



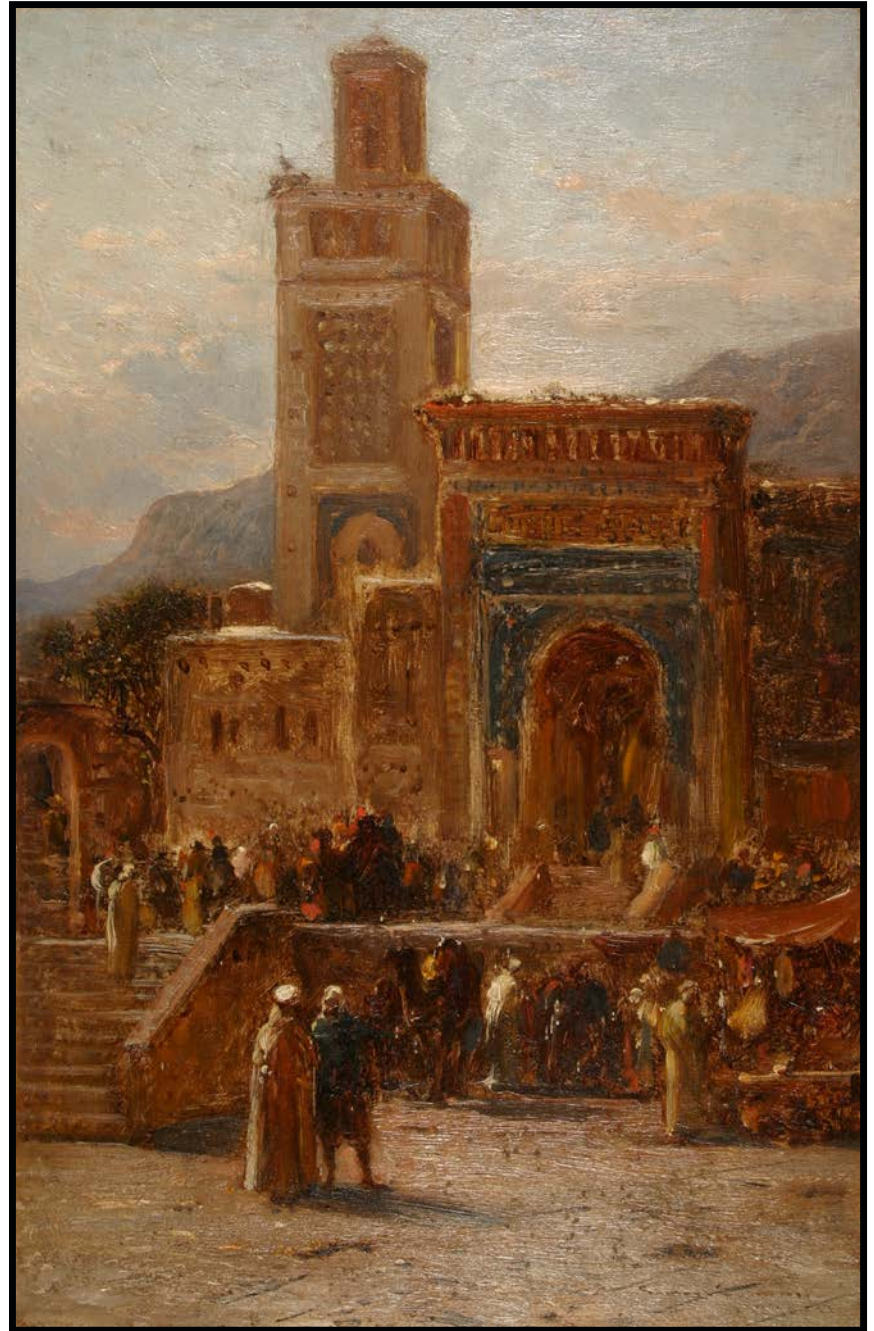
MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Orientalism: from Samuel Colman to *The Sheik*

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

The 1919 publication of *The Sheik* by E. M. Hull was a runaway bestseller, even though critics lambasted the lusty story as “wicked,” and “poisonously salacious.” Set in Algeria, the plot follows a British woman’s trip through the Sahara, during which she is abducted by a desert sheik and becomes his concubine. The blockbuster Paramount movie followed in 1921, unleashing *Sheik* hysteria on America. Almost overnight, enterprising travel agencies began heavily marketing “motor car trips” across North Africa, promising exotic and forbidden delights. One *French Line* ad tempted potential travelers to “follow the Sheik’s trail through lands of mystery. . . forbidden to Christian travelers for centuries!” The discovery of the tomb of pharaoh Tutankhamun in late 1922 only magnified the North African mystique. Orientalism had reached a febrile climax in America, but its appeal had begun much earlier.

Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 reintroduced Egyptian allure to the West, and thereafter French artists began to stray from the rational confines of Neoclassicism to the new movement of Romanticism, which appealed deeply to the senses and emotion. Many of the Paris Salon’s future luminaries fell headlong into the sensuous genre of harems, souks, and kasbahs. French domination of North Africa also continued, eventually encompassing Algeria and Tunisia. In 1893, the Society of French Orientalist Painters was founded with Jean-Léon Gérôme as president, but the movement had already spread far beyond France. A sub-genre, Japonisme, began about the middle of the century, and drew on Japanese culture for inspiration.



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Samuel Colman (American, 1832–1920)
Arabian Market, 1876–1877
Oil on composition board
Museum Purchase (79.1)



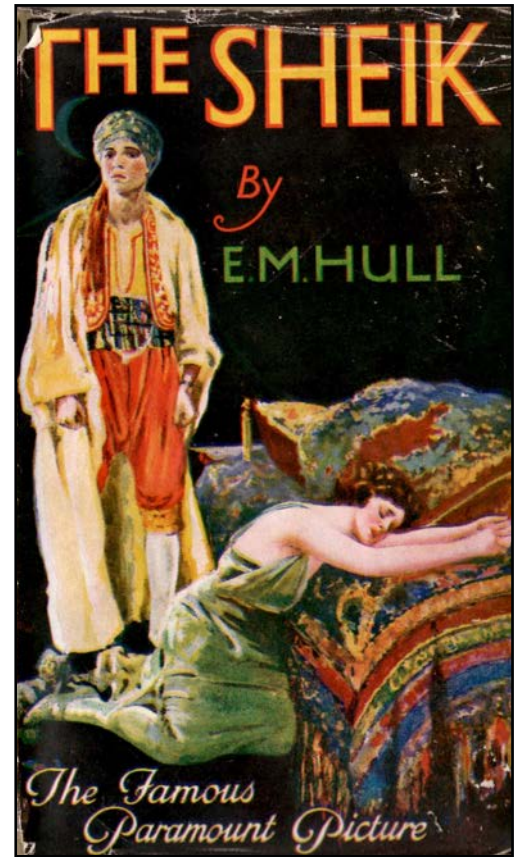
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The arrival of Orientalism in America was inevitable, and its enchanted, colorful canvases were on the rise by ca. 1870. Maine-born Samuel Colman began apprenticing under Asher Durand in the 1850s and became associated with the Hudson River School of painters. But Colman would visit North Africa twice, particularly Algeria. Painted in the 1870s, the setting of his *Arabian Market* is perhaps Tlemcen, where a similar historic mosque still stands with a distinctive, square minaret, typical of North Africa. Bathed in a sultry, gauzy light set against a lavender spur of the Atlas Mountains, the market scene is irresistibly escapist, and such exoticism found favor with war-weary Americans. John Singer Sargent, Elihu Vedder, and Frederick Arthur Bridgman, among others, followed suit and painted similar subjects. Colman went on to become an interior designer, working with Louis Comfort Tiffany on various projects, which also showed the impact of oriental motifs.

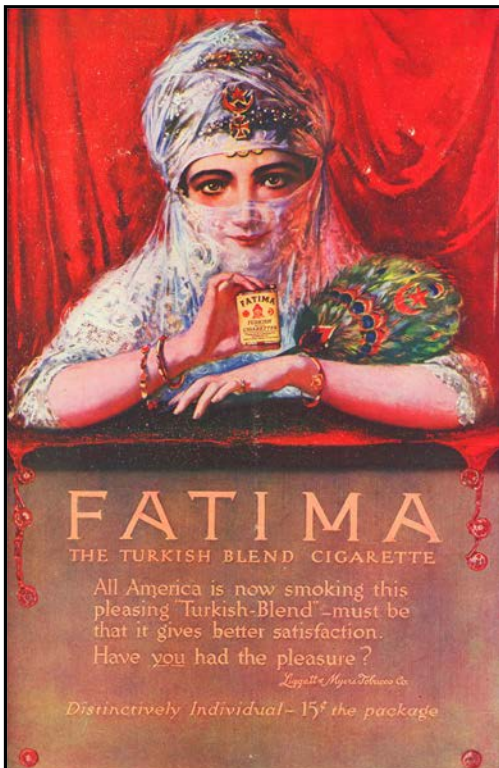
Within a few years of the new century, Orientalism had become a pop phenomenon worth millions. By the 1910s, the most daring American women could buy *les jupe-culottes* (harem pants), introduced by Parisian couturier Paul Poiret. *Fatima* cigarettes, the package of which featured an alluring, veiled woman,

became the most popular selling cigarette in America from 1910–1920 (not so subtly using words like “pleasure” and “satisfaction” in its ad campaigns). After *The Sheik*, E. M. Hull continued her racy orientalist novels, with titles like *Captive of the Sahara*. *The Son of the Sheik* also became a successful movie, and the budding medium would continue to create orientalist intrigues for the screen. One aspiring actress, born Theodosia Goodman, became the screen’s first “vamp,” but not before she was rechristened “Theda Bara.” Sources conflict on whether the name was an accidental or deliberate anagram for “Arab Death,” but publicity agents seized upon it and deceitfully claimed Bara’s father was an Arab sheik. She was from Ohio.

World War II shut down travel to North Africa as it was swept into the battle, and Orientalism in art and pop culture essentially ended. In retrospect, critics have accused the genre of being patronizing, unduly eroticizing, and promulgating inaccurate stereotypes of Arab culture. Its historical context, however, reveals it as a phenomenon specific to time and place. ■



The Sheik by E. M. Hull
photoplay book cover, 1921



Fatima cigarette ad, 1914