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Rudolph Ernst, A Moor Robing after the Bath

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Rudolph Ernst
Austrian (1854-1932)
A Moor Robing after the Bath
Oil on panel
21 3/4 x 18 1/4 in.
Gift of the Estate of Claire Hoff Toole
82.1.1



Moor Robing after the Bath by Austrian artist Rudolph Ernst draws upon the artist's experiences as a traveler in Spain, Morocco, and Turkey. Like any tourist venturing into another culture, made to seem exotic by its differences, Ernst selects and romanticizes the scene. As an artist, he finds in his alternative cultural experiences special moments to embellish his imagination and the paintings that follow. In this instance, Ernst chooses a moment of intimacy, depicting a figure with deep ebony skin tones partially draped in white stepping out of a bath while a companion, presumably a servant, dressed in an elegant gold costume and wearing a turban, assists him in robing. It seems unlikely that Ernst would have witnessed such an intimate scene, but his fertile imagination has supplied the necessary details.

The elegant interior space of the bath is adorned with oriental carpet, marble floors, and decorative glazed blue and white tile with Arabic-like designs. Above the tiled inset in the room is a wood frieze decorated with Arabic calligraphy. A brightly colored pierced wood or stained glass window and a carved wooden bench further enrich the interior of the bath. The illusion of the third dimension in the space follows classical rules of linear perspective.

Yet Ernst's portrayal of the two central figures at the center of the composition introduces an emotional, perhaps erotic tension that assures its connection to Romanticism. This theme is enhanced by the lush surroundings in the bath and a hint of disarray in the elements. An overturned metal urn, cracked marble slabs, missing tiles and casual disarray of the rug add an element of discord to an otherwise tranquil setting. How do we explain these elements? Were they simply introduced to strengthen the formal composition? Or are these elements to be understood as a part of the narrative, perhaps suggesting a playful encounter between the two figures during which the urn was accidentally overturned and the position of the rug shifted? This is a matter for the viewer to contemplate.

Romanticism marks the beginnings of modern art. It exemplifies "intimacy, spirituality, color and aspiration towards the infinite." (Charles Baudelaire, 1821-67) At least some of these qualities stand out in Ernst's painting: intimacy and color are immediately evident upon viewing the work. Less obvious are intimations of spirituality and aspirations toward the intimate.

A Moor Robing after the Bath is one of Ernst's most exquisite paintings. Ernst undoubtedly benefited from his teacher, the great German artist Anselm Feuerbach (1829-1880). He was one of the masters of Oriental genre pictures popular at the end of the Nineteenth Century.

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