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The Imaginary Orient

What is more European, after all, than to be corrupted by the Orient?

—RICHARD HOWARD

What is the rationale behind the recent spate of revisionist or expansionist exhibitions of nineteenth-century art—*The Age of Revolution, The Second Empire, The Realist Tradition, Northern Light, Women Artists,* various shows of academic art, etc.? Is it simply to rediscover overlooked or forgotten works of art? Is it to reevaluate the material, to create a new and less value-laden canon? These are the kinds of questions that were raised—more or less unintentionally, one suspects—by the 1982 exhibition and catalogue *Orientalism: The Near East in French Painting, 1800–1880.* [1]

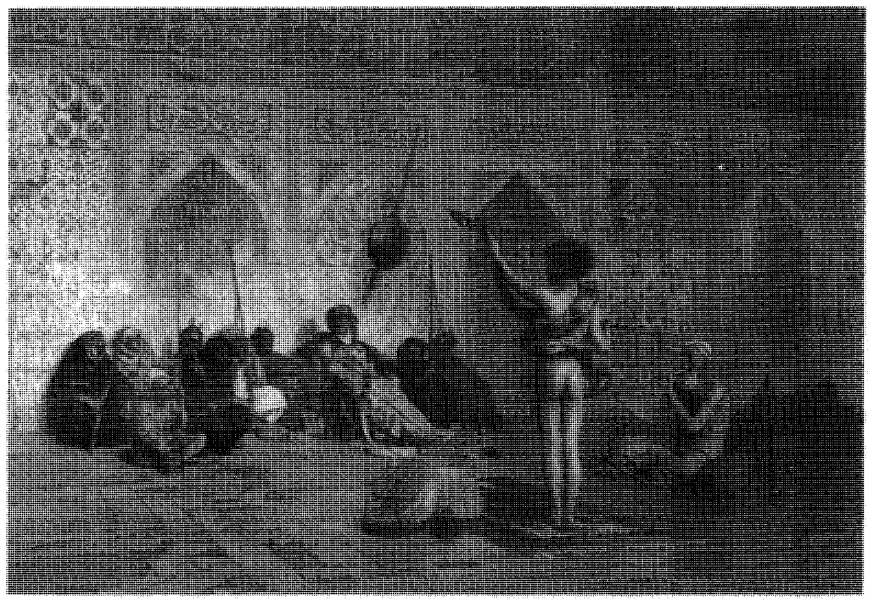
Above all, the Orientalist exhibition makes us wonder whether there are other questions besides the "normal" art-historical ones that ought to be asked of this material. The organizer of the show, Donald Rosenthal, suggests that there are indeed important issues at stake here, but he deliberately stops short of confronting them. "The unifying characteristic of nineteenth-century Orientalism was its attempt at documentary realism," he declares in the introduction to the catalogue, and then goes on to maintain, quite correctly, that "the flowering of Orientalist painting . . . was closely associated with the apogee of European colonialist expan-

sion in the nineteenth century." Yet, having referred to Edward Said's critical definition of Orientalism in Western literature "as a mode for defining the presumed cultural inferiority of the Islamic Orient . . . part of the vast control mechanism of colonialism, designed to justify and perpetuate European dominance," Rosenthal immediately rejects this analysis in his own study. "French Orientalist painting will be discussed in terms of its aesthetic quality and historical interest, and *no attempt will be made at a re-evaluation of its political uses.*"[2]

In other words, art-historical business as usual. Having raised the two crucial issues of political domination and ideology, Rosenthal drops them like hot potatoes. Yet surely most of the pictures in the exhibition—indeed the key notion of Orientalism itself—cannot be confronted without a critical analysis of the particular power structure in which these works came into being. For instance, the degree of realism (or lack of it) in individual Orientalist images can hardly be discussed without some attempt to clarify *whose* reality we are talking about.

What are we to make, for example, of Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Snake Charmer*[1], painted in the late 1860s (now in the Clark Art Institute,

1. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Snake Charmer,* late 1860s, Williamstown, Massachusetts, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute



Williamstown, Mass.)? Surely it may most profitably be considered as a visual document of nineteenth-century colonialist ideology, an iconic distillation of the Westerner's notion of the Oriental couched in the language of a would-be transparent naturalism. (No wonder Said used it as the dust jacket for his critical study of the phenomenon of Orientalism!)[3] The title, however, doesn't really tell the complete story; the painting should really be called *The Snake Charmer and His Audience,* for we are clearly meant to look at both performer and audience as parts of the same spectacle. We are not, as we so often are in Impressionist works of this period—works like Manet's or Degas's *Café Concerts,* for example, which are set in Paris—invited to identify with the audience. The watchers huddled against the ferociously detailed tiled wall in the background of Gérôme's painting are as resolutely alienated from us as is the act they watch with such childish, trancelike concentration. Our gaze is meant to include both the spectacle and its spectators as objects of picturesque delectation.

Clearly, these black and brown folk are mystified—but then again, so are we. Indeed, the defining mood of the painting is mystery, and it is created by a specific pictorial device. We are permitted only a beguiling rear view of the boy holding the snake. A full frontal view, which would reveal unambiguously both his sex and the fullness of his dangerous performance, is denied us. And the insistent, sexually charged mystery at the center of this painting signifies a more general one: the mystery of the East itself, a standard topos of Orientalist ideology.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the insistent richness of the visual diet Gérôme offers—the manifest attractions of the young protagonist's rosy buttocks and muscular thighs; the wrinkles of the venerable snake charmer to his right; the varied delights offered by the picturesque crowd and the alluringly elaborate surfaces of the authentic Turkish tiles, carpet, and basket which serve as décor—we are haunted by certain *absences* in the painting. These absences are so conspicuous that, once we become aware of them, they begin to function as presences, in fact, as signs of a certain kind of conceptual deprivation.

One absence is the absence of history. Time stands still in Gérôme's painting, as it does in all imagery qualified as "picturesque," including nineteenth-century representations of peasants in France itself. Gérôme suggests that this Oriental world is a world without change, a world of

timeless, atemporal customs and rituals, untouched by the historical processes that were "afflicting" or "improving" but, at any rate, drastically altering Western societies at the time. Yet these were in fact years of violent and conspicuous change in the Near East as well, changes affected primarily by Western power—technological, military, economic, cultural—and specifically by the very French presence Gérôme so scrupulously avoids.

In the very time when and place where Gérôme's picture was painted, the late 1860s in Constantinople, the government of Napoleon III was taking an active interest (as were the governments of Russia, Austria, and Great Britain) in the efforts of the Ottoman government to reform and modernize itself. "It was necessary to change Muslim habits, to destroy the age-old fanaticism which was an obstacle to the fusion of races and to create a modern secular state," declared French historian Edouard Driault in *La Question d'Orient* (1898). "It was necessary to transform . . . the education of both conquerors and subjects, and inculcate in both the unknown spirit of tolerance—a noble task, worthy of the great renown of France," he continued.

In 1863 the Ottoman Bank was founded, with the controlling interest in French hands. In 1867 the French government invited the sultan to visit Paris and recommended to him a system of secular public education and the undertaking of great public works and communication systems. In 1868 under the joint direction of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the French Ambassador, the Lycée of Galata-Serai was opened, a great secondary school open to Ottoman subjects of every race and creed, where Europeans taught more than six hundred boys the French language—"a symbol," Driault maintained, "of the action of France, exerting herself to instruct the peoples of the Orient in her own language the elements of Western civilization." In the same year, a company consisting mainly of French capitalists received a concession for railways to connect present-day Istanbul and Salonica with the existing railways on the Middle Danube.[4]

The absence of a sense of history, of temporal change, in Gérôme's painting is intimately related to another striking absence in the work: that of the telltale presence of Westerners. There are never any Europeans in "picturesque" views of the Orient like these. Indeed, it might be said that one of the defining features of Orientalist painting is its dependence for

its very existence on a presence that is always an absence: the Western colonial or touristic presence.

The white man, the Westerner, is of course always implicitly present in Orientalist paintings like *Snake Charmer;* his is necessarily the controlling gaze, the gaze which brings the Oriental world into being, the gaze for which it is ultimately intended. And this leads us to still another absence. Part of the strategy of an Orientalist painter like Gérôme is to make his viewers forget that there was any "bringing into being" at all, to convince them that works like these were simply "reflections," scientific in their exactitude, of a preexisting Oriental reality.

In his own time Gérôme was held to be dauntingly objective and scientific and was compared in this respect with Realist novelists. As an American critic declared in 1873:

> Gérôme has the reputation of being one of the most studious and conscientiously accurate painters of our time. In a certain sense he may even be called "learned." He believes as firmly as Charles Reade does in the obligation on the part of the artist to be true even in minute matters to the period and locality of a work pretending to historical character. Balzac is said to have made a journey of several hundreds of miles in order to verify certain apparently insignificant facts concerning a locality described in one of his novels. Of Gérôme, it is alleged that he never paints a picture without the most patient and exhaustive preliminary studies of every matter connected with his subject. In the accessories of costume, furniture, etc. it is invariably his aim to attain the utmost possible exactness. It is this trait in which some declare an excess, that has caused him to be spoken of as a "scientific picture maker."[5]

The strategies of "realist" (or perhaps "pseudo-realist," "authenticist," or "naturalist" would be better terms) mystification go hand in hand with those of Orientalist mystification. Hence, another absence which constitutes a significant presence in the painting: the absence—that is to say, the *apparent* absence—of art. As Leo Bersani has pointed out in his article on realism and the fear of desire, "The 'seriousness' of realist art is based on the absence of any reminder of the fact that it is really a question of art."[6] No other artist has so inexorably eradicated all traces of the picture plane as Gérôme, denying us any clue to the art work as a literal flat surface.

If we compare a painting like Gérôme's *Street in Algiers* with its prototype, Delacroix's *Street in Meknes,* we immediately see that Gérôme,

in the interest of "artlessness," of innocent, Orientalist transparency, goes much farther than Delacroix in supplying picturesque data to the Western observer, and in veiling the fact that the image consists of paint on canvas. A "naturalist" or "authenticist" artist like Gérôme tries to make us forget that his art is really art, both by concealing the evidence of his touch, and, at the same time, by insisting on a plethora of authenticating details, especially on what might be called unnecessary ones. These include not merely the "carefully executed Turkish tile patterns" that Richard Ettinghausen pointed out in his 1972 Gérôme catalogue; not merely the artist's renditions of Arabic inscriptions which, Ettinghausen maintains, "can be easily read";[7] but even the "later repair" on the tile work, which, functioning at first sight rather like the barometer on the piano in Flaubert's description of Madame Aubain's drawing room in "Un coeur simple," creates what Roland Barthes has called "the reality effect" *(l'effet de réel).*[8]

Such details, supposedly there to denote the real directly, are actually there simply to signify its presence in the work as a whole. As Barthes points out, the major function of gratuitous, accurate details like these is to announce "we are the real." They are signifiers of the category of the real, there to give credibility to the "realness" of the work as a whole, to authenticate the total visual field as a simple, artless reflection—in this case, of a supposed Oriental reality.

Yet if we look again, we can see that the objectively described repairs in the tiles have still another function: a moralizing one which assumes meaning only within the apparently objectivized context of the scene as a whole. Neglected, ill-repaired architecture functions, in nineteenth-century Orientalist art, as a standard topos for commenting on the corruption of contemporary Islamic society. Kenneth Bendiner has collected striking examples of this device, in both the paintings and the writings of nineteenth-century artists. For instance, the British painter David Roberts, documenting his *Holy Land* and *Egypt and Nubia,* wrote from Cairo in 1838 about "splendid cities, once teeming with a busy population and embellished with . . . edifices, the wonder of the world, now deserted and lonely, or reduced by mismanagement and the barbarism of the Moslem creed, to a state as savage as the wild animals by which they are surrounded." At another time, explaining the existence of certain ruins in its environs, he declared that Cairo "contains, I think, more idle people than any town its size in the world."[9]

The vice of idleness was frequently commented upon by Western

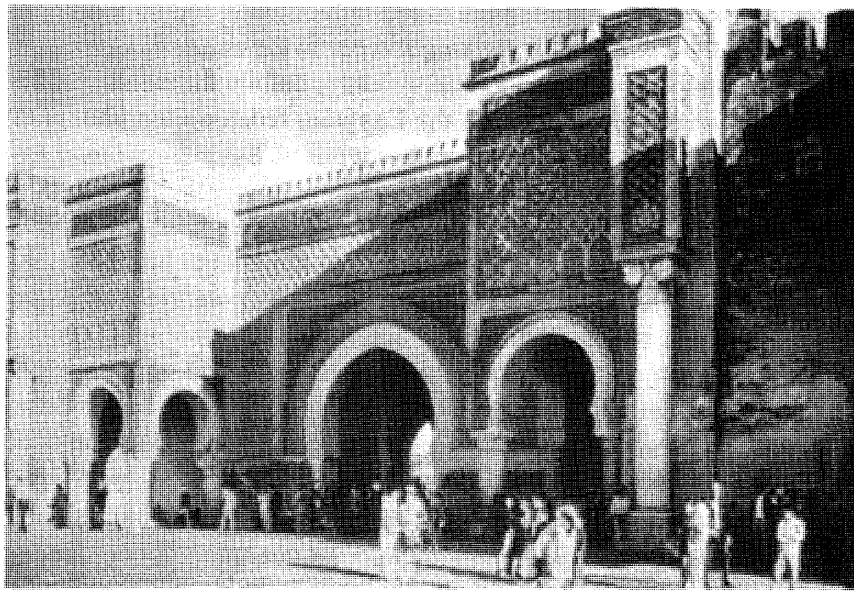
travelers to Islamic countries in the nineteenth century, and in relation to it, we can observe still another striking absence in the annals of Orientalist art: the absence of scenes of work and industry, despite the fact that some Western observers commented on the Egyptian fellahin's long hours of back-breaking labor, and on the ceaseless work of Egyptian women engaged in the fields and in domestic labor.[10]

When Gérôme's painting is seen within this context of supposed Near Eastern idleness and neglect, what might at first appear to be objectively described architectural fact turns out to be *architecture moralisée.* The lesson is subtle, perhaps, but still eminently available, given a context of similar topoi: these people—lazy, slothful, and childlike, if colorful—have let their own cultural treasures sink into decay. There is a clear allusion here, clothed in the language of objective reportage, not merely to the mystery of the East, but to the barbaric insouciance of Moslem peoples, who quite literally charm snakes while Constantinople falls into ruins.

What I am trying to get at, of course, is the obvious truth that in this painting Gérôme is not reflecting a ready-made reality but, like all artists, is producing meanings. If I seem to dwell on the issue of authenticating details, it is because not only Gérôme's contemporaries, but some present-day revisionist revivers of Gérôme, and of Orientalist painting in general, insist so strongly on the objectivity and credibility of Gérôme's view of the Near East, using this sort of detail as evidence for their claims.

The fact that Gérôme and other Orientalist "realists" used photographic documentation is often brought in to support claims to the objectivity of the works in question. Indeed, Gérôme seems to have relied on photographs for some of his architectural detail, and critics in both his own time and in ours compare his work to photography. But of course, there is photography and photography. Photography itself is hardly immune to the blandishments of Orientalism, and even a presumably innocent or neutral view of architecture can be ideologized.

A commercially produced tourist version of the Bab Mansour at Meknes[2] "orientalizes" the subject, producing the image the tourist would like to remember—picturesque, relatively timeless, the gate itself photographed at a dramatic angle, reemphasized by dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, and rendered more picturesque by the floating cloud which silhouettes it to the left. Plastic variation, architectural values, and colorful surface are all played up in the professional shot; at the same time, all evidence of contemporaneity and contradiction—that Meknes is a modern



2. "Official" tourist photograph of the Bab Mansour

3. The Bab Mansour at Meknes, photo by Linda Nochlin

as well as a traditional city, filled with tourists and business people from East and West; that cars and buses are used as well as donkeys and horses—is suppressed by the "official" photograph. A photo by an amateur[3], however, foregrounding cars and buses and the swell of empty macadam, subordinates the picturesque and renders the gate itself flat and incoherent. In this snapshot, Orientalism is reduced to the presence of a few weary crenellations to the right. But this image is simply the bad example in the "how-to-take-good-photographs-on-your-trip" book which teaches the novice how to approximate her experience to the official version of visual reality.

But of course, there is Orientalism and Orientalism. If for painters like Gérôme the Near East existed as an actual place to be mystified with effects of realness, for other artists it existed as a project of the imagination, a fantasy space or screen onto which strong desires—erotic, sadistic, or both—could be projected with impunity. The Near Eastern setting of Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*[4] (created, it is important to emphasize,

4. Eugène Delacroix, *Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827–8, Paris, Louvre

before the artist's own trip to North Africa in 1832) does not function as a field of ethnographic exploration. It is, rather, a stage for the playing out, from a suitable distance, of forbidden passions—the artist's own fantasies (need it be said?) as well as those of the doomed Near Eastern monarch.

Delacroix evidently did his Orientalist homework for the painting, probably reading descriptions in Herodotus and Diodorus Sicilis of ancient Oriental debauchery, and dipping into passages in Quintus Curtius on Babylonian orgies, examining an Etruscan fresco or two, perhaps even looking at some Indian miniatures.[11] But it is obvious that a thirst for accuracy was hardly a major impulse behind the creation of this work. Nor, in this version of Orientalism—Romantic, if you will, and created forty years before Gérôme's—is it Western man's power over the Near East that is at issue, but rather, I believe, contemporary Frenchmen's power over women, a power controlled and mediated by the ideology of the erotic in Delacroix's time.

"In dreams begin responsibilities," a poet once said. Perhaps. Certainly, we are on surer footing asserting that in power begin dreams—dreams of still greater power (in this case, fantasies of men's limitless power to enjoy the bodies of women by destroying them). It would be absurd to reduce Delacroix's complex painting to a mere pictorial projection of the artist's sadistic fantasies under the guise of Orientalism. Yet it is not totally irrelevant to keep in mind that the vivid turbulence of Delacroix's narrative—the story of the ancient Assyrian ruler Sardanapalus, who, upon hearing of his incipient defeat, had all his precious possessions, including his women, destroyed, and then went up in flames with them—is subtended by the more mundane assumption, shared by men of Delacroix's class and time, that they were naturally "entitled" to the bodies of certain women. If the men were artists like Delacroix, it was assumed that they had more or less unlimited access to the bodies of the women who worked for them as models. In other words, Delacroix's private fantasy did not exist in a vacuum, but in a particular social context which granted permission for as well as established the boundaries of certain kinds of behavior.

Within this context, the Orientalizing setting of Delacroix's painting both signifies an extreme state of psychic intensity and formalizes that state through various conventions of representation. But it allows only so much and no more. It is difficult, for example, to imagine a *Death of*

Cleopatra, with voluptuous nude male slaves being put to death by women servants, painted by a woman artist of this period.[12]

At the same time he emphasized the sexually provocative aspects of his theme, Delacroix attempted to defuse his overt pictorial expression of men's total domination of women in a variety of ways. He distanced his fears and desires by letting them explode in an Orientalized setting and by filtering them through a Byronic prototype. But at the same time, the motif of a group of naked, beautiful women put to the sword is not taken from ancient versions of the Sardanapalus story, although the lasciviousness of Oriental potentates was a staple of many such accounts.[13] Nor was it Byron's invention but, significantly, Delacroix's own.[14]

The artist participates in the carnage by placing at the blood-red heart of the picture a surrogate self—the recumbent Sardanapalus on his bed. But Sardanapalus holds himself aloof, in the pose of the philosopher, from the sensual tumult which surrounds him; he is an artist-destroyer who is ultimately to be consumed in the flames of his own creation-destruction. His dandyish coolness in the face of sensual provocation of the highest order—what might be called his "Orientalized" remoteness and conventionalized pose—may indeed have helped Delacroix justify to himself his own erotic extremism, the fulfillment of sadistic impulse in the painting. It did not satisfy the contemporary public. Despite the brilliant feat of artistic semisublimation pulled off here, both public and critics were for the most part appalled by the work when it first appeared in the Salon of 1828.[15]

The aloofness of the hero of the piece, its Orientalizing strategies of distancing, its references to the *outré* mores of long-dead Near Eastern oligarchs fooled no one, really. Although criticism was generally directed more against the painting's supposed formal failings, it is obvious that by depicting this type of subject with such obvious sensual relish, such erotic panache and openness, Delacroix had come too close to an overt statement of the most explosive, hence the most carefully repressed, corollary of the ideology of male domination: the connection between sexual possession and murder as an assertion of absolute enjoyment.

The fantasy of absolute possession of women's naked bodies—a fantasy which for men of Delacroix's time was partly based on specific practice in the institution of prostitution or, more specifically, in the case

of artists, on the availability of studio models for sexual as well as professional services—also lies at the heart of such typical subjects of Orientalist imagery as Gérôme's various *Slave Markets.* These are ostensibly realistic representations of the authentic customs of picturesque Near Easterners. Indeed, Maxime Du Camp, a fellow traveler in the picturesque byways of the Middle East, remarked of Gérôme's painting (or of one like it): "Gerome's *Slave Market* is a fact literally reproduced. . . . People go [to the slave market] to purchase a slave as they do here to the market . . . to buy a turbot."[16]

Obviously, the motivations behind the creation of such Orientalist erotica, and the appetite for it, had little to do with pure ethnography. Artists like Gérôme could dish up the same theme—the display of naked, powerless women to clothed, powerful men—in a variety of guises: that of the antique slave market, for instance, or in the subject of Phryne before the Tribunal. What lies behind the production of such popular stimuli to simultaneous lip-licking and tongue-clicking is, of course, the satisfaction that the delicious humiliation of lovely slave girls gives to the moralistic voyeur. They are depicted as innocents, trapped against their will in some far-off place, their nakedness more to be pitied than censured; they also display an ingratiating tendency to cover their eyes rather than their seductive bodies.

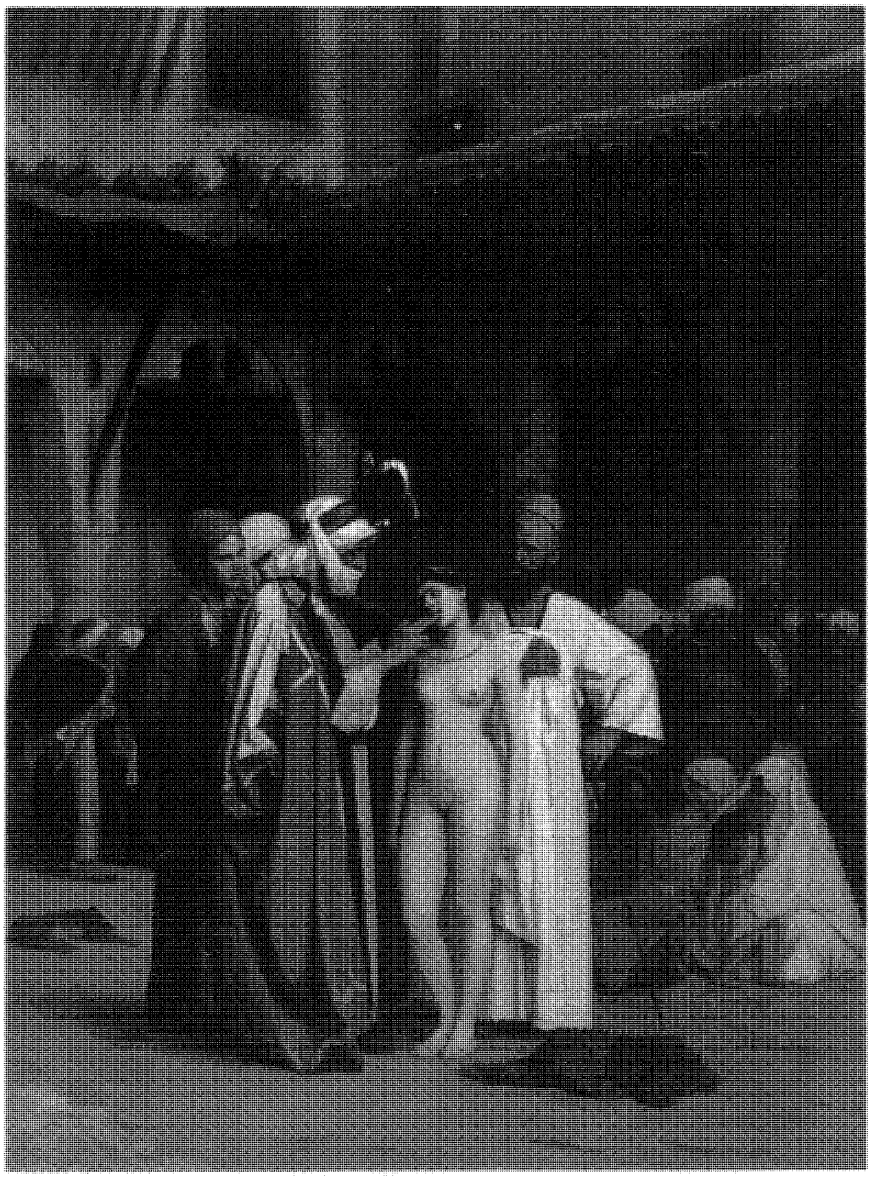
Why was it that Gérôme's Orientalist assertions of masculine power over feminine nakedness were popular, and appeared frequently in the Salons of the mid-nineteenth century, whereas earlier Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* had been greeted with outrage? Some of the answers have to do with the different historical contexts in which these works originated, but some have to do with the character of the paintings themselves. Gérôme's fantasia on the theme of sexual politics (the Clark collection *Slave Market,* for example) has been more successfully ideologized than Delacroix's, and this ideologizing is achieved precisely through the work's formal structure. Gérôme's version was more acceptable because he substituted a chilly and remote pseudoscientific naturalism—small, self-effacing brushstrokes, and "rational" and convincing spatial effects—in other words, an apparently dispassionate empiricism—for Delacroix's tempestuous self-involvement, his impassioned brushwork, subjectively outpouring perspective, and inventive, sensually self-revelatory dancelike poses. Gérôme's style justified his subject—perhaps not to us, who are

cannier readers—but certainly to most of the spectators of his time, by guaranteeing through sober "objectivity" the unassailable Otherness of the characters in his narrative. He is saying in effect: "Don't think that I or any other right-thinking Frenchman would ever be involved in this sort of thing. I am merely taking careful note of the fact that less enlightened races indulge in the trade in naked women—but isn't it arousing!"

Like many other art works of his time, Gérôme's Orientalist painting managed to body forth two ideological assumptions about power: one about men's power over women; the other about white men's superiority to, hence justifiable control over, inferior, darker races, precisely those who indulge in this sort of regrettably lascivious commerce. Or we might say that something even more complex is involved in Gérôme's strategies vis-à-vis the *homme moyen sensuel:* the (male) viewer was invited sexually to identify with, yet morally to distance himself from, his Oriental counterparts depicted within the objectively inviting yet racially distancing space of the painting.

Manet's *Masked Ball at the Opera* [see Figure 1, Chapter 5] of 1873–74 may, for the purposes of our analysis, be read as a combative response to and subversion of the ideological assumptions controlling Gérôme's *Slave Market* [5]. Like Gérôme's painting, Manet's work (to borrow a phrase from the German critic Meier-Graefe, who greatly admired it) represents a *Fleischbörse*—a flesh market. Unlike Gérôme, however, Manet represented the marketing of attractive women not in a suitably distanced Near Eastern locale, but behind the galleries of the opera house on the rue Le Peletier. The buyers of female flesh are not Oriental louts but civilized and recognizable Parisians, debonair men about town, Manet's friends, and, in some cases, fellow artists, whom he had asked to pose for him. And the flesh in question is not represented *au naturel,* but sauced up in the most charming and provocative fancy-dress costumes. Unlike Gérôme's painting, which had been accepted for the Salon of 1867, Manet's was rejected for that of 1874.

I should like to suggest that the reason for Manet's rejection was not merely the daring close-to-homeness of his representation of the availability of feminine sexuality and male consumption of it. Nor was it, as his friend and defender at the time Stéphane Mallarmé suggested, its formal daring—its immediacy, its dash, its deliberate yet casual-looking cut-off view of the spectacle. It was rather the way these two kinds of subversive



5. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Slave Market,* early 1860s, Williamstown, Massachusetts, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute

impulse are made to intersect. Manet's rejection of the myth of stylistic transparency in a painting depicting erotic commercial transactions is precisely what calls into question the underlying assumptions governing Gérôme's Orientalist version of the same theme.

By interrupting the unimpeded flow of the story line with the margins of his image, Manet frankly reveals the assumptions on which such narratives are premised. The cut-off legs and torso on the balcony are a witty, ironic reference to the actual motivations controlling such gatherings of upper-middle-class men and charming women of the theater: pleasure for the former; profit for the latter. The little legs and torso constitute a witty synecdoche, a substitution of part for whole, a trope par excellence of critical realism—a trope indicating the sexual availability of delectable female bodies for willing buyers.

By means of a similar synecdoche—the half-Polichinelle to the left, cut off by the left-hand margin of the canvas—Manet suggests the presence of the artist-entrepreneur half inside, half outside the world of the painting; at the same time, he further asserts the status of the image as a work of art. By means of a brilliant, deconstructive-realist strategy, Manet has at once made us aware of the artifice of art, as opposed to Gérôme's solemn, pseudoscientific denial of it with his illusionistic naturalism. At the same time, through the apparently accidentally amputated female legs and torso, Manet foregrounds the nature of the actual transaction taking place in the worldly scene he has chosen to represent.[17]

Despite his insistence on accuracy as the guarantee of veracity, Gérôme himself was not beyond the blandishments of the artful. In his bath scenes like the *Moorish Bath* [6], the presence of a Cairene sunken fountain with two-color marble inlay in the foreground and a beautiful silver-inlaid brass basin with its Mamluk coat-of-arms held by a Sudanese servant girl (as well as the inevitable Turkish tiles) indicate a will to ethnographic exactitude. Still, Gérôme makes sure we see his nude subject as art as well as mere reportage. This he does by means of tactful reference to what might be called the "original Oriental backview"—Ingres's *Valpinçon Bather.* The abstract linearism of Ingres is qualified and softened in Gérôme's painting, but is clearly meant to signify the presence of tradition: Gérôme has decked out the products of his flesh market with the signs of the artistic. His later work often reveals a kind

6. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Moorish Bath*, 1880s. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Robert Jordan from the Collection of Eben D. Jordan

of anxiety or a division—what might be called the Kitsch dilemma—between efforts to maintain the fiction of pure transparency—a so-called photographic realism—and the need to prove that he is more than a mere transcriber, that his work is artistic.

This anxiety is heightened when the subject in question is a female nude—that is to say, when an object of desire is concerned. Gérôme's anxiety about proving his "artistic-ness" at the same time that he panders to the taste for naturalistic bodies and banal fantasy is revealed most obviously in his various paintings of artists and models, whether the artist in question is Pygmalion or simply Gérôme himself in his studio. In the latter case, he depicts himself surrounded by testimonials to his professional achievement and his responsiveness to the classical tradition. For Gérôme, the classical would seem to be a product that he confects matter-of-factly in his studio. The sign of the artistic—sometimes absorbed into, sometimes in obvious conflict with the fabric of the painting as a whole—is a hallmark of *quality* in the work of art, increasing its value as a product on the art market.

Like the artistic back, the presence of the black servant in Gérôme's Orientalist bath scenes serves what might be called connotative as well as strictly ethnographic purposes. We are of course familiar with the notion that the black servant somehow enhances the pearly beauty of her white mistress—a strategy employed from the time of Ingres, in an Orientalist mood, to that of Manet's *Olympia,* in which the black figure of the maid seems to be an indicator of sexual naughtiness. But in the purest distillations of the Orientalist bath scene—like Gérôme's, or Debat-Ponsan's *The Massage* of 1883—the very passivity of the lovely white figure as opposed to the vigorous activity of the worn, unfeminine ugly black one, suggests that the passive nude beauty is explicitly being prepared for service in the sultan's bed. This sense of erotic availability is spiced with still more forbidden overtones, for the conjunction of black and white, or dark and light female bodies, whether naked or in the guise of mistress and maidservant, has traditionally signified lesbianism.[18]

Like other artists of his time, Gérôme sought out instances of the picturesque in the religious practices of the natives of the Middle East. This sort of religious ethnographic imagery attempted to create a sleek, harmonious vision of the Islamic world as traditional, pious, and unthreatening, in direct contradiction to the grim realities of history. On the one hand, the cultural and political violence visited on the Islamic peoples of France's own colony, Algeria, by specific laws enacted by the French legislature in the sixties had divided up the communally held lands of the native tribes. On the other hand, violence was visited against native reli-

gious practices by the French Society of Missionaries in Algeria, when, profiting from widespread famine at the end of 1867, they offered the unfortunate orphans who fell under their power food at the price of conversion. Finally, Algerian tribes reacted with religion-inspired violence to French oppression and colonization; in the Holy War of 1871, 100,000 tribesmen under Bachaga Mohammed Mokrani revolted under the banner of Islamic idealism.[19]

It is probably no coincidence that Gérôme avoided French North Africa as the setting for his mosque paintings, choosing Cairo instead for these religious *tableaux vivants*, in which the worshipers seem as rigid, as rooted in the intricate grounding of tradition and as immobilized as the scrupulously recorded architecture which surrounds them and echoes their forms. Indeed, taxidermy rather than ethnography seems to be the informing discipline here: these images have something of the sense of specimens stuffed and mounted within settings of irreproachable accuracy and displayed in airless cases. And like the exhibits displayed behind glass in the natural-history museum, these paintings include everything within their boundaries—everything, that is, except a sense of life, the vivifying breath of shared human experience.

What are the functions of the picturesque, of which this sort of religious ethnography is one manifestation? Obviously, in Orientalist imagery of subject peoples' religious practices one of its functions is to mask conflict with the appearance of tranquillity. The picturesque is pursued throughout the nineteenth century like a form of peculiarly elusive wildlife, requiring increasingly skillful tracking as the delicate prey—an endangered species—disappears farther and farther into the hinterlands, in France as in the Near East. The same society that was engaged in wiping out local customs and traditional practices was also avid to preserve them in the form of records—verbal, in the way of travel accounts or archival materials; musical, in the recording of folk songs; linguistic, in the study of dialects or folk tales; or visual, as here.

Yet surely, the very notion of the picturesque in its nineteenth-century manifestations is premised on the fact of destruction. Only on the brink of destruction, in the course of incipient modification and cultural dilution, are customs, costumes, and religious rituals of the dominated finally *seen* as picturesque. Reinterpreted as the precious remnants of disappearing ways of life, worth hunting down and preserving, they are finally transformed into subjects of aesthetic delectation in an imagery in

which exotic human beings are integrated with a presumably defining and overtly limiting decor. Another important function, then, of the picturesque—Orientalizing in this case—is to certify that the people encapsulated by it, defined by its presence, are irredeemably different from, more backward than, and culturally inferior to those who construct and consume the picturesque product. They are irrevocably "Other."

Orientalism, then, can be viewed under the aegis of the more general category of the picturesque, a category that can encompass a wide variety of visual objects and ideological strategies, extending from regional genre painting down to the photographs of smiling or dancing natives in the *National Geographic.* It is no accident that Gérôme's North African Islamic procession and Jules Breton's or Dagnon-Bouveret's depictions of Breton Catholic ceremonies have a family resemblance. Both represent backward, oppressed peoples sticking to traditional practices. These works are united also by shared stylistic strategies: the "reality effect" and the strict avoidance of any hint of conceptual identification or shared viewpoint with their subjects, which could, for example, have been suggested by alternative conventions of representation.

How does a work avoid the picturesque? There are, after all, alternatives. Neither Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* nor Gauguin's *Day of the God* falls within the category of the picturesque. Courbet, for whom the "natives" included his own friends and family, borrowed some of the conventions of popular imagery—conventions signifying the artist's solidarity, indeed identity, with the country people represented. At the same time he enlarged the format and insisted upon the—decidedly non-picturesque—insertion of contemporary costume. Gauguin, for his part, denied the picturesque by rejecting what he conceived of as the lies of illusionism and the ideology of progress—in resorting to flatness, decorative simplification, and references to "primitive" art—that is to say, by rejecting the signifiers of Western rationalism, progress, and objectivity *in toto.*

Delacroix's relation to the picturesque is central to an understanding of the nature and the limits of nineteenth-century Orientalism. He admired Morocco when he saw it on his trip accompanying the Comte de Mornay's diplomatic mission in 1832, comparing Moroccans to classical senators and feverishly recording every aspect of Moroccan life in his notebooks. Nevertheless, he knew where to draw the line between Them and Us. For him, Morocco was inevitably picturesque. He clearly distinguished between its visual beauty—including the dignified, unselfcon-

scious deportment of the natives—which he treasured, and its moral quality, which he deplored. "This is a place," he wrote to his old friend Villot from Tangiers, "completely for painters. Economists and Saint-Simonians would have a lot to criticize here with respect to the rights of man before the law, but the beautiful abounds here."[20] And he distinguished with equal clarity between the picturesqueness of North African people and settings in general, and the weaknesses of the Orientals' own vision of themselves in their art. Speaking of some Persian portraits and drawings, he remarks in the pages of his *Journal* that the sight of them "made me repeat what Voltaire said somewhere—that there are vast countries where taste has never penetrated. . . . There are in these drawings neither perspective nor any feeling for what is truly painting . . . the figures are immobile, the poses stiff, etc."[21]

The violence visited upon North African people by the West was rarely depicted by Orientalist painting; it was, in fact, denied in the painting of religious ethnography. But the violence of Orientals to each other was a favored theme. Strange and exotic punishments, hideous tortures, whether actual or potential, the marvelously scary aftermath of barbaric executions—these are a stock-in-trade of Orientalist art. Even a relatively benign subject like that represented in Léon Bonnat's *Black Barber of Suez* can suggest potential threat through the exaggerated contrast between muscularity and languor, the subtle overtones of Samson and Delilah.

In Henri Regnault's *Execution Without Judgment Under the Caliphs of Granada* of 1870, we are expected to experience a *frisson* by identifying with the victim, or rather, with his detached head, which (when the painting is correctly hung) comes right above the spectator's eye level. We are meant to look up at the gigantic, colorful, and dispassionate executioner as—shudder!—the victim must have only moments earlier. It is hard to imagine anyone painting an *Execution by Guillotine Under Napoleon III* for the same Salon. Although guillotining was still a public spectacle under the Second Empire and through the beginning of the Third Republic, it would not have been considered an appropriate artistic subject. For guillotining was considered rational punishment, not irrational spectacle—part of the domain of law and reason of the progressive West.

One function of Orientalist paintings like these is, of course, to suggest that *their* law is irrational violence; *our* violence, by contrast, is law.

Yet it was precisely the imposition of "rational" Western law by Napoleon III's government on the customary practices of North Africa that tribesmen experienced most deeply as fatal violence. Nor was this violence unintended. The important laws pertaining to landed property in Algeria, imposed on the native population by the French from the 1850s through the mid-1870s—the Cantonment of 1856, the Senatus Consulte of 1863 and the Warnier Law of ten years later—were conceived as measures which would lead to the destruction of the fundamental structures of the economy and of the traditional society—measures of legally approved violence, in other words. And they were experienced as such by Algerian natives, who felt their speedy, devastating effects as a savage lopping off of the head of traditional tribal existence, an execution without judgment.

A French army officer, Captain Vaissière, in his study of the Ouled Rechaïch, published in Algiers in 1863, relates that when this group found out that the law of the Senatus Consulte was going to be applied to their tribe, they were thrown into consternation, so clearly were they aware of the destructive power contained in this measure. "The French defeated us in the plain of Sbikha," declared one old man. "They killed our young men; they forced us to make a war contribution when they occupied our territories. All that was nothing; wounds eventually heal. But the setting up of private property and the authorization given each individual to sell his share of the land [which was what Senatus Consulte provided for], this means the death sentence for the tribe, and twenty years after these measures have been carried out, the Ouled Rechaïch will have ceased to exist."[22]

It is not completely accurate to state that the violence inflicted by the West—specifically, by the French in North Africa—was never depicted by the artists of the period—although, strictly speaking, such representations fall under the rubric of "battle painting" rather than Orientalist genre. "At the origin of the picturesque is war," declared Sartre at the beginning of his analysis of French colonial violence in *Situations V* in 1954. A painting like Horace Vernet's *Capture of the Smala of Abd-el-Kader at Taguin, May 16, 1843,* a vast panorama exhibited along with six pages of catalogue description in the Salon of 1845, seems a literal illustration of Sartre's contention.[23] This minutely detailed pictorial commemoration of the victory of the Due d'Aumale's French troops over thirty thousand noncombatants—old men, women, children, as well as the treasure and flocks of the native chief, who was leading the rebellion against French

military domination at the time—seems fairly clear in its political implications, its motivations fairly transparent.

What is less clear today is the relation of two other works, also in the Salon of 1845, to the politics of violence in North Africa at the time. The Salon of 1845 was the Salon immediately following the crucial Battle of Isly—the climax of French action against the Algerian rebel forces led by Abd-el-Kader and his ally, Sultan Abd-el-Rahman of Morocco. After the destruction of his *smala,* or encampment, at Taguin—the very incident depicted by Horace Vernet—Abd-el-Kader was chased from his country and took refuge in Morocco. There he gained the support of Sultan Abd-el-Rahman—the very sultan that Delacroix had sketched and whose reception he had so minutely described when he had visited Meknes with the Comte de Mornay on a friendly diplomatic mission more than ten years earlier.

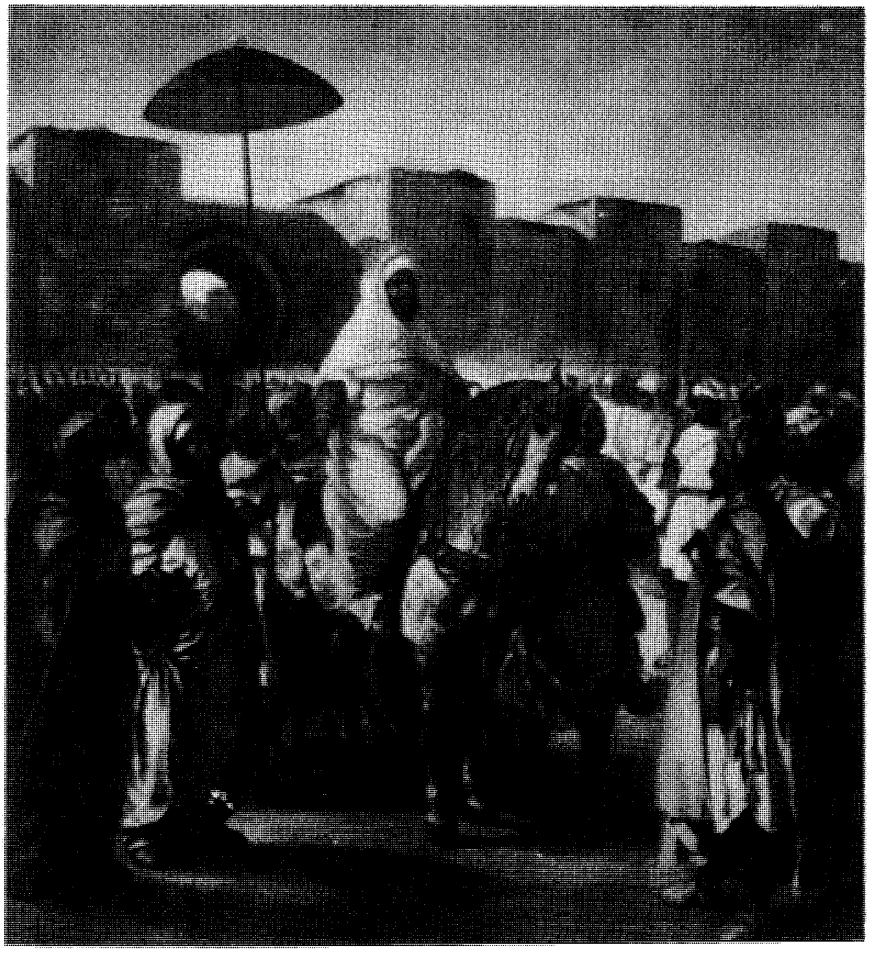
Delacroix had originally planned to commemorate the principal event of Mornay's mission by including, in a prominent position, members of the French delegation at the sultan's reception. Although it exists as a sketch, this version of the painting was never brought to completion, for the event it was supposed to commemorate—Mornay's carefully worked out treaty with the sultan—failed to lead to the desired détente with Morocco. Delacroix's projected painting would no longer have been appropriate or politically tactful. When the defeated Abd-el-Kader sought refuge with the sultan of Morocco after the defeat at Isly, Moroccan affairs abruptly took a turn for the worse. The French fleet, with English, Spanish, and American assistance, bombarded Tangiers and Mogador, and Abd-el-Rahman was forced to eject the Algerian leader from his country. The defeated sultan of Morocco was then forced to negotiate a new treaty, which was far more advantageous to the French. Moroccan affairs having become current events, the journal *L'Illustration* asked Delacroix to contribute some North African drawings for its account of the new peace treaty and its background, and he complied.

It is clear, then, why Delacroix took up the subject again for his monumental painting in 1845, but in a new form with different implications, based on a new political reality. In the final version (now in the Musée des Augustins, Toulouse), it is a vanquished opponent who is represented. He is dignified, surrounded by his entourage, but an entourage that includes the defeated leaders of the fight against the French and as such constitutes a reminder of French prowess. In Delacroix's *Moulay-*

Abd-el-Rahman, Sultan of Morocco, Leaving His Palace at Meknes, Surrounded by His Guard and His Principal Officers[7], as it was called in the Salon catalogue of 1845, there is no longer any question of mingling the French presence with the Moroccan one.[24]

In the same Salon appeared a painting which is always compared to Delacroix's *Sultan of Morocco:* Théodore Chassériau's equestrian *Portrait of Kalif Ali-Ben Hamet (or Ahmed) Followed by His Escort.* Indeed, in the

7. Eugène Delacroix, *Moulay-Abd-el-Rahman, Sultan of Morocco,* Toulouse, Musée des Augustins



Rochester Orientalism catalogue, Chassériau's painting is described as "inevitably recalling Delacroix's portrait," although more "detailed and portrait-like."[25] But Chassériau's is actually a very different image, serving a radically different purpose. It is actually a commissioned portrait of an Algerian chieftain friendly to the French, who, with his entourage, was being wined and dined by the French authorities in Paris at the time.[26]

Ali-Ben Ahmed, in short, unlike the uncooperative and defeated Abd-el-Rahman, was a leader who triumphed as a cat's-paw of the French. The relationship between the two works, then, is much more concrete than some vague bond created by their compositional similarity—they are actually quite different in their structure—or the obfuscating umbrella category of Orientalism. For it is a concrete relationship of opposition or antagonism, political and ideological, that is at issue here. Indeed, if we consider all the other representations of North African subjects in the Salon of 1845—and there were quite a few—merely as examples of Orientalism, we inevitably miss their significance as political documents at a time of particularly active military intervention in North Africa. In other words, in the case of imagery directly related to political, diplomatic, and military affairs in the inspirational territory of Orientalism, the very notion of "Orientalism" itself in the visual arts is simply a category of obfuscation, masking important distinctions under the rubric of the picturesque, supported by the illusion of the real.

How then should we deal with this art? Art historians are, for the most part, reluctant to proceed in anything but the celebratory mode. If Gérôme ostensibly vulgarizes and "naturalizes" a motif by Delacroix, he must be justified in terms of his divergent stylistic motives, his greater sense of accuracy, or his affinities with the "tonal control and sense of values of a Terborch or a Pieter de Hooch."[27] In other words, he must be assimilated to the canon. Art historians who, on the other hand, wish to maintain the canon as it is—that is, who assert that the discipline of art history should concern itself only with major masterpieces created by great artists—simply say that Orientalists like Gérôme—that is to say, the vast majority of those producing Orientalist work in the nineteenth century (or who even appeared in the Salons at all)—are simply not worth studying. In the view of such art historians, artists who cannot be included in the category of great art should be ignored as though they had never existed.

Yet it seems to me that both positions—on the one hand, that which sees the exclusion of nineteenth-century academic art from the sacred precincts as the result of some art dealers' machinations or an avant-garde cabal; and on the other, that which sees the wish to include them as a revisionist plot to weaken the quality of high art as a category—are wrong. Both are based on the notion of art history as a positive rather than a critical discipline. Works like Gérôme's, and that of other Orientalists of his ilk, are valuable and well worth investigating not because they share the aesthetic values of great art on a slightly lower level, but because as visual imagery they anticipate and predict the qualities of incipient mass culture. As such, their strategies of concealment lend themselves admirably to the critical methodologies, the deconstructive techniques now employed by the best film historians, or by sociologists of advertising imagery, or by analysts of visual propaganda, rather than those of mainstream art history. As a fresh visual territory to be investigated by scholars armed with historical and political awareness and analytic sophistication, Orientalism—or rather its deconstruction—offers a challenge to art historians, as do many other similarly obfuscated areas of our discipline.

Notes

1. Organized by Donald A. Rosenthal, the exhibition appeared at the Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester (Aug. 27–Oct. 17, 1982) and at the Neuberger Museum. State University of New York, Purchase (Nov. 14–Dec. 23, 1982). It was accompanied by a catalogue-book prepared by Rosenthal. This article is based on a lecture presented in Purchase when the show was on view there.

2. Donald A. Rosenthal, *Orientalism: The Near East in French Painting 1800–1880* (Rochester, 1982), pp. 8–9, italics added.

3. The insights offered by Said's *Orientalism* (New York, 1978) are central to the arguments developed in this study. However, Said's book does not deal with the visual arts at all.

4. Driault, pp. 187 ff., cited in George E. Kirk, *A Short History of the Middle East* (New York, 1964), pp. 85–86.

5. J. F. B., "Gérôme, the Painter," *The California Art Gallery* 1–4 (1873): 51–52. I am grateful to William Gerdts for bringing this material to my attention.

6. Leo Bersani. "Le Réalisme et la peur du désir," in *Littérature et réalité*, ed. G. Genette and T. Todorov (Paris, 1982), p. 59.

7. Richard Ettinghausen in *Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904)*, exhibition catalogue, Dayton Art Institute, 1972, p. 18. Edward Said has pointed out to me in conversation that

most of the so-called writing on the back wall of the *Snake Charmer* is in fact unreadable.

8. Roland Barthes. "L'Effet de réel," in *Littérature et réalité.* pp. 81–90.

9. Cited by Kenneth Bendiner, "The Portrayal of the Middle East in British Painting 1835–1860," Ph.D. Dissertation. Columbia University, 1979, pp. 110–11. Bendiner cites many other instances and has assembled visual representations of the theme as well.

10. See, for example, Bayle St. John's *Village Life in Egypt,* originally published in 1852, reprinted 1973, I, pp. 13, 36, and passim.

11. The best general discussion of Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* is Jack Spector's *Delacroix: The Death of Sardanapalus,* Art in Context Series (New York, 1974). This study deals with the relationship of the work to Delacroix's psychosexuality, as well as embedding the painting in the context of its literary and visual sources. The footnotes contain references to additional literature on the painting. For other discoveries about Delacroix's use of Oriental sources, see D. Rosenthal. "A Mughal Portrait Copied by Delacroix," *Burlington Magazine* CXIX (1977): 505–6, and Lee Johnson, "Towards Delacroix's Oriental Sources," *Burlington Magazine* CXX (1978): 144–51.

12. Cabanel's *Cleopatra Testing Poisons on Her Servants* (1887) has been suggested to me by several (male) art historians as coming close to fitting the bill. But of course the scenario is entirely different in Cabanel's painting. First of all, the male victims are not the sex objects in the painting: it is their female destroyer who is. And secondly, the painting is, like Delacroix's, by a man, not a woman: again, it is a product of male fantasy, and its sexual *frisson* depends on the male gaze directed upon a female object, just as it does in Delacroix's painting.

13. For a rich and suggestive analysis of this myth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Alain Grosrichard, *Structure du Sérail: La Fiction du despotisme asiatique dans l'occident classique* (Paris, 1979).

14. This is pointed out by Spector throughout his study, but see especially p. 69.

15. For public reaction to the picture, see Spector, pp. 75–85.

16. Cited in Fanny F. Hering, *Gérôme, His Life and Work* (New York, 1892), p. 117.

17. These issues are addressed in greater detail in "Manet's *Masked Ball at the Opera*"; see Chapter 5.

18. For a discussion of lesbian imagery in Orientalist painting, see Rosenthal, *Orientalism,* p. 98.

19. Claude Martin. *Histoire de l'Algérie française, 1830–1962* (Paris, 1963), p. 201.

20. Letter of February 29, 1832, *Corréspondance générale de Eugène Delacroix,* A. Joubin, ed. (Paris, 1936), I, pp. 316–17.

21. Entry of March 11, 1850, *Journal de Eugène Delacroix,* ed. A. Joubin (Paris, 1950), I, p. 348.

22. Cited in Pierre Bourdieu. *The Algerians,* trans. A. C. M. Ross (Boston, 1962), pp. 120–21.

23. For an illustration of this work, now in the Musée de Versailles, and an analysis of it from a different viewpoint, see Albert Boime. "New Light on Manet's *Execution of Maximilian,*" *Art Quarterly* XXXVI (Autumn 1973), fig. 1 and p. 177 and note 9, p. 177.

24. For an extremely thorough account of the genesis of this painting, the various versions of the subject and the political circumstances in which it came into being, see Elie Lambert, *Histoire d'un tableau: "L'Abd el Rahman. Sultan de Maroc" de Delacroix,* Institut des Hautes Etudes Marocaines, no. 14 (Paris, 1953), pp. 249–58. Lee Johnson, in "Delacroix's Road to the Sultan of Morocco," *Apollo* CXV (March 1982): 186–89, demonstrates convincingly that the gate from which the sultan emerges in the 1845 painting is not, as is usually thought, the Bab Mansour, the principal gate to Meknes, but more likely is a free variation on the Bab Berdaine, which did not figure in the ceremonial occasion.

25. Rosenthal, *Orientalism,* pp. 57–58.

26. For information about Chassériau's portrait and its subject, see Léonce Bénédite. *Théodore Chassériau, sa vie et son oeuvre* (Paris, 1932) I, pp. 234 ff., and Marc Sandoz. *Théodore Chassériau, 1819–1856* (Paris, 1974), p. 101.

27. Gerald Ackerman, cited in Rosenthal, *Orientalism,* p. 80. Also see Ackerman, *The Life and Work of Jean-Léon Gérôme* (London and New York: Sotheby's, 1986), pp. 52–53.