Fatma Gonca Tunc

The "foreign other" -the Orient- was already a subject of interest for the Western artists before the turn of the nineteenth century. The Renaissance and Baroque painters, such as Rembrandt, and Veronese, illustrated figures dressed in the exotic clothes, while the French Rococo aesthetic was entranced by the grand eroticism of a harem (Meagher, 2000). The works produced in these earlier periods were mostly bounded to artist's imaginations and limited sources obtained through military expeditions and trade. Therefore, artists, due to the mood of Romanticism, created their fictitious Orients -places of backwardness, lawlessness, and barbarisms, such as Eugène Delacroix’s ‘Death of Sardanapalus' (1827–28), which depicted Oriental subjects as violent and cruel. During the mid and late nineteenth century, Europe broke its restricted shell and started to expand, invade and colonize the near and Middle East. Notably, Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, marked the European presence in foreign lands, which provoked the opening of the Orient to visitors. The fascination with the foreign culture attracted numerous travelers especially from France, and in exchange, they brought back the knowledge from the Orients. While many artists still relied on books, like Description de l’Égypte (1809–22), travelogues, and personal diaries, some artists including Delacroix and Jean-Léon Gérôme had the chance to travel and experience the Orients. These painters captured their impressions of the “other” in paint or print, through a prevalent form of Orientalist art called genre painting.

Jean-Léon Gérôme presented as "the darling of the Orientalist movement and lion of international artistic circles" (Thornton, 1994), was one of the most prestigious painters and sculptures during the nineteenth century. His subject matters included historical painting, Greek mythology, and Orientalism. He was profoundly influenced by the Romantic themes of human pathos, uncontrollable force, and emotional extremes. As a consequence of the combination of the two, his works brought the Academic painting tradition to an artistic climax. The most classical subjects, instead of being dry ancient history, became witty, erotic, and trivial with Gérôme's remarkably realistic painting style.

During his four-month visit to Egypt in 1856, Gérôme painted scenes of Egyptian life, and most were exhibited in the Salons in Paris. ‘Femme De Caire à sa Porte’ or, ‘Woman from Cairo at Her Door’ (1897) was one of the portraits he painted during his journey and depicted the nineteenth-century fascination with the perfect "other" that was not touched by the Western culture.

A woman…

A gently curving silhouette against the sharp edge of a doorway…

A cold touch of the gold on a soft skin…

Eyes, gazing far far away…

An enigmatic smile, giving away the thoughts in her head…
Desire, Eroticism, and a journey into the unknown...

And a door opening to exotic mysteries...

‘Woman from Cairo at Her Door’ was painted without the formality of portraits of earlier periods, similar to of Francisco Goya's painting, ‘The Family of Carlos IV’ (1800), which made it a spontaneous moment in time almost giving it a photographic characteristic. The stand of the woman was deliberately orchestrated by Gérôme to enhance the informality. Moreover, realistically and objectively painted, its stunning and unusual composition gave the painting its originality. The vertical composition was interrupted by the introduction of diagonal lines. For instance, the diagonal of the woman's arm was offset to create the diagonal support of the overhang. Secondly, the shadow cast by the bird cage introduced an opposite diagonal. These overlaid lines not only activated the composition but also created a more dynamic scene.

The woman embellished in traditional clothes and accessories. She dressed in a sheer top that elevates her sexuality topped with a red vest giving her fair coverage. She wore a shalwar - the traditional Middle Eastern baggy trousers - and black slippers on her feet. Her outfit completed with a thick gold belt emphasizing her hips, layers of gold necklaces draping all the way down to her belly, gold bracelets, and a gold headpiece. The colors used to depict the woman makes her stand out against the white background. The dullness of the wall was animated as the plaster started to chip away on the left side revealing the stone wall, the vernacular architecture in the Middle East including Egypt. The body of the woman was framed by the door opening that was closed by a blue draping curtain. The wooden overhang - an essential architectural element that creates protection from the harsh Middle Eastern sun - cast a shadow creating a cool place to rest.

Gérôme emphasized the domesticity by placing everyday objects from an obedient woman’s daily life, a flowerpot and earthenware. More interestingly, the elaborately detailed birdcage and the trapped bird -on the left side of the door behind the hanging light - could be a metaphor introduced by Gérôme to symbolizing and questioning the social place and role of women in a conservative culture. The Eastern women were seen as objects of desire by the Western men. As seen in Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’ imaginary depiction ‘Grande Odalisque’ (1814), women were eroticized, desired, and seen as obedient. The prejudices before the colonization might have changed slightly during the voyages; however, the genre paintings produced during these visits still carried similar judgments about Eastern women. For instance, Delacroix’s ‘Women of Algiers in their Harem’ (1834) showed women living in the harem under the control of men and fulfilling all desires without rebelling.

A contemporary piece, ‘Reclining Odalisque’ (2008) by Lalla Essaydi, critiqued these established prejudices. Her work used the form of female body to address the issues of women’s role and identity. The art piece took both its subject matter and name from nineteenth century European Orientalist paintings, which depicted a fantasized Western idea of an odalisque (a harem slave). Essaydi took the nude figure of the odalisque, and by covering her and her surroundings with words, she challenged the viewers to see her for who she was.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:


