Dirassat & Abhath
The Arabic Journal of Human and Social Sciences

مجلة دراسات وأبحاث
المجلة العربية في العلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية

EISSN: 2253-0363
ISSN : 1112-9751

The Aesthetics of Arab Architecture in Orientalist Painting: A Descriptive Study of Selected Works by French Orientalist Jean-Léon Gérôme

جمالية العمران العربي في فن التصوير الاستشراقي دراسة وصفية لبعض أعمال المستشرق الفرنسي جيروم

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تاريخ الاستلام: 2026/01/21 **تاريخ القبول : 2026/03/03**

Abstract:

Urbanism in general, and Arab urbanism in particular, is understood from a holistic perspective, given its influence by multiple factors—religious, social, cultural, climatic, and others. It holds significant importance in expressing social, economic, religious, educational, and political purposes, as reflected in examples such as cities, fortresses, places of worship, and centers of governance. In our study, we examined Arab-Islamic models of urban art in the Islamic Arab East, which served as a source of artistic Orientalism. Western scholars, writers, and artists have long shown interest in these models due to the aesthetic values embodied in their architecture. Among them is the French Orientalist and painter Jean-Léon Gérôme, whose paintings depict the social life of the East and provide examples of Arab-Islamic architecture in its aesthetic form.

Keywords: Arts of Urbanism; Artistic Orientalism; Aesthetics; Painting

الملخص:

يفهم العمران عامة والعربي بالخصوص بنظرة شمولية ، نظرا لتأثره بروافد متعددة دينية ،اجتماعية ،ثقافية مناخية وغيرها ،باعتباره يكتسي أهمية في التعبير عن الغايات الاجتماعية ، الاقتصادية ، الدينية ، التربوية و السياسية ، كأمثلة المدن و الحصون و دور العبادة و مراكز الحكم ، و في بحثنا تطرقنا الى نماذج عربية إسلامية من فنون العمران في الشرق العربي الإسلامي التي كانت مصدرا للاستشراق الفني ،والذي دأب علماء الغرب وأدباؤه وفنانوه الاهتمام به لما تقدمه النماذج المعمارية من قيم جمالية ،ومنهم المستشرق الفرنسي والمصور جون ليون جيروم الذي جسدت لوحاته التصويرية الحياة الاجتماعية للشرق وقدمت امثلة عن العمارة العربية الاسلامية في صورتها الجمالية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : فنون العمران; الاستشراق الفني; جمالية; التصوير.

1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding urbanism is of great importance not only from a functional construction perspective, but also in its profound and comprehensive dimension. Its formation is shaped by multiple civilizational, religious, and climatic influences, which together represent an overall holistic vision. Since urbanism plays a significant role in expressing social, economic, religious, educational, and political objectives—embodied in symbolic visual forms such as cities, fortresses, places of worship, seats of governance, and others—interest in it has not been limited to engineers and architects alone. Rather, it has also become a fertile field of study for thinkers, writers, and artists.
Here, it should be noted that many successive civilizations, including Arab-Islamic civilization, produced diverse forms of urban art. Consequently, architectural models in the Islamic world became a source of Orientalism, prompting Western scholars fascinated by Eastern civilization to focus on Arab-Islamic architecture in its formal, functional, and symbolic aspects, as well as the aesthetic values it offers.

This research paper is concerned with Orientalist painting by presenting a vivid example of what we consider one of the most important and prolific painters in this genre: the French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme. His travels across Eastern countries enabled him to record events in a realistic manner, leaving a distinctive academic imprint on his artistic approach. This will be clarified later through a descriptive analysis of selected works by the painter. The central research question is whether the French painter was truly able to depict Arab-Islamic architecture objectively and faithfully by revealing its aesthetic qualities.

The paper seeks to address this question by first defining Orientalism in general, then focusing specifically on Orientalist painting, providing an overview of the artist's life, and finally examining the concept of aesthetics in Arab-Islamic architecture as it appears in the paintings of the French Orientalist through a descriptive study in which Arab-Islamic architecture is prominently manifested.

The objective of this research is to highlight the role of artistic Orientalism in revealing the aesthetic dimension of Arab-Islamic architecture through the artistic models of Gérôme. Its significance lies in presenting examples of the aesthetic and functional values of Arab-Islamic architecture as depicted in Orientalist artworks and in introducing these values as elements of modern architectural expression. Additionally, the study sheds light on the role of Orientalist art in preserving heritage through its pioneering function in documenting and recording all aspects related to Arab-Islamic tangible heritage.

The Concept of Orientalism

Orientalism is defined as an intellectual school of thought with specific characteristics and objectives. It encompasses all Western-produced knowledge concerning issues related to Islam and Muslims across all aspects of life, whether in law, politics, society, philosophy, or art, and has come to signify a specialization in Eastern cultures. When we consider Orientalism in a broader and more comprehensive sense, it represents a mode of thought based on the existential and epistemological distinction between what is called the East and the West, according to the scholar Edward Said. He states: "Orientalism is a cultural and political fact; it is not merely a body of knowledge stored somewhere in an archive. On the contrary, ideas, actions, and statements pertaining to the East follow clear trajectories…"

To understand the objectives it seeks to achieve, Edward Said elaborates that most researchers in the humanities work under the

pressures of conventions, predecessors, and established methodologies. These burdens often exceed their creative capacity, a condition that Said refers to as the "fatigue of the creative mind," which compels the researcher to produce work solely by themselves, relying entirely on their own intellectual effort. (Said, 2006, p. 59)

Scholars have differed in determining the origins and emergence of Orientalist studies. Its roots are very ancient, dating back to the period of conflict between the Greeks and Persians. The Greeks were among the first to show interest in studying Eastern peoples, sending their scholars to examine neighboring lands. These missions often targeted regions such as Egypt, Iraq, and the Levant, which were known for their advanced civilizations, with the aim of learning from their practical knowledge, ethics, and social behaviors. Initially, this pursuit had a scientific and intellectual purpose, but it gradually evolved into a colonial agenda as a result of the campaigns led by Alexander the Great in the early fourth century BCE across the Eastern lands, including Iraq, the Levant, and the Mediterranean basin (Said, 2006, p. 59).

When it comes to defining the beginnings of Orientalism as a concept, opinions differ. Some Western scholars trace its origins to the twelfth century CE, when the meanings of the Qur'an were translated into Latin for the first time. Others place its inception in the tenth century CE, while some associate it with the thirteenth century, following the Spanish campaigns against Muslims in Andalusia. Others link it to the Crusades, while yet another view traces it back to the Umayyad Caliphate in the second century AH, when the West sought to study Muslim sciences and civilizations and translate Arabic texts into their own languages.

What is certain is that Orientalism became clearly visible after Europe achieved its industrial and scientific renaissance, from the sixteenth century onward. The seventeenth century marked the beginning of Western attention to the East, with the establishment of Oriental studies departments in several European universities. These departments aimed to study the material and spiritual structures of Eastern societies to facilitate their control. Orientalist studies were divided into several fields, including archaeology, arts, religions, history, literature, anthropology, geography, economics, and language, with specific objectives, including:

- Studying Islamic beliefs and history with the aim of distorting Islam on the one hand, and questioning it on the other.
- Reinforcing the colonial agenda by presenting Orientalism as a means to "save" declining societies, while also strengthening colonial control by appointing some Orientalists to political positions.
- Examining all contributions of Muslim scholars across various fields, which inspired some Orientalists to pursue their studies out of genuine interest and love for knowledge.
- Allowing Western countries to exploit raw materials from the East and expand the distribution of their manufactured products to as many countries as possible.

Orientalist Painting

It is the body of work produced by European artists in which the spirit of the East is embodied. The significance of this production lies in its manifestation across various arts, such as oil painting, drawing, and engraving. Painting is considered one of the most important visual arts due to its ability to combine multiple artistic techniques with flexibility and ease. It is defined as an art that relies on the

arrangement of colors on a flat, two-dimensional surface to represent a form or an idea through line and color.

Principles and Foundations of Orientalist Painting:

The most important principles include:

- **Richness of the pictorial surface with visual elements:** This was evident in the paintings created by Orientalist artists, where they paid attention to the diversity and variation of elements and emphasized the importance of each element as an individual artistic unit, contributing significantly to the overall value of the artwork. Consequently, the paintings were filled with artistic elements that affirmed the authenticity of expression, faithful representation, and accurate recording (Waziri, 2004, p. 25).
- **Attention to realistic details and avoidance of ambiguity:** Artists recorded the finest details comprehensively, without altering or interfering with the nature of any element. The artist's brush replaced the camera, which had a profound effect in accurately documenting details and preserving Arab heritage.
- **Commitment to simulating reality with natural colors:** This was aimed at achieving visual pleasure and psychological balance, as well as creating harmony between shapes and spaces and their surroundings. Therefore, the colors in this artistic movement were vivid and expressive, highlighting even the smallest details.
- **Possessing two essential qualities—variety and unity—without compromising the overall coherence of the form:** Unity could be achieved through harmonious or contrasting forms, while variety could be expressed in size, shape, or direction.
- **Characterized by contrast and dominance:** Dominance means that one element stands out as the most prominent, important, and central focus of the artwork, whereas contrast is achieved through color, space, shadow, and light, which serve to convey ideas, attract the viewer's attention, and emphasize visual elements (Waziri, 2004, p. 27).

Why Arab Architecture?

There are questions surrounding the concept of architecture or urbanism. Some argue that it is inappropriate to describe buildings and structures constructed across different regions of the Islamic world throughout history as "Islamic." From their perspective, they see no necessary connection between art, architecture, and religion.

Another group argues that there is indeed Islamic architecture present in various regions of the Islamic world. This view often emphasizes the formal aspects of Islamic architecture, distinguished by certain well-known architectural features and decorative elements such as arches, domes, minarets, mashrabiyas, and others[5] (Al-Zakani, n.d, p. 26).

In choosing the term "Arab urbanism," I relied on the classification of the scholar Gustave Le Bon, who divided urban development into four main stages. The first stage, pre-Islamic Arab urbanism, refers to the architectural style before the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Here, it can be noted that the Arabs built several villages, towns, fortresses, and castles during the Jahiliyyah period, mainly concentrated in the Arabian Peninsula, including Mecca, Yathrib (Medina), Iram of the Pillars, Babylon, Palmyra, Tihama, Al-Hirah, Sanaa, and Marib.

The second stage, called Arab-Byzantine style, emerged from the fusion of

Eastern Sassanian influences with Greco-Roman elements, occurring between the seventh and tenth centuries CE, extending in some areas to the eleventh century. This style is exemplified by structures such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the Ibn Tulun Mosque in Egypt, the Great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia, and various mosques in Algeria.

Starting from the tenth century, the pure Arab style appeared, marking the third stage, which continued until the fifteenth century. Initially influenced by Byzantine trends, it gradually evolved into innovative forms. Notable examples of this style include the architectural heritage of Seville and Granada in Andalusia, as well as the Qaitbay Mosque.

Finally, the mixed Arab style emerged, blending elements of Arab architecture with influences from Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Persian architectural traditions. The Christian-Arabic mixed style is represented by the monuments of Toledo in southern Spain, while the Jewish-Arabic style is seen in Jewish temples in Toledo, exemplified by the Santa María Blanca synagogue. In Persia, buildings with a Persian style but Arabic influences also appeared, particularly in the mosques of Isfahan.

From Gustave Le Bon's classification, it can be concluded that he took the Arab architectural style as a foundation for understanding and categorizing Islamic architecture, which spread across various regions of the East and, through interaction with other architectural styles, even into parts of the West (Al-Zakani, n.d, p. 30).

Introducing the Figure of Jean-Léon Gérôme

Jean-Léon Gérôme was a famous French painter and sculptor, considered one of the foremost Orientalists who traveled to the Arab and Islamic East during the nineteenth century. His body of work includes historical paintings, Greek myths, and scenes from the East.

He was born in Vesoul on May 11, 1824. At the age of sixteen, in 1840, he moved to Paris, where he studied under the painter Paul Delaroche. He undertook a trip to Italy (1844–1845), visiting Rome, Florence, the Vatican, and Pompeii, where he captured much of Italian culture and history. The trip was cut short when he fell ill with a fever and had to return to Paris (Hosni, 2012, p. 50).

In Paris, Gérôme studied for a period in the studio of the classical painter Charles Gleyre. He attempted to enter the Prix de Rome Salon but was unsuccessful, and his early works attracted little attention. He continued to refine his skills and painted *The Cockfight*, which earned him a Third-Class Medal. Some of his other works received a Second-Class Medal in France in 1848. In 1854, he traveled to Turkey and then Egypt, marking his first visit to Egypt. Gérôme documented his journeys in diaries, which were later published as a book. He was accompanied on this trip by friends who were photographers and journalists.

Gérôme would first sketch the scenes he observed and later develop them into full paintings in his studio. He also produced preliminary sketches of the monuments he encountered. During his travels, he met Khedive Ismail of Egypt. Upon returning to Paris, Gérôme sent him an album containing photographic images of all his works. Gérôme and several other French artists were invited to the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869.

In 1868, he undertook a long journey to Egypt and Asia Minor. In Cairo, he visited historic mosques and produced many works depicting Islamic architecture. Among his most famous paintings is *Bonaparte Visiting the Sphinx*. In 1865, Gérôme was elected a member of the French Institute, and in 1869, he was elected an honorary member of the

Royal Academy in Britain (Hosni, 2012, p. 58).

Jean-Léon Gérôme passed away on January 10, 1904, in his Paris studio. He was married to Marie Goubil and had one son and four daughters.

Study of Selected Works of Gérôme:

Before presenting examples of the aesthetic depiction of Arab urbanism in Orientalist painting, it is important to emphasize that Orientalism is not a transient phenomenon or merely the result of impressions recorded during military campaigns in the East. Here, we refer to Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign, despite its influence on European Orientalism and painting in particular.

Although the military campaign had its own causes and motives, it was accompanied by a group of painters, sculptors, and architects who were able, during their stay in Egypt, to document its archaeological, natural, and ethnographic features. These works preserved both Pharaonic and Islamic civilizational imagery and were compiled into encyclopedic collections that served as key references during the nineteenth century. One example is Vivant Denon's *Description of Egypt* (1802), a work spanning twenty-four volumes (Bitar, 1992, p. 87).

Historical sources confirm that Napoleon Bonaparte was not accompanied by well-known artists; most of those who accompanied him were merely talented individuals who did not play a major role in the European art movement before traveling to Egypt. However, for the sake of scholarly accuracy, it must be noted that "Bonaparte's East" remained present in the eyes and memory of many artists, particularly those who visited the East and immortalized the locations that were the stage for his Eastern campaign, notably Vernier, Marilla, Fourmontan, Gérôme, and others.

The first attempts to interpret and explain the artistic image of the East, based on the aesthetic and religious frameworks of Eastern civilization, began in 1769 with the book *On Eastern Aesthetics* by the writer Herder. Auguste Robert, a sculptor and painter, is considered the father of artistic Orientalism in France, having established a sensory image in Orientalist art. The Romantics interpreted architectural forms as innovative elements and as symbols of time, human character, and psychology (13).

Eastern architecture represented, particularly for practitioners of Orientalist painting, an artificial space in which humans could feel free and which served as a medium to express a harmonious relationship with the world. Architectural subjects in painting acquired ethical, social, and aesthetic dimensions. As artistic symbols, they were integrated into scenes of daily life, landscapes, and historical monuments, helping to decode the relationship between space and material and the impact of nature and climate on civilization and humans.

It can be said that the heritage of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century was rich with the allure of the East, which combined the local European past with the dazzling "Other" of the East to such an extent that this fusion took on the character of pure taste in literature and architecture.

Returning to the beginning, it is worth noting that certain terms and definitions overlap, influenced by politics. For example, the term *colonial painting*, associated with Eastern colonies, depicted events linked to political elites and military leaders. Another term, *photographic painting*, carried a scientific character and is attributed to its inventor, Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, in 1839. Its importance lay in the fact that some archaeologists relied on it to document their works before rendering them in color paintings, and it was also used by Jean-Léon Gérôme (Ghanem, 2012, p. 10).

The significance of this production extends across multiple art forms, including

oil painting, drawing, and engraving. It became a source of inspiration and experimentation for most modern art schools in Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Additionally, the subjects produced by these painters were incorporated into books on archaeology, topography, and Egyptology, characterized by a scientific approach. These sciences were applied to art to reinforce scholarly research, making it a reference for Orientalist studies (Bitar, 1992, p. 88).

Orientalist artworks recorded historical periods—whether military or political—with aesthetic value, at a time when photography was not yet widely used, which gave these works unique documentary value. Among these artists, Jean-Léon Gérôme stands out as one of the most prominent Orientalists of the nineteenth century. French by origin, he was born in 1823 and died in 1904. He practiced applied arts and was known for his dedication to work and ongoing collaboration with artists such as Hamon, Tilmouche, and Chaufranc.

His paintings are predominantly historical and mythological. Despite his extensive travels to the East, Egypt remained his favorite subject, depicted in many of his works. Among them, *Bonaparte Visiting the Sphinx* is the most famous. His works are housed in most European museums and are characterized by realistic representation within an academic study framework. This approach influenced the European art movement and inspired many artists to follow his example. His influence persisted for decades, with his works dominating the Paris Salon for about thirty years.

Gérôme's artistic vision exhibits characteristics that influenced the formal language of his work in terms of expressive style and technical execution. He pursued Eastern subjects as artistic material, recording natural landscapes without distortion, preserving their original forms, and maintaining realism. Moreover, he studied details carefully, preparing preliminary sketches, which he then translated into oil paintings either on-site or in his Paris studio based on experience.

Among the works that have been studied descriptively is the painting *The Call to Prayer*, measuring 81 × 64.5 cm, dated 1866, and the painting *In the Mosque's Courtyard*, 75 × 89 cm, dated 1870. Other works include *A Scene from Cairo*, depicting old Cairo in watercolor. In this painting, the artist realistically records the scene as if observing Cairo from a high vantage point; the minarets and houses stretch across the view to the horizon. He even depicts one of the rooftops in detail, a common feature in the rooftops of popular neighborhoods, reflecting daily life. The artist carefully used colors close to nature, distributing light and shadow in the composition.

Another painting, *Leaving the Hall*, executed in oil on canvas in 1887, shows worshippers leaving the mosque. Gérôme painted a young boy leading the group, followed by a visually impaired man, and other worshippers in various attire. The mosque's architectural facade is depicted, with orange sellers in period clothing in front. The painting is notable for the harmony of colors and the multiplicity of architectural details (Briggs, 1984, p. 152).

These paintings are characterized by the precise depiction of figures, which, although imagined, appear realistic. The clothing is rendered with folds and textures that resemble real fabric.

Architecturally, Gérôme used light colors, creating multi-level entrances that enriched the composition with curved lines and columns. He paid attention to the mosque's distant architectural background, particularly its minarets, enhancing the viewer's emotional connection between the Muslim worshipper and the mosque. He added simplified forms and local colors,

avoiding artificiality.

A consistent value in Gérôme's works is his attention to design elements—color, line, light, and shadow. Their interaction creates a circular visual movement within the artwork. The colors approximate the surrounding reality, with a luminous execution. Color gradation preserves depth, reflecting the artist's skill in studying details and distributing dark areas effectively.

Regarding line, a key feature in Gérôme's work, it highlights the intersection of vertical and horizontal lines in Eastern religious buildings. Vertical lines appear in minarets and mosques, while horizontal lines characterize surrounding architecture. The mosque, as the heart of the city and the center of religious, social, and cultural life, naturally attracts Western attention due to its architectural grandeur and ornamental value, marking it as a ceremonial and civilizational monument (Hussein, 2003).

Gérôme also showcased the skill of Muslim architects in utilizing domes alongside minarets and exploiting the visual effects of their contrast. Domes are especially prominent in Egypt, characterized by height and decorative patterns. The architect skillfully designed arches connecting columns, using pointed and rounded (horseshoe-shaped) arches, as well as semicircular and standard arches, to enhance aesthetic appeal (Briggs, 1984, p. 155).

Conclusion

Gérôme's artistic output provides a clear depiction of the characteristics of the nineteenth-century Orientalist school of art, distinguished by its realistic representation of forms. His works stand as a testament to artistic creativity, both in terms of precision and mastery of execution, making his paintings visual documents that contribute to the understanding of Eastern culture, particularly Egyptian culture. They offer meticulous visual documentation of the nature and daily life of peoples, paying careful attention to Eastern décor, including clothing, carpets, curtains, utensils, and fabrics, thereby imparting an Arabesque touch to the depicted spaces.

In conclusion, Jean-Léon Gérôme was noted for his objectivity and realism in painting Oriental scenes, as well as his dedication to his work—he famously said of himself: *"I want to die while I am working."*

He would observe scenes on-site and later paint them in his studio, also preparing preliminary sketches of the monuments he encountered. This approach stemmed from the understanding that art is a tool for documenting and recording the history of specific places and conditions. Consequently, Orientalist art constitutes one of the most important historical records, having a profound influence on the field of art. Through their paintings, Orientalists meticulously recorded all details of life—customs, traditions, rituals, clothing, architectural styles, and heritage artistic elements—treating each painting as a precise and expressive document, a visual report that transmitted the East to the minds of the West.

In doing so, they represented an important stage in the development of the arts and an influential artistic school, one that played a major role in documenting aspects of Arab heritage. This heritage reflects human interconnectedness and forms part of a continuous human dialogue through time, passing from generation to generation as a historical value and a source of inexhaustible creativity. This, in turn, ensured the enduring influence of its elements, which embody aesthetic and artistic values that continue to inspire authentic artistic formulations and original aesthetic solutions.

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Appendices



Leaving the Mosque painting, downloaded from *Al-Youm Al-Sabea* magazine, August 2025.



The Call to Prayer painting, downloaded from *Al-Youm Al-Sabea* magazine, August 2025.



In the Courtyard of the Mosque painting, downloaded from *Al-Arabi* (Kuwait) magazine, issue no. 708.