



PRIVAT
ART

THE ART OF DIALOGUE

Orientalist art has long been derided for depicting the Arab world as a colonial fantasy but it now fetches high prices at auction – and the buyers are largely from the Middle East, writes James Parry



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Orientalist painters
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PREVIOUS PAGE:

Edwin Lord Weeks'
A View on the Nile
Near Cairo.

LEFT: Rudolf Ernst's
The Perfume Makers

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ARIS, 1 APRIL 1867. The French capital buzzes with anticipation as vast crowds gather on the Champs de Mars for the opening of the Exposition Universelle, the World's Fair. A showcase for global commerce, industry and culture, the fair featured over 50,000 exhibitors and at its heart were a series of elaborate pavilions dedicated to presenting the art and architecture of particular countries. The Ottoman and Egyptian quarters – evocative reconstructions of the alleyways, squares and bazaars of Istanbul and Cairo – were to prove two of the most popular attractions among the fair-going public, who queued for hours for the opportunity to wander through an architectural stage-set of recreated streets. Here they listened to traditional musicians, sampled Middle Eastern food and purchased handicrafts and luxury products from exotically dressed Turkish and Egyptian salesmen brought to Paris especially for the occasion. It was a theatrical spectacle of the highest order, with over nine million visitors enjoying the experience before the gates were closed seven months later.

'The success of the fair highlighted the West's contemporary fascination with the Middle East,' says Egyptian businessman and art collector Shafik Gabr. 'It was the first time that large numbers of Europeans were able to come face-to-face with Egypt, not just with its history but also its modern situation. There was even a pavilion dedicated to the Suez Canal, then under construction and one of the most ambitious engineering projects ever known.'

The vogue for the mysterious and alluring 'Orient', as the lands of the Middle East and wider Arab world were then described in Europe, was also in evidence across the River Seine at the Paris Salon. An eagerly awaited fixture in the European cultural calendar, the annual Salon art exhibition was a barometer of taste and fashion. Space on its walls was fiercely contested, with applications to exhibit rigorously scrutinised by a jury. Among the successful entries that year were Jean-Léon Gérôme's portrayal of a Middle Eastern slave market and Eugène Fromentin's depiction of women from a North African tribe. Both were classic examples of what was soon labelled 'Orientalist' art: paintings that drew on the Orient for their inspiration.

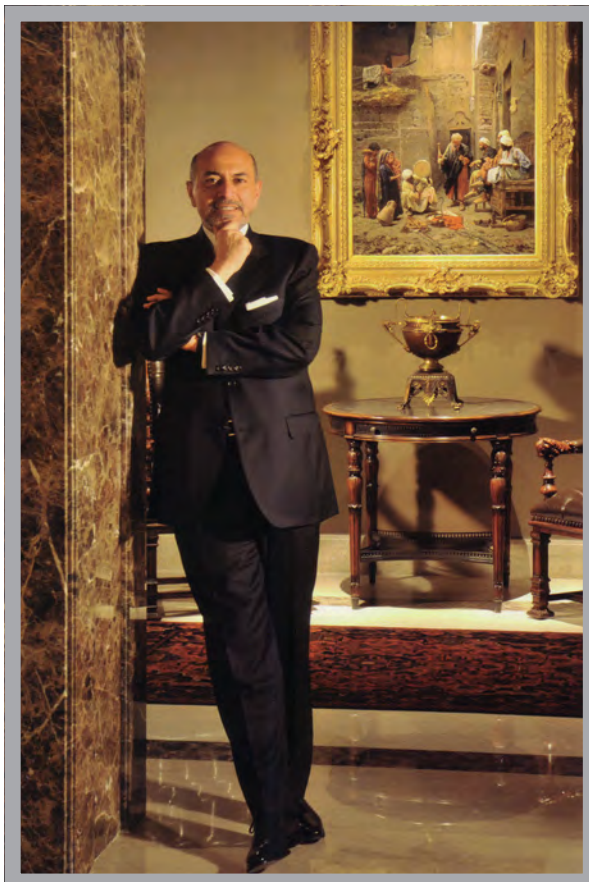
Over the next quarter of a century the market in Orientalist works boomed. Every year the Salon featured paintings by European and American artists who had travelled to the region in search of subjects to satisfy the enquiring minds and thirst for exoticism among their audiences back home. From the 1870s to the 1890s, Orientalist works sold for prodigious sums and were highly sought after by collectors, not least in the United States.

'Many artists specialising in Orientalist subjects had a particular eye on the American market,' explains Dr Emily M Weeks, an authority on the history of Orientalist art. 'Wealthy industrial magnates on the East Coast in particular were avid buyers and were in regular contact with artists and their dealers.' Popular subjects ranged from colourful street scenes and markets through domestic interiors (including the harem, arguably the bête noire of the genre), camel caravans, desert

landscapes, urban architecture and monuments such as the Pyramids and temples along the Nile to more ethnographically based works featuring the Bedouin and desert tribes. ‘The variety of subjects painted by the Orientalists reflected the complex diversity of the lands to which they travelled,’ says Gabr, now one of the world’s leading private collectors of Orientalist art. ‘Some were meticulous observers, which makes their paintings valuable historical documents for modern-day scholars.’

Gabr’s own journey through the realm of Orientalist art can be traced back to a visit he paid to the United States as a young man. The son of a diplomat, he was used to life on the move but his first trip to the US took him among people who knew little of Egypt or the Arab world generally. ‘They were fascinated to know more,’ Gabr recalls, ‘so I felt like an interpreter, attempting to explain my country and culture to a foreign audience. It gave me a glimpse of how it must have been for Western artists when they were travelling in the Middle East.’ Years later, it was the depiction of such an East-West encounter that drew Gabr’s attention to Gustav Bauernfeind’s *A Street Scene in Damascus*, painted in 1887. The German artist – sporting a pith helmet – depicts himself surrounded by a curious crowd as he attempts to sketch in the street. ‘For me, this painting is all about cultural encounters and connections,’ Gabr explains. Today it is part of his collection of over 150 Orientalist works, which reads like a roll-call of the great names in Orientalist art: Gustave Boulanger, Jean-Léon Gérôme, David Roberts, John Frederick Lewis, Frederick Bridgman, Leopold Müller, Alberto Pasini, Ludwig Deutsch, Rudolf Ernst and Étienne Dinet, among others – all of whom were stellar names in their day and often very wealthy men.

Yet the Orientalist frenzy of the late 19th century proved relatively short-lived. Some of the genre’s leading artists were ultimately to die in obscurity and poverty, and half a century after the Paris Salon successes of Gérôme and Fromentin, their paintings were viewed as anachronistic and politically suspect. Previously admired masterpieces in the world’s museums were now condemned by Orientalism’s critics as patronising and imperialist in tone, and were either relegated to gloomy corridors or taken off display altogether. Languishing in



LEFT: major collector and leading advocate for the rehabilitation of Orientalist painting, Egyptian businessman Shafik Gabr.

RIGHT: Procession of the Mahmal Through the Streets of Cairo by Ludwig Deutsch, the Austrian artist whose works can now sell for in excess of £2m





LEFT: A Young Emir Studying by Turkish painter Osman Hamdi Bey is a rare Orientalist work by a 'local'. It will be part of the collection on display at the Louvre Abu Dhabi when it eventually opens

basements and attics, they were victims not only of a harsh political reappraisal but also of changes in taste. Most Orientalists had specialised in representational painting, increasingly seen as archaic when judged against the vogue for more abstract forms of expression. Their style was decidedly out of favour, and prices plummeted accordingly.

Fast forward to today and the situation has turned almost full circle. Today, the values reached at sales of 19th- and early 20th-century Orientalist paintings are reaching new heights and demand is stronger than for decades. Works by top artists such as Ludwig Deutsch can sell for over £2m. Why such a dramatic change in fortunes? According to Claude Piening, senior director and head of Orientalist art at Sotheby's in London, there is a combination of factors at play: 'First, the passing of time has brought some welcome distance and the best Orientalist paintings are once again appreciated for what they are: great works of art. Second, there is now very strong interest from collectors across the world and especially from within the Middle East for works that represent the region's culture and history.' Particularly active in the salerooms are oil-rich states such as Qatar – where a new

Orientalist Museum is planned – and the UAE, where the Louvre Abu Dhabi has chosen as one of its key publicity icons a painting by the Turkish artist Osman Hamdi Bey, one of the few 'insiders' to have painted in the Western, Orientalist style.

It is fitting that wealth derived from oil is helping fuel the modern renaissance in Orientalist art. Piening traces the beginnings of this new appreciation to the sale in New York in 1985 of over 60 Orientalist works from the corporate collection of oil giant Coral Petroleum. 'Particularly notable was the interest shown by Western dealers,' explains Piening. 'They were busy buying for their clients in the Gulf and elsewhere in the Arab world.'

The ensuing surge of interest in Orientalist art from within the region has been welcomed by collectors such as Gabr, who feel that in the rush to embrace political correctness during the second half of the last century, the baby was thrown out with the bathwater. 'It is easy to attribute particular views to those who painted or bought Orientalist art at the height of its popularity,' he says. 'But we are all products of our time and I think there is little to be gained by forcing everything through the prism of hindsight.' Instead, Gabr favours a positive appreciation of Orientalism based on the quality of the work and on its value as an international contact point: 'For me, the key aspect is the role played by the Orientalists as globalists engaged in cultural dialogue, how they experienced and appreciated the places and peoples they visited and then conveyed what they found back to those at home who couldn't travel. Their paintings were the newsreels of that time and the likes of Gérôme, Lewis and Deutsch were the cameramen.'

Gabr is working to develop and promote the value of cross-cultural communication through East-West: The Art of Dialogue, an initiative he launched in 2012 and which

includes a fellowship exchange programme for young Americans and Egyptians. His activities as both an international business leader and a leading advocate for greater artistic and cultural communication saw him receive the Meridian Global Citizen Award earlier this year.

Meanwhile works from his collection of Orientalist masterpieces are shown regularly around the world and the collection itself continues to grow. 'Sharing the collection with others is very important to me,' Gabr explains, 'and I will continue to add to it as my resources allow. Art is all about appreciation and understanding, qualities that we could use more of in this world.'