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Re-Orientalist Images:

An Artist's Dialogue on Representation and the Middle East

Introduction:

The Middle East has been misrepresented in just about every way possible. Geographically, culturally, linguistically, aesthetically, religiously....the list goes on. This can be frustrating for someone like myself who has devoted their time to studying the region. I wish there was a way to strip away all preconceived notions and start from scratch: just the"Middle East." The REAL Middle East, before anyone got up in there and started adding their own meanings to it.

Well, here I've already hit a problem. "The Middle East" isn't exactly a neutral phrase. If it was, it wouldn't make any sense. How is it possible to be in the middle of "East"? The middle of east of where? And yet, for all its literal ambiguity, just about anyone around here will roughly understand that "the Middle East" references an area that stretches from North Africa to Southwest Asia. It's already indexing meanings that most Americans don't necessarily think about when they use the phrase: in this case, that British colonial interests in Asia led to the dubbing of the lands between the West (Europe) and the East (India) the "middle" East.

It's impossible to escape the meanings embedded in words. And the Middle East carries with it a myriad of meanings that have been shaped by our culture, history and experiences.

What do we think of when we think of the Middle East?

On the one hand, most Americans would probably mention something about terrorism, the taliban, violence, war, Isis, or anti-democratic sentiments. Why? It can be of no doubt that 9/11 had a great effect on this, and the subsequent coverage of "terrorism" in the American media adds to it. Arabs, Muslims or anyone who looks like one have been targeted as a problematic "other" linked with terrorism, violence and intolerance.

On the other hand, not all things that we think of when we hear "Middle East" necessarily elicit feelings of fear. In fact, other typical associations with the Middle East- Bedouin, Religious Practices, the Pyramids, Food, Architecture, Dress- provoke feelings of curiosity and fascination. This is part of a long-standing tradition.

Orientalism: Then and Now

In the 19th century, European colonial interests in the lands to the "East" were quickly followed by a wave of interest in the cultures and practices of those people whose lands were subsequently colonized. As news and memorabilia made their way back to Europe, the popular imagination became enthralled with these lands to the East, this "Orient." Academics wanted to study it. Poets and painters wanted to depict it. This was the beginning of Orientalism.

Retrospectively, Orientalism as a term has changed quite a bit. Formerly used to describe any created work that had to do with the Orient, is now used to reference the problematic essentializing of culture that did and does take place when the West represents the East. This is thanks to a man called Edward Said, whose extensive analysis of "Orientalism" as a Western phenomenon argues that the "Orient" was portrayed not as it actually was, but rather as the West wanted to imagine it was: an unchanging culture stuck forever in a romanticized past.

(1979) In other words, the narrative of locals was completely cut out as the West picked and chose what motifs to include in its imagined Orient, a privilege granted by colonial domination.

Despite Said's groundbreaking analysis, we as Westerners have inherited this Imagined Orient and it still persists today in the stereotypes that we see in pop culture. Two iconic examples are Aladdin and Prince of Persia. Both are films, and both are (very loosely) inspired by the 1001 Nights Entertainments, a collection of stories from south and west Asia, first made available to Europe by the French orientalist Antoine Galland. Aladdin has been heavily critiqued by a media critic named Jack Shaheen, who has devoted his life to critiquing Orientalist representations in American films and popular media. (2006) Aladdin, he notes, recycles every stereotype in the book: from the generic desert setting to the emphasized sense of brutality in all but the main protagonists. Prince of Persia could be critiqued for most of the same reasons: showing that one decade later not much has changed. Through films like these, orientalist stereotypes are being passed from generation to generation, and the cycle continues to perpetuate itself.

Orientalist Art: a chance for dialogue?

As we can see, fascination with the Middle East can be problematic if it's a one way street. It is unfair for Western perceptions of the Middle East to be based mostly on a constructed Orient especially if the constructed nature of that orient is not acknowledged. But that's not always the way it plays out. Fascination in another culture can also be constructive, if it is respectful and mindful of alternate perspectives.

I find this spectrum to be exemplified in the artworks of Orientalist painters. This movement took place mostly during the 19th century and enjoyed vast popularity for a time. Their subject matter? The Orient. From imagined harems full of nude women to landscape street scenes painted on-site. Most of the defining painters of the movement did travel extensively in the

Middle East, particularly in colonized North Africa and the Levant, but also to Ottoman Turkey and Persia. While we must acknowledge the colonial privilege that allowed them to travel so extensively, but we must also take into account the fact that on their travels, painters did interact with locals, frequently staying with them and sometimes befriending them. (Hight, 2009) As reflected in their paintings, artists of this movement had a wide variety of experiences and perspectives on their subject matter.

Orientalist paintings were a backwater of the art market for several years since falling out of vogue in the early 20th century. However, in the last few years, Orientalist paintings are becoming very sought after by collectors in the Middle East. One of the pioneers of this new trend, an Egyptian CEO named Shafik Gabr, has one of the biggest private collections of Orientalist art in the world. He doesn't believe that Orientalist art is degrading to Arabs, but rather that it is an important part their history. (Pagano, 2012) Others agree, like the poet Raficq Abdulla, who says that looking back at Orientalist art allows Arabs to become "more aware of who they are- and who they are not- in a fast globalizing world." (Hight, 2009) And it's not only Arab collectors who are finding value in this art. The Senior Vice President of Sotheby's, a Turkish man called Ali Can Ertug, says that he "finds Orientalist's genuine interest flattering and valuable." This valuing of Orientalist art in the Middle East brings in a powerful new voice to the dialogue on representation. Paintings that are "more truthful" are the ones that sell for the most money, while those that perpetuate damaging stereotypes do not sell at all. In this way, Middle Easterners are taking part in the dialogue begun by painters over a century ago, by recognizing the sympathetic nature of the painter's hand.

Concept:

Recently, I traveled to the Middle East for the first time. I was in Istanbul for two weeks for a Geography research trip in March. To illustrate my experiences, I chose to “reinterpret” three Orientalist paintings as a way to engage in a dialogue with Orientalism, an inherited set of meanings which no doubt affected my perceptions of Turkey. By engaging directly with Orientalist art, I am able to acknowledge my perspective as a Westerner and also critique it.

Additionally, because of the unique experiences and perspectives of the painters as individuals, I am able to have a dialogue with each painting that ranges from critique of problematic depictions and acknowledgement of useful ones, which are praised not only by myself but also by growing community of Middle Easterners who collect Orientalist art.

The dialogue begins: Sketches

My preliminary research involved making sketches during my trip to Istanbul and Bursa in late March. This was a unique experience in and of itself.

As an artist, I'm used to being invisible. This goes doubly when drawing from life. I usually do drawing discreetly, without my subjects noticing that they're being drawn. It did not work out this way when I was in Istanbul. Perhaps it was because I already stood out as a foreigner, but when I sat down to sketch, I was always approached by people eager to spectate. Far from being an annoyance,I would say that these moments are among my fondest memories of my trip.

During the sketch seen in figure 1 (see appendix), which was recorded outside of the spice bazaar in Eminonu, I was stationed on a crate across the road from a cheese shop. The workers at the shop quickly took notice and came over in threes and fours to watch me draw. They playfully insisted that that I focus my attention on their shop, rather than the shop next to it,

which I had been drawing at the time. After about fifteen minutes of drawing, they invited me to step into their shop for tea and breakfast, which was absolutely delicious.

The sketch seen in figure 2 (see appendix) was done at the Kadikoy-Karakoy ferry landing at about midmorning. Among a few other spectators here and there, I was revisited about three times by a man selling prayer beads in the area, who came back to see how the drawing was progressing. Each time he wished me "Kolay gelsin:" May it come easy, a phrase that we were taught to say to someone who was hard at work.

These are just two examples of many. I thought it was wonderful I as an artist, an observer, was the one being observed by the people I was drawing. That sort shift is a little nerve-wracking from the side of the artist, who has to take into account their immediate audience and thus try to THINK about the images they are producing from the perspective of the observer. The observer, of course, will be willing to point out corrections if necessary.

Now we'll look at the images I have created in dialogue with Western Orientalism and the paintings that inspired them.

Exhibition/Analysis

The first painting up for reinterpretation is The Slave Market by Fabio Fabbi. (See figure 3, appendix)

A few things worthy of note about this artist: He never traveled to the Middle East himself. He was instead a studio painter who likely produced paintings from photographs and memorabilia brought back to Italy from the Middle East.

He was also part of a group of second-rate Orientalist artists who jumped on the trend as it was becoming popular and made a living by perpetuating stereotypes to appeal to European fantasies about the Orient. (Hight, 2009) His art, not at all concerned with accuracy, is not sought by art collectors in the Middle East.

Almost all of his paintings have to do with the "Oriental woman," (some of whom even sport contemporary Italian hairstyles!). In fact, it's possible that he did several iterations of this painting for different patrons- a testament to the popularity of the theme.

In my reinterpretation of The Slave Market, I chose to depict one of the "Ottoman Costume Shops" which were commonplace in very touristy markets such as the Covered bazaar in Istanbul. (see figure 4, appendix)

The costume shop, seen on the right, carries a variety of fezes, bellydancer outfits and Turbans, reminiscent of a romanticized past.

The slave of Fabbi's painting has been replaced by a mirror, held up for a couple of tourists who are trying on some turbans. This represents Sa'id's critique of Orientalism as a reflection of what the West wants to see.

On the left, a fellow tourist wearing a hijab examines a scarf from the shop across the street. She looks back at the costume shop contemplatively. In the original painting, the man on the left examines a naked woman available for purchase, an exemplary illustration of the male desire as exhibited in most paintings of this sub-genre. In my interpretation, his gaze of desire has been replaced by the gaze of a Middle Eastern women, who ponders the mannikins in bellydancer costumes across the street. She is the foremost character in the painting, her thoughtful glance raises tensions between reality and eroticised fantasy.

The Carpet Merchant:

"The Carpet Merchant" is one of the movement's most iconic paintings by one of its most prestigious members, the famous French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme. (see figure 5, appendix)

Gérôme traveled to the Middle East multiple times after 1855.

Even so, none of his paintings were done on-site in the Middle East. Rather, he used the Middle East as an inspiration for his work, constructing his own scenes from photographs whilst pulling motifs from the Imagined Orient that was so prevalent in Western imagination at the time.

European contemporaries praised his works for its accuracy, but modern Arab art collectors prefer Gérôme's portraits to his scenes which, buyers feel, tend to favor exoticism over accuracy.

This reinterpretation was a bit more of a struggle than Fabbi's Slave Market because it is aesthetically beautiful. The composition and color use are truly the work of a master. Additionally, the action in this image seems rather innocent compared to the buying and selling of slaves.

In this painting, though, we can truly see the power of the Orientalist's imagination: an act as simple as purchasing a carpet becomes a monumental moment, immortalized forever by the artist's masterful brush.

In my reinterpretation, I chose to depict the shop of an actual carpet merchant who I had the honor to meet. (see figure 6, appendix) His name is Aziz and he is a great friend of our professor. I wanted to make Aziz's shop seem grand and monumental, just like the space depicted in Gerome's painting, but with one key difference: Aziz's shop was cozy. It felt like home, and it was a welcome break from a busy day when we stopped in to see here and there throughout our

trip. In this image, my goal was to marry the rather disparate emotions of awe and comfort that colored my entire experience in Istanbul.

I've depicted Aziz's shop with a few imaginative exaggerations. Aziz and our professor stand in the foreground, conversing. In the corner, a group of us sit drinking tea and relaxing. Textiles fill the shelves and spill over them. They are at once exotic, when examined individually, but when piled upon each other they add a sort of comforting feeling to the space. There is a carpet on the floor and wood walls, which make the shop feel very warm and welcoming. The comforts of tea and a conversation between friends are all present in this space. Despite the exaggerated appearance of the shop represents the feelings monumental awe and fascination that I felt about Istanbul before even going there including such things seeing ancient ruins and being in a place with such a rich history, but the shop's coziness reflects the interactions that ended up being the most memorable of moments of the trip: where I was able to feel at home.

Street Scene, Damascus:

The final painting I reinterpreted is a street scene, painted by the German artist Gustav Bauernfeind. (see figure 7, appendix) He studied architecture, a feature noticeable in his paintings of the Levant. He not only traveled to the Middle East, but actually moved to the Israel/Palestine area in the 1890s, where he remained for the rest of his life. Today, his paintings are very popular among Arab buyers because of their accuracy. (Hight, 2009) What I found interesting is that this painting contains Bauernfeind's only known self-portrait. Here, at the center of a crowd of people, the artist converses with locals who are eager to examine his sketches. I find Bauernfeind's painting to be a very respectful representation of what it feels like to be a traveler in a foreign place, and even specifically relevant to my experiences in Istanbul.

Shafik Gabr, the aforementioned collector of Orientalist art and owner of this painting loves it for its portrayal of “mutual curiosity and respect.” (Pagano, 2012)

In my final reinterpretation, I chose to focus on the experiences of myself and my classmates as we were welcomed by the generosity of others. (See figure 8, appendix) Nowhere was this more prevalent than at the Open-Air markets where we conducted our research, which is why have chosen such a place as the setting of my interpretation. I've included myself in the place of Bauernfeind, surrounded by some of the people who spectated on my drawings when I was sketching in public. This visual is an appropriate metaphor for the strange sort of tension that such generosity provoked in myself and my classmates. We felt as though we were inconveniencing people when they offered us tea or food from their stands, but we knew that it would be impolite not to accept. At the same time, we could see that we were being included in their community if only for the day we were there doing research because we were an entertaining spectacle- and they were recognizing that relationship by giving us food. It was at times overwhelming, but it wasn’t at all threatening, just like the circle of people surrounding myself and my sketchbook.

This painting is intended to be an homage of sorts to all of the kindness we were shown on our trip. I want to use this painting to assist me when people ask me what Istanbul was like. I'd like to show them this image and tell them stories about it and about the experiences that inspired it.

Reflection & Future Projects:

This project was a giant undertaking that's still underway. It was very useful in helping me make sense of my experiences in Istanbul through engaging with the more general "Western"

perception of the Orient, and more specifically with individual artists who represent a spectrum of perceptions.

I plan to further my understanding of perception and representation of the Middle East in graduate school, focusing specifically on depictions of the Middle East in video games and graphic novels. I would like to create an index of games and graphic novels that represent the Middle East in ways beyond the stereotypical, to empower creators like myself to engage in representation with mindfulness and respect.

References:

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Appendix:

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

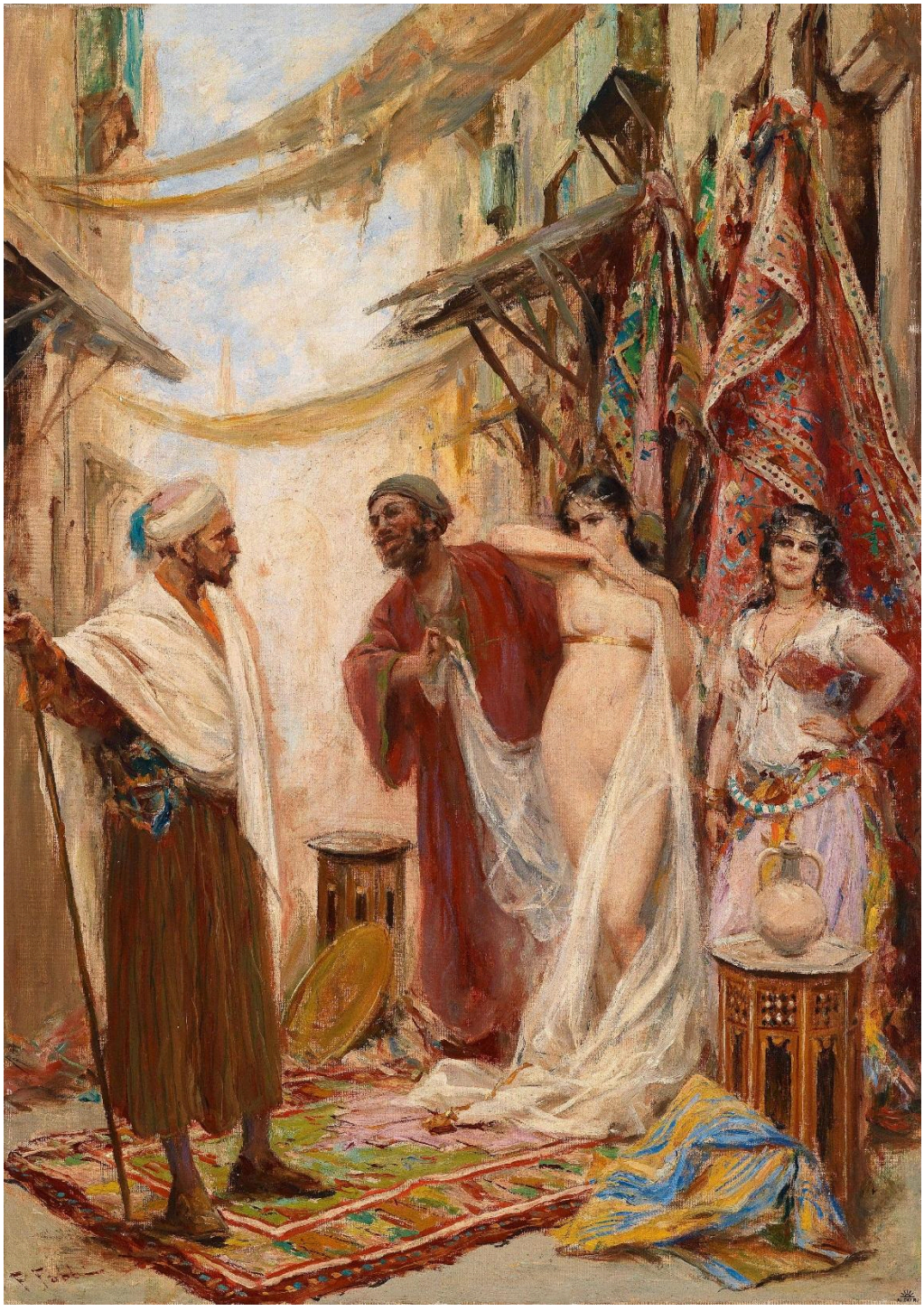

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8