



**Austrian School, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Attr. to Adolf Michael Böhm

(1861, Vienna –1927, Klosterneuburg)

*“Othello”*

Oil on canvas, 53 x 42.5 cm; 20.8 x 16.7in

Monogrammed: A(M?)B on the right-hand side

**Provenance:**

Private Collection, Italy

This sensitively observed portrait of a young North African man wearing a striking white and blue striped “djellaba” illustrates well the Orientalist movement in painting and the concurrent vogue for anthropological representations which gained currency against the backdrop of the colonization of Africa by the European powers in the second half of the 19th century.

# TRINITY FINE ART

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Up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europeans had experienced very intermittent and comparatively minimal contact with North Africa and the Middle East, a status-quo which changed abruptly with Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1798 which ushered in an age of exploration and expansion which was mirrored in artistic trends in Europe at the time, most notably in Orientalist painting. Wealthy European collectors found much to admire in these Orientalist works, which provided them with a pleasurable frisson from the exoticism, luminous colours and perceived sensuality of these "far-flung" lands, and a momentary escape from their modern urban lives.

This 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial expansion was accompanied by a thirst for knowledge about these lands and their inhabitants, and this thirst was amply provided for by an army of explorers, botanists, naturalists, and artists who led expeditions to every part of the African continent and avidly wrote about, mapped, drew and painted everything they came across to satiate an eager public at home in Europe.

The peoples of Africa were also subjected to this obsessive and minute cataloguing in service of the developing discipline of anthropology which formed part of a colonial machine eager for knowledge about their newly conquered empires, and as a result portraits such as the present one were produced in order to inform as much as to adorn. North Africa in particular, was seen as a vast and antique land sown with the monuments of ancient Egypt and Rome and inhabited by peoples from classical myth, Delacroix was deeply impressed when he visited saying of the locals that they were: *"As beautiful as antiquity ... The heroes of [Jacques-Louis] David and Co, with their rose pink limbs, would cut a sorry figure beside these children of the sun, who wear the dress of classical antiquity with a nobler air."* Indeed this utterance could also be said to apply to our painting which presents the young man in a very classical format, the white and blue djellaba falling around him like a toga and with a raised head and proud gaze which focusses on something on the horizon, but in doing so does not exchange glances with the viewer whose gaze is merely tolerated by the sitter who maintains his defiant and proud independence and does not stoop to being merely an object for the curious gaze of a European public.

This painting's title of "Othello" represents an interesting and very typically 19<sup>th</sup> century concatenation whereby the inhabitants of newly colonised territories are recorded and then linked to stories and heroes familiar to a European audience. Here the ill-fated Othello who *"loved not wisely but too well"* is reimagined, taken out of his traditional 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian garb and restored to his "Moorish" North African roots with his brooding stare testifying to the turbulent themes of his story of betrayal, jealousy, wrath, vengeance and race. This returning of Othello to his North African roots is very representative of the 19<sup>th</sup> century European obsession with verisimilitude which drove others such as the Pre-Raphaelites, to travel and paint in such areas as the Middle East, often at great personal danger, in order to give their subjects as much reality and truth as possible and in doing so transmit this back to their home audiences.