

# TRINITY FINE ART

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## "Eccentrics & Orientalists: The Lure of the East"

26th June-15th September



1. Pietro Longhi - "Portrait of Edward Wortley Montagu & his son Massoud Fortunatus", Oil on canvas, 52 x 67cm (1770-75)

*One of the most curious sights we saw amid these curiosities was the famous Mr. Montagu', He had just arrived from the East, he had travelled through the Holy Land, Egypt, Armenia, &c. with the Old and New Testament in his hands, he had visited Mount Sinai, and flattered himself he had been on the very part of the rock where Moses spake face to face with God Almighty: his beard reached down to his breast, and the dress of his head was Armenian. He was in the most enthusiastick raptures with Arabia and the Arabs: his bed was the ground, his food rice, his beverage water, his luxury a pipe and coffee.*

**Samuel Sharp, a grand tourist, 1767**

On the occasion of London Art Week, Summer 2023, Trinity Fine Art in partnership with Walter Padovani are proud to present "Eccentrics & Orientalists: The Lure of the East".

The "East" as a source of fascination, a style and a concept for artistic as well as physical exploration has long held sway over the European imagination, from Marco Polo on the 14<sup>th</sup> century silk routes, the Bellini's 16<sup>th</sup> century evocation of Alexandria to the passion for "Chinoiserie" which held sway in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, it was Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1798 which really ushered in an age of exploration and expansion which was mirrored in artistic trends in Europe at the time, most notably in Orientalist painting. Wealthy European collectors found much to admire in these Orientalist works, which provided them with a pleasurable frisson from the exoticism, luminous colours and perceived sensuality of these "far-flung" lands, and a momentary escape from their modern urban lives.

This painting of Edward Wortley Montagu, a renowned English eccentric & traveller, falls into a recognisable group of Pietro Longhi's "curiosity" paintings relating closely to his elephant, rhino, lion,

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and Irish giant paintings. Longhi was renowned in Venice for his representations of the foibles of eighteenth-century Venetian society as well as the curiosities and intrigues which carnival afforded, which were avidly collected by patrician Venetian families as well as Grand Tourists.

These paintings of “Curiosities” were very much in vogue in 18th century Venice and satisfied a thirst for everything exotic and bizarre which was a hallmark of the enlightenment era and more particularly of Venice with its trade routes to the East and love of novelty. Edward Wortley Montagu was one such eccentric novelty, born in England of aristocratic parents, from an early age he was unruly, running away from school and taking ship to Oporto. This hunger for travel led to him developing a passion for the Middle East and its languages, and eventually being fluent in Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic and Persian. He lived for a period in Egypt from where he undertook expeditions to Armenia, Sinai and Jerusalem and it was during these travels that he adopted Armenian dress considering it far superior to anything else and henceforth wore nothing else. Finally, after a great many escapades which included bigamy, gambling rackets and flights from the law, he eventually settled in Venice.

The young boy who proffers a drink in the painting, is Wortley Montagu’s son, Massoud Fortunatus Montagu, who was born in 1762 as a result of a passionate affair with a lady called Ayesha during his father’s lengthy stay in Cairo, Massoud was very much adored by his father and when he was old enough they travelled together to Italy, living in Venice and Padua, and during his final illness in April 1776, it was Massoud who looked after Wortley Montagu. He also played a role in the display which was put on for Grand Tourists since a visit to his father was viewed as an obligatory attraction in Venice.

A description of a visit by the 8th Duke of Hamilton (1756–99) to Edward Montagu’s Venetian palazzo, which contained a room decorated in the Turkish style with tiles on the walls, a painted wooden ceiling, a banquette or low sofa and a small fountain in the middle of the room, matches the scene painted by Longhi in many details: *‘we had a great deal of conversation with this venerable-looking person [...] There were no chairs, but we were desired to seat ourselves on a sofa, while Mr. Montagu placed himself on a cushion on the carpet, with his legs crossed in the Turkish fashion’*. The guests were served coffee which was *‘sticky and sickly-sweet ‘put up’ in small white vessels like egg-cups which rested on beautifully wrought golden pedestals’*. The young Massoud, elegantly dressed and sporting a turquoise silk turban, offered the guests rahat lokum, or what we today would call Turkish delight. The account adds that: *‘Edward permitted the boy to hold his right hand, kiss it and press it to his brow, when the elaborate water-pipe had been set on the floor beside him’*.

On his father’s death in 1776 he inherited £5,000, his father’s library of rare Arabic books and was sent to be educated in England. Massoud thereafter lived in Marylebone, Grosvenor Square and finally Frant in Sussex where he died in 1798.



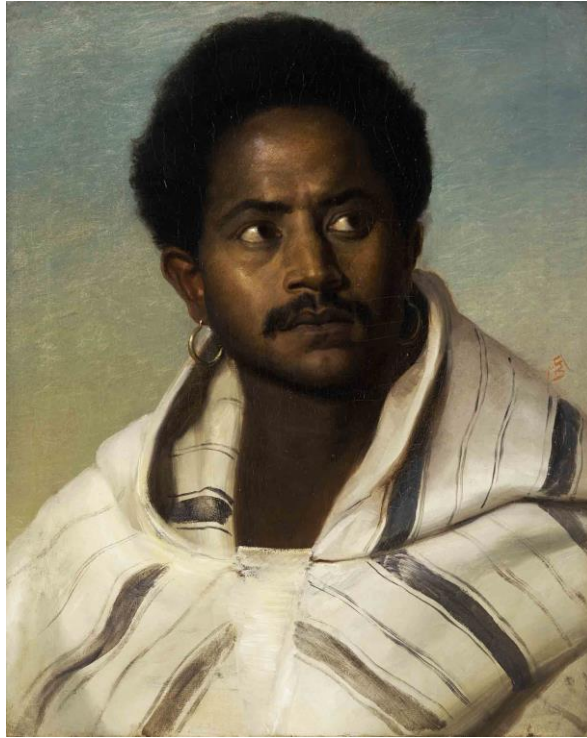
2. Francesco Hayez - "Odalisque," Oil on canvas, 42.5 x 34.7 cm

This previously unpublished painting, still on its original canvas and in excellent condition, is a significant addition to Francesco Hayez's oeuvre and, in the sophistication of its brushwork, confirms the affinity for oriental themes that was such a feature of this painter's work, a leading player in Italian Romanticism. His passion for an Orient of which he could only dream, given that he never personally visited the region, became part of his imaginary universe and of his style in the early, formative stages of his career.

The motif of the face, enhanced by the turban framing the pure oval form of the face and subsequently revisited in Hayez's depictions of biblical heroines, appears to have been especially attractive to the artist. He focuses on conveying her features, her gaze, and the folds in the fabric of her garments and gives free rein to his superb skill in the handling of soft chiaroscuro transitions, transparencies, and glazes. Like Delacroix, he moved on from the politically engaged aspect of the so-called "philhellenic" movement current at the time, to the more sensual dimension of a stylised Orient, painting a whole series of odaliques in different situations and attitudes in sumptuous harem interiors. Our Odalisque is one of the most successful products of an artistic journey that began with the splendid "Bathsheba Bathing" displayed at the Brera in 1827, and continued with a second version of the same subject which was commissioned in 1834 by the great collector, banker and philanthropist Ambrogio Uboldo (private collection).

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3. Adolf Michael Böhm - "Othello", Oil on canvas, 53 x 42.5 cm

This sensitively observed portrait of a young North African man wearing a striking white and blue striped "djellaba" illustrates well the Orientalist movement in painting and the concurrent vogue for anthropological representations which gained currency against the backdrop of the colonization of Africa by the European powers in the second half of the 19th century.

This 19th century colonial expansion was accompanied by a thirst for knowledge about these lands and their inhabitants, and this thirst was amply provided for by an army of explorers, botanists, naturalists, and artists who led expeditions to every part of the African continent and avidly wrote about, mapped, drew and painted everything they came across to satiate an eager public at home in Europe.

The peoples of Africa were also subjected to this obsessive and minute cataloguing in service of the developing discipline of anthropology which formed part of a colonial machine eager for knowledge about their newly conquered empires, and as a result portraits such as the present one were produced in order to inform as much as to adorn. North Africa in particular, was seen as a vast and antique land sown with the monuments of ancient Egypt and Rome and inhabited by peoples from classical myth, Delacroix was deeply impressed when he visited saying of the locals that they were: *"As beautiful as antiquity ... The heroes of [Jacques-Louis] David and Co, with their rose-pink limbs, would cut a sorry figure beside these children of the sun, who wear the dress of classical antiquity with a nobler air."* Indeed, this utterance could also be said to apply to our painting which presents the young man in a very classical format, the white and blue djellaba falling around him like a toga and with a raised head and proud gaze which focusses on something on the horizon, but in doing so does not exchange glances with the viewer whose gaze is merely tolerated by the sitter who maintains his defiant and proud independence and does not stoop to being merely an object for the curious gaze of a European public.

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This painting's title of "Othello" represents an interesting and very typically 19th century concatenation whereby the inhabitants of newly colonised territories are recorded and then linked to stories and heroes familiar to a European audience. Here the ill-fated Othello who "*loved not wisely but too well*" is reimagined, taken out of his traditional 16th century Venetian garb and restored to his "Moorish" North African roots with his brooding stare testifying to the turbulent themes of his story of betrayal, jealousy, wrath, vengeance and race. This returning of Othello to his North African roots is very representative of the 19th century European obsession with verisimilitude which drove others such as the Pre-Raphaelites, to travel and paint in such areas as the Middle East, often at great personal danger, in order to give their subjects as much reality and truth as possible and in doing so transmit this back to their home audiences.