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**Roger Benjamin**, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003. xxi + 352 pp. Map, plates, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-520-22217-2.

Review by Julia Clancy-Smith, University of Arizona.

In her 2002 article in *Histoire de l'Art*, Dominique Jarrassé poses an important question: "Existe-t-il une place entre les notions d'art orientaliste et d'art primitif, pour celle d'art colonial?" Allowing that art history, in coming to terms with *art colonial*, shares a set of common problems with anthropology and history, Jarrassé observes that the historian tends to "évacue la dimension artistique au profit de l'iconographie," thus privileging the ideological. The anthropologist, also tempted to reduce colonial artistic production to document or archive, interprets that production as "représentation de l'autre qui, par définition, dans cette relation est nié, absent." [1] The dilemma for art historians is to acknowledge the merit of other disciplines, while not losing sight of their subjects and methods of inquiry. This provocative challenge to scholars dealing with what is known (for lack of more satisfactory nomenclature) as colonial art has been answered in a most remarkable way by Roger Benjamin in his recent *Orientalist Aesthetics*.

Benjamin, a professor of Art History and Visual Culture at the University of Sydney, is author of *Matisse's "Notes of a Painter": Criticism, Theory, and Context* (1987). Matisse steered Benjamin to his 1997 publication, *Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee*; the next year he curated an exhibition in Sydney inspired by this study. A symposium devoted to "The Oriental Mirage: Orientalism in Context" accompanied the exhibit, later resulting in an important volume edited by Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts and published in 2002, in which Benjamin has a chapter. [2]

The questions that the author raises in the present study are: "What was Orientalist art in the time of its historical emergence? How was it thought about, written up, reviewed? Under what conditions was it produced, exhibited, collected?" (p. 3). What makes Benjamin's study stand out from other ostensibly similar works is that he takes seriously the task of carefully historicizing orientalist artistic production in its complex and contradictory relationships with colonial culture and that he understands both colonial culture and artistic production in the widest possible sense. Thus, as he somewhat modestly observes in his introduction, the "book is as much an informal contribution to the sociology of art or of colonial culture as, say, a history of style" (p. 2).

Benjamin focuses upon the Maghrib during the high water mark of French global imperialism; the emphasis is upon Algeria and France, although connections are made with Tunisia and Morocco as well as other parts of *la plus grande France*. Its chronological limits—1880 to 1930—run from the second wave of empire building by France and other European powers to the centenary celebrations of the French conquest of Algeria and the establishment in 1930 of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers. This half century represents a period which has not benefitted until now from any in-depth, overarching art historical analysis. Indeed, scholars have interpreted the decades from 1880 on as the moment when

orientalism gave way to other artistic movements and novel, more modern sensibilities. Benjamin, however, disagrees and argues that, in fact, orientalism experienced a new phase after about 1880, “the least known and most interesting of all” (p. 7). This then leads him to advocate viewing modernism from the “periphery,” that is, from colonial North Africa, which in turn suggests a reconceptualization of modernism itself, an argument which is made convincingly throughout.

Benjamin’s first chapter on “Nineteenth-Century Debates” provides pre-1880 historical context, discussing the military occupation of Algeria and the literati, photographers, and artists, such as Eugène Fromentin, who followed in the wake of the *armée d’Afrique*. The next chapters consider Renoir and “Impressionist Orientalism”; the creation of the Society of French Orientalist Painters under the tutelage of Léonce Bénédite; and Orientalists in the public gaze. Some of this might appear at first glance to constitute fairly well-traveled terrain, yet Benjamin has conceived his study as running along several axes, one of which is art-theoretical, the other institutional. This not only allows him to discuss production as well as reception of art and artists but also leads him into unexplored territory. At the same time, his analysis never strays far from the violence, racism, and dispossession of colonialism, its power exerted under so many guises, explicit as well as subtle, above all in Algeria. [3]

The government-sponsored traveling scholarships, *bourses de voyage*, constitute one fascinating and little-known story. After 1881, competitive travel grants allowed students in architecture and printmaking as well as fine arts to travel to the Maghrib and places farther afield in the French empire. Needless to say, these scholarships were also conceived of as a way to promote empire at home. Since Benjamin’s own vision of art, aesthetics, and institutions is generous, and because he leaves few interconnections unexplored, he catches in this ample net a surprising range of activities. We watch the expanding bureaucratic state’s management of both artists and the arts; the complex reasons for the Third Republic’s awakened attention to indigenous arts or “handicrafts” by the fin de siècle; the processes whereby commercialization and commodification intertwined with high art, popular entertainment, and mass spectacle; the intricate relations crisscrossing the Mediterranean between Parisian promoters and hucksters, businessmen, venal lobbies and lobbyists, and colonial officialdom. Thus, one of the many virtues of this study is that it operates on several planes simultaneously: one is broad and sweeping; the other intimate, privileging individuals and their life stories.

In my view, the most significant section is chapter nine devoted to Mammeri and Racim. These Algerian artists, both of whom began painting around World War I, had different careers and are remembered differently today. Azouaou Mammeri mainly produced landscapes of Moroccan cities and was promoted by the colonial regime under Lyautey as well as praised by art critics in the metropole. Perhaps because of this, Mammeri has fallen from view, if not entirely from grace, in the post-colonial period. In contrast, Mohammad Racim, a miniaturist inspired by Persian and Ottoman traditions, embraced “indigenous neotraditionalism,” forging his own unique genre of representation. While Racim, too, found favor with colonial authorities in Algeria, his subjects and their framing—evoking pre-colonial Algerian history and firmly attached to an ancient Islamic art form—were much more unsettling for the colonial gaze than Mammeri’s perspectival canvases. Or so it might appear. Benjamin, nevertheless, marshals evidence to argue that in Mammeri also we can discern the “grit of nascent resistance” (p. 222), above all, in his renderings of scenes from Muslim religious life, such as his “Interior of Koranic School” from 1921. These renderings belied widely held European representations of Islam and Muslims at the time as fanatic, ignorant, and dangerous—views that are still very much with us today. Benjamin’s fundamental point is that despite the apparent emulation of Western forms of knowing and representing, or the seeming co-optation by colonial regimes, indigenous painters or photographers were inherently subversive. In other words, they had the possibility to beat “the colonizers at their own visual game” (p. 235).

Benjamin opens his study with a visit he made in 1993 to Algiers’ National Museum of Fine Arts, whose library he found virtually deserted; soon thereafter it was forced to close due to fundamentalist threats.

Today, a decade later, the University of Oran's *Centre National de Recherche en Anthropologie Sociale et Culturelle* is hosting an international conference in September 2003 devoted to "Image, Histoire, Mémoire: Les représentations iconographiques en Algérie et au Maghreb." The conference will also include various exhibitions showing paintings, posters, and postcards from the colonial and post-colonial eras. It is to be hoped that Algeria can now reclaim her visual past, history, and identity.

Benjamin makes available to English-speaking audiences significant research by French scholars, such as François Pouillon, author of numerous studies on art in Algeria, including a biography of Étienne Dinet, and Elisabeth Cazenave who published a work on the Villa Abd-el-Tif in 1998.[4] With sixteen full-page color plates and 123 figures, this is a lavishly illustrated volume, in the best sense of the term. Considering the number of illustrations, the University of California Press has priced it quite reasonably, making the book, even in its hardcover edition, possible for course adoption. Finally, the author combines elegant language with profound observations while, nevertheless, remaining accessible to those somewhat outside the field. Thus, this study will not only prove of compelling interest to scholars in a wide range of fields but could be used, once again, in the classroom.

## NOTES

[1] Dominique Jarrassé, "L'art colonial, entre orientalisme et art primitif. Recherche d'une définition," *Histoire de l'Art* 51 (novembre 2002): 3-16; quotes 3 and 5. See also the special issue of *French Historical Studies* 26: 2 (Spring 2003) edited by Daniel J. Sherman and Mary D. Sheriff and devoted to "French History in the Visual Sphere"; Todd Porterfield, *The Allure of Empire: Art in the Service of French Imperialism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); and *Images et colonies: nature, discours et influence de l'iconographie coloniale liée à la propagande coloniale et à la représentation des Africains et de l'Afrique en France, de 1920 aux indépendances: Actes du colloque organisé par l'ACHAC du 20 au 22 janvier 1993 à la Bibliothèque nationale* (Paris: Syros, 1993).

[2] Roger Benjamin, "Colonial Tutelage to Nationalist Affirmation: Mammeri and Racim, Painters of the Maghreb" in Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts, eds. *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002): 43-78.

[3] If one compares, for example, "Tunisian" with indigenous Algerian artists, one perceives the impact that power and politics exerted upon the realm of the arts. Tunisia's colonial history was much less violent than that of Algeria; Tunisia thus offered more social and cultural space for artistic collaborations across the colonial divide from the inter-war period on. The École de Tunis emerged from the "Groupes de Dix" of 1948 which included artists of diverse national and cultural backgrounds: Jewish, Muslim, Christian, non-believers, Italian, Arab, French, etc. From this came painters such as Pierre Boucherle, Moses Levy, Yahia Turki, and Abdelaziz Gorgi, to name only the best known. In her study, *L'École de Tunis* (Tunis: Alif, 1994), Dorra Bouzid observes that: "Le premier mérite de la toute fraîche École de Tunis de 1949 est d'avoir opté pour une peinture "Tunisienne" ni coloniale, ni orientaliste. À la différence de l'École de Paris, elle n'était pas une réaction contre le passé mais la première dans le temps: une pionnière dans un pays Arabo-Musulman, sans tradition picturale" (20).

[4] François Pouillon, *Les deux vies d'Étienne Dinet, peintre en Islam: L'Algérie et l'héritage colonial* (Paris: Balland, 1997); and Elisabeth Cazenave, *La Villa Abd-el-Tif: un demi-siècle de vie artistique en Algérie* (Paris: Association Abd-el-Tif, 1998).

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