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Today I took a trip to the SU Art Gallery; I was on a mission to find the full painting from Professor Ray's given clue. After clumsily passing a portrait of Angelina Jolie, random checkerboard floors, a spooky life-size bronze statue, and the ever-so-powerful portrait of King Louis XIV, I had finally found the painting I was looking for, Jean-Leon Gerome's *Woman of Cairo at her Door*. Upon first impression, I was shocked by the provocative pose of the woman, but I immediately came to my senses. Thinking back to 19th century French colonialism, I had truly expected nothing less from an image depicting a Middle Eastern woman. I jotted down a few elements I found to be rather striking: caged bird metaphor (prostitute?), the flower's redness accentuating her breasts, bare background juxtaposes and emphasizes rich jewels on woman, and most importantly-- ORIENTALISM.

Keeping with the tradition of many other French artists during the 19th century, Jean-Leon Gerome was an orientalist painter. Unlike some of his peers who used travelogues and literature to construct fabricated images of the east, it is documented that Gerome took trips to Egypt and other parts of the Middle East. His trips served as inspiration to many of his paintings including *Woman of Cairo at her Door*. Even though Gerome got first-hand experience of the culture he depicts, it is pivotal to understand that the image is painted through the eyes of European, white colonialism. *Woman of Cairo at her Door*, like many other Orientalist images, promotes dangerous political and social ideologies that were used to subjugate and control the foreign "other."

Before the 19th century, the only contact Europe made with the East concerned trade and military affairs. This all changed at the beginning of the 19th century when General Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt in 1798 and occupied it until 1801. The French invasion and occupation allured many Western artists to this foreign space and thus, orientalist painting was born. The 19th-century orientalist painters largely depicted the foreign "exotic" by racializing, feminizing, and sexualizing the culture. These pictures were given documentative authority, planting images in the Western mind that people from the East are backwards and lawless, allowing people to rectify the moral conventions of French imperialism. Directly or indirectly, Gerome's *Woman of Cairo at her Door* promoted the dangerous power relations between the East and West that constituted the dominant ideology of 19th-century art and politics.

Taking a closer look at the image, the racialization and sexualization of Gerome's painting becomes very clear in the way he chose to represent this woman. She is provocatively posed: her hips and curves are accentuated by the straight wall she leans against, her face is seductive and inviting, her arms are raised above her head to emphasize what Gerome has made the most important part of the painting, her bare breasts. No matter where viewers look, the composition forces eyes back to her chest. For example, the direction of the flowers point directly back to the woman's breasts and the vase mirrors the woman's curves. Furthermore, everything in the painting besides the woman and the flowers are painted in dull tan tones, heightening the importance of these colored elements. The pink on the flowers and her breasts

are the same color, creating a visual comparison between the levels of femininity in the flowers and her own objectified, feminine body. Aside from the pinks, there is one other colored element, the traditional tapestry hung in her door frame. To keep consistency and provide a sense of reality, it can be assumed Gerome included this to add a sense of authenticity to his depiction.

Continuing, the way Gerome uses the texture of her clothing and jewelry to add an intensified layer of eroticism recalls Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' famous orientalist painting, *Grande Odalisque*. Like *Grande Odalisque*, the Egyptian woman in Gerome's painting is accessorized by the fabrics that rest against her body. The sheer top fabric and her soft silky bottoms mirror the softness of her skin, opening up the imaginations of viewers to fleshly pleasures. Like Ingres' classic orientalist portrait, the women are adorned in rich, gold jewelry, perhaps hinting at the excess wealth in the "orient," which could later be used to justify colonialist excavations.

Although orientalist paintings were largely popular nearly three centuries ago, it would be naive to think that these constructed stereotypes and representations have not carried into modern Western understanding of Eastern culture. These original paintings were the only way that Western people could visualize what life was like in foreign places, therefore these representations became unchanged embodiments. Gerome's woman becomes every woman who lives outside of the West. Her promiscuity is not individual, it becomes a misogynistic class type. Western ideology has yet to question these assumptions in the dominant narrative. Eastern women are still exoticized and viewed as sexual objects, which becomes clear when looking closely at things like sex vacationing and even the porn industry, where Eastern women are especially fetishized in ways similar to Gerome's painting. Even white colonialist attitudes have continued into the 21st century. Our modern attitudes toward Eastern women can be compared to the detail of the caged bird in Gerome's painting. The caged bird serves as an allegory for the woman it hovers near. All in all, Gerome is offering a social critique, perhaps that she is this trapped bird and her cage is the oppressive Eastern culture that forces her into prostitution. (Although his intentions seem good, he is still a white European man exerting his own moral code onto a culture that he has fabricated and does not comprehend). The same understanding of the East is present in the dominant discourse of the "orient" today, where we believe that Eastern women are oppressed by the extreme fist of Islamic patriarchy, so us, as awakened and empathetic Western people, must invade these countries and "fix" the problem. Under the veil of "saving the women and children," we are really justifying the true horrors of modern-day imperialism and globalization that have been perpetuated by from 19th century orientalism and representations like Jean-Leon Gerome's *Woman of Cairo at her Door*.

References:

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/becoming-modern/intro-becoming-modern/a/orientalism>

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd_euor.htm

and notes from WGS 201, Transnational Feminism

