Orientalism In European Art Of The 19th Century: Features, Motives, Representation Of East

Orientalist artworks flourished in the 19th century when Europeans started to discover eastern countries, from the middle east to northern Africa. The East was believed to be a place where luxurious and forbidden pleasures could be indulged in - a completely different world to the west. Artists portrayed these images of the East through intense emotions and rich colors in their works. Many of the artworks illustrated the “political context of colonialism” in the 19th century (Ali 2015). In this essay, it will be argued that orientalist artworks were depicted through predetermined perspectives the west had about the East. The reinforcement of racial stereotypes found in orientalist artworks will be analyzed through the artist’s portrayal of uncivility in the East, associations between the middle east and the biblical faith, and voyeuristic views of exotic women.

Artists portrayed orientalism through portraits, topographical paintings, archeological paintings, and most popularly, genre scenes. Genre paintings portrayed people in everyday scenes, capturing the domestic life of the orient. The Snake Charmer by Jean Leon Gerome illustrates a naked young boy holding a snake that is wrapped around his torso. A group of men armed with tribal weapons slouched against the wall watch as the elder man plays a wooden flute. Although Gerome had traveled to the East, this piece was based entirely from his own imagination. The photographic style created by “finely-calibrated details and slick surfaces”(Gebreyesus 2015) turns an imaginary scene into what seems like an accurate representation of the East. To accentuate the exotic nature of the East, faux Islamic tiles and nonsensical Arabic calligraphy are added to the wall, while the weapons and clothing of the men are inaccurately depicted. The frontal view of the audience and the back of the voyeuristically portrayed figure invites viewers to observe and judge the audience, emphasizing the stereotypes associated with moral differences and practices in the West and East (Gebreyesus 2015).

L’Atelier De Porterie, Tanger by Jean Discart illustrates a worker painting pottery with other creations scattered around him. Discart portrays the scene through western ideologies of the East; the worker sitting on the ground opposed to a chair, bare footed with dirt on the soles of his feet, and wearing a traditional head piece with an unshaven beard. These depictions accentuate the stereotypes of the East being uncivilized and filthy, with the exoticness adding to the façade of the East being a mysterious land far away from the west.

The East was portrayed as a place of indulgence, however it is also symbolic of being the Holy Land and has association to the bible. Many artists used landscapes seen on their travels or from literature as the setting for religious paintings. Pilgrims going to Mecca by Leon Auguste Adolphe Belly illustrates a caravan made of camels and pilgrims crossing the scorching dessert. A man besides his donkey who carries a woman with her infant symbolizes the importance of faith and alludes to the idea of the Holy Family travelling to Mecca. The composition of the caravan moving forward from the horizon towards the center-right in a diagonal line conveys the immense energy of the caravan, while the sharpened center captivates the audience. The naturalistic style creates both individuality of each figure and the collective bond shared between one another. Belly incorporates subtle alterations to accentuate the exotic nature of the orient, appealing and reinforcing the predetermined ideas held by the West. The camels were

much larger in size compared to the miniature scale of the surrounding figures to accentuate the exotic animals and the center figure is illustrated as a bald and shirtless man, playing into the idea of uncivilized and wild. The photorealistic nature of this piece masks the over exaggerated features and is seen as an accurate portrayal of the orient by the West.

Another popular subject heavily depicted by Orientalist painters were harem scenes. The exotic and erotic nature of the works played into the idea of the East being a fantasy-like land were lavishness and forbitten pleasures could be indulged, a place completely different to the west. The harems were forbidden to be entered, therefore the majority of harem paintings were based off the artists imaginations (Thornton 1994). Many of the harem paintings featured white women instead of dark skinned women as it portrays the “sexual and racial hierarchical values of the Western male” (Black 2006). The Bath by Jean-Leon Gerome illustrates a dark haired fare skinned woman bathed by an African servant. The architecture is beautifully portrayed through glossy blue tiles, ornate sink, and a high ceiling, creating a sense of elegance. Gerome invites the viewers into the intimate bathing space through a “camera-like objectivity” (Brown 1989). The power dynamic between the two women is illustrated through their posture, the lack of eye contact and arm placed out towards the servant suggests her lack of respect and entitlement to be pampered. The “racial division” also highlights the “superiority of the white nude” (Black 2006). The fair skinned woman being completely naked in contrast to the servant being partially clothed plays into the West’s curiosity and desires for the exotic women of the East. This is due to white women intentionally portrayed to be sexually appealing to the Western males and prioritized over the African women (Black 2006). The woman is portrayed in a sensual position, the soft curvatures of her body highlighted by the sunlight. By having her back turned towards the viewers, the mysteriousness of oriental women is intensified. The piece is composed as if Gerome had “minutely observed” the setting, adding voyeuristic qualities to the piece (Brown 1989).

In conclusion, orientalist artworks portrayed the Europeans fascination of the Eastern countries through a biased perspective. Racial stereotypes of the East being uncivil and having moral differences in comparison to the west were depicted through the audience and the young male in The Snake Charmer by Jean Leon Gerome and through the chaotic environment surrounding the pottery worker in L’Atelier De Porterier, Tanger by Jean Discard. Eastern landscapes were used as setting for religious paintings such as Pilgrims going to Mecca by Leon Auguste Adolphe Belly due to associations with the bible and the middle east being seen as the Holy Land. The exotic and mysterious pleasures of the orient were portrayed through harem paintings such as The Bath by Jean Leon Gerome, the voyeuristic qualities of the artworks intrigued many Europeans. These orientalist artworks from the 19th century allowed for Europeans to gain an insight into the East and it still influences the way our current society depicts those eastern countries (Said 1978).