

Exceeding blackness: African women in the art of Jean-Léon Gérôme

Adrienne L. Childs

They were negresses from Senaar, and indeed no species could be so far removed from our standard conceptions of beauty. The prominence of their jaws, their flattened foreheads, and their thick lips are characteristics which class these poor creatures in an almost bestial category; nevertheless, apart from this strange physiognomy which nature had endowed them with, their bodies were of a rare and exceptional beauty; pure and virginal forms were clearly visible under their tunics; their voices were sweet and vibrant like the shrill but subdued sounds of fresh mountain springs.

Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, 1851¹

Sensuality, servitude, abhorrent physiognomy; beauty, non-beauty, a blackness that enhances whiteness; Gérard de Nerval's travelogue *Voyage en Orient* presented a catalogue of conflicted ideas about black women. His depiction of "Negresses" in a Cairo slave market is a confluence of exoticism, fantasy, and ethnography, ideas that saturate nineteenth-century Orientalism. His description of the women's prominent jaws, flat foreheads, and thick lips, coupled with the employment of terms such as "species" and "bestial," recalled ethnographically tinged discourses proclaiming Africans were lowest of the human species, closer to animals than Europeans.

Then, in a dizzying about-face, Nerval abandoned the rhetoric of flawed science in praise of the "rare and exceptional" black beauties. In the very next sentence the author continued to reflect on the plight of the women for sale:

I had no desire for the lovely monsters; but without doubt the beautiful women of Cairo should love to surround themselves with chambermaids like them. There could be delightful oppositions of color and form; these Nubians are not ugly in the absolute sense of the word, but form a total contrast to the beauty we know. A white woman should arise admirably among these girls of the night, that their slim bodies seemed destined to braid hair, to pull back fabrics, carry bottles and vases as in ancient frescos.²

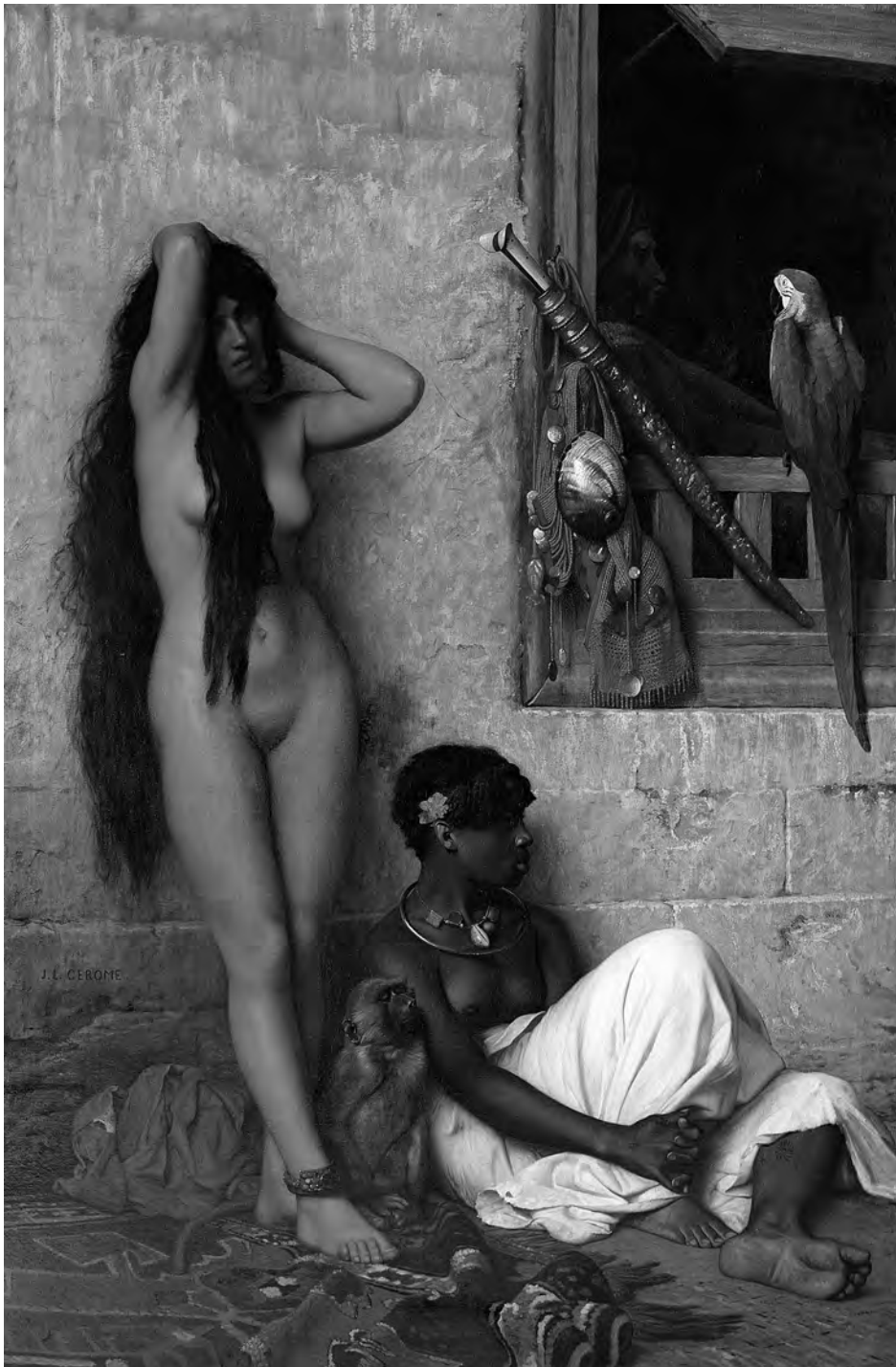
Admitting no *real* desire for the “lovely monsters,” Nerval projected them into an archetypal Orientalist tableau as shadowy servants destined to attend the beautiful women of Cairo. Drawing upon conventional constructs of light and dark, Nerval claimed that the black Nubian women, when paired with the pale Cairene (not a dark Cairene), would provide the requisite contrast of form and hue that ultimately showcased the latter’s dazzling whiteness. Nerval’s ambivalent reaction to these black female slaves exemplifies the approach taken by many European Orientalists whose attempts to represent the enigma of the black female body were often fraught with a mixture of ethnographic inquiry, fantasy, repulsion, and taboo desires.

Two decades after the publication of Gerard de Nerval’s *Voyage en Orient*, the French academic painter Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) produced the paintings *The Slave for Sale (A Vendre)* (Plate 5, Figure 6.1) and *Moorish Bath (Bain Maure)* (Figure 6.4), two works that virtually translated Nerval’s passage into what are arguably some of the artist’s most intriguing Orientalist tableaux. In these works Gérôme distilled the relationship between the black and the white body to their essential kinetic tensions.

While both the sexualized white female and the black female in the slave market or harem are signifiers in their own right, when united, the total is greater than the sum of the parts. Though Gérôme’s pale odalisques are meant to represent the nebulous concept of the “Oriental” woman, the models are clearly European types who are exoticized and racialized in large part because of their relationship to their black servants. The artist’s provocative conjoining of black and white female bodies in a sensuous play on race, rank, and servitude marked the beginning of a thematic preoccupation that would continue over the last quarter of the century, the final leg of his long and prestigious career.

Gérôme’s fascination with the black and white “oriental” women and the charged spaces between resulted in nearly thirty paintings and countless prints based on the original works. While much has been said about Gérôme’s female nudes, faithful Muslims, and dancing *almehs*, less attention has been paid to the critical role that black female figures occupy in defining Oriental sexuality in his works. Edward Said theorized Orientalism by exposing the manner in which the West, through interrelated texts and images, created a fictive reverie of the Orient that was in part defined as a hotbed of exotic sexuality. Not a fixed locale, the Orient was an amorphous region that encompassed the Mediterranean Near East, North Africa and the Holy Land. While we now understand the constructed and problematic nature of this space we call “Orient,” I freely use it here because the nineteenth-century fictions of this space that were crafted by Gérôme, Nerval, and others were part and parcel of the discursive and visual practice that was Orientalism.³

Gérôme’s images of exotic and racially inverse women present a broadly conceived set of binaries that draw upon nineteenth-century racial discourses, conceptions of slavery and abolition, female sexuality, colonialism, and more.



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6.1 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Slave for Sale (A Vendre)*, 1873. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Art et d'Industrie, Roubaix, France / Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library

Although the notion of the binary as a theoretical framework for understanding Gérôme's complex images seems limiting in some respects, these works are firmly and consciously grounded in oppositionality as an operative mode. The black/white axis not only animates this body of work, it is consistently invoked as a principal compelling aspect of the imagery in the contemporary critical reception. This analysis considers Gérôme's characterization of the spaces of Oriental eroticism that he fashioned through a rigorous negotiation of the social, cultural, and aesthetic dualities at the nexus of the black and white female body.

Gérôme and Orientalism in the critical eye

Ever since the interest in Orientalist art burgeoned in the 1970s Gérôme's ethnographic exotica has been interpreted as the embodiment of both the triumphs and the imperfections of the Orientalist project. In 1986, Gerald Ackerman single-handedly initiated a revival of interest in Gérôme through his scholarly output and an exhaustive catalogue raisonné.⁴ Linda Nochlin, following Said's example, was the first art historian to point out that Gérôme's unflinching realist style diverted his viewers, past and present, from the power dynamics of European colonialism, the horrors of slavery, the extreme sexualization of the "exotic" female, and the rhetoric of European cultural domination.⁵ However, in recent years as European academic art has gained increasing respect and attention, Gérôme has been reassessed. In 2010 the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Musée D'Orsay in Paris organized the exhibition *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904)*. A significant reconsideration of the artist's work, scholars and writers from Europe and America brought fresh eyes and new methods to Gérôme's oeuvre. However, neither the substantial catalog nor the accompanying volume of essays addresses Gérôme's images of blacks or the importance of his work to "image of the black" studies.⁶ Gérôme's construction of exotic blackness had impact beyond his own production. His imagery was widely disseminated in Europe and America through paintings, prints, and reproductions, and was regenerated through the work of his students and followers who sustained his brand of hyper-realist, racialized exotica into the twentieth century.

In his time, Gérôme was the foremost purveyor of Orientalist visual representation and his works now provoke us to consider the important relationship between Orientalist practice and the representation of blackness in the nineteenth century. Gérôme's multifaceted representations of black men and women were the polar opposites to the international cadre of white consumers of his imagery. In his works, dark bodies were saturated with key elements of an imagined Orient. Black figures embodied sexuality, aggression, servitude, barbarism, and ethnographic degeneration, defining themselves *and*, by association, the Orient. They were also cast as powerful, elegant characters, often rendered alluringly ornamentalized. Known for his

obsession with the intricate, decorative nature of Islamic material culture, Gérôme often objectified black figures such that they became ornamental props, providing fascinating passages of texture, color, and pattern as part of the visual cacophony of the Orient. The endlessly repeated depictions of marginal black figures as laborers and slaves in Gérôme's oeuvre and in European Orientalist output more broadly, reflects the symbolic currency and complex history of exotic blackness.

Lineages

The conventional aesthetic interplay of the black and white female body was, according to Griselda Pollock, the major trope of nineteenth-century Orientalist erotica. Pollock astutely observes that the African servant in the Oriental harem represents a historical intersection of Europe's domination of both colonized and enslaved peoples.⁷ This historical junction dates back centuries and began to take shape in European visual traditions long before the height of the Atlantic slave trade. Gérôme's African slave is part of the conventional practice of depicting exotic black females in European painting that conflated ideas about the Orient with ideas about Africa since the Renaissance.

Since the sixteenth century, the black female attendant could be found in mythological and biblical subjects serving some of the most famous beauties in the history of art. Titian's *Diana and Acteon* (1556–9), Rubens's *Venus in Front of the Mirror* (1614–15), Rembrandt's *Toilet of Bathsheba* (1643) all present the primping white nude in the company of a black companion. The increasing presence of black servants in Europe during this era was linked to the escalation of the European economy fueled by the slave trade and slave labor.⁸ With dark skin and sumptuous livery, they were fashionable ornaments in courts and aristocratic households, and as such they became trendy possessions amongst the elite. Many of the most elegant and powerful had their likenesses painted in the company of a black slave. To be pictured with a darker subordinate signaled prestige, wealth, taste, and luxury consumption.⁹

Luxury consumption itself took on a new flavor in the eighteenth century with the French fashion for *turqueries*, or themes evoking French fantasies of Turkish courtly life. *Turquerie* was one of the frameworks in which black servants were popularly depicted in the fine and decorative arts during the *Ancien Régime*. In this sometimes frivolous and often excessive style popular among the French nobility, black servant figures were an important part of the exotic racial mix and helped to characterize Oriental social hierarchies and relationships that fascinated the Western voyeur. The black exotic body at once evoked the Orient, European court spectacle, Africa, and slavery. As if to channel their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century predecessors, white female beauties depicted *à la turque* were often accompanied by one or more black servants while bathing or at the *toilette*.



6.2 Jean-Marc Nattier, *Mademoiselle de Clermont en sultane*, 1733. Oil on canvas. © Wallace Collection, London, UK / The Bridgeman Art Library

The well-known portrait of Anne Marie de Bourbon (1733) by Jean-Marc Nattier titled *Mademoiselle de Clermont en sultane* (Figure 6.2) is a case in point. A portrait *deguisé* in which the young princess of royal blood is “disguised” as a sultana in a harem bath, this conspicuous display of a woman surrounded by multiple black servants is highly unusual for its era. In a space more classical than exotic, the servants and objects are the essence of *turquerie*. The emotive entourage of adoring slaves not only create the sense of exoticism in what would be an otherwise conventional portrait, but they are the emotional core of the portrait and form a rich polarity to the rigid, pale, and impassive mistress. The bath setting has historically implied the titillating promise of a tryst between the bathing woman and an inferred but seldom pictured lover.

The fairer-skinned black female servant holding a towel at the feet of Mademoiselle de Clermont forms a focal point of sensuality, her bare breast and direct gaze provide a less than subtle hint at the sexual context of the sultana's bath. By the eighteenth century the black female servant had become a conventional signifier of sexuality and exoticism in the private female sphere.¹⁰ Kathleen Nicholson has deemed Nattier's painting the first odalisque, a character who, with her black servant in attendance, would become a defining construct of Oriental female sensuality in the nineteenth century.¹¹

Voyager

In the wake of the French Revolution, the exoticist language of *turquerie* represented the excesses and abuses of the overthrown monarchy and was summarily dismissed as symbolic of the crown's frivolous luxury. However, the interest in North Africa and the "exotic" remained strong in post-Revolutionary France as a result of Napoleonic incursions into North Africa and the Middle East at the end of the eighteenth century. Napoleon's "savants" or scientists who accompanied the military expedition brought back to France documentation, objects, images, and ideas about the remains of the once-great civilization. Notably, the publication of Dominique-Vivant-Denon's *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Egypte* in 1802 presented the findings of the scholarly mission that included images of ancient and modern architecture, artifacts, and culture ways to a popular audience. Their revelations inspired an Egyptian revival that ranged from the craze for Egyptian motifs in decorative arts to the deciphering of ancient hieroglyphics.¹² Travel routes into Africa, both northern and sub-Saharan, were increasingly opened up. Framing this focus on North Africa was the larger colonial/imperial project in which the French and the British were battling for control in Ottoman-ruled Egypt. This interweaving of scholarly interest and popular tastes with expansionist pursuits in Egypt and across the Middle East is what Edward Said described as modern Orientalism.¹³

A far cry from *turquerie*'s comparatively artificial mode of fanciful self-representation, modern Orientalism was predicated on the desire to accurately and evocatively represent the Oriental, Oriental life, peoples, objects, histories, and cultures. Firsthand engagement with the Orientalist subject was of prime importance to post-Napoleonic Orientalist artists. Eugène Delacroix's journey to Morocco and Algiers in the 1830s set a precedent for artists who found that North Africa gave them access to an ancient albeit primitive culture that possessed a compelling contradistinction to modern European society. For many worldly European artists travel to the Orient became a necessary part of their education, a way to expand their experiences beyond the European horizons and gain access to new and authentic subjects. The sense that artists and writers were reporting their experiences gave Orientalist subjects in art

and literature an aura of truth, as if they were transcriptions of the artists' romantic journeys. From our contemporary vantage point, the association of Orientalism with truth seems absurd. We understand that it was laced with notions of European political and moral authority that ultimately compromised any claim to authenticity. At the time, however, the Orientalist art of practitioners like Gérôme resonated with the "real."

By the middle of the nineteenth century Gérôme had become a consummate painter/traveler, witness to the spectacle of the Orient, and a purveyor of what were considered authentic, even ethnographic representations of this illustrious locale. Beginning in 1852 through 1880 Gérôme travelled to the Orient ten times, visiting Egypt, Syria, Algeria, and Turkey, where he and his traveling companions often stayed months at a time.¹⁴ Gérôme was a serious student of the visual panorama of the Orient, taking in its variety of people, their dress, their customs, their material culture and architecture. He returned to France with copious sketches of Oriental peoples and landscapes, and a collection of objects that were destined to ornamentalize and authenticate his canvases.

Because of his extensive travel experiences and his exacting, photo-realist style, Gérôme's Orientalist work was touted by contemporary commentators as ethnographic, affording it the authority of documentary accuracy that, in the tradition of Vivant Denon, enlightened and excited his audiences. Far from objective, however, Gérôme's finely wrought Orientalist themes were frequently a choreographed pastiche of objects and places that viewers read as Oriental. James Clifford described the "unruly experience" of ethnographic cultural interpretations such as these as a "garrulous, overdetermined cross-cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross-purposes"¹⁵ In other words, the position of the ethnographer, or the artist with ethnographic interests, is not guided by dispassionate observation. Therefore interpretations of Oriental blacks by nineteenth-century authors and artists such as Gérôme were shaped by literary, aesthetic, and popular notions of the Orient as a subject, and were skewed by the unquestionable sense of superiority of Europeans over "Orientals" and blacks on all conceivable levels.

A heavily charged rhetoric around black ethnicities can be found in the commentary on Gérôme's Orientalist imagery. Critic and writer Théophile Gautier was a champion of Gérôme's Orientalist work and praised his exacting ethnographic realism as necessary for the modern artist who, because of his mobility, could visit and accurately represent people from all over the planet. Gautier described a visit to the artist's studio during which he was allowed to peruse Gérôme's portfolio of sketches of Oriental types. "There are Fellahs ...," Gautier reported, "Copts, Arabs, mixed-blood negroes, men from Sennaar and from Kordofan, so exactly observed that they could have served as anthropological dissertations"¹⁶ Gautier continues his review by offering detailed descriptions of the types of Orientals represented in Gérôme's portfolio. He reiterates many now familiar and value-laden descriptions of

Orientalism as sensuous, strange, and likened to frescos in Ancient Egyptian tombs.¹⁷ Perhaps the most bizarre, according to Gautier's description, were the blacks: "... the blacks were barely comprehensible, in their expressions an animalistic calm or an infantile indifference, their souls black like their skin; their flat nostrils and their broad mouths could easily inhale the flaming wind of the desert"¹⁸

As literary historian Christopher L. Miller has proposed, black Africa was a nullity, an absence, a difference so vast that it was unknowable to the European. If Europe is the self and the Orient is the "other," Africa is a third party, a kind of blankness, according to Miller.¹⁹ Gautier's characterization of Gérôme's sketches is a telling example of Miller's conclusions. The racial and cultural divide is evidently so great that Gautier imagines the blacks as soul-less and infantile, more monstrous than human. For Nerval, the Nubian women for sale in the market were not "ugly," they were the unknown, unknowable, a "total contrast to the beauty we know." In the absence of conceptual tools or frames of reference to understand the Nubians or black Africans, the imagined Orient provides the context that renders the figures knowable. In Gérôme's high-resolution renditions of the racialized Orient, black women are similarly unreadable and function only as they relate to white figures. As dark foils, they are oppositional figures that work in tandem with the white body to define the exotic. Orientalism then is a way to access the black female body, a mediating methodology for deciphering an undecipherable blackness.

Slavery and seduction

While titillating fictions of sexual servitude were often tethered to ideological dynamics of white and dark bodies in European Orientalism, Gérôme's interest in sexual concubinage and black slavery was not pure fantasy. The harem was a well-known aspect of "Oriental" culture dating back centuries, the most famous being the harem within Ottoman Sultan's Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. The presence of white concubines in the harem had long been documented in ethnographic, historical, and fictional sources that referenced harems from historic Constantinople to Cairo.²⁰ Influential nineteenth-century British ethnographer Edward Lane describes white slaves in the Egyptian harem as Greek, Circassian, and Georgian, and black slaves as Abyssinian, Nubian, or simply black. Lane's 1860 book *An Account of the Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians* was the definitive source for information on Egyptian society in the nineteenth century.²¹ In it he elaborates on the status of the white slave:

The white slaves, being often the only female companions, and sometimes the wives, of the Turkish grandees, and being generally preferred by them before the free ladies of Egypt, hold a higher rank than the latter in common opinion. They are richly dressed, presented with valuable ornaments, indulged, frequently, with almost every luxury that can be procured²²

Black women in harems were almost exclusively slaves. In fact, the vast majority of all slaves within the Ottoman system were black females.²³ By 1872, Europe and America had abolished slavery, but it was only nominally prohibited in North Africa and the Middle East. In spite of the attempts to eradicate the ancient tradition, the trans-Saharan trade in Nubian or Sudanese blacks continued to supply Egypt and other Islamic countries with slave labor throughout the nineteenth century.²⁴

In the Islamic system, black female slaves held the lowest rank, performing most of the coarse household duties.²⁵ Lane wrote that "Most of the Abyssinian and black slave-girls are abominably corrupted by the Gellábs, or slave-traders, of Upper Egypt and Nubia, by whom they are brought from their native countries; there are very few of the age of eight or nine years who have not suffered brutal violence"²⁶ In the context of the harem, their primary duties were to serve the higher-ranking concubines and wives. Although domestic servants, they were not exempt from the role of sexual servant.²⁷

Gérôme, certainly a witness to the racial spectrum of Egyptian society, drew upon the cultural practices and coupled them with the ideological and expressive potential of race and gender in the Western imaginary. European concepts of Oriental and African alterity, complete with their own frameworks, foibles, and trajectories, collide in the Gérôme's representations of the black female slave.

Gérôme imagines

In the early 1870s, while living in exile in London with his family after the Franco-Prussian War broke out in Paris,²⁸ Gérôme began to actively explore the pictorial and ideological relationships between the black and the white female body within his ongoing Orientalist project. There he embarked on a series of paintings that would occupy him for the last third of the century. By this time he was an established French academician and commercially successful artist. Gérôme regularly exhibited at the Royal Academy where he had been induced as an honorary member in 1869. In 1871 he created a splash with this controversial painting of a Cairo slave market, *The Slave for Sale*.²⁹

Seeming to echo Nerval's reflections on the Cairo slave market, sexual slavery is the subject of *The Slave for Sale* (Plate 5, Figure 6.1). Here Gérôme revisits the underbelly of the Oriental system of concubinage that he notoriously depicted in his 1866 canvas *The Slave Market*. *The Slave for Sale* explicitly highlights the racial dynamics of the sexual slave trade in a public space. Perhaps an ambivalent reflection of the British abolitionist movement to suppress the Ottoman trade, Gérôme's presentation is an artful and complex mélange of the vulgarities of human trafficking and the taboo erotic appeal of slavery.

Far from the cloistered spaces of the imagined harem, a turbaned slave dealer lurks in the shadows of an open kiosk as he serves up two women for sale. Pictured against the backdrop of a crumbling wall are a nude white female and a seated black woman in drapery. Between them sits a monkey.



6.3 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Slave for Sale (A Vendre)*, 1873, detail. Oil on canvas.
Musée d'Art et d'Industrie, Roubaix, France / Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library

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The standing pale nude is seductively distraught as she glances at the viewer through her disheveled hair. Her explicit display of full frontal nudity is a departure from Gérôme's more reserved Roman slave market nudes who often turn their backs to the viewer. The seated black companion looks off to her left with an aloof and expressionless profile (Figure 6.3). They complement each other in form and content, true to the convention of contrast they embody. The pairing of black and white slaves reflects the variety of women that were sold in the Cairo marketplaces, from Circassian to Abyssinian. In this respect, Gérôme drew upon what he could have witnessed in the streets of Cairo.

The black woman's slave collar, dirty feet, proximity to the monkey, and position on the ground firmly establish her racial and sexual degeneracy. Gérôme depicts her in profile, emphasizing her facial angle in a manner that reflects scientific demarcations of racial difference based on physiognomy. Since the seventeenth century the distinct profile of the black face with upturned, rounded nose and prominent lower jaw was the tell-tale marker of African-ness, even more so than skin color. This frank reference to the hierarchy of human races had currency with contemporary viewers. Critic E.B. Shulldham described the painting in a review after it was exhibited at London's Royal Academy in 1871:

There is an honesty, as it were, about the slave girl's nakedness, as she stands there in the market, a dark, strong-limbed Eve, but—and here is the pathos of this picture—an Eve who is irrevocably doomed to dishonour. The jet black Abyssinian semi-nude sits careless of her fate, whilst a marvelous monkey, worthy of Landseer, squats huddling by her side, from the terms of the sale almost an acknowledged equal, the monkey and the negress evidently going together as one lot.³⁰

Shulldham likened the white slave to Eve, honestly naked, yet sadly destined for the corruption of Oriental slavery. He ascribed to the white woman feelings of dishonor and shame, imbuing her with a kind of humanity not extended to the black woman. Alternatively, Shulldham asserts that the "jet black" woman shows no emotion and accepts her fate not only as a slave, but also as an equal to the monkey. The sentiment infers that the sale of white women in Eastern slave markets should elicit the pathos of the viewer whereas slavery is a condition commensurate with the black body. With his vacillating and symbiotic moral position between lust and outrage, Gérôme nominally indicts the barbarity of the Oriental trade in white female flesh through the seductive yet anemically pathetic white nude, while inviting the male spectator to imagine himself as both client and critic.³¹

In spite of the unquestionable effort to mark the black woman as degenerate, Gérôme adds alluring decorative appointments to her body and indeed the entire tableau. His modes of embellishment seem to mitigate or at least obfuscate the real horrors of sexual slavery. A red flower adorns the black slave's hair and tattoos are visible on her hand and leg. Along with the slave ring around her neck is a decorative cowry shell necklace. The cowry was a

form of currency in Africa dating back centuries. Featured here by Gérôme as adornment for the black female slave, the cowry signifies her status as a commodity in a monetized transaction while at the same time functioning as a form of beautification. Along with the white nude's languorous body language, and ornate bejeweled ankle bracelet, these details become diversionary tactics projecting mixed messages of sensuous materiality that could draw focus from the degraded and barbaric nature of the scene.

Equally distracting and compelling is the ornate Turkish Yatagan sword with an ivory handle that is hanging on the outside of the kiosk window flanked by the stunningly blue parrot.³² This still-life vignette of exotica showcases the artist's virtuosity as a painter and echoes the sexuality of the narrative. The phallic sword is an inanimate avatar of both the hyper-masculine buyer and seller. The parrot is a symbol of exotic luxury and eroticism that dates back centuries. Parrots and black servants, or Moors, were often among the array of objects that signaled references to distant lands, trade, and conquest in Dutch still-life painting of the Baroque period.³³ Nineteenth-century paintings like Eugene Delacroix's *Woman with Parrot* of 1827 and Gustave Courbet's *Woman with Parrot* of 1866 combined assertively erotic nudes with the tropical bird in a play on female sexuality and nature. Gérôme is once again straddling the line between the transgressive contemporary art scene of Courbet and Edouard Manet and the safety of academic tradition. Gérôme managed to engage ideas infamously explored by modernists, yet through the lens of the Orient avoid the taint of modern life.

The Slave for Sale drew critical attention with its political theme and provocative display of sexuality. During that same year Gérôme produced *The Slave Market* (1871), another canvas featuring women for sale at a Cairo kiosk. *The Slave Market* is a more expansive view of the sexual slave trade, featuring six women of various shades of black, brown and white, including one with an infant. The same white nude figure featured in *The Slave for Sale* appears here among the demoralized lot of women for sale in *The Slave Market*. After completing these two canvases, Gérôme seemed to abandon the unsavory sexual underworld of Oriental slavery for a more romantic, perhaps more palatable and commercial approach to erotic potential of black and white bodies. Channeling Nattier's *Mademoiselle de Clermont* (Figure 6.2) and Ingres' *Bain Turc*, Gérôme turned to the sumptuous, decorative interiors of the Eastern harem in *Moorish Bath*. Although the explicit commercial exchange of women is avoided, the bath scenes employ slightly more subtle aesthetic devices that, like the slave market scenes, exploit racial binaries and offer female bodies for consumption. Gérôme was not the first to invest in the seductive imagery of the Oriental bath, the exotic female nude, or the sensuous rituals of beauty, but his provocative interpretations beginning with *Moorish Bath* of 1872 would come to represent some of the most potent forms of French exoticism in the nineteenth century.

Set in a private Cairo bath, *Moorish Bath* (Figure 6.4) is animated by an array of differences anchored by the blackness of the female servant juxtaposed with the creamy whiteness of the nude bather, a device he previously used to



6.4 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Moorish Bath*, 1872. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts / Gift of Robert Jordan from the collection of Eben D. Jordan / The Bridgeman Art Library. Photo: © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All rights reserved

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great effect in *The Slave for Sale*. Gérôme's carefully crafted oppositions create a reaction that evokes exoticism in a manner that neither figure could achieve alone. Exploiting the perceived binaries between Europe and Africa, black and white, civilized and savage, servant and served, Gérôme formulates an intricate oppositional interplay between the two figures, as in *The Slave for Sale*. A review of *Moorish Bath* after it was exhibited in the 1878 Universal Exposition in Paris articulates in no uncertain terms the rhetorical importance of Gérôme's use of binary oppositions as a structural framework. For reviewer Fanny Field Hering, American Gérôme biographer, friend, and devotee, it spelled perfection:

The ebony body of one and the ivory form of the other, first with a yellow Madras kerchief on her head, the second with her wealth of golden tresses, are bathed in the ambient air, the high lights being adjusted with remarkable flexibility; there is nothing to criticize in this little gem, no fault of style or orthography; one could write perfect from one end of the canvas to the other. The drawing, the color, the action, are equally irreproachable.³⁴

Indeed, a litany of contrasts defines the subject of bather and servant, as well as the composition, both of which reinforce the ideological binaries. The black figure stands facing front, and the white bather sits facing back.³⁵ An enclosed seating area on the right is juxtaposed with an empty space on the left. The black servant wears a turban, a typical headdress of the exotic slave, while the nude wears no headgear. The servant's drapery is a dark, rough-hewn cloth while the bather's discarded robe is a finely woven, vibrant silk in bright shades of green and red.

The black woman in *Moorish Bath* (Figure 6.5) was central to the dramatic tension of the scene and hence the issue of ethnographic authenticity became critical. Gérôme wrote in his memoirs that he could not even complete *Moorish Bath* in London because he did not have the proper model for the African slave.³⁶ He returned to Paris from London in June of 1871 to find an appropriate black female to model for this character.³⁷ This anecdote puzzled Gérôme biographer Gerald Ackerman, who wrote that the artist seemed to paint his white bathers from memory, prompting him to question "So why not the slave?"³⁸ In a related move to increase the veracity of his harem imagery, Delacroix added a contrived black servant to his 1834 painting *Women of Algiers*, even though she was not present during his storied visit to an Algerian harem. Both Gérôme and Delacroix used the black body, real or imagined, to enhance the authenticity of their Orientalist tableaux.

For Gérôme there were several well-known black models working in Paris during the 1860s and 1870s that were available to him and apparently preferable than those he could have found in London. In the second half of the century, black women famously appear in works by French artists such as Manet, Frederick Bazille, Charles Cordier, and Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux. Gérôme's desire to employ a black model in Paris reveals not only the availability of "proper" black models in the city, but perhaps he



6.5 Jean-Léon
Gérôme, *Moorish
Bath*, 1872, detail.
Oil on canvas.
Museum of Fine
Arts, Boston,
Massachusetts /
Gift of Robert
Jordan from the
collection of Eben
D. Jordan / The
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saw *Moorish Bath* as an academic response to Impressionist offerings such as Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and Bazille's *La Toilette* (1870), works that scandalously transported the traditionally exotic pair from the Orient to contemporary Paris. Again, Gérôme seems to dance with the contemporary avant-garde while maintaining a firm position as an academic orientalist.³⁹

Just as Turkish tiles, Egyptian fabrics, and numerous decorative objects added an aura of accuracy to Gérôme's works, the black woman's attire was operative in the decorative program in *Moorish Bath* (Figure 6.5). She is draped in coarse striped cloth of undetermined ethnic origin. Stripes were often associated with slaves and people at the lower registers of society.⁴⁰ Black females featured in several subsequent exotic bath tableaux by Gérôme wear a similar striped cloth. Her Moroccan-style necklace is an unusual and striking ornament. It is a large and elaborate piece comprised of a series of circular coins and square pendants interspersed with red coral, a composition typical of Moroccan metalwork and jewelry design.⁴¹ Gérôme's interest in adorning the black slave with North African "ethnic" items signals a transformation in the historical representation of the black servant. Prior to the Orientalist interest in authentic ethnicities,

black servants were typically dressed in European livery or generic exotica such as a feathered turban and tunic. Black bodies were often adorned with pearl necklaces and earrings that contrasted with their dark skin, marking them as objects of luxury and of course trading on the fashion for contrasts. Gérôme's pastiche of ethnic costume and jewelry moved toward differentiating black ethnicities within the Orient rather than treating all of the types with a universal Orientalist brush. This movement toward a more ethnographic approach to the black woman reflects Gérôme's larger interests in physiognomies and costumes as well the rise in popular anthropology and ethnography in mid-nineteenth-century Europe.

Moorish Bath was the first in this series of exotic bathers that eventually resulted in approximately 27 works, three of which share the title *Moorish Bath*.⁴² Most of the bath scenes include at least one black female slave. Dating from 1872 through the 1890s, they range from intimate groups of two such as the 1872 *Moorish Bath* discussed here and the 1880 canvas of the same name to multi-figured compositions such as his *Grand Bath at Bursa* of 1885 where three black women attend to nude ladies and children in a large communal bath.

The American art critic Edward Strahan described Gérôme's variations on the theme of the Moorish bath as an opportunity to show the versatility of his skill. In his compilation of one hundred photogravures by Gérôme, Strahan described the series of bathhouse scenes as a study in contrasts: "... the contrast of graceful, warm-tinted nudity and the coolness of color and largeness of space in those vaulted marble halls, with the occasional and exceeding blackness of the Nubian slaves to give an accent, this contrast and harmony is enough to tempt a painter"⁴³

Indeed, the myriad potential of contrast and harmony did tempt Gérôme, leading him to revisit the aesthetic possibilities in combinations and permutations of "exceeding blackness" and "graceful, warm-tinted nudity" for a quarter century. While the African women in the series of paintings were essential to grounding the scenes in the ostensible reality of the Orient, their individuality and ultimate humanity were incomprehensible. Commentators likened the black woman to "ebony" and "jet," decorative luxury commodities or accents that punctuate the primary subjects. With their black faces often obscured by drapery, or their backs turned to the viewer, it was their dark, ornamented bodies that activated the scenes. Often the only clothed or partially clothed figures, like tiles, costumes, and minarets in his Orientalist landscapes, black women were among the objects that definitively marked the scene as exotic. Their presence was as much a formal as a narrative device, drawing upon the nineteenth-century fascination with contrast.

"Occasional and exceeding blackness"

With smooth surfaces, hypnotic colors, and entrancing details, Gérôme's artistry conveys the sensual and seductive pleasures of the Orient while mediating European ideas of slavery, racial degeneracy, and sexual domination. Black African females in his Orientalist catalogue are slaves and servants whose racial and sexual outlandishness puts them in a dialectical relationship with white women,⁴⁴ one in which the white female is exoticized, therefore Orientalized, through to her proximity to extreme blackness. The black slave is then humanized only through her service to the white Oriental woman. The African woman's "excessive" and incomprehensible blackness exist beyond the comfort and familiarity of the "warm-tinted" (Strahan) nudes or the "beauty we know" (Nerval). Although they may exceed comprehension, they are necessary props rendered authentic, knowable, and palatable in the imagined spaces of Orientalism.

The art of Jean-Léon Gérôme has come to embody some of the core values and fundamental conflicts of Orientalist imagery, particularly in terms of representing the black female. Gérôme's images of exotic Africans are possibly the best examples of the tensions of art and ethnography of the period. Black figures are often crucial to Gérôme's construct of the Orient as a raced space, a seductive antithesis to normative European whiteness.

At times his fidelity to the physiognomy resulted in strikingly sensitive representations of individualized black figures. Yet they were often pastiches of exotica, a reanimation of the stock figures of exotic blackness dating back centuries. Today, Gérôme's brand of ethnographic exotica seems emblematic of a flawed and insidious system through which Europeans defined their own racial and cultural supremacy in opposition to others. Yet in his time, Gérôme exploited the alchemy of racial oppositions to ignite the erotic/exotic spaces of the Orientalist imaginary.

Notes

- 1 Author's translation; Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 221.
- 2 Ibid., 221–2.
- 3 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
- 4 Gerald M. Ackerman and Jean Léon Gérôme, *The Life and Work of Jean-Léon Gérôme: With a Catalogue Raisonné* (London: Sotheby's Publications, 1986).
- 5 Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).
- 6 Scott Allan and Mary Morton, eds., *Reconsidering Gérôme* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010).
- 7 Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 294.
- 8 David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds., *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 3, *From the "Age of Discovery" to the Age of Abolition*, part 1, *Artists of the Renaissance and Baroque* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).
- 9 David Bindman and Helen Weston, "Court and City: Fantasies of Domination," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 3, *From the "Age of Discovery" to the Age of Abolition*, part 3, *The Eighteenth Century*, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 152.
- 10 Perrin Stein has characterized the toilette of the sultana as a stage in the process of the sultan's selection of a favorite from the ranks of the odalisques; Perrin Stein, "Amédée Van-Loo's *Costume turc: The French Sultana*," *Art Bulletin* 78, issue 3 (1996): 424.
- 11 Kathleen Nicholson, "Practicing Portraiture: Mademoiselle de Clermont and J.-M. Nattier," in *Women, Art and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Melissa Hyde and Jennifer Milam (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 79.
- 12 Abigail Harrison Moore, "Voyage: Dominique-Vivant Denon and the Transference of Images of Egypt," *Art History* 24 (2002): 531–49.
- 13 Said, *Orientalism*.
- 14 Philippe Mariot, "Chronology," in *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme: 1824–1904* (Paris: Skira, 2010), 341–7.
- 15 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 25.

- 16 Author's translation. Théophile Gautier, "Gérôme: Tableaux, Etudes et Croquis de Voyage," *L'Artiste*, December 28, 1856. See also Miller's discussion of this article and Gérôme's ethnography as a realist project; Peter Benson Miller, "Gérôme and Ethnographic Realism at the Salon of 1857," in *Reconsidering Gérôme*, ed. Allan and Morton, 115.
- 17 Gautier, "Gérôme," 34.
- 18 Ibid., author's translation.
- 19 Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 16.
- 20 Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
- 21 Lane's book has been in print continuously since 1860; Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians: The Definitive 1860 Edition*, 5th ed., intro. Jason Thompson (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003). At times problematic, Lane's general descriptions of the ethnicity of Egyptian slaves have been confirmed by twentieth-century historians. See Gabriel Baer, "Slavery in Nineteenth Century Egypt," *Journal of African History* 8, no. 3 (1967): 417–44.
- 22 Ibid., 184.
- 23 Ehud R. Toledano, "Late Ottoman Concepts of Slavery (1830s–1880s)," *Poetics Today* 14, no. 3 (1993): 483.
- 24 The practice of keeping black slaves continued in Egypt throughout the nineteenth century. See Baer, "Slavery in Nineteenth Century Egypt"; Robert O. Collins, "The Nilotic Slave Trade: Past and Present," *Slavery and Abolition* 13, no. 1 (1992); Alice Morre-Harell, "Slave Trade in the Sudan in the Nineteenth Century and Its Suppression in the years 1877–80," *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 2 (1998).
- 25 Baer, "Slavery in Nineteenth Century Egypt," 419.
- 26 Lane, *Manners and Customs*, 185–6.
- 27 Ronald Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 109.
- 28 Gerald M. Ackerman, *Jean-Léon Gérôme: Monographie révisée, catalogue raisonné mis à jour* (Paris: ACR Editions, 2000), 90.
- 29 Ibid., 92.
- 30 M.D.E.B. Shulldham, "The Royal Academy," *Dark Blue* (1871): 472.
- 31 Alison Smith makes the astute point that the male spectator is both denouncer and potential client. See Alison Smith, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 172.
- 32 This same type of sword is featured in Gérôme's portrait of the black soldier in the painting *Bashi-Bazouk* (1868–69) in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- 33 Julie Berger Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 211.
- 34 In her biography of Gérôme, Hering quotes "Art of the Nineteenth Century" by de Pesquidoux; see Fanny Field Hering, *Gérôme: The Life and Works of Jean-Léon Gérôme* (Cassell: New York, 1892), 226.

- 35 Linda Nochlin points out that Gérôme's bather signifies tradition by referencing the "original Oriental backview" of Ingres's *Valpinçon Bather*; see Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," in *The Politics of Vision* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 47.
- 36 Author's translation; see Ackerman, *Jean-Léon Gérôme*, 272.
- 37 See time line of Gérôme's life and work in Hélène Lafont-Couturier, *Gérôme* (Paris: Editions Herscher, 1998), 117–26.
- 38 "Alors, pourquoi pas l'esclave?" Ackerman, *Jean-Léon Gérôme*, 272.
- 39 Peter Benson Miller proposes that we expand our conception of Gérôme beyond the antiquated and fantastic to think of his Orientalist works in relation to contemporary realist modes, particularly a kind of ethnographic realism; see Miller, "Gérôme and Ethnographic Realism."
- 40 Michel Pastoreau, *The Devil's Cloth: A History of Stripes*, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Washington Square Press, 1991), 35–41.
- 41 Jacques Rabaté and Marie-Rose Rabaté, *Bijoux du Maroc: Du Haut Atlas à la vallée du Draa* (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud/Le Fennec, 1996), 40–42.
- 42 Ibid. This number is a result of a survey of the images in Ackerman's monograph, the most complete assemblage of Gérôme's work to date. Many of these paintings were published as prints or photogravures.
- 43 Edward Strahan, ed., *Gérôme: A Collection of the Works of J.L. Gérôme in One Hundred Photogravures* (New York: Samuel L. Hall, 1881), n.p.
- 44 Charmaine Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 107.