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Did we all get Orientalism wrong?

A persuasive show at the Met adds new layers of nuance to decades of postcolonial polemics

By Ariella Budick



'The Grief of the Pasha' (1885) by Jean-Léon Gérôme © Joslyn Art Museum

A tiger's carcass sprawls magnificently across a carpet of ravishing blues. Rose petals cluster around its furry head; whiskers catch the light. But while the great cat lies in state, the human presence is easy to miss. A pasha in red velvet and a green cap sits cross-legged on the floor in a corner, almost disappearing into the opulent surroundings. His grief does not announce itself.

Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1885 painting "The Grief of the Pasha", inspired by Victor Hugo's poem, is just one highlight of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art's resplendent *Orientalism: Between Fact and Fantasy*. The exhibition offers some qualified love for a category of art that has long been treated with suspicion: Europeans' imaginary versions of the lands they colonised. Curators Maryam Ekhtiar, Deniz Beyazit and Asher Miller read this ensemble of paintings, vessels, textiles and photographs not just as instruments of imperial fantasy but as vehicles for stories of cultural exchange, curiosity, misunderstanding and admiration.

In Gérôme's picture, the setting is sumptuous. A pair of tall candles illuminates the tiled walls, carved arches and slender Alhambresque columns of a palace room. But the tiger is an honoured member of the court, not a trophy, and the flowers scattered around its body suggest a ritual of mourning. Warm golds and reds are suffused by twilight, deepening the stillness.



Gérôme's 'Bashi-Bazouk' (1868-69) © Metropolitan Museum of Art

The painting embodies the qualities that made Gérôme both celebrated and reviled. To admirers, he was a virtuoso, capable of rendering every textile, tile and strand of fur with uncanny precision. To detractors, he represented an artistic dead end. Baudelaire, who championed Manet and the modern life he depicted, dismissed Gérôme's work as feeble, artificial and derivative. His judgment proved remarkably durable. More than a century later, the Los Angeles critic Christopher Knight described Gérôme as a painter who "didn't have a clue" where art was heading.

And yet Gérôme's portrait "Bashi-Bazouk" (1868-69) is the finest thing here, a star of the museum's permanent collection. Far from mere ethnographic theatre or costume-box fantasy, it's a ravishing, grave and psychologically intense study of a foot soldier with a regal demeanour. Sure, there's an upholstery shop's worth of embroidery and silk, carried off with immense technical finesse, but the fabric never overwhelms the individual. There's far more sympathy than condescension in the air.



'The Central Dome of the Gallery of Machines at the Exposition Universelle of 1889' (1890) by Louis Béroud © Musée Carnavalet — Histoire de Paris

If late-19th-century modernism diminished Gérôme's reputation, late-20th-century postcolonial criticism nearly buried it. When Palestinian scholar Edward Said's landmark book *Orientalism* appeared in 1978, its cover featured another Gérôme painting (also in the exhibition) of a nude boy, seen from behind, delighting a group of spectators by manipulating a python. Said never discusses the image, but "The Snake Charmer" became an emblem of his argument that the "Orient" was a cultural invention that Europeans helped create through literature and art — and force. By portraying eastern societies as exotic, timeless, sensual and passive, western sophisticates reinforced structures of imperial power. "The Snake Charmer", art historian Linda Nochlin wrote, was "a visual document of 19th-century colonialist ideology".

The Met adds nuance to that critique, without ever rejecting it outright. The curators argue that the pathways of influence looped among continents, carrying hybrids, borrowings and entanglements that cannot be reduced to a simple story of domination. Ekhtiar writes in the catalogue that Orientalist design emerged from "a complex process of exchange, in which cultures were intertwined and boundaries were fluid, overlapping and ever-changing".



Gérôme's 'The Snake Charmer' (c1879) © Clark Art Institute



'Young Woman Reading' (1880) by Osman Hamdi Bey © Islamic Arts Museum, Malaysia

Many western designers, for instance, worked under the spell of Islamic art and architecture. The soaring arches, geometric intricacy and luxuriant ornament of the Alhambra migrated into synagogues, churches and aristocratic residences — including Shangri La, the dazzling Honolulu villa that tobacco heiress Doris Duke built to express her own fascination with the Islamic world.

The exhibition traces the catalytic role of 19th-century international expositions, which were bazaars of ideas and visual imagination as well as technology and products. At a moment when industrialisation was flooding Europe and America with machine-made goods, many artists, designers and consumers began to hunger for the handmade and ornate. And so they looked east and south, reviving moribund techniques and borrowing decorative vocabularies from the Islamic world. The results were imaginative hybrids, filtered through western tastes and desires.

The growing demand for Islamic crafts also revived languishing workshops, supplying them with new ideas and international markets. Ottoman and European entrepreneurs alike built businesses around the renewed appetite for historic forms. A Mamluk revival that flourished in Egypt soon spread to Syria. Craftsmen in Cairo, Damascus and elsewhere produced appliqué textiles, stained-glass windows, carved-wood furnishings and other luxury goods that drew on local practices while catering to cosmopolitan fashions. What emerged was neither authentic nor corrupted, but the kind of irreverent amalgam we are steeped in today.



Swan-neck bottle (Ashkdan), from the 18th-19th century
© Metropolitan Museum of Art



Rosewater sprinkler, c1896-1900
© Metropolitan Museum of Art

The exhibition's most persuasive challenge to narrow theories of Orientalism comes in the work of Osman Hamdi Bey, a Constantinople-born painter who also ran the Ottoman Imperial Museum, administered archaeological excavations and occupied a distinctly 19th-century position of cross-border, cross-discipline intellectual. As an artist, Hamdi was no amateur. He spent nearly a decade in Paris, where he trained under the gurus of French academic tradition, probably including Gérôme. The two later became friends, a fact that undercuts the cliché of the gulf between wool-suited painter and robe-wearing subject.

Like Gérôme, Hamdi favoured meticulous finish, theatrical staging and archaeological precision. But he powered those tools with an insider's understanding of an Ottoman world that was neither embalmed nor breathlessly trying to keep up with Paris. Instead, it negotiated modernity on its own terms. "At the Mosque Door (Çami Kapisinda)" (1891) hums with urban energy. Scholars, labourers, mendicants and flâneurs drift through the composition, mingling with women who accessorise their Ottoman garments with western bustles and parasols.



Hamdi's 'At the Mosque Door (Çami Kapisinda)' (1891) © Penn Museum

Several figures are self-portraits: the scholar in a saffron cloak, the seated beggar nearby, a man rolling up the sleeves of his striped garment as he squints into the sun, another sleeping against the wall. (Hamdi frequently pressed members of his family into service as models, too, turning the canvas into a form of family theatre.)

The painting possesses all the atmosphere and architectural splendour that the Orientalists back at the École des Beaux-Arts aspired to. Yet rather than present an eroticised east for western consumption, he paints a society full of complexity and casual juxtapositions. If Gérôme brought visions of the Ottoman world to Paris, Hamdi brought the techniques of Paris to Constantinople. The result was a hybrid visual language that spanned both worlds, a much richer and more human concoction than decades of postcolonial polemics would suggest.