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Kashmiri Shawl in European Oil Paintings: Representation, Exoticism through the Visual Lexicon of Orientalism

Saqib Mohammad (PhD Candidate),
Waseem Mushtaq wani (Faculty)
Department of Fine Arts Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, U.P

Abstract

This research examines the representation of Kashmiri shawls in European oil paintings, analyzing their role as aesthetic and cultural artifacts within the framework of Orientalism. These textiles, originally handcrafted in Kashmir, became emblematic of wealth, status, and the exotic East when introduced to European society through colonial trade. By analyzing 18th- and 19th-century artworks, this study explores how the Kashmiri shawl functioned as a visual lexicon for Orientalist narratives, symbolizing the allure of the 'Other' and reinforcing colonial ideologies. Employing a multidisciplinary approach that combines art historical analysis, postcolonial theory, and material culture studies, this paper investigates the aesthetic, symbolic, and ideological dimensions of the Kashmiri shawl in European art. It aims to shed light on the intersections of visual culture, imperialism, and the commodification of the East through the lens of European oil painting.

Keywords: Kashmiri Shawl; Orientalism; European Oil Painting; Cultural Appropriation; Colonialism

Introduction

The Kashmiri shawl holds a unique position in the narrative of colonial art history, becoming an emblem of exoticism, luxury, and cultural interaction. Originating in the Himalayan valleys, these intricately woven textiles became central to European artistic depictions during the 18th and 19th centuries. By appearing in oil paintings, Kashmiri shawls were transformed from mere luxury items into visual metaphors for the allure and conquest of the East. This paper examines the role of the Kashmiri shawl in European oil paintings, focusing on its representation as an Orientalist artifact, its commodification, and its embeddedness in socio-political narratives of gender, class, and empire.

Drawing upon Edward Said's (1979, p. 113) theory of Orientalism, the study reveals how these shawls were portrayed as objects of fascination and dominance, often stripped of their indigenous significance to serve Western artistic and ideological frameworks. Through visual analysis of key artworks and engagement with critical literature, this paper interrogates the aesthetic, symbolic, and cultural significance of the Kashmiri shawl in European art.

Historical Context of Kashmiri Shawls

The Kashmiri shawl, often referred to as a "Cashmere shawl" in Europe, has origins that trace back to ancient times. These textiles were crafted using pashm, the fine undercoat of Himalayan goats, and featured intricate patterns, most notably the boteh motif, later adapted as the paisley in the

West (Dar, 2019, p. 2). The shawls were prized for their lightweight warmth and intricate designs, which symbolized status and refinement in both South Asia and Europe. By the late 18th century, the shawls were exported extensively to European markets, becoming a staple of aristocratic fashion and an emblem of colonial trade dynamics (Maskiell, 2002, p. 30).

Patronage by influential figures such as Empress Josephine of France and Queen Victoria further elevated the shawl's desirability. Empress Josephine's extensive collection of Kashmiri shawls, often featured in her portraits, highlighted their association with imperial grandeur and refined taste (Carberry, 2021, p. 12). Known for her deep admiration for these textiles, Josephine received them as diplomatic gifts and actively commissioned their acquisition. Her fondness for Kashmiri shawls was not just an expression of her personal aesthetic preferences but also a statement of power, as these textiles symbolized the French Empire's reach into exotic territories (Maskiell, 2002, p. 40). The Empress reportedly owned hundreds of these shawls, and her portraits often prominently featured them, showcasing the intricate boteh designs that became synonymous with opulence and status in European high society (Dar, 2019, p. 3).

Josephine's association with Kashmiri shawls also popularized their use across the French aristocracy, creating a ripple effect that extended throughout Europe. These shawls became a critical component of women's wardrobes, serving as symbols of elegance and wealth while subtly reinforcing colonial narratives of cultural superiority (Young, 2007, p. 58).

The shawl, dating from 1790-1825, is a remarkable example of Kashmiri textile artistry, currently housed in the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. This particular piece is a tili shawl, a type known for being woven in multiple sections that are meticulously stitched together to form a cohesive whole. Kashmiri shawls have a storied history, with their origins

tracing back to the 3rd century BC, when local weavers crafted them to withstand the region's harsh winters. Over time, these shawls evolved into esteemed art forms, with artisans creating intricate designs that were highly valued by royalty and the elite. The influence of Mughal and Persian aesthetics is evident in the delicate floral and paisley patterns, as well as the rich colors and gold thread used in their embroidery. The incorporation of luxurious materials, such as pashmina wool from the high Himalayas, further enhanced their exclusivity and appeal.

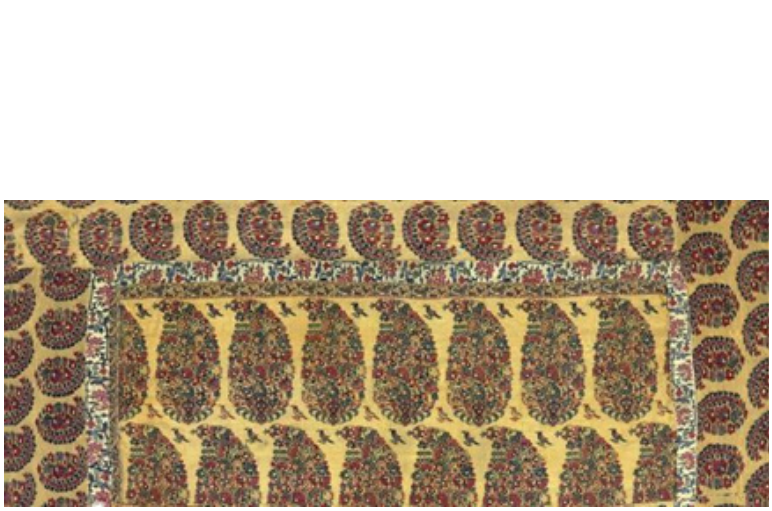

Figure: 1- A tili shawl (1790–1825), Cooper Hewitt Museum, illustrating multi-panel Kashmiri weaving.
Figure: 2 - Detail of shawl woven on a Jacquard loom, 1840–60, wool, probably Scottish (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), Smarthistory. (2021). Detail of reliquary guardian figure (Eyema-o-Byeri) [Image]. Retrieved February 6, 2025,

Materiality, Gender, and Colonial Power: The Kashmiri Shawl in European Visual Culture

European artists frequently employed the Kashmiri shawl as a compositional device that emphasized refinement, sensuality, and exotic luxury. Painters skilled in rendering both likeness and textile design were especially valued, as the shawl's intricate motifs, vivid hues, and fluid drapery elevated the visual prestige of a portrait. In Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' Portrait of Madame Rivière (1806), for instance, the shawl frames the sitter with soft, ornamental curves, subtly signaling her social elevation and Europe's access to colonial trade networks (Carberry, 2021). The material richness of pashmina also made the shawl a recurring motif in nineteenth-century genre scenes, where artists such as Alfred Stevens exploited its softness and luminosity to heighten contrast, sculpt form, and underline the sitter's sophistication and cosmopolitan tastes.

The shawl's aesthetic appeal, however, was inseparable from gendered constructions of exoticism. Female sitters draped in these textiles were often portrayed as graceful, enigmatic, or sensuous, embodying an idealized femininity shaped by Orientalist imagination. In Antoine-Jean Gros' L'Impératrice Joséphine (1809), the shawl functions as both a fashionable accessory and a symbol of imperial reach, reinforcing Joséphine's cultivated cosmopolitan identity (Maskiell, 2002). Ingres' later portraits, including those of Madame Panckoucke and Madame de Senonnes, blend Kashmiri motifs with eroticized elegance, situating women as carriers of the East's perceived sensuality. Through such representations, the shawl mediated fantasies and anxieties surrounding femininity, linking the female body with the allure of the exotic East.

Yet beneath its visual beauty, the Kashmiri shawl also embodied colonial power. Its presence in European portraiture signified wealth derived from control over Eastern artisanal labor. As European manufacturers—especially in Paisley—flooded markets with cheaper Jacquard-woven imitations, Kashmiri weavers faced economic decline (Dar, 2019). Within paintings, however, the shawl remained a symbol of authentic exoticism, masking the material exploitation underpinning its circulation. Thus, the shawl in European art simultaneously expressed aesthetic desire, gendered exoticism, and imperial dominance.

Figure: 3- A woman wearing a cashmere shawl, Alfred Stevens, Departing for the Promenade (Will You Go Out with Me, Fido?), 1859, oil on panel, 61.6 x 48.9 cm (Philadelphia Museum of Art), SmartHistory. (2021, February)

The Orientalist Lexicon: Appropriation, Exploitation, and Othering
Cultural Appropriation and Transformation

As Young (2007, p. 102) argues, cultural appropriation in art often involves the recontextualization of artifacts, stripping them of their original meanings and transforming them to fit Western aesthetic and ideological frameworks. This is evident in the European adaptation of the Kashmiri shawl's boteh motif into the paisley pattern, which became a hallmark of Western textile produc-

tion. By incorporating these motifs into their compositions, European artists appropriated Eastern artistry, reframing it as a decorative element that symbolized refinement while obscuring its cultural origins. The act of cultural appropriation extends beyond artistic representation to include the deliberate extraction of cultural elements for economic and political gain. Kashmiri shawls, originally tied to cultural practices and regional identities, were decontextualized and mass-produced in Europe, particularly in textile hubs like Paisley, Scotland. This not only diluted their cultural significance but also disrupted local economies in Kashmir, as imitation shawls flooded markets globally (Maskiell, 2002, p. 45).

Furthermore, the reinterpretation of Kashmiri motifs in European art often erased the labor and heritage of the original artisans. As Carberry (2021, p. 54) highlights, the production of these textiles in Kashmir involved intricate techniques passed down through generations. European adaptation of these designs, while celebrating their aesthetic value, rarely acknowledged the cultural and historical depth of their origins. Instead, they became tools to signify Western sophistication and control over exotic cultures. The symbolic transformation of Kashmiri shawls also reinforced colonial hierarchies. By positioning these textiles as luxury goods accessible primarily to European elites, their appropriation underscored the unequal distribution of wealth and power. The commodification of the shawls in European markets erased their connection to the skilled Kashmiri artisans who crafted them, instead attributing their value to the taste and consumption of Western society (Reinke de Buitrago, 2012, p. 110). This process not only devalued the original cultural significance of the shawls but also reduced them to commodities within the colonial economic framework. Ultimately, the appropriation and transformation of Kashmiri shawls within European art and commerce exemplify the broader dynamics of cultural domination. By reframing these textiles to fit Western narratives, European artists and markets perpetuated a system in which the East was both exoticized and subordinated, reinforcing the colonial ideology of cultural superiority.

Visual Othering

Reinke de Buitrago (2012, p. 91) highlights how visual representations of Eastern goods in European art contributed to the process of "othering," constructing a dichotomy between the civilized self and the exotic Other. Kashmiri shawls, often depicted as luxurious yet foreign, became visual markers of this ideological divide, reinforcing notions of Western superiority through their depiction as spoils of empire.

In artworks such as Ingres' Portrait of Madame Panckoucke , the shawl's presence does more than signify luxury; it positions the Eastern world as an object to be consumed and redefined by the West. By framing Eastern textiles in the context of European settings and figures, these works decontextualized the shawl's cultural and historical significance, transforming it into an ornamental signifier of the exotic. The intricate patterns and vibrant colors of the shawl further heightened its appeal, creating a visual contrast that emphasized the foreignness of the artifact within a Western aesthetic (Carberry, 2021, p. 45). Moreover, the process of visual othering was deeply tied to the colonial power structures that enabled the flow of such artifacts into Europe. The shawl's representation as a prized possession in aristocratic portraits symbolized the West's ability to appropriate and repurpose Eastern craftsmanship for its cultural agenda. This practice often obscured the labor and artistry of Kashmiri weavers, reducing their work to a mere accessory in narratives of European grandeur (Maskiell, 2002, p. 53). The Kashmiri shawl's association with feminine sensuality in paintings further reinforced the trope of the East as a space of indulgence and decadence. Female subjects draped in these shawls were often portrayed with an air of mystery, aligning with Orientalist stereotypes that conflated Eastern culture with eroticism and excess. This intersection of gender and othering reveals how these textiles were used to construct multifaceted narratives of dominance, desire, and difference (Young, 2007, p. 110).

Through these visual strategies, the Kashmiri shawl became a recurring motif in the Orientalist imagination, encapsulating the broader dynamics of cultural appropriation and imperial power. By situating these artifacts within European contexts, the paintings not only celebrated the artistry of the East but also reaffirmed the West's self-image as the arbiter of global culture and refinement. Kashmiri shawls, renowned for their intricate embroidery and luxurious materials, were highly prized in Europe and the United States during this period. Their motifs, often featuring paisleys, floral patterns, and rich textures, reflected the artistry and cultural significance of Indian textile traditions. In the West, such shawls became symbols of wealth and refinement, and their use in bespoke garments like this cloak highlighted their status as luxury items.

This cloak demonstrates the cultural fusion of Kashmiri craftsmanship with Western fashion sensibilities, illustrating how Indian textiles influenced global tastes and became integrated into Western wardrobes. It also reflects the colonial-era fascination with exotic goods and the ways in which they were adapted to suit new contexts and functions.

Case Studies: Kashmiri Shawls in European Paintings

1.John Singer Sargent's Portraits (1908–1911)

John Singer Sargent's Two Girls in White Dresses (1909–11) and his portraits of his niece from 1908 and 1911 exemplify his masterful ability to blend impressionistic light effects with a profound sensitivity to fabric and texture. While Sargent's oeuvre is not explicitly rooted in Orientalist discourse, his engagement with textiles—particularly imported luxury fabrics—aligns with the broader European fascination with exotic materials as markers of refinement. In these works, the delicacy of the sitters' white gowns contrasts with the richness of draped shawls, subtly invoking the visual language of colonial trade. The layering of fabrics in these compositions mirrors the way European portraiture absorbed and recontextualized non-European textiles as symbols of aesthetic sophistication, their origins masked beneath the guise of elite fashion.

Sargent's brushwork, loose yet controlled, emphasizes the play of light on the folds of cloth, rendering the garments as luminous and sculptural forms. In the Paintings of Sargent's Niece (1908, 1911), the interplay between soft textiles and the sitters' composed expressions suggests an engagement with materiality that extends beyond mere decoration. The shawls, if present, function as extensions of the figure, shaping the composition through movement and texture. Unlike the rigid formality of 19th-century Orientalist portraiture, Sargent's approach imbues the textiles with a sense of spontaneity, reflecting his modernist sensibility. These works, though devoid of overt colonial motifs, nevertheless exist within the framework of European material culture that prized Eastern luxury goods, positioning them as naturalized elements of aristocratic fashion. In doing so, Sargent's paintings subtly participate in the broader visual economy that transformed non-European artifacts into signifiers of taste, reinforcing the seamless integration of colonial commodities into Western artistic traditions.

*Figure: 4 - Sargent's niece Rose-Marie Ormond, wrapped in the shawl for his 1911 portrait Nonchaloir (Repose). Hearst Magazines. (n.d.). Edc090119sargent-scarf03 [Image]. Retrieved February 16, 2025, from https://hips.hearstapps.com/hmg-prod/images/edc090119sargent- scarf03-1591806311.jpg?resize =980:**

*Figure 5- Sargent's Two Girls in White Dresses, 1909-11, from a private collection. Hearst Magazines. (n.d.). Edc090119sargent-scarf05 [Image]. Retrieved February 16, 2025, from https://hips.hearstapps.com/hmg-prod/images/edc090119sargent-scarf05-1591805784.jpg?resize=640:**

2. Ingres' Portraits of Rivière, Panckoucke, and Senonnes

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' portraits—Portrait of Marie-Françoise Rivière (1805), Portrait of Madame Panckoucke (1811), and Portrait of Madame de Senonnes (1814)—exemplify how the Kashmiri shawl functioned as a material marker of exoticism, luxury, and imperialist consumption within early 19th-century European portraiture. These works, executed with Ingres' signature precision and smooth modeling, integrate the Kashmiri shawl as an ornamental yet ideologically charged accessory. The draped textiles in each portrait are not mere embellishments but serve as signifiers of the sitter's wealth and engagement with colonial commodities. By situating these women within the opulence of imported Eastern fabrics, Ingres aligns them with an aestheticized vision of affluence that subtly reinforces European dominion over distant lands and their artisanal traditions. Ingres' attention to the shawl's texture demonstrates his skill in blending Orientalist elements into a European aesthetic, turning the shawl into a central symbol of refinement and cultural aspiration (Carberry, 2021, p. 35)

Ingres' meticulous rendering of textile surfaces—capturing the luminosity of silk, the intricate curvilinear motifs of paisley, and the weight of the draped fabric—demonstrates his virtuosity in material illusionism. However, beyond their technical splendor, these textiles operate within the broader framework of Orientalist visual culture. The Kashmiri shawl, sourced from colonial trade networks, becomes an exotic appendage that elevates the subject's social standing while simultaneously inscribing her within an imperial economy of aesthetic appropriation. In Portrait of Madame de Senonnes, the vivid red of the shawl contrasts against the sitter's pale skin, enhancing the sensuality of her pose while reinforcing the East as a space of sensual indulgence. Similarly, in Portrait of Madame Panckoucke, the rich fabric enveloping the figure echoes the aesthetic ideals of both neoclassicism and Orientalist fantasy, transforming colonial commodities into emblems of European refinement.Ingres' use of the shawl not only enhances the painting's aesthetic appeal but also embeds it within a larger Orientalist framework, where Eastern objects were reimagined through a Western gaze (Reinke de Buitrago, 2012, p. 23).

These portraits reveal how the European bourgeoisie integrated the exotic into their material world while abstracting it from its socio-political realities. The Kashmiri shawl, once a textile rooted in indigenous craftsmanship and cultural specificity, is here recontextualized as a passive luxury good, its origins erased in favor of its decorative function. Ingres' sitters become icons of elegance, yet their refinement is predicated on a visual economy of imperial consumption. Ingres' use of the shawl not only enhances the painting's aesthetic appeal but also embeds it within a larger Ori-

entalist framework, where Eastern objects were reimagined through a Western gaze (Reinke de Buitrago, 2012, p. 23).

Figure 6- Ingres, Portrait of Madame Panckoucke (1811), shawl as imperial luxury.
PFigure 7 - ortrait of Madame Panckoucke wearing Kashmir Shawl.
Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres – Musée du Louvre, Paris. – 1811, Ingres, J. A. D. (1811).

3. Claude Monet's Madame Louis Joachim Gaudibert (1868)

Monet's portrait embodies the integration of Orientalist motifs into mid-nineteenth-century realism. The sitter's draped Kashmiri shawl, rendered with vibrant reds and intricate paisleys, contrasts with the soft atmospheric background typical of Monet's early style.

Here, the shawl serves as a visual anchor, symbolizing cosmopolitan modernity and wealth. The painting subtly reveals how European domestic life absorbed colonial luxury goods as naturalized elements of bourgeois identity.

Figure 8: Monet, Madame Gaudibert (1868) , exotic textile as bourgeois identity.

4. Alfred Stevens' Female Interiors

Stevens' paintings, Will You Go Out With Me, Fido? (1859), After the Ball (1874), The Visit (1870), and A Pleasant Letter (1859), feature women enveloped in richly patterned shawls, set within intimate salon environments. Stevens uses the shawl to frame femininity, domesticity, and emotional nuance. These shawls, often casually draped, highlight the effortless luxury of bourgeois interiors. Stevens' attention to their folds and textures underscores their role as symbols of wealth, fashion, and exotic cultural consumption.

Figure 9: After the Ball, Alfred Stevens Belgian, 1874, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (n.d.). Madame Moitessier [Painting].
Figure 10: A Pleasant Letter by Alfred Stevens, OilPaintings.com. (n.d.).

5. Jacques-Louis David's Marquise de Sorcy de Thélusson (1790)

Among the earliest depictions, David's portrait shows the Marquise wearing a richly detailed Kashmiri shawl. His neoclassical precision captures the textile's motif with striking clarity, marking the shawl as a fashionable and elite accessory even before its mass popularity in the early 1800s. David's work is significant because it represents a transitional moment, when the shawl was still a novel luxury, yet already embedded with exotic associations.

Figure 11: - Portrait of Anne-Marie-Louise Thélusson, Countess of Sorcy (1790) | Neue Pinakothek, Wikimedia Commons. (n.d.). Portrait of Jacques-Louis David [Image]. Retrieved February 6,

Conclusion

The Kashmiri shawl's depiction in European oil paintings serves as both a testament to its aesthetic value and a reflection of the ideological frameworks of Orientalism. Artists such as Ingres, Gros, Monet, and Delacroix employed these textiles not merely as decorative elements but as powerful symbols of luxury, refinement, and cultural exoticism. These shawls, intricately crafted and richly adorned, were celebrated for their beauty, yet their representation often obscured the labor and cultural significance inherent to their origins.

Through their inclusion in portraits and Orientalist scenes, Kashmiri shawls became visual markers of wealth and status, aligning their wearers with the sophistication and opulence of colonial spoils. However, these representations also reinforced narratives of Western dominance, positioning Eastern artifacts as objects to be consumed and recontextualized within European cultural frameworks. The shawl's transformation from an indigenous craft to a symbol of colonial grandeur underscores the complex interplay between art, commerce, and imperial ideology.

The aesthetic functions of these shawls in paintings are deeply tied to their intricate craftsmanship and visual appeal. Their vibrant colors, elaborate motifs, and fine textures served as focal points in compositions, enhancing the allure of the sitter or setting. From the sensuality emphasized in La Grande Odalisque to the aristocratic elegance in Madame Moitessier, the shawls symbolized not only beauty but also the exoticism that Europe associated with the East.

Ideologically, these shawls became tools for visualizing power and cultural appropriation. By embedding them within European art, artists participated in the colonial narrative that reimagined Eastern artifacts as commodities devoid of their cultural and historical roots. These paintings helped perpetuate the myth of Western superiority by framing the East as a source of aesthetic wealth to be curated and controlled.

This dual function of Kashmiri shawls—as aesthetic treasures and ideological instruments—reveals the broader cultural dynamics at play in European art during the colonial era. They stand as enduring symbols of the intricate and often problematic relationship between the West and the East. Moving forward, contemporary scholars and artists must continue to interrogate these narratives, seeking to honor the cultural origins of such artifacts while unpacking the layers of meaning they have accrued in Western contexts.

By examining these artworks, we gain insight into the ways European art both celebrated and commodified the East, perpetuating a legacy of cultural appropriation and exoticism. Future research may further explore how contemporary art can recontextualize these narratives, honoring the rich traditions of Kashmiri craftsmanship while addressing the historical imbalances of power and representation.

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