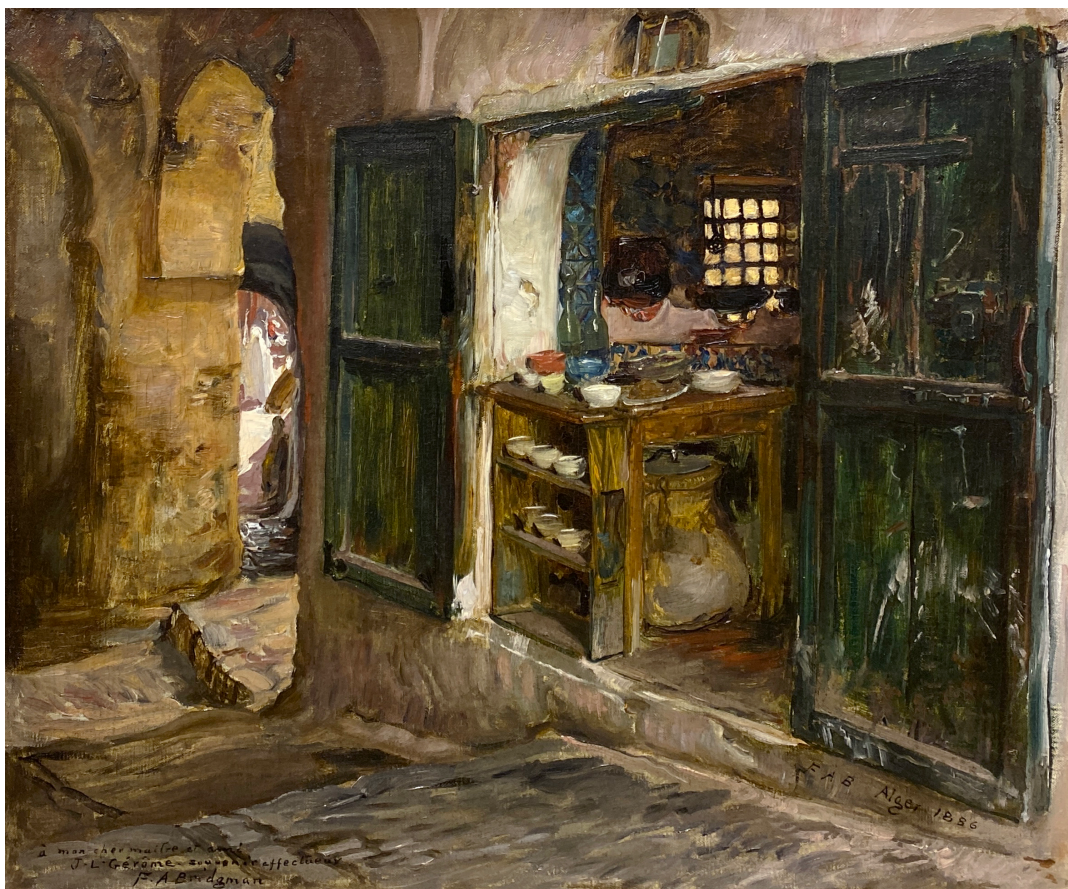
Oil on canvas

40 × 47.6 cm

15 3/4 × 18 3/4 in.

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LONDON

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American artist born in Alabama, Frederick Arthur Bridgman (1847–1928) soon left the United States for Europe, settling first in Brittany and later in Paris. In the French capital, he entered the atelier of the eminent Orientalist painter Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904), quickly becoming one of the master’s favoured pupils. One of the most celebrated Orientalist painters of his generation, Bridgman is renowned for his lively depictions of street scenes, interiors, and landscapes from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt.

First encountering North Africa during a journey in 1872, he repeatedly returned to the region over the following decades, making it an enduring source of inspiration. *Winters in Algeria*, published in 1890, records Bridgman’s North African journeys through a vivid narrative accompanied by his own woodcuts, attesting to his early career as an engraver for the American Banknote Company. By this time, Bridgman had already achieved wide acclaim, a success marked in 1889 when he presented five works at the Exposition Universelle in Paris and, the following year, exhibited 400 works at the Fifth Avenue Galleries in New York. In 1907, he was further honoured with the award of the Légion d’Honneur. In 1886, the year this canvas was painted, Bridgman returned to Algiers, settling there with his wife in the hope of a climate beneficial to her poor health. During his stay, the artist produced a series of works capturing life in the city and its surroundings. Immersed in a myriad of new stimuli, Bridgman experienced the encounter with the Arab people and culture as that of a foreigner, an artist-traveller whose curiosity had to come to terms with unfamiliar, sometimes enigmatic, habits and ways of life. “It may be said,” he recalls in *Winters in Algeria*, “that in Arab streets the ‘camera is mightier than the cannon.’ The sight of a glistening lens peering from beneath a black cloth strikes terror into an Arab’s soul.”<sup>1</sup> Signed “F.A.B. Alger 1886” and dedicated to his mentor and friend Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Restaurant, Algiers* reflects Bridgman’s artistic lineage and gratitude to his teacher. Yet, it marks a departure from his teacher’s measured lines and flawless draughtsmanship. The brushwork is vigorous, and the dense, vibrant colours evoke a synesthetic experience, almost allowing the viewer to breathe the warm and fragrant air in which the scene is set. Compared with other works by the same artist, this painting is far less detailed, almost resembling a coloured sketch, in which the absence of defined lines allows the brushstrokes of colour to define the space.

The painting depicts an intimate corner of Algiers, “a great irregular stairway of terraces, blind and blank under the sunshine,” as Bridgman described the city.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Bridgman, F. A. *Winters in Algeria*; Harper & Brothers, Franklin Square: New York, 1890, 47.

<sup>2</sup> Bridgman, F. A. *Winters in Algeria*; Harper & Brothers, Franklin Square: New York, 1890, 36.

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steep alleys and rounded arches suggest the Casbah, the fortified citadel whose labyrinthine streets withstood the urban transformations that followed the French occupation of 1830. In the scene, a modest restaurant is enlivened by traditional cooking utensils and saturated with the rich chromatic contrasts, characteristic of Bridgman's mature style. The artist captures a rare moment of stillness in a city more often defined by its traffic and noise: perhaps a pause for prayer, when the faithful withdraw into mosques and the streets fall into an elusive calm.

Human presence is almost absent from the scene, save for a silhouette in the distant shadow and a few indistinct figures within the restaurant interior. A green wooden door, wide open, reveals square majolica tiles decorating the jamb. In their geometric pattern, typical of Islamic art, green echoes the hue of the door and combines with blue, which in turn resonates in the glass bottles and ceramics arranged on the table at the entrance. This palette of cool hues gratifies the eye, offset against the arid walls framing the alley. Light plays across earth-toned surfaces, while interior and exterior dissolve into one another through an interplay of solids and voids, shifting planes and irregular levels — an unintentional counter melody to the new aesthetic then triumphing in Haussmann's Paris.

Bridgman's approach in this canvas reflects the broader late 19th-century shift in Orientalist painting from monumental spectacle to ethnographic observation, influenced in part by contemporary photography and travel writing. Unlike the staged, grandiose nature of Gérôme's historical reconstructions, Bridgman in this instance favours immediacy and gestural detail. His aesthetic is closer to naturalism, with vivid colours and vigorous brushstrokes. Presented as a gift to his mentor Gérôme and kept in Gérôme's Paris collection, *Restaurant, Algiers* exemplifies the transatlantic dimension of Orientalism: as an American artist, Bridgman sought to emulate and expand the French tradition while asserting his own vision of a city in which he

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