

ELISABETH JERICHAU BAUMANN
1819–1881

65. *Zarina, a Jewish Girl from Smyrna, 1874*

(*Zarina, jødisk pige fra Smyrna*)

Oil on canvas, 32²/₃ x 24³/₄ in. (83 x 63 cm) (Oval)

PROVENANCE: Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 682, 2000, lot 1439, ill. p. 41.

LITERATURE: Elisabeth Jerichau, *Brogede Rejsebilleder (Motley Travel Impressions)*, Copenhagen 1881, pp. 88–89, ill. as a xylograph¹ executed by the author herself from her own painting.

This scintillating portrait, which almost seems as though it were painted with tar and fire, has a well-documented provenance provided by the artist herself in a retrospective glimpse of her colorful life in the books *Ungdomserindringer (Memories of Youth)*, 1874, and *Brogede Rejsebilleder (Motley Travel Impressions)*, published in 1881, the year she died.

This latter work relates a variety of curious experiences from two long visits to the Middle East and the eastern and southern Mediterranean countries in 1869–1870 and again in 1874–1875. Mrs. Jerichau visited Turkey on each of these journeys; on the first occasion she went alone and on the second in the company of her son Harald.² The book is illustrated with beautiful black and white xylographs executed after sketches and paintings by the author herself or Harald Jerichau. (Fig. A.)

In *Brogede Rejsebilleder* she describes the meeting in Smyrna (present-day Izmir) with the young Zarina and her family and provides an account of how the portrait of her came into being. The book also contains a finely executed woodcut of the same motif as the painting. (Fig. A.) After a spirited account of the arrival and the first part of her sojourn in the hot, vibrant, alien city, Elisabeth Jerichau tells of her efforts to achieve permission to paint in a Jewish home.

In this respect, the dominant experience is that of her meeting Zarina's parents, Madame P., her husband (a wholesale carpet dealer), and the couple's countless family members, who made up a very active household. In intense, graphic language, she presents the astonished reader with pictures of the family's life, whether in their everyday activities or on festive occasions. The following passage is taken from the account of how the Loeb collection portrait came into being. (Her writing is as lively and colorful as her painting style):

It was a great favour thus to be accepted in this Jewish home; it was an even greater indulgence that they allowed me to paint the family's eldest daughter, a delightful fifteen-year-old girl. I have never yet seen a more charming woman than this little friend of mine. It is scarcely possible to describe her; but come and see her portrait—it enthralled everyone—I am almost jealous of it; for it is as though the picture of this young Oriental girl with the tightly closed, fine lips, the dark eyes shining like stars and wearing a tuberose in her dark hair, on which the bridal jewels have been placed, eclipses all my other works. I could have sold it time and time again for an exorbitant price; but I promised to make a replica for the mother, the only condition on which she would allow her daughter to be painted by me, and I have still not found time to copy it; indeed part of the bottom section of the picture is still missing. I cling to it as though by magic, the same magic as it works on the

viewer. When the fifteen-year-old girl becomes a girl of twenty, the magic that resides in her picture will perhaps be gone—it will be gone when the passion slumbering in the tightly closed bud breaks out as with flaming rose petals, and the chaste modesty that subdues the fire of her eye and tightly encloses the golden dress over the maidenly breast falls like the veil that gives a special charm to a half-fancy. This is the characteristic feature in my little Oriental Jewish girl with the eyes of a gazelle and the tuberose in her black plaits.

But her toilette! Each time it took between an hour and a half and two hours to arrange it. I presented myself at my fair young lady's home at eight o'clock. She was not ready until ten o'clock, as all the tiny plaits had to be arranged, and then the runner³ had to be sent to Mr. Taranto to fetch the grandmother's ducats; they were kept back because she was envious, and so the runner had to go to another relative, and once everything was finally in order, with a truly beating heart I set about my task, which had to be finished by a specific time; it was as though I were competing for a prize.

But then all the members of the family—and it was big—great and small, young and old, Jews and Jewesses, were like flies savouring sweetness. One after the other they all came, often seven or eight at a time, including the doctor, indeed even the preserving woman, the lace dealer, the washerwoman, the runner, the sons, the school friends, the girls and God knows who they all were, indeed even the grandmother from Rhodes had come, and there they sat and exasperated me by nudging my arm, standing in the light, knocking against the easel, chattering to each other and addressing the most incredible questions to me. At last, I exclaimed, "I can't go on—I need to be alone." But freedom was not to be mine; . . .

But at last the portrait was finished. It was evening when I left after having granted the entire family a solemn audience, whereupon I went off with it standing upright in the coach. When I drove past the illuminated cafes, the men crowded together while the coach carrying me and the portrait swayed to and fro on the uneven cobblestones. "Look! Look!" came the cries. The boys ran alongside hooting; but the darkness of the night protected this journey, so that the portrait came to no harm.

The book's xylographed version of Zarina's portrait might well have been made on the basis of the painting before it was replicated for Madame P, as the woodcut lacks "part of the bottom section of the picture." If the illustrations to *Brogede Rejsebilleder* were made in the same year as the book was published, it must be assumed that the painted portrait of the beautiful Jewish girl was only completed in 1881—and it is to be hoped for Zarina's mother that she managed to obtain her replica. However, it is also possible that in the black and white picture in the



FIG. A Elisabeth Jerichau Baumann
Zarina, a Jewish Girl from Smyrna
A woodcut book illustration, 5 x 6¼ in. (130 x 160 mm).

book the artist has consciously chosen to reproduce part of the portrait of the young girl, seen from a lesser distance in order thereby to heighten the effect of the work.

S.L.

¹A print made on wood; a special sort of woodcut made for illustrations.

²Harald Jerichau (1851–1878), an artist, as was his younger brother Holger (1861–1900). Harald died in Rome from typhoid and malaria only four years after this trip.

³A runner was a male member of the household staff whose work consisted in being a messenger for all manner of purposes. Mr. Taranto, who belonged to a prominent Jewish family to which Elisabeth Jerichau had a letter of recommendation, was the person who introduced the artist to Jewish circles in Smyrna and helped her to find both models and possibly special accoutrements for their dress.