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| ‘Orientalism’ often refers to the sociological, historical, cultural, and anthropological study of the Orient: that which is East of ‘the Occident’ and includes lands spanning from Morocco to Japan. For the French and British, the Orient is generally considered to simply include present-day Turkey, Greece, the Middle East and North Africa and, for the Americas, the Orient encompasses the Far East. The term Orientalism, however, is primarily used to describe the incorporation of aspects of these Eastern cultures in Western art, literature, and design, largely seen during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Artists whose work largely focused on Oriental subjects are often referred to as the Orientalists and include Eugène Delacroix, Alphonse Etienne Dinet, Jean-Léon Gérôme, William Holman-Hunt, John Frederick Lewis, and the photographers Lehnert and Landrock. Traces of Oriental themes can also be found later in the work of twentieth century artists such as Henri Matisse, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Wassily Kandinsky. Orientalist artists predominantly depicted scenes of the Arabian Desert, portraits of natives with Oriental artifacts and clothing, the harem, odalisques, and Oriental architecture. Broadly speaking, the Orientalists represented the Orient as primitive yet opulent and in contrast to the ‘rational’ and enlightened West. Much of the scholarship around, and definition of, ‘Orientalism’ in the twentieth century is indebted to Said’s *Orientalism* (1977), which discusses why the West has preconceived notions of the Orient (and primarily the peoples of the Middle East).  The vogue for the Orient began as the French and British colonial empires opened doors into these countries. Rumours of the ‘Other’ flooded the West and, as Victor Hugo stated in the preface to Les Orientales (1818), “tout le continent penche à l’Orient” (“the whole continent is gravitating towards the Orient”). A colourful palette of ideas of unknown cultures began to form, and was used to paint an image of the Orient which soon began to characterise it. Napoleon Bonaparte’s documentation of the Orient in 1809-1822 set an assumed example for travellers to follow, ‘accurately’ relating their experiences. However, Said argues that, ‘at most, the “real” Orient provoked a writer to his vision; it very rarely guided it.’ Fantastical ideas of the Oriental ‘Other’ quickly weaved into Europe and established stereotypes which became deeply ingrained into Western thought, remaining even today. Said maintains that celebrated writers of the nineteenth century, such as Hugo, ‘restructured the Orient by their art and made its colours, lights, people visible through their images, rhythms, and motifs.’  Said sees Orientalism as the style of thought polarizing ‘The East’ from ‘The West.’ Said asserts that these places are not an inert fact of nature, rather they are mere constructs both from and for the West. The construct of ‘the Orient’ in the nineteenth century, however, stimulated many theories, works of literature, art, and music commenting on the social and cultural observations between these distinct binary opposites. Said further defines Orientalism as ‘a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience.’  [Image: TheSnakeChamer.jpg]  Figure Jean-Léon Gérôme’s The Snake Charmer (1870) |
| Further reading:  (Lewis)  (Beaulieu and Roberts)  (Said)  (Nochlin)  (Orientales)  (Thornton)  (Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century Art) |