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exhibition review of

Pierre Loti, Fantômes d'Orient

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A CONJURATION OF PHANTASMS

Pierre Loti: Fantômes d'Orient
Musée la Vie Romantique, Paris
27th June to 3rd December 2006.
Exhibition catalogue

Pierre Loti, fantômes d'Orient.
Solange Thierry, Jérôme Godeau, Arlette Sérullaz et al. (Paris: Paris-Musées 2006)
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Modern French interest in North Africa began with the retinue of savants taken by Napoleon on his Egyptian expedition and revived when the French began the long conquest of Algeria under Louis Philippe. What India became to the British imperial imagination was supplied for the French by the Arabs: French Orientalism was born. When Julien Viaud (1850-1923), an officer in the merchant marine from Rochefort, near La Rochelle, began writing of his experiences of travel in novel form under the name of Pierre Loti, they were a huge success. Loti built an immense house for himself in his native town, filled with 'barbaric' artefacts: rugs and swords and narguilehs (hookahs), tiled rooms—Sir Richard Burton would have felt at home there. The house is now open to the public, a shrine to this remarkable man. Remarkable, and strange. Hilaire Belloc's sister was puzzled by him: 'He [...] moved about the merry crowd at L'Abbaye de Gif [the country house of Madame Adam] looking like a scoffing ghost, rather than a man of flesh and blood [...] the only Frenchman I ever heard of who disliked Paris.'^[1] When J.E.C. Bodley and the painter Bonnat met him travelling on the Franco-Spanish border, 'his summer costume included a mauve silk shirt buttoned with black pearls, in his manicured hands he held a pair of lavender gloves and his face was slightly rouged.'^[2]

The double name and double character of the man was reflected in his writings, split between accounts of the Muslim world of the Mediterranean and the Far East. The Musée de la Vie Romantique decided to concentrate on the former when mounting an exhibition of French Orientalist paintings to give the iconographic background to the novels. Loti himself rather disappears, a mere peg on which to hang the collection, although quotations from his work are on storyboards in each room, and here and there a vitrine displays a dagger or a watch or a first edition, rather disarmingly described in one instance as 'bric à brac à la manière de Pierre Loti.' The portrait of Loti, given pride of place, suggests a man amused by life: it is by Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer (1896), and shows the symbolist (and therefore metaphysical) influence typical in this painter, whose work certainly deserves greater exposure. The paintings on display in fact rather generally reflect the painters whose art has fallen out of favor, swept away by the Impressionists. Although we have representative works by Delacroix, Fromentin and Gérôme, the emphasis is on the lesser painters. Some, indeed, are so obscure that even the curators of the exhibition are baffled—Gaston Boucart is only identified as 'active in the twentieth century,' for instance, and the dates of Alexandre Lauwich are given as 1823-? so that this exhibition, like many such, affords an opportunity not simply to re-assess little known work, supposing such a re-

assessment possible, but to come to some understanding of the processes of artistic fame, as merit is defined and redefined.

For these paintings are first and foremost illustrative. This is the intent of the curator; a rather weak implied admission that they do not stand up to form an exhibition in their own right without being drawn together by Loti. Nevertheless, we are not looking at picture postcard or chocolate box art, but at scenes of Near Eastern life painted with accuracy, albeit selective, and sympathy. Occasionally there is a clue to something deeper going on. In the first room a large portrait of an androgynous young person (*Jeune bohémien(ne) Serbe* by Charles-Zacharie Landelle, dating to 1872) suggests that the curator is subtly drawing our attention to the nature of Loti, and perhaps to that other engagement of the French tourist with North Africa that we know from Pierre Louÿs and André Gide: the pursuit of amenable young girls and boys. Otherwise, eroticism plays no part in this show, save in its sanitized form of representation of the bejewelled odalisque attributed to Eugène Giraud, and perhaps the pictures, twinned by hanging, of *Femme juive d'Alger* by Alexandre Lauwich and *Algérienne et son esclave, ou L'Odalisque* by Ange Tissier. It is the Near East of the minaret and the coffee house, and the sun setting over the Bosphorus that we visit, in the rather gloomy building that was once the home of George Sand.

This voyage around a room, from Cogniet to Ziem, is also a journey around the imagination: what is ostensibly real is coloured by fantasy. (Ziem, after all, painted scenes of Venice from his studio in Montmartre.) There is a strong emphasis on portraiture, but the subjects are types rather than individuals, and there is little distinction between Turk and Circassian, Albanian and Arab and Jew, and the street senses are static: no bustle of the soukh, no sound or smells are conveyed, serving perhaps the idea of a civilisation in decay (and the Turkish Empire, which still theoretically stretched from Morocco to Persia and from the Balkans to what are now the United Arab Emirates was certainly that: the sick man of Europe). Perhaps the pictures of the Dead Sea by Léon Belly, so highly praised in the Salon of 1866, and the exquisite little interior by Théodore Frère may stand for this.

The section on Constantinople affords the nearest recognition that we are in the realms of the imagination: 'La ville double, aura été la patrie d'élection de Pierre Loti. Suspendue au dessus des brumes de la mer, elle se prête à l'invocation des fantômes d'Orient et des âmes flottantes,' says the handout [The double city, which would have been Loti's chosen homeland. Hanging above the sea mists, it offers itself up to the conjuration of ghosts and restless souls]. *Fantôme d'Orient* is the title of a book by Loti (1892), subtitled *Constantinople in 1890*, so we are returned to the interaction between the art on the walls, Loti's own descriptive talent, and the ambiguous Loti himself, for *Fantôme d'Orient* is also the title of Lévy-Dhurmer's portrait.

D.C. Rose

Notes

[1] Mrs Belloc Lowndes: *Where Love and Friendship Dwelt*. London: Macmillan 1943 p.216.

[2] Shane Leslie: *Memoir of John Edward Courtenay Bodley*. London: Jonathan Cape 1930 p.64. It is possible to date this encounter to 1st September 1898.