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### THE ART WORLD GOING EAST

Napoleon at the Dahesh.  
by PETER SCHJELDAHL

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The present sorrows of Beirut call to mind an underknown legacy of that city's last spell of ruin and its history of cosmopolitan ferment—the Dahesh Museum, a sleek institution in the I.B.M. Building, on Madison Avenue at Fifty-seventh Street, which is devoted to mostly nineteenth-century, mostly French academic art. It was envisioned for Beirut in the nineteen-seventies by the Palestinian-born Salim Moussa Achi—also known as Dr. Dahesh, which translates from the Arabic as “Dr. Wonder”—who was an enthusiast for Jean-Léon Gérôme, William Adolphe Bouguereau, Alexandre Cabanel, and other long-devalued Salon heavyweights, casualties of modernism, and who bought masses of art by lesser academics, likely at fire-sale prices. In 1975, as civil war descended, he sold his collection to a Saudi-American family in Connecticut named Zahid. He died during a visit to New York, in 1984, at the age of seventy-five. The Zahids opened the museum, in quarters on Fifth Avenue, in 1995.



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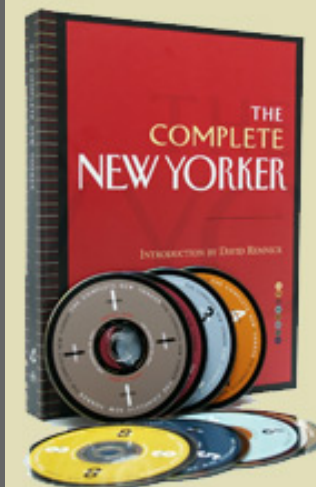
The museum's current exhibition has another timely resonance. "Napoleon on the Nile: Soldiers, Artists and the Rediscovery of Egypt" memorializes the disastrous French military occupation of 1798-1801. Bringing along teams of scientists, scholars, and artists, Napoleon's folly reaped material for a twenty-three-volume opus, "Description of Egypt" (1809-1828), characterized by Edward Said, in his book "Orientalism" (1978), as "that great collective appropriation of one culture by another." Culture was all France got. The invasion faltered soon after it began, when Admiral Nelson came upon the French fleet in a sitting-duck formation near Alexandria and briskly obliterated it. French ground forces soldiered on, winning battles against a native insurgency and its Ottoman backers but losing the war. One man in three died. Survivors were returned to France in 1801. (The British seized the gem of the losers' loot: the Rosetta stone.) The campaign had no clear goal. Napoleon cited "glory."

Dr. Dahesh was the reincarnation of Christ. So he said, and Daheshists, once numerous in Lebanon, have believed it, pointing to his hundreds of purported miracles. Daheshism teaches a unity of all religions, a metaphysic of "spiritual fluids," and habitation, with more than six thousand lives for each soul, on planetary heavens and hells, Earth being the least onerous of the hell planets. Daheshists recount that, in 1947, in Azerbaijan, Dahesh was charged with being a spy and executed by firing squad. Back in Lebanon soon afterward, he explained that he had taken the precaution of substituting for his body the apparition of one of his six immortal spiritual avatars. (According to him, Jesus employed the same stratagem on Calvary, actually dying twenty years later.) Today, Daheshism has no official organization. The museum's directors and staff, when asked, have pleaded ignorance of Dr. Wonder's program for the

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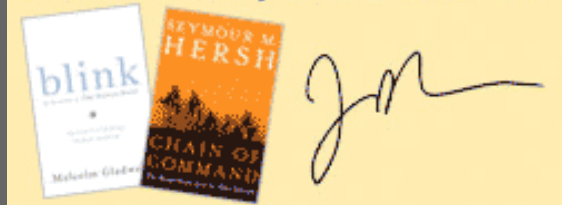
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universe. In any event, Dahesh seems not to have knitted his cult with his taste, which reflected a fashion among upper-class Middle Easterners of his time. He has proved prophetic as a collector, if in no other way (though he claimed to have predicted John F. Kennedy's assassination, among other occurrences). Lately, some French academic pictures—like a good deal of British Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian art, thanks largely to the fancies of Andrew Lloyd Webber and other epicurean celebrities—have ascended to respectability at auction, bringing dollar prices in the substantial six figures, with the odd million for a choice Gérôme or Bouguereau.

The modest return of academicism is a sign of our time's spent faith in progress. The storied triumph of Impressionism over the art of the official Salons of late-nineteenth-century Paris has lost its evangelical clout. It can no longer be wielded to chasten people who enjoy the elaborately skilled, archaically styled, formulaic splendors of the old academy, with its devout ancestor worship and deluxe eroticism. Camp—the savoring of unintended ironies—is a factor. Consider Gérôme's quite lovely "Napoleon in Egypt" (circa 1867-68), at the Dahesh: it depicts the soon-to-be emperor in sumptuous uniform, emitting terrific attitude, on a road lined to the horizon with mosques. It amounts to a retroactive "Mission Accomplished," given that Napoleon abandoned his beset soldiers in 1799 to make political hay at home. (How he then spun crushing defeat into inspiring legend may be under study somewhere today.) Of course, there are still those who, unamused, believe that art took a wrong turn when realism was abandoned in favor of unlimited formal and expressive liberties. But that point is moot, because avant-gardism didn't usurp the ground of academic art; popular culture did. Salon audiences became not modernist but only modern, drawn away by the more regularly

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available satisfactions of photography and magazine illustration. Movies applied the coup de grâce. Modern art arose to invigorate a new, self-selected class impatient with received ideas and unsated by mass fare.

The most seriously appealing works in the Dahesh show are examples of the multitudinous engravings that form most of the volumes of “Description of Egypt.” The thousands of artists and artisans who labored, with the aid of Nicolas-Jacques Conté (the inventor of the modern pencil and, just in time for publication, of engraving techniques that were unprecedented in their tonal subtlety), evinced a spirit that was academic in the best sense—dedicated to securing truth. Conventions of the picturesque governed their styles, but the same held for early photography, which soon rendered their medium obsolete. The views of monuments, landscapes, and local society in the show have a virginal quality of first looks, conveying the enchantment of a strange land and its even stranger antiquity. Exceptionally beautiful and moving are the colored engravings of tomb and temple murals and inscriptions, not yet understood but limned with fidelity that borders on mediumistic possession. The French troops disdained the “savants,” as the invasion’s burdensome intellectual auxiliaries were termed, and the English caricaturist James Gillray brilliantly mocked them. In one cartoon, a cornered savant brains an insurgent with a book entitled “Fraternization Project with Bedouins.” But there is something indeed glorious about the savants’ selfless passion, though it was in service to a naïve idealism—that of a mission to liberate Egypt from the Mamelukes, the dynastic descendants of slave warriors—that ineluctably turned brutal. Local resistance persisted as external pressures grew. Exasperated by Egyptian ingratitude, a French general proclaimed, in words that sound an eerie echo, “I love those who love us, but I can punish

our enemies.”

The few Orientalist paintings in the show are a miscellany of later nineteenth-century French, German, British, Italian, and Danish academic work. They convey the romance of exotic otherness that Edward Said anatomized: a colorful Arab, a snake charmer, dreaming ruins. They raise the interesting issue of why a Levantine like Dr. Dahesh would relish European fantasies of the Levant. Was he a postmodernist *avant la lettre*? The Dahesh Museum’s scholarly style, from the start, has displayed telling affinities with contemporary theory-speak—as in a rote exposition of “France’s self-constructed patriarchal, imperial, and cultural relationship with and appropriation of Egypt.” That’s by this show’s proficient curator, Lisa Small, writing in the catalogue. It sounds disapproving, but I detect a positive fondness for material so congenial to boilerplate analysis. The utter comprehensibility of academic art may be its chief appeal to people who like to feel in control of what things mean. Dahesh, plainly, was such a one, in temperamental key with spirits of academicism then and now. His collecting must have seemed to him a means of accruing vicarious power.

Speaking of reincarnation, the Dahesh has announced that it is seeking a new home, with expanded galleries for its large and growing collection. (For a time, the museum tried to buy 2 Columbus Circle, the former Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art. That would have been symbolically delicious, and it might have prevented the shortsighted current destruction, by renovation for the Museum of Arts and Design, of the one-of-a-kind building.) The institution’s philosophical reason for being seems a bit less outlandish year by year, as charms of messianic certainty, whether religious like Dr. Dahesh’s or political like Napoleon’s, increase their magnetism throughout the world. ♣

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