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Mary Kelly, *French Women Orientalist Artists, 1861-1956: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Depictions of Difference*. London: Routledge, 2021. 246 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. £120.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1472440310; £33.29 U.K. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1003185130.

Review by Alia Nour, Independent Scholar.

Mary Kelly's innovative book, *French Women Orientalist Artists, 1861-1956: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Depictions of Difference*, is the first comprehensive study of French Orientalist women artists practicing in France and its territories in the Maghreb region of North Africa, specifically Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. It joins a body of literature focusing on cross-cultural interactions and gender in the five decades since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978).^[1] The main purpose of this book is to "re-establish French women Orientalists within the canon" (p. 1), and to examine the impact of these "women's art on the existing Orientalist discourse" (p. 2). Through consulting primary documentation including records of the Paris Salons, artist dictionaries, and other exhibitions catalogs, Kelly uncovered seventy-two French female Orientalists. Further in-depth archival research was conducted on select artists who represented a range of styles ranging from academic conservative to avant-garde. Kelly deftly interweaves issues of gender and cross-cultural interactions in support of her central thesis that French women artists' perspectives of the Maghreb differed from those of their male counterparts, in keeping with their female social positions in France and their artistic training.

In the introduction, Kelly presents a summary of her argument along with a list of the women artists' names recorded in the catalogs of the Paris Salons, as well as a brief account of the official Salon's jury and medal system. She also provides a review of the multiple and varied perspectives of the Orientalist/postcolonial debate in terms of art and visual culture and clarifies her approach to the "problematic nature of this debate" (p. 7). Drawing on Mary Roberts's and Jill Beaulieu's definition of Orientalism as "a disparate and disputed set of discursive constructions," Kelly argues for an "open platform of discussion" that is "constructed from (and acts as a meeting place for) existing postcolonial theories," on which to place the production of Orientalist artists with the aim of showing that works of art can be read differently by individuals of diverse times, culture, ethnicity, class, or gender (p. 13). Specifically, her objective "is to filter works by women artists through different positions with the hope of creating a 'weave' of scholarship," and to "attempt locate the meeting space of different perspectives" (p. 13). She also briefly reviews literature relating to the gendered gaze upon the "Orient," including those by Reina Lewis, Billie Melmann, Laura Mulvey, and Mary Roberts.^[2]

The first chapter, on Marie Elizabeth Aimée Lucas-Robiquet, exemplifies many of the issues concerning female Orientalism identified within the book. A successful artist during her lifetime, Lucas-Robiquet was trained by the history and Orientalist painter Félix-Joseph Barrias in Paris, before moving in 1891 to Algeria, where she lived and worked until 1904. She regularly exhibited in Paris at the Salon of the Society of French Artists and that of the French Orientalist artists, and received numerous medals and awards, including a knighthip in the Legion of Honor. Despite her achievements, contemporary critics still relegated her to the marginality of women artists: Luc Oliver Merson referred to her work as “virile,” and Louis Gonse stated that “she shows herself naturally more feminine and delicate in her touch” (p. 42). The chapter focuses on Lucas-Robiquet’s series of Naturalist all-female North African weavers in interior domestic settings (1892 and 1909), a subject that, as Kelly points out, was influenced by the arts and crafts revival of the fin de siècle, the shift to Orientalist Naturalism, and her own female social position and artistic training (she resorted to private tuition as women were barred from the École des Beaux-Arts until 1897). *Interior in Beni Ounif (South Oran)* (ca. 1909) is an example of the artist’s interest of Berber female craftwork in North Africa. The painting shows four Berber women—one of them with a child strapped to her back—engaged in the preparation, spinning, and weaving of wool, which, as Kelly notes, suggests “a space that combines active female Berber labor with familial activity” (p. 47). She argues that because of Lucas-Robiquet’s female social position in France, her approach to painting Berber women differed from those of her male contemporaries. While Lucas Robiquet focused on images of Maghrebi women as “active makers of craft,” Étienne Dinet “moved the fundamental nature of stereotypical, interior harem scenes into the site of modern landscape” (p. 45), such as in *Bather by the Palmery* (ca. 1900–1901). Similarly, while Lucas-Robiquet’s and Gustave Guillaumet’s weaver paintings domesticate an erotic “Orient,” differences are located in their style and in the artists’ approach to the subject depicted. Unlike Guillaumet, Lucas-Robiquet devoted her entire series to the depiction of North African women weaving and working.

Chapter two explores representations of the domestic Maghrebi interior by women Orientalists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kelly argues that women Orientalists’ “modernizing views of Muslim women” (p. 59) were in line with their own female status, together with their interactions with these Muslim women. Here again, Kelly brings copious biographical data, visual analyses, travel writings, and contemporary critical reviews of marginalized women artists to bear on her argument. She further argues that Mary Cassatt’s and Berthe Morisot’s works of modern Parisian women (in both interior and outdoor settings) influenced many French women Orientalists to represent Maghrebi women as “modern women,” homemakers, mothers, and individual agents like those depicted in France. Following a brief discussion of the Muslim veil and patriarchal orders, along with the mid-eighteenth to twentieth-century history of the European eroticized idea of the interior harem space, Kelly highlights different approaches to Islamic interior settings by Lucie Ranvier-Chartier, Marguérite Delorme, Odette Bruneau, and others. In discussing Delorme’s Impressionist painting *The Henna* (undated) depicting an upper-class Moroccan woman having her hands being hennaed, Kelly finds that the sitter has an air of French bourgeoisie: Delorme highlighted Maghrebi female traditions, while showing female modernity through the women’s fashions and interactions. *The Henna* can also be read as “portraying the effects of dual cross-cultural interaction: firstly, the traditional process of henna application from which the beauty ritual of the manicure derived, and, secondly the modernization process in the ‘Orient’ which was influenced by European beauty rituals” (p. 88). Another approach to Islamic interior spaces is found in Bruneau’s modern musical scenes. Her untitled painting depicting happy Maghrebi women playing music in a female interior space

shows female companionship (recalling Cassatt's idea of the modern woman), and also challenges typical stereotypical perceptions that Muslim women "are motionless, unhappy, without passion and void of all self-expression" (p. 93). Of particular interest is the discussion of the paradox of painting women "behind the veil," which further highlights the complexities inherent in cross-cultural encounters (p. 96). The creation of portraits of unveiled Muslim women and their exhibition in France and North Africa by artists like Lucas-Robiquet (*Aicha*, ca. 1899) and Marie Tonoin (*Head of a Woman, Biskra*, 1899-1900), or sculptor Rachel Lucy Hautot (*Young Girl Holding her Veil*, undated) "defied Islamic law" by exposing their sitters in public spaces (p. 101). Such representations, however, Kelly states, "are important to postcolonial discourse because they allow for contradictory views on the matter" (p. 106). That is, in their portrayals of Maghrebi women, some French women Orientalists sought, first, to present a modern and benign image of Muslim women to European viewers; second, to liberate Maghrebi women from the constraints of patriarchal orders; and, finally, to enforce their colonial viewpoints of modernity upon their subjects.

In chapter three, Kelly moves from representations of the Maghrebi interior to paintings of the exterior world by women Orientalists between 1897 and 1941. Illustrating a wide selection of women's representations of nomadic, village, and city life, Kelly persuasively argues that Maghrebi women's work outdoors was seen and painted by French women Orientalists, contrary to Pierre Bourdieu's claim that Maghrebi women's labor was not seen.[3] She also explores women's contributions to the Naturalist genre—following Emile Zola's definition of Naturalism "as a corner of nature seen through the filter of the individual point of view of one person," and their approach to the challenging diffusion of light (p. 117). One of the artists discussed in this chapter is Jean Thil, whose first encounter with Tunisia was in 1921 after she had won a travel grant from the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Like Lucas-Robiquet, Thil was a respected and award-winning artist, who was lauded by the critic Camille Mauclair as "not just among the best female painters, but one of the best history and Orientalist painters of our time." [4] She was later forgotten, but has been rediscovered recently.[5] Thil's many scenes of nomadic Berber women in Tunisia performing their daily work outside the tent or campsite, such as *Nomads, Southern Tunisia* (ca. 1928), exemplifies the artist's style, combining elements of Naturalism, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism. Kelly argues that Thil's *Nomads* can be interpreted as a French artist's attempt to describe female nomadic life to the French public, citing Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial concept of "strategic essentialism" (p. 136). Marguerite Tedeschi also presented a new approach to Orientalism through her handling of color and tone; she tackled the challenging issue of light by using the painterly techniques and color theories of the Neo-Impressionist Georges Seurat, as in *Laundress* (1913). Tedeschi painted other Maghrebi subjects, including the female dancers from the Oulad Naïl tribe, and here again, Kelly compares the artist's painting *Arab Celebration, Bou-Saâda* (ca. 1913) with Dinot's *The Scarf Dance* (ca. 1910). She claims that while Dinot magnificently portrays the Oulad Naïl costumes, jewelry, and characteristic features, his dancers appear "lifeless" (p.150)—indicating that the models are posing; in contrast, Tedeschi captures the fluidity of performance and movement associated with the dance. Kelly moves from paintings to sculpted representations of rural Tunisian women by Rachel Lucy Hautot, such as the bronze cast sculpture *Woman with her Child and Baby* (undated) which displays similarities to the technique of Edgar Degas. Examples of women's paintings depicting the hybridization of urban structures and peoples include Cécile Bougourd's *Flower Shop* [Tunis, Tunisia] (ca. 1912) portraying a flower seller in the town of Tunis. Drawing on Deborah Cherry's theories of "Worlding" and framing the "East," Kelly argues that in Europeanizing the painting's temperament and combining a European subject matter (that of a

flower seller) and a Tunisian urban setting, Bougourd could be instilling the French colonial inscription on Algeria.[6] Another urban-themed painting by Yvonne Mariotte, *Market Scene Fez* [Morocco] (1937) portrays the multicultural society that existed in Morocco during the French protectorate period from 1912 to 1956. The painting also shows that women are accompanied by a man or men, thereby alluding to the patriarchal order in Morocco during this period.

The fourth and final chapter focuses on the avant-garde modernist approaches by select women Orientalists, specifically Ketty Carré, Marcelle Ackein, and Yvonne Kleiss-Herzig. She considers their treatment of media and their use of modernist forms of Islamic decorative arts. In keeping with her central thesis, she argues that these avant-garde women presented Islamic art objects and Maghrebi women “from an empathic rather than an eroticizing and othering point of view” (p. 172). She briefly discusses the development of modernist Orientalism in France and North Africa, mostly in Algeria. By the late decades of the nineteenth century many French Orientalists began to follow Hippolyte Taine’s philosophy on *race, milieu et moment*, prompting artists to preserve “natural” North African environments in their paintings—which were being transformed by colonization (p. 138). Meanwhile, the Society of French Orientalist Painters was founded in Paris in 1893 to draw more artists to the colonies, in addition to the establishment of other societies and institutions in North Africa, including the Villa Abd-el-Tiff in Algiers—the equivalent of Rome’s Villa Medici. One of the artists who lived at the Villa Abd-el-Tiff was Ketty Carré who accompanied her husband, the well-known Orientalist artist Léon Carré. Carré was overshadowed by her husband and was only briefly mentioned in artistic records; hence, Kelly sets out to discover the artist and her work in more detail. Although Carré portrayed stereotypical female figures, such as *Odalisque in the Garden* (1913) and *The Courtesan* (1918), Kelly notes that her portrayals of the female figure changed eventually, as in *Arab Interior* (1931). Depicting three Arab women drinking tea in a female setting space of an upper-class home (infused with arabesque decoration), the painting is reminiscent of Henriette Browne’s *A Visit: A Harem Interior, Constantinople, 1860* (1861) and *A Flute Player: A Harem Interior, Constantinople, 1860* (1861), while its theme of female companionship conjures Cassatt’s idea of the modern woman. The painting also makes reference to Roberts’s argument that women’s depictions of harem spaces were “a rich source of fantasy.”[7] Thus, Kelly argues that Carré “created a bridge between the traditional and modernist practices of *women* Orientalists” (p.180). She further rejects the claim that Henri Matisse was the first artist to transfer modern café subject matter to modernist Orientalism, noting that Carré experimented and painted *The Caf   Maure* (1911) one year before Matisse’s *Moroccan Caf  * (1912-1913). Another modernist female Orientalist who has received little attention was Yvonne Kleiss-Herzig. Like Carré and Matisse, Kleiss-Herzig was devoted to a modernism that drew its decorative motifs from traditional Islamic crafts. However, Kelly argues that Matisse “utilized Islamic motifs in his portrayals of the erotic Orientalist odalisque,” while Kleiss-Herzig showed a more “empathetic approach to the female figure interconnected with use of Islamic decorative line” (p. 185). For example, in *Jewish Women in the Casbah* (undated), Kleiss-Herzig focuses not on the female figures, but rather on their elaborately decorated shawls with an Islamic Persian motif known as *Boteh* (or *Buta*). While Matisse, Carré, and Kleiss-Herzig were influenced by Islamic decorative motifs, Marcelle Ackein—whose paintings are inspired by Cubist and other modernist forms—was influenced by West African crafts and textiles that she encountered, such as in the *Rug Market in Mopti* (undated).

French Women Orientalist Artists, 1861-1956 certainly makes an important contribution to our understanding of Orientalism and postcolonial perspectives. Kelly has opened new avenues for

the Orientalist discourse by providing valuable documentation on French women Orientalists and the variety of works they produced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In applying her “open platform of discussion” (p. 8) she makes some valid points and provides many insightful readings, nevertheless, there are some issues related to prioritizing theory over historical or other facts, and (in the words of Edhem Eldem) to an “over reading.”[8] For example, to state that male artists “rarely portrayed Algerian women as ‘makers’ and the private Berber female space” (p. 48), except for a painting by Frederick Arthur Bridgman, omits those by many other artists, such as Charles Landelle, Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer, Maurice Bompard, Eugène Girardet, and Paul Leroy, among others. Likewise, while some of Dinet’s portrayals of the Oulad Naïl women could be read as an engagement “with European stereotype by drawing on the idea of Berber women as mere entertainers and courtesans” (p. 45), he could also be painting what he actually saw. Moreover, as Roger Benjamin wrote, “even when depicting the Ouled-Naïl engaged in their characteristic dances, Dinet approached the subject so as to diminish the sexualized and venial aspect of their presence before and assumed (but never depicted) European viewer.”[9] Similarly, according to Kelly the differences between Guillaumet’s two versions of *Weavers in Bou-Saâda (Algeria)* (undated)—one which “appears to be an earlier study” (p. 48) and a finished version—indicate, first, that the artist had limited access to Algerian female models, and second, “shows the effect of drawing from memory or imagination within the studio space has on his paintings” (p. 50).[10] The oeuvre and writings of Gustave Guillaumet, however, tell us that one of the artist’s favorite themes was domestic female life (including those of women involved in various phases of textile production: carding wool, working the spindle, and weaving on the loom), and that he did indeed have access to female domestic interiors in Bou-Saâda, as described in his book *Tableaux Algériens* (1888).[11]

In the same vein, claims that some women artists sought and presented to the European public a benign and modernist image of Muslim women different from that of the traditional stereotypical erotic “other” would benefit from documentary evidence. The voices of women Orientalists, critics, and audiences both in France and North Africa are absent on this matter. While the book provides rich information relating to the female gendered status in Paris, the artworks discussed are mainly positioned within the opposing camps of women’s representations of North African active “makers” versus men’s depictions of stereotypical erotic “other.” I agree with Kelly that the book highlighted the need for reevaluating Orientalist theory. But the book also emphasized the need to appropriately balance between using generalized universal theories, which Kelly is prone to, with alternative historical or other facts.

A final issue relates to the citation of Arabic in the book. For example, the common phrase that decorates the frame of Dinet’s *Prayer* (ca. 1916-1929), “There is no victor but God,” is cited as *Wa la ghaliba illa-llah*, but should be *Wa la ghalib illa Allah*. *Ghaliba* is a feminine name, and is often mis-cited in English language texts.

Ultimately, Mary Kelly has corrected the omission of French women in the Orientalist canon and has prepared the ground for further research. Her book will be an important source for scholars of art, gender studies, history, and Middle Eastern and North African studies.

NOTES

[1] Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991); Billie Melmann, *Women Orients: English Women and the Middle East, Sexuality,*

Religion and Work 1718–1918 (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996); Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts, eds., *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones and Mary Roberts (eds.), *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2008); Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature* (Duke Backfile. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), and *Istanbul Exchanges: Ottomans, Orientalists, and Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Lynne Thornton, *Women as Portrayed in Orientalist Painting* (Paris: ACR Editions, 2009); among others.

[2] Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996) and *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English women and the Middle East, Sexuality, Religion and Work 1718–1918* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); Mary Roberts, “Contested terrains: women Orientalists and the colonial harem” in Mary Roberts and Jill Beaulieu (eds.), *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 179–203, and *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[3] See Pierre Bourdieu (trans. Richard Nice), “The Kabyle house or the world reversed” in *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 274–276.

[4] Camille Mauclair, “Jeanne Thil,” *L'Art et les Artistes* (Paris: June 1933), p. 298.

[5] An exhibition titled *Peintures des lointains. Voyages de Jeanne Thil* was held at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Calais from July 15, 2020 to February 28, 2021. See <https://www.quaibrantly.fr/en/exhibitions-and-events/offsite/touring-exhibitions/event-details/e/peintures-des-lointains-voyages-de-jeanne-thil-38792/>.

[6] See Deborah Cherry, “Earth into world, land into landscape: The worlding of Algeria in nineteenth-century British feminism” in Beaulieu and Roberts (eds.), *Orientalism's Interlocutors*, pp. 103–130.

[7] Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts, eds., *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 181.

[8] Edhem Eldem, “Making Sense of Osman Hamdi Bey and His Paintings,” *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Cultures of the Islamic World* (29, no. 1, 2012), pp. 339–383.

[9] Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 100.

[10] According to the Musée d'Orsay, where both paintings are housed, the second version is a reduced unfinished replica. See “Tisseuses à Bou-Saâda,” Musée d'Orsay, <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/oeuvres/tisseuses-bou-saada-9120>.

[11] See Gustave Guillaumet, “Les Interieurs,” in *Tableaux Algériens* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1888), pp. 127-145; and *L'Algérie de Gustave Guillaumet: (1840-1887)* (Montreuil: Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2018).

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