A century after Napoleon’s famous campaign in Egypt, Parisian painter, Georges-Jules-Victor Clairin (1843-1919) headed to Egypt, captivated by tales of his country’s glorious historic past. Of his Egyptian sojourn, he recalled in this memoir that he searched for evidence of Napoleon’s troops but found none: “Throughout my travels in Egypt, I was haunted by the memory of Bonaparte’s expedition. I thought to find here and there, signs remaining:” and then he regrets, “…the great adventures of history may disappear without a trace behind them, such as by a traveler on the sand in Africa, are cleared by a gale.”

He arrived by ship in Alexandria. He then traveled to Cairo where he visited the pyramids and met the renowned archeologist Jacques de Morgan. De Morgan invited Clairin to travel by boat down the Nile to visit the famous temple of Amen-Re in Karnak. Clairin’s The Great Temple at Karnak is not dated but it was executed either on site at Karnak in 1895 or soon after his return home to Paris. An engraving which he made of this painting is dated 1897.

Clairin stayed at Karnak for two months, working with an archeologist named George Legrain who oversaw 300 men to restore the temple. “I remember those days of my life with a kind of wonder. Never have I spent hours calmer, quieter, better.” Then he goes on to say, “The temple was mine. I made it my studio.”

In The Great Temple at Karnak, Clairin recreates history. He imagines Napoleon’s soldiers as they toured Karnak, probably after the Battle of Pyramids, around 1798. He places the officer with his soldiers and their Arab guide in front of the ancient ruin showing a wall of colossal figures of kings to which he gives facial definition and color, as if they are alive. He wrote in his memoir that the “figures of kings and gods on the
walls and columns” are “extravagant emblems of the divine” and they “seem to move…it looks like silent secret meetings take place between these supernatural people.” His writing also includes descriptions of the special quality of Egyptian light as hot, vibrant and red.

Clairin described himself as a “wanderer by nature.” He travelled and painted in Brittany and Spain and took two trips to Morocco. He was particularly drawn to Islamic cultures, their customs and dress. He was one of the last successful practitioners of Orientalist painting. These Western European painters, throughout the 19th century, found new interest in the Near and Middle East, following the conquest of Egypt by Napoleon. The subject of this painting directly reflects these Orientalist motivations.

At Karnak, Clairin met up with the French composer Camille Saint-Saens. Known as an agreeable and witty man, on his travels and in Paris, Clairin kept company with figures in theatrical, literary and artistic circles including the painter Henri Regnault and Sarah Bernhardt. Charles Garnier asked him to paint decorations for the Paris Opera House, the first of many public commissions. In 1866, he began exhibiting at the Salon des Artistes Français. He was one of the pillars of the French Salon des Peintures Orientalistes Français. He also exhibited at the Société Coloniale des Artistes Français and the Salon des Artistes Algériens et Orientalistes. (Material noted in text is from Clairin’s memoir, Les souvenirs d’un peintre by André Beaunier, Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1906)
In the same series:

N° 1 : Les Orientalistes Peintres Voyageurs*
N° 2 : La Femme dans la Peinture Orientaliste*
N° 3 : Prague, la ville dorée
N° 4 : Bienvenue à Marrakech
N° 5 : Nicolas Poussin, le poète de la rigueur
N° 6 : Gustave Caillebotte, l’oublié de l’Impressionnisme
N° 7 : Les Orientalistes de l’Ecole Italienne
N° 8 : La Nouvelle Cuisine judéo-marocaine
N° 9 : James Whistler, le peintre et le polémiste
N° 10 : Tapis et tissages du Maroc

* Also available in English
A great traveller – he called himself a "vagabond by nature" – but the most Parisian of Parisians, Georges Clairin never achieved the greatness of his beloved friend Henri Regnault. Nevertheless, he was an interesting artist, one whose work merits a serious study. Clairin studied with Regnault at the School of Fine Arts in Paris. With several other comrades, they went on their first journey together, to Brittany, which Clairin had already visited with his father, who had built the first Breton railways. He was to return many times. Clairin and Regnault joined up again in Spain, where they sided – briefly – with the republicans during the revolution. It was Clairin who posed in Madrid for Regnault's famous portrait of General Prim, sitting astride a barrel in lieu of a horse, and wearing the general's uniform. The two young men, penniless but always full of high spirits, went to Barcelona and Granada, where they haunted the Alhambra, "my divine mistress... fashioned of gold, silver and diamonds," as Regnault described it. It became their second studio. They made countless sketches of the Moorish architecture, which they both used as backgrounds for paintings. Clairin joined Regnault in Tanger, where the latter had arrived in December 1869. Morocco surpassed his wildest dreams: "The colour of the East, the odour of the East, its remoteness, its mystery, its prestige. Another life, another dream of life." They had barely settled into their Moorish house when the Franco-Prussian war broke out. Like many of their comrades, artists, architects, musicians, poets, they immediately enlisted, and fought
side by side in the battle of
Buirenval, in which Regnault was
killed. Clairin stayed on in Paris
till the end of the Commune, and
then returned to Morocco, despite his
suffering and discouragement. He stayed
for a year and a half. Mariano
Fortuna visited him in Tangiers.
Clarin organised
an Arab fête in
his honour — and they went on an
excursion together to Tetuan. Clairin
made another trip during this time, to
Fez, with the French plenipotentiary.
Charles-Joseph Tissot. Although
Benjamin-Constant was part of
Tissot’s mission, it is not recorded
whether he came with them. Fez, a
city, was at that date not an
easy place to visit, and Clairin was
closely protected by a group of
Moroccan guards. He found the
journey frustratingly slow, for Tissot,
an archeologist as well as a
diplomat, insisted on looking for
Roman remains. Clairin, cooped into
digging, had little time to draw, but
he was able to enjoy the continual
fantasies given by their hosts, with
tour or five hundred horsemen
galloping around them, firing off
their guns.
On his return to Paris, Clairin was
asked by Charles Garnier to assist
with his Paris Opera House, the first
of many decorations Clairin was to
do for châteaux, hotels, theatres and
casinos. After this long work, he set
off again on his travels, to Italy,
Spain, Algeria and Egypt. During
this last trip, in 1895, he visited
Upper Egypt with the archaeologist
Morgan, and although he looked in
vain for traces of Napoleon
Bonaparte’s expedition, he later
painted several pictures of the
dreadful and his soldiers. He hired a
boat with his old friend the
composer Camille Saint-Saëns, who
dressed for the occasion in a
Japanese robe and babouches, a fan
in his hand. He then started across
the Sinai desert with Morgan but,
everest, had to be taken back to
Cario where his life was saved,
despite the fact that the city was cut
off because of cholera.
Clarin, known as Joëtte to his many
friends, spent his life between Paris
and Brittany. An elegant, witty and
agreeable man, his studio became a
meeting point for theatrical, literary
and artistic circles. He was a devoted
admirer of Sarah Bernhardt and often
stayed in the actress’s Brittany home
on Belle-Île.
Clarin’s paintings were enormously
valued in subject matter, including
Venetian fêtes, opera dancers,
flowers, landscapes and genre scenes
inspired by his travels. He painted
Sarah Bernhardt in many of herrôles
and made a sensational portrait of
her, now in the Petit Palais, which
hung in her grandiose neo-Gothic
house. His early Orientalist work
was very close to that of Regnault,
but with time, it became more
more fantastic and imagined. Scenes
of war, such as After the Battle, The
Consul’s and The Carnage, are
fantastical and theatrical, while his
women of the Ouled Nail tribe, laden
with jewels and clothed in bright
rods and oranges, are like members
of an opera chorus. Prodigiously
active, he showed his work at the
Paris Salon de la Société des Artistes
Français, the Salon des Peintres
Orientalistes Français, the Société
Coloniale des Artistes Français and
the Algerian Art Salon des Artistes
Algériens et Orientalistes. A
multitude of oils, watercolours,
pastels and drawings were auctioned
during his two studio sales and that
of Sarah Bernhardt. Towards the end
of his life, he published his memoirs,
written by André Beamant.

An Ouled Nail, watercolour and bodycolour. 12.5 x 10 in (32 x 25 cm). Private
collection.

Sources d’un portrait (1906).