

# Johann Hermann Kretzschmer Samum in the Desert



# GRISEBACH

# 128 Johann Hermann Kretschmer

From our auction „19th Century Art“, 27 November 2019, 3 p.m.

Johann Hermann Kretschmer  
Anklam 1811 – 1890 Berlin

## Samum in the Desert. After 1844

Oil on canvas. 181 × 235 cm. (71 ¼ × 92 ½ in.) Signed lower left: Herman[n] Kretschmer. Inscribed on the reverse lower left with stencil in black: EAFC [= Ernesti Augusti Fideicommissum]. Inscribed with the Hanover inv. no. on the stretcher with chalk: 107. A first version from 1844 arrived as bequest of Adolf Heinrich Schletter at Museum der Bildende Künste, Leipzig (inv. no. 127). [3409] Framed

## Provenance

King Ernst August I of Hanover (acquired 1849 at the Kunstaussstellung Hanover, until 2003 in the collection of the House of Hanover; 1893–1925 loan from the House of Hanover at the Provinzialmuseum [today Landesmuseum] Hanover) / Private Collection, England (since 2003)

EUR 120.000–150.000  
USD 132,000–165,000

## Exhibition

Kunstaussstellung. Hanover, Kunstverein, 1849 (according to Boetticher)

## Literature and Illustration

Verzeichniss der zum Vermögen des Königs Georg gehörenden Gemälde, welche sich in dem Hause Nr. 3 der Landschaftstrasse zu Hannover befinden. Hanover 1876, cat. no. 76 („Sturm in der Wüste [Samum genannt]“) / Katalog der zum Ressort der Königlichen Verwaltungskommission gehörigen Sammlung von Gemälden, Skulpturen und Altertümern im Provinzial-Museumsgebäude an der Prinzenstrasse Nr. 4 zu Hannover. Hanover 1891, cat. no. 107 / Verzeichnis der zur Fideicommiss-Galerie des Gesamt-Hauses Braunschweig und Lüneburg gehörigen Bilder and Sculpturen im Provinzial-Museum zu Hannover. Hanover 1896, cat. no. 107 (stamped in red: EAFC) / Friedrich von Boetticher: Malerwerke des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts. 4 volumes. Third, unmodified print, Hofheim am Taunus, H. Schmidt & C. Günther, 1979 (at first Fr. v. Boetticher's Verlag, Dresden 1891–1901), here first volume (second half), p. 799, no. 44 / Katalog der zur Fideikommiss-Galerie des Gesamthaus Braunschweig and Lüneburg gehörigen Sammlung von Gemälden und Skulpturen im Provinzial-Museum [...] zu Hannover. Hanover 1905, cat. no. 107

We would like to thank Dr. Claudia Andratschke, Landesmuseum Hanover, for kindly providing additional information regarding provenance.

Jan Nicolaisen

## Johann Hermann Kretschmer's “The Samum in the Desert” and the German Orientalism

During the 19th century, Orientalist painting introduced urban Europeans and salon habitués to visual impressions that were magically exotic and filled with a novel sensuality. One of the triggers for this artistic trend was Napoleon's Egyptian campaign (1798–1801) which, besides soldiers, also brought a host of scholars and researchers to the Land of the Nile. Under the supervision of Vivant Denon, they systematically set about creating a comprehensive catalogue of Egypt's antiquities. The fruit of their labors, the richly illustrated “Description de l'Égypte”, was published in 23 volumes between 1803 and 1826, laying the groundwork for the academic field of Egyptology and essentially fixing the Orient's visual repertoire in the European mind. In subsequent years, France came to be the home of Orientalist painters, some of whom, e.g. Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps or Jean-Léon Gérôme, were recognized experts in the field. Surely the most important French painter to dedicate himself to this genre was Eugène Delacroix, who accompanied a diplomatic mission to Morocco in 1832. Delacroix' artwork, exhibited to great acclaim in the Paris salons, exerted a strong influence that reached as far as Prussia. The Orientalist works of Johann Hermann Kretschmer testify to the fact that Berlin, too, soon became enamored of all things Levantine.

In the 1840s, the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV financed the legendary Lepsius Expedition to Egypt and Nubia (1842–45). The young Egyptologist Richard Lepsius pursued a twofold mission: His first objective was to explore the Nile Basin in terms of its history and ancient treasures. The second was to collect artworks and cultural monuments, either as originals or as plaster casts, for a museum in Berlin. This was the Neues Museum, inaugurated on Berlin's Museum Island in 1850, that had been designed by Friedrich August Stüler, a student of the famous Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Joining in the Lepsius Expedition were painters such as Ernst Weidenbach and Johann Jacob Frey, who helped to illustrate the researchers' findings in a twelve-volume survey entitled “Denkmäler aus Ägypten und Äthiopien” (“Cultural Monuments from Egypt and Ethiopia”). With this magnum opus, Lepsius essentially laid the foundations for German Egyptology. Accordingly, it is safe to say that the 1840s, when Kretschmer created his painting of the Samum sandstorm in the desert, marked one of the first flowerings of interest in the Orient in Germany. Though Kretschmer made a name for himself as Berlin's first Orientalist painter, he soon abandoned the genre: By the late 1850s, he had already shifted his focus to depictions of

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Prussian history, so that his oeuvre of Orient-themed works is not very large.

In his search for new pictorial motifs beyond the more commonplace vistas of Italy, Kretzschmer had travelled to Greece, Constantinople, and Egypt as early as in 1840/41. The fact that Egypt was all the rage in Prussia at the time was surely a motivating factor – along with the general Wanderlust that tended to characterize painters in the 19th century. Upon returning to Düsseldorf – and also later, after he had moved to Berlin – Kretzschmer was able to parlay his experiences into a number of pictures with Oriental themes. One was the 1842 painting “Ansicht von Kairo mit den Pyramiden von Gizeh,” which was originally exhibited at Berlin’s Akademie der Künste and has since been classified as lost. Another was the 1844 painting “Der Samum in der Wüste,” which was acquired by the Leipzig-based silk merchant and leading art collector Adolph Heinrich Schletter, who went on to donate it to the Städtisches Museum of Leipzig in 1848. The work being offered at auction here is a variant that Kretzschmer created of the original, large-format oil-on-canvas painting (176 cm x 232 cm) now held by the Museum der bildenden Künste in Leipzig. This variant, which has been the property of the royal court of Hanover since 1849, differs from its model in Leipzig in only a few details, e.g. the position taken by the female figure seen from the back at the center of the image or the color of individual motifs like the tack and saddle of the horse on the right.

The artist boldly exploits the dramatic effect of the sandstorm or Samum (Arabic for “poison wind”), a dangerous weather phenomenon encountered in the North African desert. As viewers, we become witnesses to the cataclysmic, elemental forces that are unleashed as if Nature had suddenly flown into a fit of fury. The sand has darkened the background, the wind has torn the tent loose from its moorings so that it seems on the verge of flying away. The people and animals cower helplessly on the ground: A camel lies prostrate under its colorful, carefully rendered load (to reduce its wind resistance), while the camel driver huddles alongside. A mother holds her child protectively close to her. The group of figures is flanked by two magnificent Arab steeds, clearly affrighted by the storm. In the foreground lies a camel’s skull – an unmistakable omen of the deadly peril that looms here.

A late Romantic through and through, Kretzschmer could not resist portraying the sense of dread and terror as credibly as possible by minutely rendering each of the accessory figures, along with the colorful costumes, hides, jewels, and weapons. In this way, he seems to concurrently objectify the scene’s exoticism. This combination of fascination with perceived threat can be seen as paradigmatic of European attitudes towards the Oriental world during the 19th century. The desert storm also could be understood as a metaphor for the entirely other terra incognita, the wildly foreign world that the Orient seemed to represent for the West. By highlighting the differing reactions of man and beast to this act of God – from panic and agitation to stoic acceptance (as evidenced by the Arab standing on the left,

who seems determined to wait out the storm) – the artist subjects the viewer to a welter of emotions. It is in these details that the painter’s intention becomes manifest, who seems to follow the tradition of his teachers Wilhelm Wach and Wilhelm von Schadow in giving this realistic genre painting the same gravitas as the portrayal of a key historical event.