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Ken Jacobson

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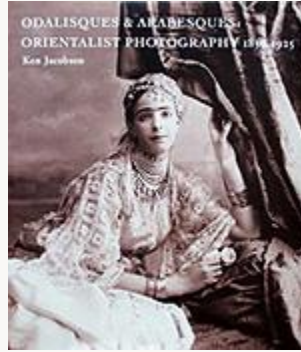
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Odalisques and Arabesques: Orientalist Photography, 1839-1925

Ken Jacobson.

London: Bernard Quaritch Ltd., 2007

308 pp.; 500 b/w illustrations, 85 full-page tritone illustrations

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Ken Jacobson's sumptuously illustrated volume challenges normative approaches to the study of non-Western photography in ways that are both compelling and frustrating. Condemning general histories that largely exclude practitioners of the art in the East, he offers this volume as a corrective to traditional surveys, and is the first in over a decade to cover the subject in a fairly comprehensive and often revealing manner.^[1] He defines the Orient as the regions of North Africa and the Middle East, and returns to the terms *Oriental* and *Orientalist*, based on their meanings prior to the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. By 'Orientalist photography' he means both images taken in the East and those created in the West as a result of Eastern influences. Tracing the evolution of photography in the East since its early introduction in 1839, Jacobson explores major influences on its practice, both foreign and local. He limits the scope of his study to several primary concerns including an examination of resident professional studios and the classification of photographs of local people as social documentation. An underlying theme in the book is expressed by its provocative title, 'Odalisques and Arabesques.' Jacobson explains that as "two powerful symbols of the Orient" the use of the words here "is not accidental, and is intended to highlight the ambivalent nature between fantasy and reality of the photographs presented" (11). He argues that this very interplay imbues photographs with a special aesthetic, thus far unappreciated. Further, he contends that, with few exceptions, photographs of the non-West have been interpreted as stereotypical Orientalist (in its current parlance) representations with little regard for their inherent artistic or historic value. He questions whether "it is viable or sensible to provide an intellectual definition of good taste in the photography of indigenous cultures," especially when some may be "in the predicament where the most politically incorrect images are among the most seductive" (12). In addressing this provocative issue, he devotes a chapter to provide a critique of, and an alternative to, post-colonialist analyses, but his study, in the opinion of this reader, raises far more questions and leaves few adequate or thought-provoking solutions.

Jacobson organizes the eleven chapters of his book thematically on both familiar and original issues. The first six chapters present a near decade-by-decade accounting of the

development of Orientalist photography, reflecting parallel as well as divergent trajectories of the field from its Western counterpart. The other chapters focus on specific issues elucidating photography's role in relation to Orientalist painting and social documentation. At the end, he includes an extensive section on detailed biographies of individual photographers.

Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of the book is the exhaustive study on professional studios in the East. In the mid-nineteenth century, several establishments opened their doors in major cities for portrait sittings and the sale of other local images. Among these were the signature firms of Alary & Geiser in Algiers, Antonio Beato in Egypt, Félix Bonfils in Beirut, and Pascal Sebah and the Abdullah Frères in Constantinople. Jacobson focuses on these studios and notes that they "had photographers of outstanding talent who created images of great sensitivity and vision" (34). He argues that the cursory attention such studios have received in the broader history of photography is due to their commercial nature and the rare exhibition of their works in Europe, restricting exposure to contemporary critics. Professional studios evolved alongside tourism. Although their main source of income came from tourists interested in purchasing souvenirs, with the introduction of the Kodak camera and the picture post card in the 1890s, they turned to other means of attracting clientele. Heading in a new direction, they began providing large scenic views or took souvenir shots of tourists at major sites of interest. For example, J. Dozsay, a photographer practicing in Egypt, created a studio at Giza, allowing tourists to have their pictures taken "atop camels in front of the world's premier backdrop—the great pyramid and Sphinx of Egypt" (57). Jacobson's exploration of the relationship between the studios and their consumers, often comprising royal personages such as the Ottoman sultan, is fascinating.

Another strength of the book is its discussion of photography's relationship with Orientalist painting. Jacobson examines the works of several artists including Jean-Léon Gérôme, Pierre Auguste Renoir, and John Singer Sargent in demonstrating photography's full impact. For instance, he attributes the tiled background of Gérôme's famous painting, *The Snake Charmer*, c. 1880, to an Abdullah Frères photograph of the Topkapi Palace interior. In addition, he highlights a trend emerging in the 1870s—the compiling of photographic study-aids or *Études d'après nature*, expressly for the artist community. These aids comprised a wide range of images from the East. The professional acceptance of such guides seems short-lived, at least in the public eye. He argues that in the face of harsh criticism, "it is probable that most painters took care to hide their use of photographs either by making certain that the image was unpublished or in only utilizing it to provide assistance with a small detail in the painting" (71). This makes the study of the use of photography in painting especially challenging. Also impressive is his insightful narrative on contributions to art photography and advancement in photographic technique by practitioners in the East. He draws attention to previously neglected details by demonstrating that, in the 1870s, studios such as Maison Béchard in Egypt were already experimenting with the pictorialist idiom, or that in his *Aegypten* (1893), Max Junghaendel pioneered the use of artistic photogravure well before J. Craig Annan and Alfred Stieglitz. In addition, Jacobson invites a brief look at photography's role in the fusion between fantastical Orientalist painting and early cinematic art as a conscious move away from the ennui of 1890s' banal tourist imagery.

Jacobson claims that social documentation, a largely ignored division of photography, has been a long-standing tradition in the East since the early 1860s. Initially, his narrative seems to define social documentation as simply a record of "real people, objects and places" (77). Under this rubric, and with an interest in figural imagery, his examples span an array of subjects incorporating street peddlers, beggars, refugees, famine victims, religious events, social gatherings, and the devastations of war. These photographs, although mediated, are indeed visual records of historical value and as such they substantiate his claim. But then, in charting the relatively late development of social documentation in the West, he mentions images of the poor and the working class by Western photographers, including some who had a more revelatory and political agenda such as Thomas Annan, Jacob Riis, and Lewis Hine. This becomes a source of confusion as to his intended meaning behind social documentation.

He specifically concentrates on John Thomson and Adolphe Smith's *Street Life in London* (1877) as part of his argument. Here, the identities of the subject and the audience of the photographs are significant—the volume focused on educating the English middle class on the circumstances of the *English* working class. The book met with little success, indicating the lack of interest in the daily life of fellow citizens. If Thomson and Smith's "deliberately documentary approach" is part of Jacobson's model for understanding social documentation, then the Western tourist as non-Western photography's main audience undermines it, especially when the photographers' intentions are unknown (79). In fact, he links the "extensive, if often inadvertent, social documentation of various trades and street characters" in the East directly to the "inquisitiveness of Westerners" about everyday life in the non-Western world (79). Thus, photographers were usually catering to the needs of their customers and not necessarily attempting to 'elevate' the conditions of their subjects through their photographs. A clear and careful definition of social documentation would have eliminated this discrepancy in the study.

Jacobson's penultimate chapter, "The Notion of Morality in Orientalist Photography," reveals the full extent of his displeasure with recent scholarly treatment of the subject. He begins his discussion by defining the traditional approach to the study of non-Western photography as an "extensive examination of period sources and original photographs" (85). He then asserts that the other popular method, post-colonialist analysis, is "based less on the minutiae of photographic history, and more on theory and sympathy for native people" (85). Further, he states: "post-colonial analyses have led to notions of 19th-century Orientalist photography that are unbalanced at best" (86). Jacobson's irritation with post-colonialism is evident throughout the book and he does have some understandable complaints—complicated language often renders the subject inaccessible and debates sometimes do verge on the vituperative. For other issues, his choice in examples to subvert post-colonialist presumptions weakens his arguments.

He asserts that apologists of the discourse have a tendency to stereotype Westerners and to dismiss those who were "highly complimentary, or even deeply moved by, the Oriental way of life" (86). Among his examples he includes the writer Edward William Lane, who "lived in Cairo for many years as a native," and converts to Islam like the photographer Vichen Abdullah, an Armenian living in Constantinople, and the French painter Étienne Dinet in Algeria (86). Lane's impressions of the Egyptians, even though complimentary at times, are

nonetheless embedded with prejudices and his actions were not entirely honorable. For instance, to gain first-hand knowledge of Islamic practices, Lane presented himself as a Muslim when he had not actually converted. Vichen Abdullah was not a visitor from the West; he was an Ottoman subject. Nor does converting to Islam serve as a key to an innate understanding of another culture. In Diné's case, his acculturation was a much more complex process.[2]

Another of Jacobson's grievances is the alleged post-colonialist oversimplification of complex imperial apparatuses in the East. He accuses theorists of ignoring the many 'Others' in play aside from the standard East-West binary. In this, he takes the example of the Egyptian people, who were ruled by a viceroy. The Ottoman sultan in Constantinople was the titular head of this viceroy and, in turn, he was subject to considerable pressure from the Great Powers of Europe. Within this hierarchy, Jacobson designates each stratum as the 'Other'. Curiously, the West still remains at the apex of this imperial pyramid and all the 'Others' can still be subsumed under the East. In addition, the extensive literature found on the Ottoman Empire, or the Middle East in general, would suggest that there is considerable awareness of these 'Others' even if not within the direct scope of post-colonialism.[3]

Perhaps the most egregious fault he finds in post-colonialist studies of art is that theory and subjectivity is favored over reality. Identifying lacunae in the writings of certain art historians, he argues that either they only heed those facts that validate their allegedly spurious claims and reject all others, or, that they end up making erroneous declarations. In sum, his critiques of post-colonialism, seen as an invariant and monolithic methodology, lead him to reject "theory-based methodologies" since they offer only a "narrow range of explanations... to assist in the interpretation of photographs" and instead advocate more traditional means (89). He categorically supports these methods rather than negotiating a more inclusive approach on examining and interpreting the substance of the photographs. While his bid to move in another direction is commendable, and even though he agrees that it is necessary to contextualize nineteenth-century photographs, he proposes no alternative method in this endeavor.

A vexing aspect of the study is his handling of the question of morality. He asks: "Without merely applying formulaic injunctions that are dismissive of most Eastern imagery, are there other ethical rules that can distinguish between the acceptable image and the one that is morally reprehensible"? (89) In the ensuing discussion, and referring back to the interplay between the real and the imaginary, he seems to suggest that aesthetic characteristics may make up for shortcomings of inaccurate portrayals of indigenous people as long as they "are accorded a certain respect in creating a depiction of their culture" (89). But who gets to decide what is respectful? This he does not address. Also, he finds the imperialist arrogance of many images to be self-evident, thus dismissing the need for cultural interpretation of such works. In this, he perhaps forgets that such understanding was by no means intuitive, but made commonplace today as a result of prior assiduous studies on their multivalent meanings.

Despite the weaknesses and uncertainties of the book, Jacobson's work is a revealing and fascinating study of non-Western photography and his knowledge on the technical and

artistic aspects of photography is impeccable. The book broadens our perceptions of how photography functioned and flourished in the East. Its chronological organization combined with the extensive biographies on individual photographers will serve as a useful reference for scholars and enthusiasts alike.

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Notes

[1] Jacobson himself mentions several earlier treatises on the subject including Nissan Perez' pivotal 1988 publication, *Focus East: Early Photography in the Near East (1839–1885)*, which also contains biographies on many photographers.

[2] For more on Étienne Dinet see Roger Benjamin's *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa 1880-1930*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

[3] For one example see Fatma Göçek's, "Ethnic Segmentation, Western Education, and Political Outcomes: Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Society". In *Poetics Today*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Cultural Processes in Muslim and Arab Societies: Modern Period I (Autumn, 1993), 507-538.