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Orientalist Art in Algeria: Its Current Reality and Impact on National Identity

الفن الاستشراقي في الجزائر: ملامحه الراهنة وتأثيره على تشكيل الهوية الوطنية.

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Abstract:

This study aims to shed light on the contributions of Orientalists in documenting and preserving intangible cultural heritage in Arab countries, particularly Algeria, which has received considerable attention in Orientalist studies across various domains such as oral traditions, arts, social practices, rituals and celebrations, as well as traditional crafts and industries. European expeditions to the region led to the recording of significant aspects of Algeria's cultural history. Many ethnological patterns of Algerian life were documented—some in the form of memoirs written by merchants, military campaign companions, or prisoners, and others through anthropological studies exploring the characteristics of Algerian society, as conducted by numerous French anthropologists since the second half of the 19th century. Art also played a role in capturing scenes from everyday Algerian life. Accordingly, this study will focus on the role of Orientalists in preserving and documenting the arts, which represent a vital component of Algeria's intangible cultural heritage and a cornerstone of its national identity.

key words:

Orientalism, Orientalists, heritage, intangible cultural heritage, artistic Orientalism in Algeria.

المخلص:

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على إسهامات المستشرقين في توثيق وتحقيق التراث الثقافي اللامادي في الدول العربية، وعلى رأسها الجزائر، التي نالت نصيباً وافراً من الدراسات الاستشرافية في مختلف المجالات مثل: التقاليد الشفوية، الفنون، الممارسات الاجتماعية، الطقوس والاحتفالات، إضافة إلى الصناعات والحرف الشعبية. فقد أسفرت الرحلات الأوروبية إلى المنطقة عن تسجيل جانب مهم من التاريخ الثقافي، حيث تم توثيق العديد من الأنماط الإثنولوجية للحياة الجزائرية، بعضها ورد في شكل مذكرات كتبها تجار أو مرافقون للحملات العسكرية أو حتى أسرى، بينما جاءت أخرى في شكل دراسات أنثروبولوجية معمقة تناولت خصائص المجتمع الجزائري، كما فعل عدد من الأنثروبولوجيين الفرنسيين منذ النصف الثاني من القرن التاسع عشر. كما لعب الفن دوراً في نقل مشاهد من الحياة اليومية الجزائرية. وبناءً عليه، ستركز دراستنا على إبراز دور المستشرقين في حفظ وتوثيق الفنون، باعتبارها جزءاً أساسياً من التراث الثقافي اللامادي الجزائري، وعنصراً محورياً في تكوين الهوية الوطنية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الاستشراق، المستشرقين، التراث، التراث الثقافي اللامادي، الاستشراق الفني بالجزائر.

1. INTRODUCTION

The artistic interaction between East and West emerged as a result of mutual cultural openness, with deep historical roots. Art, being a shared human heritage, transcends national and cultural boundaries. This interaction was reinforced by the travels of Western artists—commonly referred to as Orientalists—who drew inspiration from the rich traditions, artistic expressions, and environments of the East and the Arab Maghreb. A clear attempt at rapprochement between Eastern and Western civilizations began to take shape at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. During this period, cultural exchange was not merely between two distinct civilizations, but rather a complex process of mutual influence and cultural duality.¹

Algeria, in particular, was the focus of numerous Orientalist studies across various domains. European travelers documented aspects of Algerian life through different forms—memoirs by consuls, traders, and military companions, as well as anthropological studies that explored the social and cultural characteristics of Algerian society, especially in the second half of the 19th century. Art also played a significant role in depicting everyday life. Many prominent Orientalist painters, such as Delacroix, Fromentin, and Étienne Dinet, were captivated by the richness and authenticity of the Islamic social environment in Algeria². Their works reflect a deep fascination with its aesthetic and cultural depth. Since the French colonization of Algeria in 1830, the country became a favored destination for artists, writers, and Orientalists. During their visits, they produced numerous visual artworks that often focused on women, landscapes, and the use of warm, vibrant colors.³

Problem Statement:

Based on the above context, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the current state of artistic Orientalism in Algeria?

- To what extent has it influenced national identity?

Methodology:

This research adopts a descriptive approach aimed at providing an accurate and comprehensive portrayal of the subject under study. It involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to reach objective conclusions. Descriptive research not only describes and diagnoses phenomena but also offers insight into how these phenomena ought to be understood or addressed, according to scientific standards⁴.

1. Definition of Terms:

• Orientalism:

Orientalism refers to the study of Islamic sciences and Eastern cultures by non-Muslim scholars, whether they are from the West or the East. It also includes Arab non-Muslims who study Islam.

- Linguistically, “Orientalism” (in Arabic: استشراق) stems from the root “Sharq” (East), meaning “to seek the East”⁵
- At its core, Orientalism is a profound interest in understanding Eastern concepts and traditions. Although its roots go back to the Greco-Persian conflict, it did not acquire a clear epistemological identity until the Middle Ages.⁶
- Khafashi defines an Orientalist as: “Anyone who teaches, writes, or researches subjects related to the East.”⁷
- According to Malek Bennabi, Orientalists are “Western writers who study Islamic thought and civilization”⁸.

Some Orientalists approached their studies with political motives, aiming to identify the strengths and weaknesses of Arab societies, thus aiding colonial strategies. As a result, many Western centers for Oriental studies were established.

Culturally oriented Orientalists, particularly artists, helped build bridges between Eastern and Western civilizations. Their works often reflected cultural heritage through a Western

lens, engaging with the themes of civilizational conflict and dialogue.

Orientalists showed a strong interest in the heritage of the East, especially the Islamic tradition. They believed that understanding Eastern societies required in-depth study of the Qur'an, Hadith, and other Islamic sciences. While some were driven by pure intellectual curiosity, many Orientalist studies revealed more about the Western scholar's own background than about the subject of study. This often led to a lack of contextual sensitivity to the original environment in which the texts were produced.

As Najib Al-Aiqi observes, most of the major classical Arabic heritage texts were edited and published by Orientalists rather than Arabs themselves—a fact that underlines their deep engagement with the region's legacy.⁹

- **Definition of Orientalists:**

Orientalists—sometimes referred to as *Arabists* (although not all Orientalists are Arabists)—are a group of foreign historians, scholars, and writers who devoted a substantial part of their lives to studying the heritage, history, religion, and social fabric of the Islamic East. In order to engage deeply with the region, they studied its native languages, becoming proficient in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and other Eastern languages.¹⁰

2. The Concept of Artistic Orientalism:

According to Dr. Inas Hosni, the concept of "Artistic Orientalism" involves two distinct dimensions. The first refers to "Eastern arts," produced by artists from the East or by their civilizations. The second dimension refers to "Orientalism in art," encompassing artistic production or research conducted by Orientalists. This includes their visual works as well as academic studies in fields such as art history, aesthetics, and archaeology.¹¹ Zeinat Beitar emphasizes that Orientalist art represents a historical and artistic phenomenon, characterized by the infiltration of Eastern imagery and themes into European art. Similarly, F. Barthold

argues that Orientalist art is a traditional artistic trend in European art that emerged from the impressions left by Napoleon's campaigns in the East, especially regarding local customs and daily life. These influences significantly shaped French art from the 19th century onwards, particularly through an emphasis on Islamic aesthetic features.¹²

3. Orientalism in the Islamic Context :

Orientalism emerged within complex historical contexts, including the Islamic conquest of al-Andalus, the Crusades, the Mongol invasions, the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans, and their subsequent entry into Christian Europe. These events shaped the development of Orientalist thought, which oscillated between constructive and destructive objectives, making its study inherently intricate¹³. The West sought to understand the Islamic world with the ultimate goal of dominating it, viewing Orientalism as a strategic means to exploit the East politically and economically and to appropriate its scientific and intellectual heritage.

Early Orientalist efforts were led by ecclesiastical scholars driven largely by theological motives—to understand Islam in order to refute it as a heresy and to defend Christian faith. Figures like Peter the Venerable viewed Islam as the root of heresies threatening traditional European Christianity and argued that its errors had to be understood to be eradicated. The dual mission of early ecclesiastical Orientalism aimed to convert Muslims to Christianity and to protect Christians from doubts that could weaken their faith, especially after internal divisions within the Church.

Many early Orientalists were monks, particularly from France, who studied Arabic and Arab history. One such figure was Rodrigo Ximénez de Rada¹⁴ (1170–1247). Some church scholars were also motivated by a desire to benefit from the intellectual wealth of the Islamic world, sparking meaningful contact between the two civilizations. By the 10th century,

several monks traveled to al-Andalus to study, later disseminating Arab knowledge upon their return. This led to the establishment of Arabic schools in Rome and the translation of major works in medicine, astronomy, and philosophy—such as those of Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, and Maimonides—into Latin¹⁵.

Consequently, many scholars trace the roots of Orientalism back to the 10th century and distinguish between **"Old Orientalism"**, which focused on the languages, arts, and cultures of Eastern civilizations, and **"New Orientalism"**, which emphasized gathering and analyzing information about political and social conditions—often serving the intelligence interests of Western powers with stakes in the Middle East.

In the modern era, despite extensive interaction with Arab and Islamic academic institutions, Western scholars still rely heavily on classical Orientalists such as Goldziher, Margoliouth, Schacht, Nöldeke, Becker, and Massignon. Nonetheless, a number of Orientalists rejected the exploitation of their knowledge for colonial ends, with some expressing shame over their peers' roles in supporting imperialism. Stephan Walid, for example, criticized those who used their expertise to undermine Islam, calling it a painful reality that honest Orientalists must confront.

Following World War II, Orientalist focus shifted from Europe to the United States. Initially, American interest in Semitic languages—particularly Hebrew—was linked to biblical studies. However, by the late 19th century, the importance of Arabic was recognized, leading to the creation of institutions such as the Asiatic Society in 1942, the publication of the *Asiatic Journal* in Boston, and the establishment of Arabic studies centers like that at Princeton University. Today, the U.S. hosts more than nine universities that train students in Eastern languages, reflecting a new, well-funded phase in the evolution of Orientalism¹⁶.

4. Reasons Behind the Emergence of Orientalism and Its Islamic Studies:

Many scholars attribute the emergence of Orientalist studies in relation to Islam to a range of intertwined and diverse factors, including:

1. The initial encounters between Muslims and Romans during the battles of Mu'tah and Tabuk, which were primarily marked by political confrontation.
2. The Crusades, which created direct religious and political friction between Christians and Muslims, particularly in Palestine and the Levant. This hostility intensified during the time of Nur al-Din Zangi (d. 569 AH) and Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (d. 589 AH), when Western forces, in response to repeated defeats, sought revenge by distorting the image of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.
3. The bloody conflicts in Andalusia, especially following the conquest of Toledo by Alfonso VI in 477 AH / 1084 CE. This led to a reform movement initiated by the Cluny Monastery, aiming to restore Spanish Christianity under Catholicism, which they believed had been corrupted¹⁷.
4. The West's growing desire to both counter Islam and understand the internal sources of its resilience, particularly after the fall of Constantinople in 856 AH / 1453 CE.
5. The theological interest among certain Orientalist scholars, particularly within the Church, who sought to better understand the Semitic mindset linked to the Torah and the Gospels. This prompted extensive study of Semitic languages, especially Arabic, Aramaic, and Hebrew, along with their literary traditions.

6. Colonial ambitions, as many European powers encouraged Orientalist research to consolidate their control over colonized Islamic territories, particularly in North Africa and Southeast Asia.
7. Economic motives, whereby Orientalist studies served the interests of merchants, especially in conjunction with missionary activities.

While each of these explanations holds merit and is supported by historical evidence, it is equally important to acknowledge the profound influence of Islamic philosophy on medieval Christian thought. Notably, the works of Averroes (Ibn Rushd, d. 595 AH) had a significant impact on European religious philosophy after being translated into Latin. His ideas sparked intellectual movements that were later branded as heretical by the Church. This intellectual upheaval was a key factor in motivating ecclesiastical authorities to engage in Orientalist scholarship¹⁸.

5. The Importance of Studying Orientalism:

Although scholars differ in their evaluations of Orientalism and the role of Orientalists, they often converge on several critical points that highlight the significance of studying this phenomenon. The most prominent of these points can be summarized as follows:

1. In its earliest historical stages, Orientalism emerged from religious and missionary motivations, largely driven by the Church's aim to spread Christianity.
2. As European colonial expansion advanced, Orientalism evolved into a strategic tool that served imperial interests, particularly from the eighteenth century onward.
3. Orientalists played a crucial role in shaping the Western perception of Islam, greatly influencing how the West has viewed and interacted with Muslims for centuries and continuing to the present day.

4. The impact of Orientalist thought extended deeply into modern Islamic intellectual circles, where it helped shape the perspectives of certain influential Muslim thinkers, whose ideas were supported and widely disseminated—often aligning with the Orientalist view of Islam.
5. A unique and complex relationship exists between the understanding of Orientalism and the historical interactions between East and West; grasping this relationship is key to decoding many of the prevailing political and ideological attitudes between the two worlds.
6. Orientalism stands as a historically unprecedented phenomenon: no other civilization has undertaken such a comprehensive, systematic, and long-term study of another civilization with clearly defined objectives.¹⁹

Given these dimensions, it becomes clear that Orientalism must be approached through rigorous, critical academic inquiry that explores its various dimensions—both explicit and implicit, visible and hidden.

6. The Reality of Artistic Orientalism in Algeria:

The Orientalist movement permeated Algerian society in various forms following the French military occupation. With the onset of colonization, French authorities placed great emphasis on Orientalist artists, valuing their role more than the military, as Orientalism served as the intellectual arm of political and economic expansion. Authorities quickly moved to seize Ottoman manuscripts and documents tied to Algerian identity, culture, and religion.

Orientalist artists played a key role in studying and translating Algeria's cultural heritage, delving into resources found in schools, libraries, and religious and academic institutions. They also explored local traditions, rituals, religions, ethnic groups, craftsmen, and social classes such as merchants and artisans. France effectively employed these artists in service of its

colonial agenda, viewing them more as skilled technicians than as independent creators.²⁰

Artistic Orientalism, in particular, played a strategic role in preparing for and justifying colonial expansion. Western art supported imperial ambitions by visually romanticizing the East. Orientalist painters acted as covert observers under the guise of tourism and admiration for the "exotic" East.²¹

After France tightened its grip on Algeria, Orientalist art also served to promote settlement by portraying the colony as a paradise—sunny, serene, and rich in natural beauty. Painters depicted the country as an idyllic, isolated utopia that appealed to romantic minds and lovers of the unknown.²²

Algeria began to take shape in the French imagination alongside literary and field reports produced by Orientalist writers, travelers, and artists. From the 18th century onward, travelers such as Bésouville (1725), Father Bouvet (1789), and the Englishman Thomas Shaw (1720–1732) wrote reports rich in historical, geographical, and ethnographic content, accurately capturing the beauty of Algeria's natural and urban landscapes. These portrayals played a key role in establishing Algeria as a place of interest in French cultural memory—one viewed as rich in aesthetic potential, regardless of its political context.²³

A. The Urban Element – Rephrased and Translated:

Algeria's architectural heritage stands as one of the most prominent manifestations of artistic creativity influenced by Orientalism, particularly in its illumination of Islamic architecture with its aesthetic and symbolic dimensions. This architectural tradition served as a crucial lens for understanding Islamic civilization and significantly influenced the French colonial mindset aiming to assert dominance. Through structures such as mosques, palaces, alleys, and traditional neighborhoods, Algerian architecture revealed itself as more than mere construction—it expressed a comprehensive identity that reflected the

ingenuity of its builders and architects. Distinguished by a unique language—one of mass and void—this architecture embraced all forms of visual arts, including painting and sculpture, thus offering a distinctive and autonomous cultural identity for Algerian society²⁴.

Civil Architecture – Rephrased and Translated:

Many Orientalist artists were deeply drawn to the humble, everyday life of Algerian society. Some went as far as settling permanently in the country, embracing Islam, and integrating into local life. Their artworks depicted realistic images of civil architecture, including castles, fortresses, and ancient landmarks. Among the most iconic of these is the "Kasbah"—the old city of Algiers during the Ottoman era. As a central symbol of Algeria's architectural and defensive identity, the Kasbah was strategically built on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, serving as a military stronghold and seat of authority.²⁵

Religious Architecture – Rephrased and Translated:

The concept of Islamic religious architecture is largely framed through an Orientalist lens. Scholars argue that it goes beyond mere structural elements like arches and domes—it constitutes a comprehensive system integrating art, engineering, jurisprudence, religion, traditions, and social customs. This architectural expression reflects a profound understanding of Islamic identity across time and space²⁶.

Military Architecture – Rephrased and Translated:

Military architecture in Algeria encompasses a variety of structures built primarily for defensive purposes, including towers, fortresses, walls, trenches, and ramparts. Muslim rulers strategically fortified cities and ports by erecting such structures on elevated sites to serve both as protective barriers and as administrative centers. This highlights the defensive character of Islamic architecture within its historical context²⁷.

B. The Natural Element – Rephrased and Translated:

The Algerian landscape is marked by breathtaking natural beauty, with its warm sun, soft deserts, expansive seas, and vibrant markets infused with the aroma of spices. This enchanting environment captivated Orientalist artists, particularly when intertwined with social elements such as traditional clothing, ornate weapons, and decorative jewelry—creating imagery reminiscent of the world of "One Thousand and One Nights." For Western artists, the East became fertile ground for artistic expression that went beyond visual representation to encompass cultural and social dimensions. Their works reflected the richness of the local environment and its aesthetics, linking art to identity and society²⁸.

The Reality of Orientalist Art During the French Colonial Presence in Algeria:

Undoubtedly, the presence of Orientalist artists in Algeria was, in many cases, aligned with the objectives of French colonialism. However, their artistic endeavors also revealed two divergent ideological orientations:

First Orientation: Orientalist Artists Who Aimed to Obscure National Identity:

These artists produced highly sophisticated artworks, yet their content often distorted and misrepresented Algerian society, particularly its conservative values. They depicted scenes of harems, nudity, and female dancers in a manner that clashed with the religious and cultural ethos of the time. In doing so, they intruded upon private female spaces—such as baths and gardens—removing traditional coverings like the *haïk* and *'ajar*, while emphasizing body contours under traditional garments such as the *kaftan* and *chelkha* trousers. Such portrayals constituted part of the broader colonial effort to undermine Algerian national identity.

Notable examples include Eugène Delacroix's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* and Jean-Baptiste-Ange Tissier's *Algerian Woman with Her Maid*, both of which suggest a deliberate violation of domestic sanctity and exploit the image of Algerian women. Another example is the

Swiss artist Maurice Potter's *Night Party in Laghouat* (1898), which shows a dancer in an ornate red dress performing in a palace courtyard surrounded by a mixed-gender audience—reducing complex cultural expressions to superficial entertainment.

Nevertheless, many Orientalist artists were genuinely captivated by the allure of the East and sought to document various aspects of Algerian life—equestrian traditions, desert landscapes, local customs, and religious practices.

Some of these depictions offered more authentic representations of Algerian identity. Arthur Bridgman's *Qur'an Recitation Circle*, for example, highlights the traditional setting of Qur'anic education and the local attire worn by religious teachers. The painting *Orange Seller* vividly portrays the traditional *haïk*, *'ajar*, *chelkha* trousers, and the hairstyles of young girls.

Similarly, Philippe Pavy's *Bride to the Village* illustrates a traditional wedding procession with the bride riding a camel, accompanied by music and traditional garments and jewelry. Eugène Alexis Girardet's *Prayer in the Desert* captures a moment of spiritual devotion among the desert dwellers, emphasizing the religious depth of Algerian nomadic life²⁹.

Study Findings:

The works of Orientalist artists who diligently studied local populations for colonial purposes have come to represent visual documents of considerable historical value. These artworks have preserved significant aspects of the collective memory of colonized peoples. Ironically, although originally intended to support colonial narratives and distort indigenous identities, they have, over time, become testimonies to the richness and authenticity of local cultures. While French colonial policy, in particular, aimed to erase national identity, obscure historical consciousness, and propagate the idea that colonized societies were primitive and uncivilized, these artworks inadvertently documented the sophistication of those very societies.

Thus, Orientalist paintings can be viewed as a double-edged sword. On one hand, they document traditional arts, architecture, clothing, jewelry, textiles, furniture, and other material aspects of Algerian cultural life. On the other hand, they may carry distortions shaped by colonial and Orientalist agendas. Nevertheless, the mere presence of such crafts, as visually represented, is evidence of a deeply rooted civilization. As Ibn Khaldun noted, artisanal and cultural practices are indicators of long-standing urban development and cannot be found in nascent or artificially developed societies. These cultural traces often persist even during periods of decline and serve as enduring signs of historical continuity.

Conclusion:

It is imperative that we develop a deep understanding of the historical roots of Orientalism, as well as contemporary Arab and Islamic studies, and the regional or area studies currently prominent in Western academic institutions. Gaining a comprehensive and informed knowledge of the West and its intellectual frameworks has become essential for preserving our cultural identity, especially in the face of ideological currents promoted by powerful Western media outlets equipped with advanced tools and vast resources.

In conclusion, Orientalist art played a dual role: on the one hand, it preserved elements of national identity, and on the other, it was often marked by fabrication and distortion under colonial influence. Through the work of Orientalist artists, the colonial authorities significantly influenced Algeria's intellectual and artistic landscape. This influence notably shaped the trajectory of Algerian intellectuals and contributed to the emergence of contemporary Algerian art.

Accordingly, it is imperative for modern Algerian artists to draw from their cultural heritage and folk traditions while consciously resisting influences that compromise national identity. An informed engagement with historical facts and civilizational roots is essential to enrich their artistic and intellectual foundation.

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