

Sedentary Flesh: Nineteenth-Century French Orientalists and Bodies of the Female Other

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Abstract:

As visual texts of subjectivity and ideology, paintings are uniquely useful tools for historical analysis. Peaking in popularity in nineteenth-century Europe, the enduring erotic mystification of the Turkish seraglio manifested frequently in the form of paintings. At this time, French academicism and realism rose in status internationally and, bolstered by the esteem of the Paris Salon and the competitiveness generated by the advent of photography, so too did elaborately (and misleadingly) detailed depictions of the Orient. This paper concerns the inherent politics of French depictions of Turkish odalisques, focusing on the orientalist discourse generated by the quasi-realistic style of nineteenth-century French academic artists. I define pictorial orientalism through the words of theorists Edward Said, Linda Nochlin, and Malek Alloula, then use them to analyze five harem-themed paintings in order to prove that French artists in the nineteenth century both reflected and further entrenched orientalist values by fetishizing and alienating female colonial subjects as orientalist ideographs.

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In his 1853 letter to Louise Colet, Gustave Flaubert described the “oriental woman” as “a machine, and nothing more; she doesn’t differentiate between one man and the other. Smoking, going to the baths, painting her eyelids and drinking coffee, such is the circle of occupations which make up her existence...we are thinking of her, but she is

hardly thinking of us. We are weaving an aesthetic on her account.”¹ Beginning around the late eighteenth century, many Western academics and artists developed a long history of cultural interactions with those of the colonial “Orient.” Central in the construction of a mystical, exotic Near East was *le femme orientale*. Especially notable among the women that enthralled scores of European artists in the nineteenth century was the artistic archetype of the Turkish *Odalisque*. As defined by Joan DelPlato:

The English and French term *odalisque* derives from the Turkish ‘oda’, meaning “chamber”; thus, an *odalisque* originally meant a chamber girl or attendant. In western usage, the term has come to refer specifically to the harem concubine. By the eighteenth century, the term referred to the eroticized artistic genre in which a nominally eastern woman lies on her side on display for the spectator.²

By analyzing five individual paintings, this paper argues that, through the commissioning, creation, and consumption of *Odalisque*-themed works, French artists in the nineteenth century not only passively reflected, but actively entrenched orientalist values: effectively fetishizing, otherizing, and dominating female colonial subjects with their distinctive iconography.

The “Orient” concerning this essay chiefly refers to the areas that cover modern-day Turkey, Greece, the Middle East, and North Africa.

1 Lisa Lowe, “Orient as Woman, Orientalism as Sentimentalism: Flaubert,” in *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms*, 75-101, (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 75.

2 Joan DelPlato, *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures: Representing the Harem, 1800–1875* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), 9.

Most post-colonial academic scholarship concerning oriental cultural production is heavily critical of occidental depictions of the Orient and engages with previously un-scrutinized methods of exerting ideological influence throughout Western (and non-Western) society. Orientalism is defined by Edward Said as “a style of thought based upon the ontological and epistemological distinction made between the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occident.’”³ This distinction, as a form of cultural hegemony, denotes fundamental authority or superiority of the West over the East. Further, according to Said, “orientalism expresses and represents [material civilization] culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse” with supporting vocabulary and imagery.⁴ Therefore, orientalist ideology is inherent to many of the works by French artists in the nineteenth century.

Art historian Linda Nochlin, in applying Said’s theory directly to art, considers the implicit “colonial gaze” in orientalist works to have strengthened Western audiences’ control over their colonial subjects by further distinguishing occidental viewers from the depicted cultures and rendering the subjects consumable and powerless.⁵ Nochlin regards orientalist paintings as “a distillation of the Westerner’s notion of the Oriental couched in the language of a would-be realism.”⁶ In his examination of Algerian postcards, Malek Alloula concluded that French colonial imagery of the harem, particularly when manifested

3 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1979), 2.

4 *Ibid.*, 2.

5 Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth Century Art and Society*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 39.

6 Nochlin, 35.

through “pictorial orientalism,” helped contribute to the multi-faceted fantasy indulged in by the West and “set the stage for [oriental] phantasms.”⁷ In this paper, I draw on these previous theories and analyses in order to critically engage with the paintings of French artists Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Léopold de Moulinon, and Jean Jacob Benjamin-Constant. As Said asserts, “the oriental genre tableau carried representation into visual expression and a life of its own.”⁸ The historical utility in analyzing these paintings is clear, for they had great impact and relevance in their own time and represent ideologies that remain entrenched in Western culture.

Despite there being similar orientalist motifs found in the works of many prominent European artists predating this period, French contact and fascination with these cultures truly began in earnest in 1798, after Napoleon led the French army to invade Egypt and occupied the country until 1801.⁹ Many artistic and literary projects initiated by the French government in the nineteenth century concerned the documentation and circulation of Eastern cultural milieu, and most of the artistic schools at the time embraced these programs with vigor.¹⁰ In 1893, well after the orientalist movement had gained

7 Malek Alloula, Myrna Godzich, Wlad Godzich, and Barbara Harlow, “The Orient as Stereotype and Phantasm,” in *The Colonial Harem*, (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 4.

8 Said, 119.

9 Jennifer Meagher, “Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century Art,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), accessed December 9, 2019, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd_euor.htm.

10 Emanuel J. Mickel, “Orientalist Painters and Writers at the Crossroads of Realism,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 23, no. 1/2 (1994): 1-34, accessed May 6, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/23537316.

traction, the “Société des Peintres Orientalistes Français” was formed with the intent to “foster a critical approach to the study of their ancient arts and civilizations.”¹¹ According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “some of the most popular orientalist genre scenes—and the ones most influential in shaping Western aesthetics—depict harems.”¹² As “visual documents of colonialist ideology,” these scenes drew on existing colonial stereotypes and iconography, serving as “a type of image that is palpable in manifest form and denotative in function.”¹³ Worth noting is the fact that male artists would not have been allowed access into actual Turkish harems, so the women they painted were created using only “hearsay and imagination.”¹⁴ Because of this, many of the painted depictions of harem *odalisques* were inaccurate, subjective, and highly sexualized.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres was one of the single most prolific and active orientalists concerned with the *odalisque*. During his tenure as an artist, Ingres sketched and painted hundreds, if not thousands of *odalisques*. The most famous of these depictions by far is *La Grande Odalisque* (Fig. 1). The painting is of a single woman reclining on a generously adorned bed, with a peacock-feathered fan draped lazily in her hand and her eyes tilted directly and invitingly at the viewer. The

11 Antonio Baldassarre, “Being Engaged, Not Informed: French ‘Orientalists’ Revisited,” *Music in Art* 38, no. 1-2 (2013): 63, accessed December 8, 2019, www.jstor.org/stable/musicinart.38.1-2.63.

12 Meagher, “Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century Art.”

13 Noehlin, 35; C.H. Palczewski, “The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam: Visual Argument, Icons, and Ideographs in 1909 Anti-Woman Suffrage Postcards,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91, no. 4 (2006): 373.

14 Meagher, “Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century Art.”

proportions of her body are visibly incorrect, with the artist's blatant disregard for anatomical realism betraying his desire to grossly oversexualize the subject. Her skin is noticeably pale, almost translucent in color. These physical characteristics are important to note due to the clear fabrication of their authenticity. Ingres painted in a stylized manner (especially for the time), but his smooth, invisible brushstrokes and otherwise realistic depiction of an interior scene almost tricks the viewer into believing her proportions are natural. This is a key factor in orientalist painting, as the "strategies of pseudo-realist mystification go hand in hand with orientalist mystification."¹⁵ In concealing any evidence of their brush strokes and consequently the artist's own hand, naturalist artists insist to the viewers that their depiction is veritable. This is especially problematic considering the inaccuracy of Ingres's likeness, not only because of its implications regarding women's bodies in general, but also its skill in denoting oriental reality as fundamentally different from its equivalent in the West. Despite the familiarity in her skin color and facial features, Ingres's *odalisque* communicated to French audiences that sexual deviancy, indulgence, and mysticism characterized the Orient.

In an appraisal of Ingres's *Odalisque à l'esclave* (Fig. 2) by the Marquis de Custine, he considers the depiction "conscientiously correct," as the painter has "depicted his dream; he has painted neither which he has seen, nor seen that which he thought."¹⁶ This painting similarly features a reclined woman as the focal point; however, in this presen-

¹⁵ Nochlin, 39.

¹⁶ Hans Naef, "'Odalisque a L'esclave' by J. A. D. Ingres," *Acquisitions* (Fogg Art Museum), no. 1968 (1968): 84.



Fig. 1: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (Montauban, 1780-Paris, 1867), *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814
H. 0.91 m; W. 1.62 m
Acquired in 1899, 1899, R.F. 1158,
© 2005 Musée du Louvre/Angèle Dequier

tation she is accompanied by two other figures, that of the accompanying "swarthy" musician and the black eunuch servant.¹⁷ Much of the central *odalisque's* characteristics remain the same in this iteration, with her pale, nude body on display for the purpose of sexual consumption. The two new figures, however, represent another theme found throughout much of the orientalist "school's" work: the value disparity between black and white. According to Nochlin, the notion of "the black servant enhances the pearly beauty of her white mistress" and the "passivity of the lovely white figure as opposed to the

¹⁷ Hans, 84.

vigorous activity of the worn, unfeminine ugly black one...suggests a sense of erotic availability.”¹⁸ The element of hierarchy inherent in these depictions further entrenched orientalist notions of colorism and racism while at once heightening the sexuality of the pale, Turkish *odalisques*.

Ingres’ third painting, *Le Bain turc* (Fig. 3), features a crowded scene of female bathers in a harem, presumably washing and preparing themselves for service. Much like in his earlier paintings, Ingres’ style

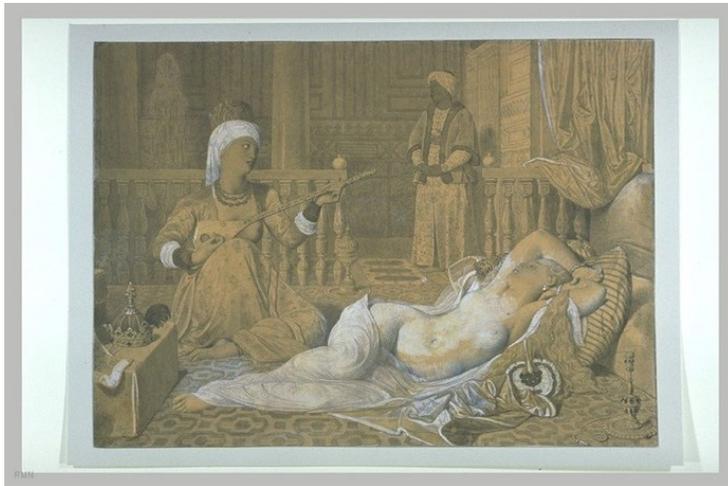


Fig. 2: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (Montauban, 1780-Paris, 1867), *La Grande Odalisque and Slave*, 1858
H. 0.345 m; W. 0.475 m,
Roger Gallichon bequest, 1918, R.F. 4622,
© 2005 Musée du Louvre/Angèle Dequier

¹⁸ Nochlin, 49.



Fig. 3: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (Montauban, 1780-Paris, 1867), *The Turkish Bath*, 1852–1859, modified in 1862,
Oil on canvas glued to wood,
H. 1.08 m; W. 1.10 m,
© 2007 Musée du Louvre/Angèle Dequier

remains deceptively natural despite the highly stylized and unrealistic bodily forms. Another motif explored further is the black servant, with this particular work containing two visibly darker-skinned, active women. The eroticism in all of Ingres’ works is palpable, with voluptuous figures, a soft haze, and sensuous atmosphere characterizing the bulk of his representations. Many of Ingres’ *odalisque* figures were

noticeably paler and “often resembled their European counterparts” in conformity with Western standards of beauty.¹⁹ Like many artists at the time, Ingres himself never actually visited the Orient and instead relied on imagination and the secondhand work of others to construct his lavish scenes.²⁰ The reality behind the veneer of these paintings and so many others like them was that they were completely artificial constructions based on an already existing ideological orientalist culture. These paintings only served to further establish orientalist fabrications as factual with an increasingly alarming tone of realism and normalization.

Le Toilette de l’odalisque (Fig. 4) by Léopold de Moulignon superficially represents a stylistic departure from the *odalisques* seen in Ingres’s work; however, some key continuities remain. Both figures in this painting are much less pseudo-photorealistic than Ingres’s models. Additionally, they were given features more accurate to that of actual Turkish and Arab women, as opposed to the previous European projections or favored Circassian models.²¹ However, as with all orientalist pictorial productions, there remains an immutable and unmistakable element of otherizing and domination. Moulignon’s scene similarly contains an unambiguous racial hierarchy, perhaps even starker than Ingres’s. The juxtaposition of slave and master is highlighted by the proximity of the two women to one another and the clear difference in skin tone. The dominance of the lighter-skinned

19 Isra Ali, “The Harem Fantasy in Nineteenth-century Orientalist Paintings,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 39, no. 1 (2015): 40.

20 *Ibid.*, 42.

21 *Ibid.*, 40.

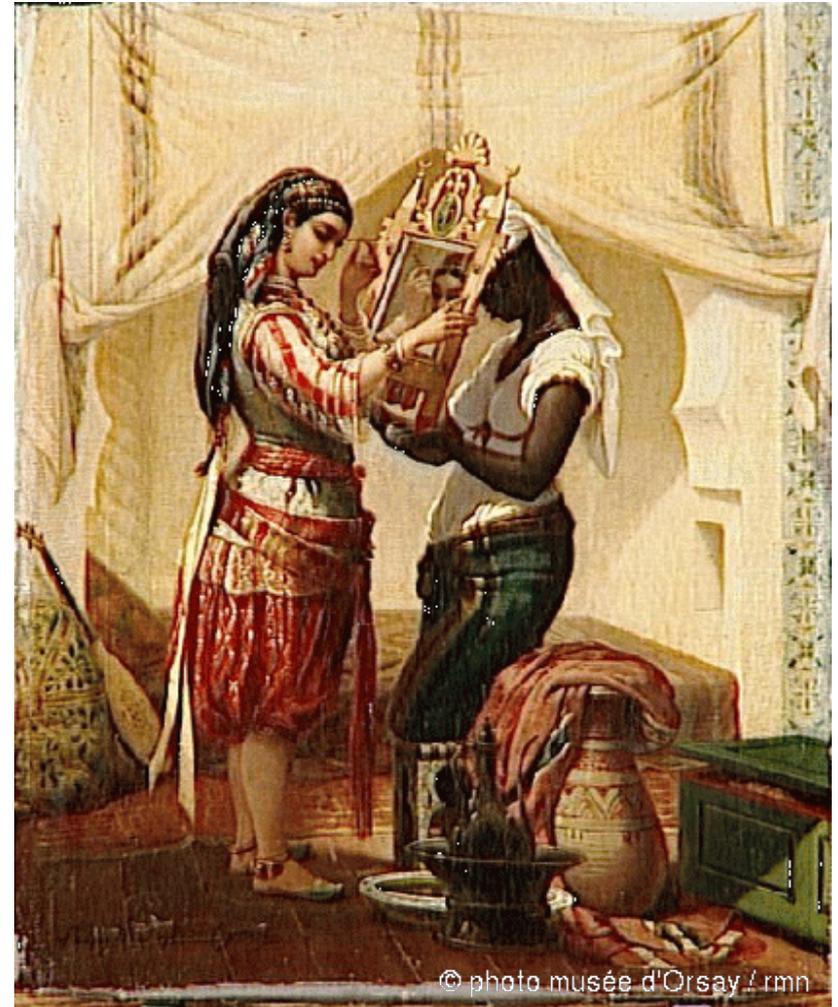


Fig. 4: Léopold de Moulignon, *La toilette de l’odalisque*, entre 1821 et 1897 huile sur toile, H. 46.8 cm; L. 38.8 cm @ avec cadre H. 56.5 cm; L. 49 cm, Musée international de la Parfumerie, Grasse, France, © photo Musée d’Orsay/rmm

odalisque is buttressed by her height superiority and physical authority implied by using the servant as a stabilizer for her large mirror. Her vanity is quite literally reliant on the subservience of the dark-skinned slave. In addition to this, the setting of the room and the style of clothing is unmistakably oriental and exotic, and despite the lack of overt sexualization, the decision to voyeuristically paint such an intimate, private setting (*the toilette*) maintains the orientalist fascination with female eroticism, albeit in a more subdued manner.

The final painting, *L'Odalisque Allongée* (Fig.5) by Jean Jacob Benjamin-Constant, returns to the style of Ingres, dripping with sexual innuendo and quasi-hyperrealism. The *odalisque* pictured here is once again reclining and nude, apparently either in the thralls of ecstasy or simply lying in languid exhaustion. In a setting replete with Persian rugs and exotic draperies, this piece is certainly emblematic of orientalist iconography. The tenebristic spotlight effect of pronounced shadow and light highlights the woman's bare breasts and torso, while at once obscuring her face (and with it, her identity and agency). The erotic atmosphere is further developed with this dramatic lighting: the day is presumably winding down and the woman will soon begin her shift in the Sultan's chambers. Like Ingres, Benjamin-Constant's *odalisque* is extremely fair-skinned, further alluding to the Western projection of beauty standards on oriental women. As with the others and inherent to all *odalisque* depictions, the woman in this painting serves chiefly as an occidental masculine fantasy. Harkening back to Flaubert's letter, the *odalisques* seen here are machines: dehumanized objects and bodies serving only as untouchable instruments of pleasure without consciousness, demands, or selfhood. This orientalist truism was made very real by these paintings, despite having little

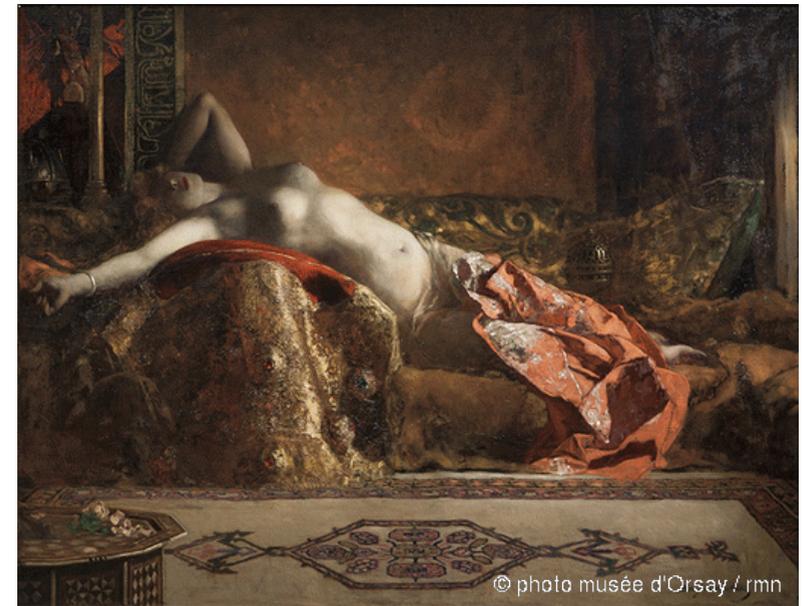


Fig. 5: Benjamin-Constant,
L'odalisque allongée, vers 1870, Huile sur toile,
H. 115.0 cm; L. 149.0 cm,
Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France,
© photo Musée d'Orsay/rmm

to no factual basis. Resulting from these perpetuations was a distinct sense of Western superiority—the men and women of the Orient were thought to have been uncivilized, helpless, and backward. Many of the institutions and political ideologies that negatively affected Middle Eastern lives were either conceived because of or justified by these ideographs.

Prior to Edward Said, orientalist doctrines were left largely untouched and rarely criticized so widely and successfully. Certainly, within the

field of art history, paintings, sketches, and photographs were seldom considered to be capable of being ideological vehicles of colonial discourse. However, despite years of criticism and reorienting within many academic fields, much of the ideological products of orientalism have endured. Orientalists have long considered Islamic societies stagnant, primitive, or fundamentalist, especially regarding gender politics. Many Western scholars and policy makers today continue to perpetuate this myth in staging civilizing or emancipating missions for women as justification for invasion and interference in Islamic countries.²² The narrative of Islamic gender inequality has had a lasting legacy, with blatantly erroneous contemporary forms of the very same cultural production found in the time of French orientalists. The distinctly orientalist characterization of the helpless and politically impotent Eastern woman, found in the bare bodies and blank stares of French fabricated odalisques, has mutated and adapted to inform modern events and justify Islamophobic ideology.

²² Ali, 34.

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