



**Penetrating the Veil:
Gérôme's Harem Paintings
and "erotic imperialism"**

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When Jean-Léon Gérôme decided on a whim to return from Russia by way of Constantinople, he could not have imagined how his first visit to the Ottoman Empire would affect his career. It was 1857, and Gérôme was already an immensely celebrated artist in Europe. His work *The Cockfight* (1846) had already won him huge praise, and by 1855 he was Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur.¹ In fact, Gérôme was such a celebrity that his arrival in Turkey was announced in the *Levant Herald*, a French and English newspaper in Turkey that then proceeded to report on his travels around the region.² Gérôme's friend, Stanislaw Chlebowski, was under commission to the Ottoman Sultan. This friendship eventually helped Gérôme gain the footing in the Ottoman court which helped him come under commission himself. He was even later assigned the task of arranging the Sultan's purchases of contemporary European art through the art dealer Adolphe Goupil, a position that made him the conduit of the Ottoman purchases of Western art.³

Gérôme's status as a key power-player in Ottoman art acquisition is interesting when one considers that while in Turkey, Gérôme himself was acquiring the content for many of the Orientalist paintings that he would complete in the coming decades. Within the genre of Orientalist painting, those of harem women were popular, with artists such as Eugène Delacroix, John Frederick Lewis, and Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres engaging in the visual dialogue. Unlike his predecessors, however, who were most commonly labeled as Romantics, Gérôme was often labeled a documentary Realist. However, Gérôme was not documenting reality, but rather engaging with notions of Orientalist fantasy in creating his images. Furthermore, Gérôme's work

¹ Jack Perry Brown, "Return of the Salon: Jean-Léon Gérôme in the Art Institute," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 15, no. 2 (1989): 154-173, 180-181, 155.

² Scott Allan, introduction to *Reconsidering Gérôme*, ed. Scott Allan and Mary Morton. (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010), 120.

³ *Ibid.*

may have been in dialogue with Orientalist erotica of the nineteenth-century that aimed to politically justify European imperial expansion into the Orient.

Gérôme has been called by many names: history painter, documentary realist, ethnographic painter, etc. However, it is clear that some thought him equally to be a painter of crude, or “low brow” art.⁴ In the 1877 edition of *The Art Journal*, for example, Lucy H. Hooper writes that *Bathers in a Harem* was “totally unworthy of [Gérôme’s] reputation.”⁵ Here

“reputation” alludes to the fame and notoriety that Gérôme’s Neo-Grec and gladiatorial scenes had gained him throughout his career; scenes such as *Pollice Verso (Thumbs Down)* (fig.1) and



Figure 2, Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Pollice Verso (Thumbs Down)*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 38 3/8 x 57 3/4 inches. Phoenix Art Museum.



Figure 1, Jean-Léon Gérôme, *A Greek Interior*, 1850. Oil on canvas, 25 3/16 x 34 5/8 inches. Collection of Lady Micheline Connery.

The Death of Caesar. Gérôme also came under the scrutiny of Théophile Thoré for his *A Greek Interior* (fig.2), a lascivious scene of nude women lounging that greatly resembles his harem work. Of Gérôme, Thoré complained “that exhibitor of puppets, the Greek advocate who lifts the skirts right off his courtesan-client, is too

risqué.”⁶

⁴ James Thompson, *The East: Imagined, Experienced, Remembered: Orientalist Nineteenth Century Painting* (Dublin: The National Gallery of Ireland, 1988), 25.

⁵ Lucy H. Hooper, “Jean-Léon Gérôme,” *The Art Journal*, 3 (1877): 26-28, 28.

It is strange that though Gérôme executed at least twenty harem images, there is scarcely a work of in-depth scholarship (past or present) that addresses these images. Though Thoré and *The Art Journal* (as well as many others) were at times scathing about the eroticism of Gérôme's work, his *A Greek Interior* is almost always the only work mentioned. In general scholarship on Gérôme, if his Orientalist art is mentioned at all, it is still unlikely that the harem scenes will even be touched upon. Even in the 2010 monograph on Gérôme by Scott Allan and Mary Morton entitled *Reconsidering Gérôme*—a book which purports to cover new territories on the artist—there is almost no mention of Gérôme's harem images. The book was scheduled for release at the same time as the opening of a new exhibition on Gérôme, “The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme.” The show, which opened on July 15, 2010 at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, is the first major showing of works by Gérôme since the exhibition curated by Gerald Ackerman in the 1970's (which until now was the only Gérôme exhibition since the artist's death in 1904).⁷ In September of 2010, the exhibition was moved to Paris' Musée d'Orsay where it is currently on display. It may come as no surprise, perhaps, that very few of Gérôme's harem images appear in the show. In fact, it is as if these paintings are as invisible to the art world as harem women were to the world outside of the Sultan's palace.

The bulk of Gérôme's harem images depict women relaxing in luxurious interior spaces. One such image, *Grande Piscine de Brousse (The Grand Bath at Bursa)* (fig.3), which was exhibited in the Exposition Universelle in 1878 and then later at the Salon of 1885,⁸ displays dozens of harem women lounging in and around a deep pool, and tranquilly socializing with one another. The setting is a stone hall—which one assumes is the *seraglio*, the part of the palace

⁶ Théophile Thoré, “Salon of 1861,” *Art in Theory: 1815-1900*, ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, Jason Gaiger, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998) 455-458, 457.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1824-1904*, (Paris: ESFP, 2010), 286.

where the harem was kept. The delicacy of Gérôme's brushwork transports the viewer to a space which feels warm and humid, where one might hear the light chatter of women's voices and the rushing of water from the waterfall in the background. The women are mainly naked, though some are draped loosely in lush fabrics. They bathe their shining skin, smoke from phallic-looking hookahs, and seem to be turned towards each other.

However, on closer examination, something seems to be amiss. The figures do not seem to be engaging with one another—rather than depicting a room of women socializing in female companionship, Gérôme has arranged a room of models in various ways, with no narrative function except to please our eye. In addition, when one considers the nature of the room—all



Figure 3, Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Grande Piscine de Brousse (The Grand Bath at Bursa)*, 1885. Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 39 5/8 inches. Private collection of Libby Howie.

stone, very little fabric, and no carpets—it is hard to imagine that the space would not be cold and drafty. It then seems unrealistic to imagine women in the space choosing to go naked. This reveals a common trope of Orientalist (and particularly harem)

images: that the women are naked not because they chose to be, but because they have been stripped bare by the artist for the viewing pleasure of the audience. Therefore, one begins to see

not only the basis of Orientalized visual rhetoric, but also how Gérôme (like many nineteenth-century artists and writers) crafted his images for consumption by European men rather than to document Oriental life.

To further demonstrate how unrealistic Gérôme's harem images are, one can look firstly at historical records of what harem life was like, and secondly to the nineteenth-century harem erotica that Gérôme's work may have been in dialogue with. So, what were harems really like? Harems existed in Asia and Africa since antiquity, and they were managed by kings and commoners alike.⁹ Gérôme, like most Orientalist painters, was most preoccupied with the royal harems of the Ottoman Empire, which were occupied by hundreds (and sometimes thousands) of women. The life of a harem woman began one of two ways: either she was the female descendent of the current Sultan, or she had been bought into this particular form of slavery. Because Muslim law forbade that Muslim women be slaves, a vast slave trade was established in parts of Eastern Europe to bring white, Christian women to Muslim palaces. The trade of Georgian and Circassian women from the Caucasus Mountains was especially profitable, as the white, fair-eyed women of that region were thought particularly desirable to Arab men.¹⁰

While some women were sold into slavery by their parents due to economic poverty, many women were kidnapped.¹¹ These captive women, who were trained in Islamic culture and palace etiquette and given new names, came to be known as odalisques.¹² If a favorite odalisque gave birth to a male child, then she became a wife of the Sultan, and if, by chance, this son were to become Sultan one day, she would become the *valide Sultana*—the highest position in the

⁹ Martin A. Klein, "Sex, Power, and Family Life in the Harem" in *Women and Slavery*, ed. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, Joseph C. Miller, 63-81. Vol. 1 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 64.

¹⁰ Joan DelPlato, *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures: Representing the Harem* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), 39.

¹¹ Alev Lyle Croutier, *Harem: the World Behind the Veil* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 30.

¹² Klein, 68.

harem.¹³ As the Sultan's mother, the *valide Sultana* was the ruler of the harem who enjoyed a comfortable living as "the most powerful woman in the empire."¹⁴ However, positions of power were tenuous, for when a new Sultan rose to power, all of the old Sultan's wives and harem women were sent to a separate palace known as the "House of Tears."¹⁵

Though it is difficult to find sources on harems due to their guarded nature, some sources report that with so much power at stake, competition was fierce among the women as they fought each other to climb the social ladder. Intrigues, brutal murders, and poisonings may have been more commonplace than one would expect. There are many stories about harem women who had other concubines tied into sacks and thrown in the river to drown.¹⁶ But why might harem women have resorted to such violent measures to promote their own social standing? The European might postulate that violence arose because of the oppressive, prison-like experience of harem women. In fact, in her book entitled *Harems of the Mind: Western Passages of Art and Literature*, English literary scholar Ruth Bernard Yeazell reveals that the European word used to describe harems, "seraglio," was actually a confusion of the words "saray" (palace) in Turkish and "serrare" (to lock up or enclose) in Italian.¹⁷ Therefore, in the European mind, harems were synonymous with prisons. For Europeans, though harem women may have enjoyed fine clothes, lavish apartments and delicious foods, they were first and foremost captives of the palace and sexual slaves to the Sultan.

Others scholars, such as Ottoman Empire historian Leslie P. Pierce in her book *Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, argue that harems were actually not as

¹³ Ibid, 67.

¹⁴ Croutier, 33.

¹⁵ Ibid, 36.

¹⁶ Ibid, 38.

¹⁷ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 59.

sexual as the representations they received in nineteenth-century Western art and literature. She writes, “It was not sex, however, that was the fundamental dynamic of the harem, but rather family politics.” Pierce continues to demystify European ideas about the sexual indulgence of harems when she writes that “sex in the imperial harem was necessarily surrounded by rules,” for the Sultan’s sexual exploits, just like all hereditary rulers, “could never be purely pleasure, for [they] had significant political meaning. . . .”¹⁸ In this way, highly sexualized European images of harems reveal the cultural disconnect between the European painter and his or her Oriental subject.

With Gérôme, this cultural disconnect can be seen easily in his bathing scenes, which allude strongly to European fantasy. In the European mind, these bathing scenes were images of leisure in which the women prepare themselves for the Sultan’s bed should they be chosen that night. These images often highlight the sexuality present between women as they caress each other’s bodies in the *hamams*, or bath houses of the palace. It is true that in the *hamams* harem women washed and massaged each other, and also examined each other’s bodies for hair. However, in Orientalist art and literature, the European viewer fantasized *hamams* as steamy pleasure rooms where women went to clean each other, but ended up falling into passionate love making.¹⁹

¹⁸ Leslie P. Pierce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

¹⁹ Croutier, 91.

Gérôme's *The Bath* (fig. 4) is one such fantasy suggestive of lesbian interaction. A black woman, whose body is ornately decorated, lathers the body of a white woman who sits on a cage. The interaction portrayed between the women is tender as they engage in this moment of cleanliness. However, Gérôme (in line with European thought in general) eroticizes lesbianism by aligning it with the taboo, that which is also indiscretion. According to Linda Nochlin in her article *The Imaginary Orient*, the sense of "erotic availability" in Gérôme's Orientalist bath scenes is "spiced with still more forbidden overtones, for the conjunction of black and white, or dark and light female bodies...has traditionally signified lesbianism."²⁰ Thus, Gérôme, who was sometimes labeled as an ethnographic painter, uses the juxtaposition of races to suggest sexual 'deviancy.' The sexual power dynamics of the scene, however, are ambiguous, as the energetic spurt of the fountain in the background could reference sexual fluids; either their own, that of the Sultan, or that of the ever-present viewer.

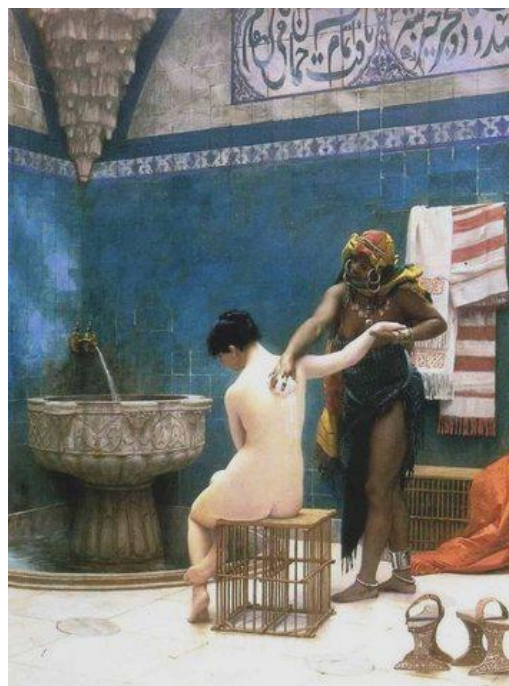


Figure 4, Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Bath*, 1880-1885. Oil on canvas, 29 x 23 ½ inches. Legion of Honor Museum, San Francisco.

²⁰ Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," *Art in America* 71, no. 5 (May 1983): 118-131, 186-189, 126.

The possibility of the “Sultan’s gaze” (that is, that it might be the Sultan who is the voyeur) is commonly found in Orientalist art, and conjures European stories of Sultans who had peep holes designed so that they could watch their harem women in secret.²¹ Gérôme also invokes another facet of the European harem fantasy by depicting two wicker cages in the scene—one for each woman. The cage functions as an obvious metaphor for the harem women

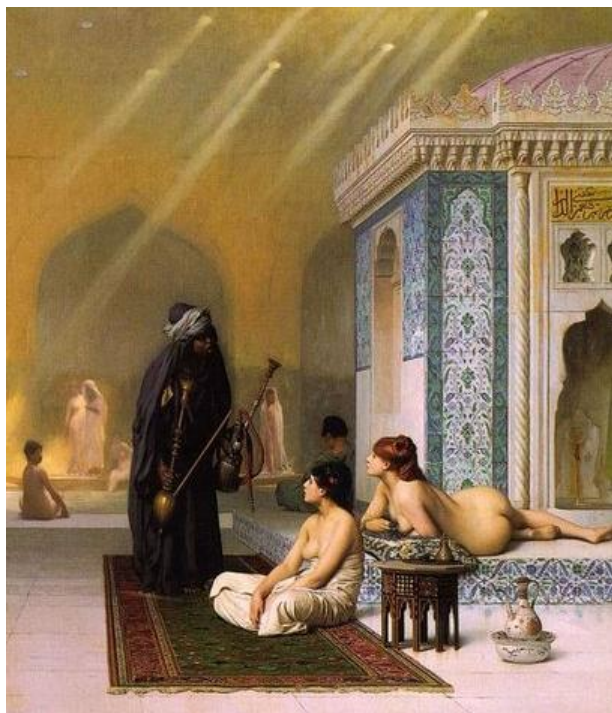


Figure 5, Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Pool in a Harem*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 29 x 24 ½ inches. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

themselves, trapped in the confines of the palace just like the exotic animals in the Sultan’s menagerie. Nineteenth-century novelist William Thackeray expressed the concept well when he said of harem women that “strangers are not allowed to see the interior of the cage in which these birds of Paradise are confined.”²² Thackeray’s comment exposes another element of harem life: that harem women were under no circumstances allowed to be seen by men other than the Sultan. Countless stories circulated in both East and West about men who were put to death for glimpsing a harem woman.²³ So then, the historical Sultan himself,

and not just the European viewer, was concerned with restricting the gaze and limiting voyeurism to himself.

²¹ Thompson, 25.

²² Yeazell, 62.

²³ *Ibid.*, 22.

For the Sultan, this was accomplished by employing eunuchs, or castrated male slaves, to guard his women. These eunuchs were male prisoners of war or house slaves who had been castrated, often violently, and often without choice, so that they would fetch a high price on the slave market.²⁴ Eunuchs appear several times in Gérôme's harem images, almost always as shrouded figures that exist in the background in a pose of absolute, sexless inaction. *Pool in a Harem* (fig. 5) displays Gérôme's most active eunuch, however. He bows slightly to offer hookahs to the two women who lounge next to an ornate tile pagoda. The phallic shape of the hookah pipes and the serpentine coil of the hoses invoke the lost masculinity of the eunuch, who can no longer make sexual offers to women. However, by offering hookahs, Gérôme's eunuch tries to reassert his masculinity by offering the women another type of pleasure: opium.

In her book, *Harem: the World behind the Veil*, Alev Lyle Croutier, writer and descendent of many generations of harem women, recalls the following about harem women and their relationship with drugs:

The women indulged in drawn-out opium rituals, spending the evenings inhaling hookahs or eating opium, the "elixir of the night," dreaming of faraway lands beyond the latticed windows. Amnesia followed; night after night of this induced chronic insomnia. The women began forgetting their distant homes, their lives before the Seraglio.²⁵

It is only with historical understanding that we can begin to unravel the complexity of common Orientalist props and realize that they are not just set pieces, but potential clues to the lives of harem women.

²⁴ Croutier, 36.

²⁵ Ibid, 56.

The second type of harem scene by Gérôme is that of the slave market. One powerful example is *The Slave Market* (fig. 6), which depicts a young, naked woman surrounded by male Arab slave traders who seem to be inspecting her, presumably for purchase into a harem. The slave woman's nakedness is heightened by the presence of dressed people around her and the evidence of her own clothing on the ground, which seems to have just been thrown down. Most striking in the image is the way one man has inserted his fingers into the slave woman's mouth.

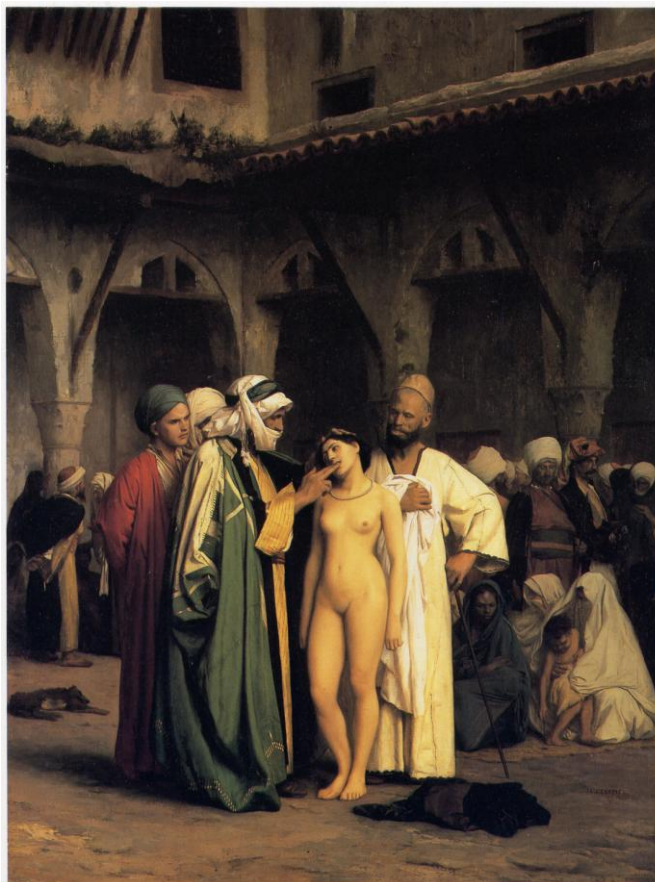


Figure 6, Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Slave Market*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 33 ¼ x 25 inches. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown.

Looking at the image as a document of reality,

one might assume that the man is checking the slave's teeth. However, the piece is much more easily judged as a product of European male fantasy, as the fingers inserted into the slave's mouth are incredibly phallic. As an image that is potentially harmful to women, it is even more disturbing to realize that *The Slave Market* was widely seen, as it was displayed in both the Exposition Universelle of 1878 and the Salon of 1885 with *Grande Piscine de Brousse*.²⁶

It is difficult to judge Gérôme, however, without comparing him to his peers. It is not hard to see how Gérôme's *Grande Piscine de Brousse*—an image with a cellar-like room full of lounging harem women—may have been influenced by Ingres' *The Turkish Bath*. A great

²⁶ *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme*, 272.



Figure 7, Eugène Delacroix, *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, 1834. Oil on canvas, 69 x 90 inches, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

difference can be observed, however, in terms of style. The overly-rounded limbs and exaggerated longness of Ingres' women, together with the peep-hole effect of the round frame conjure a sense of fantasy over reality. Delacroix's harem work, on the other hand, has a reputation for accuracy because he (unlike Ingres and Gérôme) was actually

able to visit a harem in the Orient. The women in *Women of Algiers (In their Apartment)* (fig. 7) lounge calmly in an intimate space, dressed in elegant clothes. Delacroix's portrayal of harem life is rather realistic, and lines up with Pierce's assertions about the non-sexual nature of harems. While Delacroix's presentation of the subject is realistic, his style still belongs to the fanciful whims of Romanticism. The opposite, however, is true of Gérôme; his technical reproduction of reality is far more convincing than Delacroix, yet his presentation of harem life still belongs to the cultural construction of fantasy harems wonderlands.

Coming to a historical understanding of harems can be fraught with challenges since there is so little documented about the lives of these women. Croutier presents an image of harems that emphasizes the overtly sexual nature of the odalisques and which clearly suggests that lesbian relationships were common among them.²⁷ Pierce, however, maintains that harem life was more about family than sex. And according to Martin A. Klein in his article "Sex, Power, and Family Life in the Harem," roughly two-thirds of Ottoman harem women never gave

²⁷ Croutier, 91.

birth, and many harem women never even had sexual relations with the Sultan.²⁸ In either case, it is clear that for a so-called documentary Realist, the depth and reality of harem women's experiences are just not present in Gérôme's work.

In fact, when one takes a moment to really look at what is taking place in these scenes, it becomes clear that something strange is afoot. Why the disturbing depiction of the slave woman being penetrated in *The Slave Market*? Why set *Grande Piscine de Brousse* in what appears to be a dungeon? Gérôme presents his subjects with a cool, non-threatening air. However, when the viewer takes stock of what is before them, some truly disconcerting realizations about the way that women are represented surface. In fact, though Gérôme actually did visit Turkey several times, there is no evidence that he ever stepped foot into a harem. I cannot emphasize how important this point is. Remembering that harems were closely guarded by eunuchs, and no men save the Sultan were allowed to enter, it makes sense that Gérôme would not have had access. So, if Gérôme never even glimpsed the interior of a harem or had the opportunity to see harem women, what validity does he have as a documentary Realist? More importantly, if Gérôme was not drawing from observation, what sources *did* he draw from? Though he may have been a Realist painter in technique, after a close study of historical documents concerning harems, it becomes clear that Gérôme's sources and subjects belong to fantasy.

The second way that one can trace the fantasy origins of Gérôme's harem images is through studying harem erotica that was popular in both literary and visual channels. I will begin by briefly discussing pornographic Orientalist novellas of the time. The most notorious pornographic novella written by a European writer about the Orient is *The Lustful Turk*, published anonymously in 1828. The novel, which features extremely graphic language even by

²⁸ Klein, 74.

today's standards, tells the story of Emily Barlow, an English woman who is kidnapped by the Dey of Algiers and sexually initiated by this 'lustful Turk.' After the Dey rapes Emily six times in less than twenty-four hours, Emily is described as beginning to enjoy her treatment by the Dey, as "new and wild sensations blended with [her] shame and rage."²⁹ Eventually, even though the Dey captures Emily's maid and dear friend, Eliza, and exposes her to the same traumatic treatment, both women fall in love with the Dey and thank him for unleashing their sexuality.

The basic plot of *The Lustful Turk* was repeated in many other stories; in Britain, for example, there were rumors about women lured to the East to be governesses, but who were then sold into sexual slavery to Egyptian princes.³⁰ While these kidnappings certainly did happen in real life, they were exaggerated upon greatly by European imaginations. These imaginative exaggerations typed all Arab men as being insatiable as a way to explain why Sultans would want to possess so many women in the first place. Arab women were, therefore, typed by the European as desperate and sexually frustrated because they must share one man, thus leading to the lesbian orgies that Europeans fantasized about (and to which Gérôme's bath images subtly refer).

Harem sexuality was further eroticized when the Marquis de Sade published his *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome*—a violent and shocking tale of misogynistic sexual perversity that used harem trigger words to evoke the erotic references that Europeans already connected with harem life. In the story, two *seraglios* exist for kidnapped boys and girls, upon which Sade's main character enacts terrible sexual abuses in his castle furnished with "very fine Turkish

²⁹ *The Lustful Turk* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1983), 10.

³⁰ Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: the harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 83.

beds.”³¹ While Sade’s writings were at the fringe of European culture, and much deplored, according to Yeazell, his “exercise in pornographic violence suggests how closely Oriental despotism was already identified with erotic domination.”³² Sade’s “erotic despotism” was a strong reference to European conceptions that Arab men were tyrannical, in which “orgiastic sex became a metaphor for power corrupted.”³³

This idea of power corrupted is important in terms of understanding European political interests in the Orient. During the nineteenth-century, the main powers in Europe (France and Britain) were hard at work colonizing much of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Many theorists agree that more was at stake in Orientalist art than the mere depiction of the territories being conquered. Rather, the objectification of Oriental women by European male artists allowed a sort of “erotic imperialism” that furthered European power over the Orient through objectifying voyeurism and commodification.³⁴

It is this very commodification of women that I find disturbing in Gérôme’s harem images, and which furthers the argument that they are images that belong more to erotic fantasy than to historical documentation. Gérôme was one of the most mass-marketed artists (if not the most) of his time due to his relationship with the art dealer Adolphe Goupil, who was also his father-in-law. In fact, the works of Gérôme were translated into lithographs that were sold in mass quantities, “reach[ing] audiences on an unprecedented scale.”³⁵ *The Slave Market* was made into a lithograph and mass-produced in 1866, and was distributed as a *carte de visite* in

³¹ Yeazell, 111.

³² Ibid.

³³ Pierce, 3.

³⁴ Yeazell, 104.

³⁵ Allan, 1.

1867.³⁶ Similarly, *The Bath* became a print in 1876 and a *carte de visite* in 1877.³⁷ In total, eight of Gérôme's most famous harem paintings went on to become Goupil prints that were distributed in various formats.

Another artist whose erotic, Orientalist works were mass produced in the nineteenth-century was Thomas Rowlandson (1758-1827). Rowlandson, a British lithographer, became a well known caricaturist in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, working primarily on landscapes and political cartoons.³⁸ However, Rowlandson also produced a string of highly

explicit pornographic prints. His *Harem Scene* (fig. 8) depicts the male fantasy present in *The Lustful Turk* of being shared (and most importantly, desired) by multiple women. *Harem Scene* presumably depicts what happens after the Sultan has made his selection of

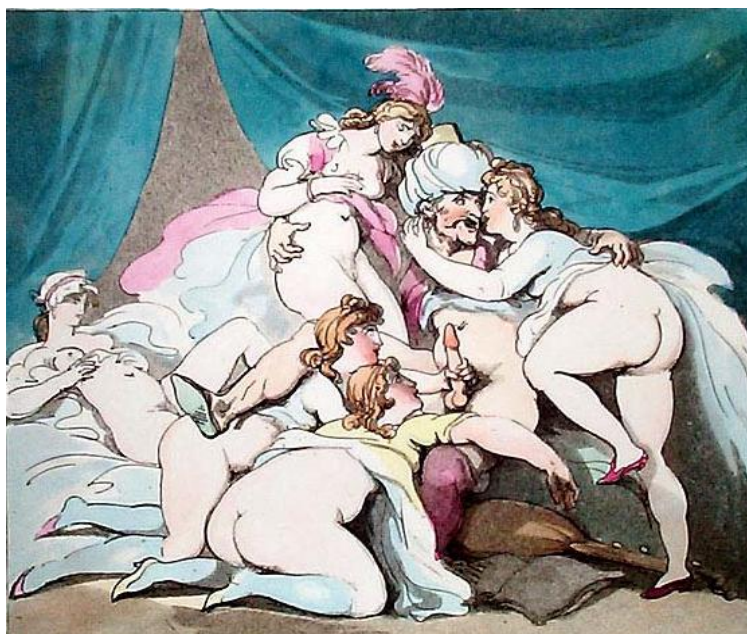


Figure 8, Thomas Rowlandson, *Harem Scene*, date and other information unknown.

women for the night. Five women surround the Sultan, much to his

obvious delight. The women seem to coo over him, almost fighting for his affections. The Sultan's enormous erection is evident and is being handled by one of the women.

³⁶ Pierre-Lin Renié, *Gérôme and Goupil: Art and Enterprise* (New York: Dahesh Museum of Art, 2000), 155).

³⁷ *Ibid*, 160.

³⁸ Richard M. Baum, "A Rowlandson Chronology," *The Art Bulletin* 20, no. 3 (September 1938): 237-250.

Clearly, *Harem Scene* is a vast departure from the images of Gérôme in its explicitly sexual nature. Though Gérôme's images suggest the European projection of sexuality on harems, no acts of sex are ever shown. Instead, Gérôme's images relate more to the classical female nude and the depiction of women as objects. Though Rowlandson's women are still being objectified, they are aware of the male gaze—that of the Sultan. However, in Gérôme's *Grande Piscine de Brousse*, for example, the women seem to be completely unaware that they are being watched. In Gérôme's harem scenes, the viewer replaces the fabled Sultan in his peep hole, he replaces the Dey of Algiers in *The Lustful Turk*, and yes, he even replaces the Sultan in Rowlandson's *Harem Scene*. Instead, the viewer becomes that most fantastical and impossible being, the invisible voyeur.

Like many of his contemporaries, Gérôme set out to depict the Orient and all of its perceived mysteries therein. Also like many of his contemporaries, Gérôme's work reflects the cultural and political impulses of his time. Despite his reputation as a history painter, Gérôme's work portrays an inaccurate image of harems as orgy nests of wonton pleasure and lesbian desire—not the important center of family life that they were. In portraying harems without ever having been inside a harem, Gérôme borrowed popular erotic, Orientalist materials to construct his own harem myth.

For this, Gérôme has been deplored by scholars for many of the past century's decades.³⁹ However, one can only hope that both the current exhibition and the new book by Allan and Morton will bring about a new wave of scholarship on Gérôme. Indeed, Gérôme was not the staunch, Academic painter and documentary Realist that some scholars have made him out to be. He, like many great artists of his time, was a synthesizer of European culture and fantasy. If

³⁹ Jori Finkle, "Art, Race, and Changing Tastes—the Gérôme Show at the Getty," *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 2010.

anything, the current exhibition proves that Gérôme is an artist that still commands attention and interest—over a hundred years after his own death, and long after the dream of European imperialist fantasy burst like a bubble on the cusp of the modern world.

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