



1878

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

EDUARD CHARLEMONT
Austrian

John G. Johnson Collection,
1917, Cat. 951

LET'S LOOK

Who is this man and where is he standing? What makes him look so powerful?

Where is the light coming from? How can you tell?

What makes this painting look so real?

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

Imagine changing one important thing in this painting—the clothing, the lighting, the architecture, the gender, or the skin color. How would this change your response to the painting? Share your ideas with a partner.

Intricate patterns are common in Moorish and Islamic art and architecture. How many patterns can you find in this painting? (Look at the vaults and arches, the tiles, the carpet, and the large copper bowl.)

THE MOORISH CHIEF

Looking down at us, a tall man in white robes stands in the doorway of an impressive palace. People have marveled at this painting's details and speculated about its subject for over a hundred years. But no one knows for sure who the man is because this is not a portrait—the artist used a costumed model standing in a Moorish palace. The painting is filled with many realistic details. Look at the man's clothing: he is dressed in the kind of hooded cloak sometimes called a *burnoose* and typically worn by Arabs and Moors. On his head is a *kaffiyeh* (headdress) that almost completely covers a crimson cap underneath. Look for two richly *damascened scabbards* (decorated sword covers) stuck into his gold-embroidered belt. One scabbard is empty. What is he holding in his right hand? It's a slender sword, the blade pointed downward like an extension of his muscular arm.

The background of this painting is based on the Alhambra, a famous fortress overlooking the city of Granada, Spain. The Alhambra was built during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries by Moors, Muslims from northwestern Africa, who ruled large portions of Spain from 711 CE until 1492. Although Spain is part of the European continent, it is located just across the Strait of Gibraltar from North Africa.

The painting probably gets its current title, *The Moorish Chief*, from the Moorish architecture in the background. But when it was first exhibited in 1878, it was called *The Guardian of the Seraglio*. Seraglio ("seh-ral-yo") is the name for the special quarters in a Muslim residence where the women of the household were sheltered from strangers—so this title identified the man as guard of the women in the palace. However, after being purchased by Philadelphia collector John G. Johnson in 1892, the painting was

listed as *The Alhambra Guard*. This title makes sense, since the palace in the background resembles the Alhambra. Finally, when the painting came to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, people began calling it *The Moorish Chief*. Do you find that these different titles make you see different things in the painting? Perhaps the painting has had so many different names because people see different stories in it. What title would you give this painting?

The artist, Eduard Charlemont, made the figure and the setting look so true to life—almost more real than a photograph!—that you might wonder how such an amazing illusion could be created with oil paint. To render different textures so precisely, Charlemont used a smooth wood panel as a painting surface instead of canvas. Look at the folds of fabric between the fingers of the left hand. Can you see any brushstrokes? To create this detailed figure, Charlemont probably combined information he found in travel books with his studies of live models and with ideas from his imagination. Illusionistic paintings of people from faraway places were extremely popular at the annual Salon exhibitions in Paris.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Eduard Charlemont (“shar-luh-mahn”) 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. When he was just fifteen, Eduard was hired to teach drawing at a girls’ school. Later he studied at the Vienna Academy, worked as an apprentice in an artist’s studio, and traveled to Germany, Italy, and finally to Paris, where he stayed for thirty years.

In Paris, Charlemont’s paintings were in great demand among wealthy patrons. He won several prizes at the Paris Salons, annual government-sponsored exhibitions held by the French Academy. At the same time, a diverse group of artists who called themselves “the Independents” were organizing their own exhibitions, rebelling against the Academy’s tight control over what kinds of paintings could be exhibited publicly. The Independents included such painters as Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt, Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, and Camille Pissarro, and soon became known as the Impressionists. Although Impressionist art is very popular today, it was shocking to the Paris art world in the 1870s.

In *The Moorish Chief*, Charlemont used quite different painting methods than those of the Impressionists. Charlemont painted indoors in his studio, observing in great detail his model and all the other elements that would appear in the picture. His goal was to use his imagination to invent a

beautiful and mysterious world. The Impressionists felt that they were simply recording what they saw in the real world. And while Charlemont was highly skilled at blending and hiding his brushstrokes, the Impressionists delighted in allowing theirs to show.

Charlemont's artistic skill brought him much recognition within his lifetime. While *The Moorish Chief* and other paintings were meant to be framed, Charlemont was also famous for murals, or large paintings made to cover a wall or ceiling. His masterwork was three enormous panels for Vienna's city theater. Each panel was almost sixty feet long!

Eduard Charlemont died in Vienna in 1906. Today his name is almost unknown, and yet *The Moorish Chief* is one of the most popular paintings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; more reproductions of this painting are sold in the Museum Store than of any other work of art in the Museum.

HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES

Have you noticed that half of the Moorish Chief's face and half of his right arm are in shadow? Experiment with a partner and a lamp or a large flashlight to create dramatic shadows like these on yourselves.

Find geometric shapes in the architecture in this painting. Choose your two favorite ones, draw them on lightweight cardboard, then carefully cut them out. Use colored pencils to trace around the shapes and develop a pattern of your own.

WRITING ACTIVITIES

Write definitions for the italicized words in the text. Then, using five of these words, write a paragraph describing in detail the physical appearance, from top to toe, of one of your favorite heroes or heroines in life or in literature.

Imagine that you are exploring the dark, shadowy rooms of the Alhambra. You come around a corner and find yourself face-to-face with the Moorish Chief. What would you say? What would happen next?

This painting is included in The Figure in the Impressionist Era, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.