

Book Review:***Souvenir from Damascus***

Hussein I. El-Mudarris and Olivier Salmon, *Souvenir de Damas / Souvenir from Damascus*. Ray Publishing and Science, 2008. 160 pages.

Reviewed by Anneka Lenssen.

Souvenir de Damas / Souvenir from Damascus offers a handy compendium of the images European visitors to the city produced from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. Its authors, Hussein I. El-Mudarris and Olivier Salmon, are scholars based in Aleppo. Over the last three years, they have published a series of books devoted to literary and artistic representations of Syria as well as organized numerous exhibitions of print ephemera (see their website www.aleppoart.com for a collection of images and video, or to order their books). This particular volume pairs good quality reproductions of 200 photographic postcards from El-Mudarris's personal collection with pieces of historical French and English-language travel writing about Damascus. In other words, it brings together the two types of formalized encounters with the city of Damascus that characterized tourism in the East in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The postcards primarily document sights from the itinerary that any European traveler bent on experiencing the Muslim cities of the East would have undertaken: long-distance views of Damascus from the overland approach, the hammam, the bazaar, the Serail and Parliament building, Damascene house interiors, mosques and churches, gardens, and other such typologies. These are accompanied by texts snipped from the prose of twenty different authors, from Alphonse de Lamartine to Freya Stark. If El-Mudarris and Salmon intend the postcards to serve as colorful symbols of appreciative contact between East and West, and the texts to document the ways in which Damascus has served as a muse for generations of lettered visitors, then the pairing of the two also demonstrates just how powerfully the body of texts we call now Orientalist still work in marking, or producing, the very sites that were naturalized as "sights" in the (subsequent) mass production of postcard souvenirs.

Souvenir is aptly named, for its brief prefatory materials key the book to a desire for the experience of authenticity and immediacy that has been lost to the travelers of the twenty-first century. Two prefaces by Mahat Farah El-Khoury (one in French and another in Arabic) emphasize the everlastingness of the city's charm, and the importance of recuperating it from the collective memory of its beholders. The editors' own introduction opens with poetic verse about Damascus, written in French. These lines make the white surface of the *carte postale* into an immanent landscape from which unfolds a "forest of ink" as green as the Ghouta. Indeed, the notion that the postcard may serve to record *changes* in social structure is almost entirely subsumed to a reverence for the inventiveness of literary language, and the conviction that poetry bestows a timelessness upon Damascus. This in spite of the change in the city that is discernable from the cards, whether thematic (electrical poles installed in city squares) or formal (new points of view, compositions, and print quality). The backs of the cards are not reproduced, nor any other information that might have pointed to the reading or touring practices and publics. Endnotes include only a bibliography of excerpted texts and a list of illustrations. The illustration list is useful insofar as it tabulates each postcard's printed information – generally a brief caption which names the pictured sight, and the name and/or address of the photography studio or printing house that produced the card – but it does not include data on postmarks or other information that would historicize the images or the experience of their beholders.

In spite of these silences, the book's material can certainly prove a valuable teaching aid in courses devoted to the modern Middle East. It might best be approached, in fact, as two related trajectories for knowledge production about foreignness (or its obverse, locality), as played out in what would become the Syrian capital. The first is that of the literary production of the Orient in the nineteenth century. For an undergraduate course, the tidbits from Alexander William Kinglake, Gustave Flaubert, and Sir Richard Francis Burton – usefully all arrayed around a single urban setting – would prove a rich case study for thinking through the "Orientalist Structures and Restructures" chapter of *Orientalism*. One could also assign chapters from British travel writer Colin Thubron's 1966 book, *Mirror to Damascus*, a spirited account written from a twilight in British intervention in the Near East. Thubron makes a good comparative because he relegates the eccentric personal behaviors of the preceding period's Orientalists to arcana yet still follows them in seeking out sights for description – the House of Ananias, the bazaar and its

craftsman, the Mosque of the Dervishes and its living practitioners. These are the same sights on display within *Souvenir*'s postcard categories.

The second trajectory would be more specific to the Mandate administration in Syria and Lebanon and the emergence of the mass tourism industry. Almost all the actual postcards reproduced here seem to date to the 1920s and 1930s. As such, they register a period of transition for the activity of the search for the Other, a refashioning of the Grand Tour to what sociologist Dean MacCannell saw as a universal experience, "the tourist." That general trajectory, of course, coincided in the region with the French powers' refashioning of the movement of both people and goods. In the 1920s, the road that was built on the order of the French High Commissioner also allowed entrepreneurs to set up a motorized mail service. The few stamps that are reproduced in *Souvenir* – those affixed to the front of some of the cards – record the shifting status of the authority to whom consumers rendered pre-payment for postal services: *Republique Libanaise*, *Republique Francaise*, *Grand Liban*.

Additional readings could again turn even single pages in *Souvenir* into cultural case studies. Kirsten Scheid's 2009 *Museum Anthropology* article, "Missing Nike: On Oversights, Doubled Sights, and Universal Art Understood through Lebanon," for example, could initiate a classroom discussion of the many registers of images associated with the Mandate authority, including postage stamp illustration. On page 103 in *Souvenir*, an image of a baroque marble fountain inside a mirrored reception hall (no. 158 in a series printed by the Beirut photo studio Photo Bonfils / A. Guiragossian), carries a French postage stamp depicting the Republic as a barefoot peasant-goddess. Scheid's article elucidates how this figure, an 1894 design, refashioned classicized grandeur into a French imperial ideology of cultivation. The stamp was introduced to the Arab regions as the official proof of payment for "French-Levant" postal office services. As a wide-spread element of the region's visual culture, Scheid argues, it also participated in producing new forms of "local" aesthetic taste and culturedness. When students see the stamp here, literally riding on a postcard picture of Damascene opulence sent by one member of the European elite to another, they can be prompted to consider the interrelationship of representation, circulation, and political power in Mandate-era Syria.

Souvenir does include one section that makes a dramatic departure from the typical nineteenth-century itinerary. That is “Le temps des combats,” a fifteen page run of postcards documenting the military occupation of Damascus including multiple views of the devastation wrought by French air raids in 1925-1926. Here the selection of texts from journalist Pierre La Maziere (1925), Roland Dorgeles (1928), two letters from Freya Stark (1928), and a 1926 report from Joseph Kessel provide compelling and absolutely contemporary detail on the Arab Revolt. La Maziere attests, for example, to the multi-ethnic character of the French forces, describing a new kind of military man every hundred meters: a sentinel, a French infantryman, an Algerian soldier, a Moroccan spahi, a Senegalese, and a Syrian policeman. Each of these is said to be calling out “Who goes there?,” crossing bayonets in a single apparatus of repressive force.

The point is that *Souvenir* provides what it promises. It is a collection of items that index a distant place and time. Each of its elements, of course, also participates in asserting that distance. Its potential as a resource for historians and students will likely be realized in the ongoing investigation of that simultaneity, the structures that establish the relationship of present to past.

Anneka Lenssen is a doctoral candidate in the History, Theory, and Criticism of Art and Architecture section and the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture Program at M.I.T. She recently returned from a year in Syria where she was researching her dissertation, The Shape of The Support: Painting in Syria's Twentieth Century.