

**Guest blog post by Alex Horn, a Masters student at Goldsmiths University.  
Henrietta Pilkington and Margaret Thomas in Jerusalem**

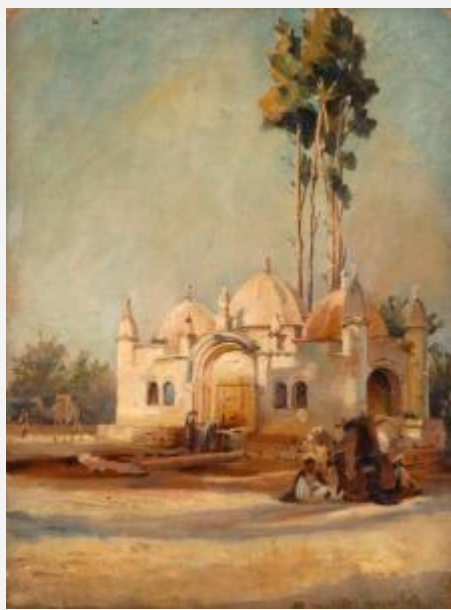
As part of my placement at the museum, I have been working on uncovering a little more about the life and travels of artists Margaret Thomas (1842-1929) and Henrietta Pilkington (1845-1927). The two met in London in the 1870s and became very close, travelling together across Europe and the Middle East throughout the 1890s before settling down in a house in Norton in 1911 where they lived together until their deaths. Their bond is memorialised on their shared headstone. Beneath Henrietta's name it reads 'The sweetest soul that ever looked with human eyes,' and beneath Margaret's, 'Friends for sixty years.'

One aspect of their travels that has been of particular interest to me is the pair's time in the Middle East, where the cultural norms the well-to-do English ladies would have been in stark contrast to the Arabic customs they encountered. It is fortuitous that in the museum's collection there are paintings by both artists from their time in and around Jerusalem as well as a book by Margaret Thomas extensively chronicling their travels entitled *Two Years in Palestine and Syria*. In this short piece, I will highlight some key moments from their travels to Jerusalem, particular monuments that caught the artists' eyes, and accompany a few paintings from the museum's collection (some perhaps seen here for the first time since they were accessioned to the museum in 1930) with Thomas' own words. From there I divert to discuss the nature of the two artists' work in comparison with one another, drawing a conclusion about their relationship from the works chosen to be both on in their shared home and donated to the museum.

During the 1890s the ethnography of Palestine was undergoing a major shift, as the First Aliyah - the migration of members of the Jewish diaspora to the Land of Israel - was underway. Approximately 25,000 Jews migrated to Palestine and Syria between 1882 and 1903, with Theodor Herzl's First Zionist Congress taking place in 1897. It was during this time that Pilkington and Thomas travelled through the region, giving them a unique artistic perspective on this changing landscape. Thomas notes that 'the Jewish population of Jerusalem, which ten years ago amounted to 10,000 now exceeds 47,000 souls according to the latest and most authentic estimates, and this number is almost daily increasing.'[\[1\]](#) This number seems exaggerated, based on more modern ethnographic analysis, but that it was a noteworthy change is obvious.

With an understanding of these women's position as outsiders in a dramatic geographical and political region, I found it interesting to see what each focused on, which aspects of the landscape stirred their artistic imaginings. Pilkington and Thomas were welcomed to the region by a great swelling of the sea on their arrival at Jaffa, an ancient port city now subsumed within southern Tel-Aviv. Thomas' serene painting from the city, with its clean white stone and cloudless blue sky, tall trees unbent by any wind, provides a stark contrast to the artist's own description of their arrival, whereupon 'I was literally thrown by a man on the ship into the arms of another in the boat, who had to wait till the crest of one of the huge waves carried him withing twenty feet of the deck to catch me, the result being that I found myself at the bottom of the boat amid all my belongings (which were thrown in

before), saturated with salt and fresh water, for it was beginning to rain heavily.’[\[2\]](#)

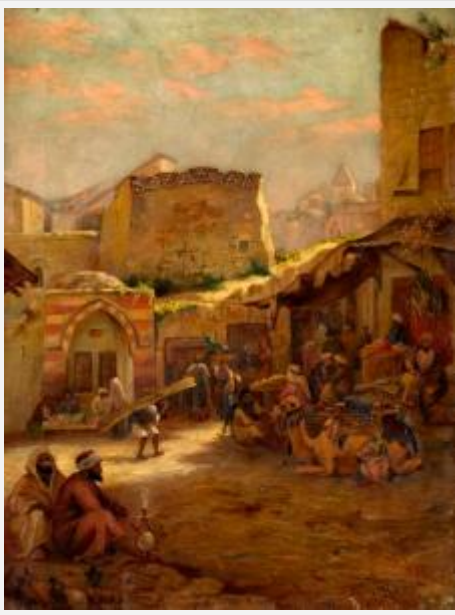


Jaffa by Margaret Thomas

The pair, now safely ashore, could begin their adventures in earnest. ‘How glad we were,’ Thomas says, ‘to get into a comfortable hotel and let the sun and air dry our soaked garments.’[\[3\]](#) From ‘Jaffa the Beautiful,’[\[4\]](#) the artists took ‘the only train in Palestine [which] takes six hours to do the fifty-four miles which lie between Jaffa and Jerusalem.’[\[5\]](#) Arriving by train to Jerusalem was rather underwhelming as they saw ‘in the evening light a small modern station, with over the door the word “Jerusalem” painted. Fortunately for sentiment this station is a mile from the city, and if you cannot catch a glimpse of the sacred walls from it, at least the sight of the station from the city does not offend you.’[\[6\]](#) From there the pair made their way to the hospice at which they would be staying first by carriage, which would take them only as far as Jaffa Gate, then ‘in rain, darkness, and mire we made our way through the Holy City ... through the lampless streets under low archways, down passages so narrow the boxes could hardly pass, up greasy steps, and amid sleeping dogs, who barely woke, when touched, to growl and go to sleep again, with the rain remorselessly pattering down upon us, till we reached our destination.’[\[7\]](#)

The two ladies expressed a great fondness for the canine residents of Jerusalem, with Thomas writing extensively about the 'pariah dogs' of the city and Pilkington sketching them for posterity. 'And now a line for the poor pariah dogs,' Thomas wrote, 'which infest the streets in such numbers. Belonging to no one, without a home, the hand of every Moslem and Jew against them, packs of these creatures dwell in their separate quarters, into which they allow no other dog to enter unless he be known to them. They are, as a rule, but very few removes from the fox and jackal. They sleep all day in the streets, on the flat roofs - anywhere, everywhere; but at night, unfortunately, they all awaken, and running along the tops of the broad stone walls, go from house to house baying incessantly till night is made more than hideous.' [8] These pariah dogs are most likely Canaan Dogs, sometimes called Bedouin Sheep Dogs or Palestinian Pariah Dogs, which remain as the oldest breed of near-wild dogs still extant.





Inside Damascus Gate by Margaret Thomas

Narrow, bustling streets become a running theme in Thomas' description of Jerusalem, in stark contrast perhaps to the tranquility evoked by Pilkington's and her paintings. The market scene *inside Damascus Gate* shows a dozen or so traders lounging with a camel in the shade, the pale blue sky punctuated by light pink clouds which evoke a sense of open freshness above the dusty streets, which Thomas describes as 'a scene of life and colour not easily matched elsewhere.'<sup>[9]</sup> Henrietta Pilkington, too, paints a calming scene from the other side of Damascus Gate with clear blue sky and only the dust kicked up by a passing shepherd with his flock to disturb the ground.



Damascus Gate, Jerusalem, 1895 by Henrietta Pilkington

From Jerusalem, Thomas and Pilkington ventured north, via the rural villages and towns of the heartlands of Palestine, to the Sea of Galilee. 'The views of the immense lake,' Thomas writes, 'were superb as we mounted higher and higher; it lay like a colossal aquamarine in the breast of its encircling mountains.'<sup>[10]</sup> The two artists were accompanied on this journey by three men: a

missionary, the owner and groom of the horses they rode, and Mahomet, 'a small wiry Arab, whose father had been servant to Holman Hunt [the pre-Raphaelite painter].'[\[11\]](#) This man Mahomet is perhaps the subject captured in portrait by Henrietta Pilkington in the only such painting donated to the museum. Many portraits were completed by Thomas during their trip, but the watercolour of Mahomet represents the only example of this form by the elder artist. It is possible that during their travels Pilkington grew to trust Mahomet enough to ask him to sit for her, as she practiced her portraiture.



The two women brought with them 'a small tent, a portmanteau containing changes of clothing, some tinned meat, tea, sugar, and coffee; these things, together with painting materials and a rifle, were put on a pack-horse, and on top of them Mahomet sat with that dignity which never forsakes an Arab, notwithstanding that a saucepan hung dangling outside his packages. We had also a thin mattress called a lehaff and two rugs, but alas! were pillowless all through our journey, and we learnt that saddles and paint-boxes are not satisfactory substitutes.'[\[12\]](#) This humorous description allows us an insight both to the material priorities of these Victorian travelling ladies and their relationship to each other, sharing a small tent and thin mattress, pillowless together. Eventually, 'a magnificent view of the deep blue Lake of Galilee burst upon us, with the walled town of Tiberias on one shore, on the other the richly coloured mountains where lie



## Henrietta Pilkington and Margaret Thomas in Jerusalem

Gadara and Gerasa, and beyond all the snowy crest of the majestic Hermon, ten thousand feet above in the sky. It is one of those views which make an impression for life.' [\[13\]](#) Pilkington was similarly moved, completing a pair of paintings of Tiberias with the Galilee and mountains behind.



Tiberias, 1895, daylight and Tiberias, 1895 twilight by  
Henrietta Pilkington



From Tiberias the journey continued as far north as Damascus and Baalbek, before the party journeyed south along the coast back to Jaffa via Sidon, Tyre and Haifa. But here we divert attention from their journey to instead draw comparisons between the two women's artistic stylings and talent. By presenting their art side by side for, I believe, the first time, it is clear that Margaret Thomas had a talent for contrast, figure and colour in a way that Henrietta Pilkington did not. The medium is different, and so one can say that Thomas' work is in a more 'finished' state, being oil on canvas likely completed back in her studio as opposed to watercolour on paper completed by Pilkington in situ. An interesting conclusion can be drawn from this, however, as the two were inseparable during the latter years of their lives and, despite artistic differences of skill, they both cared for and respected each other as artists.

Margaret Thomas clearly held much affection for Henrietta Pilkington and her artwork: the two of them travelled across the continent and beyond together for many years and lived in their shared house for at least fifteen more. Pilkington's *Damascus Gate* watercolour, seen above, was one of only four donated by Thomas to the museum after Pilkington's death in 1927 with the inscription 'presented in memory of the artist H. M. Pilkington by M.

Thomas.’[14] Why these artworks were chosen to be donated out of the eighty eventually in the museum’s collection is not known, except that only those four have framer’s tape on the reverse and an inscription describing the frames in which they were donated. These paintings were therefore framed, and may very well have been displayed in their shared home in Norton until Pilkington’s death.

I posit that the paintings in frames were chosen to donate over the others in storage due to their visible presence; such a visual reminder of a loved one’s passing often brings heartache and pain to those left behind. But, with great admiration for Pilkington’s work, Thomas presented the four pieces in memory of her partner to the museum instead of simply hiding or destroying them, making public what had once been private. This act, the transition from the private space of two women who loved one another deeply (in what way we can only speculate, but their affection is obvious enough from their biographies and burial) to the public arena of a museum’s collection is, in my opinion, a demonstration of respect and a declaration of love from one artist to another.

Though Pilkington is never named in Thomas’ writing of their travels, remaining instead the elusive ‘lady friend’[15] with whom she shared carriages, hostel rooms and, when staying at the house of a pastor, ‘rejected the room placed at our disposal and had our little tent pitched in their garden.’[16] They shared so much of their lives together – continuing to share even in death – that it is easy to imagine the relationship as one of shared devotion and affection.

[1] Margaret Thomas, *Two Years in Palestine and Syria* (London: J C Nimmo, 1900), p. 33.

[2] Ibid., p. 2.

[3] Ibid., p. 3.

[4] Ibid., p. 9.

[5] Ibid., p. 10.

[6] Ibid., p. 14.

[7] Ibid., p. 15.

[8] Ibid., p. 63.

[9] Ibid., p. 24.

[10] Ibid., p. 276.

[11] Ibid., p. 240.

[12] Ibid., pp. 240-1.

[13] Ibid., p. 270.

[14] Henrietta M Pilkington, *Damascus Gate Jerusalem*, 1895, watercolour on paper, 17 × 23 cm,

North Hertfordshire Museum, Hitchin

<<https://ehive.com/collections/4308/objects/181026/damascus-gate-jerusalem-1895>>.

[15] Thomas, p. 240.

[16] Ibid., p. 242.

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