

The Orientalist Portrait of Woman:

A Comparison of American art 18th Cent. and Present Day

The Orientalist concept of “woman” is a constantly fluxing organism depending on surrounding political climate and prevalent social standards for definition and sustenance. In comparing a very specific venue of the Orientalist representation of middle eastern women in 19th Century America with the portrayal of the same group of women in present day United States, it can be seen that though the political and social climate shifts, particularly since the bombings of 9-11, have left a significant mark, the tenants of Orientalism are not only still standing, but stronger than ever. For the purports of this paper, the aesthetic art of the portrait will be used to display social conceptualization of what it meant to be an “Oriental” woman in 19th Century America and how that conceptualization shifted, be it subtly or palpably, in present day American culture. I have chosen to discuss the artistic portrait due to the fact that it most accurately reflects the sociological norm of the time, while remaining a steady medium throughout a fluxing world of technological advancement. This paper will attempt to analyze not only an example of an Orientalist portrait for each time period, but also a Occidental portrait, thus presenting the juxtaposition vital to the existence of Orientalism itself. Finally a comparison of the two eras should outline in what ways the modern American portrait/culture inherits its Orientalist notion of the middle- eastern woman from the 19th century predecessor and how those

principles have morphed to sustain present day belief systems. To create a comprehensive analysis it will be necessary to first define the concept of Orientalism as Edward Said presents it. As Said himself explains:

[Orientalism] is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of 'interests' which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, and landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; (Said 12)

Thus, according to Edward Said, Orientalism exists in any climate where there is the cultural belief that the Orient possesses an exotic, dangerous atmosphere other than, different from, the safety and norm of the Occident. Where does the concept of Oriental woman versus Occidental woman fall then within the boundaries of Orientalism? If the above- defined institution exists then the portrait of an Oriental woman would embody what the Occidental woman is not. Forbidden, exotic, dangerous, different, anything and everything but what is considered safe, accepted, proper to the Occidental world. Perhaps she is something to be rescued, or wooed. Perhaps she is a corruptor, or a harbinger of doom, but she will always be held in the realm of there, and never admitted into

the embrace of Occidental culture. In this capacity it is not surprising that the veil is such a focal point for present day Occidental cultures. It is the thin membrane separating the Oriental woman from the Occidental. What lies beneath becomes a mystery to be discovered, feared, torn down, or seduced. For the 19th Century artist, the boundary separating Oriental women from Occidental would have been the Harem Walls. It is with this attitude that the 19th century male painter would have been armed, and each brush stroke embodies the reproduction of a mystical creature that the artist, in any real capacity would not have even had access to.

The representation of Oriental women in 19th century American portraiture is almost entirely limited to members of a harem, or the Odalisque. An Odalisque was the lowest member of a harem. The slave to the concubine. Portraits of colonial women, to the contrary, were mostly of very finely dressed ladies posing conservatively, reading or with their children. This is Orientalism in prime functionality. There is a divide between the two worlds. Impossible to imagine an Oriental woman that might actually be able to mold herself to any Occidental standard, the farthest from such a model would be the whore, or the harem woman, even more, a slave to such a woman. America, in the 19th century, was a time of Manifest Destiny, Colonialism, spreading the American truth across the lands. A slave to a harem concubine is hardly the likely subject of divine right of any kind. Completely at the mercy of her masters, she has no say over her own fate. Was this not the exact thing Manifest Destiny provided respite from? It is no surprise that those engaged in Manifest Destiny would use Odalisques, or

concepts of the Oriental life, to characterize themselves against the world which they were attempting to conquer.

Fredrick Arthur Bridgman (November 10, 1827-1928) was born in Tuskegee, Alabama. He became one of the most well known American artists of the portrait in his day. He also was a famed Orientalist. In 1866 he traveled to Paris and became a pupil of Jean Leon Gerome, a noted Orientalist painter. Within Gerome's works, one can find a brilliant example of the rift between Oriental and Occidental. Gerome's painting entitled *Odalisque* is a typical Orientalist depiction of a woman. His Odalisque is naked, smoking a hookah pipe, in a very open pose. She glares directly at the voyeur without shame. Her surroundings are very exotic, and the viewer feels as though they are partaking in something very intimate with no obstacle to keep the Odalisque at bay. Nor does she seem to want any such protection. In glaring juxtaposition to his Odalisque, Gerome painted a picture entitled *Portrait of a Lady* in which a woman stands with a small dog in her arms. The surroundings are very conservative, and proper. The subject is covered with yards and yards of fabric. Her pose is very closed and uninviting. Her arms are closed about her chest, and only her shoulders are bare. Her hair is up and perfectly placed. This is not a woman upon whom anyone can intrude. This is not an exotic seductress. This is no threat to any morality or "civilized" system. She fits in perfectly with the Victorian picture of femininity. The difference between the two women, and the implied vastness between the two cultures, is undeniable. That Gerard was Bridgman's mentor is evident in Bridgman's Orientalist works. The finest example of this would be the

painting entitled *Une Odalisque*. While Bridgman was a great deal more conservative in his depiction of a harem woman, the overall tone is identical to all Orientalist paintings, especially those of his mentor Gerome. His *Odalisque* is fully clothed, but she lounges, lazy and sensual in an open inviting pose. Her environment is lush and exotic. She smokes a hookah and looks straight at the viewer. Yet her gaze is slightly more helpless, less seductive. This is the Oriental temptress in need of saving. Bridgman traveled to Egypt for a year in 1873. It can be noted that within Said's construction of Orientalism, someone with "first hand knowledge," however flawed it may be, would be considered an expert in the field. Bridgman's trip to Egypt put him in just such a position. Though he most likely never witnessed the inside of a Harem, nor did he ever lay eyes upon an *Odalisque*, the fact that he had traveled to Egypt put him, in many ways, beyond reproach, had any reproach been forthcoming. The message is again clear. Oriental women were dangerous, seductive, in need of rescue, everything exotic and sinful, lazy without purpose or will, whose only use is to be used by men. So, in opposition, what did the portraits of the time tell of the American 19th century woman? Thomas Sully, an American contemporary of Bridgman painted a portrait entitled *Portrait of a Girl Reading*. This painting was done in 1842 and it depicts a woman, pearly white and rosy pink reading a book. Again, as with Gerome's Victorian based portrait, this girl reading wears a lot of clothing, and has a very closed pose. Her hand rests lightly beneath her chin, and she gazes away from the viewer into a book. She is intelligent, with purpose, and ladylike. No threat to a man's sensibilities, no temptress, her environment, rather than

being exotic is almost unrecognizable in its blandness. The dichotomy, the rift between Oriental and Occidental, is palpable in these paintings, and a lucid reflection of the societal attitude towards anything Oriental. Looking forward, it seems these basic foundations of mind-set do not change, but rather, shift with the fluxing societal norms of women's roles, into a different face of the same schism.

The present day global conceptualisms of culture, borders, and boundaries have morphed greatly with the innovations of technology. It no longer takes weeks on a train or ship to go across the world. Global vision has changed with the advent of the Internet, television, and the industrial leaps provided in modes of transport. Did these evolutions in civilization close the rift between Oriental and Occidental, or does Orientalism still have a firm grasp on the world at large? Using the same media as in the analysis of the 19th century conceptualization of Oriental versus Occidental women, it will become obvious that while the characters have changed, the plot remains quite similar. In the 20th Century, Occidental as well as Oriental women are artists, politicians, and forces in the working world. The borders between Middle East and West are crossed far more frequently, and there are now women who consider themselves rooted firmly in both worlds. It is just such a painter who provides the modern day example of the American portrait of Oriental women used in this paper. Negar Akhemi is the daughter of Persian immigrants. Born an American, she considers herself Persian as well. Her painting *Odalisques on a Louis Quatorze Chaise* depicts Odalisques reclining on a Louis XIV Chaise naked and in alluring poses, wearing modern western shoes. In describing her art during an interview the artist said:

In a lot of my work, I revisit Orientalist motifs (subjects by late 19th century European and American artists that engaged Western stereotypes about the Middle East). For example, I paint scenes of harem women, or odalisques, to revisit this painting tradition of Western male fantasies of exotic Muslim women. Growing up, I related to Matisse's paintings of odalisques –to their facial features, and to Matisse's Persian sensibility of patterning and color. But I also felt like Matisse's women were invisible and lacking in inner spirit. In some of his odalisque paintings, the vases and background rugs were more important than the woman.

The women in my harem paintings have a fetish-object, ceramic quality, and at times get consumed by the patterns around them like in a Matisse painting. However, my harem women have personality and desires. In contrast to the exoticism in the Orientalist view, my paintings have deeper references to Persian culture. The Persian beauty that I explore goes beyond the American media obsession with chador-clad women, and looks to the Persian beauties to which I have been exposed as inspiration. Like good Iranians, my odalisques are fashion-conscious divas on Louis Quatorze chairs. Although they are cooped up in an enclosed space, they are aware of the world beyond them. Even if they are naked, in the European tradition of harem women, they have great shoes. (Rezaei)

It is perhaps shocking that a woman, one that claims her roots in the Oriental world, would make light of the Orientalist Odalisques which have served so faithfully in propagating an image of Middle Eastern women that takes from them identity, power and self determination. Ahkami instead describes her odalisque to be merely “exotic”. Furthermore, to consider “good Iranian” women “fashion-conscious divas” perchance naked, but with “great shoes,” seems to only reinforce the Oriental notion of one-dimensional females only good for visual or sexual pleasure. Yet what is to be made of the fact that this statement is made by a woman, by a middle-eastern woman? It would seem Orientalism is alive and well. But there are some differences between this Orientalism and the old fashioned brand of 19th century American art. In Akhami’s painting, she claims to veer away from the beauty that America is obsessed with in the chador-clad women of the Middle East. Therein lies a new face of Orientalism. The veil. The Chador has replaced, in mainstream society, the nakedness of the Odalisque. In mentioning it, Ahkami is reinforcing “us” against “them”. She is validating the concept that “chador-clad” women are other, and her version of beauty, the naked Persian odalisques on Louis XIV chaises with pretty shoes somehow presents a different idea. In truth, it is the same idea, with the same conceptualization. Her painting is just as colorful as the Matisse work she mentions, with the background and the chairs just as, if not more important than the subject itself. In fact, if this wasn’t so, she would not have felt it necessary to include “on Louis XIV chaise” in her title. In attempting to merge the two worlds, she has succeeded only in showing the awkwardness such a union presents. Akhami’s Odalisques are no

more in synch with the chaise they sit on, or the shoes they wear than Bridgman's Odalisque would be. There is nothing but generic sexual desire on their faces, again keeping with the concept that the Odalisque is a vessel of sexuality, of desire of male fantasy. The painter's claim that her subjects stand out is unfounded in every way other than that they show exactly what their predecessors did, that Oriental women do not belong among Occidental things. Perhaps Akhemi means to use a satiric stance to show the state of affairs of the Orientalist condition. If she were well versed in both the Oriental and Occidental world, perhaps Akhemi could use such satire to become a bridge, creating an environment in which Orientalism could not exist. As the interview continues however, it becomes clear this is not the case. Akhemi says of herself:

Iranian art was my one source of pride at a young age when I was disconnected from being Iranian and rejected everything. Growing up, the Islamic Section of the Met was my sanctuary, and I spent a lot of alone time there over the years. When I was 18, I interned at the Met and would spend almost every break in the Islamic section. After so many years of getting lost in this work, as well as my exposure to Iranian art in my parents' home and through my travels to Iran --I inherited a lot from the Persian-Islamic aesthetic.

Being married to an American man and being very American myself, my art is the one true space where I can connect with and inherit my Persian culture. My Persian language skills are pretty lacking which tends to limit my interaction with Iranians. My art

is a space in which I can speak the version of the Persian language that comes natural to me, and continue the visual traditions that I love. (Rezaei)

Here, Akhemi resoundingly reminds one of Bridgman, a traveler in the exotic Oriental world. She has become the expert simply due to the fact that she has access to, can name herself a part of, that world. Self admittedly she doesn't speak the language, nor does she know the culture intimately even though her "roots" are there, and she has been there herself. She presents an Orientalist picture more vivid those of her predecessors. In the painting, naked, exotic Oriental women pose erotically, but rather than depict them in their own world, Akhemi has implanted Occidental furniture as the backdrop and put high fashion shoes on their feet giving us a glaringly exaggerated image of East vs. West. Those figures do not belong; they do not inspire a union of the two worlds. The opportunity for a woman with roots in the Middle East and a present life in America to bridge the gap is lost. Orientalism holds strong both in the painting itself, and the varying interpretations it allows.

With the evolution of American society into a technological super power, the ideals of a perfect woman have changed greatly. While the 19th century Victorian ideal was a conservative woman properly trained in arts, languages, entertaining guests, running a household, the 20th century ideal is a superwoman who can be sexy, pretty, a good mother, a good house keeper, and in many cases a good provider for the family. So where does Orientalism fit in this new conceptualization of ideal American woman? Again, it can be found that the

concept of Orientalism, rather than fading, has become even more ingrained.

TheArtistMario with his portrait “American Woman,” provides a prime example.

It is a painting of a blonde woman gazing directly at the viewer from the neck up.

In her hair is the word “Forbidden” written in Arabic. The artist himself provides

the perfect Orientalist explanation for why he painted the “American Woman” in

this way:

Sometimes before "seeing" something it requires knowing what it is not.

Paradox is only powerful when both sides are understood. The Arabic

word embedded throughout her hair is " Forbidden". Once you seek to

understand what is traditionally forbidden in that culture you start to see

these very things within the painting; The unveiled hair, undiverted eye's

that grab your attention, the very posture of confidence and beauty.

American Women have come to symbolize all of these traits; Powerful

inner strength and beauty with explosive confidence.

Before you think that this painting is a slight to eastern culture, it is

not. I merely used the difference to make the meaning that much

more pronounced. In fact, hard for westerners to understand but the

practice of veiling is intended to be out of respect. The Old

Testament makes reference that the woman were of such beauty

that angels descended from heaven to take them for their own.

Veiling was thought to help prevent such temptations.

(TheArtistMario)

So, we find here the comparison of the American woman to the “veiled” middle-

eastern woman. As Said pointed out early on in his work *Orientalism*,

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident. (Said P.2)

It seems that though Orientalism is still in place, however, the Oriental woman rather than the Victorian ideal is now hidden beneath yards of fabric. No longer accessible sexually, as was the Odalisque, she is now concealed. It is the Occidental woman that is direct, sensual, and available, and this is the epitome. It is no longer enough to focus on the forbidden world of the Harem, on the lowest echelon of slave, the Odalisque. Now, all the veiled women of the world become the accepted norm of "Oriental". And the exact opposite becomes the accepted norm of "Occidental." That which is "forbidden" in the Middle East is the "American Woman." Let us not forget that there are many veiled women in America, many women of ethnic backgrounds that do not fit the portrait ThePainterMario has given. Regardless of such an oversight, or perhaps because of it, the fact remains that there is still a juxtaposition of one with the other. There is still the concept of "them" and "us". It is the "Occidental" way versus the "Oriental."

In conclusion, the Portrait is a telling medium of evaluating the cultural norms between the Orient and Occident, how they have changed, and whether Orientalism still plays a strong role in societal crafting of the "ideal" American woman. While there are many other mediums available due to technological advancement, and the originators of the art forms have vastly expanded to include

women themselves, the theme of Orientalism, most specifically the distinctions made between the Orient and the Occident are still very strongly ingrained. The 19th Century ideal American woman was a conservative, well kept, and hidden behind yards of fabric. Pale and shy, she was delicate and veiled by a world of social morality. The 20th Century American ideal has transformed into one of accessibility, availability, openness, and versatility. Both these models in both eras were contrasted to women of the Middle East. As expected, the 19th century portrait of an Oriental woman was the “odalisque”. Slave to the harem women, she was completely helpless, sexual in nature, open and naked to the voyeur, she was listless and lazy, without purpose, and almost always painted with a hookah pipe. Corrupted, and the nucleus of desire, she lured and threatened the Occidental’s morality. In the 20th Century veiling has muddied the conceptualization of the Middle-Eastern woman. In the example of Akhmi, a woman attempts to take the Odalisque and change the meaning, but falls short in her inability to escape the boundaries set between the Orient and the Occident. With the example of the portrait “American Woman,” a male painter has engaged the stereotype, vital to Orientalism, of the veiled woman as the standard Middle-Eastern representation. It would seem that if Orientalism is to be escaped, a new world would have to be constructed, in which the divide between the world of Orient and Occident, America and the Middle-East is filled by the refusal to look at differences, but rather the yearning to find similarities, avoid definitions, and accept absence of power or superiority when dealing with either world. Such a place does not exist, and so, the portrait of women be she 19th Century, or 20th

Century will always be in opposition when dealing with America and Middle East, Oriental or Occidental.

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