

Local colour

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M. Shafik Gabr

MASTERPIECES OF
ORIENTALIST ART
The Shafik Gabr collection

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From the late 1970s onward, the prices paid in auction rooms for Orientalist paintings started to soar. One contributory factor to the revived popularity of this sort of art may have been the publication and widespread sales of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, as Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting "The Snake Charmer", in which a naked boy performs in front of an oddly assorted bunch of slumped oriental characters, provided this contentious book with a beautiful dust jacket. Other books, which were severely critical of intellectual and aesthetic Orientalism, were to make similar use of attractive Orientalist paintings. The dust jacket of Rana Kabbani's *Europe's Myths of Orient* (1986) reproduced Ludovico Marchetti's "The Siesta", which featured an indolent denizen of a harem, while the English translation of Maxime Rodinson's book on Orientalism, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam* (1987), made use of Gérôme's erotically posed "Arab Girl in a Doorway". The dust jacket of my own *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their enemies* (2006) showed a detail of a painting by Hermann Kretschmer of Prince Albrecht of Prussia mounted on a camel, but the lack of erotic content in this image may have been a marketing error.

Of course, there were other more important factors in the renewed interest in Orientalist art. For the most part, the prices paid for these paintings were being pushed up by Arab and Turkish bidders. After the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, the revenues of Arab oil-exporting nations increased sharply and so did the numbers of wealthy Arabs looking for things to collect. At the same time, there was a growing preoccupation with the Middle Eastern heritage (*turath*) and how swiftly the old ways – including falcon hunts, mounted fantasias, dervish ceremonies, traditional artisanship, coffee rituals and so forth – were being destroyed by globalization. Orientalist art seemed to open a window on a vanishing world. As the Egyptian millionaire M. Shafik Gabr observes in the foreword to *Masterpieces of Orientalist Art*, the catalogue of his magnificent collection, "these artists were fascinated by and anxious to record our world, our customs, our architecture, our habits. We owe them a great debt, because although much of what they saw lives on today in our streets and villages, we constantly need to be reminded of the richness and value of our culture". Some Orientalist artists in the nineteenth century were indeed conscious of being engaged in a painterly equivalent of rescue archaeology. Frank Dillon, in particular, made a speciality of painting the vulnerable Mamluk domestic architecture of Cairo, and William Holman Hunt wrote of his time in that city: "All traditional manners were threatening to pass away, together with ancient costume and hereditary taste; I saw that in another generation it would be too late to reconstruct the past". In *Istanbul: Memories and the city* (2003), Orhan Pamuk credits the painter Antoine Ignace Melling with almost single-handedly preserving the way Istanbul once looked.

It is surely a wish to "reconstruct the past" that lies behind the recent formation of the great collections of Orientalist art. The Sultan of Oman collects Orientalist paintings, as does the Shaikh of Qatar, and a museum dedicated to Orientalist art has recently opened in Qatar. The Pera Museum in Istanbul possesses more than 300 Orientalist paintings.

The Najd collection, put together by a

self-effacing Middle Eastern businessman, includes over 150 such works, while the Shafik Gabr collection numbers over 137 paintings by such noted Orientalist painters as Gérôme, John Frederick Lewis, David Roberts, Ludwig Deutsch, Rudolf Ernst, Gustav Bauernfeind and Edward Lear. All the paintings are illustrated in the catalogue of the Gabr collection, often with additional details. The accompanying essays by Gerald Ackerman on Gérôme and his Bonapartism, Kristian Davies on the thoroughly obscure career of Deutsch, and Bryony Llewellyn on Lewis and Roberts, are particularly valuable.

Enthusiasm for this sort of art follows a long period during which artistic Orientalism was either neglected or actively disparaged. Its heyday, which began in the 1830s, was over by the 1880s or 90s. There are various possible causes for the decline that followed. Paintings of the exotic lost some of their allure, with the rise of mass tourism, touristic postcards and box brownie cameras. Moreover, in the 1880s and 90s there was a fairly general collapse of the art market with the demand for works by living artists being particularly badly

affected, as the trade recession of 1884–7 brought a significant number of works by Old Masters on to the market which those who could still afford to collect tended to buy in preference to the works of living artists. The hostility shown towards the Orientalists and their admirers by the Impressionists and their supporters has also been adduced as a cause. The incomes of Orientalist painters fell sharply, and some museums actually started to sell off the now-unfashionable works. Kristian Davies notes that those few museums that acquired paintings by Deutsch "de-accessioned them in the twentieth century". (I do not know if the National Gallery in London

ever owned an Orientalist painting, but I think it is shocking that it does not seem to possess a single example of one today.) The relationship between photography and Orientalist painting is too complex to be properly explored here, though it seems worth noting a few things. The intensely, even hyper-realistically detailed look that is characteristic of so much Orientalist painting, particularly of works produced by Gérôme, Deutsch and Ernst, did not originate in the painters' desire to emulate photographic accuracy. Rather, the stress on detail and on the "licked finish", by which individual brushstrokes became invisible, preceded the invention of photography and derived from the teachings of the Academies in Paris and London from the eighteenth century onwards.

This stress on detail was reinforced by John Ruskin, who placed a great deal of emphasis on being able to see the amount of work that had gone into a work of art. (He was to rhapsodize about the minute care that John Frederick Lewis had evidently taken in depicting the eyelashes of the camels in "A Frank Encampment".) The coming of photography provided the Orientalists with challenges and opportunities. Though most of them travelled to North Africa or the Middle East to research their paintings, it was extremely difficult to paint in oils in the heat, for the paint dried too quickly and, moreover, the act of painting often attracted the unfavourable attention of iconophobic locals. So photographs served as invaluable aides-mémoire for pictures that



"A Street Scene in Damascus" by Gustav Bauernfeind, 1887

were most often produced later in Parisian studios. Furthermore, the artists' collections of photographs facilitated the production of composite scenes in which a minaret from one mosque might be attached to the dome of another and the tile-work on the wall could be drawn from a third source. Early black-and-white photographs were particularly poor at registering changes of tone within shadows, whereas Orientalist painters, particularly Gérôme and his students and imitators, worked hard with colour. Gérôme tended to create areas of intense local colour within shadowed areas and achieved brilliant effects through the late application of glazes and var-

nish to the oils. Lear, two of whose landscapes feature in the Gabr collection, wrote as follows: "In no place – it seems to me, can the variety and simplicity of colours be so well studied as in Egypt; in no place are the various beauties of shadow more observable, or more interminably numerous". But other artists chose to paint architectural and desert scenes in which the direct light of the sun bleached out almost all colour. In the Gabr collection, Ivan Bilibin's painting of the courtyard of the al-Azhar mosque in Cairo may serve as an example. (Bilibin's phase as an Orientalist painter was a revelation to me, as I had hitherto only been familiar with his illustrations of Russian fairy tales.) Most Orientalist paintings, like most Orientalist photographs, showed people at their ease – Nubian guards posing in front of elaborate doorways, chess players, hookah smokers and idle women in domestic interiors. Some critics have seen this focus on idleness as part of a campaign to disparage the Arabs. Yet a twin ancestry for the painting of idleness in Western art can easily be found in Dutch genre painting and, at another social level, in the works of Watteau, Fragonard and Boucher. The American Orientalist Arthur Bridgman wrote of the frenzied activity attendant on a traditional Arab wedding, with the women "you-youing", the musicians with drums and tambourines, and the children running everywhere, but the Gabr collection's "Preparations for a Wedding, Algiers" by Bridgman shows that the artist has chosen a much quieter scene in which the seated bride is being adorned for the ceremony to follow.

The Gabr collection includes fifteen paintings by Deutsch. As Gabr observes in his preface, the Orientalists were "respectful onlookers". The nobility and the philosophic air of the features of Deutsch's "Smoker", "Mandolin Player", "Philosopher" and "Fortune Teller" are striking. The harem guards painted by Deutsch, Gérôme and Ernst, with their dignified poses and striking physiques, serve as magnificent clothes horses for richly textured costumes and somewhat antiquated weaponry.

Cézanne denounced the Orientalists: "All these buggers who go off to the Orient, to Venice, or Algeria in quest of the sun, do they not have a little house in the field of their fathers?". Gérôme, for his part, damned the Impressionists and he denounced the Caillebotte gift of Impressionist paintings to the state. Yet it was not always a matter of outright warfare between the two schools. Charles Gleyre, Gérôme's teacher, also taught a number of leading Impressionists. Gérôme taught Bonnard. Monet admired and studied the works of Eugène Fromentin and Charles-Théodore Frère. (There are four landscapes by Frère in the Gabr collection.) Renoir painted Orientalist scenes. Several Orientalists, including Bridgman and Deutsch, tried to turn themselves into Impressionists, though in Deutsch's case the result was not judged to be a success. In the early nineteenth century, Orientalist painters had played an important role in breaking away from the traditionally grand subject matters of academic painting, comprising history, mythology and religion. Moreover, for the most part the Orientalists eschewed the sentimentality, moralizing and storytelling that were characteristic of so much Victorian painting. It is easy to miss what was once seen as excitingly modern in Orientalism.