ORIENTALISM: *A COLONIAL PROJECT*

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Abstract:

Different modes of representations in the Western world worked to advance a political and imperial agenda that foregrounded European dominance and superiority over the Oriental "other." In the nineteenth century there were various novel ways in which the West could map out and organize the world as a visual spectacle, one that objectified Eastern cultures in order to emphasize and assert European power and progress. This emphasis on the spectacle is not just engaged with the perpetuated representations of the East, but with the hierarchical social relationships mediated by these representations, defining social and cultural relations through the construction of otherness. Western representations and visual spectacles of the Orient consequently posit the East as a lesser paradoxical other in contrast to the Occident. It is further important to note the two phases of orientalism covered in the nineteenth century and their respective impacts; the first of which demonstrates the emerging interest in the fantasy of the orient born from the Romantic movement, while the latter pertains to European imperial interest in the late nineteenth century. These ideas will be discussed and critiqued using the 1855 and 1889 Paris World Fairs, romantic literature and poetry, travel accounts, and works by romanticists and orientalists, namely Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Léon Gérôme, as case studies for evaluating and understanding the West's simultaneous objectification and eroticization of the East. These examples further support the argument that European visual culture in the nineteenth century had consciously perpetuated harmful stereotypes in line with a larger colonial project not just to establish dominance, but also to impart false "objective truths" and create order within the world.

In 1855, the Exposition Universelle was held in Paris during the reign of Napoleon III, demarcating the early beginnings of the Second French Empire. More generally, the exhibition had been an opportunity to display French authority, militant and economic prowess, wealth, and technological advancement, declaring France a key player on the world stage. The exposition also presented the way in which European countries had organized the world. It had proved that the image of the orient stretched beyond literature and art, and was subsumed in larger scale national projects including, museums, theatres, zoos, fashion, architecture, and education.[1] Visited by over five million people, the sheer scale and popularity of the Exposition enforced the expansion of orientalism's influence and the West's obsession with organizing the world.[2]

The construction and representation of otherness strategically works to establish imperial hierarchy, and is also imperative in defining, ordering, and representing the position and power of European countries on a global scale. It thereby creates an exhibitionist order within the world. This defining and subsequent ordering is characterized by absence. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault has argued that different moments in history are defined by absolute truths, which ground civilization and determine the "acceptable," further claiming that the period of enlightenment had encouraged classification.[3] The ability to create hierarchies and relationships allows us to make sense of the world and to compare the civilized to the uncivilized. Foucault discusses how this -arbitrary- system of ordering the world was governed by a rationale that was a product of perpetuated prejudice: "To know what properly appertains to one individual is to have before one the classification -or the possibility of classifying- all others."[4] This idea of classification that ushers in new political systems also perpetuates cognitive shortcuts and stereotypes. Through the lens of orientalism, Eastern cultures become misunderstood in deliberate ways by European societies. Scientific classification methods born out of the Enlightenment had consequently promoted representation through comparative means of interpreting information, generating a limited vocabulary for understanding the world. In the case

[1] Carter V. Findley, "An Ottoman Occidentalist in Europe," *The American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 16.
[2] Ibid, 37.
[3] Michel Foucault, *The order of things* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1974), xi-xxiv.
[4] Ibid, 157-158.

of the Orientalists, the Orient becomes an imaginary staging realm designated to explain what Europe is *not*.

The Orient was exploited and put on display for pleasure and consumption. World fairs, such as the Exposition Universelle, sought to represent a truthful view of the world through new classification systems. Many buildings, objects, and people were put on display and organized according to ethnographic and anthropological research.[5] Timothy Mitchell has called the strategy of these fairs an "exhibitionary order," rendering these people and their cultures on display as objects for consumption.[6] Exhibits were organized from the least to the most civilized societies, almost to be read as a narrative. A country's assigned pavilion in the fairs was therefore dependent on its political and economic status, as cultures that were deemed primitive were relegated to amusement zones.[7] This emphasizes that official progressive world cultures were appreciated and seen as civilized, while others were exotified and viewed as forms of entertainment.[8] People from these nations were hired as entertainers to sit in reproduced villages and put their lives on display. Upon looking at accounts written by Arab visitors of the 1889 Paris Exposition, it becomes clear that the exhibitions went beyond solely depicting representations of the world. Instead, there was a sense that the world was intentionally organized as a set of exhibitions. This created a fabricated reality that imposed a false image of the *other,* enforcing national identity, order, imperial motive, and certainty. The exposition thus presented an example of second phase orientalism that is largely directed towards asserting imperial order. The visitors' accounts of the exposition are particularly interesting in that they provide us with descriptions of their experience with their *own* otherness. En route to the Eighth International Congress of Orientalists in Stockholm, four members of the Egyptian delegation had stopped in Paris, visiting the 1889 Exposition.[9] After visiting the Egyptian exhibit, one delegation member had noted the carefully curated surroundings claiming, "Even the paint on the buildings was made dirty."[10] This was intentional on part of the French. The Egyptian exhibit was carefully constructed in a way that represented the chaotic clamor and discord of the old streets of Cairo, presenting a stark contrast in comparison to the exhibits of western countries, containing clean linear streets, refined architecture, and well-planned layouts.[11] In addition to this, a mosque –resembling the Qaytbay mosque- had been built.[12] However, this too was a deceitful display that essentialized and exotified both Muslim and Egyptian culture as the mosque solely stood as an architectural façade, its interior functioning as a café with female dancers dressed in "Arabian inspired" costumes: "…The interior had been set up as a coffee house, where Egyptian girls preformed dances with young males, and dervishes whirled."[13] What claimed to be authentic was therefore instead a fantasy projection of a foreign culture with its people exotified and essentialized. Such a phenomenon is highly problematic, both as it evidences a lack of respect for other cultures and also as it simplifies the "other" for domination and violent subjugation.

After their stop in Paris, the Egyptian Delegation had resumed their journey to Stockholm where they were greeted with amicable curiosity, and even christened as "Bona fide Orientals."[14] A European member had noted that they [the Egyptians] were treated as "a collection of *Orientals*, not of *Orientalists*," further proving the notion of exhibitionary order as a means to organize the world for the European subject.[15] Nevertheless, all these accounts share some clear commonalities: the European gaze, characterized by the uncontrollable need to stare and observe, and the discomfort and humiliation felt by non-European visitors (as experienced by visiting their national pavilions at Expositions). The urge to stare at other cultures stems from the idea of exhibitionary order, in which cultures and individuals are aligned with objects for consumption, to satisfy and fulfill a European curiosity and fantasy. The fantasy in turn informs us more about the people fantasizing [Europeans] as opposed to the actual other. It thus aids in the construction of a perceived European identity in which the image of the civilized European proliferates specifically as a contrast to the

[5] Paul Starkey and Janet Starkey, *Travellers in Egypt* (London: I.B Tauris, 2001), 7-11.
[6] Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order" in *Colonialism and Culture,* ed. Nicholas b. Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 290.
[7] Ibid, 296-297.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Paul Starkey and Janet Starkey, *Travellers in Egypt* (London: I.B Tauris, 2001), 9.
[10] Muhammad Amin Fikri, Irshad al-alibba' ila mahasin Urubba (Cairo, 1892), 128.
[11] Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order" in *Colonialism and Culture,* ed. Nicholas b. Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 291.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Muhammad Amin Fikri, *Irshad al-alibba' ila mahasin Urubba* (Cairo, 1892), 136.
[14] Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order" in *Colonialism and Culture,* ed. Nicholas b. Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 291.
[15] Ibid.

essentialized other.[16] The dualism of "Self" and "Other" and their comparison -which is essential to projecting this new image of the West- therefore plays a key role in this attribution.
The curiosity for the Orient had inevitably led to many European travelers visiting these foreign lands. In examining European travel accounts, there is a noticeable sense of shock, even disappointment upon viewing the reality of the Orient. Within these accounts travelers attempt to reconstruct their new surroundings and pair their lived experience with the false Orientalist representations that had been ingrained in the minds of European subjects. The exoticism and essentialism of Orientalism had constructed an unrealistic image of the East, resulting in disappointment when viewing the reality of these spaces. As a result, European accounts and works of art had often combined different Eastern customs and cultures to form a subaltern realm of fantasy.[17] This point is articulated by the French anthropologist Claude-Levi Strauss in his book Tristes Tropiques: "I can understand the mad passion for travel books and their deceptiveness. They create the illusion of something which no longer exists but still should exist."[18] The disappointment and shock is clearly revealed in Gustave Flaubert's letters to colleagues during his trip to Cairo: "What can I say? How can I write to you about it? I have scarcely recovered from my initial astonishment…. it's an astounding hubbub of color, and your poor old imagination, as if it were at a firework display, is perpetually dazzled."[19] Such accounts amongst European travelers in the nineteenth century were common, as the majority struggled to view cities as comprehensible whole images. Certainty was replaced by unfamiliarity and discord as the "exhibitionary order" proved to be uncontrollable in the reality of the other. The ultimate struggle for the European visitor was their inability to capture the reality in a single visual image. This is unsettling as western domination and self-recognition were dependent on the construction, order, and regulation of an Oriental pictorial certainty.[20]
With the Romantic Movement, there was a clear interest in travel and the emotions and sensations experienced through exploration. The mysticism and intrigue evoked by the fantasy of the orient had particularly interested romanticists, which had led to a burgeoning of romantic literature and poetry that addressed themes of imagined travel. Poems include Charles Baudelaire's "L'invitation au Voyage" in Fleurs du Mal, a poem which showcases the fascination with the mystery and timelessness of the orient through its use of evocative phrases such as, "la splendeur orientale" and "le monde s'endort" when describing a faraway land.[21] Victor Hugo was another poet who, like Baudelaire, did not travel but instead depended on travel accounts by scholars such as Flaubert, Gérard de Nerval, and Théophile Gautier, in order to compose an oriental realm in his poems.[22] A collection of Hugo's poems were published in "Les Orientales" (1829), which served as a key source for artists of the era, aiding in their construction of a distant land fabricated by the collective imagination of orientalists.[23] Hugo's poems were largely based on the subject of the 1821 Greek War of Independence, thus addressing contemporaneous events that speak to a romantic sensibility and longing for an exotic land.[24]

Fig. 1. Eugène Delacroix, The Death of Sardanapalus, 1827, oil on canvas, 3.92 m x 4.96 m., Paris, The Louvre

Hugo had even acknowledged his subconscious penchant for the colourful and exotic in his preface: "Il resulte… que l'Orient, soit comme image, soit comme pensée, est devenu, pour les intelligences autant que pour les imaginations, une sorte de préoccupation générale à laquelle l'auteur de ce livre

[16] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 6.
[17] Albert Memmi and Howard Greenfeld, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (London: Souvenir Press, 2016), 123-124.
[18] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).
[19] Gustave Flaubert, *Flaubert in Egypt* (London: Michael Haag, 1983), 79.
[20] Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order" in *Colonialism and Culture,* ed. Nicholas b. Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 304.
[21] Peter Broome, *Baudelaire's Poetic Patterns* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 253-254.
[22] Maria João Castro, "The Fascination of the Orient in Travel, Literature and Painting," International Journal of Humanities and Management Sciences 4, no. 2 (2016): 153.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Denis Hollier, and Howard Bloch*, A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 700.

a obéi peut-être à son insu."[25] Hugo's work thus drew from the discourse of orientalism, employing literary devices in order to construe (or misconstrue) a false reality.

Literature, poetry and travel accounts had therefore provided a narrative for French artists, paving the way for a realized visualization of these written fantasies. Delacroix's 1827 painting titled *The Death of Sardanapalus* presents the translation from the literary to the visual. Inspired by Lord Byron's 1821 play *Sardanapalus,* Delacroix's canvas depicts *Sardanapalus*, the last king of Assyria, reclining on his extravagant bed amidst the chaotic slaughtering of slaves, concubines, and horses.[26] The despot stares apathetically, depicted at an "Orientalizing distance," as his indulgent lifestyle comes to a halt with his possessions, ornaments and treasures being destroyed along with him.[27] In terms of understanding Delacroix's composition and subject matter from an orientalist lens, the eastern fantasy of violence, sex, and excess becomes clear. It becomes a source of voyeuristic pleasure for a European audience, albeit taboo. Coupled with France's increasing military and imperial conquests of the time, the desire to colonize and correct eastern cultures was at its peak.[28] While *The Death of Sardanapalus* was clearly a history painting of an event from the seventh century BCE, its orientalist treatment gives it a sense of timelessness. Upon further considering its reception at the Salon of 1828, it is no surprise that it had angered viewers. The painting presents the pinnacle of corruption, culminating in a gory funerary pyre that is antithetical to the nobility and structured regularity of neoclassical works (figure 4).

The political and historical context of France is significant when considering Delacroix's painting, particularly France's longstanding tradition of antiroyalism and collective protest against the sexual perversity and excess of French royalty and aristocracy.[29] It is not unusual to therefore consider the figure of Sardanapalus as a metaphor for French royal authority (and to suggest that the painting would have been perceived as such at the time).

While Sardanapalus' corrupt gaze is all too familiar with that of the French monarchy, he is still primarily viewed with an "orientalized remoteness."[30] Delacroix's imagery thus prompted French ideas of oriental savagery and idleness that had in turn empowered the European psyche, fueling revolutionary protests in tandem with their desire to correct these regressive nations.[31] Todd Porterfield has similarly argued, "France could destroy itself by continuing the struggle over the Revolution or divert its attention to intervention in the East. The revolutionary passion and the nationalistic passion were the two major currents in French society. Only the nationalistic passion, expressed through intervention in the East, would bring order at home."[32] As a result, it is imperative to consider Delacroix's painting alongside France's political and imperial state and consider how such imagery would have impelled racist attitudes whilst boosting colonial strategies and conquests.

Fig.4. Jacques-Louis David, The Oath of the Horatii, 1784, oil on canvas, 3.26 m x 4.2 m., Paris, The Louvre.

Works taking on oriental imagery continued to circulate throughout Europe and became increasingly popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. Paintings began to develop a realistic visualization of a cultural imaginary that perpetuated harmful stereotypes and prejudiced views of what the East signified in Western cultural spheres.[33] This was evidently shaped by attitudes of Western imperialism, making the work political in its nature. Therefore,

[25] Richard B. Grant, "Sequence and Theme in Victor Hugo's Les Orientales," Modern Language Association Stable 94, no. 5 (1979): 894-895.
[26] Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Counterrevolution, 1815-1848* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 228-229.
[27] Natalie Harris Bluestone, *Double Vision* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995), 23.
[28] Ibid, 25.
[29] Elisabeth A. Fraser, "Delacroix's Sardanapalus," French Historical Studies, 26, no. 2 (2003): 320.
[30] Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2010), 43.
[31] Elisabeth A. Fraser, "Delacroix's Sardanapalus," French Historical Studies, 26, no. 2 (2003): 321.
[32] Todd Porterfield, *The Allure of Empire* (N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 117–19.
[33] Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2010), 33.

when viewing orientalist productions, one must be critical as it is not an objective depiction of truth, but rather a distortion of reality produced to further a European political agenda. The inaccuracy of these cultural representations functions as discrimination and domination through its creation or classification of inferior cultures. This is clearly demonstrated in Gérôme's *Snake Charmer*, painted in 1870. During the late nineteenth century, Gérôme was praised for his objectivity and detailed depiction in his paintings, even termed a "scientific picture-maker."[34] In an 1873 issue of The California Art Gallery, an American Critic declared that "Gérôme has the reputation of being one of the most studious and conscientiously accurate painters of our time… it is alleged that he never paints a picture without the most patient and exhaustive studies of every matter connected with his subject."[35] In her 1989 article titled "The Imaginary Orient," Linda Nochlin has thoroughly scrutinized the point of Gérôme's authenticity and realism, questioning whose reality is being rendered.[36] Nochlin further argues that Gérôme's realistic mode of representation and attention to detail is in fact what allowed this unrealistic scene, infused with sexual exoticism, to posit itself as an accurate pictorial representation of the east.[37] It is important to emphasize that this painting -as well as countless other Orientalist productions- speaks to a European fantasy or notion of the East, further delineating what the West is *not* as opposed to truly depicting reality.

Nochlin states that within Gérôme's *Snake Charmer,* time stands still.[38] This timeless world is embedded with ideas of regression and primitivism; both commonly held opinions of the East at the time, which in turn worked to emphasize progress in the Western world. This perception is evident in the writing of British painter, David Roberts, who visited Cairo in 1838: " Splendid cities, once teeming with a busy population and embellished with…edifices, the wonder of the world, now deserted and lonely, or reduced by mismanagement and the barbarism of the Moslem creed, to a state as savage as the wild animals by which they are surrounded."[39] Upon looking at Gérôme's Snake Charmer with such a context in mind, it becomes clear that the painting is not merely an exotified representation or pastiche of Eastern cultures, nor is it a quasi-scientific documentation of a real space; instead it is reference to the Muslim peoples with emphasis on their "barbaric nature" as they choose to literally charm snakes while their nations fall into a pit of ignorance, regression, and neglect.[40]

Fig.2. Jean-Léon Gérôme, The Snake Charmer, 1879, oil on canvas, 84 cm x 122 cm., Williamstown, Massachusetts, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

While *The Death of Sardanapalus* and *The Snake Charmer* both represent oriental subjects in their works, their formal treatment and reception widely differ. An apparent reason for this is that they were produced at different times with different political contexts. Delacroix's canvas, romantic in its nature, presents a chaotic outpouring of death and destruction, while Gérôme's Snake Charmer is constructed in a regular, geometric plane with a hyper-realistic treatment of forms. The former privileges emotion over logic and pictorial realism, while the latter boasts its realistic accuracy so much that the artist tries to remove any evidence of their mark in order to lend authenticity to the scene. Thus, Gérôme's realism and naturalism becomes a vehicle of authenticity. Inversely, Delacroix's sketch-like execution makes his work appear more fantastical. The erotic nature of the nude female bodies coupled with the violence projected onto them is nothing short of a sadistic fantasy inherent in male fantasies of domination and possession of female bodies.[41] Critics had repeatedly commented on the perversity, insanity, and lack of construction and coherence within *The Death of Sardanapalus* as being a clear reflection of the undisciplined and perverse nature of Delacroix himself. In an 1828 issue of Journal des Débats, the French critic Etienne-Jean Delécluze

[34] Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision,* 37.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid, 38.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid, 35-36.
[39] Kenneth Bendiner, "The Portrayal of the Middle East in British Painting 1835-1860" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1979), 110-111.

[40] Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2010), 39.
[41] Ibid, 43.

claimed that the work "did not possess grace," and that the painting was a "mistake."[42] In his review, Delécluze had mainly scrutinized the swarming composition of the canvas, calling it "disjointed," as the spectator's eye is unable to "disentangle" or unravel the work due to its "confusion of line and colour."[43] The critic Augustin Jal had claimed that "He [Delacroix] has given himself to Sardanapalus with passion, with feeling, and unfortunately, in the delirium of his creation, he has been carried away beyond all limits."[44] Gérôme on the other hand held an objective standpoint, making his "oriental erotica" (See Gérôme's *Slave Market,* figure 3) acceptable due to its factual and journalistic objectivity. Nochlin makes the argument that Gérôme's style (that is, pseudo-objectivity via realism) had justified his subject matter, whereas Delacroix's subjectivity, emotive brushstrokes and dizzying composition had caused heads to turn.[45] Nevertheless, both paintings were Orientalizing in their nature, inviting a moralizing French voyeur to cast judgment on the idleness and corruption of eastern cultures, and arguably asserting the nobility of the quest to colonize, modernize and correct these "primitive" cultures. Such tableaus had helped formulate and visualize these pre-conceived and misinformed notions of the east, aiding in the European creation of order within a world in which they are able to lead.

Overall, Orientalizing language and representation was relentlessly used to construct European national identity and construe cultural differences through a supposedly objective and empirical ordering of the world.[46] It is important to consider that the Western portrayal of the East also sought to create an oriental political reality in order to establish colonial order.

[42] Étienne-Jean Delécluze, "Beaux Arts: Salon de 1827," *Journal des Débats*, Mar. 21, 1828.
Quote: "Le Sardanapale de M. Delacroix n'a trouvé grace ni devant le public ni devant les artistes. Valuement l'on a cherché à faire resortir les idées spirituelles que l'auteur a eues en composant ce tableau; l'intelligence du spectateur n'a pu penetrer dans un sujet dont tous les details sont isolés ou l'oeil ne peut debrouiller la confusion des lignes et des coleurs et où les premières règles de l'art semblent avoir été isolées de parti pris. Le Sardanapale est une erreur du peintre."
[43] Ibid.
[44] Augustin Jal, *Esquisses, Croquis, Pochades* (Paris, 1828), 312–313. Quote: "C'est de tout son coeur qu'il faut son Sardanapaleil y est allé de passion, de sentiment, et malheureusement, dans le délire de sa création il a été emporté au- delà de toutes les bornes."
[45] Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2010), 43-44.
[46] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 240.

This reality was constructed in complete opposition to Western civilization and, as Edward Said has argued, "sought to excise the European presence altogether."[47] Representations demarcating the East were therefore chaotic as opposed to orderly, passive rather than active, and emotional rather than rational.[48] Even in the case of Gérôme, whose compositions were seemingly rational and realistic, one must question whose reality is being rendered. While it is a form of discrimination and control, the subjugation of Eastern cultures and their depiction of "otherness" concurrently acts as a form of affirmation for the West, allowing them to create order in a world (in which they are dominant) by defining the East in terms of what they are *not,* imparting a kind of absence in Eastern cultures. Western representations and visual spectacles of the Orient consequently posit the East as a lesser paradoxical other in contrast to the Occident.

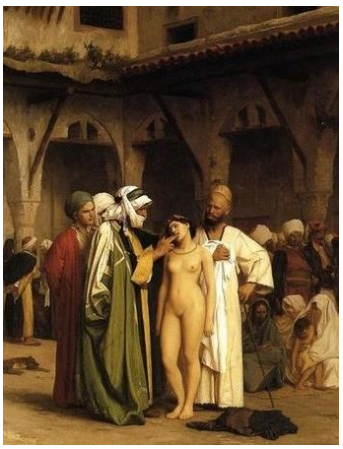

Fig.3. Jean-Léon Gérôme, The Slave Market, 1866, oil on canvas, 84.6 cm × 63.3 cm., Williamstown, Massachusetts, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

Two phases of orientalism have been surveyed in order to understand its development in European, specifically French, culture and art. Upon considering both the 1855 and 1889 World Fairs, it becomes clear that French representations of Eastern cultures were increasingly becoming staged to fulfill a personal agenda that privileged French control and superiority. Travel accounts and poems by romanticists and orientalists alike further projected the European obsession and intrigue with the East. Finally, comparing a painter of the Romantic Movement to an

[47] Ibid, 168.
[48] Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order" in *Colonialism and Culture,* ed. Nicholas b. Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 289.

Orientalist has presented us with several differences, particularly in terms of their respective critical receptions. It is clear that orientalism grew out of the Romantic Movement through its way of feeling as described by Baudelaire. The romantic fascination with the exotic and sensuous coupled with its interest in travel had paved the way for an orientalist art that transformed such a curiosity and intrigue into racist stereotypes and orders that still resonate today, harmful to Middle-Eastern, South Asian, and North African cultures that continue to be marginalized and essentialized through the lens of Orientalism, thus requiring us to be critical and mindful of the origins of these ideas and representations.

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