



## Layers of Fantasy – Gunnar Berndtson's *Almée*

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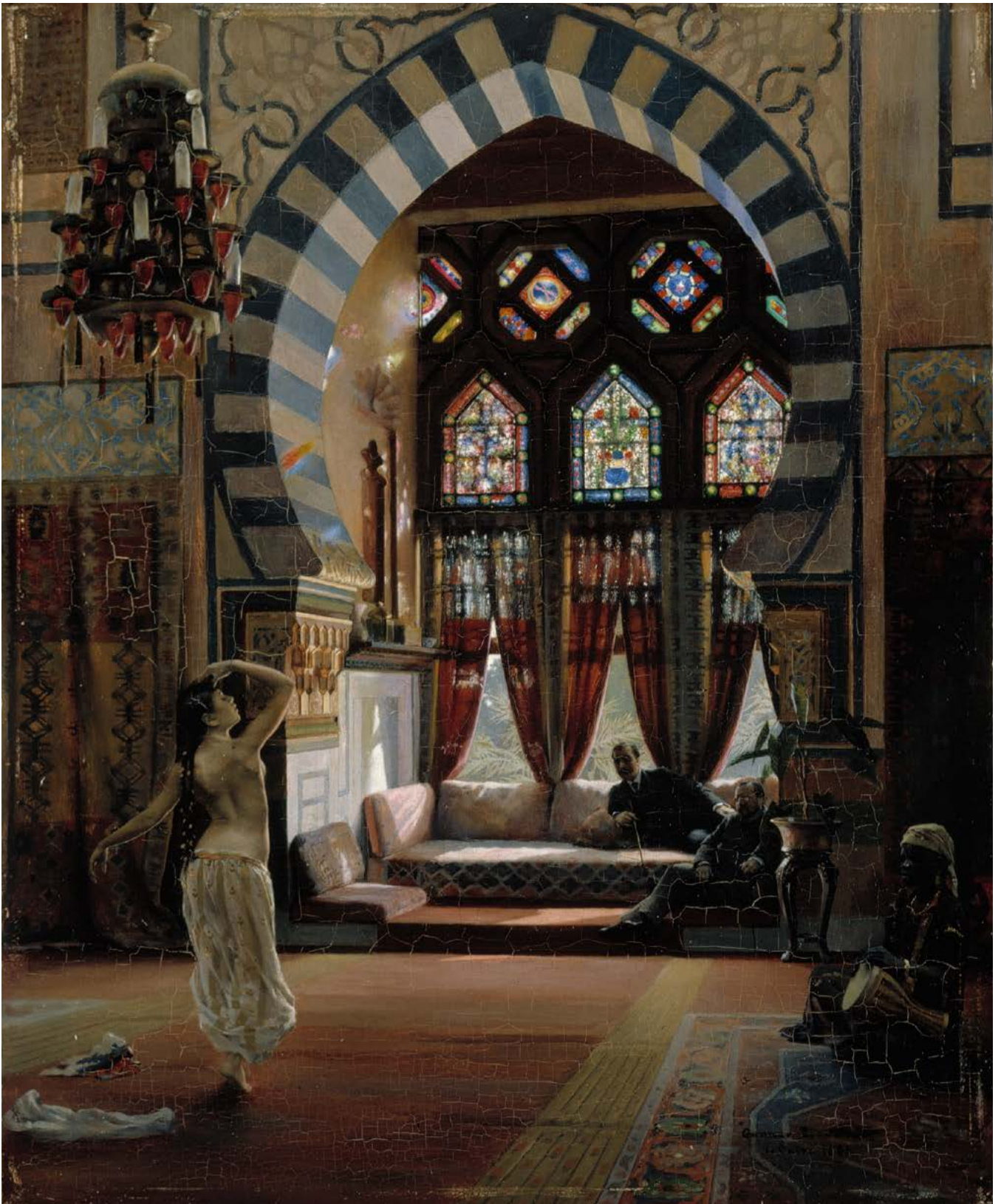
I first came across the painting *Almée, an Egyptian Dancer*, by Gunnar Berndtson (1854–1895) in 1989, when I was looking through the picture archives of the Ateneum Art Museum as part of my research for a series of short television programmes about music that I was co-producing. I found a black-and-white photograph of the work on cardboard backing. At the time, the actual painting hung in the office of then Director General of the National Board of Customs in Kaleva House, a neo-Renaissance building on Erottaja in Helsinki. Designed by Theodor Höijer, the neo-Renaissance palace with its decorative interiors seemed to echo the spirit of the fantastical interior in *Almée* (1883), and the exoticism of the painting established a thematic connection with the international profile of the Customs Board. These factors may well have contributed to the decision regarding where to place the work, which belonged to the collection of the Ateneum Art Museum. At the time, the painting had not been displayed in the Ateneum except as a photographic reproduction in Berndtson's 1896 memorial exhibition,<sup>1</sup> which also explained why it was relatively unknown.

The painting of an *almée* (*almeh*, meaning an Oriental dancer) with a drummer, was perfect for illustrating the musical theme of our programme. The black drum player, however, is an indistinct presence on the right-hand side of the painting, while the dancer dominates in the foreground with her curving, bare back and hips. Also in the picture are two apparently European gentlemen, one of whom is reclining on a sofa in a window recess, leaning on his elbow and holding a water pipe in his hand. The other spectator is closer to the viewer, sitting in the Western manner. The postures of the two men indicate that they are watching the performance with great concentration; however, they are not displaying their acclaim but rather acting with cultivated restraint befitting of the civilised upper classes of the time. The topic of the work is suspect as regards its propriety – the garment on the floor would seem to imply a striptease performance – but the artist manages quite well to avoid any hint of indecency. The viewer's attention is drawn instead to the sumptuous interior: the archway that divides the space and the stained-glass windows, the multi-coloured light on the wall reminiscent of the glitter of jewels, of mythic, abundant treasures of the Orient.

For an art historian like myself who had read *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment* but was familiar with the Orient primarily through popular culture, the immediate reading of the painting pointed to fantasy. Although I happened to know that when he painted this piece in 1882–83, Gunnar Berndtson was in Cairo,<sup>2</sup> I was nevertheless held captive by my idea of the fictional Orient. For me the painting was an a-historical fantasy, a product of the imagination inspired by Berndtson's trip to Egypt, without any actual links to the real world. In retrospect it

1 *Katalog öfver arbeten af Gunnar Berndtson utställda i Ateneum*. Februari 1896. Helsinki.

2 'Gunnar Berndtson.' *Kyläkirjaston kuvalehti*. B-sarja nro 4, 1895.



Gunnar Berndtson, *Almée, an Egyptian Dancer*, 1883,  
oil on panel, 45 x 37.5cm  
Antell Collections, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum  
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

seems strange that I passed over the clue offered by the painting for another kind of reading – the European men in the background.

My blindness was partially explained by my ignorance of the tradition of Orientalism in Europe, and of how fantasy and precise ethnographic observation alternated and overlapped in Orientalising art, as well as how artists travelling in the Orient<sup>3</sup> in the 19th century were expected to depict what they saw with maximum fidelity, because buyers valued likeness and verisimilitude. In keeping with the emergence of realism in French art, late-19th-century Orientalism gave increasing preference to ethnographic realism,<sup>4</sup> while the British tradition of genre painting had already been applied to depictions of the Orient in the first half of the century.<sup>5</sup> Had I known even these bare facts, I would have been better prepared to consider the possibility of realism in *Almée* as well as the manner of its realism.

Closer research of the painting was deferred, however, until I returned to it in the 2000s in an article on artists' travels<sup>6</sup> for which I had new sources and new research tools: Berndtson's letters from his trip to Egypt in the collections of the Central Art Archives (today Archive Collections of the Finnish National Gallery), not yet researched at the time, the Press cuttings that came with them, as well as the internet. Meanwhile, Turku Art Museum had organised a Berndtson retrospective, in connection with which Cairo too was referred to, as well as Berndtson's partnership with Delort de Gléon.<sup>7</sup> In my article, I presented Berndtson's Egyptian sojourn as the only trip to have been taken by a Finnish artist outside Western Europe in the 19th century. The trip was also the inspiration for extended travels by other artists in the early part of the 20th century.<sup>8</sup> Although it has since been shown that Hugo Backmansson had visited North Africa in the 19th century, in 1898, Berndtson nevertheless remained the earliest artist-explorer and the first Orientalist in Finnish art.

As I was scouring the internet for information about Berndtson, I soon found myself at a site showing outdoor photographs of Baron Delort de Gléon's palace in Cairo and its annex, taken by Emile Bechard.<sup>9</sup> I was quite shocked by my discovery. The photographs had been taken in 1874, eight years before Berndtson's journey and only two years after the completion of the palace. The pictures depict the building in the quarter of Ismailia rising above the still unfinished city in its brand-new splendour. The second-storey windows seemed precisely like the three-part windows in the painting with their octagonal rose lunettes: two complete and two half-lunettes. The windows were evidently the same as those in *Almée*, which meant that the interior too might be like the one depicted in the painting. The website informed me that the palace had been designed by French architect Ambroise Baudry (1838–1906), who lived in Cairo from 1871–88 and whose life's work is the subject of a monograph.<sup>10</sup> The building represented European Orientalism with references to medieval Ottoman and Mamluk architecture in Cairo.<sup>11</sup>

Alongside the picture of the palace, another serendipitous Google search took me to the obituary of Baron Delort de Gléon, published in 1899 in *Annales des Mines*, one of the

3 For Europeans the Orient was a vast region that extended from southern Spain all the way to India, its geographic location most clearly identified with the Ottoman Empire.

4 Peltre, Christine, 2004. *Orientalism*. Paris: Terrail/Edigroup, 12 and 107–113.

5 Tromans, Nicholas, 2008. 'Genre and Gender in Cairo and Constantinople.' *The Lure of the East. British Orientalist Painting*. London: Tate Publishing, 78.

6 Heikka, Elina, 2006. 'Kolonialismia myötä- ja vastakarvaan. Taiteilijamatkat Euroopan ulkopuolelle.' in Liisa Lindgren (ed.), *Vieraila mailla*. Helsinki: Weilin & Göös.

7 Berndt Arell and Christian Hoffmann (eds.), 1998. *Gunnar Berndtson 1854–1895. Salonkimaalari. Salongmålare. Peintre de Salon*. Oulu: Pohjoinen, 21.

8 E.g. Hugo Backmansson, Oscar Parviainen, Harald Gallen and Birger Carlstedt. Heikka 2006.

9 [www.egyptedantan.com/le\\_caire/villages\\_et\\_agglomerations/quartier\\_ismailieh/quartier\\_ismailieh13.htm](http://www.egyptedantan.com/le_caire/villages_et_agglomerations/quartier_ismailieh/quartier_ismailieh13.htm) (accessed 22.7.2010). The *Egypte d'antan* website was maintained by Max Karkegi, who kindly allowed me to use photographs of the palace.

10 *L'Égypte d'un architecte. Ambroise Baudry (1838–1906)*, 1998. Paris: Somogy Editions d'art.

11 Volait, Mercedes, 1998. 'Le séjour en Égypte.' *L'Égypte d'un architecte. Ambroise Baudry (1838–1906)*. Paris: Somogy Editions d'art, 71–76.





Front view of Delort de Gléon's palace.  
 Photograph by Emile Béchard, 1874.  
 Private collection

oldest periodicals of industry and technology, now accessible online.<sup>12</sup> Baron Alphonse Delort de Gléon (1843–1899) had graduated as a mining engineer in Paris in 1864 and had lived in Cairo for about 20 years. Initially serving as director of the water company of Alexandria, he had later founded the water company of Cairo that was in charge of sewerage in the new parts of the city and also for the construction of the Kasr El Nil steel bridge over the Nile. He founded a large ice-cream factory, a brewery, and Egypt's first sugar refinement plant, all in Cairo, and he was also a co-founder of the country's first bank, *Crédit Foncier Egyptien*. Alongside his business activities, Delort de Gléon also represented France's interests in Egypt in many ways: he was the local president of *Alliance Française* and founded three schools along the Nile in Upper Egypt. He was also the commissioner in charge of building *La rue du Caire* at the 1889 World Fair in Paris.<sup>13</sup>

My online discoveries forced me to return to square one with *Almée*. Instead of an Orientalist fantasy scene, the painting now opened a window into a Cairo of French engineers, architects and art lovers: a Finnish artist painting a view of an interior space that is a palace with its features borrowed from Islamic architecture, in a city where large-scale modernisation projects inspired by the renewal of Paris were underway. Based on portraits in the collections of the Ateneum Art Museum and the Louvre, the man on the sofa in *Almée* could be identified as Baron Delort de Gléon himself, and the other man could also be identified as a Frenchman: Berndtson's other close friend in Cairo, the lawyer and later newspaper publisher Octave Borelli. For in a letter referring to *Almée*, Berndtson remarks: 'I am animating the painting of Delort's Arab-style salon with the figure of a belly dancer, and in the background I have portrayed Delort and Borelli watching the dance.'<sup>14</sup>

12 [www.annales.com/archives/x/delort.html](http://www.annales.com/archives/x/delort.html) (accessed 17.7.2010).

13 Delort de Gléon, 1899. *L'Architecture arabe des khalifes d'Egypte à l'Exposition Universelle de Paris en 1889. La rue du Caire*. Paris: Librairie Plon.

14 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother. Undated. TKK/Be108. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery (FNG). The identity is confirmed by the description of Borelli's physiognomy: 'I have enclosed also a few photographs, myself in costume and Borelli, a portly gentleman in an embroidered morning gown, and Delort painting his nephew. This will give mother an approximate idea of the appearance of these gentlemen.' Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother. Undated. TKK/Be116. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.



**Gunnar Berndtson, *Portrait of Baron Delort de Gléon*, 1883, oil on panel, 40 x 26.5cm**  
**Antell Collections, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum.**  
**Gift from Gunnar Berndtson to his host in Cairo**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Asko Penna

The painting began to connect with historical events and facts, colonial politics, and the legacy of Orientalism. It began establishing itself in time and place. Fantasy took a step towards realism, and in this sense the work of art became, in my mind, almost the complete opposite.

## Letters as a source: why Cairo?

The best source for constructing the painting's historical context is the correspondence between Berndtson and his mother during the period he was in Egypt, which constitutes a total of about 30 pages of text.<sup>15</sup> The letters are basically factual accounts of events. For example, the Swedish Press in Finland used them as the source for reporting on Berndtson's trip and even published an extract containing a description of dancers at Delort's palace 'on

<sup>15</sup> The collection of artists' letters in the Archive Collections of the Finnish National Gallery has altogether seventeen letters sent by Gunnar Berndtson from Egypt to his mother, Augusta Berndtson (née de la Chapelle). She donated the letters to the Finnish Art Society after Berndtson's death in 1896. The Press cuttings mentioned in the letters were part of the donation, but the photographs have disappeared. Some of the letters are incomplete, and of some the collection only has short quotations or notes apparently made by the donor. The letters were probably edited for private family reasons, which more often must have involved not the sender but other family members, at least the artist's brother Axel, or Acku, who was a cause for concern for the mother. I want to thank Riikka Laczak for transcribing the letters and Maria Vainio-Kurtakko, who checked my translations of the letters from Swedish into Finnish, and who also drew my attention to the fact that many of the letters were drafts corrected by the artist in pencil. Clean copies of the letters were perhaps never made; we know that Berndtson tended to postpone things and failed to complete them. Letter from Maria Vainio-Kurtakko to Elina Heikka, 21.11.2007.

the Great Sabbath', as Berndtson mentions at the beginning of his letter, thus consciously or unconsciously emphasising the difference from the Christian world.<sup>16</sup> We should remember here that the departures and arrivals of artists on such journeys were regularly reported in the Press at the time. The informative character of the letters can be explained by the writer's wish to give an account of his rare journey to as wide an audience as possible but also because their intended recipient, the writer's mother, would surely have been best spared some details, such as the erotic milieu in Cairo. For an art historian, the letters are useful because they draw a map of the artist's general circumstances, containing as they do many references to people, places, and incidental events, which can be augmented from historical sources and which also provide more information about the origin of *Almée*. The letters have no particular literary value, nor can Berndtson's penmanship be compared with that of someone like his close friend, the painter Albert Edelfelt.<sup>17</sup>

Aiming to provide an accurate overall idea, the letters contain detailed descriptions of such matters as the progress of the journey to Egypt, annual religious processions, and celebrations with spinning dervishes and other rituals. The descriptions lend the letters an exotic local colour but in a rather superficial manner; Berndtson shows no anthropological interests in the modern sense of wanting to understand an alien culture. His first report from Egypt also reflects a notion, quite common among European educated classes at the time, of a superiority *vis-à-vis* foreign nations, an attitude that served well to establish

a strong ideological foundation for colonial politics. In his first impressions Berndtson complains about dirtiness and makes a remark – rather blunt from a contemporary viewpoint – that the Arabs seem more like animals than humans.<sup>18</sup> The European sense of superiority is also echoed in Berndtson's plans to paint a female folk type in the spirit of realism: 'As Mother says, I must not forget to paint a beautiful Egyptian female. They are, admittedly, ugly as anything, but I'm sure that placed in a suitable composition they can be used to create something beautiful.'<sup>19</sup>

A question that requires deeper background research is, what was the purpose of the trip? Why did a Finnish artist, who had been a success in Paris, decide to travel to Cairo? The letters do not say whether Berndtson had, like many Frenchmen who had settled in Egypt, some particular reason to leave Paris, but they do make clear the attraction Cairo held for him. On 25 September 1882, Berndtson wrote from Paris to his mother about his plan



**Gunnar Berndtson (left) with his travelling companion, artist Marius Michel (right), standing next to a ground-level *mashrabiya* window. The person in the middle is unknown. This cabinet card is the only known photograph of Berndtson in Cairo. Photograph by P. Sebah, Cairo. National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki**

<sup>16</sup> *Morgonbladet* 10 April 1883 and *Hufvudstadsbladet* 8 May 1883; there were about a dozen references to Berndtson's journey in the Press 1882–83.

<sup>17</sup> The letters indicate that Berndtson corresponded also with Albert Edelfelt when he was in Cairo, but none of those letters survive.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 22 October 1882. TKK/Be100. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, undated. TKK/Be108. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

to travel to Egypt with fellow artist and friend Marius Michel (1853–1912). Another artist friend, Emile Wauters, who himself had made a successful trip to Egypt to paint a panorama, had finally won Berndtson over.<sup>20</sup> Berndtson and Michel's passage to Cairo was significantly smoothed by an offer from Baron Delort de Gléon to use the studio in the garden of his palace and the many letters of recommendation that promised work opportunities among the French and British in Cairo. Moreover, both artists had it 'in black and white' that they were correspondents for *Le Monde Illustré*: 'We will travel tomorrow [from Port Saïd] to Cairo, where we will stay to work, and I have no doubt there will be no problems, given our recommendations.'<sup>21</sup>

Although funds for the trip were guaranteed at least in part by the deal with the news magazine, the question of funding otherwise remains a complex one, as the sources are conflicting. The donor's notes on the letters mention that Michel had offered Berndtson a free trip, but they also cite a letter saying that the job of a correspondent would cover costs for only a part of the trip. Moreover, it was reported in the Finnish Press that the artist had received a free trip on the condition that he would later exhibit his paintings of Egypt in London.<sup>22</sup> This would suggest discussions or deals with the British. Perhaps Berndtson wanted to justify his trip to the folks at home – who regarded the trip as rather daring – by its inexpensiveness, which would also explain his many references to alternative funding options.

Delort's tempting invitation is further explained by a piece in a local newspaper in Cairo that mentions that the baron's palace was called the Villa de Medici of Cairo because of the owner's patronage of the arts. From a present-day perspective, the baron appears to have run a kind of private patronage and residency programme in his garden studio, putting up artists for different lengths of time. Other visitors similar to Berndtson included the history painters Gustave Bourgain (1856–1912) and Olivier Pichat (1823–1912),<sup>23</sup> as well as the American painter Julius L. Stewart (1855–1919) and the Swiss Emmanuel de Dieudonné (1845–1889).<sup>24</sup> Berndtson had met the baron in Paris.<sup>25</sup> They may have been aware of each other for quite some time before the actual encounter, having moved in the same circles of aristocratic art lovers within a global network that considered Paris its hub. Albert Edelfelt mentions the baron in a letter to his mother in December 1880.<sup>26</sup> The success of *The Bride's Song* (1881) in the Salon had brought recognition for Berndtson, and Delort must have become aware of Berndtson by that time at the latest. One contact they had in common was artist Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904), a successful Orientalist who taught both Berndtson and Delort and who had visited Egypt as early as the 1850s, and painted the aforementioned portrait of Delort de Gléon (1884) in the Louvre. Delort compares Berndtson to Gérôme as an artist, which obviously pleased Berndtson: 'Delort wants me to return here next winter so that I can compete with Gérôme and Gounaud, both of them rather prestigious personalities.'<sup>27</sup>

20 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 21 May 1883. TTK/Be117. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

21 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 22 October 1882. TTK/Be100. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

22 Notes of a letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 25 September 1882. TTK/Be117. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG; 'Konstnärnotis.' *Helsingfors Dagblad* 12 October 1882.

23 'Chronique locale' *Moniteur Egyptien*, No 84, Mardi 10 Avril 1883. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

24 Volait, Mercedes, 2009. *Fous de Caire. Excentriques, architects et amateurs d'art en Egypte*. Apt: L'Archange Minotaure, 99–101.

25 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 22 October 1882. TTK/Be100. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

26 I want to thank Anna Kortelainen for information regarding references to Delort in Edelfelt's letters. Letters from Albert Edelfelt to his mother. Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland (Swedish Literature Society in Finland, Helsinki).

27 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 27 February 1883. TTK/Be117. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.



Rear view of Baron Delort de Gléon's palace with a corner of the studio annex visible on the left. Rue Manakh (today Abd Al-Khaliq Sarwat), Cairo. Architect: Ambroise Baudry. Photograph by Emile Béchard, 1874. Private collection



The studio annex where Gunnar Berndtson worked at Baron Delort de Gléon's palace. Photograph by Emile Béchard, 1874. Private collection



In order to understand the context of Berndtson's trip we need to remember that, seen from Paris or London, Cairo was not regarded as the kind of distant and geographically remote destination that it was for artists from Helsinki; for a travel agency like Cook in London, Egypt was a popular tourist destination.<sup>28</sup> For Parisians, the capital of the Arab world was much more familiar than Helsinki, since after Napoleon's Egyptian campaign (1798–1801) the country had become a permanent part of the domain of French culture; at the end of the 19th century, there was a sizeable French colony in Egypt. With all its adventurers, the colony had a rather questionable reputation for many outsiders, despite the fact that many of its members saw settlement in Egypt as a patriotic duty for the furtherance of French interests. Opening its

<sup>28</sup> Ahtola, Janne, 2000. 'Egypti ja Palestiina brittiläisten seniorimatkailijoiden kohteina 1800–1900-luvun taitteessa.' *Muuttuva matkailu* 4/2000, 17–19.



arms to foreigners, Egypt offered many French settlers an opportunity to start anew e.g. after financial or other difficulties back home.<sup>29</sup>

Contacts between the two countries were tight in the fields of economy, education, and science, as well as culture. Knowledge about Egypt among the French was based on the *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–29), whose several volumes detailed the past and present of Egypt. Also, the origins of modern Egyptology lay in Napoleon's expedition. The French assumed responsibility for the research and protection of archaeological sites in Egypt. France also had political influence through high-ranking French civil servants such as Borelli. After Napoleon's campaign, the country was officially part of the Ottoman Empire; being a weak state, however, Egypt under its Ottoman viceroy or *khedive* – and with the assistance of Europeans – was actually rather independent. For example, taxes were collected for Egypt.<sup>30</sup>

Ismail the Magnificent (1830–1895), Viceroy of Egypt from 1863–79, was a pro-European ruler, as was common among the elite of the time, and had studied in Paris. In the footsteps of his grandfather, Mohammed Ali, he sought to Europeanise the country. One of the greatest achievements of Ismail's period of rule was the Suez Canal – completed under the direction of French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps – which connected the Mediterranean with the Red Sea, and the opening of which in 1869 featured a stupendous party that included European VIPs.

Ismail also began modernising Cairo with a firm hand. It has been suggested that the decisive inspiration for the modernisation was his trip to the 1867 Paris World Fair and the boulevards, built gardens, department stores, and shopping arcades he saw in the city. Using Paris as his model, Ismail designed boulevards that bisected the old town of Cairo and a district on the east bank of the Nile that was fashioned after the Parisian radial plan and named Ismaélien.<sup>31</sup> Apart from Delort's, other Orientalising palaces sprang up in the new district, including one for the architect Baudry himself, another for the Viceroy's stable master, Count Saint-Maurice, who is also mentioned in Berndtson's letters. Delort de Gléon's uncle Jean-Antoine Cordier (1810–1873) directed the building of the new district, even allotting the properties personally, and Delort succeeded him in 1869.<sup>32</sup> The canal and other construction projects employed a great many foreign engineers and architects like Delort.<sup>33</sup>

Ismail drove his country to the brink of total bankruptcy with his grandiose building projects but above all with the war against Ethiopia, which had as its goal the establishment of an Egyptian empire. This led the European powers to tighten their control, and in order to be able to pay his debts, in 1875 the *khedive* had to sell his shares in the Suez Canal to the British, bringing state finances under even greater control by the British and the French. In the end, Egypt was forced to accept the dual economic and political control of Britain and France. There was some rebellion against the European powers, as a result of which Ismail, who had sympathised with the nationalists to secure his own position, had to abdicate in favour of his son, Tewfik, in 1879.<sup>34</sup>

On 12 June 1882, riots against foreigners broke out in Alexandria, and in July British troops, sent to support the Viceroy, fired from the sea onto the city's weapons stores, thereby setting most of the city on fire. 'Egypt for Egyptians' was the slogan of the rebels representing the nationalist party who fought against Ottoman rule that was supported by Europeans. In

29 Garcin, F., 1981. 'Un notable Français du Caire à la fin du XIXe siècle.' *Revue de l'occident musulman et la Méditerranée* 30/1981, 71.

30 See e.g. Daniel Panzac and André Raymond (eds.), 2002. *La France et l'Égypte à l'époque des vice-rois 1805–1882*. Caire: Institut français d'archéologie orientale; Hanioglu, Sükrü M., 2008. *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

31 Arnaud, Jean Luc, 2002. 'Le Caire – Paris à la fin des années 1860.' In Daniel Panzac and André Raymond (eds.), *La France et l'Égypte à l'époque des vice-rois 1805–1882*. Caire: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 280.

32 Volait 1998, 59.

33 Volait 1998, 59.

34 See e.g. Tuominen, Kirsi-Marja, 1998. "'Egypti egyptiläisille!' Wilfred ja Anne Blunt vallan-kumouksellisen nationalismin tukijoina 1800-luvun alussa.' In Kirsi-Marja Tuominen (ed.), *Kansa ja kumous: Modernin Euroopan murros 1880–1930*. Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura.

The funeral of the Viceroy's sister-in-law, Princess Tawhida Ismail, in Cairo. Illustration from *Le Monde Illustré*, 27 January 1883. Wood engraving after drawing by Gunnar Berndtson



September 1882, British troops landed in Egypt and advanced towards Cairo. Battles between the British and the nationalist forces led by War Minister Colonel Ahmed Urabi ended in the battle of Tell El Kebir on 13 September, with the nationalists vanquished.<sup>35</sup> Delort's residency artist Olivier Pichat painted a panorama of the famous battle, possibly at the request of the British and to be displayed in Britain.<sup>36</sup> Pichat staged scenes with characters wearing military outfits and photographed them to use as models for the painting.<sup>37</sup>

The decisive battle was fought only a month before Berndtson's arrival, and two weeks before he wrote to his mother about his idea for the trip, but he must have known of the outcome of the war when he set out. On the train from Port Saïd to Cairo, Berndtson observed the ravages of the war in Tell El Kebir: 'There were exploded bombs and grenades on both sides of the railroad. Here and there you would see dead horses and walls of sand, hinting that people killed in the war had been buried there. An enormous number of empty food tins lay helter skelter on the sand, glittering here and there in the sun.'<sup>38</sup> After his arrival in Cairo, Berndtson's eye was caught by British soldiers who patrolled in their red coats and comported themselves like manorial lords.<sup>39</sup> As a result of the crisis, the Viceroy was allowed to retain his position nominally, but in reality the ruler of Egypt changed, and the country became part of the British Empire for the next 70 years. Britain had achieved her main goal – safeguarding the sea route to India.

Egypt remained in the focus of world politics throughout 1882, and events there had also been keenly followed in Finland, where Ahmed Urabi, 'the Arab Pasha', and his nationalists became known through the Press. It is not inconceivable that parallels were

35 Tuominen 1998.

36 'Chronique locale.' *Moniteur Egyptien*, No 84, Mardi 10 Avril 1883. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

37 Photographs by Pichat that appear to be models for a battle painting can be found in the collections of Musée d'Orsay, see [www.photo.rmn.fr](http://www.photo.rmn.fr) (accessed 25.7.2010).

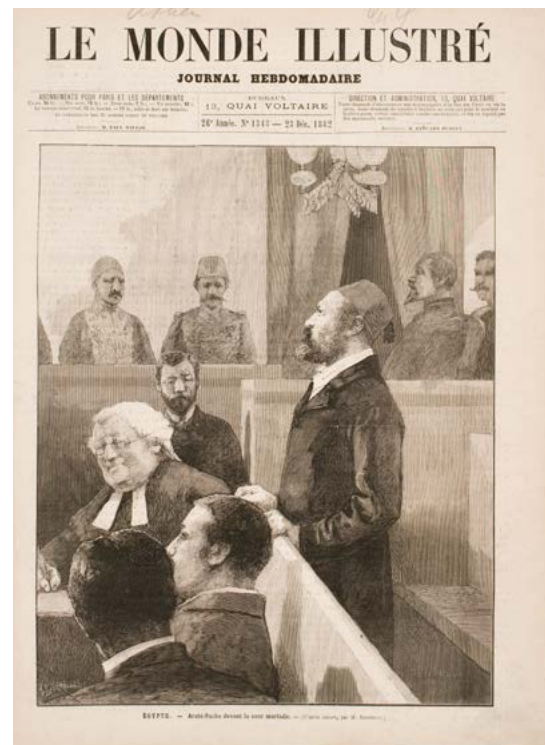
38 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 26 October 1882. TKK/Be101. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

39 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 26 October 1882. TKK/Be101. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

perceived between the political situation in Finland and that of Egypt – that both countries laboured under a foreign power, and that Finnish nationalism contributed to the emergence of a lively interest in a first-generation Egyptian officer from a peasant background, a hero ‘who is so much talked about these days’, as the Finnish newspaper *Uusi Suometar* wrote at the time.<sup>40</sup> When Berndtson arrived in Cairo, the most dramatic events had already passed and media interest was waning, although the trial of Urabi, who had surrendered to the British, provided the Press with material well into the autumn. Octave Borelli, who was at the peak of his career, had the demanding task of representing the State of Egypt in the trial, Urabi having been accused of crimes against it. Urabi was ultimately sentenced to exile in the farthest corner of the British Empire, Ceylon.<sup>41</sup>

Through Borelli, Berndtson gained access to the court. Berndtson wrote to his mother about greeting Urabi during the court session, and how he had been privileged to receive an Arab greeting in return.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps because of his Finnish values, and certainly in contrast to the views of Borelli and Europeans in general, Berndtson seems to have viewed Urabi with sympathy. He rejoices in his letter at the greeting he receives, and even before the trial he wants to paint Urabi’s portrait. The sitting never took place, however, and the artist had to make do with drawing a portrait based on ‘the very latest photograph’.<sup>43</sup> Berndtson’s sympathies with the nationalists must not be overestimated, however, since his views were

also affected by Urabi’s value for the media and by the opportunity it represented to carry out the work of a news reporter, something that he had had in mind as a way of earning money when he had set out for Egypt. *Le Monde Illustré* did in fact publish a drawing by Berndtson of Urabi’s trial on its cover, as well as two other drawings.<sup>44</sup> Contributions to the paper dwindled, but thanks to commissions to paint portraits, they were no longer necessary.



Colonel Ahmed Urabi in front of a military tribunal. Cover of *Le Monde Illustré*, 23 December 1882. Wood engraving after a drawing by Gunnar Berndtson

40 ‘Arabi-pasha.’ *Uusi Suometar* 27 July 1882 and 1 August 1882 (article in two parts); on Ahmed Urabi see e.g. Tuominen 1998 and Cole, John R.I., 1999. *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East. Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt’s Urabi Movement*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

41 Garcin 1981, 75.

42 Notes of a letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 1 December 1882. TTK/Be117. Collection of artists’ letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

43 Notes of a letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 16 November 1882. TTK/Be117. Collection of artists’ letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

44 The letters mention three drawings at least two of which were published: *Le Monde Illustré* 23 December 1882 and 27 January 1883. Notes of a letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 16 November 1882. TTK/Be117. Collection of artists’ letters. Archive Collections, FNG.



## Letters as a source: Cairo days

Settling in Cairo went smoothly for Berndtson, thanks primarily to the assistance he received from Delort and Borelli. 'Dear Mama can see that it is possible to succeed anywhere in the world,' the artist wrote, summarising his circumstances in November.<sup>45</sup> His popularity was to a large extent based on a portrait of a certain Dr. Fouquet and a piece he called 'Gypsy Tambourine', a tambourine decorated with a painting of a young woman in a boat in moonlight, used as a prize in the lottery of a charity ball organised by the French.<sup>46</sup> He received commissions for portraits in both Cairo and Alexandria from the Ottoman elite, Jewish merchant families, and Frenchmen, all of whom were more or less acquaintances and business partners of Borelli and Delort.<sup>47</sup> Berndtson became quite famous locally, and a newspaper reported that he was working so hard he hardly ever left his studio.<sup>48</sup> There were ultimately so many commissions that his return journey had to be postponed, and Berndtson hardly had time to complete all his commissions when the hot weather forced him back to Europe in June. (European tourists usually travelled to Egypt between November and March.)

Because Berndtson earned more money in Cairo than he did in Paris, he intended to put his works on sale in Cairo in the future unless he managed to sell them elsewhere. Because his order book was full, he planned to return the following winter.<sup>49</sup> The folks at home did not seem to have liked him focusing on commissions, whether in Egypt or Europe, expecting him instead to paint more dignified subjects. This made Berndtson defensive: 'Mother says that there are expectations regarding myself [in Finland] when I return from Egypt, but I think that the demands placed on me cannot be greater anywhere than in Europe. Why? I cannot dedicate all my time to art; I have to live too, and the more I make, the more time I can have for myself to do what generally goes by the name of great art, *le grand art*, but which does not sell.'<sup>50</sup> There was a chasm between art made for a living and work that was artistically prestigious.

For the Salon, Berndtson painted a large, 2m x 1.35m ethnographic street view entitled *Arabian Dyer* (1883), which he sent to Paris with slight hopes for success.<sup>51</sup> Before shipping, the work was displayed at the Viceroy's club with a Salon painting by Michel. We do not have any information as to whether *Arabian Dyer* survived, nor of its present location, but the collection of the Gösta Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation has a sketch on the same subject and a small painting with the same title. According to the dedication, the painting is a 'gift from a friend and admirer to Octave Borelli'. Unlike the painting at Serlachius Art Museum, contemporary sources tell us that the Salon piece was intensely blue: 'In the collection of paintings, we find an *Arabian Dyer* by Mr. Berndtson, a very funny figure in a blue costume, with blue hands, dyeing blue fabrics in blue water, all most naturally rendered.'<sup>52</sup> With Edelfelt's assistance, Berndtson tried to find a buyer for the piece in Paris, but he ultimately sold it in Egypt to Baron de Menasee (also Menasce or Menache). The Menasees were an

45 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 14 November 1882. TKK/Be102. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

46 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, undated. TKK/Be105. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

47 People who commissioned portraits that are mentioned in the letters were Dr. Fouquet, Borelli, Madame Francis, Holstein, Orustein, Hussein, and Padoa Bey.

48 'Chronique locale.' *Moniteur Egyptien* No 84, Mardi 10 Avril 1883. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

49 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 18 March 1883. TKK/Be111. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

50 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 18 March 1883. TKK/Be111. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

51 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 10 March 1883. TKK/Be110. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

52 Nordensvan, Georg, 1883. 'Studier i modern konst. Parisersalongen 1883.' *Finsk Tidskrift*. Förra halfåret 1883, Tom XIV, 417.



**Gunnar Berndtson, *Arabian Dyers*, 1883,**  
 oil on canvas, 61 x 40.5cm  
 The Gösta Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation,  
 Serlachius Museums, Mänttä

Photo: Vesa Aaltonen / The Gösta Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation



**Gunnar Berndtson, *Arabian Dyers*, sketch, 1882–83,**  
 oil on canvas  
 The Gösta Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation,  
 Serlachius Museums, Mänttä

Photo: Vesa Aaltonen / The Gösta Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation

influential Jewish family of businessmen, and of the members of the family Berndtson may have had Baron Bohor de Menasce (1830–1886) in mind.<sup>53</sup>

At the end of his working day, Berndtson used to stop by a café, after which he dined alternately with the two bachelors, Delort and Borelli. 'I haven't dined in the hotel for over a week but alternately with Delort and Borelli, who always dine together, and because I work all day at Delort's in his studio, he always calls to me when the occasion arises: '*Venez donc ce soir chez moi*' [So come to my place tonight] and I heed him.'<sup>54</sup> More guests often arrived at the palace later in the evening, and time was spent playing music, reading, or modelling

53 The painting may have been expropriated by the British during World War I: being citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the de Menasces represented the enemy. In considering the fate of the painting, we should not forget that Jews were exiled from Egypt after the war of 1956. I want to thank Mercedes Volait for speculations on the destiny of the painting. According to Mohamed Shawarby, members of the family still live in Cairo. Email from Mohamed Shawarby to Elina Heikka, London, 14 May 2008.

54 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 22 March 1883. TKK/Be112. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

wax figures.<sup>55</sup> The plentiful dinners were a strain on the stomach, but that was eased by a diet and the flax seeds Berndtson’s mother sent from Finland.<sup>56</sup> The writer of the letters omits to tell his mother about more delicate pastimes, such as the gambling sessions, playing with high stakes, for which Delort’s palace was notorious.<sup>57</sup> Neither do the letters reveal how frequent were the dance performances described in the Sabbath letter, or how daring erotically. Berndtson’s travelling companion Marius Michel was a gambler and proved to be a quarrelsome person. The artist’s relations with Michel grew so cold in the course of the winter that the friends no longer met and returned to Paris on separate routes. ‘He is a nonentity who with all his demands and susceptibilities has finally come to a point where he is at odds with everyone,’ Berndtson wrote.<sup>58</sup>

Berndtson moved in very upper-class circles in Egypt. Delort de Gléon’s uncle had been a friend of Viceroy Ismail,<sup>59</sup> and the baron had easy access to court circles as well: ‘The other day we went, Delort and me, to the Viceroy and Prime Minister in order to present me, but the first one was in the mosque and the second had travelled to the countryside. Nothing was lost thereby, however, because this will surely be repeated again soon enough, and I would rather visit the Viceroy in my tails than in my painter’s gown, which I was wearing when Delort entreated me to follow him.’<sup>60</sup> When Berndtson later met the Viceroy, the latter already knew of him. Berndtson attended the Viceroy’s birthday party, and when he left the country, Berndtson was awarded a medal of the Order of the Medjidie.<sup>61</sup>

One major society event in spring 1883 was a cruise to celebrate the opening of Delort’s sugar factory. The event was attended by a prestigious crowd that included the Viceroy. For the luncheon, Berndtson designed a menu that looked like a sugar loaf, flanked by two female figures, one Arab and one European. ‘We will leave early in the morning and have lunch on the boat. At our destination, we will have a tour of the sugar refinery and then we will return. I will write more of all the amusements when the opening is over.’<sup>62</sup> In his last letter to his mother from Egypt, the artist, who had obviously become quite wealthy, also writes that he bought shares in the sugar factory, whose value he is convinced will increase. In the name of developing economic cooperation, Delort had earlier asked Berndtson to draw ‘modern views of life in Paris’ for the decoration of a mass-produced porcelain tableware service.<sup>63</sup>

Berndtson’s close circle got along well with the British, as seen by his invitation to visit the Consul-General of Britain Sir Edward Malet, as well as Lord Dufferin, who was in charge of normalising the situation in the country after the war. A theatrical soiree was once held at the Dufferins. ‘Countess Dufferin performed and showed rather a fine talent for acting – two of the three plays were performed in English and one in French. In between the performances we adjourned around buffet tables that offered all sorts of refreshments, and eventually fewer and fewer people remained. A few minutes past midnight the fun was over.’<sup>64</sup> Berndtson also met British soldiers at the Viceroy’s balls – ‘besides, the entire event is similar to all

55 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 1 February 1883. TKK/Be106. Collection of artists’ letters. Archive Collections, FNG. The date on the letter is incorrect; the letter was sent in mid-May.

56 Letters from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 4 February 1883. TKK/Be107 and early April 1883. TKK/Be114. Collection of artists’ letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

57 Volait 2009, 101.

58 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, undated. TKK/Be116. Collection of artists’ letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

59 Volait, Mercedes, 2005. *Architects et architectures de l’Egypte moderne 1830–1950. Genèse et essor d’une expertise Jean-Antoine Cordier (1810–1873)*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 426.

60 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 10 March 1883. TKK/Be110. Collection of artists’ letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

61 *Moniteur Egyptien* 6.6.1883, No 131. Collection of artists’ letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

62 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 1 February 1883. TKK/Be106. Collection of artists’ letters. Archive Collections, FNG. The date on the letter is incorrect; the letter was sent in mid-May.

63 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 10 March 1883. TKK/Be110. Collection of artists’ letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

64 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 18 March 1883. TKK/Be111. Collection of artists’ letters. Archive Collections, FNG.



corresponding official events in Europe' – at which the soldiers were the most enthusiastic dancers, and he planned to pay a visit to the Saqqara pyramids with British soldiers of his acquaintance.<sup>65</sup>

'We visited tombs that were not too far away from the pyramids. Long corridors carved into the mountain, with vaults on both sides, many of which contained sarcophagi twice the size of a man, hewn from a single stone. With the help of a ladder we climbed into one sarcophagus whose lid had been pushed aside and took a few dance steps inside the coffin in the light of a candle. [Auguste] Mariette, who had discovered the entrance to these abodes of the dead, had removed the mummies a long time ago.'<sup>66</sup> Berndtson admired the realism of the paintings and reliefs in the ancient temple, writing, 'the best were depicted with unsurpassed skill, all masterfully made and just as realistic as today', but there is no evidence of him taking a more sustained interest in archaeology or Egyptology from his letters. One can, however, deduce that in the 1880s, archaeological finds in Egypt were still thought to belong to their discoverer: 'We were naturally in the middle of the desert, with only sand around us, but it is certain that had one implements for digging, one might be able to make finds almost anywhere.'<sup>67</sup> In Cairo Berndtson met the Swedish Egyptologist Karl Piehl (1853–1904), who was following Gaston Maspero (1846–1916) on an expedition to Upper Egypt, where Maspero was continuing the work of Auguste Mariette.<sup>68</sup>

## The palace and interest in Islamic art

The architecture of Delort's palace is evidence of the lively interest in Islamic art that the baron shared with his acquaintances. Delort, Ambroise Baudry and Count Saint-Maurice were all known as 'connoisseurs' and collectors who had a special interest in the Mamluk era and Mamluk architecture in the history of Cairo, and their homes showed their interest in the architecture and the objects they collected. Berndtson too was taken to see the medieval parts of the city when he first arrived: 'In the evenings, we have walked around the Arab quarters of the city under the most wonderful moonlight. We are of course accompanied by some acquaintance or another to ensure that we don't get lost in the narrow, winding and labyrinthine streets. There are mosques at almost every step, but it is best not to venture inside, because you might end up being thrown out head first and shoeless onto the dirty street.'<sup>69</sup>

Baudry was an Orientalist who made detailed studies of old Mamluk and Ottoman architecture in Cairo and applied them, with erudite borrowings, in his own works from the 1870s onwards. Like his friends, he too collected wooden fragments of decaying buildings as well as ceramics, then re-used them in his own buildings, including Delort's palace, which he designed. Many features of Delort's palace are borrowed from the Mamluk mosque architecture of Sultan Kait Bey; 15th-century vaulted ceilings and decorative mosaic motifs found their way into private residential architecture. It should be noted that it was Baudry and a few other Europeans who had a hand in the modernisation of Cairo and who also introduced the idea of preserving the city's medieval cultural heritage. The protectionists criticised Ismail's intensive developmental policies vehemently and began systematically promoting the

65 Letters from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 16 January 1883. TKK/Be103 and 22 March 1883. TKK/Be112. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

66 Auguste Mariette (1821–1881) was an eminent French archaeologist and Egyptologist, who among other things founded the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and wrote the libretto for Verdi's *Aida*; letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, early April, 1883. TKK/Be112. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

67 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, early April, 1883. TKK/Be112. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

68 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, undated. TKK/Be105. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

69 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 26 October 1882. TKK/Be101. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

A view of *la rue du Caire* designed by Delort de Gléon for the 1889 Paris World Fair, comprising mock façades of 16th- and 17th-century buildings incorporating genuine doors and *mashrabiyyas*. Photograph from Delort de Gléon, *La Rue du Caire*. Paris 1889



preservation of the medieval buildings in Cairo. Baudry was one of the founders in Cairo of the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe (Committee for the Conservation of the Monuments of Arab Art) in 1881.<sup>70</sup> According to one of the protectionists, Arthur Rhoné, the development of the city was too greatly dominated by British business and Parisian superficiality.<sup>71</sup>

Delort de Gléon's interest in Islamic art found its culmination in the spectacular *La rue du Caire*, a street he designed and financed for the Paris World Fair in 1889 in tribute to Arab architecture and the defence of old Cairo, which was fast disappearing. The temporary installation of mock façades constructed along the Champ de Mars showcased different periods, features and building types of Arab architecture. The collage of façades imitated the originals as faithfully as possible; one might step in through a door of a mosque only to find oneself in a café. Some of the wooden parts used in the construction, such as doors and window blinds, *mouchrabi*, were genuine and brought from Cairo. Because of the need for commercial access to the street's businesses it was designed to be wider than a genuine street in Cairo would have been and the buildings lower than their models. It rained during the World Fair and the street turned into mud, which according to Delort gave a taste of the mud in the real Cairo on the few rainy days of the year.<sup>72</sup>

Egyptian 'types de danseuses' at the Paris World Fair 1889. Photograph from Delort de Gléon, *La Rue du Caire*. Paris 1889



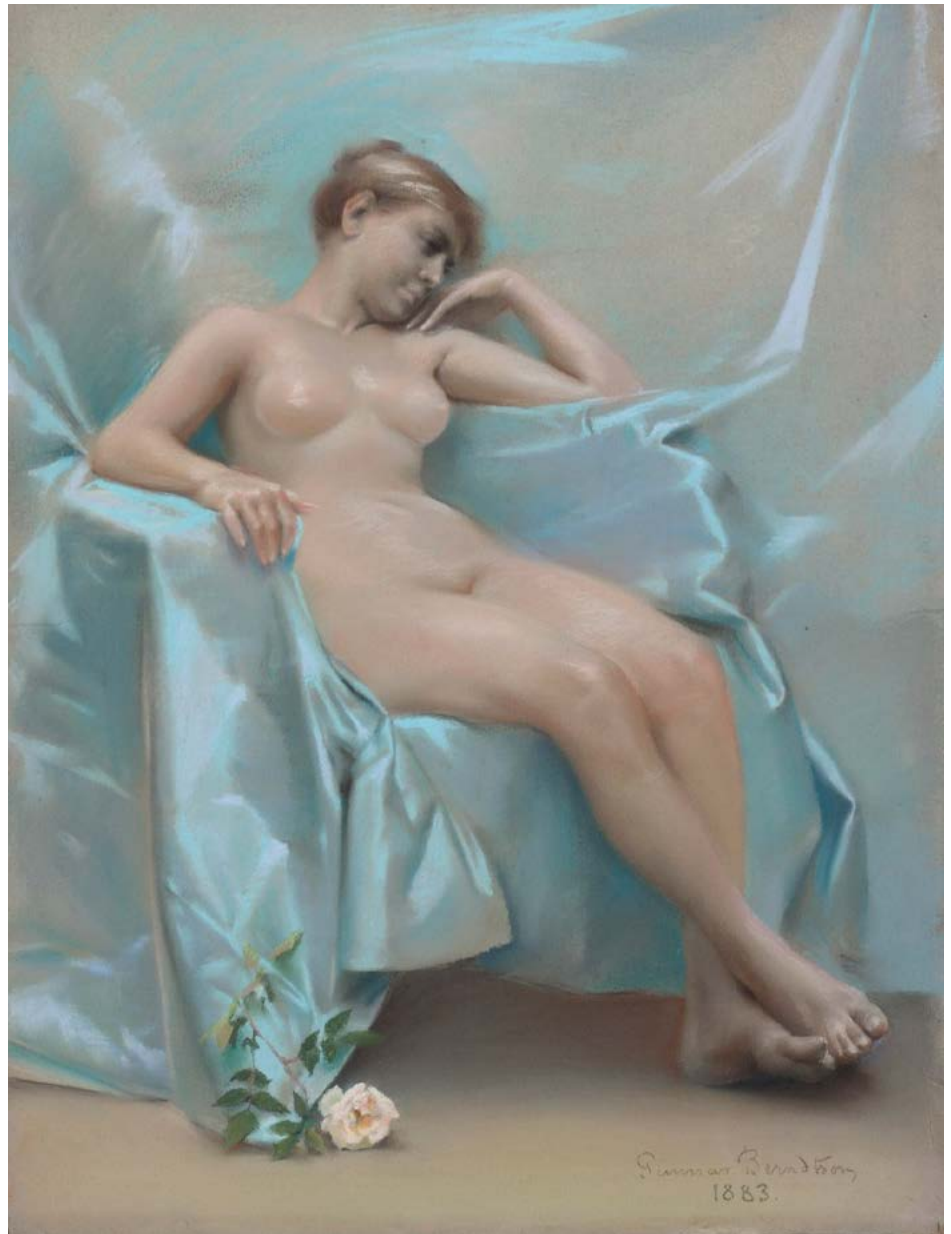
Along with the new Eiffel Tower, the street was one of the most popular attractions of the exhibition, but even more than the architecture, the public was interested in the gallery of characters assembled by Delort to populate the street: 150 people brought in from the Orient and 75 local workers, from donkey drivers to belly dancers and black musicians.<sup>73</sup> The Egyptian café, where belly dancers

70 Rhoné, Arthur, 1882. *Coup d'oeil sur l'état du Caire ancien et moderne*. Appendice. Paris: Imprimerie de A. Quantin, 41.

71 Rhoné 1882, 38.

72 Delort de Gléon 1889, 6–12.

73 Volait 2009, 125.



**Gunnar Berndtson,**  
***Nude Female Model*, 1883,**  
 pastel, 64.5 x 52cm  
 Antell Collections,  
 Finnish National Gallery /  
 Ateneum Art Museum.  
 This work is part of the  
 bequest collection of  
 Baroness Delort de Gléon  
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery  
 / Asko Penna

performed, drew half a million visitors.<sup>74</sup> A series of anthropological photographs taken by Roland Bonaparte of dancers and musicians at the *Egyptian concert* raised my hopes of finding models for *Almée* among them, but all those in the photos are too young to have posed for the painting. The anthropological pictures, with their uncanny resemblance to mug shots, have terse captions that identify the subject, whether a dancer ('Sadika, 22, born in Cairo') or a black musician ('Khadiga, 27, freed slave, born in the Sudan').<sup>75</sup> Black African slaves were

<sup>74</sup> Fauser, Annegret, 2005. *Musical encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 225.

<sup>75</sup> Bonaparte, Roland, 1889. *Concert égyptien*. Album de 36 phot. anthropologiques présenté à l'Exposition Universelle de 1889 à Paris. Collection of Prince R. Bonaparte. Société de Géographie / Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Roland Bonaparte also photographed members of other faraway nations brought to the exhibition in the same way.



common in Egypt in the late 19th century. A photograph in the book on *La rue du Caire* shows dancers whose costumes correspond to the description in Berndtson's Sabbath letter.<sup>76</sup>

After Delort de Gléon's death, part of his collection of artefacts was donated to the Louvre, where it comprises a core part of the museum's collection of Islamic art. *Almée* and five other works, including portraits of the donor family, were donated by Delort's widow to the Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki, according to the annual report of the Finnish Art Society from 1912: 'At the beginning of this year, the Board received notice of a valuable donation, which the Society will receive through the last will and testament of Baroness Delort de Gléon, who died on the 14th of last December (...) the following six paintings: an Arabic interior view depicting a female dancer from Cairo, where it was painted in 1883, a portrait of Baron Delort de Gléon, painted in the same year (both these paintings were on display in Helsinki at the Finnish Art Exhibition in 1885), a portrait of the mother of Baron Delort de Gléon, and a miniature, all painted by G. Berndtson, and additionally a portrait of the now deceased Baroness, which was painted by Emmanuel de Dieudonné and was corrected [sic] by Berndtson, and a pastel by an unknown painter depicting a woman sitting in an armchair.' The last-mentioned piece, a pastel of a nude woman, has later been attributed to Gunnar Berndtson as well; it may have been a gift to his host.

## Almée – dancer from Cairo

We do not know the identity of the dancer depicted in *Almée*, but the model was most likely found and brought by Delort, who, being an amateur photographer, may have also taken a photograph of her to be used for the painting. Delort had promised Berndtson to find models and costumes for his paintings.<sup>77</sup> The elegant posture of the dancer in the picture is obviously Europeanised, inspired by ballet.<sup>78</sup> Descriptions of authentic belly dancing and of the cultural background and social status of the dancers can only be found in travelogues from the time, on the basis of which Karin van Nieuwkerk has studied 19th-century dance culture in Egypt.<sup>79</sup> Although dancing was part of Egyptian cultural heritage and a common part of celebrations and family occasions, professional female entertainers were an obvious socially disruptive element. The status of dancers changed in many ways over the course of the century and according to Nieuwkerk, a key factor in this was the presence of foreigners. For many European tourists in the 19th century, Oriental dance was a much more interesting spectacle than the pyramids, and eroticism was a central aspect of exoticism.

In the early 19th century, dancing in public was allowed in the streets and during religious festivals, and dancers were also a standard element in family celebrations such as weddings. Travellers reported, however, that private dance performances were frowned upon, although they were quite common. Performing for 'infidels' was discouraged; for instance, performances were given to Napoleon's troops only in the face of military pressure. The government of Egypt and religious leaders alike wanted to keep dancers and prostitutes away from the army.

The French word *almée* and its English version *almeh*, derives from *alma* (plural *awâlim*), which denoted a female poet, composer, singer and musician who performed for women in the harem. *Almehs* were highly prized for their skill and probably also generally respected; men might listen to them only from behind a grille. Unveiled dancers, *ghâwazî*, could be seen dancing in the streets, in front of cafés and at public festivities. They wore a kind of vest and danced with vases, candles and other objects, which is consistent with the performance reported by Berndtson (translated and accompanying this article). In travelogues

76 Delort de Gléon 1889, pl 26.

77 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 16 January 1883. TTK/Be103. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

78 I want to thank instructor of Oriental dance Eeva-Liisa Kallionpää for this observation.

79 Nieuwkerk, Karin van, 1995. *A Trade like Any Other. Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 21–39.

– whose value as sources must always be regarded critically – *ghâwazî* are described as itinerant Gypsies, with the peculiar habits of their tribe. It was estimated that there were 6,000–8,000 *ghâwazî* in Egypt in 1817. The division between groups, or between entertainers and prostitutes, was not very clear, which also led to conceptual confusion. In the diaries of the Finnish explorer Georg August Wallin from 1844, for instance, the *ghâwazî* are referred to as prostitutes.<sup>80</sup>

In Muhammad Ali's period of rule in the early 19th century, heavy taxes were imposed on entertainers, and as a result *almehs* and *ghâwazî* moved away from the capital to escape such control. Religious opposition to dancing and disapproval of government revenues gained through a 'sin tax', led to the prohibition in 1834 of public dancing and prostitution in the capital. The police kept a tight watch on infractions of the law, including at private events of foreigners. Women were sometimes replaced by male dancers. To avoid the prohibition, dancers moved south, to Esna and Luxor, which developed into centres of dance. Performances by famous dancers became a main tourist attraction in Upper Egypt. As foreign audiences grew, they offered a source of income that offset the unduly harsh tax. Earning a livelihood nevertheless remained more difficult than in Cairo, and many dancers turned to prostitution. Consul-generals of Britain, France, Germany and other countries used to hold dance performances on boats for their guests. One popular performance among tourists was the 'bee dance' in which the dancer took off her garments one by one, pretending to search for a bee trapped in the folds. One of the famous entertainers in Esna was Kucuk Hanîm, who attracted the attention of Gustave Flaubert on his trip to Egypt in 1849–50.

By the 1850s, the ban on dancing in Cairo was lifted in the hope of increasing revenues, and many performers returned to the capital. It was nevertheless forbidden to dance and sing in public, although this did not apply to famous singers; for instance, the prohibition was repealed temporarily for the inauguration of the Suez Canal. In the 1880s, the law no longer prohibited inviting dancers to one's home in Cairo, as Delort used to do. Gradually, public dance performances in streets and squares moved to the *Eldorado* and other famous variety theatres, and singers moved to special cafés.

Although interaction between Europeans and dancers was lively, and the *almeh* became a popular subject in art, it was rare to paint a dance with a European audience. Within 19th-century Orientalist imagery, Berndtson's 'bee dancer' is therefore quite exceptional; apart for the occasional picture, artists generally wanted to retain the illusion of absolute otherness of the Orient when compared to Europe. In art, depictions of interaction between East and West, expressed through characters or alluded to by some other means, was avoided, with the exception of historical battle scenes of Europeans fighting an enemy. The Europeans' desire to keep the Orient at arm's length is blatant in the iconographic logic of these imageries. Visual representations sought to draw a clear distinction between East and West and against cultural mixing. Except for news images in major European illustrated magazines, the Orient and Europe would only fit into the same picture in depictions of battle, where the roles were clear, with the East obviously cast as the enemy.

*Almée* challenges iconographic conventions by making the tension between the Orient and Europe a key element of the narrative. While the woman is not in a vitrine, she is placed rather far away from the men, in order to avoid any confusion, and the men are confined to the window recess with its phallic-shaped arch. The mid-ground of the painting is occupied by the dancer and the drum player, who brings a third, complementary element to the composition. Africa thus constitutes the third apex of the geographic triangle of Europe, the Orient and Africa, yet in terms of the narrative tension it remains less important. Since the paint has cracked, the drummer appears less distinct than he might have been originally, but his position outside the circle of the dancer and the men is obvious. In Berndtson's geographic allegory, black Africa is an unknown continent that echoes around the edges of the composition, while the centre is occupied by the encounter between East and West.

80 Wallin, Georg August, 2007. *Aavikon vaeltaja. Elämä ja päiväkirjat*. Ed. Kaj Öhrnberg, trans. Jaakko Anhava. Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Otava, 183.



**Berndtson painted many works of performances with viewers.**  
**Gunnar Berndtson, *The Bride's Song*, 1881, oil on canvas, 66 x 82.5cm.**  
**Antell Collections, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**  
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jouko Könönen

Expressed by the men's gazes, the bond between Europe and the Orient is erotic, yet it is also masked: except for a slight curvature of the bosom, the dancer's bare breasts are hidden from the viewer of the work, and we are unable to partake in the secret shared by the men and the dancer. Although the painting cannot be regarded as a visual allusion as such, it is not implausible that Berndtson had depicted precisely, albeit indirectly, the key position of eroticism in the social intercourse among men, and more generally among Europeans in Cairo. For Europeans, a key factor that distinguished East from West was eroticism as expressed by female dancers, yet it was improper to display it too openly.

Berndtson's choice of subject, uncommon in Orientalism, is explained by the private nature of the painting and the discussions he had with Delort about its content. From his letters we know that he had painted 'a small interior piece' of the salon in the palace before Delort had arrived from Paris. The baron examined the interior piece 'with approbation', and soon intimated that he would like to buy the work and also hoped that he would see himself



in it, dressed in Arab garb.<sup>81</sup> Choosing to paint a scene with a dance performance was natural for Berndtson, as he had done it before: like *Almée*, *Music in the Studio* (1878) and *The Bride's Song* (1881) were studies of the relation between performers and audience. The men struck a deal on a still somewhat unfinished painting in which the 'enlivening' motif of the belly dancer as well as Delort and Borelli were already sketched in their allotted places. The negotiation of prices was difficult for the artist, who wanted to express his gratitude to his friend and host – from whom he himself had received valuable gifts.<sup>82</sup>

Twelve years after his trip to Egypt, Berndtson died of a disease that he had, it is commonly believed, contracted in Egypt.<sup>83</sup> The progress and long duration of Berndtson's illness point towards syphilis, a common enough disease among tourists in Egypt but which was also known to occur within the artist community in Paris. Because of its dry and warm climate, Egypt was considered an excellent destination for good health, and between 1883 and 1889 only nine British travellers were reported to have died there, although Cook's travel agency brought tourists there in great numbers. The most common diseases among tourists were diarrhoea, typhoid and syphilis.<sup>84</sup>

The first symptoms of syphilis usually appear a couple of weeks after the infection, and signs of the second stage a few months later. Symptoms of the third stage typically do not appear until 8–12 years or even several decades later. Only few cases progress to the third stage, however, which then affects the central nervous system and the internal organs. In the years following his trip to Egypt, Berndtson was in bad condition, seeking cures in sanatoriums and spas, and his artistic work suffered from his illness as well. Towards the end of the decade, his condition improved and he took up his career anew.

## Epilogues

Just like Berndtson's in his day, my own path to the East passed through Paris. Within a research project, I had become acquainted with Mercedes Volait, who had studied Ambroise Baudry's time in Egypt and the collectors of Islamic art operating in Cairo, and in November 2007 she kindly invited me to Cairo to see Delort de Gléon's palace in its current state. There it was, in the middle of a commercial quarter, dilapidated and so perfectly immersed in the buildings around it that without previous knowledge of its palatial origin, it would have been very difficult indeed to tell it apart from the structures that overlaid it.

As if presenting a letter of recommendation, I showed a picture of *Almée* to the owner of the shop operating in the house. He quickly turned his eyes away in modesty, but to our delight he allowed us to make a tour of the former palace, the facilities of which seemed quite beyond repair. For example, the salon depicted in Berndtson's painting had been converted into an office with a suspended ceiling, which made its identification very difficult. The most reliable indicator of the original identity of the space were the capitals on pilasters supporting the vaulted arches. Most of the building now served as storage space for the shop.

In his office in the building next door, we met a lawyer who represented the owner of the former palace. We were served tea by an expressionless black servant in a traditional costume – I could not help thinking about Nubian slaves. In the course of the visit, I left the lawyer my card, and much later I received a letter from an elderly gentleman in London. Mohamed Shawarby's grandfather, Mohamed Shawarby Pasha, had bought the house from Delort in the 1880s, after Delort had built a new palace in the same neighbourhood. Later, in 1962, the building had been expropriated during President Nasser's socialist regime,

81 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 4 February 1883. TKK/Be107. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

82 Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, 4 February 1883. TKK/Be107. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, FNG.

83 *Gunnar Berndtson. Sex färgplansch. Kuusi värrikuvaa*. 1922. Text/teksti L. Wennervirta. Helsinki: Atenaion.

84 Ahtola 2000.



**Delort de Gléon's palace in a present-day commercial quarter in Cairo**

Photo: Elina Heikka, 2007

a tumultuous period of nationalisation during which documents detailing the possessions of the El Shawarby family were lost. It was difficult to keep track on the properties, but during Anwar Sadat's regime some property was restored, including the seriously despoiled palace. The El Shawarby street had, as late as the 1950s, been a fashionable and valued part of the city.<sup>85</sup>

Using information from the correspondence, I tried to bridge the deep gap between the 19th century and the present, but intriguingly I found myself embroiled in a new way in the same kind of fantasy that had become familiar to me in my research. This time, however, it was not about the Orient but a fantasy of a Finland of mythic stories and impressions of nature, a representative of which I was now taken to be. I could see how the unexpected information and interest arriving from someone from an exotic country had sparked off the London letter writer's curiosity. Empirical information that was not previously known about had activated a need to understand and learn more. But despite this fresh information both sides were unable to set aside their fantasies about each others' culture. In my case, the historical evidence of my research proved to be so fantastical that the 'reality' I was seeking began to evade me even as I advanced. The initial, rapid impression of a fantasy was replaced by a fantasy of a 19th-century Orient filled with countless detail. I was in fantasyland, but instead of relying only on my speculations, the fantasy element associated with the East became a conscious fact. Yet, even when I was already in Cairo, I found myself being

<sup>85</sup> Email from Mohamed Shawarby to Elina Heikka, London, 14 May 2008.



The salon of Delort de Gléon's palace in Cairo in 2007, when it was used as the back office of a shop. Seated at the desk is Mercedes Volait holding a picture of *Almée*

Photo: Elina Heikka, 2007

astonished by the question: 'Is this your first time in the Middle East?' because the image I had constructed in my mind had nothing to do with the current political realities of the region nowadays called the Middle East. It was obvious I was a captive of my cultural background and its propensity to cultivate mental images of the Orient.

How, then, do I now see the position of *Almée* within the interplay between fantasy and realism? As I have tried to describe above, the painting emerged as the sum of various elements in a process in which the final idea unfolded gradually. The painter's approach to the subject was in line with the practices of realism of his day, and although the motif was not from the life of common people, it can nevertheless be seen as a depiction of society and social relations that adheres to the aims of social realism. Gunnar Berndtson's trip to Cairo can be viewed as an epilogue of politically significant events, and in this context, the painting of *Almée* as a depiction of the culmination of France's declining influence by showing a time of French affluence and sense of power.

One way of looking at the painting is to see it as the artist reflecting on the experiences of his trip to Egypt, and as such it correlates exceedingly well with 20th-century critical analyses of the relationship of Europeans with the East. The artist stages a scene of hierarchical, unequal opposites; a half-naked woman representing the East versus two Western men controlling her with their gaze. It is a stereotypical meeting between feminine East and masculine West. Could there be any clearer visual representation of the basic tenets of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the East being a construct of European imagination? Brought onto the stage of an Orientalist palace, the female dancer is a creation of men, a fantastical object for display or a collector's item acquired through wealth. Here she is just as much an element of the Orient – produced by desire and economic resources – as the architecture of the palace.

Translated from Finnish by Tomi Snellman.

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Letter from Gunnar Berndtson to his mother, Augusta Berndtson, Cairo, 26 March 1883 (below and pages 25–27; English translation page 28). Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery

Photo: Finnish National Gallery

Till Berntsons  
Mor

Cairo d. 26 Mars 1883

Min egen Mamma!

I torsdags föskaftonen var stor fest hos delord till Mr. Bamberger's ära. Till dinnern voro vi ej många, heder gästerna, greve de Saint-Maurice, baron delord de Gleon och jag. Vi tre sistnämnda voro klädd till araber och uppträdde i våra kostymer hela aftonen, då de öfriga gästernas efter dinnern anlände. Då vi väl alla voro vräktta behagligt på våra divaner uppträdde Almée, danserska med sin musik af 4 araber. Almées kostym voro så delvis egendomblika, en liten vest öfver axlarna och bröstet, midjan täckt af en gas samt vida byxor af tycket videns tyg guldstickade och uppfästade med ett bälte af



guld brocade, kring handlofvor  
 och vrista guldock silfver-om-  
 band samt kring halsen slänga  
 tjocka guldkedor, med metall-  
 gor med brillanter samt and-  
 ligsjoutaria, fingrornas frusallat  
 med ringar. Deras dans var  
 litet enformig och stillsam  
 men egendomlig och antagligen  
 ganska svår att utföra. Bland  
 annat dansade en med en  
 butelj, i hvilken en brinnande  
 ljus var instuckad, på hufvudet  
 och gjorde en massa skräm-  
 bövelsen utan att buteljen  
 det minsta förändrade plats  
 eller visade benägenhet att  
 falla ner. Den arabiska  
 dansiken är ingenting att skratta  
 med, enformig och skräm-  
 lighet. Emellertid tog det sig en  
 fruktansvärt orientaliskt prägel  
 i delosts orientaliskt insedd  
 utdrag och erbjöd ett afantiskt  
 intressant isynerhet för mig

som målare. Bordeci var rest  
 till Alexandria, men är i dag  
 åter kommen och säger att jag  
 Alexandria har att göra flera  
 ga porträtt. Jag vill. Jag för-  
 klarade honom att jag verkligen  
 i nästa år skulle begära mig  
 därför ty för denna gång bör  
 jag frunt oss att göra. I  
 Paris har jag äfven ämnat en  
 porträtt att göra namn. unge  
 Bambergers, som till den kvällen  
 frunt varit fläga. Det är ju  
 sådela bra att få klienter i  
 så rika hus. — Det kost pro-  
 joserat mig att beta, då vi be-  
 gifva oss hörför, till Constan-  
 tinopel och Wien; hörför jag  
 sedan ensam skulle göra min tur  
 genom Italien och föreständ  
 ordentligt, men vi få att se hur  
 det må gå. I det fall att skulle  
 vi ej begifva oss hörför försän-  
 mat den 20<sup>de</sup> Maj och skulle  
 få en tredje restaurat M. Delafra



I ofvornorgon biten hoppas  
 jag erhåller bref från Er och  
 antager jag för hörs det är  
 alla min bra. Numera har  
 jag ej fått säkert meddelande  
 från Paris om min tafel, men  
 jag antager jag ifrå i ofvornor-  
 gon för hörs något från E-  
 delbet. — Och dröps adieu  
 för denna gång  
 Mamma och  
 Pappa

Cairo, 26 March 1883

My dearest Mother!

Last Saturday, on the Great Sabbath, Delort gave a grand party in honour of Mr Bamberg. In attendance at the dinner were only a small group: the guest of honour, Count de Saint-Maurice, Baron Delort de Gléon and myself. We three last-mentioned were dressed as Arabs, and we remained in costume the entire evening until other guests arrived after dinner.

Just as we had each settled comfortably on our divans, six *almées*, dancers, appeared before us, accompanied by four Arab musicians. The costumes of the *almées* were extraordinary, a small vest that covered the shoulders and chest, a veil covering the waist and broad trousers made of silk with gold embroidering, held up by a gold brocade belt; silver and gold bangles on their wrists and ankles and thick gold chains around their neck, brilliant medallions and other jewellery, fingers full of rings.

Their dance was a bit monotonous and calm but presumably quite difficult to perform. One of them danced holding a bottle on her head with a lighted candle inside, performing difficult movements without the bottle tottering or threatening to fall in the least. Arab music is nothing to boast about, tiresome and noisy. All this carried a perfectly Oriental character in Delort's salon, which is decorated in the Oriental style, and as a painter was exceedingly interesting to me especially.

Borelli has been to Alexandria, but he returned today. He says that I could get as many commissions for portraits in Alexandria as I could care for. I told him that I would not be able to do any of that work until next year, because I have my hands full at the moment. There is a portrait waiting for me also in Paris, of young Bamberg, which I have promised to paint first. I guess I am particularly adept at getting customers from rich families like that.

Delort has suggested to me that when we depart from Cairo, we should travel to Athens, Constantinople and Vienna, whence I could continue alone to Italy. It sounds tempting, but we'll have to see how it works out. In case we do not depart before 20th May, we might have M. de la Fitte as a third travel companion.

I am hoping to receive a letter from you the day after tomorrow and to hear that you are all well. I have not yet received confirmation from Paris regarding my painting, but I am certain I will receive a word from Edelfelt as well the day after tomorrow. – And now, after all this, I bid thee farewell this time.

Mother's own Gunnar