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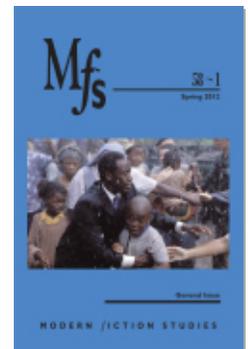
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## Orientalism Matters

Ali Behdad

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## ORIENTALISM MATTERS

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Ali Behdad

As a political critique of European representations of the Orient, Edward Said's *Orientalism* has been rightly credited as a pioneering text, inaugurating the field of postcolonialism within the American academy over thirty years ago. *Orientalism* not only riveted the attention of the intellectual establishment on the issue of colonial power by rigorously interrogating the ideological underpinnings of familiar scientific and artistic representations of otherness in modern European thought, but also played a pivotal role in shifting the focus in literary and cultural criticism from textuality to historicity, and from the aesthetic to the political. Said's almost singularly generative text inspired a whole new generation of scholars who have sought to develop his critique by exploring its implications in new, and sometimes unexpected, arenas of inquiry. As a seminal text, *Orientalism* provided the effective and necessary means of inventing and transforming postcolonialism as a discursive practice to include unforeseen fields of studies.

In light of the wide-ranging influence of this text, it is remarkable how much critical energy has been expended in recent years to demonstrate that Said's book misrepresents or inadequately represents the project of Orientalism. To be sure, *Orientalism* has always attracted perhaps more than its fair share of critics. Just a few years after its publication, scholars such as Ajaz Ahmad and James Clifford challenged *Orientalism's* "high humanism" (Ahmad 166), took issue with its use of Foucault's theory of knowledge-power, and questioned its omission of German and Russian Orientalism. What distinguishes recent criticism of *Orientalism*, however, is that it emanates from a broader rejection of the field of postcolonialism itself, and indeed

of the project of political critique of literary and artistic expressions altogether. In this essay, I take recent art historical discussions of nineteenth-century photographic representations of the Middle East as an exemplary site for considering the implications of such recent anti-Saidianism for the field of postcolonial studies, with the aim of showing why Orientalism (still) matters when studying representations of otherness today.

"In contemporary writing about nineteenth-century photography of the Middle East," writes Michelle L. Woodward, "it has become almost a cliché to describe many of these images as 'Orientalist'—that is, reflecting or propagating a system of representation that creates an essentialized difference between the 'Orient' and the 'West'" (363). This claim aptly captures the predominant anti-Saidian sentiment among art historians and curators who work on representations of the Middle East created by both European and indigenous painters and photographers. To be sure, responses to Said's discussion of Orientalism as a discourse of colonial power span the critical spectrum, from more rigorous and subtle critiques articulated from the left to the sometimes facile and reactionary from those of an opposing political orientation. On one side are art historians such as Zeynep Çelik, Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts, and Woodward who argue that "the trend to extend Said's analysis to apply equally to visual representations has . . . been used too broadly, obscuring nuances and inconsistencies, not only between different photographers' bodies of work but also within them" (Woodward 363). These scholars typically aim to constructively revise Orientalism to encompass "a disparate and disputed set of discursive constructions" while at the same time acknowledging "Orientals" as "participants in the production of counternarratives or resistant images" (Bealieu and Roberts 3). On the other side are writers, such as John MacKenzie and Ken Jacobson, who betray a marked suspicion of theory and seek to return the term "Orientalism" to its prior usage as an art historical term that could be deployed without suggestion of a broader political or ideological critique. In *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts*, MacKenzie argues against Linda Nochlin that "there is little evidence of a necessary coherence between the imposition of direct imperial rule and the visual arts," claiming that "Orientalism celebrates cultural proximity, historical parallelism and religious familiarity [with the Middle East and North Africa] rather than true 'Otherness'" (51). Given such perceived "misconceptions inherent in postcolonialist analysis," Jacobson similarly suggests that "a return to more traditional methods is desirable for the study of 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century photography in North Africa and the Near East," urging commentators to focus more single-mindedly on the "notable aesthetic, as well as documentary and historical merit" when analyzing visual representations (88).

In what follows, I argue that Orientalism should not be understood merely as an ideological discourse of power nor as a neutral art historical term, but rather as a network of aesthetic, economic, and political relationships that cross national and historical boundaries. Understood in this way, Orientalism is indispensable to understanding nineteenth-century photography of the Middle East. Whether considered in the context of their production and dissemination in the nineteenth century or in relation to their current afterlives as collectable objects or archives, photographs of the Orient become meaningful and legible only if they are considered in terms of the specific geopolitical distinctions, economic interests, and cultural assumptions about the Middle East and its people. While insisting that Orientalism offers a crucial perspective from which to comprehend the meaning and significance of photographic representations of the Middle East, I do not mean to suggest that such images should be understood merely as a reflection of Europeans' racial prejudice against "Orientals," or that these images simply validate European imperial dominance over the region. Nor would I wish to argue that Orientalist photography entails a binary visual structure between the Europeans as active agents and "Orientals" as passive objects of representation. Rather, I hope to provide an alternative view of Orientalist photography that focuses on nodes and ties that bind artists, collectors, and museums across historical and national boundaries, which are productive of a distinctly exotic vision of the region, a vision at once embraced and perpetuated by the elite in the Middle East. Indigenous photography in and of itself, I maintain, does not constitute an oppositional locus or resistant iconography, for it too belongs to the Orientalist network that mediates its vocabulary and thematics of representation.<sup>1</sup> A network theory of Orientalism concerns itself neither with the motivations of individual artists nor with the attributes of art objects, but instead studies the symmetric and asymmetric relations between discrete objects, specific individuals, and concrete practices.

A crucial link between the history of photography and Europe's knowledge about the Middle East has existed since the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839. Significantly, at the very meeting in which Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's invention was introduced to the Chamber of Deputies, the presenter, Dominique François Arago, commented on "the extraordinary advantages that could have been derived from so exact and rapid a means of reproduction during the expedition to Egypt" (17). He then recommended that the French government immediately equip various institutions of knowledge gathering about the Middle East such as the Institut d'Egypte with the new technology to further the project of Orientalism. It should come as no surprise that only eighty days after this meeting, a group

of French painters and scholars led by Horace Vernet, an Orientalist genre painter who had traveled to Algeria with the French Army in 1833, and Daguerreotypist Goupil-Fesquet went to Egypt to photograph Egyptian antiquity; nor is it a coincidence that as early as 1846, Daguerre's British counterpart, William Henry Fox Talbot, published a pamphlet titled "The Talbotype Applied to Hieroglyphics," which was distributed among archaeologists and Orientalists, as Nissan Perez reminds us (15). In subsequent decades, many early European traveling photographers such as John Cramb, Francis Frith, Maxime du Camp, and Auguste Salzmann followed Arago's suggestion and traveled to the Middle East to photograph various places and monuments, making the Middle East one of the most original and popular sites for the practice of photography.

Photography's potential for the development of Orientalism was widely acknowledged early on. For example, in a review of Maxime du Camp's *Égypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie*, Louis de Cormenin wrote,

A daguerrian excursion is thus fortuitous from the dual points of view of both eternal art and the written voyage (*voyage cursif*), above all when this excursion is undertaken in little known, unique, and strange countries of which science possesses only insufficient data. Nor is it rash to say that the publication of Maxime du Camp completes, in brief and comprehensible form, the works of Denon and des Champollion-Figeac, and opens a new way of investigation to Orientalists, just as it offers a horizon particular to artists' studies. Art, as much as science, can gain precious information from [such photographs]. The intellectual movement directed towards the Orient can, from here on out, take it as the *vade mecum* of its research, and the smartest, most definitive of guides. (105)

Photographic works such as Du Camp's not only "completed" the research and artistic projects of earlier Orientalists, but they also paved the way for new ways to explore and represent the Orient by perpetuating the Orientalist desire.

And yet, art historians and museum curators have treated such early amateur and expeditionary images of the Middle East either as distinct artistic expressions of individual photographers, or as documentary projects to provide European audiences, in particular archeologists and Egyptologists, with truthful images of the Holy Land and Egyptian antiquity.<sup>2</sup> What these approaches conceal is the network of relations that enabled the production of these images in the first place as well as the politico-cultural context that led them to be

so rapaciously consumed as visual objects. That the representations of the Orient figured so prominently in the early history of photography specifically in England and France speaks to the network of aesthetic, economic, and political relations between western Europe and the Middle East, a network that provided the logistical means and conceptual paradigms for various photographic projects. Indeed, the photographic projects of du Camp, Félix Teynard, and Salzmänn never would have been realized were it not for the great interest in Middle Eastern antiquity generated by Napoleon's 1798 expedition to Egypt and the subsequent establishment of Institut d'Égypte; the intellectual and artistic contributions of earlier Orientalist scholars, painters, and travelers; and the sponsorship of French government and its institutions. Du Camp, for instance, belonged to the Orientalist institution, Société Orientale; had a government commission from the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce to photograph historic monuments in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria; was trained prior to his journey by Gustave Le Gray and Alexis de Lagrange to produce good negatives; was accompanied by Gustave Flaubert, who fancifully documented their trip; and was finally able to publish his photographs in 1851 using the Blanquart-Évrard printing process, photographs that became immediately successful because of the popular and scholarly interest in Orientalism. Far from being the result of a manic obsession with photography, as Flaubert claimed, du Camp's images are products of a network of individual and institutional relationships that not only determined the content of his photographs but also provided the technical knowledge and logistical support to execute them. Du Camp's *Egypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie* weaves together a web of textual and visual traces that inscribe it within the iconography of Orientalism. As in Frith's *Egypt and Palestine*, his photographs in the book, which became an instant success in spite of its costliness, are accompanied by texts containing verbatim extracts from eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Orientalist travel narratives in order to make these images meaningful and legible. These textual precursors function not merely as explications for photographic representations of the Orient, they also determine what is worthy of photography in the Middle East.

As such, du Camp and Frith's photographs of the Middle East belong to a European system of visual and textual knowledge-production that engenders a "denial of coevalness" (Fabian 25), for as Anne McCauley has cogently observed, they utterly reject contemporary Middle Eastern life. Early photographic representations of the Middle East are either close-up images of antiquity in Egypt and the Holy Land or panoramic views of biblical sites; in neither genre is there any engagement with the people of the region or their everyday lives. Du

Camp's photograph of the Denderah ruins (see Figure 1) provides a representative example of the former, while Frith's image, *The Town and Lake of Tiberias* (see Figure 2), offers an example of the latter. As is the case with the overwhelming majority of early images of the Middle East taken by expeditionary European photographers, the first photograph presents a close-up of an archaeological site in decay. The image obviously aims to provide useful detail for Egyptologists and Orientalists, but in so doing, it represents the Orient in a state of deterioration and decadence, while transforming the oriental figure literally into an instrument of measurement to provide the viewer with a sense of scale and proportions. What interests the Orientalist photographer, as du Camp makes abundantly clear in his narrative, are not the contemporary people and culture of the Middle East but its historical ruins and the disintegrating relics of a bygone civilization. The images, therefore, convey a static monumentalism, a dead magnificence, symbolized by the fallen stones and crumbling remains, capturing a glorious past that foregrounds the absence of presence. In spite of the presence of Hadji-Ishmael which indicates the shared temporality of the photographer and his subject, in this image, the other is denied contemporaneity through his objectification as "a uniform scale of proportions" to use du Camp's own description of the sailor's function in the photograph (Du Camp 327).

Frith's photograph of the town of Tiberias, on the other hand, does not portray an archaeological site but instead offers the spectator a panoramic view of a biblical site. The photograph, which mimics typical descriptions of near Eastern landscapes by Victorian travelers, positions the viewer as what Mary Louise Pratt calls "the monarch-of-all-he-surveys,"<sup>3</sup> a promontory subject position that the traveler-explorer assumes when he ascends an elevated location during the peak moment of his journey in order to gain a panoramic view of the landscape, all as a gesture of mastery and discovery. The image, therefore, implies a mastery over the landscape, as the individual is positioned to have a total view, representing the "right of (over) sight" that the European assumes in the Orient (Barthes 278-79). In addition to invoking a scientific and expeditionary tradition that privileges visibility as a mode of knowledge production, Frith's photograph also relies on a romantic tradition of Orientalism in which the Middle East serves as a place for symbolic, mythical, and religious contemplation of the individual traveler, thematized in this case by the contemplative presence of a figure in European costume overlooking a biblical site. The inclusion of the European observer in the image poised above the scenic lake and town is thus a self-conscious recognition of the home audience, encouraging viewers to imagine themselves in the place of the figure in the photograph, looking down

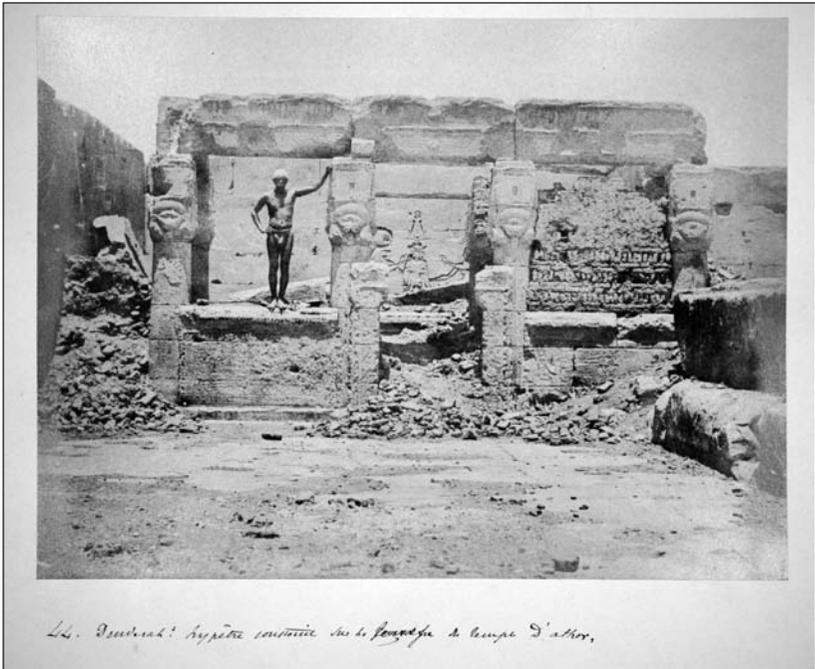


Fig. 1. Maxime du Camp, *Ruins of Denderah*, 1849. Photo Courtesy of Special Collection, UCLA.

over the exotically romantic and religious site below. In this way the image self-consciously thematizes both the touristic urge to see the romanticized scenery and an imperialist desire to have mastery over the biblical landscape.

While the early photography of the Middle East captured the Orient's disappearing past, thus representing it as a deteriorated and decadent civilization in need of European intervention for historical preservation and cultural renewal, with the rise of permanent professional studios in major cities, local and foreign photographers began to produce a large archive of topographic images of people, their professions, costumes, and customs, further catering to the tourists' and European audiences' demand for exoticism. Indeed, nothing belies the myth of photographic naturalness in the Orientalist image more than the staging of what is being represented in such photographs. The photographer's intervention here goes well beyond mere framing, lighting, or focus, for everything in the image denotes a staged scene: the artificial backdrop, the ever-present props, and the unnatural gaze of the sitter. The Orientalist photograph in this



Fig. 2. Francis Frith, *The Town and Lake of Tiberias*, 1862. Photo Courtesy of Special Collection, UCLA.

way is an exception to the art of photographic representation, for it is never "related to a pure spectatorial consciousness," as Barthes claimed, but rather it is related "to the more projective, more 'magical' consciousness on which film by and large depends" (278–79).<sup>4</sup> Although Orientalist photography is born of an archaeological urge for documentary evidence and an anthropological desire for empirical knowledge, its content ultimately reveals a projected fantasy of the Middle East and its people. The image mobilizes a fictional lexicon that undermines its documentary aims and diminishes its significance as a souvenir of a voyage.

As such, like in the expeditionary tradition of Orientalist photography, these images at once were enabled by and participated in a network of aesthetic, economic, and political relationships between Western Europe and the Middle East. Art historians and curators have generally treated these images in terms of their aesthetic or documentary value and as unique expressions of a particular artist or professional studio. What these approaches overlook, however, are the overlapping systems of knowledge and aesthetic sensibilities that

historically enabled and mediated the production and consumption of these exotic photographs. Put otherwise, the focus on a particular artist or studio preempts a broader understanding of the visual vocabulary that informs their photographs' aesthetic dimension, the tropes linking their thematic concerns, and the conceptual frameworks that renders them legible as images and desirable as commodities.

If archaeology and Judeo-Christian mythology informed the expeditionary tradition of Orientalist photography, ethnography and secular temporality circumscribed the iconography of the images of people produced by professional studios in the Middle East. In making this broad claim, I am not arguing that every image produced by professional studios of, say, the Bonfils in Beirut or Abullah Frères in Istanbul, fall within the purviews of ethnographic typecasting—as the official photographers to the Sultan Abdülaziz, the Frères, for example, photographed Ottoman dignitaries and official ceremonies in a respectful and dignified fashion. Nor do I wish to suggest that there were no individual stylistic differences between various photographers in the Middle East, though these stylistic differences are often difficult to determine given the fact that professional studios regularly employed other photographers to take images, often sold their negative inventories to other studios, and occasionally rephotographed other artists' images and sold them as their own. Rather, I argue representations of Middle Eastern people and their cultures, especially those that circulated in the European market, were inscribed in an ethnographic system of differentiation and classification that made them both legible and desirable as images of cultural difference.

The albums of late-nineteenth-century tourists and travelers to Turkey provide representative examples of the visual consistency of cultural alterity in late Orientalist photography. Whether assembled by French or English travelers to the region, or locally by the professional studios themselves, these albums invariably begin with panoramic views of Constantinople, especially of the Bosphorus (see Figure 3), followed by images of historical monuments, such as Saint Sophia (see Figure 4) and the Mosque of Sultan Ahmed, and end with several images of Turkish women (see Figure 5), street vendors (see Figure 6), and ethnic types.

Often photographed by the studios of Sébah and Frères, the multitude of ethnographic and harem images and the visual consistency in the narratives of these albums not only foreground the fact that the photographic styles of commercial studios in the Orient adapted and catered to European pictorial conventions, but they also demonstrate the ways in which the discourse of ethnography, the practice of photography, and the business of tourism overlapped



Fig. 3. Maison Berggren, View of the Bosphorus from the Seraglio Point, circa 1900s. Photo Courtesy of the Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

in the Middle East, producing a distinct style of representation that froze aesthetically the people and cultures of the region in a static and picturesque tradition. Produced for European consumption, these images transform a typological and taxonomic perception of the world into exotic mementos by aestheticizing the ethnographic penchant for categorization and classification, while catering to the touristic desire for the exotic and the picturesque.

The following photographs of Jewish types by Abdullah Frères provide representative examples of the aestheticization of ethnographic taxonomy (see Figures 7 and 8). These beautifully executed images found in two different European albums belong simultaneously to an ethnographic tradition of representation that classifies people into professional and ethnic types as well as the picturesque tradition in painting in which the ragged poor in the countryside are portrayed through an aesthetically pleasurable iconography. Despite the heavily staged quality of these photographs, complete with dramatic painted backdrops of the countryside and exotic props, these images invoke



Fig. 4. Pascal Sébah, Interior of St. Sophia, circa 1880s. Photo Courtesy of the Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

a nostalgic aura that is as compositionally beautiful as it is ideologically violent. The nostalgia these images invoke establishes a temporal distance between the viewer and the Jews who are meant to represent an earlier stage of human history. The nostalgic relation between the viewer and the Jewish figures assumes a unilateral form of observation and pleasure, a kind of ethnographic and aesthetic voyeurism: note that the Jewish figures in the image are not looking into the camera's eye. In the Orientalist picturesque a return gaze must be absent so that the other, his costume and culture can be transformed into "esthetic delectation" (Nochlin 127). Although these photographers claim realism as their strategy of representation, what is depicted in them is not the actuality of Jewish experience in Ottoman society but the nostalgic pleasure their picturesque lifestyle and exotic costumes offer to the European viewer. Details in these photographs do not inspire an interest in the other, nor do they bring him closer to the viewer, but they perform an ethnographic fantasy in which to indulge visually.

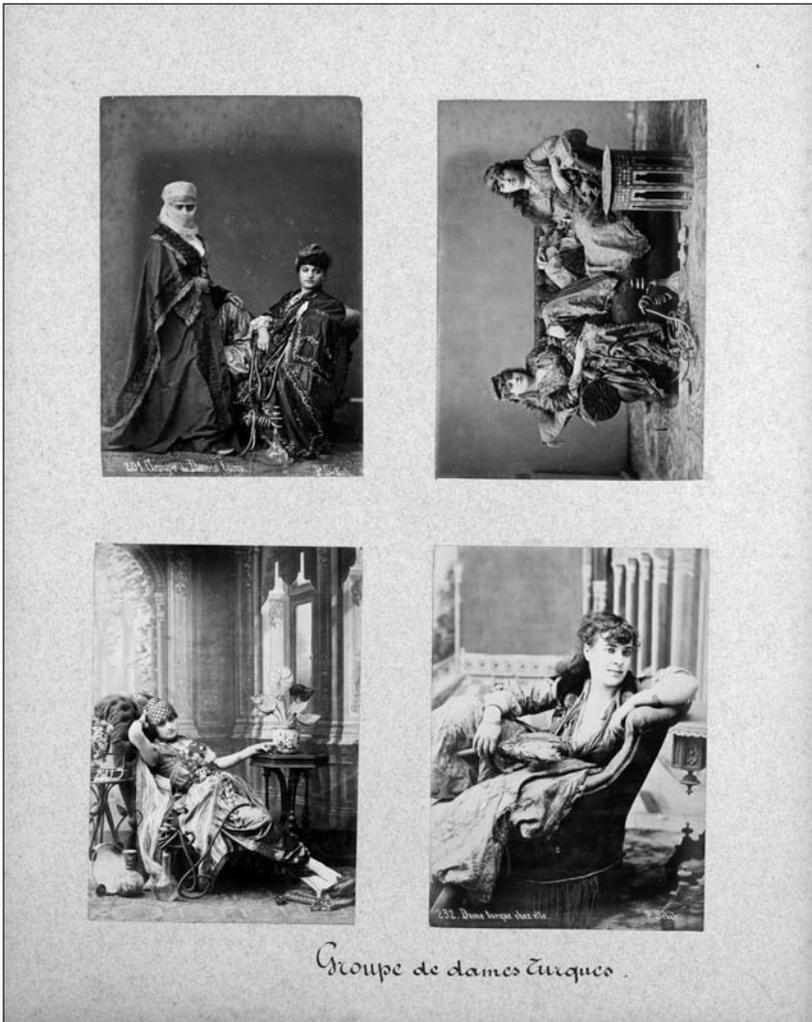


Fig. 5. Pascal Sébah, Turkish Ladies, circa 1880s. Photo Courtesy of the Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

To the extent that my notion of Orientalism is meant as a trans-historical as well as a transnational network of aesthetic, economic, and political relations between the West and the Middle East, it is crucial to consider its relevance to the afterlives of photographs of the Middle East as collectable objects and in museum archives. In the remaining pages of this essay, I wish to briefly consider the Pierre de Gigord collection of photographs of the Ottoman Empire and the



Fig. 6. Pascal Sébah, Street Vendors, circa 1870s. Photo Courtesy of the Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

Republic of Turkey held at the Getty Research Institute (GRI) by way of sketchily substantiating my claim about the transhistorical dimension of Orientalist representation. By transhistoricity of Orientalism in this case, I mean both the fact that a collector such as Gigord was moved to collect images of Turkey because of an Orientalist "love affair" with the country that was mediated through the canon of European representations of the Middle East, and the fact that the curatorial logic behind GRI's acquisition of this collection is born of the knowledge of and interest generated by critical debates about Orientalism in the academy and museum circles unleashed by the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978.

In an interview with a French journalist in 1993, Gigord traces the origin of his collection to his "aventure orientale" in Turkey. He recounts how on his way to Afghanistan and other parts of the Middle East in 1964, he stopped in Istanbul to visit an aunt, Mme. H. de Saint Peine, a cultivated and charming lady and the wife of one of the founders of the Ottoman Bank and Turkish Tobacco who



Fig. 7. Abdullah Frères, *Jewish Types*, circa 1880s. Photo Courtesy of the Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

introduced him to the old and cosmopolitan Istanbul bourgeoisie. In a language reminiscent of Pierre Loti's and Flaubert's experience in the Orient, he describes his initial fascination with Istanbul: "Dès le premier instant, j'ai eu le coup de foudre. Pendant trois jours, je visite les monuments, je parcours les rues et le Bazar, je m'enfonce dans les ruelles tortueuses escaladant les collines. Le soir venu, du haut de Galata ou du café de Pierre Loti, je contemple les derniers rayons du soleil qui dorent les minarets et les coupoles" ("It was love at first sight. For three days, I visit monuments, I wander the streets and the bazaar, I push through the winding back alleys, clambering up hills. In the evening, from the top of Galata neighborhood or the café Pierre Loti, I contemplate the last rays of the sun which gild the minarets and cupolas"; Plaisance 38). It is this quintessentially Orientalist experience of arrival that afflicts the young Pierre with "mal d'exotisme," a "malady" that leads him first to establish a small business of jewelry and textiles from Turkey in 1968 and then opening the store Anastasia in 1969, business ventures that financially enable him to pursue his passion for collecting Orientalist paintings,



Fig. 8. Abdullah Frères, *Jewish Types*, circa 1880s. Photo Courtesy of the Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

stamps, coins, and eventually photographic images from 1976. In an interview, predictably titled "Comte Pierre de Gigord, sur les traces de Loti," Gigord speaks of his passion for images of alterity, while acknowledging the mediating role of his Orientalist precursors: "Dans les années soixante-dix, je me suis passionné pour les travaux des écrivains et des peintres voyageurs. Je recherché avant tout en Europe des oeuvres à caractéristiques topographiques, ethnographiques ou encore historiques, à travers la peinture, les estampes et les livres" ("In the 1970s, I was fascinated by the work of travel writers and painters. In Europe I sought above all works that had topographic, ethnographic, or historic traits, in painting, printing/engraving, and books"; 53). Gigord's discussion of the genealogy of his collection not only foregrounds the mediated nature of his desire, but also brings into focus the relation between his desire for the exotic, financial ventures, cultural assumptions, and aesthetic sensibilities that undergird his practice of collecting. Gigord traces the origin of his interest in

Orientalist photography to his reading of European travelogues and looking at paintings of the Middle East. Gigord's collection speaks to the productive function of Orientalism as a nostalgic discourse of exoticism. As in the case of the belated Orientalists of the late nineteenth century, the works of such European travelers as Gautier and Loti mediated the desire in Gigord to meticulously collect photographs of Turkey in the bazaars of Istanbul and from European art dealers to preserve metonymically through his collection a disappearing culture and civilization. In sum, though narrated as an individual obsession with the exotic, Gigord's collection is the material articulation of a network of overlapping relationships between aesthetics and politics, culture and economics, individual and the collective.

While an un-self-reflexive, not to mention unapologetic, form of Orientalism informs Gigord's own desire to collect images of and artifacts from Turkey, the GRI's acquisition documents of his collection demonstrate a more conscious engagement with Orientalism in both the historical and critical sense of the term. Consider the following statement from the acquisition justification letter:

Besides its obvious value for scholars working in the history of photography, cultural and social historians would profit greatly from consulting this collection. Purchased primarily in western markets (Paris and London), the majority of the images were the kind that helped define the western perception of the east. While "Orientalism" has been viewed by some as a trend in research that may have reached its peak, the words of Carney Gavin, Curator at the Harvard Semitic Museum, seem to have particular relevance given the current unrest in the Mediterranean basin: "Orientalism—however defined artistically or in terms of intellectual colonialism—must continue to be analyzed as a phenomenon, even if primarily to permit Westerners to examine our consciences for webs of preconception and illusion woven throughout the period of Imperialism in ways which tragically continue today to shroud many perceptions of life and 'mentality' in former Ottoman territories" (*Journal of Turkish Studies*, 12, 1988, 280). Given its breadth and depth, Gigord's collection could function alone as a cohesive visual resource on the perception of the Ottoman Empire in the west. . . . The 40 large-size albums, spanning a period from 1852–1920, alone chart a record of trends in the history of visual "Orientalism" and popular images. (Terpak 3)

What is remarkable about this carefully crafted statement is the tension between a critical understanding of Orientalism as a discourse of

colonial power, which is at once dismissed as a fashionable academic trend and made relevant as a historical and ethical issue, and an art historical notion of the term that in spite of its ambiguity is uncritically assumed. The symptomatic decoupling of the aesthetics and the political, the documentary and the imaginary, in this passage underscores the relevance of Orientalism as a viable term not only in justifying the acquisition of this collection but also in its scholarly usage as an archive. Read against the grain, this statement is thus a powerful reminder that Orientalism is not merely "a trend in research that may have reached its peak" but a powerful network of aesthetic, cultural, economic, and political relations with which art historians and research institute curators have to reckon in studying and displaying the large body of visual representations of the Middle East.

By way of conclusion, I wish to suggest at once the productive function of Said's work in enabling the Orientalist revival, and also to underscore the apolitical and anti-Saidian nature of this curatorial revival. The GRI's acquisition of Gigord's and, more recently, the Ken and Jenny Jacobson Orientalist Photography Collection, present valuable occasions for critically engaging the Orientalist revival today. The very fact that a collector of Orientalist photography of the stature of Gigord could describe so unabashedly his project in terms of Loti's Orientalism—and that a major museum would invoke Said's work to justify acquiring such a collection—draws attention to the fact that Orientalism as a discourse of exoticism continues to maintain its cultural currency into the present day. Far from dismantling the hegemony of Orientalism, postcolonial critiques of its ideological underpinnings and discursive economy inadvertently have bolstered the longevity of Orientalism in certain cultural and institutional contexts. Ironically, in the years since the publication of Said's *Orientalism*, museum curators have often exhibited what one might call "Orientalist nostalgia," re-presenting the archive in aesthetic and exotic terms. Major exhibitions such as "L'Orientalisme: L'orient des photographes aux XIXe siècle" which appeared in Paris in 1989, "Étranges Étrangers: Photographie et exotisme, 1850–1910" in 1994, and "Sight-seeing: Photography of the Middle East and its Audiences, 1840–1940" at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum in 2001, all display a recuperative urge to rearticulate European Orientalist photographs as aesthetic objects that, at best, "permet enfin de voir *autrement*" to use the words of one curator (Favrod). The usage of the notion of Orientalism by collectors and museum curators today as a means of intellectual justification to aestheticize nineteenth-century photographs of the Middle East discloses the potential for postcolonial critiques to perpetuate an Orientalist vision of the region and its people.

The current interest in Orientalist iconography among collectors and curators is a powerful reminder that Orientalism is not merely a

historical discourse of power, but a transhistorical and transnational phenomenon that continues to inform the politics of knowledge and culture today. Insightful and important as their readings of European colonial history, culture, and subjectivity have been, many postcolonial commentators have overlooked the ways in which dominant discourses of power such as Orientalism have maintained cultural currency through recuperative strategies that disavow the politics of aesthetics. That over thirty years after the publication of Said's seminal text curators and collectors alike unabashedly invoke and deploy Orientalism as an aestheticized discourse of exoticism and difference suggests that any engaged postcolonial critique of Orientalism must view itself as an open-ended discourse of opposition that perpetually reconsiders its critical and theoretical assumptions, remains attentive to the processes of transformation and rearticulation that ensure the cultural hegemony of Orientalism, and continues to work against the kinds of cultural disavowal that perpetuate such discourses of power.

## Notes

I would like to thank Tracey Schuster at the Getty Research Institute and Simon Elliott at the Special Collection at UCLA for their assistance with the reproduction of images for this essay as well as Sarah-Neel Smith for her help with the translations.

1. I have demonstrated elsewhere, for example, that the indigenous practices of photography in the Middle East were more indebted to Orientalism's aesthetic values and ideological assumptions than to local and Islamic traditions of pictorial representation; see my essay, "The *Powerful Art of Qajar Photography: Orientalism and (Self)-Orientalizing in Nineteenth-Century Iran.*"
2. For an example of the first approach see Joana Talbot's *Francis Frith*, which was published as part of the *Masters of Photography* series edited by Rosemary Eakins, and for an example of the second approach see Claire Lyons' *Antiquity & Photography: Early Views of Ancient Mediterranean Sites*.
3. The term is Malek Alloula's, and I use it to underscore both the omission of the actualities of the Middle East in Orientalist photography and the imperial tendency in such images to invest the European viewer with the power of sight over the region; see his *Colonial Harem*.
4. Engin Özendes's *Abdullah Frères: Ottoman Court Photographer and From Sébah & Joaillier to Foto Sabah: Orientalism in Photography*, and Carney E.S. Gavin's *The Image of the East: Nineteenth-Century Near Eastern Photographs by Bonfils From the Collections of the Harvard Semitic Museum*, are examples of this tendency.

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