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### The Understanding of the Other in Orientalist and Primitivist Art

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Murray State University Honors College

HONORS THESIS

Certificate of Approval

The Understanding of the Other in Orientalist and Primitivist Art

Jasmine Groves

May 2021

Approved to fulfill the  
requirements of HON 437

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Dr. Antje Gamble, Assistant  
Professor  
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Approved to fulfill the  
Honors Thesis requirement  
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The Understanding of the Other in Orientalist and Primitivist Art

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
Murray State University  
Honors Diploma

Jasmine Groves

April 2021

## Abstract

In 1978, Edward Said published *Orientalism*, a seminal book that shed light on one of the “leftovers” of European colonialism. In it, he describes the West’s attempts to exoticize and romanticize the non-Western world. While the Near East, the Far East, and East/Southeast Asia are geographic terms that correspond to specific countries and cultures, the “Orient” is a Euro-American fantasy that only exists to contradict the West. The term is intentionally vague in order to satisfy any and all exotic desires that a consumer may have.

A great deal of European and American artists found inspiration in the exotic during the late 19th century. The artworks they created, however, rarely celebrate or appreciate non-Western culture. They emphasize “otherness,” and turn dynamic societies into mere playgrounds for their own artistic expression. The beginning of the 20th century saw a rise in artistic Primitivism, or the influence of so-called “savage” cultures on modern art. Both of these movements represent a justification for ethnocentrism.

Since the publication of Said’s book, art historians, anthropologists, and historians have been taking an inquisitive look at how (and why) cultures outside of Europe and America have been generalized and exoticized. In response, many artists, curators, designers, and art collectors have asked themselves if they are representing non-European cultures as a mysterious “other”, or as diverse histories hosting a myriad of different cultures, languages, and histories.

In my paper, I will be evaluating the scope of Orientalism in the 19th century and Primitivism in the 20th century. I will also discuss the value of authenticity and what causes “the West” to crave exotic art.

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## THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE OTHER IN ORIENTALIST AND PRIMITIVIST ART



(fig. 1) Gucci's 'Indy Full Turban' at Milan Fashion Week in 2018. © Copyright, Getty Images.

In 2018, Gucci dressed a model in what was called the 'Indy Full Turban' during Milan Fashion Week. The 'Indy Full Turban' was a bright blue hat designed to look like a Sikh turban, known as a dastār. The model accompanied the look with an oversized 49ers sweatshirt and bright pink floral pants (figure 1). Gucci faced backlash almost immediately, with many people scolding the company for yet another instance of cultural appropriation (the brand had also released a balaclava with a design that resembled blackface).<sup>1</sup> The Sikh Coalition (@sikh\_coalition) responded by saying "@gucci @Nordstrom The Sikh turban is not just a fashion accessory, but it's also a sacred religious article of faith. We hope more can be done to recognize this critical context. #appropriation".<sup>2</sup> Although Gucci removed the \$790 product from

<sup>1</sup> Layla Ilchi, *Gucci Accused of Cultural Appropriation Over 'Indy Turban'* (WWD: Penske Media Corporation, 2019), <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/gucci-indy-turban-cultural-appropriation-backlash-1203132880/>

<sup>2</sup>Sikh Coalition. Twitter Post. May 15, 2019, 3:08pm.

[https://twitter.com/sikh\\_coalition/status/1128754082011807745?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwca](https://twitter.com/sikh_coalition/status/1128754082011807745?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwca)



its online store, the fact that that the item made it to the runway is incredibly important. Gucci relied on consumers (presumably non-Sikh consumers) to perceive the hat as fashionable and exotic *first* and as a piece of religious headwear *second*, evidenced by the fact that the product is not actually a turban, but a hat that had been pre-sewn to look like it had been carefully tied and folded. In *Fashion Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity, and South Asian American Culture*, Vanita Reddy calls this a “capitalist orientalist fashion aesthetic of turban chic”.<sup>3</sup>

Orientalism is not a phenomenon confined to popular culture and fashion. It refers to the much larger practice of dividing the cultures of the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’, or more specifically, ‘East’ and West’. In this paper, I will use the terms ‘East’, ‘West’, and ‘Orient’ to reflect the manner in which artists and academics have simplified differences between cultures. Of course, the terms ‘West’ or ‘East’ have no stable definition, and do not physically exist. They are constructions that depend entirely on context. In this paper, when I use the term West, I am using it to refer to the United States and European countries that provided significant scholarship on Orientalist topics. When I use the term East, I will use it to refer to those countries within the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, which were/are the subjects of Orientalist fascination. The term Orient, similarly, refers to no specific geographical location and is rather a construct based loosely around the cultures of what we now identify as the Middle East.<sup>4</sup>

The term orientalism had not been used critically until the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978. The book came at a time of heavy European decolonization, giving rise to a new questioning of European intellectualism. Said critiqued the manner in which western

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mp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1128754082011807745%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1\_&ef\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.com%2Ffashion-news%2Ffashion-scoops%2Fgucci-indy-turban-cultural-appropriation-backlash-1203132880%2F

<sup>3</sup> Vanita Reddy. *Fashion Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity, and South Asian American Culture*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016), 184.

<sup>4</sup> William H. McNeill. “What We Mean by the West,” *Orbis* 41, no. 4 (1997): 513-519.

scholars, namely British, French, and American, made the Near East and Middle East a topic of study and fascination. In his estimation, numerous 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century academics were guilty of being preoccupied with "otherness," when writing about the lives of "Muslims, Arabs, and stylized "Orientals."<sup>5</sup> Said showed that the development of an imaginary Orient existed to enhance the successes of Europe by creating a binary system, making the Orient "an integral part of European material civilization and culture."<sup>6</sup> The idealized Westerner is presented as rational, masculine, and powerful, but the idealized Easterner is feminine, lazy, and over controlled by violent and sexual urges. It is a "fundamental concept that one society's view of another's culture may be used, like an interpretation of the past, to sanctify its own institutions and political aggression."<sup>7</sup> *Orientalism* identifies that many of the writings provided by Orientalist academics reveal more about the writer than the actual topic.<sup>8</sup> *Orientalism* has been seminal for the evaluation of artwork depicting the peoples and landscape of the Middle and Near East during the 19th century.

Many of Said's most vocal critics identified themselves as academic Orientalists. Robert Irwin, an Arabist, wrote *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and its Discontents*, a sharp criticism of *Orientalism*. In regards to Said's work, Irwin expressed confusion with the way Said seemed to place most of the blame on the British and the French, and not the Germans, who also provided substantial scholarship on the Orient.<sup>9</sup> Irwin also charged Said with turning

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2007), 90.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage, 1978), 33.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Scott, "Reading Said's Orientalism," *Essays in Criticism* 58, no. 1 (2008): 65. Accessed March 28, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/escrit/cgm025>

<sup>8</sup> Scott, Reading Said. 64-81

<sup>9</sup> Varisco, Reading Orientalism. 90

“Orientalist” into a “bad word,” associating it purely with racist and ethnocentric intent.<sup>10</sup> I mention Said’s critics as well as his admirers to show just how influential his book has been since its publication. Analyses of Orientalism as a concept have been both political and academic. Art historians are continuing to build off of his seminal works.

Where the division of East vs West began is debated. In *Art and Exoticism: An Anthropology of the Yearning for Authenticity*, Paul van der Grijp proposed that the notion of exoticism and a division between the East and West may have begun with Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus travels to a variety of extraordinary and hostile lands. The strangeness of these exotic people in the Homeric tale is accentuated by a number of supernatural creatures that the protagonist must defeat. Van der Grijp also cites Herodotus of Halicarnassus, whose anthropological studies of "barbaric" societies revealed how the Greeks perceived others.<sup>11</sup> This is an early example of a writer using an intentionally Eurocentric and ethnocentric point of view when describing those from foreign lands. William McNeill, in *What We Mean by the West*, attributes the split in part to Constantine moving the capital from Rome to Constantinople, and the subsequent division of the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire.<sup>12</sup>

The term “Orient” is intentionally non-specific, as Said first pointed out. In visual culture, especially before the 21st century, "oriental" can describe almost anything, from a Persian rug, to a woman wearing a kimono, to a statue of dancing Shiva. Grijp writes, "Exoticism is not an inherent quality of people, objects, or places. It's ascribed from a certain egocentric and

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Kramer, "Enough Said [review of Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge*]," *Campus Watch*, The Middle East Forum, 2007, <https://www.meforum.org/campus-watch/10822/enough-said-review-of-robert-irwin-dangerous>.

<sup>11</sup>This is a point of view provided by Grijp. Though interesting, it romanticizes classical Greece as the birthing place for all subsequent European cultures. Paul van der Grijp. *Art and Exoticism: An Anthropology of the Yearning for Authenticity* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 31- 34.

<sup>12</sup> McNeill, *What We Mean by The West*.

ethnocentric point of view."<sup>13</sup> Because the Orient is a construct, it is simultaneously sophisticated, and simple, violent, and peaceful, wild, and full of repose.

Orientalism was a subgenre of Romantic art. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic artist desired to explore that which could not be explained by the rational mind. Likewise, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalists created a visual language to describe a place where people were not controlled by their rational mind.<sup>14</sup> Orientalist art is driven by a desire to relish in the exotic and escape monotonous and predictable life. It was the perceived responsibility of 19th century artists, whom we now label "Orientalist", to create images that both satisfied aesthetic expectations and strengthened "otherness" (and, arguably, served as a mirror for the artist themselves). Frederick Borher, in *Orientalism and Visual Culture*, poses that Eugene Delacroix was successful in creating that union.<sup>15</sup>

## THE OTHER IS VIOLENT

In 1832, Eugene Delacroix joined the Count de Mornay on a French diplomatic mission to North Africa. After his trip, he completed many paintings of the Algerian landscape as he perceived it. His letters and journal entries reflect a significant interest in the beautiful colors of Tangier. In a letter to Frédéric Villot, he writes:

This place is made for painters. Economists and Saint-Simonians might find much to criticize as regards to human rights and equality before the law, but beauty abounds here; not the over-praised beauty of fashionable paintings. The heroes of David and Co. with their rose-pink limbs would cut a sorry figure beside these children of the sun.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Paul van der Grijp. *Art and Exoticism*. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Little, ... *Isms: Understanding Art*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2004), 72- 73.

<sup>15</sup> Frederick N. Borher, *Orientalism and Visual Culture* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger. *Art in Theory, 1815-1900* (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 87.

Delacroix is observing this foreign land aesthetically. He is not searching for anthropological or historical benefits; he is looking for the brightest and most breathtaking scenes to take back to France with him. In many of his Orientalist and Romantic works, women were more likely to be naked or hardly clothed, and they were often lounging or sitting. Men are more likely to be standing or fighting. Delacroix's depiction of sex reflects a prevalent attitude among upper-class men in late 19th century France. The power of Europe over the "East" is comparable to the power of man over a woman.<sup>17</sup> This similarity can easily be seen in his *Death of Sardanapalus*, made in 1827 (figure 2). Delacroix uses the titular character from Lord Byron's 1824 play *Sardanapalus*, in which the fictional ancient Assyrian ruler is portrayed as a violent, self-absorbed man.<sup>18</sup> When he received news that his troops had been defeated by the Babylonians, he ordered for all of his clothing, gold, silver, concubines, and eunuchs to be destroyed. His enemies would not be able to annihilate his land if he does it first. In this large, swirling Romantic painting, Sardanapalus lays on his bed and watches the death and destruction occurring below him with an ambivalent gaze. The image is overflowing with luxury. Jewels, vases, and brightly colored fabrics are littered throughout the scene, filling in every inch of space not taken up by figures. Sardanapalus's possessions become even more beautiful and evanescent as the viewer watches them fall to the ground.

<sup>17</sup> Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," *Art in America*, May 1983, 119-126.

<sup>18</sup>In addition to Lord Byron's play, Aristotle, in the *Nicomedian Ethics*, described a character named Sardanapalus as someone overcome by brutish desires. The Sardanapalus figure is most likely based on many real-life Assyrian kings, including Arshurbanipal. The re-discovery of Assyria through archaeology was also occurring at this time. The ambiguity of Sardanapalus's existence contributes to the romantic and over-exaggerated nature of Delacroix's painting. Frahm, E., & פראם, א. דמיונותיו של אשורבניפל במסורת המאוחרת, "Images of Ashurbanipal in Later Tradition," *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies*, 2003, 38-41.



(fig.2) Eugene Delacroix, *Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827. Oil on canvas, 154 in × 195 in.

Viewers of *The Death of Sardanapalus*, in the 19th century, might perceive Sardanapalus in one of two ways. First, they may view the king as a merciless brute, a murderer who can not even conjure sympathy for the human lives he is taking. There is something off-putting about the way he casually props his head up to see the action below him, as if he is witnessing something completely ordinary. This point of view was rationalized by Eurocentric 19th century views of civilization. In that mindset, people of non-Western cultures simply hadn't progressed past

barbarism. Linda Nochlin, in “The Imaginary Orient”, suggests that the 19th century Orientalist necessitates that “*their* law is irrational violence; our violence, by contrast, is law”.<sup>19</sup>

A viewer might also identify with Sardanapalus’s ambivalence towards the violence that surrounds him. The head resting on the hand might remind a viewer of the philosopher Heraclitus in Raphael’s *School of Athens*. Sardanapalus outsmarted his enemies; he did everything within his power to ensure that the coming Babylonians do not even get the pleasure of destroying him. In this image, he has the privilege of ordering violent acts and the privilege of not being the one to carry out the acts. Once again, this can be linked to Eurocentric ideas of progress. Like the East vs West dichotomy, one rational side possesses (and should possess) power over the lawless, irrational side.

It should be mentioned here that this painting was completed in 1827, before Delacroix had even traveled to North Africa. Indian, Turkish, and North African people were present throughout his body of work from 1820 to 1863. It might be assumed that Delacroix’s depictions of Middle Eastern and North African landscapes and life might have become more ethnographic and less romantic after his voyage to Tangier, but that statement would not be entirely accurate. A chronological list of his works will show that the number of paintings like *Turk with a Saddle* (1825) and *Two Views of a Standing Indian from Calcutta* (1824), individual portraits with simple backdrops, slightly decreased after his trip. Dramatic, swirling paintings with large crowds and lavish landscapes, like *Fanatics of Tangier* (1838) and *Arabs Skirmishing in the Mountains* (1863) are more prevalent after 1832. Delacroix began to showcase an interest in not only the clothing of ‘exotic’ people, but their architecture and natural landscape as well. His excursion to Algeria inspired him to create exotic landscapes with more emotion and movement.

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<sup>19</sup> Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient”, 130.

## THE OTHER LIVES IN A LAND OF DESIRE

Laura Nochlin contrasts Delacroix's swirling compositions and looser brushstrokes to Jean-Léon Gérôme's near-perfect perspective and smooth paint application, essentially "veiling the fact that the image consists of paint on canvas."<sup>20</sup> Gérôme was one of the most talked about artists of his time. Trained as an academic painter, he was exceptionally skilled at painting the picturesque. The Musée d'Orsay describes his painting style as a collage of sorts.<sup>21</sup> Both his Orientalist and more classic style paintings are similar to still lives in that the placement of architecture, costume, artifacts does most of the storytelling.

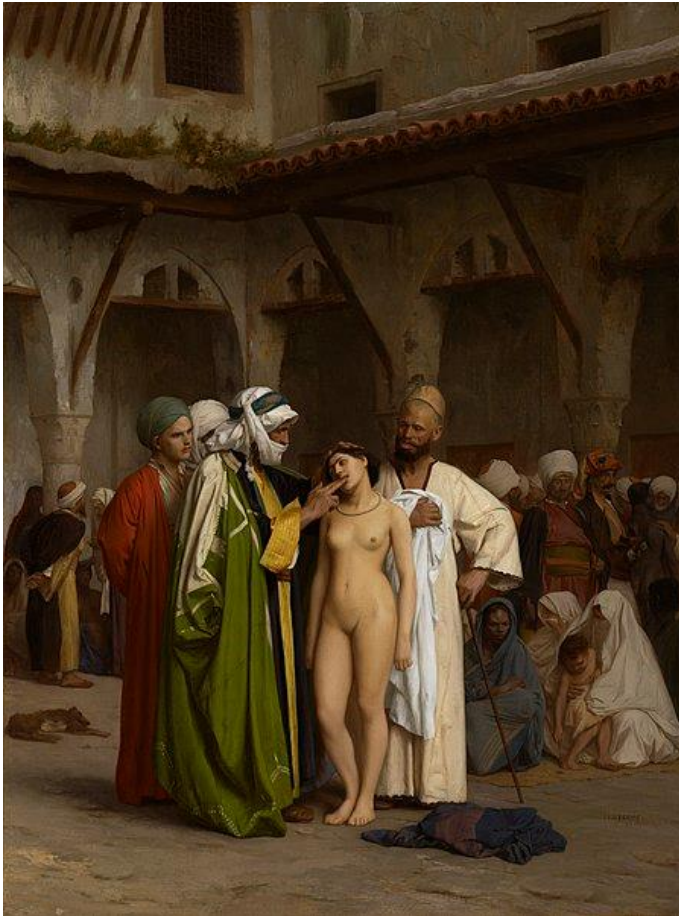
*The Slave Market* (1866) exemplifies this trend. In an unspecified Near East environment, a seller presents a slave woman to a potential buyer (figure 3). The buyer uses two fingers to examine the nude woman's teeth. He holds her head back with his other hand. Two additional men stand near the woman, waiting their turn to examine the goods for sale. In the background are two other naked slaves. On the right, a naked African man stands with his back towards the

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<sup>20</sup> Nochlin. "The Imaginary Orient" 119-125.

<sup>21</sup> "The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)," Musée d'Orsay, 2006, accessed on March 25, 2021, [https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-museums/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay-more/article/jean-leon-Gérôme-25691.html?S=&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=649&cHash=249cd211df&print=1&no\\_cache=1&](https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-museums/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay-more/article/jean-leon-Gérôme-25691.html?S=&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=649&cHash=249cd211df&print=1&no_cache=1&).





(fig.3) Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Slave Market*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 33.3 in × 24.9 in.

viewer. A buyer or owner touches the man on his shoulder. On the left, very faintly, a naked woman can be seen sitting between two standing men.

Gérôme's academic attention to detail is integral to the eroticism of *The Slave Market*. While Delacroix's messy brushstrokes and swirliness roused emotion, Gérôme's smoothness roused sensuality. The viewer is invited to take the place of the buyer, imagining the texture of

the slave's hair, and listening for the sound of a fingernail hitting a tooth. The woman stands in the sunlight, and has the brightest skin tone of all the figures. The openness of her body contrasts that of the potential male buyers, who only have their faces exposed. Since Nochlin suggests that a theme of Orientalist paintings is that the Westerner is never physically present, but implied, I argue here that the Westerner is present in the buyer.<sup>22</sup> He was investigating the slave for her usefulness, and he was the one 'civilized' enough to cover up most of his body, and he was the one with the means to even consider a purchase. The slave, on the other hand, is a personification of the "East," beautiful but au naturel and uncivilized. The lawlessness ingrained into her depiction is attractive. Slavery was abolished in France in 1848, amongst a wave of other European and American abolitionist movements. The abundance of slave markets and harems in Orientalist paintings reflects an attempt to simplify and vilify places that were unknown to Europe. Grijp points out that the similarities between the gender binary and the "East vs. West" binary are not accidental.<sup>23</sup> The use of female nude as a symbol for the Orient was a tool utilized by Gérôme, Delacroix and Ingres.

*The Snake Charmer* (figure 4) was painted by Gérôme sometime around 1879. In it, a young nude boy, facing away from the viewer, holds a large snake. It wraps around his waist and extends out onto his outstretched arm. A group of men of varying ethnicities (including Berber and Circassian) watch on with awe. Calligraphy sprawls across the beautiful, turquoise wall, and the stonework on the floor remains impressive, despite a few missing tiles.<sup>24</sup> On the boy's right, an old man sits cross-legged in the ground and plays a flute.

<sup>22</sup> Nochlin, *The Imaginary Orient*. 112- 126.

<sup>23</sup> Grijp, *Art and Exoticism*. 90-95.

<sup>24</sup> The clarity of the calligraphy in *The Snake Charmer* has been debated. In "The Imaginary Orient", Nochlin cites Richard Ettinghausen's quote that it is 'perfectly legible', but also mentions that Edward Said called it 'unreadable' in a conversation with her. 'Unreadable' and 'made-up gibberish' could mean the same thing for someone who cannot read Arabic (such as myself).



(fig.4) Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Snake Charmer*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 32.4 in × 48 in.

*The Snake Charmer* gained attention when the painting was featured on the cover of Said's *Orientalism*. Although Said does not discuss the painting in the book, numerous postcolonial texts (like Nochin's study) cite Orientalist painting's tendency to combine clothing and artifacts in a way that emphasizes 'otherness'. To the average French 19<sup>th</sup> century viewer (and, arguably, many 21st century viewers), the scene looks like a faithful depiction of reality.

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Ibn Warraq, an author specializing in Quranic criticism, states that the calligraphy *is* legible, and is a verse from 256 from Surah II. Considering the fact that Gérôme could not read Arabic, and did not know the rules of Arabic calligraphy, it can be assumed that he took some artistic liberty when painting the text. Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," *Art in America*, May 1983, 191. Ibn Warraq, "Linda Nochlin and the Imaginary Orient," *New English Review*, *New English Review*, June 2010, [https://www.newenglishreview.org/Ibn\\_Warraq/Linda\\_Nochlin\\_and\\_The\\_Imaginary\\_Orient/#\\_ftn23](https://www.newenglishreview.org/Ibn_Warraq/Linda_Nochlin_and_The_Imaginary_Orient/#_ftn23)

Like Delacroix, Gérôme took two trips to North Africa during 1856 and 1862 before producing *The Snake Charmer*.<sup>25</sup> He would keep many photographs from his travels, but would also record what he saw on canvas. Gérôme's photographs and other visual recordings are not immune to Orientalist tendencies. Artists consciously choose what to paint and what not to paint just as photographers consciously choose what to photograph and what not to photograph. Many of his works, especially *Snake Charmer*, are stuffed with as much detail as possible to appear ethnographic, obscuring the fact that they are still partially created with a Western imagination.

For this painting, Gérôme owed a great deal to Abdullah Frères' photography, including *Interior View of the Imperial Baghdad Pavilion* (1880) (figure 5).<sup>26</sup> The white vegetative design on the tiles in *Snake Charmer* was taken from the Baghdad Pavilion of the Ottoman Topkapi Palace in Istanbul (in what is now Turkey), while the floor was influenced by a part of the palace called the Golden Path. It's highly likely that Gérôme worked from a photograph of the Golden Path, as foreigners were not allowed in that specific space.<sup>27</sup> Snake charming was an Egyptian and Indian phenomenon, and it was highly unlikely that such a performance would be taking place in the Topkapi Palace in this time period.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Lees, *Nineteenth-Century European Paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute* (Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2012), page number. 359-360.

<sup>26</sup> "Abdul Hamid II Collection, Topkapi Palace," *Library of Congress*, accessed April 4, 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/abdul-hamid-ii/?fa=subject:topkapi+palace+%28istanbul,+turkey%29&sp=3>

<sup>27</sup> Fanna S. Gebreyesus, "Beyond the Orientalist Canon: Art and Commerce in Jean-Léon Gérôme's 'the Snake Charmer'." ProQuest, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1746943101?fromopenview=true&pq-origsite=gscholar>.

<sup>28</sup> A.J. Racy, "Domesticating Otherness: The Snake Charmer in American Popular Culture," *Ethnomusicology* 60, no. 2 (2016): 199.



(fig. 5) Abdullah Frères, *Interior View of the Imperial Baghdad Pavilion*, 1880. Photograph.

The depiction of the young boy is especially peculiar. He stands on a prayer mat, though not praying. His nudity, though not belonging to a woman, is feminine enough to forego heavy questioning. When the viewer's eyes wrap around the python, they may wrap around the boy's naked body, lingering on his pale skin and muscular legs. Like the slave in *The Slave Market*, he is the brightest figure in the painting. The viewer is also invited to take the place of the men sitting against the wall, entranced by the performance, and possibly watching the boy with a homoerotic and pedophilic gaze. Said describes the imaginary Orient as a place where Western

men could experience "sexual experience unobtainable in Europe."<sup>29</sup> Joseph Boone, in his essay "Vacation Cruises, or Homoerotics of Orientalism," elaborates on how themes of European dominance mirror themes of sexual dominance.<sup>30</sup> Since the Orient was created to be complete opposite of the Occident, non-Western men can appear as both lawless brutes and as alluring objects of desire, whichever suits the needs of the artist.

Towards the end of Gérôme's seventy-year artistic career, his academic style went out of fashion. The academic style, heavily influenced by the Académie des Beaux-Arts, valued idealism and an extreme attention to the human form. But more abstracted and painterly styles became popular. A chasm grew between Realists like Édouard Manet and Gustave Courbet and the artists that retained the academic and neoclassical styles.<sup>31</sup> The shift in styles, for Holly Edwards in *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures*, is due in part to the increased availability of mass-produced goods and urbanization.<sup>32</sup> Travel was possible for people outside of the higher classes, and the Orient became 1) a marketplace for an array of decorative objects and goods, and 2) a collection of motifs that could be used for sex and exotic appeal for advertising products. For example, the very popular brand of Camel cigarettes utilized an Orientalist landscape to liken the self-indulgence of tobacco products to the supposed indulgent lives of those in the East. As technological advances allowed for luxury, the life of the irrational, slothful Easterner became less deplorable and more compelling.

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<sup>29</sup> Said, *Orientalism*. 222.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph A Boone, "Vacation Cruises; Or, the Homoerotics of Orientalism," *Modern Language Association* 110, no. 1 (1995): 89-94.

<sup>31</sup>Phillipa Kaina, "Resuscitating Gérôme?," *Associations of Art Historians* 35, no. 4 (2012): 854-56.

<sup>32</sup> Holly Edwards, *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870—1930*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, (2000), 16-20.

## A NEW PERCEPTION OF THE OTHER

Anthropological and psychological studies saw an increase in scholarship during the beginning of the 20th century. The terms ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ became common around the turn of the century, used to refer to the “so-called tribal cultures of Africa, the Pacific, and North America.”<sup>33</sup> Like ‘East’ and ‘West’, they refer to geographical locations but without clear-cut boundaries. Whether or not 20th century Chinese or Egyptian cultures could be considered ‘primitive’ depended on how harshly the language, symbols, and history were compared to European tradition.

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One of the most important books for visual artists at that time was Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913), in which he claimed that all societies progress in a linear fashion from savagery to complexity. In Freud’s estimation, the mental state of those in primitive societies was comparable to that of a child or of the insane.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Social Darwinist theory, and the writings of Herbert Spencer, Carl Jung, and Claude Levi-Strauss proposed that the “savage mind” is unhindered by time: while a European child grows to have an understanding of history and self-reflection, the primitive human being does not develop “advanced” faculties by adulthood.<sup>35</sup>

While the Orientalist artists of the 19th century sought to separate themselves from the “other” in their paintings, 20th century artists utilizing primitivist elements in their art sought a form of collaboration with the “other.” The “Age of Reason” had been a large part of the European canon for most of the 18th and early 19th century. Reason represented a deliberate

<sup>33</sup> Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 23.

<sup>34</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. (New York: Moffat, Tard & Co.)

<sup>35</sup> Rhodes, *Primitivism*. 13-30.



split between philosophy, religion, and science, and sought to create a better future. It is easy now to see how elitist and one-sided many Enlightenment thinkers truly were. When Thomas Hobbes and his contemporaries rallied for the ‘natural equality of all men’, they didn’t really mean *all* men, especially non-European men and women.

The time-honored mode of thinking that characterized visual Academicism and Neoclassicism did not serve the needs of the modern artist. Rapid changes caused by industrialization, including but not limited to, the birth of motion pictures, the Model T, and the first intentional splitting of the atom caused people to yearn for a new type of knowledge. In 1933, art historian Herbert Read claimed that “we can learn more of the essential nature of art from its earliest manifestations on primitive man (and in children) than from its intellectual elaboration in great periods of culture.”<sup>36</sup> These people and their ‘simpler’ minds could be of use to academics and artists alike. The ‘noble savage’ narrative posits that non-Europeans possessed a form of introspection and wisdom that had been lost in the modern day. Gerald Gillespie, in “In Search of the Noble Savage: Some Romantic Cases”, calls this fallenness: an obsession with returning to the foundations of Christianity.<sup>37</sup>

For artists, the ‘untouched’ nature of the primitive was the answer to the questions asked by rapid industrialization. Using Freudian and Darwinist theories, appropriating motifs from ‘savage’ cultures was a form of deliberate regression, like a return to childhood. Gauguin is perhaps the poster child for the artist seeking a better life in primitive lands. When asked why he decided to travel to Tahiti, Gauguin answered, “I was captivated by that virgin land and its

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<sup>36</sup> Rhodes, *Primitivism*. 56.

<sup>37</sup> Gerald Gillespie, “In Search of the Noble Savage: Some Romantic Cases.” *Neohelicon (Budapest)* 29, no. 1 (2002): 89-95.



primitive and simple race; I went back there, and I'm going to go there again. In order to produce something new, you have to return to the original source, to the childhood of mankind."<sup>38</sup>

Needless to say, there is a striking ethnocentric bias in this understanding of culture. The racist ideals of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century could now be justified under pseudo-scientific guises. For the modern Primitivist artist, there is little to no need to delineate between the African, Pacific, or Native American motifs that one has appropriated. The purpose of those motifs are their non-Westerness, their otherness. That otherness could be a vessel for a simpler life, in Paul Gauguin's case, or a rejection of the classic, in Pablo Picasso's case.

## THE OTHER LIVES IN AN EROTIC, EXOTIC PARADISE

Philosopher Ruud Welten argues that, regardless of the amount of Tahitian sunsets he watched or the number of Tahitian 'lovers' he took, Gauguin never expressed a desire to shed his Western gaze.<sup>39</sup> As demonstrated by his use of color and heavy outlines, he is not trying to *record* what he sees, rather, he is projecting and depicting what he is looking for. This is characteristic of other Symbolist and Post-Impressionist artists.

*Arearea*, painted in 1892 (figure 6) shows two young Tahitian women seated on a hill underneath a tree. The woman in white makes direct eye contact with the viewer while the woman in blue looks down and plays a flute-like instrument. A red dog sniffs the ground in front of them. In the background, three women worship a large statue. The entire canvas is full of colors that the Academy of the previous century would have despised. Bright yellow, red, and

<sup>38</sup> Ruud Welten. "Paul Gauguin and the complexity of the primitivist gaze." *Journal of Art Historiography* 12, vol. 1 (2015) 1-13

<sup>39</sup> Welten. "Paul Gauguin and complexity". 2.

green are the colors that Gauguin has chosen for the middle ground. The skin of the woman on the left is identical to the yellow-green on the vegetation on the tree. The perspective is intentionally skewed so that Gauguin can show us multiple scenes at once.

Gauguin was never trained classically in art.<sup>40</sup> His friends were Post-Impressionists, like Vincent van Gogh and Paul Odilon Redon. The academic style never caught his eye, so thick outlines and visible brushstrokes are common in his body of work from 1879 to his death in 1903. *Arearea* clearly demonstrates Gauguin's distinctive visual language.

It can be interpreted that the simplicity of Gauguin's painting style is meant to reflect a simplicity that he sought after in the 'primitive' peoples of Tahiti. *Arearea* depicts a peaceful scene meant for reflection and leisure, not unlike the idyllic landscapes of Claude Monet and other Impressionists. Gauguin included the Tahitian people in his paintings to *fuse* them with the natural landscape. While the plants and animals in the Western world were being desecrated for the needs of Europeans, the plants and animals in the landscape of *Arearea* have no purpose other than being beautiful and colorful. The land of Tahiti could serve as a retreat from the rapid urbanization of France, and so the people of Tahiti (who were supposedly inseparable from their land) personified that retreat. It should be mentioned that this perception is quite ironic; 19th century industrialization is what allowed the advertisement of exotic lands in the first place.

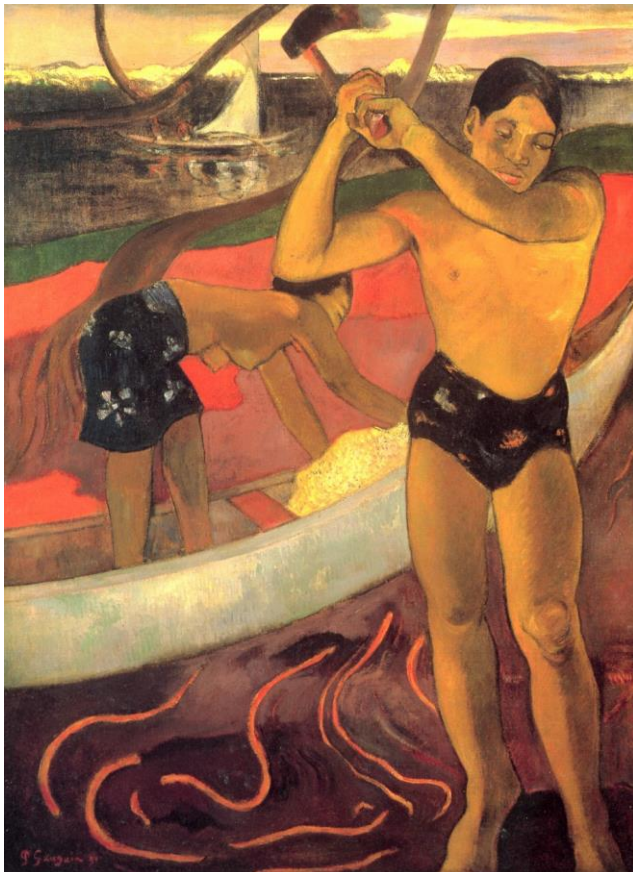
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<sup>40</sup> Nancy Mowl Mathews, *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001), 14.



(fig.6) Paul Gauguin, *Arearea*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 30 in × 37 in.

In Gauguin's painted paradise, every day is filled with leisure. He painted mostly women and girls in Tahiti, who are rarely seen in interior settings, in dynamic, moving settings, or laboring. Even in *A Man with an Axe*, the young man shows little expression in his face as he swings the axe over his shoulder (Figure 7). His body shows little action too. Gauguin added in dynamism rather through the pink, abstracted forms in the bottom left corner. In *Arearea*, as well as *A Man with an Axe*, the solid, stationary human figures are contrasted with bright, swirling landscapes.



(fig.7) Paul Gauguin, *A Man with an Axe*, 1891. Oil on canvas.



(fig.8) Paul Gauguin, *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 45.6 in × 53 in.

*Spirit of the Dead Watching* (figure 8) was painted during Gauguin's first trip to Tahiti in 1892. In it, a native girl lies on a bed with many blankets. She rests on her stomach, with her hands raised up near her head and her eyes gazing fervently at the viewer. A mysterious-looking woman with a head covering leans against a pillar and watches over the girl. The deep purple void behind them suggests that it is nighttime. Gauguin's cloisonnist style is strong here; the girl's dark skin, a nearly solid block of color, contrasts greatly with the off-white blanket she lies on. The night sky is painted with visible brushstrokes that are characteristic of Post-Impressionists. The painting is eerie, the ghost-like woman's eyes could be interpreted as

looking at the girl or staring directly at the viewer. The girl relaxes her body as if she was sleeping, but her eyes are full of fear.

In 1901, Gauguin published his travelogue, *Noa Noa*, with the help of editor and novelist Chalres Morice. It was revealed in *Noa Noa* that Gauguin took a thirteen-year-old girl, Teha'amana (also called Tehura) as his 'native wife' during his stay. They married very early into his trip, and she became pregnant by him by the end of the year.<sup>41</sup> Gauguin justified his relationship with her by describing her as 'equivalent' to an eighteen- to twenty-year-old European woman.<sup>42</sup>

Teha'amana is the woman depicted in *Spirit of the Dead Watching*. In *Noa Noa*, Gauguin recalled Teha'amana's behavior upon coming home late one evening;

Quickly, I struck a match, and I saw...Tehura, immobile, naked, lying face downward flat on the bed with the eyes inordinately large with fear. She looked at me and seemed not to recognize me. As for myself I stood for some moments strangely uncertain. A contagion emanated from the terror of Tehura... Never had I seen her so beautiful, so tremendously beautiful. And then in this half-light which was surely peopled for her with dangerous apparitions and terrifying suggestions. I was afraid to make any movement which might increase the child's paroxysm of fright. How could I know what at that moment I might seem to her? Might she not with my frightened face take me for one of the demons and specters, one of the Tupapaüs, with which the legends of her race people sleepless nights? [sic].<sup>43</sup>

Teha'amana's beauty is that of the noble savage—she was presented as untainted by the rigid and rational conventions of the West, and therefore 'purer'. Like the boy in *The Snake Charmer*, the girl in *Spirit of the Dead Watching* represents a sexual conquest that would have been unobtainable (or at least, frowned upon) in Europe.<sup>44</sup> Gauguin unabashedly admits to wanting to

<sup>41</sup> Nancy Mowl Mathews, *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001), 180.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa*. (New York: Greenburg, 1901), 66.

<sup>43</sup> Gauguin, *Noa Noa*. 76-77.

<sup>44</sup> Mathews suggests that Gauguin sought homosexual encounters in Tahiti. In *Noa Noa*, he expresses attraction towards a young Tahitian man, writing "The similarity of the sexes make their relations the easier...In spite of all this lessening in sexual differences, why was it that there

rape young women, saying "...For in this way, she has not given her consent for the beginning of permanent love. It is possible that there is a deeper meaning in this violence which at first sight seems so revolting."<sup>45</sup> Her sensuality comes in part from her naivety. For Gauguin, Teha'amana and Tahiti are both rare finds that must be kept secret and untouched to maintain purity. Her breasts and genitals are hidden, but she makes direct eye contact with the viewer. She surrenders to the ominous figure with her body, but uses her eyes to ask for help. The viewer is being asked to 'save' her in whatever way they see fit.

There is something off about the way Gauguin attributed her fear to the "Tupapaüs that filled the sleepless nights of her people" and not himself.<sup>46</sup> We will never know Teha'amana's side of the story, but it is not unreasonable to imagine that her fear may have been caused by her new husband. Gauguin had been abusive to Mette, his first wife in France, and was likely abusive towards Teha'amana--beyond her being a child, unable to consent to their marriage.<sup>47</sup>

## THE OTHER CAN BE USED TO MAKE A POINT

Gauguin desired to create a sense of comfort and eroticism when painting the noble savage. For other artists in the very late 19th century and early 20th century, however, the savage's bruteness was a desirable quality. Pablo Picasso painted *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (figure 9) 1907, but it was not publicly exhibited until 1916. *Les Femmes d'Alger* was not well-received when it was first shown.<sup>48</sup> Unlike the other artists discussed thus far, Picasso used sharp

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suddenly rose in the soul of a member of an old civilization, a horrible thought...the fever throbbed in my temples and my knees shook." Nancy Mowl Matthews, *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001), 183-185.

<sup>45</sup> Gauguin, *Noa Noa*. 34-35.

<sup>46</sup> Gauguin, *Noa Noa*. 76-77.

<sup>47</sup> Matthews, *An Erotic Life*. 182.

<sup>48</sup> Christopher Green, *Les Femmes d'Alger*. (United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1-10.



angles to represent an erotically charged setting. In *Les Femmes d'Alger*, five naked women are depicted in an area with draped fabric. Given their nudity, poses, and the metaphor provided by the bowl of fruit (fruitful=blossoming objects of desire), it can be assumed that this is a brothel. Their bodies are sharp and disjointed, and it is difficult to tell which angle(s) the women are being viewed from. Their faces are harsh and static, a stark contrast to most 19th century female nudes. The ground is rotated upwards and is indistinguishable from any wall or foreground.



(fig. 9) Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*. 1907. Oil on canvas, 96 in × 92 in.



Frances Connelly describes *Les Femmes d'Alger* as “improvisational,” suggesting that the perspective of the background and angles of the women’s heads actively “subvert the accepted norms of representation.”<sup>49</sup> The shifting perspectives of the painting might lead a viewer to believe that they are moving around the women as they move through the brothel. The painting also brings to mind Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1865), another woman painted in an anti-classical manner. *Olympia* was a reflection of changing class structures because the main figure was, unabashedly, a prostitute. Even more controversial, within art historical circles, was the fact that her pose was taken from Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*. In *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, Charles Harrison relates Manet’s use of the pose in *Venus of Urbino* to Picasso’s use of the ‘Venus Anadyomène’ pose in *Les Femmes d'Alger*. The ‘Venus Anadyomène’ pose is classically contrapposto, with the arms raised above the head to reveal an elegant, ‘unblemished body’.<sup>50</sup> However, viewers of *Les Femmes d'Alger* can easily see that the Picassos’ ‘Venus Anadyomène’ is not elegant at all. Instead, she is confrontational.

Before painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Picasso had observed Iberian and African sculpture in the Louvre and Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro.<sup>51</sup> The two women in the center of the painting look very similar to two Etruscan stone heads that would have come under Picassos’ possession in 1907.<sup>52</sup> Since these sculptures were not Ancient Greek or Roman, they could be labeled as primitive by someone in the 20th century. The bulkiness of facial features is also

<sup>49</sup>Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Harrison. *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, (New York: Yale University Press, 1993), 113 .

<sup>51</sup>Green, *Les Femmes d'Alger*. 7.

<sup>52</sup> John Golding, “Femmes d’Alger,” *The Burlington Magazine* 100, no. 662 (1958): 10-11.

characteristic of non-European sculptures and masks that Picasso acquired. The faces of the two women on the right are most often considered to be reproductions of West African and Pacific sculpture, which Picasso saw at the Musée d'Ethnographie after creating rough sketches for *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

Why would Picasso use African masks in a painting about prostitutes? Despite Picasso's signature reduction of form, references to politics still existed in his work. France's involvement in the colonization of Africa troubled Picasso. Popular press served as a source for images, reports, and fantasies about Africa, especially the French Congo.<sup>53</sup> Picasso looked at these stories with horror, and desired to subvert the notion that France's presence in Africa was anything to be admired. Picasso began painting representations of Africa to create a "powerful expression of polar meanings" like many modernists.<sup>54</sup> Representing Africa through masks (as opposed to caricatures and human zoos) was an act of anti-colonialism for Picasso and his contemporaries. Upon seeing masks in the Trocadero, Picasso wrote,

Men had made those masks and other objects for a sacred purpose, a magic purpose, as a kind of mediation between themselves and the unknown hostile forces that surrounded them, in order to overcome their fear and horror by giving it a form and an image. At that moment I realized that painting isn't an aesthetic operation; it's a form of magic designed as mediation between this strange, hostile world and us, a way of seizing power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires.<sup>55</sup>

The physicality of the forms in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, especially the faces, is characteristic of the European understanding of the idol. Idol worship has been associated with blasphemy and/or peoples with no belief in the one true, Christian God. For Primitivists, the so-called 'rejection' of European, Christian rationality by African cultures mirrored the anti-classical motives in modern

<sup>53</sup> Patricia Leighton, "The White Peril and L'Art nègre: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism" *The Art Bulletin* 72, no.4 (1990): 609-630

<sup>54</sup> Harrison, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction*. 127.

<sup>55</sup> Rhodes, *Primitivism*. 116.

art. The modernist artist called himself brave for being able to face the 'savage' practices outside of the West. Africa was not a place of blasphemous violence that needed to be 'saved' by the West, instead, it was a place that needed to be given a 'second chance' for its simplistic nature. Like Gauguin, Picasso believed that romanticization could serve as the antithesis of colonialism.

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Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with seeking a better life and looking for alternative answers. Travel is even easier today than it was in Gauguin and Picasso's time, and looking outside of one's own culture or geographical area should be encouraged. What I am intending to criticize here is the idea that some people are simpler, and therefore happier, than others because of their race, nationality, or class. For Gauguin, Tahiti was not its own place. It was a vacation spot, a dream-like menagerie where everything was to be ruled against a European benchmark. It was a classic case of the 'grass is always greener on the other side' mentality, a justification for colonialism disguised as flattery.

The Western idea of progress would have some believe that the Primitivist approach is better than the Orientalist approach. It might seem that industrialization and the increase in anthropological studies in the early 20th century would lead to greater understanding. This simply isn't true. Both of these movements require othering. Knowingly or unknowingly, all four of the artists were enforcing the idea that 'savages' and 'Orientals' were the compulsorily the products of their race and geographic location, but only the Westerner was capable of thinking outside the box. The mindsets behind both of these movements are ethnocentric and imperialist in nature.

## THE OTHER IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

The fact that othering doesn't 'get better with time' is evidenced by present-day exoticism in popular culture, like the 'Indy Full Turban' from Gucci. The term 'cultural appropriation' has seen a rise in use to describe modern-day Orientalism and Primitivism. Oxford reference defines cultural appropriation as "the taking over of creative or artistic forms, themes, or practices by one cultural group from another. It is in general used to describe Western appropriations of non-Western or non-white forms, and carries connotations of exploitation and dominance."<sup>56</sup> Just as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century introduced a new meaning of the exotic, the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century has provided countless new forms of media that can be used to appropriate non-Western cultures. This includes fashion shows and popular music videos.

There is a style seen in fashion and furniture design, called 'bohemian' or 'boho', that often relies on consumers' partial understanding of the visual language of African, Indigenous, and East/South Asian cultures. Fast fashion does not allow time for consumers to wonder why so many items might have both 'vintage' and 'Navajo-inspired' in the description. In 2012, Victoria's Secret model Karlie Kloss donned a 'Native American style' headdress on the runway, complete with turquoise jewelry and a suede bikini. There is an attempted connection between the 'wildness' of sexuality and the 'wildness' of Indigenous cultures. There is also little concern for consistency; the headdress obviously references a Native American war bonnet, but the bikini is cheetah print. The outfit was removed from the television broadcast and received massive negative feedback.<sup>57</sup> But the fact that the design was even approved by an organization as big as Victoria's Secret shows that exotification and sexualization can go hand in hand.

<sup>56</sup> "Cultural Appropriation – Oxford Reference," Oxford Reference, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095652789>

<sup>57</sup>Brittany Adams, "Remember When Karlie Kloss Wore a Native American Headdress in the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show," CR Fashion Book, Hearst Digital Media, 2017,

The purpose of this paper is to examine the similarities between the way that Orientalists and Primitivists use the other to reaffirm beliefs about themselves. Discussion about the ethnocentric biases present in Orientalist and Primitivist art has increased in the past 40 years with the help of notable writers like Said and Nochlin. The predominant narrative has shifted from an unquestioned celebration of these artists to a more critical eye. Still, there are innumerable complexities within the ways artists represent and reference people of other cultures. Analyses on the 'othering' present in art from the people that have been 'othered' have been and will be very valuable to the discussion of exoticism.

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