

# Visions of the harem

**Of all the British artists who went east in the 19th century, for Ahdaf Soueif, only John Frederick Lewis looked beyond colonial stereotypes to capture its true spirit. Cairo gave him the colours, light and architecture to become a great painter**

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Reciprocal relationship ... El Khan Khalil, Cairo The Carpet Seller by John Frederick Lewis (1860)

A postcard on my mantelpiece shows two men and a woman strolling through a museum. Their backs towards us, they pause for a moment to contemplate a painting. The men are in white North African robes, the woman is in a long skirt with a jumper slung over her shoulders. In her left hand she holds what could be a plan of the museum. The title of the postcard is "Africains au Louvre devant Les Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement". Even though their backs are towards me, I fancy I can read the carefully neutral expression on their faces.

When Edward Said's ground-breaking *Orientalism* appeared in 1978, it articulated and theorised a disquiet that already existed - albeit in fragmented and anecdotal forms - in Arabic critical discourse. *Orientalism* does not discuss painting, but its critique provided a framework to understand one's own feelings of unease when faced with images of "odalisques" and slave markets and drug-dealers - the same unease evoked by skewed media representations of Arabs

(and Muslims) today. Jean-Léon Gérôme, for example, may or may not have believed in France's mission civilisatrice; perhaps he only ever wanted to sell paintings. But in supplying images of indolence and cruelty he helped to nourish perceptions that eased the path of that mission. Many of the US soldiers who are now refusing to fight in Iraq cite the discrepancy between what the media told them about Iraqis and what they saw for themselves as the reason. As Jean Genet remarked in *Un captif amoureux*, the mask of the image can be used to manipulate reality to sinister ends.

British artists found their way to the Arab and Turkish "Orient" in the run-up to Britain's colonial surge towards it, and the images grouped by Tate Britain in "The Lure of the East", its exhibition of British orientalist painting, can be read as so many takes on the targets of the incipient imperialist project. It's a difficult exhibition - and a brave one for the Tate to put on; some people will just want to look at pretty pictures, but by inviting a variety of guest writers into the catalogue, and including listening-post contributions and commentaries next to the paintings, the Tate has not only acknowledged the issues raised by the paintings, it has added tremendous value to the exhibition.

Rasheed El-Enany of the University of Exeter flicks away the notion that James Sant's Captain Colin Mackenzie was dressed in Afghani clothes as a mark of respect for the Afghani culture. It's just a novelty, El-Enani says, fancy dress - and we should remember what Mackenzie was doing when he was in uniform. Rageh Omaar spots the signet ring as the giveaway mark of the British and invites us to wonder what we would make of a British captain dressed in Taliban gear today. Orhan Pamuk contemplates William Allan's nasty *The Slave Market*, Constantinople and cedes his home town, granting the painter an equal right to "conjure up" the city.

Sometimes the combativeness is a little unreasonable, as in the view of Meyda Yegenoglu of Ankara University that John Frederick Lewis's whole attitude to the world he was painting in *The Seraff: A Doubtful Coin* was one of dissemblance, doubt and mistrust. In fact, I find Lewis's work so attractive that it became a source of sustenance for the heroine, Lady Anna Winterbourne, of my novel *The Map of Love*: recently widowed, Anna visits the South Kensington museum and takes pleasure in "the wondrous colours, the tranquillity, the contentment with which [Lewis's paintings] are infused". Of all the "oriental" paintings I had come across, only those of Lewis beckoned me in. At the simplest level, the world he shows is a happy one, filled with sunlight, people, animals, flowers, food. But something else is transmitted from his surfaces: empathy. Lewis lived in Cairo for 10 years, and "went native" in adopting Egyptian dress. But that wasn't it. Edward Lane did the same, and I find his work unreadable. I was reminded of his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* a few years ago when attending a London briefing for a British ambassador about to be sent out to Egypt. The "experts" gathered round the table displayed full possession of facts and figures about my homeland. What they lacked - or what there was no room for - was the merest inkling of everything that gave it value, that made it, uniquely, itself.

Lewis's truth, expressed in colour and brushstrokes, was a truth about the spirit of the place.

A lecture by Briony Llewellyn alerted me to Lewis's habit of painting himself into his pictures, and an article by Emily Weeks pointed out the ambiguities he deployed in, for example, *The Carpet Seller* (1860). A carefully staged self-portrait, it brings to mind Byron's satirical proposal to "sell you, mix'd with western sentimentalism, / Some samples of the finest Orientalism". Compare that weary, wary gaze, the grip on the sword, the uneasy feet, with William Holman Hunt's *Self-Portrait in Oriental Costume* (1867/75). Hunt's foregrounded palette and brushes, his intense gaze, his sincere leaning towards the viewer, the ring on his pinkie, all demand that he be taken on his own terms.

Hunt came east in mid 19th-century, on a religio-ideological quest, and armoured by a distaste for all things eastern. Even the surface jollity of *A Street Scene in Cairo: The Lantern Maker's Courtship* has an uncomfortable, sordid undertow as the courting "lantern maker" grins (his teeth echoed in the teeth of the camel in the background?) and gropes his intended's veiled face. I bet that Hunt never saw such a scene. Or if he did he posed it: the European artist making natives act out how he thinks natives should act - which is the problem with so many orientalist paintings of "natives". Even the rather beautiful Arab interior on the cover of the catalogue rings false: we note the patterned cushions, the latticed woodwork, the brass urn, but why is that man sitting there, on his own, in the gloom, perched awkwardly on the edge of the plush divan, his long hookah unsmoked in his large workman's hand? Because he was paid or persuaded by the artist to sit there. The problem is that back home in London these works were marketed as observation, as documentary.

None more so than the work of Hunt's protégé, Thomas Seddon, whose paintings have been likened to the Ordnance Survey maps that came into being 10 years later. But Seddon's "accuracy" was a camouflage for ideology - Hunt's ideology. Seddon and Hunt camped outside Jerusalem for four months in 1854, and Seddon painted *The Valley of Jehoshaphat from the Hill of Evil Counsel*. His text would have been clear to his audience: they would have known that they stood on the spot where Christ's betrayal was planned and that in the valley in front of them the Last Judgment was scheduled to take place. The Muslim Dome of the Rock dominates the scene from the left. The bulk of the landscape is stony, untended land, and the only human figure is the usual indolent Arab, in this case a shepherd neglecting his flock.

No contemporary Arab inhabitant of Palestine would have recognised the title of the painting; for them, the Hill of Evil Counsel was Jabal al-Mukabbir and the valley was simply Wadi al-Joz, named after the nutmeg trees that grew there. But Arab reality was not just being ignored, it was being modified: this fertile land, as other contemporary paintings and documents record, was well cultivated. Why does Seddon's painting show aridity and emptiness?

Here we need to step back slightly: in 1830 Muhammad Ali Pasha had (unwisely?) opened Palestine to western travellers in the cause of "modernisation", and Jerusalem soon became a focus for western powers jockeying for position. Much travel and Christian religious writing described the Holy Land as "cursed"; it was desolate, stagnant and suffering because it was inhabited by Jews and Muslims who rejected the gospel of Christ. One of the most powerful influences to arrive on the scene was the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity among the Jews, a missionary arm of the Anglican Church and a prototype of what today is called Christian Zionism. Its mission was to convert the Jews, but it was also to "ingather" them into Palestine to facilitate Armageddon. When the British Consulate was established in Jerusalem in 1839, both the first consul, William Young, and the second, James Finn, belonged to the society. Finn became a good friend of Hunt, and Hunt was Seddon's mentor and inspiration.

A poem that Seddon wrote as an intended companion piece to *The Valley of Jehoshaphat* describes the Jews as "Abram's faithless sons / Swept by God's anger from the holy ground". They "wail", the poem says, "round thy head mosk-crowned, their temple wail / And barred by Moslem sword through ages long, / Leave all they can, their bones, afront thy slopes, / And prove the invoked curse's heavy weight, / On us & on our children be His blood". Seddon's depiction of Nutmeg Valley as barren and desolate was a poster for the enterprise of ingathering and settling Jews on it, for only when the Jews were gathered in the Holy Land and the Messiah appeared would this desolate landscape find redemption.

Even more in need of redemption is another poster, the ghastly landscape of Hunt's *Scapegoat*, for which he and Henry Wentworth Monk (a Canadian obsessed with nudging Old Testament prophecies into actualisation) transported two goats and various skulls to the Dead Sea before they were chased away by the Bedouin.

Hunt, his personal agenda dictated by dogma, could be seen as the antithesis of Lewis. Where one artist came ready with an ideology and a fantasy to impose upon the landscape and the people, the other observed, received the landscape and entered into the spirit of the place and its inhabitants. Can we imagine Hunt depicting himself, as Lewis did in 1857, at prayer in a mosque, his red slippers laid neatly with his sword at his side?

When Lewis came to Cairo in 1841, Europeans - again welcomed into Egypt as part of Muhammad Ali Pasha's modernisation programme - were busy ripping off the country. Consular officials were crowbarring reliefs off temple walls; travellers were looting depositories of documents; dealers were tearing illustrations out of manuscripts - and artists were forging visions of harems and indolence and cruelty and passing them off as reality. Moreover, Britain had just - in coalition with Austria and the Ottoman Sultan - defeated Muhammad Ali Pasha's attempt to spread Egyptian hegemony into Syria. The spirit of the times would have made

it natural for the 37-year-old Lewis to be part of the burgeoning imperial drive. The spirit of the times, but not his spirit.

Lewis's first Egyptian painting to be shown in England was *The Hhareem*. He exhibited it in 1850 (to avoid being fired from the Society of Painters in Watercolour for non-productivity) and gave his audience everything they desired: a slave-dealer displays a prize beauty to an oriental nobleman surrounded by his wives and attendants. Lewis supplies a long description of each woman and - with the detail of the painting and the idiosyncratic spelling of its title - stakes a high claim to authoritative knowledge and artistic mastery. *The Hhareem* established Lewis spectacularly at the head of his profession, and in 1855 he was elected president of the society. Yet he was already subverting the genre of the harem painting: the master of the house, far from being the lascivious cruel Turk of tradition, has a young fresh face, full of wonder; his new acquisition has something of a defiant stance, and the description places the painting firmly in the past, in Mamluk times. It declares itself a fantasy - and leaves open the question: whose?

Much of Lewis's work embodies good humour: in *The Mid-day Meal* (1875) everyone, including the servants, is enjoying something the white-bearded man on the left has just said. This painting, together with *The Bezestein Bazaar* (1872) and *Outdoor Gossip* (1873), captures its subjects' delight in good conversation and repartee. True, these men are not hunting, fighting or throwing javelins, but there is no trace of that "indolence" much cited by orientalist painters and commentators.

Another subversive and revelatory painting is *And the Prayer of Faith Shall Save the Sick* (1872), where a beautiful woman (resembling Lewis's wife, Marianne) reclines in her sickbed. A panel on the wall above her head bears a relief of the ancient Egyptian goddess Hathor, manifested as Sekhmet; the centre of the wall is inscribed with a quotation from the Qur'an: "We have embraced the faith, so forgive us." At the front of the picture, Lewis, turned discreetly away from the women, reads from the Holy Book.

I found, I think, my key to Lewis when I saw a painting done before he went east. I had always loved his *Siesta* (1873), but understood its significance only when I saw *Interior* (1824); *Interior* aspires towards *Siesta* - or *Siesta* is what the skills, the eye, the spirit behind *Interior* was striving for. Almost 50 years later, the green drapes in the corner of *Interior* fill the centre of *Siesta*, and through their brilliant billowing green the fluid shadows of the lattice shutters can be made out. The empty vase on the floor has bloomed into three vases crowded with lilies, poppies and roses. The viewer has stepped back so that, although the composition is essentially the same, the effect is more spacious, more relaxed. The air of haphazardness, of a room in disarray, has morphed into a gracious orderliness. The *Siesta* has no need to refer to a painting of Venice in a gilt frame; everything it needs in the way of architecture, ornamentation and light is

right there in the room. And the woman stretched out, napping, breathes into the painting a wonderful sense of repose. It may indeed be that Lewis, in the last year of his life, was trying to restimulate market interest in his work by going back to a "harem" subject - but he was incapable of dealing with it other than honestly. Lewis entered into a true relationship with Cairo: the city gave him the colours, the light, the architecture - the material he needed to become a great artist. Unlike so many of his colleagues, though, he felt that the city demanded something of him in return. Cairo made Lewis interrogate himself, what he and his compatriots were doing, the artist's relationship to his material, his social and political role, his integrity and, finally, his historic responsibility. It was through this interrogation that he produced his masterpieces.

· "The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting" is at Tate Britain, London SW1, until August 31. Details: 020 7887 8888; visit [Tate.org.uk](http://Tate.org.uk)