

Chapter 6

Constructing and Reconstructing Orientalism: Depicting Orientalist Imagery in Contemporary Art in the Quest of Self-Identity

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the chapter is to show that orientalism is a dynamic construct that simultaneously represents continuity and change. The hypothesis outlines that contemporary artists build upon 18th century symbols to reconstruct orientalist art, hence reproducing the constructed, stereotypical neo-orientalist or self-orientalist imagery. The hypothesis is seen to be true as the intimate artwork of Zahrin Kahlo, Lalla Essaydi, Eric Parnes, and Yasmina Bouziane shows that contemporary orientalist artists are using recurring symbols to depict their self-identity, even though they appropriate those symbols in an act of resistance to depict social change. A more productive path of expression may be one of authenticity rather than a recreation of existing imagery in the attempt to deconstruct it. Even though the continuity of the construct is obvious, change is granular and not as pronounced.

INTRODUCTION

Orientalism is a construct very much alive today (Thomas, 2001; Kerboua, 2016; Shatz, 2020). One sees the reproduced Orientalist imagery that Western travelers and explorers created in the 18th century in the art of Eastern artists living in the West. However, these artists show us a contemporary and resilient prism of Neo-Orientalism and Self-Orientalism. The definitions of Neo-Orientalism and Self-Orientalism, though, are not completely suitable when we look at the interpretation of Orientalism in contemporary visual arts. The artist's efforts to self-identification are much more layered and present a complex combination of the two concepts.

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Constructing and Reconstructing Orientalism

In the effort to understand the continuity and change of Orientalism, this chapter makes use of the theory of self-identity (Horowitz, 2012) and takes visual art as narrative analysis. It studies the contemporary trend of Orientalist art by Zahrin Kahlo, Lalla Essaydi (2020), Eric Parnes (2011) and Yasmina Bouziane (2019), and their layered construction and reconstruction of Orientalism throughout their quest for self-identification. The selection of these four artists was based on their contemporaneity; Orientalist focus of any kind; international recognition, and Middle Eastern origin. Examining the visual art of Zahrin Kahlo, Lalla Essaydi, Eric Parnes and Yasmina Bouziane as a form of narrative (Adler et al., 2017) allows us to open the black box of contemporary Orientalism and decipher the layered harmonious and fragmented levels of self-identification. The artists' narratives are analyzed through their visual work, interviews and personal statements that are publicly available online.

The objective of the chapter is to show that Orientalism is a dynamic construct that simultaneously represents continuity and change, as well as to advocate for greater articulation of the contemporary self-identity of Orientalist, Arab artists.

BACKGROUND

During colonial periods, the Orient represented a mystical, magical place that was to be studied by Western explorers and government officials. It represented the binary opposite of the West, barbaric, exotic, erotic, unknown and un-civilized. Later, Orientalism became an influential theory introduced by Edward Said, which outlines the Western attitude and stereotyping towards the Eastern peoples (Said, 1978). As Said (1978) argues, the root of the stereotypical representations of the Orient is in the 18th Century French and British colonization of the Middle East and North Africa that depicted the Orient as very static and monotonic. In Said's words "...as if they have consensually agreed on one common representation." (1978, p. 20). Similarly, in Root's words "[T]he quality of timelessness and the presentation of Araby as a static, decadent entity well past its prime helped create an imaginary Orient undifferentiated by place, time, and national or cultural specificity" (1996, p. 164). Among the many examples of these representations are the Orientalist paintings of French Neoclassical artists as Delacroix, Gerome, and many others who depicted women, men and sceneries of Algeria and Morocco through the eyes of the male Western explorer.

The historical background of the relationship between Orientalism and visual arts starts with the origins of the French *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* which later became *Academy De Beaux-Arts*. The Academy emphasized the intellectual component of artmaking and distinguished the sophisticated bourgeoisie painters from the ordinary craftsman. After its recognition by Louis XIV, the *Academy De Beaux-Arts* controlled all artistic and academic activity in France and heavily influenced the academic teaching at the Royal Academy of England and the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts (Trodd & Denis, 2000). The standardization of the academic painting trends was enforced by the rigorous acceptance criteria to the Paris Salon that was the exhibition place where artists could seal their careers. Only artists who strictly followed the academic standards could have a chance of exhibiting (Ibid).

Orientalist painting emerged as part of the academic painting and was a combination of the artistic movements of Romanticism, Neoclassicism, Realism, Idealism and History painting. Initially, Orientalist painting aimed at depicting historical events, however, the political feelings and the curiosity towards the East resulted in creating romanticized images instead. As painting Eastern scenes became more and more fashionable, painters voyaged to North Africa, the Middle and the Far East to better depict the

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