

Orientalism and the Visual Arts: A New Formulation

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The representations of the East have always occupied an outstanding place in the imagination and the work of many Western artists who, fascinated by that world, have applied their discoveries to European tradition. However, the interpretation of Eastern culture and landscapes has been made based on a biased and imperialist view. The exhibition “The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting” explores this interpretation, which makes clear the need to apply visual studies research to the fields of thought. Exhibitions of this kind are essential to promote an interdisciplinary conception of artistic representations.

This article seeks to set out the reasons why “The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting” is one of the best exhibitions of Orientalist painting held to date. It opened in February 2008 at the Yale Center in New Haven (United States) and then moved to the Tate Britain in London and to the Pera Museum in Istanbul and finally to the Sharjah Art Museum (United Arab Emirates) where it will close in April 2009. “The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting” is an excellent exhibition for two reasons. For the first time – the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona dealt with the issue with “Fantasies of the Harem and New Scheherazades”, in 2005, but only applied to the harem – an exhibition of painting from the 17th to the 20th centuries has been organised featuring pictorial materials in the light of the analysis defended by E.W. Said. In other words, the interpretation of the East by the West based on an imperialist and biased view. The development and relevance of visual studies over the last 20 years reveal the need to apply the research in the fields of philosophy and thought not only to textual but

also to visual representations. This displacement is greatly enriching because it adds the conclusions of another language to the study, in this case of the East. By going beyond their own spheres, the literary and pictorial fields can return with a renewed vision with which to challenge themselves. In this respect, they complement and help, rather than resembling or excluding, each other. In short, there will be a progress towards a comparative and interdisciplinary study, as all artistic representations will be researched at the same level.

The second reason for the interest of this exhibition is that it poses a narrative yet to be written and which is undoubtedly rooted in the previous approach started by Said; in other words, that there is *another Orientalism* or path through the impartial representations of the East, such as the erudite, scientific, etc. In this case, the exhibition contrasts French Orientalist painting considered, according to the catalogue, as a projection of the desires and the imaginary which is more distanced from reality than the British. It is also true that, while in Great Britain for a long time the classical



T.E. Lawrence by Augustus John, 1919.



Lord Byron by Thomas Phillips, 1813.

method of perspective in three modules was dominant, in France this practice was rejected in favour of the subjectivity of the vision. The elements that characterise British Orientalist painting are: the decorative and quotidian ornamental detail, the absence of a masculine dominant figure, the spacious interiors, and the presence of observers of the daily scenes in the paintings and of women who interact socially, among others. To this we should add that the painters are mainly travellers who spend long periods in the cities, which undoubtedly results in another type of representation of places.

The exhibition features, through more than 100 paintings by the most outstanding British painters, responses to the inhabitants, cities and landscapes of Cairo, Istanbul and Jerusalem, destinations at that time under Ottoman control, where they arrive via Morocco, Spain, Greece and the Balkans. In this context, the East refers to those Eastern Mediterranean regions which can be reached with relative ease, especially after the development of the

steamboat and railway in the 1830s. In these mainly Islamic cities, British artists try, on the one hand, to find images which illustrate their visions and, on the other, to apply to their work a culture impregnated with compositional traditions. To them it is not easy to abandon these practices despite the apparent disparity of the people and the places they encounter on their journeys. For this reason, the exhibition focuses on the range of pictorial options that artists have within their reach. Among these, the following stand out: the work of G. Hamilton, *James Dawkins and Robert Wood Discovering the Ruins of Palmyra*; the portraits of *Lord Byron* by T. Phillips and of *Lawrence of Arabia* by A. John; *The Slave Market in Constantinople* by W. Allan; the *Panoramic View of the Ancient City of Baalbek in Lebanon* by D. Roberts; the *Flight Out of Egypt* by R. Dadd, and *Harem Life in Constantinople* by J.F. Lewis.

“The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting” is structured in six sections. The thematic axis focuses on the points of greater inter-

est today for research on the East and thereby it advances a thesis to apply to its study. The first section is devoted to Eastern portraiture or how aristocrats and intellectuals disguise themselves with Eastern dress. This is a theme of great interest, mainly in anthropological terms, which shows the staging of a determined search or flight from identity. Although private journeys from Great Britain to the East are rare before 1830, those undertaken for reasons of trade, diplomacy, religion and war are indeed more frequent. Travellers disguise themselves to feel more secure, to pass unseen or show their sincere solidarity with the culture whose dress they wear. Perhaps the most interesting case is when they portray themselves with the attire that they wear or buy in the East once they have returned home. From the mid-20th century, few travellers disguise themselves with Eastern clothes, influenced by the fact that the Ottoman, Turkish and Egyptian cultures are adopting the Western style in their architecture, design and dress. Nevertheless, some British artists chose to portray themselves wearing Eastern clothes, perhaps to suggest their authority as Orientalist painters to Western viewers. The contemplation of the portraits of *Lord Byron* (1814) by T. Phillips, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1920) by A. John, *Lady Montagu* (1775) by J. Richardson, and *Mrs. Baldwin* (1782) by J. Reynolds, shows the fascination with the East and awareness of its difference.

The next section features genre scenes, which represent details of the daily life of the Orientalist painters. Through these paintings, British society can analyse itself and, specifically, reflect on the petty dramas of domestic life. The interiors show the feminine social spaces free of the tensions between genders which appear in the traditional paintings of domestic scenes. The third section, "The Holy City", brings together the representation of Jerusalem based on the biblical and therefore imaginary geographies, as well as the difficulty

of undertaking this representation, which is resolved by painting the geographies through their similarity with British architecture. Jerusalem symbolises a yearned for destination, impregnated with biblical antiquity. The reality of the modern appearance of the city only starts to be familiar through the images brought by the artists from their journeys, around 1840. When comparing them with the preconceived idea they have of the city, most of the painters are disappointed by what they see.

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"Mapping the Orient" is a small and interesting section exhibiting photographs of Eastern cities between 1850 and 1920, with the aim of comparing the pictorial and photographic realities. While European Orientalist painters seek to present an anachronistic and atemporal East, a period of change and development starts in the Middle East with the expansion and later fall of the Ottoman Empire. The maps, photographs and plans of the cities illustrate this change, as well as how a determined visual culture is constructed. The important phenomenon of Western photographers who established their studios in the Middle East and their influence remains to be researched.

The fifth section, "Harem and Home", presents a new analysis which is added to those existing on this prohibited space of Islam and the synthesis of the desires of the West towards the East. Its most outstanding element is the possibility of seeing, for the first time and in public, the harem of H. Brownie. This is a feminine space, painted by a woman, which shows another story of Orientalism which has not yet been told, that of the feminine narrative of the interior and private spaces, prohibited to other eyes. We should not forget the low number of women travelling in com-



Interior of a Mosque, Afternoon Prayer
by John Frederick Lewis, before 1857.

parison to men. Between 1500 and 1763 there is documentation of only one trip by a woman to the East, while between 1763 and 1801 there were 100 and, between 1801 and 1900, from 200 to 400. The exhibition ends with “The

Orient in Perspective”, an interesting section studying the debt that the conventions of the representations of the European landscape owe to Orientalist painting. British painters, greatly interested in landscape, when travelling to the East felt constrained to introduce architecture in the paintings. For better composition, they enlarged the painting and broadened the angle of vision, the latter for fear of the landscape not fitting in the painting, fascinated as they were by architecture. This is exemplified in the *veduta* of Cairo (1839) by D. Roberts.

The concerns aroused by this exhibition are so many that it is difficult to focus on a single one. There is the representation of the East in pre-Raphaelite painting, which introduced the practice of painting shadows and colours from purple. Something similar happens with the utopias and the embryonic socialism, which turned the East into the source of their metaphors, or A. Melville’s discovery and his definitive contributions to the history of watercolour. However, above all, the exhibition reflects a thesis on which to focus: that Orientalist painting should not be studied only based on its Eastern theme or contents but on its formal contributions. For instance, we should study its influence on the pictorial representation of the nude in the second half of the 19th century (Ingres, Renoir) or the backgrounds in paintings (Matisse), which from ornamental became conceptual, as in Islam itself.