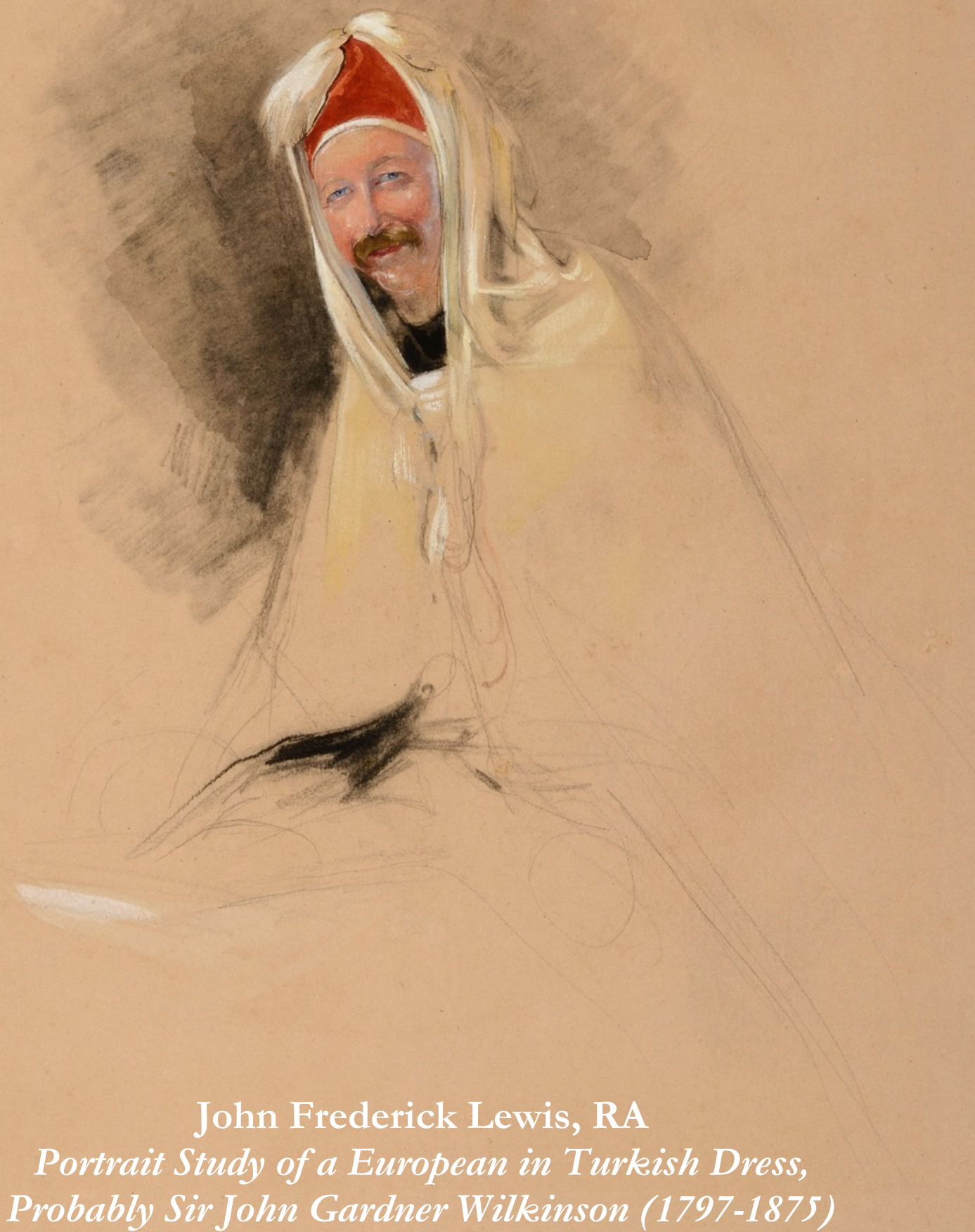


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John Frederick Lewis, RA
*Portrait Study of a European in Turkish Dress,
Probably Sir John Gardner Wilkinson (1797-1875)*

JOHN FREDERICK LEWIS, RA
(London 1804–1876 Walton-on-Thames)

*PORTRAIT STUDY OF A EUROPEAN IN TURKISH DRESS, PROBABLY SIR
JOHN GARDNER WILKINSON (1797-1875), C. 1850*

Watercolour over pencil and black chalk heightened with bodycolour

37.5 x 27.5 cm; 14 3/4 x 10 3/4 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, England.



This is a portrait study of the British Egyptologist Sir John Gardner Wilkinson (1797–1875) by John Frederick Lewis, made during Lewis's decade in Cairo in the 1840s. A fair-skinned, middle-aged man looks out at the viewer with a quizzical smile. He has blue eyes beneath heavily hooded lids that droop at the corners, and a long, flowing moustache. He wears a red fez over a white skull-cap, over the top of which is the hood of a large white burnous, the fabric framing his face and falling across his shoulders. Below, the figure dissolves into pencil, the body barely indicated, caught only in outline.

Lewis has given us the face and withheld almost everything else. Working in watercolour over pencil and black chalk, heightened with bodycolour, he has brought the full resources of his technique to bear on the head alone: the cool modelling of the skin, the precise rendering of the eyes, the weight and nap of the fez. On the left, a sweep of dark chalk shading throws the face into relief against the pale paper. The lower portion of the sheet remains in the condition of a working drawing. Whether this reflects an interrupted sitting, a study intended as the basis for a more finished work, or a conscious compositional decision is not known. What is certain is that the face, isolated by the surrounding sketchwork, commands the sheet with an authority it might not otherwise possess. As Briony Llewellyn observed of the sitter, he seems to acknowledge his awkward accumulation of Oriental garb with wry amusement, accentuating, she noted, his youthful looks.¹

The practice of Europeans adopting local dress in the East had a long and self-conscious history by the time Lewis arrived in Cairo. Lord Byron (1788-1824) had done it in Greece and Turkey three decades earlier, and his portraits in Albanian costume had made the gesture simultaneously glamorous and transgressive, a statement of sympathy with the East that sat uneasily with the assumptions of the world he had left behind. Lewis was entirely at ease with the tradition. His own self-portrait in a paisley turban, now in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, in Kuala Lumpur, shows a man who has absorbed his adopted world with evident pleasure. When William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863) visited him in Cairo in 1844, he found his friend “*going about with a great beard and crooked sword, dressed up like an odious Turk*” living far from what Thackeray called “*the haunts of European civilization*” in what he memorably described as “*a dreamy, hazy, lazy, tobacco-fied life.*”²

¹ Llewellyn, Briony, and Newton, Charles, catalogue entry for *Portrait Study of a European in Turkish Dress*, Guy Peppiatt Fine Art, BADA Fair, London, 2017. Briony Llewellyn (4 July 1952 – 12 March 2023) was the pre-eminent authority on John Frederick Lewis and British Orientalist painting. Her death was a great loss to the field.

² Thackeray, William Makepeace, *Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo*, London, 1846.



John Frederick Lewis,
*Portrait of a Memlook Bey (said to be a self-portrait)*¹
Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, IAMM

Among the many Europeans who settled in Cairo in the first half of the nineteenth century, two figures stand out for the depth and seriousness of their engagement with Egyptian life. John Frederick Lewis arrived in Cairo in 1841 and remained for a decade, living in a large Ottoman-style wooden house in the Islamic quarter of the city, adopting local dress and customs and immersing himself in a world that most of his contemporaries only visited. Sir John Gardner Wilkinson had preceded him. Between 1821 and 1833, Wilkinson had spent twelve years based largely at ancient Thebes, modern Luxor, studying the monuments and recording the daily life of the ancient Egyptians with a thoroughness that no Western scholar had previously attempted. His three-volume *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*, published in 1837 and illustrated by the artist Joseph Bonomi, caught the popular imagination and passed through many editions; it earned him a knighthood in 1839 and established him beyond dispute as the father of British Egyptology. He returned to Egypt four times between 1841 and 1856, and it was during his first return visit that his path crossed with Lewis's.



Godfrey Thomas Vigne (1801-1863)
Shayk Abd al-Qadir Maghribi – *The Magician of Egypt*, 1844
Watercolour drawing, 27.3 x 19.1 cm,
V&A South Kensington SD.1148.

The two men moved in the same expatriate and scholarly circles, and the documentary evidence of their connection is unusually specific. On 8 December 1841, Wilkinson was among the guests gathered at Lewis's Ottoman house for a séance conducted by Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Maghrabi, a Cairene magician whose performances had become a celebrated, and contested, fixture of Western expatriate life in the city. His speciality was the "*mirror of ink*": a magic square drawn on paper, a large drop of ink placed in a young boy's palm, incense burning, the Shaykh chanting, and the boy reporting the visions that appeared to him in the ink, visions that might include, if the observers were fortunate, any figure they cared to name from history or the living world. The British Orientalist Edward William Lane (1801-1876), had given a famous account of these séances in *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, 1836; the account was itself part of the expatriate literature Lewis and Wilkinson both knew intimately.³ That the father of British Egyptology and the most celebrated Orientalist painter of the age should find themselves together in a Cairo interior awaiting the pronouncements of this particular conjuror tells us something about the world they shared, a world in which the boundaries between scholarship, adventure and credulity were, like so much else in Cairo, pleasingly difficult to draw. Later that month, Wilkinson's journal records dining with Colonel Barnet and meeting 'Mr Lewis and Mr Coste.'⁴ Both men appear in February 1842 as members of the newly established Literary Association of Egypt, and a letter written by their mutual friend Joseph Bonomi (1796-1878), in January 1844, places them in Cairo and moving in the same circles. When Wilkinson later wrote *Murray's Handbook for Travellers in Egypt* (1847), he singled out Lewis's drawings of Cairo for particular praise.

The identification of the sitter as Wilkinson rests on compelling documentary evidence. Most telling is the record of a posthumous studio sale of Lewis's works at Christie's on 5 July 1855, in which lot 129 is listed as *Sir Gardiner Wilkinson, in Oriental Costume*, acquired by the dealer William Vokins.⁵ A letter of 14 April 1857 from Lewis to the dealer John Scott further lists *a portrait of Sir G. Wilkinson*.⁶ A closely related version of the composition exists in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, currently titled *Study of a Seated Oriental Man, smoking*, in which the figure is almost identical but includes, lower right, a brass-mounted glass nargile from which the man is smoking.⁷ The sitter's distinctive features, the long flowing moustache, the blue eyes, the heavily hooded lids drooping at the corners, are consistent across both versions and accord with the

³ Lane, Edward William, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, Charles Knight and Co., London, 1836.

⁴ Wilkinson Journal, 1841–42, Griffith Institute, University of Oxford, Wilkinson MSS. 1.69.

⁵ Christie's, London, *A Collection of Drawings by J.F. Lewis, Esq., R.A.*, 5 July 1855, lot 129: *Sir Gardiner Wilkinson, in Oriental Costume*, bought Vokins.

⁶ Letter from John Frederick Lewis to John Scott, 14 April 1857, Private Collection, cited in Llewellyn, Briony, and Newton, Charles, catalogue entry for *Portrait Study of a European in Turkish Dress*, Guy Peppiatt Fine Art, BADA Fair, London, 2017.

⁷ Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, WA.OA966, currently titled *Study of a Seated Oriental Man, smoking*.

known portraits of Wilkinson by William Brockedon (1838) and Alfred, Count d'Orsay (1839), both now in the National Portrait Gallery.

What distinguishes this portrait from many of the works in this exhibition is not its technique but its subject. The Orientalist tradition represented here is largely populated by figures whose names we do not know, anonymous types observed in the street, the market, the interior, rendered with varying degrees of precision but not as individuals. They are, in the main, either genre figures with a dominant presence, or what one might call fancy-dress portraits: studio models costumed for the occasion, embodying an idea of the East rather than a particular person within it. Sir John Gardner Wilkinson is different. He has a name, a biography, and a scholarly reputation that precedes his appearance in the frame. The burnous and the fez are costumes, consciously worn, as consciously as Byron wore his Albanian dress and as Lewis himself appears to have done in what is believed to be his self-portrait in a paisley turban. That slight amusement in Wilkinson's eyes acknowledges the game being played. Wilkinson controls his own image in a way that the anonymous sitters cannot.

John Frederick Lewis was born in London in 1804 or 1805, the son of the landscape painter and engraver Frederick Christian Lewis. An early career as an animal and sporting painter gave way to watercolour, and an extended tour of Spain and Morocco in 1832–34 earned him the soubriquet 'Spanish Lewis'. Further travels through Italy, Greece and Albania brought him to Constantinople in 1840 and to Cairo in 1841, where he remained for a decade, living in an Ottoman-style house in the Islamic quarter of the city and immersing himself in Cairene life in a way that set him apart from his contemporaries. On his return to England in 1851, he resumed his exhibiting career, becoming President of the Society of Painters in Watercolours in 1855 and a full Royal Academician in 1865. Among those who came under his influence in his final years was his Walton-on-Thames neighbour Charles Robertson RWS (1844–1891), whose Egyptian watercolours reflect the debt he owed to Lewis's example. Lewis died at Walton-on-Thames in 1876.

Portrait Study of a European in Turkish Dress is a work of unusual intimacy and sensitivity. It captures a moment of genuine friendship between two extraordinary men, the greatest British Egyptologist of his age and the most empathetic painter the Orientalist tradition produced, in a city that had claimed them both. Wilkinson sits for Lewis not as a subject but as a collaborator, wearing his borrowed costume with the easy amusement of a man entirely comfortable in his own skin. The portrait is unfinished, and yet it is complete. The face tells us everything we need to know.

COLNAGHI

COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com