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Jean-Leon Gérôme
Portrait of a Woman (Aiouch), 1855

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JEAN-LEON GÉRÔME

(Vesoul 1824 - 1904 Paris)

PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN (AIOUCH), 1855

Inscribed lower left: D. "hedjas"

Inscribed lower right in Arabic: "عِيُوش (Aiouch)"

Inscribed lower right: "Aiouch / Louxor 1855 / dessin de J.L. Gerome / Aimé Morot"

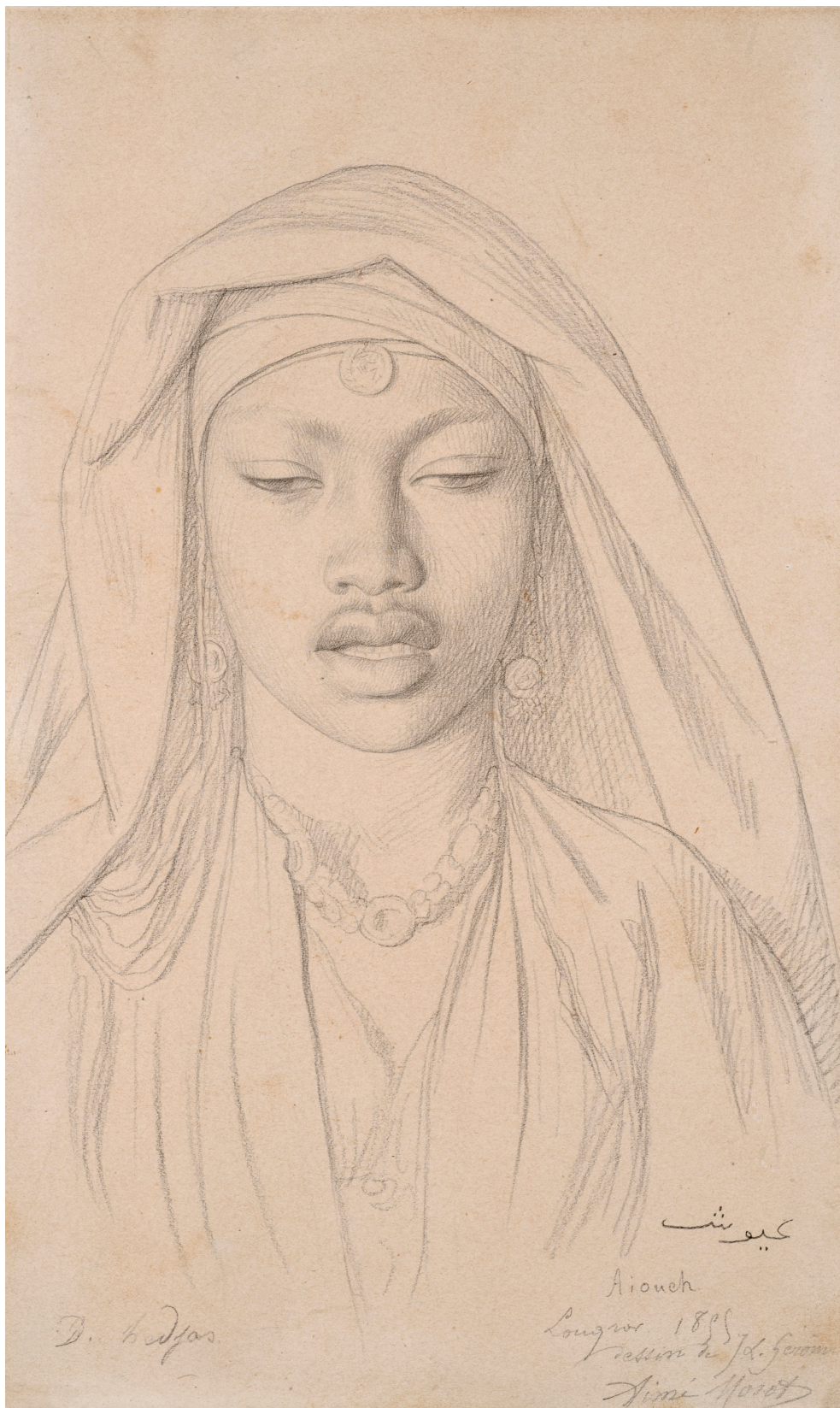
Pencil on paper

26.7 x 16.1 cm (10 1/2 x 6 1/4 in.)

Provenance

Possibly Aimé Morot (1850-1913).

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This beautifully expressive portrait was drawn by Jean-Léon Gérôme on his first visit to Egypt in 1855-56 and forms part of a series of about a dozen sensitively observed studies of men and women encountered by the artist on his journey down the Nile. It surely counts as one of Gérôme's most mesmerising and impactful Orientalist portraits, in either pencil or oil, and was published as a lithograph in 1860 by the Gazette de Beaux-Arts (Fig. 1). Though the image has long been known and admired thanks to the lithograph, the drawing itself was previously unknown and its reappearance marks a felicitous moment for Gérôme studies.

In the winter of 1855, already celebrated and famous, the thirty-one-year-old Gérôme arrived in Egypt, beginning the first of six extended visits made over the course of his life. In December at Damietta, on the eastern mouth of the Nile, Gérôme rented a sailing boat with some friends and for the next few months they journeyed over one thousand kilometres down the river to Aswan, passing the time hunting, fishing and drawing. On their return up the Nile, the group stopped at Cairo for four months, before returning home via the Holy Land. Gérôme's companions were the dramatist Émile Augier, the artists Léon Belly and Narcisse Berchère, and the sculptor of Eiffel Tower fame Auguste Bartholdi, whose numerous photographs of Egyptian sites proved to be extremely useful to Gérôme as artistic prompts back in Paris.

This trip would prove to be highly significant for Gérôme: not only did it foster a deepseated love for Egypt but it also turned him, almost overnight, into the leading Orientalist of his day. The dozens of sketches and studies, and the impressive collections of photographs and local goods amassed by the artist, allowed Gérôme to create in his Paris studio a group of meticulously detailed and highly polished Orientalist paintings exhibited at the Salon of 1857 to great acclaim (Fig. 2). As Gérôme himself wrote of this preparatory material, *"I did not know beforehand what I was going to do with these studies...brought back from travels. It is only later that ideas come: there is an unconscious labour in the brain and, suddenly, they are born!"*.¹

Amongst these studies are the group of beautifully refined portraits, quite documentary and almost ethnographic in nature, of which the present work is a particularly fine example. Others include a turbaned man from Aswan, looking downwards, at the Met (fig. 3) and a man in profile in the collection of the Getty (Fig. 4). Their merit was immediately recognised by Théophile Gautier, an ardent support of Gérôme, who wrote in 1856 that *"these pencil portraits of different types...are so well observed that they could serve as anthropological essays"*.²

Gérôme often inscribed these portraits with the names of the sitters in Arabic. Indeed, the name of the sitter in the present portrait, Aiouch, has been written in Arabic at the lower right and translated into the Latin alphabet below. A later hand has noted both

¹ F. Field Herring, *Gérôme, his Life and Works*, New York 1893, p. 143.

² T. Gautier, 'Gérôme, tableaux, études, et croquis de voyages' in *L'Artiste*, vol. 3, 1856, p. 23: *'l'artiste voyageur a fait à la mine de plombe plusieurs études-portraits d'après différents types caractéristiques: il y a des Fellahs, des Cophtes, des Arabes, des nègres sang-mêlé, des hommes si bien observés qu'ils pourraient servir aux dissertations anthropologiques'*

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Aiouch's origins from the Hejaz and the place where the portrait was drawn, namely Luxor. This was likely inscribed by Gérôme's son-in-law Aimé Morot, as the script accords with that of his authentication at the lower right. However, Morot has likely made a mistake with the date of 1855 given that Luxor, site of the ancient city of Thebes, is far down the Nile, just to the north of Aswan, and Gérôme would probably not have arrived there until early the following year. The lithograph of 1860 is entitled '*Négresse de Hedjaz*', emphasising the sitters' origins from this arid region of western Arabia along the Red Sea, and therefore enhancing the ethnographic aspect of the portrait.

Though each of these portraits demonstrate Gérôme's elegant and exacting draughtsmanship, Aiouch is a particularly beautifully rendered example. The artist has scrutinised his sitter very carefully, conscientiously detailing Aiouch's striking features, down to noticing the slight differences in the forms of her eyes and eyebrows. Yet whilst this meticulousness is apparent throughout the drawing, one can quickly discern, even without the contextual inscriptions, that it is a rapidly executed study, done on the spot and far from the comforts of the studio. This combination of detail and spontaneity amplifies the impact of the portrait, giving Aiouch a tangible presence, which is magnified by her satisfyingly volumetric head covering.

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Fig. 1 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Négresse de Hedjaz*, 1860. Etching, 21 x 16 cm, Yale University Art Gallery.

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Fig. 2 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Camels at the trough*, 1857. Oil on canvas, 75 x 120 cm, National Gallery of Canada.

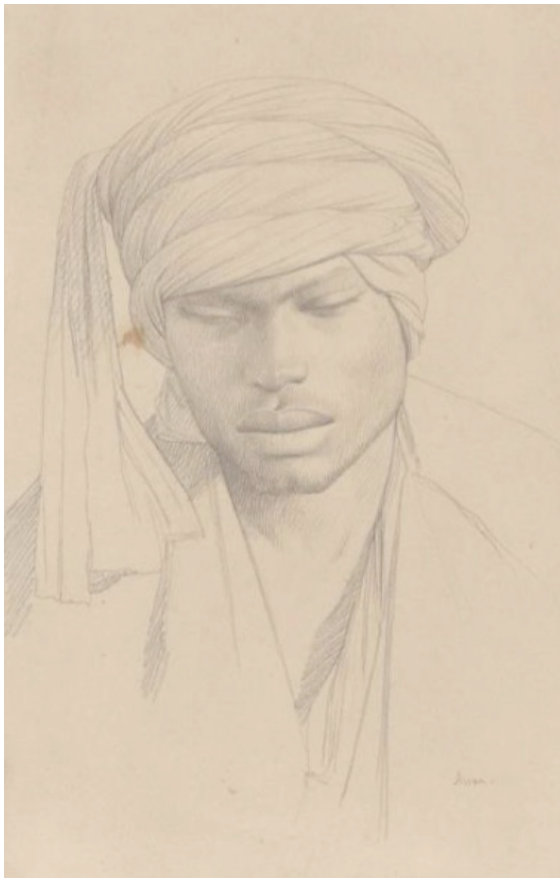


Fig. 3, Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Portrait of Assan*, 1856, graphite on paper, 26.6 x 16.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art & Fig. 4 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Portrait of a Man*, 1856. Graphite on paper, 26.7 x 16.2 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum.

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