On 25 June 1832, Delacroix disembarks in Algiers for a short stopover. He has just spent a month in Morocco, immersed in a universe of extreme, visual richness (the splendor of the costumes, reckless frenzy of fantasias, the pomp of a royal court, the rapture of Jewish weddings or of street musicians, the nobility of royal felines: lions, tigers, and so forth).

This Orient, so near and of his own time, offers itself to him as a total and excessive novelty. An Orient as he had dreamed it for The Death of Sardanapalus—but here washed clean of any association with sin. An Orient that, in addition, and only in Morocco, escapes from the authority of the Turks, loathed ever since The Massacre at Chios.

Thus, Morocco is revealed as the place where dream and its incarnation of an aesthetic ideal meet, the place of a visual revolution. In fact, Delacroix can write a little later: "Ever since my journey, men and things appear to me in a new light."

Delacroix spends only three days in Algiers. This brief stay in an only recently conquered capital city directs him, thanks to a felicitous combination of circumstances, toward a world that had remained foreign to him during his Moroccan trip. For the first time, he penetrates into a world that is off-limits: that of the Algerian women.

The world he had discovered in Morocco and that he freezes in his sketches is essentially a masculine and warrior world, in a word, a virile one. What his eyes saw was the permanent spectacle of an exteriority made up entirely of pomp, noise, cavalcades, and rapid motion. But, as he passes from Morocco to Algeria, Delacroix crosses, at the same time, a subtle frontier that is going to invert every sign and will be at the root of what posterity shall retain as this singular "journey to the Orient"

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The adventure is well-known: the chief engineer of the harbor of Algiers, Monsieur Poirel, a lover of painting, has in his employ a chaouch, the former owner of a privateer—the sort who used to be called a rais before the 1830 conquest—who after long discussions, agrees to allow Delacroix entry into his own home.

A friend of the friend, Cournault, reports the details of this intrusion to us. The house was situated in what used to be the rue Duquesne. Delacroix, in the company of the husband and undoubtedly of Poirel as well, crosses "a dark hallway" at the end of which, unexpectedly and bathed in an almost unreal light, the actual harem opens up. There, women and children are waiting for him "surrounded by mounds of silk and gold." The wife of the former rais, young and pretty, is sitting in front of a hookah. Delacroix, Poirel reports to Cournault, who writes it down for us, "was as if intoxicated by the spectacle he had before his eyes."

With the husband as intermediary and impromptu translator, he begins a conversation and wants to know everything about "this new and to him mysterious life." On the many sketches that he draws—women
seated in various positions—he writes what seems to him to be the most important and not to be forgotten: specification of colors ("black with lines of gold, lacquered violet, dark India red," etc.) with details of costumes, multiple and strange references that baffle his eyes.

In these brief and graphic or written annotations, there is an almost feverish hand at work, an intoxicated gaze: a fugitive moment of evanescent revelation standing on that borderline in motion where dream and reality converge. Cournault notes, "that fever that the sherbets and fruits could barely appease."

The completely new vision was perceived as pure image. A as if this all-too-new splendor might blur the image's reality, Delacroix forces himself to note down, on his sketches, the name of every woman. Like a coat of arms, watercolors bear arnes like Bayah, Mouni and Zora ben Soltane, Zora and Kadoudja Tarboridji. Penciled bodies coming out of the anonymity of exoticism.

This abundance of rare colors, these new-sounding names, is that what arouses and thrills the painter? Is that what causes him to write: "It is beautiful! It is straight out of Homer!"

There, during that visit of a few hours with women in seclusion, by what shock, or at least by what vague stirrings was the painter seized? This heart of the half-open harem, is it really the way he sees it?

From this place through which he had passed, Delacroix brings back some objects: some slippers, a shawl, a shirt, a pair of trousers. Not just trivial tourist trophies but tangible proof of a unique, ephemeral experience. Traces of a dream.

He feels the need to touch his dream, to prolong its life beyond the memory, to complete what is enclosed as sketches and drawings in his notebooks. It's the equivalent of a fetishist compulsion augmented by the certainty that this moment lived is irrevocable in its uniqueness and will never be repeated.

Upon his return to Paris, the painter will work for two years on the image of a memory that teeters with a muted and unformulated uncertainty, although well-documented and supported by authentic objects. What he comes out with is a masterpiece that still stirs questions deep within us.

Women of Algiers in Their Apartment: three women, two of whom are seated in front of a hookah. The third one, in the foreground, leans her elbow on some cushions. A female servant, seen three quarters from the back, raises her arm as if to move the heavy tapestry aside that masks this closed universe; she is an almost minor character, all she does is move along the edge of the iridescence of colors that bathes the other three women. The whole meaning of the painting is played out in the relationship these three have with their bodies, as well as with the place of their enclosure. Resigned prisoners in a closed place that is lit by a kind of dreamlike light coming from nowhere—a hothouse light or that of an aquarium—Delacroix's genius makes them both near and distant to us at the same time, enigmatic to the highest degree.

Fifteen years after these few days in Algiers, Delacroix remembers again, reworks it, and gives the 1849 Salon a second version of Women of Algiers.
The composition is almost identical, but the recurrence of several changes has rendered more obvious the latent meaning of the painting.

In this second canvas—in which the features of the characters are less precise, the elements of the setting less elaborate—the vision's angle has been widened. This centering effect has a triple result: to make the three women, who now penetrate more deeply into their retreat, more distant from us; to uncover and entirely bare one of the room's walls, having it weigh down more heavily on the solitude of these women; and finally to accentuate the unreal quality of the light. The latter brings out more clearly what the shadow conceals as an invisible, omnipresent threat, through the intermediary of the woman servant whom we hardly see any longer, but who is there, and attentive.

Women always waiting. Suddenly less sultanas than prisoners. They have no relationship with us, the spectators. They neither abandon nor refuse themselves to our gaze. Foreign but terribly present in this rarified atmosphere of confinement.

Elie Faure tells us that the aging Renoir, when he used to refer to this light in Women of Algiers, could not prevent large tears from streaming down his cheeks.

Should we be weeping like the aged Renoir, but then for reasons other than artistic ones? Evoke, one and a half centuries later, these Bayas, Zoras, Mounis, and Khadoudjas. Since then, these women, whom Delacroix—perhaps in spite of himself—knew how to observe as no one had done before him, have not stopped telling us something that is unbearably painful and still very much with us today.

Delacroix's painting has been perceived as one approach to a feminine version of the Orient—undoubtedly the first one in European painting, which usually treated the theme of the odalisk as literature or evoked only the cruelty and the nudity of the seraglio.

The distant and familiar dream in the faraway eyes of the three Algerian women, if we make an attempt to grasp its nature, makes us in turn dream of sensuality: a nostalgia or vague softness, triggered by their so obvious absence. As if behind those bodies, and before the servant lets the curtain fall once more, a universe is displayed in which they might still live continuously, before they take their pose in front of us, who look on.

For that is exactly it, we look on. In reality, that look is forbidden to us. If Delacroix's painting unconsciously fascinates us, it is not actually because it suggests that superficial Orient within a luxurious and silent semidarkness, but because, by placing us in the position of onlookers in front of these women, it reminds us that ordinarily we have no right to be there. This painting is itself a stolen glance.

And I tell myself that, more than fifteen years later, Delacroix remembered especially that "dark hallway" at the end of which, in a space without exit, the hieratic prisoners of the secret keep to themselves. Those women whose distant drama cannot be guessed at except for this unexpected backstage scene that the painting becomes.
Is it because these women are dreaming that they do not look at us, or is it that they can no longer even glimpse us because they are enclosed without recourse? Nothing can be guessed about the soul of these doleful figures, seated as if drowning in all that surrounds them. They remain absent to themselves, to their body, to their sensuality, to their happiness.

Between them and us, the spectators, there has been the instant of unveiling, the step that crossed the vestibule of intimacy, the unexpected slight touch of the thief, the spy, the voyeur. Only two years earlier, the French painter would have been there at the risk of his life...

What floats between these Algerian women and ourselves, then, is the forbidden. Neutral, anonymous, omnipresent.

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That particular gaze had long been believed to be a stolen one because it was the stranger’s, the one from outside the harem and outside the city.

For a few decades—as each nationalism triumphs here and there—we have been able to realize that within this Orient that has been delivered unto itself, the image of woman is still perceived no differently, be it by the father, by the husband, and, more troublesome still, by the brother and the son.

In principle, they alone may look at the woman. To the other male members of the tribe (and any cousin who may have shared her childhood play becomes potentially a voyeur-thief) the woman shows—in the early days of an easing of the customary rigors—if not her entire body, at least her face and hands.

The second period of this easing turns out, paradoxically, to be dependent upon the veil. Since the veil completely covers the body and its extremities, it allows the one who wears it and who circulates outside underneath its cover, to be in turn a potential thief within the masculine space. She appears there above all as a fugitive outline, half blinded when she can only look with one eye. The generosity of "liberalism" has restored to her, in some cases and certain places, her other eye and at the same time the integrity of her gaze: thanks to the veil, both her eyes are now wide open to the exterior.

Thus, there is another eye there, the female gaze. But that liberated eye, which could become the sign of a conquest toward the light shared by other people, outside of the enclosure, is now in turn perceived as a threat; and the vicious circle closes itself back up again.

Yesterday, the master made his authority felt in the closed, feminine spaces through the single presence of his gaze alone, annihilating those of other people. In turn, the feminine eye when it moves around is now, it seems, feared by the men immobilized in the Moorish cafes of today's medinas, while the white phantom, unreal but enigmatic, passes through.
In these lawful glances (that is to say, those of the father, the brother, the son, or the husband) that are raised to the female eye and body—for the eye of the dominator first seeks out the other's eye, the eye of the dominated, before it takes possession of the body—one runs a risk that is all the more unforeseeable since its causes may be accidental.

It takes very little—a sudden effusiveness, an unexpected, unusual motion, a space torn open by a curtain raised over a secret corner—for the other eyes of the body (breasts, sex, navel) to run the risk in turn of being fully exposed and stared at. It is all over for the men, vulnerable guardians: it is their night, their misfortune, their dishonor.

Forbidden gaze: for it is surely forbidden to look at the female body one keeps incarcerated, from the age of ten until forty or forty-five, within walls, or better within veils. But there's also the danger that the feminine glance, liberated to circulation outside, runs the risk at any moment of exposing the other glances of the moving body. As if all of a sudden the whole body were to begin to look around, to "defy," or so men translate it.... Is a woman—who moves around and therefore is "naked"—who looks, not also a new threat to their exclusive right to stare, to that male prerogative?

The most visible evolution of Arabic women, at least in the cities, has therefore been the casting off of the veil. Many a woman, often after an adolescence or her entire youth spent cloistered, has concretely lived the experience of the unveiling. The body moves forward out of the house and is, for the first time, felt as being "exposed" to every look: the gait becomes stiff, the step hasty, the facial expression tightens.

Colloquial Arabic describes the experience in a significant way: "I no longer go out protected (that is to say, veiled, covered up)" the woman who casts off her sheet will say, "I go out undressed, or even denuded." The veil that shielded her from the looks of strangers is in fact experienced as a "piece of clothing in itself," and to no longer have it means to be totally exposed.

As for the man who agrees to share in this, his sisters' or his wife's most timid of evolutions, the slowest possible one, he is hereby condemned to live ill at ease and sick with worry. He imagines that no sooner will the lacy face veil, then the long body veil, be lifted, than the woman will (she can't help it) move on to the stage of fatal risk, that of uncovering the other eye, the eye-that-is-sex. Halfway down this slippery path, he glimpses the only stopping point of the "belly dance," the one that makes the other eye, the navel-eye, grimace in the cabarets.

Thus the woman's body, as soon as she leaves her seated waiting in the cloistered interior, conceals dangers because of its very nature. Does it move around in an open space? All that is suddenly perceived is that straying multiplicity of eyes in and on that body.

Around this feminine drifting away, the dispossessed man's haunting feeling of paranoia crystallizes. (After all, the only man in Algiers who, in 1832, permits a foreign painter to penetrate into the harem, is precisely a former little pirate, now a conquered chaouch who is henceforth accountable to a French civil servant.)

In Algeria, it was precisely when the foreign intrusion began in 1830—an intrusion contained at all costs at the doorways of impoverished seraglios—that a gradual freezing up of indoor communication accompanied the parallel progressive French conquest of exterior space, an indoor communication
becoming more and more deeply submerged: between the generations, and even more, between the sexes.

These women of Algiers—those who have remained motionless in Delacroix's painting since 1832—if it was possible yesterday to see in their frozen stare the nostalgic expression of happiness or of the softness of submission, today their desperate bitterness is what must strike our most sensitive nerve.

At the time of the heroic battles, woman was watching, woman was crying out: the gaze-that-was-witness throughout the battle, which ululations would prolong in order to encourage the warrior (a cry, extended, piercing the horizon like an infinite abdominal gurgling, a sexual call in full flight).

But, throughout the nineteenth century, the battles were lost one after the other, further and further to the south of the Algerian territories. The heroes have not yet stopped biting the dust. In that epic, women's looks and voices continue to be perceived from a distance, from the other side of the frontier that should separate us from death, if not from victory.

But for those born in the age of submission, feudals or proletarians, sons or lovers, the scene remains, the watching women haven't moved, and it is with a retrospective fear that the men began to dream of that look.

Thus, while outside an entire society partitions itself into the duality of the vanquished and the victorious, the autochthons and the invaders, in the harem, reduced to a shack or a cave, the dialogue has become almost definitively blocked. If only one could force that single spectator body that remains, encircle it more and more tightly in order to forget the defeat! . . . But every movement that might recall the fury of the ancestors is irremediably solidified, redoubling the immobility that makes of woman a prisoner.

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In the oral culture of Algeria, primarily in the thoroughly occupied small towns, there develops the almost unique theme of the wound, which comes to replace the lively unpredictability of the expression of ironic desire, in poetry, in song, and even in the patterns of the slow or frenzied dances.

The fact that the first encounter of the sexes is not possible except through the marriage ritual and its ceremonies sheds light on the nature of an obsession that profoundly puts its mark on our social and cultural being. An open wound is etched into the woman's body through the assumption of a virginity that is furiously deflowered and the martyrdom of which is consecrated by the marriage in a most trivial manner. The wedding night essentially becomes a night of blood. Not because the partners become better acquainted or, even less, because of pleasure, but a night of blood that is also a night of the gaze and of silence. Hence the razor-sharp chorus of long cries uttered by the other women (a sisterhood of spasms that tries to take flight in the blind night), hence also the din of the gunpowder in order to better envelop that same silence.
Now, this look of the sex steeped in blood sends us back to the first look, that of the mother at term, ready to give birth. The image of her rises up, ambivalent and flooded with tears, completely veiled and at the same time delivered naked, her legs streaked with blood in spasms of pain.

The Koran says, and this has been often repeated: "Paradise is found at the feet of mothers." If Christianity is the adoration of the Virgin Mother, Islam, more harshly, understands the term mother to mean woman without pleasure, even before seeing her as the source of all tenderness. Thereby obscurely hoping that the eye-that-is-sex, the one who has given birth, is no longer a threat. Only the birthing mother has the right to look.

III

As the war of liberation in Algeria was just barely getting started, Picasso, from December 1954 to February 1955, goes to live every day in the world of Delacroix's "Women of Algiers." There he comes face-to-face with himself and erects around the three women, and with them, a completely transformed universe: fifteen canvases and two lithographs carrying the same title.

It moves me to think that the Spanish genius presides in this manner over a changing in the times.

As we entered our "colonial night," the French painter offered us his vision that, the admiring Baudelaire notes, "breathes I don't know what heady perfume of evil haunts that leads us rather quickly toward the unplumbed limbo of sadness." That perfume of evil haunts came from quite far off and will have become even more concentrated.

Picasso reverses the malediction, causes misfortune to burst loose, inscribes in audacious lines a totally new happiness. A foreknowledge that should guide us in our everyday life.

Pierre Daix remarks: "Picasso has always liked to set the beauties of the harem free." Glorious liberation of space, the bodies awakening in dance, in a flowing outward, the movement freely offered. But also the preservation of one of the women, who remains hermetic, Olympian, suddenly immense. Like a suggested moral, here, of a relationship to be found again between the old, adorned serenity (the lady, formerly fixed in her sullen sadness, is motionless from now on, but like a rock of inner power) and the improvised bursting out into an open space.

For there is no harem any more, its door is wide open and the light is streaming in; there isn't even a spying servant any longer, simply another woman, mischievous and dancing. Finally, the heroines—with the exception of the queen, whose breasts, however, are bursting out—are totally nude, as if Picasso was recovering the truth of the vernacular language that, in Arabic, designates the "unveiled" as "denuded"
women. Also, as if he were making that denuding not only into a sign of an "emancipation," but rather of these women's rebirth to their own bodies.

Two years after this intuition of the artist, there appeared the descendants, the carriers of the bombs, in the Battle of Algiers. Are these women merely the sisters-companions of the nation-alist heroes? Certainly not, for everything takes place as if the latter, in isolation, outside of the clan, had made a long trek back, from the 1920s to almost 1960, in order to find their "sisters-lovers" again, and that in the shadow of the prisons and the brutal treatment by the legionnaires.

As if the guillotine and those first sacrificed in the coldness of the dawn were needed for young girls to tremble for their blood brothers and to say so.10 The ancestral accompaniment had, until then, been the ululation of triumph and of death.

It is a question of wondering whether the carriers of the bombs, as they left the harem, chose their most direct manner of expression purely by accident: their bodies exposed outside and they themselves attacking other bodies? In fact, they took those bombs out as if they were taking out their own breasts, and those grenades exploded against them, right against them.

Some of them came back later with their sex electrocuted, flayed through torture.

If rape, as a fact and a "tradition" of war, is in itself hor—ribly banal ever since wars have existed, it became—when our heroines were its victims of expiation—the cause of painful upheaval, experienced as trauma by the whole of the Algerian collective. The public condemnation of it through newspapers and legal intervention certainly contributed to the spread of scandalous repercussions: the words that named it became, where rape was concerned, an explicit and unanimous condemnation. A barrier of words came down in transgression, a veil was shredded in front of a threatened reality, but one whose repression was too strong not to return. Such repression submerged a solidarity in misery that for a moment had been effective. What words had uncovered in time of war is now being concealed again underneath a thick covering of taboo subjects, and in that way, the meaning of a revelation is reversed. Then the heavy silence returns that puts an end to the momentary restoration of sound. Sound is severed once again. As if the fathers, brothers, or cousins were saying: "We have paid plenty for that unveiling of words!" Undoubtedly forgetting that the women have inscribed that statement into their martyred flesh, a statement that is, however, penalized by a silence that extends all around.

Sound severed once again, the gaze once again forbidden, these are what reconstruct the ancestral barriers. "A perfume of evil haunts," Baudelaire said. There is no seraglio any more. But the "structure of the seraglio" attempts to impose its laws in the new wasteland: the law of invisibility, the law of silence.

Only in the fragments of ancient murmuring do I see how we must look for a restoration of the conversation between women, the very one that Delacroix froze in his painting. Only in the door open to the full sun, the one Picasso later imposed, do I hope for a concrete and daily liberation of women.

February 1979
Women of Algiers in Their Apartment
Translated from the French by Marjolijn de Jager