



## The Reception of the Other

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

**In 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 Muhammad Immara studies texts. Wolfgang G. Schwanitz reports**

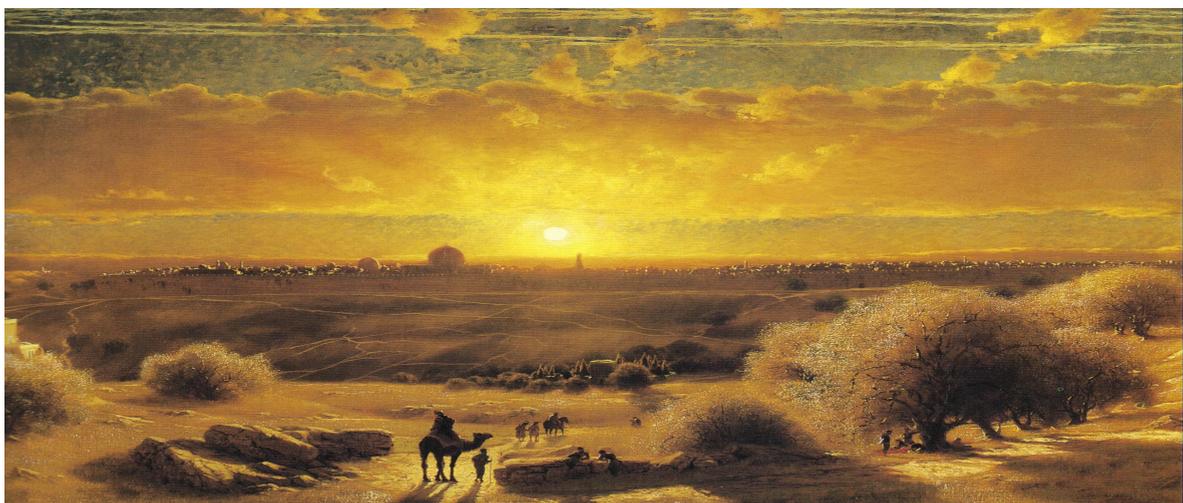
While the American examines 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western painters of the Orient, the Egyptian challenges Western attacks on Islam by presenting citations from 32 Western scholars. Muhammad Immara also attempts to show that Islam represents the highest development of monotheistic religion.

In the introduction to his splendid 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 pre-modern era in their work. Davies found their paintings in 60 institutions in ten countries. It is a pleasure to leaf through the book, especially as the paintings are so perfectly laid out and competently discussed.



"Market in Jaffa" by Gustav Bauernfeind

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", 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"). Davies introduces us to the life and work of these and other artists.



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



### **Edward Said's critique of Orientalism**

In the period under study, says Davies, the Orient – which stretched from Morocco to Persia and India – was seen as a place of great and colourful 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 Said's "Orientalism" described the Western conception of the Orient as 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 (somewhat briefly) as the assertion that centuries of Orientalist studies had been nothing more than techniques of espionage and methods of oppression – in short, means of serving the West.

Certainly, Davies admits, Said made some fascinating discoveries in the field of literature; yet he admonishes Said 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 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. The 1980s were the decade of deconstruction, and Orientalist paintings were under attack from all sides. It was argued that the 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 sees the 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 disparagement.

The Superiority of Islam Muhammad Immara wishes to rehabilitate other objects of Said's criticism: he praises the Orientalist writers of the West, using their texts as examples to support his belief in the superiority of Islam. Immara has divided his book into three sections. In the first part, he sketches the "true" Islam; in the second, he castigates the anti-Muslim Crusade carried out by the West since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001; in the third, he quotes 32 Western scholars who have written about Islam. These include William Montgomery Watt from Scotland, Arnold Joseph Toynbee from England, Sigrid Hunke from Germany, and Bernard Lewis from the USA.

الدكتور محمد عمارة

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بين افتراء الجهلاء .. وانصاف العلماء



دار الشروق

Some of Immara's statements about and evaluations of these writers are false or dubious; he has not researched their lives carefully enough. His selection of texts is also problematical, for Toynbee and Hunke were never regarded as Orientalists. It is at times not even clear where certain quotations begin and end.

Immara takes passages that suit him and combines them to create a decidedly rosy picture of Islam. Nonetheless, his work deserves widespread attention. For one thing, he does not slander Orientalists in the Saidian style; he recognises their achievements. This unites him with Davies, whose work is distinguished by its conscientiousness and accuracy. And although Immara hopes his work will drum up support for Islam, widespread discussion will also temper the book's reception.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

*Translated from the German by Patrick Lanagan*

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

Muhammad Immara: *Al-Islam fi 'uyun gharbiyya baina ifтира' al-Djuhala' wa insaf al-'Ulama'.* Cairo: Dar ash-Shuruq 2005.