

“Unveiling the West: Through the Eyes of Artists, Historians and Critics”
Reviewed by Doris Bittar

Review of ***Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art***

Edited by David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros

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Photo Illustrated

Let us suppose that the Middle Eastern world was hyper-obsessed with the seemingly ubiquitous Western practice of preparing one’s daughter for a sexual life beginning at the age of 13 or 14. Suppose that this was all that Middle Easterners discussed among themselves and Westerners. Whether the conversation begins with world politics, the price of oil, the Euro, or tennis, the Middle Easterner would predictably drift the discussion back to the question of how Western girls, at tender ages, are equipped with the latest birth control technologies and offered out to the world as sexual beings. The rallying cry to the world would be that “These girls will inevitably be ruined if not saved by the values of Middle Eastern modesty.” A Westerner may laugh at this and want to change the subject – not out of shame but out of a sense of irrelevance and silliness.

For Westerners, the veil has become a monolithic symbol for all that is wrong with the East. The Orient, as seen through Occidental eyes, is usually defined as a singular and monolithic threat to “Western values”. This ignores not only the variety and diversity of veiling practices but the entire spectrum of Middle Eastern

cultures. Thus, the acknowledgment of diversity rejects the implicit or explicit Western view of a monolithic Islamic or Middle Eastern culture.

Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art is based on an exhibition of artists from throughout Europe, the United States and the Middle East. The essays are collaborative efforts between artists, theorists and critics. They range from providing historical facts and artistic practices to asking how images, art and resistance strategies challenge and/or reinforce Western stereotypes of the other. The strands that most engagingly tie these at times disparate and heterogeneous articles together are their tenacious and steady engagements with the “West’s” motivations and role in the region. The authors never address the issues surrounding the veil and its diverse uses in a vacuum. Their discussions are anchored in the regional and local socio-political contexts.

Leila Ahmed in “Discourse of the Veil” traces the patterns of intersection between the colonial bureaucracy and the Arab elite. We see colonial administrators such as Egypt’s Lord Cromer bent on “liberating” the Arab man by lifting the veil off of his woman. At the same time, Lord Cromer presses for cuts in the education of Arab women and works against the suffragette movement back home in England. The link is clear from the colonial history to contemporary Anglo-American pundits who cry for women’s rights in the Arab world as justification for

occupation of Iraq, but support cuts in social services to women and children and erosion of reproductive rights back home.

As one of the chapters points out, there is no single word for “veil” in the Arabic language. There are many words for various headwear that both men and women use, just as in Western society there are words such as bowler, pillbox hat, bandana, baseball cap, etc. We find that Middle Eastern headgears are linked to tradition, function, job, ethnicity, religion, fashion, class and context.

Ironically, the veil becomes an issue for the Middle Easterner only when he/she feels that his or her culture is under attack. If the West uses its opposition to the veil to weaken Middle Eastern societies, then Middle Eastern resistance movements equally use the veil to undermine Western designs. Patterns of transgressions, whether by lifting the veil to symbolically advance the suffragette movement in Egypt in the 1920’s or using its anonymity to subvert and confuse the occupiers in Algeria in the 1960’s, are given equal importance. Frantz Fanon’s timeless article, “Algeria Unveiled” (first published in 1959) jarringly explicates the tortured perceptions of the veil and its use as a tool for resistance to confuse and defy the colonialists in Algeria.

The veil is also a restriction, a symbolic imposition. The *bourka* endangers women by restricting their sight and thus their safety. Conversely, the veil may be a restriction that produces unexpected creative and expanded career

opportunities. For example, in post-revolutionary Iran the modesty codes ironically brought more women not only into the government, but also into the arts. Hamid Naficy dispassionately points out that there is a sort of women's cinema in Iran that is getting international attention and is light years ahead of pre-revolutionary Iran's inclusion of women.

Veils are also subject to fashion, as Alison Donnell points out. In the near past most women wore scarves or *hijabs* and one could not necessarily tell the difference between a Christian, Muslim or Jewish woman going to get water from the public well.

Aside from historical articles, another central focus of ***Veil*** is to question disconnects between the art world's avant-garde rhetoric and results with real life field observations. We are drawn into artistic processes as well. A book steeped in art world rhetoric and conceptual contortions may inconspicuously omit the significance of the religious uses of the veil. This book thinly covers it. However, artist Zineb Sedira in "Mapping the Illusive" acknowledges the need for a discussion from a religious perspective disinterested in art or politics to explore the "sacred meaning of the veil..."

Some of the images – especially those not discussed in the text – give ***Veil*** the feeling of a coffee table book. This may be a marketing strategy, but could inadvertently divert attention from the seriousness of the book's central lessons.

Those who are purely tantalized by its cover will be disappointed to find that these articles do not reveal any mysterious secrets of the harem.

We can deduce from the essays collected that the history of the so-called veil is really the history of Western imperial perceptions, attitudes and designs on the region of the Middle East. The editors, artists and critics leave hardly a stone unturned in their thoughtful scrutiny and broad understandings of historical patterns, societal contexts and examination of artistic strategies. Each chapter swells and leaves a wake that builds to establish a cumulative and creative discourse. ***Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*** is a welcome addition to my library, a rich reference book that I will visit periodically and recommend to others.