

Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps, *Arab Town Scene*

oil on canvas
31 ¾ by 39 ½ inches (80.8 by 100.4 cm.)
signed lower left: 'D.C.'

provenance: with Browse and Delbanco, London;
Private collection, United Kingdom

note: Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps was born in Paris May 3, 1803.¹ With his brother Maurice-Alexandre (1804-52), the art critic and essayist, he spent some years of his youth at Orsay, in Picardy, 'in order to learn to rise early and know the hard life of the fields'. The artwork of the peasants stimulated an interest in drawing. He entered the atelier of Etienne Bouhot (1780-1862) in 1816. Towards the end of 1818 he left Bouhot to study under Alexandre-Denis Abel de Pujol, quitting his studio in 1819-20 in order to embark upon a career as an independent professional artist. He had been an inattentive student, who thought that 'the formula of instruction of the academic doctrine reduced the least examination almost to the proportions of silliness'. Memories of Orsay remained his point of departure throughout his working life, and in this sense he was a self-trained artist. Nevertheless, he admired, and learnt from the art of such diverse artists as Raphael, Titian, Giovanni da Bologna, Poussin, Rembrandt, Géricault and Léopold Robert.

Decamps made his début at the Salon of 1827/8 with *Hunting in a Swamp* (untraced) and *The Janissary* (Wallace Collection, London), simple compositions where recession is effected by the overlapping of edges, with fresh local color and a finesse of touch. In 1828 he travelled throughout Asia Minor and eastern North Africa, becoming the first major European artist to travel extensively in the Near East. On his return he began a vogue for Oriental themes with such works as *Turkish Patrol* (circa 1830-31; Wallace Collection, London) and *Route of Smyrna* (1833; Musée Condé, Chantilly). At the same time he painted his memories of Orsay in *Chasse au miroir* (1830; Clark Art Institute, Williamstown), developed a long-lasting interest in rendering animals, evinced in the *Monkey Painter* (circa 1833; Louvre, Paris) and painted numerous genre scenes, such as *The Mendicants* (circa 1832-3; Musée National des Beaux-Arts, Algiers).

Decamps sent his most famous work, *Defeat of the Cimbri at Aquae Sextiae* (1833; Louvre, Paris), to the Salon of 1834; it is a large painting, consistent in style with other works but demonstrating a fully developed understanding of atmospheric perspective. It is painted in his characteristic *cuisine*, a golden,

¹ Biographical information taken from Dewey F. Mosby, *The Grove Dictionary of Art*.

brittle, dry-brushed texture. He spent the rest of his career trying to reconcile his two strengths; a desire to create high-minded art and an interest in rendering his immediate surroundings.

During the late 1830s, after travelling to Italy in 1835, Decamps completed numerous canvases with biblical themes, such as *Joseph Sold by his Brothers* (1838, Wallace Collection, London). Characteristic of such works is an emphasis on horizontal recession into space, with the principal action taking place in a valley, and fusion of classical elements with naturalistic description. The result was a completely new approach to religious subjects. Through such devices as small architectural structures in the background and barren landscapes, Decamps created a believable image of the Orient, both historically and geographically, whereas previous artists had unconvincingly located scenes in Egypt and other Near Eastern countries merely by inserting pyramids or tropical growths. His work of the 1840s continued in the same stylistic vein, although he placed a greater emphasis on the figures and strong contour lines. The *History of Samson* series (Salon 1845; Private Collection, Paris) is characteristic of the period; these nine drawings also show that Decamps' drawing style parallel that of his paintings and of his printmaking. His oeuvre includes over 2000 paintings, drawings and prints, though he was not highly active during the last decade of his life. However, his style took on a new interest in light, while color began to play a minor role. *Job and his Friends* (1853; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis) and *Truffle Searcher* (circa 1853; Städel Museum, Amsterdam) are characteristic of this period.

Decamps received most of the major awards and recognitions bestowed on contemporary artists and enjoyed economic success: Eugène Leroux (1807-63) made lithographs after many of his works, and Decamps's patrons included such important 19th century collectors as Marquis Maison (1771-1840), the 4th Marquess of Hertford, Henry, Lord Seymour (1805-59), the Barons Rothschild and the Duc d'Orléans. The painting *Job* was commissioned by the French government in 1849. Perhaps the crowning point of his career was the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1855, where he was given a retrospective exhibition, as were Ingres and Delacroix: all three were awarded the Grand Medal of Honour. Decamps was an avid sportsman and champion of artists' rights. The esteem in which he was held is illustrated by Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse's *Monument to Decamps*, erected in 1862 in the Place Decamps, Fontainebleau. Decamps died August 23, 1860 as a consequence of being thrown from a horse while hunting at Fontainebleau.