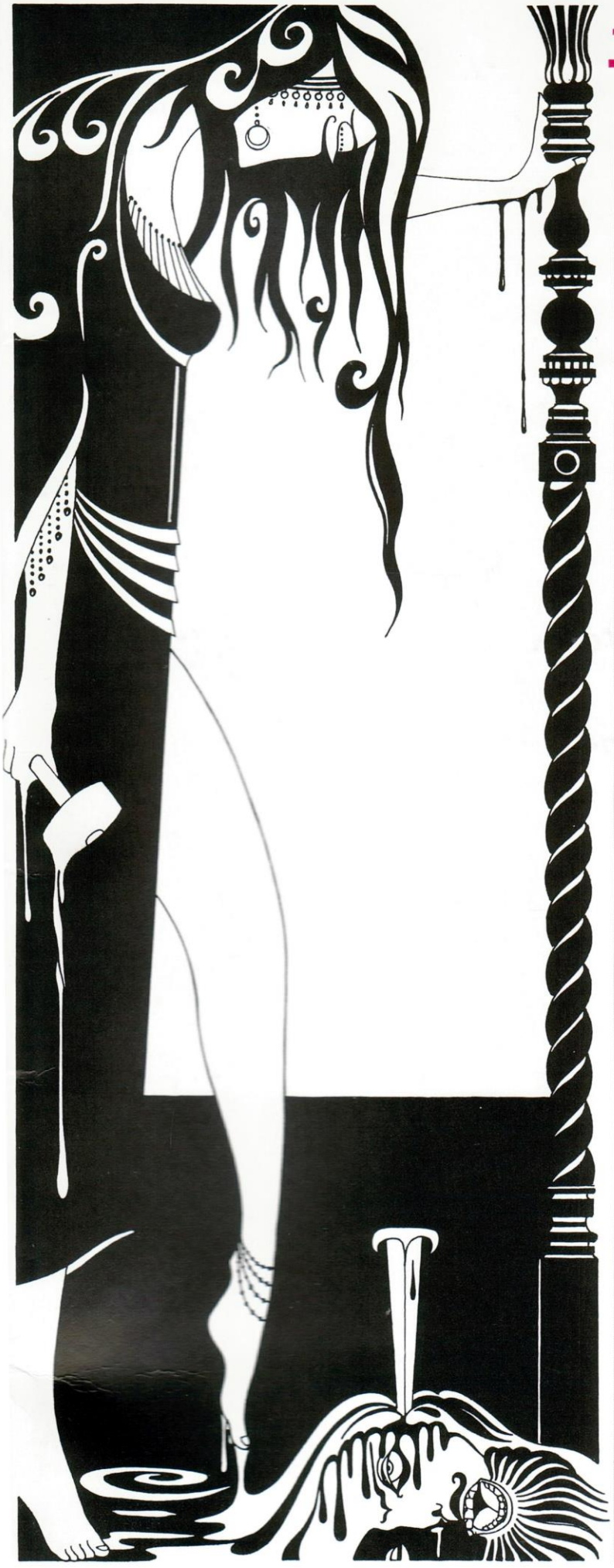

THE MAGAZINE OF THE GOTHIC SOCIETY

Udolpho

AUTUMN 1996

"My hobby as a child was collecting lavatory chains. I also kept snakes. But my father's work — he ran Broadmoor for twenty-five years — was the strongest influence on my developing imagination."

Patrick McGrath & a Taste for the Gothic

"Capgras' Syndrome ... involves beliefs that family, friends, or items of personal significance have been replaced by copies or impersonating doubles ... a twenty-nine year old man became convinced that his wife, on returning home from a stay in hospital, was in fact a double, created by a modern miracle of plastic surgery and psychological conditioning as part of some long-standing and incomprehensibly sinister plot. Though in good physical health and with no previous psychiatric history, this man's convictions remained unshakeable and completely resistant to treatment, and he became a chronic patient in a psychiatric hospital." *(Andrew Phelvin on The Outer limits of Psychiatry)*

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Autumn 1996, Volume 26

Pictures & Page Decorations
Front Cover: Gerald Gaubert, Jael & Sisera from The Song of Deborah (Judges V)

MANAGING EDITOR ***Jennie Gray*** MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY ***Julie Fennelly***

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ORIENTALISM

by Jonathan Little

This is an abbreviated version of Jonathan Little's article 'Orientalism: Counterpart of the Gothic in Nineteenth Century Artistic Inspiration'.

TO THE nineteenth century European, the fabulously exotic and mysterious Orient covered a greater expanse of the globe than the regions known by that name today. It took in the Iberian Peninsula (particularly those parts with a Moorish influence), North Africa and Eastern Europe, and the Near, Middle and Far East. As Rana Kabbani has noted in *Europe's Myths of the Orient* the 'Romantic's Orient was largely a sublimated location, with no connection with the real East'. As with Gothic subject matter, the primary function of Oriental material was to provide artists with a gripping scenic backdrop for weird and fantastical imaginative adventures. Many of these adventures began in daydreams.

Around 1797 Coleridge was reading a passage from an evocative, antiquated travelogue entitled *Purchas his Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and the Religions observed in all Ages* (1613) about the Khan Kubla and his palace. This particular Oriental passage proved to be of vital significance, for it was the last thing that Coleridge read before he fell into his famous opium-induced torpor. The poet subsequently woke from one of the most vividly gorgeous and exhilarating of all his dream experiences, and began desperately to write down what was recoverable of the verses still ringing in his mind. It was at this moment that a gentleman from Porlock chose to call (though much doubt has been cast on this part of the legend recently). As a result, all we are left with is an enchanting fragment:

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure-dome decree
> Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea.

The vision is not exclusively of splendidly coloured palaces, for soon darker aspects emerge.

> A savage place! as holy and enchanted
> As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
> By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

In this miraculous region it seems that opposites could coexist, and thus we find 'A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice'.

William Beckford's *Vathek* has a similarly schizophrenic nature, with lush descriptions and black humour vying with terrifying retribution. Beckford claimed to have discovered on one of his Continental wanderings a real-life paradise near Cintra in Portugal (which Byron celebrates in *Childe Harold*) — the perfect Moorish paradise designed to suit the imagination of the day. He chose, however, not the Oriental style but the medieval when he created Fonthill Abbey, the ultimate Gothic extravaganza.

THE ORIENT in the Romantic imagination was frequently embodied in a temptress like Carmen — at once attractive and repellent — or that archetypal pair, Salome and Herodias, or the plotting murderess, Semiramide, or again Thais, inspirer of carnal delights, or the equally voluptuous Delilah: beauty and wickedness inseparably intertwined. These dangerous females were the Orient itself. Théophile Gautier, one of the most famous of the arch-Romantics, claimed in 1852: 'The Orient is the dangerous, above all the barbaric Orient; it causes vertigo we can well understand'.

It was another French writer, Victor Hugo, who was highly instrumental in the creation of the early nineteenth century fad known as *L'Orientalisme*. Victor Hugo imagined 'an Orient streaming with colour, voluptuous and savage'. This exaggerated but glowing picture of the Near East Hugo conveyed in poems such as *La Captive* and *Les Djinns*. His vivid poems on Oriental subjects were an overwhelming success. Each line was crammed with evocative imagery, and served to fuel the imaginations of countless painters, sculptors, musicians — and of course, other writers. Hugo was acclaimed as the 'father of the Golden Age' for his rediscovery of the Orient, leading creative artists 'into the great garden of poetry where there is no forbidden fruit'.

Les Djinns, from Hugo's influential early collection of verse, *Les Orientales* (1829), takes for its subject matter those djinns (sometimes referred to as jinness or genii or even geniuses), the evil spirits of Arab mythology, who frequently introduce the magical element into Oriental tales (as in *Vathek*, for instance). Hugo was well aware of the part that djinns played in Muslim theology:

> crafty-spirited beings, who refused to worship man as Allah had ordered, and with their chief, Eblis, were cursed, but some of whom will be saved because they believed in Mahomet.

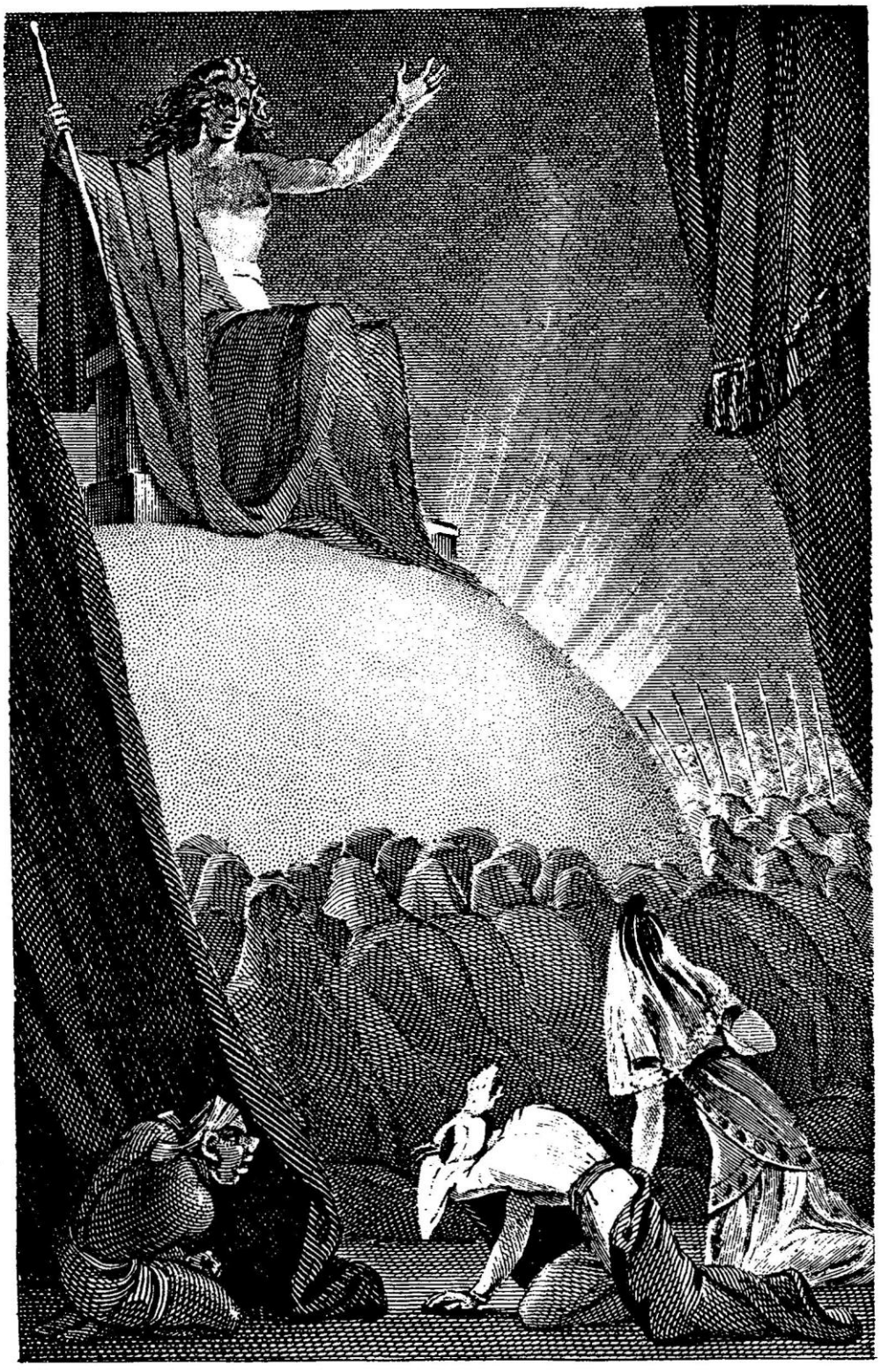
As a corollary of such religious beliefs, it often occurs in Arabian tales that an act of disobedience is the reason behind the imprisonment of a djinn or genie in some talisman. Nevertheless, Hugo's djinns have more in common with the sprites and goblins of Nordic and Anglo-French folklore than the djinns of the Koran or the *Thousand and One Nights*. Hugo's poem is, in fact, a work of almost pure imagination, mixing elements of both Eastern and Western mythology, the Oriental and the Gothic.

Opposite Page: Frontispiece to the 1815 Edition of Vathek

Thus Hugo felt no scruple at the inconsistency of introducing a Witches' Sabbath into his Oriental poem in order to heighten the atmosphere of supernatural horror. In Franck's *Les Djinns*, (1884), a symphonic poem directly inspired by Hugo's work, the composer set himself the extraordinary task of depicting in musical terms

> the approach, presence, and disappearance of the horrible swarm of Djinns, the hideous army of vampires and dragons, driven by the north wind, that fill the air with infernal cries, howls, and groans, and pass whirling, and whistling, shivering the yew-trees, and all but overthrowing the strongest dwelling.

ORIENTALISM MIGHT BE said to be the obverse of the Gothic in nineteenth century artistic inspiration, and a natural complement to it. Many artists, from Beckford onwards, tried their hand at both genres. Several, including Poe, Hugo and Southey, succeeded in integrating Oriental and Gothic characteristics into their literary works. Indeed, the return of the long narrative poem to the English language after an absence of



nearly half a century was heralded by a remarkable work, *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), by Robert Southey, in which the poet united a highly personal and extremely bizarre view of the East with horrifying supernatural forces. In his next and more popular Oriental epic, *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), Southey wrote of the drowned city of Baly where lurks a dragon-like guardian beast, shoals of fish swimming around empty halls, and mummified kings in their undersea catacombs.

Certain fundamental characteristics were shared by those two nebulous worlds of otherness: the Gothic and the Oriental. Both were largely concerned with inducing notions of weirdness, danger, fear, barbarity, cruelty and bloodlust. Gothic and Oriental tales were often impossible to grasp from a rational point of view, and frequently involved digging into the mental and physical past, and uprooting the ghosts that lurked there.

Above all, however, the special forte of the Romantics — whether Orientalists, Gothicists or both, was their ability to create the most unusual atmospheres ever yet imagined. In this eclectic age of unprecedented imaginative escapism, the stranger the aesthetic atmosphere that could be invented, the better the effect was held to be. As artists vied with each other in fashioning works of unutterable weirdness and horror, an increasing stock of remarkable creations was produced. A fine selection of the sinister ingredients which parallel, yet always remain distinct from those of the Gothic genre, can be found in Flaubert's *Salammbo* of 1862 — the quintessential example of the bizarre Oriental tale.

THERE WAS A certain amount of polarisation between the two great Romantic trends, with the Orientalists and the Gothicists vying for their taste to be considered the most elegant and original. Théophile Gautier, for one, much preferred the Orient to the Middle Ages, a period from which he longed to be delivered:

> ... these Middle Ages which are not the Middle Ages, these cardboard and terracotta Middle Ages which are Middle Ages only in name ... So, down with the Middle Ages as the charlatans have created them (the great word is out! the charlatans)! The Middle Ages are now irrelevant, we want something else.

Ironically, a supporter of the Middle Ages might well have directed a similar tirade against the Orientalists.

The taste for Orientalism in literature and art naturally found its way into interior decoration. All sorts of people with the gift of imagination filled the interiors of their houses as well as their minds with exotic images and artefacts from the Orient. Sometimes this could be taken to extremes, as when the French symbolist poet Mallarmé saw the exotic decor of a Parisian house belonging to the eccentric aristocrat, Robert, Comte de Montesquiou-Ferenzac, and was overjoyed to find himself in what appeared to be Ali-Baba's cave.

On those occasions when the wandering French novelist Pierre Loti was at home, and not in his legitimate attire as a naval officer, he often elected to dress in the costumes of ancient and Oriental civilisations. Above all, his preference for the Turkish and Arabic modes of life saw him, by turns, adopt the costumes and daily customs of one of these peoples, right down to the very subtlest of their mannerisms. At Rochefort, in France, he had built for himself a fabulous palace consisting of a curious hotchpotch of styles and ages. This palace boasted a Medieval room, a Japanese room, a vast red and gold Chinese hall and a chamber furnished in old Turkish style. These rooms became the settings for sumptuous entertainments — a fête Chinoise, fête Arabe, a Carthaginian evening attended by the actress Rose Caron who dressed as Salammbo, and a fabulous fifteenth century party held in April, 1888, to celebrate the completion of two years of interior decorating, and at which his guests were permitted to speak only Medieval French. Hearing that a mosque was to be demolished in Damascus, Loti even gave orders that it should be transplanted, stone by stone, to the grounds of his home in France. There it took its place beside an Oriental pagoda. Into his mosque Loti crammed the hundreds of souvenirs he brought back from his many visits to exotic countries. Over the years, he also successfully transformed his garden into a most authentic tropical paradise, replete with all the necessary flora. And Loti positively churned out Oriental novels set in a wide variety of unfamiliar locations, most of them enjoying enormous success. It was in his bizarre Oriental palace that Loti died in 1923, exotic to the last.

AN INTEREST BOTH in geography and in the earlier days of human history, stemming from a host of new archaeological discoveries, led artists to make fanciful speculations as to the exact nature of life in decayed past civilisations. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, R A, the Victorian painter famed for the detail and colour of his Egyptian, Greek and Roman canvasses, wished his pictures to convey the feeling that ancient people, 'despite their strange dress, were just such people as one might know'. With a similar aim in mind, the German Egyptologist, Georg Moritz Ebers, who insisted 'that the proper study of the archaeologist is life', also published historical novels. These novels he viewed as the fitting outcome of his studies. In 1864, Ebers wrote *An Egyptian Princess* in his desire to make the most of his researches, to bring the past to life, to draw his audience in and to imbue this past with some sense of immediacy, thereby clothing 'the dry bones of learning with romance'. Even Sigmund Freud would seem to have adhered to Ebers' belief that the archaeologist must 'study life', for it was Freud's clearly stated intention to be like his archaeologist hero, Heinrich Schliemann

(who began to dig up the remains of Troy in 1870, through many layers of the Eastern past), except that he was to be an excavator of the mind. Freud likened himself to Moses, leading his people out of those neuroses induced by their Egyptian bondage (whereby they were forced to live in a manner at variance with their basic natures) and into the Promised Land of freedom.

British author and politician, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, undertook as demanding a research task as did Ebers with the composition and publication of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 'perhaps the most successful attempt by any novelist at using newly discovered archaeological evidence as material for a story'. While focusing on life in Pompeii, the choice of such a bustling centre of activity in the ancient world nevertheless allowed Lytton to introduce people from 'the remotest climes' — Oriental regions such as Syria and Egypt — and make mention of their curious religions, especially worship connected with the Egyptian cult of Isis. (The Temple of Isis was one of the most important buildings in ancient Pompeii.)

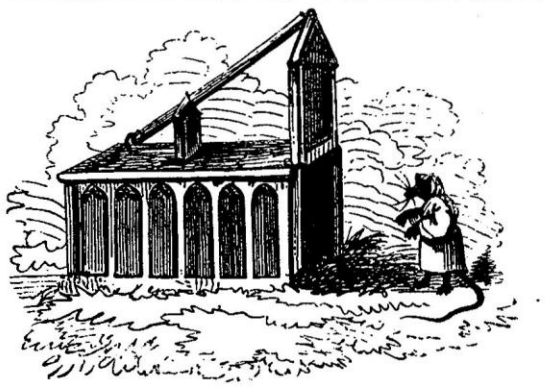
The choice of cosmopolitan city centres as focal points of action became a useful device in such historical novels, for they allowed for further heightening of the exotic coloration. In his Preface to the First Edition (1834) of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Lord Lytton stated that he had 'laboured, however unworthily' to realise his desire 'to people once more those deserted streets, to repair those graceful ruins', and 'to reanimate the bones' of Pompeii's long-dead inhabitants. Lytton emphasised that his century, the nineteenth century, was one in which the responsibility of 'the Poet (the creator)' was to raise 'scholarship to the creative', rather than 'bow the creative to the scholastic'.

Artists motivated by a desire to recreate the past, took archaeology one step further into the realms of individual experience and tried, by all possible means, to re-imagine and re-experience this past as far as possible. This might entail dressing-up in authentic historical costume, decorating in the antique style, visiting those lands around which one's art was centred, even practising authentic ancient customs(!).

In the final two paragraphs of Mircea Eliade's *Myth and Reality*, the author concludes that the romanticising of history is a remnant of human kind's tendency to mythological behaviour — and Eliade finds that literature holds the greatest responsibility for this phenomenon.

Théophile Gautier blamed 'the ugliness of civilisation' for 'the fact that artists abandon modern times to the craftsmen and stubbornly seek their ideal in the past'. He thought it impossible for the artist ever to record this ugly modern era. Gustave Flaubert was to claim that Gautier, the linchpin of French Romanticism, 'died of disgust with modern life'. He did not see how one could extract from such times any kind of beauty or happiness.

MUSICIANS WERE, by temperament, no less susceptible than artists and men of letters to the desire to furnish their lodgings and working environments in styles suggestive of the more exotic regions of the earth. Claude Debussy, that most famous but ultimately elusive of French musicians, whose art came to be influenced by both the Gothic world of Poe and his own particularly vivid impressions of the Orient, believed that one could 'never spend too much time constructing that special atmosphere in which a work of art should move'. After the Great War, when Maurice Ravel took 'a house of his own which he was able to furnish after his own heart', he escorted the writer and critic M D Calvocoressi on a tour of this new home. Calvocoressi later recalled how, when he showed his guest one room, Ravel would gleefully exclaim 'Look: here, nothing but fake Greek ... And here, nothing but fake Chinese!' Elsewhere in the house could be found a profusion of Japanese prints and mechanical birds. Ravel became noted for 'that curious trait of his of seeking out fake curios and antiques'. The composer soon came to embrace artificiality completely, preferring imitations to the original objects from which such items were copied. His prizing of 'reproductions above the genuine thing' might be seen as the extreme outcome, the 'reductio ad absurdum' of the nineteenth century obsession with historical reconstruction. Furthermore, it would seem to be indicative of that final stage of nineteenth century artistic awakening, wherein the Aesthetes acknowledged that anything that had once belonged to the real world must, ultimately, prove imaginatively unsatisfying, and eventually engender that morbid condition of ennui which artists of the period often mention in their writings. Thus A J Krailsheimer can speak of 'Flaubert's lifelong obsession with ennui, cosmic tedium' which lies heavy in his bizarre, bloodthirsty Oriental epic narrative, *Salammbo*. The artists who suffered most acutely from this sense of ennui were precisely those who most felt the need to free their imaginations from all earthly constraints and associations. Perhaps that is why the aesthetic ideals of the nineteenth century can often seem so absurd when viewed in the rather cool, clear, yet deadening and matter-of-fact world of today.



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