cial, often third-world, artist among the demands of the local culture, the expression of national identity, and the frequently internalized demands for high quality, in which quality is inevitably equated with the standards of the world center.

Yet at the same time, one must not underestimate the importance, expecially in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, but today as well, of modernity and modernization as liberating, expansionist concepts, which opened doors, knocked down walls, expanded the cramped, often conventional roles inflicted on people by traditional village culture. Both nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction offers us many visions of the talented or the unusual individual oppressed by or languishing in restrictive, stultifying provincial settings, from *Madame Bovary* to the *Three Sisters.* The center, then—Paris above all for the nineteenth-century artist—should be thought of not just in terms of oppression or domination, but as the source of liberation and stimulation as well. In this conflict, so central to the meaning and direction of art, and indeed, of all cultural creation today, Francisco Oller stands as an exemplary figure, one whose importance extends far beyond the island which nourished him with that all-important sense of place.

Notes

1. Eudora Welty, *Place in Fiction* (a condensation of lectures prepared for the Conference on American Studies, Cambridge, England, 1954) (New York: House of Books, 1957), n.p.
2. Francisco Oller, cited in the exhibition catalogue *Francisco Oller: Un Realisto del Impresionismo* (Francisco Oller: A Realist Impressionist) (Museum of Art, Ponce, Puerto Rico, June–December, 1983), cat. no. 43, p. 193.
3. *Francisco Oller,* cat. no. 23, p. 175.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., pp. 224–27.
6. *Francisco Oller,* cat. no. 35, p. 185.

LINDA NOCHLIN, THE POLITICS OF VISION: ESSAYS ON NINETEENTH-CENTURY ART AND SOCIETY (NEW YORK: HARPER & ROW, 1989)

3

The Imaginary Orient

> *What is more European, after all, than to be corrupted by the Orient?*
>
> —RICHARD HOWARD

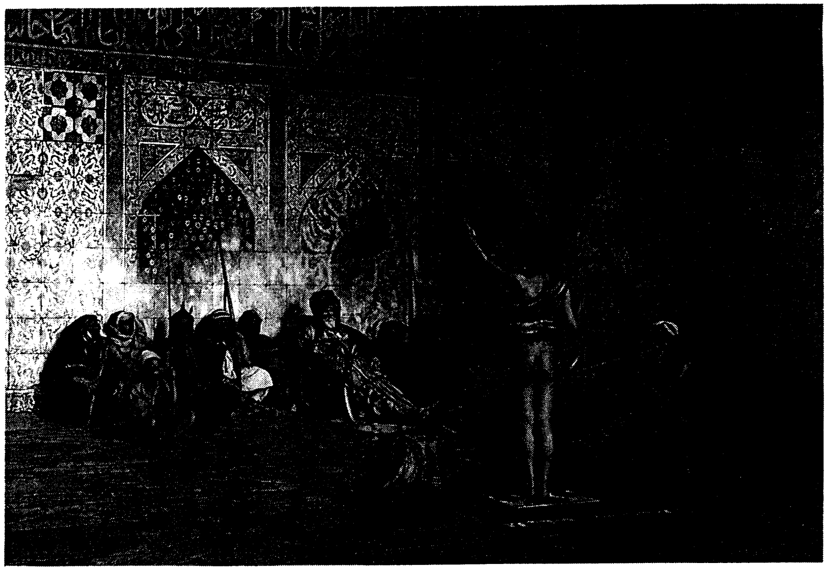
What is the rationale behind the recent spate of revisionist or expansionist exhibitions of nineteenth-century art—*The Age of Revolution, The Second Empire, The Realist Tradition, Northern Light, Women Artists,* various shows of academic art, etc.? Is it simply to rediscover overlooked or forgotten works of art? Is it to reevaluate the material, to create a new and less value-laden canon? These are the kinds of questions that were raised—more or less unintentionally, one suspects—by the 1982 exhibition and catalogue *Orientalism: The Near East in French Painting, 1800–1880.*[1]

Above all, the Orientalist exhibition makes us wonder whether there are other questions besides the "normal" art-historical ones that ought to be asked of this material. The organizer of the show, Donald Rosenthal, suggests that there are indeed important issues at stake here, but he deliberately stops short of confronting them. "The unifying characteristic of nineteenth-century Orientalism was its attempt at documentary realism," he declares in the introduction to the catalogue, and then goes on to maintain, quite correctly, that "the flowering of Orientalist painting . . . was closely associated with the apogee of European colonialist expansion in the nineteenth century." Yet, having referred to Edward Said's critical definition of Orientalism in Western literature "as a mode for defining the presumed cultural inferiority of the Islamic Orient . . . part of the vast control mechanism of colonialism, designed to justify and perpetuate European dominance," Rosenthal immediately rejects this analysis in his own study. "French Orientalist painting will be discussed in terms of its aesthetic quality and historical interest, and *no attempt will be made at a re-evaluation of its political uses.*"[2]

In other words, art-historical business as usual. Having raised the two crucial issues of political domination and ideology, Rosenthal drops them like hot potatoes. Yet surely most of the pictures in the exhibition—indeed the key notion of Orientalism itself—cannot be confronted without a critical analysis of the particular power structure in which these works came into being. For instance, the degree of realism (or lack of it) in individual Orientalist images can hardly be discussed without some attempt to clarify *whose* reality we are talking about.

What are we to make, for example, of Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Snake Charmer*[1], painted in the late 1860s (now in the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.)? Surely it may most profitably be considered as a visual document of nineteenth-century colonialist ideology, an iconic distillation of the Westerner's notion of the Oriental couched in the language of a would-be transparent naturalism. (No wonder Said used it as the dust jacket for his critical study of the phenomenon of Orientalism!)[3] The title, however, doesn't really tell the complete story; the painting should really be called *The Snake Charmer and His Audience,* for we are clearly meant to look at both performer and audience as parts of the same spectacle. We are not, as we so often are in Impressionist works of this period—works like Manet's or Degas's *Café Concerts,* for example, which are set in Paris—invited to identify with the audience. The watchers huddled against the ferociously detailed tiled wall in the background of Gérôme's painting are as resolutely alienated from us as is the act they watch with such childish, trancelike concentration. Our gaze is meant to include both the spectacle and its spectators as objects of picturesque delectation.

1. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Snake Charmer,* late 1860s, Williamstown, Massachusetts, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute



Clearly, these black and brown folk are mystified—but then again, so are we. Indeed, the defining mood of the painting is mystery, and it is created by a specific pictorial device. We are permitted only a beguiling rear view of the boy holding the snake. A full frontal view, which would reveal unambiguously both his sex and the fullness of his dangerous performance, is denied us. And the insistent, sexually charged mystery at the center of this painting signifies a more general one: the mystery of the East itself, a standard topos of Orientalist ideology.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the insistent richness of the visual diet Gérôme offers—the manifest attractions of the young protagonist's rosy buttocks and muscular thighs; the wrinkles of the venerable snake charmer to his right; the varied delights offered by the picturesque crowd and the alluringly elaborate surfaces of the authentic Turkish tiles, carpet, and basket which serve as décor—we are haunted by certain *absences* in the painting. These absences are so conspicuous that, once we become aware of them, they begin to function as presences, in fact, as signs of a certain kind of conceptual deprivation.

One absence is the absence of history. Time stands still in Gérôme's painting, as it does in all imagery qualified as "picturesque," including nineteenth-century representations of peasants in France itself. Gérôme suggests that this Oriental world is a world without change, a world of timeless, atemporal customs and rituals, untouched by the historical processes that were "afflicting" or "improving" but, at any rate, drastically altering Western societies at the time. Yet these were in fact years of violent and conspicuous change in the Near East as well, changes affected primarily by Western power—technological, military, economic, cultural—and specifically by the very French presence Gérôme so scrupulously avoids.

In the very time when and place where Gérôme's picture was painted, the late 1860s in Constantinople, the government of Napoleon III was taking an active interest (as were the governments of Russia, Austria, and Great Britain) in the efforts of the Ottoman government to reform and modernize itself. "It was necessary to change Muslim habits, to destroy the age-old fanaticism which was an obstacle to the fusion of races and to create a modern secular state," declared French historian Edouard Driault in *La Question d'Orient* (1898). "It was necessary to transform . . . the education of both conquerors and subjects, and inculcate in both the unknown spirit of tolerance—a noble task, worthy of the great renown of France," he continued.

In 1863 the Ottoman Bank was founded, with the controlling interest in French hands. In 1867 the French government invited the sultan to visit Paris and recommended to him a system of secular public education and the undertaking of great public works and communication systems. In 1868 under the joint direction of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the French Ambassador, the Lycée of Galata-Serai was opened, a great secondary school open to Ottoman subjects of every race and creed, where Europeans taught more than six hundred boys the French language—"a symbol," Driault maintained, "of the action of France, exerting herself to instruct the peoples of the Orient in her own language the elements of Western civilization." In the same year, a company consisting mainly of French capitalists received a concession for railways to connect present-day Istanbul and Salonica with the existing railways on the Middle Danube.[4]

The absence of a sense of history, of temporal change, in Gérôme's painting is intimately related to another striking absence in the work: that of the telltale presence of Westerners. There are never any Europeans in "picturesque" views of the Orient like these. Indeed, it might be said that one of the defining features of Orientalist painting is its dependence for its very existence on a presence that is always an absence: the Western colonial or touristic presence.

The white man, the Westerner, is of course always implicitly present in Orientalist paintings like *Snake Charmer;* his is necessarily the controlling gaze, the gaze which brings the Oriental world into being, the gaze for which it is ultimately intended. And this leads us to still another absence. Part of the strategy of an Orientalist painter like Gérôme is to make his viewers forget that there was any "bringing into being" at all, to convince them that works like these were simply "reflections," scientific in their exactitude, of a preexisting Oriental reality.

In his own time Gérôme was held to be dauntingly objective and scientific and was compared in this respect with Realist novelists. As an American critic declared in 1873:

> Gérôme has the reputation of being one of the most studious and conscientiously accurate painters of our time. In a certain sense he may even be called "learned." He believes as firmly as Charles Reade does in the obligation on the part of the artist to be true even in minute matters to the period and locality of a work pretending to historical character. Balzac is said to have made a journey of several hundreds of miles in order to verify certain apparently insignificant facts concerning a locality described in one of his novels. Of Gérôme, it is alleged that he never paints a picture without the most patient and exhaustive preliminary studies of every matter connected with his subject. In the accessories of costume, furniture, etc. it is invariably his aim to attain the utmost possible exactness. It is this trait in which some declare an excess, that has caused him to be spoken of as a "scientific picture maker."[5]

The strategies of "realist" (or perhaps "pseudo-realist," "authenticist," or "naturalist" would be better terms) mystification go hand in hand with those of Orientalist mystification. Hence, another absence which constitutes a significant presence in the painting: the absence—that is to say, the *apparent* absence—of art. As Leo Bersani has pointed out in his article on realism and the fear of desire, "The 'seriousness' of realist art is based on the absence of any reminder of the fact that it is really a question of art."[6] No other artist has so inexorably eradicated all traces of the picture plane as Gérôme, denying us any clue to the art work as a literal flat surface.

If we compare a painting like Gérôme's *Street in Algiers* with its prototype, Delacroix's *Street in Meknes,* we immediately see that Gérôme, in the interest of "artlessness," of innocent, Orientalist transparency, goes much farther than Delacroix in supplying picturesque data to the Western observer, and in veiling the fact that the image consists of paint on canvas. A "naturalist" or "authenticist" artist like Gérôme tries to make us forget that his art is really art, both by concealing the evidence of his touch, and, at the same time, by insisting on a plethora of authenticating details, especially on what might be called unnecessary ones. These include not merely the "carefully executed Turkish tile patterns" that Richard Ettinghausen pointed out in his 1972 Gérôme catalogue; not merely the artist's renditions of Arabic inscriptions which, Ettinghausen maintains, "can be easily read";[7] but even the "later repair" on the tile work, which, functioning at first sight rather like the barometer on the piano in Flaubert's description of Madame Aubain's drawing room in "Un coeur simple," creates what Roland Barthes has called "the reality effect" *(l'effet de réel).*[8]

Such details, supposedly there to denote the real directly, are actually there simply to signify its presence in the work as a whole. As Barthes points out, the major function of gratuitous, accurate details like these is to announce "we are the real." They are signifiers of the category of the real, there to give credibility to the "realness" of the work as a whole, to authenticate the total visual field as a simple, artless reflection—in this case, of a supposed Oriental reality.

Yet if we look again, we can see that the objectively described repairs in the tiles have still another function: a moralizing one which assumes meaning only within the apparently objectivized context of the scene as a whole. Neglected, ill-repaired architecture functions, in nineteenth-century Orientalist art, as a standard topos for commenting on the corruption of contemporary Islamic society. Kenneth Bendiner has collected striking examples of this device, in both the paintings and the writings of nineteenth-century artists. For instance, the British painter David Roberts, documenting his *Holy Land* and *Egypt and Nubia,* wrote from Cairo in 1838 about "splendid cities, once teeming with a busy population and embellished with . . . edifices, the wonder of the world, now deserted and lonely, or reduced by mismanagement and the barbarism of the Moslem creed, to a state as savage as the wild animals by which they are surrounded." At another time, explaining the existence of certain ruins in its environs, he declared that Cairo "contains, I think, more idle people than any town its size in the world."[9]

The vice of idleness was frequently commented upon by Western travelers to Islamic countries in the nineteenth century, and in relation to it, we can observe still another striking absence in the annals of Orientalist art: the absence of scenes of work and industry, despite the fact that some Western observers commented on the Egyptian fellahin's long hours of back-breaking labor, and on the ceaseless work of Egyptian women engaged in the fields and in domestic labor.[10]

When Gérôme's painting is seen within this context of supposed Near Eastern idleness and neglect, what might at first appear to be objectively described architectural fact turns out to be *architecture moralisée.* The lesson is subtle, perhaps, but still eminently available, given a context of similar topoi: these people—lazy, slothful, and childlike, if colorful—have let their own cultural treasures sink into decay. There is a clear allusion here, clothed in the language of objective reportage, not merely to the mystery of the East, but to the barbaric insouciance of Moslem peoples, who quite literally charm snakes while Constantinople falls into ruins.

What I am trying to get at, of course, is the obvious truth that in this painting Gérôme is not reflecting a ready-made reality but, like all artists, is producing meanings. If I seem to dwell on the issue of authenticating details, it is because not only Gérôme's contemporaries, but some present-day revisionist revivers of Gérôme, and of Orientalist painting in general, insist so strongly on the objectivity and credibility of Gérôme's view of the Near East, using this sort of detail as evidence for their claims.

The fact that Gérôme and other Orientalist "realists" used photographic documentation is often brought in to support claims to the objectivity of the works in question. Indeed, Gérôme seems to have relied on photographs for some of his architectural detail, and critics in both his own time and in ours compare his work to photography. But of course, there is photography and photography. Photography itself is hardly immune to the blandishments of Orientalism, and even a presumably innocent or neutral view of architecture can be ideologized.

~~A commercially produced tourist version of the Bab Mansour at Meknes[2] "orientalizes" the subject, producing the image the tourist would like to remember—picturesque, relatively timeless, the gate itself photographed at a dramatic angle, reemphasized by dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, and rendered more picturesque by the floating cloud which silhouettes it to the left. Plastic variation, architectural values, and colorful surface are all played up in the professional shot; at the same time, all evidence of contemporaneity and contradiction—that Meknes is a modern~~