PAINTINGS OF THE HAREM: POSED FANTASIES AND EUROPEAN ORIENTALIST PAINTING

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In the context of Orientalism, beauty is quite dangerous, as it lures the viewer into accepting the fantasy. I want to expose the distortions these paintings present and provoke the view into a different kind of seeing, one that shapes a new understanding.¹

Lalla Essaydi

This essay first explores how male Orientalist painters have influenced Lalla Essaydi’s photographs. It will also consider the ways in which Orientalist images depict Arab women, especially in the context of the posed female body in a highly constructed, architectural environment. These are imagined visions of the harem, or private spaces of the Arab home. The majority of European artists who traveled to Morocco or other Arab lands during the nineteenth century did not have direct access to viewing Arab women in the home and instead they rendered images drawn from their imaginations.² Many Orientalist paintings are small in scale, and were produced specifically for the male viewer. Depictions of the Harem created an eroticized theme that enforced the idea of women being kept in isolated areas available to their masters for sexual endeavors. In their day they were not unlike issues of Playboy magazine, marketed especially to a male audience.

Essaydi’s Contact with Orientalist Works in America: Seductive Reality

It is important to appreciate at what point Essaydi realized that not all American or Western viewers understood the full context and meaning of Orientalist paintings. In her recent interview for this exhibition, the artist describes an experience she had in graduate school in Boston:

First, I fell in love with the aesthetic beauty of Orientalist paintings while I was in Paris many years ago. Then I started reading about Orientalism. I loved the way these paintings are painted; they are exquisite. But I then started seeing them as a portrait of a culture. At that time in my life, I started seeing them as a portrayal of fantasy and I, as part of one of the cultures being portrayed, knew that the images were not representative. They were portrayals of fantasy, and I thought everyone knew that. It was an interaction that took place while working toward my MA at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston that helped me bring to light the fallacy of these

beliefs and set the trajectory of my career. I had painted a very large painting of the work of Jean-Léon Gérôme, and a curator approached me, curious about the work. She wanted to know why I was incorporating Gérôme. I was making the painting so large; the original was small by comparison. I started to explain that Gérôme’s painting was a fantasy and that I was trying to show that by putting the images in a different setting. I was hoping to make people realize that if you removed the characteristics of these paintings that make them so beautiful, that beauty that allows you to accept these women being sold in the streets and still look at them as beautiful things. As the discussion with the curator progressed, I expressed my belief that it was wrong to willfully misrepresent a culture in this way and depict fantasy as reality. The curator replied that she had no idea that it was a fantasy. She said, “I thought it was real.”

Women’s Placement and Gaze in the Built Environment
Architecture plays a large part in the works of Orientalist paintings, as well as in Lalla Essaydi’s photographs. The series Harem, and Harem Revisited present women in lavish architectural spaces, with mosaic tiles covering the walls in vibrant colors. Their dress is that of a similar color scheme and pattern, blurring the lines between natural form and architecture. This blending is done throughout Essaydi’s work. The earlier series Converging Territories and Les Femme du Maroc create an environment of text and cloth. Unlike the lush environment of “couches and settings” in Orientalist paintings, Essaydi’s environments are abstracted and do not allow the viewer to feel as though they can enter the space.

In many Orientalist paintings, nude and semi-nude women are depicted lying on floors in low beds, seated in window seats, or propped in a calm manor, lounging about leisurely. Essaydi’s figures are not nude, they are fully dressed, some hard at work actively practicing the art of calligraphy. Essaydi’s works are “process oriented” meaning that there is more to the photograph than the initial glance, the viewer must complete their dialogue.

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Works Cited and Suggestions for Further Reading


