

Episode 10 (Season 2, Episode 1): Thinking and Rethinking Orientalism
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Linda Steer: In a recent series of tweets, filmmaker Benjamin Chesterton criticized the adjudication committee of a documentary photography granting institution for short-listing a photographer who had, he claimed, behaved unethically in the ways in which he photographed a young Muslim subject. An outspoken critic of unethical practices in documentary, Chesterton chastised the committee for supporting a photographer whose work did not follow local or international laws regarding photographing children and provided the subject's name, potentially causing harm. Chesterton uses his twitter account to reveal ethical issues in Western documentary photography that examines so-called non-Western subjects.

These ethical issues are not new, however, and stem from a longstanding point of view that we can call the Western gaze. The Western or European gaze treats non-Western subjects as different and inferior, but also as exotic, mysterious, enticing... This gaze has a history that is connected to colonization. In this episode of Unboxing the Canon, called "Thinking and Rethinking Orientalism" we will examine a particular version of the Western gaze that influenced many 19th century paintings: Orientalism.

(intro + theme music)

LS: Welcome back! So, you might be wondering, "what is Orientalism?" and "why is it important to think about it?"

Before we get to that, though, we have some changes at Unboxing the Canon to announce. I'm so pleased that the podcast now has a research assistant! Madeline Collins is a 4th year undergraduate student in the History of Art and Visual Culture Program at Brock University. She conducted a lot of the research for this episode and she's co-hosting with me! Welcome Madeline!

Madeline Collins: Hi! It's great to be part of this project.

LS: Ok, so back to Orientalism. Well, Orientalism is both a Western art movement and a way of seeing that is connected to the politics and effects of colonization.

Orientalist art visually expressed European ideas and stereotypes about the people living in the geographic area that used to be called the Orient. Today, that area is Turkey, the Middle East, and North Africa.

Orientalist art -- mainly painting, but there is also Orientalist photography, even music -- imagined or reinvented this part of the world as subject matter for Western consumption. Orientalist works appropriated Near Eastern settings, designs and histories, yet represented people from North Africa and the Middle East according to xenophobic and imperialist Western ideas: so the men were depicted as passive, lazy, or violent, and the women were sexualized and exotic. Artists painted North African and the Middle Eastern culture as decidedly un-modern, even ancient.

There are some similarities here to European depictions of North American Indigenous peoples that we covered in an episode in Season 1. You might remember that artists depicted First Nations people as a “dying race” that represented the past, which of course supported American and Canadian appropriation of Indigenous land.

If you remember that episode, you will not be surprised then that it is no coincidence that the Orientalist art in France developed alongside the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798. Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said, who wrote an influential book called “Orientalism” in 1978 noted that the art movement occurred amid beginning of “the greatest territorial acquisition ever known.” Said reminds us that “by the end of WWI Europe had colonized 85% of the earth.”

Let’s take a look at a couple of French Orientalist paintings and see how they express these ideas. Both Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Léon Gérôme painted scenes that were meant to represent the “orient” (and I’m putting quotes around the word orient here as it is important to recognize that it is a misnomer.)

(music:Beethoven. Opening of String Quartet No. 1. 1801)

LS: Delacroix’s large (and by large I mean it is approximately 12 x 16 feet) oil painting that hangs in the Louvre Museum in Paris, titled *The Death of Sardanapalus*, depicts the story of mythical ancient Assyrian ruler Sardanapalus who, upon his defeat in a war with the Babylonians and others, burned himself and all his luxuries and possessions, including his eunuchs and concubines. This story, first told in ancient Greek texts, appealed to poets and painters of the Romantic movement in literature and art because of its high drama and themes of excess, explicit violence, and engagement with the limits of human behaviour.

Delacroix depicts a dramatic scene in lush reds and yellows. It is a chaotic scene that is difficult to read visually. Dark smoke billows from the background and, at the top left of the canvas we see the Assyrian leader in white, atop a luxurious divan that is held up by carved golden elephant heads. Sardanapalus reclines calmly, a neutral expression on his face, as scenes of violence unfold around him. The naked or partially naked women’s bodies writhe in passive and submissive poses as they are threatened or stabbed with knives. A bejewelled dead or dying woman splays her arms across the divan, face down in submission to a ruler who will not save her. The artist has used lighting to highlight the whiteness of the skin of these concubines allowing viewers to peruse their bodies. Those with darker skin are relegated to the

edges of the painting, including the smoke-filled background. For instance, in the lower left corner, we see a man in deep blue cloth wrestling with a beautifully decorated, terrified horse, his red turban connecting him to the red harness of the horse and the red carpets and the red velvet of the luxurious, oversized divan. The canvas is filled with bodies in motion, rich cloth and luxury objects in gold and silver. These objects, textiles, and figures are signifiers of difference that say “not European.”

According to art historian Nancy Demerdash, Delacroix employs common Orientalist tropes in *The Death of Sardanapalus* such as an angry despot, pitiful yet sensual women, and violence. This reminds us of who this painting is for: this is a painting for a European audience, particularly a male French audience. It was shown at the Salon, a large annual art exhibition in Paris, in 1828. Delacroix’s painting shocked audiences for both its style and its subject matter, but as art historian Linda Nochlin writes, the belief that men “were naturally entitled to the bodies of certain women” was an assumption in 19th century French society. Who are these “certain women”? Women of the lower classes in France and, especially, women who are not French, not European, here the so-called Oriental Other. For Nochlin, paintings like this one are “a project of the imagination, a fantasy space or a screen onto which strong desires can be projected with impunity.” Delacroix’s painting certainly derives from his imagination: it depicts a story that didn’t happen and the painter created it in France in his studio, far from the land he purports to depict. When the painting was displayed at the Salon, the erotic and sadistic desires of fantasy were visible to a public, representing what Nochlin lists as two ideological assumptions about power:

1. men’s power over women where women are subservient to men, possessions for male fantasy and
2. white men’s superiority to other races where Europeans are perceived as civilized and righteous in comparison to other cultures, such as the Islamic world

Delacroix’s *The Death of Sardanapalus* displays both these tendencies.

Let’s turn towards another iconic French Orientalist painting from later in the 19th century: Jean-Léon Gérôme painted *The Slave Market* in 1871. While Delacroix painted in a Romantic style, Gérôme employed an academic naturalist style that lent an air of legitimacy and objectivity to his work.

[music:Rimsky-Korsakov. Scheherazade, Symphonic Suite, Op. 35. The San Francisco Symphony Orchestra conducted by Pierre Monteux. Violin solo by Naoum Blinder.]

LS: Much smaller than Delacroix’s painting, at about 2 ½ by 2 feet, *The Slave Market* depicts a theme that Gerome returned to often. Here we see a row of young naked, clothed or partially clothed women lined up in a medina or old quarter alleyway in the foreground, while a clothed man, ostensibly their seller, looks over them from an

open window at the right side of the canvas. Orientalist visual tropes include the carpet the women sit on, the hookah the man holds in his hand, the crumbling facade of the building, and the parrot that sits atop a cabinet next to the man. None of the women meet our gaze, and as Nochlin notes, they are unwilling innocents to be pitied by French viewers.

Again, in employing the white Western gaze, and in presenting a fictional scene as reality, this painting creates a dichotomy between the supposed civilized Europeans and uncivilized Arabs. According to Nochlin, here Gérôme uses women's bodies to provide a kind of "satisfaction...to the moralistic voyeur." The Clark Institute claims that painting such as this "appealed to France's assumptions of its own moral superiority as it expanded its colonial empire across North Africa."

This painting produces a kind of knowledge about the Oriental other and, as Said claims, to have knowledge of something is to dominate it, to have authority over it. Therefore, through painting, and other kinds of knowledge, the people of the so-called Orient are re-framed as "a subject race, dominated by a race [here, the French] that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves." Orientalism is a form of infantilization that serves European colonial purposes. None of the knowledge and advances of the Islamic world, such as mathematics, literature, art, and architecture, are present in these paintings. Instead we see what Demerdash calls "cultural, spatial, and visual mythologies and stereotypes" that have "impacted the formation of knowledge and the process of knowledge production."

[brief music interlude]

LS: Why does all of this matter? Well, almost 200 years after Delacroix painted *The Death of Sardanapalus*, these stereotypes continue. We see them in documentary photography, in news reports, in films and in other media. If nothing else, looking at these paintings shows us the power of stereotypes along with the power of art to create and maintain them over centuries. What can be done? Use art to critique, change and expose those stereotypes!

I'll turn now to Madeline who will tell us about some interesting examples from contemporary art that engage with the history of Orientalism.

(JuliusH. Bandari - Persian Arabic Music - Khaliji Drum and Nay Flute.)

MC:

Thanks Linda!

Now that we've had a taste of French Orientalist paintings and their perspectives, we can look towards current artists and their techniques that break down those art historical boundaries. As we just heard, Orientalist paintings are

made with a gaze that is almost exclusively white, male and Western. But there are many contemporary Middle Eastern and North African artists who are working to represent their own cultures and communities through their own eyes, without the superior tone or fantastical inaccuracies that have plagued European representations of the East.

(Andrewfai. Enti w Ana arabic song OUD Cover.)

MC: One of these artists is Lalla Essaydi, a Moroccan photographer whose bold, meaningful portraits of Muslim women create a dialogue between viewers and our perceptions of Arab female identity. Based on her experience of growing up in Morocco, Essaydi presents a modern, female gaze that pictures Arab women and the issues they face.

To do this, Essaydi frequently appropriates traditional Orientalist tropes and techniques, in order to reclaim or subvert its ideals. Her “Harem” series of 2009 and “Harem Revisited” series of 2012 consist of portraits of Muslim women in interior settings. In *Harem #1*, for example, a young Muslim woman reclines on one arm on a bed that is enclosed within an alcove of a room, caged by architecture within architecture. The bed is adorned in brilliant geometric motifs of white, blue, green and black, like a mosaic tile pattern. Her draped clothing is the same pattern, meaning that she is nearly camouflaged into the furniture, as if she has become part of it. Despite her passive pose, her serious gaze looks right into our eyes, unflinching. She doesn't look down or away like many of the women in French Orientalist paintings.

Essaydi references multiple historical works here: the pose of the girl is reminiscent of famous odalisques. An odalisque was a common visual trope -- a reclining nude woman, but typically a Muslim woman in a harem; this trope was used by many Orientalist painters, including Jean-Léon Gérôme. The word “odalisque” derives from a Turkish word meaning “to belong to a place”: a fitting definition, as Essaydi's series highlights the importance of architectural space in Islamic culture. Public space, she writes on her website, belongs to men, and private space (in the home and behind the veil) is defined by women, who are ultimately confined to these limited spaces which are controlled by men. In these series, the home is the true harem, another domain where women's bodies are governed.

The model's skin is heavily decorated with flowing, uninterrupted text written in henna, a type of temporary body art that is applied and worn exclusively by women. However, the text is in the sacred style of Islamic calligraphy, an art form typically practiced exclusively by men. By synthesizing the feminine art of henna and the masculine art of calligraphy, the image's meaning becomes layered, and culturally significant: the women are finally given the ability to speak through the henna, as well as able to find a place in a tradition typically dominated by men. Essaydi's women are able to transcend multiple gendered boundaries at once:

physically, the boundaries of the domestic indoors, and metaphorically the subordinate space of womanhood.

The claustrophobic architectural surroundings in Essaydi's works reminds us of Gerome's so-called "moralizing" details in architecture: he would depict shabby buildings and dirty cities as proof to the Europeans that the Islamic world is neglected and crumbling. Essaydi revamps this condescending trope: rather than appeasing European superiority over the Other, she instructs her audience by presenting the unseen perspective of the oppression facing Muslim women today. While French Orientalist works are based in fantasy, Essaydi roots her images in reality.

(music: Bagher Moazen. Struggle.)

MC: Let's look at another artist working to modernize Eastern representation: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian.

Farmanfarmaian was an Iranian artist and sculptor whose works combine Eastern and Western influences into a unique sculptural style. She incorporates religious and traditional Islamic craft, such as mirror mosaics, reverse glass painting and mazes, as well as following practices such as cosmology and Islamic geometry. She blends these traditions with the methods of Minimalism and modern sculpture to create a cross-cultural style unique in the American art scene.

Farmanfarmaian apprenticed to local craftspeople in Iran, before and after she moved to New York and immersed herself in its art world. Her signature style began in 1970 after she visited the Shah Cheragh mosque in Shiraz and was dazzled by its lavish, mirrored, mosaic-laden interior.

Rather than the stagnant nature of Orientalism, which depicts a specific subject for a specific audience, Farmanfarmaian's works are multivalent, conceptual and universal, providing diverse experiences and meanings for those different audiences in different contexts.

In 2013, she produced a series called "Fourth Family", one of several Family series of sculptures. Starting at a triangle and ending with a decagon, the series contains one of each geometric shape, each decorated with a mosaic-like pattern of more polygons.

(sound clip)

MC: For example, the nonagon shape of the series, which is 47 inches in diameter and made of mirror pieces and plaster, looks like a swirling whirlpool made of silver; the angular arms are reminiscent of labyrinthine mazes, and the face is decorated with an elegantly repeating pattern of diamonds and triangles. The mysterious object is simultaneously familiar and foreign, a transcultural abstraction that plays with

dimension and light. In Islamic design, the triangle represents the intelligent human body, with infinite configurations and thus infinite possibilities, but her avant-garde objects showcase this iconography in a completely new way. Farmanfarmaian's art is not limited by a paternalistic view of the "Other", as the Orientalists were, but instead it is made limitless through its multiple perspectives and its ability to be understood by all – we are all equal in the reflections of her mirrors.

LS: Her work is evocative and complex. It speaks to the long history of traditional non-referential Islamic art that uses geometry, but there is something futuristic about it as well.

MC:

Looking into the future, we see Middle Eastern and North African contemporary artists who are no longer the subjects of the imperial gaze, but are now presenting their own narratives in their own voices. We encourage you to explore more Eastern artists and their work as we continue to widen our perspective on the world of art, because there are so many more connections to be made.

LS: And we have put links to some of these artists in the notes for this episode.

MC: That's it for this episode. Bye for now!

(theme song)

(credits)