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## **Geometry and Color. Decoding the Arts of Islam in the West from the Mid-19<sup>th</sup> to the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

**edited by Sandra Gianfreda, Francine Giese,  
Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga**

# Impressum

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## Deconstructing Orientalism

### Islamic Lessons in European Arts at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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#### Abstract

This article has no intention to deconstruct the now classical Saidian idea that Western Orientalism was a global system of misrepresentation and control of non-Western cultures, particularly in the nineteenth century, when the colonial expansion spread over most of the regions marked by the cultures of Islam. Instead, it intends to reflect upon the fact that during this period, the Orientalist system established itself in the broader context of a modern condition which was (and still is) felt and conceived as a general "state of crisis." This critical dimension of modern Western culture explains both the extreme degree of violence of the Orientalist enterprise of capture and its internal criticism by its own perpetrators.

The same duality characterizes the modern production of visual images: the crisis of the Western mode of mimetic representation is responsible for both the paroxysmal multiplication of images, in the nascent "society of the spectacle," and their implosion, in the experiments of the so-called artistic avant-gardes at the beginning of the twentieth century. Some decades earlier, such a radical critique of representation had been developed at the crossroads of applied arts and architecture, in debates on the nature and function of ornaments. We know how central the reference to the arts of Islam and their aesthetics, which were conceived in opposition to the contemporary Orientalist fancies, was for these debates. How did these two positions—the critique of Orientalism and of visual representation—interact? To what extent did they reinforce each other? In order to illustrate this question, this article will conjure up a most revealing episode: Henri Matisse's trip to Algeria in 1906 and the works that immediately followed this early "Oriental" encounter for the artist.

**Keywords:** Orientalism; crisis; melancholy; ornament; Matisse

The purpose of this article is to weave together the notion of critique and that of crisis and to explore their interdependence in the Orientalist system of representation, which I will describe as the quintessence of our modern relation to images. For this purpose, I will allude to the well-known debates on ornament in the nineteenth century, in which the critique of Orientalism and the critique of figurative images were closely associated, and I will eventually link it to Matisse's early work and thought as a case study.

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### What is a crisis?

By the title of this article, I do not mean to deconstruct Edward Said's definition of "Orientalism", his idea of a Western system of misrepresentation, control and violent exploitation of non-Western cultures, from the late eighteenth century onwards, when the colonial expansion spread over most of the regions marked by the cultures of Islam. On the contrary, I would like to take this view for granted and to use it as a starting point, from which to investigate its intellectual roots in the collective mind of our modern societies. My assumption is that, in the context of what can be called a modern condition of mind, Orientalism appears as a self-deconstructing system, emblematic of a *state of crisis* which also characterizes our contemporary relation to visual images in general.

The "Orient" can be considered as an image-world *par excellence*, aspiring to substitute itself to reality. As we shall see, the inner contradictions of such a process of derealization endows it with a critical dimension which, therefore, affects the notion of representation as much as the Western relation to cultures and people identified as "Oriental". But self-deconstruction does not necessarily lead to a practical dismantling of the system in question. Although it seems paradoxical at first sight, I will also suggest that a self-critical structure, in the case of Orientalism as well as in the case of modern image-making in general, implies an intensification of the effects of the system, in a headlong rush where a higher level of concrete destructive actions immediately follows a deeper knowledge of their internal conflicts. I believe that this is best illustrated by the critique of the notion of representation developed in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century through a reconsideration of the arts of Islam, be it within the context of the applied arts or the so-called fine arts.

There is no place here to go back to the material and intellectual origins of this modern state of crisis, especially as it is not properly the topic of this issue. If we accept *a priori*, as a historical fact, the idea that the relation to the Other, the relation to images and, furthermore, modernity in itself were (and still are) in such a state in the modern age, we would rather focus on the inner characteristics of this notion. In other words, what does it mean to say that during this period, the Orientalist system established itself in the broader context of a modern condition which was (and still is) felt and conceived as a self-perpetuating crisis?

Etymologically, be it in French, English, or German, speaking of something "critical" (*critique*, *kritisch*) has two meanings, related to the two substantives "crisis" and "critique" (*crise/critique*, *Krise/Kritik*). One refers to a phase of disorder, threatening the perpetuation of a collective or individual stability and resulting in violence. The other suggests a movement of inquisitive introspection, leading on to an analysis and a judgment on oneself (as the ancient Greek radical *kritein* says). If something is at a "critical" stage, it means that it is both threatening and revealing. The path is then open to a process of analytical elucidation *and* to a burst of actual violence, in a ceaseless dialectical interrelation between these two poles. From this situation a continuous *state of crisis* emerges, which is to crisis alone (in the usual sense of a brief explosion of violence) what melancholy is to mourning as described in Freud's celebrated 1915-1917 article "Mourning and Melancholy." As we know, Freudian melancholy perpetuates itself without an end, nurtured by its own impetus and ignorant of the nature of the loss which lays at its core, whereas, in mourning, the grief work leads to a recovery from the loss which has been endured, thanks to its proper recognition. Similarly, a *state of crisis* (or of deconstruction), caught into the dialectics of destruction and criticism, opens up onto nothing but its own continuation and deepening, without any prospect of a resolution, as it would be expected after a specific *moment* of crisis.

### **Orientalist violence as a paradoxical consequence of European self-criticism**

These two faces—self-inquisitive and violent—are inextricably linked in the case of Orientalism. The process of intellectual self-criticism, which can be considered as a cornerstone of Europe's modern relation to other cultures, cannot be separated from an escalated degree of concrete violence acted upon these cultures and their representatives (be they objects, environments, or human beings).

In the case of Orientalism, as it was defined and explored by Edward Said more than forty years ago, a structural need for political expansion and economic growth in the Western industrial nations created a cultural collapse of unprecedented speed and thoroughness in the colonized countries from the early nineteenth century onwards. As we know, this process of destruction was legitimized by the ideology of progress—i.e., by the belief that the command of scientific and technical development befell to the West and would lead the world to the best possible state. Together with the pride taken in techno-industrial accomplishments, however, what also came to the fore was the instability of any human system of representations and Europe's own relative, maybe even peripheral position in history. Evolutionism (the intellectual framework within which Western nations affirmed their superiority over the rest of the world) threatened in return the firmness of their position in history and their sheer identity. The belief in "progress" was constantly counterbalanced by a crying inconsistency between the certitude of a better future and the anxiety of an insuperable relativity of all historical situations, that is between eschatology and historicism.

The results were—and still are nowadays—a self-criticism tinged with a sense of melancholy, a fear of decadence and cultural disaster, lurking beneath the glowing aspects of techno-scientific progress. The speed and violence with which the process of colonization was expanding was as much a matter of anxiety as of satisfaction. Conversely, a "preference for the primitive", as Ernst Gombrich coined it, manifested itself ever more insistently, and it encompassed the fascination for the "Orient" as a conservatory of supposedly authentic, unchanging sets of meaning.

It may be tempting to separate these two trends and identify a dual system of opposite forces, some working for the complete eradication of the so-called "traditional" cultures for the sake of progress, some bemoaning and resisting this radical erasure by various means of promotion and protection of foreign people and things. But it is not that simple: in fact, the extreme brutality of the Orientalist enterprise of capture has been criticized from the inside, by its own supporters, without being alleviated for all that. Let us take just one example: that of the conservative art critic and French government official Léon de Laborde. In his report on the London Great Exhibition of 1851, Laborde was the first who decried the miserable quality of European applied arts, in comparison to that of "the Orient", and then bluntly called for a final but—he hoped—profitable "killing" of the latter: "The Orient is no longer the Orient. While it still exists, let us admire it...and form collections of its products which we will use as models. ...Oriental people will come to Paris. Hopefully, they will find in our museums the art which we will have killed in their hands and which will have thrived in ours" (268).<sup>2</sup>

Briefly speaking, self-criticism was and still is an integral part of the Orientalist system of domination and destruction. It prompts the thrust for appropriation to reach a heightened degree of radicalness. It results in a melancholy which itself ends up in hubris, that is, practically, a headlong rush to exacerbated destructive actions: slaughter, plunder, alteration, eradication pure and simple. A kind of disenchanting lucidity that, as it is verging on depression, nurtures a destructive impulse, in such a way that Orientalism can be considered concurrently as a self-critical and self-enhancing violence. It is self-enhancing because it is self-critical, not *despite* this

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author of this article.

self-criticism. Insofar as it criticizes the relationship to the non-Western as intrinsically destructive, it contaminates this relationship with a ruthlessness inflamed by something like an inner panic.

Orientalist representations echo faithfully this complex dynamic of critique and crisis. The image-world they create is almost systematically diagnosed by its own creators as the result of a process of derealization, substituting the imaginary to the real: its own inconsistency is conjured up by the intentional exaggeration of its unreality, like in the final reworking by Prosper Marilhat of his first accurate architectural studies of the ruins of the Cairene mosque El-Hakim (990-1013), in the late 1830s (fig.1).



Figure 1: Prosper Marilhat. *Mosque in Lower Egypt (Mosquée dans la Basse-Égypte)*. 1835–45, oil on canvas, 109 x 179 cm. Musée du Quai Branly, Paris. Author's archive.

This fundamental disbelief that the Orientalist artist implicitly shares with his viewers is an essential component of the kitsch, with its mixture of cynicism and melancholy, as it was defined by Walter Benjamin (234) in relation to nineteenth century historicism. Hence, the spectacular flowering of fancy paradises and fairytales deprived of any faith but full of unbounded expressions of basic instincts—be they of violence or desire. These are twofold images: at a surface level, they set up a ravishing (or thrilling) "Oriental" spectacle; and more or less implicitly, they uncover its fallaciousness as well as the brutality and meaninglessness of its real background in colonial obsessions. In one single movement, they show what they say they want to hide. This is particularly obvious in the Orientalist academic paintings all over the Western world in the nineteenth century, when this kind of artistic production was systematically implemented and institutionalized. As a matter of fact, such a system of representation was bound to raise the stakes to survive its own skepticism: it developed itself all the more avidly as it was disillusioned, as it is epitomized in Jean-Léon Gérôme's abundant Orientalist production of paintings and sculptures, in the late nineteenth century (fig. 2).



Figure 2: Jean-Léon Gérôme. *Snake Charmer (Charmeur de serpents)*. 1880, oil on canvas, 84 x 122 cm. The Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

### **The “society of the spectacle” as an equally paradoxical consequence of the critique of representation**

Can we apply the same type of interpretation to the modern relation to images in general? I already mentioned the “Orient” constructed by the West in the modern age as the image-world *par excellence*. What does this mean? In the Western visual tradition since the Renaissance, an “image” can be defined as a constructed unit of visual forms which provides its viewers with a discursive meaning. Mimesis was the name for such a vision, which was characterized by the assumption of an intrinsic link between language and vision, thus exceeding by far the simple notion of realism. Mimetic images speak. They abide by the antique principle of the “*ut pictura poesis*”, for the application of which the faithful imitation of reality is just one instrument among others. This discursive quality of mimetic representation allows its products to establish themselves as substitutes for the real world and its lively interrelations. Beyond all their particular narratives, what these substitutes say is that the representation of things and living beings is richer and worthier than their direct presence. In the process of image-making, the world is not reduced to an image, it is raised to the higher level of image-worlds, replacing the actual experience of the living world.

In the history of modern art, it is a commonplace to suggest that an increasing criticism has been addressed to the universal validity of this aesthetics of representation. A process of deconstruction followed, which challenged the academic rules governing the arts and appealed to the lessons of non-Western visual traditions—among them the arts of Islam—, where the relations between the imaginary and the real seemed to have been negotiated on different bases.

While the Western culture of mimetic images was gradually collapsing, undermined by a lasting and powerful self-criticism, a disbelief in the possibility for images to become worlds by themselves (an inner criticism which culminated in the shattering of the perspectival space), the actual production of images was expanding dramatically, up to the paroxysmal multiplication of images of all sorts produced by the ever-growing digital technologies. In other words, the more the mimetic imaginary is identified as fallacious, the more it proliferates, in a race into wonder-worlds where a self-diagnosed addiction has replaced the former belief in the ontological legitimacy of representation.

Therefore, it would be misleading to see these two historical trends—the internal critique of images and the accelerated engulfment into virtual worlds—as simply opposed to each other, and to interpret the self-critical dimension of image-making in modern art as a univocal resistance to the vertiginous proliferation of industrial images. In fact, the two phenomena are not only contemporary but interlinked: criticism undermines the faith in images, sets off a sense of loss of reality and consequently provokes a headlong rush in the quantitative increase and technical efficiency of ever-more devalued images. Briefly speaking, the critical undermining of the iconicity of images finds its paradoxical aftermath in the indomitable empire of representations, by all possible means and in all possible contexts, and a heightened *state of crisis* of our direct relation to the real.

As I suggested, this is exactly what characterizes the Orientalist system of representation, which, therefore, can be considered as the most perfect embodiment of this global process of derealization, a sort of stem cell of this loss of reality which lies at the roots of the modern Western mind. The critique of images and the critique of Orientalism are part of one and the same cultural system, characterized as a self-sustaining crisis, paradoxically rooted into self-criticism.

### **The modern aesthetics of ornament as a critique of both representation and Orientalism**

Let us now go back to the field where this global criticism expressed itself most acutely in the nineteenth century: the debates on ornament and ornamentation. This was by no means just a superficial question of taste in decoration. More fundamentally, what was at stake was the capacity of a techno-scientific industrial culture to produce its own symbolic order. While in the nineteenth century, new rational processes of material production were continuously coming to light, the concord of artistic creation with technical production became a central problem. The question of ornamentation stood at the core of the related debates. At the crossroads of art and industry, ornament was expected to be the means whereby a rejuvenated synthesis between these two pillars of civilization would be created.

However, this first required to free ornamental creation from the domination of the fine arts and to endow it with a higher, autonomous intellectual status. This was the task pursued by an active community of amateurs, art critics, and designers (even if the word itself was fixed only gradually), which emerged in Europe in the 1830s and grew until the end of the century. With this situation in view, they combined a critique of mimetic representation as an aesthetics of illusion, and of Orientalism as the quintessence of this doctrine. Conversely, they promoted the full artistic value of two-dimensional non-figurative patterns in ornamentation and used to refer with predilection to the formal principles of Islamic arts. The traditional notion of the image in the Western world was thus called into question, as the paradigm of visual creation was no longer discursive iconicity but formal architecturality, following a shift from narration to structure—what the Germans would call “tectonics” from the 1830s onwards (Bötticher). As architecture, rather than painting or sculpture, became a model for this new vision, ornament could no longer be seen as a sort of lower image or the by-product of pre-existing images. It could and would cast away not only any narrative propensity but any iconic status whatsoever, without being relegated to the margins of human



invention for all that (Labrusse, "Islamic Arts" 1204). The final goal was to revolutionize not only our visual environment but the way we all were dealing with it in everyday life. In the viewer's eye, fantasy had to be replaced by rationality, and a passive contemplation by an active understanding of the surrounding visual structures, in order to solve the spiritual and material crisis undergone by contemporary societies.

Consequently, the nineteenth century defenders of an autonomous aesthetics of ornament suggested that the latter, away from any submission to the imaginary, be productive rather than conclusive, centrifugal rather than centripetal, present—and future—rather than past-oriented. It should engender action rather than contemplation, continuous invention as opposed to the passive fascination provoked by a representational imagery (all the more so if the latter was overloaded with exotic fancies).

Geometry was directly responsible for this shared productivity of ornamentation, in so far as it implied the idea that the greatest simplicities could lead to the greatest complexities and prompted the viewer's gaze to shape its own combinations of forms by itself. It is with this in mind that Owen Jones' friend Richard Redgrave, in accordance with the famous promoter of "moresque" ornamentation (fig. 3), provocatively challenged the universal validity of Western mimesis, in his address to the students and teachers of the London Government School of Design in 1853: "It may unhesitatingly be said that imitation, when relied upon itself, is but a very low merit in the artist" (15).

During the same period, the young curator of the Museum of Applied Arts in Berlin, Julius Lessing, expressed a similar feeling by giving a positive value to the concept of "lack of meaning" (*Bedeutungslosigkeit*) when applied to "Oriental floor decorations and carpets" (7; fig. 4). If Islamic arts served as a model in this programmatic deconstruction of the principles of mimesis, it was because of their mathematical basis, as opposed to literary discursivity. Culturally and visually, what can be called an "Oriental" paradigm—which was in fact an Islamic one—led to consider these arts as the perfect embodiment of Neoplatonic aesthetics, revealing a purely formal rationale beyond the confused muddle of visual appearances.



Figure 3: Owen Jones and Jules Goury. *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the Alhambra*, vol. II, 1845, pl. XLIX.



Figure 4: Julius Lessing. *Ancient Oriental Carpet Patterns after Pictures and Originals of the xv<sup>th</sup>-xvi<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (*Altorientalische Teppichmuster nach Bildern und Originalen des xv-<sup>vi</sup>. Jahrhunderts*). Berlin, 1877, pl. 4.

Thus, it was believed that the critique of the ontological inconsistency of Western mimetic images could be positively enriched by the celebration of a fundamental logic at work in Islamic non-iconic ornaments. Aniconicity no longer meant a low level of reality but the true uncovering of the invisible structure of Being, an ideal order of things that went beyond historical, geographical, or ethnic singularities. There are innumerable examples of this early recognition of the mathematical, geometrical side of Islamic arts, endowed with higher artistic and philosophical meaning. Among them the French connoisseur, writer, and photographer Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey, who, as early as 1841, *à propos* the Nasrid architectural ornamentation of the Alhambra, extolled a "skilfully calculated art" (191; fig. 5), thus contradicting most of the Orientalist pronouncements regarding the unbridled fantasy of these ornamental grids.

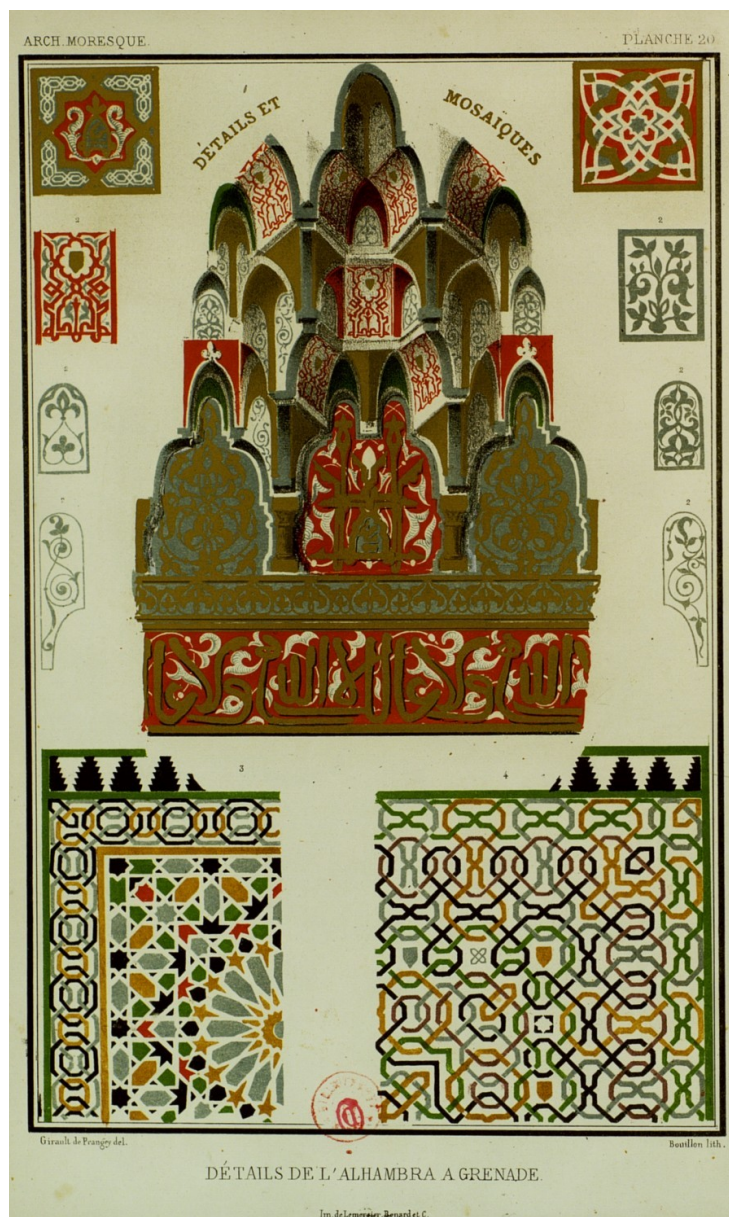


Figure 5: Joseph Philibert Girault de Prangey. "Details of the Alhambra in Granada" (Détails de l'Alhambra à Grenade). *Essai sur l'architecture, des arabes et de mores en Espagne, en Sicile et en Barbarie*. Hauser, Brockhaus et Avenarius, 1841, pl. 20. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, gallica.bnf.fr / BnF.

Such a scientific, anti-narrative approach of Islamic ornamentation implied a radical rejection of all the literary and theatrical elements of the Orientalist imagery. The picturesque perspective—though favored by an audience fascinated with the myth of the “Orient”—was thought at best insufficient and at worst prejudicial, insofar as it gave precedence to the narrative horizon of dreams and was not overly concerned with accuracy. Among many examples, this is obvious in the preface that the architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc wrote for Léon Parvillée’s book on early Ottoman architecture and decoration in 1874 (fig. 6), decrying the “promoters of fantasy in everything”, as opposed to the discoverers of the role of “cold science” in “Arab” arts (iii-iv). Thus, evolving from a belief in the reconciliation of art and science, a modern, architectural and musical aesthetics of ornament, specific to Islam, had been set in contrast to a historicist, imitational and discursive aesthetics of pictorial illustration typical of the Western tradition since the Renaissance.



Figure 6: Léon Parvillée. “Yeşil Camii, Mosque in Bursa. Background of the Mihrab” (Yéçhil Djami, mosquée à Brousse. Fond du mirhab). *Architecture et décoration turques au xv<sup>e</sup> siècle*. 1874, pl. 17. ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Alte und Seltene Drucke.

However, this sort of "Islamophilia" (Labrusse, *Islamophilies*) cannot be radically separated from the Orientalist system in general; it should rather be considered as the culmination of its self-deconstructive dimension, which, to some extent, contributed to perpetuate its external destructive effects. Indeed, promoting the scientific formal lessons of Islamic arts led their defenders to *exploit* Islamic patterns and transform them into "modern" systems of forms not necessarily recognizable as "Oriental" by essence. No matter if objects and ornamental details belonged to different periods and had diverse geographical origins; what was at stake were the purely formal, transhistorical and transcultural principles they could convey to the modern European designers. The process of uncovering the scientific applications of geometry and color in the arts of Islam ended up in an appropriation of the Other for the sake of an allegedly universal but in fact Western-centered reformation of our modern visual culture. The final result was not a distorted representation of the "Orient", like in the Orientalist imagery, but a pure and simple obliteration. As aesthetically opposed as they were, both positions shared the belief that the insuperable laws of evolutionism would lead to a disintegration of Islamic cultures, as we saw in Léon de Laborde's opinions after his examination of the 1851 Great Exhibition. It legitimized a common consent to annihilation, be it through the progressive invention of an Islam-influenced ornamentation in the so-called "grammar of ornament" (Jones), or through the melancholy evocation of an Oriental paradise in Orientalist paintings.

Practically, the notion of Islamic lessons coming from an irretrievable medieval past prompted the transfer of innumerable artefacts, extolled as material bearers of these allegedly doomed cultures, in Western museums—first among them the recently invented museums of decorative arts, like the South Kensington Museum in London—and private collections of all sorts, thus actively collaborating to the overall colonial plunder and contributing to the accelerated collapse of local cultures under a system of imperial control. In doing so, a self-critical theory of visual creation, crying out for a new Islam-influenced ornamental aesthetics, did not counteract but rather intensified colonial violence. Willingly or not, this reformative relation to the present, typical of an avant-garde commitment to the foundation of a new cultural and social order, was strengthening the continuation of a state of crisis, as much as the disillusioned multiplication of empty images did in the context of Orientalist narratives. In both cases, a self-conscious internal critique of modern Western culture was conceptually deconstructing but concretely nurturing a thrust for violent domination and global destruction. Critique led to no other outcome than this ever-increasing state of crisis. If one adds that the numerous late nineteenth century calls for a true reformation of ornament consistently failed to reinvent a new society based on the symbolic union between art and science, it will be clear that, in this most strategic field of the applied arts, critique and crisis were indeed inextricably associated.

### **The radical experiments of European artistic avant-gardes as a perpetuation of the debates on representation and the Orient: Matisse as a case study**

Let us now transpose these views to the field of painting, through the evocation of a case study, that of Henri Matisse's early work. This should enable us, as a conclusion, to verify firstly, that avant-garde artists and ornament reformers were sharing the same questions at the turn of the twentieth century, even if they answered them differently; secondly, that the reference to Islamic arts greatly helped to dialectize our Western notion of the image; and, finally, that the self-critical position which stands at the roots of modern culture in general applies to our relation to images, of which visual Orientalism is a supreme embodiment. When they named "decorative" the new gaze they were seeking to establish at the heart of the Western tradition of representation, the artistic avant-gardes of the turn of the twentieth century were recognizing more or less consciously the impact

of the revolution which the notion of ornament and decoration had undergone in the previous decades, with the lesson of Islam at their core.

Matisse was certainly not the only one to explore and conceptualize this "decorative" quality of modern art: from Gauguin to Signac and their followers, the word "decorative" was meant by many young painters and critics as the opposite of "academic", i.e., mimetic representation. Let us just recall Albert Aurier (38) celebrating Gauguin's "decorative painting" in 1891 as akin to the "first pictorial experiments" of "primitive societies", and rejecting in turn "easel painting" as a manifestation of "decadent civilizations". In 1903, Maurice Denis, one of the founding members of the Nabis, noted that "the word 'decorative'" had even become "a pet thing *tarte à la crème* of the discussions among artists" (170). On this shared ground, Matisse, however, went farther and was more consistent than anyone, as shown in this late statement of 1945: "The decorative for a work of art is an extremely precious thing. It is an essential quality. It is not pejorative to say that the paintings of an artist are decorative" (165). Affirming for himself that this new "decorative" art he was trying to establish was anti-mimetic, architecturally structured, and musical by essence, he had no difficulty accepting that the same qualities—granted for a long time to Islamic artefacts such as carpets, ceramics, etc.—recommended these objects to his admiration and could reinforce him in his own intuitive views. This was when he discovered them in landmark exhibitions in Paris in 1903 and in Munich in 1910, and, to a lesser extent, on site in Algeria in 1906, in Andalusia in 1911, or in Morocco in 1912-1913.

Matisse uses two words in order to characterize his responsiveness to the arts of the Orient, by which he mixed together Islamic and, slightly later, Byzantine cultures: he speaks of a "revelation" and of a "confirmation". For instance, in a 1947 interview, recalling the early experiences of his youth, he explained: "*Revelation* came to me from the Orient. It was later, before the icons in Moscow, that that art touched me and that I understood Byzantine painting. You surrender yourself that much better when you see your efforts *confirmed* by such an ancient tradition. It helps you jump over the ditch. I had to get away from imitation, even of light. One can provoke light by the invention of flat planes, as one uses harmonies in music" (178; italics in the original). Visually, these arts were a *revelation* when he first discovered their unsuspected riches; intellectually, they acted as *comforting* testimonies that what he was already aiming at encountered echoes at least in foreign cultures, if not in the Western visual traditions of the past five centuries.

But before being able to make something of the attraction he felt for these objects, Matisse had first to get rid of the burden of Orientalism, since the contemporary relation to these cultures, for a painter at least, had been integrated into a powerful system of production of Orientalist fictions. Thanks to his nascent decorative aesthetics, he knew he had to distinguish himself radically from these mimetic phantasmagorias. A "study trip" ("*déplacement d'étude*"), as he later described it (Matisse and Courthion 116, 315), to the nearest "Oriental" country for a French man at that time, Algeria, offered him such an opportunity in May 1906. It preceded his more traditional Italian tour of 1907 and predetermined it. It was actually Matisse's first visit outside of France, if we except a short honeymoon in London in 1898. This Algerian fortnight took place in a highly colonial context. Spectacular Oriental settings had been displayed at the Parisian 1900 Universal Exhibition, which Matisse had visited. In 1906, the same type of Oriental decors was shown at the Colonial Exhibition in Marseille, when the artist was encouraged to travel to Algeria by an art collector, Gustave Fayet, who conducted wine business in Algiers, and he was introduced there to members of the colonial troops like Maurice Le Glay. As it was often the case, however, these keepers of the official and economic colonial order used to express critical views on the destructive impact—particularly intense in Algeria—of the whole apparatus they were consciously serving.

In such a context, it is commonplace to say that Matisse's first personal "Orientalist" experience proved to be severely disappointing. But it should rather be said that this disillusion was

intentionally pursued by the artist, in order to deconstruct the Orientalist system of representation and to remove the obstacle it formed against a free inspiration taken from the arts of Islam. This deconstruction had to be internalized, experienced from the inside, not just intellectually formulated. And this is exactly what happened when Matisse discovered himself almost completely unable to paint from nature in Algeria, except for a single small and not particularly exotic landscape, *Street in Biskra*,<sup>3</sup> and when he told his friend Manguin, he had been repelled by the “picturesque”, the “belly-dancers”, and the nauseous colonial eroticism. Conversely, back in France, the small Southern village of Collioure prompted again his “ferocious desire to paint”, he wrote again (letter quoted in Labrusse et al. 112).

What he painted, however, was *The Red Carpets* (fig. 7), a painting inspired by the lesson of the Berberian carpets he had brought back from Algeria, and, therefore, his first explicit act of allegiance to the decorativeness he had been discovering for a few years in these arts of Islam, displayed in Parisian museums and exhibitions. It expresses the artist’s leanings not only towards the colors but also the geometrical forms of Islamic design. With an almost aggressive lack of picturesqueness, it gives a concrete embodiment of the idea that the meaning of a visual composition does not rely on its narrative quality but on its ability to transmit a stream of vital energy through the spectator’s eye. Similarly, a year later, in *Tableau no. III*, also known as *Blue Nude: Memory of Biskra* (fig. 8), the “Oriental” setting is rendered almost illegible—“abstract”, following Louis Vauxcelles’ telling criticism—and the female body challenges all the expectations of “Orientalist” eroticism. By so doing, the deconstruction of the Orientalist rhetorical clichés instantly opens the way on to a deconstruction of the fundamental bases of a representational image. From then on, the shackles of literal exoticism had been broken. Matisse knew for certain that the academic representation of an imaginary Orient was alien to his nature, so much so that his theatrical “Odaliques” of the 1920s cannot but be seen as a regressive, if not depressive despondency, in the context of the post-war “*retour à l’ordre*”, even if some of them still display a complex, somehow dialectical quality.

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<sup>3</sup> Henri Matisse, *Street in Biskra (Rue à Biskra)*. 1906, oil on canvas, 34 x 41 cm. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.





Figure 7: Henri Matisse. *The Red Carpets (Les Tapis rouges)*. 1906, oil on canvas, 89 x 116 cm. © Succession H. Matisse / 2022, ProLitteris, Zurich. Photo: Ville de Grenoble / Musée de Grenoble-J.L. Lacroix.



Figure 8: Henri Matisse. *Blue Nude (Souvenir de Biskra)*. 1907, oil on canvas, 92.1 x 140.3 cm. The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland, BMA 1950.228. © Succession H. Matisse / 2022, ProLitteris, Zurich. Photo: Mitro Hood.

By contrast with this transitory and rather questionable body of works of the 1920s, some of Matisse's most significant works of the 1910s are, consciously or not, attuned to an interpretation of Islamic arts according to which the logic of form and color should be radically emancipated from the duty of describing the outside world objectively. In many cases, he makes direct allegiance to the example of Islamic works of art, like in the 1915 drawing *Still Life with Iznik Tile*.<sup>4</sup> The same act of allegiance distinguishes one of his most programmatic works, the *Red Studio* (fig. 9) painted towards the end of 1911, just before he left Paris for Morocco. Right at the center of the composition, he placed "the warm blacks of the border of a piece of Persian embroidery placed above the chest of drawers", as he put it in a letter to his patron Sergei Shchukin from Tangiers in February 1912, hoping in this way to encourage him to accept "the most musical of all [his] paintings" (Labrusse et al. 240, 364). This piece of Islamic fabric (most probably a "scrap" of Ottoman velvet, then commonly identified as "Persian") is unrecognizable as such but is used purely to provide propulsion for the forms, a nucleus of colored energy, closely associated with the artist's paintings and with the flowers in the Persian Qajar vase in the foreground. This simultaneous celebration and obliteration of an Islamic ornamental pattern as forerunner of a modern non-representational decorative aesthetics closely recalls the instrumental use of Islamic lessons by ornament theoreticians and reformers of the previous century. Hinting at a new universal language of forms, the inspirational work of art is deprived of its cultural identity in the moment when it exerts its formative action.



Figure 9: Henri Matisse. *The Red Studio*. Issy-les Moulineaux. Fall 1911, oil on canvas, 181 x 219, 1 cm. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund, acc. no. 8.1949. © Succession H. Matisse / 2022, ProLitteris, Zurich. Foto: The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Matisse, *Still Life with Iznik Tile (Nature morte au carreau d'Iznik)*. 1915, charcoal on paper, 74 x 54 cm. Private collection. See figure in Labrusse, *Islamophilies* 300.

In parallel, another recurrent feature characterizes Matisse's experimental works of the same period: namely the display of this experimental dimension as such, through intentional marks of gestures and chance (stains, overlappings, interruptions, etc.), which all contribute to a strong sense of incompleteness. Clearly, the tension between exactitude and intentional accidents, carefully designed structure and undefined patches of medium is what has retained the artist fundamentally.

This aspect of his work must be situated in a vitalist aesthetics which positions itself not only against the tradition of representation but also against the Neoplatonic ontology underlying all geometry. Gestures are more meaningful than forms, real life is more important than the contemplation of a perfect composition: this is what his paintings eventually tend to render manifest to the eye. Matisse's experience of art is not *ontological* in nature (relating to the image's ability to give an account of the structure of being) but instead *phenomenological* (pertaining to the image's ability to give life to the space of perception). That is why, when he refers to Islamic art again in 1947, he does not mention formal or stylistic characteristics as such (flatness, for example, as has often been asserted) but instead talks of a general *sense* of space: "By its properties [*accessoires*], this [Oriental] art suggests a larger and truly plastic space. That helped me to get away from intimate painting" (1978). The lesson to be learnt from Islamic art, as he saw it in its triumph in the exhibition of Muslim Art in Munich in 1910, was not about a new *style*, it was about a new *existential behavior*, that is a new *way of life*: the work of art did not aim to captivate but instead to liberate the being-in-the-world of the spectator, not absorbing the viewer by adopting a centripetal logic, but referring the viewer back to real space, in keeping with a centrifugal logic, and endowing this space with a new energetic quality. This principle of defocalization implies that the viewer is required not so much to meditate on what he sees, as to experience an all-over visual effect which draws the eye away from the picture surface to the total environment.<sup>5</sup>

There is another reason for this anti-geometric aesthetics of chance gestures and incompleteness: the critical questioning of the image through the image. The painting does not only produce a new kind of expansive ornamental effect; it also provides the eye with a self-critical questioning about the making of images. Such a self-criticism often reveals itself through systematic discrepancies, which fracture the global overall harmony of the composition with an aggressive juxtaposition of form against form. In *The Red Carpets*, for example, following a diagonal line from the lower right to the top left corners, some zones verge on chaos while others thrive with intense light and color contrasts, in such a way that the suggested meaning of the image is a critical question about the process of image making, starting in erratic gestures and emerging into a clear structure of geometry and colors, before dissolving themselves outside the frame, in the effectiveness of real life. In other words, with reference to the arts of Islam, deconstruction allows the mimetic image to transform itself in a "decorative" structure, but it also leaves the question open, of how this process occurs and, more generally, what for a visual creation has to be done *and* undone in a modern culture.

In the second version of the *Sevilla Still-Lives* (fig. 10), the powerful two-dimensional expanse of a white and blue Spanish carpet, reinvented as if it were an Islamic tilework, covers only half of the sofa; the other half is painted in perspective, according to the traditional rules that govern the creation of an illusion of depth. Similarly, the rhythmical repetition of pattern does not inhabit an unequivocal decorative universe; motifs and patterns are displayed in such a way that, once again, the ambiguous relationship between the referential value of the pattern as such and the formal rhythms that emerge from the spaces between the patterns is *deliberate*. The systematic intertwining of the plants and the textile designs based on plant forms is a patent illustration of this ambiguity. Confronted with such a juxtaposition, the spectator is inevitably challenged on the nature of the figurative impulse and the way it is overstepped or not in a representational image.

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<sup>5</sup> The general idea and some sentences of this paragraph are taken from my article "Islamic Arts and the Crisis of Representation in Modern Europe" (Labrusse 1213)



Figure 10: Henri Matisse. *Spanish Still Life*. Ca. 1910/1911, oil on canvas, 89.5 x 116.3 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Inv. no. GE-9043. © Succession H. Matisse / 2022, ProLitteris, Zurich.

Finally, in the case of *The Red Studio*, the subject of the painting is precisely what is and should be the role of objects and works of art in an inhabited space: therefore, the Venetian red of the ground is both decorative and conceptual, insofar as it embodies *and* represents the energetic effect a "decorative" painting should have on the spectator's mind and body. In short, the paradoxical strength of this image lies in a sort of critical decoration, inseparable from a never-ending reflection on the condition of its own existence. Geometrical formalism is immersed in this ceaseless critical process, which will pervade Matisse's work up to the monumental paper cut-out compositions of his last years, like *The Snail*<sup>6</sup> of 1953, in which some edges of large regular geometrical blocks of color are simply and somewhat randomly torn.

Let us now go back to our starting point. In Matisse's case, we are confronted with an experimental artistic endeavor which criticizes its own conditions of possibility, culturally, through the visceral rejection of the visual embodiment of imperial Orientalism, and aesthetically, through the calling into question of the Western tradition of representation. This criticism is also a self-critical analysis; it includes the artist's work itself in its questioning, going as far as to threaten the very possibility of painting (in *Algeria* in 1906) or to accept the menace of an impending chaos (through incompleteness and randomness). Matisse's work is intrinsically modern because it is intrinsically critical: the artist

<sup>6</sup> Henri Matisse. *The Snail (L'escargot)*. 1953, gouache on paper, cut and pasted on paper mounted on canvas, 286 x 287 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

refuses to build up a definitely "decorative" work of art but infuses it with a sense of inquisitive anxiety about its own being.

That is why, in his best works, the clear geometrical and colorful legacy of Islamic art is systematically accompanied by discrepancies and self-referential devices. The vitalist aesthetics which he longed for is put under the permanent pressure of a critical stand that the artist has to share with his viewers. He himself was absolutely conscious of this modernist fate, as he wrote in his *Notes of a Painter* in December 1908: "Whether we like it or not,...we belong to our time and we share in its opinions, its feelings, even its delusions" (43). It implies that the explicit deconstruction of Orientalism can only open onto a void: the formal lesson taken from the arts of Islam is shaped in such a way that their own identity is effaced and that they are engulfed in the same critical inconclusiveness about the legitimacy of image-making.

Is this critical stand a way to counterbalance the monstrous overgrowth of fictional images all over the world? Or, on the contrary, are critique and crisis, once again, inseparable? Is the contemporary proliferation of fancy images (including Orientalist ones) hindered or spurred on by the subtle critical anxiety which modern works of art such as Matisse's entrust to their viewers, beyond their brilliant decorativeness? Should we definitely oppose, on the one hand, the melancholy self-distrust of kitsch images in the Orientalist vision and, on the other, the revolutionary enquiries about the condition of images, in applied as well as fine arts? Or are these two trends, each in its own way, nihilistic or utopian, nurturing a rush to the worse, in order to obliterate a distressing, maybe unbearable sense of disillusion? These are questions that ought to be left open, at an obviously critical turn of our contemporary societies and their endangered relation to the reality of life.

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## Biography

**Rémi Labrusse** teaches art history at the University Paris Nanterre. A large part of his research is focused on the imagined sources of the Western modern condition from the late eighteenth century onwards—among them the notion of the Orient, in connection with the reception of the arts of Islam and the debates on the reform of ornament. On these subjects, he co-curated with Salima Hellal the exhibition *Islamophilies. L'Europe moderne et les arts de l'Islam* (Lyon, Musée des beaux-arts, 2011) and published *Face au chaos. Pensées de l'ornement à l'âge de l'industrie* (2018).

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