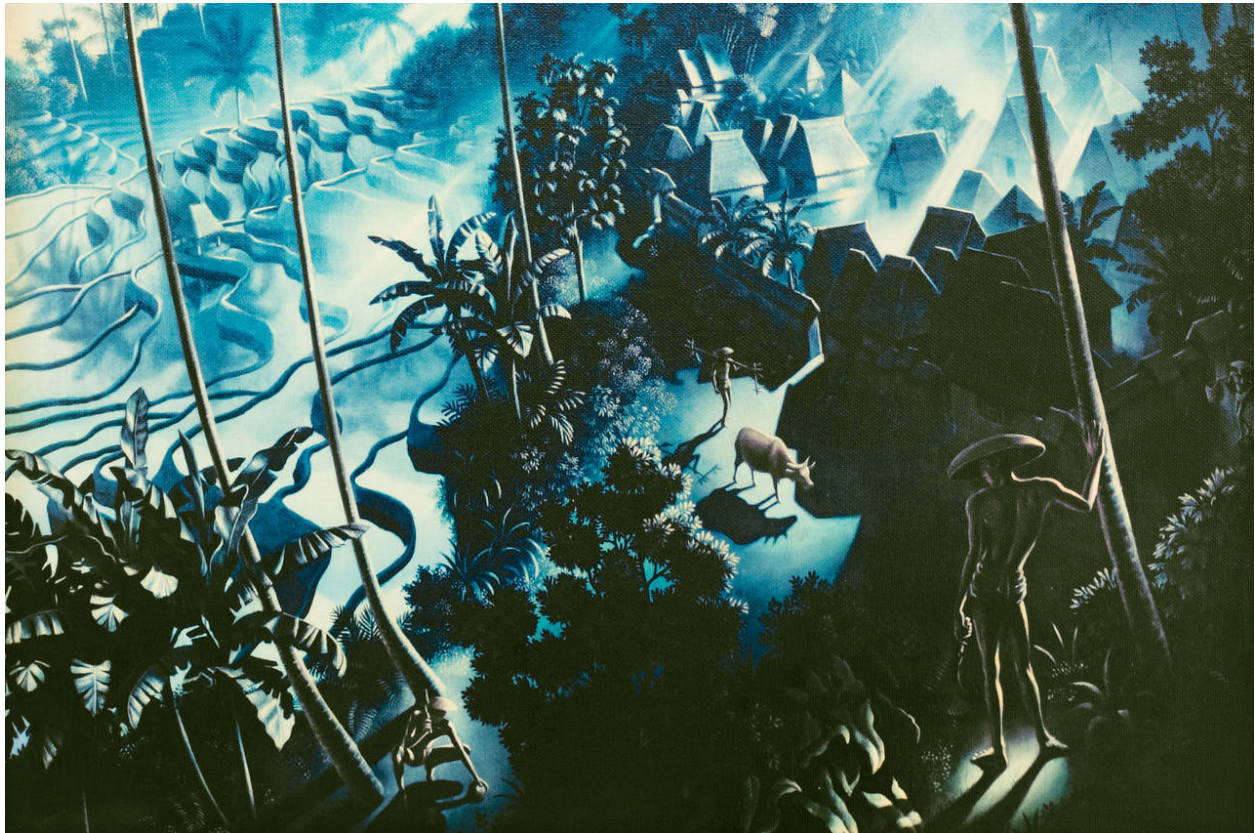


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Seeking the Strange and Savage

Gauguin's flight to Tahiti, Maya Deren's obsession with voodoo, Isabelle Eberhardt's Islamophilia—the lives of the exotes.



'Iseh in Morning Light' (1938) by Walter Spies. Photo: Alamy

By Ben Downing

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Are you an exote? Probably not. Exotes are a rare breed, and my guess is that few read this newspaper. “But what the devil is an exote?” you ask. “Some kind of gender-bender or cutting-edge hipster?” Actually, the term, coined in 1904 by the French writer Victor Segalen, denotes a passionate, self-immersing traveler to exotic realms, as against a mere “impressionistic tourist.” In “The Glamour of Strangeness,” a splendid book marred only by its awkward title, Jamie James borrows and adapts Segalen’s term, applying it to a number of 19th- and 20th-century writers and artists who, in his view, exemplify the type. To label the book a biographical study would be to scant its originality. Shifting fluently from subject to subject, teasing out patterns but not pressing them too hard, bringing his own experience to bear in illuminating ways, Mr. James has written a book that defies easy classification and is completely at ease in its skin.

Mr. James has had an appropriately unusual career. Raised in Texas, he moved to New York and wound up writing art criticism for the *New Yorker*; became a globe-trotting writer of travel pieces and profiles (with a specialization in archaeology and lost cities); fell in love with an Indonesian entrepreneur and settled in Bali; and, in 2013, relocated with his partner to the neighboring island of Lombok. His earlier books have dealt with, among other topics, Arthur Rimbaud's adventures in Java and the herpetologist Joe Slowinski, who died of snakebite in Myanmar.

As Mr. James explains, "The Glamour of Strangeness" began as a "dual study" of two artists connected to Indonesia, and these mirroring profiles remain its highlight. The first is of the Javanese painter Raden Saleh (1811-80). A child prodigy, he was apprenticed at age 8 to an expatriate Belgian painter. At 18 he sailed to Holland, where he continued his studies, became a Freemason and received royal commissions for official portraits. Later he spent five years in Germany at the court of Ernest II, Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (and brother of Queen Victoria's husband), who befriended him. Toggled out in "pastel satin tunics with a bejeweled kris thrust in the sash and a turban set with a fluffy aigrette and a diamond crescent," Raden Saleh styled himself "the prince of Java" and flitted happily among aristocrats.

The Glamour of Strangeness

By Jamie James

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 364 pages, \$30

Artistically, meanwhile, he tried to out-Orientalize the French Orientalists (such as Delacroix and Horace Vernet) with gaudy depictions of tiger hunts and other Javanese scenes. These made him a minor sensation, and one huge canvas, exhibited in Paris at the Salon of 1847, was bought by King Louis-Philippe. After returning to Java in 1851, Raden Saleh faded from European awareness, but he persisted in his Continental ways by marrying "a rich white woman" and building a neo-Gothic mansion.

"A rare example of the East-to-West exote," Raden Saleh elicits from Mr. James more curiosity and sympathy than admiration: "There is," he acknowledges, "an emptiness at the core of Raden Saleh's European work." By contrast, the German artist Walter Spies (1895-1942) brings out the author's full enthusiasm, and it's easy to see why. "Sunny-natured," open-minded and multitalented, he was a free spirit of the best kind. Wanting a break from the gay underworld of Weimar Berlin (where his lovers included the director F.W. Murnau, of "Nosferatu" fame), he went in 1923 to Java, where he made exquisite landscape paintings, played piano in a Chinese cinema and led the private orchestra of the sultan of Yogyakarta, in whose palace he lived.

In 1927, Spies moved to Bali. Enchanted by the island's culture, he plunged into it with joy, learning fluent Balinese and "all the instruments in the gamelan," an orchestra made up mostly of percussion instruments, apprenticing himself to "a master mask carver," choreographing traditional dances and forming close friendships with many Balinese artists. He also became a magnet for visiting Westerners. Comparing Spies's status to that of Gertrude Stein in Paris and Paul Bowles in Tangier, Mr. James establishes his centrality to the "Bali boom" of the 1930s. Everyone from Margaret Mead to the Woolworth heiress Barbara Hutton sought him out, and Noël Coward wrote an affectionate poem in his guest book ("Oh Walter dear, oh Walter dear, /

Please don't neglect your painting," it begins). After meeting Spies, Charlie Chaplin wrote a 50-page sketch of a projected film about Bali, and Mr. James detects in the manuscript clear signs of Spies's influence. Small wonder that Mr. James sees him as a kind of tropical Renaissance man.

Another of the book's main subjects is Paul Gauguin, whose flight to Tahiti Mr. James makes compelling even though it has been studied to death. Then there's Segalen (1878-1919), a restless naval doctor who did a tour of duty in Tahiti and was inspired by Gauguin's audacity as an exote. Segalen went on to become a rabid sinophile, mastering Mandarin with remarkable speed and traveling in remote parts of China. His obsession yielded a series of experiments in poetry and prose, of which his novel "René Leys" is generally held to be the most successful—Mr. James compares it to Kafka's "The Castle," its thwarted quest played out in Peking's Forbidden City. Cerebral and melancholy, Segalen seems an elusive subject, but Mr. James skillfully evokes the longing for exoticism that both drove and fascinated him.

In terms of extremity, risk-taking and sheer freakishness, no one in the book touches Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904). Born in Geneva and tyrannically home-schooled by a demented Russian anarchist who may or may not have been her father, she got an odd start in life and went on from there. In 1897 the family moved to Algeria, where Isabelle's budding Islamophilia and attraction to the Sahara burst into riotous bloom. In the seven years before she was killed by a flash flood, she joined a Sufi order; survived an assassination attempt (by saber); smoked kilos of hashish; enjoyed "quick trysts" with sailors and toughs; married an Algerian cavalryman; and undertook a secret mission for the great French colonial administrator Hubert Lyautey, who, remarkably, became her friend. To top it all off, she dressed in drag half the time and churned out novels and stories that some have praised highly. Mr. James is hardly the first to portray Eberhardt—among others, Lesley Blanch did so in "The Wilder Shores of Love" (1954), perhaps the most obvious forerunner of "The Glamour of Strangeness"—but he does so with vivid economy.

Finally, there's the American experimental filmmaker Maya Deren (1917-61), who in the late 1940s and early '50s developed a rather unhealthy obsession with Haitian voodoo. Deep in debt and jacked up on amphetamines injected by New York's notorious "Dr. Feelgood," she kept returning to Haiti and trying to penetrate its shadow world. Though she wrote (with the encouragement of the mythologist Joseph Campbell) a book about voodoo, she never finished her film on the subject and in fact pretty much dried up as an artist. Mr. James's sad account of her unraveling reads as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of exote compulsiveness.

It's a tricky theme, exoticism; the mere word "exotic" can make readers groan and academics see red. Impressively, Mr. James manages to take the theme seriously while avoiding the pious claptrap to which it lends itself. (One exception is the wretched phrase "the Other," which oozes in here and there.) He also avoids—unlike Lesley Blanch—the temptation of hothouse prose. Witty and light-handed, he spins out many wonderful sentences, such as this one about the historical phenomenon of "Westerners who arrived in exotic corners of the world" and never left: "Most of them were sailors and soldiers who fell in love with local women and went AWOL or scalawags who had compelling reasons not to return home, prototypes of Joseph Conrad's outcasts of the islands, deracinated losers who leave no legacy except their genes."

Best of all, Mr. James achieves a tapestry-like richness of weave. His range of reference is vast but never showy, and his six main subjects are deftly intermingled with a supporting cast of dozens, from Lady Hester Stanhope to Pierre Loti to Wilfred Thesiger. Exote art, in his view, is chiefly characterized by its “overlay of cultures.” (Raden Saleh, for instance, lets us see “French Romantic painting . . . through Javanese eyes.”) Mr. James doesn’t call himself an exote and might not meet his own definition. But his book is art of a kind, and it could only have been written by someone who strongly prefers Lombok to Texas.

—Mr. Downing is the author of “Queen Bee of Tuscany: The Redoubtable Janet Ross.”