LEHNERT & LANDROCK
REVISITING A COLONIAL ARCHIVE
31.10.2025 – 01.02.2026

Photo Elysée offers a critical reinterpretation of the photographic archives of the Lehnert & Landrock studio, which have been part of the museum's collection since 1985. Active in North Africa in the early 20th century, Rudolf Franz Lehnert (1878–1948) and Ernst Heinrich Landrock (1878–1966) constructed and disseminated an iconography of the Orient intended for a European audience, deeply marked by the colonial context of their time.

The original archives are exhibited alongside contemporary works by Nouf Aljowaysir and Gloria Oyarzabal, which explore the history and legacy of colonial representations.

ARTIST GLORIA OYARZABAL STATEMENT

The artist wishes to express that her intention has always been to address the issues presented with respect and sensitivity. Each work has been conceived with the hope of provoking reflection—never of infringing upon the emotions or beliefs of the viewer.

LA BLANCHE ET LA NOIRE

In 1913, Félix Vallotton painted *La Blanche et la Noire*, inspired by Manet's *Olympia* and Ingres' *Odalisque à l'esclave*, depicting Sapphic love between a sylph and a Black woman. Unlike his predecessors, Vallotton dispenses with all exotic references, portraying a horizontal relationship.

The familiar reclining nubile female nude of Art History is frozen in time and laid out for voyeuristic pleasure in a post-coital doze; her cheeks flushed from exertion. Here, we assume not the gaze of the white bourgeois Western male, but that of a racialized woman—one who consumes the visual pleasures traditionally reserved for the privileged male archetype. Embedded in this dyad is the Orientalist fear and fascination with interracial erotic fantasy. Thus, while the Western eye bristles at being cast as the subjugated Black woman, this discomfort is tempered by the suggestion of an illicit and transgressive bond between the two women.

Starting with a faithful recreation of the original, and moving through different scenarios, the work culminates in a contemporary reflection: both women are shown reading books—*Afrotopia* by Felwine Sarr (co-author, with Bénédicte Savoy, of the report[1] commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron on

[1] *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics* (*Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle),* Philippe Rey/Seuil, Paris, 2018

looted objects in French museums, notably the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris), and *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes* by Barnaby Phillips.

A two-voice dialogue around gender, race, and colonialism emerges between them.

Odalisques in Western art and art spaces function as colonial devices, representing hierarchies of difference and inviting reflection on the act of contemplation—reinforcing stereotypes and exoticization: always bold, available, and subservient.

Eternal odalisques, eternally posed in sensual postures, have persisted through time—especially when femininity has been closely linked to the tropes of beauty and seduction—highlighting their role as obscure objects of male desire and pleasure.

What remains of the odalisques today?

"*The difference between nakedness and nudity in the European tradition: to be naked is to be oneself; to be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become nude.*" — John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972)

ON PHANTOMS, WOUNDS & THE WA(O)NDERING EYE

Images complain.

We subject them to an unacceptable disciplinary arrogance.

W.J.T. Mitchell suggests that when we ask, *"What do images want?"*, they reply: *"To be left alone."*

Thinking about the archive within an imperial context invites us to go beyond a reading of the iconography it contains—to identify certain legal, political, and historical documents as legitimate and authoritative, regardless of the damage or violence involved in their creation or current use.

The consequence of this status of "sacredness" accorded to the archive dangerously imposes a spatio-temporal freezing effect, relegating the reader to a neutral stance, with no space to question its content or impact. The imperial apparatus of preservation and possession is perpetuated not only by **what** we read, but by **how** we read.

Orientalism set the stage for the deployment of phantoms.

Photography intervenes in the colonial paraphernalia by reactivating ghosts in the devil's finest details—phantasmagoric compositions, dis/encounters, scars as wrinkles in the body, testifying to the passage of time; silent witnesses.

And the wo/andering eye: amazed, astonished, inquisitive, flâneur-like—an eye that rethinks the act of looking, of gazing, that interprets, learns, and possesses.

What—and where—is the essence of images, their metaphysics?

"*Restitution, repair, repatriation, and renaming are among the new functions of photography, which is facing a debt to its past and to itself.*"
— Ariella Aïsha Azoulay

ESSAY FOR AN ATLAS OF THE ETHICAL JOURNEY OF AESTHETICS: THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAIL

French philosopher Roland Barthes (1915–1980) referred to the image as "what I think the other thinks of me."

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said introduced a critical concept that describes how the West constructs a reductionist representation of the Orient—one closely linked to imperialist societies and therefore inherently political and power-serving. This representation emerges from a complex process of internalizing a romanticized version of local cultures, explicitly created by colonial powers and their accompanying paraphernalia.

The scarecrow image of an East marked by archaism and obscurantism has been constructed to contrast with that of a progressive, modern, and egalitarian West—thus justifying colonial domination presented as a mission of civilization, democracy, and peace.

The colonial ideologies of the 19th century established European superiority through the formation of "cultural hegemony," a concept introduced by Gramsci, which suggests a shared common sense or cultural universe wherein the dominant ideology is practiced and spread through political, moral, and cultural values. Western writers, travelers, artists, and scholars often portrayed the "East" [Middle East to whom? as Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi thunders] as a static, timeless land filled with emotion, wealth, sensuality, mystery, danger, and superstition. These portrayals reflected Western fantasies and anxieties rather than the realities of Eastern societies.

It is important to note that the term "Muslim world" is often used to group together countries, languages, and cultures that are vastly different and spread across multiple continents—ignoring the sociological diversity and complexity of individual societies, as well as their socio-economic and historical particularities.

From the phrase attributed to French writer Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880), traveller and perpetuator of the Orientalist imaginary, "*Le bon Dieu est dans le détail*" (The good God is in the detail), the meaning later shifts with the devil replacing God. Chilean photographer Sergio Larraín (1931–2012) captured an image of two lovers in a park, which inspired Julio Cortázar's short story *Las babas del diablo* (*The Devil's*

Drool, 1957). Michelangelo Antonioni based his 1966 film *Blow-Up* on this story. For this *Essay for an Atlas...*, I blow up the details, looking for the devil.

By mapping out a cartography of the imaginary—already existing and replicated *ad nauseam* by artists, writers, scientists, travellers, journalists—a microcosm is created that reflects on the Lehnert & Landrock legacy. Stereotypes endlessly replicated in a loop, freezing the represented universe in a space-time capsule:

Dunes
Oasis
Rivers
Smoke, reflections, and sparkles
Palm trees
Pyramids
Sunsets
Camels
Prayers
Mosques, palaces, bazaars
Draped fabrics, traditional clothing
Jewelry
Patios, columns, fountains
Veils, gazes
Daily life…

But also: sensuality, exoticism, erotic fantasies, and stereotypes.

So-called Orientalist artists freely employed sexual and racial components in their compositions, depicting their imagination and projecting idealized desires onto a forbidden zone—without boundaries, filters, or red flags. Can these offensive, sensitive, painful images be described without showing the image itself? Would that be enough? Racialized sexism toward the non-white female body continues to be dangerously perpetuated. Displaying such images remains controversial and always runs the risk of replicating the white gaze and a narrative of suffering.

If we could ask these women again for their consent to reproduce their bodies endlessly, would they agree—knowing the consequences? These are bodies in circulation: postcards were the viral images of their time, long before the internet.

Edward Saïd argued that the Oriental woman was always represented and therefore positioned as passive and breathless, so that "she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her."

And yet, to avoid the reductionism found in certain decolonial discourses, it must be acknowledged that the "Orientalized" woman was—and is—not an inert being, static and devoid of agency. Women's rights movements have emerged throughout the Arab world since time immemorial, with internal debates and

controversies, just like all feminist movements—shaped by their own narratives and agendas.

The argument of Muslim women's emancipation and liberation was central during colonization. This form of colonial feminism served as a foundation for the claim to "civilize the Muslim world." In her seminal work *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), Leila Ahmed demonstrates how current controversies surrounding Islam and Muslim women are rooted in colonial discourse developed in the 19th century. Under the title *The Battle of the Veil*[2], Frantz Fanon addressed the symbolic struggle over the unveiling of Algerian women during French colonial rule.

Gayatri Spivak's famous phrase— "White men are saving brown women from brown men"—still holds relevance, especially considering that men are often feminist only in the face of the sexism of the Other. The way a body is sexualized is also a way of racializing it. Feminism cannot exclude other forms of domination in its analysis and critique of patriarchy—otherwise, it risks becoming complicit in racism.

Western narratives about the East continue to reflect and perpetuate cultural biases and power dynamics, caught in a complex interplay of admiration and condescension. The 19th-century curiosity and fascination with the "Other"—though riddled with fallacies—was arguably less sinister than today's fear attached to any mention of Islam in a political context.

What happened along the way?

[2] The Battle of the Veil refers to Frantz Fanon's analysis in *A Dying Colonialism* (1959) where the veil became a site of struggle between French colonial power and Algerian national identity. Fanon observed that French colonial officials initially focused on the veil as a symbol of traditional Algerian culture and a means to destroy Algerian national identity by encouraging unveiled women to assimilate to European ways. However, Algerian women transformed the veil, with both its presence and absence becoming acts of political resistance, subverting the colonial gaze and eventually playing crucial roles in the anti-colonial struggle by acting as militants or even spies behind enemy lines.

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TEXT TRANSCRITIONS FROM THE ARTWORK *ESSAY FOR AN ATLAS OF THE ETHICAL JOURNEY OF AESTHETICS: THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAIL*

EMBROIDED POSTCARDS

1.

Sfax, July 8, 1901
My dear Fernand Fontayne,
I'm sending you these 3 cards. I hope they will please you.
Send me 3 big men.
Your friend, Pascal Bonairta
At his parents' place, Sfax
(Tunisia)

2.

[ESP]

Queridísima Juanita: Recibí su preciosa postal con la noticia de que suenan menos las espuelas por la calle de las Beatas y como me figuro que cuando suenan menos es porque el pollo que las lleva está parado, no quiero ni pensar las pavas que estarás pelando de Navidad;

Dé muchos recuerdos a sus tíos lo mismo que a Amparo y Ud recíbalos de su buen amigo

Mariano

[EN]

Dearest Juanita: I received your lovely postcard with the news that the sound of spurs is fading on Beatas Street. And since I imagine that when spurs make less noise, it's because the rooster wearing them is standing still, I don't even want to think about all the turkeys you must be plucking for Christmas!

Please send my warm regards to your uncles, as well as to Amparo, and receive from your good friend,

Mariano.

NOTES

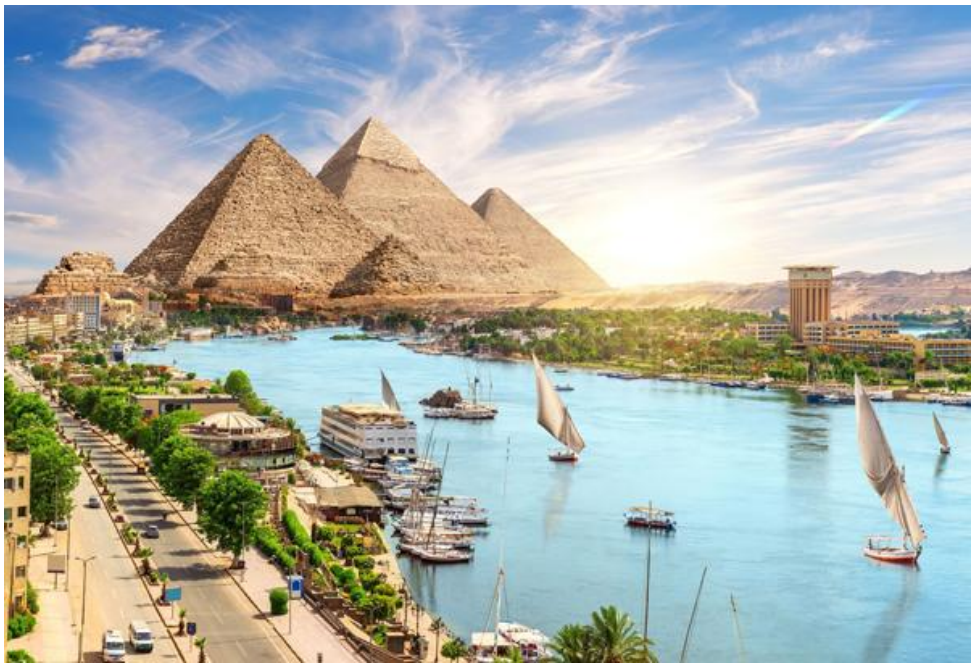
The original Spanish text contains colloquial and culturally specific expressions that do not have exact equivalents in English.

- "Espuelas" (spurs) refers to the metal tools worn on boots, evoking a traditional, possibly Andalusian, setting. The phrase about the "sound of spurs" fading suggests that someone is no longer walking or moving around actively.

- The terms "pollo" (rooster) and "pavas" (female turkeys) are used figuratively and playfully in the original. While literally referring to birds, in Spanish popular speech, they can imply young men and women or be affectionate nicknames.

- The phrase "pelar pavas" literally means "to pluck turkeys," which fits the Christmas context of preparing food. However, it can also be a colloquial expression meaning to flirt or court, adding a humorous double meaning.

LENTICULAR IMAGE



"In the Egyptian desert, thirty miles east of Cairo, a new city emerges—not through gradual habitation or incremental growth, but from a profound gesture of speculative statecraft. Egypt's New Administrative Capital (NAC) functions less as a city and more as a materialized myth, a vision constructed from a calculated gamble on sand, security, sovereignty, and future imaginaries. In this entanglement of speculative finance and ideological fabrication, infrastructure is no longer merely concrete or fiber optic cable; it is a complex mechanism through which the nation-state attempts to stabilize its sovereignty amid geopolitical flux.

[…]

Beyond its material utility, NAC functions as a spatial declaration of political legitimacy, a financial instrument for capital accumulation, and a technological platform for surveillance and control. Yet it is also fundamentally a mytho-ideological creation: a projection of power and modernity that seeks to reshape not only urban space but the very conception of Egyptian identity and its place in regional and global orders."

Malek Al-Sarnamy
Temporal States: Speculation, Myth, and the New Egyptian Capital
e-flux Architecture, *New Silk Roads*, June 2025