

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Frances S. Connelly

book review of

Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe by Frederick N. Bohrer

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 4, no. 3 (Autumn 2005)

Citation: Frances S. Connelly, book review of *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe* by Frederick N. Bohrer, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 2005), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn05/orientalism-and-visual-culture-imagining-mesopotamia-in-nineteenth-century-europe-by-frederick-n-bohrer>.

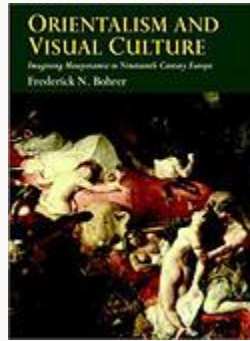
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).



Frederick N. Bohrer,
Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe
Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003
384 pp; 79 illus.
ISBN 0-521-80657-7
Index; bibliography
Hardcover: \$95.00

The title indicates the ambitions of this study: the excavation of Mesopotamian antiquities in the nineteenth century serves as the subheading for the broader aim of examining the phenomenon of Orientalism. Frederick Bohrer's stated purpose is to explore the workings of exoticism and to do so he depends especially on the reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss, and on Walter Benjamin's theories concerning power relations, commodification, and the mechanical reproduction of art. Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory, particularly his notion of hybridity, also provides a framework for Bohrer's book. Despite the book's title, Bohrer prefers to use the term exoticism and defines it as a process that "cannot be seen apart from a system of circulation"(11). In other words, Bohrer does not focus on Mesopotamian artifacts themselves, but upon their reception and "representational transformation" in nineteenth-century England, France, and Germany. The book explores existing European attitudes and beliefs, their "horizon of expectation" (to use Jauss's term), upon first encountering these exotic others and the interchanges and transformations that ensued. This "horizon of expectation" refers not only to European expectations but to the *limitations* of these expectations. One might imagine European culture metaphorically as a perspectival grid imposed upon a distant civilization. While this grid establishes a recognizable order for the European viewer, the myriad aspects of that civilization that do not conform to this structure of thought are rendered invisible, beyond the horizon. Following Jauss and Benjamin, Bohrer stresses that this was not a simple process of assimilation, but an active production of meaning, and also that the characterizations and uses of "Mesopotamia" (which referred primarily to ancient Assyria, but also Babylon, Sumer, and Persia) varied widely among European audiences. The exotic was "not an immutable class of objects so much as a mode of apprehension" (11). Mesopotamia was, of course, one of many "Others" to nineteenth-century Europeans and Bohrer's extensive analysis of its excavation and the many forms of its representation, through exhibitions, popular journals, illustrations, sermons, and various bibelots, provides an extremely useful model for looking at the greater phenomenon.

The book has much to commend it; perhaps first and foremost its creative and exhaustive exploration of this particular Mesopotamian moment in nineteenth-century European culture, with particular emphasis upon the French and English excavations of the 1840s and subsequent decades of interpretation and assimilation through the Exposition Universelle of 1889. Courbet's Assyrian beard and other parts of this story are familiar territory but, to take one example, who knew that none other than William Henry Fox Talbot was involved in deciphering cuneiform? Or that he planned to use his fledgling photographic techniques to make these tablets more accessible for further scholarly study? Gustave Moreau's drawings of the Louvre's Assyrian artifacts in his sketchbook, *Études Orientales*, make an all-too-brief appearance. Similarly enlightening is Bohrer's extensive comparison of Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827-8) with John Martin's *Fall of Nineveh* (1830), a work whose relative unfamiliarity recontextualizes Delacroix's famous one. The chapter on late nineteenth-century France brings together the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, the theatrical productions of symbolist Joséphin Péladan, and the works of academic painter Georges Rochegrosse and Paul Gauguin.

Also impressive is the author's ability to draw insights from a wide range of material. He more than follows through on the title's promise to explore visual culture (granted, a study of the representation of ancient Mesopotamia in nineteenth-century fine art would be a short book indeed). For example, Bohrer's analysis of the struggles within the British Museum to find the right place (in every sense of the word) for the Assyrian antiquities is fascinating. The gigantic bulls of Nineveh upended the museum's tidy bifurcation of the ancient world, which contrasted Greek with Egyptian, and sparked heated debates concerning the aesthetic and historic value of all three cultures. As Bohrer argues, the Assyrian sculptures occupied a hybrid space, in-between the established categories. They presented another ancestor to the West that scrambled received notions of historical progress and patrimony. The archaeologist responsible for unearthing Nineveh, Sir Austen Henry Layard, was an outspoken proponent of Assyrian antiquities. As such, he occupied a similar boundary position between resistant museum authorities, who were loathe to ascribe significant aesthetic worth to Assyrian art, and the general public who flocked enthusiastically to see these new arrivals to London. Frustrated with official channels, Layard appealed directly to the British public, through the popular press and through his best-selling book, *Nineveh and Its Remains* (1849).

The popular press played a leading role in the reception of Assyrian works and Bohrer's detailed analysis of the audiences and social agendas of periodicals like *Le Magasin Pittoresque*, *L'Illustration*, *Penny Magazine*, *Athenaeum*, *Art Journal*, and *The Illustrated London News* demonstrates this effectively. He shows, for example, that Layard was active in publicizing the Assyrian excavations, setting a "horizon of expectation," two years before the antiquities arrived in England. In 1845, Layard published an article in the *Malta Times* that was quickly excerpted in the most widely circulated English literary weekly, the *Athenaeum*. In it he hailed the recovery of "the long-buried art of the Assyrians" (100) and went on to praise its aesthetic qualities. Even when displayed in the British Museum's basement "Nimroud Room," Bohrer demonstrates convincingly that the popular press offered the general public more access to Assyrian imagery, especially in well-illustrated periodicals such as *The Illustrated London News*.

Discussion and debate was far more constrained in France, however. Although the Frenchman Paul-Émile Botta was the first to excavate and exhibit Assyrian artifacts in the 1840s, their circulation and transformation within French culture was severely hampered by the Louvre's limited viewing schedule and general hostility to the public, as well as the rather limited coverage available in popular journals. While Botta's archaeological project was enshrined, in a lavish, five-volume study along the lines of *Description de L'Égypte*, the audience for such a work was extremely small and elite. Further, Botta had the misfortune to be sponsored by Louis-Philippe, and his funding evaporated with the fall of the July Monarchy in 1848, only one year after what should have been his crowning moment, the opening display of Assyrian art in the Louvre.

Another strength of the book is its succinct demonstration of the imperialist aspirations at work in these excavations. While it is commonplace now to think of exoticism or primitivism in terms of colonialist power, Bohrer gives concrete examples of the interplay between imperialist aspirations and archaeological excavations. The two major powers pursuing archaeological projects in Mesopotamia were France and England, and we see how the competition for empire fueled their efforts to "discover" the ancient past, to install these treasures in their national museums, and to document their conquest of the historical past as well as the geopolitical present. Layard's essay in the *Malta Times* provides a specific example. This periodical was created by the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Stratford Canning, to "foster British interests in the Eastern Mediterranean" (100). It was Canning who initially funded Layard's first excavations, undertaken without authorization from the local rulers. When called to task for his actions, Canning was explicit about the imperialist competition with France. Referring to the discoveries of the French archaeologist, he wrote: "M. Botta's success at Nineveh has induced me to adventure in the same lottery, and my ticket has turned up a prize...there is much reason to hope that the... [British Museum] will beat the Louvre hollow" (102). Similar nationalist aspirations were voiced by Friedrich Delitzsch: "Babylon, the royal city of Nebuchadnezzar—might it be a mission worthy of Germany to be associated with these names" (272)?

The book more than follows through on its promise to examine the workings of exoticism through a study of the European encounter with Mesopotamia, and the author brings together theory and material history in a consistent, thoughtful manner. The theoretical argot can at times create more heat than light. Statements such as: "The conditions of production are completely fractured, fragmented, and imbricated among a variety of audiences" (58), or "This is another application of the referential calculus of exoticism, enabled within the structural mobility of the exoticist signifier" (252), are needlessly pedantic. The first chapter, "Exoticism as System," has much the same relationship to the rest of the book; its labored description of the study's theoretical apparatus puts the reader in a situation somewhat like that of the nineteenth-century public desiring to see the antiquities from Nineveh: our access is unnecessarily constrained and delayed. Although an introduction to methodology is warranted, many of the concepts introduced here are repeated in the subsequent chapters and have more impact when harnessed to the historical events.

The one thread of confusion that runs throughout the book is the omission of any substantive discussion of primitivism. Primitivism and exoticism overlap and intertwine all

through the nineteenth century, both being "modes of apprehension" rather than actual objects. While the book's subject is exoticism, the failure to clarify its relationship to primitivism shears away crucial pieces of the historical moments under discussion in the book, and also creates some interpretive problems. There is also the fact that the theoretical models used here are very familiar territory in the scholarship on primitivism. Contrary to historical evidence, the book appears to understand primitivism as a subset of exoticism (17); however, the discussion of Gauguin seems to situate exoticism as a prelude to primitivism. While Gauguin is a "paradigmatic exoticist viewer," Bohrer states that it is "through...Gauguin's ideas of exoticism and the Ancient Near East we can locate artistic 'Primitivism' within the broader horizon, which met Mesopotamia" (266). A page later, Bohrer states that, as exoticism comes to closure at the end of the nineteenth century, "we find the Ancient Near East engaged in a newly founded 'Primitivist' enterprise." The discussion of Emil Nolde in chapter eight repeats the formula, broadly stated, that the Others of the nineteenth century are "exotic" while those of the twentieth century are "primitive," and specifically that the exotic Mesopotamia was absorbed into "the concerns of 'Primitivism'" (274).

Perhaps the most immediate problem here is that primitivism does not spring full-grown from the head of Gauguin. Nor was Emil Nolde's characterization of Indian, Pre-Columbian, and Chinese artifacts as the "...rough *Urkunst* of primitive peoples" (274) a new idea, but a sentiment expressed all through the nineteenth century.[1] As George Levitine, Walter Friedlaender, Giovanni Previtali, and Robert Rosenblum have shown, Archaic Greek and Egyptian imagery were deemed "primitive" circa 1800, as were the paintings of Giotto and Jan van Eyck.[2] When an English newspaper critic, quoted by Bohrer, compared the "stiff, formal positions" of Assyrian figures to those of Van Eyck (181), the implication was that they were "primitive," not "exotic." The ways in which Gauguin construed "primitive" expression drew upon what was a decades-old, well-established construct, and as these few examples demonstrate, Gauguin's conflation of Japanese with Egyptian, Medieval with Marquesan, continues a tendency to bind together all sorts of "Others" to one's purposes and to routinely blur the lines between "exotic" and "primitive." [3] My point is that the "horizon of expectation" was already in place to receive Assyrian artifacts as "primitive" as well as exotic. In fact, Assyrian art was arguably more "primitive" to European observers at the beginning of its reception, when it was compared to Greek or Egyptian art, than later. By the early twentieth century, as Bohrer tells us, Assyrian art was not "primitive" enough for Nolde.

Looking through the visual examples in this study it is fair to say that Assyrian imagery itself had little impact *stylistically* except in the decorative arts and popular illustration. For most nineteenth-century artists, the historical figures of Mesopotamia provided narrative material and its artifacts provided grandiose stage settings. It is in the case of Gauguin, where Assyrian imagery plays a modest part in his synthetist, cloisonné style, that Bohrer sees the threshold between exoticism and primitivism (266-271). This threshold turns into more of a traffic-jam of intersecting and contradictory messages, however, due to the unresolved relationship between exoticism and primitivism. Bohrer claims that Gauguin has been so imprisoned in the "Father of Primitivism" role that "he himself is often treated as largely inner-driven and strangely uninfluenced by larger contexts and prior histories of Orientalism and exoticism." I have read this passage repeatedly and cannot explain why it

ignores the considerable scholarly work on the impact of Japanese, Egyptian, Buddhist, or Pre-Columbian art on Gauguin.

The crux of the problem lies in the difficult work of defining both exoticism and primitivism. The closest we come to it in this book is Bohrer's explanation for his use of the term exoticism rather than Orientalism. The exotic is preferable because it sidesteps the binary opposition of Orient-Occident. Further, it makes no connection to geographic locales, and "refers somewhat more indiscriminately, and non-hierarchically, to a generic elsewhere (17)." Exoticism is more inclusive, Bohrer argues, and is not a "more specifically delimited" term, like "Orientalism and Primitivism, but also Chinoiserie, Turquerie, Espagnolism, etc." To list Primitivism in the same category with Chinoiserie or Espagnolism, though, implies that there is indeed a group of primitives as real as the Spaniards or Chinese. The broader point, though, is that primitivism and exoticism both describe the European imaginary and not any specific culture, and I would further observe that the value of the terms "exoticism" and "primitivism" is not so much that they are denatured and generic, but that they name the desire for difference in the subject. This is not to say that exoticism and primitivism are the same thing; , but I would argue that their desires and processes grow from the same root.[4] The exoticist desire for difference seems primarily escapist, while the primitivist desire for difference is regressive. "Primitive" expresses an overt value judgment and places a society, past or present, in an early state of development (hence our desire to distance ourselves with quotation marks around "primitive" but not exotic). Yet Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha have amply demonstrated that although the value judgments of exoticism are more covert, they too exert enormous power. The desire for the exotic is not absorbed into the "primitive" at the close of the nineteenth century; rather, the unstable and conflicting relation between the two continues and continually changes in the search for ever more exotic and ever more "primitive" Others.

This study is well researched, historically grounded, and theoretically sophisticated. It makes a significant contribution to both nineteenth-century studies and to our understanding of the workings of exoticism. It is an ambitious scholarly undertaking, unstinting in its research, and full of fresh insights into the period.

Frances S. Connelly
Associate Professor, Art History
University of Missouri-Kansas City
connellyf[at]umkc.edu

Notes

[1] It is interesting to note that while the *cultures* of Egypt, India, China, or Japan were most often received as "exotic," the *imagery* of these traditions was frequently characterized as "primitive." See, for example, Elisa Evett, *The Critical Reception of Japanese Art in Late Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1982) and "The Late Nineteenth-Century European Critical Response to Japanese Art: Primitivist Leanings," *Art History* 6 (March 1983): 82-106. See also Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

[2] Giovanni Previtali, *La Fortuna dei primitivi dal Vasari ai neoclassici* (Turin: Einaudi, 1964); Walter Friedlaender, "Eine Sekte der 'Primitiven' um 1800 in Frankreich und die Wandlung des Klassizismus bei Ingres," *Kunst und Künstler* 28 (April 1930): 281–286; George Levitine, *The Dawn of Bohemianism: The Barbu Rebellion and Primitivism in Neoclassical France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978) and Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth-Century Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967).

[3] Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, reprinted 1999).

[4] In the European hierarchy of world cultures, assiduously tended and revised from the Enlightenment on, those cultures understood as "exotic" were invariably those with a written language, most having "court" cultures with established fine art traditions, and were consistently ranked above so-called "primitive" societies.