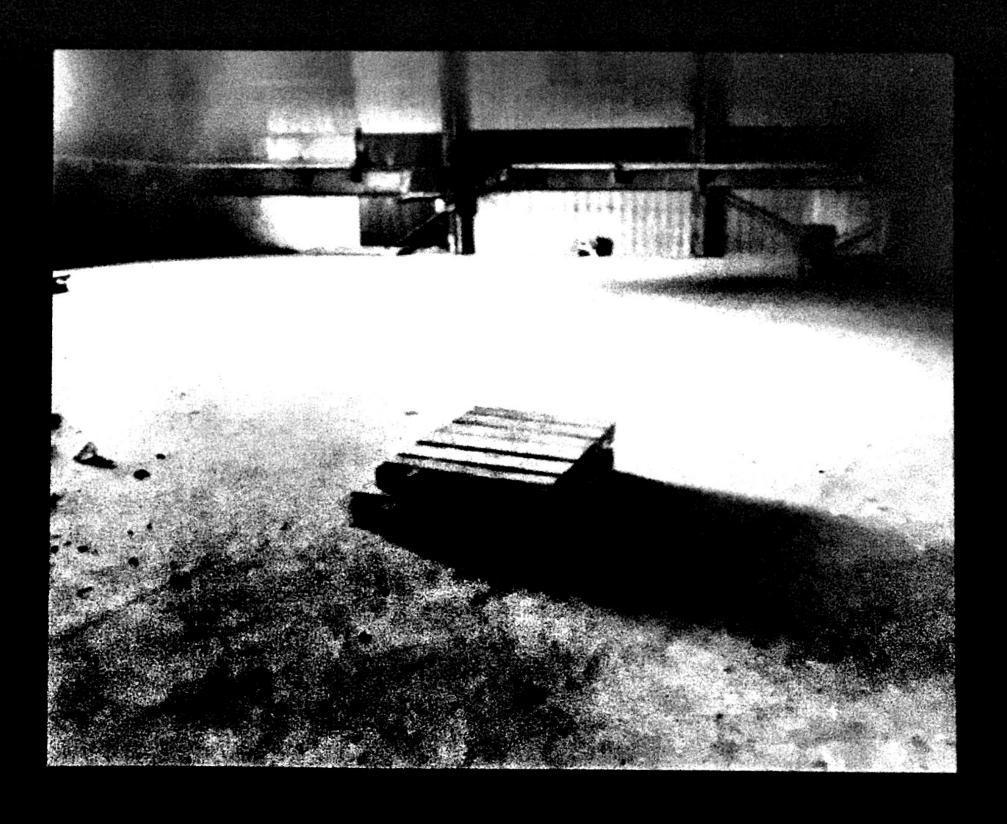# Mizna

Prose, Poetry & Art Exploring Arab America

An Orientalist Arab Identity
by Ralph Hajj

The monarch is lying indolently on the huge bed, almost oblivious. All around him the carnage is taking place: naked women being murdered by dark, hook-nosed slaves; horses panicking; jewellery and other precious items piled chaotically waiting to be burned along with the bodies of the murdered. Even in the violence of their death the women are highly sexualized. Sexualized to whom? Not to the indifferent potentate certainly, but to the one outside consuming the carnage as aesthetic pleasure, the viewer of the painting.

Eugene Delacroix painted *The Death of Sardanapul* from 1827–28. The scene it depicts is the end of the reign of Sardanapul, an Oriental monarch. His castle surrounded by enemies, he orders everyone and everything that matters to him, including himself, to be burned rather than captured. It is one of the first Romantic expressions of Orientalism; it is also one of its most complete. It is all there, in a distant time or distant place outside of Europe: the opposite of Europe's historical changes it is a-temporal; the opposite of Europe's political uncertainty it is despotic; the opposite of bourgeois society it is violent, cruel, and wholly aristocratic; the opposite of European sexual prohibitions it is sensual, even decadent. In other words, the Orientalist's Orient is Europe's radical other.

A lot has been made of the fact that the Romantics such as Delacroix approved highly of this Orient they were picturing. For them it was a world whose authenticity was used to contrast the stifling conventions of the over-evolved Western civilization. This is usually taken as an argument in their defense. What is overlooked, however, is that whether the radical otherness of the Orient is perceived as good or bad is irrelevant. Both those who approved and disapproved of this civilization saw it in the same manner: distant, violent, savage — a picture of a lesser evolution. That this is a construction based largely on a pre-existing discourse about the Orient, that this discourse is completely detached from empirical reality, that any images thus created are collages constructed by a selection of facts has already been shown extensively elsewhere. Authors such as Edward Said, Linda Nochlin, and Thierry Hentsch, among others, have attacked this problem in several books and articles.

Yet despite the work of these authors, the historical continuity of this Orientalist image and its incredible resilience can still be seen today in an extreme number of cultural productions: popular novels, media coverage of Middle East affairs, theatre, televi-

sion, advertising, photojournalism, cinema—even ceramic plates. These are only some of the manifestations of the Orientalist image. This is a discourse that transcends any single discipline. It is basically a series of shared assumptions about what the Orient is, one which determines how any single discipline will approach it. For instance, Hollywood did not invent the stereotypical Arab seen in most movies—he existed long before cinema was ever invented. Thus, the incredibly racist representation of Arabs in Disney's *Aladdin* is really nothing new. If in this movie the protagonist sings about a cruel and barbaric Orient "where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face," this is simply a continuation of Orientalist representation of radical otherness.

The influence of Orientalist representation can also be seen in media coverage of events in the Middle East. It is always useful to emphasize that a photograph is not a wholly objective representation of reality; it reflects what the photographer thought was worth photographing. The same holds true for television coverage. Reporters from CNN and other news organizations always present the same pictures of the Middle East—generally, Palestinian youth throwing rocks or an angry crowd protesting. Because they are presented out of their original context, these pictures become those of irrational Arabs participating in mob violence. Their context becomes the pre-determined ideology about what the Middle East is supposed to be. That these people suffer under an occupation, that their most basic rights are violated, that they are victims of state-organized violence and apartheid is not considered a proper context for explaining what is going on. Relying on the shared assumptions about the Orient created by Orientalism, the implied explanation of what we see before us on the news is that these are an inherently violent people who commit violence out of irrational hatred.

In a sense, Orientalist representations serve a ritualistic function. Paintings such as *The Death of Sardanapul* as well as stereotypical representations of Arabs in the media and in movies are a Western ritual. They are meant as a collective experience whereby the viewers are given the chance to commit deadly violence by proxy against a group perceived as being outside of their own. In the case of *The Death of Sardanapul*, the act also includes the expression of a prohibited kind of violent sexuality—the equivalent of snuff. Such rituals allow the internal violence of the group to be redirected outside. Thus, instead of leading to internal violence within the group, it allows a unanimous projection of violence outside of it, against another group. Such unanimous projections of violence in turn reinforce the cohesion of the group.

The fact that these projections of collective violence can sometimes go beyond the purely symbolic is made evident by such

events as the Gulf War. The ease with which the American public supported that war was made possible by the Orientalist discourse and the pervasive nature of racist representations of Arabs. What the war also proved was the effect such exercises of collective violence can have on the cohesion of the group. George Bush had a 90% approval rating during the Gulf War period and most Americans interviewed reported feeling a surge of patriotism and solidarity. Conversely, Clinton's repeated attempts to duplicate that effect with air strikes during his periods of scandal had very limited success. This shows that when people are made aware of this mechanism, they refuse to be fooled.

Given all these facts, what is most surprising is the vogue that Orientalism still has in the Arab world today. What is essentially an expression of a colonialist ideology has been internalized by a very large number of Arab artists. In fact, it could be argued that Orientalism is still one of the most popular genres of painting in the Arab world today. Its themes are also used extensively in propaganda images such as the huge pictures of a heroic Saddam Hussein riding a white horse, wearing his traditional jallabieh and raising his sword, or of Qaddaffi in front of his tent and camels. The same camels, the same swords, tents, horses, the same scenes, the same underlying discourse about Oriental "authenticity." So paradoxically, whereas exhibitions of abstraction—a genre more related to Islamic visual traditions—remain largely suspect, Orientalist subject matter is considered truly "authentic" and traditional.

How to explain this? Beyond the historical ignorance that the attitude toward Orientalism implies, there are several reasons for it; some are historic and some have more to do with a specific conception of *assala*, or authenticity. For despite a long visual tradition in the Arab world, painting was never as important as other art forms such as music or poetry. Painting as an independent medium of artistic expression, existing outside of a church, a book, or a mosque, as a canvas to be hung on a wall or viewed in a gallery for its own sake, was essentially a European import. A large number of the artists who did this importing, such as Mustapha Faroukh, studied in France or in Italy where they learned an ideological approach to the Orient *as* they were learning their artistic techniques. Part of the way these artists gave meaning to their experience as immigrant students learning the art of painting was through an Orientalist ideology.

On the other end of the canvas is the public viewing it. European immigrants and representatives of European powers introduced the first Orientalist paintings into the Arab world in the nineteenth century. These were emulated by the Arab governing and economic elite, some of whom were already being educated in Europe. This elite largely agreed with the Occidental vision of a decadent Arab civilization (although it was more in view of finding ways of "catching-up" with the Europeans). The enormous technological advance of the European powers as well as the increasing financial and political difficulties of the ever-weakened Ottoman Empire convinced them of this. Painting in the Arab world, as an independent art form viewed for its own sake, had its first public with this elite. The representations that some Western Orientalists had of the past greatness of Arabic civilization were uncritically appropriated without a proper understanding of their underlying nature. It was an appropriation that gave rise to the hope of a future where Arab civilization could regain equality with the Europeans.

What this elite, along with Arab artists and intellectuals, did not perceive was the deeply flawed nature of these representations. Orientalism posited the Arab world as a static entity outside of modernity, defining its identity in terms of traditionalism and political authoritarianism. In the radicalization of this view (as represented by the current religious fundamentalism), identity can be defined solely in opposition to the West and all that it stands for, including democracy, critical and scientific inquiry, and opposition to dogmatism. In other words, the way Orientalism as a pictorial school defined the Arab world was in opposition to the same modernity these elite and these intellectuals were striving for. As such, Orientalist representations are in concordance with the same political authoritarianism largely responsible for the weakening of the Arab world. To be sure, these same elite were deeply conservative and had their privileged positions to protect. They wanted the technological and scientific advances of the West without the social and political instability that made it possible. In other words, they wanted France without the French revolution; they wanted Copernicus and Galileo without doing away with the Inquisition. This is a basic problem that the Arab world is still facing today: the difficulty that intellectual and artistic innovations face because of authoritarian regimes that view such innovations as socially destabilizing and possibly dangerous. The explosion of Arab talent was contained because its price would have been social instability.

Arab Orientalism provides an innocuous vision of identity—one that is supportive of political and social conservatism. Identity is defined in relation to a glorious and largely idealized past, a golden age from which all problematic issues—including slavery and near-slavery, feudalism, and the howling inequalities between Arab peasants and their aristocracy—are largely evicted. The image presented is of a past where society was cohesive and today's social problems did not exist. Viewed from this angle, the attraction of authoritarian Arab regimes to Orientalist imagery is very understandable.

What all of this points to is the urgent need for a new def-

inition of identity in the Arab world. Identity is a series of presuppositions used to approach all circumstances that arise in the world before us. As such it is absolutely crucial and its loss is very deeply felt. So a critical examination of Arab identity promises to be painful. Yet it is absolutely necessary because the appropriation of Orientalism as an identitarian model leaves Arab identity presupposing an a-historical stability and a radical opposition to the West that has justified the opposition to and repression of liberal movements and cultural minorities in the Arab world. Such an identity is very difficult to maintain in the current ever-changing world creating a dissonance between what things are supposed to be and what they truly are. To reduce that dissonance, critical speech is curtailed and people are forced to live in the glorious make-believe world created by the official media and by censorship. What this leads to is an incapacity to innovate and to effectively adapt to changing circumstances.

A new identity can only be achieved through a critical examination of our society including its history with all of its faults and all of its victims. Uncritical glorifiers of the Arab civilization forget that despite its great achievements it was a colonial power like any other with its share of victims and injustices. An unthinking glorification of the past is dangerous because it justifies unjust practices in the name of this glory—the massacre of the Kurds in Iraq is but one example. Such a re-evaluation must be an internal evolution of the Arab world and cannot be imposed from the outside or it will be perceived—quite rightly—as an attempt to justify its current exploitation by Western powers. But the urgency of the question is overwhelming. In an Arab world where identity is defined in a way that is completely unadapted to the changes of the contemporary world, how can we go beyond an oppositional and an a-historical definition? Whenever such a definition of identity is used, it reinforces tribalism in all of its forms. In turn, tribalism, with its emphasis on group loyalty and conformity, destroys the possibility of religious, social, or political dissent, which are conditions of political innovation. Without this possibility of dissent, the creativity that the Arab world needs to face these extremely dangerous times will not be possible. *m*