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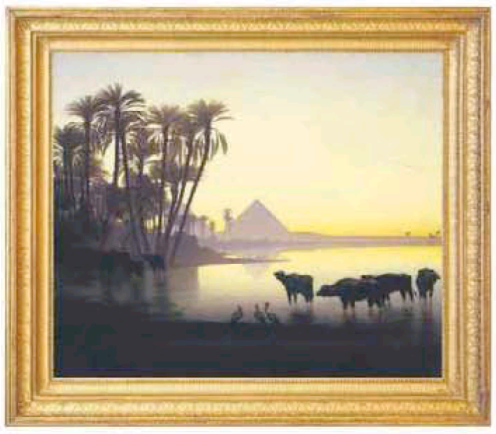
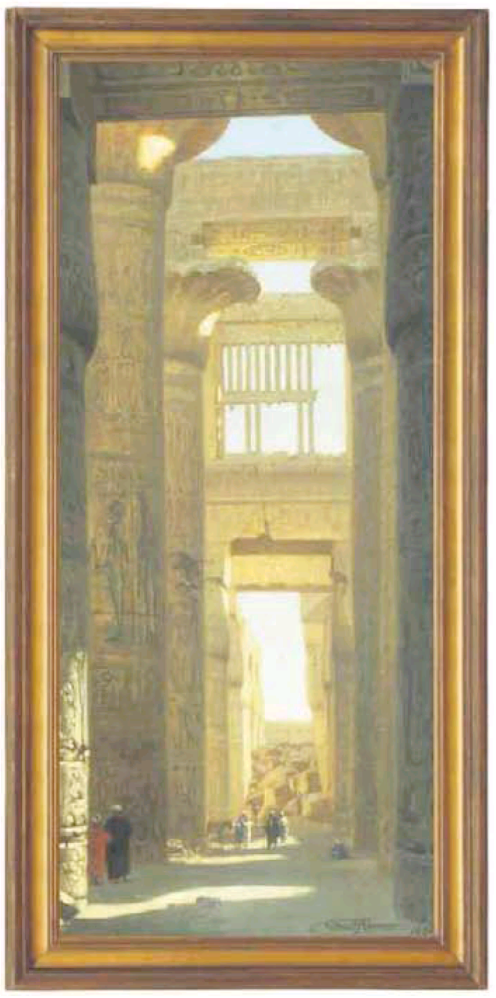




Returning the gaze

Until recently, curators and collectors in the West were embarrassed by Orientalist art. Carol Kino considers one small museum that never blushed

One afternoon last spring, I met the art collector and philanthropist Amira Zahid over a lavish tea at the St Regis Hotel in Manhattan. Our plan was to talk about the past and future of the Dahesh Museum, a small institution that she and her family opened in 1995 in New York. But not far into our conversation, Zahid began steaming with indignation about the present.

Apparently, a rumour was circulating that the Dahesh's permanent collection was on the block. "People should know that a museum does not divest itself of the collection!" she said. "But every week I get a call from someone asking if it is for sale."

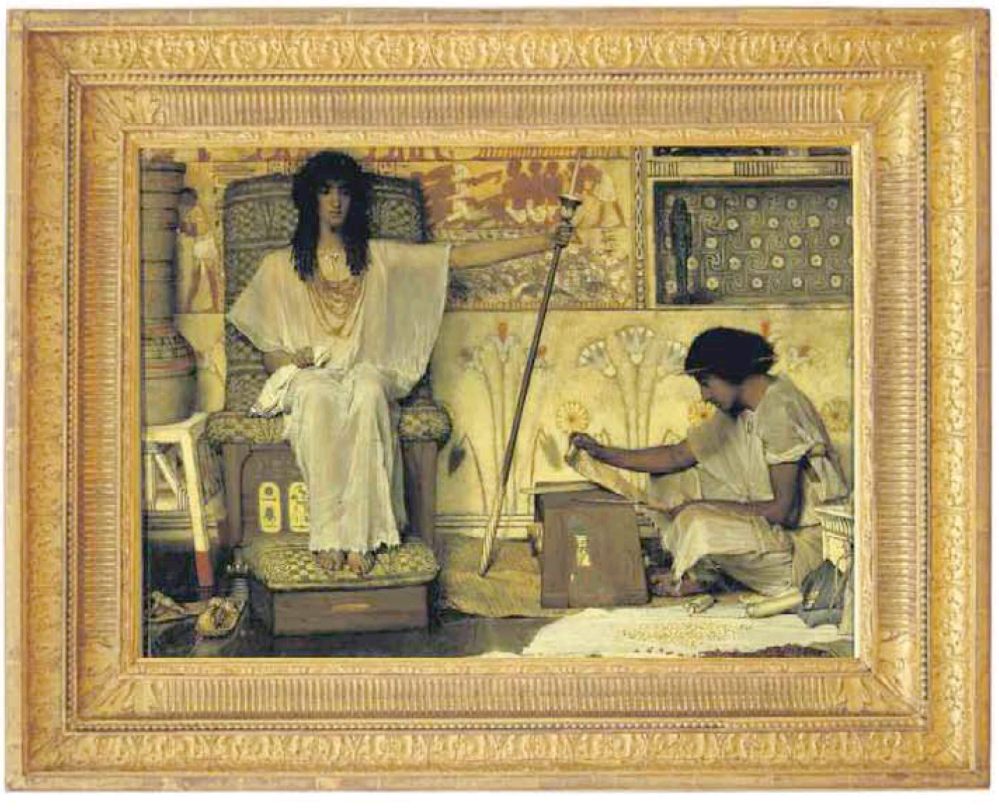
Most recently, she'd received inquiries from someone associated with Ali bin Fahad al Hajri, Qatar's ambassador to the United States. Before that, she had run into the Egyptian businessman Shafik Gabr at a party, and he'd asked her point-blank if she was interested in selling.

"I said, 'It is completely frowned upon for any museum to sell its collection to raise money," Zahid recounted, incensed. "We are a public museum – it is not the Amira Zahid collection." If we hadn't been surrounded by silver teapots, cake stands and cutlery, she might well have banged her fist on the tablecloth.

The Zahids, originally from Saudi Arabia by way of Beirut, had emigrated to Connecticut in 1975 at the start of the Lebanese civil war. Twenty years after their arrival, they opened the museum to carry out a fairly unusual mission: to collect, show, and interpret 19th and early 20th-century academic art. This superrealist, technically flamboyant style had been taught at art academies throughout Europe since the Renaissance, and reached its apotheosis in the 19th century salons of Paris, before it was vanquished by Impressionism. By the 1930s, it was regarded as kitschy and passé.

Dahesh, continued on **4** ➔

Clockwise from top left: Charles Théodore-Frère, 'Along the Nile at Gyzeh'; Ernst Karl Eugen Koerner, 'The Temple of Karnak'; Marie Hadad, 'Portrait of Dr Dahesh'; Lawrence Alma Tadema, 'Joseph, Overseer of Pharaoh's Granaries'. All works courtesy the Dahesh Museum of Art



6.7m

Price, in US dollars, paid for the most expensive Orientalist painting, 'A Lady of Constantinople' by Osman Hamdi Bey

Yet somehow in the recent celebration of all things Orientalist, the Dahesh – an American museum with roots in the Middle East, an institution equidistant between East and West – was largely forgotten

➜ **Dahesh,** continued from 1

Despite that, within a few years the Dahesh succeeded in making a name for itself. But in 2007, rising rent and the cost of doing business in boom-era Manhattan prompted Zahid to shut down its rented premises and to disband most of the staff. Since then it has been what she likes to call "a museum without a home", loaning and touring its collection while she searches for a permanent abode.

Yet few in New York realised the Dahesh was still alive until this past spring, when Zahid finalised a deal to mount occasional shows at Lubin House, the Manhattan outpost of Syracuse University. The first opened in March. Called *In Pursuit of the Exotic: Artists Abroad in 19th Century Egypt and the Holy Land*, the show used some of the Dahesh's greatest Orientalist hits to illuminate the sights that had enticed 19th century western artists to follow in Napoleon's footsteps to the mysterious, alluring East.

The show included lithographs of scenes in Jerusalem, Petra, and Egypt made after the work of David Roberts and Jean-Léon Gérôme, as well as maps and lushly rendered landscapes like *Along the Nile at Gyzeh* by Charles Théodore Frère. The highlight was an 1888 masterpiece by the German Orientalist Gustav Bauernfeind. Called *Jaffa, Recruiting of Turkish Soldiers in Palestine*, it depicts Ottoman soldiers ferrying their conscripts to a distant steamship, while women wail after them from the shore – a scene that seems both ancient and strikingly modern.

On the face of things, the timing was perfect, because many in the New York art world had just returned from pilgrimages to what they may have regarded as the mysterious, alluring East – Art Dubai and the Sharjah Biennial. Around the same time there was a flurry of stories about Orientalist art – to which the art market was suddenly paying attention, buoyed by strong prices in 2008, and the fact that major collectors like Gabr, chairman of the Egyptian development company Artoc Group, and Terry Garnett, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, had begun to publicise their holdings. In April, Sotheby's held a much-vaunted Orientalist sale in New York – its second within the year. Lured by thoughts of museum-building potentates in the Gulf, auction houses had organised their first big Orientalist sales in the region – Sotheby's in Doha in March and Bonham's in Dubai in May.

Yet somehow in the recent celebration of all things Orientalist, the Dahesh – an American museum with roots in the Middle East, an institution equidistant between East and West – was largely forgotten. Only a couple of stories mentioned the museum, and one that did strongly implied that its entire collection was for sale. So it wasn't too surprising that, as Zahid talked, she grew increasingly incensed. Before long, the conversation wound around to all the other injustices that had been visited upon her family and her beloved museum.

"I only wish that people would explore things before making assumptions," she said. "Because we came from the Middle East, our ethnic background has always clouded people's opinions."

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From the moment the Dahesh opened in a former nail salon on Fifth Avenue in January 1995, it had several strikes against it. The first and most obvious was its peculiar focus on 19th century art, which had been derided for years.

In its heyday in post-Revolutionary France – a time when the audience and market for art expanded rapidly – academic art was as popular with the public as movies are today, and its subject matter became remarkably similar, encompassing everything from historical and mythological drama to comic vignettes and scenes from everyday life. But by the end of the First World War it seemed desperately *démodé*, and by the 1960s it was regarded as so embarrassing that most American museums had removed it from display.

So New York critics had no idea what to make of the Dahesh's first show, which bore the provocative title *When Art Was Popular*. It was filled with rather weak work from artists that no one had ever heard of before, like Charles Daniel Ward, whose insipid *The Rites of Spring* (1905) depicts girls gathering blossoms in a meadow; Henri Pierre Picou, represented by a steamy rendering of *Andromeda Chained to the Rock* (1871); and Georges Clairin, whose *Combat d'Arabes* presents a bloody battle scene. Holland Cotter, a critic for the *New York Times*, summed up the feelings of many: "With their vacuous subjects and splashy brushwork," he wrote, "these salon paintings have the very special awfulness of expensive kitsch."

Although the museum was run and programmed by seasoned professionals – like the director, J David Farmer, formerly director of exhibitions for the perfectly respectable American Federation of Arts – museum people generally concurred. In fact, a former museum director told me recently, "There were a lot of people who thought the Dahesh was just plain silly and it was a huge expense on a bunch of junk."

The museum's devotion to Orientalist art, the subject of its third show, struck many as even more insane. A branch of academic art, it arose in the wake of Napoleon's abortive Egyptian campaign, whose forces included over 150 engineers, scientists, and artists the emperor brought along to document the land he wished to conquer. The French government eventually published their observations in *Description de l'Egypte* (1809-29), a 23-volume compendium illustrating their take on Egypt's people, sights and landscapes, now regarded as the seminal work of Orientalism. As the art market grew, railway lines were laid and Europe's colonisation of the Middle East continued, the appetite for depictions of these exotic lands increased. It was such a ready market that some artists even made Orientalist work at home, using local models, imported props and imagination.

Because of these colonialist underpinnings, Orientalist work wasn't only seen as tasteless and kitschy – it was also regarded as politically incorrect. Since 1978, the year that Edward Said published his damning critique *Orientalism*, most Western intellectuals have written off all Orientalist art as a discomfiting reminder of the West's colonisation of the East, without making distinctions between excellent examples of the genre, such as Roberts's carefully observed landscapes, and somewhat cheesier renderings, such as the bare-breasted ladies languishing in harems painted by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

The most damning issue of all, however, was that the collection's origins seemed shady. The work was said to have been acquired by Salim Moussa Achi, a Palestinian who later adopted the name Dr Dahesh – or "Dr Wonder". The official line was that he had begun collecting in the mid-1950s in Beirut, and that "friends" had brought the work to this country during the civil war. To most New York art-world observers, the scenario seemed unlikely. How could Dr Dahesh have come by such colonialist work in Beirut? And why on earth would an Arab want to collect it in the first place? (By now, of course, it is well known that academic art was widely admired and collected in the East – especially in Cairo, Beirut, and Istanbul – long after it had fallen from grace in the West.)

So, while early museum handouts demurely described Dr Dahesh as "an important figure in the intellectual life of the Middle East", journalists soon unearthed a juicier story: that in 1942, he had founded a religion, Daheshism, many of whose adherents regarded him as the second coming of Christ. In 1996, a year after the museum opened, *ARTnews* magazine published an investigative report that revealed, among other things, that his doctorate had come from a French psychic research institute. Also, his followers believed that he had been executed by firing squad in Azerbaijan in 1947, after which he had risen from the dead.

The story ended by floating the idea that the museum might be the front for some strange Middle Eastern cult, in part because the Zahid family had also funded a Daheshist publishing company, as well as Dahesh Heritage, a bookstore near Columbus Circle. The Zahids' response was essentially "no comment," which only fanned the flames.

Not long thereafter, Zahid, then the museum's treasurer, told me she'd refused to talk because she didn't feel she had to justify herself to anyone. (She did agree to talk to me, however, for a story that eventually appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 2000.)

"This is a family that has existed for hundreds of years," she said, during our first interview in 1997. Indeed, she hails from a family of Jeddah grain and spice merchants who trace their roots back to the Khazraj tribe, one of the two that welcomed Mohammed at Medina. More recently, in 1951, her father, Sheikh Majid Zahid, established the Gulf's first General Motors dealership with his brothers in Jeddah; his business empire now extends throughout the Arabian Peninsula and includes Zahid AMECO, Arabian Motors and Engineering Company, and Zahid Travel.

As Zahid described Dr Dahesh during our meetings, he seemed eminently reasonable. She had begun visiting his house with her parents as a child; they had all been taken by his seriousness, his modesty, and his spirit of tolerance. He believed "in brotherhood", she said, "and that all religions lead to the same thing".

He had also encouraged Zahid and her siblings to think for themselves, and had given her the notion of pursuing a career – one reason she later went to law school in America. "The Middle East is about women who end up in a house," Zahid said. "This is part of your fate. And this did not happen with Dr Dahesh."

Then there was his collection, full of Meissen porcelain, prints and illustrated books, African masks, Phoenician crafts and taxidermied animals – basically, anything that appealed to him – as well as 19th century academic painting and sculpture. The work was hung salon-style around his rooms, and he would change the installation whenever new acquisitions arrived. It was the first collection Zahid had ever seen in someone's home, and by listening to him talk about the work – landscapes, animal paintings, and nudes alike – she said, "We learned how to evaluate art for its own sake and how to appreciate it for itself."

Zahid made Dr Dahesh sound like an old-fashioned humanist, maybe with a little early 20th-century theosophy thrown in. But the life story I began to uncover, after talking to her and interviewing dozens of Lebanese poets, intellectuals and expats, was more reminiscent of a picture-perfect Orientalist fantasy – one that wasn't only discomfiting to Americans, but also to the Lebanese intelligentsia.

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Legend has it that Dr Dahesh made his name in Paris in 1929, by spending seven days in a casket at the bottom of the Seine – much as the magician Harry Houdini did at the turn of the 20th century. In the 1930s, Zahid told me, he was a fashionable man-about-town in Cairo during the Francophilic era of King Faroukh. By the 1940s, he had relocated to Beirut, where some still recalled such "wonders" as his mesmeric gaze; his ability to change paper into banknotes and render himself invisible; and his habit of removing his head and dropping it off at the barber's whenever he needed a shave.

Along the way, Dr Dahesh attracted many visitors to his home, including the Lebanese poet Mikha'il Na'ima and the film star Jayne Mansfield. Rumour has it that he got on especially well with the ladies – no wonder, if he preached emancipation – and that's apparently how he became embroiled in the political scandal that made him infamous.

One of his regular visitors was the painter Marie Hadad, who was also the sister of Michel Chiha, author of the Lebanese Republic's first constitution, and the sister-in-law of Beshwara el Khoury, Lebanon's first president. In 1944, el Khoury, fearing Dahesh's influence, had him put on trial, stripped of his citizenship and expelled from Lebanon. Although stories differ as to whether el Khoury's concern was his family or the fledgling Lebanese republic, that's presumably how Dr Dahesh ended up in Azerbaijan.

After returning to life, as some of his followers believe, Dr Dahesh came back to Beirut. He moved into the home of Hadad and her husband – where he lived until his actual death – and began studying and collecting art while in hiding. It was then that he seems to have developed his particular obsession with 19th century European art, which he loved, Zahid said, because it was related to the foundation of Western democracy. "This is the kind of art that started getting out of the castles and into the homes," he'd tell her. "It is when art became secular."

How Dr Dahesh financed his collection isn't clear – possibly his followers gave him work or supplied the money to buy it. But after el Khoury's government fell and Dr Dahesh's citizenship was restored, he began travelling widely, and his trips usually included a visit to the old Parisian municipal auction house at l'Hôtel Drouot. Since by that point academic art was virtually valueless in the West, he was no doubt able to procure plenty of it at bargain prices. He referred to Drouot as "my Mecca".

When the civil war began, Zahid's mother purchased Dr Dahesh's collection (paying a reported $1 million for about 3,000 items) and shipped it to Connecticut with the family's luggage. "We were moving our own belongings," Zahid explained, "and she just brought it with them." Although Dr Dahesh stayed behind, he loved visiting America, and died while visiting the Zahids in 1984.

Some time later, Zahid recalled, during her first year of law school at St. John's University in Queens, her mother said, "We're starting a museum!" and assigned the project to Amira. She drew up the papers herself one summer, while interning at a law office in Greenwich. The museum was chartered in 1987.

In keeping with the democratic, humanistic, art-for-all ideals they had imbibed in Dr Dahesh's salon, the Zahids decided to establish their institution with rigorous standards. Rather than retaining private control of the artwork, as do many collectors who found their own museums, they gave most of the work they intended to show to the museum outright, long before it opened. (This is one obvious reason that it wouldn't be too easy for Zahid to sell the Dahesh's holdings even if she were inclined to do so.)

They also went shopping for more work to beef up the collection, taking Dr Dahesh's tastes as their inspiration. But it was actually the museum's founding director, David Farmer, who helped push the institution in a strictly academic direction, and encouraged them to enrich the collection further.

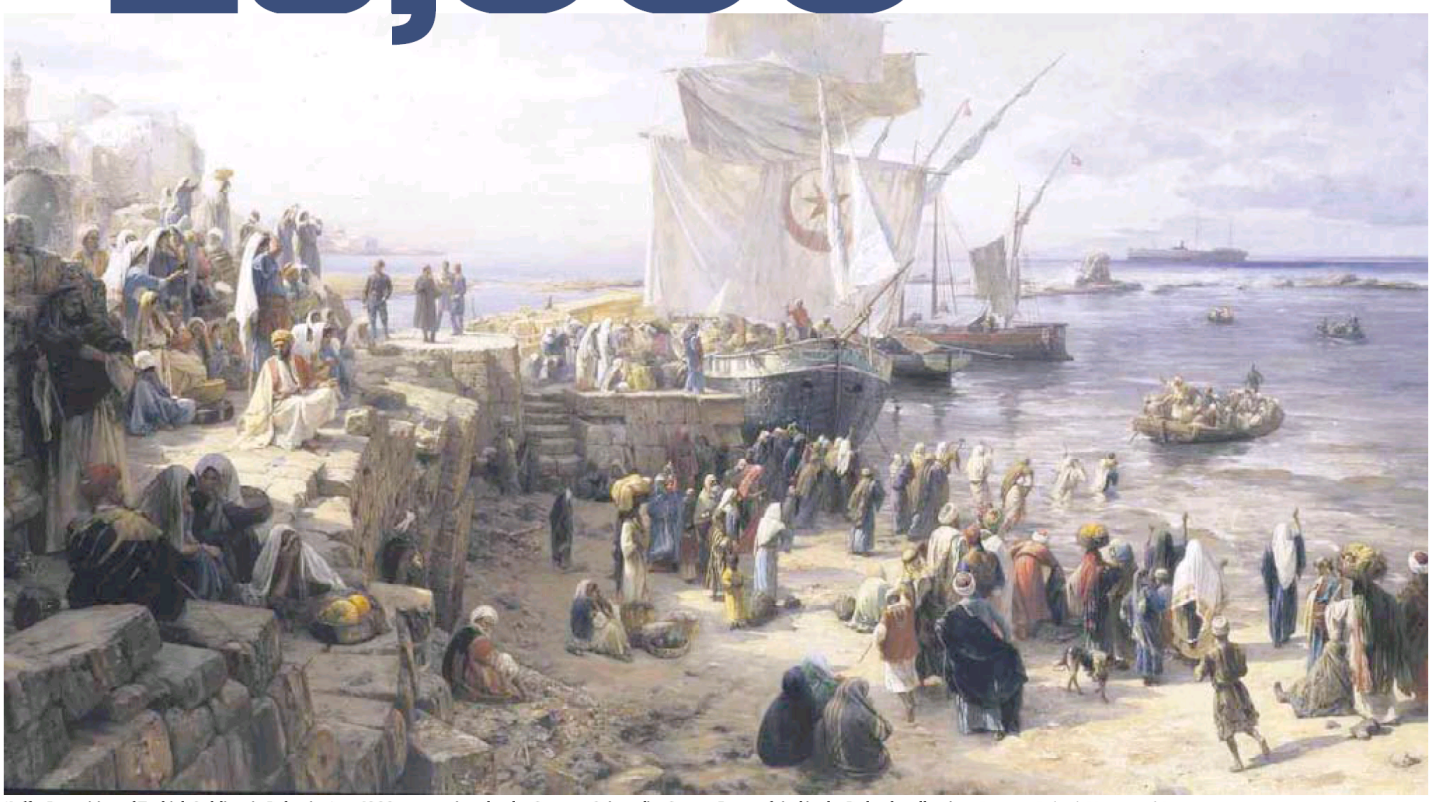
Not only was there a chance to make a mark by doing something new and different, but the field was "still underpriced by comparison with anything else," he said. And it was still possible to buy masterpieces, like the Bauernfeind painting of conscripts in Jaffa, which Farmer discovered in

Amira Zahid, whose family founded the Dahesh Museum in New York in 1995. Christinne Muschi for The National

review

25,000

Number of French troops who fought in the 1798 Battle of the Pyramids



'Jaffa, Recruiting of Turkish Soldiers in Palestine', an 1888 masterpiece by the German Orientalist Gustav Bauernfeind in the Dahesh collection. Courtesy Dahesh Museum of Art

Georges Clairin, 'Combat d'Arabes'. Courtesy Dahesh Museum of Art

Jean-Léon Gérôme, 'The Egyptian Expedition'. Courtesy Dahesh Museum of Art

the late 1990s at a small German auction house, and Zahid purchased for a little under $1 million after bartering with the dealer who had outbid them during the sale. (Bauernfeind's work now holds the second-highest Orientalist record at auction – over $5 million for the 1890 painting *The Gate of the Great Umayyad Mosque, Damascus*, achieved at Christie's in 2008 – and Zahid now receives more purchase inquiries about this particular painting than any other.)

"If you look at the exhibitions that we've done over the years," Farmer said, "the major works were all acquired after the museum got started." While beefing up the collection, they also began to borrow work and shows from European museums, like the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

As Farmer also observed, Zahid was especially enthusiastic about expanding the collection to include more Orientalist work, which Dr Dahesh had never collected extensively. In part that was because "she recognised quality and we went for it," he said. Zahid also didn't have the same prejudice against Orientalist art that a western museum founder might have, because she hailed from the Middle East, where collectors began investing in Orientalist work during the 1970s oil boom. "Edward Said always looked at Orientalism as the product of colonialism," Zahid told me recently. "I don't think he looked at it as art itself." Indeed, some of the major Gulf collectors have been at it for decades, including Dr Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, the ruler of Sharjah and Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar. So while in the early 1970s a prime painting might have cost about $3,000, by 1999, the Orientalist record stood at $3.2 million, achieved at Christie's for "The Palace Guard," a 1892 masterpiece by the Austrian Orientalist Ludwig Deutsch. (It is now in Gabr's collection.)

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As the millennium approached, and with it the inevitable comparisons to the turn of the last century, academic art and Orientalism both began to enjoy something of a revival. And after its slightly rocky start, the Dahesh's shows soon became so interesting and on point that they were hard to ignore. Many drew clever parallels between the end of the colonialist 19th century and the approach of the globalist 21st; others tackled subjects like the technical training of young artists and the social position of female painters in 19th century Paris. And several turned a fresh eye on Orientalism, examining how 19th-century print and photographic techniques helped popularise and disseminate stereotypes, or how the Occident and the Orient held a mutual fascination for each other.

Soon, the museum developed a small cult of its own – one focused on academic and Orientalist art. Zahid also gained new supporters for the museum in her attempt to find a new building. In 1997, she began bidding against the real estate magnate Donald Trump to take over the Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art, a disused museum at Two Columbus Circle that was being sold by the city. (It had long been a favourite of Dr Dahesh, because Hartford had opened it in 1964 to show off his own collection of academic art.)

Then came September 11, 2001, and New York changed. The staff of the Dahesh, fearing that a spate of anti-Arab fervour might spell its demise, went so far as to contemplate pulling a new acquisition from the museum's walls: the painting, *The Abduction of a Herzegovenian Woman* (1861), by the Czech Orientalist Jaroslav Cermák, depicts a naked Christian woman being dragged from her village by Ottoman bashi-bazouks. (In the end, they let it stay.)

Orientalist imagery was indeed proving unpopular – this time because it suggested the stuff of American nightmares. In October, just seven weeks after the World Trade Center attack, Christie's New York held its first dedicated Orientalist sale in eight years, featuring 19 glorious paintings by the likes of Gérôme, Bauernfeind, and John Frederick Lewis, from the collection of the Dubai-based businessman Alexander Ebeid. Although the paintings were exquisite, the estimates were aggressive – and many of the canvases depicted turbaned men holding weapons or praying in mosques. Only five sold, and the entire sale tallied a paltry $2.46 million.

The next year, the city awarded Two Columbus Circle to another institution, the craft-focused Museum of Arts & Design – a development that Zahid still ascribes to anti-Arab sentiment. By that time, Farmer had retired, and she closed the Dahesh later that year to regroup.

But then America invaded Iraq, thereby embarking on its own decidedly Napoleonic venture – and suddenly it became newly fashionable for worldly New Yorkers to take an intelligent interest in the mysterious East, just as the English and French intelligentsia had done in their own expansionist eras. In 2003 the artist Steve Mumford left for Baghdad, where he spent months embedded with different military units making drawings of the local life and people. The art journalist Steven Vincent followed in his footsteps to become a freelance war correspondent. Oddly enough, Vincent had written one of the one of the first stories about the resurging Orientalist market for *Art & Auction* in 1997; and in Iraq, Mumford says, he often disguised himself in a dishdasha and kaffiya, like a latter-day Richard Francis Burton. (Sadly, Vincent's career change proved fatal: in 2005, two days after the *New York Times* published his Op-Ed about the infiltration of the Basra police force by Shiite militias, he was abducted, beaten, riddled with bullets, and left dead on the street.)

> *I think it's probable that for serious collectors, the real draw is a fascination with the West's perception of the East*
> *Roger Mandle Qatar Museums Authority*

By the time the Dahesh reopened in 2003 in the basement of the IBM office tower on Madison Avenue, New York was a different world. And the museum, with its lavish new space, its worldly internationalist perspective, and its gift shop stocked with Egyptian textiles and Syrian inlaid tables – the sort of thing Zahid has in her home – seemed right on the money. The museum also had a new, young, enthusiastic director, Peter Trippi – one of the young 19th century art historians who had been so excited by the opening of the Dahesh.

At the same time, the museum's shows began to garner consistently admiring reviews. Its second to last exhibition, *Napoleon on the Nile*, focused on *Description de l'Égypte*, the work that emerged from Napoleon's campaign. It is still touring.

Ironically, just as the Dahesh closed, another development put the museum's trajectory in a new light: a sudden spate of art dealing and museum-building in the Gulf. In the last three years, enticed by museum openings and art fairs, western artists, curators and critics have increasingly travelled to the region – and many have been shocked to discover that Orientalist art is not just hotly collected in the Gulf, but also displayed and enjoyed without equivocation.

That was the experience of Emily Doherty, the director of Dubai's Al Bastakiya fair, when she moved to Abu Dhabi from London in 2006 and began to encounter Orientalist work in her new friends' homes. "There was absolutely no reference to a discourse surrounding Orientalism," she said, still sounding incredulous. "The paintings seemed to be hung on the wall as what they were – no irony, no context, no nothing, just literally presented as beautiful paintings."

Nick Tromans, the curator of *The Lure of the East*, which appeared at the Sharjah Art Museum last spring, noted the same thing. When this exhibition of British Orientalist painting appeared at Tate Britain in 2008, he said, the organisers felt the need to put the paintings in context. "We're still trying to get over our imperial legacy," Tromans said, "and we feel terribly guilty – or many British people do – about any picture or text or memory that has to do with the British lording it over poorer countries in the past." In London, the paintings were accompanied by voluminous wall texts, written by American, European and Middle Eastern intellectuals, each of whom responded to the work from a different perspective. ("I don't know how much I would have enjoyed being a visitor to that show," Tromans said, laughing. "There were a lot of texts to read.")

But the wall texts did not come to Sharjah. "They rolled their eyes when we started talking about Edward Said," Tromans said. "Some of these senior figures in the museum thought, 'Just get over it.' They were very keen to interpret the exhibition as being evidence of a strong Anglo-Emirati relationship."

So what do Middle Eastern collectors see in Orientalist painting? Essentially the same thing Zahid does: "If we did not have that record of Orientalism through paintings," she told me recently, "we wouldn't know how people lived or how they dressed. These pictures have really given us a sense of the eyes, the skintones of people... It gives us a glimpse into the lifestyle, the architecture. I don't see anything negative about that."

Indeed, if you want to know what the 19th century Middle East looked like, Orientalist paintings are about the only thing going. Although the Ottoman Empire did spawn a handful of academic painters, the bulk of this work was made by Europeans, who were sometimes commissioned to come out by the Ottoman sultans and the Egyptian khedives.

Ali Can Ertug, head of strategic business development at Sotheby's for Turkey and the Middle East, said that collectors appreciate paintings that depict their own region. "Whenever they see a painting that depicts the part of the Middle East that they're from, they have a natural-born affinity for this object. Me being Turkish, if I see a painting of Turkey, it captures my attention immediately."

They are also said to prize authentic, accurate depiction. But Tromans, for one, said he doesn't buy it – especially not where the Gulf is concerned. "The way that auction houses represent Middle Eastern collecting is as a finding out of the authentic," he said. "But how would a modern Gulf businessman know how 1840s Cairo looked? What they're doing is just defining good pictures."

Indeed, most of the work purchased in the Gulf today doesn't really depict the local lands: in the 19th century, the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula remained mostly closed to Europeans, and artists who journeyed East usually travelled in the Levant.

Roger Mandle, the executive director of the Qatar Museums Authority, believes that many Gulf collectors are captivated by Orientalism for another reason. "I think it's probable that for serious collectors, the real draw is a fascination with the West's perception of the East," he said. "This romanticised view of the souqs and so on is something that is appealing to people who are broadly educated about both West and East."

Although he wouldn't reveal much about Qatar's not-too-secret plans to build an Orientalist museum, he did talk about their collection, dating back to the Renaissance and including work by artists like Jean-Baptiste van Mour, a Flemish painter who worked at the 18th century court of Sultan Ahmed III. They are also thinking about the way that Islamic art influenced early Christian and Buddhist art, and how all of it affects the present. "We see this as a continuing confluence of connections and ideas flowing back and forth," he said. "It's a much more sophisticated view that I'm being educated about as I spend more time in Qatar."

Meanwhile, back in New York, the fascination with the Middle East continues. In May, Muslim Voices, a festival of art, films and performance – and the first of its kind in New York – drew a surprising amount of attention, selling out theatres that aren't even filled to capacity during Next Wave, an avant-garde performance festival that has been going for 27 years. More recently – thanks in part to the post-election violence in Tehran then making headlines – huge crowds flocked to the opening of "Iran Inside Out," a show of Iranian artists at the Chelsea Art Museum.

Zahid, who sat on an advisory committee for the Muslim Voices festival, seemed pleased with the event. Although she is still searching for a building – "I would love to see New York City approach us and tell us there is a building we can use now that they have not given us Two Columbus Circle," she said – she remains intent on sharing the Dahesh collection with the public. In July, she lured David Farmer out of retirement to oversee the collection and organise more exhibitions. She recently opened a new Dahesh museum gift shop in the atrium of the Park Avenue Plaza, which will promote the permanent collection with multimedia displays.

And although the attitude towards the museum "completely baffled me at the beginning," she said, she now feels things are on the right track. "I think that the museum has done a lot of bridging the gap between East and West," she said. "We are really not one museum representing one culture or another. We are a universal museum." Albeit one that is still searching for a home.

Carol Kino is a contributing editor at Art & Auction and a frequent contributor to The New York Times.