

Art and the Everyday: Female Painters in the age of 'Orientalism'

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Abstract

It is now clear that art produced in and of the regions known as the 'East' and the 'Orient' by women have created new perspectives on Orientalism, contributing to the emergence of a broader understanding and pointing to the complicated nature of European reactions to the cultures of North Africa and the Middle East. In this paper I will look at what has become a clear theme uniting the work of late nineteenth and early twentieth century female artists. In many of their paintings, we see a movement away from classic orientalist imagery that played on a combination of the 'exotic' and the 'erotic' and the emergence of a more quotidian art. While it might be assumed that female artists had better access to the everyday life of the towns and cities in which they painted, whereas male artists had easier contact with the public domain, this does not completely account for these apparently gendered differences. In this paper I will look in some detail at the work of a number of female artists and in particular at the paintings and drawing of the Australian artist, Hilda Rix Nicholas, who made it her business to paint what she saw in very great detail, rather than what her audience expected to see or what her education prompted her to imagine. Although she had access to the private spaces of the 'harem' as well as the pomp and splendor of great events, she painted neither. In her art the impact of the observational focus of the scientific method is clear as well as her own cosmopolitan world-view. Rix Nicholas' training as an impressionist, and her adventures into post-impressionism encouraged her to strive to capture not only the properties of light, but also the truth that resided in line and colour, as she moved away from the pull of narrative and the myths upon which it relied. Hilda Rix Nicholas prefigures the complaint of Edward Said as she was forced into an uncomfortable 'disconnect' between her expectations of the 'Orient' and what her lived experience revealed.