



The Revelatory Road Trip of Lalla Rookh

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

Writing more than 2,500 years ago, Homer could not have realized the future impact of *The Odyssey*, his swashbuckling tale of the hero Odysseus' epic journey to reach home after the Trojan War. Other Greek epics followed, and they would all captivate readers with exotic places, fantastic creatures, fearsome foes, and magical objects. The very word "odyssey" passed into English as a synonym for a long, eventful journey. From the *Wizard of Oz* to *The Hobbit* and beyond, such stories have continued to fascinate up through the modern era. A lesser known odyssey, though enormously popular in the nineteenth century, is Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh: an Oriental Romance*. Largely forgotten today, the 1817 publication went on to inspire artists, musicians, composers, choreographers, and many others.

Even the East India Company named one of its ships after Moore's title character, while Barnum and Bailey staged a spectacular circus pageant to recreate her mythical entourage. One artist, Francis John Wyburd, was said to have been particularly enthralled by the story, motivating him to create several paintings* inspired by it. The Museum Associates gifted one of these to the permanent collection in 1979.

Moore's epic "frame tale,"** about the journey of a Mughal princess from Delhi to Kashmir to marry a neighboring king, was a runaway hit. The author was not an "orientalist," but according to his own introduction to the poem, he was encouraged by friends (including George Byron) to take on the exotic subject. Moore had never been to India either, but he managed to create an enormously enduring tale that was still in print 100 years later. Marrying fact and fantasy, the plot follows the remarkable journey of Lalla



Francis John Wyburd (British, 1826–1909)
Lalla Rookh, 1855
Oil on cardboard
Gift of Museum Associates (79.94)

(Continued on page two)



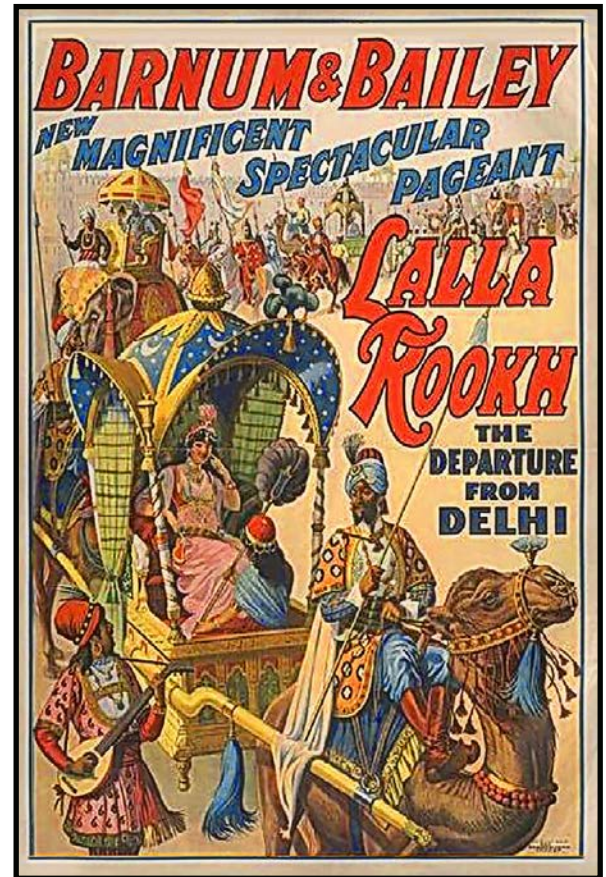
MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Rookh (“tulip-cheeked”), a fictional daughter of Emperor Aurungzeb (r. 1658–1707). As the story opens, a great entourage has been assembled to convey the princess to Kashmir, to wed the King of Bucharia (roughly today’s Uzbekistan). Over the course of the 450-mile trip, the princess is attended and entertained by a slew of servants and court staff. Among the servants is a Persian girl who lulls Lalla to sleep by singing the “ancient ditties of her country,” accompanied by a stringed instrument known as a *vina* (or *veena*). It is this particular event that Wyburd represented in the Museum’s painting. Women were usually the subject of Wyburd’s work, and one critic characterized the artist’s output as the “perfect realization of female beauty.” We might also note that his representations of Asian subjects were hardly accurate, but rather Europeanized fantasies of the East. Wyburd was not alone in such misrepresentations.

Others included in Lalla Rookh’s entourage are Fadladeen, a fussy, finger-wagging chaperone, whose disdain and reproaches furnish comic relief. But the most important of the group is Feramorz, a handsome young poet, newly arrived at the Delhi court, engaged to entertain the princess on her remarkable road trip. As the entourage meanders slowly through lush, exotic landscapes, redolent with “wild fragrant airs,” Feramorz recites four epic poems, all of which hold Lalla rapt, despite Fadladeen’s persnickety critiques. The plots of the poems revolve around a pair of doomed, star-crossed lovers, a fallen angel seeking readmission to Paradise, the trials of Zoroastrians confronting Islam, and a harem girl using magic to gain a prince’s favor. These tales sweep the reader back to an extraordinary, magical age typical of the literary odyssey. Fabled locales are populated by valiant warriors, handsome princes, beautiful princesses, and formidable enemies. Amplifying the exoticism are characters such as Persian fire-worshippers, the dark-eyed sorceress Namouna, “beautiful creatures of the air who live upon perfumes,” and the malevolent “Veiled Prophet” whose monstrous, true identity is hidden behind a veil of silver.

Whether it be Middle Earth or the Mughal Empire, winged sandals or ruby slippers, a sorceress or a wizard, the components of the classic literary odyssey coalesce into stories of timeless appeal. But the true allure of such stories must be their humanity, and thus love, passion, and spiritual redemption are often

(Continued on page three)

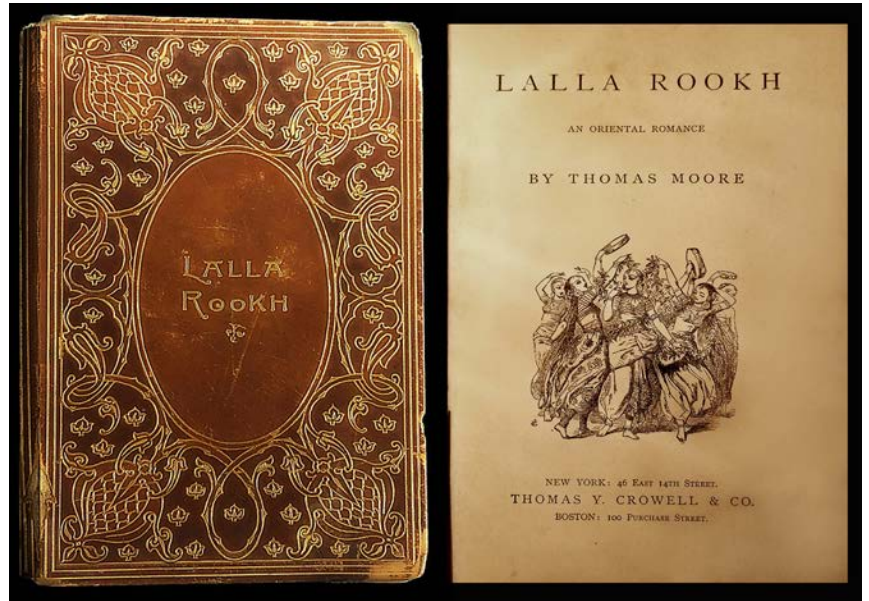


Barnum and Bailey poster, 1915



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

prominent themes. Odysseus is reunited with his devoted wife, Dorothy Gale is returned to her loving family, and Lalla Rookh finds the love of her life. As the story progresses, the princess arrives at the heartbreaking realization that she is in love with Feramorz. She falls into a deep depression because she is en route to meet her future husband, a man she has never met, much less loves. A startling revelation, however, is only a few pages away. It is divulged that Feramorz is, in fact, the King of Bucharia, Lalla Rookh's husband-to-be. Although Moore wrote often of love's pitfalls, he conceded in another poem that there is "nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream." More broadly, the literary odyssey is a journey of the soul, one that often finds redemption in the final pages. It is no wonder these tales continue to inspire not only the casual reader, but also artists and many others. ■



Gilded Victorian edition of *Lalla Rookh*, cover and title page, 1884

*These include *The Kiosk*, *The East*, *Hinda*, possibly others. A cursory search does not readily reveal the locations of these artworks.

**Literary technique in which the main narrative sets the stage for one or more secondary narratives within the overall plot.