

Colonialism and Orientalism

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers colonialism and Orientalism. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the historical context of 19th-century colonialism, and identify important examples of Orientalist works of art from this period. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

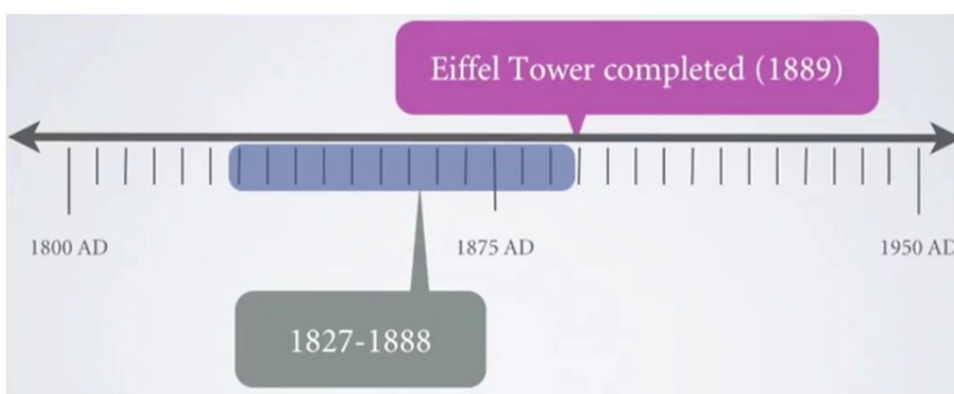


BIG IDEA

The 19th century in Europe marks a time of significant territorial expansion and colonialism in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. This exposure to and fascination with other cultures can be seen in the Orientalism in works of art from this period.

1. Period and Location: Colonialism and Orientalism

The artwork that you will be looking at today dates from between 1827 and 1888 and focuses geographically on Paris, France.

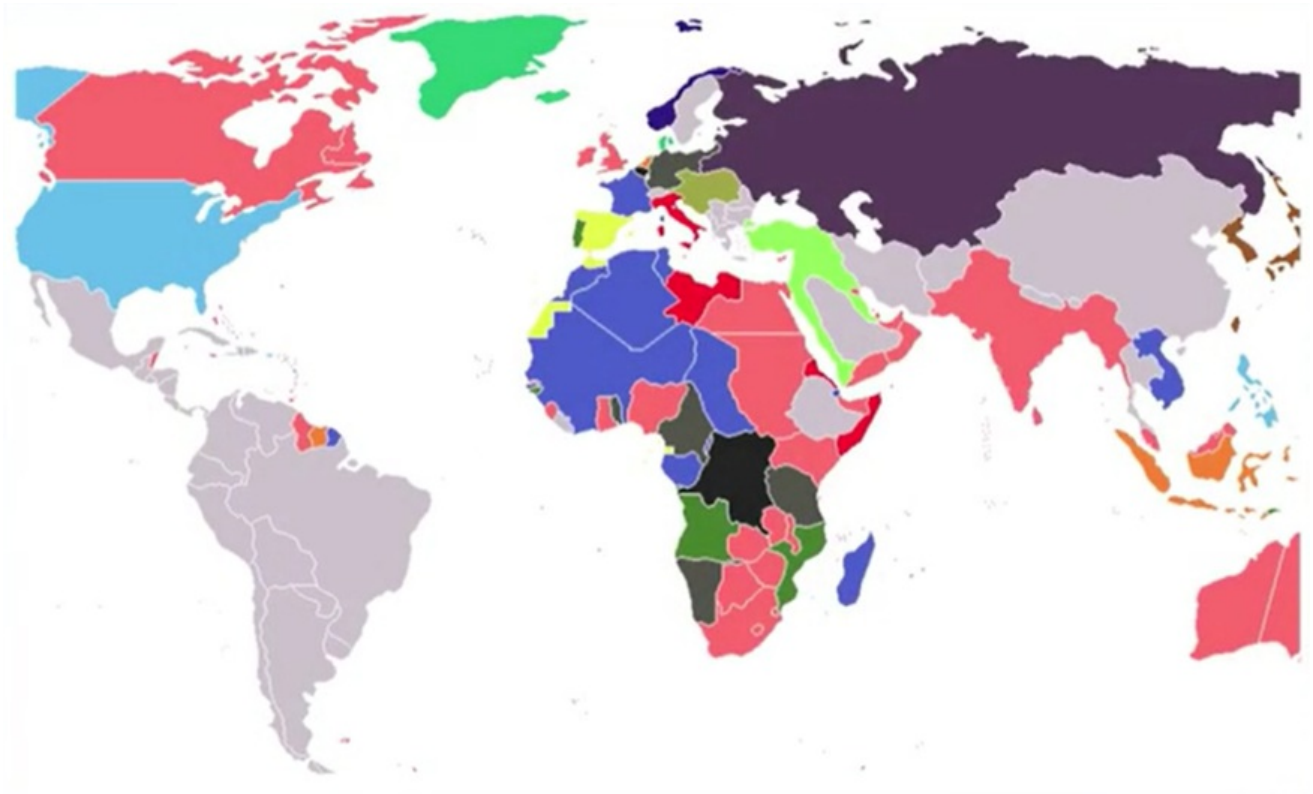


2. 19th-Century Colonialism and Orientalism: Historical Context

Colonialism is essentially the spread of one culture into a foreign area with the establishment of a permanent colony within that recently acquired area. This occurred extensively in the 19th century, with countries from all

over Europe staking their claims in foreign lands in attempts to expand their empires.

Here is a snapshot that illustrates the presence of colonialism in the world by the year 1914. Notice that each bright color represents a country and the respective spread of its culture into a foreign area, through the establishment of a permanent colony.



The history of **colonialism** is a complicated one with dark consequences, some of which you still see today.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Many scholars argue that Africa has never really recovered from the effects of European colonialism.

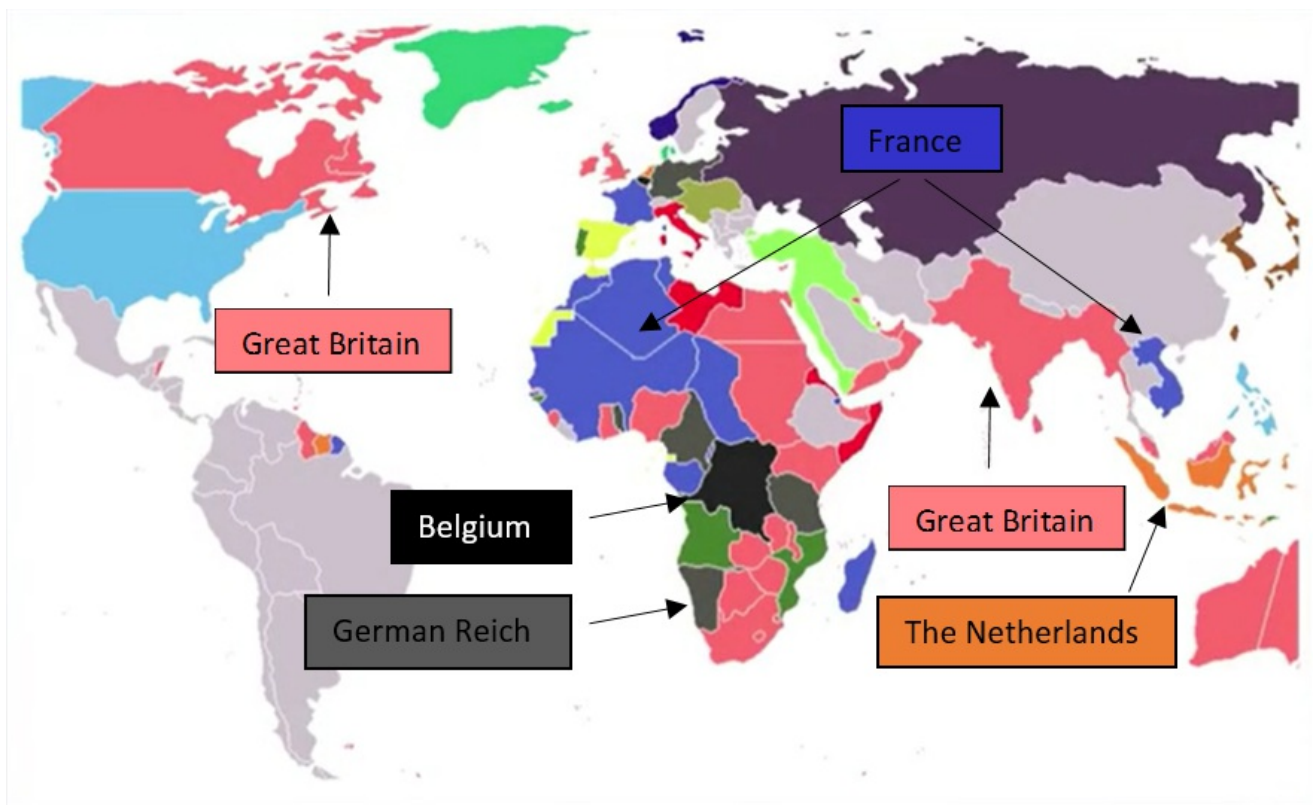
Orientalism is linked to this time as European powers were seizing control around the world, and not just in Asia. England, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany are just a few of the countries of Europe that established colonies at one time or another outside of Europe.

For example, Great Britain colonized areas of Canada and throughout Africa, as you can see in the map below. Similarly, France colonized in Africa and Vietnam, Belgium, and the German Reich colonized in Africa, and the Netherlands colonized in the island nations of Southeast Asia. However, nobody did it quite like Great Britain. At one time the British Empire was the most dominant and powerful empire in the world.



DID YOU KNOW

As the saying went, "The sun never sets on the British Empire." If you include the British Isles as part of the European continent, Britain at the onset of World War I had recognized territories on six of the seven continents on the planet and a seventh unrecognized claim in Antarctica—fairly impressive for a little island country.



TERM TO KNOW

Colonialism

The unequal relationship, acquisition, and expansion of colonies in one territory by people from another.

3. Orientalism in 19th-Century Artwork

In the early part of the 19th century, the Empire of France was the dominant force in continental Europe. The spread of France into the Middle East and Asia exposed the people of Europe to the cultures of these areas. Europeans were fascinated by other cultures but also tended to view them as inferior to their own.

Orientalism in art refers to the inaccurate depiction of these cultures, often through a lens of **stereotype** and European cultural superiority, in works of art.



HINT

Though most Orientalist paintings depict scenes from the Middle East and feature Muslims, it should be noted that the term can also apply to Asia as a whole.

The artists Eugène Delacroix, Jean Ingres, and Jean-Léon Gérôme were noted for their Orientalist work. French Orientalism was influenced not only by the Napoleonic campaigns but also by romantic interests in the sublime and the exotic.

You may recognize the following painting from an earlier tutorial on Romanticism. This painting by Eugène Delacroix depicts the Assyrian King Sardanapalus casually reclining and preparing to commit suicide by immolation, or burning, to avoid facing defeat. However, he doesn't plan on going solo. On the contrary, he's taking his prized possessions along with him, including women from his harem. You can tell by the gestures and expressions of these women that they may not agree with their master's decision.



The Death of Sardanapalus by Eugène Delacroix

1827

Oil on canvas

The painting above and the following painting by Ingres, called “The Turkish Baths”, were influential in connecting Oriental themes to sensuality. Both of these paintings depict scenes featuring **odalisques** in **harems**—nude, of course—and with a few exceptions, they are generally relaxed or at leisure.



The Turkish Bath by Jean Ingres

1862

Oil on canvas

An interesting comparison to paintings featuring pleasure slaves is this next piece, which is a more sobering depiction of the slave trade by the artist Jean-Léon Gérôme. This is one of his several paintings depicting the Middle Eastern slave trade.



The Slave Market by Jean-Léon Gérôme

1888

Oil on canvas

Interpretations of this painting are varied in their explanations of what the artist is trying to say, if anything. It's been described by some as a scientific painting of veiled eroticism. Others feel that her expression, which appears almost vegetative or at least detached from reality, really downplays the eroticism. Still others suggest that it's an implication of European superiority over Middle Eastern cultures, given how the men are shown in the extremely degrading behavior of assessing a fair-skinned slave by checking her mouth as if she were a horse.



THINK ABOUT IT

What do you think about these varying interpretations of the painting? In reality, none of these suggestions can be discounted. Any or all of them could be correct. It could also be a realistic depiction of the slave trade of the time. The spread of the Ottoman Empire into parts of Eastern Europe created the potential for a sizable market for fair-skinned women. It's very likely that she's of Eastern European descent and unfortunately has made her way east or south into Africa as a victim of the sex trade.



TERMS TO KNOW

Orientalism

In art, the imitation or depiction of aspects of culture from the Middle East and Asia, usually in a highly inaccurate and biased fashion.

Stereotype

Widely held, but oversimplified and sometimes inaccurate, ideas about people based on their gender, ethnicity, and other qualities.

Harem

The section of a Muslim household that is reserved for women; could also refer to wives and concubines.

Odalisque

A female attendant or chambermaid that lives in a harem.

**SUMMARY**

Today you learned about **colonialism** and **Orientalism**. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms. You also learned about the **historical context of 19th-century colonialism** and how to identify important examples of **Orientalist artwork** from this period.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.

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