

**Painting the Theatre of the East:  
19<sup>th</sup> Century Orientalist Painters  
and the Modern European Theatre**

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Although theatre is not the first association one is likely to make at the mention of *Orientalism*, Edward Said's 1978 landmark study of Arab culture as seen and defined by Western eyes, the book, especially in its early theoretical sections, is saturated with theatrical metaphors and allusions. In the introduction, to establish his argument that the role of the Orientalist as cultural translator or ventriloquist who "makes the Orient speak" derives from a position outside the Orient, Said offers as an example the first extant Western play, *The Persians*, by Aeschylus. This obviously privileged perspective outside has as its product a representation of the Orient that is, writes Said, "relatively familiar," in which the "dramatic immediacy... obscures the fact that the audience is watching a highly artificial enactment of what a non-Oriental has made into a symbol for the whole Orient."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), p.21.

*The Persians* is a particularly compelling choice as a text that is emblematic of cultural and political relations between East and West for reasons beyond its primacy. The play's artificiality as enactment derives not only from the fact that it was written by a non-Oriental and that theatre is necessarily a synecdochic universe in which something small and constructed stands for something much larger and less contrived. Although Aeschylus was himself a war veteran who may have actually fought in the Battle of Salamis,<sup>2</sup> which is described at length in the play, and "much of the material... must be the result of... firsthand eyewitness evidence,"<sup>3</sup> he self-consciously chose to dramatize his experiences from the point-of-view of the enemy. Although *The Persians* is a Greek play, no Greeks appear in it, only Persians.

Aeschylus employed a number of other quite artificial strategies in the creation of *The Persians*. For example, as Hall writes, he:

did everything he could to make his audience forget they were hearing Greek... [He] uses Iranian proper names, cacophonous imitation of foreign vocabulary, cries, interjections, repetition, and

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Waley Harsh, *A Handbook of Classical Drama*, p.6 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1948).

<sup>3</sup> Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 14.

anaphora designed to suggest barbarian diction,  
Ionicisms (to lend an Eastern feel to the language).<sup>4</sup>

The word "barbarian" appears for the first time in Western literature in this play, and the Persians refer to themselves as "barbarians."<sup>5</sup>

A ghost, in the form of Xerxes' father, Darius, makes its first appearance in extant Western drama in *The Persians*. The play is anti-heroic; its subject is defeat, and thus more likely to inspire the kind of introspection that comes from being vanquished. Following the Greek convention, the "action" in *The Persians* takes place offstage. The "climax" is the arrival of a messenger who gives a long description of a defeat. Thus the play points to the wider world and the wider implications of war in general, and the messenger "performs" the battle through storytelling. What Hall calls the "effeminization" of Persia is achieved by various means in the play.<sup>6</sup> For example, Xerxes, the Persian king, appears with ripped clothes and behaves hysterically. Moreover, as Atilio Favorini has pointed out, Aeschylus may himself have played the role of Xerxes, the defeated king, in the earliest productions, and thus the playwright was the precursor not

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

only of a long line of Western participant-observers in the East but also of Western cross-dressers.

Lest we forget, all of the audience members and all of the actors were male, and the latter wore masks, raised shoes and a device for projecting their voices. Therefore, although we can not know the extent to which Aeschylus's contemporaries were caught up in what Said calls the "immediacy of dramatic representation," the first productions of *The Persians*, as with all performed theatrical texts, were "highly artificial enactment[s]."

It is precisely for that reason that Said returns to *The Persians* and to theatre more generally later in the introduction of *Orientalism* as a means of making his case that the ultimate goal of the acts of representing, codifying, fictionalizing, and feminizing undertaken by Westerners was to control the East. In *The Persians*, writes Said, "a line is drawn between continents. Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant. Aeschylus represents Asia, makes her speak in the person of the aged Persian queen, Xerxes' mother."<sup>7</sup> He goes on to write that "the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined," and offers as an example d'Herbelot's 1697 *Bibliothèque Orientale*. He points to the author's placement

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<sup>7</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p.57.

of Mohammed in this work, "who no longer roams the Eastern world as a threatening immoral debauchee; he sits quietly on his (admittedly prominent) portion of the Orientalist stage."<sup>8</sup> Images such as Mohammed in d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque* "represent or stand for," Said asserts, "a very large entity, otherwise impossibly diffuse, which they enable one to grasp or see. They are also characters, related to such types as the braggarts, misers or gluttons produced by Theophrastus, La Bruyère, or Selden".<sup>9</sup> This metaphorical Orientalist stage is portrayed as a "system of moral and epistemological rigor."<sup>10</sup>

Said describes the Napoleonic expedition and its attendant discursive apparatus as providing "a scene or setting for Orientalism" because Egypt and subsequently other Islamic lands were viewed by Westerners as "the theater of effective knowledge about the Orient."<sup>11</sup> Of the many other theatrical metaphors he employs to characterize the Egyptian campaign, perhaps the most startling, because it is so reminiscent of the rhetoric used by U.S. officials before and during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, is

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.66.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.67.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

Said's characterization of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt as a "coup de théâtre."<sup>12</sup>

However, Said's evocation of theatre in *Orientalism* is by no means always pejorative. When he describes the "theatrical form" in which Flaubert writes about his travels to the East it is a means of saying that the French writer is interested "not only in the content of what he sees but... in how he sees."<sup>13</sup> "Flaubert's work," writes Said, "is so complex and vast as to make any simple account of his Oriental writing very sketchy and hopelessly incomplete."<sup>14</sup> Flaubert is cited, along with Nerval, as the only Western writer whose oeuvre in some sense transcends the kind of academic Orientalism that forms the basis of Said's critique.<sup>15</sup> The explanation he offers is that because Flaubert and Nerval are artists and not official historians, institutional interpreters, linguists and encyclopedists like Lane, Sacy and others, they have produced protean bodies of work that elude simple classification and can not be so easily pressed into the service of colonial control. As Said writes:

What mattered to [Flaubert and Nerval] was the structure of their work as an independent, aesthetic

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 185-186.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 181

and personal fact, and not the ways by which, if one wanted to, one could effectively dominate or set down the Orient graphically... [T]he subject of their work is more than Oriental or Orientalistic (even though they do their own Orientalizing of the Orient); it quite consciously plays with the limitations and the challenges presented to them by the Orient and by knowledge about it.<sup>16</sup>

The only other Westerner besides these two artists and Napoleon who is accorded the honor by Said of having—at least to some extent—transcended Orientalism is Mozart. He specifically asserts that *The Magic Flute* and *The Abduction from the Seraglio* “locate a particularly magnanimous form of humanity in the Orient.”<sup>17</sup> By in part exempting Flaubert and Mozart from the charge of being Orientalists, Said seems to self-consciously invite a reassessment of his own theory of Orientalism, at least as it applies to artists and the arts, and to suggest that both a preoccupation with the East and the assimilation of its forms by Western artists are central to Western aesthetic traditions. As Eric Bentley writes, for example, “Mozart’s four operatic masterpieces are the greatest achievements of 18th-century

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

theatre and the greatest operas of all time."<sup>18</sup> One gets some sense of the potential of *The Magic Flute* to incorporate and re-animate complex Eastern imagery in an ostensibly Western genre by viewing, for example, the sublime and monumental designs of the Palace of the Queen of Night for an 1815 production of the opera in Berlin, which were created by Karl Friederich Schinkel, perhaps the most important German architect of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Flaubert's profound influence on Symbolism, realism, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian novel—itsself arguably an "Eastern" form—and literary modernism, have been written about extensively.

Equally intriguing is Said's characterization of the Orient created by Delacroix and the so-called Orientalist painters in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, principally from France and England, as "free-floating," i.e. not easily classifiable. This chameleon-like quality of Orientalist painting was, he claims, "severely curtailed with the advent of academic Orientalism,"<sup>19</sup> but, as if to invite another clear exception to his overall thesis, in the same passage he explicitly states that "the Oriental genre tableau carried representation into visual expression

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<sup>18</sup>Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker: A Study of Drama in Modern Times* (New York: Meridian, 1955), p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 119.

and a life of its own (which this book unfortunately must scant). Sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy..."<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps because he was a musician, critic of classical music and opera, as well as a professor of comparative literature, Said appears equivocal about the role of the arts—painting, literature, theatre and opera—as accomplices of academic Orientalism. On the one hand, theatre is offered repeatedly as a metaphor for disassembling, falsifying, arranging and puppeteering—a clear reference to Foucauldian control of the images and discourse about the East. Edward Ziter follows this line in his impressive study *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*, in which he writes that, "imperial theatre told a story of irrepressible progress and uplift; colonial imagery was adaptable to every theatrical genre except tragedy."<sup>21</sup> Describing an 1837 production in London of *Sardanapulus*, an opera based on Byron's dramatic poem, he points to the set's conflation of an ancient Egyptian temple and an Islamic harem, the latter "apparently accepted as a timeless feature of Eastern civilization."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 174.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

As is clear, for example, from Said's acknowledgement of the complexity of Flaubert's literary achievements, his praise of Mozart's operas and his admiration for 19th-century Orientalist painters such as Delacroix, he accepts that, at least in some cases, the aesthetic components of complex literary, dramatic and artistic texts preclude their being easily pressed into the service of imperialism, racism and colonialism. In the case of both Flaubert and Mozart, Said points to the artists' abilities to assimilate and hybridize Eastern themes within a complex personal aesthetic that, at least to some extent, valorizes Eastern imagery and culture. Flaubert wrote in so many genres—letters, diaries, novels, essays—and on such a vast range of topics that attempting to discern and classify which of his texts are ostensibly “Orientalist” and what forms these “Orientalisms” take would be a hopeless task. Identifying Orientalist and proto-Orientalist elements in Mozart would likely be an even more daunting task, if for no other reason than the fact that the modes of transmission of musical and dramatic motifs from the East—through Venice, the music of Vivaldi, Turkish musical and visual traditions in the Austrian Empire—are manifold. In her study *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literature*, Maria Rosa Menocal describes a similar and equally complex process of cultural

and aesthetic transmission from East to West, for example, by identifying and analyzing shared forms and motifs in medieval Hispano-Arabic poetic texts and those of the Provençal poets, and European versions of the Eastern oral framed tale, especially *1001 Nights*, *The Decameron* and *Canterbury Tales*. In a 2008 exhibition at Hunter College entitled *Re-Orientations*, in which Ülkü Ü. Bates has assembled Persian miniatures, books and pencil cases; Turkish porcelain and glass; Syrian tiles and Indian silver and several dozen other objects from the Metropolitan Museum's collection, one can see this process in reverse. That is, the substantial influence of Western artistic styles on Islamic visual arts and crafts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Said's decision not to include an analysis of Orientalist genre painting in his study seems an implicit acknowledgement that these works can not easily be subsumed within the discourse of academic Orientalism. Nicolas Tromans, writing in "The Lure of the East," the catalog for an exhibition of British Orientalist painting at the Yale Center for British Art in 2008, makes much the same argument when he claims that, by following Said's thesis—at least Tromans' rather narrow reading of it—one could view the pictures in that exhibition "as images constructed to

justify the aspirations and self-image of the British empire." However, writes Tromans, the exhibition "aims to demonstrate that these complex works operate not only as ideologically loaded statements, but also as expressive, often alluring and aesthetically innovative images; they are open to multiple interpretations and function on multiple levels: documentary, aesthetic, and narrative."<sup>23</sup>

One of the many strengths of Said's extraordinary thesis is that it advocates the great value of developing a "skeptical critical consciousness,"<sup>24</sup> and thus both acknowledges its own limitations and points to the paths for reassessing it at later points. Moreover, one clear reason why Said excludes the arts in general and specific artists in particular from his analysis is that their texts do not fall easily within clearly defined genres, traditions or civilizations. Unlike Xerxes' mother, the artists who produced these texts do not pretend—at least in their work--that the Bosphorus, or any other geographical marker, provides a clear demarcation between East and West. For example, Flaubert's novels are discontinuous with the diaries of his trips to the East; his novels that do not, at first glance, seem classifiable as "Orientalist" such as

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<sup>23</sup> Nicolas Tromans, "The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting: 1830-1925. (New Haven: Yale British Art Center, 2008), p. 7.

<sup>24</sup>Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 327-328.

*Sentimental Education* contain numerous allusions to Orientalist painting and the East; and works such as Mozart's *Abduction* and *Magic Flute* participate in and embody various artistic traditions simultaneously. It is precisely this blurring of boundaries among traditions, genres and geographic locations upon which this study will focus in its reassessment of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalist genre painting.

The first and most significant boundary that will be interrogated is the generic boundary between painting and theatre. One of the most striking aspects of the tradition of Orientalist painting is its considerable overlap with theatre. This convergence of genres is, moreover, not based simply upon contemporary, theoretical notions of performance such as cultural cross-dressing, the harem as backstage space, etc., although there are numerous examples of these elements. The connections between 19<sup>th</sup>-century painters, primarily British and French, and the history of the European stage are far more concrete, such as, for example, the large number of Orientalist painters who worked as scene designers in theatres before and after traveling to the East; the scenes they painted based on operas and other literary works with Eastern themes; the various forms of performance from the Arab and Islamic

world—snake charmers, dancers, religious ceremonies, storytellers, etc.—that served as subjects for their paintings; and, finally, the fact that a number of French Orientalist painters, after their return from the East to Paris, converted their studios into Eastern stage sets full of clothes, weapons, books and other objects they had collected in the Arab world.

Three other intriguing aspects of this relationship connection will be briefly touched upon: the connection between 19<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalist painters and European modernism more generally, especially in the works of painters such as Picasso, Klee, Kandinsky and Matisse; a process in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Persia, during the Qajar period, that is in many ways analogous to the European one I will be describing here of cross-generic and cross-cultural sharing; and the influence of the visual styles of Orientalist painting in modern and contemporary European architecture, opera and cinema.

This paper does not pretend to be exhaustive. Its principal purpose is to collect and re-examine a variety of available materials from a fresh perspective so that we may begin to acknowledge the pervasiveness of Eastern visual culture in modern and contemporary Western painting, theatre, opera, architecture and cinema, and the extent of

the aesthetic interpenetration between East and West that does not lend itself to interpretations based strictly on power relations.

There are two obvious points of departure for a discussion about 19<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalist painting, one French and the other Scottish. Almost anyone who has traveled to the East—and even many who have not—has come into contact with the almost ubiquitous lithographs of the Scotsman David Roberts. He is best known for enormous panoramas of sites such as Dendera, Karnak, Baalbek and Palmyra, but he traveled to many parts of the Arab world and to Arabic Spain and produced dozens of landscapes and architectural studies. As Lemaire writes:

Self-taught and highly gifted, [Roberts] first came into contact with the Middle East in an unusual way—through his sets for a production of *Aladin* at the Theatre Royal in London, where he worked for 14 years. On the advice of... Turner, he decided to travel abroad. In 1832 he discovered Morocco, where he was completely captivated by Islamic art.<sup>25</sup>

During his 14-year stint as a stage designer, Roberts, who began his career as a house painter in Edinburgh, also worked at the Coburg Theatre in London, which is now the

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<sup>25</sup> Gerard-Georges Lemaire, *The Orient in Western Art* (Cologne: Könemann, 2001), p. 113.

Old Vic. Of particular interest are his design for an 1825 production of Mozart's *Abduction*, which, according to Phillipe Jullian, earned him international fame and the accolade of "the Scottish Canaletto,"<sup>26</sup> and two dioramas he collaborated on after traveling to the East, one, in 1847, of the city of Cairo and another entitled *The Overland Route to India*, in 1850. Ziter writes extensively about these dioramas, or panoramas, in terms of Foucault's panopticon, in which, Ziter asserts, the London audiences were offered omnipotent access to the spectacles of a timeless East—harems, desert landscapes, scenes from *The Arabian Nights* and the streets of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Cairo.<sup>27</sup>

After leaving his position as a stage designer and painter in London in 1832, Roberts first visited Spain, where he produced, among other subjects, watercolors of the interior of the Cathedral in Seville and the Alhambra. These watercolors were reproduced and widely sold as collections of lithographs, including an 1837 selection entitled *Picturesque Sketches in Spain*. One particularly intriguing connection between Roberts and the history of the European theatre may be adduced from Jullian's observation that, "[f]rom 1830, each capital had its

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<sup>26</sup>Giovanni Antonio Canal, also known as Canaletto, was an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian painter best-known for his landscapes of Venice, which were especially popular among collectors in England, where he lived and worked for several years. He learned painting from his father, who was a theatrical scene painter.

<sup>27</sup> Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*, p. 45.

Alhambra, a theatre or a fun-fair that imitated it more or less exactly.<sup>28</sup>

In 1833 Roberts visited Tangier and Tetuan, and in 1838 and 1839 he visited Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. As Rosenthal writes:

The English Orientalist best known in France was David Roberts. The text and lithographs based on his Near Eastern experiences, published in six volumes as *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt and Nubia* (London 1842-49) had an enormous circulation. An abbreviated translation, *La terre sainte, vues et monuments* (Brussels, 1843), dealing only with Palestine and Syria, made Roberts's work available to a French-speaking audience; this edition, however, lacked the delicate color lithographs of the best English printings."<sup>29</sup>

The significance of the influence of Roberts, who was the most commercially successful Orientalist painter, on subsequent French Orientalist painters can hardly be overstated. His proto-cinematic style, in which human figures are dwarfed in enormous panoramas of ruins and desert scenes, has clear roots in the theatre, and his

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<sup>28</sup> Phillipe Jullian, *The Orientalists: European Painters of Eastern Scenes* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1977), p. 115.

<sup>29</sup> Donald A. Rosenthal, *Orientalism: The Near East in French Painting, 1800-188* (Rochester: Rochester Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, 1982), p. 137.

lithographs helped to create an imaginative universe in which Eastern landscapes formed a continuum with Western stages.

A number of critics have pointed to the painting *The Death of Sardanapulus*, by Eugène Delacroix, exhibited in the Salon in Paris in 1827, as a starting point for the tradition of French Orientalist painting, which lasted until almost the end of the century. The painting is based on an episode in which an ancient Assyrian king, faced with imminent defeat, gathers his entire coterie around him, including the women in his harem, his slaves and his dogs, and orders them all to be slaughtered. Although Delacroix does not explicitly link this painting to Byron's dramatic poem *Sardanapalus*, based on the same incident, Delacroix's profound affinity for Byron's poetry, as evidenced by passages in his diary and paintings based on other works by Byron, leaves little doubt that the English poet's play was the source for his painting.

While painting *The Death of Sardanapulus*, Delacroix met with the Paris opera set designer Eugène Ciceri to ask for material,<sup>30</sup> and as Lemaire writes, Delacroix "loved scenes of festivals, theatre and music," as can be seen in his paintings *Jewish Musicians of Mogador* (1848), *Arab*

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<sup>30</sup>Jullian, *The Orientalists*, p. 42.

*Clowns and Jesters* (1848), and *Jewish Wedding in Morocco* (1837-1841).<sup>31</sup>

During the early 19<sup>th</sup> century there were a number of operas with Oriental themes, including Mozart's *Seraglio* and Gluck's *Les Pèlerins de la Mecque*. In addition to the 1837 opera adaptation of Byron's *Sardanapulus* at Drury Lane in London mentioned above, Ziter describes an 1853 production by Charles Kean in which "the scene painting and *mise-en-scène*... evoked contemporary research on the East... [and] reflected contemporary theories on the decline of ancient Eastern civilizations."<sup>32</sup>

The two other most significant French Orientalist painters, writes Jullian, were Théodore Chassériau and Eugène Fromentin.<sup>33</sup> Not only do Chassériau's works include many portrayals of performance such as *Dance of the Kerchiefs* (1849), but Théophile Gautier, who in his role as an art critic was the principal champion of the Orientalist painters, described the studio Chassériau created after returning from the Maghreb as follows:

The *yataghans*, the *kanjars*, the Persian daggers, the Circassian pistols, Arab rifles, old nickel plated strips of damask with verses from the Koran, weapons

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<sup>31</sup>Lemaire, *The Orient in Western Art*, pp. 215, 218.

<sup>32</sup>Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*, p 139.

<sup>33</sup>Jullian, *The Orientalists*, p. 46.

decorated with silver and coral, all that delightful barbarian luxury was arranged in trophies all round the walls. Carelessly slung over pegs, the *gandouras*, the Arab cloaks, the burnouses, the kaftans, and the silver- and gold-embroidered jackets were a feast of colour for the eye.<sup>34</sup>

As Thornton makes clear, Chassériau was hardly alone in turning his studio into a prop room or the set for his own drama of the East:

Towards the end of the century, the successful, affluent artists in Paris, who lived for the most part in the newly built area around Parc Monceau, recreated astonishing worlds of make-believe. The military painters were surrounded by arms, armour and stuffed horses, the historical painters with Henri IV buffets, figured velvets and feathered musketeer hats, the Orientalists by carpets, textiles and works of art."<sup>35</sup>

Fromentin's paintings of the Maghreb are marked by a preoccupation with light and color that presage not only paintings done by Klee and Kandinsky in Tunisia but also the focus in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century scenic design in theatre and film on the medium of lighting, more particularly the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>35</sup> Lynne Thornton, *The Orientalists: Painter-Travellers* (Paris: Pouche-Couleur, 1994)

creation of illusions by means of new illumination technologies. In a book he wrote about his travels in the Sahara, Fromentin discusses "the overwhelming impact" of the desert and "of the mirages,"<sup>36</sup> of which he wrote a study. In *Arab Falconer* (1863), for example, one sees two of the most salient features in his oeuvre: outdoor action in the desert--frequently hunting--and the light of the Saharan sky.

Of the French Orientalists, Georges Clairin had perhaps the most direct links to the theatre. "He was a devoted admirer of Sarah Bernhardt," writes Thornton, "and often stayed in the actress's Brittany home... He painted Sarah Bernhardt in many of her roles and made a sensational portrait of her, now in the Petit Palais..."<sup>37</sup> After returning to Paris from Algeria, he was asked to assist in the construction of the Paris Opera House, one of various projects Clairin worked on for theatres.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, according to Jullian, Clairin's paintings of Ouled Nail women, a Berber group from the area near the Algerian town of Biskra, renowned as dancers, entertainers and creators of the musical style called Bou Saâda, show the influence

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<sup>36</sup> Jullian, *The Orientalists*, p. 54.

<sup>37</sup> Thornton. *The Orientalists*, p. 53

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53

both of Bernhardt and Henri Regnault, whose painting of Salomé hangs in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.<sup>39</sup>

Another French Orientalist with direct ties to the theatre was Adrien Dauzats, who was brought up in the wings of a Bordeaux theatre where his father worked and, writes Thornton, where he "dreamed of being a scene-painter" (54).<sup>40</sup> His works, like Roberts', evince a profound preoccupation with architectural detail, perspective and Eastern spaces. In *Tomb of the Sultan Qalaun in the Maristan, Cairo*, the viewer, through the use of shadows and perspective, is made to feel as if he or she were placed within the tomb. One can see a similar effect in Roberts' *Under the Grand Portico* (1838), in which the viewer, as in a panorama, is given the sense of being surrounded by columns.

Jules Laurens, who is also known for his precisely detailed architectural sketches, worked as a young man as a theatrical scene painter in Carpentras. He went on to accompany the geographer Xavier Hommaire de Hell on an 1848 expedition to Persia. In *Ashraf Palace Ruins, Manzanderan Province* (1848), *Persia* one sees a lone dark female figure from behind through the arched doorway of the ruins of a

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<sup>39</sup> Jullian, *The Orientalists*, p. 129.

<sup>40</sup> Thornton, *The Orientalists*, p. 54.

palace in northern Persia. This composition prefigures modern *mise-en-scene* not only in its inherently anti-dramatic portrayal of an anonymous woman but also in its use of a *mise-en-abyme* structure, a proscenium within a proscenium, which becomes a frequent feature of 20<sup>th</sup>-century stage design.

*A Lady Receiving Visitors (The Reception)* (1873), by the British painter John Frederick Lewis, which appears on the cover of the catalog of "The Lure of the East," is notable for the kind of precision of detail in the portrayal of Eastern spaces that we also see in Laurens and Dautzats. As the exhibition notes point out, however, although the realistic style and architectural precision might lead the viewer to conclude that the painting is a documentary representation of Eastern spaces, the reception area of such residences was in fact a space usually reserved exclusively for males.

Henri Regnault's painting *Salomé* (1870) is arguably the most renowned portrait of an Oriental literary or theatrical character. It is, however, but one of the numerous 19<sup>th</sup>-century renderings of the Biblical temptress, including those by Gustave Moureau, which, as imaginative landscapes much more than Orientalist ones, constitute

signal images of the Symbolist movement, and profoundly influenced Oscar Wilde's stage version of *Salomé*.

Although Regnault's *Salomé* is rendered in a far more realistic mode than portrayals of the Biblical temptress by Moureau, it is itself an excellent example of the many levels of fictionality and theatricality one encounters in Orientalist paintings, a genre that continues to be fallaciously described as a documentary or proto-photographic means of presenting the reality of the East. It is certainly true, as Ziter convincingly shows, that 19<sup>th</sup>-century English producers and impresarios of Orientalist extravaganzas were, much like their 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century Hollywood counterparts, anxious to emphasize the factual or scientific basis of their theatrical portrayals for purposes of marketing. Nonetheless, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalist painters, especially in France, seem to have self-consciously reveled in the levels of unreality in their paintings. As Eric Bentley has pointed out, even naturalism contains artifice, which he describes as "naturalness.. the final artifice, the art that conceals art".<sup>41</sup> Although Orientalist paintings are often described as documentary or realistic works they are no less the product of artifice than works of theatre.

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<sup>41</sup> Bentley, *Playwright*, p. 97.

Regnault's *Salomé*, for example, began her life as an Italian peasant girl and, writes Rosenthal, "expanded into an Oriental subject under such intermediate titles as *Study of an African Woman*."<sup>42</sup> It is, therefore, somewhat bizarre that Rosenthal should insist on the strictly factual basis of what is perhaps the best known Orientalist painting, *The Snake Charmer* (1889), by Jean-Léon Gerôme. This painting, which hangs at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, is familiar to many as the cover of Said's *Orientalism*. Rosenthal offers proof of the painting's veracity by citing a passage in the diary of Maxime du Camp, who accompanied Flaubert on his Eastern tour, in which du Camp relates the story of a snake charmer who disrobed during a performance to insure the Frenchman that he was engaged in no chicanery.<sup>43</sup> Whether one finds the painting offensively exotic or aesthetically inventive, the idea that it is a true--as opposed to a stylized, theatrical--portrayal of an Eastern scene seems dubious at best.

There is certainly no expectation that a painter, even a realistic painter, is engaged in the collection of truthful or verifiable material, something Said obviously

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<sup>42</sup> Rosenthal, *Orientalism*, p. 85.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

recognizes by largely excluding artists from his study. The fact that Flaubert's novels are realistic obviously does not mean that they are not highly stylized. Clearly the images that artists produce are not harmless in the sense that they powerfully inform the imaginations of those who view them. Nonetheless, to say that a European visual artist presents a stylized, theatricalized or even fallacious view of the East is not the same as asserting that a social scientist, historian or linguist does.

Dozens of Orientalist paintings not only portray performers and performances, frequently, as in the case of Gerôme's *The Snake Charmer*, they also include spectators. In Alma-Tadema's *Egyptian Juggler* (1870), for example, two seated viewers watch the dynamic action of the juggler, creating, as Thornton writes, a composition "remarkably like those found in early Hollywood films."<sup>44</sup> *The Moroccan Storyteller*, by Alfred Dehodencq, is one of many 19<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalist paintings to portray the Eastern performance tradition of the *hakawati*, or storyteller. Dehodencq painted numerous scenes—many quite sensationalistic—of festivals, dances and ceremonies. According to Thornton, he was once almost killed when he was discovered secretly sketching the public stoning of a

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<sup>44</sup> Thornton, *The Orientalists*, p. 6.

woman in Morocco. *Dragoman in Teheran* (1848), another painting by Jules Laurens completed during his expedition in the late 1840s, which renders a street performance in the Persian capital viewed by spectators, has resonance as a portrayal of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Eastern theatre for several reasons. Since Laurens' drawings and paintings were done before photography was introduced into Qajar Persia, his works, along with Persian paintings from the period, constitute much of the visual record of social life in Iran in the first half the 19th century. Moreover, the dragoman's dress and gestures are far more theatrical than, for example, Dehodencq's *Storyteller*. Another performer lies prone on the ground in the foreground, thus emphasizing the fact that Laurens's painting is a representation of an elaborate dramatic scene. Clearly, in spite of the supposed prohibition against public performances in Islamic societies, there was a thriving theatrical culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Iran.<sup>45</sup> Laurens was also aware of the tradition of Persian paintings and Persian miniatures during the Qajar Dynasty, which is itself highly theatrical.

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<sup>45</sup>Curzon writes in *Curzon's Persia*, for example, of his visit in 1889 to the Masumeh mosque in Qum, one of the holiest sites in Islam, that, "Outside its encircling wall extends a vast necropolis, adorned with thousands of stone slabs and crumbling mounds. A conjurer had selected this incongruous spot as his theatre, and was holding spell-bound a large crowd," p. 117. See also the Chelkowski essay in *Royal Persian Paintings* discussed later in this article.

Delacroix's *Jewish Wedding in Morocco* is of interest not only for its portrayal of a festival but also for the fact that it underscores several of the inherent paradoxes of the most significant early French Orientalist painters. First, these painters in a literal sense went West, not East, to get to the "Orient" in Morocco. Second, because of the difficulty of finding Arab women who could or would serve as models, many of these painters used Jewish female models. Many of the Eastern women in the works of Dehodencq, Delacroix and their contemporaries are, therefore, based on Jewish models, simply because they were more accessible. Third, the Oriental space and subject matter which was probably of greatest interest to Western male artists was, of course, the harem, but for obvious reasons very few Western male artists ever gained access to a harem. Delacroix was one of the few who apparently did.

There are several other examples of the interchange between Eastern and Western visual and theatrical cultures in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that are of particular significance. The first concerns the relationship between 19th-century Orientalist painting and 20<sup>th</sup>-century European modernist painting and Western visual styles more generally. Although this relationship is clearly far more pervasive in modern Western literature, painting, cinema, theatre and

architecture than has heretofore been acknowledged, a few salient examples in the realm of painting--which focus on the influence of the East and on levels of unreality in the works--will suffice. The first is the clear relationship between *The Turkish Bath* (1859-1863), by Ingres, and two well known works by Picasso, *The Harem* (1906), and *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* (1907), which is perhaps the most emblematic work of cubism. Ingres' painting is an excellent example of a more or less realistic painting based purely on imagination--he never went to the East, much less visited a harem--which serves as one of the sources for Picasso's cubist portrait of prostitutes from Avignon Street in Barcelona, whom he knew at first hand. Moreover, Picasso did a series of 15 variations, also in cubist style, of *Algerian Women in Their Apartments* (1834), by Delacroix. It appears from Delacroix's diary that he was one of the very few Western men--and the only known Western painter--to gain access to cloistered women in the East, and *Algerian Women* is based in part on that experience. Thus one can trace a tradition in which a realistic painting of an entirely imagined Eastern scene serves as the basis of a non-realistic painting of a Western scene, and a realistic painting of an Eastern scene that was actually experienced

as first hand serves as the basis for multiple non-realistic interpretations by a Western artist.

A second connection between the tradition of Orientalist painting and modern European art can be seen in the clear relationship between the formal abstraction of Kandinsky and Klee and their visits to Tunisia in the early 20th century. Of particular interest are the transformations that took place in their work as a result of their coming into contact with the architecture, Islamic ornamental designs and light of North Africa. As was mentioned earlier, Fromentin wrote a study of mirages and was intrigued by the particular kinds of light one finds in North Africa. Although Camus would later dismiss the light of North Africa as a stark, white blinding light that bleaches out everything, many of Klee's paintings in Tunisia, for example, are clearly works in which he attempts to make manifest the theories about light and color that he was reading in Robert Delaunay's *Essai sur la lumière*.<sup>46</sup> In addition to his move toward abstraction and color studies, Klee continued to paint works with Oriental motifs, including *Battle Scene for a Comic Opera: The Sailor* (1923), based on a chapter on Sinbad in *A Thousand and One Nights*, and *The Sphinx at Rest*, a parodic

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<sup>46</sup> Lemaire, , *The Orient in Western Art*, p. 311.

interpretation of Shinkel's sets for the 1815 production of *The Magic Flute* mentioned earlier.

Another example of the relationship between the tradition of Orientalist painting and European modernist art is also directly linked to theatre. David Hockney, who traveled to Egypt in the early 1960s, where he did a series of watercolors and sketches for *The Times of London* that were never published, began producing stage sets at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1966, and in 1978 he designed sets for a new production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* at Glyndebourne, Sussex. According to Marco Livingstone:

Pyramids, obelisks, stone heads, massive interior spaces, palm trees and desert landscapes all feature prominently in the large gouaches [Hockney] painted in 1977 as models for the painted drops. In April 1978, a month before the premiere and after nearly a year's concentrated work on the designs, Hockney made his second visit to Egypt."<sup>47</sup>

A final example is Matisse who, as is well known, was enamored of art from the Islamic world. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, for example, has an entire room

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<sup>47</sup> Marco Livingstone, *David Hockney: Egyptian Journeys* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2002), p. 11.

devoted to paintings he produced after his 1912 visit to Morocco, and he executed a number of paintings with Oriental motifs and ones based on Persian miniatures, a genre for which he professed great admiration.

The abrupt shift in aesthetic appreciation from the 19<sup>th</sup>- to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century and the generosity of Matisse's acknowledgement of Eastern influences can be seen most clearly in comparison to Delacroix's lack of acknowledgement and disparagement of Persian miniatures. Although several of Delacroix's early paintings, done in the 1810s, appear to have been directly influenced by Persian miniatures, in the 1850s he attacked the lack of "perspective" and "feeling for what is really a painting, that is, a certain illusion of projection" that he claimed one found in Persian paintings.<sup>48</sup> Matisse not only did a study of Persian miniatures, Jullian writes that he "loved the exhibition of Islamic art... in Paris in 1903."<sup>49</sup> After seeing the 1910 exhibition "Masterpieces of Islamic Art" in Munich, which Paul Klee also wrote about, Matisse said:

In Munich I have found further confirmation of all that I have been looking for. In Persian miniatures, for example, I discovered a new depth of sensation.

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<sup>48</sup> Rosenthal, *Orientalism*, p.33.

<sup>49</sup> Jullian, *The Orientalists*, p. 161.

The visual props in this form of art give a feeling of greater space, a really tangible space. This has helped me to get away from overly 'intimate' paintings."<sup>50</sup>

Parenthetically, Jullian points to a complete renewal of Orientalism and Persian influence in Europe shortly after the turn of the century in productions by the Ballet Russe, and more specifically in the choreography of Diaghilev and the costumes of Bakst and, for example, in productions of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, which both borrowed from and in some sense superseded Orientalist painting.<sup>51</sup>

The case of the interrelationship between painting and theatre in Persia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could constitute a separate study in itself. As Layla Diba, quoting B.W. Robinson, writes in her introductory essay to *Royal Persian Painting: The Qajar Epoch 1785-1925*, the catalog of a 1998 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, "Persia in the nineteenth century was a land of paintings, as never before or since."<sup>52</sup> Not only does the catalog convincingly dispel the myth that there is a wholesale prohibition against the

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<sup>50</sup> Lemaire, *The Orient in Western Art*, p. 295.

<sup>51</sup> Jullian, *The Orientalists*, 1977, pp. 43-44..

<sup>52</sup> Layla Diba, "Images of Power and the Power of Images: Intention and Response in Early Qajar Painting (1785-1834)" *Royal Persian Painting: The Qajar Epoch 1785-1925* (Brooklyn: I.B. Tauris and Brooklyn Museum, 1998).

reproduction of the human image in Islam, it offers abundant evidence for Matisse's high opinion of the tradition in the form of intricate and stunning landscapes, battle scenes and portraits—both miniatures and very large paintings, on canvases, pencil boxes and caskets, by various artists, some known, some not, for a period that lasted over a century.

Intriguingly, the time period of this tradition coincides with the visit in 1848 of the French geographer Xavier Hommaire de Hell and the painter Jules Laurens, who, as stated earlier, began his career as a theatre painter. From Hommaire de Hell's account of the journey, we know that he and Laurens met Muhammad Hassan, one of the most celebrated Persian painters of the period in Tabriz, who brought them an unfinished penbox to examine. "Laurens' presence," writes Diba, "must have contributed, if only indirectly, to subsequent advances in portraiture."<sup>53</sup>

As Peter Chelkowski points out in another introductory essay in the catalog, Persia in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had a rich theatrical tradition with permanent structures called *takiehs* for the staging of *ta'zieh*s, the mourning rituals of Muharram. The best known of these theatres was the Takieh Tawlat in Tehran, which is believed

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp. 221-222

to have been inspired by the Albert Hall in London. Chelkowsi includes a detailed first-hand description and a reproduction of a painting of the Takieh Tawlat along with his essay.<sup>54</sup>

Diba, in her essay, describes the extraordinary role that painting played in Persia as a means of portraying regal pageantry. Diba writes:

As numerous travelers noted, nothing exceeded the splendor of the Persian court on ceremonial occasions. Colin Meredith has argued that since the Qajars possessed neither the aura of divine sanctity nor the support of the royal slave corps of their Safavid predecessors, such visual displays were necessary to create a 'mystique of authority' and that this mystique was embodied in the person of the ruler. Meredith's vividly phrased comment that 'the Shah formed the center of a revolving pageant which he himself seemed to illuminate' offers a near perfect description of the image of power for which the painters and designers of Fath 'Ali Shah's court were required to find a visual expression."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Peter Chelkowski, "Popular Arts: Patronage and Piety" *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch 1785-1925*, p. 92.

<sup>55</sup> Diba, "Images of Power and the Power of Images," p. 36.

Moreover, Diba points to numerous instances of public veneration of life-size images on ceremonial occasions. (She asserts that European artists and scholars have frequently focused on Persian miniatures primarily because they were easily transportable, although Persian artists also painted very large paintings). European travelers to Persia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, writes Diba, "record oral recitations around these life-size images by popular storytellers attended by large public audiences."<sup>56</sup> It would be intriguing to compare these mixed-media spectacles, in which paintings are utilized alongside live performances, with the performances employing paintings and actors that Ziter describes taking place at approximately the same time in London exhibition halls, panoramas and theatres.

Finally, one finds continuities and transformations of the visual traditions elaborated here in modern and contemporary cinema. Jullian points to the convergences between the visual styles of the Orientalist painters and such early Hollywood films as *The Sheik*, with Rudolph Valentino; *The Thief of Baghdad*, in which Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. flies about on a magic carpet; and *Kismet*, with Marlene Dietrich, directed by William Dieterle, which was nominated for four Academy Awards. However, the Western

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

cineaste he identifies as having "brought to life marvellously all the themes so beloved of our painters, like violence, sensuality and magic" is Pier Pasolini, especially in his 1974 film *The Arabian Nights*.<sup>57</sup> That film, of course, is itself part of a trilogy that includes the *Canterbury Tales* and *The Decameron*, and large parts of *The Arabian Nights* was filmed in Sana'a. It seems a particularly fitting note on which to conclude this survey of some of the continuities of visual traditions from the East and West in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, with three films based on three collections of framed tales--one Eastern, two ostensibly Western--one written by an Italian in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, another by the so-called "father of English literature" several decades later, the third collected from oral stories from the East, and all translated to film in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> by an Italian, with characters acting their roles on the streets of Yemen's capital and speaking in Italian. Clearly, what mattered to Pasolini, as Said writes about Flaubert, Nerval and Mozart--and as he might just as easily have written about the Persian painter Muhammad Hassan or the Syrian playwright Sa'dallah Wannus or the anonymous craftsmen represented in the "Re-Orientations" exhibition curated by Bates--"was the

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<sup>57</sup> Jullian, *The Orientalists*, p. 180.

structure of [his or her] work as an independent, aesthetic and personal fact, and not the ways by which, if one wanted to, one could effectively dominate or set down the Orient graphically..."<sup>58</sup> As this survey shows, the pervasiveness of the interpenetration of these Eastern and Western traditions of painting, theatre, literature, opera, cinema, architecture and other arts is far more complex and extensive than has heretofore been acknowledged.

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<sup>58</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 181.

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