

The harem fantasy in nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings

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Abstract This article examines Orientalist cultural production through an overview of the literature on Orientalist paintings produced by European artists in the nineteenth century. There is a particular emphasis on gender and sexuality, and the use of depictions of gender and sexuality to undergird the political project of colonialism. Furthermore, these historical depictions continue to provide the symbolic vernacular for contemporary representations of Muslims that have their own political uses in the era of the War on Terror. This overview illuminates the emergence of representations of Muslims in fine art for European audiences beginning in the twelfth century, and the changes those depictions undergo later on in the nineteenth century as the political relationship between “East” and “West” shifts. The piece also takes into account gender in relationship to the act of authoring these representations.

Keywords Islamaphobia · Empire · Orientalism · Islam · Nineteenth century · Oil painting · Gender and sexuality · Harem

A review of the scholarship on the depictions of gender in nineteenth-century Orientalist oil paintings illustrates the ways in which that specific form of cultural production was defined by the broader political context of colonialism. In particular, tracing the scholarship on the role of fine art in forming perceptions of Muslims and Islam in European societies at the height of colonialism reveals the origins of the emphasis on gender in visual representations of “the Muslim world,” and provides insight into the subtle shifts in those representations as the specificity of the politics of the encounter between “the West” and “the Muslim world” changes over time. Gender equality has long functioned as a marker or sorts, a unit of data, to be

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measured during various historical and contemporary “encounters” between “the Muslim world” and “the West.” Examples of gender inequality and/or the mistreatment and abuse of women in Muslim societies are utilized by politicians, commentators, and war hawks in the polemic of the clash of civilizations to provide quantifiable evidence that particular primitivisms are endemic to Muslim society, especially so when Islam provides the basis for the law in a given society.

In *Islamaphobia and the Politics of Empire*, Deepa Kumar addresses the core Orientalist myth that Islam is a uniquely sexist religion (Kumar 2012, p. 44). As she points out, this particular myth became part of the systemic representation of the Muslim world in the nineteenth century. The emphasis on the mistreatment of Muslim women by Muslim men lent the colonial project an air of nobility; rather than a grab for power and resources, the colonial enterprise could be recast as a progressive project that will advance the societies they invade and occupy and ultimately improve the standing of women. She argues that this historical myth is very much in play today, in the era of the War on Terror for example the emancipation and advancement of Afghan women has been used by two US administrations as an effective rhetorical device to garner support for the invasion of Afghanistan and its ongoing occupation. An analysis of the origins and contemporary uses of the gender inequality myth is so necessary because when the fundamental primitivism of Muslims becomes an implicit assumption in the discourse, any number of highly destructive and oppressive policies that will impact the lives of Muslim people can be justified. Representations of gender relations in Muslim societies that circulate in the visual culture of North America and Western Europe have the potential to further the archetypal narrative of the clash of civilizations, or to disrupt it. That archetypal narrative can also be disrupted by developing a better understanding of the origins of the use of gender in visual representations of Muslims, and the connection between the political uses of those representations in different historical moments.

Contemporary cultural production in North America and Western Europe is rife with the mythologies around Islam that Kumar identifies, often in relationship to gender. Videos of ISIS terrorists beheading American and European hostages fill news feeds, alongside images of Saudi Arabian women swathed in the niqab, protesting restrictions on their autonomous public mobility, and US marines building schools for Afghan girls. Film and television are peppered with representations of Muslim men and women that revolve almost exclusively around the global conflict between state powers and various political Islamist insurgent factions in the War on Terror. The implicit characterization of these images is that they present insight into the way contemporary Muslim societies function on the whole. They suggest Muslim societies are prone to a barbarism that is even out of bounds on the battlefield and that they are mired in provincial antiquated social custom that perpetuates the oppression of women. These images are often considered together, in a way that elides national, social, cultural and political specificity, to provide a narrative about who “Muslims” are and to illustrate what the practice of “Islam” creates. As Kumar shows us, these contemporary representations are not indiscriminate forms of cultural production that have no meaning. These depictions of Muslim society have a political purpose in a public

discourse that is produced within the specter of the War on Terror, and moreover, providing an ongoing rationale for militarism and can even allow individuals and institutions to view Islamophobia as a liberal project, one that supports progressive secular principles.

In the first chapter of *Islamophobia*, Kumar takes us from the eighth to the eighteenth century, a period in which Islam emerges and begins to become a visible external threat to the Byzantine Empire and to Christendom. As other threats were reduced and integrated, Islam and Muslims came to symbolise an “other” that could be used to mobilize support for territorial conquest, and to redirect intra-European conflict outward (Kumar 2012, p. 14). Echoing Kumar’s assertion, Mohja Kahf argues that by the twelfth century medieval era, an awareness was developing about the spread of Islam in the region now known as Western Europe. Thus, Western European literary representations of Muslims were part of a dynamic in which “crusading emotion had been building for decades, and with it, the image of Islam and its people as *the* paramount danger to the Christian world.” She writes, “...If there is such a thing as a European outlook on the world, a sense of what is European as distinct from not-European, it began to develop and define itself in opposition to Islamic civilization” (Kahf 1999, p. 13–14).

Medieval European discourse exhibits a fixation on many of the same themes later literary culture and visual culture do. There is an emphasis on opulence, and gender and sexuality figure prominently thematically. While some aristocratic depictions were somewhat favorable toward these trading partners in the East, and the harem was not yet the ever present backdrop, opulence was used to depict the corruption of the more powerful and wealthy Arabs, which fit well with the Catholic Church’s narrative during the Crusades from 1095 on (Kahf 1999, p. 18). Kahf argues that it is in the literary depictions that emerge between 1100 and the 1400s that the figure of the Muslim woman “stepped into the Western imagination,” (Kahf 1999, p. 21) in the form of the “overbearing Muslim noblewoman who converts and leaves her country to enter a Christian European society,” (Kahf 1999, p. 33).

These women, Bramimonde in *The Song of Roland* for example, pursue a Christian suitor (and defying their fathers in the process) because they see the inherent goodness of Christian society despite the relative lack of wealth and power. Many of these “wanton queens” leave positions of high rank to be Christian wives. Though Kahf states that the permissive sexuality of Muslim women portrayed in these depictions is not too different from portrayals of courtly European women, they are meant to indicate an “outrageous liberty” resulting from an “orgiastic morality” the medieval Christian Church saw as a pollutant (Kahf 1999, p. 33–36). Kahf traces the evolution of the termagant—“the exuberant and overbearing Muslim woman” to the “helpless, inferior” odalisque of Said’s eighteenth and nineteenth-century literary analysis (Kahf 1999, p. 8) in Western poetry and literature, mapping these iterations to the changing nature of the relationship between East and West.

Kahf’s assertion that depictions of Islamic societies functioned as a mirror of European society in which it could define itself builds on Edward Said’s initial conceptualization of Orientalism in the late 1970s. Said asserted that part of the legacy of colonialism and imperialism was the creation of a body of scholarly,

literary, and cultural, knowledge about the East by actors in the West, whose purpose has been to perpetuate the notion of the clash of civilizations and the general inferiority of the Muslim and Arab World to Western Europe and the USA. However, Kahf emphasizes visual representations, and specifies how popular images in medieval art are similar to, and differ from, those that Said identifies in the literature and scholarship of later periods. Said himself offers little analysis of paintings, though he acknowledges the importance of this work:

In the works of Delacroix and literally dozens of other French and British painters, the Oriental genre tableau carried representation into visual expression and a life of its own)... Sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy: the Orient as a figure in the pre Romantic, pretechnical Orientalist imagination of late-eighteenth-century Europe was really a chameleonlike quality called (adjectively) "Oriental," (Said 1978, p. 119).

In *Covering Imperialism* Said gestures to painting and its role in the overall production of Orientalism, calling these "images of Western imperial authority...haunting, strangely attractive, compelling." Alongside other cultural artifacts Said is taken with images like G. W. Joy's painting of "Gordon at Khartoum, fiercely staring down the Sudanese dervishes...armed only with revolver and sheathed sword," and in contrast, "the concubines, dancing girls, odalisques of Gerome, Delacroix's Sardanapalus, Matisse's North Africa, Saint-Saen's *Samson and Delilah*" (Said 1994, p. 110). For Said these images function as part of a broader project, they create the cultural fabric that is interwoven with the political project of colonialism and imperialism, helping to lay the groundwork for those incursions and to rationalize and perpetuate the binarization of the Oriental and the Occidental. While Said's analysis did not center on these images, his contribution to the politicization of the study of Orientalist art has impacted how these images have been discussed since.

A cornerstone of Said's argument is that the Orient represented in this form of knowledge production is a fantasy that not only stands in for the reality of heterogeneous and diverse places and peoples, but also narrows the scope of representation, actively obscuring reality. While Said himself dealt almost exclusively with text in *Orientalism*, the fantasy he describes is a visual one: "The idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate," (Said 1978, p. 63). In the milieu of Orientalist painting, the stage setting was often one of opulence and luxury, ornate and detailed: patterned rugs and clothing, ornate furniture on which figures recline, jewelry, daggers and swords, bath houses and servants and slaves depicted throughout, catering to the subject's whims. This sense of opulence extended from the surroundings to the figures represented therein. Following the trend of many representations of women in these paintings, Gustave Moreau painted Salome dripping in jewels. Many artists would simultaneously excise any signs of influence from the West; in the early nineteenth century, the Turkish government made

reforms in regard to dress and Western style clothing became common, though artists often chose to replace Western style dress with traditional “native” wear in their paintings. In the Orientalist art market consumers sought images of an “untouched” Orient, one that was mired in an ancient moment—that is where the allure of the mystical East resided. (Lewis 1996, p. 140; Kabbani 2008, p. 125).

Painting “the Muslim world” in the nineteenth century

In 1989, the art historian Linda Nochlin published a seminal piece “The Imaginary Orient,” which took up a critical inquiry into the twentieth century interest in nineteenth-century Orientalist art. Prior to her interjection, art history criticism of Orientalist art focused on the aesthetic value of the work and avoided significant engagement with the “political domination and ideology” that informed its production (Nochlin 1989, p. 34). Nochlin clarifies Said’s primary contribution to the study of Orientalist knowledge production, illustrating the political role that culture, and fine art, played in these historical periods and the ways in which they may serve a political function in the present day. She identifies the “picturesque” view in pieces such as Gerome’s *Snake Charmer* as a way of establishing an absence of history, a sense that this place is unchanging, while its counterpart the Occident moved forward on the engine of progress.

The “picturesque” appeal of these images, Nochlin notes, is dependent upon the absence of any reference to the painter/observer, imbuing the image with a sense of objectivity. After the high demand for these types of Orientalist images in the nineteenth century, they dropped off in popularity in the early twentieth century, only to experience a revival in the late 1970s and the 1980s. This renewed interest gave rise to a series of exhibitions that took place across Europe and England, and in the USA as well. In 1985, Coral Petroleum capitalized on the renewed interest in these tableaux and sold off sixty-one of the pieces, it owned through famed New York auction house, Sotheby’s. In this era of circulation, the audience for this art was no longer primarily European and American audiences but buyers from the contemporary Middle East (Mackenzie 1995, p. 44–45). Nochlin urges a politicized analysis of the original and subsequent demand for these representations of “the Orient,” in light of Said’s contributions, rather than attributing that demand to trends in cultural taste making.

Nineteenth-century visual representations of Muslim societies are a rich site of Orientalist production, drawing thematically from earlier medieval representations, but in the context of a new power differential, Western imperialism. The artists who depicted the Orient in this era were responsible for creating images whose iconography would resonate throughout the next century and into the twenty-first. In their work, the existing tendency to depict opulence meets the subsequent fascination with the harem, creating scenes that become symbolic representations of the Muslim world in that period, and deeply inform subsequent imaginaries of the Orient in the West, even as the specific iterations of these visuals change to reflect

the shifts that occur over time.¹ In the nineteenth century, numerous painters were attracted to depictions of “the East.” Of this fascination, the writer Victor Hugo wrote in 1829:

Today for a thousand reasons all of which foster progress, the Orient is of more concern than it’s ever been before. Never before have oriental studies been explored so deeply. In the century of Louis the XIV one was Hellenist; today one is an Orientalist.²

The numbers of artists who were attracted to the Orient as a subject are significant during this period, and there were different genres of paintings produced at this moment. John MacKenzie identifies several phases, beginning in the eighteenth century with painters such as William Hogarth and Gavin Hamilton who had no direct experience with the subjects they represented. The second phase features two trends in the paintings: “topographical and archaeological realism” by artists such as Dominique Vivant Denon and David Roberts, and the Romantics, Eugene Delacroix and Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps. This work then gives way to the realism of Horace Vernet, Eugene Fromentin and Jean-Leon Gerome in the later 1800s and into the early 1900s. By this time, Orientalism and Eastern aesthetics were influencing painters like Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Henri Matisse, and Paul Cezanne to take up the Orient in their work (Mackenzie 1995; Grigsby 2002).

The Orient, now thought of as the Middle East, has maintained its popularity as a site of representation in Western art and entertainment culture ever since, often converging with political events of the day. The Algerian struggle for independence in the mid-twentieth century inspired Pablo Picasso to rework the harem scene in Delacroix’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* in his own abstract style; he produced fifteen paintings and two lithographs on the theme (Celik 2002). Picasso’s reimagining of this iconic harem scene that was painted at the beginnings of French Imperialism, in order to symbolise the end of French Imperialism, is an illustration of how the paintings produced in the nineteenth century continue to influence the contemporary cultural imagination and indicates the relative stasis of the symbolic vocabulary available to Western authors and artists representing the Muslim world.

Market demand for specific representations of the Orient and the Oriental was a driving force for the artists who created them, and those who would not adhere to

¹ Though the United States provided its own specific context in which particular Orientalist tropes would arise and be utilized in the production of fine art, literature and popular culture, there is evidence that U.S. Orientalism also shared commonalities with the British and French trends. *Arabian Nights* and the story of Scheherazade captured the imaginations of Americans also, and had as much influence in the U.S. as it did in Europe. As they did with European audiences, these stories give rise to similar fixations on the harem, an erotically charged depiction of Oriental women, and their violent and hyper sexualized male counterparts. These depictions evolved alongside the development of media technologies from literary representations to the silver screen in the early twentieth century such as *The Sheik* (1921) starring Rudolph Valentino. (Little 2002; McAlister 2005).

² Said points to particular historical moments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that set the stage for the simultaneous fascination of two colonial rivals France and Britain with Islamic societies, including some initial forays into producing knowledge about the East for European audiences. Chief amongst these are Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and then Syria, a moment that “became the first in a long series of European encounters with the Orient in which the Orientalist’s special expertise was put directly to functional colonial use” (Said 1978, p. 80).

these considerations were vulnerable to having their work go unnoticed and unsold. “Europe was charmed by an Orient that shimmered with possibilities, that promised a sexual space, a voyage away from the self, an escape from the dictates of the of the bourgeois morality of the metropolis,” (Kabbani 2008, p. 112) and painters who did not cater to that day dream, and whose aim was a more faithful depiction of what they saw had difficulty finding an audience. Landscape artists who painted the Orient were never as successful as those who painted the more fantastical scenes of violence and sexuality. This was the case with Edward Lear whose watercolors were not sensational in the custom of Orientalist painting and so failed to elevate his status or provide him with significant income (Kabbani 2008, p. 135).

Success was also somewhat dependent upon relationships with brokers like the French duo Gambart and Goupil. Adolphe Goupil’s son Albert was a collector of Orientalist art, and photographer himself; he was also brother in-law to Jean-Leon Gerome and travelled with him to the Orient on an extended trip in 1868. The younger Goupil offered patronage to Orientalist artists, lending painter Henri Regnault an apartment in Paris where he completed a number of works. Also in that apartment another Orientalist, Alexandre Bida, painted portraits of Regnault forming his contributions to Orientalism (Clayson 2002, p. 145; Mackenzie 1995, p. 48). The nineteenth century marked a shift from aristocratic to bourgeois patronage; British royals were patrons to several Orientalists, giving this work cache, and in turn leading to a greater commercial market among the newly wealthy and upwardly mobile. This European trend also translated to the USA where certain wealthy individuals became collectors of these works. These representations also emerged in other forms of cultural production, including book illustrations (facilitated in the lowered cost of printing in the nineteenth century), popular magazines, advertising and eventually to film (MacKenzie 1995, p. 48).

The harem and depictions of oriental sexuality

As representations of Muslim women and society have been translated to different media platforms, there continues to be a fascination with certain Orientalist tropes,³ particularly the figure of the harem woman and the figure of the barbaric Oriental male. The harem provides a point of commonality among Orientalists because of the way it figures throughout the work of all these artists, whether French, British, male or female. Its recurrence as a setting is one specific way in which to make the argument for the study of these works in some cohesive manner. Simultaneously, the slight variations in portrayals of the harem by individual artists help to delineate among the specific threads of this production of visual culture. French Orientalist art was more salacious and apt to portraying nudity in the harem, whereas British painters tended to be more reserved, painting their imaginary harem women in

³ Alloula’s (1986) *The Colonial Harem* illustrates how harem women were also popular subjects for photographers in Algeria, and those images often became postcards used for souvenirs. The distinction between the ‘high’ art of the unique valued oil painting or water color and the mass produced cheap post card does not disrupt the continuous portrayal of the harem as a site of fascination, and the women who inhabit them, as exotic, alluring, and foreign.

clothing. Englishman John Frederick Lewis' paintings, *The Hahreem* (1850), *The Arab Scribe, Cairo* (1852), and *The Reception* (1873) are examples of the latter trend, but despite the presence of clothing the harem is still depicted as space of luxury, with an atmosphere of exoticism, and an "erotic charge" (Lewis 1996, p. 111).

The harem is the primary site in which the eroticism of the Orient is depicted in the realm of Orientalist visual art and also in Orientalist literature. One of Said's most oft cited examples is that of the French writer Gustave Flaubert whose fascination with and production of knowledge about the Orient preceded his actual visits there, and whose affair with the Egyptian dancer and courtesan Kachuk Hanem, Said asserts, is the basis for several female characters in his novels. These included the Queen of Sheba, a character cobbled together from several archetypal figures—Salome, Scheherazade, and Cleopatra (Kabbani 2008, p. 120). Of Hanem, Flaubert wrote "the oriental woman is no more than a machine: she makes no distinction between one man and another." Flaubert's account of Hanem's "dumb and irreducible sexuality," Said argues, is an exemplar of how entrenched the notion of Muslim sexuality as detached from intimacy and humanity is in the Orientalist imagination (Said 1978, p. 187).

Still, the "desirable" women portrayed in these harem scenes often resembled their European counterparts; J. F. Lewis, like many Orientalists, preferred to paint a certain kind of Oriental woman, the Circassians. The Circassians had the allure of the exotic oriental but were fair-skinned and light haired, and so conformed to European ideals of beauty. Rana Kabbani points to the painting *L'Esclave Blanche* by Jean-Jules-Antoine Lecomte de Nouy in which a Circassian beauty sits nude next to a spread of food, smoking by a bathing pool in the foreground. In the background, dark-skinned servants toil away, one of them only partially in the frame. Lecomte de Nouy painted this scene from imagination, he never actually travelled to the Orient; he had turned to painting Orientalist scenes after developing a reputation as a painter of classical ruins, and this shift transformed his more reserved style to the sensationalism expected of the Orientalist genre, (Kabbani 2008, p. 135). Kabbani argues that these largely imagined depictions of nude and semi-nude women in private spaces, "in a state of pleasing vulnerability," was a means for the painter (who safely resides outside of the field of observation) to assert the balance of colonial power on the Orient of his imagination. The eroticism in particular was a way for male painters to access places they were otherwise prohibited from (Kabbani 2008, p. 121).

In contrast to the fair-skinned Oriental woman who was an object of desire, Oriental men were often portrayed as dark-skinned, whereas women were portrayed as inviting, if dumb, men were portrayed to be obstacles to entry into the Orient, and associated with violence to varying degrees. Gerome's *Le Garde de Serail* (1859) is one such depiction of an imposing black figure, armed with a number of weapons, and blocking the viewer's gaze from penetrating the harem behind him. Ludwig Deutsch paints another such image, albeit a more complimentary one, in *Le Garde Nubien*, and Henri Regnault's *Execution sans Judgement Sous les Rois Maures de Granade* (1870) takes this image one step further to depict this figure cleaning his sword on a cloth he wears, next to him the felled body and severed head of the man

whom he has just beheaded. Austrian painter Rudolphe Weisse also settled into this niche of Orientalist painting, creating his own series, including *Le Garde Harem* in 1888.

Just as women in these paintings were imbued with a passive sexuality, men were imbued with an active propensity for violence. Kabbani, echoing the analysis of Nochlin, identifies this as a trend toward depicting Oriental men as villains, and she provides several compelling examples of specific representations of Oriental men as plunderers; Filippo Baratti's *The Prisoner* (1883) shows two darker skinned men lounging casually, while a frail white man sits bound in front of them, at their mercy (Kabbani 2008, p. 128). Though the painters themselves seem to have little regard for the bodies of Oriental women outside of their objectification for the gratification of the viewer, they are quick to depict Oriental men as having even less. John Faed's *Bedouin Exchanging a Slave for Armour* (1857) and Gerome's *Le Marche d'Esclaves* both depict Oriental men trading naked women (who are fair-skinned) for goods, lending an ominous air to the portrayal of gender relations among men and women in the Orient. In these gendered depictions, one sees the interconnect- edness of sexuality and violence in Orientalist visual culture (Kabbani 2008, p. 125–130), a trait that made these depictions enticing to a European buying public.

John MacKenzie takes issue with Said's, and then Kabbani's and Nochlin's assessments of Orientalist textual and visual culture. Like many of Said's critics he asserts that Said over determines the notion of a coherent body of representations of the Orient over such a lengthy period of time. He claims Said inadvertently engages in an "Occidentalism" that reduces "the West" and Westerners to a homogenous undifferentiated mass, and implies hostilities where there are none. MacKenzie argues that interest in the Orient was largely due to proximity, not because of any specific set of imperial relations and that the goal of these artists was not to depict domination or negative images of the East, but to explore what they considered a fantastical world. Orientalists, he writes, exhibited a "duality" toward the Orient that reflected the ambiguous relationship travelers often have with the places they visit:

Thus, the Orientalist painters expressed both sublime fear and a sense of liberating themselves and their art; both admiration for the outward forms of religion and anxieties about its inner meanings; both fright at cultural difference and an admiring fascination with characteristics their own society had repressed (MacKenzie 1995, p. 65).

Though he agrees with Kabbani that the nineteenth century was an era in which the consumption of goods emphasizing sexuality was high and that there was real demand for such depictions, Mackenzie generously characterizes these Orientalist works as condemnations of the "heavy-handed bourgeois morality" of the artists' own Western societies, displaying in the process their "particular brand of nineteenth-century dominant masculinity" (Mackenzie 1995, p. 64). For MacKenzie and other critics of Said, the feminization Said identifies as detrimental and indicative of desire to portray the Orient as weaker, is in fact an effort on the part of European males to renegotiate and rediscover their own suppressed emotional life in the abandon of the East. The dark-skinned men whose portrayals Kabbani and

Nochlin view as violent and without humanity, MacKenzie characterizes as depictions of a masculine ideal. This reading, however, is only possible if one omits the ways in which the context of colonialism and its power relations informed the work of these painters, the logics of Orientalism, colonialism, and empire present in others forms of cultural production at the time, and the ways in which the colonial project itself facilitated the presence of these painters in these places, engendered the rise of this particular genre in fine art, and created a market for these works.

An “imaginative geography”

Orientalism, Said writes, conjures an “imaginative geography” in excess of what is actually empirically known, and it is in that excess that the fantasy of the Orient emerges. That fantasy is very much at play in visual representations of the Orient; some of the most well-known painters of the nineteenth century worked from imagination rather than direct observation. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres never actually travelled to the Orient, but relied on the work of Charles Montesquieu (Kabbani 2008, p. 134) and:

Used Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s account of her visit to a Turkish bath as a source for his bath scenes, but ignored her insistence that the women’s behavior was perfectly proper when he wanted to produce a picture of sex and excess in keeping with Europe’s treasured myths. (Lewis 1996, p. 129).

French artist Eugene Delacroix began painting scenes featuring *odalisques*, concubines of the sultan, in the 1820s but did not actually visit the East until more than a decade later as part of a diplomatic mission to visit the Sultan of Morocco Moulay Abd-er Rahman (who he would also paint) on behalf of King Louis-Phillipe. The colonization of Algeria by France in 1830 may have allowed Delacroix momentary access to an Algerian harem for 1 or 2 days when a French customs inspector was able to gain him entry when he visited briefly in 1832 (Grigsby 2002).

Delacroix’s initial paintings, however, were imagined scenes whose visual tableau was culled from literary representations of the Orient and then imposed on representations of the models posing in his studio. This was the case when he painted *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) inspired by the play of the same name by Lord Byron (Kabbani 2008, p. 125). The process by which these painters created these scenarios is the system of citation that characterizes Orientalism according to Said (Said 1978, p. 23), in which texts become references for and to one another rather than the Orient, their ostensible object of study. This system of citation and reference to other representations by other European authors has a great deal of influence even when an author or artist does travel to the Orient in person. Even after his visit to the East literary references loomed large in Delacroix’s imagination of the Orient, and he remained, “preoccupied with themes from the *Arabian Nights*,” (Kabbani 2008, p. 125).

There were artists who routinely travelled to the East and even stayed for periods of time, but this did not produce an unmediated representation of their surroundings.

Gerome travelled to Egypt seven times between 1857 and 1880 (Mackenzie 1995, p. 54). Gerome took photographs so that he could reliably recreate architectural details when he painted his Orientalist scenes back in his European studio, true to his style of realism. His direct observation of the place he sought to represent, as well as the photographs, suggest Gerome's representations were depictions of reality. Nochlin writes of this practice that photography, like painting, is a form of representation that requires the artist to selectively record the world around them, and this is never an entirely neutral process; given that Gerome was traveling to Egypt in a period following Napoleon's conquests, the rise of colonialism and the emergence of a demand for certain tropes in Orientalist images, the choices he made in regard to the images he recorded were not random, but deeply informed by these events.

Regnault was inspired to travel to the Orient having seen the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris featuring displays from Egypt, Persia and Turkey among others, and his encounter with the Orientalist works of Mariano Fortuny, but after 9 months in Tangier was forced to return to Paris to serve in the military when war erupted between France and Prussia in 1870. He sketched and painted while in Tangier (*Execution sans Jugement Sous les Rois Maures de Granade 1870*), but it was an imagined scene set in historical Granada he painted, not the North Africa in whose present he was living.⁴ The lush romantic watercolors he used in Paris provided a point of antithesis to his gray surroundings. Instead, he envisioned opulent harem scenes (*Hassan et Namouna 1870*), without much concern for portraying his subjects with any accuracy regarding their lived experience. Regnault clearly expresses this intent, and also an awareness that European audiences have expectations about the realism of what's depicted in these paintings:

...When you come to Tangier, you will find me facing an immense canvas, where I want to paint the entire character of the Arab dominion in Spain, and those powerful Moors of yesteryear, those who still have the real blood of Mohammed of the third, fourth, fifth and sixth generations in their heads. I hope to find in the histories of the Moors a historical fact or a name that will match what I want to do to satisfy everyone. I'll start anyway, and if I find a way to baptize my tableau before I finish it, so much the better; if not I'll invent something and send the critics to chapter 59,999 of an undisputed Arab history, but destroyed in the fire or sack of a city (Clayson 2002, p. 139).

Regnault's ambition is to encompass an imagined history of vast Moorish power within a canvas, though his concern in portraying this scene is not to bring forth an actual history but to create his own.

Even in residence on site in the Orient, nineteenth century European artists were concerned primarily with their own adventure and how it could inform their

⁴ In her essay on Regnault's Orientalism Clayson writes,

That a painting on a late medieval Islamic Spanish subject could encapsulate his Moroccan campaign should come as no surprise, insofar as Regnault was on a quest for Moorish Andalusia in modern Morocco. Nor should the fact that it was imagined despite its basis in the architectural research that the artist completed in Granada (Clayson 2002, p. 137).

production of “great works,” which would in turn bring them recognition among the elite of Europe. Like others, John Frederick Lewis became enamored of the Orient and began producing images of it long before he visited, by using Orientalist literature as a reference. Three years after producing a set of engravings *Illustrations of Constantinople* (1837), Lewis went to live in Istanbul, immersing himself in the culture, dressing in traditional Turkish clothing, growing a beard, and living away from other European ex-patriots. None of this deterred him from painting scenes that fit with the imagined Orient. Presence also did not always equate with authenticity; Renoir complained that on his visits to Algeria (where he went briefly in 1881 and in 1882) Algerian models were expensive and unavailable because the ever increasing number of artists working in the region due to the demand for images of these Oriental women in Europe. This forced Renoir, and others who could not afford the expense, to use European models to portray the “Oriental” figures instead (Grigsby 2002).

Women as authors

Questions around presence, distance, fantasy, and authenticity are significantly complicated by recent scholarship on the women who travelled to the Orient in this period to make visual art, “there was a painterly female Orientalist gaze in operation in the nineteenth century, the products of which circulated in the same venues as paintings by Decamps, Ingres, or Gerome” (Lewis 2004, p. 144). In the work of Reina Lewis, Nancy Micklewright, and Barbara Hodgson, the often overlooked contributions of female artists texturize the account of Orientalism that Said presents; by introducing gender into the analysis of the authorship of Orientalism these scholars challenge the notion of a monolithic form of knowledge production in another way, illustrating the subtle ways in which these women at once participated in creating the fantastical Orient and also challenged popular representations of it. Henriette Browne’s paintings depicted a sparser scene in her *Harem Interiors* disrupting the Western audience’s expectations of opulence and excess, but that was more in keeping with the reality of Ottoman households in this time. On the reception of Browne’s work in this period Reina Lewis writes “Women who reported back on the harem were faced with an audience curious for knowledge but resistant to changes in accepted knowledge about the East,” (Lewis 1996, p. 138).

Critic Oliver Merson saw Browne’s depictions of the Orient as a mistake rather than an alternative, and perhaps more realistic, perspective. Leon LeGrange attributed Browne’s lack of depictions of hypersexuality and languorous partially clothed *odalisques* in the harem to sexual naiveté. Neither Merson nor LeGrange allow for the consideration that Browne is simply more interested in portraying the harem as a social space for women rather than a space created to serve the sexual appetites of men (Roberts 2002, p. 180). The particular themes of sex and violence are so in demand from critics and audiences in the West that though Browne’s depictions of the harem are a result of actual engagement with those spaces and the people represented, they are rejected in favor of the fantasy.

These scholars do not argue that female painters completely eschewed the conventions of Orientalist painting in this period (Browne's most famous pieces are still harem scenes), but their ability to enter the harem sometimes complicated the prevailing imaginary of the Orient simply by virtue of their ability to interact with its inhabitants directly during the process of painting. The variations in the representations authored by women are not necessarily even a conscious decision on the part of the artists, but are sometimes simply the result of the intrusion of reality into the practice of painting actual interiors and peoples rather than imagined ones. In 1886, painter Mary Adelaide Walker wrote of her experience with Princess Zeinab, an Ottoman harem woman, in the Princess' summer palace in Constantinople. Walker tells her audience that her subject demanded that she be portrayed as she wished, rather than in the vernacular that Walker would use of a traditional figure living in a mystical past. Princess Zeinab preferred to use a hybrid of Western and Eastern conventions of dress and portraiture. Though Walker objects (demonstrating her own investments in the notion of an exotic harem) Zeinab insists her vision be honored, and as the patron who is employing Walker to provide a service she must be respected (Beaulieu and Roberts 2002, p. 1).

What is of interest here is not only the differences in the representation of the harem yielded by this conflict, but the way in which an actual interaction challenges stereotypical notions of passive harem women whose sole purpose is to be available for sexual activity. The actual interaction of painter and subject also forces the painter to reconsider creating representations of the harem and the women in them as existing in a sphere that is wholly disconnected from Western civilization. The subject whose experience is on display would prefer to assert that this representation accurately depict the hybrid nature of her experience, one that combines social conventions of "the Muslim world" and "the West." Given that the presence of a British female artist in the harem, and the encounter between these women, indicates the material reality of this hybridity, it becomes apparent that there is a genuine attachment to the fantasy of two cultural and social spheres operating independently of one another. This attachment is apparent in the way in which these artists preferred to forgo the inclusion of realistic details in favor of a limited and fantastical vision of "the Muslim world."

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