

Orientalism in 19th-Century French Painting

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In his very influential 1978 book *Orientalism*, Edward Said argued that the manner in which the West always conceptualized the greater Orient was intrinsically imperialistic. Said offered a powerful binary model of the way that the West had thought of its relationship with the Orient as (it)Self versus the Other.

He published this book while employed in a university system full of people who had spent many years learning Eastern languages and painstakingly acquiring forms of knowledge to speak intelligently about the Orient; naturally, his message caused a stir. Since its publication, many criticisms have been leveled at Said's *Orientalism*. Some scholars find it overly reductive in its binarism: did Western elites truly subscribe to such a polarized view of West versus East? Second, Said admitted that he was uninterested in comparing the way the Orient actually was with the way the West historically perceived it, but rather in analyzing the West's discourse on the East. This robbed his work of some analytical force. For if a comparison between a discourse and the reality of that discourse's object cannot be made, it is difficult to effectively criticize the perception and the discourse surrounding it. However, Said's focus was, instead, to explore the ways in which he thought that Western authors and painters, particularly in the nineteenth century, created what he saw as an essentializing and derogatory discourse about the Orient.

Professor Grigsby's lecture explained and challenged Said's hypothesis. She offered the extensive bibliography below for images of Orientalism in 19th Century France:

ANCIENT REGIME: BOURBON MONARCHY

Images of the harem.

Harem: [a. Arab. aram, and arm lit. (that which is) prohibited or unlawful, that which a man defends and fights for, as his family, a sacred place, sanctuary, enclosure; the women's part of the house; wives, women;] 1. The part of a Muslim dwelling-house appropriated to the women, constructed so as to secure the utmost seclusion and privacy; collectively; the female members of a Muslim family; esp. the wives and concubines collectively of a Turk, Persian, or Indian Muslim.

Suggested Reading:

Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, 1721.

A political critique of despotism using the harem as a parable: a lack of liberty breeds corruption. The harem women rebel. The eunuchs who are disempowered are corrupt, like the French aristocracy.

Lady Mary Montague, British woman of letters, visits harems in the early 18th Century and criticizes the status of women in English society by casting Oriental women as more free. Her writing is considered an important influence on depictions of harem women by French painters.

From Lady Mary Montague's writings:
“[Dining with the Sultana](#)” (see painting below)
[Turkish letters](#)

Painting:



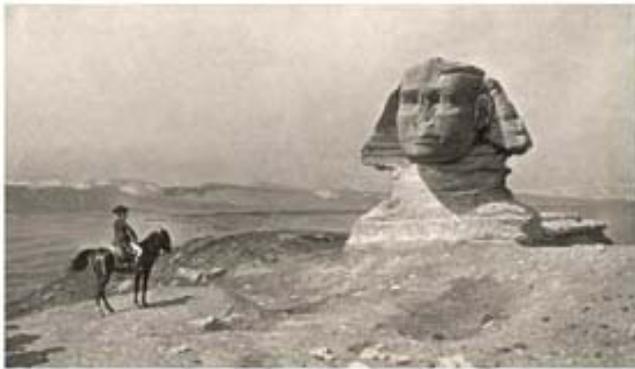
Carle Van Loo, *A sultana served coffee by a slave*, 1755

NAPOLEONIC EMPIRE: NAPOLEON'S EGYPTIAN CAMPAIGN, 1798-99

Suggested Readings:

Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978

Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities. Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France*, Chps. 2-3





The scientific expedition accompanying Napoleon on his [Egyptian campaign](#) made careful visual records of what they found including: geographic and cultural descriptions of Egypt. Preliminary work was done in Egypt, 1798-1801 and published between 1809 and 1822. 400 copper-engravers worked on this project for 20 years.

The Napoleonic publication contains 837 copper-engravings and more than 3,000 illustrations.

Plates (almost a square meter in size) were divided into 3 sections:

1. Antiquities, 5 volumes.
2. Modern State (Cities and Sites, Alexandrai, Arts and crafts; Costumes and Portraits; Vases, furniture, and Instruments; Inscriptions, Moneys and Medals), 2 volumes.
3. Natural History (Zoology Verterbrates, Zoology Invertebrates, Botany, Minerology), 3 volumes.

Mapping was understood quite explicitly to be another form of conquest:

"We were many times obliged to replace our weapons with geometrical instruments and, in a sense, to fight over or to conquer the terrain we were to measure."

Paintings:

Some of the images the Middle East inspired by Napoleon's campaign:



Gros, *Battle of Aboukir*, 1806



Guerin, *Pardon of the Rebels of Cairo*, 1808



Gros, *Bonaparte visiting the Plague-Stricken of Jaffa*, 1804

(Satirized in Cruikshank, *Napoleon Poisoning the Plague-Stricken*, 1815)

From Salon (Exhibition) brochure:

"Bonaparte, general in chief of the army of the Orient, at the moment when he touched a pestilential tumor while visiting the hospital at Jaffa... To further distance the frightening idea of a sudden and incurable contagion, he had opened before him some pestilential tumors and touched several. He gave, by this magnanimous devotion, the first example of a genre of courage unknown until then and which has since had imitators."

Of the plague, Napoleon retrospectively stated:

"Fear caused the disease's spread more than anything else. The principle seat of the plague was the imagination. During the Egyptian campaign all those whose imagination was struck by fear died of it. The surest protection, the most efficacious remedy was moral courage."

Salon Critic:

"Sir, are these Egyptians who have the plague? No they are Frenchmen. Have they then taken on the air and character of the country of Egypt?"

ORIENTALIST DEPICTIONS OF THE MAMELUKES:



Girodet, *Revolt of Cairo*, 1810



Paillot de Montabert, *Portrait Roustam*, 1806



Photo, *Frenchman who had served in the Mameluke Corps*, 1860s.

Reading:

Volney: "For a somewhat long time, the [Mameluke] beys that governed Egypt insulted the French nation and covered its merchants with affronts; the house of their punishment has arrived. For a very long time, this pack of slaves bought in Georgia and the Caucasus has tyrannised the most beautiful part of the world but God, upon whom all depends, has ordered that their empire end... Is there a beautiful land? It belongs to the Mamelukes; is there a beautiful slave, a beautiful horse, a beautiful house? These belong to the Mamelukes."

"Of Circassian, Georgian or Muscovite origins [Mamelukes] cannot reproduce themselves in Egypt, their children all die at three or four years of age. Therefore they buy others at eight or nine years of age who after five or six years of exercise soon become admirable horsemen. Their leaders owe their elevation to their beauty, intelligence, their handling of horses, and above all their personal courage."

BOURBON RESTORATION

Suggested Readings :

Victor Lugo, *Les Orientales* (1829):

"Today for a thousand reasons all of which foster progress, the Orient is of more concern than its been ever before. Never before have oriental studies been explored so deeply. In the century of Louis XIV one was Hellenist; today one is an Orientalist..."

Painting:



Delacroix, *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827):

Note the shift from actual events to literary subject, inspired at least in part by Byron's play of the same name about an Assyrian king whose enemies were about to destroy him. Based on the ancient historian Diodorus of Sicily "He built an enormous pyre in his palace, heaped upon it all his gold and silver and every article of the royal wardrobe, and then, shutting his concubines and eunuchs in the room which has been built in the middle of the pyre, he consigned both them and himself and his palace to the flames."

JULY MONARCHY

Suggested Readings:

Delacroix, Excerpts from *Journal*

Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Orientalism and Colonies: Delacroix's Algerian Harem" in Beth Wright, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Delacroix*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 69-87.

Delacroix visits Morocco, 1832 after the French have conquered Algeria in 1830.

The decision by the French to conquer Algeria in 1830 must be seen as the culmination of the aims of the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt; 1830 is the date when historians generally see as the beginning date of modern French colonialism. The colonial period lasts 130 years, ending with the war of independence in Algeria in the 20th century.

From Delacroix's journal:

"Imagine, my friend, what it is to see, lying in the sun, walking the streets or mending shoes, men of consular type, each one a Cato or a Brutus... all

in white like the senators of Rome and the Panathenaic procession of Athens."

"Beauty passes through the streets; ...the Romans and the Greeks are there at my door.... The Heroes of David and company would cut a poor figure here with their pink limbs."

"I did not begin to do anything passable from my North African journey until I had so far forgotten the small details as to recall only the striking and poetic aspects in my paintings. Up to then I was pursued by the love of exactitude, which most people take to be truth."

Delacroix went to Morocco, a country which France not only did not possess but with which it had hostile relations. And the women Delacroix could actually paint were not generally Muslim women but Jewesses. Nonetheless, Delacroix in his Salon debut after his trip exhibits this painting whose title underlines the penetration of an Algerian harem:



Delacroix, *Women of Algiers in their apartment*.

In fact it seems at the tail end of actual harem; he did so because of the Algerian conquest, a French customs inspector Leopold Victor Poirel apparently gained him access: "Delacroix spent a day, then another in this harem, a prey to an exaltation which translated itself into a fever which was hardly calmed by sorbets and fruits."

See also this painting: Delacroix, [*Moroccan Military Exercises*](#), 1832
Notice the masterful excision of the Frenchmen. This clearly continues; the paintings are addressed to French men, but painters now construct a fiction of a glimpse unto a world unaware of being watched. Gérôme repeatedly refuses the returned gaze.

SECOND EMPIRE

Suggested Readings:

Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Out of the Earth: Egypt's Statue of Liberty" in Mary

Roberts and Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones, eds., *Edges of Empire, Orientalism and Visual Culture*, Blackwell Press, 2005, pp. 38-69.

Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Colossal. Engineering Modernity in the Long Nineteenth Century*, forthcoming Periscope Publishing, 2009, Chps. 2-4

Bartholdi in 1855 during his visit:

“How adorable a thing is Egypt in all regards, for art, for customs, for nation and its civilization which I had forgotten. She certainly has her charm.”

“To write you, for example, I am obliged to confide my letter to couriers who with a bell on their foot will carry it from village to village until Cairo. This is very pretty, but it does not offer very much security. Whatever one can say about mohammed-Ali [the modernizing ruler of Egypt from 1805-1848], it was, he alone who searched to make something of Egypt. He made Egyptians respect Europeans who hardly had been. He organized some departments, some schools, and a little industry and he bought some machines, etc. Since then, the administrations have tended to return to their original state as have the schools. Industry goes similarly because the Arabs are too dazed and lazy to occupy themselves with it. The machines bought by Mohammed-Ali were magnificent. They all rust in the Arsenal, in a frightening disorder. The calvary trumpets on top of the weaving looms, the boilers, the cannonballs, the gears, the cannons, the keys of pianos, old windows, astronomical instruments with the butts of rifles.... here is the ensemble of the Arsenal. This is a visible metaphor laid bare of the history of all things in Egypt. One has at hand all the perfect instruments to furnish water for miles around, they construct *chadoufs*. They appear to concern themselves with civilization only in order to make clear that they prefer not to make use of it. If Europeans could possess the land, they could probably make something of it but they could not get it except by a feat of skill and then it would be necessary for them to be married. You can understand how in these conditions this would be almost impossible.”

Charles Baudelaire, Salon of 1859:

“I myself am suffering to some extent from a nostalgia which draws me towards the sun; for I find an intoxicating mist arising from these luminous canvases, which soon condenses into desires and regrets. I catch myself envying the lot of those men who are lying outstretched amid their azure shades and whose eyes neither walking or sleeping, express, if anything at all, only love of repose and a feeling of blissful happiness inspired by an immensity of light.”

“M. Horace Vernet is a soldier who practices painting. Now I hate an art which is improvised to the roll of the drum, I hate canvases splashed over at the gallop, I

hate painting manufactured to the sound of pistol shots, since I hate the army, the police force--everything, in fact, that trains its arms in a peaceful place.”

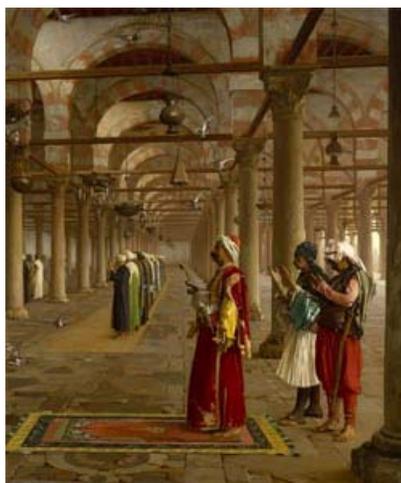
Jean-Léon Gérôme (painter)

A collection of Gerome’s orientalist paintings can be found at:

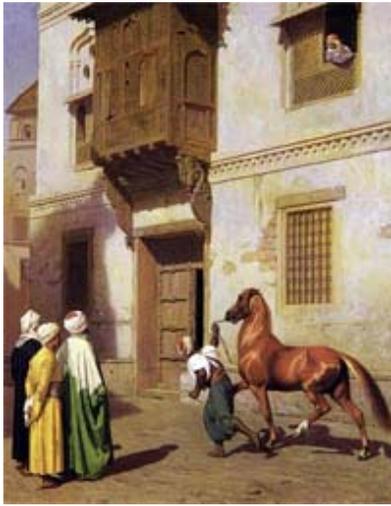
http://www.turkoteck.com/salon_00105/salon2.html



Bartholdi, *Bartholdi and Gerome in Oriental costume*, photograph (calotype), 1855



Gerome, *Prayer in the Mosque of 'Amr*, 1872



Gerome, *The Horse Dealer*, 1867

Notice that in the paintings above, Gerome creates an 'effect of the real' with plethora of authenticating details, the more inconsequential, the more convincing.

Suggested reading:

Linda Nochlin, "The imaginary Orient," *Art in America* 7, no. 5 (May 1983), pp. 119-131, 187, 189.

Linda Nochlin on Orientalism in naturalistic style of Gerome:

1. Absence of history; timelessness, no sign of impact of Western power and modernization; French government's political relation to different Oriental sites.
2. Absence of western man. Absence of either a colonial or touristic presence.
3. Absence of artists/art in effect of exactitude and transparency to world itself.
4. General absence of scenes of work/labor.

Picturesque scenes mask conflict with an appearance of tranquility; French at once wiping out traditional practices and avidly attempting to preserve them. Picturesque premised on destruction, certifies difference, cultural inferiority relates to French viewers/artists.

The shift from Delacroix to Gerome and from early to late Orientalist paintings can be seen to be analogous to shift from voyager's account of personal adventure to tourist guide. Written in third person rather than first person autobiographical nature of voyage, this is a shift from author to viewer/user.

Suggested Reading:

Brown, Marilyn. "The Harem Dehistoricized: Ingres's *Turkish Bath*," *Arts Magazine* 61, no. 10 (Summer 1987), pp. 58-68.



Ingres, *Turkish Bath*, 1863

The *Turkish Bath* was done during the period of Turkish reform and westernization; begun after loss against Greeks during that war of independence. In 1854 the Ottoman sultan, responding to Western pressure, banned commerce in white slaves. By 1857 black slave trade was also banned. The painting was finished in 1859 for patron Prince Napoleon, cousin of Napoleon III; apparently for his bathroom. Prince Napoleon had fought in the Crimean war along with Great Britain supporting Turkey against Russia; the painting is perhaps a memento of that campaign but one that reminded France of sloth of Ottoman Empire in need of French intervention. But in early 1850 Princess Clothilde's disapproval leads to its return to Ingres. He shifts it from rectangular to tondo circular forma, which makes it seem even more timeless. This painting is then bought by Khalil-Bey the former Turkish ambassador to St. Petersburg, mistress with Prince Napoleon. Khalil-Bey was against Turkish nationalists for Turkish westernization.

THIRD REPUBLIC

Pierre-Auguste Renoir



Renoir *Mlle Fleury in Algerian Costume*, 1882

Renoir goes to Algeria for one month in 1881 and 2 months in 1882

Renoir during his first trip:

"The women so far are unapproachable; I don't understand their jabber and they are very fickle. I'm scared to death of starting something again and not finishing it. It's too bad, there are some pretty ones but don't want to pose."

Their reluctance is explicable; because they are against Islamic culture:

1. Contravened religious convention against picturing people or animals in plastic arts *which varied form region to region and should not be taken to be Muslim in general*;
2. violates sharia laws of property, woman in public only with veil.

Renoir writes the art dealer Durand-Ruel:

"Here I am, more or less settled in Algiers and negotiating with some Arabs to find models. Which is not easy, since it's a question of who is the trickiest. But I hope that this time I will manage to bring you back some figures. . . . I've seen some incredibly picturesque children. Will I get them? I'll do whatever is needed for it."

The few models were expensive because there were wealthier traveling artists:

"The figure, even in Algiers, is getting more and more difficult to obtain. If only you knew how many bad painters there are here. It's insane, and especially some Englishmen who spoil the few available women. It's insupportable."

One answer was to paint Europeans dressed as Orientals, a time-honored expedient from the painter Liotard to Delacroix (i.e: *Mlle Fleury in Algerian Costume*). Renoir says he painted it in an Arab house, although it appears to be a studio fabrication.

Other reading:

Castagnary, art critic, introduces the term "orientalism" to define a tendency in art; in his Salon of 1857 he dismisses Orientalists as inferior landscapists. Castagnary claims the Orient was beyond public's experience versus Courbet's experiential concrete art of customs in France. Thus the public was unable to evaluate orientalist art:

"I love the nature which surrounds me because, being born into it, used to seeing it, I and such a nature are in intimate correlation. It has, as it were, entered into the development of my ideas, participated in the formation of my personality, and wherever I go, I carry it with me. Now your desert, your palm-trees, your camels may astonish my intelligence, but they will never produce the sweet and peaceful emotion given me by the sight of cows in a meadow edged with poplars."

Fromentin, painter, writer:

"The difficulty is to interest the European public in places it knows nothing of; the task is ... to separate the beautiful from the bizarre and the impression from its environment, which is almost overwhelming; to introduce the most perilous novelties by normal means of expression; in sum to obtain the result that such a peculiar country becomes a sensitive, intelligible and realistic picture, by adapting it to the laws of taste."

TWENTIETH CENTURY ORIENTALISM

Henri Matisse

Matisse went to Morocco twice, 1912-3 and in 1913. He showed his work at the Galerie Bernheim Jeune in April 1913.

Suggested Reading:

Bejamin, Roger. "Matisse in Morocco: A Colonizing Esthetic," *Art in America* (November 1990), pp. 155-164, 211-2.



Matisse, *Zorah on the Terrace*, 1912

Between Matisse's first and second visit, Zorah became a prostitute; Matisse was concerned that she might be killed by her brother if found modeling.



Matisse, *Seated Riffian*, 1912-1913

Both paintings draw on the rhetoric of authentic experience. Riffians were Berber tribes of the Atlas mountains at war with France; they made it difficult to move outside of Tangiers. Matisse, unlike other Orientalist painters, was unadventurous, approaching middle age. Riffians represented an undefeated Morocco, a vestige of the pre-colonial past with a distinctive ethnic and political actuality, an air of potential threat. Matisse tells his daughter he is beginning: "The portrait of a Riffian, a magnificent mountaineer type, savage as a jackal." Matisse says, "The Arabs who were nice to me at first disgusted me in the end -- I found them too downtrodden." He continues, "I found the landscapes of Morocco just as they had been described in the paintings of Delacroix and in Pierre Loti's novels."