An exhibition in desperate need of critical nuance.

Is a pure aesthetic approach to Orientalist painting still tenable?

Exhibition review: Oriental visions. From dreams into light

By Lisa Lambrechts, curator in training at the Rijksmuseum.

This spring, Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris presents an exhibition dedicated to 19th-century orientalist painting entitled: Oriental visions. From dreams into light. The curator, Emmanuelle Amiot-Saulnier, has opted for a strongly aesthetic approach, setting out the evolution of figure and landscape in Orientalist painting, from 1800 to the birth of abstraction. In the exhibition, the visitor experiences how legible scenes steadily make way for an explosion of abstract colour planes. This message of how Orientalism was conducive to a complete immersion in light and colour, is embodied in the first exhibition space by confronting Ingres’ La Petite Baigneuse with Paul Klee’s Innenarchitektur.

This approach and message may have had their value in the past, but they feel outdated and superficial in this day and age, when discussions regarding decolonisation are prevalent and urgent in a globalised society. One could invoke a critique that Linda Nochlin (1931-2017) made 37 years ago in her article “The Imaginary Orient”. Nochlin was an avid believer that art history should be critical and should aim to expose underlying power structures in the artist’s visual language. In this case,
her analysis was strongly influenced by Edward Said’s (1935-2003) theoretical framework, developed in his book *Orientalism* (1978), which is considered to be the parting shot for postcolonial studies in the academic sphere. According to Said, the Western discourse on ‘the Orient’ is characterized by an unequal power relationship, which establishes a mental or idealistic separation with ‘the East’: “everything that ‘they’ are, ‘we’ aren’t.” This conviction eventually leads to the justification of the dominance and subjugation of ‘the East’ to ‘the West’. With Said’s theoretical framework in mind, Nochlin critiqued the exhibition *Orientalism: The Near East in French Painting 1800-1880*, curated by Donald Rosenthal (1982). She was disappointed that Rosenthal approached the theme in the “usual art-historical manner”, which did not dare to ask questions regarding the implicit colonial power relations and ideology in the works shown: an ideology determined by political domination. As she wrote: “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.”

The same lack of critical nuance can be detected in the Marmottan exhibition, where Orientalism is characterized as a mere ‘vision’ or ‘imagination’. This isn’t only problematic because the exhibition is situated in a private mansion that houses a collection mainly devoted to Napoleon and his family – representatives of the 19th-century mentality of conquest and imperialism – but also because a large share of the paintings included in the exhibition have been used over the decades to discuss the kind of critical issues addressed by Said and Nochlin. Examples are Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *The slave market* (1860); Eugène Delacroix’s *The death of Sardanapalus* (1827-1828), Édouard Debat-Ponsan’s *Turkish bath scene* (1883), and last but not least: Gérôme’s *The snake charmer* (late 1860), Said and Nochlin’s poster-child for their postcolonial critique.

![Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The snake charmer*, 1879, Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.](image-url)
The first part of the exhibition, called “Oriental(ized) woman”, is dedicated to the figure of the odalisque. This idealized, Venus-like female figure is discussed in the label texts in purely formal terms, e.g. how the sensuality and the curves of the depicted bodies complement the arabesques in the architectural decorative motifs, or the artist’s bold use of colour. Her representation is thus solely interpreted as part of a larger practice of experimentation with colour, form, and the search for an ideal classic beauty, inspired by an increasing confrontation with ‘the Orient’. By only addressing what is revealed to the eye at first glance, an important implicit ideological layer of this fantasy is bypassed. Overlooked (or ignored?) is the fact that the paintings are visual documents of 19th-century colonial and imperialist ideology, only to be fully understood by analysing them in their particular historical context. It is a western notion of ‘the Orient’ we encounter in these paintings, produced by white western men. These artists created an inaccessible, mysterious eroticized, and unchangeable world inhabited by the odalisques and other exotic creatures, depicted as ‘oriental desirable others’, forever available to the western, male voyeuristic eye. A fascination for the so-called primitive is evident from the choice to almost always depict the figures (partially) naked, unable to measure up to European social standards. By placing these paintings in their colonial and imperialist context, we understand that the white male gaze is mainly one of domination and power, fed by a feeling of European superiority. This unequal power relationship can especially be found in the confrontation between the black body and the white body, discussed only as a pure aesthetic consideration in the Marmottan exhibition. But the inclusion of black bodies actually became a recurrent theme for Orientalist paintings, as we can see in their omnipresence. The black body - depicted in a bent and subservient posture - is a visual scheme that has its origin in 16th-century Venetian painting, where Titian depicted such a juxtaposition for the first time in his Portrait of Laura Dianti (ca. 1520-1525). From this point onward, the black body is transformed into a trope, accompanying the white body throughout the following centuries solely to underline and elevate the latter’s status and assumed superior position in beauty, power and wealth.

The curator’s choice to discuss 19th-century Orientalist painting exclusively in terms of its aesthetic qualities leads to the loss of an important critical nuance, relevant to current discussions regarding decolonisation. Decolonisation is important as a movement for creating awareness of the historicity of the present. Discrimination has a complex history that goes back to these kinds of visual constructs. An imperialist mentality of white male superiority underlies the images. It would have been more interesting to take a closer look at the issue of ‘reality’ vs. ‘imagination’ and really try to deconstruct the works, showing what underlies the ‘imagination’ of painters and the visual tropes they employed. This deconstruction of the image would have been a good starting point for a conversation about imperialism and its real human implications. In order to understand the links between the past and the present it is important to emphasize that these depictions do not only tell an aesthetic story, but are also utterances of a certain mental construct that urgently needs to be taken apart.


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