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Roger Benjamin

Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930

(Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003)

xxi & 352 pp.; 16 color & 123 b/w illustrations, 1 map, ISBN 0-520-22217-2, \$49.95.

The study of artistic interactions across cultures raises a number of challenges to established methods and paradigms in the art historical study of Western art. Whereas scholarship tends still to valorize and concentrate on the most innovative works of the highest quality produced by the most influential artists, much of the hybrid art generated by cross-cultural interaction is derivative work of mediocre artistic quality produced by marginal artists. Cross-cultural study often places enormous emphasis on institutions and discursive systems, an approach developed within Western art history but usually limited to contextual background for the interpretation of great works. And the nature of art's context is in turn quite different, with intercultural social, political, and cultural networks being far less stable or homogeneous than in single-society studies. Undertaking intercultural study, in short, forces us to question and revise many of our basic assumptions about the aims and values underlying art historical research. Do we seek to enrich our understanding of great works of art? Do we try to reconstruct a unified culture? Do we descriptively map all the multiple strains of ideology in a given society? Do we use theory to hone our empirical apparatus or use data to valorize theoretical models?

A rapidly growing body of art historical literature has been addressing these kinds of intercultural issues, and Roger Benjamin's *Orientalist Aesthetics* should take its place alongside the best of these, both as a rich case study of one network of interactions and as a methodological model for advancing intercultural research in general.^[1] As a case study, Benjamin explores various hybrid forms of visual culture resulting from the French colonial presence in Algeria, and later Morocco, between the 1850s and 1930s. With great precision and nuance, he describes and evaluates the contributions of a range of French and North African artists, critics, collectors, cultural agents, and institutions. In doing so, he deploys several key analytical methods adapted especially for intercultural studies: contextualizing exhibition events in France and Algeria; emphasizing the formation, leadership, and activities of colonial art societies; tracing competing ideas of cultural identity and heritage in art historical writings about Orientalism; examining the role of colonial art schools in variously promoting French, indigenous, or hybrid forms of art; comparing works of European high art genres with indigenous categories of fine and decorative arts; and

weighing the deep effects of politics, with an appropriate complication of simplistic binary models of colonial power facing indigenous resistance. Marshalling such a mixed bag of analytical tools is a difficult but necessary chore for monographic intercultural studies, and Benjamin's example offers much for other scholars to emulate.

The book's most fundamental contribution is its empirical reconstruction of an entire world of intercultural practices, ideologies, and cultural policies that have by and large been neglected by scholars of nineteenth-century art (perhaps less so by twentieth-century scholars). Still focused primarily on avant-garde innovation and a teleological narrative history of the period, we have yet to chart and seriously grasp the complex roles played in nineteenth-century society by academic art, popular arts, print culture, art from Northern, Eastern, and Southern Europe, and other substantial but neglected sectors of visual culture. A string of major recent studies (bolstered by many smaller ones) has advanced our understanding of France's substantial engagement with the Middle East and North Africa, including Benjamin's own 1997 exhibition catalogue *Orientalism*.^[2] *Orientalist Aesthetics* adds to these by offering the first comprehensive, deeply contextual study of French engagements with Algeria and Morocco in the later half of the century. By doing so, it enables us to advance our theoretical modeling of both European art and intercultural interaction.

The book's first chapter (of ten) sets the stage for this reconstruction by delineating debates over Orientalism that existed in the years following France's definitive military conquest of Algeria in 1843. A detailed account of Eugène Fromentin's Algerian paintings in the 1840s and 1850s—set against his articulate texts on art—establishes some of the basic practices and values of one branch of Orientalism, notably an anti-ethnographic, picturesque emphasis on the beauty of undisturbed indigenous people, landscapes, and customs. Benjamin contrasts this with the more intrusive, exoticist, and ethnographic work of Jean-Léon Gérôme, who otherwise does not play a major role in the book. A comparison of critical writing by Baudelaire and Gautier, who championed exoticism, and by the naturalist critic Castagnary, who denounced Fromentin, Gérôme, and exotic imagery in general, brings out the ambivalent nature of Orientalism in the period, a kind of third pole crossing the boundaries between myth and reality, classicism and contemporaneity, literary imagination and political rule. With these practical and critical principles in place, Benjamin devotes the next three chapters to a range of French activities anchored in the 1880s and 1890s, followed by three chapters dealing primarily with the period 1900 to 1930, and concluding with three chapters emphasizing indigenous and hybrid cultural activity in the 1910s and 1920s.

The section on 1880-1900 begins with a chapter focused on Renoir. Surveying his landscapes and figure paintings from two visits to Algiers in 1881 and 1882, the chapter reveals Renoir's typical tourist's choice of motifs and praise for colonial rule, explains his difficulty finding native models (due to Islamic prohibitions against human representation and female public exposure), and discusses his images of cultural cross-dressing. It then analyzes the writings of Léonce Bénédictine, who saw the depiction of light as the key modern innovation, but favored mainstream Orientalists like Albert Lebourg and Léon Belly over the Impressionists. Benjamin's argument is inconclusive here, with Renoir's Orientalist paintings coming across as curiously unremarkable, but he does argue persuasively that Renoir's work challenges the standard critical opposition between progressive

Impressionism and conservative Orientalism—a point pivotal to understanding 'Orientalist aesthetics.' Renoir's entire Algerian oeuvre is further explored in Benjamin's 2003 exhibition catalogue *Renoir and Algeria*, which similarly turns on the key point that Renoir was a typical Orientalist in his choice of motifs and apolitical attitude, but was the only later nineteenth-century artist to endow Algeria with a "modern pictorial treatment."^[3]

Chapters three and four, particularly rich in new information, shift to institutional analysis, detailing the central importance of the Society of French Orientalist Painters in collecting Islamic art, sponsoring Orientalist exhibitions, generating art criticism, and constructing a canonical history of Orientalism. Bénédite plays a crucial role here; named curator of the Luxembourg Museum in 1892, we learn from chapter three that he mounted the first major retrospective of Orientalist art in 1893, founded the Society in 1894, and organized a series of retrospectives from 1895 to 1899 canonizing Alfred Dehodencq, Théodore Chassériau, Belly, and Gustave Guillaumet. The multi-faceted Society crossed all kinds of boundaries. Members ranged from Gérôme and Benjamin Constant to Renoir and James Tissot; exhibition venues ranged from the Grand Palais to the modernist galleries of Durand-Ruel; and patrons included Orientalist scholars and colonial politicians, who attended Arab-theme banquets alongside the painters and critics. The key painter from the Society seems to be Étienne Dinet, the main focus of chapter four. Unlike either Renoir or Gérôme, Dinet developed an ethnographic mode of painting from the 1880s to 1920s that contravened Fromentin's principles but won great critical praise, especially from Bénédite. Benjamin interprets such taste carefully, charting a preservationist ideology among Orientalists wanting to retrieve pre-colonial authenticity, and explaining that the French Dinet learned Arabic, converted to Islam, and collaborated closely with Sliman ben Ibrahim, an Algerian who joined the Society, frequented Paris, and with Dinet published several illustrated books on Islam between 1900 and 1920. One of Benjamin's most compelling points comes here, in showing how this hybrid art form appealed strongly to both Europeans and Africans, colonizers and colonized—a point all the more interesting because that aesthetic today is so de-valued by Western scholars in comparison to both Renoir and Gérôme.

As the book moves more firmly into the early twentieth century, chapter five details the role of the Society and its painters at the 1900 International Exposition, and at a series of French colonial exhibitions over the following decade. Expanding on practices from the 1889 Exposition and following the innovative lead of Louis Dumoulin, painters provided murals and panoramas that served both as backdrops for live displays and as popular entertainment in their own right. The Society and Dumoulin's rival Colonial Society of French Painters also organized mini-Salons of Orientalist canvases at these fairs. Benjamin concludes from these activities that painting was an indispensable technology for such exhibitions because it represented the exotic "as a theater of representations," reinforcing a variety of colonial interests—political, economic, cultural (126). The sixth chapter follows the influence of art policies into the colonies themselves. From 1881, the French government gave eight annual grants for artists to spend one year traveling outside France, a practice that encouraged numerous artists, including Dinet and Léon Carré, to re-focus their academic training on Orientalism. Victor Barrucand, a liberal French writer and journalist in Algeria, promoted Franco-Arab cultural cooperation in his influential bilingual newspaper *L'Akhbar* and helped establish the Villa Abd-el-Tif, a kind of Villa Medici overlooking elaborate gardens in Algiers. It became a pivotal institution in hosting visiting artists from France (selected by Bénédite), teaching Western art in Algeria, and generally promoting the dissemination of

French art in the colony. This one-way transfer of cultural technology establishes a clear ground for subsequent chapters on indigenous and hybrid art practices.

In the meantime, however, the seventh chapter pauses for another single-master interlude focused on Matisse. Like Renoir in the 1880s, Matisse in 1906 followed a tourist itinerary in Algeria, but he found the dirty towns and exotic dancers disenchanting. Benjamin recounts Matisse struggling—and failing—to adapt modernist aesthetics to Orientalist motifs, revealing the depth of interdependence between aesthetics and subject matter even in Fauvist abstraction. Matisse was more successful during his two stays in Morocco in 1912 and 1913. Benjamin argues that, in contrast to utopian views of Matisse as a pure modernist unsullied by Orientalist ideology, and despite distancing himself from Orientalist societies, Matisse nevertheless worked within the "discursive boundaries" (160) that structured Orientalism, reiterating numerous nineteenth-century prejudices: romanticizing 'authentic' indigenous subjects through a Eurocentric visual model; associating North Africa with Roman classicism; and, in works such as *Moroccan Café*, choosing motifs that suggest Muslims are lazy or corrupt yet enviable. And while Matisse's abstraction was the most radical departure from ethnographic realism, Benjamin still interprets that formalism as "a complex expression of . . . Eurocentrism," which was based on shutting out the tense politics of the moment. (170) He suggests vaguely that in reorganizing "troubling subject matter into a supposedly neutral abstraction," modernist aestheticization "potentially alters a work's political implications," (180) but this seems outweighed by his more compelling assertion that the apolitical viewpoint of abstraction was part of "the specialized consciousness that makes the colonizing aesthetic possible." (170) The key conclusion, in other words, seems to be that Matisse's evacuation of Orientalist meanings remained still firmly rooted in Orientalist ideology and the colonial politics structuring it. Was it then possible, one wonders, for any painter visiting the Orient to escape Orientalism?

In the last three chapters of the book, Benjamin moves farthest away from art historical precedents in reconstructing some of the indigenous and hybrid art practices within North Africa. He first clearly distinguishes two competing trends in French colonial cultural policy: "assimilation" (forcing natives to adopt French culture, as common in Algeria) and "association" (blending French and native cultures together, the new norm in Morocco). Chapter eight focuses primarily on Morocco, made a French protectorate in 1912 and ruled by the associationist governor Hubert Lyautey from 1912-25. Seeking political stability and economic benefits, Lyautey preserved Moroccan architecture, funded books and workshops to perpetuate indigenous rug-making and other decorative arts, and exhibited Moroccan goods at the Museum of Decorative Arts and elsewhere. This culminated in the 1925 International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris, where Moroccan traditional arts were mixed with French modern arts in displays of model modern homes—an example closer to our contemporary Orientalist modes than to nineteenth-century ones. Chapter nine examines two Algerian painters who took up assimilationist and associationist approaches in the 1910s and 1920s. Azouaou Mammeri, who learned European-style oil painting, appealed to Africans and Frenchmen alike with conservative, realistic scenes of Islamic sites and manners. Mohammed Racim gained more lasting fame in France for combining European perspective techniques with traditional Persian miniature techniques (also foreign to Algeria) in images of Arab and Muslim life and history. While revealing how much Racim was inspired by French patronage, including

collaboration with Dinet and Carré, Benjamin also identifies an incipient anti-colonial nationalism that made Racim popular with Algerians later in the century.

Benjamin's final chapter focuses on the National Museum of Fine Arts of Algiers, which he shows to be a decidedly assimilationist institution. It opened in 1930 as part of the centenary celebrations of French presence in Algeria, and Benjamin begins by describing the way that organizers reinforced conservative views of Algeria as Roman land lost to Arabs—over fierce protests by Dinet and others who were promoting equal rights for indigenous people. He then details the work of Jean Alazard, a Renaissance scholar who was the museum's curator from 1926 to 1961. Alazard built an elaborate modern building combining classical and African elements, but he built a collection that excluded indigenous art and focused on French landscape, Impressionism, and sculpture, the latter being most associated with Rome and most offensive to Islam. Most important, the museum aimed to be the greatest collection of Orientalism, here configured to include, again, only French painters. The museum failed, Benjamin argues, in the sense that it never forged an indigenous audience but only reinforced colonial culture for colonial viewers. Interesting by comparison is the 1931 International Colonial Exhibition on the edge of Paris, which Benjamin discusses in his conclusion; it included more art from France's colonies and broadened the Orientalist canon by including slightly more progressive styles, especially Gauguin's, but it was similar in marginalizing the work of Dinet.

The book's plethora of empirical information and analysis is of tremendous intrinsic value and I believe constitutes its greatest contribution. Complex, multi-layered, and interconnected, the ten chapters offer a rich representation of how art was produced, disseminated, and received in France's colonial setting. Informed by postcolonial theory but never sacrificing historical complexity for facile theoretical generalizations, the book also enables us to refine the methods, theories, and assumptions that we bring to our models of both European art and intercultural interaction. It helps us grasp how cultural precepts and political ideologies structure aesthetic taste, and how such taste can be re-interpreted and transferred across cultures. It enriches our understanding of Realism by revealing the way contemporary reality in the Orient was perceived as the non-real, as part of the domain of the classical or literary imagination. It complicates our picture of Orientalist art, showing it to be fluid and pervasive rather than a simplistic, unitary academic foil to avant-garde modernism. And it surprises us by revealing how widely Orientalism was valued over modernism in the 1890s, how deeply Orientalism structured avant-garde work by Renoir and Matisse, and how hybrid Orientalist taste became, making Eurocentric modes of viewing popular among many indigenous viewers.

Methodologically, the book also greatly advances the study of intercultural interaction, especially in moving away from artist-centered approaches. Benjamin argues in his conclusion that it is "the mass of less distinguished artists who most accurately characterize Orientalism as a cultural phenomenon." (281) Masters and masterpieces are pushed to the periphery, with analysis focused more on institutions, discourses, and exhibitions. Most chapters weave individual practitioners into the context of particular kinds of cultural activity, while the two chapters on Renoir and Matisse are woven into the broader context of Orientalist activities as a whole. While Benjamin justifies his study in part in a traditional way—enriching our understanding of two canonical masters and "recontextualizing

modernism from the periphery"—the text itself goes well beyond this limited outlook. (3) More interesting than Orientalism's influence on Renoir and Matisse is its popular appeal, its coercive power in naturalizing public opinion, its archeological utility, its use in promoting commercial craft, its capacity for fashioning new indigenous identities, and, in the end, its profound ambivalence. All of these findings do little to deepen our understanding of Impressionism or Fauvism, but they do much to deepen our understanding of the cultural histories of France and Algeria, and the ways in which they interacted. Benjamin's approach thus establishes a compelling model for making *cultural systems* the primary object of analysis, opening an alternative to the study of masters and oeuvres.

Related to this, finally, the book also helps reorient the field of study by challenging our habits of periodization. By selecting the time period of France's greatest colonial development in North Africa, Benjamin crosses the divide between nineteenth- and twentieth-century studies. We see many important issues stretching from the 1880s into the 1920s, continuities in international exhibition practices, in private and state patronage, in the role of critics. For historians of nineteenth-century art in particular, this helps us appreciate that nineteenth-century ideas did not vanish abruptly in 1900 or 1905, and that attitudes created by Delacroix, Fromentin, and Gérôme continued to influence French and North African artists and critics well into the twentieth century. Certainly, avant-garde styles changed radically, but the many continuities in Benjamin's book challenge our assumptions about the geographical and chronological limits of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Symbolism, and Fauvism, as well as the supposed discontinuities between them. Viewed in conjunction with Orientalism's crossing of traditional categories like avant-garde and academic, these overlaps of style and ideology provide us with a richly nuanced view of one sector of French and Algerian cultural production during the peak of France's colonial expansion.

Some of these great strengths of *Orientalist Aesthetics* do, however, cause difficulties for the reader. Benjamin's thoroughness in describing context diffuses the focus of some chapters, and his admirable reticence to over-interpret evidence seems to hold him back from drawing more expansive conclusions. I think he has earned the right, for example, to give a bolder opinion about the ways in which colonial politics affect the production of visual culture in general.^[4] I wonder what generalizations we might draw— if any—about how "cultures" interact. And I wonder what this detailed case study tells us about how to deal with some of the problems typical of other intercultural studies, such as conflicting categories of "art" and "craft", different aims of artistic production, and different audiences and aesthetic value systems. The only real flaws in the book, however, are of two kinds. One is an occasional weakness in organization. In part because of the complexity and interconnectivity of the various issues, information is sometimes scattered, with facts or people popping up in one section or chapter before being more thoroughly introduced in a later one. Some key statements of argument are also buried in the middle of a chapter; in my reading, for example, the complicated chapter on Matisse came into sharp focus one-third of the way through, with the assertion of formalist Eurocentrism. The second weakness is that several important works are brushed over with little individual analysis. While this is again partly justified by the focus on systems rather than works, it makes it

difficult for readers to become familiar enough with specific examples to add them to a course or incorporate them in their own scholarly writing.

Certainly this book is original and excellent in extending our study of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French art. It illuminates well-studied figures in new ways while adding many new characters and issues to our view of the period. And it is the most complex study of Orientalism to date. But an even greater contribution, I think, lies in its opening up of new ways of thinking about art history—ways that integrate individuals, institutions, and cultural systems, and that enable us to make sense of the complex, often contradictory activities and ideologies that arise in any intercultural interactions, including that between our present and the past we study.

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Notes

[1] Some leading monographs I have in mind here are Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture, and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Stephen Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997); Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Timon Screech, *The Western Scientific Gaze and Popular Imagery in Later Edo Japan: The Lens within the Heart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; reprinted Curzon, 2002).

[2] Chronologically, major works include Gerald Ackerman, *The Life and Work of Jean-Léon Gérôme* (London: Sotheby's, 1986); Roger Benjamin, *Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee* (Sydney: Gallery of New South Wales, 1997); Christine Peltre, *Orientalism in Art* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998); Todd Porterfield, *The Allure of Empire: Art in the Service of French Imperialism, 1798-1836* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

[3] Roger Benjamin, *Renoir and Algeria*, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press; and Williamstown: Sterling and Francis Clark Art Institute, 2003); quote on p. 4.

[4] Frederick Bohrer considers this problem in detail in his review of the book, in *The Art Bulletin* vol. 86, no. 1, March 2004, pp. 176-180.