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HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF TURKESTAN IN THE LATE 19TH – EARLY 20TH CENTURY: ORIENTALIST PERSPECTIVES AND EDWARD SAID'S THEORY

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Abstract

This article examines the artistic heritage of Turkestan in the late 19th – early 20th centuries through the lens of Orientalism theory. It explores how the image of the East was constructed in visual arts, architecture, photography, and ethnographic illustrations during the Russian Empire period, highlighting mechanisms of stereotyping and exoticization. The study also addresses the interaction between local and European artistic traditions and the connection of this cultural phenomenon to colonial policy. Conducted at the intersection of multiple disciplines, the research reveals the role of Orientalism in shaping the perception and interpretation of cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Turkestan; Orientalism; colonial culture; visual arts; architecture; stereotype; exoticism; cultural heritage; Russian Empire*

Introduction

Orientalism, as developed by Edward Said, represents a critical analysis of Western conceptions of the East. In his foundational work *Orientalism*, Said explains how the Western world constructed an image of the East as exotic, irrational, and backward, thereby legitimizing colonial power structures and domination (Said, 1978). Said also emphasizes that Orientalism is not a fixed or monolithic phenomenon but rather a dynamic system of representations that adapts to changing political and historical contexts (Said, 1978).

The case of Turkestan is particularly significant. Located at the crossroads of Russian and British imperial ambitions, the region became a contested space where different strategies of representation and control were enacted. Studying visual culture from this period not only reveals how Orientalist stereotypes were embedded in art and architecture but also helps us understand how imperial power shaped cultural memory. Scholars such as Baker (2009) and Elmenfi (2023) have pointed out that Said's theory has wide applicability across disciplines, making it a valuable tool for reassessing the cultural heritage of Central Asia.

Method

The research employs a historical-analytical and comparative approach that combines art history, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory. Several strategies were used:

Analysis of artworks – Paintings by Russian artists such as Vasiliy Vereshchagin, Mikhail Znamenskiy, and Aleksandr Belyayev were closely examined to reveal patterns of exoticization and stereotyping (Baker, 2009).

Study of architectural heritage – Special attention was given to monuments like the Romanov Palace in Tashkent, which reflects a synthesis of local craftsmanship and European architectural trends (Khasanova, 2016).

Ethnographic sources – Illustrations and photographs produced under Russian rule were reviewed to understand how scientific and documentary practices contributed to constructing an Orientalist discourse (Abashin, 2015).

This interdisciplinary methodology makes it possible to see Orientalism not merely as a style of representation but also as a political strategy that framed how Turkestan was perceived within imperial ideology.

Results

The findings demonstrate that Orientalist patterns strongly shaped Russian depictions of Turkestan. For instance, Vereshchagin's ethnographic sketches such as *Uzbek Pot Seller* (1873) and *Tashkent Woman* (1873) simultaneously strive for documentary realism and yet reinforce exotic stereotypes (Elmenfi, 2023). Similarly, depictions of bazaars, dervishes, and everyday life emphasized difference rather than commonality, creating an "Other" for Russian audiences.

Ethnographic illustrations and early photography further cemented this process. They often presented the population of Turkestan as timeless, static, and unchanging – a stark contrast to the European image of modernity (Chuvilkina, 2022).

In architecture, Orientalism took the form of stylistic hybridity. The Romanov Palace in Tashkent combined European neo-Gothic elements with Central Asian decorative techniques, including ganch carving, geometric ornamentation, and floral motifs. Local masters from Bukhara, Samarkand, and Namangan contributed to its design, but

the overall framing served imperial representation (Khasanova, 2016). Such examples show that Orientalism was not only a matter of artistic taste but also a symbol of colonial power and cultural negotiation.

Discussion

The comparison of Russian and Western European Orientalism highlights both parallels and divergences. Western Orientalism, rooted in colonial expansion into Asia and Africa, often stressed the "irrationality" of Eastern societies as a justification for control (Said, 1978). Russian Orientalism, while sharing similar stereotypes, was shaped by specific geopolitical contexts of Central Asia and the Caucasus. It incorporated elements of admiration for local culture but framed them within imperial domination (Baker, 2009).

Furthermore, Orientalism was not confined to art alone. It became a mode of knowledge production, influencing ethnographic studies, education, and museum collections. As Chuvilkina (2022) notes in her study of the Savitsky Museum, Orientalist imagery remains deeply embedded in the cultural memory of Central Asia, affecting how artworks are curated and interpreted even today.

Postcolonial critique allows us to reassess these cultural narratives. As Elmenfi (2023) points out, Said's legacy is not simply descriptive but transformative: it enables scholars to deconstruct colonial discourses and give voice to local perspectives that were marginalized under imperialism.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Orientalism played a decisive role in shaping the visual and cultural representations of Turkestan during the Russian Empire. Paintings, architecture, and ethnographic works both reflected and reinforced stereotypes of exoticism and backwardness. At the same time, hybrid artistic forms reveal a more complex process of cultural negotiation between local and European traditions.

From a postcolonial perspective, revisiting these visual narratives is crucial for understanding how colonial power influenced the cultural memory of Turkestan. By deconstructing Orientalist images, scholars can

foster a more objective and multifaceted appreciation of Central Asian heritage. This not only enriches art history and cultural studies

but also contributes to global discussions about representation, identity, and decolonization.

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