

The Orientalist Aesthetic in Amadeo Preziosi's Oeuvre

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Abstract

This paper discusses Amadeo Preziosi's Orientalist representations within the socio-political and cultural contexts of nineteenth century Ottoman Empire. Adopting the theoretical lens of Orientalism, this paper will show how Preziosi's oeuvre is interlaced with the lexicon of Eurocentric exoticisation of the Middle East, where the space and people are transformed into objects of aestheticism. The nineteenth century artist (Count) Amadeo Preziosi (1816-1882) is often known for the representation of the Ottoman city, Istanbul, where he based most of his career. However, to understand Preziosi's broader context within the fabric of Orientalist discourse, the paradoxicality and hybridity of the artist's own national context as a Maltese citizen has to be taken in consideration. Amadeo Preziosi was the first-born son of Gio Francesco Preziosi and Margareta nee Raynaud. The Preziosi family had Italiophile origin with strong ties with the Order of Saint John and later with the British colony. Despite his nobility and lineage to central Europe, Preziosi's Maltese nationality made him a British subject. In this light, the aim of this research has been to place him within the theoretical framework of Orientalism. This is done by questioning the notions of authenticity in his representations and deeply analysing the narratives at play. For this reason, he will be mainly discussed within the representation of Istanbul, and Malta, and based on the several socio-cultural dynamics of the period.

Keywords: Orientalism, Nineteenthcenturyart, Orientalistart, Amadeopreziosi, Arthistory

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse Amadeo Preziosi's Orientalist representations and the aestheticization of the Middle East. Through the theoretical framework of Orientalist discourse, this paper will highlight how Preziosi's oeuvre is intertwined with Eurocentric exoticisation of the Middle East, where the people and spaces are translated into objects of Aestheticism.¹

Amadeo Preziosi remained a renowned name within auction houses, such as Sotheby's and Christies, as well as an artist of importance both in Malta and in Türkiye. His name gained substantial attention in Art History in 1985, through the Victoria and Albert exhibition, titled *The People and Places: watercolours by Amadeo Count Preziosi*.² The exhibition re-introduced Preziosi within Art Historical discourse, however he remained relatively absent from Orientalist and Post-Colonialist theories, contrasting other Orientalist artists. From there on, Preziosi gained attention as an artist who portrayed authentically Middle Eastern cultures and lifestyles, particularly within Ottoman context.³ For this reason, the purpose of this research has been to place Amadeo Preziosi within the broader framework of Orientalism.

Theoretical Framework

In recent history, the understanding of Orientalist theory is very much based on the seminal works by the Egyptian French political Scientist, Anouar Abdel-Malek, specifically his essay *Orientalism in Crisis* (1967), and by the Palestinian-American literary critic and political activist, Edward Said. Said's 1978 book, *Orientalism*, pioneered postcolonial and Orientalist discourses. The Saidean model of Orientalism recognises Western colonialism as an aspect that conditioned the perception and narratives surrounding what is defined as the Orient.⁴ Orientalist tropes are used by the West to transfer the anxieties and self-criticism, projecting them elsewhere – thus the need of the reflective *other*.⁵ It becomes a metaphor to criticise the Western modernised bourgeois society. Traditional art historical understanding of Orientalism is used as means of escapism and to instil inspiration.⁶ However, by doing so it translates the Middle East into an object of aesthetic. The omission of modernisation in Orientalist representations gave a misconception on the socio-cultural and economic situation of the East.⁷

The nineteenth century characterised the Ottoman Empire with a set of reforms. These reforms were motivated by the Empire's attempt to remain relevant as Western powers grew dominant. A key aspect of these reforms was modernisation. The fabric of modernity can be understood within 4 routes. The first route is (European) internal route towards change. The

¹ This paper discusses Amadeo Preziosi within the context of Orientalism, with a special focus on the Maltese context, and is based on the author's own M.A (by research), in History of Art (2022) thesis at the University of Malta, under the supervision of Professor Conrad Thake.

² Llewellyn, B., Newton, C., *The People & Places: watercolours by Amadeo Count Preziosi*, (London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1985).

³ Abdilla, R., *Amadeo Preziosi and Orientalism: A Study of his Art in Istanbul and Beyond*, (M.A History of Art diss. University of Malta, 2022).

⁴ Abraham, M., 'Introduction: Edward Said and after: Toward a New Humanism' *Cultural Critique* No.67, (Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 2-4.

⁵ Lowe, L., *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalism*, Cornwell University Press, 1991, 93.

⁶ Mackenzie, J., *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*, Manchester University Press, 1995, 72-74.

⁷ Abdilla (2022).

second route is the modernisation of the Americas and Australia through European migration. The third is through Western colonisation (an example of this are Malta and Egypt). The fourth was the external induction of modernity as Eastern empires are threatened by Western powers – the route that the Ottoman Empire had to take.⁸ By the break of the new century, there was a conscious attempt by the empire to reform itself. Sultan Mahmud II had started the reformation, while his successor, Sultan Abdulmejid brought about the Tanzimat reform in 1839. The aim of these reforms was to modernise, and to certain extent, Westernise, the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire became a centre of inter-cultural exchange and Istanbul was a cosmopolitan city that advocated modernity, equality, and education. As it socially progressed, the topography of the city was also changing, following a similar model to that of Paris. The role of modernity played a crucial role in the Tanzimat, and in Europe's expansionist attitude towards the East. The notions of modernisation became essentially a European hegemonic tool.⁹

Biography

Amadeo Preziosi was born on 2nd December 1816 into a noble Italophile Maltese family, whose nobility was very much tied with the Order of Saint John, through which they gained their countship.¹⁰ His father, Gio Francesco Preziosi, was a prominent figure for Malta to become a British protectorate during the Treaty of Amiens in 1802, which subsequently, led to Malta to become a British crown colony.¹¹ His mother Margareta nee Reynoud, was French. Thus, Preziosi had a very central European lineage, while his Maltese nationality subjected him to a British colony.¹² His early artistic training was in the Nazarene school of Giuseppe Hyzler, and 1839, the young artist studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts for a year.¹³ It can be speculated that Preziosi was introduced to Orientalism during his year in Paris,¹⁴ where he supposedly went to study law at the Sorbonne, as his father wished for his eldest son, however instead he pursued his artistic endeavours.

Upon his return to Malta in 1841, it is documented that Preziosi went on a tour to the Levant, and on 28 September 1842, Amadeo Preziosi left Malta permanently with the plan to establish himself in Istanbul.¹⁵ It is still unclear to why the artist chose to live in the Middle East, as most of the Orientalists travelled for a period of time and returned to Europe shortly afterwards. Taking for instance, within a Maltese context, the Schranz brothers, particularly Joseph Schranz, often travelled to Istanbul for a couple of years and then returned to Malta. It is traditionally thought that it was due to the constant conflict with his father over his artistic lifestyle.¹⁶ However, it is quite plausible that the reason was that Preziosi met his wife, a Greek Balkan from Istanbul, whom he married shortly afterwards.¹⁷

⁸ John Freely, *Istanbul: The Imperial City*, Penguin Books, London 1998, 226.

⁹ Vaughn Findley, C., *The Turks in World History*, Oxford University Press, New York (2003), 138.

¹⁰ Llewellyn, Newton (1985).

¹¹ John Montalto, *The Nobles of Malta, 1530-1800*, Midsea, Valletta, 1973, 324.

¹² Abdilla (2022).

¹³ Leone, F., *Amadeo Preziosi (1816-1882): I Disegni Preparatori*, Art & Libri, Florence (2011), 51.

¹⁴ Abdilla (2022)

¹⁵ Llewellyn, B., Preziosi Biography OMK Catalogue, unpublished manuscript, 2020.

NAM CUS KL (arrivals and departures), 58.

¹⁶ Leone, 7.

¹⁷ Abdilla (2022)

Works

Preziosi arrived in Istanbul amidst the Tanzimat reforms, and established his workshop underneath the British Embassy, thus it comes to no surprise that his early commissions were from British officials. Easel paintings were the preferred style in Istanbul,¹⁸ and in fact, most of his works are small in scale, and his preferred mediums were watercolour washes on paper, and chromolithographs. Over time, his workshop became a popular spot among European travellers, where they could purchase watercolour drawings to take back with them to Europe – there is the sense of portability of the ‘Orient’.¹⁹ His early works were in the tradition of Ottoman costume books and were commissions from influential British patrons. Two of his most prominent early works were the portrait of Sir Henry Layard (Fig1), and the *Costumes of Constantinople*, in which both examples one can note cultural appropriation and aestheticization of Ottoman culture. The portrait done for the British archaeologist, Sir Henry Layard who at the time was in Istanbul. The portrait depicts the archaeologist in a *Bakhtiari* dress (1843).²⁰ The aim of the portrait functions as means to exert the archaeologist’s knowledge over Assyrian and Iranian cultures. Seen in this context, the Iranian attire is accessorised to induce a sense of fantasy for the European audience.²¹ Here Preziosi’s works would seem to fit within Eurocentric and Orientalist frameworks, where exoticisation and intrigue presents the individuals and the inhabiting space as objects of aesthetic and fantasy.²²

¹⁸ Roberts, M., *Istanbul Exchanges*, University of California Press, California, 2015, 5-6.

¹⁹ Abdilla, R., ‘Amadeo Preziosi and Orientalism: The Question of Authenticity’, *Treasures of Malta* 87, Summer 2023, (FPM, 2023), 21.

²⁰ Greenwood, de Guise, *Inspired by the East: How the Islamic World influenced Western art*, British Museum, 2019, 202. Bakhtiari dress is a tribal outfit, originated from the Iranian regions. It may have been popular among Europeans to give them sense of rurality and detachment from European modernity (dandy) – Roberts (2007), 20-21.

²¹ Young, J.O., *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2010, 58.

See also: Eagleton, T., *Culture*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 60-62.

²² Abdilla (2022).



Fig 1: Amadeo Preziosi, Portrait of Sir Henry Layard in Bakhtiari Dress, 1843, Watercolour on Paper, British Museum

This can be noted further in the costume book, which was commissioned the British Ambassador's private secretary, Robert Curzon. Such books, including travel books, were a popular artistic production at the time. They were intended to exhibit the diverse ethnicities of the Ottoman Empire, highlighting the various nationalities and traditional attires.²³ On a surface level, these functioned in a similar manner to the sixteenth century Ottoman-costume books. Such books were produced by Ottoman illustrators to be distributed as diplomatic gifts in Europe to educate Europeans about Ottoman cultures and customs. However, as the political climate shifted due to Western expansionism, costume albums were based on Eurocentric narratives. In this manner, the viewer may hypothetically travel through place and time through the pages of the travel books. A defining aspect of such costume books is the standard stylisation of the imagery, where the figures stand isolated, and dominate the frame of the drawing, often with a low horizon and a scenic context in the background.²⁴ The creation of Ottoman costume books is made through a series of preconditioned assumptions and biases. The spaces within which the figures are placed were often such that evoke a sense of timeless nostalgia, displacing the figures from the contemporary space of the nineteenth century. Hence, exemplifying how Ottoman individuals are translated into objects of aestheticism.²⁵

²³ Fraser, E., 'The Ottoman Costume Album as Mobile Object and Agent of Contact', Fraser (Ed.), *The Mobility of People and Things in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (2019), Taylor and Frances, 91.

²⁴ Ibid., 91.

²⁵ Abdilla (2022), 62.



Fig 2 & 3: Amadeo Preziosi, *Costumes of Constantinople* (Madam Guido in a Circassian Dress), 1844, British Museum

In *Costumes of Constantinople*, Preziosi included two portraits of Lady Canning's Genoese maid, Madam Guido, in a Circassian dress (Fig 2, Fig 3). In one of the portraits, she is reclined on a Turkish carpet with a pair of slippers next to her. Like Layard's portrait, Madam Guido's portraits show an aspect of cultural appropriation. However, Madam Guido instigates an element of an exotic fantasy. The travel writer, Emily Hornby recounted at length the beauty of Circassian woman within a harem and her own longing to experience an exotic fantasy. Here, one can note further the aspect of aestheticism, integrated within cultural appropriation, through travel writings and a narrative generated through Eurocentric interpretation of the *Arabian Nights*. In Orientalist art, often the subject matter depicted becomes a nostalgic fascination of an idyllic space, detached from a coherent timeframe – it becomes a spectacle to suit a narrative that would indulge European audiences. The figures in *Costumes of Constantinople*, and in other paintings by Preziosi, are devoid of intellectuality; the mundane space that they inhabit becomes a staged spectacle.²⁶

²⁶ Abdilla (2022), 162.



Fig 4: Amadeo Preziosi, Cup of Coffee, Stamboul: Recollection of Eastern Life, 1858, Victoria and Albert Museum



Fig 5: Amadeo Preziosi, Interior of A Coffee House (detail), Stamboul: Recollection of Eastern Life, 1858, Victoria and Albert Museum

In 1858 Preziosi produced the chromolithograph album *Stamboul: Recollections of Eastern Life*. It was published by the printing house Lemaire in Paris, and it is one of his most prominent works.²⁷ Whilst there are several editions of the album, an interesting aspect of it, is the inclusion of the Sultan's seal on the cover, which is known as *Tughra*. This may suggest that the album was somehow affiliated with the sultanate or possibly dedicated to the Sultan.²⁸ Furthermore, the city is referred to with its Ottoman name, rather than its Byzantine name as per Robert Curzon's book. The album presents a sublime image of the city, devoid of any aspect of modernisation and industrial changes that were present at the time. It focused on the image of the mundane everyday life – thus, *recollections of an eastern life*. Istanbul took the role of stage to induce a spectacle to suit a European audience.²⁹ The only elements that place the scenes to a contemporary setting is the architectural motifs in some of the prints. Taking for instance, *The Cup of Coffee* (Fig 4), a harem scene, which has eclectic architectural motifs, evoking neo-Ottoman architecture and Baroque revivalism. Yet the context of the print remains very much within the notions of an *Arabian Night* instilled fantasy. A similar aspect can be seen in *Interior of a Coffee House* (Fig 5). The eclectic architectural vocabulary was the most prominent aspect within Preziosi's oeuvre which exhibited Istanbul's elements of modernisation.³⁰ Thus, most of the time there would be an aspect of amalgamation between traditional cultural elements and eclectic modern additions.

Preziosi's oeuvre juxtaposes itself with various narratives at play, which were also dependant to which audience the artworks were targeted for. There is a cross-cultural dynamic which

²⁷ Leone.

²⁸ Abdilla (2022).

²⁹ Schiffer, R., *Oriental Panorama: British Travellers in 19th Century Turkey* (1999), Rodopi Publishers, 265.

³⁰ Abdilla (2022)

interchanged the narratives and representations. So much so, that even during his lifetime Preziosi was considered as an artist who accurately depicted life in Istanbul.³¹ Yet, taking in consideration the various socio-cultural and political dynamics, particularly when including the role of the audience, modernity (and its omission) become a hegemonic tool. This can also be noted in a market scene in *Souvenir du Caire*, which preserves the sublime image of Old Cairo. Here, in contrast to *Stamboul*, the album omits all of aspects of modernisation.³²

On the other hand, the European cities of Paris and London are portrayed as centres of modernity. The watercolour album of 1875, which records Preziosi's voyage to Europe with his family and the Balkan regions, titled *Souvenir: De Mon Dernier Voyage*, reflects a different treatment between the West and East.³³ An interesting representation is the watercolour of Ludgate, where Preziosi included a locomotive on a viaduct (Fig 6). The viaduct was considered a symbol of modernity during the Victorian age.³⁴ The artist clearly captures this with a crossing locomotive leaving a trace of steam behind, portrayed with strokes of white chalk. There is quite a distinction when comparing this with Orientalist scenes, and the juxtaposition can be noted further when compared with *A Street in Old Istanbul* (1855, Fig 7). Both watercolours have a similar composition and execution, yet the iconography is quite strikingly different. Another watercolour from the same album showcases a hall in the British Museum, proudly exhibiting the Assyrian lions, referencing once again Henry Layard, and Greek sculptures. Once again, there is the sense of the *Orient* being portable and staged for European narrative. In this instance this is also extended to the Balkan, particularly Greek. Here Greek and Iranian artworks are appropriated to fit further within a European, colonial, context – enhancing further the notion of Eurocentric narrative and aestheticism.³⁵

³¹ Llewellyn, Newton (1985).

³² Abdilla (2022).

³³ Ibid., 71

³⁴ Abdilla (2022), 139.

See also: Shaw, W. M.K, 'Between the Sublime and the Picturesque', from Zeynep Inankur, Reina Lewis, Mary Roberst (ed.), *The Poetics of Place: Ottoman Istanbul and British Orientalism* (2009), Pera Museum, Istanbul, 123.

³⁵ Abdilla (2022).



Fig 6: Amadeo Preziosi, Holborn Viaduct, St Paul's Cathedral in the background, 1875, watercolour on paper

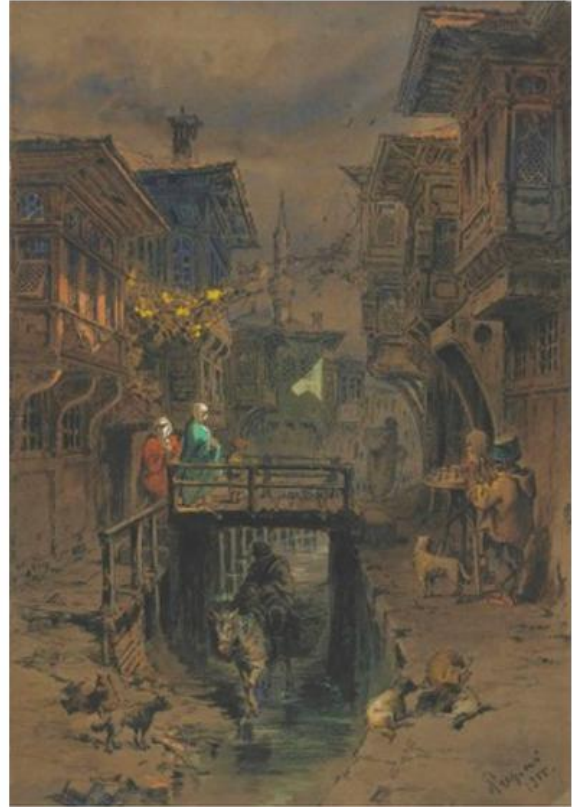


Fig 7: Amadeo Preziosi, A Street in Old Istanbul, 1855, watercolour on paper



Fig 8: Amadeo Preziosi, British Museum, London, (verso and recto), Souvenir De Mon Voyage, 1875, watercolour on paper

Conclusion

To conclude, whilst this paper focuses primarily on a selective example of Preziosi's oeuvre, one can note how his gaze presents a series of paradoxes that are conditioned by pre-established biases brought about by European expansionism and othering of the East. The people and spaces became objects of fascination and intrigue – aestheticized to indulge Eurocentric narratives. Preziosi's socio-cultural stance remains rather ambiguous within the larger context of the discourse. This is further accentuated by the fact that his portrayals are also conditioned by the audience for which it is produced. Amadeo Preziosi's life in Istanbul established him as an artist that represented the Ottoman culture (and by extension the Middle

East), in an authentic manner. However, as it has been discussed, aestheticism and romanticism incline towards a tendency of cultural appropriation, and due to these different narratives, detach the representation from the socio-cultural environment.

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