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What is strange about the Dahesh Museum?

by James Panero

On the reopening of a curious New York institution.

There was a spiritual director, an oracle, in these parts who daily filled a famous column in one of the local newspapers. Once, in days of family piety, it bore the title Aunt Lydia's Post Bag*; now it was* The Wisdom of the Guru Brahmin*, adorned with the photograph of a bearded and almost naked sage. To this exotic source resorted all who were in doubt or distress.*
—Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One*

Imagine yourself in a different place and time: California, let's say, late 1940s. Like many of your compatriots, you consider yourself a spiritual sort of fellow. People might call you a "new ager." Your chain of General Motors dealerships is thriving; you are a millionaire; yet something is lacking. Then a friend introduces you to a spiritual man named "Dr. Wonder." Your friend explains that Dr. Wonder eats only raw onions, olives, and cheese, he perspires profusely, yet he always smells clean. Indeed it is true! Soon enough Dr. Wonder takes you into his confidence. You learn about his philosophy: "essential spiritual fluids." Also: Dr. Wonder can remove, if necessary, his head from his body; he has six avatars that sometimes appear at once; he can walk through walls. It all sounds quite fantastic. The guru invites you to his salon with other soul-searching notables: the Christopher Isherwood/Gerald Heard types, some rich dowagers, as well as the sister-in-law of the governor of the state. Pretty interesting company. Many of them give Dr. Wonder money. Through this, combined with his literary sales (yes, he is a prolific writer), he acquires objets d'art for his salon: china, sculpture, realistic-looking paintings that no one else wants. He collects over fifty new items a year.

By the time Dr. Wonder dies his second death, while visiting your Connecticut home in 1984, he has collected over three thousand items (much of which you purchased from him back in 1975) and has socked away fifteen million dollars. He bequeaths it all to you. Now, you already run the Dr. Wonder Publishing House, dedicated to the writings of Dr. Wonder. You decide that the best thing to do is open up a museum. So you apply for a temporary charter from the State of New York. In 1995, with the best intentions, you open a tiny, 1,800-square-foot museum on Lexington Avenue in New York City called "The Wonder Museum" next to an outfit named (can you believe this?) "The Fine Art of Hair Replacement." Not exactly Class-A stuff. Nevertheless, you hire some art professionals through the College Art Association to head the museum, and you keep them out of the family faith. You invest Dr. Wonder's money with a well-respected New York bank, let's call it Citibank. You see the assets realize, oh, $20 to $30 million. You try to purchase part of the Edward Durrell Stone-designed Huntington Hartford Museum building on Columbus Circle only to lose out first to the crafty Donald Trump and then to the American Craft Museum. Finally, through your real estate contacts at a well-respected New York agency like Newmark, and with a top lawyer from a

firm like Paul Weiss Rifkind Warton and GarrisonLLP, you land a sweetheart three-level sublease deal in the lower floors of the IBM Building on 57th Street and Madison; you employ a firm like Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates LLP for $4 million to spruce the place up with a 200-seat auditorium, a 70-seat cafe, a street-level gift shop, and 5,400 square feet of exhibition space; you hire a new curator and double the staff to forty; you list your new friends at Citibank and Paul Weiss on the roll call of trustees (although, ahem, this is still really a family operation). Then, on September 3, 2003, you watch from your thirteen-million dollar, eleven-acre estate in Greenwich, Connecticut, with nine-bedroom mansion, two-bedroom Cape Cod cottage, and three- bedroom colonial home, as the doors of your new, improved, wonderful museum open for business.

Replace California in this marvelous story with the flush, beachy environs of pre-war Lebanon, with the millions belonging to the Zahid family of Connecticut, New York, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain (the Zahid family are principal board members of the Saudi-based Zahid AMECO, the Arabian Motors and Engineering Company), and you have something approaching the real-life history of an institution in New York called the Dahesh Museum of Art. This is the only New York museum, one is relentlessly reminded, dedicated to the heretofore unrealized mission of solely presenting nineteenth-century academic French art, the slick, licked, outré collecting passion of its namesake: Salim Moussa Achi, a.k.a. Dr. Dahesh.

Yet when it comes to the full history of the Dahesh Museum, perhaps no art institution in recent memory has similarly chosen to obfuscate its own founding, funding, and history of acquisition in quite the same way. What we do know has largely been uncovered through two investigative articles that appeared in *ARTnews*, the first of which brought the Daheshi religion connections to light to the consternation of its then director, J. David Farmer.[1] Farmer claimed that while he did not at first investigate the Zahid background, he and his staff had chosen to distance the history of Dr. Dahesh, a quasi-Arabic moniker meaning “Doctor Wonder” or “Doctor Amazing,” from the activities of the museum. This syllogistic strategy has now been taken up by the museum’s new director, the spritely young Peter Trippi.

“Very few of us at the museum know about Dr. Dahesh’s life,” Trippi said to *ARTnews*, “We’re not deeply interested.” In Trippi’s defense, *ARTnews* quotes Robert Rosenblum, a professor of fine arts at New York University and a senior curator at the Guggenheim museum: “Nobody I know has ever thought about it any more than they’ve thought about where Henry Clay Frick’s money came from. The museum’s potential is as an exhibition space for the future serious study of nineteenth-century academic art. If Daheshists are willing to fund it, that’s fine. Think of all of the exhibitions Philip Morris has sponsored.” Or that Giorgio Armani has sponsored, one might add.

A singular source of English-language information on Dr. Dahesh has been Mounir Murad, a high-tech business owner in Virginia, an open Daheshist, and the self-published author of *Daheshism and the Journey of Life*. Murad’s account of Dr. Dahesh greatly expands upon what little one finds on him at the Dahesh Museum. A wall text in the museum’s Pier 1-like gift shop, beside a portrait of Dr. Dahesh, describes Dahesh’s nineteenth-century Lebanese home as “a cosmopolitan and convivial salon where people of all ages gathered to exchange ideas”—not as a spiritual center. Dr. Dahesh was also an advocate for “human rights,” although exactly how is never made clear. Elsewhere in the bookshop, a few pages in the 1999 catalogue *Highlights from The Dahesh Museum Collection*, with an essay by Lisa Small (the curator of a current exhibition called “Reframing Academic Art” on view through February 8), echoes much of the same roundabout language. She indicates that Dr. Dahesh was once awarded an “honorary degree.”

On the subject of the “honorary degree,” Mounir Murad writes: “Dahesh traveled throughout the Middle East and Europe and received a certificate from the Société Psychique Internationale on May 6, 1930 and a doctorate in psychic research from the Sage Institute in Paris on May 22, 1930, for his ability to transgress the laws of nature.”

And what was Dr. Dahesh's dissertation? Murad continues:

> About 10 experts in the field of supernatural studies witnessed the 20-year-old man, at his request, be placed in a casket, which was sealed and then submerged at the bottom of the Seine River for seven days under tight surveillance. After the seven-day period was over, the casket was pulled out and … the miracle man had a smile on his face and was in perfect health.

Murad describes other death-defying scenarios. For example, Dr. Dahesh's Lebanese oppressors, under Bechara El-Khoury, chased him from Lebanon in 1944. On July 1, 1947, Dahesh was blindfolded and executed by firing squad in Azerbaidjan, which was "photographed and documented." Yet as Dr. Dahesh had substituted one of his six "spiritual personalities" for the body of the real thing, he quickly returned to Lebanon in order to prepare "a large-scale media attack on his oppressors." Murad, with open enthusiasm for Dr. Dahesh, then concludes:

> According to the followers of Dr. Dahesh, Jews have missed Jesus Christ for the second time, and Christians and Moslems have also failed to recognize him. By now you may have guessed that Dr. Dahesh's life is regarded as the second coming of Jesus Christ.
>
> Bon voyage!

Far be it for someone in these pages to deliberate on the claims or counterclaims of the followers of Dahesh. Yet one can say that it is quite clear the Dahesh Museum will never be taken seriously as a fully accredited, scholarly institution until it confronts its own history: the record of collecting before 1995 by Dr. Dahesh and the Zahid family, the museum's funding, and the aesthetic interests behind its creator, Dr. Dahesh. Only then will the Dahesh collection be viewed in a critical way. It may be that the directors of Dahesh hope simply to brush off the doctor's heritage from the museum; or perhaps the Zahids have instructed their museum employees to keep silent on the matter. At any rate, every effort is made to separate the two. Dr. Dahesh may have been able to remove his head from his body, yet the Dahesh Museum enjoys no such luxury, and the museum's current posture towards its own history is euthanastic.

For example, when I visited the Dahesh Heritage Center, also known as the Daheshist Publishing Company, at 1775 Broadway, a representative hastily informed me that there were no books on Dr. Dahesh's history of art collecting, even though the Daheshist Publishing Company publishes only work by Dr. Dahesh (and nothing, I was told, by Mounir Murad). "Mr. James," he held up his palms, "we have nothing here for you. Yes, there is a history of Dr. Dahesh's European travels. But it is twenty-two volumes and," he smiled, "only in Arabic. You should visit the Dahesh Museum." The telephone rang and he ducked away. A short walk across 57th Street to Madison Avenue proved no more rewarding. When I asked a salesman at the Dahesh Museum gift shop if he had any books about Dr. Dahesh, he scurried off, wrote down an address on a stickie, and told me to visit the Dahesh Heritage Center. Such has been the experience of most inquirers into the history of this museum.

So what does it all mean for academic art? With modernism's steady decline in the esteem of so many contemporary critics, scholars, and artists, it is little surprise that academic art has enjoyed something of a kitschy resurgence in the past fifteen years. Whereas romanticism, the realism of Courbet, Impressionism, and numerous other nineteenth-century side movements came together into a single understanding of modernism at the turn of the century—"modernism" as we came to know it

in the twentieth century—the labored, conservative art of the French academy was really the popular and mainstream art for most of the nineteenth century. It was the French academicians who largely controlled the powerful salons as well as the Prix de Rome. When Napoleon III established the Salon des Refusés in 1863 for Cézanne, Pissarro, Guillaumin, Jongkind, Fantin-Latour, Whistler, and Manet, among others, the public reacted with scorn and ridicule. Fifty years later, the sentiment had reversed, academic art was out, although an echt-academic painter like Bouguereau was still exhibiting popular new work, such as his *Regina Angelorum*, through 1900 (he died in 1905).

Many of us were reminded of this fact by Rosenblum's important exhibition "1900: Art at the Crossroads," which he curated at the Guggenheim Museum a few years back. "1900" smartly cut right down the middle of a moment in art history, even recreating part of that year's salon from the Exposition Decennale des Beaux-Arts, in which Bouguereau appeared.

The moment when you might find many a heated partisan for the modernism-academicism debate is over. The re-inclusion of academic painters like Delaroche, Vernet, and Gérôme in the canon is all but inevitable, just as the earlier academics Ingres and David have now received their due.

It is therefore all the more surprising that the Dahesh Museum continues to champion academic art—all academic art—with a unique blend of zealous advocacy and aesthetic blindness. This can only be attributed to the connection of the museum to Dr. Dahesh and his larger-than-life reputation. If Dr. Dahesh did not enjoy the aesthetic judgment of, say, Ernst Gombrich, does this throw his other accomplishments in doubt? This is a possibility the curators of the Dahesh Museum seem eager to avoid. Compare these three Dahesh quotations:

> [M]odernism [is] a belief system which dominated much of the twentieth century, and which often reduced to mere obstacles those artists and institutions—broadly known as academic—that did not follow its trajectory. But there is another story to tell about the nineteenth century. [Younger people] are viewers who do not carry the "baggage" of modernist thinking about the nineteenth century and thus are open to considering all of this period's arts in a clear-eyed manner. Be warned that in reading this book, a high level of open-mindedness is required. If you start reading this book with the firm idea that what you currently believe in is not open to change, please proceed no further, for Daheshism and this book are not meant for you. It takes a very open-minded person to understand and appreciate the Daheshist philosophy, and even so, it may be too much for some people to handle.

Lisa Small, Peter Trippi, Mounir Murad: the rhetoric is the same. A case for academic art can be made, but it should not be a faith-based initiative. The Dahesh Museum's presentation of academic art is as dematerialized as Dr. Dahesh's Azerbaidjani avatar: no contextualization towards mainstream art history; no discrimination between Gérôme's majestic *Working in Marble* (1890) and Henri Pierre Picou's *Andromeda Chained to a Rock* (1874) (which belongs on the wall of the Yale Club taproom); no discussion of recent acquisitions compared to Dr. Dahesh's original collection (very few of his paintings seem to make it out of storage). In short, no nothing at this strange museum.

Notes

Go to the top of the document.

1. See “The Riddle of Dr. Dahesh” by Ferdinand Protzman, *ARTnews*, December 1996; and “The Dahesh Enigma” by Kelly Devine Thomas, *ARTnews*, October 2003. Go back to the text.

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http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/What-is-strange-about-the-Dahesh-Museum--1626