



Elisabeth A. Fraser. *Mediterranean Encounters: Artists between Europe and the Ottoman Empire, 1774-1839.* University Park: Penn State University Press, 2017. Illustrations. 320 pp. \$89.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-271-07320-0.

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Elisabeth A. Fraser's new book, *Mediterranean Encounters: Artists between Europe and the Ottoman Empire, 1774-1839*, actively decenters Europe as the locus of modern history. It gives agency to Ottoman artists and artistic accounts, exploring the entangled histories and often contradictory narratives that link these parts of the world. By looking at a group of six illustrated travel albums produced at the end of the eighteenth century, Fraser positions migration and representation as related components in a transnational system of exchange. She illustrates continuities of historic experience across the land and sea, highlighting visual accounts shaped by particular moments of contact. With a carefully theorized methodology to investigate such meetings and their materializations on the album page, *Mediterranean Encounters* illuminates the intercultural nature that has long defined the Ottoman Empire. Fraser's splendidly rich analysis embraces the instability and disorientation engendered by the experience of travel and the reciprocal (though not always equal) process of borrowing visual forms and representational strategies across shifting imperial and national borders.

Divided into three parts, "Power in Question," "Ottoman Culture Abroad," and "Contradictory Contact," *Mediterranean Encounters* uses case

studies based on both artists and albums to traverse the whole of the Ottoman-occupied Mediterranean basin. It is well written and beautifully produced with ample illustrations in both black and white and color. The introduction provides an outline of Fraser's theoretical approach to the history of contact. Using actor-network theory, Fraser crafts a philosophy of cross-cultural encounter that draws connections between books, images, and people, which, as she suggests, embody the construction and circulation of knowledge. Her philosophy is strongly informed by approaches to global history from the early modern period, from the work of such scholars as Nathalie Rothman. Expanding on the exemplary approach of Mary Roberts, with her most recent publication *Istanbul Exchanges: Ottomans, Orientalists, and Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture* (2015), Fraser examines Western and Ottoman imperialism in relationship to each other. What follows are six insightful chapters that move chronologically from 1774 to 1839. This short but vibrant time period in the history of both European and Ottoman expansion allows for careful and rewarding object studies that articulate Fraser's commitment to detailed research and archival study.

In brief, the first chapter addresses Comte Marie-Gabriel-Florent-Auguste de Choiseul-Gouffier's *Voyage pittoresque de la Grèce* (1782) as a paradigmatic example of illustrated travel literature within the Orientalist archive. The second chapter explores pictorial publications by the French artist-assistant, Louis-François Cassas, and examines how Cassas's position as a relatively unknown artist and aide to the French ambassador transformed his views of the Mediterranean. Ignatius Mouradgea d'Ohsson's illustrated history, *Tableau général de l'Empire Othoman* (published in seven volumes from 1787 to 1820), comprises the third chapter and provides a pivotal example for understanding the syncretic processes of translation, mediation, and circulation involved in French-Ottoman interaction. Chapter 4 takes a close look at Antoine-Ignace Melling, his twenty-year residency as imperial architect to Sultan Selim III in Istanbul, and his illustrated travel account *Voyage pittoresque de Constantinople et des rives du Bosphore* (1819). Fraser argues that Melling's volume was shaped by an Ottoman pictorial vocabulary formed by the imperial elite. Chapter 5 investigates the convoluted process of making *Voyage à Athènes et à Constantinople* (1825) by the French artist Louis Dupré. The final chapter looks closely at Eugène Delacroix's sketchbooks made during his sojourn to North Africa as part of a French diplomatic mission in 1832, and argues that his works comprise "part of French expansionist engagement with the Ottoman Empire" (p. 207).

While the book is oriented around these discrete case studies, Fraser weaves information from one chapter into the next, deliberately sequencing them to build off one another. For example, she purposefully discusses Melling's album (published between 1809 and 1819) before the work of Dupré, in part because Dupré drew inspiration directly from *Voyage pittoresque de Constantinople et des rives du Bosphore*. In so doing, Fraser explores how the costume representations illustrated by Dupré were compiled and made to

communicate cultural identity with the same power and persuasion as monuments and panoramas, like those featured in Melling's album. Tracking this transition between representations of geographical topography and sartorial customs is a productive one. Both were informed by and instrumental to shaping hierarchies of power and social identities in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Mediterranean. Moreover, to treat dress as a topographical body—something that can be read, mapped, and mined for information—resonates not only in conversations about cultural belonging and national identity but also in investigations of portraiture and portrait conventions. While Fraser's configuration of dress as "topography" might be novel in the context of these travel albums, her work joins an extant body of literature on the communicative value of costume in the Ottoman Empire.[1] She does not, however, fully explore how costumes (and their massive compendiums) perform as pseudo-scientific specimens (both on and off the page). The lack of Ottoman sources, imperial precedents, or courtly commissions for the printed costume album makes Fraser's fifth chapter thin in comparison to the rest of the book and fails to honor Ottoman agency in the same way.[2] Perhaps what is missing from this chapter will be addressed in her newest and forthcoming project: "Dressing Empire: Transculturation and the Ottoman Costume Album."

Mediterranean Encounters demonstrates Fraser's dedication to nuanced and comprehensive object-based analysis as well as to transnational conversations in art historical practice. She treats Melling's Bosphorous panoramas, for example, not as "cumbersome or inaccessible visual objects" but as mutable entities, worthy of thorough and sequential readings (pp. 20-21). Fraser emphasizes the enormity of Melling's grand exterior views, which dominate *Voyage pittoresque de Constantinople et des rives du Bosphore*. She notes how these topographically vast depictions of Constantinople form "a navigational narrative"

and guide both viewer and voyager along the city's waterways (p. 136). The theme of water connects Melling's panoramas from one page to the next and it is this material continuity and pictorial uniformity, Fraser argues, that instills the album with a proto-cinematic quality. Through her close looking at the very protean objects in *Mediterranean Encounters*, she demonstrates why these illustrated histories have been previously misunderstood and how one can reread them as agents of important cultural work in their own time.

Fraser is most successful in her ability to navigate the dichotomy between the Orientalist and the Orientalized. Repeatedly, she determines how both travel and its representations can "be seen as parts of a dynamic and unpredictable process rather than one with preordained results" (p. 2). *Mediterranean Encounters* addresses the art historical "tendency to read Ottoman images as 'Westernized'" (p. 11). By emphasizing the interdependence (rather than independence) and shared nature of European and Ottoman histories, her book eloquently shifts this problem of interpretation. Fraser allows travel albums to bring complexity and even contradiction to the oft-employed and monolithic view of Orientalism. With her vibrant analysis of Delacroix's work made in North Africa, for example, she identifies an inherent uncertainty in the beginnings of modern European imperialism and its Orientalist underpinnings. Furthermore, in her discussion of the Choiseul album, Fraser outlines just how heterogeneous these travel albums really were. Not only did Choiseul have his travel companions, such as Jean-Baptiste Hilair, "render what he saw," but he also later had these sketches translated into prints, which are so diverse in subject matter "as to override any impression of a unified text with a single author or voice" (p. 31). It comes as no surprise that Choiseul's staff included at least thirty-six artists as well as engravers, authors, and research experts. Similarly, Cassas also oversaw the work of an astounding number of employees—

eighty-five engravers and etchers worked on his book at various points. By expanding the traditional biographical model, Fraser highlights the multiplicity of authorship occurring in these albums. The notion that an album can be made by more than one person (and oftentimes people from differing cultural contexts, as is explicitly the case with d'Ohsson) changes the conversation around Orientalism. A collaborative and multicultural model unsettles strict notions of cultural belonging and Orientalist hegemony.

Fraser explores multiplicity with regard to the author and equally, and perhaps most remarkably, through the role of the reader. In her text, albums operate as material testaments, which do not only document visual knowledge but also activate a human and corporal knowledge. The repetition of visual images in albums like those by Cassas establish a "dynamic relationship between the monument and the monument depicted" where the picture plane is penetrated by the viewing experience (p. 88). In comparison, Choiseul's singular frontal views contain and isolate these same monuments, standardizing our spatial understanding of such sites and keeping the viewer at a safe distance. Through such comparative analysis, Fraser uncovers how the act of making illustrated travel accounts and the act of reading them become intertwined. She further explains how Cassas offers his audience multiple views of single sites, moving the viewer in and out and around Palmyra (like Auguste Salzmann does with his camera in Jerusalem nearly fifty years later).[3] This movement "breaks the representational frame that holds the viewer," repositioning the viewer into an experiential (rather than an imagined) relationship with the landscape (p. 87). Fraser observes how this type of experiential relationship is also evident in d'Ohsson's album, which through its translations of images from Ottoman manuscripts enjoins the reader-viewer "to participate in a cultural encounter—or at least to observe it unfolding in the book" (p. 117). Her articulation of this process is poignant. By moving

this “cultural encounter” (that is facilitated and guided by the album) off the page, Fraser makes it personal, thus navigating it toward the historical present. In effect, twenty-first-century readers also experience a cross-cultural engagement as they turn through the pages of Fraser’s book.

Taken as a whole, *Mediterranean Encounters* moves beyond existing literature to revise our understanding of art production in a vibrant transnational context. Although she is trained in European art history, Fraser situates her work at disciplinary crossroads, positioning this project as a continuation to the recent explosion of dissertations, articles, and books on Ottoman cross-cultural contact. She builds on the foundational work of early modern Ottomanists like Gülru Necipoğlu and Emine Fetvacı as well as scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ottoman artistic engagements like Ahmet Ersoy, Nancy Micklewright, Mary Roberts, Zeynep Çelik, and Edhem Eldem. To this end, diplomatic networks play a significant role in Fraser’s argument, and she describes the value of their study in art historical investigations: “The cumulative effect of all these varieties of crossings is to blur the boundaries between French and Ottoman forms, to see them as connected across a continuum of visual possibilities” (p. 123). With such statements, Fraser raises questions about how to treat local production and visual idioms while also acknowledging patterns of circulation and cross-cultural continuities. Indeed, her excellent *histoire croisée* accounts not only for the successes but also the failures and contradictions that come with cross-cultural contact. For the later nineteenth-century historian, the value of illustrated travel albums as prototypes for photographic albums remains unmatched in the existing literature. This is of particular note because Fraser’s text ends in 1839—the same year Sultan Mahmud II died, the *Tanzimat* reforms were instated, and photography was announced as a new technology in Britain and France. Issues of authenticity, authority, and sci-

entific discovery, as well as the scopic interests of land survey projects, prefigure how photographs were used for similar means in Mediterranean lands as well as in the United States, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, and other colonial territories. Tools (mapping and measuring, for instance) that shape pictorial scenes as indices for the act of viewing were later expanded and exploited through the new medium of the photographic travel album.

In her quest to bring to life the rich and long-lasting transnational relationship between the Ottoman and French worlds, Fraser’s text does not lend itself to neat or clean reductions, and thus disrupts the art historical tendency to assign artists to national schools. Indeed, the multiethnic and multireligious nature of the Ottoman Empire—“a vast conglomeration of diverse peoples”—benefits Fraser’s inclusive approach. She makes this point most stridently in her chapter on Melling: “Regarding an artist like Melling unproblematically as ‘European’ falsifies the transcultural aspect of Ottoman art. And the assumption that Ottoman artists were ‘influenced’ by European art, by something essentially and profoundly outside inherited Ottoman cultural knowledge, creates artificial divisions that do not fit the Ottoman world. To acknowledge Melling as an Ottoman court artist is to begin to recognize the transcultural aspects of his work, but also simultaneously, Ottoman art” (p. 160). Fraser’s astute analysis of Ottoman identity as both ambiguous and hybrid transcends deep-rooted Orientalist arguments about the fixity of cultural belonging, which her text demonstrates is never fixed at all. Indeed, it is this quality for transcendence that makes *Mediterranean Encounters* a truly exciting new book—for the world was global, connected, and contingent long before the advent of more modern technologies and digital networks.

Notes

[1]. For instance, on the nineteenth-century Ottoman costume books, see Erin Hyde Nolan, “You Are What You Wear: Ottoman Costume Por-

traits in the Elbise-i Osmaniyye,” *Ars Orientalis* 47 (2017): 178-209; Ahmet Ersoy, “A Sartorial Tribute to Late Tanzimat Ottomanism: The Elbise-i ‘Osmaniyye Album,” *Muqarnas Online* 20, no. 1 (2003): 187-207; Nancy Micklewright and Yedida K. Stillman, “Costume in the Middle East,” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 26, no. 1 (1992): 25-28; and Brown Wilson’s discussion of early modern costume albums as cartographic exercises in *The World in Venice: Print, the City and Early Modern Identity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

[2]. The seventeenth-century Album of Ahmed I serves as a valuable example of an earlier differentiation of people through variations in costume. See Emine Fetvacı, “The Album of Ahmed I,” *Ars Orientalis* 42 (2012): 127-138.

[3]. Anjuli Lebowitz, “Faith in the Field: The Art of Discovery in Auguste Salzmann’s Photographic Albums, 1854-1875” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2017).

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