



ESSAYS: OSMAN HAMDI BEY **NEW INTERPRETATIONS**

“CONVEYING THE DRAMA AS IT EXISTS”: OSMAN HAMDI’S *Zeibek at Watch* (1867) AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH PAINTING

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The reception of Osman Hamdi’s paintings in the twentieth century mainly focused on his Orientalist works. One line of illustrious art critics and historians, exemplified by Nurullah Berk in the first half of the century and Sezer Tansuğ in the second half, criticized the artist for his derivative imagery and for subscribing to the idiom of French Orientalism instead of inventing a distinctly Turkish visual language.¹ In response to this criticism, other historians have read a pedagogical mission in Hamdi’s work, one of correcting Western stereotypes about the East.²

While a detailed analysis of the scholarship on Hamdi’s Orientalist painting is beyond the scope of the present article and has been done efficiently by other scholars,³ I would like to draw attention to a particular tendency in this body of writing: that is, to the interchangeable deployment of the terms “Ottoman,” “Turkish,” and “us” that conflates late nineteenth-century identity politics in the Ottoman Empire with late twentieth-century Republican Turkish nationalism. The following paragraph by Mustafa Cezar, author of the only monograph on the artist, is representative of this approach:

¹ Berk 1943, 20; Tansuğ 1986, 95.

² Germaner 2001, 4; Çelik 1992, 41; Shaw 1999, 425.

³ Eldem 2004, 39-46.

In Osman Hamdi[’s work], an Orientalist painter, there is a distinct atmosphere, a distinct rendering of the subject matter that distinguishes him from European Orientalist painters. The magical factor that creates this important difference is no doubt the fact that Osman Hamdi is a member of *these* lands, of *this* society. Of course he would approach the subjects representing this country with a different sensitivity than the Westerner, and would reflect his sentiments in his work. (...) Even if most of the costumes he depicted are not Turkish, the actual elements that announce their belonging to *us* are architectural elements, ornaments and accessories.⁴ [italics added]

One of the earliest formulations of Hamdi’s “Turkishness” that had a lasting influence on later generations of art historians and critics came from Adolphe-Marie-Antoine Thalasso. “Everything in Hamdy Bey is inspired by the Turkish Orient,” wrote Thalasso in 1910 in his *L’Art Ottoman: Les Peintres de Turquie*.⁵ Osman Hamdi’s paintings did not depict generic Muslim types, the writer argued, but specifically Turkish people, ornaments, architecture, and landscape.⁶ Thalasso also pointed out the meticulousness with which Hamdi researched and depicted historical accessories, such as tiles, inscriptions, arms, costumes, and lanterns, stating that “the artist shall never lend himself to accusations of the slightest anachronism.”⁷

Subsequent scholars have taken these two points about Hamdi’s Orientalist painting, namely its “Turkishness” and its accuracy, as proof that the painter was radically different from his Western counterparts, who were—it is widely assumed to this day—unscrupulous in their fantastic constructions of an imaginary Orient. What has not been explored is the place of these concepts in the critical and artistic traditions of nineteenth-century France.

In nineteenth-century French art criticism, “Turkishness” was one variety within the Orientalist imaginary. More than half a century earlier than Thalasso, writer and art critic Maxime Du Camp had made a corresponding claim in relation to the work of Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps, one of the foremost Orientalist painters in France at the time. Having seen

⁴ Cezar 1995, 2: 349-51.

⁵ Thalasso 1988, 21.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. 22.

a wide array of Decamps' works at the Fine Arts section organized in conjunction with the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1855, Du Camp stated:

From the moment he had seen the Orient, M. Decamps felt himself in his element, in his truth, and he rendered and translated it with an exactitude which astounds me. The Orient of his preference, the one he knows and loves, is not the blond Egypt, it is not the bountiful Hindoustan, neither is it the infinite deserts of Libya, it is Asia Minor: Asia Minor with its kiosks, its towns divided by narrow streets, its blue mountains, its high cypresses, its bushes of myrtles, its beautiful children with singular gazes, its pensive camels, its brooks full of tortoises, its fields filled with storks, its veiled women.⁸

This enumeration of different Orients and the breakdown of each Orient into its distinctive elements was characteristic of the art criticism of the period. From this viewpoint, in which Orientalism is the formulation of a body of organized knowledge, Osman Hamdi's paintings are not subversive, for they comply with the most basic rule: articulating the Orient as an identifiable and knowable entity.

If an interest in the accurate depiction of the quotidian was a dominant aspect of nineteenth-century French Orientalism, it was the outcome of a more general need for a new painting. In the aftermath of the 1855 Universal Exhibition in Paris, it became clear to many critics and artists that history painting had reached a deadlock: that at best, the genre was temporarily stagnant, and at worst, it was no longer relevant. *Grande peinture*, which once had the ability to enthuse the public, had lost its currency with its contemporary audience. "What will art in France be like in the second half of the nineteenth century?" asked the critic Charles Perrier. "This is the new question which is not without some importance and which is not easy to answer. Our contemporary art is far from having found its formula."⁹ When Perrier wrote these lines in his review of the Fine Arts section of the Universal Exhibition, the most pressing issue for many artists and critics was how to affect a transformation in the

⁸ DuCamp 1855, 130.

⁹ Perrier 1855, 129.

conventions of high art and produce a painting that was alive, accessible, and relevant to contemporary life.

Orientalist painting in the nineteenth century emerged out of this crisis. Starting in the 1820s and '30s, critics noted the rise of a new type of French painting as more and more artists traveled to North Africa and the Middle East and returned with notebooks filled with studies that claimed to capture accurate portrayals of life in these lands. By the early 1860s, the terms *peinture orientaliste* and *école orientaliste* had firmly established the subgenre.

Jean-Léon Gérôme's work in the mid-1850s engaged with the pressing issue of how to perpetuate the elevated style while healing the breach between art and life.¹⁰ Of the many answers the artist came up with in the course of the 1850s and '60s, the most effective was his so-called *peinture ethnographique*.¹¹ It was not only the contemporaneity of the subject matter that attracted the critics, but also the genre's claim to accurate observation and its adherence to "nature," and in particular, to the human model—the so-called "ethnographic type." The first and most effective example of this kind of painting in Gérôme's work, *Prayer at the House of an Arnaut Chief* (*La prière chez un chef Arnaute*, present location unknown), was exhibited at the Salon of 1857. "Each head offers a particular type and in the truthfulness of a portrait" declared Théophile Gautier, and added: "M. Serres [*sic.*] the anthropologist could have consulted in all security these specimens of unknown races. . . . We have had the chance to encounter in Constantinople the majority of the types represented by M. Gérôme and we have recognized them perfectly."¹²

The initial reception of Gérôme's *peinture ethnographique* was positive to the extent that the artist addressed the growing emphasis on scientific accuracy and the increasing demand to paint after nature. Although an analysis of the concept "nature" in its multiple

¹⁰ I offer a thorough account of the artist's project in my dissertation, "Jean-Léon Gérôme: The Formative Years (1852-1864)," written under the supervision of Michael Fried and Kathryn Tuma at Johns Hopkins University.

¹¹ Perrier 1855, 91.

¹² Gautier 1857, 247.

connotations is beyond the scope of the present study, suffice it to say that nature and art were widely believed to be on a continuum, with nature understood as a collection of individualized, specific entities, and art as a deeper understanding of the essential truth underlying such individual manifestations. While art and nature were thus intimately connected in the eyes of many, a clear distinction was nonetheless recognized between things found in nature and their expression in art. Art was much more truthful to the essence of things than nature itself could be. It was the task of high art to discern absolute values in nature and to filter out the accidental in order to arrive at the essential truth.¹³

Gérôme's *peinture ethnographique* initially satisfied many critics because it successfully revised the conventions of *l'idéal grec* by introducing contemporary human types. According to Théophile Gautier, prior to Gérôme, "the Orient had been mostly represented by its strange landscapes, its unique architectural forms, its brilliant carnival of costumes and its luxurious variety of colors, rather than in the sculptural beauty of its types."¹⁴ What differentiated Gérôme's work from others who had depicted the Orient since the 1830s was the priority the artist gave to capturing the essence of the contemporary people inhabiting these lands, "the Oriental types in all their purity."¹⁵

By the mid-1860s, the novelty of Gérôme's invention had started to exhaust its possibilities. Art critic Jules-Antoine Castagnary, for one, protested strongly against Orientalism. A proponent of naturalism and realism, and above all a fervent advocate of landscape painting, Castagnary accused Orientalist painters of an escapist drive to avoid the here and now: "to flee Paris, to run away from the world around them, to escape the obsession with the real and the present. There is nothing they would not prefer to what *is*."¹⁶ More important, despite its claim as high art and its aspiration to expand its conventions, in

¹³ Blanc 1881, 9.

¹⁴ Gautier 1856, 33.

¹⁵ Ibid. 34.

¹⁶ Castagnary 1892, 1: 211.

the eyes of many, the new genre of *peinture ethnographique* had not attained the status of an elevated style. Although Gérôme had hoped for the style to transform and replace the outdated history painting tradition, the majority of critics curtly categorized it as a simple genre that slavishly reproduced individual entities in nature and failed to provide insight into the general condition of humankind.

Although the exact circumstance of Hamdi's acquaintance with Gérôme is unknown, Hamdi is widely acknowledged to have received his training in the mid-1860s from Gustave-Clarence-Rodolphe Boulanger (1824-88), a close friend of Gérôme's since their student days at the studio of Paul Delaroche. Attesting to the intimacy between Boulanger and Hamdi as early as 1865 is Boulanger's *Portrait of Hamdy-Bey* (*Portrait de Hamdy-Bey*, present location unknown). When exhibited at the Salon, the portrait was criticized by Théophile-Étienne-Joseph Thoré for imitating the style of Gérôme's *Reception of Siamese Ambassadors by Napoleon III at the Palace of Fontainebleau* (*Reception des ambassadeurs siamois par l'Empereur, au palais de Fontainebleau*, Musée national du Château Versailles), exhibited at the same Salon: "in the portrait of Hamdy Bey, he imitates M. Gérôme, and it might be said that he even equals [Gérôme]: the small person in a blue *burnous* holds in his white hand a sword and pushes his left hand against a wall. All the details are finely executed with that cold and precise thoroughness, which astonishes in the painting of the *Siamese Ambassadors*."¹⁷

Hamdi's training by Boulanger would have taken place in a pedagogical and artistic environment strongly influenced by Gérôme's understanding of the stakes of contemporary painting in France, an atmosphere that would have been equally marred by the shortcomings of the master painter's revisionist project. Little is known about Hamdi's own early work, apart from the fact that in 1866 and 1868, three of his paintings were shown at the annual

¹⁷ Thoré 1870, 2:42.

Salon exhibition in Paris. In both catalogues, he is featured as “Osman Hamdy, born in Constantinople, student of M. Gustave Boulanger.” In 1866, registered under the address Rue de l’Odéon, 20, Hamdi exhibited a single canvas, titled *Turkish woman (Femme turque*, cat. no. 906). In the Salon of 1868, this time appearing under a different address (Rue de Lisbonne, 17), Hamdi had two paintings, *Portrait of Mme. de H... (Portrait de Mme. de H...*, cat. no. 1199), and *Jewish Conjurer in Constantinople (L’Escamoteur juif à Constantinople*, cat. no. 1200). While he did not exhibit any paintings at the Salon of 1867, Hamdi had a major opportunity to show his work at the Universal Exhibition among the displays of the Ottoman Empire.

La Turquie à l’Exposition Universelle de 1867, the official catalogue published under the auspices of Salaheddin Bey and written by Marie De Launay, commences its description of the fine arts section with a lengthy account of the three paintings by Hamdi: *Stopover of the Gypsies (Halte de Tchinganès*, present location unknown), *Death of the Zeïbek (Mort du Zeïbek*, present location unknown), and *Zeïbek at Watch (Zeïbek à l’affût*, Private Collection) (fig. 1). While the first two paintings have yet to be identified, the third is illustrated under the title *Pusuda Zeybek* in the most recent edition of Cezar’s monograph.¹⁸ *Zeïbek at Watch* shows a single male figure stretched on the edge of a cliff, observing the distant landscape, the main feature of which is the sky and the light reflected by the setting sun. His torso is buried under an amorphous vest, and his headpiece defies gravity on top of his lithe body. The rock to the left of the figure, bent at an almost ninety-degree angle, seems to compensate for his left shoulder, which has disappeared under the vest. This sharp curve suggests that the cliff drops to a steep valley below, which lies beyond the picture plane.

According to Wendy Shaw, Hamdi’s entries at the 1867 exhibition were complicit Orientalist representations denigrating the Eastern Other, suggestive of the “hyperbolized

¹⁸ Cezar 1995, 2: 691.

bellicosity and languor typical of Orientalist paintings and befitting the work of a student of Gérôme and Boulanger.”¹⁹ A closer analysis of *Zeïbek at Watch*, however, reveals this painting to be a far more complex project, in which the young artist engaged in the ongoing discussions about art in France.

The motif of the mercenary-bandit Zeïbek appeared in French Orientalist painting as early as in the 1830s in the work of Decamps. The Wallace Collection’s, *The Turkish Patrol* (c. 1830), and its variant, *Night Patrol at Smyrna*, of the Metropolitan Museum, show a troop of elegantly costumed and groomed military men. One is on horseback, nine others surround their chief, and all are suspended gracefully in mid-stride, floating in the center of the canvas and rushing towards an unknown destination. *A Turkish Guard-House on the Road from Smyrna to Magnesia (Un corps de garde turc sur la route de Smyrne à Magnésie*, 1833, Musée Condé, Château Chantilly) by the same artist gives a more tranquil view of the various members of the crew. At the end of the 1850s, Zeïbeks dancing, smoking, and playing backgammon start appearing in Gérôme’s painted work.

In his *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle*, Pierre Larousse defined the Zeïbeks as “genuine bandits; they live as brigands, robbing the passengers, not only to become rich, but also to meet their daily needs.”²⁰ Particularly attached to their special costume, which symbolized their “brotherhood of bandits,” the Zeïbeks fought valiantly against attempts to abolish it.²¹ That the Zeïbeks had a contemporary resonance in France as heroic bandit figures is evident from Maxime Du Camps’ response to *The Turkish Patrol* at the Universal Exhibition in 1855:

Ah! The Zeïbeks! Here are the true heroes of M. Decamps. *The Turkish Patrol* shows how he has wonderfully understood these peculiar soldiers who are at once recruiters and draft dodgers, customs officers and smugglers, guides and robbers of travelers, gendarmes and thieves, innkeepers and lodgers, brigands

¹⁹ Shaw 1999, 424.

²⁰ Larousse 1866, 1467.

²¹ Ibid.

and philosophers. They kill, rob and ransack readily the tourists, but more readily still they come to an arrangement to protect them.²²

What is peculiar to Hamdi's depiction of this contemporary hero type is the landscape backdrop: *Zeïbek at Watch* eschews the conventional codes whereby the setting would mark the otherness of the Orient. While Decamps and Gérôme carefully set their Zeïbeks in ostensibly foreign settings, be it indoors or outdoors, Hamdi stations his model in nature so that the costume is the only indicator of the figure's iconographical and cultural meaning. *Zeïbek at Watch* is not only exceptional in the Zeïbek iconography of nineteenth-century French painting; it is also singular in Hamdi's oeuvre, to the best of my knowledge. Neither his studio studies, in which he rendered nudes as well as models posed in costume, nor his later genre scenes featuring Zeïbeks dancing (*Zeybekler*, formerly in the Erol Kerim Aksoy Collection) or playing backgammon (*Tavla Oynayan Zeybekler*, 1890, formerly in the Erol Kerim Aksoy Collection) correspond to this single heroic male figure in a landscape.

The entry in the official catalogue of the 1867 Universal Exhibition described the painting as follows:

Without giving his Zeïbek at watch a theatrical pose, without learnedly grouping the figures of frightened travelers, without covering the sky with black clouds, which simultaneously obscure the situation and direct the light on the principal subject, [Hamdi] succeeds in conveying the drama as it exists, and not as one sees it on the stage. This bandit, in a landscape of pure lines and rosy hues, tranquilly watching his victim, simply gives one the shivers.²³

It is noteworthy that a specific set of images is enumerated to explain what Hamdi's portrayal of a Zeïbek does *not* include: a group of frightened travelers attacked by bandits, an overcast sky, or a dramatic light that draws attention to the central action. The writer contrasts Hamdi's work with a painting that shows the moment of attack in all its details, a style with which nineteenth-century viewers would have been thoroughly familiar. The theme of

²² Du Camps 1855, 130.

travelers attacked by brigands went back as far as seventeenth-century Dutch paintings and Jacques Callot's appropriation of them in his etchings of the *Great Miseries of War* from 1633. Francisco de Goya's *Attack of the Bandits* (*Asalto de Bandidos*, Colección Marqués de la Romana, Madrid), three oil paintings completed between 1808 and 1812, provided a more recent and dramatic depiction of the bandit in a landscape. The three paintings show the viewer a series of increasingly violent events, starting with the rounding up of ambushed travelers, progressing to a depiction of female victims stripped bare, and culminating in an image of rape and murder. Not as dark as Goya's scenes, Horace Vernet's *Italian Brigands Surprised by Papal Troops* (1830, The Walters Art Museum) exemplifies the form the bandit-in-landscape would take in France in the nineteenth century: picturesquely costumed rural folk (in this case Italian peasants) are shown at the moment of skirmish, with expressions and gestures representing the variety of feelings generated by such an incident.

With its focus on the supine body of the Zeïbek and its lack of central violent action, Hamdi's painting differs radically from this line of bandit-in-landscape imagery. The beholder sees only the bandit himself, while none of his victims are in sight. If this figure gave his nineteenth-century viewer "the shivers," it was because the Salon public would have been familiar with the genre that depicted the moment of attack in all its brutality, and therefore would know what to expect from a scene featuring a bandit. *Zeïbek at Watch* stimulated the imagination of its nineteenth-century viewer: it wanted her/him to speculate about what the bandit might be watching, or whom he might be preparing to ambush.

A painting exhibited by Boulanger at the Salon of 1857, titled *Arab Scouts* (*Les éclaireurs arabes*, present location unknown), seems to have been similar to Hamdi's conception, as far as one can tell from an engraving published in the journal *L'Artiste* (fig. 2). The painting depicts three figures, identified by the title as Arab scouts. Unlike Hamdi's

²³ *La Turquie à l'Exposition Universelle 1867*, 142.

work, however, Boulanger's scene includes the object of the scouts' attentive gaze: smoke billowing from a distant spot in the landscape to the left. A commentator, convinced that the scene had been observed in nature by the artist, claimed to have discerned a campground with tents and fire in the background of the painting, although these details are not visible in the engraving.²⁴

That the spot carefully observed by Hamdi's Zeïbek is invisible from our vantage point has a function: it focuses our attention on the figure himself, who seems oblivious to the fact that he is being watched. As if his *profile perdu* does not hide him sufficiently, his face is further screened from our sight by the falling tresses of the elaborate headpiece. Far from being languid, as Shaw argues, the figure would have been perceived as deeply alert and dangerous by his contemporary viewers.

The pose of Hamdi's Zeïbek is closely connected to two models of ideal masculinity in the classical tradition: the body in action, representing the heroic body in motion, and the body at rest, showing the heroic body in a state of unconsciousness. As Thomas Crow demonstrates in his seminal book, *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France*, at the end of the eighteenth century, Jacques-Louis David and his students brought the ideal of heroic masculinity to the center of Academic painting. In his *Dying Athlete (Soldat romain blessé*, Musée du Louvre), painted in 1785, Germain-Jean Drouais, a star pupil of David, transformed the studio exercise of the male nude—the *académie*—into a representation of virtuous martyrdom.²⁵ *Dying Athlete* depicts a supine nude in an unconventional blend of extreme pain and intense alertness, having as accessories an unsheathed sword and a shield. His left hand stanches and at the same time reveals a bleeding wound on his left thigh. This life-size figure provided an influential new model of an androgynous male hero, subverting

²⁴ "Gravure du numéro" 1858.

²⁵ Crow 1995, 56.

the conventional distinction between the active and the resting male bodies.²⁶ This imagery would be repeatedly deployed in a number of canonical paintings produced by David and his students at the turn of the century.

Hamdi's *Zeïbek* similarly amalgamates the categories of the male body in action and the male body at rest. *Zeïbek*'s body below the waist seems to recline in a leisurely manner: his feet and legs do not convey a posture of alertness, but one of repose. In contrast, the upper half of the body is ready to act as he raises himself on his left arm to gaze into the distance. By drawing on the tradition of bandit-in-a-landscape imagery, and yet deeply embedding his figure in the Davidian lineage of masculinity, Hamdi framed the *Zeïbek* motif as a contemporary model of heroism, offering his own version of what a modern history painting could look like. The display of the painting at the Ottoman section of the Universal Exhibition would have bolstered its implicit fiction of contemporaneity.

There is another strategy by which Hamdi aspired to ensure the modernity of his painting, which we discern when we bring our attention to the artist's depiction of the landscape. As I mentioned earlier, the critic Castagnary was adamant that painters had to take as their focus their own reality and establish "the broken connection between man and nature."²⁷ With this in mind, we may begin to understand Hamdi's strategic decision to situate his heroic *Zeïbek* "in a landscape of pure lines and rosy hues."²⁸ The dramatic, uneven distribution of light and color values in the sky and the indentation of bluish hilltops at a distance marking the horizon evoke the freshness of an open-air oil sketch. The fluid brushwork of the sunset in the right background in particular contributes to the painting's claim to spontaneity. In a couple of minutes the sun will be fully beyond the horizon and the twilight will set in. The scene conveys the effect of having arrested a fleeting instant, creating in the beholder the belief that the artist must have worked from nature, observing the motif *en*

²⁶ Ibid. 61.

²⁷ Castagnary 1892, 1: 66.

plein air and immediately transcribing it onto the canvas. Such an attempt to convey a sensation of spontaneity would have been strongly associated with the tradition of open-air landscape painting that had been established in France by the Barbizon School in the 1830s and had drawn increasing attention since the revelation of the oeuvre of Théodore Rousseau to the public at the Universal Exhibition in 1855.

If we are to look for possibilities of agency in Hamdi's early work, therefore, we should take into account the prevalent sense of urgency that shaped French art during this period: an urgency that materialized in the works of ambitious painters as nothing less than a revision of long-established conventions. By choosing as his protagonist the contemporary hero-bandit motif of the Zeïbek, by giving primacy to this single heroic male and thereby inscribing himself to the Davidian lineage, by setting this figure in a generic landscape devoid of codes of an exoticized setting, by imbuing the scene with the freshness and immediacy of an open-air sketch, and above all, by exhibiting this painting at the Ottoman section of the Universal Exhibition, Hamdi cannily dealt with the urgent issue of depicting the here and now, albeit the here and now of the Ottoman Empire.

Zeïbek at Watch is clearly the work of a student, as betrayed by the figure's awkward anatomy and faulty foreshortening. Its shortcomings, however, do not cancel out the ambition of the project: a painting of contemporary heroism and a modern history painting. Such a reading allows us to glimpse Hamdi's preoccupations when, as a young and aspiring painter, he reflected intensely on the discussions surrounding tradition and innovation in France.

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²⁸ *La Turquie à l'Exposition Universelle 1867*, 142.

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Illustrations



Figure 1: Osman Hamdi Bey. *Zeybek at Watch*. Oil on canvas, 1867, Private Collection. Source: Mustafa Cezar. *Sanatta Batı'ya Açılış ve Osman Hamdi*. İstanbul: Erol Kerim Aksoy Kültür, Eğitim, Spor ve Sağlık Vakfı Yayını, 1995, vol. 2, p. 691



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 2: Engraving made after *Arab Scouts* by Gustave-Clarence-Rodolphe Boulanger published in periodical *L'Artiste* (new series, vol.3), 14 March 1858, p.188. Source: gallica.bnf.fr

