



The Moorish Chief, 1878, by Eduard Charlemont

About the Artwork

A tall, bearded man stands at the top of the stairs in a doorway to a beautiful palace. Dressed in stunningly white robes, he looks down at us from his perch at the threshold to this impressive architectural space. A crimson red cap is just barely visible underneath the hooded cloak he wears. The man faces us with his left foot firmly planted on the top stair and his right on the stair below, as if stopped midstride. His left hand gathers his robes at his knee, revealing his sandaled feet and bare ankles. In his other hand he holds a sword, the long, slender blade extending down at his side toward his toes. The outer layer of his white robes is lifted over his right shoulder revealing his muscular arm and two richly decorated scabbards (sword covers) tucked into his golden belt. The golden and bejeweled handle of a blade is clearly visible in one scabbard, while the other is empty, likely belonging to the sword at his side.

Behind the man is a spectacular palace. Parts of it are bathed in a warm golden light, while others are obscured in dark shadows, adding to the dramatic feeling of the painting. Who is this man? And what is this place? People have speculated about his identity for more than a hundred years. The artist hired an unknown studio model to pose for this painting and dressed him up in a costume to create this intriguing image of a powerful man. The palace in the background is based on the Alhambra, a famous building in Granada, Spain, which was built in the 1200s and 1300s by Muslims from northwestern Africa, known as Moors, who ruled large parts of Spain. So even though this painting was inspired by real people and real places, the painting itself is an imaginative fiction created by the artist.



The Moorish Chief

1878

Eduard Charlemont

Austrian, 1848–1906

Oil on panel
59 1/8 x 38 1/2 inches
(150.2 x 97.8 cm)

John G. Johnson Collection, 1917: cat. 951

About the Artist

Eduard Charlemont was born in 1848 in Vienna, the capital of Austria. His father was a professional artist who painted miniature portraits and encouraged his talented son to help in his workshop and learn from this practice. Charlemont went on to study painting at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and later traveled throughout Europe, eventually settling in Paris, the center of the art world in the 1800s. Charlemont lived in Paris for the next thirty years of his life and in that time he won several prizes at the Paris Salons, the annual government-sponsored exhibitions hosted by the Academie des Beaux-Arts. His masterwork was not a painting, but rather a series of murals created for Vienna's city theater that each measured almost sixty feet in length.

The Moorish Chief was purchased by Philadelphia lawyer and art collector, John G. Johnson, who in 1917 gifted his entire collection of European art to the city of Philadelphia. The collection now resides at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where *The Moorish Chief* has become one of the most beloved paintings in the museum. Charlemont achieved only moderate success as a painter in his lifetime and never became as well-known as many of his peers who also exhibited artworks at the annual Salon. In spite of this, more reproductions of *The Moorish Chief* are sold in the museum store than any other work of art in the collection, which speaks to the lasting power of this masterpiece.

Let's Look

- Look closely at the man's clothes. What details stand out most to you? Can you make any inferences about where this man is from based on what he is wearing?
- What is the setting of this painting? Describe some details you notice about the room. Have you ever visited a place like this before? What do you imagine it would feel like to stand where the man is standing?

Let's Look Again

- How would you describe the man's posture? Use your own body to copy his pose. How does standing like this make you feel?
- Many have described this man as looking very powerful. Do you agree? If so, what makes him look that way?



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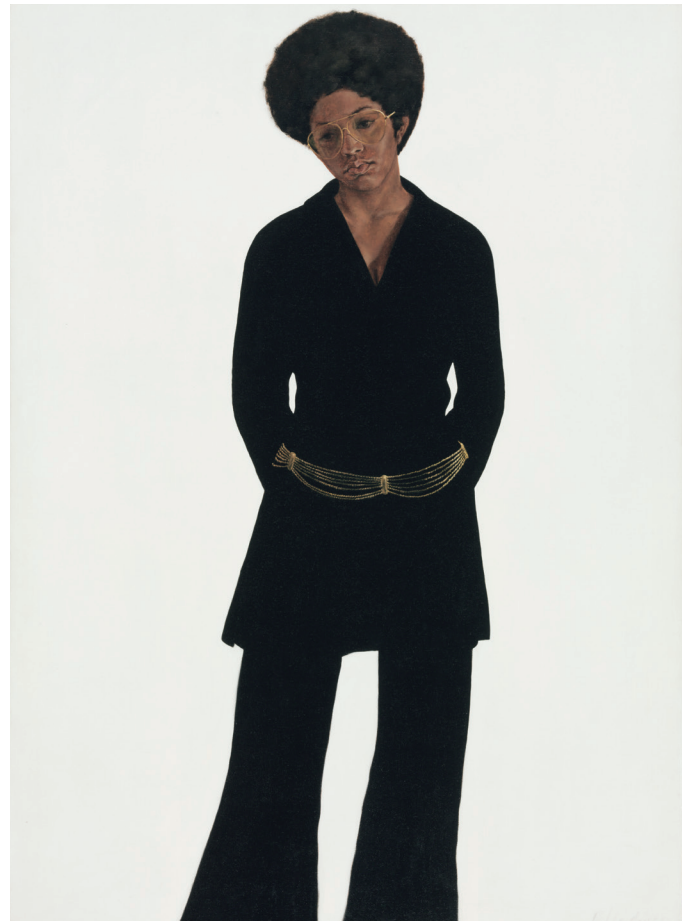
Looking Outward

In the 1800s, artists and collectors in France developed a great interest in the people and places that existed beyond the borders of Europe. There had long been a tradition in European painting of artists depicting what they perceived to be far-off lands and the people who lived there. However, the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt and Syria between 1798 and 1801 prompted an even greater fascination with countries in the Middle East and North Africa. This interest only continued to grow as European nations established colonies in the 1800s throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Artists responded to the public's fascination with these places by depicting them in their artworks. Many of these artists, having never left Europe, idealized the countries and their people as embodiments of an exotic and simple way of life untouched by industrialization. These kinds of representations were as much a tool of colonialism as Napoleon's armies.

Orientalism is the art historical term that has been applied to artworks like *The Moorish Chief*. The term was defined in 1978 by the critic Edward W. Said "... as a Western artistic style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." Here the term *Orient* is used to refer to countries east of Europe. Through that lens, *The Moorish Chief* was a means by which European viewers could feel superior over the man pictured and take pleasure in his exotic dress and surroundings.

While the history of *The Moorish Chief* cannot be completely divorced from the context in which it was made, many modern viewers have come to interpret the man pictured as embodying great strength, fortitude, and power. Through this contemporary lens, the painting is seen by many as a rare

and powerful representation of a regal, black man from a time when such representations were few and far between. The contemporary artist, Barkley Hendricks (American, 1945–2017), who was known for painting compelling portraits of black people, greatly admired *The Moorish Chief* and even had a magnet on his fridge of the artwork. Hendricks, who was from Philadelphia and had enjoyed seeing the painting on his visits to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, explained how he saw his own work as part of the same history of portraiture and figure painting as Charlemont's *Moorish Chief*. In honor of Barkley Hendrick's passing in 2017, his painting *Miss T* was temporarily hung next to *The Moorish Chief* at the museum.



Miss T, 1969, by Barkley L. Hendricks (Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with the Philadelphia Foundation Fund, 1970-134-1) © Barkley L. Hendricks, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Comparing and Connecting

Mary Cassatt (American, 1844–1926) painted this portrait of an elegantly dressed woman at the Paris Opera around the same time that Charlemont painted *The Moorish Chief*. Though painted in the same city and only one year apart, they look very different. Cassatt, who was an Impressionist, experimented with loose brushstrokes and bright colors, which stands in great contrast to Charlemont's attention to detail and precise brushstrokes.

- Compare both paintings. Which one do you think is more realistic? What specific details in the painting support your conclusion?
- When these were first painted, the art establishment favored Charlemont's realistic style over the Impressionist style. Which style of painting do you prefer? Why?
- Imagine if the people in these paintings could come to life and tell you their stories. What do you think they would tell you?



Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge, 1879, by Mary Cassatt (Philadelphia Museum of Art: Bequest of Charlotte Dorrance Wright, 1978-1-5)



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