

Title: Fantasies of the Orient: 19th Century European Perceptions of the Harem

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This paper explores European male painters' accounts of harems, as a representation of what they expected an inferior culture to be, as well as a projection of their own sexual fantasies of untamed female sexuality. These depictions were purely imaginary because European men were not allowed into harems, which in actuality were private living quarters for the female members of a family (Herath 33). Some painters depicted bondage, bestiality, and hinted that women engaged in homosexuality, not for their own enjoyment, but as a spectacle for men (Golley 19). European men could not fulfill these fantasies in their own culture because proper European women did not engage in these activities. Artists such as Eugene Delacroix and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres used a realistic style of painting to communicate their own perception about harems as personal brothels for wealthy Arab men, filled with bored, sexually available women whose life's purpose was to serve their husbands. Some European women travelers who did visit harems wrote sensationalized fictional accounts that fit the dominant European male narrative of the Orient as an exotic place of decadence, female oppression, and sexual wonders not tolerated in proper Christian Europe (Herath, 33). Others wrote more accurate accounts. Lady Mary Montagu argued that Middle Eastern romantic behaviors were not different from European courting, while Lady Hester Stanhope argued that having separate living quarters in the house where men could protect children and women was like the homes of the European bourgeoisie (Stanhope 181).

Works Cited

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