

Orientalist Artworks to Obliterate the Algerian National Identity During the French occupation

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Abstract:

The French occupation of Algeria, with its varied landscapes of plains, plateaus, and deserts, made it appealing to Orientalist artists to travel there. Among the most prominent were the (French artist Eugène Delacroix, Étienne Dinet, and Pablo Picasso). They were chosen or commissioned to depict natural subjects and prevalent social aspects within Algerian society to distort and obliterate its national identity which is regarded as a fertile ground for artistic activity, and service to French colonialism.

Keywords: Orientalism, Artist, National identity, Algerian society, Artistic activity.

Introduction:

The 20th century was characterized by a convergence between the West and the East. Apart from the fact that this encounter was politically harsh, represented by colonialism and mandate, we will approach it from the perspective of artistic Orientalism brought forth by some writers and artists. We seek to explore what could be new, focusing on uncovering: What is Orientalism? What are its negative effects on obliterating the Algerian national identity through Orientalist artworks?

This study aims to identify the contributions of Orientalist artists during and after the Algerian Revolution, given the rich heritage encompassing the Algerian identity. Our study is divided into three main sections: The first section delves into the concept of Orientalism. In contrast, the second section highlights the significant Orientalist artists during the

National Liberation War. Finally, in the third section, we talk about the artists who emerged after independence and their remarkable ability to narrate the cultural identity of Algerian society.

1. Orientalism concept:

Numerous intellectuals and linguists have delved into the concept of Orientalism: 1

- Linguistically, "To orientalize " "Istashraqa" entails assimilating into Eastern societies and becoming one of them.
- Terminologically, it refers to pursuing Western knowledge about Eastern languages, cultures, customs, and arts.

Edward Said defined Orientalism as "a method of controlling, exploiting, and dominating the East,²" stating that "the history of colonization and political dominance in the East has distorted the writings of Orientalists who possessed a good understanding, studied its culture, knowledge, and civilization³." Edward Said further emphasized that Western scholars, in pursuing what they perceived as truth, regarded themselves as superior to the Orientals, as evidenced by his decisive argument: "They are incapable of representing themselves; they must be represented.⁴"

Hassan al-Ziyat says Orientalism is "the study undertaken by Westerners of the history, nations, languages, customs, sciences, beliefs, and myths of the East." However, during the medieval period, it expressly referred to the study of Hebrew about religion and Arabic concerning knowledge. While the East, from its lowest to its highest, was illuminated by the

¹ - Ben Arbi Ali, Gouini Al-Tidjani, *Orientalist Painting between the Aesthetic Function and the Colonial Function - Etienne Dinet as a Model* -, Master's Graduation Note, Specialization in Fine Criticism, College of Literature, Languages and Arts, Supervision by Professor: Kamal Ben Senussi, ZayanAshour University, Djelfa, 2014-2015 p. 06.

²HalaMadoui, *The Concept of Orientalism in the Thought of Edward Said*, Master's Note, supervised by Professor: KhairaBouranane, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Mohamed Boudiaf - M'sila, 2015/2016, p. 37.

³Ibid., pg. 45.

⁴Ibid., pg. 46.

radiance of Baghdad and Cairo with their secular lights and knowledge, the West, from its seas to its horizons, was submerged in the abysses of ignorance, barbarism, and savagery⁵."

Through these statements, we observe the Westerners' distortion of Orientalism from its true essence, as they sought to tarnish the Islamic identity through various means, transforming it into a tool for colonial dominance.

2. Artworks by Orientalists during the French colonization of Algeria:

The French authorities perceived the Algerian artistic heritage as worthy of protection, recognizing that the French photographer could benefit from it and immerse himself in a civilization distinct from the Western culture within a significant part of Islamic civilization's domain.

The French colonization of Algeria in 1830 served as a powerful and armed means of integrating the cultural life of Algeria into that of France. To this day, we still witness the presence of French artists' works adorning the walls of the People's Palace in Algeria.

The artistic Orientalist movement in Algeria started with the visit of the French artist Eugène Delacroix, which began in January 1832, encompassing Toulon, Tangier, Meknes, Oran, and the city of Algiers. Regarding this experience, Delacroix remarked, "Here, sunlight illuminates the plains and deserts, and life exudes tranquillity, joy, and radiance. The vibrant colors of the natural beauty compel one to capture it through the lens⁶."



French artist Eugène Delacroix

⁵Ibid., pg. 07.

* Eugène Delacroix: He is considered the pioneer of the Orientalist school and the leader of the Orientalists, who traveled to the Arab Maghreb on an official mission in the beginning of 1832 AD. See: Tariq Mourad, *Encyclopedia of Drawing Schools in the World*, 1st edition, Dar Al-Ratib International, 2002, p. 26.

⁶Afif Al-Bahnasi, *Modern Arab Art between Identity and Subordination*, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Arabi, Syria, 1997, p. 67.

Delacroix's visit marked the beginning of a series of visits by other artists who gained fame through their Algerian works, making Algeria a destination for artists. ThéophileGauthe declared, "Traveling to Algeria has become more important for photographers than making the pilgrimage to Italy.⁷"

Delacroix meticulously recorded his impressions in his memoirs, on sketch papers, and in his letters to friends. Upon his return to Paris, these documents became invaluable resources for capturing the splendours of Eastern life, which he continued to produce until the last days of his life. His renowned masterpiece, "Women of Algiers," epitomizes the essence of Orientalist art. Art critic Philippe Berti remarks, "Among the Orientalist painters, the women of Algeria are depicted most beautifully on the Barbarian Coast.⁸" Delacroix painted the women of Algeria in their abodes, capturing the beautiful social life of Algeria. The painting featured three beautiful young women, including French colonial servants, and he employed his brushes to depict the colours, fashion, landscapes, and intricate details of the celebrations he witnessed.⁹



Algerian women painting

Moreover, we find his most famous artworks, such as "The Arab Actors in 1848" and "The Sultan of Marrakesh," which drew inspiration from his experiences in Morocco and Algeria.

⁷Abou Al-QasimSaad Allah, Algeria's Cultural History, Dar Al-Basair for Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, Vol. 7, 2007, p. 377.

⁸Ben Al-Arbi Ali, Gouini Al-Tijdani, previous reference, p. 55.

⁹Ibid., p. 55.

Delacroix remains one of the greatest artists of his time, known internationally for his depiction of colonial societies in a peculiar manner, obscuring their historical realities. Other artists, like him, addressed these themes artistically, but he stood out with his unparalleled creativity, beauty, and a blend of clarity and authenticity.¹⁰

Eugène Delacroix is also regarded as a pivotal figure in the Romantic movement, as his efforts injected movement to eliminate the influence of Jacques-Louis David, the founder of Neoclassical art, while paving the way for the emergence of renowned contemporary art movements after that. However, Romanticism reached its zenith, venturing into excessive richness, distancing itself from engaging with reality and delving into the realms of dreams, capturing a world of imagination that momentarily eclipsed the burdens of reality.¹¹

Eugène Delacroix considered an artist's duty as "expressing nature, not merely reproducing its images," clarifying that this entailed capturing the spirit, essence, and true nature of objects and creatures.¹²

Another prominent Orientalist artist who resided in Algeria was Etienne Dinet.



French artist: Etienne Dinet

His first visit to Algeria was in 1882, when he was a 22-year-old photographer. He studied the principles of academic realism at the School of Fine Arts in Paris. He settled in Bousaâda, a marvelous oasis in the heart of the Algerian desert. In 1913, he embraced Islam,

¹⁰Ibid.p 55.

¹¹Ibid, p. 51.

¹² Tariq Mourad, previous reference, p. 26.

which marked, according to many historians, the pivotal moment between the talented Orientalist and the apostate who became a friend of the Arabs¹³. He became fully immersed in the Algerian way of life, embracing it to the fullest. He converted to Islam, read the Quran, performed the Hajj pilgrimage to Kaaba, and spoke Arabic. He took the name NasreddineDinet and expressed his desire to be buried in Bousaâda. He developed a deep love for Algeria and its people and shared their joys and sorrows. He managed to penetrate the Algerian spirit, profoundly influenced by their faith, which he embraced out of pure love and genuine belief. François Halm, the French critic, criticized his conversion to Islam, stating that "any Frenchman who converts to Islam condemns, through his actions, the colonial movement of his country, and considers his Islamic faith a betrayal against the French nation. If his faith had been devoted to the study of art and intellect, irrelevant to us, it would have been more fitting for him to have worked for the benefit of his homeland and limited his studies to help us comprehend the mentality of the locals. He should not have succumbed to that wretched religion of Islam, which led him to abandon his life and his nation.¹⁴"

The artist expressed the joys and sorrows of Sahrawi society, particularly in his extensive body of artwork comprising nearly 500 paintings¹⁵. These paintings adorned books that recounted profound poems and folk tales, such as "Antar," "Rabie Al Kouloub," "Al-Fayafi," and "Sarab." Among the artistic works that depict Sahrawi society, particularly in Bousaâda, we find, for instance, the painting "Women of Bousaâda." However, it is not the only one depicting Sahrawi women. Numerous others exist, such as the painting "Girls of Bousaâda.¹⁶"

*EthienDinet: His name, after his conversion to Islam, NasreddineDinet, is one of the leaders of oriental artists in Algeria and the most loving and close to it. He was born in Paris in the year 1861 AD in the midst of a bourgeois family. He is a lover of the Algerian desert. He lived for nearly 50 years in BouSaada, or as it is called the city of happiness. See: Ben al-Arbi Ali, Gouini Al-Tijani, previous reference, p. 33.

¹³MouradBourboune. Nasreddine: the paths of light - emigration news, N61, October 29, 1986, p36.

¹⁴ Francois-Helme. A Frenchman at allah. E.D. study (review), Paris, 1932, p441.

¹⁵Ben al-Arbi Ali, Gouini al-Tijani, previous reference, pg. 44.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 44.



Bousaada girls painting

We also find paintings such as "The Abandoned Woman" and "The Blind Woman," in which the artist expressed his solidarity and empathy towards the suffering of these people due to colonial oppression. There are other paintings as well, including "The Oasis," "Roofs of Laghouat," "The Prayer," "Procession of Faith," and "The Ambush.¹⁷" Etienne Dinet was close to the public as he tackled the depths of human existence. He aimed to create an immersive atmosphere through his subtle brushstrokes, bridging the gap between Impressionism and his style.

In his works, he sought to reveal the truth about Islam and defend it against certain Western Orientalists who attempted to distort its reality. His most notable books are "The Life of Prophet Mohammed" and "The Hajj to the Holy Kaaba.¹⁸" Etienne Dinet had a close connection with the Algerian artist Mohammed Racim, who assisted him in creating decorative illustrations for his books.

The artist Etienne Dinet passed away in Paris on December 24, 1929, following a period of illness. His funeral prayer was held at a mosque in Paris, and his body was later transported to Bousaâda.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibrahim Mardoukh, *The Contemporary Fine Arts Movement in Algeria*, National Book Foundation, Algeria, 2nd edition, 1988, pp. 30-31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

* Mohammed Rasim (1896-): Mohammed Rasim grew up in an Algerian artistic family whose creative nobility extended to its affiliations to Islamic decorative art. Muhammad Rasim remained immortal after his death in 1975 in the history of the international plastic art movement, a renewed symbol of the dialogue of civilizations in an open, human, cosmic world. See Abd al-RahmaneDjaafar al-Kinani, *Miniatures by Mohammed Rasim al-Jazaery*, University Publications Office, Algeria, (Data), 2012, p. 38.

¹⁹ Ben al-Arbi Ali, Gouini al-Tidjani, previous reference, p. 34.

Among the artists who visited or lived in Algeria, we also find the French artist Eugène Fromentin, who described the desert by saying: "The summer of the desert recalls the Scriptures as if its mention allows one to experience the Algerian people, who preserved their beauty despite settlement civilization.²⁰" As for the French artist Saint Supéry, he states that "The desert represents an enclosed space, akin to a cell, where companionship is found only in silence and solitude.²¹" The French artist Gustave Guillaume, who spent much of his life in the Algerian desert, completed his first painting in 1863 entitled "Prayer in the Desert." He demonstrated his proficiency in accurately depicting the desert community's natural landscape and daily life²². He is also regarded as the only artist who addressed the tragic events that befell the Algerian population during the decades of French invasion. In this regard, his painting "Famine in Algeria" depicted the tragedy of the Algerian people enduring extreme poverty, diseases, and famine between 1866 and 1868.

In essence, the desert symbolizes a refuge of salvation in the eyes of Westerners for extraordinary heroes with rare physical and psychological qualities, those who faced trials and escaped the imminent death that awaited them. Their legendary challenges allowed them to transcend the hardships imposed by the desert.²³

Every desert space conceals a story that delves deep into history. The desert occupies mythological and political functions, according to M. Eliade, although the only source can be traced back to ancient times, the era of King Solomon. This refers to the stories in the Bible related to the five books of Genesis, Exodus, Chronicles, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and the Old Testament. Artists and scholars drew inspiration from these narratives and formed their perspectives on the desert, incorporating key definitions derived from the sacred scriptures.²⁴ M. Roux hinted at this by stating, "It is nourished by Judeo-Christian traditions,

²⁰Ibid, p. 16.

²¹Ibid., p.16.

²²Ibid., p.22.

²³Ibid, p16.

²⁴Ben al-Arbi Ali, Gouini al-Tidjani, previous reference., p.24.

drawing strength and depth from them, as its foundations rest upon the desert in the Bible.²⁵"

In essence, the desert symbolizes a refuge of salvation in the eyes of Westerners for extraordinary heroes with rare physical and psychological qualities, those who faced trials and escaped the imminent death that awaited them. Their legendary challenges allowed them to transcend the hardships imposed by the desert.

The Orientalist influence is most evident in the works of Henri Matisse, who declared, "My colors rely on the observations I made in the land of light (Algeria) and are based on my emotions.²⁶" Matisse learned under the guidance of Gustave Moreau, who believed that "The East is a treasury of arts and a haven for modern artists.²⁷"

Matisse traveled to Arab countries in 1906 and delved into Orientalism. He imparted valuable lessons that Arab artists benefited from in shaping Arab art. He acknowledged the Arab nations and affirmed that his creativity always derived from the East. His paintings were not merely representations of ideas or translations of emotions; they were expressions of beauty.

Most of those who sought refuge in the East and its vast deserts, whether artists, writers, or philosophers, did so due to their critical stance towards Western society and desire to influence the course of time. They yearned to live in a mythical era, detached from the materialistic world. Therefore, they found solace in the Eastern lands and their legendary deserts, viewing them as a remedy for their eccentric inclinations within this new geographic space dedicated to the West and expanding according to their desires.

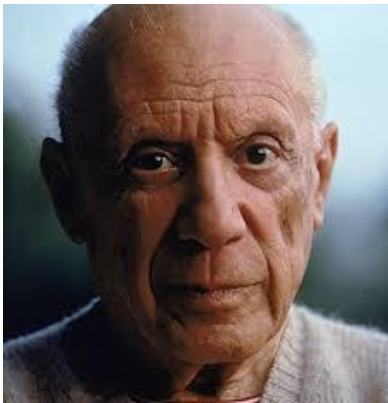
Similarly, we find the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), who lived a long life and possessed a true character. He initiated an artistic revolution, shattering realistic forms in search of his geometric foundation, which he highlighted through cubist shapes. One of his most famous paintings, "The Women of Algiers," served as his support for liberation

²⁵ Ferdinand Tuttle the Jesuit, *Al-Munajjid fi Al-I'lam for Literature*, Dar Al-Mashreq, Beirut, 7th edition, 1973, pg. 24.

²⁶ Afif Al-Bahnisi, previous reference, pg. 47.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.22.

movements and his connection to Algeria. His paintings played a crucial role in enticing Europeans to come to Africa and attempt to discover the enchantment of Algeria. Picasso's main fame can be attributed to his status as one of the giants of the art of painting.²⁸



Spanish artist Pablo Picasso

The paintings of Delacroix and Picasso encapsulate the history of Algeria. The former depicted the era of colonization, while the latter represented a final rupture, as Picasso belonged to a movement that rejected any form of domination or authority that infringed upon human freedom.

Picasso attempted to express the temporal aspect of Arab culture, embodied by the Sufi movement, which manifests itself in vegetal motifs. Gertrude Stein remarked, "It is difficult to deny Picasso's Islamic Arab roots."²⁹

Western art was dominated by Western expansion campaigns, playing a reprehensible role. Orientalist painters became the eyes that roamed the lands of the East, disguising their activities under cover of tourism, love for travel, and an attraction to the East's beauty, charm, and Western landscapes. Their paintings were saturated with intricate details that accurately portrayed the geopolitical and economic geography, traditions, behaviors, social, cultural, and administrative conditions, and the deployment of cultural capabilities.³⁰

²⁸Naamat Ismail Allam, *Arts of the West in Modern Times*, Dar Al-Maarif, Cairo, 5th Edition, 2010, p. 225.

²⁹Afif Al-Bahnasi, previous reference, pg. 50.

³⁰Nadia Kadjal, *The Basic Functions of Orientalist Painting Before and During Western Colonization of the Islamic World*, *Algerian Humanities Journal in Anthropology and Social Sciences*, Issue (46), 2009, p. 32.

2- Westernization and the attempt to obliterate the Algerian national identity:

The artistic works of the Orientalists were undoubtedly creative. However, they also carried submerged ideas that distorted and undermined the Islamic religion and the Algerian society's principles of national identity³¹. This can be attributed to the indecent and offensive images depicted by these Orientalists. For example, the French Orientalist Eugène Delacroix's painting "Women of Algiers in Their Bed" and the French Orientalist Louis Ferdinand Antoni's painting "Dance in the Harem" depicted women in transparent clothing engaging in provocative movements among groups of men. Even the Muslim artist Etienne Dinet had a negative aspect in his portrayal of completely nude women attributed to the Bousaadian woman.³²

- Scientific studies have proven that the Orientalists have pursued the following objectives³³:
 - A religious objective: To cast doubt on the Muslims' Prophet, Quran, Sharia, and jurisprudence.
 - A political objective: To weaken the spirit of Islamic brotherhood among Muslims in various regions by fueling disputes and animosities among their peoples.

The colonial campaign was accompanied by Orientalist ideology, which exemplified Western domination over the East as evidenced by the literary and creative output that followed the colonial effort in Algeria since it was an essential component.³⁴

It is worth noting that the Orientalists left behind many paintings depicting Algeria. These artistic works introduced Europeans to the locals and transcended temporal barriers, serving as an eternal window for future generations into the past. The French colonization of Algeria

³¹Shikhi Habib, CharkiHadjer, Features of Algerian Identity in Algerian and Oriental plastic art during the French occupation, Aesthetics Magazine, University of Mostaganem, Volume 07/ Issue (01), 2020, p. 390.

³²Shikh Habib, CharkiHadjer, previous reference, p. 391.

³³ Saleh Hamad Hassan al-Ashraf, Orientalism, its concept and effects, Shabakat al-Aloka, Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University, academic year 1437/1438 AH, p. 8- p. 9.

³⁴Ben al-Arbi Ali, Gouini al-Tijani, previous reference, p. 02.

primarily targeted religion and culture, considering them the fundamental pillars of the Algerian people's identity, to erode their national identity.

Conclusion:

The West has shown a greater interest in the Arab heritage and its artifacts since the beginning of the occupation, which started in 1830 in Algeria and spread to other Arab countries. We can say that this interest has been more substantial than the Arabs' interest in their heritage and art. The studies published by Orientalists continue to serve as a reference for Arab and non-Arab researchers in Arab art and heritage. The number of artistic, historical, and philosophical research has multiplied during this century, necessitating the classification of these studies into comprehensive books that include the titles of the works and the authors' names.

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