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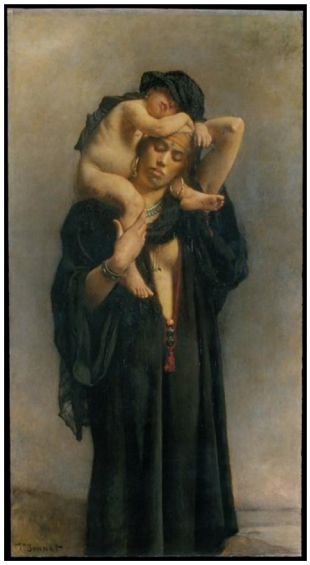
Cover Art

"An entire destiny in a few brushstrokes:" an analysis of sleep and empire☆



[Léon Bonnat. *An Egyptian Peasant Woman and Her Child*, 1869-1870. Oil on canvas. Credit for the journal cover and the image above: Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Bequest of Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, 1887].

Leon Bonnat's *An Egyptian Peasant Woman and Her Child* (1869-1870) depicts a "fellah" woman, a farmer's wife, eyes closed, supporting her slumbering child on her shoulders. At a time when many young French artists were exploring the exotic nature of the Orient and voicing judgment, appraisal, and awe through their brushstrokes, Bonnat captured a microcosm of empire through his use of sleep in art. At once, this painting betrays a once powerful nation's dignified and romanticized past, its uncertain present, and its threatened future.

Bonnat produced this painting from a sketch he made in 1869 while attending the grand opening of the Suez Canal.[1] Guests of the Egyptian Khedive Isma'il Pasha (Viceroy to the Ottoman Emperor) who attended the ceremony celebrating this harbinger of modernity and European influence wrote about "folkloric dances, performing dervishes, fire-eaters, and karagöz (shadow theater),"[2] creating what one guest termed a "most varied and bizarre spectacle."[2] Witnessing this exotic display, European scholars, writers, and artists rhapsodized about the *old* Egypt (once a great and powerful empire), appreciating it as a faded archeology—a fetishized memory out of place in a new world order that held modernity as its hegemon. Emblematic of Egypt's vanishing past was the female fellah, a beautiful, innocent, and primitive woman who became an artistic "type" used in French art throughout the time period.[3] The fellah appeared, to Bonnat and his contemporaries, at once exotic and beautiful, untainted and natural, and in the words of French writer Gautier (also present at the Suez's opening) "intimate … with the earth … molded by the clay."[3] And yet, although modernity had helped create this allure by providing an opposition to the simplicity and naturalism she represented, it also bestowed upon her beauty a certain vulnerability. Indeed, when observing Charles Landelle's painting of the "type" entitled *Woman Fellah* at the Universal Exhibition in 1867, art critic Alfred Assollant writes of the fellah's innocent vulnerability, "This is why the Orient which nothing disturbs has been for such a long time prey to the first come … an entire destiny of a people is traced in a few brushstrokes on this woman."[3]

Therefore, Bonnat's decision to render the fellah asleep is a powerful image. In sleep, our conception of time disappears, and memories of our past blur into our present state, creating dreams which blend the conscious with the unconscious. The sleepy woman is temporally trapped when asleep as she is temporally trapped by the antiquity of her typified culture. What Bonnat creates in his painting of the Egyptian woman is a figure representing her country as old and arrested not only because she seems to sleep the sleep of the ancient greatness of a dead empire but also because she rests even in the present, wrestling with memories of the past and trapped in a space outside that which the viewer occupies. The fellah is depicted trapped in what art historian Darcy G. Grigsby terms technological and developmental "stasis" oblivious to the threat "progress" may offer.[3] The sculptor Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi, best known for the *Statue of Liberty*, gateway to America, traveled as a young man throughout Egypt studying the very women who would serve as the models for Lady Liberty.[3] True to this impression, Bartholdi wrote that Egypt, "certainly has her charms," but remarked on her apparent immobility—her sleep—in the face of industrialization.[3]

Before creating the *Statue of Liberty*, Bartholdi created a prototype "Lighthouse" of Egypt "under the features of a female fellah" to hold aloft a torch in the Suez harbor welcoming foreigners to Egypt's wealth.[3] Bonnat's painting, however, suggests that the fellah is a guardian not of commerce but of *future generations*. Her slumbering

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child's presence begs an inquiry not into Egypt's past or present but into her future. Supported by her mother and the ancient dignity she represents, the child is nevertheless blinded by the garment her mother wears. Bonnat seems to suggest that one blinded by the past cannot confront the future and questions whether or not the fellah can endure.

As ambassador of the land, the fellah is tasked with guarding its future. Although she possesses the dignity afforded her by ancient nations, she is caught by the imperialist in a moment of exhaustion, eyes closed, unawares, and at rest. Bonnat's use of sleep in this painting warps time, pitting the past against the future in an image of the present. The future's guardian (the mother) is left vulnerable to the ravages of the present, whereas the future herself (the daughter) sleeps blindly and deeply, her only defense the strong, ancient dignity of her inheritance and the glorious past on whose shoulders she stands. Bonnat could not have predicted the future to which he had blinded his youngest subject, but he was correct in perceiving its threats. Hardly more than a decade after Bonnat painted this piece, in what would have been the brimming childhood of his youngest subject, the British seized control of Egypt, first financially and then politically. By 1882, the British had taken Egypt, having used the Suez as the Navy's route to Cairo.[4]

Disclosures

The authors have declared that they have nothing to disclose.

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