

DAHESH MUSEUM OF ART

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STAGING THE ORIENT:
VISIONS OF THE EAST AT LA SCALA AND THE METROPOLITAN OPERA
March 2 – May 30, 2004

Spring Exhibition at the Dahesh Museum of Art explores opera's changing depiction of the Orient from the 18th to the 20th centuries

New York, NY – *Staging the Orient: Visions of the East at La Scala and The Metropolitan Opera*, an unprecedented international project that opens new territory for the Dahesh Museum of Art, makes its only North American appearance here from March 2 to May 30, 2004. This is the first exhibition in the Museum's history to explore the fertile frontier between the visual and the performing arts that opera represents, and the first to honor the artists who created opera's onstage world of the Orient.

Since La Scala's opening in 1778, the world-renowned opera house in Milan has set the standard for extraordinary theatrical productions and played a crucial role in the history of costume and set design. *Staging the Orient* concentrates on operas set in Western Europe's conception of the Orient as broadly defined on La Scala's stage to include Russia, Egypt, the Near East, India, and the Far East. The exhibition, drawn primarily from La Scala's incomparable archival collections and supplemented with seldom seen loans from the Metropolitan Opera Archives and Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, connects La Scala's fabled past to the remarkable history of opera in New York from the late 19th century to the present day.

Staging the Orient illuminates how Italy's most famous set designers (and their counterparts in America a century later) created an imaginary East onstage. With the stories, set designs, costume sketches, historic photographs, and extravagant costumes from the world's two greatest opera houses, *Staging the Orient* demonstrates opera's enduring fondness for the exotic from the late 18th through the early 20th centuries.

The exhibition features 200 works on paper (including watercolor sketches, lithographs, photographs, and other memorabilia), 20 costumes, and several architectural models. Its wealth of materials brings into vivid relief the history of opera's *affaire de coeur* with the Orient: how it evolved from the opening of La Scala to the opening of the Metropolitan Opera in 1883, from the classicism of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (1791) to the romanticism of Verdi's

Aida (1874); the transition to modernism is highlighted by the exhibition's focus on Puccini's *Turandot* (1926), the last grand Italian opera to enter the international repertory.

The history of opera is the history of theater, and this exhibition reveals the extraordinary range of architectural conventions fabricated on stage to suggest the Orient. The golden age of the great set designers – from Alessandro Sanquirico at La Scala to Joseph Urban at the Met – will be illuminated alongside the inspired work of such costume designers as Giuseppe Palanti, Umberto Brunelleschi, Caramba (Luigi Sapelli), and Dada Saligeri, and directors like Cecil Beaton and Franco Zeffirelli. Costume sketches alongside actual costumes created for a roster of great *Turandot* singers, including Rosa Raisa, Maria Jeritza, Birgit Nilsson, and Franco Corelli, bring a dazzling dimension to the exhibition.

Because the contemporary canon of Orientalist opera has been reduced to a few “classic” works, such as *Madame Butterfly*, *Aida*, and *Salome*, many of the 42 different Orientalist operas and ballets staged at La Scala are virtually unknown to the general public today. *Staging the Orient* reintroduces these “lost” works, juxtaposing descriptive plot summaries with the set and costume designs they inspired, allowing the museum visitor to imagine what opera audiences experienced over two centuries ago.

The exhibition, organized by the van Gogh Museum and presented in Amsterdam as *La Scala: The Opera and The Orient, 1780-1930*, was curated there by Vittoria Crespi Morbio (Teatro alla Scala di Milano) and Joke van Pelt (Theater Instituut Nederland). In *Staging the Orient*, visitors to the Dahesh Museum of Art will see a version of the Amsterdam show expanded by Chief Curator Stephen R. Edidin, who co-curated it with Vittoria Crespi Morbio. The installation, which has transformed the Museum's galleries into a sumptuous theatrical space, was designed by Daniel Kershaw.

OPERA AND THE ORIENT

As Western views of the Orient converged with the narrative conventions of opera, it became obvious that the two were naturally suited to each other: exoticism, mystery, violence, and passion—strongly associated in Western perceptions of the Orient—were also the dynamic elements of great operatic storytelling. In the 19th century, when artists were particularly inspired by depictions of exotic cultures made available to the West by archeological expeditions, colonial expansion, missionary activities, and the opening of Japan to Europe, a cultural consensus was forming about the authentic Orient. La Scala's great set designers, who were primarily painters, were also influenced by the visual culture of the time, including the flowering of Orientalist paintings, “illustrated tours,” and the birth of photography, and drew upon similar sources to bring this world to their respective audiences.

OPERA AND ACADEMIC ART

For their depiction of the Orient, academic painters, stage designers, and composers shared popular sources: ancient myths; the Bible; historical and contemporary events; plays and novels. The basic perspectival techniques employed by academic artists to create three dimensions on a flat canvas were passed along to opera designers.

Within this reality singers struck poses and mimed expressions that were borrowed from academic art—drawn, in turn, from the study of Greek and Roman sculpture. The highest form of academic art was history painting, a multi-figured narrative image that told a story, and opera became a moving history painting. At the turn of the century, academic artists worked as stage designers in the early cinema, and film directors soon staged operas. In fact, the director or designer of every 20th-century production of *Turandot* described in *Staging the Orient* was well known for his work in film.

PROLOGUE

The Museum's permanent collection galleries provide a prologue to *Staging the Orient*, introducing the wealth of Oriental themes to be found in 19th-century academic art. Organized by Associate Curator Lisa Small, the new installation of these works features portraits of Arab men, women, and children, genre scenes, desert landscapes, Biblical scenes, and dramatic versions of historical events that took place in the Near East, Egypt, or North Africa. Hand-colored engravings of Ottoman types served as models for generations of Orientalist artists and stage designers. Influential "illustrated tours" including those by Achille Prisse d'Avennes and Luigi Mayer document the popularity of these appealing images, and show how easily they could be incorporated into sketches for set and costume design.

SANQUIRICO'S ORIENT AT LA SCALA

When Teatro alla Scala opened in 1778, it immediately became world-famous for its magnificent productions and fantastic sets. The grand pavilions, vaulted chambers, hanging gardens, and burning cities that materialized on the stage of La Scala in the early 19th century first took shape in the imagination of Alessandro Sanquirico (1777-1849).

An architect, stage and landscape designer, decorator, restorer, and inventor, Sanquirico served as the theater's principal stage designer from 1817 to 1832. His inventive use of perspective on painted backdrops and massive scenery, organized around both central and angled axes, enticed viewers into seemingly limitless spaces. He was also a master of innovative lighting effects: with oil lamps—or the more recently introduced gaslight—he could conjure the sepulchral gloom of a shadowy, vaulted chamber or the brilliant blaze of a burning city. Sanquirico's greatest fame, however, derives from the spectacular mechanical effects he created for the stage. One of the most notable of these transformed his production of Giacomo Meyerbeer's *The Crusader in Egypt*, when a huge, stately vessel filled with crusaders emerged from the back of the stage and advanced toward its mooring at center stage in the port of Damietta, to be greeted by a sizeable *corps de ballet* and choruses. This stunning effect, documented in a color lithograph, is reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue.

SETTINGS AND CHARACTERS

The Near East and especially the “biblical Orient” often served as a backdrop to opera’s religious wars and biblical stories. In heart-rending action, heroes (or villains) who embodied the values of opposing civilizations waited for sieges, conquered nations (or lovers), defied rulers, and became martyrs. Operas set in India made visual drama of the mystery of nature with awe-inspiring palaces and temples, their interiors draped with luxurious fabrics and exteriors covered with lush vegetation. Set designs for the many operas and ballets set in Carthage, Persepolis, Arabia, Babylon, Corinth, and Egypt are extraordinarily evocative, while costumes and props created for stock characters – the soldier, the hero, and the seductress – are richly detailed. Notable for their mix of fact and fantasy are Giuseppe Palanti’s costume design for *Delilah*, *Mata Hari*, and *Salome*, the classic Oriental seductresses.

EGYPT

Ever since Napoleon’s 1798 military expedition uncovered the tombs of the pharaohs, artists and scientists have been fascinated with ancient Egypt, and not surprisingly many Orientalist operas take place there. In fact, the largest number of sketches in the exhibition are set in Egypt and designed by Sanquirico. His pyramids have Egyptian wall paintings, gigantic idols, and hieroglyphics, decorative details based on historical research undertaken by an army of assistants. Egypt’s seductive charms also were embodied in costume and set designs for Cleopatra’s palace at Alexandria.

As the 19th century progressed, lavish stage sets with multiple visual effects became the norm, and critics began to note factual inaccuracies. Detailed descriptions of Eastern cities were now available, and art began to imitate life. The harem interiors of Carlo Ferrario and his pupil and collaborator Giovanni Zuccarelli mirrored the overflowing interiors of the time, while the suggestive curves of Palanti’s costumes paved the way for Art Nouveau, and other designers embodied the Art Deco aesthetic.

TURANDOT AT THE LA SCALA AND THE MET

Staging the Orient devotes substantial space to Giacomo Puccini’s last opera, *Turandot*. Displayed on dramatically lit stages, in galleries as red as La Scala’s interiors, are twenty original costumes from legendary *Turandot* productions. From the 1926 La Scala world premiere, the exhibition displays ten of the costumes designed by Caramba (Luigi Sapelli, 1865-1936) and loaned by the Devalle Collection in Turin. Another ten costumes represent every 20th-century production of *Turandot* at the Metropolitan Opera. This section includes sketches for the New York premiere by the Viennese designer and architect Joseph Urban (1872-1933), whose unified “new stagecraft” approach had been honed at the Boston Opera and Zeigfeld Follies, and also costume sketches by his daughter, the designer Gretl Urban (1898-1997), including the magnificent gown worn by Soprano Maria Jeritza for that production.

In 1961, what became known as “The Nilsson/Corelli/Beaton *Turandot*” (even long after other sopranos and tenors began singing those roles) was the talk of the town. Birgit Nilsson’s costume, designed by Academy Award winner Cecil Beaton (whose first love was theater), stands majestically with its red and yellow swirling train in the penultimate gallery of the

exhibition. Along with seven other costumes from that production, including Franco Corelli's, this is a remarkable testament to Beaton's achievement.

When the Metropolitan Opera moved to its new home at Lincoln Center, Franco Zeffirelli, whose other Puccini productions had become very popular, was asked to prepare a new production of *Turandot* to debut in 1987. The very last image in the Dahesh's exhibition is from that production -- Turandot's costume (by Dada Saligeri) for Eva Marton stands aloof and magnificent, theatrically lit, a perfect coda to the exhibition.

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GENERAL INFORMATION

The Dahesh Museum of Art is located at 580 Madison Avenue, between 56th and 57th Streets, in midtown Manhattan. Gallery hours: Tuesday through Sunday, 11 am – 6 pm, closed Monday and all legal holidays. Admission: \$9 adults, \$4 students and seniors (62+), free to Museum Members and children under 12. On the First Thursday of every month, admission to the Museum is pay-as-you-wish from 6-9 pm.

CAFÉ OPALINE:

Open daily 11 am – 5 pm. Lunch 11 am – 3 pm. Afternoon Tea and Teddy Bear Tea 2:30 – 5 pm. Perfect for your special event; call 212.521.8159 for details.

MUSEUM SHOP:

Open daily, 11 – 6 pm. Books, accessories, home décor, jewelry, prints, sculptures, and much more, inspired by 19th-century traditions, and images drawn from the Museum's collection and special exhibitions.

EXHIBITION LENDERS

Lenders to the exhibition are the Metropolitan Opera Archives; Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; Roberto and Andrea Devalle Collection of Turin; the Commune di Foligno; the Collezione Rancati, Milan; and the Città di Torino. Mannequins for the costumes in this exhibition have been generously loaned by the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

EXHIBITION PARTNERS

Promotional support for *Staging the Orient* has been provided by *Opera News*, a publication of The Metropolitan Opera Guild, *Le Parker Meridien New York*, *The Art Newspaper*, *MacMurray Ranch*, and *Where New York*. Additional support for the exhibition was provided by the Italian Cultural Institute of New York.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Staging the Orient: Visions of the East at La Scala and The Metropolitan Opera is accompanied by a 40-page, fully illustrated catalogue of the same name, published by the Dahesh Museum of Art. It contains a preface by Peter Trippi, Director of the Dahesh Museum of Art; an introduction by Stephen R. Edidin, Chief Curator; an essay on the history of set and costume design at La Scala from its founding to the premiere of *Turandot* in 1926 by Vittoria Crespi Morbio, curator of the Museo del Teatro alla Scala; and two

essays on the history of *Turandot* at the Metropolitan Opera from its New York premiere in 1926 to the Zeffirelli production of 1987, by the noted independent opera historian and commentator, Paul Thomason. The illustrated catalogue, which contains both color and black & white plates, is available at the Dahesh Museum of Art for \$24.99; on-line at museumshop@daheshmuseum.org.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

A series of exciting public programs, including lectures, screenings, interviews, musical events, conversations, and workshops for children and adults, is planned to enhance enjoyment of the exhibition. For more information on Spring 2004 Programs, visit daheshmuseum.org, or call 212.759.0606 x365 to request a brochure.

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