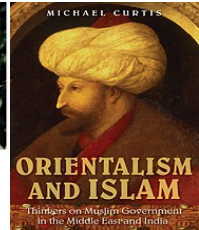


## Othering



AME • 15th June 2024  
Struggle  
As-Sayyid 2004: Islam & Reform



## Western Painters of the Orient, Orientalists in the East

### Holy Land

Two books that cast light on the history of the reception of the “Orient and the Occident.” The New Yorker Kristian Davies looks at images, while the Egyptian and Islamic scholar Muhammad Imara [1931-2020] studies texts penned by western scholars. As the American examines the 19<sup>th</sup>-century western painters of the Orient, the Egyptian challenges “western ideas of Islam” by presenting citations from 32 western scholars. Therewith Muhammad Imara also attempted to show [that](#) one religion signifies the highest development of a monotheistic faith. On the other hand, in the introduction to his splendidly illustrated book, Kristian Davies describes the Orientalist painters’ rare gift of capturing wonderful motifs. These were artists who travelled to the East and preserved a record of the premodern era in their works. Davies found their paintings in 60 institutions of ten countries. It is a pleasure to leaf through the book, especially as the paintings are laid out and explained.

In Najd Collection: „Market in Jaffa” by Gustav Bauernfeind 1887



The author has selected images of deserts and caravans, streets and markets, warriors and women, places of worship, people at prayer and people taking their pleasure. The title page shows “Pilgrims on their way to Mecca” (see below) – a masterpiece by the Frenchman Léon Belly, and the book also contains works by, for example, the German Gustav Bauernfeind (“Market in Jaffa”) and the American James Fairman (“A View of Jerusalem”, see the drawing below). Davies introduces us to the “life and work” of these and other most impressive artists.

James Fairman, View of Jerusalem -1904



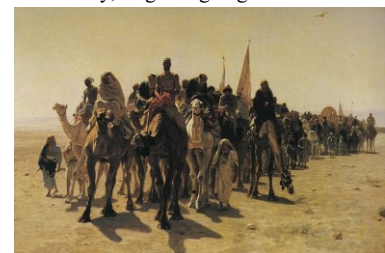
### Jerusalem

Arthur Rimbaud, Jean-Louis Burckhardt, Sir Richard F. Burton, Jean-Léon Gérôme, James Tissot and Jane Digby el-Mezrab also appear in this volume. Davies captures a Golden Age from 1800 to 1900; for him, the Orientalist painters are a key part of the European and the American Enlightenments.

### Critique of Orientalism

In the period under study here, says Davies, the Orient – which stretched from Morocco to Persia and India – was seen as a place of great and colorful diversity; yet there was also a certain uniformity to this exotic attractiveness. Nonetheless, he maintains, the painters who travelled eastwards were innocent of any intention to warp the truth. In 1978, Edward W. Said’s [1935-2003] “Orientalism” described the Western conception of the

Léon Belly, Pilgrims going to Mecca 1861



Orient as a “sheer invention.” From linguists to archaeologists, Said argued, Westerners had presented a false and misleading image of the exotic East. Kristian Davies sums up Said’s argument, briefly as the assertion that centuries of Orientalist studies had been nothing more than “techniques of espionage and methods of oppression” – all the means of just serving the West.

Certainly, Davies admits, Said made some fascinating discoveries in the field of literature; yet he admonishes him for seeing “Western guilt” everywhere and for developing an extremely hostile attitude. Davies argues that a younger generation of authors extended Said’s polemical critique to include Orientalist painting of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which they discovered a “plethora of untruths.”

In these paintings, Linda Nochlin [1931-2017] and others believed they could discern sexism, racism, chauvinism and a host of other “-isms.” Davies argues that these writers had hastened to link the artworks to the process of “colonial expansion.” Accordingly, the 1980s were a key “decade of deconstruction,” and Orientalist paintings were under attack from all sides. It was argued that those painters were merely a part of the “imperialist project,” inauthentic, lacking in any higher artistic ambition, and prejudiced against the East before they had even visited it.

There was also widespread adverse criticism of the representation of women. Davies regards this Saidian style as an intellectual defect. He opposes it by defending the high art of the Orientalist painters, insisting that a beautiful painting may also be called – beautiful. Kristian Davies wishes to rehabilitate these painters, to rescue them from Said’s “fundamental disparagement.”

## Western Views

Muhammad Imara wishes to rehabilitate other objects of Said’s criticism, for he praises the Orientalist writers of the West, but using their texts as examples to support his belief in the superiority of Islamic views. Imara has divided his book into three sections. In the first part, he sketches a “true” Islam; in the second, he castigates the “anti-Muslim Crusade carried out by the West” since September 11, 2001; in the third, he quotes 32 Western scholars who have written about faith. These include William Montgomery Watt from Scotland [1909-2006], Arnold Joseph Toynbee [1889-1975] from England, Sigrid Hunke from Germany [1913-1999], and Bernard Lewis [1916-2018] from America. [Of course, 9/11 was a so deeply sad point in Mideastern ties for so many innocent civilians lost their lives on that day in 2001.]

Some of Imara’s statements about (and evaluations of) these writers raise questions. He has not researched their lives enough. His selection of texts is also problematical, since for instance Toynbee and Hunke were not seen as “Orientalists [researching and/or teaching Oriental, Asian or Mideastern studies]. In Imara’s text it is at times unclear where quotations begin and end.

Muhammad Imara takes passages that suits his goal and combines them to create a decidedly broad picture. Nonetheless, his work deserves widespread attention. For one thing, he does not slander Orientalists in the Saidian style. He also recognizes their achievements. This unites him with great “Orientalists as painters” by Kristian Davies whose work is distinguished for his conscientiousness and accuracy as well. So arguments of many sides may help the reader to understand diverse points of a long lasting discourse.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

**Kristian Davies:** The Orientalists. Western Artists in Arabia, The Sahara, Persia And India. New York: Laynfaroh 2005.

**Muhammad Imara:** Al-Islam fi 'uyun gharbiyya, محمد عمارة الإسلام في عيون غربية, baina iftira' al-Djuhala' wa insaf al-'Ulama', بين إفتراء الجهلاء وإنصاف العلماء. [Islam in Western eyes between the ignorants' flattery and the fairness of the scholars] Cairo: Dar ash-Shuruq 2005; see also my review Kristian Davies' prächtiger Bildband 2005, in Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 130805.

This review first appeared as Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, The Reception of the Other, Western Painters of the Orient, Orientalists in the East, in Qantara, قطر، 010206; 270608. Translated from the German by Patrick Lanagan. For a prior German version just on Kristian Davies see Kristian Davies, The Orientalists. Western Artists in Arabia, The Sahara, Persia and India, New York: Laynfaroh 2005, in: Sehepunkte, 5(2005)9 [15.09.2005]. AME Report (010206). Here updated, expanded, covers, Wikimedia pictures, headings and links were added [221124].

