

GALERIE SANCT LUCAS

VIENNA - ZURICH

ISIDORE - ALEXANDRE - AUGUSTIN PILS

1813 or 1815 Paris- 1875, Douarnenez, Finistère

TWO NORTH AFRICANS CONVERSING

Canvas, 38 x 40,5 cm

About 1860s

Provenance:

Private Collection, France



The present rare painting was executed in the early 1860s when Pils was in Algeria. It depicts two North African men conversing and dressed distinctively, à la Turque.

Prior to the execution of this painting Pils had been involved in painting scenes from the Crimean War such as *Siege Lines at Sebastopol* (1855; Bordeaux, Musée de Beaux-Arts) and *Battle of Alma, 20 September 1854* (1861; Versailles). Following the wide success of these war paintings, he was offered a commission to paint a scene depicting the reception of the Arab chiefs by the Emperor Napoleon III during his visit to Algeria in 1860. Pils accompanied the Emperor to Algeria and remained there for two years. Together with other Orientalist's such as Alfred Dehodencq (1822-1882) and Adrien Dauzats (1804-1868), he was fascinated by the intriguing and mysterious environment of Northern Africa.

The studies and paintings that emerge from this period, of which the present work is an excellent example, show a common careful attention to precise detail and an overall objective observation of the subject matter. He made sketches of the landscape and people. Staying in the Kabylie region, he was based at Fort Napoleon and travelled from there into the surrounding area. He was particularly struck by the dress and appearance of the Algerians, though often found them unwilling to be drawn. Despite interruptions caused by illness, his *Reception of the Arab Chiefs* (1867; untraced) was completed and exhibited at the Exposition Universelle of 1867 in Paris. Though Pils had managed to make preparatory studies for the figures of the Arab chiefs, he had been largely unable to do the same for the Emperor and his entourage and this, coupled with his great fascination for the Arabs, made his treatment of the French figures less impressive than that of the chiefs. This aroused criticism, though he was nevertheless promoted to Officer of the Légion d'Honneur.

The son of the painter Francois Pils (1785-1867), Isidore-Alexandre-Augustin entered the studio of Guillaume Lethière (1760-1832) at the age of 15, where he remained until his master's death in 1832. He then moved to the studio of François-Eduard Picot. On Picot's recommendation in 1834 Pils was commissioned to restore the paintings in the Gallery of Henry II at Fontainebleau. Whilst

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working there he produced several pictures of the interior of the palace and the surrounding area. On his return to Paris and Picot's studio, he intended to compete for the Prix de Rome, but hampered by illness; he won only the second Grand Prix (1837). However, the following year he fulfilled his ambition with *St. Peter Healing a Lame Man* at the *Man at the Gate of the Temple* (1838; Paris, L'École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts). In January 1839 he arrived at the Académie de France in Rome, at that time directed by Ingres. His poor health, that afflicted him throughout his life, again frustrated his plans and from July to September 1839 he convalesced on the Italian island of Ischia. On his way back to Rome he visited Pompeij and made studies from the antique vases and bronzes there. Despite continued bouts of illness, he managed to study art in Naples, Florence and Venice.

In September 1844 Pils returned to France and the following year was commissioned to paint a work based on a scene from the life of St. Madeleine for the Eglise de la Madeleine in Rouen. This resulted in the *Death of St. Madeleine*, which was shown at the Salon of 1847. His first great success at the Salon came with the *Rouget de l'Isle Singing the Marseillaise at the Residence of the Mayor of Strasbourg* (1849; Strasbourg, Musee Historique). Its patriotic subject-matter and depiction of ordinary people were to be hallmarks of many of his subsequent pictures.