

DISCOVER THE NEW FACE OF ACADEMIC ART

With artworks by American Orientalists

The unique Mission of the Dahesh Museum of Art was to provide the public with a fresh look at European academic art of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and to assess the impact of the academic tradition—training, style, subject matter, and ideals—on the world of art. This tradition had until then been relegated to the margins of art history, and consequently, the public had almost no access to museum exhibitions that explored the achievements of these artists and their legacies.

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What is Academic Art

"Academic art" refers to the tradition of drawing, painting, and sculpture taught at the academies, or art schools, of Europe. The most important academy of the modern period, and the one upon which many others modeled their own systems of promotion, patronage, display and teaching, was the French Academy, founded in 1648. During most of the 19th century, this powerful institution oversaw the premier art school in Paris, the *École des Beaux-Arts*, and controlled the official exhibitions known as *Salons*. It established a strict hierarchy for valuing subject matter, with history paintings at the pinnacle, and also awarded the most prestigious honor a French art student could receive, the *prix de Rome*.

19th-century American artists flocked to Paris which had become the "cultural capital" of the world. Students came in large numbers to train at various *Académies* and in the studios of the great artists of the day, like Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) and Carolus-Duran (1837-1917), who had taken on American pupils. Parisian *Salons* provided an

added arena in which expatriated painters might prove their artistic merit.

During the 19th century, European and American travelers explored, excavated and wrote about an ancient and exotic world just across the Mediterranean Sea. Westerners demonstrated an egocentric and somewhat proprietary point of view in relation to these lands, which stretched across the north coast of Africa from Morocco to Egypt, and on through Arabia and the Levant to the Ottoman Empire, by naming them collectively: the Orient. Scholarship and art generated by European interest in the region came to be known as Orientalism.

Orientalism refers to Western visions of Near Eastern aesthetics. Some American artists, such as Frederic Edwin Church and Sanford Gifford, began enchanted with it as early as the 1870s, followed soon by Louis Comfort Tiffany, R. Swain Gifford, Frederick Bridgman and Edwin Lord Weeks and many others near the turn of the century, many of whom had studied under Jean-Léon Gérôme in Paris.

Orientalism was, in fact, a compilation of individual perception and interpretation that gradually took on its own reality, sometimes coinciding with the reality of Middle Eastern culture and sometimes not. Orientalism created its own expectations and most artists developed formulas to satisfy those assumptions.

In truth, it is important not to over-analyze Orientalism or we risk losing the pleasures of its voluptuousness, diversity and real artistic merit, even its importance as a resource for Europeans eager to glimpse the rest of the world. It is

impossible for artists to step completely away from the conventions of their own environment and, so, Orientalism was overall a product of European tradition. The best Orientalists actually captured the exciting appearance of a rediscovered region and its inhabitants with great effect, a skill inherent in the training of European artists. How successful they were in grasping the inner meaning of a culture so different from their own is a crucial question still debated.

Frederick Arthur Bridgman (November 10, 1847-1928) an American Artist on the Nile



An American Southerner, born in Tuskegee, Alabama, the son of a physician, Bridgman would become one of the United States' most well-known and well-regarded painters and become known as one of the world's most talented "Orientalist" painters.

He began as a draughtsman in New York City, for the American Bank Note Company in 1864-1865, and studied art in the same years at the Brooklyn Art Association and at the National Academy



of Design; but he went to Paris in 1866 and became a pupil of Jean-Léon Gérôme. Paris then became his headquarters. A trip to Egypt in 1873-1874 resulted in pictures of the East that attracted immediate attention, and his large and important



composition, *The Funeral Procession of a Mummy on the Nile*, in the Paris Salon (1877), bought by James Gordon Bennett, brought him the Cross of the Legion of Honor. Other paintings by him were *An American Circus in Normandy*, *Procession of the Bull Apis* (now in the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), and a *Rumanian Lady* (in the Temple collection, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania).



In 1867, Bridgman entered the studio of the noted academic painter Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), where he was deeply influenced by Gérôme's precise draftsmanship, smooth finishes, and concern for Middle-Eastern themes. (Bridgman would even become known as "**the American Gérôme.**") No mere imitator, however, Bridgman would later adopt a more naturalistic aesthetic, emphasizing bright colors and painterly brushwork.

Bridgman made his first trip to North Africa between 1872 and 1874, dividing his time between Algeria and Egypt. There he executed approximately three hundred sketches, which became the source material for several later oil paintings. Additional visits to the region throughout the 1870s and 1880s allowed him to amass a collection of costumes, architectural pieces, and objets d'art, which often appear in his paintings.



(Amusingly, John Singer Sargent noted that Bridgman's overstuffed studio, along with the Eiffel Tower, were Paris's must-see attractions.) Though Bridgman maintained a lifelong connection to France, his popularity in America never waned. Indeed, in 1890, the artist had a one-man show of over 400 pictures in New York's 5th Avenue galleries. When the show moved to Chicago's Art Institute, it contained only 300 works - testimony to the high number of sales Bridgman had made.



One of Bridgman's most recognized Orientalist images, "A Street Scene in Algeria", is exceptional for its biographical and historical significance. Many of its details can be considered "signature" motifs of the artist, and its subject, a pointed record of travel. In keeping with Bridgman's tendency in the 1880s to focus on intimate domestic subjects, two seated male figures are given

pride of place in the center of the composition, gesticulating while they chat.

Henry Roderick Newman
(Eaton, New York, 1843 - Florence, Italy, 1917)



In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Henry Newman and his wife spent so much time at Philae -where Newman painted large, exacting watercolors of the ancient buildings on the island- that they became a tourist attraction, and Henry acquired the nickname, “Philae” Newman.

Henry Newman’s family settled in New York City when he was a baby. His father was a physician and intended his son for the same profession; young Henry wanted to be an artist. When his father died, in 1861, his mother gave him six months to prove his talent as an artist; he was still in his teens. He applied himself diligently and produced six nature studies, three of which were accepted for exhibition at the national Academy of design.



During the Civil War, Newman and few friends managed to found the Association for the advancement of Truth in Art. The club was formed of some 26 young painters conscious of being like an American branch of the English Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

In 1870 Newman went to Paris to study at the Ecole. He enrolled in Gerome ’s atelier. When the war

broke, he went to Italy and developed a specialty of architectural scenes of Venice and Florence that he sell easily. Although he visited the States several times, he never lived there again.

In 1883 Newman married a wealthy Englishwoman, Mary Watson Wills and they settled in Florence. Their villa became one of the centers of the Anglo-American community. As early as 1881 the couple started a regular visit to Egypt, and from 1887 on, they spent every winter in Egypt. They bought their own dahabeah (a passenger boat used on the River Nile in Egypt) and became such a regular sight on the Nile and particularly at Philae that the archeologists of the region felt they were responsible for looking after them, particularly as they got older.



For twenty six years they come to the Nile - spending the summer in Florence. They had owned the dahabeah for 23 years. Newman was a man of one job only: He painted temples. “He does them by the inch, near an hour to the square inch” as the American archeologist Charles E. Wilbour recoded in his diary, “it looks like a colored photograph in which the colors are affected by something... Every crack in the stone, every vein, every hieroglyph well drawn.”

When Newman became too frail and weak to make the trip to Egypt he was confined to Florence. He dies in 1917.

Elihu Vedder, American, 1836-1923
The Questioner of the Sphinx;



Born in New York City, **Elihu Vedder** was an American symbolist painter, book illustrator, and poet. He is best known for his fifty-five illustrations for Edward FitzGerald's translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (deluxe edition, published by Houghton Mifflin).

Vedder grew up on his grandfather's farm at Schenectady, New York. He trained in New York City with Tompkins H. Matteson, then in Paris with François-Édouard Picot. Finally, he completed his studies in Italy - where he was strongly influenced not only by Italian Renaissance work but also by the modern Macchiaioli painters (The Macchiaioli were a group of Italian painters from Tuscany, active in the second half of the nineteenth century, who, breaking with the antiquated conventions taught by the Italian academies of art, painted outdoors in order to capture natural light, shade, and colour) and the living Italian landscape. He first visited Italy from 1858 until 1860, becoming deeply emotionally attached to fellow painter Giovanni Costa. Their idyllic trips through the Italian



countryside were cut short because Vedder's father cut off his financial allowance.

Vedder returned to the USA, penniless, during the American Civil War, and made a small living by undertaking commercial illustrations. He was involved in the bohemian 'Pfaff's' coffee house group, and painted some of his most memorable paintings notable for their visionary nature, romantic imagery and often Oriental influences. Paintings of this time include 'The Roc's Egg', 'The Fisherman and the Genii' and one of his most famous works, 'Lair of the Sea Serpent.' In the USA he sought out and became friends with Walt Whitman, Herman Melville and William Morris Hunt. Vedder became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1865.



At the end of the Civil War he left America to live in Italy. He married an American student in Italy in 1866. He had a home in Rome and - after the financial success of his 1884 *Rubaiyat* work - on the Isle of Capri, then a haven for male aesthetes.

Vedder visited England many times, and was influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites, and was a friend of Simeon Solomon.

He was also influenced by the work of English and Irish mystics such as William Blake and William Butler Yeats. In 1890 Vedder helped establish the In Arte Libertas group in Italy.

Tiffany commissioned him to design glassware, mosaics and statuettes for the company. He decorated the hallway of the Reading Room of the Washington Library of Congress, and his mural paintings can still be seen there.

He occasionally returned to the USA, but lived only in Italy from 1906.

Edwin Lord Weeks (1849-1903)

Edwin Lord Weeks was born in Boston to an old New England family. As a young man in the 1870's went to Paris to train at Ecole des Beaux-Arts under *Jean-Leon Gerome* and privately with Leon Bonnat.



In France, Weeks became part of an increasingly noteworthy colony of American expatriate artists competing with natives and foreigners alike and eventually becoming one of the city's most celebrated artists.

Weeks, one of the most celebrated American "Orientalist" painters of the late nineteenth century, traveled extensively to Morocco and Tangiers.

In 1882, Weeks made his first journey to India opening an area previously unexplored by Western artists. He recorded ancient Indian culture and architecture. His presence in India coincided with the height of the British Raj during the 1880's and Weeks captured the Victorian romance and splendor of Indian civilization. This fact was recognized when Weeks was invited to exhibit a large collection of his works at the Empire of India Exhibition held in London in 1895.

Edwin Weeks continued to paint until his death in 1903, which is thought to have been due to an illness he contracted in India. During his life, Weeks was a member of the Legion of Honour, France, an officer of the Order of St Michael, Germany, and a member of the Secession, Munich as well as, a very successful artist.

Weeks's pictures are notable for their sensitivity to the rendering of brilliant sunlight as well as their architectural and topographical accuracy. Weeks is represented in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York; the Joslyn Art Museum, Nebraska; and the Portland Museum of Art, Maine.



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