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‘The Glamour of Strangeness: Artists and the Last Age of the Exotic’, by Jamie James

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Review by Tash Aw



More than 60 years before the painter Paul Gauguin travelled from Paris to Tahiti in order to refashion his life and work “in isolation and virtual savagery”, another artist had made the voyage in the opposite direction, a journey that began with considerably less fanfare than Gauguin’s, but which also involved a deliberate invention of a near-mythic public image, complicated cultural loyalties and, ultimately, a less than happy ending.

Born to a noble Javanese family in 1811, Raden Saleh was a child prodigy whose talents brought him to the attention of the Dutch colonial administration, which arranged for a scholarship that took him to the Netherlands, where he swiftly established a successful career as a professional

painter, regularly receiving commissions from the crown for prestigious portraits. Influenced by Delacroix and Vernet, his work is credited with importing western technique into tropical Asian painting — a heady combination of high European Romanticism and reverse Orientalism — but it was his determined cultivation of his social circumstances that make his story utterly unique.

A fervent Europhile from an early age, he idolised western science and culture, and set about ingratiating himself into the higher echelons of Dutch society, creating a wholly misleading persona of “prince of Java,” complete with resplendent tropical costumes, in order to do so. It succeeded. For many years, his life and work in Saxony and, later, Paris, was supported by his friend and patron, Ernest, Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. But his connections to the Javanese ruling class were to prove his downfall: forced to return to Java, he was later accused of treason against the Dutch colonial government in spite of desperate declarations of his love of the Netherlands. A final sojourn in Europe proved he belonged to neither continent. “Our bodies are in Java, but our spirit and our thoughts are in Europe,” he wrote in a letter to Ernest.

Raden Saleh’s is perhaps the most moving of the half-dozen portraits of “exotes,” the term Jamie James uses throughout his entertaining, erudite study of a rarefied group of people whose experience of other cultures transcended mere travel, who sought instead “to immerse themselves in otherness” over the course of 100 years, starting from the 19th century.

Borrowed from the French writer and Sinologist Victor Segalen, the term is a crucial part of the thinking behind Segalen’s influential essay on exoticism, which provides the intellectual foundation of James’ work. For “exotes”, exoticism is not a negative concept, but rather, a simple recognition of otherness, involving distances in time as well as space.

The subjects of Jamie James’s book seek this immersion for a variety of reasons, and with hugely varying degrees of success. Walter Spies, who fled Weimar Germany for the Indies, threw himself into the customs and rituals of Bali, and was instrumental in the re-establishment and subsequent flourishing of painting, music and dance in Bali. He was the most prominent of a number of foreign artists responsible for the promotion of the paradise image of Bali that still feeds its tourist industry today. The chapters on Spies form the centrepiece of the book, and paint a man troubled by a constant sense of exile that was never successfully masked by his assimilation into Balinese culture or his unfailingly optimistic nature.

In 1947, a few years after Spies’ death in what would soon become the Republic of Indonesia, Maya Deren, the Ukrainian-born American experimental film-maker — most widely known for her influential short *Meshes of the Afternoon* — travelled to Port-au-Prince, where she dedicated herself to the study of voodoo, and to taking as many lovers as she could.

In this way, at least, she had been preceded by Gauguin and the Swiss explorer and writer Isabelle Eberhardt half a century earlier. Gauguin’s well-documented sexual abandon in French Polynesia raised accusations of paedophilia, and resulted in his death from syphilis; Eberhardt wandered the Algerian desert dressed as a man, smoking hashish that, according to James, “emboldened her in the aggressive pursuit of sex”.

A powerful sexual attraction to the other was clearly one of the principal motivations for the cross-continental voyages made by many of James's "exotes": the book is full of frank discussions of the romantic — and not so romantic — tendencies of its subjects and the people they meet, including a detailed description of a visit to a male brothel in China in 1898. But, as these cases illustrate, sexual union rarely led to a feeling of belonging.

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The book is at its most powerful when dealing with the passage of time — that fundamental element of Segalen's definition of exoticism. When Raden Saleh finally succeeds in returning to Europe in old age, having sold all his possessions and endured an unhappy period in Java, he finds Paris is no longer the glamorous, wicked city he had known a quarter of a century before, but a modern, bourgeois Hausmannian capital still recovering from the Prussian occupation and the chaos of the 1871 Commune; Germany's "fairytale fiefdoms" were also rapidly modernising together with Victorian Britain and France's Third Republic.

It is perhaps this sensitivity to the rapidity of change that links the various travellers in the book to each other — and, by extension, to its author. Although James admirably avoids drawing parallels between his subjects on the grounds that their circumstances were so different, he admits that his fascination with them stems from his own situation as a contemporary "exote". His awareness of what it means to look at another culture through time and space has been honed by a trajectory that has taken him from Texas to New York and finally to Lombok, after more than a decade in Bali. He opens the book with a long, ravishing account of night-time visits to the temples of Angkor, when most of the district was still under Khmer Rouge control, and each excursion riddled with danger (landmines, poisonous snakes, and so on) — a place so perilous and remote that it seems to predate modern travel, with its cheap flights and package tours. And yet that journey only took place in 1989; now, more than 2m tourists visit Angkor each year. James's brief description of the rapid, ugly transformation of his neighbourhood in Bali feels as poignant as Raden Saleh's sadness on finding a Europe transformed: both their chosen others had become something else.

The Glamour of Strangeness: Artists and the Last Age of the Exotic, by Jamie James, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, RRP\$30, 364 pages (published in the UK in September)

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