

Cairo as an artifact in 19th century Western imagery

Caroline Williams

The Symposium Abstract I received suggests that history is not an objective entity but a subjective construct of the contemporary mind.¹ This is an engaging proposition and I shall examine with you how an experience of two cultures, Europe and Islam, in the 19th century, resulted in the phenomenon we call Orientalist art. The ensuing vision - "the painterly equivalent of rescue archaeology"² - is being currently revalidated by collectors in the Middle East who now see in these paintings reminders of the richness and value of their own past culture. These paintings offer "texts" which can be read with profit.

(S) When the first European artists came to Egypt they found in Cairo a continuation of the chief city of the Muslim world and a seat of Empire. In the 14th century, Ibn Battuta described Cairo as "mother of cities...boundless in multitude of buildings, peerless in beauty and splendor..."³ (S) while Ibn Khaldun⁴ wrote: "He who has not seen Cairo does not know the grandeur of Islam...the thronging place of nations and the anhill of the human race" By the 19th century this urban legacy was still basically intact: it had not been destroyed by Mongol raids in the 13th or 15th centuries, nor in the 19th century by the new building programs of Muhammad Ali's dynasty.

How did the 19th Western artist react to this city and its people?

(S)⁵ At first, it was the city's architecture – "the multitude of buildings" - that caught their imagination. The images these artists created (S) continued, expanded and improved upon the visualization that began with the volumes of the *Description de l'Egypte*, , the first consistent attempt to depict urban Cairo, published from 1809 to 1822.

(S)The early artists were mainly French and British, and as draftsmen, architects, or topographers they came by invitation of Egypt's Viceroy, Muhammad Ali Pasha, or as members of a foreign scientific expedition. For the most part their on-site drawings were turned into lithographs and published in the 1840's.

(S) For example, Pascal Coste (1787-1879) was in Egypt from 1817-27 and as one of Muhammad Ali's trusted counselors he was given official permission to visit all the principal mosques in Cairo.⁶ As an architect Coste was one of the first Europeans to appreciate the fact that "Cairo was the only city in the Orient, which still possessed a collection of Arab monuments of all periods – the 7th to the 18th centuries". (S) Some of the buildings he drew then exist now only in a partial state.

(S) Robert Hay⁷ was a scholar enthusiast who came to Egypt with a group of architects to "record" the Pharaonic monuments, but it is for the illustrations of Cairo done around 1830 that Hay is primarily known.

(S) Like his contemporaries, Hay was beguiled by the new architectural forms he encountered, such as the sabil-kuttab, a combination of Quran school and water dispensary unique to Cairo, These sabil-kuttab continued, and modified, the 15th century Mamluk style.

(S) Hay's team left us also a record of monuments that have disappeared such as the Mamluk Qasr al-Ablaq on the Citadel, (S) and the handsome Ottoman

residences around the Birkat al-Fil, which was drained in 1840 by Muhammad Ali's order.

(S) David Roberts is the last and best known artist of the first part of the 19th century . A member of the Royal Academy, he came to Egypt with the specific intention of creating a portfolio of commercially profitable images. He was in Cairo for six weeks in early 1839 and he drew 27 views of the city. He wrote: "I am bewildered with the extraordinary picturesque nature of the streets and buildings of this most wonderful of all cities –..."

(S) Some of his subjects had caught the eye of previous artists. For example; Roberts' perspective around the *Gate of Citizenab* is similar to an earlier painting, *The Necropolis*⁸ by Prosper Maril/hat. These panoramic views include early Mamluk tombs situated near shrines dedicated to the Prophet's family, and look towards the Citadel as it was before Muhammad Ali built his great mosque on its summit.

(S)The funerary complexes of the Mamluk Sultans Qurqumas and Inal in the Northern cemetery were painted by three contemporary artists. Here, Adrien Dauzats who was in Egypt for 6 months in 1830, places Turkish tombs in the foreground. **(S)**Roberts and Dadd⁹ include the desert, Cairo's hinterland, and in it the camels, essential to the caravan route that led east to Suez and then north to Syria. **(S)**Thomas Seddon, in depicting the neighboring funerary complex of Sultan Barquq, makes the camel and the Bedouin the foreground of his painting.¹⁰

(S)¹¹ These architect-draftsmen-topographers caught Cairo at its peak. The city which had survived five hundred years was already under assault . In the 1830's, even as artists sketched, Muhammad Ali had ordered the removal of *mashrabiyya*¹² from windows, and *mastabas* ¹³from shop-fronts because they posed fire and traffic hazards.

(S)¹⁴ In the later part of the century the emphasis on external description gave way to anecdotal detail, to a portrayal of the people– "the anthill of the human race" - in their immediate contexts and daily activities. Visitors from this period have left quotes expressing an excited appreciation of

(S)"the splendid costumes, ..." ¹⁵

(S)"the brilliant color",¹⁶ And

(S) " the light and shade."¹⁷

In totality these artists record a living society and impart to their Western audiences a visual appreciation of its culture. An aspect of this culture which they found especially fascinating was the Muslim faith in its physical and spiritual forms.

(S) If we contrast the depiction of the Madrasa of Sultan Hasan in the *Description* with those of later artists, we see the artistic change that has taken place. Sultan Hasan was a favorite monument and many artists took this view.

(S) Roberts emphasizes the scale of the building by having the portal tower over his human scale. Lewis highlights the Portal by placing it as a destination at the end of a tunnel of subsidiary buildings, all of which have subsequently been removed to make way for one of Muhammad 'Ali's roadways.

(S) In Farquharson's courtyard the emphasis is on the people who use the mosque for prayer.

(S) In the Northern Cemetery, a frequently drawn mosque is that of the Sultan Qaytbay which forms the centerpiece of his funerary establishment. (S) Here, the monument forms the background. The foreground is an addition, an aberration. It is valuable, however, because it shows the bronze grilles of the sabil of Sultan Mahmud which have long since been missing. (S) Another painting which provides important documentation is this depiction of Qaytbay's mihrab, also long since stripped of its decoration. (S)

(S) In the same area of the Northern cemetery is the Qubba¹⁸ or domed chamber of a dervish sect. The building is permanently closed, but here the interior is depicted by Carl Haag, (S) and again, in a more animated scene by Jean-Léon Gérôme.

Gérôme is the dominant artist in this later period: not only because of his own enormous output, but also because of the many artists he taught and inspired. (S) One of his most evocative series is his memory of the *adhan*¹⁹ or call to prayer. The Muezzin in the upper balcony of a minaret intones the words, "God is Greater, God is Greater", which float down over the neighborhood below. Gérôme wrote: "In Cairo there is true religious faith, and its manifestations have none of the elegant and frivolous piety of our Catholic mosques."²⁰ (S) John Frederick Lewis, a British artist who lived in Cairo for almost ten years, paints a devotee at prayer. Curiously, the man's features are similar to Lewis' own. Perhaps this is a visual endorsement by Lewis of Gérôme's "true" feeling.

In some of the views there are mistakes. (S) In this lovely composition depicting ritual postures, Gérôme incorporates Cairo's famous skyline along the Bayn al-Qasrayn. However, so as not to conflict with the direction of the *malqaf* or air vent, Gérôme's men face north rather than southeast, the true *qibla* in Cairo.²¹ (S) Likewise Mielich's worshippers are wrongly placed. The clock tower in the courtyard of the mosque is on the northwest wall. If the devout were truly facing Mecca (southeast) the clocktower would not be visible. Mielich shows the *du'a*, a gesture frequently made as a personal and spontaneous part of prayer.

Lewis and Mielich depict the act of prayer (S) Robertson's focus is on the portal as transition between outer and inner worlds.

(S) In *the Lamplighter* the setting is the 16th century Madrasa of Sultan al-Ghuri. Deutsch imbues his scene with an intuitive appreciation of the importance of light and water in Islam. The Lamplighter prepares the lamp to give light, a central Qur'anic metaphor for God: "God is the light of the heavens and the earth..."²² The ovoid marble jar which stands in the corner was the medieval water cooler, and the provision of water for the thirsty, since the days of the Prophet, has been a charitable and noble act in Islam.

(S) Here is the outside of the Ghuriya, the double complex of the Sultan al-Ghuri, the last of the great Mamluk buildings erected in the early 16th century, as drawn by Hay and by Lewis in the 1840's. (S) Here it is today, with its wooden roofing newly restored. One hundred years ago, (S) Deutsch animated the area with a celebration important in Cairene life. The Mahmal - the camel-mounted litter containing the holy Qur'an and the centerpiece of the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca - is central to this lively scene in which incense billows, banners float, fires flare in portable braziers, and the crowd peers and points.

In conclusion, the Orientalist images, which in this presentation highlight piety amidst Cairo's material-architectural culture, are relevant in several ways:

It is from these Western artists – French, English, Italian, American and Austrian – that we have a pictorial-historical record of a pre-industrial Cairo (S) little changed from its medieval heyday and its Ottoman overlay. Here on the Bayn al-Qasrayn,²³ the central section of the main ceremonial artery of al-Qahira, we see, in Coste's drawing, the 13th century Madrasa of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars demolished in 1874, and in Hay's, the sabil of Muhammad Ali built in 1828.

(S)Furthermore, when the same area is depicted by different artists at different times it becomes also a record of artistic change, (S) illustrating the shift from topography to genre, from external state to interior use.

Finally, these images provide a visual record of times past. I was surprised, when studying early 20th century Egyptian painters, that not one of them took as his subject the visual legacy of Islam's architectural and spiritual past. The Orientalist output was created by foreigners, and although some of the products may be criticized, these paintings are the only visual texts that survive to show us how it once was. These images remain as reminders of the former richness and value of a city now being plundered and despoiled. (S)

¹ A variant on this idea is to be found in D.Fairchild Ruggles:"Inventing the Alhambra" in D. Roxbrugh:*Envisioning Islamic Art & Architecture: Essays in Honor of Renata Holod* (2014, Brill)

² Robert Irwin review of M.Shafik Gabr: *Masterpieces of Orientalist Art* , TLS, April 12, 1913

³ 1325, David Roberts: Entrance to the Citadel

⁴ 1384, David Roberts: *Bab Zuwayla*, detail

⁵ Complex of Amir Khayrbak, P. Coste, 1822, P. Marilhat, 1830

⁶ His book, *Architecture Arabe ou Monuments du Kaire*, which appeared in 1838, was based on these studies. Plate XLIII Show Muayyad, ext. and Qaytbay, int.

⁷ Hay, drawn by Owen Carter, Pl. VIII, c. 1830, and Ruqayya Dudu

⁸ P. Marilhat, The Necropolis, Oil on canvas, 1839 who was in Egypt from October 1831 to May 1833

⁹ R. Dadd *Tombs of the Khalifs* Watercolor, 1843, V&A

¹⁰ Thomas Seddon: Dromedary and Arabs at the City of the Dead, Cairo, with the Tomb of Sultan El Barkook in the background 1853/56, Private Collection, Houston,

¹¹ D. Roberts "Bazaar of the Silk Mercers"

¹² The wooden lattice screens across windows

¹³ The stone benches

¹⁴ *Gates of the Khalif* by William Logsdail leads into the second period. Here the emphasis is on the commercial traffic and ethnic variety emerging from the gate rather than its urban architecture.(K. Davies)

¹⁵ J. Burgess: *Arab Interior, 1878 and Deutsch The Inspection, 1883* - quote from S.R. Gifford, 1868

¹⁶ F. Steegmuller: *Flaubert in Egypt* p. 79; WJ Muller: *The Bazaar*, 1843

¹⁷ Thackeray:*From Cornhill to Cairo*; illus. Melville: *An Arab in his house, 1881*

¹⁸

Sultan Hasan: David Roberts,Portal; J.F. Lewis, view to Portal; J. Farquharson:*The Hour of Prayer, 1888*

Louis-Claude Mouchot:*The Funerary Complex of Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay, 1866*

A. von Ferraris:*Captive Audience, Cairo, 1891*

R. Swoboda: *Mosque Interior, 1895*

Qubbat Ma'bad al-Rifa'i, Monument #108

C. Haag: *Ma'bad al-Rifa'i, 1890* and J-L Gérôme:*Whirling Dervishes, 1895*

¹⁹ J. L. Gérôme: *Khayrbak*, c. 1880, private collection and Sarghatmish, 1865, Joslyn art Museum, Nebraska, K.Davies

²⁰ Fanny Field Hering: Gerome etc. see page 143

J. F. Lewis: *Interior of a Mosque at Cairo - afternoon prayer (the 'Asr)*, 1858-

²¹ J-L. Gérôme: *Prayer on the Rooftops of Cairo* (1865)

A. L. Mielich: *Prayer at Muhammad Ali Mosque*, 1889

Charles Robertson: *The Faithful at Prayer*, 1888

²² Ludwig Deutsch: *The Lamplighter*, 1900. Verse 24, line 35.

L. Deutsch: *The Procession of the Mahmal through the Streets of Cairo*, 1909

²³ P. Coste c. 1822; R. Hay, c. 1830; WH Bartlett, c. 1848 (Shari'ah- al-Gohergiyeh, V&A)); A. Preziosi, 1862, priv. coll.,Christies Oct. 2007; C. Robertson, *A Carpet Sale*, c. 1889 Mathaf 1997 and W.C.

Horsley, *The Missing Word*, 1878

A. Haig: *The Blue Mosque*, 1890