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# A history of artists, committed to steeping themselves in exotic locales and in otherness

By **Matthew Price** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 19, 2016

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They were painters, filmmakers, writers, and cultural vagabonds. But, besides being connoisseurs of faraway lands, the subjects of Jamie James’s fascinating new cultural history, “The Glamour of Strangeness: Artists and the Last Age of the Exotic,” were seekers, suffering from an existential kind of homelessness, destined to “roam the world in search of the home they never had in the place that made them.”

James dubs them “exotes,” a term he borrows from the French writer, doctor, and sinologist Victor Segalen, one of the subjects of his book, for those who choose “to immerse themselves in otherness.” In these nine linked essays, James focuses on the lives and travels of a half dozen artists who took deep dives in such locales as Tahiti, Java, China, Haiti, and the deserts of North Africa from the 19th century through the middle of the 20th, before the “cultural homogenization” ushered in by the rise of global capitalism and personal technology and the Internet.

Some exotes are well known. Paul Gauguin, perhaps the archetypal example, is the subject of a chapter, and French poet Arthur Rimbaud and Englishman turned Arab guerrilla leader T.E. Lawrence have walk-on parts as presiding spirits.

For some, like Gauguin, who left his native France for Tahiti in 1891, the act of departure is also a showy act of renunciation. (The French seem particularly prone to such habits.) He hoped to “correct the error of his French nationality” and “became a sort of freelance pagan.”

James incorporates art criticism, cultural theory, and biography while he ranges freely. Sometimes, in his zeal to pursue an idea, the clauses pile up. Of Gauguin's Tahitian nudes, James observes, the "process of cultural overlay, interpenetrating the artist's idealized vision of the new homeland, formed in prospect, and the real world he found when he arrived, is a distinguishing characteristic, almost a defining quality of the exote." The idea of the exote's tendency to blend the idealized and the real is intriguing, but that's a doozy of a sentence.

The brunt of James's account focuses on lesser-known figures that reflect the author's art-insider if eclectic taste. The chapter on Segalen, for example, is tough going and doesn't quite come into focus.

An art critic and expatriate writer, James is a Texan turned New Yorker who has lived in Bali since 1999, and his most interesting chapters showcase his impressive knowledge of the Indonesian archipelago. Perhaps the most fascinating character we encounter is Walter Spies, a — what to call him? Spies was *sui generis*, a German painter in the technical sense but also a musician, ethno-musicologist, composer, and amateur naturalist.

Discontented with Europe like Gauguin, "Spies loathed bourgeois German society as only a German intellectual can." Spies decamped to Java in 1923, and there he flourished. He conducted a small orchestra, but his real vocation was mastering Balinese musical forms.

He was preternaturally eclectic, and one can hardly keep up with his activities. For James, Spies is a kindred spirit, a Westerner who "integrated his own life and art with that of the island."

The two chapters on Spies alone make "The Glamour of Strangeness" worth dipping into.

As James observes, the trajectory of the exote is typically West to East. But he offers a fascinating case study in a reverse journey, that of the Javanese painter Raden Saleh. Born in 1811 in what was then the Dutch East Indies, Saleh's talents

brought him to Europe, where he became a portrait painter in German royal courts. After some two decades, he returned to Java in 1851, bringing European artistic techniques with him.

His art fused East and West. He was also an amateur scientist: In keeping with the other exotes here, Saleh was a generalist in the extreme sense of the term. He was implicated in anti-colonial activity in 1869, but the charge was unfounded, James notes. Saleh moved between worlds, and it came at some cost.

Many of the figures struggled against convention and the dictates of their times. James does not neglect the politics of sex and gender. Dutch colonial authorities accused the homosexual Spies of pedophilia in the late 1930s, and his trial was “a cause celebre, a tropical equivalent of Oscar Wilde’s scandalous trials.” Margaret Meade wrote an impassioned defense of Spies, who was found guilty on scant evidence.

This is mostly a boys club, but James also profiles the exploits of Isabelle Eberhardt, the 19th century Russian-Swiss writer who lived in North Africa, passing as an Arab man, and experimental filmmaker Maya Deren, who went to Haiti in pursuit of voodoo in the late 1940s. “Like Byron’s Childe Harold, Eberhardt sought freedom in the purity of the desert, an illimitable place where she could roam at will in her new identity as Si Mahmoud Saadi, a taleb on a solitary quest of the infinite.” Estranged from their homelands, the artists here forged new identities and new visions in terrain all their own.

## **THE GLAMOUR OF STRANGENESS:**

### **Artists and Last Age of the Exotic**

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