

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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**Press Preview:
June 26, 1984
10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

THE ORIENTALISTS: DELACROIX TO MATISSE
AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D.C. March 30, 1984. Between 1798, when the French Army under Napoleon Bonaparte occupied Egypt, and 1914, the onset of World War I, numerous European and American artists traveled to the Near East. The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse, on view in the National Gallery of Art's East Building from July 1 through October 28, 1984, chronicles nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists' responses to the Islamic Near East, North Africa and the Holy Land.

Known as the "Orient" in Europe, this area, once accessible in the nineteenth century, fascinated Western artists. "Orientalism"--the term used to describe the taste for and depiction of the Near East and North Africa--became a popular and influential aesthetic.

Containing approximately ninety works, the exhibition traces the shift from early romantic evocations; through the more realistic, "archeological" depictions of the mid-nineteenth century; to later artists' technical innovations which prefigured major developments in twentieth-century art. Artists'

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responses were complex, varied and individual, yet united by a fascination with an exotic and unfamiliar world.

The first major European artists to embrace Orientalist subjects were Baron Gros, J.-D.-A. Ingres and Eugène Delacroix. Of these three, Gros and Ingres never traveled to the region; their depictions of Eastern subjects, however, profoundly influenced later interpretations.

Gros, the propagandist of Napoleon's earlier military campaigns in north Italy, celebrated the French Army's exploits in the Near East in three paintings, The Battle of Nazareth, The Battle of Aboukir, and The Pesthouse at Jaffa, by relying on eyewitness accounts. Ingres incorporated the colors and textures of Islamic interiors, derived from literary descriptions and illustrations, into his influential series of bathers and odalisques. In the light and color of North Africa, Delacroix found the justification for his system of complementary colors, and intensified the range of his palette in paintings such as the heroic Sultan of Morocco and Lion Hunt. The works of all three helped to shape the Western idea of the Near East as an exotic, colorful and tumultuous area.

By the mid-nineteenth century, truthful representation of the external world based on objective observation had become an aesthetic standard. The influence of realism on Orientalist painting was felt in two particular subject areas--religious and ethnographic painting. Jean-Léon Gérôme, an important exponent of the French academic tradition, became the greatest Orientalist of the second half of the nineteenth century. His scenes of Arab life and worship and landscapes were noted for their brilliant color, meticulous detail and highly finished surfaces. Other artists included in this section of the exhibition are Fromentin, Edward Lear, David Roberts, J. F. Lewis and Holman Hunt. Many American artists also visited and recorded their impressions of the Near East: Frederic E. Church, Sanford R. Gifford and Elihu Vedder.

At the end of the century, a younger generation of artists approached Near Eastern subjects with new artistic objectives. Trips to North Africa and the Near East provided the basis for the discovery of fresh ways to handle paint and a new perception of color for Renoir. Matisse and Kandinsky found primitive elements and an intense color in North Africa which were added to innovations already present in their styles.

Matisse's evocative landscape triptych of Morocco, including the National Gallery's Palm Leaf, Tangier, will be reassembled for the exhibition. Two famous odalisques, Blue Nude-Memory of Biskra and Odalisque in Red Trousers, demonstrate Matisse's romantic awareness of earlier Orientalist painters. The two extraordinary Orientalist paintings by Kandinsky from the Lenbachhaus, Munich illustrate the influence of the abstract geometrics of the Islamic world on Kandinsky's pioneering artistic journey toward an abstract style.

A smaller version of this exhibition will be on view at the Royal Academy of Arts in London from March 24 through May 20, 1984. The exhibition was organized by MaryAnne Stevens, formerly of the University of Kent at Canterbury and now Education Officer at the Royal Academy. Coordinators for the National Gallery are D. Dodge Thompson, head of exhibition programs, and Florence Coman, assistant curator of French Painting. The accompanying catalogue contains essays by Ms. Stevens and other noted scholars.

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