French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945
The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

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Born in Frankfurt-am-Main in 1828, Christian Adolf Schreyer traveled widely in search of exotic locales to paint. His canvases, inspired by the snowy plains of Eastern Europe and the deserts of North Africa, won medals at three Paris Salons, and wealthy American collectors sought them out.1 After studying at Frankfurt’s Stadel Institut, Schreyer served as a painter-reporter for the German regiment of Maximilian Karl (1802–1871), 6th Prince of Thurn und Taxis, during the Crimean War (1854–1857). A decade after his wartime experience, Schreyer enthralled Parisian audiences with immersive battle scenes hailed as “the work of a master.”2 At the Salon of 1865, Schreyer earned a medal for The Charge of the Artillery of the Imperial Guard, Torkir, Crimea, 16 August 1855 (Fig. 1), purchased by the French State after the Salon and now in the collection of the Musée d’Orsay. This painting displays all the trademarks of Schreyer’s work: proximity to the action, attention to the details of uniforms and anatomy, and empathy for the trauma experienced by warhorses. Schreyer’s depiction of horse anatomy is so precise that the Nelson-Atkins picture, which is contemporaneous to The Charge

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of the Artillery, was recently used as an illustration in a study on horse genetics.

Fig. 1. Christian Adolf Schreyer, The Charge of the Artillery of the Imperial Guard, Traktir, Crimea, 16 August 1855, 1865, oil on canvas, 79 1/2 x 168 9/10 in. (202 x 429 cm), Musée d’Orsay, Paris, RF 440

Schreyer made detailed studies during his many travels through the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa and used them to create finished paintings throughout his career. Since Schreyer recycled motifs and there is no existing archive of his correspondence, it is difficult to date his finished paintings. This dearth of Schreyer documentation means that scholarship on his oeuvre has mainly focused on French Orientalism more broadly or cited his name in a long list of artists painting similar images, like Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876) and Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863). The titles of Schreyer’s paintings, including the former title of the Nelson-Atkins picture, Arab Horsemen, generally overlook the specificity of costume and context that he sought to depict. However, there are several visual clues here that provide evidence for where Schreyer traveled and what members of Algerian society he was able to depict, based on French colonial politics.

Fig. 2. Christian Adolf Schreyer, Arab on a White Horse (Arabischer Schimmelreiter), ca. 1863, oil on canvas, 21 1/2 x 29 in. (54.6 x 73.7 cm), private collection. Photo © Christie’s Images/Bridgeman Images

The specific group that Schreyer painted in many of his pictures, including the Nelson-Atkins painting, was the Arab Berber corps of mercenaries known as spahis, a critical component of French imperial rule. The most conclusive evidence thus far that the Nelson-Atkins picture depicts an advance party of spahis can be found in a review of the Salon of 1863 from the newspaper Le Temps. In it, the critic describes Schreyer’s painting Poste avancé arabe (Arab Outpost; no. 1707 in the Salon) specifically as “le poste avancé de spahis,” in which “a spahi mounted on a slate-gray horse” stands in the foreground in front of two other riders, one of which is “mounted on a chestnut horse.” The reviewer further notes three other riders sitting immobile on their steeds farther in the background, preparing to descend into a ravine. Based purely on this description of 1863, that painting must be the one sold at Christie’s in New York on October 22, 2008, under the title Arabischer Schimmelreiter (Arab on a White Horse; Fig. 2). That painting has much in common with the Nelson-Atkins picture, including an identical backdrop, probably the oasis of Biskra, and the rider in the red cap, who appears in both paintings.
As mentioned, Schreyer's works are difficult to date, but he developed the motif of the Nelson-Atkins and Christie's pictures around 1863, when he was living in Paris. Further historical context supports the assertion that the Nelson-Atkins painting, *Algerian Horsemen near an Oasis (possibly Biskra)*, is a depiction of Algerian spahis policing a critical French military outpost. The term *spahi*, used to describe Indigenous Arab Berbers recruited by the French to assist in maintaining imperial control in the Maghreb (North Africa), derives from the Turkish *sipahi*. The French utilized a system of native mercenaries that had been effective for their Ottoman predecessors in North Africa. Unlike artists who traveled to Algeria later in the century, when it had become a popular tourist destination, Schreyer observed the military phase of the French conquest of Algeria. In Schreyer's painting *The Charge* (Fig. 3), Indigenous men brandishing muskets gallop into the foreground. They emblematize the "anarchic tribal society" that the French perceived in North Africa; the French argued that they "saved" North Africa by imposing European order.\(^9\) The empty saddles and the figure who has slumped to the ground are evidence that these men are engaged in battle, though their enemies are beyond the picture's frame. In comparison, the Nelson-Atkins picture depicts five horsemen arrayed against a mountainous backdrop, clad in red and white burnous (a long, loose, hooded garment traditionally worn by Arabs).\(^10\) In colonial Morocco, the Berber spahis were readily identifiable by their blue burnous. The French Resident-General in Morocco from 1912 to 1925, Marshal Hubert Lyautey, wrote of the spahis, "My thoughts go to the men in blue burnous, who gave their lives to French peace."\(^11\) Their Algerian counterparts, as seen in Schreyer's paintings, wore red sashes and cloaks.

The red burnous was a recognizable motif in Orientalist art (Fig. 4) and literature and a hated symbol among Algerians fighting against French imperialism. In her 1922 short story *Le manteau de spahi*, the writer Colette depicts a French mother's obsession with "the cloak of a spahi, red, and of fine cloth, [which] slept folded in a used sheet."\(^12\) The protagonist's husband, a wounded French soldier, had brought the red burnous home as a trophy from the Algerian campaign. Despite the mother's efforts at preservation, mites chew holes in the cloak, which devastates her. In Sage Goellner's analysis of the story, the burnous stands for the amputated soldier, French nostalgia for days of empire gone by, and the tattered state of France's colonial government in Algeria.\(^13\) At the end of the story, the father turns the ruined garment into a pen cleaner, transforming the exotic into the quotidian, which speaks to how colonialism infiltrated the everyday in mainland France.
The historical title of the Nelson-Atkins picture, *The Oasis*, is the first clue to determining where Schreyer traveled. One of his other pictures, *Arab at a Fountain in Bouchagroune (Algérie)* (location of painting unknown), includes the name of a town in Biskra Province, a region encircling the oasis of Biskra. The quickest route to Biskra at the time was a steamer ship from Marseille to the Algerian port of Skikda (renamed Philippeville in 1838 by the French colonial administration, in honor of King Louis-Philippe). From Skikda to Biskra was an additional two-hundred-mile overland journey, for a total of approximately three days’ travel from Paris. When Schreyer traveled there in 1861, Algeria was not yet fully under French control, and it is unclear if his journey would have been smooth. For the first forty years of French occupation, French Algeria was a military state.

On March 14, 1844, Henri d’Orléans (1822–1897), Duke of Aumale and King Louis-Philippe’s son, besieged Biskra with three thousand French troops and installed the Ben Ganah family as leaders of the city in return for their assistance to the French Army. While the French boasted that they had captured Biskra without firing a shot, there was a mutiny among the Indigenous mercenaries less than two months later. Resistance to French rule was persistent, and the garrison at Biskra required five hundred permanent French soldiers just to maintain their foothold in the North African desert.

A further clue that the backdrop in both the Nelson-Atkins and Christie’s pictures is a Biskra vista is the similarity of the white adobe structure atop the hill to Biskra’s local baths, the Hammam Salihine (Fig. 5), located in Vieux-Biskra at a higher elevation than the core of the city. Biskra has regular access to water due to its several intermittently watered riverbeds, one of which is visible from the Hammam Salihine and also appears in the left middle ground of the Christie’s picture. Water was such a crucial resource to the French that they ranked the 360 Saharan oases under their control by each one’s quantity of date palm trees, which indicated the strength of its water supply. Biskra’s prevalence of water and date palms earned it the moniker “Queen of the Sahara.” As early as the Middle Ages, Biskra was described as a “place of palm date trees and flowing water” by the Arab geographer Muhammad Al-Muwaddast (945/6–991 ce). Both European and Arab sources speak to Biskra’s pivotal position at the mouth of the Sahara desert. Crowning the hillside behind the spahis, the baths were a critical piece of infrastructure for the French to control, which Schreyer highlighted by including them in the Nelson-Atkins and Christie’s pictures.

Once a darling of America’s most prominent collectors, Schreyer is scarcely mentioned in the vast body of modern scholarship on Orientalist painting. As the Nelson-Atkins picture shows, his depiction of Algerian spahis provides rare, early insight into the French colonial military state, whereas most other images of Biskra date from later in the century, when the city became a tourist destination. A recent exhibition at the Arab Institute in Paris highlighted Biskra’s burgeoning tourist industry beginning in the 1880s, assembling images of bazaars, fantasized harems, and photographs of other local sites as seen through European eyes.

Most famously, Henri Matisse’s *Nu bleu (Souvenir de Biskra) / Blue Nude (Memory of Biskra)* (1907; Baltimore Museum of Art) presented the Maghreb as a region that was easily accessible to Europeans in every sense. Schreyer’s paintings are a preambule to the development of Algeria as a tourist destination for Europeans. His depictions of spahis performing reconnaissance tasks at the mouth of the Sahara are crucial to a full understanding of the French imperial project in North Africa.

Glynnis Stevenson
May 2020

**Notes**

1. Chauncey Mitchell Depew Jr. (1879–1931), the son of a senator from New York, probably owned the Nelson-Atkins picture just before the museum purchased it in 1932.
2. *Le Salon de 1865* (Lyon, France: L. Perrin, 1865), 17. Translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.


8. 19th Century European Art and Orientalist Art (New York: Christie’s, October 22, 2008), lot 4, as *Arabischer Schimmelreiter*. The painting was in the J. P. Schneider collection in Frankfurt as of 1984 and later with Galerie Bühler in Munich. In this essay, I make the first identification of the 1863 picture as the one sold at Christie’s in 2008.


10. Derived from the Berber word *abernus*, the burnous is the traditional dress in the Maghreb. Made of heavy wool, a burnous is usually white. Wolfgang Bruhn and Maurice Cottaz, *Encyclopédie du costume: Des peuples de l'Antiquité à nos jours ainsi que* (Paris: Nouvelles editions latines, 1990), 80.


13. Colette’s own father, Captain Jules-Joseph Colette, served in the Zouave regiment in North Africa. She noted that his military journals were eerily blank. She surmised that he was ambivalent about his military service and, in her short story, he is the model for the amputated father figure. Sage Goellner, “Algeria in France: Colette’s ‘Le manteaux de spahis,’” *French Review* 65, no. 3 (February 2012): 483, 486.

15. Schreyer gave this painting to the artist François Bonvin, who then lost his livelihood when he became blind and paralyzed. Bonvin sold his collection at Hôtel Drouot on May 9–10, 1887, to support himself. *Catalogue de tableaux, aquarelles, dessins, sculptures, etc.: Offerts par les artistes à [sic] F. Bonvin, leur confrère frappe de cécité et de paralysie* (Paris: Hôtel Drouot, May 9–10, 1887).


Citation

**Chicago:**


**MLA:**


Provenance

Possibly with Deforge-Carpentier, Paris, at the earliest by 1871—no later than 1879 [1];

Probably Chauncey Mitchell Depew, Jr. (1879–1931), New York, by January 26, 1931;

Purchased from *Important Paintings by Schreyer, Heuner, Daubigny, Dessar, Murphy, Van Goyen, Gainsborough, Lobley, Van Huysum and Artists of Like Distinction from Several Collections together with an Athenæum Portrait of Washington, by Stuart, and a Portrait of Judge Robert Johnson, by Waldo from the Estate of the Late Chauncey M. Depew, Jr.*, O’Reilly’s Plaza Art Galleries, New York, December 4, 1931, lot 11, as *The Oasis*, probably by Newhouse Galleries, New York, 1931–March 25, 1932 [2];

Purchased from Newhouse Galleries, through Harold Woodbury Parsons, by The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, 1932 [3].

Notes

their shop to 6, rue Halevy, Paris in 1871, while their workshop remained at 79, rue Legendre. The firm closed in 1879.

[2] It is likely that the picture belonged to Chauncey M. Depew Jr., but the sale had multiple consignors.

[3] The painting was placed on view at the Kansas City Art Institute from March 14 until May 20, 1932, since the museum was not yet built. See “Objects owned by the W. R. Nelson Trust on exhibit at the K.C. Art Institute as of March 14, 1932,” March 14, 1932, Nelson-Atkins Archives, William Rockhill Nelson Trust Office Records 1926–33, RG 80/05, Series 1, box 02, folder 17, Exhibition at the Kansas City Art Institute, 1932, and was removed before May 20, 1932. See also, “Pictures remaining in the Art Institute after May 20, 1932,” May 20, 1932, Nelson-Atkins Archives, William Rockhill Nelson Trust Office Records 1926–33, RG 80/05, Series 1, box 02, folder 17, Exhibition at the Kansas City Art Institute, 1932.

Related Works

Christian Adolf Schreyer, Arab Caravan, ca. 1860, oil on canvas, 18 x 32 in. (45.7 x 81.3 cm), The Dayton Art Institute, OH. Gift of Mr. Robert Badenhop, 1953.64.

Christian Adolf Schreyer, Arabischer Schimmelreiter (Arab Riding a White Horse), 1863, oil on canvas, 21 1/2 x 29 in. (54.6 x 73.7 cm), sold at 19th Century European Art and Orientalist Art, Christie’s, New York, October 22, 2008, lot 4.

Christian Adolf Schreyer, Arabs on the March, before 1887, oil on canvas, 22 5/8 x 37 3/4 in. (57.5 x 95.9 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Bequest of Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, 87.15.127.

Christian Adolf Schreyer, Arabs on Horseback, late 19th century, oil on canvas, 24 2/5 x 38 1/5 in. (62 x 97 cm), Princeton University Art Museum, NJ, 1999-35.

Christian Adolf Schreyer, Arabs, late 19th century, oil on canvas, 21 x 34 in. (53.3 x 86.4 cm), Saint Louis Art Museum. Bequest of Cora Liggett Fowler, The John Fowler Memorial Collection, 169:1928.

Christian Adolf Schreyer, The Oasis, late 19th century, oil on canvas, 16 x 25 in. (40.6 x 63.5 cm), private collection.

Exhibitions

Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia, KS, October–November 1941.


Adolf Schreyer: An International Exhibition Presented by the Paine Art Center and Arboretum, Paine Art Center and Arboretum, Oshkosh, WI, June 8–July 30, 1972, unnumbered, as The Oasis.

References


“Hooper and Clarke Furniture on Sale; Large Collections With Many Rare Pieces to Be Dispersed at Auction This Week; Stuart Portrait Offered; Clarke Library Is Also Included—Ten Rooms of Old King Hooper House Cover Three Centuries,” New York Times 81, no. 26,972 (November 29, 1931): 6N.

Catalogue of Important Paintings by Schreyer, Heuner, Daubigny, Dessar, Murphy, Van Goyen, Gainsborough, Lobley, Van Huysum and Artists of Like Distinction from Several Collections together with an Atheneum Portrait of Washington, by Stuart, and a Portrait of Judge Robert Johnson, by Waldo from the Estate of the Late Chauncey M. Depew, Jr. (New York: Plaza Art Galleries, December 4, 1931), 9, as The Oasis.

M[inn]a K. P[owell], “A New Nelson Group: Paintings and Drawings Are Added to Gallery; The Public May View the Recent Purchases From 2 Until 6 O’Clock This Afternoon at Epperson Room,” Kansas City Star 52, no. 206 (April 10, 1932): 11A.

M[inn]a K. P[owell], “Art: Mr. Parsons Will Be Heard Thursday Night on ‘The Italian Renaissance’—What Is to Be Seen in the Group of Recently Acquired Paintings for the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art Was Told the Hospitality Committee Yesterday by Him,” Kansas City Times 95, no. 88 (April 12, 1932): 10, erroneously as Tunisian Arabs on horseback.

“Kansas City Adds Important Works to its Holdings: Works Recently Bought for the William Rockhill Nelson Trust All Secured from Leading New York Dealers,” Art News 30, no. 30 (April 23, 1932): 8:

“Kansas City Art Museum Adds Important Pictures to Collection,” Art Digest 6, no. 15 (May 1, 1932): 4, as The Oasis.

Art News 30, no. 36 (June 4, 1932): 15, (repro.), as The Oasis.


“Art and Artists: ‘Masterpiece of Week’ On Display Next Sunday; Plan to Give a Single Work of Art a Spotlight and Special Setting Each Week at the Nelson Gallery to Be Inaugurated Sunday,” *Kansas City Star* 54, no. 173 (March 9, 1934): 15, as *Arab Horsemen*.


