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Go East, Young Man

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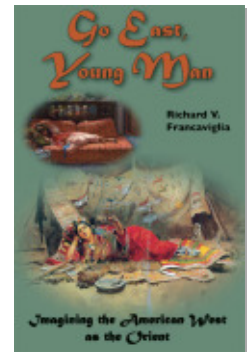
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Lands of Enchantment

The Modern West as the Near/Middle East

“No I am not in Egypt and no the Sphinx has not gotten a recent facelift. Instead I am in Las Vegas.”

Posted by a traveler on the *Amateur Traveler* website

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS, I DEMONSTRATED THAT PORTIONS of the American West were Orientalized in various ways and for various reasons during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most of this Orientalization was a result of travelers and would-be settlers coming to grips with the overwhelming geography here, a process that called for analogies to be drawn between new and old, and East and West. By the 1870s and 1880s, however, the West began to take on a different demeanor as people began to conceptualize it as uniquely American. Nevertheless, Orientalism had become such an important part of the image of the American West that it would be involved with the region’s identity throughout the twentieth century, taking on a new life in modern literature, film, and tourism. Even western cities themselves would embrace elements of Orientalism in their design. In part, the impetus for a new Orientalized identity was a result of the United States becoming a major world power after the Spanish-American War (1898). However, it is also related to the United States’ rise as a giant in entertainment technology, such as film, that facilitated and yet complicated the transmission of cultural image building.

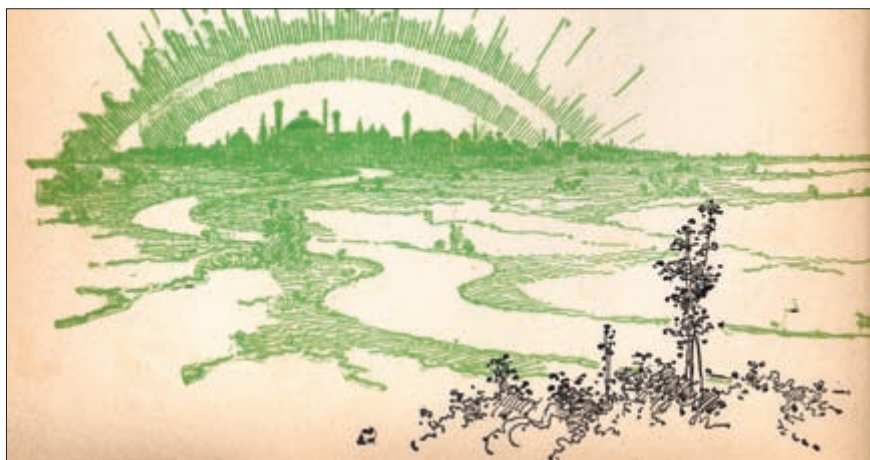
One of the vehicles that enabled this to happen was the modern American Western—both as literature and as film. It has roots in the nineteenth century as the dime novel but took concrete form as a major literary and cinematic art form at a pivotal time, namely about 1900, as both the novel *The Virginian* and the film *The Great Train Robbery* were released in 1902

and 1903, respectively. Looked at more closely, though, characteristically American Westerns are more dependent on two sources of Orientalism (the Bible and fantastic folktales like the *Arabian Nights*) than is commonly recognized. In Owen Wister's classic Western, for example, the rugged Virginian himself characterizes Wyoming as "a world of crystal light, a land without end, a space across which Noah and Adam might come straight from Genesis."¹ In one fell swoop, Wister not only taps the Bible but also depicts Wyoming as a characteristically western American locale—desolate, even forlorn, and brimming with conflicts, including man vs. nature and man vs. man. I will explore the Oriental nature of the American Western shortly but first want to demonstrate that the Orient-in-the-West could also play out in other genres, especially fantasy. As the remainder of this book will show, fantasy literature and film must be recognized as sources that both contributed to, and reflected, the Orientalization of the American West. In other words, fantasy worked not only side by side with the Western but sometimes hand in hand with it—which is to say that western and fantasy literature and film converged to help Orientalize the American West.

This convergence emerged full-blown in 1900, using the western landscape of Kansas as the setting for what would become one of the most enduring American parables about the search for the exotic, namely, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In the mind of novelist Lyman Frank Baum, the flatness and drabness of the Kansas prairie demanded a counterpoint—a magical tower, an ancient spire, or a similarly fantastic form—to break the monotony. In this regard, Baum had something in common with earlier travel writers. However, as a modern American educator and newspaper editor, Baum wanted to supersede the "old-time fairy tale" by writing a book in which, as he put it, "stereotyped genie, dwarf and fairy are eliminated, together with all the horrible and blood-curdling incidents devised by their authors to point a fearsome moral to each tale."²

At first blush, *The Wizard of Oz* appears to be a fantasy residing in the mind of a child, but it is also a geographical travelogue. It above all contrasts the bleakness of the Kansas prairie—where "not a tree nor a house broke the broad sweep of flat country that reached the sky in all directions"—with the mystical city of Oz. By so doing, it not only builds on an age-old tension between experience and imagination but also uses the western American plains as the jumping-off point for that adventure.

Baum employs the most fearsome phenomenon the plains has to offer—a tornado—as the device that transports Dorothy from consciousness to unconsciousness. The tornado carries Dorothy, Toto, and the entire house from



Author's collection

Fig. 8-1. As illustrated by W. W. Denslow, original editions of J. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* transform the Emerald City into a decidedly Middle Eastern locale, complete with domes and minarets.

Kansas to the magical land of the Munchkins, setting in motion a tale as captivating as one from the *Arabian Nights*. From the land of the Munchkins, Dorothy is urged to travel to the Emerald City of Oz, where her wish to return home will be granted. Like a city in an Arabian tale, Oz is surrounded by deserts and requires considerable effort to reach. That city, though, enchants those who seek it. As they walked in the direction of the Emerald City in the morning, Dorothy and her companions “saw a beautiful green glow in the sky just before them.” Nearing the city, its “green glow became brighter and brighter.” By afternoon, they “came to the great wall that surrounded the city.” Like an ancient city in an Oriental fable, Oz had to be entered through “a big gate, all studded with emeralds that glittered so in the sun that even the painted eyes of the scarecrow were dazzled by the brilliancy.” Upon entering the city, they found themselves in a “high arched room, the walls of which glistened with countless emeralds.” It was this magic world that enabled Dorothy to tell Toto, “We’re not in Kansas anymore”—an understatement, of course, but one that overlooks an important point: it was precisely *because* they were in Kansas that this magic land was possible. In other words, Dorothy’s bleak setting in Kansas was the springboard that vaulted her into the imaginary and the exotic.

Although the phrase “We’re not in Kansas anymore” has become synonymous, in American culture at least, with finding oneself in a new and unusual setting, yet another term from Baum’s masterpiece has also been immortalized. The term *Oz* itself has come to signify something far beyond one’s normal

expectations. So how, then, did Oz appear to Dorothy? The early versions of *The Wizard of Oz* (1899, 1903) illustrate the cityscape of Oz as Middle Eastern, its skyline bristling with at least nine minarets and several domes (fig. 8-1). The river in the foreground meanders toward the fabulous city, whose site is reminiscent of the Near East's magical cities, for example Baghdad or Cairo. Whereas Baum endeavored to write a new story shorn of antecedents, the illustrations by W. W. Denslow give Oz a decidedly Mesopotamian or Egyptian character.³

Although Baum wrote many *Oz* sequels, none became the enduring classic that the original has. Much the same can be said of the 1939 movie version of *The Wizard of Oz*. When Vincent Minnelli and his crew tackled the project, they had no idea that it too would become a classic—nor did they likely comprehend its Orientalist implications.⁴ *The Wizard of Oz* film translates the Emerald City into a cluster of “modern”—given its date of production (1939) toward the end of the Great Depression—art deco-style buildings. Still, the place possesses a magical quality right out of Orientalist tales. That the Emerald City endures as Middle Eastern cityscape is evident in David Russell's recent renditions of it. Russell, a noted film illustrator (*Batman*, *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*) elected to use a magnificent Oriental cityscape with domes, minarets, and other features. As seen on Russell's website, the new Oz is a dazzling landscape much more in harmony with Baum's earlier version, and vision, of Oz.⁵

Both the original book and the film utilize a remarkably effective three-part structure based on origin, search, and return (leaving Kansas, traveling to mysterious and wonderful places, coming back to Kansas) that contrasts the everyday landscape of the American prairie with the landscapes of magical lands (Deadly Poppy Fields, Fighting Trees, Dainty China Country, Jeweled City). Like the *Arabian Nights*, Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* is as much an adult story as a kid's tale. Like its Oriental predecessor, it employs enduring Oriental-style storytelling elements, including epic travel and magical characters and locales (the faux potentate and the intoxicating poppy fields being but two examples).

Oz was born in the American Midwest, yet builds on a sense of the exotic and fantastic that the Orient readily provided. Over time, if the term *Oz* came to signify any fantastic city, it took on special meaning in the oil-rich Middle East in modern times. Dubai, with its spectacular high-rise buildings, offers perhaps the ultimate example, though Saudi Arabia also has its share of spectacular, almost surreal, urban skylines. A *Los Angeles Times* report by Jeffrey Fleishman discussed “life in this exotic, repressive and often beguiling [Saudi] society where tribal customs and religious fervor rub against oil wealth

and the tinted-glass skyscrapers that rise Oz-like in the blurry desert heat.”⁶ Fleishman’s use of the term “Oz-like” is revealing indeed, for it shows how easily, perhaps even inevitably, Baum’s American characterization of Oriental-like fantasies could be reapplied to the original source area of such poetic prose—the real Middle East.⁷

We can find examples closer to home. In the modern West, the process of creating the Emerald City played out in southern Nevada. The location is the once-sleepy Mormon agricultural village of Las Vegas, which in the last two generations has experienced a transformation that might make Baum blush and his city of Oz pale in comparison. The creation of modern Las Vegas, in fact, used some powerful Orientalizing themes to help make a dream reality. Although Las Vegas took on new life when the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad arrived in 1905, it gained greater appeal in 1931 with the legalization of gambling in Nevada. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the mob recognized the community’s potential as Sin City. Given improvements in transportation, including the establishment of convenient train and air service, not to mention the miracle of air conditioning, Las Vegas’s desert setting represented no problem. In fact, the surrounding stark landscape, heat, and aridity simply added to the city’s allure as an exotic locale where forbidden pleasures awaited. Las Vegas in the 1950s and 1960s creatively used Middle Eastern desert themes, such as the Sahara and Aladdin, to create part of the allure and the magic. Like John Charles Frémont a little more than a century earlier, the developers here in Nevada recognized the enduring power of Oriental icons. One of the city’s recent crowning achievements offers a stunning counterpart to Frémont’s stone pyramid, albeit about 150 years after the fact, and about 350 miles southeast of Pyramid Lake.

In the late twentieth century, when developers sought a design for the luxurious Luxor Hotel, they too used the ultimate symbol for the mysterious and exotic—the Egyptian pyramid. As opposed to Frémont’s natural topographic feature, though, this man-made one is a dark glass incarnation that adds a stunning element to the eclectic skyline of an eccentric desert oasis (fig. 8-2). Its sides, like those of its prototype in Egypt (and more imperfectly, Frémont’s rock), slope at thirty-two degrees. The Luxor’s striking black glass pyramid—so evocative as an abstract form, especially given the presence of black diorite in real Egyptian artifacts—harmonizes with, and yet also stands in contrast to, Frémont’s light-colored pyramid. American culture has changed remarkably since Frémont’s time, and today Orientalism is far more associated with sensual pleasure than it is with concerns about ancient wisdom and biblical events. By the 1990s, the connection between Jews and Egypt had pretty



Author's photograph, 2010

Fig. 8-2. In Las Vegas, the Luxor Hotel uses venerable Egyptian icons, such as the pyramid and sphinx, rendered as King Tut, to convey a sense of the exotic.

much vanished from popular culture. Today, the Egyptian idiom is more likely to evoke mystery and sensuality than Judeo-Christian religion. Although the secular nature of the pyramid today represents a gulf in perception between the mid-nineteenth century and the early twenty-first century, one underlying element remains: the Luxor pyramid, like Frémont's rock in Pyramid Lake, plays upon the power of Egypt as both exotic and Oriental. The Luxor proves that pyramid as motif still works despite the fact that a great deal of social change occurred between Frémont's time and the 1990s.

The pyramids are the premier, but not the only, landmarks associated with ancient Egypt. Like its original standing guard near Egypt's pyramids, the sphinx next to the Luxor pyramid is also intriguing and arresting. The seemingly restored replica recalls the stunning original, but is miraculous in that while the passage of time has weathered the original, the sphinx in Las Vegas is simultaneously new-old. In Las Vegas, both the Tut-like sphinx and the glass pyramid are perfect—better, in a perverse sense, than their originals in Egypt, which, as Frémont implied, were compromised by the passage of centuries filled with blowing sand, spalling stone, and profiteering artifact hunters. Nevertheless, the durability of these monuments as symbols is noteworthy. Their ability to evoke strong feelings about place and time makes the Luxor pyramid highly successful as both premodern and postmodern architecture.

In *The Necessity for Ruins* (1980), J. B. Jackson speculated that the rediscovery of the past is tied to a culturally shared belief that there is first a “golden age, the time of harmonious beginnings,” after which the culture experiences “a period when the old days are forgotten and the golden age falls into neglect.” These two stages are then followed by “a time when we rediscover and seek to restore the world around us to something like its former beauty.” But in doing this, Jackson asks, “Are we perhaps trying to re-enact some ancient myth of birth, death, and redemption?”⁸ Another question we might also ask is why, in selecting items from the past, do we resurrect objects, buildings, and structures that were not originally ours at all, but belonged to others? When we reproduce their ruins instead of ours, are we in effect vicariously reliving the lives of others? We may try to appropriate their past by imitation, but of course it is our own culture rather than theirs that we reproduce. Depending on one’s personal or political philosophy, this appropriation can represent the basest form of thievery or the highest form of flattery. Regardless, few can deny that counterfeiting the great pyramids allows their classic form to endure in yet another desert setting, this one in the New World.

However, the Luxor pyramid is not a ruin but rather a vibrant structure that builds upon modern Oriental fantasies. Similar in shape and size to the pyramid that so overwhelmed John Lloyd Stephens on his trip to Egypt in 1835–36, the Luxor has become one of the city’s most recognizable landmarks. This ersatz pyramid in Las Vegas is a structure of superlatives in a city that constantly strives to outdo itself. At 350 feet (107 meters) in height, the Luxor Hotel houses thirty floors of plush guest rooms and recreation space. The sloping angle of the pyramid’s exterior is carried to the interior, where guests must use an “inclinator,” a clever term for an ingenious elevator that runs at a thirty-nine-degree angle. The black glass pyramid is striking enough by day, but it becomes even more so at night, when a bright beam said to be “the most powerful light in the world” thrusts skyward from the pyramid’s uppermost point. This sky beam is so bright that it can be seen 250 miles away by people flying in airplanes. Apparently there is no better way to build on the Las Vegas urge for attention than to plumb an Oriental motif. The Luxor is both radically new and highly imitative in that it calls upon one of the world’s original seven wonders for inspiration. Of those seven original wonders, only the pyramids of Egypt remain.

Cultural anthropologist Margaret Malamud astutely noted that “the Luxor capitalizes on a positive set of images Americans have of ancient Egypt, and it caters to the New Age interest in Egypt as a source of occult wisdom.” Given the Luxor’s enthusiasm for conveying and selling artifacts from Egypt

in its gift shop, Malamud concludes that “a trip to Las Vegas substitutes for a trip to Egypt.”⁹ But it may also take us even further back in time. Architectural historian Jerilynn D. Dodds considers the shape of a pyramid to be elemental, “the prime image of New Age pan-spiritualism, its universality confirmed by its appearance in multiple pre-Industrial cultures.”¹⁰

Pyramids constitute a tangible landscape element on the one hand, and the stuff of deeper imagination on the other. On the Luxor website, striking visuals are accompanied by music that begins as majestic and soon turns Oriental, the rhythm becoming more measured and sensual. As the viewer clicks onto “The Power of the Pyramid” section of the Luxor’s interactive website, a question appears: “How will the Pyramid affect you?” The viewer is given three choices—“Read minds,” “Attract,” and “Spark Anything.” Interestingly, all three options emphasize the power to connect with attractive people. This, of course, is the sensual and sexual side of Orientalism, where exotic suggests erotic.

This is a reminder that Nevada’s two pyramids are considerably different in their context. The nineteenth-century version created, if you will, by John Charles Frémont, signifies something very different than does its late twentieth-century counterpart in Las Vegas. The difference reflects a transition of Egypt as spiritual to Egypt as sensual and erotic that took place over several decades. To find the pivotal point in time, we need only recall the Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893), which featured glimpses forward and back. While presenting the grand works of the ancients, it also played with Orientalism’s erotic side, as evident in its “taffy-colored nudes” and “Sargent’s Egyptian Girl, with her great dark eyes and inviting nakedness.”¹¹ This was somewhat scandalous at the time, but it was a harbinger of much racier things to come in the twentieth century.

The Luxor hotel continues this tradition of perceiving ancient Egypt as hedonistic territory. When inside this nouveau pyramid, one can also satisfy many appetites, for example by partaking of the cleverly named “Pharaoh’s Pheast Buffet”—which is billed as “a true delight for Kings and Queens of all ages,” or visiting the “Sacred Sea Room,” where fresh seafood from “oceans around the world” is available. Once again, the draw here is pleasure, in this case food that is guaranteed to “please even the most discriminating epicurean.” Not satisfied yet? The Oasis Spa treats the outside of one’s body with a full range of services, from the irresistible-sounding “Peppermint Head to Toe” massage bath to clay masques, loofah scrubs, and scalp treatments.¹² Again, the theme here is physical pleasure. Significantly, in this type of pop Orientalism, the ordinary person becomes a king or queen, living a fantasy

experience of the type that would have been reserved for royalty in ancient Egypt. This is what makes the sensual side of Orientalism so irresistible: even when experienced by common folk, it can be unabashedly lavish and elitist.

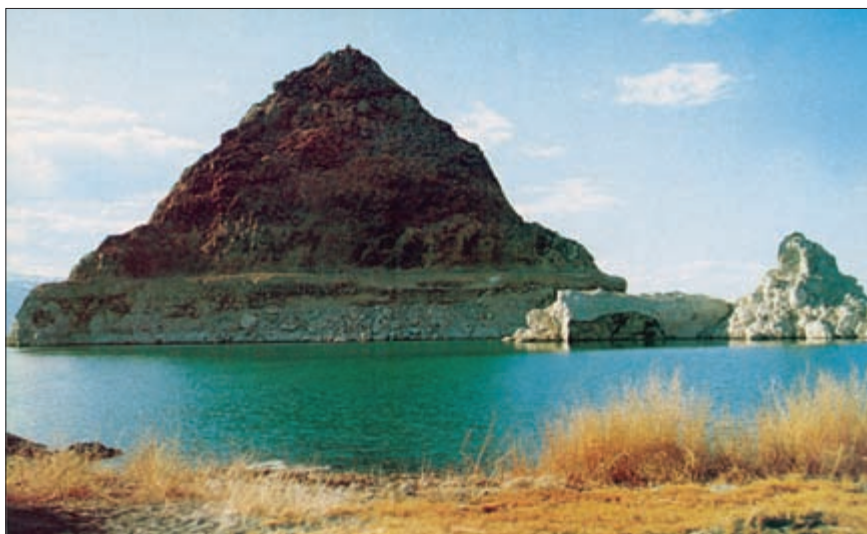
Popular fantasy films also employ themes of the Orient as exotic and erotic. As Ella Shohat astutely observes, the 1965 Elvis Presley film *Harum Scarum* features “a carnival-like Orient reminiscent of Las Vegas, itself placed in the burning sands of the American desert of Nevada, and offering harem-like nightclubs.” The film’s title *Harum Scarum* is a takeoff on a term like *hocus pocus*—witty and more than a little suggestive of mysteries and magicians. By the time Elvis Presley starred in this “reflexive film,” as Shohat calls it, Las Vegas had become America’s most eroticized city—a city that Elvis took by storm around this time. Like most of Elvis’s movies, *Harum Scarum* is short on plot but filled with songs. In it, Elvis frees a woman from two sinister Arabs, enters a normally off-limits *harem* (the very word which refers to something “forbidden” in Arabic), and sings his way through a series of mindless adventures. In one particularly memorable song that may serve as a metaphor for the lure of Las Vegas, Elvis proclaims, “I’m gonna go where the desert sun is; where the fun is . . . where there’s love and romance—out on the burning sands.” Here, Elvis observes, “You’ll feel like the Sheik, so rich and grand, with dancing girls at your command.” More to the point about the power of the Orient, and the seduction of places like Las Vegas, Elvis concludes, “I’ll make love the way I plan. Go east—and drink and feast—go east, young man.”¹³ This, of course, is a delightfully subversive—and highly Orientalist—inversion of Horace Greeley’s, or rather John Soule’s, famous nineteenth-century credo, “Go west, young man.” Now, however, in the mid to late twentieth century, that West is the East of cinematic fantasy—yet another new frontier, as it were, in a nation’s changing popular Orientalist imagination.

In the 1970s, Maria Muldaur’s popular novelty song “Midnight at the Oasis” was blatantly sensual and employed highly Orientalized imagery.¹⁴ In it, Muldaur sings “I’ll be your belly dancer, prancer, and you can be my sheik.” Quite aside from a possible association of “sheik” with a brand of condoms, she also means Middle Eastern seducer. “I know your daddy’s a sultan” who has “fifty girls to attend him,” she knowingly states, adding a promise of sexual variety aplenty by telling her lover that “you won’t need no harem, honey, when I’m by your side.” More to the point, she promises a blissful night of energetic sex, claiming, “You won’t need no camel, no no, when I take you for a ride.”¹⁵ Covered by The Brand New Heavies on the album *Brother Sister* (1994), this song endures, a reminder of the perennial appeal of the desert oasis as a place of uninhabited pleasure. The Oasis, though, is

also a transported place, as it served as the name of hotels and motels in Las Vegas. In this it joined others, such as the Aladdin, Sahara, and the Dunes, in suggesting the Middle East.

Las Vegas fills an important niche in the contemporary American psyche. Here the spirit and libido are in a nearly constant state of war, or perhaps tug-of-war might be a better term, as even the tension between them seems to be a source of amusement. Las Vegas is expected to be decadent, but not too decadent, because it has now become a family entertainment city, too. A December 5, 2005, episode of the television show *Las Vegas* began with attractive women stripping off their clothing in several locations in the Montecito—at the casino/hotel's pool, in the elevator, and even on the casino floor. When the hotel security chief sees this, he asks his staff, "What the hell is going on? Is this Sodom and Gomorrah?" He is told that these are not regular guests but are here for an adult entertainment conference. In other words, the ribald men and women are pornographic movie stars and are engaging in wild behavior that would normally be considered X-rated. Offended by the goings-on in the hotel, an older woman observes that all these young people are doing is having "Sex! Sex! Sex! They never even come up for air." When she complains that the people in the room next to hers are making "animal noises," the security chief decides to move that raunchy group to another wing of the hotel where "decent families" won't be offended. That separation suggests that Las Vegas has two sides, one catering to decadence and the other to wholesome entertainment. An ambiguity between the good and pure and the risqué and dirty is embedded in Orientalism. But it is the decadent or naughty side that is frequently emphasized, as Las Vegas has earned that reputation as Sodom and Gomorrah since the 1940s. A town where "anything goes" somehow seems more natural in the desert—at least the very first book of the Bible set the standard for this type of drama about 2,500 years ago.

Las Vegas's reputation as Sodom and Gomorrah was given a nod in the 2009 spoof film *Year One*, in which Cain tells a young man who is engaged to be married and refuses to partake of the pleasures of Sodom not to worry because "what transpires in the confines of the walls of Sodom stays within the confines of the walls of Sodom." This, of course, is a reference to the popular advertising slogan "What happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas."¹⁶ Central to Las Vegas's edgy image of debauchery and materialism is its clientele hailing from all corners of the globe. The prospect of anonymity here is an age-old hope that one's actions will not be observed by the prying eyes of those in the home village. As Las Vegas hotel room service deliveryman Mark Zartarian colorfully put it, "The interesting thing about this job is when you knock on



Author's collection

Fig. 8-3. A 1950s-era postcard of Pyramid Lake, Nevada, shows both the pyramid-shaped rock and a light-colored tufa formation some call “the Sphinx.”

the door, you never know whether the person on the other side has got a gun, it’s a naked woman, or both.”¹⁷

Those two pyramids in the Nevada desert—the rough, earth-colored natural pyramid in Pyramid Lake and the razor-sharp, black glass Luxor pyramid in Las Vegas—perfectly symbolize how landscapes reflect deeper thoughts about places and the broader worlds those places represent. If John Charles Frémont was part of the initial process of immortalizing the Old World, in this case the Orient, he had a good landscape to build upon in Nevada. The desert setting of Pyramid Lake was, and remains, quite evocative, and the similarities between Old World and New World deserts endure. A 1950s-era postcard of Pyramid Lake (fig. 8-3) perpetuates the island’s iconic form and also offers another element: the white, oddly shaped rock to the right which has been construed as the sphinx, at least by some imaginative minds.¹⁸ A postcard of “Exotic Pyramid Lake” from about the same time declared that the signature triangular rock was “older and larger than the ancient pyramids of Egypt.” This sentiment had the effect of downplaying ancient Egypt and using the American West as the superlative. Fifty years earlier, Henry M. Field had helped begin this process when he compared the pyramids of Egypt to a geological feature in the American West. As Field put it, “Except the Kings’ and Queens’ chambers . . . the whole pyramid is one mass of stone, as solid as the cliff of El Capitan in the Yo Semite valley.”¹⁹

Nevada's two pyramids also reveal stunning differences in the way perceptions of the American interior changed from the 1830s to the present. Although both perceptions involved translating the Orient into the West, the transition was not simply a swapping of one identity for another. Rather, the transition involved a fluctuation toward two poles of an Orient associated with religion and spirituality on the one hand, and sensuality and hedonism on the other. The path by which this change occurred was complex but usually plumbed the two very different faces of Orientalism—something much like two sides of the same coin—the contrast of the spirit with the flesh.

Lest we think that only the sensual side of Oriental history played out in the twentieth-century West, we might recall that the Garden of Eden was still on the public's mind. In 1924, amateur American archaeologist Alan Le Baron wrote a series of attention-grabbing articles for the *San Francisco Examiner*, wherein he claimed that he had discovered the Garden of Eden. Its location? Not in southwest Asia Minor, nor even in Missouri as the Mormons claimed, but rather on a hilltop overlooking the East Walker River about twenty miles south of Yerington, Nevada. At what Le Baron called the "Hill of a Thousand Tombs," he reportedly found indisputable evidence—such as the bones of camels, elephants, and lions and the remains of lush forests—that proved the site's antiquity to mankind. Le Baron further claimed that the petroglyphs depicting animals and abstract designs were related to, and probably even predated, Egyptian hieroglyphics.²⁰ We should place Le Baron's seemingly illogical claim in a broader cultural context, not as professional archaeology, but rather as a logical outcome of the hyper-Orientalization of the American West in particular.

But for all its heavenly qualities, the Garden of Eden is always subliminally associated with sex. After all, succumbing to temptation is what caused Adam and Eve to be expelled from it and their descendants to perish at Sodom and Gomorrah when they forgot the lesson of obedience. This again leads us back to the subliminal connection between the deserts of the East and lust, which runs deep, and helps conflate western American landscapes, especially the cinematic variety portrayed by Hollywood, with their exotic and sexually charged Middle Eastern prototypes. That sexuality, of course, is based more on fantasy than reality. Among the standard tropes of the East are the mysterious, sensual, seductive, worldly woman, and the mysterious, strong, potent, barbaric Arabian man. Both can ravage and liberate their presumably tamer Western lovers, a concept that is at once fearsome and delightful. This is related to what Edward Said called Orientalism's "imaginative geography," whose major sexual tropes are "the sensual woman, the harem, and the despotic—but curiously attractive—ruler."²¹

For their part, Arab rulers are often stereotyped as sexually potent, perhaps even predatory: in a wonderfully geographic metaphor in the 1954 film *King Richard and the Crusaders*, Richard later says of Saladin's interest in Edith—"he knows the geography of the female like the palm of his hand." A much earlier press release described actress Mary Conway (who played Lot's wife and the Queen of Syria in early films) as "a girl who evokes one's wildest desires and craves sacrifice, so that an honest man, robbed of his wits, is driven to commit deeds beyond his better judgment."²² That European Americans might do things beyond their better judgment is exactly the point, and a factor in the lure of the Orient. The East's seduction here operates to break down the norms of Anglo-American Protestantism.

The desert East is the source of conflicting attitudes toward sex. After all, the Christian ethic that urges restricting nonprocreative sex (both in thought and act) is as Eastern as Saul (the Jew) turned Paul (the Christian); yet that same East abounds in tales of lust and sin that are legendary enough to bring an end to sinful cities in the desert. It is the difference between today's proper Mormon communities in Utah where lust is kept under control and those wild Nevada towns and counties where gambling and prostitution are legal. It is this tension and this ambivalence that make the desert anywhere so interesting. It is on the one hand seemingly sterile and yet so stimulating to the imagination.

By the 1950s, a century of irrigated agriculture had made the Wasatch Front into an oasis, and Mormon dairy farmers along Utah's Jordan River were involved in introducing farming techniques from Utah into the real Holy Land with the goal of helping improve the latter's productivity. This reinforced the perception of parallels between both New World and Old World lands. In his 1958 *National Geographic* article titled "Geographical Twins a World Apart," David S. Boyer described and photographed scenes in the Holy Land and Utah to show how similar both places appeared. Of two scenes taken along the River Jordan and Utah's Jordan River, for example, Boyer enthusiastically noted that both featured the "same scenery, same trees, Even the same name—Jordan—for the Rivers, yet one is in Utah, the other in the Holy Land." Primed to see parallels, Boyer erroneously cited the Australian eucalyptus trees in both places when, in fact, Utah's climate is too cold. In his search for similarities, Boyer lumped Utah's cold-desert climate and the Holy Land's hot desert, stating that the "climates of the Two Jordan Valleys across the globe have changed little in 5,000 years. Dry Years and Wet [years] come and go." Evidently unaware of the Striking Comparison Map from the 1890s, Boyer also placed maps of the Holy Land and Utah side by side—inverting the

Utah map—to show what he called “an intriguing parallel between lands on opposite sides of the world.” Boyer’s enthusiasm in finding perfect geographic analogies reminds us that oversimplification and faith are part of the process.²³

In modern-day Utah, the Mormons themselves still resonate as somewhat exotic. Given their emphasis on mysterious temple rites and their continued use of seemingly arcane symbols, some observers still associate the Mormons with the Orient, albeit less frequently than in the nineteenth century when polygamy was condoned by the church and travelers viewed its leaders as Oriental potentates. Those seeking a symbolic connection between Mormons and the Middle East in modern times need look no further than Salt Lake City’s Gilgal Garden, which plumbs numerous artistic traditions, including Orientalism, for inspiration. This sculpture-filled park, constructed by Mormon businessman Thomas Child from the 1940s into the 1960s, renders in physical form deep beliefs about the “unsolved mysteries” of life. As a masonry contractor, Child recognized the power of stone to symbolize permanency. He creatively used an oxyacetylene torch to sculpt the stone, giving it a unique burnished quality. The centerpiece of this sequestered urban garden, which underwent restoration beginning in 2000, is a remarkable statue depicting Joseph Smith as a sphinx (fig. 8-4). This selection might at first seem irreverent, but the sphinx was the perfect metaphor for a timeless dilemma. As a devout Mormon, Child sought to pose questions that inevitably arise about Joseph Smith—namely, who was this prophet and how can his beliefs, which were unveiled in the early nineteenth century, continue to inspire new generations of followers? It is not surprising that Child chose both the sphinx and an oddly shaped stone, upon which words are inscribed, to ask such eternal questions. By doing so, he equated the mysteries of Mormonism with the mysteries of antiquity. Both of these Oriental-inspired symbols convey a sense of the enormity of time, a perennial theme in American Egyptomania. As if that were not enough to cast Smith in the role of Egyptian icon, Child added that large slab of rock inscribed with writing, which to some evokes the Rosetta Stone. Discovered by Europeans in the Egyptian desert more than two centuries ago, this stone containing the writings of three cultures helped scholars decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics—much like Smith helped to decipher deeper meanings of faith.

Utah has other twentieth century works that drew upon Egypt for inspiration. In Ogden, Peery’s Egyptian Theater offers a remarkable example of 1920s-era Egyptomania but owes its existence to theatrical events that occurred in California. Although Egyptomania swept the entire United States and was evident in architecture, dress, and entertainment nationwide,



Author's photograph, 2010

Fig. 8-4. In Salt Lake City's Gilgal Garden, Mormon prophet Joseph Smith appears as the sphinx, situated in front of a Rosetta-like stone.

California embraced it with a special zeal. The timing was perfect, as California became the center of a nationwide and international entertainment industry. In regard to the latter, the new medium of film enabled “a magnetism between conceptual accounts of the nature of entertainment by projected light and Egypt—an imaginative association pulling together the ancient culture [of Egypt] and modern spectacular innovation.”²⁴

The California film industry also helped perpetuate Orientalism. In the early to mid-twentieth century, Hollywood filmmakers from D. W. Griffith to Cecil B. DeMille made movies featuring supposedly Oriental locales. What better way to premiere such exotic films than in an Egyptian-style theater? Hollywood's Grauman's Egyptian Theatre offers a remarkable case of good timing: the theater opened in 1922 just five weeks before King Tutankhamen's tomb was discovered in Egypt. Grauman's Egyptian was the “prototypical Egyptian movie palace” (fig. 8-5) and thus served as the inspiration for numerous theaters that opened elsewhere in the country, including Peery's Egyptian, which opened just a year later.²⁵ An Egyptian theater might be built anywhere in the United States, for its interior sets the theme for the exotic experience. In the West, however, the landscape and climate outside the theaters helped contribute to the region's Orientalization.²⁶



Author's collection

Fig. 8-5. A 1922 postcard shows the newly completed Grauman's Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood.

The public also had an insatiable interest in the mysticism embodied in ancient Egypt, and the Rosicrucians helped fuel that interest and respond to it as well. In the early to mid-twentieth century, their ultimate contribution was the informative and spectacular Egyptian Museum in San Jose, California (figs. 8-6 and II-1). The Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum's website describes its beginning, "After the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis's (AMORC) headquarters settled in its present San Jose location, Dr. Harvey Spencer Lewis (First Emperor of the Rosicrucian Order, 1914–1939) conceived of a public collection, The Rosicrucian Egyptian Oriental Museum in 1928." The website further notes that the 1920s were a time of considerable enthusiasm, and by the early 1930s, "the collection had outgrown its second floor home, and additional construction was added as an annex to the Administration Building." Many of the artifacts in the collection were real Egyptian antiquities, but educational replicas were also made. In 1935, a replica of the Rock Tomb, "modeled on several originals in the Beni Hasan desert," was unveiled. Another replica, a model of the Djoser Step Pyramid complex, was made by museum staff and volunteers. The outside of the building was also carefully developed: "The familiar Byzantine design and Moorish arches of the Museum greeted visitors for over thirty years [but] as the collection grew and deepened, it became obvious to Ralph M. Lewis, AMORC's second Emperor, that a fully modern museum facility was needed for the more than 2000 artifacts." Accordingly, a



Author's collection

Fig. 8-6. A 1950s-era postcard showing the gardens at the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum in San Jose, California.

new museum building opened in 1966, and it contained “the largest display of Egyptian artifacts in the Western U.S.” The website further claims that the Rosicrucian Museum is “the only such Museum on the planet designed in the Egyptian style, and situated in an Egyptian revival park.”²⁷

This may be true, but we should recall that a forerunner of this impressive Egyptian-style structure could be found in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park in the first decade of the twentieth century. As already noted, this park offered a glimpse of the Far East, but its Near East–influenced Museum of Antiquities featured a beautifully stylized portico and facade crowned by an Egyptian pyramid. This distinctive building was a repository of ancient treasures, and the use of the Egyptian motif and style perfectly symbolized the appreciation of ancient Egypt as part of the “Cradle of Civilization.” The fact that it was located in San Francisco was not surprising, for that city had a voracious appetite for all things Oriental.

Like San Francisco’s Museum of Antiquities, San Jose’s Egyptian Museum remains a treasure trove. The lengthy description provided by the Rosicrucians of their museum reveals the impact of active collecting in Egypt in the 1920s, when the United States was gripped by a fascination with ancient Egypt. It is easy to think that this is the same interest in Egypt shared by Frémont and Stephens, and it is certainly related to it. However, almost a century had transpired, and the Egyptian revival of the early twentieth century built on themes

of increasingly personalized spirituality and incorporated Egyptian themes in popular entertainment (including dance) and popular fashion (Egyptian dress and jewelry). Note, too, that the museum was originally called the Egyptian Oriental Museum, a reminder that Egypt was popularly linked to a broader “East” at that time.

The impressive Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum does more than simply exhibit the many interesting artifacts from numerous expeditions to Egypt. It also subtly conveys what Rosicrucians view as the meaningful mysticism of ancient Egypt. The Egyptian Museum is a totally “themed” experience. By entering it, one not only experiences various aspects of Egypt but is transported in time and space to create, or rather re-create, place. That it works so effectively is a tribute to not only Egypt and the Rosicrucians but to Orientalism itself. This makes the Egyptian Museum, with its striking but restrained Egyptian exterior, part of the popular intellectual frontier of the twentieth century. Given Northern California’s pivotal place in alternative spirituality, it is no surprise to find this museum in the San Francisco Bay Area.²⁸

The Egyptian Museum appeals to even the accidental tourist, so to speak. In 2005, American Airlines included it on its list of the twenty-one places worth visiting during long airport layovers. An article by Tracy Staton in the flight magazine *American Way* reveals the museum’s many treasures to people who can steal a few hours between planes. “Amateur Egyptologists,” Staton began, “take note: The best collection of [Egyptian] artifacts in the western United States is within reach.” To entice air travelers laying over in San Jose, Staton mentions that the museum is “modeled after the Temple of Amon at Karnak . . .” and that it “has a full-scale replica of a noble’s tomb, human and animal mummies, tools and objets d’art, and a garden filled with statues of the gods.”²⁹ Although an hour or two of free time might provide the visitor with a taste of these sights, they, like ancient Egypt, are worth considerably more reflection. And yet even when sandwiched into a hectic schedule in the American West, “Egypt” still has its allure.

Modern California’s Oriental mystique is also dependent on people such as singer-actress Cher. Originally part of the Sonny and Cher duet, this dark-eyed Armenian American beauty from the Fresno area of the fertile San Joaquin Valley has enchanted the public since her debut in the mid-1960s. Born Cheryl Sarkisian in 1946, Cher originally wore Egyptian-style eye makeup reminiscent of Cleopatra and traded on a mysterious Eastern ethnic identity. In doing this in the 1960s, Cher built on the popularity of Elizabeth Taylor’s depiction of Cleopatra in the 1963 movie of the same name. But in songs like “Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves” and “Half-Breed,” Cher critically addressed

the theme of ethnic identity in an assimilating United States. The former song, clearly Oriental, is about a roving band of gypsies who are regarded with suspicion. More properly called Roma today, Gypsies themselves are Oriental in that they originated in India, and they are still regarded with suspicion in Europe as exotic outsiders. Then, too, Cher's song about half-breeds portrays the problems facing people who do not fit into clear racial categories. The "half-breed" she sings about is of Native American heritage but could be as easily conflated with anyone of mixed ancestry, as it is ultimately about bigotry. The point to be remembered about the multi-talented Cher, though, is that she is in part a product of Orientalism, particularly California's energetic type of Orientalism, which creates new identities from very old imagery.³⁰ Like the pyramids themselves, Cher has undergone an occasional facelift, but her underlying natural beauty and mystery help explain her enduring popularity for nearly five decades.

The California-as-Middle East fantasy still insinuates itself into the popular imagination in the early twenty-first century. In the Sci-Fi Channel original movie *Sands of Oblivion* (2007), a young man named Jesse returns home to California from service in the Iraq War to help his grandfather find a time capsule box that he buried as a child in 1923. Now about ninety, the grandfather was on the set when Cecil B. DeMille filmed the original *Ten Commandments*. This science fiction film builds on a real cinematic event—DeMille's construction of the movie set in the sand dunes on the central California coast. In *Sands of Oblivion*, archaeologists plan to conduct a dig to find artifacts from DeMille's early 1920s filming event. However, the movie set is haunted by a curse from ancient Egypt, and mayhem ensues as the grandfather is killed by Ra, the left hand of Seth—an ancient Egyptian avenging spirit. Led by head archaeologist Alice, the team also experiences tragedies, which the Iraq veteran investigates using what he learned in the Middle East. The archaeologists determine that one of the sets is indeed ancient Egyptian, brought in by DeMille for authenticity, and it houses the god of chaos and infertility. The archaeologist learns that the chamber was assembled in California by the only people who know how to build such things—the Freemasons. It even features the supposedly ancient square-and-compass Freemason symbol along with the other Egyptian hieroglyphic symbols. With the help of another veteran, who provides a veritable arsenal (including phosphorous grenades), Jesse ultimately fells the rampaging Ra and wins Alice in the process. The plot is timeless and timeworn, but the point here is that the East and West morph into each other through faux film history and pseudoarchaeology.³¹

Quite aside from these more or less fantastic, if not deceptive, aspects of identity, though, is California's real climatic similarity to the area around the Mediterranean Sea. Coastal California is the only portion of the United States that experiences the type of hot, dry summers and relatively mild, but wetter, winters found in a broad area from Spain to Lebanon. Just across the mountains, in eastern California, lie two deserts—the Mojave and Colorado—that possess climates similar to places such as North Africa, Arabia, and Egypt. For that reason, it was relatively easy for observers to note California's similarity to both Spain and the Middle East (or at least the coastal Mediterranean margins of the latter). In this regard, California certainly offers a climate (or rather climates) evoking the feel of the real Promised Land west of the Jordan and east of the Rock of Gibraltar, to paraphrase a song by Bob Dylan—the master of morphing identities.³²

Before leaving the subject of how Hollywood Orientalized the desert American West, I should note that it creatively used American western locales to simulate Old World deserts. Cinematically speaking, the conflation of interior Asia and interior American West has occurred for almost a century, and thousands of films have substituted the West for Asia. Consider, for example, the John Wayne film *The Conqueror* (1956), which is often considered the worst in the Duke's long career. Directed by Dick Powell, *The Conqueror* features some bizarre casting, or rather miscasting, including Wayne as Genghis Khan and Susan Hayward as the Tartar princess Bortai. The landscape is also somewhat miscast, as the canyons and deserts of southern Utah become the Gobi Desert. Given the logistical and political difficulties of filming in Communist China during the height of the Cold War, however, Powell's selection of Utah was understandable enough. The sight of Wayne as Khan riding hell-bent-for-leather in this western landscape, complete with sagebrush, makes *The Conqueror* as much a Western as an Eastern. This mixing of landscapes serves as a reminder of the flexibility of the West in popular film and television, where the Mojave Desert may double for Iraq, and portions of Nevada become Turkestan.

What can we conclude about the varied and sometimes bizarre cultural examples from California and its stepchild, Las Vegas? First, California became the undisputed center of western American Egyptomania, and its influence spread to other parts of the region. Despite its self-conscious exceptionalism and much-touted innovativeness, however, California was (like China and Japan) also highly imitative. This is not a new finding, but the strong presence of Middle Eastern elements suggests that this aspect of Orientalism had a strong influence in shaping California's overall identity. Moreover, it reveals

that Orientalism is both covert (as in the despotlike behavior of water barons) and overt (as in the East-enthralled Cecil B. DeMille). The enduring tropes of paradise and Promised Land—both closely connected to biblical literature—are noteworthy. Above all, though, in its elaborate creation of lifestyle and landscapes, California (and Californians) becomes part of a fabricated drama that is at once real and mythic. In other words, the identity of both people and place here is remarkably malleable. Small wonder, then, that subliminal perceptions of the Orient, with its excesses of power, beauty, sensuality, and even spirituality, resonate so strongly and self-consciously in the Golden State.

But California is by no means the only place to be so thoroughly caught up in this kind of magic. Orientalism thrives in the American Southwest today. Since about 1900, when Indian raids were a thing of the past, the region's "magical" quality has been stressed. For more than a century, in fact, the American Southwest has had a distinct regional identity based on its landscape, climate, and native peoples. Many travelers "feel" that there is something nearly magical about this region. Capitalizing on this appeal, New Mexico brands itself the "Land of Enchantment." The very idea of enchantment—the ability to charm or be charmed—is a hint that romanticism is at work here. New Mexico's slogan is a testimony to the power of modern tourism to give places special charm, but we need to ask how that charm develops and what its consequences are for the indigenous peoples swept along with it: first, unless the landscape or some other geographic quality is involved, the magic is not likely to happen. Consider the case of Santa Fe. Located in the scenically beautiful and archaeologically rich upper Rio Grande Valley, that city has a character that lures the wealthy sojourners and less well-off tourists who want to glimpse the exotic within the borders of the continental United States. If, as cultural historian Barbara Babcock claims, the Southwest serves as America's Orient, then Santa Fe is one of the places within that region that enables this magic to happen.

In his fascinating book titled *Explorers in Eden*, Middle Eastern historian Jerold Auerbach revealed that even people with considerable experience in the Holy Land can equate Santa Fe with Jerusalem. As Auerbach noted, when he and his wife, Susan, traveled to New Mexico, Santa Fe seemed enough like Jerusalem to them to evoke the sense of *déjà vu*. Auerbach recalled that "just moments into our first morning in Santa Fe, as we wandered through a maze of adobe buildings under a blazing summer sun, Susan turned to me and asked, 'Doesn't this remind you of Jerusalem?'" As Auerbach put it, Susan's "observation precisely expressed my own inchoate feeling that we had stepped outside the boundaries of the United States, beyond 'American' culture as we

knew it, into a strangely familiar foreign land, with deep historical and personal resonance.” The “maze of adobe buildings” that Auerbach mentions are a factor in the Orientalization of Santa Fe.³³ The prevailing design here is indeed reminiscent of portions of the Middle East and North Africa, where a series of cubic, earth-colored buildings lose their individual identities and become a *tout ensemble*. Collectively, the typical streetscape of the desert Old World and Santa Fe—with their adobe buildings in clay tones—suggests an intimacy between architecture and the earth. Santa Fe’s setting in a valley flanked by mountains adds to the impression, but it is also enhanced by the omnipresence of the sky—often crystal clear—that appears to be a cobalt-blue dome suspended over the community.

The Auerbachs had a common experience, for we recall that Santa Fe impressed many early Anglo-American traders as both exotic and Near Eastern. Today, despite about 150 years of Anglo occupation, the community retains a similar feel. To modern travelers, Santa Fe seems to be a place that time forgot, but in fact it is precisely because time is *remembered* here that the charm is so palpable. Through the aggressive use of design controls that keep buildings to a certain style and color, Santa Fe deliberately conspires to appear ancient.³⁴ The ruse is so effective that few people even know it is operating; appropriately, architectural historian Chris Wilson refers to the city’s ability to evoke magic through history as *The Myth of Santa Fe*. Although the city’s goal is to remain Spanish and Indian, the buildings’ design and colors help create and sustain an Old World look that is as much Oriental as it is Native American or Spanish.

The Southwest is one of America’s most powerfully constructed regions in part because it builds on emotional response to earth, sky, and history. To visitors, the architecture and the physical landscape of Arizona, and especially New Mexico, seem to complement each other. As architectural critic Michael Sorkin observed of Albuquerque and vicinity: “The beauty of the Southwestern landscape is deeply architectonic; those buttes and mesas and striated cliffs are already so incredibly like architecture that there is a powerful incitement to literally inhabit them (as cliff-dwelling Native Americans did for thousands of years), to imitate their forms (take a look at the mountainous massing of an art deco skyscraper), or to create an architecture that participates in the same processes—sun, wind, rain, erosion—that sculpt the cliffs.”³⁵ This helps to further equate the Southwest’s indigenous peoples with “nature.” No place better exemplifies this than the pueblos of the Southwest, where the architecture seems to rise out of the very earth itself, and where it is tempting to think that the people are as ancient as that landscape. Understandably, then, those peoples seemed to belong to the ancient world.

In the twentieth century, western American Orientalism was perpetuated by descriptive writers such as Mary Austin, who imagined that Hadji Ali (Hi Jolly) and his camels would be at home here. As Austin put it in her popular 1924 book *The Land of Journeys' Ending*: "I suppose that a Syrian loosed in the country between the Rio Grande and Colorado [River] must have found many a touch of home there." To Austin, the star-filled night sky, topography, and the scents of vegetation were similar in both places.³⁶

Southwestern Orientalism, some of it very imaginative, was also perpetuated by writers of romantic fiction. Ancient history and modern history were conflated when a young Texas writer, Robert E. Howard, penned one of the great Orientalist fantasies of the early twentieth century—*Conan the Barbarian*. Howard, who was born in 1906 and spent his youth in the oil boomtowns of West Texas, patterned his characters from some of the "rough-necks, gamblers, and opportunists" he experienced there. Texas fantasy writer Joe Lansdale recently suggested that the prototype for *Conan the Barbarian* was, in fact, "a combination of oil-field worker, rambling cowboy and card sharp." Although *Conan the Barbarian* put Howard on the literary map, so to speak, he wrote in what Judy Alter calls "an amazing variety of genres—horror, sword and sorcery, fantasy, Western—while also creating popular characters of lasting interest." Orientalism was an important element of Howard's fantasy genre. Like most Orientalists, Howard had an expansive imagination. His tendency to draw from the exotic, the ancient, and the frontier infuses his writings with a surreal quality. Howard's heroes included swashbuckler Solomon Kane; adventurer King Kane; a westerner called the Texan; and of course Conan, who manages to combine traits from each and position them in a mysteriously Eastern locale.³⁷

In *Conan the Barbarian*, which began its literary life as a series of short stories published in 1933, Howard describes the desert of the ancient Middle East as a "mysterious expanse lying southeast of the lands of Shem," where "the great river Styx" marked "the land of Stygia, the dark-bosomed mistress of the south, whose domains, watered by the great river, rose sheer out of the surrounding desert."³⁸ Howard here seems to be referring to one of the Middle Eastern rivers, but the description could as easily match the Rio Grande, whose bends define a border between Texas and "dark-bosomed" Mexico to the south. But the land south of the Rio Grande offers more than a metaphor for feminine conquest. Like the Orient itself, its premise was that indigenous cultural elements could be—as historian Richard Slotkin observed—"by turns comic and cruel, sensual and indolent."³⁹ When finally published as a book in 1954, *Conan the Barbarian* had it all—desert vs. oasis, sensuality and sexuality,

despotism vs. independence, and enough monsters and mirages to challenge the *Arabian Nights*. Howard built on a long tradition of casting indigenous peoples of exotic lands as wild creatures. So too did the numerous Marvel comic books, including *Conan*, that presented a lurid and exciting Orient to a generation of young readers.

If the popular novel *Conan the Barbarian* subliminally plumbs both American southwestern and Near Eastern landscapes for inspiration, it took Hollywood to make it blossom on the silver screen. The film's densely packed action and vivid imagery represent Orientalism on steroids. In the hands of screenplay writers John Milius and Oliver Stone, *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) became one of the more popular Orientalist fantasy films of the period, catapulting a nearly steroid-perfect but seemingly subliterate movie character (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger) to fame. However, consider the fate of Texas writer Howard, who penned the original story but found himself unable to cope with his demons. Howard's tormented life ended in suicide when his Orientalist fantasies could no longer sustain him. Schwarzenegger, by contrast, became rich, famous, and powerful—the quintessential perpetuator of California's golden dream, sexual scandals notwithstanding.

The physical landscape of the modern Southwest still possesses an Oriental identity through place naming. Consider, for example, the aptly named Rock Camel (interchangeably named Camel Rock) near Santa Fe, New Mexico (fig. 8-7). Confronted with an oddly shaped hill strewn with huge boulders of fractured stratified rock, the human mind searches for meaning—and similarities. The hill's humpbacked form is suggested by two particularly resistant rock units that escaped being broken off by the elements. At one side, a capped tower of rock suggests a camel's head, while the rock unit that tops the center of the hill appears to be the single hump of a dromedary camel. With the sun at the correct angle, and the hill's reddish-brown color so visible due to the scarcity of vegetation, Camel Rock appears aptly named, indeed. Then, too, the arid landscape hereabouts seems like a natural enough habitat for such a desert creature. Since the early twentieth century, Camel Rock has fascinated motorists and adorned postcards. As the verso of one postcard suggests, the camel has a purpose: "Perched on a rock where he can overlook curious visitors, is this stone figure along U.S. 285 north of Santa Fe."⁴⁰ Whimsical? Yes, but then again, the tendency for people to read such Old World symbols into a landscape of the New World (where, ironically, camels once thrived but vanished millennia before humans arrived) is given some credibility by stories of Hi Jolly and his camels in the nineteenth-century desert West.



Author's collection

Fig. 8-7. Postcard of New Mexico's Camel Rock (ca. 1930) uses an ox cart and a unique geological feature to suggest another (earlier) time and another (distant) place.

A somewhat more abstract but more readily visible feature near Phoenix also honors the camel. Rising about 1,500 feet above the city's skyline, the peculiar "Camelback Mountain" has become a regional landmark (fig. 8-8). Whether seen from the south (Phoenix and Scottsdale) or from the north (Paradise Valley), Camelback Mountain qualifies as this area's most prominent topographic landmark. As opposed to the Camel Rock, however, Camelback Mountain requires a bit more imagination to recognize. On a recent flight into Phoenix, two women seated next to me were discussing just what they comprehended when they saw Camelback Mountain out the window of the plane as it approached Sky Harbor Airport. Was it a one-humped dromedary camel, or a two-humped Asian Bactrian camel? Given the variation in elevation of Camelback Mountain's two protuberances, one might suggest either scenario. Is the camel, regardless of type, standing? Reclining? Sleeping? Most people probably visualize it as a camel lying down to rest, its head and hump defining the pose, or rather repose.

Camelback Mountain, or simply "Camelback," as it is usually called, is regarded with considerable affection. Even on hazy days, its uniquely shaped silhouette seems somehow reassuring. Architectural critic Michael Sorkin describes downtown Phoenix as having "a certain presence as a navigational icon (like its natural analog Camelback Mountain)."⁴¹ Camelback also gives its name to a major east—west street as well as several businesses and housing



Courtesy Susan Areola postcard collection

Fig. 8-8. As seen in this 1920s-era postcard, Camel Back (also called Camelback) Mountain near Phoenix has long been a regional landmark.

tracts; moreover, the fact that it is named after an exotic desert animal makes the peculiar feature seem perfectly named in the shimmering Sonoran Desert environment here. About thirty-five miles southeast of Camelback Mountain, another evocative feature—Dromedary Peak—forms yet another Orientalized Arizona landmark. It rises about a thousand feet above the hilly, cactus-studded landscape of Pinal County. Much farther to the north, in the Wasatch Range outside of Salt Lake City, rises another, much higher Dromedary Peak. It too reminds us of the power of romanticized icons to influence the popular naming of places.

Camels have not vanished from consciousness in the modern American West. A newspaper article titled “Camels on the Range” recently asked, and quickly answered, an Orient-inspired question: “Rocks and Sand. West Texas has ‘em. So does the Sahara. What else do they have in common? Camels, thanks to Doug Baum.” The story described the enterprising activities of Baum, a professional musician who also leads camel tours through several desert areas, including the sand dunes of West Texas, the Sinai Desert, and the Sahara. As Baum put it, “Many spiritual people come away with a renewed sense of this ancient land, [and] its people. And the religious significance for them is awesome.”⁴²

Further commemorating the camel is the pyramid-shaped, camel-topped monument to Hi Jolly located in Quartzite, Arizona, which makes a serious



Fig. 8-9. The album cover of Kinky Friedman's *Lasso from El Paso* (Epic Records, 1976) humorously used stylized Middle Eastern imagery based on the Camel brand cigarette label to Orientalize the American West.

and very positive statement about Hadji Ali and his camels (see fig. I-2). In the West, though, Middle Eastern icons can be treated with considerable irreverence and humor, too. The cover art of Texas musician (and erstwhile politician) Kinky Friedman's 1976 record album *Lasso from El Paso* (fig. 8-9) is a case in point. Using the venerable Camel cigarette logo as a starting point, Friedman westernizes this commercial icon by positioning himself astride the camel while wearing his signature western garb and swinging a lasso. In an equally interesting and subversive use of the Camel logo, a recent (2008) public service antismoking ad features an American-style cowboy seated on a camel. As if by magic he morphs into the Marlboro Man as he rises from the camel, ultimately succumbing to lung cancer.

Modern literature continues this tradition of finding the Middle East in the American West. In the novel *West of Babylon* (2002), Spanish writer Eduardo Garrigues ingeniously recast the ancient Babylonian Gilgamesh epic in New Mexico. Long before he visited North America, Garrigues observed

that Gilgamesh—“probably the first yarn in universal literature where men and not gods are the main characters in the story”—could easily be set in the Hispanic Southwest. Garrigues had long been fascinated by American Westerns and had succumbed to the Southwest’s charms well before he ever visited it. In fact, two worlds were about to converge here, for even as a child in Spain, Garrigues sensed the traditions of the “eight centuries of Arab domination” that resonate to the present in the Iberian Peninsula.

Garrigues also had another source of inspiration: as he noted, “Inspired by the successful adventures of the British pioneers of Assyriology, I decided to travel from London to New Mexico, looking for the scenery and the cultural background of the story I wanted to tell.” In other words, Garrigues was influenced by Orientalists and was about to become an Orientalist himself. He continues: “From the moment I set foot on Southwestern soil, I was convinced that my project of adapting the ancient Babylonian myth to the American West could succeed.” In the process of setting (or rather resetting) the epic novel here, Garrigues discovered “some parallels between the Middle East and the American Southwest that I could hardly have imagined when I started this literary adventure”—namely, that travelers from Francisco Vázquez de Coronado to Charles Lummis had also found the Near East in the Far West.⁴³

West of Babylon breaks new (and old) ground by setting an epic Mesopotamian story in the American Southwest, and transforming both landscape and people in the process. The Native Americans assume characteristics of Mesopotamians and Mesopotamians become southwesterners. In Garrigues’s imagination, the protagonist Gilgamesh becomes Gil Gomez with the stroke of a pen, or the keystroke on a computer keyboard. Garrigues does this by merging Old World and New World identities. For example, while caught in a ferocious rainstorm, the book’s narrator relates that “I began to offer prayers not only to the God of Israel, who saved Noah from the flood, but [also] to the pagan gods who seemed to reign in those mountains and to the Water Monster who had saved the Navajos from a deluge.”⁴⁴ In Garrigues’s *West of Babylon*, both people and landscapes resonate with the magic of the Gilgamesh epic; the landscape analogues here, including the fabled cedar forest and flood-scoured arroyos, are replicas of the cedar grove and wadis in the Old World, but ingeniously set in New Mexico.⁴⁵

Not coincidentally, there is a dreamlike quality to Garrigues’s southwestern/Babylonian drama. At the beginning, the character Baltasar recalls an “old nursery rhyme” that “my mother used to sing us to sleep.” As he plods through the Southwest, he now sings it:

How many miles to Babylon?
Three score and ten.
Can I get there by candlelight?
Yes, and back again.
If your heels are nimble and light,
You may get there by candlelight.

To the narrator, however, “the words to that ballad turned out to be prophetic, for we rode far into the night, taking advantage of a full moon that covered the landscape with its shiny shroud, and we only stopped to camp when the officer in command noticed that some of the animals were about to drop in their tracks.”⁴⁶ This nursery rhyme allegory is a reminder that Orientalism is often first communicated through stories told to impressionable children, who, in that nether state between subconsciousness and sleep, are particularly susceptible to fantasies. In the passages above, Garrigues reveals how a childhood memory can sustain him through a grueling march in a “real” but magical world that is itself pure literary fantasy.

In transforming the American Southwest into the Orient, writers like Garrigues build on a long Spanish (and European) literary tradition. In their hands, the Orient is yet another metaphor for a world of eternal sunshine punctuated by jet-black, star-filled nights. Orientalism, in other words, was and is an antidote to the constrictions imposed upon the West by its own drive toward the regimentation of an increasingly industrial (factory) and bureaucratic (office) life. Consider the Catalonian writer Francesc Estival, who describes himself as an “author” who “day by day . . . fritters away his vital juices as a government bureaucrat, which brings little light to his life.” However, Estival knows full well that “for a Spaniard raised on the Mediterranean, lack of light is slow death.” To compensate for this deprivation, “the author escapes this dire reality by writing fiction,” building “his stories around the Mediterranean Sea, its civilizations, its lights and its lies.”⁴⁷ Lying along the Mediterranean Sea’s southern and eastern shores, the Near East provided a ready source of inspiration for those who shaped popular images of the American Southwest.

The modern political implications of such regional Orientalism continue to concern scholars. As historian Jerold Auerbach further noted in his *Explorers in Eden*, “For postmodern academic critics, no term of opprobrium cuts deeper than ‘Orientalism,’ defined as an insidious strategy ‘for dominating, restructuring, and having authority’ over non-Western peoples.” As Auerbach notes, Edward Said claimed that Orientalists always racialize and denigrate people of the East because “the one thing that the Orient could

not do was represent itself” and therefore that “every European in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, and imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric.”⁴⁸ As Auerbach counters, though, “Said’s scathing critique of Orientalist essentialism can easily be redirected to Said himself—and to his academic disciples.” Auerbach here includes feminist scholars such as Barbara Babcock and Margaret Jacobs, who suggest that Orientalism essentially trivializes the Southwest’s indigenous women, as it “exoticizes and appropriates Pueblo culture for purposes of Western entertainment and pleasure.” According to Auerbach, however, such critiques are problematic because they assume that southwestern Indian women were helpless victims, when in fact, Native women in this increasingly tourist-oriented region had many ways of dealing with Anglos on their own terms.⁴⁹

The conflation of southwestern Native American and Asian continues into the present and reveals that it offers the potential for reconciliation as well as conflict. In the 2003 Tony Hillerman PBS Navajo mystery film *Coyote Waits*, a Navajo policeman and a young man are discussing fate. The young man says his Navajo father learned about fate in Vietnam, adding sarcastically that fate’s relationship to mankind is like the mongoose’s relationship to a mouse (which is to say that fate specializes in consuming man). Upon hearing this Vietnamese proverb, the Navajo policeman says, “We have the same story.” This translates the Asian story into a shared kind of folklore, but the specificity is uncanny, as the southwestern Indian equals the Asian “other” in numerous stories.⁵⁰ This, as we have seen, involves a process underway since the 1800s, if not earlier, as travelers believed the Indians were representatives of Asian or Middle Eastern tribes, as reflected in their physiognomy and culture (notably folklore, ceremonies, and the like).

Travelers seeking Oriental symbolism in the modern Southwest should visit artist Roy Purcell’s Chloride Murals, which are tucked away in a small canyon near the former mining town of Chloride, Arizona. Purcell’s murals are among the most fascinating Orientalist works in the modern American West. Jim Eidel of Carson City notes that Purcell “found a desert dream and followed it,” creating the Chloride Murals in 1966 “on house-sized granite boulders and immense cliff faces with enamels and bits of desert” (fig. 8-10a). The murals, which were restored in 2006, are startling, a reminder of how much the desert itself is like a canvas, and how readily the artistic imagination can add to the desert’s drama, but Purcell abstracted their imagery into a painting that explicitly lays out the Oriental symbols. Called *The Goddess Rising*, it places in context a wealth of symbols from both Easts—Near East and Far East (fig. 8-10b). The centerpiece is a stylized sun held up by a buxom

female goddess whose outstretched arms are entwined by two serpents with their mouths open to encircle her breasts. The goddess holds an all-seeing eye as she stands in the maw of a huge serpent. Her ample breasts suggest the fertility rites of ancient Hindu India, while her vagina is a yin and yang symbol from East Asia. Overhead, two ibises, sacred to the Egyptians, fly on either side of the sun symbol. One bears a branch in its beak, while the other spreads its wings majestically. From sky to ground, a river adorned with stylized fish—presumably the Nile—crosses diagonally like a lightning bolt. From ground level, palm trees and vines rise skyward above a tent. A camel and rider appear, as does that other enduring symbol for the ancient Near East, a pyramid. Adding to the mystery, a winged creature (griffin) stands at the lower right.

Serpents are a central motif in the Chloride Murals, and on the original murals, they twist their way about the rocks like huge roots. Eidel notes that Purcell was fascinated by the religious traditions of the Old World and is currently engaged in Native American studies, as well as “visual exploration of the goddesses from ancient historical traditions and civilizations.” Interestingly, the way in which Purcell presented these scenes suggests a Native American influence in that the assemblage and its very location bring to mind an elaborate rock art pictograph. As Eidel concludes: “Chloride has certainly never been the same, nor have countless visitors who, over the years, have wound their way into the little canyon to study the Murals and be profoundly changed in some quiet way.”⁵¹ For his part, Purcell was deeply aware of the rich iconography associated with the Oriental world, and he easily merged that identity into a western landscape. To Purcell, the mural represents “The Journey,” which, he told me, turned out to be a prediction of how his own life would develop, though he had no idea at the time. Purcell, it should be noted, was a devout Mormon until images like these came to him and called in question that faith. Purcell, when he created the Chloride Murals, built on a time-honored tradition of exploring the connections between the landscape and memory, but modern-day tourists seek the place out for enlightenment.

Some historians, including the late Hal Rothman, critique the imitative and exploitative aspects of tourism. Rothman called it a “Devil’s Bargain that has compromised the American West.” In clever pop culture–tinged phrasing right out of Steely Dan’s song “Deacon Blues,” Rothman observed that “tourism created a culture, languid and bittersweet that has as its object participation in consumption.” Like the human viper in that song who crawls through suburban streets making love to “women languid and bittersweet,” tourism represented the seductive side of capitalism and materialism to Rothman. As a historian interested in deeper meanings of the ordinary, Rothman further



Photo by author, 2010

Fig. 8-10a. Roy Purcell's stunning Chloride Murals near Chloride, Arizona, offer a remarkable vision of Oriental symbolism in the American West.

suggested that “as the American West became the psychic location of the national creation myth, Americans understood their experience and identity as a people as being formed and refashioned.”⁵²

Rothman persuasively argued that the West itself was powerful enough to shape this identity, but it should again be noted that this could not have happened without that of other more distant places being employed first. As I have shown, these were places that, like the fabled East(s), had the strongest presence in the imagination and the greatest similarity, visually speaking, to their western counterparts. This process required that the landscape here be branded, in part, with an Oriental identity *before* it could become wholly American.

However, because our own Southwest was once part of Mexico and still shares a border with that country, it remains foreign to us in many ways despite the fact that it is indisputably part of the United States. What borderlands historian James Brooks describes as “strands of desire and repulsion that stretched across the cultural frontiers”⁵³ can still be glimpsed in folklore and popular culture. This is explicit in the 2006 film *Bordertown*—a gritty exposé of the murders of approximately four hundred young women in the vicinity of the Juárez (Chihuahua) *maquiladoras*. When an enthusiastic journalist (Jennifer Lopez) arrives in El Paso/ Ciudad Juárez, she finds another world south of



Painting courtesy Roy Purcell

Fig. 8-10b. Artist Roy Purcell's painting of *The Goddess Rising* features serpents, yin/yang, and other Oriental symbols.

the border. To decipher the mysteries here, she connects with a local newspaper editor (Antonio Banderas) who operates at considerable peril to himself, as the government intends to suppress news about the murders. As configured by director Gregory Nava and cinematographer Rey Villalobos, Juárez has a decidedly infernal and Oriental quality. The city is teeming with an erotic quality of sexual abandonment associated with Sodom and Gomorrah. Lopez seeks a young Mexican woman who miraculously managed to escape the clutches of a serial killer who raped her and buried her alive. The Mexican woman rises from her would-be grave and returns to Ciudad Juárez only to find herself in a kind of hell dominated by mysterious strangers who have no regard for human life. The movie's musical score has a decidedly Arabic quality, and numerous scenes in Juárez, including a huge sign for a bar that is a

brightly colored replica of King Tut, add to the film's sinister Oriental quality. So too do several Middle Eastern men who are part of the nefarious dealings in Juárez.

Bordertown is a reminder that the Southwest has long been vulnerable territory in the eyes of Americans. It was first threatening country as it entered the United States after the US-Mexican War, perceived as a thorn-ridden land full of Apaches, Comancheros, bandits, and other miscreants. Anglo-American ethnocentrism played a role, as the popular press portrayed the region as so lawless and ethnically alien that it took nearly fifty years of intense lobbying for Arizona and New Mexico to become states. However, even after the region gained statehood in 1912, the Mexican Revolution (circa 1910–1920) reminded Americans of the region's vulnerability when Pancho Villa invaded Columbus, New Mexico, in 1916, killing about a dozen Americans.⁵⁴ More recently, with illegal immigration a growing concern, the Southwest seemed once again threatened, and Arizona passed controversial legislation in response. In addition to undocumented workers, though, two bigger concerns loom. The first, heavily armed and particularly savage drug lords who operate with impunity, have left thousands dead (some beheaded) across the border in Mexico. The second concern is the fear that al-Qaeda-inspired Islamist terrorists may slip into the United States across the border. That present-day fear of savagery and terror has resulted in what geographer Daniel Arreola calls the "hardening" of the border,⁵⁵ and is a dark reminder not only of the region's own sometimes troubled past but also of current events playing out in destabilized Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.