

British Museum: Inspired by the east – how the Islamic world influenced western art

A friend asked me to accompany her to this exhibition at the British Museum recently. [Guardian review said](#) of the exhibition that it

...attempts to present orientalist art as not only one where western artists traded in cliché, but also to show how portrayals of the east in the west were more than just racist pastiches. It attempts to present orientalist art as a sort of cultural exchange, rather than plunder, more of a long-term interaction between east and west that influenced not just paintings but also ceramics, travel books and watercolour illustrations of Ottoman fashion. It also presents orientalism as an effort to understand other cultures at a time when there was not much travel,

Prayer is a common theme in orientalist art, as common as the trope of the harem. The exhibition's selections also tease out another element of prayer that perhaps appealed to a certain nostalgia among western artists – the



exclusively male nature o

Whether it is in individual or group prayer, men are portrayed in a sort of windswept nobility . . . This is the most striking aspect of the exhibition – that there was a time when images of Muslims and Islam were not toxic, when Islam was seen as exotic and religious observance something to long for. It is a sad observation that the west has gone backwards in its respect for and appreciation of Muslim culture and faith. If the orientalism of the past was patronising fetishisation, it is still a far more respectful perspective than the fearful one that predominates today.

Overall – and this is made clear in the introductory notes to the exhibition – this is an attempt to reclaim orientalist art from its sinister connotations and strip it back to what the exhibition nudges you towards thinking

it was: curiosity and interest in a different culture when the west was beginning to pass from one era to the next.

In the current political climate, where prejudice against and suspicion of Muslims is commonplace, this is a refreshing initiative. But should we really be grateful to the orientalist for depicting Muslims as just a little bit more human than how they are often portrayed today?

[Submisson.](#) Except she had submitted.



One of a series of Persian costume 1842 by an unknown Qajar artist

The final installation was the weirdest. It was an animation by Inci Eviner which took another harem picture, the black and white drawing by Antoine Melling, Interior of part of the harem of the Grand Seigneur and updated it to her ideas.

Melling had to imagine what was going on in the harem. And he imagined women in clothing much like the women he knew wore, doing things he knew women did. Some are at a table eating, some carrying parcels from one floor to another. Some seem to be praying, others chatting, hanging up or folding laundry. One pair of women are in an affectionate embrace, which may well be a hint towards a same sex attraction, or may not. It may be a hint of fantasy at 'what women do when access to men is limited – ooh'. Or it may just be two women who are friends. The activities so far as I could see, and can see from the photograph I took and the postcard I bought, would not look out of place in a Jane Austen novel, with which it is (1819) contemporary.



Inci Eviner thinks differently. She says she 'wanted to tear this scene (masculine and pseudo-realistic) apart'

Her animation starts with the static Melling drawing. Sounds are heard of breathing, crying, and the clanging of metal as

the figures turn from 19th century dress to women in modern shapeless trousers and tops. The clanging is from the central figure at the foot of the stairs who is repeatedly bashing a post. This noise continues throughout the animation. Eviner says these woman are protesting, praying and attempting to escape.

The praying does look like prayer. The protesters hold placards – so far so conventional. The escapers appear to be using the Blackadder technique. Stick underpants on head (or in this case a paper bag) and pretend to be mad. Very mad.



Nothing says 'free me' like fighting with a fellow concubine for possession of the communal cardigan (central staircase, first floor) or putting one's head between the legs so as to kiss one's own bottom, (left staircase first floor) or dressing up as a bear (foreground). I think the lady flashing her bra (next to Miss Paper Bag) is meant to be a protest. Other ladies have taken, or that's what it looked like to me,

the potential same sex attraction to a PRIDE conclusion. Others, bottom of left hand staircase have lost their heads completely.



Her execution isn't as detailed as a Hogarth but his drawings of Bedlam was what her work reminded me of. As a depiction of the oppression of women under Islamic attitudes her work may have merit. As an attack on a European white man whose sin was to imagine that the women in a harem behaved just like his own female relatives and friends in France and Germany it is unwarranted.

I found the exhibition interesting in parts, simplistic in others, misleading in places. It closes in London soon and transfers to the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur from 20 June to 20 October 2020.

