This article examines a particular form of nineteenth-century Salon art – images of the Middle East now generally known as Orientalist painting. It asks what special role this imagery played in nineteenth-century European visual culture. Nicholas Tromans suggests that this role was related to a desire to affirm a ‘natural’ Western transparency of vision, in deliberate contrast to a supposed ‘Oriental’ inability to comprehend images.

Imagine yourself in a nineteenth-century exhibition of pictures – the annual display of the Salon in Paris or the Royal Academy in London, perhaps – let’s say in the 1860s or ’70s. Pictures painted in rich oils and encased in bold gilt frames are packed together over the walls, identified only by numbers which you work hard to match with entries in the catalogue. There are portraits – dozens and dozens of them; there are landscapes and townscapes from every corner of Europe; there are some larger Classical, historical or allegorical subjects, showing a little learning on the part of the artist but not too tricky to decipher; and then, every so often, you encounter various ‘Oriental’ scenes.

This vague category, comprising portraits, landscapes and genre scenes, could cover a lot of places. The ‘Orient’ began as soon as Western Europe stopped and so it included the Balkans and Russia as well as the Near, Middle and Far East. Oriental pictures were generally opportunities for a lot of local colour, for plenty of exotic architecture and costume, but any stories these pictures told were likely to be minimal. The figures would be shown doing ‘typical’ Oriental things, or rather not doing them, for typical Oriental pastimes were understood to be sitting around languorously (in the case of women) or sitting around sullenly (the men).

What would you have made, as a visitor to our exhibition, of these Eastern scenes? Probably you would not have taken them too seriously. Not as seriously as the portraits of the great people whose faces it is so interesting
Tromans

to connect to what you had heard of their careers and characters; not as seriously as the landscape paintings of your own countryside which seem so imbued with both pride and melancholy; and certainly not as seriously as the grand compositions of the modern Olympians whose Classical works seem to preserve all that is most noble in Western civilization. It seems that by and large, Oriental pictures were admired by the critics and the public for the evidence they showed of the artists’ initiative, energy and faithfulness in travelling far from home to bring back descriptions of distant places. But their paintings, almost always completed back in Europe on the basis of sketches made abroad, entered private collections and museums alongside the other sorts of pictures with which they had initially been exhibited. Hardly anyone, it seems, thought to make a collection of Oriental pictures alone. In nineteenth-century visual culture, then, we can begin by observing that the Orient nestled comfortably among the longer-established modes of European art. The Pyramids were neighbours to the farms of Brittany, and the minarets of Istanbul formed patterns on the wall with the spires of English churches. In this article, I will be suggesting that there were, nevertheless, some special characteristics of Orientalist painting that justify us in briefly removing it from this mixed natural habitat in an attempt to understand its particular role in nineteenth-century visual culture.

Orientalism as Art

Let’s make progress feasible by defining our Orientalist pictures more carefully. Although the ‘Oriental’ label might be attached to images of so many different places, the Eastern Mediterranean was the most strongly represented region: Turkey, Palestine, Egypt and the Maghreb – predominantly Muslim countries, many of them under the control of the Ottoman Empire. Artists from all over Europe began visiting Istanbul (or Constantinople as they still referred to it), Jerusalem and Cairo in large numbers as soon as this became possible thanks to steam-powered travel from around 1840. That moment coincided with far-reaching Westernizing political reforms within the Ottoman Empire and with the establishment of a Protestant bishopric in Jerusalem, not to mention the invention of photography which was itself soon put to work in the East but which I will be leaving aside here (although perhaps much of what I will be suggesting might equally have been argued using photographic examples). This particular Orient was defined in large part by convenience. It was where,
Nineteenth-century Orientalist painting

as an artist, you could reach and return from comfortably without upsetting your annual rhythm of painting, exhibiting and selling. For the French and the British, the ‘painter’s Orient’ had different political associations. For the former, it involved parts of their actual empire in North Africa, while for the British it included no formal possessions but places of great strategic significance (Egypt, the conduit to India) and of historic, religious and sentimental importance (Palestine).

An Orientalist was originally, in the eighteenth century, any European with some specialist knowledge of the East. In the art world it gradually came to be applied in the nineteenth century to painters who specialised in making trips to the Islamic Mediterranean. Among the pioneering professional artists were Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps (in 1828), Horace Vernet (1833), David Roberts (1838), and John Frederick Lewis (1840); Jean-Léon Gérôme and William Holman Hunt each first went to the East in 1854. These are usually seen today as some of the most interesting and original of the Orientalists, although there were literally hundreds of others whose works and names appear now only in reference books and auction catalogues. The work of this very international band of artists could become very conventionalised. Certain motifs and places recur ubiquitously – the souk, the harem, the mosque, the caravan in the desert – and indeed so well established did the imagery become that there were a few painters who did not even feel it necessary to go to the Orient in order to paint Orientalist pictures. Constructing their compositions from medleys of standardised props, characters and situations, the job could be done from the comfort of the artist’s own studio. Henry Warren, for example, seems to have managed to make a reasonable career from the Orient without himself going there.

Originality versus convention

The entire genre soon had the reputation that dogs it still today, of being repetitious, unimaginative and emotionally limited. But at the same time there was an intriguing dynamic at work within Orientalist painting that championed originality precisely on account of the dreary predictability

1 Generally such specialists were not grouped together in any formal way, although in France a Société des Peintres Orientalistes was eventually established in the 1890s: see Roger Benjamin, Orientalist aesthetics. Art, colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930 (Berkeley, CA and London 2003) chapter 3.
2 Art Journal (London 1861) 265.
that the genre was seen to tend to. Those Orientalist painters that I just listed were praised by their contemporaries for having eluded the dull traditions of older, conventionalised representations of the East. All were very self-conscious reformers, making claims, either in letters or implicitly in their pictures themselves, to be capturing something more truthful than could be represented in the standardised academic versions of their subjects. Here I think is one of the ways in which Orientalist painting can teach us more broadly about how visual cultures function. Once a genre of painting (or of printmaking, photography or film) is established, its defining rules and conventions immediately risk appearing artificial and mannered, and so the genre must struggle against its own parameters while never ignoring them to an extent that would place the work outside the genre’s protecting professional competence, that is, its authority as an established way of doing things. In the specific case of nineteenth-century Orientalist painting, this struggle is still being played out retrospectively today within the art market. Orientalist pictures have done very well at auction since the 1980s, not least thanks to Middle Eastern collectors. The art market has learned to speak a public relations language, essentially borrowed from nineteenth-century debates over authenticity versus convention, that attributes to its Eastern clients the ability to filter out the supposedly sincere Orientalism from the kitsch, thus cleverly claiming for the market itself the role of improving a product which, all had always agreed, had a dangerous tendency to banality.3

In the nineteenth century, authenticity in Orientalist painting was assumed to be the result of first-hand study. As we have noted, close inspection of the places, people and monuments was itself a novelty for self-employed professional artists (as opposed to the draftsmen-companions of gentleman travellers) of the years around 1840. Roberts, a Scottish architectural specialist, spent ten months in Egypt and Palestine in 1838–39 and used the resulting corpus of sketches to compose paintings for the next twenty years. He painted the mosques of Cairo, the ancient Egyptian temples of the Nile and the churches of Jerusalem. It was a thrilling experience for exhibition-goers of the 1840s and 1850s to feel themselves so very close to these awesome structures – to feel indeed that they had been engulfed within them, for Roberts borrowed some of the techniques of the panorama-

Nineteenth-century Orientalist painting

Jean-Léon Gérôme, Prayer in the Mosque. oil on canvas 1871
(Metropolitan Museum, New York no.87.15.130).

painters to give his viewers the sense of being entirely surrounded by the architecture he reconstructs in two dimensions. A single dose of full exposure to the Orient might thus be potent enough to sustain professional life over decades without the need for a renewed prescription.

Holman Hunt and Gérôme made regular visits to the East, each acquiring a reputation for precisely and lucidly executed paintings evoking the solid presence of the scenes they depicted. Gérôme indeed can be seen as transferring to the Orient a version of the French Classical tradition of painting that he had inherited from Jacques-Louis David, via a chain of master-pupil relationships passing through Antoine-Jean Gros and Paul Delaroche. The kudos of this tradition of painting in France – based ultimately upon a sculptural paradigm – helps explain Gérôme’s huge success and academic authority. Hunt on the other hand, along with his fellow Pre-Raphaelites, conceived his fastidious attention to detail and to the concrete presence of his motifs as anti-academic, as a rebellion against the abstracting traditions of British Romantic painting.

John Frederick Lewis

The precision of observation and execution that was generally seen as a feature of European Orientalist painting might carry yet another different set of connotations in the case of a watercolour specialist. John Frederick Lewis wavered between oil and watercolour paints throughout his career which he had begun as an animal and sporting specialist. But he first came to fame as an Orientalist with an extraordinarily large, dense and intricate watercolour of a Cairo Hhareem (1850; Japanese private collection). Lewis spent a full decade in Egypt, building an archive of drawings from which, like Roberts, he was able to sustain a twenty-five year career following
his return to England in 1851. He was seen to have used Orientalism to re-invent the watercolour. The lushness and exactitude generally associated with the genre could now be seen in Lewis's use of opaque gouache paints with which he built up images of painstakingly detailed elaboration. Thanks to Lewis, the watercolour seemed able at last to compete with oil painting, traditionally considered its grander and more lucrative sibling.

The way in which Roberts and Lewis, the two most prolific British specialists in Orientalism, used their original drawings repeatedly over many years meant that they played out individually the struggle within their chosen field between the aspiration to authenticity and the apparently inescapable trap of artificiality. In Lewis’s work, the same figures reappear in different guises in different cities, looking equally accurate in both. A wonderfully sensitive depiction of an Arab Scribe, Cairo (1852; private collection) reappears looking just as authentic as an elderly scholar reading the Qur’an in a royal mausoleum in Bursa, the old Ottoman capital (1869; private collection). As a man, Lewis would never have seen inside a functioning harem, and yet harem scenes were among his most famous pictures. His work seems to dramatise, perhaps even deliberately, the problem of Orientalism’s parameters. Lewis’s in-depth first-hand knowledge of Egypt is seen to wrestle with the limits of what it was possible to do in a picture painted for public exhibition. The critics of the day realised this, praising both his realism and regretting his artificiality in the same breath.
A battle of the gaze

This paradox at the heart of the public impact of an artist such as Lewis may be considered also in terms of the paradoxical status of the Orientalist drawing or on-the-spot sketch. The rhetoric of authenticity depended entirely upon it, but the sketches themselves were rarely visible during the artists’ lifetimes as they were of course needed, retained and used by the painters themselves, sometimes, as we have seen, for very long periods of time. So in the absence – to the public – of the sketch itself, legends of its creation had to take its place, and indeed stories of daring behaviour on the part of Orientalist painters determined to capture their motif on paper form a readily identifiable theme in Orientalist letters and memoirs. The artists recorded the dangers they risked from sunstroke, the massive inconvenience of setting down drawings while seated in a crowded souk, and above all they stressed the hostility of local people to their sketching. Time and again we read of artists being pestered and interfered with, of people totally failing to understand what it was they were doing, of others considering it embarrassing or offensive, and even of the Europeans being threatened or chased away. We do not have to pretend that these stories were all made up in order to see that they help form a very clear discourse of the ‘battle of the gaze’ in which the medal of authenticity was to be won. The image had to be hunted, the gaze of the artist had to be flexed against an intractable subject in order to be strengthened.

It is in this context that we can best start to understand the place of Islam in the minds of the Orientalist painters. Our artists tended to know little of the formal theology or history of Islam. For example, I know of only one British Orientalist painter who certainly read the Qur’an, and that was Richard Dadd who obtained a copy in 1869 while he was living at Broadmoor, the state criminal lunatic asylum (Dadd had returned from his Eastern tour of 1842-43 suffering from a psychotic illness and had killed his father). But what all the Orientalist painters thought they knew about Islam was that it outlawed the representation of living creatures. Again, we do not have to deny that in certain hadith, and of course in many actual cultural traditions, this iconophobia or aniconism is indeed present in order to claim for it an inordinate role in the rhetoric of European Orientalist visual culture. To make the battle for the sketch a more significant one, the entire society being represented was cast as hostile to the image per se. It did

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4 Broadmoor Archive, Berkshire Record Office, D3/3/1/1.
not want to be sketched, and so became a worthy opponent against which the artist’s gaze might be tested. It seems to me that in this little drama of the resisted gaze, we find the most significant aspect of the tradition of European Orientalist painting.

Take the case of the Pre-raphaelite artist Holman Hunt, who developed a very strong attachment to Palestine where he seriously considered settling. It was in Palestine that he began several of his most famous pictures, including the Scapegoat, the Finding of the Saviour, the Shadow of Death and the Triumph of the Innocents. During his various periods in Jerusalem (and later in his voluminous autobiographical writings), Hunt often stressed the inability of the local Arab population to understand his art, and evolved a reading of religious history in which he sought in effect to explain away Jewish and Protestant Christian iconophobia as historical accidents, while repeatedly insisting upon the complete incompatibility of art (as he conceived of it) with Islam. In his diaries there is an unintentionally comic passage where Hunt describes how, in 1855, he lectured a Palestinian muezzin, in whose mosque there were images of flora and fauna, on Islamic iconophobia: ‘when ... I tell him that the Khoran forbids the representation of living creatures, he seems as much enlightened’, as well the man might have, for of course no such prohibition appears in the Qur’an itself. Hunt allowed this casting of the Muslim as an inveterate iconoclast to inform his political thinking about Palestine. Because he saw images as having a unique capacity to express the predictions and fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies, any rejection of images risked, in his eyes, leading to exclusion from the divine plan. Eventually Hunt became a convinced Zionist and looked forward to the Palestinian Arabs being placed under the economic dominance of Jewish colonists.

It was a European or Western assumption that the gaze must be free to wander anywhere there is work to be done. To limit vision is construed as superstitious and unscientific. The Orientalist painter, in his (very occasionally her) insistence on the physicality of looking – on the battle of the gaze as I have termed it – further assumes that the gaze must be carried bodily wherever necessary, and so the innocence of the eye seemed easily to translate into a license to go anywhere and stare at anything. That this way of thinking was not so self-evident to everyone is suggested by the memorable comment of the nineteenth-century Egyptian educationalist

6 John Rylands Library, Manchester, MS.1211, fol.76v.
Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi, who in a book comparing different cultures noted with curiosity that ‘one of the beliefs of the Europeans is that the gaze has no effect.’ Quoting this Egyptian voice raises the whole question of the reactions of local populations to visiting European painters, and indeed the question of how Turkish and Arab artists came to borrow and adapt Orientalist visual languages to represent their own cultures. This is the focus of much recent writing, especially in an Ottoman context, where the case of Osman Hamdi Bey (1842-1910) is an especially well debated one. Turkey’s pioneering archaeologist and museologist, Hamdi was also both an élite statesman and a painter of what are, at least superficially, European-style picturesque images of Turkey. Whether this makes him some sort of Orientalist, or rather someone speaking back to Orientalist culture formations, is a question scholars of this field love to argue over.

Before returning to European Orientalist painting itself, I will just briefly observe the very great vigour that still surrounds the battle of the gaze which the Orientalists first joined (and in which a figure such as Hamdi Bey occupied such an intriguingly ambiguous position). It is still being fought, believe it or not, in art. The American painter John Currin, who specialises in highly-finished and grotesque versions of popular and sentimental imagery, has spoken of how he sees his explicitly sexual pictures in part as retaliation for 9/11, and pornography generally as (another) last stand of Western visual culture mounted against the supposed alternative of Islamic iconoclasm. And in Europe today we do not have to think very hard to find other examples of Islam being held to blame for placing impediments on a ‘natural’ desire to look. Countries throughout the EU are considering bans on face-coverings in public places, and as I was writing this essay, the French parliament voted in favour of legislation that would compulsorily ‘reveal’ the few women in that country who regularly wear burqas.

Preserving perspective

I don’t want simply to suggest that Orientalist painting was an intentional declaration of an antagonistic project that was in some sense a deliberate prelude to colonisation. But let’s note that by the time Orientalist painting as a professional genre came to an end around 1920, France and Britain were in occupation of most of the territory the artists had fondly depicted. We must bear in mind again the tension inherent in Orientalism between its raison d’être as a feat of adventurous looking on one hand, and its constant resorting to cliché on the other. While an artist might decide for himself to seek to outdo his predecessors in terms of authenticity, the genre of Orientalism could never be entirely within his power to instrumentalise. The rules of the genre were such that they put limits on what the artist might allow themself to do, and indeed we might claim that these rules didn’t just mark the boundaries of what was possible, but to some extent generated the project itself. I mean that vision must be recognised as having its own compulsions – social, erotic, emotional – and that the products of visual culture must not be reduced merely to the status of illustrations of abstract tendencies of the Zeitgeist, ‘cultural attitudes’ or the like.

One way of looking at the whole Orientalist genre is as the creation of a new habitat for modes of representation that were under threat in Europe. To condense the argument, let’s look at perspective, long considered the archetypal characteristic of Western art, with its ‘objectification of the subjective’, and hence with its power as a metaphor of political responsibility: perspective is ultimately the appropriate placing of the subject within the world order. The history of artistic perspective in Turkish history seems to have been closely related to its military modernisation, forming part of the syllabus for students of gunnery at the İstikbal Teknik Üniversitesi from the 1790s. Quite when Renaissance perspective began its demise in Western painting is a question to which there have been many answers, but it is clear that Orientalism offered perspective a new lease of life in the East when Impressionism (often seen as the opposite to the often highly-finished academicism of the Orientalists) was abandoning it back home.

Throughout the history of the genre, the critics’ preferred Orientalist

pictures were described as capturing the solidity of their motifs, as building a satisfyingly three-dimensional mental image of them. On one hand this had to do with the attention given to architecture and to interiors, the scene-setting that often made life easier for the artists who could let the buildings guide their compositions. But the solidity that was understood to be desirable in the Orientalist picture was more than the competent marshalling of the perspectival grid of Renaissance tradition. It suggested an expansion of the powers of perspective, often relating to the nineteenth-century interest in binocular or stereoscopic vision. Stereoscopy was an early 3D photographic technique involving looking at two slightly different photographs simultaneously. The Orient was a favourite source of subjects for the manufacturers of the images, and their effect often compared to that of Orientalist paintings. For many artists, travel in the Orient was an opportunity to explore these new capacities of perspective. Landscape specialists such as Roberts or the poet-painter Edward Lear created compositions in which the old single-point perspective schemes were retained but amplified and dramatised to offer a thrilling visual experience of the gaze hurtling forwards. In his *The Great Temple of Edfou at Upper Egypt*, Roberts sets up a sequence of architectural vistas that resembles the view through the sights of a rifle.

Other artists felt the Orient was the place to humanise perspective, that is, to recognise that the old Renaissance schemes were in fact authoritarian structures entirely distinct from the actual human experience of binocular looking. Pre-Raphaelitism had in its early days championed this approach, and it formed part of Holman Hunt’s conviction that their original creed of Truth to Nature had some special destiny in the East. When recreating the

Jewish Temple for his famous picture of *The Finding of the Saviour* (1854-60; Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), Hunt tried to paint it without calculating formal perspectival lines as he felt two eyes working together was the natural way to achieve realism.\(^{15}\) John Ruskin, the dominant Victorian critic, wrote that he believed in the total authenticity of the pictures painted in Palestine by Hunt and his companion Thomas Seddon despite never having himself visited the Holy Land. So Orientalism seemed to offer new life, not only to perspective, but perhaps even to the whole Western tradition of believing in the capacity of an image to contain reality, a tradition whose collapse forms of course the core story of the history of modern art. This line of thinking suggests it was art or vision itself that compelled artists to take up Orientalism. To borrow words from a famous critique of traditional theories of perspective, that of Jacques Lacan, ‘the geometrical dimension enables us to glimpse how the subject who concerns us is caught, manipulated, captured, in the field of vision’.\(^{16}\) Lacan envisages the supposed viewer as themself in some sense projected by perspective, an image that resonates when we think of those European painters scurrying from location to location around the Eastern Mediterranean.

The kind of questions I have been raising have to do with the authority that, really or apparently, attached to certain privileged forms of representation of one set of cultures by another. I therefore need to say something about the relationship of the study of visual culture to the debates around Orientalism begun by Edward Said’s 1978 book of that title. Strongly influenced by Michel Foucault’s theories of the will to


power that lies behind ostensibly objective or scientific representations or institutions, Said famously turned Orientalism into a dirty word, an epithet for a supposed expert who was in fact, in the last analysis, an agent of imperialism. Said himself had little to say about images in his original book, although later scattered references allow us to reconstruct something of what he believed about visual culture. Said, in keeping perhaps with the influence upon him of Foucault and other French philosophers for whom ‘the gaze’ implied coercion of some form, was suspicious of vision and the image. At various moments in his writing, we have the sense that the visual needed to be gotten out of the way in order to proceed with his own lines of thinking. Here’s a passage from his memoir, *Out of Place*:

‘To be looked at directly, and to return the gaze, was most difficult for me. When I was about ten I mentioned this to my father. “Don’t look at their eyes; look at their nose,” he said, thereby communicating to me a secret technique I have used for decades. When I began to teach as a graduate student in the late fifties I found it imperative to take off my glasses in order to turn the class into a blur that I couldn’t see. And to this day I find it unbearably difficult to look at myself on television, or even to read about myself.’

As for representational images, Said’s attitude again seems to have been one of suspicion. Pictures were too easily recruited by power: they were not to be trusted. An apparently harmless picture by Gérôme of a Cairo muezzin issuing a call to prayer, for example, was all too easily recast as a crude *Time* magazine cover introducing a fearful account of the Iranian revolution. Later critics, however, such as Linda Nochlin and Rana Kabbani, saw a more fixed meaning – a very negative meaning – in Orientalist paintings. For Kabbani it was the subject matter that was wrong, so often demeaning as it was towards anything Other, and so often inventing the Orient as an imagined playground of sexualised violence. For Nochlin, Orientalism’s aspiration to realism was the problem. Contrasting Gérôme’s classicising academic style with Manet’s witty modernist ironies, Nochlin spelt out the

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**Conclusion**

Today academic literature has again moved on from those rather limited readings of the 1980s to stress the variety of situations in which artistic encounters took place, and the intercultural conversations that followed. Gérôme, Roberts and Lewis are no longer the only names to conjure with. Hamdi Bey seems to raise more interesting questions of political identity, and several women artists, little researched or exhibited until recently, have been shown to have had more involved relationships with their subject matter. But admirable as much of this literature is, its nuancing and biographical complexity risks encouraging us to forget why it was that the nineteenth-century genre of Orientalist painting seemed worth revisiting historically in the first place. To be sure, a few of the artist-travellers formed part of complex stories of transnational dialogue that show how images could become the currency of polyglot conversations. But taken en masse, those European Orientalists on show in the public exhibition with which we began formed part of a visual culture with a strong sense of its difference and superiority. The Orientalist paintings there played an important, if modestly rewarded, role in nineteenth-century exhibition culture, subtly underlining the authority of vision that was on view throughout the salons and private picture galleries. If we are to really measure the cultural role of Orientalist painting then we will need to return to some of the fundamental questions posed by the original debates around power and culture sparked by Said’s *Orientalism*, and to seek to understand the particular role of the visual image in them, especially such as the way our sense of our own vision’s scope and liberty is generated partly by attributing a contrasting impeded visuality to others. Here as in other fields, images need to be seen as generating ideas, not simply representing them.

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21 See for example the essays in Beaulieu and Roberts ed., *Orientalism’s interlocutors* (as in note 8 above) and Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones and Mary Roberts ed., *Edges of empire. Orientalism and visual culture* (Oxford 2005).