

tasmeem
design.research.connect

OPEN ACCESS

In focus

Orientalism today: Revisions and remakings

Debra Hanson*

Virginia Commonwealth University in
Qatar, Doha, Qatar

*Email: hansondw@vcu.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the transformative role of Orientalism – a form of visual, literary, and ideological hybrid making that has impacted East/West perceptions and relations from the nineteenth century to the present day—in historical and contemporary terms. It focuses on post-colonial revisions of Orientalism and its varied meanings, as evidenced by 1) the recently expanded body of scholarship on this topic; 2) the acquisition of important Orientalist works by museums and collectors in North Africa and the Gulf region, and 3) the appropriation and re-making of Orientalist imagery by contemporary Arab artists such as Lalla Essaydi. While interrogating Orientalism's colonialist and hegemonic affiliations, this paper also underscores the richness and complexity of the East/West cultural dialogue it has engendered.

This paper was presented as part of the Tasmeem Exploration Platform on March 17, 2013.

[http://dx.doi.org/
10.5339/tasmeem.2014.5](http://dx.doi.org/10.5339/tasmeem.2014.5)

Submitted: 12 March 2013
Accepted: 10 September 2013
© 2014 Hanson, licensee
Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation
Journals. This is an open access
article distributed under the terms
of the Creative Commons
Attribution license CC BY 3.0, which
permits unrestricted use,
distribution and reproduction in any
medium, provided the original work
is properly cited.

ORIENTALISM TODAY: REVISIONS AND REMAKINGS

In keeping with the 2013 Tasmeem conference theme of hybrid making, this paper examines the shifting role of Orientalism, a form of visual, literary, and ideological hybridity that has impacted East/West perceptions and relations from the nineteenth century to the present day. It focuses on post-colonial revisions of Orientalism and its varied meanings, as evidenced by the recently expanded body of scholarship on this topic, the acquisition of important Orientalist works by museums and collectors in North Africa and the Gulf region, and the re-making of Orientalist imagery by contemporary Arab artists such as Lalla Essaydi.

At its most fundamental level, Orientalism can be understood as a network of Western beliefs and ideas—as manifest in a wide range of nineteenth-century and later sources—concerned with “the Orient” or “the East,” which at that time was understood as encompassing North Africa, the Near and Middle East, and India. This broad definition was refined and expanded by Edward Said in his 1978 essay *Orientalism*, a seminal text that is still the foundation of academic programs and scholarship in the field. Said described Orientalism as “a style of thought based upon... distinctions made between the Orient/East and the Occident/West.”¹ Orientalism can also be understood as a knowledge-producing discourse, or “a systematic discipline in which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.”² As a discipline grounded in assumptions of Western superiority, it paralleled and supported European colonial expansion during this period. In Said’s original view (which he later modified somewhat), Orientalism was a fixed binary system based on the opposition of East and West, which largely precluded the possibility of cross-cultural exchange between the two entities.³

In the decades following the publication of *Orientalism*, a number of scholars have called for a more nuanced understanding of East/West cultural dynamics. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), for example, Homi Bhaba considers the complex psychological mechanisms that underlie colonial relationships, which he views as inherently ambivalent, contradictory, and often undermining of the very boundaries they seek to enforce.⁴ Without denying the Western attempt to control and “manage” that underlies the Orientalist agenda, this line of thinking admits the complex and often paradoxical nature of human as well as cross-cultural interaction while reinscribing at least some degree of agency to the colonized subject. Understood in this way, colonialism itself might be viewed as a form of hybrid making, since the blend—or clash—of cultures it forced resulted in a new entity that was a part of, but also apart from, its originating components. In the cultural realm, Orientalism operated within similarly shifting and unstable boundaries.

If considered in relation to Said’s critique, the recently expanded market for Orientalist works among Arab collectors and museums may appear puzzling: Why acquire works of art that have generally been interpreted as demeaning the Oriental subjects they portray? Recent scholarship on the subject of Orientalism is contributing to the answer. While Said did not consider paintings in his 1978 text (although Jean Leon Gerome’s controversial image of *The Snake Charmer* appeared on its cover) his ideas were applied to the visual arts by Linda Nochlin and other art historians writing in the 1980s. In her influential article on “The Imaginary Orient,” Nochlin acknowledged “the richness of the visual diet... and the presence of the alluringly elaborate surfaces of Turkish tiles, carpet and basket...” that Gerome created in *The Snake Charmer* (see [Figure 1](#)).⁵ At the same time, she decried the work’s many absences; foremost among these was what she described as “the absence of history.”⁶ Focusing on deteriorating wall tiles of the Topkapi Palace in the background, she sees the painting as a timeless and therefore ahistorical image that failed to acknowledge the effects of the Ottoman tanzimat, the system of modernization that was well underway by the time *The Snake Charmer* was painted in 1870. Much the same critique—as well as those of racism and racial stereotyping, imperialism, and sexism, among others—has been applied to Orientalist painting in general.

Without denying the often-provocative nature of these works, recent trends in scholarship and collecting have nonetheless prompted their reconsideration. If, as Nochlin stated, “Gerome is not reflecting a ready-made reality, but producing meanings,”⁷ then those meanings are surely open to a range of interpretations and not those of Western art historians alone. In a 1996 interview, Brahim Alaoui, a curator of contemporary art at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, suggested some of the alternative meanings that might be available to Arab collectors:

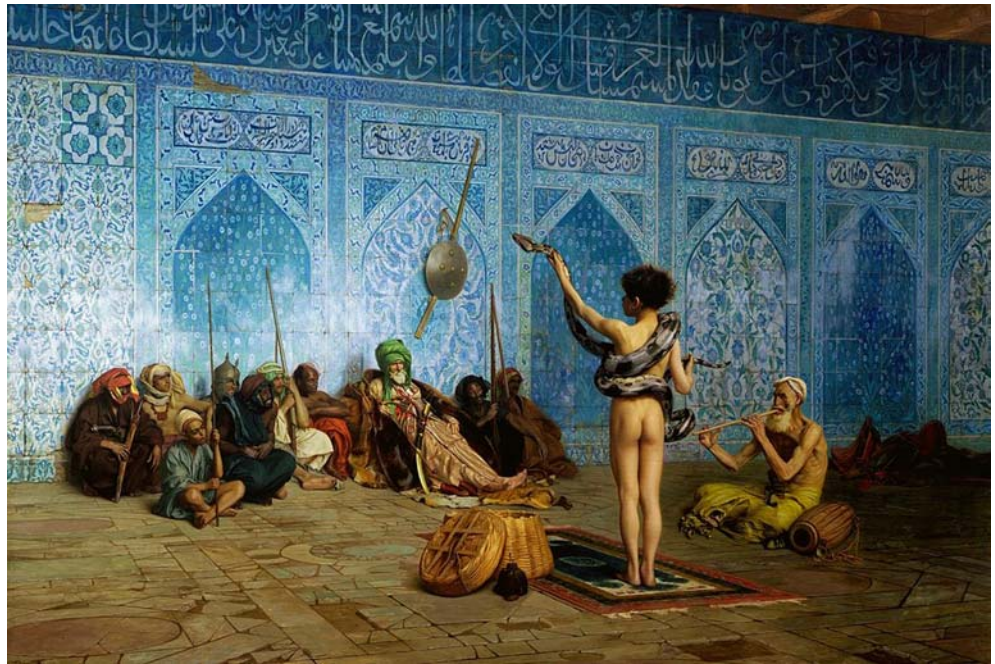


Figure 1. Gerome, J.L. *The Snake Charmer*. 1870. Oil on canvas. Wikimedia Commons. Web. March 19, 2013.

that image of the Orient which set the Occident dreaming in the 19th century now returns something to those Orientals who seek an image of their past. They find in this painting a world on its way to being eclipsed... Orientals are now attempting to recover an image that was fixed by the Occident in the nineteenth-century.⁸

More recently, Egyptian industrialist and philanthropist Shafik Gabr described the Orientalists whose paintings he collects as “early globalists... who travelled not to conquer or find oil, but to discover and understand”.⁹ In an attempt to extend the sense of discovery and global exploration that he perceives in Orientalist painting into the present day, Mr. Gabr’s foundation sponsored a 2012 symposium on “Early Globalists: What Do the Orientalist Travelers have to Teach Us Today?”¹⁰ His promotion of Orientalist art as a tool for improving East/West diplomatic relations signals a dramatically revised understanding of its content on the part of this major collector.

As Orientalist paintings return to the regions of their inception – be they actual or imaginative – their shifting parameters and hybrid nature would seem to allow for the active intervention of knowledge, memory and imagination on the part of each viewer, who “completes” the image accordingly. In this way, the act of collecting and/or exhibiting can also become an act of remaking these works, and with them elements of a past most often visualized—or in Said’s words, managed—through the pictorial language of the West. If history cannot be rewritten, it can nonetheless be re-presented; a case in point being Doha’s Orientalist Museum, which operates under the auspices of the Qatar Museum Authority. As it exhibits and thus represents Western images of “the East” within the context of modern Arab culture, this museum is but one example of the state of Qatar’s recognition of art as a critical cultural and historical resource capable of visualizing the connections between past, present and future (see Figure 2, a work from the collection of the Orientalist Museum in Doha). As Qatar continues to modernize while striving to preserve its native traditions and heritage, its growing museum community has become an increasingly important resource in this effort.

Like collectors and museums in the region, contemporary Arab artists are also engaged in the appropriation and remaking of Orientalist imagery. For example, consider a work by Lalla Essaydi, a Moroccan-born artist who revised and remade some of the most well-known Western paintings of the nineteenth-century in her 2009 “Femmes du Maroc” (“Women of Morocco”) exhibit. Her dialogue with Orientalism (which she describes as a love-hate relationship) is richly complex, as it critiques both Eastern and Western attitudes and practices regarding women.

In her re-making of Eugene Delacroix’s iconic *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, (see Figure 3) the artist strips the 1834 painting of its hookahs, carpets, and other exotic accouterments, as well as its



Figure 2. Delacroix, Eugene. *Arab Horseman at a Gallop*. 1840s. Oil on canvas. WikiPaintings. Web. March 19, 2013.

seductive interplay of colors, textures, and subtly bared flesh. In her photograph, these elements are replaced by pale neutral surfaces, webs of hennaed calligraphy, and veiled, wrapped or otherwise covered female figures (Figure 4). In this way, she reinstates what she describes as “the private space of the veil”¹¹ while emphasizing the self-containment of her female subjects, none of whom acknowledge or engage directly with the viewer. As the private space of her models is reinstated, the controlling gaze of the male artist long associated with Western Orientalist images of women is disrupted, and with it the voyeuristic experience suggested in Delacroix’s original image and stated blatantly in Picasso’s later variations on it executed in 1954–55. Essaydi’s subjects are further empowered by the performative nature of her photographs, which are a collaborative effort between the artist and her models, who are “family acquaintances” rather than hired professionals. The henna applications they undergo require hours of preparation, as do their rehearsals for the staging of the image to be photographed. The artist explains that

... despite the demanding process, the women in the photographs participate because they feel they are contributing to the greater emancipation of Arab women, and at the same time conveying to a Western audience a rich tradition often misunderstood in the West...¹²



Figure 3. Delacroix, Eugene. *The Women of Algiers*. 1834. Oil on canvas. Wikimedia Commons. Web. March 19, 2013.

The agency of Essaydi's subjects, in conjunction with the unique materials and techniques employed in her images, gives voice to both artist and models, who now "speak in the language of femininity to each other... just as my photographs have enabled me to speak."¹³ In Essaydi's re-vision of Delacroix's work, both the "forbidden gaze" (of the Western artist entering and representing the space of the harem normally unavailable to him) and "severed sound" (the agency or voice denied his female sitters) of the original painting are subverted. At the same time, the physical containment of her subjects "in their 'proper' place, a place bounded by walls and controlled by men,"¹⁴ recalls the restriction of women



Figure 4. Essayi, Lalla. *Les Femmes du Maroc #1*. 2005. Photograph. Lalla Essayi. *Les Femmes du Maroc*. Brooklyn, NY: powerHouse Cultural Entertainment Company, 2009. 21. Print. [*Les Femmes du Maroc #1*, scanned April 2, 2013] Permission to publish to be obtained.

within traditional Arab cultures and in doing so underscores Essaydi's desire to challenge all gender and cultural stereotypes, whatever their derivation.

While Essaydi's dialogue with Orientalism differs radically from that of Mr. Gabr,¹⁵ both underscore the ongoing impact of this discourse and the varied range of issues associated with it. As it continues to be revised within the varied contexts of scholarship, collecting, and the making of art, Orientalism remains a powerful, engaging, and controversial force in the cross-cultural dialogues of today's world.

REFERENCES

- [1] Edward Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books; 1978, 2.
- [2] Edward Said. *Orientalism*. 3.
- [3] Said Edward. *Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books; 1994.
- [4] Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge; 1994. See, for example, "The Other Question." 66–85.
- [5] Linda Nochlin. *The Imaginary Orient. The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth Century Art and Society*. Boulder, Co. Westview Press; 1989, 35.
- [6] Nochlin. "The Imaginary Orient." 35.
- [7] Nochlin. "The Imaginary Orient." 39. For a more recent consideration of Gerome's work, see Mary Morton, editor, *Reconsidering Gerome*. Los Angeles: Getty Publishing, 2010.
- [8] Quoted in Roger Benjamin, *Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee*. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997. 33.
- [9] Bill Turque. "Once-Reviled Orientalist Art Inspires Egyptian Industrialist to Improve East-West Relations." *The Washington Post*. February 21, 2013. Accessed: 1 March 2013 [<http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-02-21/entertainment/>].
- [10] Michel Lebrun. "Seeing Orientalist Art as an Aid to East-West Dialogue," *The New York Times* (November 29, 2012). Web 1 March 2013. [<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/29/seeing-orientalist-art-as-aid-to-east-west-dialogue>].
- [11] Lalla Essaydi. "Artist Statement," *Les Femmes du Maroc* (New York: Powerhouse Books, 2009), 17.
- [12] Essaydi. "Artist Statement." 16.
- [13] Essaydi. "Artist Statement." 17.
- [14] Assia Djebar. *The Women of Algiers in their Apartment*. Charlottesville, Va: University of Virginia Press, 1992. See final chapter: "Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound." (Djebar's literary re-vision of Delacroix's 1834 painting provides yet another perspective on the original image.).
- [15] Mr. Gabr's collecting practices surely reflect his interest in historical genre scenes, while Ms. Essaydi's most direct engagement is with many of the more "exotic" and provocative Orientalist images of women by artists such as Delacroix and Ingres. Their divergent interests underscore the wide range of subjects, styles, artists' experiences, etc. found in nineteenth-century Orientalist painting.