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Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby. *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002. Illustrations, notes and index. \$65.00 (cl). xi + 392 pp. ISBN 0-300-08887-6.

Review by Robert Aldrich, University of Sydney.

The major exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris early this year has been "Chevaux et cavaliers arabes dans les arts d'Orient et d'Occident." The show includes miniatures of magnificently caparisoned stallions, bejeweled saddles and harnesses, treatises on the equestrian arts from North Africa and the Middle East, photos of Abd el-Kader and his retinue and French spahi soldiers, and a video of a brilliant fantasia in Morocco. Another section of the exhibition focuses on Western portrayals of Arab horses and horsemen. There is a picture of Napoleon and his Mameluke and horse in Egypt (both given to the Frenchman by a sheik), then paintings by Géricault, Delacroix, Fromentin, Chassériau, and Moreau, evidence of long-lasting French fascination with Arab horsemanship. This attraction, so beautifully exemplified by the nineteenth-century paintings, the exhibition points out, was also bound up with French colonialism. From Napoleon's expedition to Egypt through Delacroix's trip to the Maghreb in the wake of French conquest of Algiers, from the increased familiarity of Orientalist painters with the Arab world that was falling under French dominion to the symbolist fantasies of the fin-de-siècle, art and imperialism marched together.

Reading Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby's splendid *Extremities* provides further proof of the concern with overseas expansion in French painting of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. "The word 'extremities,'" she explains, "is meant to conjure geographical removal, the intimacy of somatic experience, and the extreme artistic gestures required to give such disjunctive or at least disparate realities visual form. This book addresses the ways post-Revolutionary paintings in France vividly expressed the visceral, if hallucinated, experience of distant, often violent colonial contact" (pp. 3-4). Her very successful method is to devote a chapter to each of six paintings, all of them based on real events or people, not just fantasies about faraway places, even if the works were composed in Paris studios. All "are meditations on slavery and freedom" (p. 317). First is Girodet's *Portrait of Belley, ex-Representative of the Colonies* (1797), a picture of a black man, born into slavery in Senegal, transported to Saint-Domingue (Haiti), where he gained his freedom. Belley became a soldier, then an officer, and was elected a deputy from the colony to the revolutionary assembly that (temporarily) abolished slavery in 1794. The next painting is Gros's *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa* (1804), a well-known representation of Napoleon with a number of ill-fated soldiers who had fallen victim to the illness in 1799, followed by another painting of the Egyptian campaign, Girodet's *Revolt of Cairo* (1810), recording an insurrection that took place in 1798. Grigsby then examines Géricault's famous *Raft of the Medusa* (1819), showing the survivors of a ship that set sail to re-establish French control in Senegal in 1816. Finally, she looks at two paintings set in the Balkans, where Greeks battled for independence against imperial Turks: Delacroix's *Massacres of Chios* (1824), and his *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi* (1826), documenting incidents that occurred in 1822 and 1826, respectively.

Grigsby, an art historian at the University of California in Berkeley, pays particular attention to the composition of the works she discusses—the influences from one artist and school to another, the metamorphosis from preliminary sketches to final work, the particular artist's use of colour and line, the treatment of figures. Grigsby is also interested in what the pictures say about French imperial ambitions and perspectives on the countries that lie on the periphery of Europe, and *Extremities* includes fine social history, as well as cultural history. Every section sparkles with lively details, sustained analysis, and fresh insight. Although her work is informed by the theory of art and by postmodern theory, she happily avoids scholastic commentaries, verbose pedantry, and most jargon. Beautifully produced by Yale University Press in a large format, with a generous number of illustrations (many in colour), the book is as much a pleasure to look at as to read.

Grigsby notes that the paintings that she discusses are often seen as documents of uncomplicated Orientalist discourse and ethnocentric bias. She refutes such simplistic castigation, taking issue with Said and his disciples: the pictures "are strikingly preoccupied not with mastery and conquest, as Edward Said would have it, but with loss, degradation, and failure" (p. 4). In each of the works, Grigsby discerns a complex, and often ambivalent, attitude towards "the other," sometimes pleasure in the beauty of foreign people, or a will to knowledge about them and their countries, or an acknowledgement of the dangers and costs of overseas expansion. She investigates why Gros's panorama of plague-stricken men features French not Levantine victims, a feature that largely disqualifies it as colonialist propaganda. The painting is a record of defeat, not success, but also an indictment of the Bonapartist regime. The work provides an opportunity to discuss the rumour that Napoleon had his soldiers kill comrades suffering from the plague who were too ill to leave the Middle East when the French retreated. Grigsby also considers why the Greeks in Delacroix's *Massacre of Chios* are shown not as heroic and beautiful Hellenes but as passive and unattractive folk. She often picks up on specific details of paintings that open an avenue for discussion of broader issues. She highlights the issue of cannibalism, rather than shipwreck, implicit and explicit in Géricault's rendition of the Medusa tragedy, a chance to reflect on the real and fantasied experiences of cannibalism among French seafarers. She asks why the "Arab" in the background of Delacroix's image of Missolonghi is black. She picks out métis figures, such as the dark-skinned Greek man in Delacroix's work, in order to study his portraits of a mulatta and the whole phenomenon of métissage in French art, a subject on which she is particularly good.

One of the most remarkable of Grigsby's chapters concerns Girodet's *Revolt of Cairo*. She focuses on the homoeroticism of the painting (an analysis which I wish I had been able to read before writing my *Colonialism and Homosexuality*). Girodet's sexual orientation was directed to other men, as seen in many of his paintings. The *Cairo* work is little less than a homoerotic *mise-en-scène*, modeled partly on Arabic men whom he entertained in his Paris apartment. Three male figures on the right of the canvas, a crouching black man, a standing and almost naked Arab, and an expiring light-skinned Mameluke in rich robes, are exemplars of different races, but also, with their entwined limbs and, for the middle figure, striking muscularity, embody a scenario of homosexual desire. They may even be seen in their poses to show the cycle of sexual arousal, erection, and detumescence. Meanwhile, a French soldier across the canvas, brandishing his sword in the direction of the erect Arab, is involved in a pictorial homoerotic and cross-cultural relationship with his enemy, and the head of a decapitated Frenchman smiles in a sort of post-coital ecstasy. Some readers, of course, may find that Grigsby draws a long bow in such a reading, but her presentation is cogent and convincing, and she may be commended for emphasizing the homoeroticism of Girodet's work, a subject from which some other commentators have shied away.

Grigsby looks closely at the physical bodies in the paintings and what they symbolize—fear, longing, racial typologies, heroism, rejection—for the painters and the public. The artistic treatment of flesh provides indications, for instance, of attitudes towards slavery. The three black men on Géricault's raft, noticed or unnoticed by contemporary critics, served to emphasize the question of race in colonialism

and the issue of emancipation (not definitively achieved in France's colonies until 1848): "For Géricault to make a painting profoundly and transgressively evocative of the equality of flesh was to partake in an abolitionist discourse that was inherently conflicted" (p. 224). In this, and the other works, flesh and blood said much about imperial attitudes and policies.

On just a few occasions, Grigsby misses a clue. In the Girodet painting of Cairo, more could be made, perhaps, of the detail in which a French soldier is pulling away the cloak of the handsome Arab, to my eye, a clear case of homoerotic voyeurism. Similarly, certain positionings of figures may well indicate particular sexual acts, although in an acceptably discreet fashion, as when arms or heads strain towards crotches. More might be said about the enormous bulge in Belley's trousers in Girodet's painting of the black député (or Napoleon's similar endowment in Gérôme's painting). However, these are minor points, and empire, not sex, is Grigsby's main theme, though it plays a relatively major role in that primary subject.

In *Extremities*, Grigsby traces a developing interest in French overseas expansion, but also changes and nuances in attitudes. Belley is a hero for Girodet in the 1790s, but later portrayals of black men show a more negative attitude towards Africans. There are wide variations in views of Arabs, not an "identikit" Orientalist portrait—learned doctors in Jaffa, seductive warriors in Egypt, captors in the Balkans. Imperial endeavours are not always crowned with glory: Frenchmen suffer plague and battlefield death, the liberated are not necessarily more heroic (or beautiful) than their oppressors. Although she leaves many historical conclusions about politics and colonial strategy to the reader, Grigsby suggests a complicated relationship between France and the exotic world in the period from the Battle of the Pyramids to the taking of Algiers. She usefully draws attention back from general "Orientalism" to a more specific colonialism of conquest, slavery, and international political and military strategy. Painting was inspired by "real-life" events but in turn helped form public opinion and governmental policy: "This book has attempted to clarify the extent to which pictorial processes and oil paint's materiality, its viscous substantiality, were implicated in the politics of French colonial history" (p. 240). It would be illuminating to read what Grigsby might say on Gauguin and later painters of the "exotic" in France's colonial history.

Robert Aldrich
University of Sydney
r.aldrich@econ.usyd.edu.au

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