Egyptian Orientalism: A Cultural Movement of the Harlem Renaissance

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The exhibit on Egyptian Orientalism in the Harlem Renaissance begins with materialist wealth and commodities and the Egyptian Orientalist influence on those commodities. Our exhibit features tobacco products featuring strong Egyptian qualities, including the packaging and the product itself. Featuring the RJ Reynolds product Camel, the first domestically produced, pre-rolled cigarettes to be sold in the United States, the immense extent of Egyptian cultural and societal influences in America. The Camels, designed by Reynolds to directly compete with the tobacco companies foreign competitors, was designed with the consumer in mind, who valued greatly both Egyptian-made tobacco products and Egyptian imagery. This high quality product was seen as unequaled by domestic tobaccos, and as such Reynolds refused to offer price cuts, for “the cost of the choice quality tobaccos makes it impossible” for them to be given. The Egyptian influence continues on the packaging and marketing techniques used to sell the product, for by the time Camels were introduced, Egyptian produced cigarettes held the dominant stake in the one of the largest consumer commodities of the early twentieth century; a product that transcended all racial and social barriers.

The Egyptian influence in American homes did not merely extend to the cigarettes adults smoked, for the furniture and upholstery used in middle and upper class homes were of Egyptian influence, for regardless of an individual’s tastes, American’s desire for Egyptian-inspired works was extremely high. This was met with the production of various household furnishings being made to fill the consumer demand, from rugs and drapes to simple vases. “It is difficult to overestimate the pervasiveness of Egyptomania”, a phenomenon that extended into automobile design. This trend was echoed most by one of the most bespoke automakers of the early twentieth century automakers: Duesenberg. A cultural phenomenon that went unappreciated until such archeological discoveries such as the discovery of King Tut’s tomb in 1922, the
Egyptian influence aspired to influence one of the most expensive automobiles every produced, the Duesenberg Model J Phaeton. The Model J being one of the finest luxury automobiles of 1930s, one example recently selling for over $1.2 million and cost the original buyer between $13,000 $25,000 in 1929; at a time when the average U.S. physician was earning about $3,000 a year.

Meanwhile, Egyptian orientalism in art and literature depends a lot on the fashion and clothing seen on the featured women. The Harlem Renaissance was transnational, affecting multiple continents and was illustrated through multiple forms of art. Eroticized views of women are evidenced by the colorful accessories and suggestive clothing and are conveyed through male and female writers throughout the Harlem Renaissance. Whether the writer was male or female, women in these feature novels were subjected to an Egyptian orientalist sexualized gaze. Especially in orientalist art, women are shown as wealthy people, or sometimes as slaves or captive, even occasionally as animals. The portrayal of women in this nature cements their place in history as sexual objects. The dangers associated with this view include domestic violence. Once a person comes to be viewed as an object, they cease to be a human and can therefore be subjected to any kind of violence without remorse. Another side effect of this portrayal includes African-American women being seen as irrational people who are ruled by their emotions and have a lack of control over their actions. These women should not be realistic of the time but when this is how they are portrayed it becomes difficult to see where the line of truth begins and ends. If this is how they are shown in literature and art of the time, it becomes only natural that people begin to believe what is presented to them.

Egyptian Orientalism also permeated in the writing of the Harlem Renaissance. It went hand-in-hand with the concept of Negritude or black pride. Since African Americans came to the
United States from Africa and became slaves, there was always a negative stigma associated with Africa. White America had thoroughly tainted the image of Africa, depicting it and its people as a primitive, backwards, and uncivilized place.

The Harlem Renaissance however, helped to bring about the appreciation of the African culture, in addition to stimulating an interest in African Americans regarding their roots and heritage. Instead of looking to Europe and colonial America as the source of ideas, beauty and insight, poets such as Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett and Claude McKay shifted their writing to praise and acknowledge African royalty and beauty. Poets of the Harlem Renaissance continued to help change this feeling of black/African degradation and redefined Africa as a worthwhile, beautiful homeland that had given much, had much to teach, and should be celebrated with a sense of pride and reverence. Their poetry expressed ideas of royalty, concepts of beauty and ideals of intelligence.

There are also several representations of Egyptian Orientalist-inspired art to finish the exhibit, all of which provide complex subtexts into a message expressed by the author of the work itself and are echoed by other Harlem Renaissance writers. These works include:

The image of “The Queen of the Brigands” reflects the relationship in “Nigger Heaven” between Mary Love and Byron Kisson in a way that Mary is the ringleader of the relationship. Mary is the Queen lying on her laurels with nothing in the world to worry about because Byron, the servant, will tend to her every need.

The image of “The Pasha’s Favorite Tiger” represents Bridget Elliot’s view on Orientalism in a way that it can’t be imitated. Bridget Elliott states that it is a dead form of art and does not deserve to be brought back. The Egyptian Orientalism form of art is a unique style.
The image of “The Manicure” represents a caricature of Helga Crane in a way that she is a young and immature woman. The young woman in the image could be the same as Helga Crane because these two subjects fit into the “young and dumb” group where people do not realize that their lives are much better than they think. They are not mature enough to appreciate their lives.

The image of “The Jewellery Box” represents Gyan Prakash’s view on Orientalism in a way that Orientalism was a very successful movement. The man can be similar to the idea of Orientalism because like Orientalism, the man lived a seditious life and thrived, and the proof is in the picture.

The image of “The Gate of the Great Umayyad Mosque” represents Van Vechten’s “Nigger Heaven” in a way that the gate of the mosque is heaven to the men in the image. The men are taking advantage of the splendor of the day.

Works Cited:


Corrodi, D. S. Hermann, ”Kiosk of Trajan Philae on the Nile.”


“Mary Kirkland Hall: Living Room”. 1925. Vanderbilt University.


Exhibits

Materialism by Josh Sotomayor

“It is difficult to overestimate the pervasiveness of Egyptomania: women were wearing ‘Cleopatra’ earrings, biscuit tins were produced in the shape of Egyptian vases, Egyptian architectural styles became popular…” (Farebrother 135), and as a result the demand for Egyptian Orientalism-styled commodities was extremely high, especially in the 1910s, 20s and 30s. As Rachel Farebrother elaborates, the desire for all things Egyptian was paramount to the American consumers purchasing decisions. This was met by the redesign of products to reflect the consumer demand, from household appliances to living room furniture, and the tobacco industry was no different. With the majority of Americans smoking tobacco, the domestic tobacco industry was keen to offer a product that appealed to the American pallet and utilized the “Egyptomania” of American culture to market the product to the consumer.

With American’s buying Egyptian-produced tobacco that required the user to hand roll the product before consumption, the American tobacco manufacturer R.J. Reynolds was eager to increase their stake in the market by introducing a product that was pre-rolled and on that utilized Egyptian imagery to further entice American buyers. While Egyptian brands controlling the majority of the market, R.J. Reynolds introduced Camel cigarettes in 1913, and received immense positive feedback from the American market, for it provided instant gratification on the part of the consumer for there was no longer a need to hand roll the tobacco
before smoking, and it cost significantly less than having a tobacco shop pre-roll them.

Utilizing images of a romanticized ancient Egypt, along with a product name that conjures images of the Egyptian desert, R.J. Reynolds marketing technique directly appealed to consumer’s desire or Egyptian Oriental-styled goods.

R.J. Reynolds furthered their appeal to the American consumers’ Egyptian tastes by advertising Camels as a product without parallel, for the blend of domestic and imported tobaccos used in the product and the overall quality of the Egyptianized product made it impossible for Reynolds to offer discounts on the product. This was not met with consumer opposition, however, for Camel was till offered at a cheaper prices as their hand rolled counterparts, and their Egyptian counterparts they were copying had established themselves as a driving force in “world cigarette production” (Schechter 51), a fact R.J. Reynolds used to their advantage. It was of further considerable advantage to R.J. Reynolds that tobacco products were the cornerstone on which all American lifestyles met, for the consumption of tobacco knew no social, cultural or racial boundaries, and all Americans, regardless of heritage or race, were either surrounded by smokers or smokers themselves.
The nature of Americans’ tobacco consumption was immense in proportion, as it was near impossible to enter any American home, dining establishment or nightlife attraction without being met with a room full of lit cigarettes; the exact market that R.J. Reynolds was attempting to breach with their Egyptian-styled tobacco. Perhaps more of a staple in the American social life than alcohol, tobacco transcended all social boundaries and was a product used in every social setting, from mere gatherings to the most elite of Harlem Renaissance jazz clubs. This societal phenomenon is illustrated by Wallace Thurman in his work “Cordelia the Crude”, as he depicts a typical 1920s nightclub scene in which all patrons, regardless of their socioeconomic or racial background, are enveloped in the always prominent cigarette smoke, where a club’s “chaotic riot of raucous noise and clashing color all rhythmically [merge] in the red, smoke filled room” (Thurman 632), a scene extremely common for the first half of the twentieth century, and one that depicts the prolific American consumption of cigarettes.

Egyptian Orientalisms effect on materialistic wealth in America was not limited solely to tobacco products, for home furnishings were of the most desirable of the Egyptian Oriental material goods. Adopted as staples in the American middle class home, Egyptian styled goods founds themselves at the top of the American families list of desirable goods for their home. From suburban America to prestigious universities the use of Egyptian furniture was regarded as the affluent choice in home décor, as seen by Vanderbilt University’s picture of the living room in Mary Kirkland Hall. Completed in 1920, Mary Kirkland Hall’s living room was
decorated in period correct fashion, for it included both American ingenuity with the styling, but also incorporated Egyptian Oriental pottery on the tables and Egyptian rugs, with matching drapes, which were especially popular in American homes. Furthermore, the furniture used by Vanderbilt to furnish the living room reflects the dedication to the Egyptian Oriental motif, as they are of the same Egyptian style as the upholstery and pottery in the room, and would have ran a premium over cheaper, inferior designed furniture.

This trend of Egyptian decorating continued in the home, as it was extremely desirable for the American family, regardless of race or socioeconomic standing to have items styled in the Egyptian Oriental fashion in their household. In that sense, “…Orientalism as the means to a mutually interpenetrating transculturation, as a cultural ground on which western social and cultural weakness as well as oriental resistance can be played out often in subtle and implicit ways.” (MacKenzie 25), which strikes harmony with the American social climate at the time, as the nation was experiencing a time of massive economic growth while simultaneously suppressing a large majority of its citizenry. This cultural divide was expressed in the American home, while concurrently showing the nation’s desire for assimilation of foreign cultures, as desirable Egyptian Oriental designs, and as a result Egyptian Oriental culture, were placed alongside American beliefs and ideals in homes, a phenomenon captured by Theodor Horydczak’s “Living Room, to piano, with man”, where Horydczak
captures the typical “Leave it to Beaver” household, with the twentieth century breadwinner reading the paper in his robe, one of the most recognizable icons of Americana, while intermingling with Egyptian Oriental culture by proxy of his Egyptian, furniture and mantelpiece.

The typical American also came into Egyptian Oriental commodities through the most influential of twentieth century America luxuries: the automobile. At the turn of the twentieth century, personalized transportation met its greatest technological advancement since the locomotive, and the United States was at the forefront of this new mobile frontier. Pioneering both automobiles and the production methods used to craft them, the American domestic market was flooded with options for consumers, from the simple Model T Ford to the bespoke luxury options from Duesenberg. Automotive design played a significant role in the purchasing process for both average and wealthy American car buyers, as, like everything else that was purchased during the Roaring ‘20s, style played a significant role for if it was not aesthetically pleasing, it did not sell.

A perfect example of this is the 1929 Duesenberg Model J Dual Cowl Phaeton. With a name almost as long as the car itself, the Duesenberg was the last word in luxury American motoring in the first half of the twentieth century.

As a result, the distinguish the Duesenberg, or “Duesy”, from lesser, inferior motorcars, the designers utilized the Egyptian Oriental method of design in order to fully appeal to America’s elite. Usign colors
reminescent of Ancient Egyptian jewelry, and body styling that provides its elite owner with
transportation suitable for King Tut himself, the Duesenberg embodies the American economic ideal of
“more is more” and fully utilizes the Egyptian Oriental cultural phenomenon that was prominent in the
Harlem Renaissance.

The Egyptian Orientalist movement continues to endure as American tastes progress and
change, for it was born in the Harlem Renaissance but continues to be manifest itself in twentyfirst
century commodities.
Works Cited


“Mary Kirkland Hall: Living Room”. 1925. Vanderbilt University.


Egyptian orientalist eroticized views of women are evidenced by their fashion and clothing as conveyed through male and female writers throughout the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance otherwise known as the New Negro Movement spans from the 1890s through the 1930s and is transnational, affecting multiple continents. Orientalism specific to Egypt was prominent during this time period because of the British presence in North Africa. Egypt was considered a rediscovery of rich history, science and cultural ideas.

Orientalism is present in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* from the very beginning of the novel. Helga’s room is described, “Only a single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade, made a pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet…the shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums beside her own the low table, and on the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet” (Larsen 1). Her personal space is further described as “a small oasis in a desert of darkness” (Larsen 1). By putting Helga in an orientalized space from the offset it suggests her character is exotic. In fact, Helga is exotic in that she falls into the tragic mulatto literary stereotype. This kind of character is known for being unable to make decisions, overly emotional, intelligent but their identity crisis leads them to end up dead or in horrible situations.

Helga is further characterized as exotic by the bright colors she wears. During her time in America, Helga’s gratuitous use of bright colors is frowned upon:

“‘Bright colors are vulgar’ – ‘Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people’ – ‘Dark complected people shouldn’t wear yellow, or green or red.’...she, Helga Crane, a despised mulatto, but something intuitive, some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colours were fitting and that dark-complexioned people should wear yellow, green, and red. Black, brown, and gray were ruinous to them, actually destroyed the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins. One of the loveliest sights Helga had ever seen had been a sooty black girl decked out in a flaming orange dress,
which a horrified matron had next day consigned to the dyer. Why, she wondered, didn’t someone write *A Plea for Color*?” (Larsen 17-18).

Bright colors in fashion can be seen as support for orientalism in the Western Harlem Renaissance. While she is told repeatedly that bright colors do not complement her skin tone in America, as soon as Helga goes abroad to Denmark she goes shopping and expands her wardrobe with the clothing she desires. Her Aunt Katrina asks her about colors and fanciful dresses, “haven’t you something lively, something bright...you’re young. And you’re a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression” (Larsen 68). After her Aunt supports this much-desired change in wardrobe, Helga admits, “she loved color with a passion that perhaps only Negroes and Gypsies know” (Larsen 69). Helga goes on to buy earrings, scarves, shoe buckles, bracelets, and many new colorful dresses as well as bright make-up. All these wardrobe changes were not for Helga’s personal preferences, but were a technique used by her family to make Helga stand out as unique and exotic in the hopes that she would attract a gentleman’s attention and soon be married.

Even though a woman authored *Quicksand*, the gaze of sexual objectivity is still present within the novel. Larsen uses Helga as a vessel to illuminate the wide, transnational scope of the Harlem Renaissance and the different ways women are perceived in different nations during the time. While Helga is discouraged from wearing bright colors in America, the fact that she so desires to supports the reasoning that Helga herself is an orientalist. She has many foreign materials in her small apartment and is an avid reader. Helga is very concerned with the world outside her small experiences in Naxos. Therefore, when she travels abroad and comes into her own, buying fanciful clothes, standing out from the crowd and blossoms, she receives an offer of marriage from one of the most desirable men in the country. He is a photographer and it is obvious he is only interested in Helga because of her exotic
appeal and the influence she will have on his work as an artist. “You know, Helga, you are a contradiction. You have been, I suspect, corrupted by the good Fru Dahl, which is perhaps as well. Who knows? You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I. And I am” (Larsen 87).

When Axel Olsen basically calls Helga a prostitute as a proposal of marriage it can be related to Jean-Leone Gerome’s orientalist art, specifically Selling Slaves in Rome. This painting portrays a naked woman on stage, an auctioneer gesturing at her and many men in the audience raising hands and bidding. The woman hides her face with her arm out of shame and despair. Such blatant sexual objectivity coming from the male character in Larsen’s novel is accurate when compared with this orientalist art. However, Helga breaks this cycle by denying the proposal, “And, suddenly, she didn’t at all care. She said, lightly, but firmly: ‘But you see, Herr Olsen, I’m not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don’t at all care to be owned. Even by you’” (Larsen 87). Perhaps if a man wrote Quicksand and included the sexualized gaze, Helga would have married Herr Olsen even though his proposal was insulting. There is still evidence of the attitude of sexual objectivity, but luckily the female character is strong and able to overcome this degradation. The thought that women must stand out through their fashions and bright colors to be married trickled down even to
underwear sales in the UK in the 1920s. In an advertisement for Twifit women’s underwear, three women are posing in sheer, colorful lingerie, one on a chair, which suggests an erotic chair dance, and the others stand wearing high heels. This advertisement targeted modern women, suggesting that this is the correct and desirable fashion of the time period. By showcasing the bright colors, disregard for modesty and other Western ideals connected to fashion, this advertisement glorifies orientalism. The new and different designs and fabrics like silk and laces are meant to intrigue men and used mainly as a way to increase sexual desire in males. The new outfits and underwear are titillating and exotic, which makes them exciting and new. (Twifit Womens Underwear).

Another advertisement from the 1920s found in popular women’s magazines of the time comes from the company of Nufashond Garters. Featured prominently is a blonde woman in what appears to be a cancan outfit posed seductively. The company states that the garters are beautiful but reasonably priced and even offers the option of selling the material so women can make their own. This advertisement shows that fashion and style can be emphasized by something as simple as an accessory. Garters are by nature alluring since in order to actually see them a woman must lift up her skirt and expose her upper thigh. During the 1920s the idea of a fully exposed leg was somewhat taboo and the garter advertisement encourages the exoticism of such an orientalist ideal, (Nufashond Garters).

A woman’s physical appearance is only a small part of what it truly means to be oriental. Another draw to the style is the
symbolism and what a woman represents while she’s wearing the clothing. “Orientalism is not a picture of the East...It represents longing, option, and faraway perfection. It is, like Utopia, a picture everywhere and nowhere, save in the imagination” (Koda and Martin). Essentially, orientalism is considered to be an unattainable and foreign style. The women who dare to wear the bright clothing, showing off their bodies and suggesting a hint of sexual promiscuity are the women desired by men during the Harlem Renaissance.

In Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, a strong female character, Lasca, is a wealthy socialite who has power over men. Her wealth allows her to go wherever she wants, travel to Paris and buy fanciful clothes and exotic merchandise for her apartment. Lasca’s home has a “representation of a nude woman in a silver frame which hung over the white marble fireplace” (Van Vechten 236-237). When she comes out to seduce Byron, “She was wearing a dressing-gown of soft, filmy golden-brown chiffon, adorned with bands of ostrich-feather filaments which graduated in colour from a pale yellow near her throat to a fiery orange about her ankles. Her golden-brown arms were bare; her feet were shod in golden mules” (Van Vechten 237-238). The bright colors can be related to Helga’s desire for orientalism in *Quicksand* and the ostrich feathers are extremely exotic since the animal is not native to America, but to Africa.

Lasca’s personal style is extremely sexualized and exotic. Even her perfume gives off the aura of orientalism, “As Byron’s lips brushed Lasca’s cheek, an exotic fragrance assailed his nostrils, a fragrance with which he was becoming more and more familiar, a fragrance it would be impossible henceforth for him to forget” (Van Vechten 245). The orientalist influences in her wardrobe add to her seduction power and allow her to turn heads wherever she goes. Her outfits and behavior are the basis for gossip and other negative comments. Rather than concern herself with these demands for propriety, Lasca derives greater strength from standing out from the crowd.
Lasca’s lifestyle and superior attitude can be related to Frederick Arthur Bridgman’s *The Siesta*. This oil on canvas portrays a woman lounging in a lavish room taking a nap. Surely Lasca’s party lifestyle necessitates naps most every day so she could be related to the female in this image. The many symbols related to orientalism in the image include:

“The doorway at the far right, closed enough to suggest privacy but sufficiently open to suggest access or surveillance, adds ambiguity to the scene. The monkey, too, perched on the back of the divan, has been interpreted as a symbol of licentiousness, but that unsavory feature is external to the women, divorced from her and embodied in bestial form. The pipe in the foreground, the apparent source of her torpor, bars the viewer’s access to the most complex part of the picture, where a table, coffee, pipe, pillows, and the dreamer’s head converge. Ultimately the picture is about dreams and fantasies: those of the girl and those of the viewer” (Horsley).

Bridgman’s oil on canvas takes the viewer to another exotic world. The fact that a man painted the image and a man also created Lasca’s character in *Nigger Heaven* is no coincidence. The sexualized nature of the woman in *The Siesta* and the hints toward voyeurism and surveillance further accentuate the attitude towards women being viewed as sexual objects or even property. In a similar vein, although Lasca is powerful when it comes to her influence over men, her character is struggling with identity and self-worth. During multiple points in the story Lasca demands that Byron treat her as a slave and even encourages him to abuse her, “He flung her back on the chaise-longue and stepped away. Her hair disheveled, she was gasping for breath, her tongue lolling out, but she lifter her arms feebly and beckoned him. Kiss me, Byron, she panted. I love you. You’re so strong! I’m your slave, your own Nigger! Beat me! I’m yours to do with what you please!” (Van Vechten 260). It
is hard to fathom that a female writer would have taken such a stance on domestic violence within the novel, especially with a character like Lasca who is supposed to be, at least partially, a strong character. This portrayal of Lasca falls into the thought that once a person is objectified it becomes very easy to treat them poorly. An object has no humanity and therefore can be subjected to such violence.

Domestic violence within the Harlem Renaissance can be related back to the orientalist ideals of women as sexualized objects. Stephen Knadler’s article “Domestic Violence in the Harlem Renaissance: Remaking the Record in Nella Larsen’s Passing and Toni Morrison’s Jazz” deals a lot with femininity and the ideas of aggressiveness, sexuality and freedom as it pertains to real women and the protagonists in the stories. The article argues that the objective of writing is to seek to identify an alternative female-centered dialogue rather than continue to imply that being severely emotional and possessive are natural traits for African-American women. Knadler discusses Larsen’s Passing and the death of Clare:

“...Larsen leaves the novel’s ending indeterminate: She never, that is to say, makes clear (clarifies) whether Clare commits suicide or whether Irene pushes her out the Freeland’s window in a fit of jealousy. However, this assessment of Larsen’s lack of narrative closure fails to take into account that Larsen’s readers would have been well trained to read the clues at the end: as one more example of the hysterical black woman’s domestic violence. In denying her readers, however, this expected answer...Larsen leaves unresolved as well the text of black femininity. She opens it back up to a complexity, fluidity, and illegibility that would have been flattened and naturalized as typical “loss of control” (Knadler 111-112).

By ending the novel in this unclear way, Larsen is both contributing to and questioning the way African-American women are portrayed as highly emotional beings that can’t control their actions. Assigning these characteristics to women protagonists in the Harlem Renaissance supports the orientalist gaze. The women in the art of the time, wearing provocative clothing, lounging around fanciful rooms are seen as sexual objects and sometimes viewed as animals. The idea of women being wild animals contributes to the portrayal of their personalities being based around irrational emotion
and loss of control. Both of these ways of looking at women during the Harlem Renaissance exclude seeing them as rational human beings demanding respect.

Whether the writer was male or female, women in writing during the Harlem Renaissance were subjected to an Egyptian orientalist sexualized gaze. The way they are portrayed is most evident through the use of fashion, clothing, accessories and colors the women wear. Especially in orientalist art, women are shown sometimes as slaves or captives, even as very wealthy people lounging and relaxing in their riches. These women should not be realistic of the time but when this is how they are portrayed it becomes difficult to see where the line of truth begins and ends. If this is how they are shown in literature and art of the time, it becomes only natural that people begin to believe what is presented to them.
Works Cited:


Orientalism art started around 1800 where many different known artists at the time would paint what they saw. These artists travelled throughout the Middle East and Africa to capture what they endeavored on their travels. The paintings that these artists created were so focused on detail that they could have been mistaken for photographs. The Orientalist movement lasted for more than a hundred years and every artist that was influenced by the Orientalist movement was changed by their personal experiences. The following five images represent examples of Egyptian Orientalism art and entail the experiences the different artists had to capture these sights.

The image of “The Queen of the Brigands” reflects the relationship in “Nigger Heaven” between Mary Love and Byron Kisson. The image suggests that Mary is the ringleader in the relationship.

The “Queen of the Brigands” image shows the Queen lying on many pillows while being tended to by one of her servants. From a first impression, the servant could have been someone very close to the Queen, but the male figure does not have shoes on while sitting next to the Queen. He does not have shoes on because this is a sign of respect towards the royal female. The servant seems to have some sort of tiny paintbrush in his hand, and the Queen is very still and attentive to what the servant is doing. This brings up the possibility
that this servant could be putting on the Queen’s makeup.

The color scheme in this image is very majestic, very bright, and shimmering as well. There is a huge emphasis on bright colors. There are many different colors shown in the image, but the one color that sticks out the most is gold or even bronze. The servant wears different colors in his attire: red, white, blue, etc. but the gold sticks out the most because of the surrounding items. The chair that both the servant and the Queen are sitting on is gold. The wall in the background seems to have a gold or bronze tint to it. The Queen has many different colors in her attire as well: blues, greens, yellows, oranges, and many others. Like the servant, the gold that the Queen wears sticks out the most. The reason gold is most important color in this image is because gold represents royalty and wealth during that time. During the time of Orientalist lifestyles, gold was the most regal color of choice, and it represented the most expensive type of currency.

Carl Van Vechten’s “Nigger Heaven” portrays two African-American residents of Harlem, Mary Love and Byron Kasson, who are attempting to evolve their occupational life. But because of their race and the time they live in, their aspirations to move up in the workforce are prevented. Throughout the novel, Mary and Byron have verbal quarrels between each other. During one of their quarrels, Mary reveals how she really feels about Byron. Van Vechten summarizes how Byron feels about his relationship with Mary: “She really didn’t love him at all. She just wanted to possess him, to own him, to boss him” (Van Vechten, p. 206). Byron thinks that Mary does not put in as much emotional effort into the relationship as he does. He believes that she wanted to be with him just to say that she was with him. He believes that she thinks of him as a servant to her every move, her every request, which is very similar to the servant in “The Queen of the Brigands.”
When Byron thinks about Mary’s impression of their relationship, the image of “The Queen of the Brigands” can be brought up to visually explain the situation. Mary is the Queen lying on her laurels with nothing in the world to worry about because Byron, the servant, will tend to her every need. As she sits on a handcrafted lounge chair, her servant will make sure everything she needs is fulfilled. Clearly, Van Vechten depicts that Mary treats her relationship with Byron more respectful than Byron thinks, but crazy thoughts pop into a person’s mind when everything is not going right in their life.

The image of “The Pasha’s Favorite Tiger” represents Bridget Elliot’s view on Orientalism in a way that it can’t be imitated. Elliot explains that Orientalism art, as a whole, is a very unique form of art and is on a level of its own.

In “The Pasha’s Favorite Tiger” image, the Pasha shows pride and pleasure being able to walk around his home with his favorite tiger. The tiger’s fur color and its stripes go well with the color of the walls that surround the Pasha and his tiger. Again, the color scheme of the image shows majesty and royalty. The Pasha’s stance in this image shows similarities to the contropossto stances that famous figures assimilated in early Greek mythology. This stance shows traits of strength and nobility. It shows that the Pasha has nothing to worry about in the world, as long as he has his favorite tiger by his side. They say that a dog is man’s best friend. This image portrays that a tiger is a Pasha’s best friend.

The Pasha’s domicile looks very luxurious and well manicured. The beauty of marble floor that they walk on accents the different colors and designs on the wall surrounding them. The cream background on the tiles located on the lower half of the wall shows different designs that do
not go with the overall color scheme of the place, but being put next to the marble floor below it seems perfect for the room. The golden backgrounds on the upper half of the wall are very unique. It fits right into the overall color scheme of the room and accents the attire of the Pasha.

Bridget Elliot’s article on “Art Deco Worlds in a Tomb: Reanimating Egypt in Modern(ist) Visual Culture” brings up an argument that Orientalism has no ties to modern art, and Egyptian Orientalism would have trouble fitting into the modernist visual culture of France. Elliot draws on some comments from a famous French artist, Le Corbusier, who tried to capture the art deco style through the remains of Egyptian Orientalism art, but it did not fit into his forte. The reason this effort did not work out for Le Corbusier is because the “rich materials and showy surfaces was the fact that they appealed to the aesthetically uninformed, the vulgar and depraved” (Elliott). In the article, Elliott emphasizes on a key quote from Le Corbusier that perfectly depicts the motive of Egyptian Orientalism:

“What shimmering silks, what fancy, glittering marbles, what opulent bronzes and golds! What fashionable blacks, what striking vermilions, what silver lamés from Byzantium and the Orient!” (Elliott). The Pasha is wearing shimmering silks. His domicile contains fancy, glittering marbles. The walls of his home have opulent bronzes and golds. Le Corbusier describes many of the elements that are contained in the image of the Pasha and his tiger. Le Corbusier picked an intriguing form of art to try and revive, but Elliott states that it is a dead form of art and does not deserve to be brought back. Whether it needs to be brought back or not, the Egyptian Orientalism form of art is a unique style. Elliott explains that it is not for everyone, so to each its own.

The image of “The Manicure” represents a caricature of Helga Crane in a way that she is a young and immature woman. The image suggests that Helga does not appreciate life and is very lackadaisical when it comes to evaluating life-changing decisions
In the image of “The Manicure,” there is a young woman who is lying on a furnished bench and being tended to by one of her servants via a manicure. The young woman is clearly of royal descent the way her body language portrays. The way she is lying on the bench and receiving her manicure shows that she has manicures on a constant basis. The woman seems to be looking into the distance while the servant is doing her manicure, which means that the woman is thinking about something other than the manicure at hand and it shows the possibility that she is not appreciative of the services.

There is a wide variety in the color scheme of the image. The colors range from blue to green to egg-white to orange to gold. The room in the image seems to be either a bathroom or some kind of recreation room with the hot tub on the bottom left. It is furnished with differently designed tiles and marble floors along with rugs and pillows. All of the designs in the room differ from each other, but they all have similar forms in the shape of diamonds and octagons. Unlike the “Queen of the Brigands” and “The Pasha’s Favorite Tiger” the main color in the image is not gold. It seems that the main color would have to be burgundy or maroon. However, the main color is accented by the gold walls in the background. Even though the woman is being tended to by her servant, it seems that the two women could be of the same social status because of the similar clothes they are wearing. They are both wearing white silk dresses with maroon accessories draped over the dresses. The one difference that sticks out between the two is the
woman who is lying on the bench has some kind of gold crown on her head, which could definitely represent the sense of royalty and upper-class status.

In the novel “Quicksand and Passing,” Nella Larsen examines the standings of race and gender equality during the time of the Harlem Renaissance. “Quicksand” looks at Helga Crane, a young woman who is having trouble finding her true identity while “Passing” looks at two childhood friends, Irene and Claire, who reunite and look for stability in their upper-middle class lifestyles. In the “Quicksand” portion of the novel, Larsen describes Helga Crane as “a slight girl of twenty-two years, with narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate but well-turned arms and legs, she had, none the less, an air of radiant, careless health” (Larsen, p.5). According to Larsen, Helga Crane can be very similar to the woman who is getting a manicure done. The woman in the image looks young and fits the description Larsen writes of Helga. The one part of Larsen’s description that sticks out is “she had, none the less, an air of radiant, careless health” (Larsen, p.5). For one to have an air of radiant and careless health means that the person does not really appreciate what they have in front of them.

Helga Crane did not appreciate what she had in Naxos, so she moved to Chicago. When she didn’t appreciate what she had in Chicago, she moved to New York. The same happened in New York, so she travelled overseas to visit her aunt in Copenhagen. The young woman in the image could be the same as Helga Crane because her facial expression shows she does not appreciate the services that her servant is giving her. These two subjects fit into the “young and dumb” group where people do not realize that their lives are much better than they think. They are not mature enough to appreciate their lives.
The image of “The Jewellery Box” represents Gyan Prakash’s view on Orientalism in a way that Orientalism was a very successful movement. This image suggests that Orientalism is in a league of its own.

“The Jewellery Box” image shows a man going through his box of valuable jewelry. The jewelry seems to be very expensive looking at the clothes that he is wearing and the way the room is decorated. The door to the right of the room looks to be handcrafted and also draped with silk dressings. This image looks to have gold as the dominant color like the other aforementioned images. All of the items in the image have some sort of gold in it: the rug underneath the man’s feet, the silk dressing in front of the door, the dresser that the jewelry box sits on, and the design on the wall in the background.

The attire the man is wearing in the image seems to be very casual and laid back, but the type of attire he is wearing looks very hierarchal. Everything he has on looks like it is made of silk or fabric that associates with silk. It looks like he is wearing shoes similar to a jester, but they must be regular slippers for him. They are a peculiar choice of footwear to have on while just walking around the house, but this must be comfortable to him. If this is what he wears for when he is chilling in his own home, just imagine what he wears when he goes out on the town.

In his article, “Orientalism Now,” Gyan Prakash argues that Orientalism has “lived a seditious life and thrived” (Prakash). The reason it stayed alive for as long as it did was because of its “relentless transgression of boundaries drawn by disciplines of knowledge and imperial governance” (Prakash). That’s what makes Orientalism so unique: the fact that it stayed within
itself. It never tried to imitate any other concepts. Orientalism went by its own rules. This is why it has no ties to modern art because it is one of a kind. The idea of Orientalism can be compared to the man in the image looking at his jewelry.

The man can be similar to the idea of Orientalism because like Orientalism, he never shied away from his own ways of being. Like Orientalism, the man lived a seditious life and thrived, and the proof is in the picture. All he has to do now is sit back and delve through his rich valuables. Looking at the clothes he wears, the jewels he has in his hands, and the designs of his domicile, it is evident that he has thrived in life. He lived life the way he wanted to live. He didn’t go by any other rules except for his own, and came out on top.

The image of “The Gate of the Great Umayyad Mosque” represents Van Vechten’s “Nigger Heaven” in a way that the gate of the mosque is heaven to the men in the image. The image suggests that the gate of the mosque for the men in the image is similar to Harlem for American Negroes.

The image of “The Gate of the Great Umayyad Mosque” shows a group of men sitting underneath a canopy relaxing from the rituals of the day. The canopy contains many hand-crafted hieroglyphics on the wall, as well as designs that accent the color scheme fluently. The color scheme is dominated, yet again, by the color of gold. There is also gold in the attire of some of the men sitting under the canopy as well. From the looks of what the people outside of the canopy are wearing, the weather conditions are possibly humid. There are subjects in the background that do not have shirts on,
but some sort of scarf around their neck. These men that are sitting underneath the canopy could be taking a break from commuting in the hot sun by sitting in the shade.

In Van Vechten’s “Nigger Heaven,” Mary Love was looking out the window of her room to see who was occupying the pool below. “Taking advantage of the splendor of the day, several men were bathing. Two or three of them lay recumbent on the sand, their brown limbs gleaming like bronze in the sun” (Van Vechten, p. 24). This could describe the men that are sitting in the shade in the aforementioned image. The only difference is the men sitting by the pool and taking in the sun are probably not fully clothed. The men sitting underneath the canopy are in a shaded area, but the sun is still shining on the location they are sitting. There are plenty of spots to sit in the shade, but they choose to sit where the sun hits the cobblestone floor.

In conclusion, the five aforementioned images represent Egyptian Orientalism in a way that only the best artists can be considered Orientalists. The Orientalist movement requires artists to capture what they see during their travels and pay close attention to every little detail. Each detail can represent every artist that has endured in the Orientalist way. When you take each detail and put them all together, you have one full image that is the Orientalism movement. Gyan Prakash said it best: Orientalism has lived a seditious life and thrived.
Works Cited


Poetry by Jaimie Metellus

“...Let's bare our arms and plunge them deep through laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let's sing it, dance it, write it, paint it. Let's do the impossible. Let's create something transcendentally material, mystically objective. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.” - Aaron Douglas

In his essay, "The Negro Digs up His Past," Arthur A. Schomburg notes that, "There is the definite desire and determination to have a history, " (963). As "the Negro has been a man without a history because he has been considered a man without a worthy culture [due to the] depreciation of Africa which has sprung from ignorance of her true role and position in human history and the early development of culture" he has been denied such fortunes (967). Negritude or “becoming black,” in short, can loosely be described as a “philosophical movement to revive black pride…a call for Africans in all parts of the world to reclaim their African heritage and by doing so, reclaim their pride (Campbell 33).

Since art from Africa was considered primitive, particularly during the negrophilia era, African art justified the savage treatment of Africans by their oppressors, which shorts Africa as a "civilization" while implying that African based peoples are devoid of culture. Furthering the notion of German philosopher Hegel that Africa has Africa was "no historical part of the World… [and] no movement or development to exhibit,” African art became a symbol of the continent's lack of progression with some critics mocking African artists and thus “…linking Africa with "darkness, irrationality, [and] backwardness”(Stepan, p.8, 9) (Campbell 34).

However, artist such as Gwendolyn Bennett, Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, Claude McKay, and many more challenged this notion during the Harlem Renaissance with the push towards African Nationalism. These Harlem Renaissance writers were deeply concerned with racial pride and with the
creation of purely African-American poetry. They encouraged the notion of cultural reaffirmation and race liberation. These artist believed that “in reaffirming their own identities, they were telling Africa’s past, not merely to glorify it and it’s ancient king…but also to establish the humanity of the people’s Africa—a humanity denied by Hegel’s assertion that Africans had no history other than merely a “blank darkness”” (Mkandawire 18). Schomburg stresses that "the American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future"--he must reclaim a "history that restores what slavery took away" (963). Thus, for African-Americans, the creation of art, which not only acknowledged but also celebrated Africa, invoked a sense of purpose and belonging, to replace an identity that had been defined and imposed by their oppressors. Particularly, the incorporation of Egyptian royalty and power in their art during the Harlem Renaissance helped to establish pride in their African heritage. Since the “majority of slaves imported to America came from West Africa, allusions to Egyptian imperial grandeur had more to do with fashioning the politics of pride,” which is what artist during the Harlem Renaissance attempted to do (Farebrother 12).

References to Egyptian aesthetics could be seen in many aspects of Art during the Harlem Renaissance. For example in Bennett’s Heritage poem, "Heritage," Bennett depicts Africa as an serene and sensual utopia, a beautiful place the she desires to see, "to see the slim palm-trees/pulling at the clouds" and "to breathe the Lotus flow’r/sighing to the stars" (1-2,13-14). The image that she describes helps to establish the beauty of Africa. She refers to the desert sands and Egypt, “I want to hear the silent sands, Singing to the moon/Before the Sphinx-still face” (9-12). Bennett is alluding to a return to a beautiful place, Egypt, the place where African Americans were kings and queens, a reestablishment of identity. This desire can also be seen in Aaron Douglas’ painting “Rebirth,” (left) where the sharp contrast
of black and white and Egyptian symbols help the viewers to envision the recreation of the African American identity.

Like Bennett, in his poem “Heritage” Countee Cullen also depicts an image of a strong African people with references to Egyptian power and royalty. “The Ascent of Ethiopia” by Lois Mailou Jones (right) further illustrates this concept of power. However, Cullen and Jones have contrasting views of power, which represents the conflict that many African American faced during the African pride movement. Many African Americans struggled with the concept of dual identity, fearing that in claiming one they might lose the other. The image in her [Jones] painting is that of an Egyptian face wearing a headdress with a snake coming out of it. In Egypt, snakes were considered very powerful and held in high esteem. Jones uses this analogy to establish a royal and powerful lineage of the African American people to African kings and queens, strengthening the notion that blacks came from royalty. However, where Jones embraces the snake and its representation of power, Cullen rejects it, or explains why the snake does not interest him:

Silver snakes that once a year
Doff the lovely coats you wear,
Seek no covert in your fear
Lest a mortal eye should see;
What’s your nakedness to me? (245)

Cullen is also uninterested in what the snakes stand for (i.e. power). He seems to be unconcerned with the power that his African heritage can give him, power that would pose a threat to his adopted society (i.e. America). Black was not always beautiful, and African Americans were not always proud to be of African descent, Cullen and Jones both capture this conflict of dualism in different ways. Though he takes pride in his images of Africa, he constructs a pseudo-conflict...
(i.e. the misunderstandings in which we perceive that there is a conflict when there is none) between his desire to unite with his notion of 'Africa' and to remain a part of his new American society. He wants to abandon neither, but embrace both.

Claude McKay alludes to Egypt in his poem “Africa” to similarly demonstrate the struggle of the African American people during the Harlem Renaissance to be find a stable connection with the past while living in the present. Cullen describes Africa as a mighty nation of the sun; he referenced how people used to have respect and admiration for the nation:

The sun sought thy dim bed and brought forth light,
The sciences were suckling at thy breast;
When all the world was young in pregnant night
Thy slaves toiled at thy monumental best.
Thou ancient treasure-land, thou modern prize, (1-4)

There is a sense of nostalgia; the pyramids are a symbol of the greatness of African civilization, “New peoples marvel at thy pyramids!” (6). McKay parallels Douglas’ painting, “Building More Stately Mansions,” (right) where the images in the painting seem to be looking back at the sphinx and pyramids. McKays’ poem shows both ambiguity and irony, acknowledging the power that Africa once held, “Cradle of Power! Yet all things were in vain!/ Honor and Glory, Arrogance and Fame!” (10-11). “Building More Stately Mansions,” also alludes to the grandeur that once was Africa while still holding on the to the powerful representation. The painting tracks the construction of a powerful people who descended from Egypt with a royal past and now are here in America/present. The effect of this juxtaposition in the painting is that it
removes the origin of African peoples from the history of restriction and oppression and places it within the context of an earlier beginning characterized by freedom, and thus possibility.

In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, Langston Hughes also includes Egypt in the black man’s streams of heritage, “the collective, allegorical “I” signifies pride, the enduring, trans historical strength of the community’s spirit, comparable to a river, whose eternal form is composed of myriad individuals droplets of water: “My soul has grown deep like rivers” (4)” (Bloom 279). The rivers mentioned by Hughes comprise he Nile, the Congo, and the Mississippi, but also the Euphrates, “besides appropriating Egyptian references into a Pan-African concept of beginnings, Hughes enlarges his vision to the common patrimony of mankind” (Bloom 280). Hughes also references the larger and unrecognized influence of African peoples as a reminder and strength of their history, using rivers in Egypt to further represent the analogous nature of the African American people to royalty. To accentuate this point he returns to Africa where the traces of this history are significant. He establishes in his first few lines a deep lineage and heritage to the past, “I've known rivers:/I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the/flow of human blood in human veins” (1-3). Hughes is establishing the presence of the African people at the dawn of civilization as they “bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young” and at the peak of civilization as they “looked upon the Nile and raised pyramids above it” (4,6). The repeated use of water and rivers as a metaphor for the soul of African American people in association with these pivotal events emphasizes the depth and strength of this soul, as “[it] has grown deep like the rivers,” those "ancient, dusky rivers” (10,9). In addition, by using the image of the Nile, the longest river in the world, he is further establishing the long history of the African American people, and making it a worthy or significant history. He attributes the general strength and resilience of his people to the legend of this
deep history. Huges, unlike Cullen, in his poem is able to balance his dualism with American and African identity. McKay recognizes that as his African identity was able to overcome the obstacles of the past and achieve such greatness, his American identity is well equipped to tackle its current challenges.

Where most of these poems celebrate the history of African Americans, Bennett’s poem “To a Dark Girl,” celebrates the people that Africa has created, and Jones painting Egyptian Heritage provides a representative image of that celebration. In her poem, the first stanza contrasts dark skin with less tangible darkness. Bennett presents a new meaning of what it means to be dark skinned. Typically, darkness in literature signifies impurity, spite, and sin; however, in her poem, she used the adverse: beauty, grace, and charming. Therefore, she is taking back and renaming not only the literary tool, but also the color of her skin. She alludes to Egypt when referencing queen in her poem, “Oh, little brown girl, born for sorrow's mate, Keep all you have of queenliness,” (6-7). Jones’ painting depicts a similar image; she has a modern dark skinned girl who is cradled on both sides by a slave girl and an Egyptian queen. Jones, like Bennett is portraying a feeling of pride of heritage. This painting serves as a reminder of the great lineage and history of African American people. Bennett encourages the brown skinned girl in her poem to, “Forget[ting] that you once were slave, And let your full lips laugh at Fate!” (8-9). However, this command is not in the sense to forget your history, but to remember the bad (i.e. slavery) and live for the good (i.e. the time of Egyptian royalty).

In their attempts to recreate the history of African Americans, which focused predominantly on the fundamental source of their heritage and necessarily their history, the artist of the Harlem Renaissance helped to reestablish what it meant to be African American. Through their use of juxtaposition of images and the use of descriptive language, they emphasize how distinctly, the identity that they wish to create
for themselves [African American] through the invocation of their African history differs from the American identity that had been thrust upon them by others. The Harlem Renaissance was not just about the new Negro and literature or art; it was about establishing identity and a feeling of pride in one’s heritage. It its constant reference and allusion to Egyptian power, royalty and beauty, it attempted to unite black skin with pharaonic or royal regalia, giving the African American people a worthy heritage. The emphasis in the art was on the achievements and the ancient glory of Egypt and Africa, and the legendary people the derived from this nation. Where Africa was a nation that was once looked down upon, written off as unimportant and primitive, these artists helped to challenge that notion.

When Europe was inhabited by a race of cannibals, a race of savages, naked me, heathens and pagans: Africa was people with a race of cultured black men, who were masters in art, science and literature...men who, it was said, were like the gods...why, then should we lose hope? Black men, you were once great, you shall be great again (Lawler 47-48).

The Harlem Renaissance was successful in that it brought the Black experience clearly within the corpus of American cultural history. Not only through an explosion of culture but on historical level, the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance is that it redefined how America, and the world, viewed the African-American population. It allowed the African American people to have a history that was once denied to them, as Jacob Lawrence quotes “I've always been interested in history, but they never taught Negro history in the public schools... I don't see how a history of the United States can be written honestly without including the Negro.” Now they [African Americans] could not only be included in history but be prideful of that history. Artist like Hughes, Douglas, Cullen, and Bennett found solidarity in their common ideal of affirming pride in their shared black identity and African heritage, and reclaiming African self-determination, self-reliance, and self-respect. They helped to signal an awakening of race consciousness for blacks America. This new race consciousness, rooted in a discovery and rediscovery of the authentic self. It helped to dispel denigrating myths and stereotypes linked to black people, by acknowledging their culture, history, and achievements, as well as reclaiming their contributions to the
world and restoring their rightful place within the global community. By focusing on Egypt, it gave the
African American people an opportunity to boast about royal heritage and lineage. It established that
Negros were a strong people who were direct descendants of the greatest and proudest race who ever
inhabited the earth.
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