



George Baer
American, 1893 - 1971

Masouba

1927

oil on canvas

overall: 55 x 33 cm (21 5/8 x 13 in.)

framed: 74.9 x 52.1 x 7 cm (29 1/2 x 20 1/2 x 2 3/4 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Geo. Baer / Colomb / Bechar 27

Chester Dale Collection 1964.19.1

ENTRY

George Baer painted *Masouba* during his second extended trip to North Africa in 1927, when he and his artist brother Martin lived at Colomb-Béchar, an oasis in the Algerian Sahara about 400 miles south of Oran. The sitter's elongated, half-length figure is pressed close to the picture plane. She rests her right hand on her head and looks down to her right. The girl has a pensive, remote expression. In the left background a bearded man is engrossed in reading a text of some kind. The painting's title was derived from the girl's Arabic name. [1] Baer commented on the sitter's background:

The young girl in this painting was the daughter of a mixed marriage of Jewish and Moorish parentage. When the Jews and Moors migrated from Spain to North Africa, it appears both Jews and Moors had a great deal in common—survival. So, when this group settled here they not only forgot or overlooked all prejudices and differences of religious beliefs, but worked and lived together and also intermarried. There was not the slightest vestige of segregation of Jews as prevailed in most of North Africa. [2]

There are many possible antecedents for the painting's imagery. *Masouba* recalls the North African exoticism and Orientalism of Eugène Delacroix, an artist with whom both Baer brothers were—and still are—often compared. The deliberate

distortion evident in the exaggerated, elongated features of the two figures is also clearly related to El Greco and to German expressionism, a movement with which the Baers became familiar during their academic training in Munich. George and his brother may also have been consciously following the examples of Paul Klee and August Macke, who in 1914 had sought artistic inspiration in Tunisia. The unusually bold brushwork of *Masouba* is, moreover, similar to the technique of the expressionist painters Chaim Soutine and Oskar Kokoschka. Despite these many precedents Bulliet concluded that the North African works were more than the sum of their influences: “The Baer brothers have evolved something that is recognized in France and America as distinctively ‘Baer.’ It is easy to trace their influences. . . . But all such influences are offset . . . by something that is distinctively their own, that springs out of their inner consciousness and is readily recognizable in everything they paint.” [3]

A series of paintings that the brothers made during their initial visit to the area in 1925 had immediately garnered critical acclaim and attracted buyers when they were exhibited in the spring of 1926 at the Durand-Ruel Gallery, Paris, and later that year at the Art Institute of Chicago. Noting that the Baers “found the Algerians as much to their liking as Gauguin found the Tahitians,” in 1928 Bulliet extolled the works from the second trip—including *Masouba*—for “a loosening up of their technique, and a greater spontaneity of spirit.” [4] *Masouba* is a highly representative example of George Baer’s style of the 1920s, the most productive and successful decade of his career. Neither George nor Martin was ever able to repeat the critical acclaim of their North African subjects.

Robert Torchia

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NOTES

- [1] The name is properly spelled Mahsouba, but the French transliteration probably dropped the H.
- [2] Quoted from a description of the painting written by the artist and sent December 16, 1969, to Gallery curator E. John Bullard, in response to Bullard’s November 9, 1969, request for information; both letters in NGA curatorial files.
- [3] C. J. Bulliet, Charles Fegdal, Georges Remon, and Paul Very, *The Art of*

Martin Baer, George Baer (New York, 1928), n.p.

- [4] C. J. Bulliet, Charles Fegdal, Georges Remon, and Paul Very, *The Art of Martin Baer, George Baer* (New York, 1928), n.p.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined, finely woven, plain-weave fabric support remains attached to its original stretcher with original tacking margins. The artist applied stiff paint squeezed directly from the tube, wet into wet, in thick, impastoed layers with broad brushstrokes onto a commercially prepared, thin, off-white ground. The buttery consistency and conformation of the well-preserved impasto seem to indicate the use of a palette knife to lay in several of the forms, particularly in the foreground. The x-radiograph confirms this evaluation but shows no artist's changes. Infrared examination reveals neither evidence of underdrawing nor artist's alterations. The painting is in very good condition with only minor deformations in the surface plane and a few small losses and abrasions marring its appearance. The surface is coated with a slightly yellowed layer of natural resin varnish. There is a good deal of grime accumulated in the troughs between the high impastos.

PROVENANCE

The artist; gift June 1929 to Maud Dale [Mrs. Chester Dale, 1875-1953], New York; [1] her husband, Chester Dale [1883-1962], New York; his estate; bequest 1964 to NGA.

[1] According to Chester Dale Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington; copies in NGA curatorial files. In the catalogue of the early 1929 exhibition organized by Newhouse Galleries in New York, the painting is credited to "Collection of Le Galerie Jeune Peinture, Paris," in whose 1928 exhibition the painting was included.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

1928 Exposition Martin & George Baer: Peintures des Frères Baer, Galerie Jeune Peinture, Paris, 1928.[2]

1929 Paintings of North Africa and The Grand Sahara Desert by Martin Baer, George Baer, Newhouse Galleries, New York; Newhouse Galleries, Saint Louis; Newhouse-Dalzell Hatfield Galleries, Los Angeles, 1929, unnumbered catalogue, repro.[1]

EXHIBITION HISTORY NOTES

[1] The catalogue for the exhibition appears to have been *The Art of Martin Baer, George Baer*, Appreciations by C.J. Bulliet, Charles Fegdal, Georges Rémon, and Pierre Very, published by Newhouse Galleries, New York, 1928.

[2] The information about this exhibition was located in the vertical files of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery Library, and was produced by the Oakland Museum; copy in NGA curatorial files. The catalogue has not yet been located.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1928 Bulliet, C.J., et al. *The Art of Martin Baer, George Baer*. Exh. cat. Newhouse Galleries, New York, 1928: unnumbered, repro. (as "Mashouba, Colomb-Bechar, Afrique").
- 1970 *American Paintings and Sculpture: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1970: 14, repro.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 23, repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 23, repro.

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