

**Elisabeth A.
Fraser:
“Mediterranean
Encounters:
Artists between
Europe and the
Ottoman Empire,
1774 – 1839”**

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The complex nature of artistic exchange in the Ottoman world has been gaining traction in scholarship over the past few years. One of the latest offerings is Elisabeth Fraser's *Mediterranean Encounters* which, in the author's own words, seeks to examine how "travel accounts furthered a cultural exchange in which Ottomans had more agency than modern writers have acknowledged" (3). The final chapter aside, Fraser's focus is on grand travel books adorned with luxurious large-scale prints, all of which were produced in France by artists and travelers from France and other European nations, as well as the Ottoman world. This study delves into a richly tangled and fascinating cache of material; it is revealing in discrete ways but I continually felt that the source material could have been interrogated in even greater detail and that certain arguments could have been taken even further in order to reveal the nuances of Mediterranean visual culture.

Despite its title, this volume is a near-exclusive study of Franco-Ottoman cultural relations in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with an additional chapter on Eugène Delacroix's sketches from Tangier. The book is divided into three parts, each of which contains two chapters centered on a specific travel book. Fraser's work is compelling in its

cumulative momentum, ably demonstrating how these books often responded to and built upon the efforts of one another. In many cases the same artists worked on multiple books and in others there is a clear sense of imitation and emulation. This tight focus on a few case-studies is a strength.

The first of three parts ("Power in Question") approaches the Comte Marie-Gabriel-Florent-Auguste de Choiseul-Gouffier's *Voyage pittoresque de la Grèce* from two distinct perspectives: first as patron and then, in chapter two, as a source of competition and comparison through the work of Louis-François Cassas. The former, a French aristocrat and diplomat, better known simply as Choiseul, directed a grand project with a troop of at least 36 artists involved in the making of his *Voyage* which was published in installments between 1778 and 1782. The collaborative means of production of these books comes to the fore in Fraser's narrative and especially in these opening chapters. Choiseul's *Voyage* is shown to be the benchmark for subsequent French artists and patrons.

The second chapter focuses on Cassas, who was one of the dozens of artists employed by Choiseul. The relationship between artist and patron was deeply problematic, as references to an exten-

sive body of archival material demonstrate. The particular dynamic between Cassas and Choiseul was overturned by the events of the French Revolution: Cassas transformed himself from “Seigneur Cassas” to “Citizen Cassas” (67), while Choiseul’s fortunes tumbled as he found himself in exile in Russia until 1802. Fraser subsequently casts Cassas as “subaltern” and poses the question (13): what does it mean to be both Orientalist and subaltern?

Fraser argues that Cassas’ imagery presents his subaltern status while concurrently reflecting Orientalist tendencies. Attention focuses on Cassas’ depictions of hulking heavily-armed Arabs and Turks, with Fraser contending that these images were intended to heroize these figures and, in turn, reflect the artist’s own identity: “These images of incongruously powerful figures paradoxically bear a trace of Cassas’ own subaltern status, betraying the socially marginal position that he sought to overcome” (82). Yet, this interpretation is at odds with the artist’s own letters in which he described these peoples as barbarous, animal-like, and “ignorant fanatics” (82), and at odds with the images themselves which show menacing and sullen characters. The desire to frame the debate in these terms is therefore appealing but not wholly convincing;

arguably the terminology distracts from what could have been a more nuanced and intersectional debate about class and identity in the Ottoman Mediterranean.

In the second part of this study (“Ottoman Culture Abroad”) Fraser engages most fully with one of the stated aims of *Mediterranean Encounters*, namely to challenge Eurocentric approaches to the field. She examines the travel books of two artists working within Ottoman imperial circles: Ignatius Mouradgea d’Ohsson and Antoine-Ignace Melling. These two chapters are the most stimulating in the entire book. Fraser posits Melling and d’Ohsson as “Ottoman cultural actors” (11) and in different ways they both are. The two figures point to the multifaceted forms that translation and mediation in cultural encounters could take. This is especially clear in the chapter on d’Ohsson and his *Tableau general de l’Empire Othoman* (published in three volumes between 1787 and 1820). D’Ohsson was a translator and cultural mediator in his work as a dragoman for the Swedish Consul in Constantinople. There are many layers of translation at play in this chapter, namely the translation of images from manuscript illumination to engravings. This is demonstrated through careful visual comparisons that show how French engravers interpreted the iconog-

raphy, style, and spatial organization found in their Islamic miniature models. On this point, however, one further mediation is overlooked. D’Ohsson comments that he was working from images in “Persian” manuscripts which Fraser rather cryptically dismisses as “presumably a translator’s shorthand” (117). It is a shame that we are not provided with a reference nor with further discussion here. D’Ohsson’s statement may prove gnomic but it merits revisiting because the author’s central argument is that d’Ohsson was mediating Ottoman aesthetics drawn from Ottoman manuscripts. Yet in the dragoman’s own words these were, in some sense, Persian images. That this subtle distinction, which cuts to the very issue of translation, remains unpicked is a missed opportunity.

The following chapter, which focuses on Melling’s *Voyage pittoresque de Constantinople et des rives du Bosphore* (1819), argues that the German-born artist be considered in light of Ottoman artistic conventions as opposed to a purely European tradition in which he has previously been framed. In many ways this is a convincing argument, although not strictly on the grounds presented: the author cites Melling’s fascination with the Bosphorus and specific sites along the waterfront as proof that the artist was

working in an Ottoman idiom by emphasizing places important to Sultan Selim III (153).

Both of these chapters prompt valuable re-thinking of the two figures in question. Melling's complex biography is well-presented (159): he was German-born, half-Italian, married to a Genoese woman in Istanbul, equipped with limited French and semi-literate Turkish, and he self-identified as a native of Lorraine (then a defunct state). In contrast, d'Ohsson's identity is less-well dissected; it would have been interesting to consider what it meant to be an Ottoman, an Armenian *and* a Catholic, and how this complex identity informs d'Ohsson's travel book.

In short, these two characters encapsulate the trouble with modern labels. On this point, Fraser expertly demonstrates the limitations of thinking in terms of "national schools" (159). This is most evident in relation to Melling. However, having rightly wrestled him from a European tradition she then classifies him as belonging to an Istanbul court school. In effect, one limiting label is replaced with another. We may need to move further beyond such language all together.

Related to this theme, one senses that d'Ohsson and Melling were working in response to their *exclusion* from Ottoman patronage. D'Ohsson's decision to publish

in France is cast as his choice (101), but his extended praise of the imperial press in Constantinople (108-9) makes one question whether he was still seeking Ottoman support. Melling is likewise presented as an imperial insider, but he only begins work on his book after his sudden fall from imperial favor in 1800. This does not discredit his Ottoman qualities but it does give them a different complexion. Perhaps more precisely, these two travel books indicate a *desire* to be insiders of an Ottoman school even if the reality was more complex.

The comparisons Fraser makes do not always exploit the potential of the material under examination. For instance, far more attention is given to the stolid scenes by William Bartlett (found in Julia Pardoes' *Beauties of the Bosphorus* published in London in 1838) than to the fascinating and under-examined book by the Ottoman diplomat Mahmud Raif whose *Tableau des nouveaux règlements de l'Empire Ottoman* was published in 1798 in French under the patronage of Sultan Selim's imperial press in Constantinople (compare pages 142-3, 145, 147, 151-3, 159, 235-7 on Bartlett's work to the single page on Raif [p. 156]). These comments illustrate the stimulating issues raised in these two chapters but also the extent to which they do not always go far enough in exploring

the challenges and subtleties of the source material.

The third part ("Contradictory Contact") begins with discussion of Louis Dupré's *Voyage à Athènes et à Constantinople* (published 1825). Dupré's images are the most visually satisfying in the whole book. His figures pose with a beguiling ice-cool elegance. Fraser duly matches Dupré's art with some of her finest writing. Here she explores the tangled ethnic identities amidst the rising tide of nationalism in Ottoman lands. This chapter treats us to the fabulous scene of the French Consul, Louis Fauvel, painting on his shaded terrace before the brightly lit Acropolis of Athens. Fraser dubs Fauvel's posture to be one of "strange effect" (201), but it is surely a deliberate visual ploy: the crossed legs and languid resting arm of the consul contrast beautifully with the more violent forms of the adjacent classical carving. The final chapter on Delacroix's sketches from his time in Tangiers in 1832 does not work in this particular book; it muddles the close-knit relationship of the preceding case-studies in geography, medium, and function. The central argument is that Delacroix's drawings from his journey differ from his European sketchbooks in being more *objective* and *distant*. In her rather jargonistic manner, she attempts to use these sketches to read "the politics of

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expansion through the uncertainties of encounter" (208). However, as the author later admits (223-4), the more obvious (and, to my mind, more convincing) explanation for this aesthetic is that the sketchbook was intended as an iconographic resource for later paintings and that it reflects the harsh practicalities of a trip in which the artist was physically unable to access many areas of north African society (232).

Taken as a whole, this is a grandly illustrated and beautifully produced book. The author's prose is oftentimes elegant. Take, for instance, the verve with which Fraser draws out Melling's cinematic qualities (136-7). However, there are issues in the presentation of evidence. The immense scale of these prints is frequently commented on but many of the largest images are the smallest of reproductions, few close-up details are provided, and the dimensions of these images are rarely provided. The language can also prove distracting. There is a tendency to overstate and overinterpret certain points, as well as a writing style in which theoretical approaches and jargon make certain sections laborious.

More significantly, the unique format of the travel book as a complex combination of text and image is remarked upon but never sufficiently examined. The texts in

these travel books are rarely quoted from and there is little sense of their authorship, rhetorical style, and content. This is another missed opportunity. These travel books could have been used to engage with different modes of Orientalism. Edward Said's original conception of Orientalism was primarily a textual one, but this has since morphed in interesting ways to become a largely visual construction in modern scholarship. How these books might reflect different modes and different speeds of Orientalism remains an open question.

Furthermore, a number of observations important to this book are evident in earlier periods and in the work of many other artists in the Ottoman Mediterranean or were simply wider pictorial conventions of the age. For example, the claim that Melling was distinctive for focusing on the architecture of the Bosphorus is not born out when examined in the *longue durée*: European travel writing from the sixteenth century onward places great emphasis upon the shores of the imperial capital, and views of palaces along the Bosphorus are common to many early costume books. Also, to say that Cassas was "departing from convention" by depicting himself in Oriental garb in some of his Middle Eastern scenes (90) requires more contextualization, and neither was Dupré

the first to turn characters from the generic costume book format into portraits (194). That the visual and rhetorical modes of encountering the Ottoman Mediterranean waxed and waned across several centuries is rather lost.

In sum, this is a book that will prove valuable to specialists interested in the particular artists under discussion and in the culture of French travel books of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Fraser nimbly demonstrates the status of the luxury illustrated travel book in this period and the multiple ways in which they were products of complex mediation *between* cultures and *within* cultures. This study rightly points to many important issues around agency and encounter in the Ottoman world even if it does not always unpack them in full.

Works Cited

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