

Modernity and Frontiers. Art Travel in the Colonial Context

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Abstract

The role of Art in modern global society is unquestionable. In fact, art and travel have come to occupy an increasingly central place in contemporary culture in a genealogy that began with the Portuguese Discoveries when men set off to conquer and later to build a heritage that was an extension of the metropolitan culture in the distant colony. Although adapted naturally to the intrinsic conditioning restrictions of the overseas territories, the arts travelled from this side of the ocean to the other, perpetuating an inheritance that would become a legacy and a derivative in the post-colonial world of the twenty-first century. This paper aims at providing a perspective of the links between Art, Travel and Colonial Power in the light of postcolonial and modernity studies.

Keywords: Art, Colonial, Contemporary, Power, Empire.

In the nineteenth century, the expeditions and journeys venturing to explore new lands aroused considerable interest in the Europeans. This newfound curiosity spread through the whole of the Old Continent at the dawn of the nineteenth century but its roots, in fact, lie in the last two years of the eighteenth century, more precisely in the Military Campaign carried out by Napoleon Bonaparte in Egypt between 1798 and 1799. The Emperor's idea was to advance as far as India where, with local help, he would attack the British dominion; this objective was not achieved, but another was to have significant repercussions. In fact, taking the French Army to the land of the Pharaohs was not merely a

political move since they were accompanied by a scientific delegation which included a committee for the arts and sciences. Created on 16 March 1798, this committee consisted of some 167 members, 154 of whom accompanied the Emperor to Egypt. Numerous French academics and artists were part of it, and their mission was to carry out a cultural-artistic survey of the country. Among them were antiquarians, draughtsmen, engravers, sculptors, Orientalists, painters and writers, but the name which primarily stands out is that of Dominique Vivant Denon (1747-1825), a French diplomat, painter, archaeologist and writer. To him, we owe the systematic record of the main Egyptian monuments, which served as the basis for the work that is considered the founding work of Egyptology, *Description de l'Égypte*, published in an imperial edition between 1809 and 1828. Denon became the director of the *Musée Central des Arts* and the *Musée Napoléon*, the future *Musée du Louvre*, the place chosen to exhibit part of the plundered works.

However, this expedition to Egypt was important not only to France: it triggered a desire in other European colonial empires also to explore this African 'Orient'. Such was the case in England, which in 1830 created the *Royal Geographical Society*, an institution aimed at increasing and developing geographical knowledge. To this end, it financed the expedition to discover the source of the Nile, first with Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) and then with David Livingstone (1813-1873). The basis underpinning this whole dynamic was justified by the missionary societies initially set up in England during the eighteenth century, who sought to bring 'spiritual assistance' and 'civilise' the 'less developed' world. This was the second

phase of a more ambitious plan that had begun with Great Britain's abolition of slavery mentioned above. However, just as with the anti-slavery movement, the fulfilment of this plan would only really come to fruition the following century. The idea that it was not enough to convert the Africans to Christianity but rather to 'civilise' them is extremely important since the justification for the later acculturation, guiding subsequent cultural and artistic policies, stemmed from this idea. To missionarise and civilise, however, it was necessary to explore. "Since the foundation of the Royal Geographical Society in 1830 there had been those who had argued that Africa needed to be explored before it could be converted" (Ferguson 2013: 168), and so the nineteenth century chopped up and divided the African continent.

Added to this was a series of events that enabled the enlargement of horizons and discovery of civilisations outside the Western world. Some of these were the Greek War of Independence (1821-1829), the French conquest of Algeria (1830 to 1847), the trade treaties with Japan (1858), the exploratory expeditions in Africa and the growing accessibility of travel brought about by the development of transport. All of this led to a notable rise in interest by the West towards the 'discovered' cultures, even seeking in them a new source of artistic inspiration, which spurred on a renewal of the arts.

At the same time, this century of the bourgeoisie, conquering and liberal, proffered an invitation to travel to people motivated by the flourishing of art with a distinctly exotic influence and inspired by colonial travels. Artists began to travel to the overseas possessions, recording these faraway atmospheres that they later showed in the salons of the empires' capitals in a wide-ranging process that had different consequences and echoes at different levels on the metropolitan scene.

What stands out is that this 'discovery' of the Orient, the fruit of incursions by the European empires, nourished a travel literature that would have due repercussions on other arts, notably pictorial art. However, and almost without exception, after the initial

appreciation of the 'discovery' of the other, there followed a reaction which undervalued this with the Europeans placing themselves in a position of superiority over a world which they considered to be undeveloped and barbarous; in other words, a culture that was unique but inferior. Within the European panorama of the mid-nineteenth century, the Orient had become, as Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) put it, a career in an endlessly repeated simulacrum: periodicals, dictionaries, grammars, publications and translations, successively edited and re-edited, all flourished on the shelves of Academy libraries, giving birth to a new aesthetic – Orientalism. This fashion became the European way of relating to the Orient, influencing a new cultural wave more idealised than experienced. Thus started a rise in this literary *topos*, which, allying itself to the Romantic Movement and its fascination for ancient remains (ruins) and melancholic and/or sublime landscapes, meant that the countless travel narratives, produced from a culture of travelling to colonial territories, met with unusual success. The poetry of Victor Hugo (1802-1885) in *Les Orientales* (1829) revealed an Orient that would serve as a reference and model for the arts of his time; Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) too would explore this Orientalist aspect in his work *Fleurs du Mal* (1857) where the theme is dealt with in the poem *L'invitation au voyage*. These authors attest to the idea of the oriental impetus even though the land chosen was but a mirage that would never be experienced. Nonetheless, some authors were ready to abandon their home comforts and depart: in 1811, François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848) started a new travel narrative trend with his *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*. In this work, Chateaubriand describes an Orient that he has experienced although the work is still full of myths, legends and obsessions. Taking his initial initiatory experience as a starting point, numerous French writers joined him in this oriental seduction producing a vast number of impressions gleaned while travelling in the Near East. Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869) wrote *Voyage en Orient* (1835) giving an account from the point of view of the

coloniser: France is shown as the dominating power of a subjugated Orient seen as an extension of the metropolitan homeland, unreal and reduced to a series of generalisations; Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) wandered around the land of the Pharaohs on a journey that went far beyond Lamartine's idealisations and published *Flaubert en Egypte* in 1851. The following year, in 1852, Gérard de Nerval (1808-1855) published *Voyage en Orient*; in 1853, Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) launched *Constantinople* and in 1870 *Voyage en Egypte*.¹ However, it was perhaps Pierre Loti (1850-1923) who was the French traveller-writer *par excellence* of the Romantic-Oriental period. Loti was an officer in the French navy, which allowed him to travel the world settling for long periods in the Far East. He travelled to Algeria, South America, Easter Island, French Polynesia, Turkey, Vietnam, Cambodia and Japan.²

It can be seen then how for nineteenth-century Frenchmen the journey to the Orient (especially the Orient belonging to the Empire) was an essential quest to experience a 'new' world. But it would be wrong to think that this dynamic was restricted to Imperial France: in nineteenth-century England, *The Corsair* (1814) by Lord Byron (1788-1824), one of his 'Turkish Tales', *Lalla Rookh*, an Oriental novel by Thomas Moore (1779-1852) that was published in 1817, and *The Revolt of Islam*, a poem of oriental inspiration written by Percy Shelley (1792-1822) in 1817 are all works that show the fascination shared by Europeans for overseas lands and the desire to make them known to a cosmopolitan public avid for novelty.³

Travel narratives and the fashion for Orientalism became fulcral in that they exerted a great influence over numerous painters who, after plunging into the narratives of certain works, grabbed their tubes of paint and their easels and departed for those destinations that had become synonymous with exoticism and seduction, but not always the Orient. This was the case of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) who, before settling in Polynesia, had read Pierre Loti's *Le Mariage de Loti*, and Henri Matisse who,

before travelling to Morocco, had read another book by Loti, *Au Maroc*.

It was through Orientalist canvasses by, for example, Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) of the north of Africa, Jean-León Gérôme (1824-1904) reproducing the atmosphere of Constantinople, Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) painting Algeria, Étienne Dinet (1861-1929) in Egypt, David Roberts (1796-1864) in Cairo and John Frederick Lewis (1804-1876) in Morocco that the West 'saw' the Orient for the first time. Under the auspices of the pictures by these painters exhibited in the imperial capitals, Europeans could actually see the concrete reality of the landscape described in travel accounts, experiencing the light and colour of a world as diaphanous as it was dreamlike. These paintings made faraway places 'visible' and made the specificities of the colonial territories known.

However, this travel quest to the practically unknown oriental world immediately raised a series of problems regarding form. One of the first examples was Eugène Delacroix in his journey to the north of Africa who encountered a different light, which made it impossible for him to paint it according to the canons in vogue at the time in the Parisian capital. In fact, Morocco and Algeria light, the way it changes forms and interacts with the local tones through reflection, led him to the conclusion that none can be dissociated, a fact that implied a fragmentation of the brushstrokes from which Georges Seurat (1859-1891) and Paul Signac (1863-1935) would draw assumptions for their own searches. Delacroix's travel notes and his notebooks filled with drawings that he produced during his stay in North Africa came to influence many of the artists that came after him, especially Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), about their research into colour. Indeed, one result of the solution found for this problem was the emergence of new pictorial content. If in regard to form, it was necessary to highlight the manner in which light was represented and the suitability of new pigments that could translate this African luminosity, the content – exotic motifs, Arab and Arabist atmospheres, hitherto unknown to the European idea set – became a fashion

that not only made this awesome overseas empire known but also reproduced it in the cosiness of the European home.

Thus, under the generic notion of getting to know the empire – and within the limits of the protective hegemony of the West – this “epidemic of Orientalia” (Said 2004: 58) motivated poets, essayists, philosophers, writers and painters to set out for a magical Orient, thereby influencing and inspiring the culture and the arts of the metropole. However, many of these witnesses showed “a kind of free-floating mythology of the Orient” (Said, 2004: 60) multiplying stereotypes in the light of which these legendary lands were shown as more idealised than real.

As a consequence of this fashion for Orientalism, a range of destinations almost unknown to the majority of people in the West opened up. This led to the ‘discovery’ of some ‘lost paradises’ which had been described since time immemorial⁴ and to which was linked the romantic myth of the *Noble Savage* propagated by the Enlightenment a century before and whose purity and authenticity would rescue Baudelaire’s ‘modern man’. In the contemporary era, at the end of the nineteenth century, one French artist came to materialise this search for the *Noble Savage* and a lost paradise through a pictorial oeuvre that was the precursor of a new period: Paul Gauguin. Gauguin managed more than any other artist to live the existence he evoked in his work since the journeys he undertook, his wanderings in search of somewhere less corrupted by Western society, his finding of a place as yet not contaminated by progress and his search for ‘a new meaning of life’ signify dissatisfaction and disenchantment, a disbelief in the supremacy of European civilisation which was heading in a direction that no longer satisfied his desires. Having settled on one of the South Sea Islands, Gauguin simplified forms and themes, reducing them to almost iconographic representations full of symbolic value: for this French artist, the renewal of art and Western civilisation could only come from ‘primitive’ peoples. What is important is that Gauguin’s pilgrimage to the South Pacific was a

metaphor for something that until then had never been questioned. It symbolised the end of four hundred years of colonial expansion, or rather, by preferring to exile himself in a French colony, the painter shows how he exchanged the hegemony of the imperial metropole for a life lived outside the canons of developed society, preferring the ‘primitive’ life in the colony in Oceania. It is indeed here that all the modernity of his work lies and the influence this exerted over later artists. This showed the need for withdrawal from progress, the result of the Industrial Revolution, in the search for a place and a culture still uncorrupted by urban, bourgeois, European Man. This disenchantment, this movement towards the picturesque, an antidote to a society characterised by the exaltation of material values, incited artists to leave as in the case of Gauguin.

As a result of all this, the Orient was not sought for what it ‘was’ but for what it ‘suggested’, a palimpsest through which to re-discover the lost key to a purer and more innocent way of life that acted as a rebirth, a new way of thinking about the country itself and the culture of origin; in the event this revealed more about situations encountered in the history of Europe than about the Orient itself.

Influenced by these atmospheres, the artistic avant-garde of the early twentieth century allowed themselves to show the influence of this extra-European creation in their works, especially in Pablo Picasso’s Cubism. At that time, the question of primitive art was related to the belief that so-called ‘primitive’ societies had fossilised in a state of evolution that had long been overtaken by Western society. Some artists saw in it a return to a primordial art still free of the evils of modern society, which had grown out of the Industrial Revolution.⁵ The fact is that the dominant (and discriminatory) form to qualify and characterise art led to a marginalisation of the so-called ‘primitive’ arts which were of an absolutely unquestionable richness (for example, the art of China, India and Cambodia) and which had only a short time before begun to be studied in connection to the world of Western historiography. As is

well known, the history of Western art is based on the idea of artistic progression, a fact that does not constitute a matrix for a definition of art, if such is possible. Indeed, in the case of India, non-Western writers claim that it was, in fact, European (British) colonialism that caused the painting to stop evolving and led to its subsequent decline (King, 1999: 82). In other words, the model of development established by the coloniser (who neglected local art) disturbed and interfered with Indian artistic production so taking away its vitality. From the imperial point of view, there were other reasons: the art produced up until then was treated with contempt and belittled, being deemed 'inferior' and 'minor', a judgment not only proffered by England but also shared by all the nineteenth-century European colonial empires. It was as if the coloniser's settling there might lead to the start of a new era, adjudicated by their 'civilising' mission, which would help to create a new art but obviously according to Western canons. From the perspective of the colonised, it was precisely the ascendancy of the coloniser over the colonised and the resulting miscegenation that caused the loss of artistic vitality and its decline. Added to this argument that European colonial intervention was responsible for the decline of art is the belief of many non-European artists that it was their art that influenced the modernity of Western art, enabling it to gain a new 'breath of life' regarding form and content. For example, look at those who defend the idea that it was African art (always based on the abstract) that gave birth to abstract art and Cubism, or that Japanese prints and cloisonné were at the origin of Symbolism or Fauvism.

Added to all this is the fact that by the early twentieth century the avant-garde had become part of the established culture and was frequently politicised, that is, the artistic avant-garde had become political. World War I and the 1917 Russian Revolution significantly contributed to such a view. The avant-garde itself (especially Futurism and later Dadaism⁶) were apologists for the war even though after 1914 the only formal artistic innovations – among the established avant-garde – were Dadaism and

Constructivism: the former gradually turning into (or foreshadowing) Surrealism⁷ in Western Europe while the latter became predominant in Eastern Europe.

Consequently, to evaluate colonial art in the light of Western aesthetic values, regulated by a plastic standard extraneous to other cultures, meant that other arts such as Indian, African or Cambodian art were considered of lesser worth and the value intrinsic to their creation was not taken into account. This reductive position of superimposing on the other an aesthetic taste and a plastic evaluation was not restricted to imperial power or the colonial context: for example, the art that the Nazis considered 'degenerate', which connoted in a pejorative way an art that did not obey the aesthetic standards of the Third Reich and was misunderstood, thus being considered subversive.

Paradoxically, the European colonial empires helped to promote a specific artistic knowledge of the colonised territories by sponsoring archaeological expeditions, translating documents and so on, but this was not done for altruistic reasons since a large number of the objects found and the items collected were 'diverted' to the great halls of European museums where they remain until this day.

European colonisers changed their colonised societies but forgot that they suffered influences more profound than might have been thought at first glance. As a result, the well-known remark with which E. H. Gombrich begins *The Story of Art*: "There is no such thing as art. Only artists" (Gombrich 1995: 15), remains topical. There is not one univocal reality, but various, and each artist sees their own: between contemplation of the world and creation there exists a universe that is fixed to the canvas in a re-thinking of history triangulated between art, travel and empire that attempts to ensure that oblivion does not supplant memory.

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¹ In the same literary tradition, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* by Edward William Lane (1801-1876) had been published in 1836 – a work with a clearly Romantic interpretation – and between 1851 and 1853 Richard Burton (1821-1890) published his *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to al-Madinah and Meccah*.

² A large part of his literary work is autobiographical and his novels were inspired by his travels as a sailor. This can be seen in his 1881 novel *Le Roman d'un spahi* (Senegal), his 1882 *Le Mariage de Loti* (Tahiti), *Trois Journées de guerre en Annam*, published between 1884 and 1885 (Vietnam), *Madame Chrysanthème*, dated 1887 (Japan), *Aziyadé* (1879) about Turkey, *Au Maroc* (1890), *Un Pèlerin d'Angkor* (1912), the result of a visit to Cambodia in 1901, *L'Inde sans les Anglais* (1903) and *La Mort de Philae* (1909).

³ There were also female writers who, regardless of the rules of the society of the time, travelled and left important records of these journeys. We can mention *The Turkish Embassy Letters* by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), a volume in which she describes her incursions into Constantinople palace harems, into a culture veiled by religion and tradition that had been hidden until then from Western eyes; also Lady Hester Lucy Stanhope (1776-1839) and her travels in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, the result of which was the three-volume *Memoirs of the Lady Hester Stanhope* written by Charles Lewis Meryon, published in 1845, followed by a new trilogy one year later entitled *Travels of Lady Hester Stanhope*; Jane Dieulafoy (1851-1916) who fell in love with Persia, the land which she wrote about in the magazine *Tour du Monde* between 1881 and 1886; Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) who, inspired by her visit to Iran, published *Safar Nameh, Persian Pictures – a Book of Travel* in 1894, later making two trips around the world (1897 and 1903) followed by trips to Imperial India, Afghanistan, Burma, Singapore, China, Korea and Japan on a long journey that brought her back via America. However, Bell specialised in the Middle East, publishing *The Desert and the Sown* (1907)

and *Amurath to Amurath* (1911) and leaving a collection of one thousand six hundred letters, five travel books, diaries, reports and around seven thousand photographs from her many journeys around the globe. For a more complete listing, see Sónia Serrano, *Mulheres Viajantes*, Lisboa, Tinta da China, 2014.

⁴ Since Greek-Roman Antiquity, there have been numerous accounts describing an age when humans lived happily like gods, far removed from evil, by such writers as Hesiod (*Les Travaux et les Jours*, Paris, Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres", 1979, pp. 106-126), Ovid (*Metamorfoses*, Lisboa, Cotovia, 2007, pp. 89-112) and Virgíl (*Éclogas*, Lisboa, Bertrand, 1901, pp. 37-45) all of whom expressed a nostalgic longing for this mythical place.

⁵ See John Picton on "Yesterday's cold mashed potatoes" in Katy Deepwell (ed.), *Art Criticism and Africa*, where the historian says that "it is said that before the 20th century there was no art in Africa, no 'Art', that is, as 'we' have it in the 'West'", London, Saffron Books, 1998, p. 21. The justification found for such a claim lies in the fact of associating artistic creation to a written theoretical tradition which, so to speak, legitimates it. See also the case of Chinese art: China was never under the yoke of any European colonial empire and it would be difficult to consider it 'primitive' since, because it had existed a long time before the creation of a genealogy of Western art, it had reached such an extreme refinement that made it impossible to consider it as 'primitive'. Furthermore, it was accompanied by a theorisation a long time before the first contacts Europeans had with the Middle Kingdom. The solution found by Western historians was to classify it as immutable; in other words, it was contrary to the progression of European art. This reductive view does not contemplate the possibility that Chinese art had reached such a level of refinement that visible progression became impossible, at least within the conceptual parameters of the Old Continent.

⁶ A group of exiles in Zurich started Dadaism in 1916. They undertook a nihilist protest against established formal art and World War I. They took some stratagems (one of which was collage) from the pre-war Cubist and Futurist avant-garde. Scandal was the principle behind Dadaist cohesion as was the fight against conventional bourgeois art. In this respect, we should mention Marcel

Duchamp's 1917 urinal.

⁷ Surrealism, although dedicated to 'the rejection of art' as instituted by the canons of the Academy, had a theoretical basis, which justified it and anchored

it in the Unconscious (with links to automatic writing) revealed by psychoanalysis, dreams, spontaneous imagination and similar notions.

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