

# The Fascination for the Orient in Contemporary Travel Literature and Painting

Maria João Castro

**Abstract**---The journey is one of the most recurring and chameleonic themes in contemporary society. The mere undertaking of a journey has undergone a slow and deep transformation, which reflects human evolution and denotes a civilization of undeniable vitality. Undoubtedly the mere appeal of travel has permeated the times, justified by the desire to discover the “Other” and simultaneously discover oneself as other. In fact, the pretext of displacement and movement, has given rise to a literary sub-genre of unusual popularity, establishing a complete vision of Man’s existence in its multiple facets, conflicts and challenges: travel literature.

**Keywords**---Art, travel, Orient, literature, painting

*Our destination was not simply the East, or rather: our East was not simply a country or anything geographical: it was the synthesis of all times*  
HERMANN HESSE

From early on, the Orient fascinated the Western world, evoking an image of romantic destinations populated by exotic beings, extravagant landscapes, unusual cultures and more unusual habits, and consequently focusing on extraordinary experiences.

From antiquity to the present day, the journey to the East has been linked to a tradition whose origins lie in the *Iliad*, possibly the first western literary work to depict this mythical, faraway orient. Later, the *Bible*, the rise of Christianity and the division of the Roman Empire (into East and West), would exacerbate the gap in civilization between ourselves and the oriental "Other". A first attempt to unite east and west would be undertaken by Marco Polo with his *Travels* (1300), followed by modern era Maritime Expansion and the Portuguese Discoveries, along with the numerous and varied subsequent records from missions, official reports and visits to foreign embassies. Moreover, the reports of Lodovico di Varthema<sup>1</sup> and Pietro della Valle<sup>2</sup> constitute a good example of Europe in the Renaissance period, advocating the desirability of a trip to a faraway Orient.

In addition, knowledge of the Orient was spreading, due to the discovery of numerous oriental texts, although perhaps no other work contributed as much as *A Thousand and One*

*Nights*, a story translated in Europe by the arabist Antoine Galland.

While it is true that in the 18th century, in full Enlightenment era, the argument for the universality of humanist values placed Europe in second place to the Orient, it is equally true that a growing strength of feeling for a certain European superiority led to the Orient being considered a field for observation and expansion, offering endless possibilities. This difference in perspective, ethnocentric and minimizing of the “Other”, opened the way for colonization by the European powers.

Along with the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798, came the establishment of a model scientific appropriation of a culture, hitherto virtually unknown and forgotten. This unique action, bringing about a whole proliferation of exploratory trips, gave rise to the spread of several institutions that promoted Oriental studies, such as the Société Asiatique, the Royal Asiatic Society or even the American Oriental Society.

Thus, under the generic label of knowing the East - and within the protective, but limited, hegemony of the West - the "epidemic of Orientalism"<sup>3</sup> as Edward Said called it, drew poets, essayists, philosophers, writers and painters towards a magic Orient, one that influenced and inspired the culture and arts of the metropolis. However, many of these accounts divulge "a sort of fluent mythology of the Orient",<sup>4</sup> depicting a multiple of stereotypes in which the legendary lands were more idealized than real.

It was the imperial colonies, (Great Britain in India; France in Indochina; Portugal in Goa, Macau and Timor), who were the driving force behind overseas travel, contributing to an increasing number of artists and writers being eager to experience and learn about these overseas possessions.

Such was the case of Friedrich Schlegel, who travelled in India, esteeming the culture for its pantheism, spiritualism, longevity and primitivism, or of Pierre Loti, who will be referred to later. However, almost without exception, initial appreciation gave way to a certain reservation, placing Europeans in a position of superiority over a world considered to be undeveloped and barbarous: in sum, a culture that was unique but inferior.

In mid-19th century Europe the Orient had become what Disraeli would refer to as “a career”, an endlessly repeated simulacrum. Periodicals, dictionaries, grammars, journals and translations flourished on the shelves of academic libraries, in successively edited and re-edited versions, giving birth to a new aesthetic: “Orientalism”. The fashion constituted a

<sup>1</sup> Lodovico di Varthema (c. 1470-1517), Italian traveller, Varthema was the first non-Muslim to enter Mecca as a pilgrim. His volume *Journey of Ludouico de Varthema Bolognese*, was published in Rome in 1510.

<sup>2</sup> Pietro della Valle (1586-1652) was an Italian explorer who travelled to Asia. The account of his travels was published under the title *The Travels of Pietro della Valle in India*, in London in 1892.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalismo*, Cotovia, Lisboa, pp. 58-59, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p. 60.

European mode of relating to the Orient, influencing a new wave of art and literature which idealised rather than portray the living reality. Equally, world exhibitions universally contributed to the increased desire for this dizzying, distant and distinct Orient. There thus began the rise of a literary genre, allied to the Romantic Movement and its fascination for ancient ruins and melancholic or sublime landscapes. It ensured the unprecedented success of abundant travel narratives derived out of a culture of the Orient.

It is Friedrich Schlegel's *c'est en Orient que nos devons chercher le romantisme suprême*, which shows the extent to which the romantics were caught in the Oriental swing.

The poems of Victor Hugo in *Les Orientales* (de 1829) portray an Orient that would serve as reference and model for the arts of the time; Charles Baudelaire also demonstrated this "Orientalist" tendency in his *Fleurs du Mal* (published in 1857), exploring the theme in his poem *L'invention au voyage*. These writers are testament to the idea of a drive for the Orient, though the chosen land was a mirage they never experienced. There were some however who did choose to abandon the comfort of home in order to experience for themselves the legendary continent of which so many spoke.

In 1811, François de Chateaubriand opened up a new tendency in travel narrative with *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*. In this work Chateaubriand portrays an Orient<sup>5</sup> very much alive, though still steeped in myth, legend and obsession. From this initial, formative experience innumerable French writers shared their taste for Oriental seduction, producing lengthy accounts of their journey to the "Near Orient".

Alphonse de Lamartine would write *Voyage en Orient* in 1835, an account from the point of view of the coloniser - France as the ruling power over a subjugate Orient, an extension of the nation, unreal and reduced to a series of generalisations. Maxime du Champ, firstly alone (1844), and then with Gustave Flaubert (1849), wandered in the land of the Pharaohs - a journey which prompted the author of *Madame Bovary* to publish *Flaubert in Egypt (1851)*, whose descriptive passages reveal the extravagant atmosphere of the country visited. It is worth noting that the Orient in *Flaubert in Egypt* involved a personal search through an intense journey of exploration, and went far beyond the idealised accounts of Lamartine. The following year in 1852, Gérard de Nerval would publish *Voyage en Orient*, while in 1853, Théophile Gautier launched *Constantinople* and in 1870, *Voyage en Egypte*. In the same literary tradition Edward William Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* was published in 1836, a clearly romantic interpretation, and between 1851 e 1853, Richard Burton would stamp his mark with *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to al-Madinah and Meccah*.

But possibly the most notable travel writer of the romantic-oriental epoch was Pierre Loti, who was able to travel the world as an officer in the French navy, spending long periods of time in the Far East. He journeyed to Algeria, South

America, Easter Island, French Polynesia, Turkey, Vietnam, Cambodia and Japan. A large part of his writing is autobiographical, and his novels were clearly inspired by his navy voyages, evident in *Roman d'un spahi*, (1881), which is set in Senegal; *Le mariage de Loti*, (1882), based on a visit to Tahiti; *Trois Journées de guerre en Annam*, published by *Le Figaro*, about the occupation of Hué (in Vietnam) between 1884 and 1885 and *Madame Chrysanthème*, (dated 1887), for which the background was Japan. A period of time spent in Turkey influenced his first novel *Azivadé*, (published 1879), together with its sequel *Fantôme d'Orient*, (1892) and *As Desencantadas*, (1906). The author also explored the more regionally exotic in such works as *Mon frère Yves*, (1883), inspired by Brittany; *Pêcheur d'Islande* (1886), or *Ramuntcho*, (1897) e onde Loti se takes his inspiration from the Basque Country. It was as if the Orient, as previously stated, was not a concept confined to one particular region. If Africa and Eastern European countries were comfortably labelled as "Oriental", even Spain and Portugal were "picturesque" destinations. For the French this notion supposed that anything that was not Gaul had its own local colour, could be categorised as oriental by French romanticism and added to the production of literary titles of oriental influence: *Japoneries d'Automne* (1889), *Au Maroc* (1890), *Le Désert* (1894), *L'Inde sans les Anglais* (1903), *La Mort de Philae* (1909), *Un Pèlerin d'Angkor* (1912), or *La Turquie Agonisante* (1913).

It appears that to 19th century France, the journey to the East was an undeniable imperative. But it was not only they who allowed themselves to be seduced by the Orient. English writers followed suit: *The Corsaire* by Lord Byron (1814), *Lalla Rookh* by Thomas Moore (1817), or *The revolt of Islam*, by Percy Shelley (1817), showed the same fascination for a world that had taken its place in European society as a way of life.

Of equal interest are *Turkish Embassy Letters*, by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, in which the author describes her secret entry into the Constantinople palace harems, a culture shrouded in tradition and religion, until then hidden from Western view.

The Orient thus became a sought after destination, a collective passion, justified by the desire for escape, the promise of the unknown. However, the fundamental reason lay in a deeper sentiment, often subconscious, in which the call of the Orient became a search for the noble savage, whose purity and authenticity would rescue Baudelaire's "Modern Man". This was no more than the need to eschew the progress brought about by the Industrial Revolution, in search of a culture uncorrupted by urban, bourgeois, European Man. Such disillusion was an antidote to a society which extolled material values, and which caused writers to embark on a path towards the exotic.

The East then became a coveted destination and a collective passion, sought after, not for what it was but by what it suggested, a palimpsest by which to access a purer and more innocent way of life: a rebirth. In the event, setting out in search of an uncontaminated paradise led to a rethink of the country and culture of origin, and revealed more about the historical foundations of Europe than it did about the Orient.

<sup>5</sup> The Orient was a vague concept with imprecise boundaries, including places which today are not considered to be part of the East, such as Eastern Europe and Africa.

In the twentieth century, the East's appeal would remain, experienced by a number of writers such as Colin Thubron and Paul Theroux, who, like their predecessors, explored a geographical region that continued to entice the Western imagination.

Their work is notable in that it takes us into the 21st century with the same brilliance as its romantic predecessors. Over half a century Thubron has written award-winning books based on his travels in the Orient, including, *Jerusalem* (1976), *Istanbul* (1978), *Behind the Wall: A Journey through China* (1987), *The Silk Road* (1989), later, *In the Shadow of the Silk Road* (2006) – and also *Among the Russians* (1983), *The Lost Heart of Asia* (1994) and *In Siberia* (1999). Likewise the Paul Theroux, whose numerous works include *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975), *Travelling in China* (1984), *To the Ends of the Earth* (1990), *The Happy Isles of Oceania* (1995), *Ghost-Train to the Eastern Star*: (2008), and *The Tao of Travel* (2011). Both authors have rewritten the Orient in the era of globalisation, shedding light on the dissimilarities to contemporary society. In this sense their books reflect a demystification of the Orient as a destination, homogenised by the globalisation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, diminishing the aura of previous written accounts by travel authors.

Portugal, the country that "gave worlds to the world" has a long tradition of travel writing dating back to the period of the Discoveries. It was the first country in Europe to portray what came to be known as the Far East. After the initial contacts, marked by a fascination for the order and the wealth of these faraway countries there followed - from the beginning of the 18th century - an "Oriental Renaissance". This intensified throughout the 19th century and followed the European trend driven by Romanticism, accompanied by the expansion of European empires in Asia.

Some claim that Portugal created the first example of European Orientalism, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, though it is not crucial here to state the authors. In truth Portuguese maritime exploration led to the first empire constructed on a global scale, which was not only territorial, geographical and commercial, but also cultural, literary, and artistic. The relationship with missionaries, diplomats and merchants, developed over centuries, led to an abundance of Portuguese literature, the extent of which is still little known.

From Fernão Mendes Pinto with his *Pilgrimage* (16<sup>th</sup> century) one can draw a genealogical line of authors who helped document the history of Portuguese colonial empire in literature. The generation circa 1770, and their successors, are notable for names that include Lopes de Mendonça, Luciano Cordeiro, Francisco Maria Bordalo, Ricardo Guimarães, Wenceslau de Moraes, Antero de Quental e Eça de Queirós, figures who showed a distinct taste for travelling in the East. Lopes de Mendonça would be remembered for *Recordações de Itália* (1852) and Luciano Cordeiro for *Viagens: França, Baviera, Áustria, Itália* (1875). Francisco Maria Bordalo took his romantic vision to the Far East with *Um passeio de sete mil léguas. Cartas a um amigo* (dated 1854). Bordalo's journal is an account of his voyage from Egypt to Ceylon and then to Hong Kong across the China Sea. In Macau the writer expresses his fascination for the exotic landscapes and abundant vegetation. A year later, in 1859, there appeared

*Ensaio sobre a estatística das possessões portuguesas na África Ocidental e Oriental, na Ásia Ocidental, na China e na Oceania*, (Statistical Accounts of Portuguese Possessions in West and East Africa, East Asia, China and Oceania) published by order of José Joaquim Lopes de Lima (Governor of the State of India and later Portuguese Timor) and widely known in the colonies. Ricardo Guimarães became the author of *De Lisboa ao Cairo: scenas de viagem* in 1876, but it was to be in the work of Wenceslau de Moraes that the call of the East would be expressed in its multiple facets, the writer having eschewed the role of a westerner discovering Eastern culture. *Traços do Extremo-Oriente* (1895), *Dai-Nippor* (1897), *Paisagens da China e do Japão* (1906) and *Relance da História do Japão* (1924) are examples. Meanwhile, in his sonnets, the Portuguese poet Antero de Quental edified an Oriental philosopher whom he had never known.

Among the various authors one who merits special attention is Eça de Queirós, whose discourse often ran contrary to the dominant Eurocentrism and Western hegemony. The brief two weeks he spent in Egypt towards the end of 1869, at the invitation of his friend the Count of Resende, who was there for the opening of the Suez Canal, gave him a taste for travel and the opportunity to write, decisively contributing to his cultural resume and the choice of his future career as a diplomat. Although published posthumously in 1926, *Egipto: Notas de Viagem* (Egyptian Travel Notes) became the inspiration for the journey of Teodorico Raposo in *A Reliquia* (The Relic) published in 1887, and Fradique Mendes, with one distinct difference: while the former traces Eça Queiroz's journey to Western Egypt step by step the latter goes beyond to places the writer never reached – The Upper Nile. The references to Egypt continued in *Cartas de Inglaterra*, published between 1880 and 1896, and *Crónicas de Londres* printed in 1944. Even the Mediterranean route to Alexandria provided some lines for *O Mistério da Estrada de Sintra* published in 1870, thanks to a visit to the island of Malta. In effect the theme of the journey enabled Eça de Queirós to recreate unforgotten places and moments, with satire or lyricism, historical truth or precision. Distant China, for example, was an influence on *O Mandarin*, published in 1880.

The beginning of 20th century modernism, through the work of Fernando Pessoa, would spread a complex nostalgia for a mythical Portuguese past, expressed in poetry and prose around an illusory and illusionist journey to the Fifth Empire<sup>6</sup>.

Almada Negreiros was introduced to the rising Oriental trend through the performance of the Russian Ballet on the Lisbon stage. The new aesthetic was an integral part not only of the scenes and costumes of the Serge Diaghilev dance

<sup>6</sup> "O Quinto Império" (The Fifth Empire) was conceived by Father Antonio Vieira in the 17th century. For him the four empires had been the Assirian, Persian, Greek and Roman; the fifth was to be Portuguese. This utopia permeated the work of the poet Fernando Pessoa in the 20th century, notably in *Mensagem*. In Pessoa's case the four empires differed from Vieira's, the first being Greek, the second Roman, the third Christian and the fourth Europe.

troupe, but of the ballets themselves, of which *Cléopâtre*, *Shéhérazade*, *Les Orientales* and *Le Dieu Bleu* are examples. Without doubt the art of Terpsicore helped to spread European exaltation of the Orient in the 1900s, widening and echoing the distant dream.

With the First and Second World Wars, interest in an Orient which so seduced 19th century European authors, gave way to a more realist style of literature, up to the present day with Gonçalo M. Tavares - *Uma Viagem à Índia* (2010), José Luís Peixoto - *Dentro do Segredo, uma viagem na Coreia do Norte* (2012) and Maria João Castro - *Transiberiana* (2014).

Literary works were not alone in drawing their inspiration from the Orient: the visual arts, including painting, gained new life, thanks to Eastern light and color. The growth in the travel accounts of some of these writers made numerous painters gather together their tubes of paint and their easels, and head for destinations synonymous with exoticism and charm, not always the East. This was the case of Henri Matisse who, before travelling to Morocco, had read the book Loti *Au Maroc*. It cannot be forgotten that the West first came into contact with the Orient through the canvases of Eugène Delacroix, Gabriel Decamps, Théodore Chassériau, Jean-Leon Gerome, Alfred Darjou, Edouard Richter, Paul Louis Bouchard and Paul Gauguin. It was under the aegis of these artists, whose paintings were exhibited in galleries and in salons, that Europeans witnessed the landscapes described in travel accounts and experienced the light and color of a world as dreamlike as it was diaphanous. The Oriental atmosphere depicted in several paintings thrilled some viewers into living and retracing the journey, contributing to the massification of travel and the creation of tourism. In the twentieth century this influence would remain in the "Tahitian" paintings of Henri Matisse or in the oriental inspiration of Pablo Picasso's work.

Of the Portuguese painters of the 19th and 20th century whose artistic output centered around their travels, the most notable are Artur Loureiro, António Xavier Trindade and during the Salazar dictatorship, Fausto Sampaio: Artur Loureiro would paint the Australian landscape while António Xavier Trindade e Fausto Sampaio focused on the Portuguese colonies in the East. Trindade became "o pintor de Goa" (the Goan painter) and Sampaio became known as "o pintor do ultramar português" (the painter of overseas Portugal).

As Maria de Aires Silveira writes in the catalogue *Fausto Sampaio, Viagens no Oriente* "the colour and formal content of his foreign canvasses contrasted with the grey national background, based on images from newspapers, and black and white films and documentaries<sup>7</sup>.

In fact, the vibrant visual impact of Fausto Sampaio's canvases, coloured the taciturn, monochromed national scene, bringing to life through an abundance of pictorial production, impressions of his journeys overseas: in 1934 he travelled to St. Tomé where he stayed a couple of months; in 1936 he visited Macau for one full year; in 1937 he visited some of the Indonesian islands and Portuguese Timor, compiling a geographical dossier which recorded picturesque

everyday scenes from the Portuguese East; in 1944 he travelled throughout Portuguese India: Goa, Dadra, Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu. The artistic and documentary value of his work, of national and nationalist flavor, gave rise to the idea of creating a museum of colonial painting, which never materialized.

There are several national events of note which familiarised the Portuguese with their overseas colonies in the East. Fausto Sampaio took part in some of these: the *Exposição Colonial do Porto* (Oporto Colonial Exhibition) of 1934, the *Exposição Histórica da Ocupação* (Historical Exhibition of Occupation) in 1937, the *Exposição do Mundo Português* (Portuguese World Exhibiton) in 1940, as well as the *Semanas das Colónias* (Weeks in the Colonies) promoted by the Geographical Society during the 1930s and 40s.

## II. CONCLUSION

The final thought on this fascination for the Orient in contemporary travel literature and painting is to make reference to a map illustrated with both artistic forms, which are unified by a common denominator, an Orient to "Orientalize," as Henri Michaux wrote. If the travel narrative is presented as a written testimony of the Oriental experience, the painting is a visual record of the foreign and exotic, an image which enabled the visualization of the written account. Thus, Oriental and Orientalist inspired painting and literature allowed the contemporary *Homo Viator* to conjure up this diaphanous and mellifluous world, providing a showcase that can only continue to open, in the future, a horizon of infinite possibilities.

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Maria João Castro holds a PhD in Art History. She is a researcher in the Department of Art History at the Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa (FCSH-UNL), where she is a member of the Portuguese Centre for Global History (CHAM), an inter-University research unit of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa and the Universidade dos Açores. Maria Castro teaches

<sup>7</sup> Maria de Aires Silveira, *Fausto Sampaio, Viagens no Oriente*, Fundação Oriente, Lisboa, p. 17, 2009.

on undergraduate and masters programs as well as working on the Art History doctoral program at FCSH-UNL where she is an invited professor. Her main academic research interests focus on the relationship between Art and Politics. She has a Masters in Contemporary Art History, a post-graduate diploma in International Relations/Foreign Affairs and a degree in Tourism. She has published several articles in newspapers, travel magazines and indexed web sites as well as being the author of three travel books. She coordinated the volume *Art & Discourses: from facts to reports built by foreigners about Portugal* (2014) and organized the 2013 annual international conference of the Department of Art History, entitled *Art & Travel*. In 2015, she started a post-doc project entitled *ArTravel. Travelling and Colonial Art in Contemporary Culture*.