

*Double-take: Officer
Leader of the Chasseurs
Syrian Revolution
Commanding a Charge
(2014)*

1.

Sultan Pasha al-Atrash was the chief leader of the uprising against French-controlled Syria in the twenties that is thought to have been the spark to end European occupation in the Middle East. His image appears in Syria, variously as a public monument, pinned-up photographs on shop walls, and incorporated into large murals. And his struggle repeatedly finds voice in songs punctuated by the fluctuating and itinerate string of the *rababa*.

2.

Théodore Géricault painted *An Officer of the Imperial Horse Guards Charging* in 1812. In 2010, Rafiq Hamadeh, a wealthy Syrian businessman residing in the British countryside, commissioned an artist, also British, to reproduce Géricault's painting, instructing him to maintain every hue, brushstroke, and perspective of the original with utmost exactitude. One sizeable alteration was requested, namely to replace the French imperial officer in Géricault's painting with Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, the Syrian revolutionary commander.

3.

The painter dutifully followed the instructions to render every detail, including the blank facial expression of the rider, the monstrous fear of the horse, and the bleak clouds of smoke signaling the destructive swathes of the unseen imperial brigade. The painter tried to capture the exact mood of this masterpiece, and yet, as instructed, he replaced the little known Lieutenant Dieudonné—a Chasseur d'Afrique, fighting in an unnamed colonial battle that could have taken place anywhere from Morocco to the Levant—with Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, the man who, in 1925, would work to undo the very types of imperial campaigns Dieudonné was embroiled in a century beforehand.

In doing so, the painter unwittingly transformed the clouds of smoke billowing from an apocalypse of colonial subjugation into the triumphant flames that would herald the dawn of Arab independence. And yet, these subversive brushstrokes were not born out of a loathing for the colonial rule of the Middle East, but, in fact, out of a love for British country life. Mr. Hamadeh is and always has been an obsessive Anglophile.

LAWRENCE ABU HAMDAN is an artist and audio investigator. His interest in sound's intersection with politics originates in facilitating DIY music and touring as a musician. He is the author of *[inaudible]*:

A politics of listening in 4 acts, and his investigations have been used in asylum and immigration cases. He received his PhD from Goldsmiths, University of London.

4.

Arab Anglophilia is a condition that befalls many in the region, whether from the Gulf, the Levant or Egypt. In this regard, Mr. Hamadeh, our wealthy Syrian businessman, is no different, with his polo clubs, fox hunting weekends, striped lawn, pipe, flat cap, waxed jacket, and babbling in contrived received pronunciation. And when this self-made man finally accumulated enough wealth to bring himself on par with the old money aristocrats that he was so eager to become, he bought a Downton Abbey-style house in the British countryside, complete with cedar of Lebanon in the driveway. So good was the offer he made on this oversized crumbling relic of British majesty that the owners agreed to sell the house with all of its existing paintings included. And so our painting of the sultan, the rebellious leader, would come to sit beside paintings that mark the previous occupants' lineage of bouts in the Boer war, Crimea, and at Waterloo.

5.

The innovative portrait of Atrash was conceived by Hamadeh on that first night in his new home. As he was striding through his new hallways, giddy that his dream of becoming a British country gent was now more tangible than ever, he found himself looking around at his new collection of art. Accompanied only by all the unfamiliar chatter of this vast creaking house, he had the distinct feeling that someone was watching him. Turning around swiftly, he saw above the fireplace a reproduction of Géricault's *The Charging Chasseur*. Rafiq's eyes locked with the vacant stare of the rearing Lieutenant Dieudonné. And, as he stood there, transfixed by the lieutenant's empty gaze, a haunting loneliness came over him. He felt both isolated and crowded at the same time. The house was eerily empty, and yet, he felt almost surrounded by the charging hordes depicted in the painting that faced him. It was this moment that bore the seed of the idea to commission the Géricault-inspired portrait of Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, as it occurred to him that he needed to find a place for himself among the history he now owned and exhibited.

In addition to the portrait of Atrash, he also commissioned another image from the

same painter. Also inspired by the colonial battle scenes that lined the walls of his new home, this second painting shows the French colonial forces being slaughtered and retreating in terror from a Druze Arab brigade. And yet, even though, here, the violence is directed toward the colonial project of the Middle East, whether it be colonial violence committed upon the Arabs or the violent resistance of the Arabs against their colonizers, Mr. Hamadeh correctly understood that, much like polo trophies, striped lawns, wall antlers, pipes, tweed suits, and wax jackets, the display of paintings depicting ancestral violence is an essential part of looking every bit the old moneyed Brit.

6.

Within the first months living in his new home, Mr. Hamadeh, the new resident to the neighborhood, offered to host a fox hunters' meet. At the reception before that day's horseback charge through the fields, the riders gathered for whiskey, port, tea, and crustless sandwiches. Seeing that his host was not in earshot, William Robbins-Hamilton MBE, one of Mr. Hamadeh's guests and a recent business associate, began blathering loudly about the crass flamboyance of the property. And as his eyes were surveying the room in order to give his interlocutors an example, he glanced at the portrait of Sultan Pasha al-Atrash. So provoked by the image, he did a double-take. His eyes returned to the image to check the veracity of what he had initially seen, locking with the vacant stare of Atrash. Confounded by the incongruous image of an Arab in the position of the colonial conqueror, Robbins-Hamilton temporarily lost control of his jaw. The painting had this member of the British empire's unadulterated attention. As his gaze drifted from Atrash to the petrified expression of the horse, he mustered the ability to speak: "Why, that ... tha ... that's a Géricault, isn't it?"

This work is a print adaptation of Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Double-Take: Officer Leader of the Chasseurs Syrian Revolution Commanding a Charge* (2014).



Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Double-Take: Officer Leader of the Chasseurs Syrian Revolution Commanding a Charge*, 2014
Photograph by Stefan Jaeggi, Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen.
Image courtesy of the artist and Mor Charpentier, Paris.