

The Phenomenon of “Foreign” in Oriental Art

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Introduction

The Phenomenon of “Foreign” in Oriental Art

Elizabeth S. Ettinghausen

In the context of the conference topic, the term “foreign” can be interpreted in such a way as to consider anything outside one’s perceived norm as unfamiliar and therefore strange or even odd. This attitude, however, can change as a result of greater familiarity with foreign culture and art so that the foreign trait might be considered as something exceptional to be admired and therefore desirable or even treasured.

The foreign phenomenon in ‘Oriental’ art can be understood in two ways: either as the approach of Europe towards the Muslim Middle East (including North Africa and Central Asia) and its art or, conversely, as the attitude and reaction of the Middle East towards the Western world and its art. This phenomenon pertains also to the approach of the Middle East to the Far East and its art, as well as the attitude of the Far East to Middle Eastern art. In the course of historical developments the attitude and approach of the parties change significantly and bring about different results. While many are being discussed by others at this conference, I will, instead, elude to just a few pertinent, yet randomly chosen examples demonstrating, how pervasive this phenomenon has been.

A typical example of the European elites’ high esteem for the Islamic Middle Eastern artistic productions can be gleaned from the great admiration accorded the elaborate gifts, such as the splendid textiles – fine silk robes and a precious tent – which the Abbasid ruler Harun al-Rashid sent to the Frankish King Charles the Great around 800. The first large-scale encounter and direct contacts of Europe with the Middle East, especially the Holy Land, during the Crusades brought about a drastic change: It opened the crusaders’ eyes to the highly sophisticated culture and artistic achievements of the Muslim world and initiated the Europeans’ desire to acquire such accomplished art works. This resulted also in taking over from the Islamic world such technical expertise as that of the ceramic and glass production in the Renaissance, and adopting certain Middle Eastern features, as well as adapting them to their specific needs.

The psychological impact and admiration of Islamic art is evident in the use of Arabic or, more frequently, pseudo-Arabic lettering or of typical Near Eastern ornamentation for the haloes, particularly of the Madonna, in Italian Medieval and Renaissance paintings. This must be a western adaptation of Islamic designs, possibly derived from metalwork with its inscriptions and decorations inlaid in precious metals. Likewise, applying a border of Arabic inscriptions or, more often, pseudo-Arabic lettering to the Virgin’s garment, is clearly derived from and reminiscent of the Arabic *tiraz*-inscription bands on robes of honor presented to dignitaries by Muslim rulers. The impetus for using Arabic-related signs when depicting the Madonna, may not only have been due to the desire to surround her with the most luxurious types of artistry, but also – in spite of the obvious anachronism – the attempt to establish a reference to the ‘Oriental’ locale.

Speaking of the dichotomy in Europe’s perception of the Islamic Middle East as foreign, strange, and possibly threatening, but, equally, to be admired for its sophisticated

culture and artistic creations, makes me think of the Central Europeans' fear and disdain, for several centuries, of the Ottoman Empire's "terrible and cruel Turks", and, conversely, of their fascination with their artistic productions. In a number of Italian and Netherlandish paintings, a small Ottoman carpet appears in front of the enthroned Madonna and Christ Child or in other contexts of holy significance. This exemplifies the honor bestowed on Ottoman artistic products, even if another interpretation might also play a role, namely a vision that in the same way as the carpet is placed at the feet of the Virgin, ultimately, through the intercession of Christ, His Mother, and the Saints, the power of the Christian religion would be victorious over the Ottoman Muslims.

The superior quality and intricate decoration of Iranian and Ottoman carpets increasingly attracted the attention of the European upper classes and many of its painters, but the inclusion in a painting of as precious an item as an Oriental carpet can also be considered to represent a status symbol. No wonder that eventually, in more recent times, western imitations of Oriental carpets were produced, among others the Ziegler carpets in Great Britain.

The superb production of Ottoman silk textiles and their exportation to the West, especially to Venice, a great trading partner of the Ottoman Empire, lead the ingenious Venetians to imitate these highly prized textiles domestically, which in turn created a desire on the part of the Ottoman court circles to import these foreign 'imitations' to be used for their luxury garments. This instance exemplifies the lure of foreign goods. With the gradually fading Ottoman threat the fascination with the mysterious foreign culture of the Ottoman and other Middle Eastern Muslims grew exponentially and the Three Kings in Oriental Muslim garb including turbans and a similar depiction of an "Oriental", as in Venetian Renaissance paintings, became frequent. The predilection of the upper classes for the exotic went so far that some men, especially in Great Britain, had their portraits painted in 'Oriental' attire. The interest in the "Turquerie" was not only evident in painting and sculpture (such as Meissen porcelain figurines), but also in music. The most famous example, of course, is Mozart's "Turkish March".

The Austrian Empire's fascination – although paired with fear – with the 'Orient' was not restricted to the Ottoman Empire, its direct eastern neighbor, but also with the art of a distant – and therefore not threatening – Muslim realm, namely Mughal India. The Empress Maria Theresa's (1740–80) interest in Mughal Indian miniatures can be gleaned from their use, albeit cut up to fit into wall spaces between the gilded rocaille decorations in the so-called "Millionenzimmer" in her grand Schönbrunn palace, at that time outside Vienna. The relationship between the Middle and Far East, with the following important example: This fascination with the beauty of, and also the supposed power of poison detection by the blue-and-white Chinese porcelain and the expense of importing it in larger quantity to the Iranian and Ottoman courts, lead to their imitation in high-quality ceramic ware under the Timurid and later Safavid rulers of Iran, as well as productions in Iznik and Kütahya under the Ottomans. While this fact is fairly well known, it is often overlooked that blue decoration on white ceramics originated actually in the ninth century Abbasid realm (today's Iraq) and the Chinese admiration for this combination lead them to adopt it and develop it into their famed blue-and-white Ming porcelain.

Among many other features, the strong influence of the Mongols on the ideal of female beauty (the moon face), both in poetry and painting, should be mentioned, too. Another reevaluation of beauty – in another context and time – is expressed in our own days with the use of eye shadow ('koħl') around women's eyes, which echoes the resulting greater emphasis on this part of the face in the Middle East.

The increasingly strong influence on the art of the Middle East is evident in its paintings as well as its architecture, culminating in the Middle Eastern 'baroque' and 'rococo' creations of the nineteenth century. Likewise, the Europeans' fascination with the 'Orient' and everything 'Oriental' lead to the emergence of the 'Orientalist' movement in painting of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Americans' attraction to the 'Orient' took slightly different forms: The predilection of Frederick Church (1842–1923), the well-known painter of the "Hudson River School", was a devotee of the Islamic Middle East, as the architecture of his home 'Oleana' as well as its furnishings and art works prove. By contrast, James Whistler (1834–1903), the great painter and master of etching, was attracted to and influenced by Japanese art, of which the Japanese-type "Whistler Room" at the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC bears witness. The creation of pseudo-Moorish architecture in the later nineteenth and mostly the earlier decennia of the twentieth century in Europe and the United States forms part of the same trend, too. Actually, this tendency is still alive, as the rather recent construction of a Moorish-type building at the Sorbonne in Paris for the department dealing with the Middle East and North Africa signifies.

All these interests in the 'other' and 'outsider' artworks has taken place in spite of repeated hostilities, but trade for luxury goods and new ideas, as well as interest in profitable merchandising never entirely stopped the flow of exchanges. These exchanges were numerous and could also mean that the commercial drive and curiosity of mankind wins out over the hesitation to adopt features of foreign art and culture. The mystery and lure of the exotic and the magical attraction of the "foreign" element can take many forms.

In the following chapters it will be shown that this fascination with foreign artistic features, themes, and goods can be deemed desirable and coveted, can be expressed in many different ways, and usher in new artistic concepts.