

Orientalism and Middle Eastern Culture at The 1893 Chicago World's Fair

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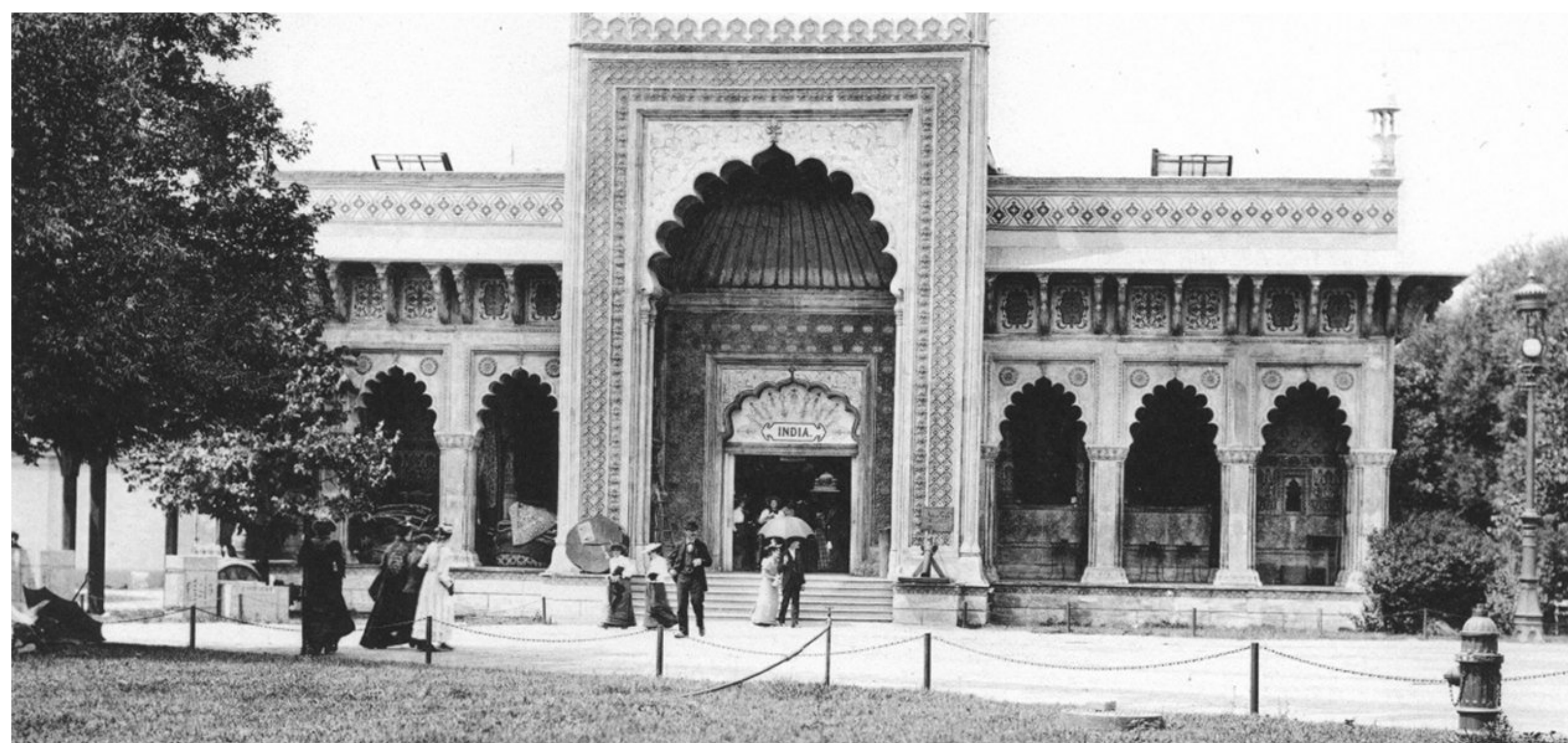


The Court of Honor at the Columbian Exposition.

Background

The 1893 Chicago World's Fair, also known as the Columbian Exposition, commemorated the 400th anniversary of Columbus's journey to the Americas. While it overtly intended to celebrate important world events, it also served as a place to compare global art and design, and prove that America was in fact far ahead of any other country.

This intent to prove America's superiority, once uncovered, reveals a rather unfortunate intent to assert Western supremacy over what was considered the underdeveloped Orient. My research focuses on unpacking and exploring the many varieties of Orientalism applied to Middle Eastern art and culture present at this exposition.



The India Building at the Columbian Exposition.

Research Questions

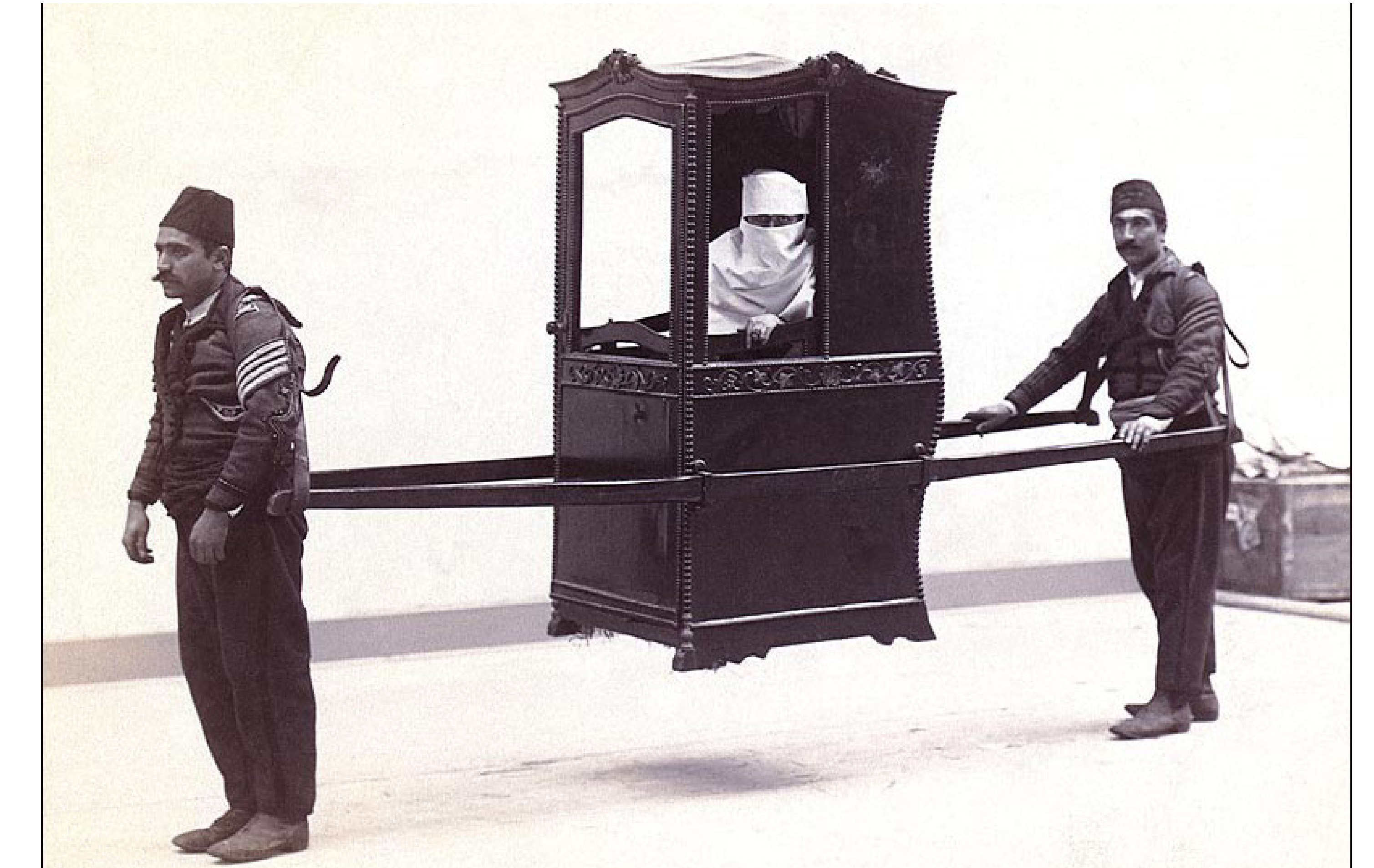
- How did European Orientalism shape the way nations like Egypt and Turkey were exhibited?
- What motifs, art, and traditions were appropriated or mislabeled?
- How did sexualization and fetishization contribute to shaping the idea of a lesser "Other"?
- Did quiet participation in these "performances" mean consent to appropriation and misrepresentation?



A young Syrian man and woman part of the narrative of a "Bedouin Romance."

Methods and Materials

Knowing that most of the records were kept and written by Europeans, I knew that it would be hard to pinpoint Orientalism. Most of my research and guidance stemmed from Edward Said's text on Orientalism. This book, along with personal experience with appropriation and cultural "Othering," helped me identify racism and orientalism that directly affected the Middle Eastern people. As I continue with my research, I hope to uncover and explain as much as I can about how white supremacy and Orientalism affected the way the Middle East was portrayed at the Columbian Exposition.



Turkish men carrying a woman in a Sedan chair.

Results and Conclusion

My preliminary research has led me to realize that the majority of the documentation for the Columbian exposition was done by white and European people, which means that what would typically be identified as marginalization, racism, and Orientalism, is not identified. Not to mention the concept of Orientalism as we know it today was not present during 1893. A lot of the exhibits were purposefully exaggerated, like purposefully dirty streets and crumbling architecture, for the sake of entertainment and an authentic foreign experience. The fetishization of traditions like belly dancing and the concept of harems heightened the sexualization of Middle Eastern cultures. These practices helped dehumanize and elevate the moral and technological progress of the West in comparison to Oriental cultures. Even today, despite more knowledge on these topics and a greater understanding of the effects of white supremacy on the rest of the world, there are people who still intentionally or accidentally reinforce these archaic ideals of Orientalism.

Acknowledgements

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