

# Mediterranean Artists as Footnotes: On Exhibitions and Other Forms of Culture

**Patricia Almarcegui.** Writer and Lecturer in Comparative Literature, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya

European culture programmes have finally begun regularly including exhibitions about the East. Thanks to the curiosity and need for knowledge that this cardinal point has awakened for more than two decades, these exhibitions have become the most pertinent way of getting to know the culture and society. This is due to both the visual and tangible nature of the exhibitions, which bring a more truthful approach to reality. Thus, to understand the West it is necessary to understand the East and, to this end, we must seek out what they shared in a common past. European culture exists insofar as it relates with others and joins part of a world dimension. This is how, among many other things, it is being revealed, firstly, that the East and the West have not been as distanced or separated as certain intelligentsia have sought to argue, and, secondly, how culture and its forms or representations continue to be the most outstanding meeting places for understanding this relationship.

To explore this issue further, I will describe three exhibitions recently held in the cities of

Lyon, Rome and Granada. Different from each other and, therefore, complementary, all of them develop and enrich research on the East. The first took place at the Lyon Museum of Fine Arts. Under the title “The Genius of the East” and the more specific catalogue title of *Islamophilies. L'Europe moderne et les arts de l'Islam*,<sup>1</sup> it displayed over 200 objects in the French city from 2nd April to 4th July 2011. The aim, which was to show the new visual code brought about by Islamic arts in the 19th century during the change experienced by decorative arts in the industrial era, is fully achieved. Europeans were always interested one way or another in Islamic arts, but it was not until the arrival of the Industrial Revolution, which obliged a rethinking of art as a whole, when the relations established with Islam were really understood. Lyon, a bourgeois city par excellence, played a determining role in this respect. Fully immersed in industrial development and banking, the bourgeoisie enjoyed being surrounded by objects that showed off their power and wealth. From 1860, many col-

---

1. Rémi Labrusse, *Islamophilies. L'Europe moderne et les arts de l'Islam*, Paris, Somogy, 2011.

lectors, such as Albert Goupil, Émile Guimet and Édouard Aynard, were passionate about objects from Islamic Spain, Maghreb, Egypt or Turkey, as well as the Near and Middle East. Hence, the art market and private collections gradually contributed to showing a new perspective and a new understanding.

*Travellers, photographers and collectors were fascinated by a new visual culture at a moment when the history of representation was in crisis*

At the time of reform of decorative arts in France and Great Britain, Islamic art emerged as the perfect union between art and science. Theoreticians of decoration and ornamentation and certain avant-garde artists sought in it a new aesthetics which could transform the codes of Western representation. However, for many, industrial society turned out to be unbearable. Hence, such a revolution coexisted at the same time as the fruitful evasion movement or painting trend, well-known today, of Orientalism, in which the reality of the East became distanced and European sensual imagery was projected. For this reason, Matisse made his first journey to Algeria in 1906. Beyond the well-known commentaries on how the light of the East influenced his work, the painter returned from his trip with carpets and ceramic pieces which would definitively influence the backgrounds and forms of his paintings. This collecting facet of Matisse is emphasised in the exhibition, mainly focused on those who had such a liking.

“The Genius of the East” illustrates these opposing perspectives through different individual and group visions. Travellers, photographers and collectors were fascinated by a new visual culture at a moment when the history of representation was in crisis. The exhibition is rightly divided into five sections arranged around the subjects of discovery, collecting,

copying, acquisition and dissemination of Islamic arts. The variety of objects included – carpets, fabrics, metals, and wood and ivory marquetry – fully show the new range of forms, motifs and techniques to which art today is indebted. One of the most notable elements in the exhibition is the information it provides on how the sections of Islamic art in the Lyon Museum of Fine Arts were created. This research, still pending in most European art galleries, reflects not only the interest in the East but how visual codes in Europe were gradually shaped.

Some months later, from 20th November 2011 to 22nd January 2012, the most important exhibition held in Italy to date on Orientalist painting opened at the Chiosstro del Bramante in Rome: “Orientalists: Incantations and Discoveries in Nineteen Century Italian Painting”. Within the most canonical Orientalism lacking any postcolonial approach, the exhibition features over 80 works by more or less recognised painters enthusiastic about the imagery awakened by the East.

Mainly active in the second half of the 19th century, most artists of Italian Orientalism were travellers who accompanied the scientific and diplomatic missions, as happened in other European countries. Notable among them is Ippolito Caffi, a tireless traveller, the master of later Italian Orientalist painters, who reproduced the views of Cairo, Syria, Jerusalem, Constantinople, Izmir and Ephesus. We can also admire the works of Stefano Ussi and Carlo Biseo, who travelled to Egypt and Morocco and, upon their return, illustrated the well-known book by Edmundo De Amicis, *Marocco*. Also outstanding is Francesco Hayez, a Venetian painter who never left Italy but introduced the Orientalist motifs of eroticism and exoticism into his work. Finally, we should mention Francesco Netti, a traveller to Constantinople, whose *Odalisque*, always available for pleasure and passion, is a symbol of the exhibition and the pictorial current that sees

in the East the place of dreams and seductions of the West. Domenico Morelli, also present in the exhibition and one of the most sensitive Italian painters in the second half of the 19th century although he never went outside Naples, wrote “imagination is truer than we think.” The imagination generated in the East also forms part of the history of the West. The exhibition, along with featuring the formal and thematic values of Italian Orientalist painting, poses some questions. Among them is the need to continue studying the works by European artists who travelled to Italy and believed they had discovered the East there, as well as the influence of the representations of a “more domestic” East in Italian artists.

*Jones thought he had found in this monument the scientific laws of the use of ornament and colour in architecture*

The last exhibition we will consider here took place at the Alhambra from 21st October 2011 to 28th February 2012. Under the title “Owen Jones and the Alhambra. Islamic Design: Discovery and Vision”, it was devoted to the figure of the British architect and decorator Owen Jones (London, 1809-1874), produced by the Alhambra and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The visits that Jones made between 1834 and 1837 to Granada, accompanied by his friend Jules Goury, were a source of constant inspiration. There he undertook a painstaking study of the Nazarene monument, which he contributed to making one of the main references of 19th century architectonic debate.

The exhibition, like that in Lyon, again forms part of the study of the aesthetic debate brought about by the advent of the machine

era. In 1851 the London Great Exhibition was inaugurated with industry and art as its central themes. This leads to several questions such as the role that aesthetics must play and the place that the ideal of beauty should occupy. Hence, Jones’ work must be understood in a wider context, within the issue of modern art, architecture and design, in which he dialogues with figures such as John Ruskin, William Morris, Henry Cole and Christopher Dresser.

As a result of this itinerary a beautiful major work in two volumes was published: *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the Alhambra*,<sup>2</sup> jointly written by Jones and Goury and released between 1842 and 1845. It is a thorough description of the decoration in the Alhambra through their sketches and plans with elevations and copies. For the first time the Nazarene palace was studied using scientific criteria, as was required by the time, something which had not been done before. The work was crucial for the creation of a new type of Orientalism (which Tonia Raquejo called “Alhambresque” many years ago in her book *El palacio encantado* [The Enchanted Palace])<sup>3</sup> that made the Alhambra one of the main references of 19th century architectural debate. Jones thought he had found in this monument the scientific laws of the use of ornament and colour in architecture. So much so that the Crystal Palace, the most important building in the London Great Exhibition, was decorated like the Nazarene palaces. Moreover, when in 1854 a second version of the Crystal Palace was made in Sydenham (United Kingdom), a replica of the Court of Lions was built inside it along with other Alhambra settings.

However, Jones’ most important work, also the result of his visits to the Alhambra, is *The Grammar of Ornament*, first published in 1856.

2. Charleston, SC, Nabu Press, 2001.

3. Madrid, Taurus, 1989.

The work is an attempt to condense the author's experience in a decoration treatise, as well as a synthesis of the "grammar" bringing together the scientific principles of ornamentation. *The Grammar of Ornament* became the main manual of the recently inaugurated London Fine Art School and, consequently, the bible for at least three generations of architects and artists, including Le Corbusier. The original colours of the Alhambra ceramics, for instance, are reproduced as a perfect and lasting sample of ornamentation.

The exhibition includes more than 140 pieces, most of them from a travelling exhibition by the Victoria and Albert Museum completed with the collections of the Museum of the Alhambra. Notable among them are the original sketches of Jones' travels and the plaster casts made based on the Alhambra honeycomb work. The exhibition is divided into six rooms distributed around Jones' first travels, his visit to the Alhambra, the Nazarene pal-

ace between 1834 and 1837, the 1851 London Great Exhibition, the grammar of ornament and Jones' influences on 19th century design. This final section is the most interesting, as it allows in-depth exploration of the legacy of the architect's work and, above all, the history of the palace. Jones was deservedly one of the essential references of 19th century restorers, particularly Rafael Contreras.

In short, these three exhibitions provide new research for the study of the East. The Lyon and Granada exhibitions form part of the recent interest in what, for a long time, have been called minor arts, that is, decorative arts, and reveals how culture must also be interpreted based on the objects it comprises. In parallel, some exhibitions have been held in recent months in Spain on foreign Orientalist painters, but none on Spanish artists. Thus, a new exhibition on Spanish Orientalism, offering the chance to revise and revisit it, is still pending.