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MASTER DRAWINGS



Charles-Théodore Frère
*A view of the Pyramids at Giza
from the Nile at Sunset*

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CHARLES-THÉODORE FRÈRE
(Paris 1814 – 1888)

A VIEW OF THE PYRAMIDS AT GIZA FROM THE NILE AT SUNSET

Signed lower right: *TH. FRÈRE BEY.*

Watercolour on paper
9.5 x 15 cm ; 3 3/4 x 5 3/4 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Chartres.

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Few artists did more to shape the nineteenth-century European image of Egypt than Charles-Théodore Frère. This intimate watercolour unites two of the defining motifs of his Egyptian oeuvre: the evening light that became his hallmark and the timeless silhouette of the Pyramids of Giza. Bathed in a glowing golden sky, the ancient monuments rise beyond the broad waters of the Nile, while three water buffalo graze quietly in the foreground and tiny figures and pack animals animate the distant bank. A cluster of palms frames the right-hand side of the composition, while a flock of birds wheels overhead in one of Frère's characteristic compositional devices. Executed on a remarkably small scale, the sheet demonstrates the artist's exceptional ability to evoke vastness through little more than light, atmosphere and silhouette.

The present watercolour belongs to a recurring group of views of Giza that occupied Frère throughout his Egyptian career. Among the finest of these is the monumental oil *Pyramides de Gyzeh pendant l'inondation du Nil. Crépuscule*, exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1885 (fig. 1). Although vastly different in scale, both works share the same expansive treatment of the Egyptian landscape, in which the pyramids emerge quietly from the glowing horizon beyond the Nile, ultimately subordinate to the effects of light that fascinated the artist. If the Salon painting presents the subject on a grand, almost panoramic scale, the present watercolour distills the same vision into an object of striking intimacy.



Fig 1. Charles-Théodore Frère, *Pyramides de Gyzeh pendant l'inondation du Nil. Crépuscule*, 1885, oil on canvas, 145 × 180 cm, Private Collection.

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Frère was drawn not simply to Egypt's celebrated monuments, but to the relationship between antiquity and the living landscape that surrounded them. Here the pyramids are neither archaeological curiosities nor isolated symbols of the ancient world. Instead, they emerge naturally from a landscape animated by grazing livestock, travellers and cultivated riverbanks, presenting Egypt as a place where everyday life unfolded beneath monuments that had endured for millennia. Painted before the rapid expansion of modern Cairo transformed the western bank of the Nile, the watercolour preserves a vision of Giza that nineteenth-century travellers recognised as one of the defining sights of Egypt.

Frère's fascination with the Orient began during an extended stay in Algeria between 1836 and 1839. Following further travels through Egypt, Greece, Turkey and the Levant between 1851 and 1854, he established a studio in Cairo in 1853. Unlike the majority of European Orientalist painters, whose works were produced almost exclusively for collectors in Paris, London and other Western capitals, Frère became closely integrated into Egyptian artistic and courtly society. He enjoyed the patronage of members of the Egyptian ruling elite and was awarded the honorific title of *Bey* by the Khedival court, a distinction that appears alongside his signature in the present work. The title reflects the exceptional esteem in which Frère was held by the Egyptian court and distinguishes him as one of the very few Western Orientalist painters to have worked extensively for both Egyptian and European patrons.

This unusual position shaped Frère's art. Returning repeatedly to Egypt over several decades, he developed an intimate understanding of its landscape, architecture and daily life. His paintings avoid theatrical anecdote in favour of careful observation, their enduring appeal deriving from their remarkable balance of topographical fidelity and poetic atmosphere. The luminous skies, tranquil waters and restrained silhouettes that characterise his finest works evoke not merely the appearance of Egypt, but its distinctive quality of light, which captivated generations of nineteenth-century travellers.

From 1839 until 1887 Frère exhibited more than one hundred and twenty North African, Egyptian and Near Eastern landscapes at the Paris Salon, establishing himself as one of the leading Orientalist painters of his generation. Admired by contemporaries including Claude Monet and Théophile Gautier, his works were eagerly sought by collectors throughout Europe and the Middle East alike. The intimacy of the sheet only serves to emphasise Frère's remarkable accomplishment. On a surface measuring little more than fifteen centimetres across, he distils the defining qualities of his art: its luminous atmosphere, masterly handling of light and extraordinary sense of space into a composition of exceptional refinement. Few artists could evoke such breadth of landscape with such remarkable economy of means.

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