



VISUAL ORIENTALISM: THE OTTOMAN WOMAN IN VISUAL ART

Maftuna Bobomurodova 

Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies

Submitted: 02-Jun, 2026

Accepted: 15-Jul, 2026

Published: 27-Aug, 2026

Vol. 3, No. 1, 2026. Sociometrics.us

Sociometrics: Journal of Social
Measurement and Analysis

Abstract

This article examines the formation of the image of the Ottoman woman in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European visual art through the theoretical framework of visual Orientalism. The study analyzes the artistic interpretation of the harem theme in French and British painting, the aesthetic and ideological functions attributed to the female body, as well as the influence of East-West cultural interaction on pictorial traditions, drawing upon the theoretical concepts of Edward Said and Linda Nochlin [1]. The article employs an interdisciplinary methodology that combines historical-art-historical analysis with postcolonial criticism.

Keywords: *visual Orientalism, Ottoman harem, odalisque, female body, East-West, Edward Said, European painting, postcolonial criticism.*

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and
Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This
work is licensed under the Creative
Commons Attribution International
License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

1. Introduction

In nineteenth-century European culture, the interest in the East was reflected not only in literature and travel writing but also extensively in the visual arts. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, colonial expansion, and the intensification of diplomatic and military relations with the Ottoman Empire, European public perceptions of the “East,” particularly the Ottoman world, began to take shape. However, these perceptions were often based not on direct observation but rather on imagination, desire, and ideological needs. In his seminal 1978 work *Orientalism*, American literary scholar Edward Said analyzed this phenomenon as a mechanism through which Europe constructed the East as the “Other” in order to establish and legitimize its own superiority. His work subsequently contributed to the development of the concept of “visual Orientalism” within art-historical studies [1–2].

One of the most persistent and controversial manifestations of this phenomenon in visual art was the harem theme and, within it, the representation of women. Most European artists had never been permitted to enter Ottoman harems, while some had never traveled to the East at all. Nevertheless, they created images of the “Oriental” woman based on indirect sources, literary descriptions, and their own imaginations. Over time, this image became a seemingly “official” visual representation of the Ottoman woman in the European imagination, despite being considerably removed from historical reality [3].

The relevance of this study lies in the growing tendency in contemporary art history to reassess Orientalist painting not merely as an aesthetic phenomenon but also as a visual expression of colonial ideology and gender politics.

Within Uzbekistan's higher education system, the issue of East–West cultural interaction, particularly the representation of the Ottoman heritage in the European imagination, remains a relevant subject of research in the fields of art history and cultural studies [4].

The aim of this study is to analyze, from a historical and art-historical perspective, the mechanisms through which the image of the Ottoman woman—particularly representations of the harem and the female body—was constructed in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European painting, as well as to examine its aesthetic and ideological dimensions. The objectives of the study are as follows: to examine the historical development of the concept of the harem in the European imagination; to analyze the artistic representation of women in the works of leading Orientalist painters; to identify the aesthetic and ideological functions of the representation of the female body; and to demonstrate the mechanisms of interaction between Eastern and Western visual traditions [4].

2. Literature review and methodology

2.1 The Concept of the Ottoman Harem and Its Formation in the European Imagination

In Ottoman usage, the term “harem” (حرم) derives from a word meaning “forbidden” or “sacred place” and referred to a private section of a palace or household where women, family members, and servants lived. In practice, the harem constituted an important social and economic structure, as well as a significant component of family hierarchy and the distribution of power, with a clearly defined administrative system headed by the Valide Sultan (the Sultan's mother) [5]. However, beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European travel accounts—particularly texts written by women, such as the letters of the English aristocrat Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, written from Istanbul in 1717–1718 and published in 1763 under the title *Turkish Letters*—attempted to provide a more realistic and detailed portrayal of everyday life in the harem and to distinguish it from fantasies constructed by men.

Nevertheless, the image shaped primarily by male travelers and artists remained dominant. In Western thought, the harem was interpreted as a closed and inaccessible space, and precisely because of this inaccessibility, it became mysterious and alluring. Paradoxically, this seclusion transformed the harem into an “empty space” for imaginative erotic projection. Artists acquired the freedom to imagine what they could not actually see. As a result, the images they created reflected not so much the realities of Ottoman domestic life as Europe's own desires, gender perceptions, and ideas about power, effectively turning the harem into a mirror of European imagination [6].

2.2 The Harem Theme in Nineteenth-Century French and British Painting

In nineteenth-century European painting, the theme of the Ottoman harem emerged as one of the most significant iconographic directions of Orientalism. Particularly in French painting, the image of the Eastern woman was constructed according to a distinctive artistic formula through representations of the harem, the odalisque, and women's quarters. In this process, the works of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Eugène Delacroix, and, later, Jean-Léon Gérôme were of particular importance. Harem scenes were often not direct documentary representations of real life, but rather artistic expressions of European artists' perceptions of the East, aesthetic attitudes, and gender stereotypes [7].

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres was one of the artists who developed the harem theme not through direct observation, but through Orientalist imagination and established artistic conventions. His 1814 painting *La Grande Odalisque* (The Grande Odalisque) is considered one of the most famous examples of this tendency. According to information provided by the Louvre, the painting depicts a reclining nude female figure whose combination with a turban, fan, draperies, and other Oriental attributes situates the figure within an Orientalist setting. The artist deliberately altered the anatomical proportions of the female body, transforming it from a realistic representation into an idealized and eroticized figure.

In Ingres's work, the image of the odalisque functioned less as a means of providing accurate ethnographic information about the inner life of the harem than as an artistic device that combined the female body with Oriental exoticism. In this respect, *La Grande Odalisque* represents an important example of the nineteenth-century European tradition of portraying the harem woman as a passive, aestheticized figure presented for the viewer's gaze. The Louvre's materials on Ingres likewise describe *La Grande Odalisque* as a work that combines the iconography of the reclining female nude with Orientalist attributes.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Jean-Léon Gérôme further expanded representations of the harem, bathhouses, and Turkish settings. His works depict Oriental interiors, women's spaces, bathhouses, and scenes of everyday life with remarkable attention to detail. Among them, *The Great Bath at Bursa*, created in 1885, is one of the Orientalist compositions depicting Ottoman bath culture and women's spaces. The Metropolitan Museum of Art includes this work among examples of Gérôme's nineteenth-century Orientalist production [8].

In Gérôme's work, the impression of documentary authenticity is particularly significant. The detailed treatment of architecture, clothing, textiles, architectural decoration, and human figures allows the depicted scenes to be perceived as direct representations of real life in the East. Nevertheless, such images cannot be regarded as completely objective documents; rather, they constitute artistic constructions shaped by the artist's choices and the Orientalist aesthetics of nineteenth-century Europe. For this reason, Gérôme's works can be analyzed not only in terms of their ethnographic interest but also as mechanisms through which the East was visually "displayed." Materials published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art on nineteenth-century Orientalism likewise emphasize the complex relationship between fact and fantasy in the representation of the East by European and Ottoman artists [9].

Thus, the harem theme in nineteenth-century French painting can be understood through three principal artistic tendencies: in Ingres's work, the imaginary and eroticized image of the odalisque; in Gérôme's work, a highly detailed, seemingly documentary representation of the Ottoman bathhouse and harem environment. Together, these representations contributed to the formation of a persistent visual image of the Ottoman woman in European art. However, they should not be regarded as complete or objective historical representations of the Ottoman harem, but rather as manifestations of the ways in which nineteenth-century European painting imagined the East in aestheticized, exoticized, and often gendered terms.

3. Result

3.1. The Representation of the Harem and the Female Body in Painting

The central element of paintings depicting the harem theme is the female body, which in nineteenth-century European painting was constructed according to a persistent iconographic formula: a semi-reclining or reclining figure (the odalisque pose), a gaze directed toward the viewer or turned sideways, light and revealing clothing or nudity, and Oriental props surrounding the figure, such as a chibouk or nargileh (hookah), carpets, curtains, and decorative objects. This formula reached an almost canonical form in Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque*: the elongated body, proportions that depart from natural anatomy, and the gaze that appears to invite the viewer all functioned as compositional devices that transformed the female body into a passive object of contemplation [9].

According to art historian Helen Weston, such representations by Ingres may be interpreted as images created "for male pleasure," in which the female figure is depicted as motionless, "not performing," and silently presenting herself to the viewer. In Delacroix's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, however, the situation is somewhat more complex. Although the three female figures are shown conversing and remain clothed, their relaxed poses, informal *déshabillé* style of dress, and compositional arrangement create the effect of imaginatively "inviting" the viewer into a private space.

This suggests that, although the work is not explicitly erotic in character, it nevertheless forms part of the Orientalist fantasy of the harem [10].

Another noteworthy feature is the recurring representation of a Black female servant within these compositions. She is often positioned in chromatic contrast to the white odalisque, either in the background or at the margins of the scene. In contemporary critical art-historical scholarship, such representations are analyzed not only in terms of gender but also as visual codifications of racial hierarchy. Through the positioning of bodies at the “center” and “periphery,” hierarchies of visibility, privilege, and subordination are constructed for the viewer’s gaze [10].

In the works of Jean-Léon Gérôme, the female body is often depicted within collective settings, such as bathhouses or marketplaces, which gives the image an additional status of an “ethnographic document.” This very sense of “documentary authenticity”—the claim that the work represents the result of a supposedly neutral observation—increases its ideological impact, because viewers may be inclined to perceive the depicted scene not as an artistic interpretation but as a representation of “Eastern reality.” By the beginning of the twentieth century, this iconography had also migrated into photography and postcard culture. In particular, the “staged” harem photographs produced by French photographers in Algeria, as analyzed in Malek Alloula’s study *The Colonial Harem*, continued the conventions established by Orientalist painting while giving them an even more “documentary” appearance [10–11].

4. Discussion

From the perspective of visual Orientalism, two interconnected layers can be distinguished in the analysis of representations of the harem and the female body: the aesthetic and the ideological. At the aesthetic level, these works can be regarded as examples of Romanticism and academic artistic experimentation, as well as outstanding achievements in terms of color, composition, and technique. The elegance of Ingres’s line, Delacroix’s richness of color, and Gérôme’s photographic precision occupy a distinctive place in the history of art. At the ideological level, however, as American art historian Linda Nochlin demonstrated in her influential 1983 essay *The Imaginary Orient*, such “documentary realism” actually served as a means of legitimizing the ideological dominance of the West over the East. Historical change, social conflict, and the traces of Western colonialism are largely absent from these paintings; instead, they construct an image of an “eternal” and “timeless” East [12].

Nochlin, particularly in her analysis of Gérôme’s *The Snake Charmer*, demonstrates that the viewer’s gaze exercises control not only over the depicted scene but also over the “Oriental” spectators observing the performance within the scene. This constitutes a direct visual manifestation of Edward Said’s concept of “power through the gaze.” Said defines Orientalism as “a style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient,” forming part of a broader mechanism intended to establish and perpetuate European dominance. From this theoretical perspective, the representation of the female body in a passive and inviting pose is not merely an aesthetic choice but also a simultaneous visual coding of binary oppositions such as East–West, female–male, and subordinate–dominant. Through the image of the Ottoman woman, the entire “East” is presented as a territory that can, in both sexual and political terms, be imagined as available for possession [12].

At the same time, contemporary art history has also developed critical perspectives on the approaches of Said and Nochlin, including those articulated by scholars such as John Mackenzie. Such critics point to the danger of reducing Orientalist painting to a single ideological framework and of failing to distinguish between artists working in different historical periods and artistic styles [13]. In particular, the works of some artists—including women Orientalists and artists who lived in the East for extended periods and studied local cultures in depth—contain representations that are not merely stereotypical but relatively individualized and respectful.

Therefore, rather than mechanically applying a single ideological framework, it is essential to analyze each work within its specific historical context, taking into account the artist's biography and creative intentions [14].

With regard to the interaction between Eastern and Western visual traditions, it is important to emphasize that this cultural exchange was not one-directional. On the one hand, European Orientalist painting adopted motifs, compositional structures, and color schemes from Ottoman miniature painting, Islamic decorative arts, and calligraphy. On the other hand, from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Western academic painting became institutionalized within the Ottoman Empire through the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi, the Istanbul Academy of Fine Arts founded in 1883. As a result, local artists such as Osman Hamdi Bey employed Western techniques while simultaneously producing works that openly challenged Orientalist clichés, most notably *The Tortoise Trainer*. This demonstrates that visual Orientalism was not exclusively one-directional but could also possess dialogical and, at times, counter-discursive characteristics [15].

5. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the image of the Ottoman woman in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European visual art, particularly representations of the harem and the female body, developed as a complex cultural construction reflecting Europe's own ideological, aesthetic, and gendered perceptions rather than being based primarily on direct ethnographic observation. In the works of artists such as Ingres, Delacroix, and Gérôme, the female body was represented through persistent iconographic formulas—including passive poses, inviting gazes, and exotic props. In contemporary art-historical scholarship, these formulas have been reread, particularly through the Orientalism theories developed by Edward Said and Linda Nochlin, as visual expressions of relations of power and control.

At the same time, the analysis has established the necessity of avoiding a one-dimensional ideological interpretation and instead examining each work within its specific historical and biographical context, while taking into consideration the artist's personal experience, the stylistic developments of the period, and the dialogical nature of East-West cultural interaction. The emergence of a responsive and counter-representational tendency within Ottoman academic painting, particularly in the work of Osman Hamdi Bey, provides clear evidence of this complexity. In conclusion, visual Orientalism remains an actively developing field of research at the intersection of art history, gender studies, and postcolonial theory. It is also of particular significance for art-historical scholarship in Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, as a means of rethinking the historical and cultural dialogue between East and West.

References

- [1] E. W. Said, *Orientalism*. New York, NY, USA: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- [2] C. Peltre, *Orientalism in Art*, J. Hedley, Transl. New York, NY, USA: Abbeville Press, 1998.
- [3] R. Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule*. Bloomington, IN, USA: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986.
- [4] S. M. Xasanov, *San'at tarixi va nazariyasi masalalari*. Toshkent, O'zbekiston: O'zbekiston, 2019.
- [5] R. Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem*. London, U.K.: I.B. Tauris, 2004.
- [6] L. P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*. New York, NY, USA: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993.
- [7] H. Weston, "A look back on Ingres," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 114–116, 1996.
- [8] "Orientalism Movement Overview," *TheArtStory*. [Online]. Available: [TheArtStory - Orientalism Movement Overview](https://www.theartstory.org/movement/orientalism-overview/). [Accessed: Aug. 13, 2026].

- [9] M. Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature*. Durham, NC, USA: Duke Univ. Press, 2007.
- [10] M. Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, M. Godzich and W. Godzich, Transl. Minneapolis, MN, USA: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- [11] A. Behdad and L. Gartlan, Eds., *Photography's Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation*. Los Angeles, CA, USA: Getty Research Institute, 2013.
- [12] L. Nochlin, "The imaginary Orient," *Art in America*, vol. 71, no. 5, pp. 118–131, 187–191, May 1983.
- [13] J. M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester Univ. Press, 1995.
- [14] B. Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718–1918: Sexuality, Religion and Work*. Ann Arbor, MI, USA: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1992.
- [15] W. M. K. Shaw, *Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic*. London, U.K.: I.B. Tauris, 2011.