

The Courtauld

Drawing on *Arabian Nights*

22 February – 3 June 2023

The Project Space, The Courtauld Gallery

Curated by Emily Christensen and Ambra D'Antone

In art, the term Orientalism refers to the depiction of a region identified by Europeans as “the Orient”, which loosely covered the Middle East, North Africa, West and South Asia. Beginning in the 18th century, European audiences saw Orientalist paintings and drawings as faithful records of travel in these regions, an interpretation encouraged by the extreme degree of naturalism typically associated with Orientalist art. This selection of prints and drawings from The Courtauld’s collection, many of which relate to, or are directly inspired by the text *Arabian Nights*, invites viewers to consider an alternative reading of these artworks, as confluences of observed detail and literary fiction. Looking at these works through the lens of *Arabian Nights* reveals the active role that artists played in creating “realistic” but not necessarily “real” visual representations of regions and peoples beyond Europe.

Arabian Nights (in Arabic *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, or *One Thousand and One Nights*) is a collection of stories passed down in various combinations over the course of hundreds of years. As a product of oral storytelling that drew on Arabic, Persian and Indian sources, there is no single authoritative version, although the earliest extant text is a fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript. It first appeared in Europe in 1701, in a highly successful French translation from Arabic by Antoine Galland that circulated widely across Europe. *Arabian Nights* became a common point of reference for artists, who sought to capture a world that resembled the fantastical stories that were familiar to them from childhood. The print by the contemporary poet and translator Yasmine Seale, which concludes this exhibition, demonstrates the ongoing resonance of this material.

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Works on display



Dalziels' Illustrated Arabian Nights' Entertainments

London: Ward, Lock & Tyler, 1864-1865

The Courtauld Gallery Archive

The framing device of *Arabian Nights* is the story of Shahrazad (or Scheherazade) who offers herself as wife to the Persian king Shahriyar. The king, as revenge for his first wife's infidelity, determines to marry a young woman each night and have her put to death the following morning. Shahrazad's audacious plan is to tell the king a fantastical story, with the promise to tell an even more wondrous one the following night, if only she is permitted to live that long. This results in an interconnected series of vivid stories, crafted to enthrall the audience with adventure, magic, sex and suspense.

This edition is an English translation of Antoine Galland's French version, edited to suit Victorian morality. All erotic references have been removed or converted into innocuous euphemisms. It contains over 200 detailed engravings, executed by the Dalziel Brothers from illustrations by British artists including John Everett Millais.



Dalziel Brothers (active 19th century), after Arthur Boyd Houghton (1836-1875)

The Journey of Prince Firouz Schah and the Princess of Bengal, 1865

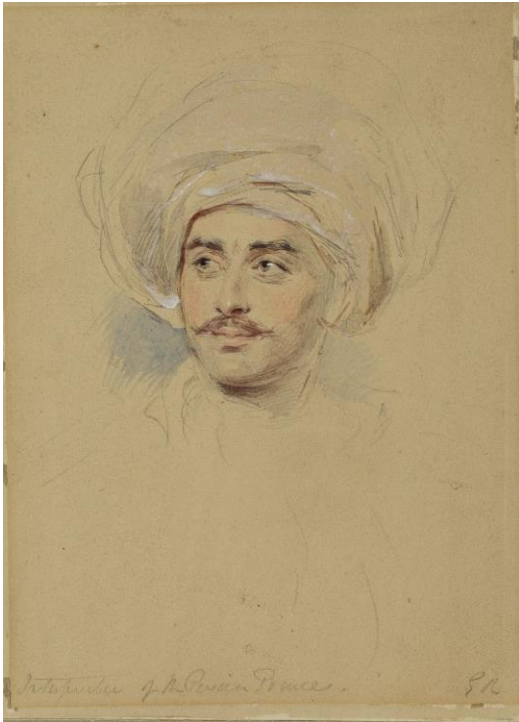
Wood engraving

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust): Witt Library transfer, 1990

G.1990.WL.7042

Established Victorian artists were commissioned to produce illustrations for the Dalziels' lavish edition of *Arabic Nights*, among them Arthur Boyd Houghton who produced the drawing on which this engraving was based. It illustrates the story of "The Enchanted Horse" in which the Prince of Persia rode a magical mechanical horse to the Kingdom of Bengal and fell in love with its princess. It contains elements of magic, romance and the exotic, which epitomised the appeal of *Arabic Nights* to Europeans.

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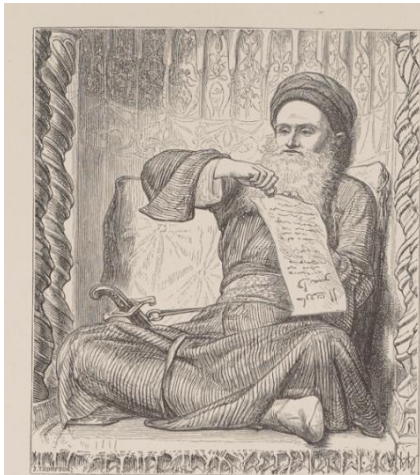


George Richmond (1809-1896)

Portrait head of Edward William Lane in a turban,
around 1838

Graphite, watercolour and opaque watercolour on card
The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust): Sir Robert
Witt bequest, 1952
D.1952.RW.3805

The scholar of Arabic Edward Lane (1801-1876) lived in Cairo for several years between 1825 and 1849. Lane immersed himself in the culture of Ottoman Egypt for scholarly research and regularly dressed like a wealthy Ottoman Egyptian. In 1838 he published a new translation of *Arabian Nights* in English, adding copious ethnographic notes which suggested that the stories were credible accounts of life in Egypt. In this portrait, an inscription identifies Lane as the "interpreter of the Persian Prince", a reference to a character in *Arabian Nights*.



John Thompson and Thomas Williams after William
Holman Hunt

Two prints from *Recollections of the Arabian Nights*,
1857

Wood engraving

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust): Witt
Library transfer, 1990

G.1990.WL.4512; G.1990.WL.4513

The Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt travelled to the Middle East in 1854, driven by what he called his "oriental mania". His writings suggest he saw places through the lens of *Arabian Nights*, describing "a mosque with marble inlaid work that seemed to belong to the time of Harun al Raschid", a historical figure fictionalised and made famous by *Arabian Nights*. These prints were produced by Holman Hunt to illustrate Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem, *Recollections of the Arabian Nights* of 1830.



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John Frederick Lewis (1805-1876)

Oriental interior, around 1841-1851

Graphite, black and white chalk, pen and brown ink, watercolour and opaque watercolour

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust): Sir Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.3550

The English painter John Frederick Lewis lived in Cairo between 1841 and 1851. This work meticulously details a domestic interior, is unfinished quality suggesting a scene rapidly captured from life. Upon Lewis's return to London, sketches like these served as models for some of his most famous paintings of harems (women's quarters). It serves as a reminder of the common artistic practice of incorporating 'real' backdrops into imagined scenes.



John Frederick Lewis (1805-1876)

Street with the Mausoleum and Mosque of the Sultan al-Ghuri, Cairo, around 1841-1851

Graphite with some stumping, watercolour and opaque watercolour on wove paper

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust): Sir Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.3051

While Lewis lived in Cairo he often sketched the city. He produced several watercolours of the souq (market) that lay within the 16th-century Sultan al-Ghūrī mosque complex, a popular subject among European artists. As in the nearby drawing of an interior, Lewis accented samples of colour, textures, architectural details and people, leaving other elements unfinished. The market was a space of social encounters and exchanges, where many of the *Arabian Nights* stories began, making it an evocative narrative backdrop for Orientalist art.

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Glyn Warren Philpot (1884-1937)

Study for *Après-Midi Tunisien*, around 1922

Pen and black ink, watercolour, over graphite

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust): Gabrielle Cross gift, 1962

D.1962.GC.16

This is a study for Glyn Philpot's oil painting *L'Après-Midi Tunisien* (1922; fig. 1). Two men have kicked off their slippers and are lounging in a niche shielded in the sun. An ornate mashrabiyya screen appears behind them here, but not in the finished painting. This discrepancy suggests that Philpot experimented with different visual effects and that he was not simply depicting an observed scene.

Philpot first visited Tunisia in 1920, and then again in the mid-1930s. For artists travelling to North Africa, ideas of the Orient drawn from fiction were as important as reality itself. Texts like *Arabian Nights* contributed to moulding the artists' and public's expectations around the Orient, imagined as a place of decadence and lasciviousness.



Fig. 1. Glyn Warren Philpot, *L'Après-Midi Tunisien*, 1922. Whereabouts unknown



John Frederick Lewis (1805-1876)

A male figure in North African dress, around 1841-1851

Black, red and white chalk, pen and brown ink, watercolour and opaque watercolour on wove paper

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust): Dorothy Scharf bequest, 2007

D.2007.DS.27

This man could be one of Lewis's models in costume or Lewis himself, as he often appeared in disguise within his works. While the costume may suggest authenticity, it provides evidence that this is a fictional scene: the man wears a Berber burnus (cloak), with the hood incorrectly worn up, held up by a headrope ordinarily associated with dress from the Arabian Peninsula. The trope of men in disguise recurs repeatedly throughout *Arabian Nights*, where it allowed access to information, introduced voyeurism and created intrigue.

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David Wilkie (1785-1841)

Madame Giuseppina in Turkish dress, 1840

Black and red chalk, graphite, watercolour and opaque watercolour on buff wove paper

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust): Spooner bequest, 1967

D.1967.WS.100

Scottish artist David Wilkie travelled to the Middle East in 1840 on a sketching tour. Fascinated by the varied fashion that he saw in Constantinople, but with limited access to female subjects, he painted his Greek landlady, known as Madame Giuseppina, in Turkish dress. The inscription at the base of the drawing provides a rare example of an artist acknowledging the fiction of a European model posing in an Oriental scene.



Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702-1789)

Man seated on a drum smoking a hookah, 1748-1753

Red, black and white chalk on laid paper

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust): Sir Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.4340

The Swiss artist Jean-Étienne Liotard lived in Istanbul from 1738 to 1742. There, he adopted Turkish clothing and called himself "the Turkish painter". In this work, using only red, black and white chalks, Liotard renders the figure of the man smoking with extraordinary realism. The artist was known for his attention to detail, and a technique he called "l'élimination des touches", a fine application of colour without visible traces of the artist's hand. The careful rendering of clothing here may have provided a reference for his many portraits of European notables in Ottoman dress.

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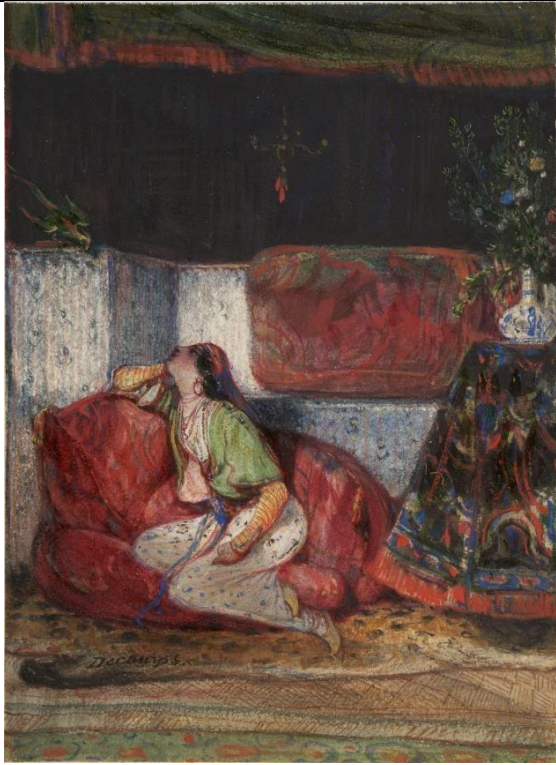
The Odalisque

The odalisque (from the Ottoman Turkish *odaliq*, female slave) is one of the most recognisable subjects in Orientalist art. Over the course of the nineteenth century, odalisque imagery came to have stereotypical components: an interior space evoking a harem (women's quarters), decorative objects from the Middle East or North Africa that suggest sensual pleasures, and a woman wearing exotic and often revealing clothing, posing languidly, seeming to advertise her sexual availability. This figure was, however, a figment of the European imagination, fired in part by the fabrications in *Arabian Nights*.

Closed to men and most Western travelers, harems became misunderstood objects of intense fascination and sexual fantasy. Male artists frequently complained of the difficulty they had in finding female models in Islamic countries, and the works in this room were all likely executed using European models. The popularity of *Arabian Nights* helped shape the development of the odalisque through the erotic elements in the stories, not least Shahrazad herself, who narrates all the tales under threat of death from the King's bed.

Arabian Nights was fiction; it was never intended as a factual portrayal of life and morals in the Middle East and North Africa. The stories were created to entertain; characters and situations were exaggerated to further the plot or enhance suspense. Their popularity contributed to European belief that the Orient was lascivious, barbaric and morally corrupt. Foregrounding the significance of this text as inspiration for artists contributes to our understanding of these works and to current debates about their role within art history.

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Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps (1803-1860)
Odalisque in an interior with a parrot, 1830s
 Watercolour and opaque watercolour on wove paper
 The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust): Sir Robert Witt bequest, 1952
 D.1952.RW.4404

Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps was a leading French Orientalist painter, and one of the first to travel extensively in North Africa and the Middle East. This work, with meticulous attention to detail in the textiles and furnishings, was an imagined scene, likely based on the *Arabian Nights*' "Story of the Husband and the Parrot". The jealous husband buys a magic parrot that reports on his beautiful wife's infidelity. For readers of the *Nights*, this image would have evoked lasciviousness, magic and despotism.



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867)
Study for La Grande Odalisque, 1814
 Graphite on woven paper
 The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust): acquired by the Samuel Courtauld Trust with assistance of the Victoria & Albert Museum/Museums and Galleries Commission
 D.1995.XX.1

The odalisque was a recurring subject for French Neoclassical artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, most famously in his painting *La Grande Odalisque* (Louvre Museum, Paris; fig. 2), for which this sketch was a study.



Fig. 2. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814. Paris, Musée du Louvre

Ingres never travelled outside of Europe, relying instead on literature and his own imagination for the depiction of this sexually suggestive female nude in an exotic setting. Devoid of the contextual details of textiles, turban and props, which orientalised the subject in the finished painting, this drawing shows Ingres's intense focus on the sensuality of her curving naked form. *La Grande Odalisque* became a reference for numerous artists (among them the Impressionist artist Edgar Degas, who owned this sketch) and established a cipher for "the oriental woman".

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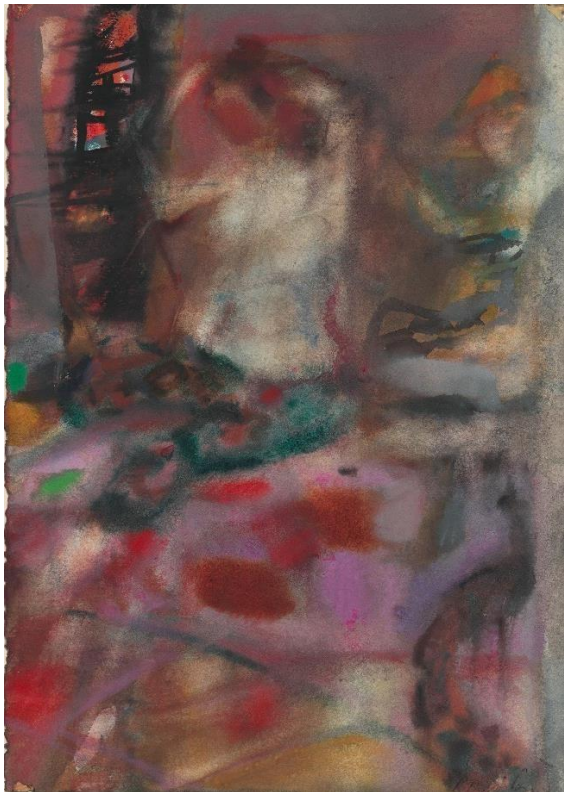
Édouard Manet (1832-1883)

Odalisque, around 1868

Etching and aquatint

On loan from a private collection

Édouard Manet is often considered the first modern artist to emerge in 19th-century Paris. His paintings were seen as controversial for their loose handling and incorporation of explicitly working-class Parisians. The fictional theme of the odalisque was unusual for Manet, who never travelled to the Middle East or North Africa, although he painted an erotic Orientalist work (*La Sultane*) in 1871. This etching shows his familiarity with the conventional features of an odalisque, particularly her revealing attire and languid pose, demonstrating the popularity of this subject.



© Estate of Sir Robin Philipson

Robin Philipson (1916-1992)

Odalisque and flute player, 1962-1963

Watercolour and opaque watercolour with blotting on wove paper

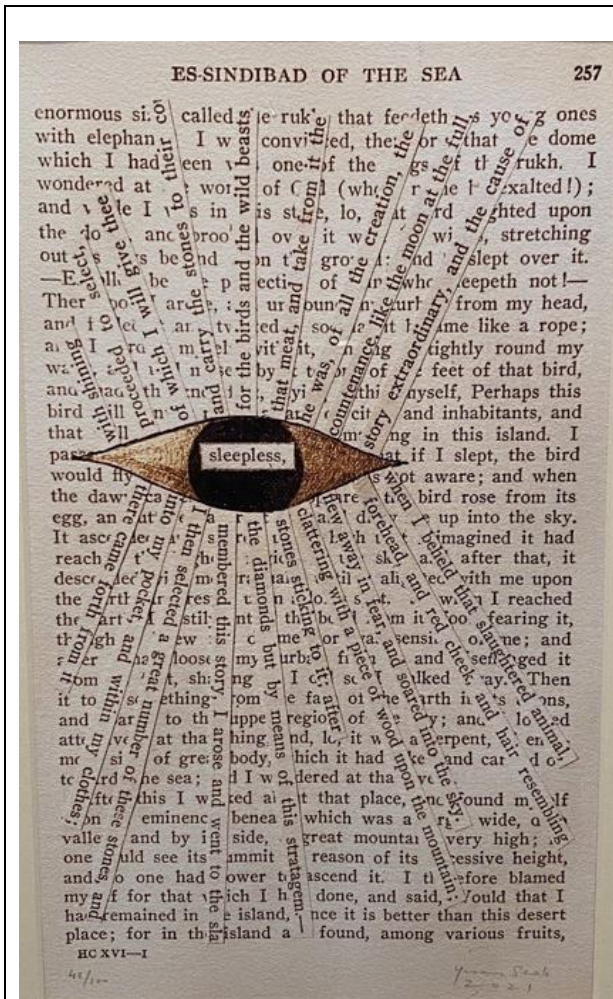
The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust): Lillian Browse gift, 1982

D.1982.LB.9

Philipson painted several odalisques in the 1960s. Here, the woman, facing left, sits on a richly patterned bed; she is naked, other than her dark green trousers, and is fixing her hair, accompanied by a flute player and a peacock at right. The faceless figures are difficult to discern, and Philipson's manipulation of watercolour, dissolving the edges between objects, gives the work the quality of a dream.

Odalisques as a fictional theme persisted for over a century. Even when approaching abstraction, their visual elements remained familiar and recognisable.

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© Yasmine Seale

Yasmine Seale (b.1989)

Erasures (Arabian Nights), 2020

Mixed media on paper

On loan from a private collection

Seale is a poet and translator of *Arabian Nights*.

Alongside her translation, she produced a series of works called *Erasures* using pages from an Edward Lane translation of the *Nights*. These works acknowledge and embody the *Nights*' long history as an unstable text that shapes images by literally cutting, distorting and layering selected sections of text into a new composition that weds word and image.

The range of works in this display shows the continuing power of *Arabian Nights* and its imagery to inspire the creation of art up to the present day, even when made with radically different subject matter, media and aims. This exhibition provides an opportunity to re-engage with Orientalist works of art in a way that confronts their ambivalent status as material witnesses of a bygone past. The drawings, watercolours and prints shown here have been drawn from *Arabian Nights* every bit as much as they have been drawn from life.