

Beyond The Imperial Gaze? Edwin Lord Weeks & American Orientalism In India

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Abstract

In 1887 and 1893, the famous American painter Edwin Lord Weeks travelled through Rajasthan; capturing its cities, rulers, architecture, and everyday life in sketches and paintings. Unlike many nineteenth century Orientalist artists who relied on studio reconstructions, Weeks experienced the places he painted firsthand. This paper examines whether Weeks' paintings of India challenged or reproduced Orientalist conventions of nineteenth century Western Art. It compares Weeks' paintings with the works of contemporary European Orientalists. Through formal visual analysis, the paper argues that Weeks gave greater attention to human figures, lived spaces, everyday activity, and the specificity of place, than the selected European artists. However, his work targeted western audiences, tended to exoticisation, and remained tethered to broader Orientalist assumptions about India. This paper contributes to debates on Orientalism by showing that nineteenth century American Orientalism occupied an ambiguous position; different from European Orientalism, but not fully outside its representational framework.

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I. Introduction

Edwin Lord Weeks (1849-1903) exposure to the peoples and landscapes of India would become the subjects of some of his most celebrated works. This raises an important question; did his American identity allow him to approach India outside of the imperial assumptions that shaped much of European Orientalist representation, or did his work remain influenced by the same Western frameworks that defined other nineteenth century depictions of the East?

The concept of Orientalism, famously articulated by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), has profoundly shaped the study of Western representations of North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Said argued that the "Orient" was not a geographical reality but a cultural construct by which the West portrayed these Eastern societies. The artistic and academic worlds have often interpreted Orientalist Art not just for its artistic expression, but also for reflections on broader structures of power and knowledge. Much of this scholarship, however, has focused on European artists working within the imperial contexts of the British and French empires.

This emphasis on European Orientalism raises an important problem. Can art historians apply the same interpretive framework to the nineteenth century American artists who worked outside the colonial system in India? Edwin Lord Weeks occupies a particularly significant position within this debate. As one of the first American painters to travel extensively through India, Weeks produced works that often display a remarkable attention to local traditions and everyday life. His paintings appear less concerned with imagined fantasies of the East than with recording specific places and experiences. Yet, they were created exclusively for a Western audience.

This paper argues that while Weeks remained influenced by Orientalist conventions, his lack of association with a directly colonising power, the so-called imperial imperative, could have produced representations that differ in important ways from those of his European contemporaries. Through a comparative analysis of selected paintings by Weeks and European Orientalist artists, this study suggests that nineteenth century American Orientalism occupied an ambiguous position; neither completely detached from Orientalist assumptions, nor defined by the imperial concerns that shaped European Orientalist Art.

II. Literature Review

Orientalism in Art

Orientalism refers to the body of knowledge and the style of thought by which the Occident (West) historically created and interpreted the Orient (East). In this paper, the term 'Orient' does not refer to a clearly bounded geographical region, but to a historically constructed category used by Western writers and artists to describe and portray parts of North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. As defined by Edward Said, the "Orient" is better understood as an idea shaped by the Occident's perception and relations with the East.

An East conquered, controlled, and finally contrived by the West.

Edward Said argues that Orientalism was a broad field encompassing both visual art and scholarly studies and that it produced incorrect and misleading ideas about the East, playing a crucial role in reinforcing Western power and authority. For practical purposes, a tool, with which the West spiritually subjugated the East, while simultaneously, and conveniently, explaining their physical domination to themselves. Orientalism operated across cultural forms; it shaped the way travellers wrote their diaries, academic studies, and representations of Eastern communities in art. Through Western literature and visual culture, Orientalism framed the East as fundamentally different from the West; mysterious, exotic, and, most significantly, inherently inferior. This impression of the East allowed Western societies to position themselves as rational, progressive, and civilized in comparison to the ostensibly irrational and “frozen in time” East (Said 1978). Orientalism therefore functioned both as a way of perceiving the East, and as a system of representation that itself formed and informed Western understanding of Eastern societies.

Given that Orientalism is the imaginary Western depiction of the East shaped to fit Western expectations, a key aspect of Orientalist Art is its imaginative reconstruction of the East. Instead of portraying accurate representations of Eastern societies, many Western depictions created an imagined landscape of the East that was moulded by Western desires and expectations (Said 1978; Burney 2012). These representations were exaggerated; and because they were exaggerated, so were the differences further enhanced, to create the perception of a completely different, sensuous and sensational society; bustling bazaars, sensual harems, rugged deserts, and mysterious rules and rulers, rites and rituals – everything not present in Western society (Said 1978). This imagery most often did not actually exist in the lived realities of Eastern communities and acutely reflected the West’s fascination with a world it wanted to perceive, project and propagate as the ‘Other’.

Rudyard Kipling, 1889: “East is east, and West is west, and never the twain shall meet.”

In the nineteenth century, Orientalism became especially prominent in European Art. Imperial expansion and increased travel stimulated a growing Western interest in representations of the East. Artists produced detailed scenes of markets, mosques, temples, and other subjects that were remarkably different from the architecture, landscapes and scenes of the West. These artworks were meant to document foreign societies and cultures, and were widely circulated in exhibitions and publications.

At the same time, these illustrations were closely related to the cultural environment of Empire; indicative of a smug imperial curiosity, tinged with a palpable moral superiority, that reinforced the notion that Eastern societies were objects to be classified and categorised. Orientalist painting therefore existed within a much broader background of imperial knowledge production, in which art played a role similar to travel writing. The popularity of these works only proves how easily they were able to shape European beliefs of the East during the height of imperial expansion.

Late in the twentieth century, scholars and researchers began to critically reassess Orientalist Art and its cultural implications. They challenged the assumption that these paintings were aesthetically accurate depictions of foreign landscapes; stressing that it was critical that Orientalist artworks be analysed within the political context of imperialism. By presenting Eastern societies as backward, these images implicitly sanctioned and explicitly reinforced Western dominance. The viewer was positioned as an outsider observing a distant spectacle rather than a lived culture. Viewers were separated, both figuratively and literally, from the faraway landscapes portrayed by Orientalism.

Many authors, such as Linda Nochlin (1989), have highlighted how the absence of visible imperial control in paintings depicting colonial settings is deliberately meaningful. By removing signs and symbols of imperial authority, Oriental artists created the illusion that Western intrusion and presence in the East was natural and unproblematic.

Scholarly Debates

The concept of Orientalism has caused significant scholarly debate on how broadly the term should be applied. While early researchers treated Orientalism as a system of representation of the East tied to imperial power, later historians have highlighted conceptual ambiguities within. They argue that the diversity of engagements between the West and East has often been intentionally ignored or conveniently forgotten. Orientalism is not a single uniform ideology but a set of representations of the East produced within different historical and cultural contexts (Prakash 1995). Art historians therefore increasingly question whether the term can properly capture the full range of artistic practices that depicted the East, particularly with regard to artists’ motivations, opinions, attitudes, travel experiences, and, not least, the different political contexts in which they worked (Nochlin 1989; MacKenzie 1995).

One major debate concerns the temporal framing of Orientalism, particularly the tendency to situate it almost exclusively within the nineteenth century. Much of art historical literature associates Orientalist Art with the height of European colonial expansion, when travel and colonial governance increased Western interactions with territories in Africa and Asia (Mackenzie 1995). Following this interpretation, Orientalism marches hand-in-hand with Imperialism, a willing handmaiden to modern colonisation. However, other scholars argue that the imaginative construction of the Orient predates the nineteenth century and can be traced through earlier travel literature, religious practices, and artistic traditions (Burney 2012). From this perspective, nineteenth century Orientalist Art should be viewed not as the origin of Orientalism but as the intensification of much older patterns of representation.

The second debate concerns the spatial boundaries of Orientalism, with emphasis on the assumption that it was primarily a European, especially British and French, phenomenon. Importantly, Said himself suggested that the United States did not develop a significant nineteenth century Orientalist tradition comparable to that of the European Powers (1978).

Historians have begun to question this geographical limitation too. They argue that the US developed its own forms of Orientalist representation through travel writing, missionary activity, and trade connections (Ngai 2000). The last giving rise to 'Commodity Orientalism'. Even though these representations often appear visually similar to European Orientalist works, they appeared within a different geopolitical context (Ngai 2000). The production of knowledge about the East was therefore not confined to imperial administrations but circulated through wider intellectual and artistic American networks (Prakash 1995).

This debate is particularly relevant to the work of Edwin Lord Weeks. He travelled extensively through India, Persia, and the Middle East in the 1880s and 1890s, producing paintings that depict architectural sites, bazaars, palaces, and scenes of everyday life. Unlike many studio-based Orientalist painters who constructed imaginary scenes, Weeks worked from his own sketches and strove to render architectural details with a considerable degree of accuracy, his works also revealing intense observation of everyday human activity.

However, observational accuracy and realism do not necessarily place an artist outside Orientalism. An artist may carefully study and accurately depict Eastern societies while still representing them through an Orientalist framework. Rather than treating Weeks as either an Orientalist or a non-Orientalist, this study approaches his work as occupying a more ambiguous position. His paintings may simultaneously hold elements of direct observation and elements of Orientalist representation. As an American artist working outside the structure of British imperialism in India, Weeks provides a rare and useful case through which to reconsider both the geographical limits of Orientalism, and the assumption that all nineteenth century representations of the East were shaped in identical ways. The question, therefore, is not whether Weeks escaped Orientalism entirely, but whether his position as an American artist produced a different mode of representing India.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the concept of Orientalism as explored by Edward Said, while engaging with other scholars who have expanded and challenged his concept. Said defines Orientalism as a system of knowledge through which the West constructs and represents the East as fundamentally different and inferior (1978). His analysis primarily focused on European Powers, particularly Britain and France, and situates Orientalism squarely within the political and cultural context of colonial expansion.

He further suggests that a distinctly American form of Orientalism only appeared in the twentieth century, shaped by the United States' geopolitical involvement in the Middle East.

This study looks at a broader understanding of American Orientalism by extending this concept into the nineteenth century, and more specifically applying it to visual art.

Rather than limiting Orientalism to former imperial contexts, Orientalism is understood here as a system of representation that could operate across different national contexts. This broader understanding allows for an examination of how an American artist such as Weeks interacted with the East through his travels and artworks, despite the absence of any American colonial rule in India.

The distinction between American and European Orientalism in this study is based on the differences in colonial context, and the motive and purpose of the artworks created during this time. While European Orientalism developed alongside imperialism, American Orientalism came about in a different geopolitical framework that lacked direct political and administrative control over the regions it portrayed. These differences shape the expectations of this study.

One would expect European Orientalist Art to reinforce imperial hierarchies, exude moral superiority, erase colonial intervention, and present the decadent East as a space crying out loud for domination and governance. At the heart of it a conqueror proudly surveying his or her possessions.

American Orientalist Art, by contrast, may reveal a more natural curiosity for ordinary day-to-day life, displaying greater emphasis on observation, and individual artistic experience. "Innocents Abroad" - a tourist taking in new lands. A distinctly non-imperial American representation of 19th Century India would contain more

commercial - markets, shops, wares, merchants - than martial overtones. It would almost certainly be less sexualised and voyeuristic, as the puritanical Americans mostly tended to avoid the European obsession with the harem. It would focus not only on architectural detail but also genuine human activity. Perhaps consciously staying away from stereo-types like the evil slave trader and indolent Eastern despot, one would expect American Orientalism not to cross the line between romanticisation and exoticisation.

III. Methodology

Selection of Cases

To test these expectations, this paper compares works by Edwin Lord Weeks, with similar works by European contemporaries.

Weeks was a Boston based American artist well known for his journeys through Persia and India. He visited Rajputana in 1887 and 1893, recording his experiences through sketches, paintings, and written observations, later published in *From the Black Sea: Through Persia and India* (1896). His account shows a remarkable attention to detail, documenting everything from architecture and landscape to princes, merchants, craftsmen, priests, ordinary townspeople, and animals. His work reflects a sustained interest in the different people and places he came across, making him a useful subject for examining artistic representations of India in the nineteenth century. Weeks is particularly valuable for this study because he was amongst the first American artists to extensively travel to, and paint in India. He is also an artist unattached to the British colonial administration, and offers a perspective free from the imperial interests that shaped British Orientalism. His emphasis on capturing the lived reality of ordinary Indians, merchants, peasants, and townspeople alongside nobility and royalty, suggests an approach fundamentally different from the exoticised theatrical representations characteristic of European Orientalists.

The comparative strategy of this paper relies on examining selected paintings across specific comparanda. The selection of two representative works by Weeks was followed by the identification of two European Orientalist paintings depicting similar subjects to make the comparison more precise. The paired comparisons are Edwin Lord Weeks' *The Lake at Oodeypore, India* and Auguste Borget's *An Indian Mosque on the Hooghly River near Calcutta* - and Weeks' *A Rajah of Jodhpur* and William Tayler's *The Rich and the Poor*.

Auguste Borget (1808-1877) was a French artist and travel writer who visited India, producing sketches and paintings based on direct observation. William Tayler (1808-1892) was a British colonial administrator and amateur artist who worked in India with the East India Company from 1829 to 1867, creating sketches and paintings of Indian life. These works were selected because they address related themes of Indian architecture, landscape, and society, while being produced by European artists for Western audiences. In the context of this paper, the artists' nationalities may be set aside for a European collective.

The analysis will focus on how architecture functions within each composition, the relationship between monuments and the people who inhabit them, and whether the figures are presented as individual subjects or as generic exotic types. The scale of the figures relative to their surroundings, the portrayal of everyday life, costume, posture, and the degree of observational detail will also be examined.

By comparing artists who experienced India firsthand and produced work for similar audiences, this paper seeks to determine whether Weeks placed greater emphasis on observed daily life, individual presence, and lived reality, than the selected European artists.

The selected artworks were chosen because they depict very closely comparable subjects, which allows the Viewer to make a more focused and precise assessment of how the artists approached their works in India. Weeks' *The Lake at Oodeypore, India* and Auguste Borget's *An Indian Mosque on the Hooghly River near Calcutta* both represent prominent architectural landmarks set beside water bodies, with groups of local figures engaged in activities such as bathing, relaxation and conversation along the shoreline. Likewise, Week's *A Rajah of Jodhpur* and William Tayler's *The Rich and the Poor* focus on important royal figures and raise questions of social and economic status.

Method of Analysis

This paper uses a combination of formal visual analysis, a comparative art-historical analysis, and post-colonial critiques to examine whether American Orientalists' representations of the East diverged from the colonial viewpoint associated with nineteenth century Orientalism. Formal visual analysis is a key component of art historical analysis that examines compositional elements such as perspective, colour, lighting, brush stroke, scale, and architectural detail to understand how cultural meanings and attitudes were expressed visually. Particular attention is paid to architectural details, perspective, and the depiction and placement of human figures. This will help assess how realistic the artworks truly are, and whether the subjects are presented as well-defined individualised human beings or reduced to exotic types and categories.

Comparative Analysis

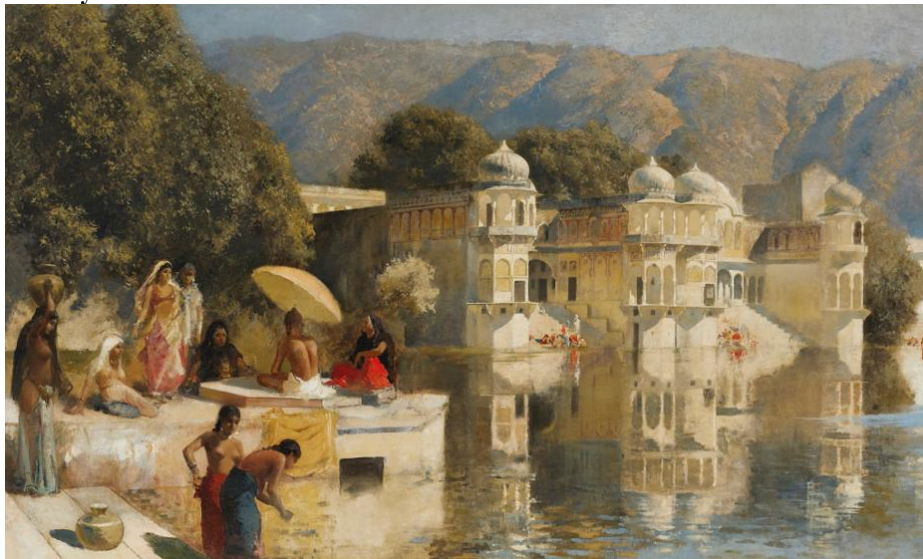


Figure 1: The Lake at Oodeypore, India, Edwin Lord Weeks

Figure 1: The Lake at Oodeypore, India, (1893), oil on canvas; captures the stunning palaces and waterfront architecture along the shores of Udaipur's famous Lake Pichola. The Viewer is at once captured by a group of women occupying stone terraces (Ghats) at the edge of the water; some seated in conversation while others bathe, wash, and fill vessels to take home. There is also a monk (Sanyasi) sitting nearby underneath an umbrella, with other women gathered around him, no doubt taking in an impromptu discourse. Their colourful garments and different activities draw attention to the foreground of the composition. Behind them, exquisite cream-coloured palaces, reflected in pristine water, with the surrounding green hills of Mewar forming a natural backdrop.



Figure 2: An Indian Mosque on the Hooghly River near Calcutta, Auguste Borget

Figure 2: An Indian Mosque on the Hooghly River near Calcutta (1846), oil on canvas; portrays a river-side mosque surrounded by trees, along the broad banks of the Hooghly (a distributary of the Ganga). The landscape's composition combines Indian religious architecture and groups of colourful figures coming into pray. There is the proverbial elephant, and a sense of activity and movement. Borget bathes the sky and river in a warm golden light that makes the scene gloriously tranquil, while the Islamic Mosque with its towering minaret, partly shaded by a massive Banyan tree, remains the dominant focal point.



Figure 3: A Rajah of Jodhpur, Edwin Lord Weeks

Figure 3: A Rajah of Jodhpur (1888), oil on canvas; creates an image of the magnificence of Rajputana's Maharajas, enhanced by a pair of grand elephants and other symbols of kingship. Jodhpur's Mehrangarh Fort does loom in the background, but it is the scale of the elephants that dominates the architecture, and other figures in the painting. Meticulous attention has been paid to the intricate surface details of the gate. The Rajah (King) and his elephants are dressed in gold brocade (Zari), surrounded by attendants and citizens. Women and ordinary folk, including an ascetic or two, sit on the steps of the Haveli (Town Mansion), taking in the scene - as does the Viewer. The painting does not portray the Rajah in a court or a palace and yet manages to convey his majesty through a simple glimpse of everyday life. It may be noted that the bearded Rajah bears more than a passing resemblance to His Highness The Maharaja Jaswant Singh II (1873-95) himself.



Figure 4: The Rich and the Poor, William Tayler

Figure 4: The Rich and the Poor (1842), water-colour; creates a composition around the extreme social and economic contrast between a richly adorned young prince's entourage and the impoverished beggars in the shadowy corner of a ruin in the foreground. The beggar woman and her naked children sit at the margins of the scene, their dark tones and low placement revealing their inferior status. The young prince, no more than a child, sits high on a pony, framed by his attendants and a parasol, signifying dynastic rank in India. The surrounding vegetation is complete with dense foliage and a tall tree, which creates a rich textured background.

Visual Analysis

Differences across the two pairs of paintings are analysed, specifically highlighting 'Human Figures' and 'Lived Spaces'.

Depiction of Human Figures

The placement of human figures within the compositions reveals the artists' differing approaches to representing India subjects in their paintings. In Borget's *An Indian Mosque on the Hooghly River near Calcutta*, the figures are indiscriminately distributed along the riverbank, a part of the wider landscape. Even though the human element is introduced to enhance the painting, the throng remains distinctly subordinate to the mosque, which occupies an explicitly dominant position in the composition. The Viewer's attention is directed first, and almost exclusively, to the architectural structure, and only then, and incidentally, to the surrounding environment, in which the figures function merely as a small part of the wider setting.

In comparison, Weeks clearly gives his human figures a more central compositional role. In *The Lake at Oodeypore, India*, a group of women occupying the foreground of the painting immediately attract the Viewer's attention; while in *A Rajah of Jodhpur the Rajah* is not only the principal subject of the painting but is also placed in the geometrical centre of the composition, captured while dismounting from an elephant. The role of his presence in the painting is to give an insight into his everyday life. In both works, Weeks fully integrates his human figures into the painting, giving them well defined presence. This supports the argument that his paintings place more emphasis on, and attention to, real human activity and experience.

The scale of the human figures in each painting also demonstrates differences in approach. In Borget's *An Indian Mosque on the Hooghly River near Calcutta*, the figures appear tiny in relation to the mosque and surrounding landscape. In Weeks' *The Lake at Oodeypore, India*, the women in the foreground are larger in scale and occupy greater visual space, allowing the Viewer to appreciate fine details, like their facial expressions, intricate garments, and actions.

The perspective created between the Viewer and the painted figures also distinguishes Weeks' works from those of Borget and Tayler. Borget's river-side composition positions the Viewer at a distance, which encourages observation of the mosque. The Viewer may eventually notice the shapes of the figures but not their expressions, or any significant individual detail. In *The Rich and the Poor*, the Viewer is primarily the observer of a social arrangement - the stark contrast between the two little groups clearly the main subject - not the individuals themselves.

The perspectives created between the Viewer and the human figures further displays how Weeks placed more emphasis on lived reality. While Tayler presents them in an essentially staged relationship with the Viewer, Weeks allows him/her to observe the group of women on the Ghats of Lake Pichola, up close, sharing in their activities. *A Rajah of Jodhpur* pictures the Rajah dismounting from his elephant aided by his attendants. Common people form a part of this informal scene, watching their ruler in awe. This painting enables the Viewer to become a part of the street; standing by with the others, watching the Rajah in real life and time. In Tayler's *The Rich and the Poor*, the boy-prince looks directly towards the Viewer, creating an awareness of the Viewer as an observer on the 'outside'. In fact, the directness of the gaze suggests the figure is presented with primarily, or even only, the Viewer in mind. Unlike Weeks' figures, who appear naturally immersed and actively engaged in their surroundings, Tayler's figures portray an artificial self-conscious relationship with the Viewer.

These compositional features, each simultaneously highlighting the significant differences in viewer perspectives of Weeks' human figures with Borget and Tayler's, are critical because they combine to position their Western Viewer in relation to India. An interested, empathetic tourist engaging with a foreign land (Weeks) on the one hand - a distant master, inventorying his possessions (Borget) and categorising his subjects (Tayler) on the other.

Lived Spaces

The representation of living spaces in Weeks' *The Lake at Oodeypore, India* and Borget's *An Indian Mosque on the Hooghly River near Calcutta* also portray strikingly different relationships between the human figures and their surroundings. In Borget's painting, the mosque forms the central focus, with the surrounding riverbank, trees and human figures creating the wider setting. The figures are positioned around the water's edge, moving towards the mosque, but the entire space is explicitly arranged around the mosque itself. In comparison, Weeks portrays the architecture of Udaipur in a more seamless way. Not isolated and aloof. The built-up Ghats are being used naturally by women occupying the immediate space of the Viewer. The palaces are beyond the foreground. The architecture remains important without dominating the composition; intrinsically and functionally connected to the people who inhabit it.

The treatment of space around the figures in Weeks' *A Rajah of Jodhpur* and Tayler's *The Rich and the Poor* also demonstrates different approaches to the representation of Indian environments. Tayler's painting organises it around the contrast between the wealthy prince and the beggars before him, cowering in the ruins.

The figures are theatrically arranged to communicate an explicit contrast in social position, with the setting functioning merely as a background. The theme explicitly contributes to the stereo-typical image of India as a land of deprivation and contrast. India! Land of Beggars and Rajas! Literally. In Weeks' painting the setting is more tightly integrated with the depicted figures. The Rajah appears appropriately, on an elephant outside the Haveli, surrounded by his attendants, and watched by his subjects. Using rich colour, architectural detail and a well described streetscape, Weeks makes the scene come alive with all the different figures, high and low, creating a harmonious sense of a particular location rather than a generalised representation. A real place in real time.

The natural integration of architecture by Weeks in both Udaipur and Jodhpur, as against its contrived domination on the banks of the Hooghly near Calcutta, as well as Tayler's typical ruins in Bihar, is indicative again of how differently the images position their Western Viewer in relation to India. A visitor admiring an ancient society in its natural setting, whilst drawing attention to its remarkable architectural achievements (Weeks) on the one hand - a coloniser dwarfing its subject peoples (duly categorised) as the inconsequential inheritors of a golden past that needed to be restored (Borget and Tayler) on the other.

IV. Conclusion

This paper examined whether nineteenth century American Orientalism, through the work of Edwin Lord Weeks, was separate from the imperial framework that shaped much of European Orientalist Art. Through a comparative analysis of a pair of Weeks' paintings with a pair of European Orientalist paintings, this study explored whether Weeks' representations challenged or reproduced Orientalist conventions.

The analysis suggests that Weeks' first-hand experience of India definitely influenced a different approach to representation. Unlike many Orientalists' works that presented Indian spaces as distant and exotic spectacles, Weeks' paintings placed greater emphasis on lived environments and well-defined human presence. His attention to individual figures suggests a stronger engagement with lived reality compared with the generalised representations found in the selected European works. This fundamental difference is only enhanced by the fact that both Auguste Borget and William Tayler also visited, lived and painted in India.

However, it is difficult to consider Edwin Lord Weeks entirely separate from Orientalism. His paintings were produced for the same Western audience; remained influenced by nineteenth century ideas of the East as visually distinctive and culturally different; and did tend towards exoticisation. As Edward Said's theory of Orientalism suggests, precise observation does not necessarily remove the larger frameworks through which the East was gazed at, and represented. Weeks work therefore exists somewhere between documentation and idealisation. It reflects genuine observation while still taking part, and partaking, in the popular Western modes of interpreting India.

The findings suggest that American Orientalism was not simply a continuation of European Orientalism; nor was it completely free from its assumptions. Edwin Lord Weeks appears to occupy an intermediate position, where his direct encounters with India shaped representations that differed from many European contemporaries, but did not fully escape Orientalist ways of seeing.

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