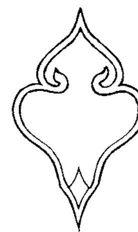
THE ORIENTAL OBSESSION



Islamic Inspiration in British and American Art and Architecture 1500–1920

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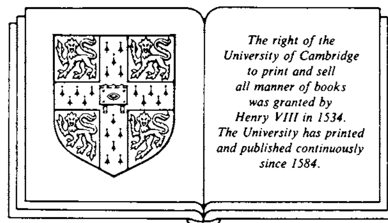

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Introduction

This book has grown out of an interest in the English 'orientalist' painter, John Frederick Lewis, an unconventional and unmoralising Victorian, whose almost exclusive concern from early middle age was to paint the life of Cairo.

In recent years, the old-established term 'orientalist' has come to be applied to European artists, particularly those of the nineteenth century, who used Eastern themes as the starting-point for their work. Some did this in the imagination only, but a greater number – Lewis was among them – based their inventions on actual experience, turning their backs on their own artistic upbringing and an increasingly urbanised Europe to seek out the alien and mysterious qualities of Middle Eastern life and desert expanses. There were many orientalist artists, especially in France, and their work was popular, providing a welcome extension of the traditional subject areas of European painting and evoking a degree of fantasy in a period of growing materialism. We in the late twentieth century, when the Middle East has itself become caught up in the commercial and economic scramble of the shrinking world, can respond to the same urges, and clearly reflect them in our regard for the Arab paintings of Lewis, Delacroix and Gérôme, the book illustration of Dulac and Nielsen, and Art Nouveau letter forms with the elongations of Islamic calligraphy.

The unsympathetic may indeed view nineteenth-century orientalism in painting as a symptom of a Romantic cult of excess; as a flight into a world of superfluity and indulgence in which make-believe Chinese tea-pavilions are replaced by harems and Persian rose-gardens; as a kind of virulent chinoiserie run to seed. The vigorous classical tradition of the West has encouraged this assessment. This tradition has, of course, conducted a magnificent celebration of the nude human figure, often not without regard for the erotic. The light-filled distances of Claude's Roman landscapes and the elegiac scenes of Poussin (*Et in Arcadia Ego*) yielded a powerful imaginative release. But in its public, didactic role, concerned with the activity of man imposing order on his surroundings and the artist as a specially gifted and socially useful imposer of order and improver of virtue, the classical tradition has, in theory, tended to reject the idea of art as escape. To the classical purist (if he has survived the punishing twentieth century), the orientalist picture, concerned with alien traditions which the Western artist has approached, nomad-like, from outside, can easily appear frivolous, or at least no more than an eccentricity.

While it may be conceded that the harem subjects of the French classical artist Ingres are to some degree eccentric, even such a purist will agree that they are certainly not frivolous. One of the most enterprising small exhibitions to be seen in Britain in recent years, David Carritt's *The Classical Ideal* (1979), contained, alongside images of classicism extending from ancient Greek vase-painting to

Picasso, a gouache variant by Ingres of his harem scene, *Odalisque with a Slave* (1839, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Mass.), which looked completely at home in the bracing company of a selection of works concerned with the human form.[1] The deep associations for Ingres of the female figure, in particular, enabled him to evoke the harem subject without going East: his pictures of reclining odalisques are explained today – no doubt rightly– as providing an opportunity for exercises in *volupté*, and placed in the tradition of Titian's paintings of Venus. Beside Ingres, much later orientalist painting, by artists who specialised in it, may look slight. But is the view of it as a kind of limp *fin de siècle* fad at the opposite pole from the clear-cut rigours of classicism – an agreeable frivolity bodied out of nothing more substantial than a desire to escape – really adequate? This book is written in the belief that it is not.

Such a view ignores the long exposure of Europe historically to widely varied visual ideas from Islam. The nature of this exposure and its strength in relation to Britain and America is our subject, though we shall constantly be aware of France also. The period under review extends from what was very much a time of expectation and new beginning – the onset, about 1500, of the challenge of the Renaissance to the French and English – to the twentieth century, taking in not only painting but also the applied or decorative arts of pottery, metalwork and textiles, and architecture, in which fields the Islamic or Muslim world had such important ideas to put forward. The countries involved are Turkey, Persia, Syria, Egypt, Moorish Spain and Morocco, and the areas of northern India (now largely represented by Pakistan) where Islam has flourished. Despite the recent interest in nineteenth-century painting of Middle Eastern subjects, the broader field has received little attention, far less than the related topic of chinoiserie. Neither Hugh Honour nor Oliver Impey in their books on European chinoiserie give more than passing reference to Islamic art as a source of inspiration; the book *Chinoiserie* by Madeleine Jarry keeps almost exclusively to the influence of China.

It is as well to make clear at the beginning where in fact our theme stands in relation to 'chinoiserie'. As a blanket term this refers to the Western imitation (more strictly emulation) of Eastern decorative art, mainly that of China but extending to embrace that of Islam also: firm distinctions about exact geographical origins were seldom made by the imitators. China, however, prevailed as an imaginative stimulus, and the study of chinoiserie, in rightly observing this, has tended to obscure the differences between the Chinese and Islamic traditions as sources of inspiration in the West, and the circumstances in which they were available in the Renaissance and post-Renaissance worlds. These differences are considerable and revealing.[2]

To see this we have to consider the images of China and Islam in Europe. Though traceable from the Middle Ages, the Western imitation of Chinese art was at its peak in the late seventeenth and mid eighteenth centuries, when immense quantities of articles from the Far East, especially the brilliant material called 'china' or porcelain, were being imported by the European East India Companies trading with China, India and the ports of South-East Asia.

The main period of chinoiserie, coinciding with the rococo style in decoration of about 1750, was in fact when many Europeans, tiring of the formalities of high classicism and baroque, were looking for a more unbuttoned, if not frankly informal art. The asymmetries and mobile line of Chinese porcelain painting readily combined with rococo ingredients – shells or rock-work, for example – to supply exactly what was needed, and there is undoubtedly much truth in the view that European work based on Chinese decorative ideas, and exemplified in such objects as German or English porcelain figurines in Chinese dress, stopped

tout court at the point of registering a sense of sheer gaiety and frivolity. This was not perhaps surprising: despite considerable attentiveness on the part of eighteenth-century Western philosophers to the accounts of travellers who had followed in Marco Polo's footsteps, and to those of Jesuit missionaries, understanding of Chinese ideas was inevitably limited at the time. In art the very remoteness of China encouraged free invention and a light-hearted acceptance of what little was accessible.

Chinoiserie, therefore, was propelled forward by an idea of what China was felt to be like: an idea made potent by distance. With the Islamic countries, however, we are literally and metaphorically on very different ground. Islam adjoined Europe and in the case of Moorish Spain (eighth to fifteenth centuries), Sicily (tenth to twelfth centuries) and the Turkish-occupied Balkan area and Greece (fifteenth to nineteenth centuries) was actually part of it. Christianity, which had taken root in Europe, had originated in the Near East, in a country where the Dome of the Rock nevertheless came to perpetuate Muslim belief. The builders of Rome, the heartland of European classicism before the intellectual rediscovery and reassessment of Greece in the eighteenth century, had also built extensively in the deserts of Asia Minor, Syria and North Africa. In Constantinople (Roman Byzantium), Roman power had had an Eastern counterpart. In 1453 the shock-waves of the capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks spread over Europe to distant England, and a London chronicler recorded: 'Also in this yere . . . was the Citie of Constantyn the noble lost by Cristen men and wonne by the Prynce of Turkes called Mahomet.' The Grand Turk became for Europe the scourge of God. Yet Ottoman Turkey's military threat to Europe until the end of the seventeenth century was more than offset by the fascination of Constantinople as a city where Roman, Byzantine-Christian and Muslim architecture stood side by side.

There were other factors, less momentous but still important. There was the strategically placed presence of medieval and Renaissance Venice, continuously purveying Byzantine and Islamic design to the rest of Western Europe. There was the large number of Middle Eastern textile centres and markets which gave their names to European languages: in England we have only to think of damask (Damascus), muslin (Mosul), or fustian (Fustat). There were the ceramic insets (*bacini*) in the walls of medieval Italian churches and public buildings. There were Arab horses, admired the civilised world over: Stubbs's paintings of them in the eighteenth century – with their brilliantly observed attendants – show us why. In literature there was no serious Far Eastern rival to *The Arabian Nights*, known to the English in the eighteenth century in Galland's French version of 1704–07, and in the nineteenth in Lane's English translation of 1838–40 (also expurgated) and Richard Burton's English version of 1885–8. 'Aladdin, or the Wonderful Lamp' – one of the most popular of all stories – became a pantomime at London's Covent Garden in 1813. Fitzgerald's translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam* of 1859 in itself made an immense contribution to the European vision of Persia.

It is true that Persia itself and Arabia, which had given birth to Islam, remained relatively remote – though increasingly explored by the nineteenth century – and the oriental tastes of romantics like William Beckford were fed by an idea of what the East might be like rather than by actual knowledge. But by virtue of all the factors mentioned above, so various and in some cases so deep-running, we would expect Islam to make a more complex and insistent disturbance on the Western consciousness, on many levels, than China, powerful as the emanations from that country were. In Britain's case we also had British power being established in a heavily Islamicised Bengal in the late

eighteenth century, which brought about the close mutual acquaintance of Eastern and Western traditions.

In spite of this particularly British link with the Muslim world, it may be wondered whether Britain and America deserve special consideration in the context of Islamic influence in art. Surely Europe as a whole should be included? France, Holland, Portugal, Sweden and Denmark all had strong trading links with India in the eighteenth century: the English did not have the prerogative of patronage there, as the collecting activities of Swiss-French soldier Colonel Antoine Polier show. France, moreover, developed close relationships with Algeria and Morocco in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which powerfully fostered artistic contacts. Spain, virtually rediscovered by the post-Waterloo generation, had an ebullient Moorish culture within its borders and had been importing and making carpets with Islamic patterns for at least 700 years previously. Trade in Islamic carpets during the late Renaissance period had developed strongly in many other countries besides England. Distinguished imitations were made, notably in Flanders and Poland (many of these armorial, like those in England). The Isfahan carpets shown by Count Czartoryski at the 1878 Paris Exhibition were indeed wrongly taken to be of Polish manufacture. And Turkish art, like Turkish arms, was so intimately part of European experience that Alexandrine St Clair's useful work, *The Image of The Turk in Europe* (the catalogue of an exhibition held in New York in 1973) contained virtually no examples of work with English connections.

It might be further claimed, with some justice, that the French made more creative use of Islamic subject-material in painting than either Britain or America. Delacroix's visit to Morocco in 1832 was an unforgettable experience for him. And which English or American artist who visited Islamic lands can match the importance of Delacroix? Did not Ingres, who never visited Turkey, characterise the scented languors of the harem more memorably than any Englishman who did?

It is true that we shall not be concerned here with the process by which new material is transformed by first-rank European artists, achieving a deeply imaginative and affecting accommodation of that material to their own inherited traditions, in the way that an Arab horseman by Delacroix accommodates his first-hand experience of the original to his predilection for Rubens. But the absence in our context of front-rank artists by European standards is not the same as saying that no imaginative leaps were made: indeed the leaps of artists of narrower range may be more purposeful because less beset by the Hamlet-like distractions of added awareness.

On the (by these standards) less exalted levels of the applied arts, the activities of the English invite careful attention. The entrepreneurial roles of the English East India Company in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and of Britain and America in the world of international exhibitions in the period from 1850 to 1920, have become clearer in recent years. The part played by the English-speaking countries in the rediscovery of the Alhambra at Granada in the 1830s has, however, never been evaluated: written about by the American Washington Irving in 1832 and by the English designer Owen Jones (outliving his French collaborator) 10 years later, the influence of this building on the reassessment of the qualities of Moorish pattern has its importance in the history of taste.[3]

The intention, therefore, is to explore these matters and to concentrate on developments in the English-speaking world from the end of the Middle Ages. Nevertheless it is important to take note of the many preceding centuries during which Islamic motifs were woven into the texture of European classicism and