

# TRINITY FINE ART

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## **Francesco Hayez**

Venice 1791 – Milan 1882

### *Odalisque*

Oil on canvas, 42.5 x 34.7 cm.

This previously unpublished painting, still on its original canvas and in perfect condition, is a significant addition to the corpus of Francesco Hayez's work and, in the sophistication of its brushwork, it confirms the affinity for oriental themes that was such a feature of this painter, a leading player in Italian Romanticism. His passion for an Orient of which he could only dream, given that he never personally visited the region, became part of his imaginary universe and of his style in the early, formative stage of his career. He began to address biblical themes with *The Piety of Ezekiel, King of Israel* painted in 1817<sup>1</sup>, constantly alternating them thereafter with more specifically oriental subjects, right up to what is considered his final masterpiece – a kind of last will and testament in paint completed in 1881, the year before he died – entitled *A Vase of Flowers on the Window of a Harem* (Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera), in which we catch a glimpse of an odalisque in the background placing a vase full of flowers on the parapet, draped in a Persian carpet, of a harem window. While we can see only a small portion of her head swathed in a turban, her two hands holding the vase are, on the contrary, very much in evidence in the foreground<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The recently rediscovered picture painted for the so-called "Tribute of the Venetian Provinces" to mark Austrian Emperor Francis I's fourth wedding, acting on a suggestion by Leopoldo Cicognara. See *Hayez*, exhibition catalogue (Milan, Palazzo Reale, Accademia Pinacoteca and Biblioteca di Brera November 1983 – February 1984) ed. M.C. Gozzoli and F. Mazzocca, Milan, Electa, 1983 pp. 38-40; *Canova, Hayez, Cicognara. L'ultima gloria di Venezia*, exhibition catalogue (Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia, 29 September 2017 – 2 April 2018) ed. F. Mazzocca, P. Marini, Roberto De Feo, Venice / Milan, Marsilio / Electa, 2017, pp. 192-221.

<sup>2</sup> *Francesco Hayez*, exhibition catalogue (Milan, Gallerie d'Italia, 7 November 2015 – 21 February 2016) ed. F. Mazzocca, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan), Silvana Editoriale, 2015, pp. 322-323.

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Hayez reveals this interest in the Orient, explored in both space and time, more explicitly from the 1830s onwards, starting with a crucially important picture entitled *The Refugees of Parga* which was displayed in triumph at the Brera in 1831, and including the numerous paintings that he devoted to events in the history of the Greek struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire. Thus in turning his hand to the orientalism that was such a characteristic feature of 19th century painting throughout Europe, eventually becoming a fully-fledged fashion, Hayez effectively addressed a broad range of different themes. He admitted to taking immense delight in the subject because, as he tells us in his *Memorie*, he found “much therein that was picturesque both in form and in thought”<sup>3</sup>.

Like Delacroix, he moved on from the politically engaged aspect of the so-called “philhellenic” repertoire to the more sensual dimension of a stylised Orient, painting a whole series of odalisques in different situations and attitudes in sumptuous harem interiors, starting with *An Odalisque at the Window of a Harem* which he painted in 1838. Most of this immensely atmospheric output was produced in the 1830s and ‘40s, though he was to turn back to it in the 1860s when he alternated his odalisques with figures of such biblical heroines as Bathsheba, Rebecca, Ruth and Tamar of Judah<sup>4</sup>.

Hayez displays all his modernity in his handling of these themes, probing beyond the subject matter, which ends up acquiring the feel of a mere pretext, to focus exclusively on the values of a style that achieves its loftiest results on precisely these occasions. Celebrated by patriotic propaganda and by Giuseppe Mazzini as the great prophet of the nation’s destiny, Hayez shows himself – and this applies equally to his magnificent portraits – to be one of Europe’s greatest exponents, on a par with Ingres, of “art for art’s sake”.

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<sup>3</sup> *Le mie memorie dettate da Francesco Hayez*, ed. and with a postscript by F. Carotti, Milan, Tipografia Bernardoni, 1890, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> For an exploration of this output in greater detail, see F. Mazzocca, *Francesco Hayez. Catalogo ragionato*, Milan, Federico Motta Editore, 1994.

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Our own *Odalisque* is one of the most successful products of a formal journey that began with the splendid *Bathsheba Bathing* (private collection) displayed at the Brera in 1827, where it was purchased by the King of Württemberg who happened to be passing through Milan at the time<sup>5</sup>, and continued with a second version of the same subject that he was commissioned to paint in 1834 by that great collector, banker and philanthropist Ambrogio Uboldo (private collection)<sup>6</sup>. The motif of the face, enhanced by the turban framing its extremely pure oval and subsequently revisited in his depictions of other biblical heroines, appears to be especially congenial to the artist, who focuses on conveying her features, her gaze and the folds in the fabric of her garments. Adopting a highly sophisticated palette containing what is almost a musical note, he gives free rein to his superb skill in the handling of soft *chiaroscuro* transitions, transparencies and *velature*.

Yet this is far from being a simple, if very lofty, stylistic exercise, an end in itself, because in each one of these faces we rediscover an emotion, an ability to convey sentiment that is eminently congenial to the man who, in those same years, was creating such absolute masterpieces as the two versions (painted in 1840–1 and 1842 respectively) of *Melancholy* (Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera and private collection), emblematic figures of Romanticism's existential anguish.

I would date our extremely touching *Odalisque* precisely to the very early 1840s, a truly magical period for this Venetian artist, in that it shares numerous features with the grieving face of *The Sorrowful Virgin with Angels and the Marks of the Passion* (Riva del Garda, Museo Civico) painted for Countess Carolina Bevilacqua of Verona in 1842 and subsequently owned by her friend, the poet Andrea Maffei<sup>7</sup>. In fact, one gets the impression that Hayez used the same model, successfully capturing not only the beauty of her complexion but also the sweetness of her facial features, showing incredibly meticulous painterly sensitivity in capturing and

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<sup>5</sup> *Hayez dal mito al bacio*, exhibition catalogue (Padua, Palazzo Zabarella, 20 September 1998 – 10 January 1999) ed. F. Mazzocca, Venice, Marsilio, 1998, pp. 138-139.

<sup>6</sup> *Francesco Hayez* op. cit., 198-201

<sup>7</sup> *Francesco Hayez* op. cit., pp. 232-233.

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conveying every detail. His choice of a red background is yet another touch of genius, conjuring up as it does the headily sensual atmosphere of the Orient and imbuing the figure with a uniquely emotional quality.

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*Prof. Fernando Mazzocca*

