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Édouard Frédéric Wilhelm Richter
The Harem Dancer

ÉDOUARD FRÉDÉRIC WILHELM RICHTER
(Paris 1844–1913)

THE HAREM DANCER, C. 1866

Oil on canvas
51.5 x 75.5 cm; 20 1/4 x 29 3/4 in.

Provenance

Fine 19th Century European Paintings & Sculpture, Sotheby's New York, March 2000, Lot. 49;
Private Collection, Spain.

Publications

Harem: Geheimnis des Orients, Tayfun Belgin, Kunsthalle Krems, 2005, p. 77.



A female dancer stands at the centre of a richly appointed interior; her body caught in a moment of graceful arrested motion. She is draped in a sheer white gown through which her form is visible, a gold sash tied at her hips, a diaphanous veil held aloft in both hands above her head. Around her, the harem assembles in poses of languid attention: to her right, women seated on the floor play tambourines and other instruments; to her left, figures recline on low divans piled with silk cushions and layered carpets, watching or lost in reverie. The space recedes into deep shadow, its architectural details, ornate carved screens, and a large brass chandelier suspended in the gloom, only partially visible, as if the room itself resists full illumination.

Richter has constructed the composition with considerable theatrical intelligence. The dancer is positioned slightly off-centre, forming the vertical axis around which the other figures arrange themselves in a loose arc, drawing the eye inward and back. The low viewpoint places the viewer at floor level among the assembled women, creating an uncomfortable intimacy, the sensation of having been admitted to a space ordinarily closed. Two light sources animate the scene: a warm glow emanating from behind the dancer, which throws her into luminous silhouette against the darkness, and the stained-glass cupola visible in the upper right, flooding the scene with jewelled warmth from above. It is this double illumination, the glowing interior light and the coloured light from above, that gives the painting its extraordinary atmospheric quality.

The palette is built on deep reds, golds and ambers, punctuated by the brilliant white of the dancer's gown, a tonal contrast so sharp it draws the eye before anything else in the canvas. Richter's handling of texture is characteristically assured: the weight of the Persian carpets, the translucency of the dancer's veil, the reflective gleam of the brass chandelier are each rendered with a different quality of touch. It is a painting that deploys every resource of the academic tradition in the service of an image of carefully orchestrated desire.

The harem, from the Arabic *ḥaram*, meaning "forbidden" or "sacred," was the private domestic quarters of an Ottoman household, reserved for women and children and inaccessible to any men outside the immediate family. For European male painters, it was, by definition, a space that could never be directly observed. Not one of the great harem paintings of the nineteenth century, neither Gérôme's (1824-1904), nor Ingres's (1780-1867), nor Richter's, was painted from life. The artists worked instead from a combination of published travel accounts, studio props, hired models and the accumulated visual vocabulary of a tradition that fed upon itself, each new harem interior drawing on those that had preceded it. What resulted was not a record of Ottoman domestic life but a richly elaborated fantasy: a space of luxury, leisure and abandon constructed entirely for, and by, the European male gaze. Richter, who

never travelled to the Middle East, was among the most accomplished practitioners of this tradition. His interior is magnificent with its theatrical lighting, and his dancer is exquisitely rendered. But the scene he depicts existed nowhere but, in his imagination, fuelled by a European taste for the exotic.

Yet the harem was not entirely closed to Western eyes. European women, unlike their male counterparts, could and did cross this threshold, and what they found there differed profoundly from the fantasy that male painters had constructed. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762), accompanying her husband on his appointment as British Ambassador to Constantinople, visited Ottoman harems in 1717 and described them in her published letters with intelligence and precision that cuts directly against the male tradition.¹ This counter-narrative has been rigorously developed in recent scholarship, most notably in Mary Roberts's examination of the complex cultural exchanges that took place between Western women visitors and their Ottoman hostesses.² Roberts shows that on those occasions when Western women artists did gain access to the harem, among them were Mary Adelaide Walker (1820-1905), who painted Princess Fatma Sultan (1840-1884) in the 1850s, and the Danish artist Elisabeth Jerichau-Baumann (1819-1881), who painted the Egyptian princess Nazili Hanum (1853-1913) in the 1860s. They encountered women who were anything but passive. Elite Ottoman women exercised considerable agency over their own self-representation, directing how they wished to be portrayed and on what terms. Roberts also introduces the concept of the reciprocal gaze: Western women who entered the harem frequently found themselves becoming the objects of scrutiny rather than its subjects, as Ottoman women examined their dress, their manners and persons with a curiosity equal to their own. The harem that Richter imagined and the harem that Montagu, Walker and Jerichau-Baumann actually entered were, in almost every respect, different places.

Richter's harem interior draws not on Ottoman Turkey but on Andalusia. The architecture that frames his dancers and musicians: scalloped arches, carved stucco and geometric ornamentation is unmistakably Moorish in character, derived from the Alhambra in Granada rather than from any Ottoman palace.³ This conflation of Andalusian and Ottoman aesthetics was common among Parisian Orientalist painters, for whom the Islamic world was a single imaginative territory rather than a

¹ Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley, *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Written during her Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa*, T. Becket and P.A. de Hondt, London, 1763. The letters describing Montagu's visits to Ottoman harems were written between 1716 and 1718 and circulated privately before publication.

² Roberts, Mary, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2007.

³ The identification of the Alhambra's architectural vocabulary in Richter's harem interiors is noted in Galerie Ary Jan, Paris, catalogue entry for Richter. See also Thornton, Lynne, *The Orientalists: Painter-Travellers 1828–1908*, ACR Edition, Paris, 1993.

collection of distinct cultures separated by geography, history and tradition. The Alhambra, accessible to European travellers and extensively documented in prints and photographs, provided a convenient architectural vocabulary for painters who had never set foot in Cairo or Constantinople. Richter, working entirely from his Paris studio, assembled this interior from the same sources available to any painter of his generation: travel literature, studio props and the work of his predecessors and contemporaries. He was part of a distinguished Parisian circle that included Ludwig Deutsch (1855-1935) and Rudolf Ernst (1854-1932), fellow Orientalists who shared both his subject matter and his approach. What distinguished Richter within this circle was precisely this theatrical ambition, his ability to orchestrate figures, light and architectural grandeur into an image of overwhelming sensory richness.

Édouard Frédéric Wilhelm Richter was born in Paris on 13 June 1844 to a Dutch mother and received his early training at the Academy of Fine Arts in The Hague, before continuing his studies in Antwerp.⁴ He subsequently enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he studied under Ernest Hébert (1817–1908) and Léon Bonnat (1833–1922), both distinguished figures of the French academic tradition. He made his Salon debut in 1866 and, during the following two decades, established himself as a painter of portraits and historical subjects before turning increasingly to Orientalist themes, sumptuous interiors populated by odalisques, dancers and musicians in hispano-moresque settings that proved highly popular with both French and American collectors. He became a permanent member of the Société des Artistes Français in 1883, received an honourable mention in 1881, a third-class medal in 1901 and a second-class medal in 1902, before being declared *hors concours*. His refined handling of colour and texture drew considerable admiration from his contemporaries, and his palette has been described as jewel-like in its richness and luminosity. He died in Paris on 4 March 1913.

The Harem Dancer is a painting of extraordinary ambition and technical accomplishment. Richter has conjured a world of warmth, music and flickering light with a confidence that borders on the majestic, with its stained-glass cupola, glowing interior, and the luminous figure of the dancer poised between shadow and radiance. That this scene was entirely imagined makes it no less compelling as a work of art. What Richter offers is not a document but a dream, and one of the most seductive and beautifully constructed dreams the Orientalist tradition created.

⁴ Bénézit, *Dictionary of Artists*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

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