

ORIENTALIST IMAGERY IN THE VISUAL ARTS

By Tania Kamal El-Din

“The Orient,” Edward Said wrote, was “almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.”¹

His paradigm—Orientalism—analysed how the West studies, describes, and creates the ‘Orient’ that is inherently inferior to the West; and how the West’s knowledges about the Orient are bound up with its domination over it. “Orientalism establishes a set of polarities in which the Orient is characterised as irrational, exotic, erotic, despotic and heathen, thereby securing the West in contrast as rational, familiar, moral, just and Christian.”²

Said drew on travel literature, academic writing, and novels for his influential model. Much discourse followed Said’s work, articulating his model and insights, particularly in literature and visual arts.

I intend to examine the latter, specifically, how Americans have represented the Orient visually. I will show that some of the imagery reflects the denigration that Said implied but that there is also positive visual imagery. I will start with Orientalist paintings of the nineteenth century and conclude with American cinema.

“The East was a major preoccupation of nineteenth-century painting, an East which was, in turn, ‘Imagined, Experienced, Remembered’.”³ Artists travelled to the East in search of excitement, adventure and new sources of inspiration. European painters, especially the French, were engaged with the Orient much more than their American counterparts.

At that time, Americans regarded the Orient mostly as a traditional and monolithic culture in a pristine natural setting. “As such, it was a distant screen upon which the Protestant narrative could be reenacted, American values could be projected and nostalgia could be expressed.”⁴

Many American artists travelled to the East in search of religious panoramas for their canvases. One of the most famous painters was Frederick Church (1826-1900) who devoted much of his oeuvre to the Orient. His landscape painting, *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives* was prototypical of Biblical scenes.

Alternative to the religious Orient depicted by Church, there was the imaginary Orient of pleasures and fantasy, characterised by the *Arabian Nights*, or the *Thousand and One Nights*. Originally a massive body of oral literature, these stories transmogrified into several written incarnations and translations over a long period. “Readings from the Arabian Nights and similar literature preconditioned the American traveller even before journeying to the Orient and definitely shaped his attitude to things Oriental.”⁵

Sarah Haight, a travel writer from New York admitted to being torn between the “sacred associations” of the Orient and its charm. “I could scarcely believe it to be reality,” she remarked on her visit to Constantinople. “I confess I could only think of scenes of the Arabian Nights, or fancy myself dreaming over a page of Hajji Baba.”⁶

Bayard Taylor, one of the best-known American travel writers, embraced the imaginary Orient. For him the Orient was a masquerade and an adventure. In 1864, Frederick Church invited Taylor to join his Traveller's Club. It was basically a social club for "men of education and talent" who would get together to "spin their yarns" about their escapades abroad. Taylor made a lucrative career out of recounting his experiences of the exotic Orient to audiences on the lecture circuit as well as publishing them. His *Lands of the Saracen*, 1885, was among the most popular travelogues of the nineteenth century.

Such travel accounts inspired people, many of whom were artists, to travel eastward. Most of these travelling artists were white males from New England. Much of their work depicted the experiences and places that tourists would encounter.

Travel literature that dealt with the Orient was tremendously popular. In addition to books, there were copious articles and illustrations in periodicals describing travel experiences. The public's enthusiastic demand for such literature was due in part because it "titillated Victorian repression by sketching scenes forbidden to their own pallid novels."⁷

"Taylor provided audiences with an armchair experience of the Orient. He presented himself as a charismatic adventurer, causing Victorian women to swoon and becoming, in a straight-laced nineteenth-century way, a sort of sex symbol, anticipating the stardom of Rudolph Valentino, who also rose to fame in Arab dress."⁸

A daguerreotype of Taylor donning oriental attire was engraved for *Putnam's Magazine*. In addition to the publicity it gave him, he enjoyed dressing up in Arab costume. Cross-cultural dressing was not uncommon among Orientalists. It was a safe way to experience a different reality. On a more subtle level, it was a way to transgress national and gender identities. It was also a way to assimilate and empathise with the subject of one's painting.

William Sartain (1843-1924), for example, was an American painter who went "native" during his stay in Algiers. Sartain donned local Algerian garb and tried to learn Arabic so he could seek out "the curious things."

Sartain's painting of an Algerian water carrier epitomised the traditional, village life. Like many other Orientalist paintings, it resonated with nostalgia for the simpler way of life that preceded America's urbanisation and industrialisation.

The preeminent American painter Frederick Bridgman had two studios. "One was decorated in the ancient Egyptian style, the other was filled with palm trees, textiles, moucharabies, Islamic tiles and narghiles, creating a Thousand and One Nights atmosphere, in which he adored dressing himself up in Oriental costume."⁹

More than any other American Orientalist painter, Bridgman focussed on women as his subject matter. This was probably due to the influence of his French mentor, Jean-Leon Gerome (1824-1904). "The darling of the Orientalist movement and lion of international artistic circles, Jean-Leon Gerome was, of the most famous painters in the world."¹⁰

Gerome was notorious for his salacious harem and bath scenes. While this was acceptable to French viewers, most Americans were not as receptive. Bridgman was compelled to avoid painting graphic sexual themes to sell his work in the American market.

Victorian mores in the U.S. started to diminish by the beginning of the twentieth century. “The old order—agrarian, republican, and religious—was being replaced by a new society that was secular and market-driven. Outmoded standards of propriety and self-abnegation were being supplanted by the quest for pleasure, security, and material well-being.”¹¹

The Orient was reinvented for the America public. Orientalist paintings were on the decline; but other forms of imagery emerged which could be reproduced more readily and made available to mass consumers. This imagery appeared in popular magazines, decorative arts, photographs, fashion, and performing arts. Department stores and mail order catalogues used Orientalist imagery to sell clothes, candy, perfume, tobacco (Camel cigarettes still survive) and a plethora of consumer products, particularly targeting women.

“The stylistic convergence of Orientalist iconography with consumer trends has been well documented as part of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century marketing in department store displays and consumer packaging design that served as an exotic appeal to the fantasies of women and as a means of selling middle-class consumer goods.”¹²

Orientalist imagery was also widely disseminated through motion pictures. Film producers assimilated Orientalist influences and iconography that pervaded American popular culture. “Western narrative and ethnographic cinemas of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries inherited the narrative and visual traditions, as well as the cultural assumptions, on which Orientalism was based, and filmmakers discovered how popular Orientalism could be.”¹³

The Orient became a familiar cinematic backdrop for romance and adventure. Hollywood fabricated an eroticised and exoticised Orient, titillating audiences with lust and adventure in a desert setting. The desert landscape was a frequent verbal and visual motif in Orientalist films. In addition to being “undeveloped” and “primitive” and therefore in need of Western civilisation”, the desert provided an erotic dimension. “The barren land and the blazing sands metaphorize the exposed, unrepressed ‘hot’ uncensored passions of the orient.”¹⁴

In the 1920s, the Oriental stereotype on screen was a concoction of exoticism, eroticism, abduction, banditry, revenge and slavery.

The Sheik (1921) became a blockbuster hit and catapulted Rudolph Valentino into stardom. The movie was a prime example of miscegenation (sex relations between whites and non-whites) where Valentino as the lusty sheik set out to seduce a young, fair woman. A New York Times reviewer assured readers that “You won’t be offended by having a white girl marry an Arab, for the sheik really isn’t a native of the desert at all.”¹⁵ At the end of the film, the sheik is revealed to be the son of an English lord; thus miscegenation is averted and consummation between the couple is OK.

The resounding success of *The Sheik* inaugurated more hotblooded, swashbuckling melodramas including *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924). The figure of the sheik became a popular masculine icon while harem and dancing girls became female icons for the Orient. The harem, traditionally an exclusively female domain, was continuously being violated by men in cinematic narratives. The topos of the harem drew on a long history of Orientalist fantasies.

In addition to harem girls, the most frequently cast role for women in Hollywood's imaginary Orient was dancing girls. Their eroticised performances were a melange of Arab, Persian, Chinese, and Indian dances. "These melanges recall the frequent superimposition within Orientalist painting of visual traces of civilisations as diverse as Arab, Persian, Chinese, and Indian—a painterly version of the musical's "mark of the plural."¹⁶ By lumping various cultures together, American cinema fabricated a collective portrayal of the exotic East. This blurring of cultural difference was conducive to creating the 'Other'.

In the forties, the screen adaptation of *Arabian Nights* (1942) garnered millions of box office dollars. It spawned several movies including *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, the *Sinbad* series, and *Cobra Woman*, which all featured the predictable cliched cast of harems, dancing girls and despots.

In the fifties, Hollywood produced biblical epics, comedies, and musicals with Oriental settings. In the early sixties, a new cinema genre emerged in which Orientals were frequently portrayed as kidnapers, terrorists, and hijackers. These negative images have prevailed in American cinema until now.

American Orientalism has changed over time. Artists engaged with the Orient have rendered it visually in various ways. At the height of the painting genre in the 1870s and 1880s, the imagery was mostly a pictorial record of artistic exploration and tourism. At the end of the nineteenth century, Orientalist painting started to diminish. By the beginning of the twentieth century Orientalist imagery was disseminated through media of mass production, particularly cinema. As the United States grew into a leading global power and developed an increasingly imperialistic agenda, Orientalist imagery became more negative.

ENDNOTES

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979) 1.

² Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1996) 16.

³ John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) 44.

⁴ Holly Edwards, *Noble Dreams Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 17.

⁵ Fuad Sha'ban, *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought: The Roots of Orientalism in America* (Durham: The Acorn Press, 1991) 179.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁸ Holly Edwards, *Noble Dreams Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 120.

⁹ Lynne Thornton, *The Orientalists* (Paris: ACR Edition Internationale, 1983) 172.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹ Holly Edwards, *Noble Dreams Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 40.

¹² Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds., *Visions of the East* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997) 103.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, eds. *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (London: Routledge, 1994) 148.

¹⁵ Lawrence Michalak, "The Arab in American Cinema: A Century of Otherness" *Cineaste*, vol. 17, no.1 (1989), p.3.

¹⁶ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, eds. *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (London: Routledge, 1994) 158.