

German Orientalism

Review of:

Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race and Scholarship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and Washington, D.C., German Historical Institute, 2009, 560pp., £48.00 hdbk, £22.99 pbk ISBN 9780521169073.

Current scholars of art historiography are fortunate to have *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*. Thirty years ago when I was at work on my dissertation on the Austrian art historian and theorist Alois Riegl, I was disappointed that *Orientalism*, Edward Said's important book, purposely ignored exactly those scholars, Germans and Austrians, whose work I encountered as I traveled through nineteenth century academia.¹ I hungered for the kind of guidebook that could help me think myself into their time, place them in a context, and impart something of their backgrounds and interests. Marchand deserves our gratitude for her explorations of countless official and personal archives, and for conveying her subject with the expansiveness of an author who has read widely and the intimacy of one who has read deeply.

Said's *Orientalism* lurks in the background of *German Orientalism*, and many of Marchand's generalizations imply challenges to his assumptions. Yet Marchand rarely addresses his work directly. Instead of merely filling an important gap in his picture of Orientalism, she uses the example of German scholarship to complicate his ideological interpretation of Orientalism. By focusing on the interplay between intellectual, institutional and political history, she reveals the contradictions and opposing forces that informed orientalism and oriental scholarship. Furthermore, Marchand covers different territory from Said. The Orientalism she traces is not focused on the Middle East. Like the nineteenth century scholars she studies, she uses the term "Oriental" to cover East and South Asia as well. She presents a more multifaceted picture of Orientalism by extending it to its pre-Saidian borders (15), and thus complicates the field mainly for better, but occasionally, as we shall see, for worse.

In ten chapters and an epilog, Marchand moves from the Enlightenment, when study of the "Orient" first became possible and even respectable, through the difficult middle decades of the nineteenth century in which "lonely orientalists," struggled in anonymity and without proper academic positions, to a time, late in the century, when "furious orientalists" fought their way through the combination of sheer antagonism and sometimes audacious theories that challenged received wisdom about the indebtedness of Christianity to Judaism and other subjects. Along the way, she relates how academic positions are won and lost, as the rise and fall of empires nurtured some forms of Orientalist scholarship and discouraged others. She

¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York : Pantheon Books, 1978)

addresses key questions about Western cultural dependence on the East, the origins of Christianity, the status of sacred texts, the organization of disciplines, the establishment of chairs in Orientalistik, the beginning of Religionsgeschichte, the relation of Christianity to Buddhism and Zoroastrianism and many others. She examines the biographies of scholars from Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Creuzer to Ignaz Goldziher and Josef Strzygowski in order to illuminate and problematize the relation between Orientalism and racism.

The detailed, complex narrative repeatedly belies easy assumptions about the relationship of knowledge to power. Attempts to use Orientalism to support received religious ideas backfired, and imperial power, too, often failed to determine what scholars would find. Scholars, mere humans wrestling with language, often succumbed to the power of their own ideas. One of the unintended consequences of scholarship is that one can undermine the idea one tries to serve. In her many case studies, Marchand shows how those who tried to use Oriental studies to prove the truth of the scriptures found their own ideas changing instead. Although starting from a detached academic point of view, they often ended up seeing through the eyes of those they studied. Earlier scholars laid the foundation for the work of later scholars who would accuse them of Orientalism. In penetrating discussions of Herder and Johann Salomo Semler, she shows how their attempt to find truth in the “primitive” in fact historicized these cultures and their scriptures: “once [the scriptures are] put in historical and anthropological context, it was difficult to extract them” (p. 37). Even if the scholars themselves were not changed by their studies, their texts were often used against their intentions, as probably happened, for example, to Johann David Michaelis (41). Her treatment of Richard Wilhelm and Erwin Baelz challenge received notions about the relation of Orientalists’ prejudices to the colonial function of scholarship. Even when scholars wished to be “relevant” to empire, imperialists were right to worry about their penchant to go native. But for much of the period covered in the book, there was no empire to call the scholarly shots by ensuring or preventing scholarly advancement. How could “lonely orientalists,” working in obscure fields against odds and with no prospect of employment, contribute to ideologies of power?

In Chapter Nine, “Interpreting Oriental Art,” art historiography takes center stage. Some of the material is familiar terrain for readers of Marchand’s earlier *Down from Olympus* or her essay on Josef Strzygowski.² Here her vista extends to issues of classification that determine whether a work is to be treated as art or artifact, and to such topics as oriental carpets and exhibitions. Her earlier interest in archaeology expands to include the fascinating and understudied Turfan expeditions to Central Asia. For an art historiographer, the book is especially useful insofar as it looks at art history in the context and from the vantage point of a wider

² Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus : archaeology and philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); *ibid.*, “The Rhetoric of Artifacts and the Decline of Classical Humanism: The Case of Josef Strzygowski,” in *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 33 (1994): 106-30.

scholarly world out of which it comes: philology, biblical scholarship, orientalist studies. It is useful to watch art historians embarking on the same trips as Oriental philologists and relying on the same conquests, particularly when their object was to build collections. It is instructive to consider comparisons between scholars of Oriental languages and art: whether a catalogue is equivalent to a dictionary, for example.

Embedded as it is in a narrative centered on the study of “Oriental” religions and literatures, the visual element that differentiates the study of art history from these other areas does not come through powerfully or distinctly. I therefore hope that this book will inspire others to further work on scholars of visual arts and orientalism.³ If so, one area of interest is the way in which their work brought them into dialogue with other visual disciplines such as the physical anthropologists, scientists who relied on visual classifications and created portfolios of their drawings and photographs, as did architects, designers and art historians. In their work, culture and racial theory often intersected, thus clarifying the visual dimension of the relations between race and scholarly Orientalism.

Scholarly arguments also clarified this relationship. While Strzygowski, as Marchand argues, indeed granted Jews a role in Western art (404), this was a malevolent role in the wider war of the races to which he ascribed the historical trajectory of western art.⁴ The people from the east whom Strzygowski wished to rehabilitate were Aryans. To this end, he attributed the Mshatta façade not to Islamic art, but to the “northern” spirit. When Strzygowski mentioned “Aryans” specifically, he generally meant Persians, a fact that got him in trouble not only with other Orientalists, but eventually with National Socialists as well. The Persians were important to him as the racial “origin” of the Aryans. Marchand’s searching discussion of pan-Babylonism and especially the Bibel-Babel controversy, which shows the stake that some Orientalists had in the significance of origins, here applies to art history (236-51).⁵ Art historians who thought that the discovery of the origin of a visual form was its key explanatory factor, often equated folk styles of various countries with early styles. Others, however, were wary of this move, and not merely because of a proto-Fabian realization of the equation of Otherness with distance in time.⁶ They valued origins lightly because they valued function more. In *Altorientalische Teppiche*, for example, Riegl attributed ornamental change to culture

³ There are the usual run of inevitable mistakes: Josef Strzygowski was not Alois Riegl’s student, but his contemporary and rival [403]. Riegl was a scholar and a curator, not a “connoisseur” (399); he did not curate a large exhibition of carpets in the Handelsmuseum (curated by Artur von Scala), but only wrote a catalog essay for it (400). Alois Riegl, “Zur Geschichte des orientalischen Teppiches,” in K. K. Österreichisches Handels-Museum, *Katalog der Ausstellung Orientalischer Teppiche im K. K. Österreichisches Handels-Museum*, (Vienna: k. k. Österr. Handels-Museums, 1891): 11-23.

⁴ See Margaret Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses in Jewish Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001): 18-24.

⁵ See also Marchand, *Down From Olympus*, 223-6.

⁶ The reference is to Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia, 1983)

contact or work made for foreign markets, an argument on which he elaborated in essays about “so-called Polish Carpets.”⁷ Strzygowski’s very different emphasis on innate racial characteristics led him to value origins.

Some information Marchand did not encounter would strengthen, add complexity to (and lengthen) her argument. She is mistaken when she writes that Riegl did not visit the “Orient.” His early work had been informed primarily by pattern books and other illustrations, but he soon changed his mind and traveled to Egypt, visiting Cairo and floating down the Nile to Luxor.⁸ He saw the ornaments of Ibn Talun and became convinced that only first hand views of the monuments would suffice for proper scholarly study. In 1901, he wrote impassionedly to his colleague Franz Wickhoff begging him, in connection with a planned publication on Qusayr Amra, to undertake an exhibition to Jordan to see the monument.⁹ Riegl tried to underplay the arduous journey, but Wickhoff must have been able to read the subtext and withdrew from the project in favor of Riegl, although in the end Riegl’s health prevented him from going.¹⁰ Marchand could use this anecdote to illustrate her point that accidents of circumstances are often catalysts for Oriental scholarship. It could also suggest the growing significance of the culture of observation whose history and theoretical consequences have been explored by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison.¹¹ This concern was vital to art history, and explains the significance for art historians of travel to monuments, although not always the collection of artifacts. Art historians most frequently brought back from these trips not artifacts, but rather photographs. In any case, when he did go to Egypt, Riegl did not divest himself of his prejudices. He was unfortunately not as careful to avoid racial stereotyping as Marchand gives him credit for, and was perfectly capable of Orientalist remarks like the following from his lecture notes: “Even today every Oriental is an egoist. The Oriental essence is ineradicable.”¹²

Finally, the inclusion of Jewish studies in a study of Orientalist scholars brings up other issues when the visual arts are at stake. The myth of aniconism encompasses Islamic and Hebrew art and separates both from East Asian art. A further distinction between Jewish art and the other arts grouped among the “oriental” arts was enunciated perhaps best by Heinrich Frauberger (1845-1920), who wrote, concerning the Düsseldorf Museum of Applied Arts, that the collection

⁷ Alois Riegl, “Zur Frage der ‘Polenteppiche’” *Mitteilungen des k.k. Österreichisch. Museums* 106 (1894): 225-30.

⁸ Riegl mentions this trip in the essay “Spättrömische oder orientalisches?” *Beilage zur Allgemeinen Zeitung* 93 (23 April, 1902): 164.

⁹ Riegl to Wickhoff, 3 March, 1901. Wickhoff *Nachlaß*, carton 2, archives of the Institut für Kunstgeschichte, Vienna.

¹⁰ See Alois Riegl and David Heinrich Müller, ‘Vorwort’, *Kusejir ‘Amra*, Vienna: K. K. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1907, pp. I-VIII

¹¹ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, New York: Zone Books, 2007.

¹² Alois Riegl, *Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste*, ed. Karl M. Swoboda and Otto Pächt (Graz, Cologne: Hermann Böhlaus Nachf., 1966): 237. The passage comes from a university lecture, not intended for publication.

was “rich in models for the Mohammedan and Buddhist cults, although neither Mohammedans nor Buddhists lived along the Rhein.”¹³ The German scholars of Jewish art, unlike German scholars of Buddhism, Islam, or Hindu texts, studied groups whose descendants lived along the Rhein, and perhaps even could count themselves among them. Some, such as the polymath scholar David Kaufmann, who included visual art in his portfolio, who studied Arabic as well as Hebrew medieval sources, and mixed genealogy with theory and philosophy, could have served as an illuminating example. Indeed, the example of Jewish art specifically brings up one of the dangers of Marchand’s dependence on individuals and their histories for explanations: one can end up evoking the very stereotypes that a study of Orientalism should avoid. Her generalization that “the realists adopt the Semites; the dreamers the Aryans” (321) recalls the very Orientalist trope of uninspired Semites and idealist Aryans. Dreaming Jews, who certainly existed, did not tend to adopt the Aryans. The example suggests the limits of individual personality as an explanation.

Generalizations and systems often blur or prove contradictory when examined with a close-up lens. When one draws back from the detail in Marchand’s book, and looks at it and the field it covers as a whole, does one see this larger field differently? With all its variations, is Orientalism still only a matter of “Othering” or is there something dialogic in a Bakhtinian sense, about the discourse? Surely if scholarship is a series of conversations, there is material enough in this book for many of them. If further, scholarship aims to widen and open the conversation to those beyond scholarly circles, then Marchand’s aim is very different from that of Said’s book, *Orientalism*. Indeed, his aim, to be relevant without being opportunistic or instrumental to empire, could be considered a modern installment of the discourse of Orientalism. In Said’s critique of Orientalism past, and his concentration on one well-documented distinction, he advances beyond the works Marchand cites that succeed in making cogent critiques of colonialism. Marchand’s work, which begins by assuming Said’s critique, ends by encompassing it.

In addressing the ethics of Orientalism, Marchand works with one foot in the past and one in the present. She not only tries to understand why Orientalists followed the disparate paths that they followed, but she also struggles with what they should have done and, by extension, the ethics of present scholars of the Orient. In our present day of multiplying Arabic majors, her discussion has eerie echoes, which I hope will resound clearly throughout the mass of learned historical detail in this book.

Margaret Olin is Senior Research Scholar in the Yale Divinity School, with appointments at Yale University in History of Art, Religious Studies, and Judaic Studies. Her publications include: *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl’s Theory of Art*

¹³ Heinrich Frauberger, “Zweck und Ziel der Gesellschaft zur Erforschung jüdischer Kunstdenkmäler zu Frankfurt a.M.,” *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft zur Erforschung jüdischer Kunstdenkmäler* 1 (October 1900): 3

(University Park, 1992); *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses in Jewish Art* (Lincoln 2001); *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*, co-edited with Robert S. Nelson (Chicago 2003); and *Touching Photographs* (Chicago 2012). She co-edits the journal *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture*. Topics of recent essays include images of prisoners of war, theories of ornament, and Jewish spatial theories.

Margaret Olin
Yale University
PO BOX 208298
New Haven CT 06520-8298

molin48@gmail.com