

Jules Pierre van Biesbroeck, *Portrait of a Blind Arab*
Portici 1873 – 1965 Brussels

oil on panel
21 by 14 3/8 inches (53 by 36.5 cm)
signed upper right: 'Van Biesbroeck'

provenance: Private collection, Belgium

note: Jules Pierre van Biesbroeck (fig. 1) was born in Italy in 1873. His father was the Belgian painter Jules Evariste van Biesbroeck and like many artists of his time, he was working in Italy when his son Jules was born. The child was two years old when the family returned to Ghent.

After a short period of practice with his father, van Biesbroeck was enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent. He was a child prodigy and sold his first painting at the age of 14 during the Triennale Ghent Exhibition. In 1888, when he was 15 years old, he made his debut at the Salon des Champs-Élysées in Paris with a monumental canvas which stood out because of his nude models. The canvas scandalized the censors and the young artist was asked to cover his figures with drapery before the painting could be exhibited. The jury gave Van Biesbroeck an honorable mention on the recommendation of William Bouguereau. Van Biesbroeck won fame in sculpture as well as paintings and was rewarded with many commissions for the city of Ghent.

When German troops invaded Belgium during World War I, Van Biesbroeck went to Bordighera in Italy where he continued to paint and sculpt. In 1926 he made a trip to North Africa, then in 1927, he visited Algeria. The light and atmosphere of Maghreb caused him to change his palette and employ lighter colors and represent orientalist subjects, particularly the inhabitants of Bou-Saada. Algiers had such an influence on the artist, that he lived there for nine years. In 1938 he returned to Ghent, and continued to paint orientalist works. *Portrait of a Blind Arab* dates from Van Biesbroeck's early period in Algeria.



Fig. 1