Images of the East in Renaissance Art

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Introduction

The Renaissance, which most scholars agree links the Middle Ages to the Modern World, included a dramatic shift in thought and culture in Europe. It was a period of new ideas, a revisiting of classical thought, and an effort to bridge ancient concepts with the modern world. French historian Jules Michelet described the Renaissance as a movement that witnessed “the discovery of the world and the discovery of man.”¹ For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the Renaissance as a discovery of the world and increasing European interactions with the Middle East.

European Renaissance art reflects the fact that Europe was engaging heavily in trade with the Middle East during the Renaissance and constantly receiving their ideas as well as goods is certainly reflected in European Renaissance art. The significance of Eastern imagery in Western art can offer key insights into the Western perspective toward the study of the East as a whole, which some have described as Orientalism.² Specifically, this imagery in Renaissance art serves as an ongoing basis for debate among history and art scholars, as they continue to analyze the complicated relationships between Europe and the Middle East in an increasingly globalized world.

During the Renaissance, Europeans saw themselves as being in the center of the universe – quite literally, according to the geocentric model. In many instances, Europeans believed themselves to be superior to people of other nations. Because of this, it is ironic that Europeans relied on Middle Eastern goods and trade as symbols of wealth and opulence. One of the ways that powerful Europeans expressed their power was by commissioning paintings and portraits that included Middle Eastern and other exotic images and motifs. Even as Europe saw itself as a self-sufficient and dominant force, it relied on so-called inferior countries for its true expression of power. I will begin by detailing the existing debate on the topic of Orientalism, and then providing background information about the Renaissance before specifically analyzing where and how these two topics intersect.

The Orientalism Debate

The word Orientalism originally referred to “the study of the languages, literature, religions, thought, arts, and social life of the East in order to make them available to the West.”³ In 1978, scholar Edward Said released a book called Orientalism that changed the meaning of this word. Said’s main point was that Orientalism had in itself become a field of thought that was

³ Ibid., xii.
inherently biased. He noted that Orientalism involved seeing the East through a Western viewpoint, which often resulted in stereotypical portrayals rather than genuine reflections of Eastern culture. His has become the modern definition of Orientalism – a term that now has negative connotations - and it has formed a basis for heated debate among scholars in the past thirty or so years.

Many followers agree with Said, and lament the Western bias that often exists in analysis of Eastern cultures, the Middle East in particular. Others note that Said’s theory was an attack on Western thought, and make the case that Said “occidentalized the West, by ‘essentialising’ - describing by means of essences or stereotypes - the characteristics of European powers no less than they ‘essentialised’ the East.” John MacKenzie, a respectful Said skeptic and leader in this area of study, notes that “in this field perhaps more than any other, a particular selection of paintings, or a specific set of quotations can be used to prove anything.” He also points out that some of Said’s devotees have produced work supporting Said’s thesis that is “both subtle and crude, some of which the master might have wished to disown.” Some followers, such as Chandreyee Niyogi, even dedicated their books to Said. Though mostly supportive of Said’s work, Niyogi points out an irony in the debate – Said had wished to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western thought, but instead, Said acknowledged that in many ways, he widened the gap. This is because scholars are now engaged in a complex argument regarding how the East should be viewed as a whole; instead of working together to form a common basis of thought, many Eastern and Western scholars are instead disagreeing on what constitutes a respectful view of the East.

While the finer points of this debate are lengthy and complex, suffice it to say that Edward Said started a debate in 1978 that continues in literature and classrooms all over the U.S., Europe, and the East. It is unlikely that this debate about what Orientalism means and what affects it has on academia will be resolved anytime soon, but it is an increasingly meaningful discussion as the Western and Eastern worlds work more closely together than ever before.

**Renaissance Overview**

It has been said that “if there is one movement at which most people define the birth of modern European civilization, it is surely the period between 1400 and 1600 known as the Renaissance.” Although the term Renaissance was not used until the 19th century, Europeans certainly acknowledged the period as a time of rediscovery, rebirth, and creation while it was occurring. There are several reasons why the Renaissance began where and when it did. First, the classical civilization of Rome certainly influenced Renaissance artists, and “a growing sense of the past prompted the study of [Roman] remains.” Additionally, northern Italy was incredibly wealthy due to flourishing Mediterranean trade in ports like Genoa and Venice. Florence and Milan were also vital centers of manufacturing and distribution for the whole of Europe as well. This wealth meant that there were a large amount of benefactors eager to employ Italian artists, the most

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4 Ibid., 5.
5 Ibid., 5.
famous example being the Medici family in Florence. Furthermore, institutions like the Roman Catholic Church often commissioned expensive and intricate works by artists and architects.\footnote{Black, Cultural Atlas of the Renaissance, 22.} Finally, Italy’s city-state structure at this time meant that the country shared many attributes with ancient Greek and Roman society. Italians had civic pride and a love of their home cities, and acknowledged and appreciated their heritage and traditions. Because of its location, trade, and traditions, Italy in the 1400s was the prime location and time for a shift in thought and culture.

Once Italian artists began to experience a shift in their outlook and thought, the rest of the European world followed suit. With an increased number of foreigners traveling through Europe, as well as the invention of the printing press, the Renaissance movement quickly spread to other countries. Renaissance themes included the rediscovery of antiquity and classical studies, a renewed interest in the individual and humanism, a curiosity for science, mathematics, anatomy, and nature, and a fascination with Eastern goods, people, and society.

In 1482, Ptolemy’s *Geography* was published. This world map detailed over 8,000 places, and popularized latitude and longitude as a way to lay out the grid of the Earth. Ptolemy centered his world around Constantinople, Alexandria, and Baghdad. This shows that although Europeans considered themselves the most dominant people in the world, they recognized that power lay in the East. As mapmaking improved and each subsequent map became more accurate, trade and exploration flourished. This expanded trade allowed for an increased presence of foreign goods, people, and ideas in Renaissance Europe, thus fueling the frequency of Eastern themes seen in Renaissance art.

Without wealthy patrons backing the artist community during the Renaissance, we might not see such obvious and frequent images of the Middle East in famous works. Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* details more about the lives of specific Renaissance artists and works. Vasari elevated artists to a high status, portraying them as noble and selective creators rather than as dirty workers.\footnote{Brotton, The Renaissance Bazaar, 124} Because artists were increasingly seen as elite, they began conversing and networking with the powerful and the wealthy. Through these connections, they received commissions of work from prestigious leaders, who often requested Middle Eastern themes in their portraits to show opulence and wealth. If artists like Michelangelo and da Vinci were not backed by wealthy patrons and encouraged to explore exotic themes, the Renaissance may have looked very different.

**Trade and Exploration: Growing Curiosity During the Renaissance**

One historian writes that “To fully evaluate the artistic achievements of the Renaissance, it is necessary to acknowledge that the art that emerged from it was deeply imbued with the worlds of trade and politics, both of the east and of the west.”\footnote{Brotton, The Renaissance Bazaar, 153.} Around the year 1500, European countries were actively engaged in trade all over the world. Black notes that the “endless curiosity that characterizes ‘Renaissance man’ can be seen as the mainspring of the exploring impulse that was to take European culture across the world.”\footnote{Black, Cultural Atlas of the Renaissance, 109.} Groups like the Dutch East India Company and the
British East India Company made it their business to travel to new and exotic lands, including the Middle East, in search of wealth and luxury goods to introduce into the European market.

However, trade is never a one-way process; as European culture traveled East, Eastern ideas and imagery traveled West. The Renaissance period was the so-called Golden Age of exploration, when famous figures like Bartolomeu Dias, Vasco da Gama, and Christopher Columbus set sail. Exotic goods like musk, ginger, Arabian horses, and Chinese porcelain indicated that Eastern countries could make powerful trading allies. Brotton indicates that these goods and luxury items made a powerful impression on artists and architects like Masaccio, Filarete, and Mantenga, who made an effort to incorporate images of exotic animals, Islamic script, and Eastern materials like silk and woven carpets into their works.14

Traditionally, scholars have believed that the Renaissance involved a return to classical Roman and Greek ways of thinking, and that Renaissance artists incorporated Eastern ideas as a curiosity when it suited them or their benefactors. Brotton argues that this traditional view simply is not true. Instead, he says that Eastern countries played an active role in shaping the course of the Renaissance. I believe that both the traditional view and Brotton are partially right. While Brotton’s argument that the Middle East was a critical force in the European world is certainly valid, I believe that Renaissance artists liked to have fun with their themes. They probably found it interesting to scatter exotic imagery throughout traditional works, and most likely found amusement in the fact that their wealthy patrons placed so much emphasis on the inclusion of exotic goods and symbols in commissioned works.

Despite the Inquisition’s widespread emphasis of traditional European customs and values, many people remained actively curious about the unknown. One such individual was the French writer Pierre Belon, who headed east in search of wonders in the mid-16th century. Belon wrote books about his accounts, popularizing his journeys and prompting other explorers to venture East as well, also writing accounts of their trips. These tours became like Oriental sight-seeing for adventurous Europeans. The wealthier the traveler, the better they were received by what could otherwise be hostile groups of people. In this way, high-ranking travelers like Jean Palerne, who went abroad in 1581, could attest to Eastern atrocities and brutalities without ever truly experiencing them. This kind of morbid curiosity contributed to the sense of wonderment about these exotic people.15 Additionally, possessing Eastern goods and wealth became seen as a status symbol; Europeans began to define themselves by “purchasing and emulating the opulence and cultured sophistication” of Eastern lands.16

As we must now reexamine our traditional beliefs about the Renaissance, so Renaissance artists too had to reexamine their views of the world. In sculpting and painting the perfect human specimens, artists generally created European figures. Michelangelo’s David, for example, looks very European in physical traits and stature. The idea of perfection seemed synonymous with European culture. This raises some important questions: why would a group of countries who were

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so prosperous and self-sufficient demand faraway goods from Eastern lands? Why were other countries so fascinating when they were so “obviously” inferior? These are questions that many Europeans tried to avoid. Renaissance artists, however, seem to have picked up on this contradiction, displaying their understanding in interesting ways.

**European Impressions of the Middle East**

In the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, scholars struggled with attempting to understand Islam more accurately. This was also the period during which the Crusades were active. One scholar writes that, during this time, “everyone in the West had some picture of what Islam meant...but it was not knowledge, and its details were only accidentally true.” For the most part, Islam was perceived as a dangerous force that had usurped lands in which Christianity had previously dominated, “and which continued to constitute a serious threat to Christendom.” Fortunately, no one regards Islam as such today.

Historian Zachary Lockman proposes that Islam served as a mirror for Europeans; it was a culture that they could compare themselves to in order to feel better. Much like how modern Americans watch reality television for the comforting notion that at least they are better than these classless, obscene characters, Europeans in the twelfth and thirteenth century looked to Islam as an inferior ideology that bolstered their self-confidence. Lockman indicates that “it was in part by differentiating themselves from Islam...that European Christians, and later their nominally secular descendants, defined their own identity.”

Another scholar agrees, noting that the Middle East became something of a laboratory for information gathering. Additionally, the exploration of the Middle East raised questions about history, human origins, and the definition of human nature itself, as Europeans realized more and more that what they considered normal and civilized—a belief in Jesus as God, in city living as a sign of wealth, and proper manners and civility—often conflicted with the ideas of Middle Eastern culture.

**Examples of Middle Eastern Imagery in Renaissance Art**

Many Renaissance artists incorporated imagery of the Middle East into their work in quite interesting ways, as the notion of Islam as a serious threat faded somewhat during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Scholars argue that the Renaissance is what allowed for a de-emphasis on Christian thinking, and a weakening of the church. Therefore, the Renaissance as a movement allowed for freer expression and permitted individual artists to incorporate Middle Eastern imagery into their works. Anna Contadini, a scholar at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, points out that Middle Eastern elements were incorporated into Renaissance works for four main reasons. The first was to show exotic goods as valuable objects that provide opportunities for wealth through trade. The second reason was to denote power and status to the patron or subject of a portrait. The third reason for including Middle

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17 Zachary Lockman, Contending Visions of the Middle East, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 36.
18 Ibid., 37.
19 Yes, that was a joke.
20 Ibid., 37.
22 Lockman, Contenting visions of the Middle East, 39.
Eastern motifs was to creatively experiment with new themes and ideas. Lastly, artists could show Islamic and Middle Eastern ideas as prototypes for imitation and learning. For simplicity’s sake in future reference, I will name these four motivations for including Middle Eastern imagery Prospects, Prestige, Playfulness, and Prototypes.

One interesting study is the imagery of Islamic and Middle Eastern textiles in Renaissance art. Europeans, especially Italians, valued trade with the Middle East, because it resulted in a wealth of luxurious cloth to be used in Italian clothing for those who could afford it. Walking down the street, Italians could distinguish between basic Italian textiles and Middle Eastern ones, and the latter evoked a sense of respect and admiration of the wearer. One early example of Middle Eastern textiles in Renaissance art is Cimabue’s paintings from the thirteenth century. Cimabue’s *Madonna and Child with Angels* incorporated imagery of Islamic textiles with Arabic inscriptions. In the fourteenth century, Giotto’s frescoes include textiles with Kufic-like scripts. Kufic was an early calligraphic form of Arab writing.\(^2^3\) In the fifteenth century, Frá Angelico’s *Madonna and Child* incorporates Arabic inscriptions and cloth – a stunning combination of Christian icons surrounded by Islamic influence. These works incorporate the concepts of Prestige and Playfulness. The textiles denote power and sovereignty, but at the same time, we can imagine that Renaissance artists noted the irony of using Islamic motifs to depict Christian figures. Contadini notes that as the Italian textile industry grew in the fifteenth century, the presence of Oriental textiles in paintings decreased; they are seen only in the borders of clothing made of otherwise Italian cloth, such as in Botticelli’s “Fortitude” in 1470.\(^2^4\)

Middle Eastern trade also brought coveted and prestigious Oriental carpets to Europe. These carpets were typical of Anatolian Turkish workshops, and were often used in paintings to denote status or even holiness at the feet of the Madonna or Saints\(^2^5\). This idea of Islam and Middle Eastern motifs as a sign of holiness is ironic, since the Western idea of holiness was fundamentally tied to a belief in Jesus Christ as the son of God and part of the Holy Trinity – ideas which Islam rejected altogether. As the carpets became more common, the wealthy bought them more frequently for use as interior decoration, and they were increasingly seen in portraits of nobility to signify authority and power.

Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, at left, includes several examples of Middle Eastern imagery. The carpet on the table and lush green backdrop are examples of the aforementioned Turkish imports, signifying the importance of the subjects in the painting. The inclusion


\(^{24}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 6.
of furs is meant to be a sign of opulence gained from international trade.\textsuperscript{26} The terrestrial and celestial globes and navigation tools reference the emphasis on exploration and trade during the Renaissance. While this painting has many interpretations and much symbology, one clear message of Holbein’s portrait is that exploration very often leads to opulence and wealth – it invokes the themes of Prospects and Prestige.

Another fascinating example is Benozzo Gozzoli’s The Journey of the Magi, above, which can be interpreted appears to be a celebration of the Medici’s role in uniting the Eastern and Western churches.\textsuperscript{27} Gozzoli painted John VIII, Joseph II, and Lorenzo de’Medici as the three Magi. The Medici family negotiated commercial access to Constantinople in 1439, as Lorenzo de’Medici saw this as a critical connection between the East and West. Unfortunately, the general population of Constantinople rejected the agreement, and the Italian state refused to provide military assistance to the Byzantines in their fight against the Ottomans. In 1453, the agreement ended.\textsuperscript{28} Though the contract dissolved, the painting remains an important source of Middle Eastern ideas incorporated into Italian artwork. It shows the Prestige associated with embarking on a grand journey to the East, and depicts the travelers as wealthy explorers and diplomats forming critical connections between Europe and the Eastern world.

Another interesting work is Costanzo da Ferrara’s Seated Scribe, which was painted during Costanzo’s trip to Istanbul in the 1470s. This portrait is painted in the traditional Ottoman and Persian style of portraiture\textsuperscript{29}. Costanzo’s subject is a young scribe, seated and writing in Arabic. The scribe wears a turban, traditional Ottoman dress with a rich pattern and velvet sleeves, and a golden earring. The 15\textsuperscript{th}-century Persian painter Bihzad created a response to this work, called Portrait of a Painter in Turkish Costume. Interestingly, Bihzad changes the scribe into a painter who is shown working on a painting quite similar to Costanzo’s. Brotton notes that “each artist draws on the aesthetic innovations of the other, making it impossible to say which painting is definably ‘western’ or ‘eastern.’”\textsuperscript{30} While Italy and Turkey exchanged money and goods, they also exchanged artistic ideas and skills. Brotton notes that to ignore the fact that Renaissance art owes a debt to Islamic techniques is to only tell one side of the Renaissance story. In this way, the painting evokes the idea of Prototypes, showing that the exchange of ideas and thought is beneficial. Costanzo shows a respectful admiration for Islamic study and the tradition of discipline and learning in Middle Eastern culture.

Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait (1434), on the following page, is a classic portrayal of the opulence of exotic goods. The painting shows Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini, a wealthy and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{26}] Contadini, Islam and the Italian Renaissance, 9.
\item[\textsuperscript{27}] Brotton, The Renaissance Bazaar, 101.
\item[\textsuperscript{28}] Ibid., 102.
\item[\textsuperscript{29}] Ibid., 116.
\item[\textsuperscript{30}] Ibid., 138.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
powerful Italian merchant, with his wife, Giovanna (who came from wealth herself). The couple stands in a room overflowing with symbols of their wealth: Baltic furs, Spanish oranges, Venetian glasswork, Ottoman carpets, and German woodwork. It was said of the city of Bruges, where the couple lived, that “anyone who has money and wishes to spend it will find in this town everything that the whole world produces.” This painting shows the themes of Prospects and Prestige – this couple delights in their Middle Eastern goods, even though they are part of a European society that thinks of Middle Easterners as barbarian or inferior. The mirror in the back of the painting also shows the growing field of optics. Interestingly, van Eyck has painted himself on this mirror, placing his likeness directly in the center of his painting. Brotton notes that this was a daring and groundbreaking move – van Eyck stressed the artist’s importance alongside that of the patron or sitter. This was an important trend throughout the Renaissance – even as countries and continents became more interconnected, there was still a movement toward individual thought and the importance of the self, potentially growing Europe’s sense of superiority.

Gentile Bellini’s Venetian Embassy in the East shows Venetians and Turks engaging in dialogue. Venice’s Jewish population served as an important link to the Mediterranean trading business, and merchants from the Ottoman Empire often visited Venice to engage in contracts and to warehouse items. Black notes that “although Christians and Turks were often involved in open conflict, the channels of communication through diplomacy and trade remained open.” In this painting, it is apparent that the Venetian and Turkish merchants set aside their cultural and religious differences in acknowledgement that they and their people shared similar goals of trade – a clear example of Prototype, in which the exchange of ideas is beneficial.

Finally, Leonardo da Vinci’s ceiling frescoes in the Sals delle Asse in Milan show crosses side-by-side with eight-pointed stars and looped knots, traditional symbols of the Islam faith. Albrecht Durer imitated these themes. Contadini explains that this is an example of Playfulness, because da Vinci incorporated unorthodox symbology into a traditionally sacred space for apparently no other reason other than the fact that he could.

One unifying theme throughout these examples Middle Eastern imagery in Renaissance art is that as Eastern goods showed status, so did custom paintings and works that incorporated Eastern ideas. This is a bit humorous in the sense that Europeans at this time generally considered themselves superior to their Middle Eastern counterparts; yet, when they wanted to convey their wealth, power, and authority, one common request was for the artist to paint the patron

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31 Ibid., 135.
32 Ibid., 136.
33 Ibid., 137.
34 Black, Cultural Atlas of the Renaissance, 135.
surrounded by Middle Eastern goods. It is ironic to think that Western rulers relied on dominance in Middle Eastern trade as a symbol of power.

**Additional Thoughts**

After exploring how Renaissance artists incorporated Middle Eastern and Oriental ideas into paintings as a way to show Prospects, Prestige, Playfulness, and Prototypes, we must consider an important question: why did some artists choose to not incorporate images of the exotic when it seems to be so popular and lucrative? Did images of the East inherently contradict the idea of the Renaissance as a return to more classical/traditional works? It is my opinion that the Renaissance is often described using two conflicting characteristics: the movement was a return to classical thought as well as a time for exploration of new ideas and cultures. In this way, we are able to see such interesting and unique juxtapositions like the Virgin Mary adorned with Islamic calligraphy. Rather than seeing this as confusing or nonsensical, we can instead view these images as a glimpse into the Western mindset regarding the Middle East during the Renaissance. The artists who did not incorporate these themes may simply not have been backed by wealthy patrons, may not have had a strong preference for new or exotic ideas over traditional imagery, or may not have believed that Middle Eastern imagery was necessary for creative thinking and portraying the world around them.

**Conclusion**

It has been said that “the history of the Arabs has been written in Europe chiefly by historians who knew no Arabic, or by Arabists who knew no history.” While this is a sharp comment, it is relevant to the analysis of Middle Eastern imagery in Renaissance art. As we have examined, much of what Europeans during the Renaissance knew about places like Egypt or the Ottoman Empire was from stories of others who had visited, from viewing other artists’ work on the subject, or from hear-say by way of sailors and merchants. Very few artists who incorporated Middle Eastern ideas and themes into their Renaissance works had actually been to these places or conducted detailed studies of the cultures and traditions of the Middle East. In other words, their knowledge of Middle Eastern culture was based on embellished stories and superficial interactions with exotic goods rather than an in-depth understanding of Middle Eastern thought.

On one hand, we can argue that this limited the artists’ ability to accurately and respectfully depict Islamic themes, and that by throwing calligraphy and Middle Eastern goods into paintings, they cheapened the image of the East. On the other hand, we can note that the Renaissance artists were not limited by a need to understand everything about Islam – instead, they experimented with Middle Eastern imagery in interesting and fun ways that provide scholars today with a quite intriguing topic to study.

In this way, it can be argued that Said’s argument was right – Orientalist imagery became more and more stereotypical throughout centuries of artistry, culminating in the work of 19th century artists, which some feel border on racist. Linda Nochlin, a leading critic of Orientalist art, argues that most exotic imagery is incredibly stereotypical and shows “a childlike indifference to the need to preserve culture and tradition.” She indicates that artists used Orientalism as an area

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**Notes**

in which to explore fantasy and imagination.\textsuperscript{37} She sees this as a negative aspect rather than liberating idea. For better or worse, Middle Eastern imagery in the Renaissance had a direct effect on how the Middle East was viewed by Europeans for centuries after it had been created.

In sum, we can say with confidence that there is an element of humor in Europeans’ elevation of Middle Eastern goods as a status symbol. Much like how a Swiss watch or Egyptian cotton sheets carry an element of sophistication and refinement today, Middle Eastern produce, textiles, and spices allowed the owner to feel like they had conquered a small part of the world for their own pleasure. We may conclude that the man who treasures his German-made BMW is not inherently more special than any other person – it is the possession that differentiates him. Similarly, we can speculate that Europe in itself was not the epitome of perfection during the Renaissance. Europeans relied heavily on the support and trade of other countries, particularly in the Ottoman Empire and North African regions, to define their high status and provide them with the luxuries they coveted.

\textsuperscript{37} A.L. Macfie, Orientalism (London: Longman, 2002).