Kay Nielsen: Orientalism in Illustration During the Belle Epoque

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KAY NIELSEN: ORIENTALISM IN ILLUSTRATION DURING THE BELLE ÉPOQUE

by

ANDREW STUART JONES

JESSICA DALLOW, COMMITTEE CHAIR
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MINDY NANCARROW

A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham and the University of Alabama, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts.

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2009
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KAY NIELSEN: ORIENTALISM IN ILLUSTRATION DURING THE BELLE ÉPOQUE

ANDREW STUART JONES

DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY

ABSTRACT

As a fantasy gift book illustrator in the Belle Époque, Kay (pronounced “Kigh”) Rasmus Nielsen (1886-1957) combined European and Asian sources to create a single artistic style. Nielsen’s cross-cultural artistic vocabulary is evident not only in his illustrations for Asian tales such as The Thousand and One Nights, but also in distinctly European tales. Furthermore, Nielsen was one of only a few European artists who engaged Persian and Indian pictorial style in the early twentieth century when Persian and Indian miniatures became increasingly available in Europe. Consequently, Nielsen can serve as a window onto a neglected chapter in Orientalist history in much the same way that Aubrey Beardsley, Nielsen’s role model whom he never met, has been used to show the impact of Japanese prints on European art, specifically illustration. This paper seeks to provide a context for Nielsen’s work, and to explain Nielsen’s relation to Asian art.

Keywords: Kay Nielsen, Orientalism, illustration, theater, Belle Époque, fantasy
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INTRODUCTION

Figure 1: Kay Nielsen, *She is waiting still*, from “The Flying Trunk,” in *Andersen’s Fairy Tales* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923).

European art and culture produced many significant achievements in every artistic field during the Belle Époque (1874-1914), including music, literature, theater, and the visual arts. Scientific discoveries during this period prompted the creation of new artistic mediums such as photography and film, which in turn prompted the redefinition of older artistic mediums. This period of transition and diverse artistic achievement was cut short by the onset of World War I in 1914. Some of the artistic cultures that had flowered during the Belle Époque were vigorously renewed when the war ended, while others were not. One of the artistic cultures that formed and faded with the Belle Époque was the culture of illustration devoted to fantasy-themed gift books. Fantasy gift book illustrations have
generally been regarded as sentimental kitsch. As such, they have been the subject of nostalgia rather than scholarly attention. This historical omission is unfortunate. Gift books and their illustrations offer a revealing look into prewar culture, and have left a lasting influence on postwar culture.

This thesis examines the work of one Belle Époque fantasy gift book illustrator, Kay (pronounced “Kigh”) Rasmus Nielsen (1886-1957), and the insight it offers into the visual culture of Orientalism in the early twentieth century. Orientalist culture during the nineteenth century was an ideology separating Europe from Asia, although it contained undertones of fantasy and indulgence. During the Belle Époque, these undertones were brought to the fore and Orientalism became a theme for pop-culture entertainment. The binary relationship between Europe and Asia was gradually traded for a culture of hybridity and role-playing. Nielsen’s work serves an excellent example of this transition because Nielsen was unique amongst his peers for routinely borrowing from Asian artistic cultures, regardless of whether he was illustrating an Asian or European tale. Furthermore, Nielsen was one of only a few Western artists who engaged Persian and Indian pictorial style in the early twentieth century when Persian and Indian miniatures became increasingly available in Europe. Consequently, Nielsen can serve as a window onto that neglected chapter in Orientalist history in much the same way that Aubrey Beardsley (1872 – 1898), Nielsen’s role model whom he never met, has been used to show the impact of Japanese prints on European art, specifically illustration. Additionally, Nielsen left a lasting influence not only on fantasy illustration, but also on the international vision of “high fantasy” through his work at Disney in the 1940s, and
possibly through influence on J.R.R. Tolkien.¹ Nielsen’s work has drawn comparisons to two of the most historically recognized illustrators, his contemporaries Edmund Dulac (1882-1953) and Arthur Rackham (1867-1939). Yet, Nielsen is perhaps the most neglected of the major Belle Époque illustrators.

A brief account of Nielsen’s life and influences is necessary to understand the significance of his illustrations. Upon looking back on his childhood, Nielsen remarked that his parents brought him up “in the tense atmosphere of art.”² His mother, Oda Nielsen (1851-1936), was an actress at the Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen, and “the interpreter of the songs of Old Danish folklore.” As a child, Kay would draw the characters in the Volsung sagas when she would read them to him. His father, Martinus Nielsen (1859-1928), was the managing director of the Dagmar Theatre in Copenhagen, and had experience as a classical actor. Through his family, Nielsen was exposed to contemporary Scandinavian composers, authors, and playwrights. In 1930, Nielsen stated, “I remember such men as [Henrik] Ibsen, [Bjornstjerne] Bjornsen, [Jonas] Lie, [Edvard] Grieg, [Christian] Sinding, and [Georg] Brandes and many others probably unknown to the American public.”³

Nielsen’s early artistic tutelage began under Johan Rhode in 1903, and Ludvig Find in 1904. It was then, at the age of 18, that Nielsen abandoned his planned medical career and left Denmark to study art in the schools of Montparnasse. He attended the Académie Julian from 1904 to 1907, studying under Jean Paul Laurens, then the

Académie Colarossi from 1907 to 1909, where he studied under Christian Krogh (a fellow Dane) and Lucien Simon. His art education was classical and based upon the observation of nature, but his unassigned work was imaginative and stemmed from observing the work of illustrators, such as Beardsley. Representatives of a London gallery saw some of these drawings in 1910 and offered him an exhibition. Nielsen accepted the offer and left for London in 1911. The exhibition was held in 1912, and his first book, *In Powder and Crinoline*, was published a year later. *In Powder and Crinoline* immediately drew comparisons to the work of Rackham and Dulac. Nielsen’s style matured and became more eclectic with *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, published in 1914.

However, the arrival of World War I in the same year brought an end to illustration’s “Golden Age” and obscured Nielsen as quickly as he had been introduced. Nine years passed before another series of Nielsen’s illustrations would be published. In contrast, Rackham and Dulac had been publishing annually before Nielsen’s career had even begun and continued to publish during World War I. Consequently, Rackham and Dulac have fared better than Nielsen in terms of popularity and scholarly attention over time. Rackham in particular is one of the most celebrated illustrators of any era and has moved beyond this approach to Orientalism, and consequently these illustrations can be used to contrast their later achievements and form uninitiated due to modern reproductions of his work and hundreds of websites showcasing various illustrations from his eighty-six books. Additionally, several books analyzing Rackham’s life and art have been published. In contrast, the illustrations from Nielsen’s five books are obscure even
amongst illustration enthusiasts, and his involvement in the “Night on Bald Mountain” sequence from Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940) is much better known (fig. 2).

![Chernabog from *Fantasia*](image)

**Figure 2:** Chernabog, from the “Night on Bald Mountain” sequence from *Fantasia*, directed by Wilfred Jackson, storyboarding and art direction by Kay Nielsen (Hollywood: Walt Disney Productions, 1940).

Nielsen’s place in modern publications has been almost totally confined to brief entries in dictionaries of illustrators. These entries frequently mention the influence of Asian art on Nielsen’s work, and the sole recorded comment made by Nielsen on the topic of Asian influence on his work:

> I was brought up in a classical view concerning art, but I remember I loved the Chinese drawings and carvings in my mother’s room, brought home from China by her father. And this love for the works of art from the East has followed me. My artistic wandering started with the Early Italians over Persia, India, to China.⁴

There is no indication that Nielsen literally wandered across the globe. However, Nielsen left no further details of his exposure to Asian art in Europe or the influence Asian art had on his work. Nielsen’s opportunities to be exposed to Asian art have not

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⁴ Miller and Whitley, 52.
been discussed in literature, nor has the Asian content in his work undergone critical analysis. This thesis attempts to remedy this problem by accounting for and describing the opportunities for Nielsen’s exposure to Asian art, and by arguing that Nielsen’s work exhibited many of the tropes of Orientalist visual culture, including caricature and quotation, in addition to exhibiting signs of the integration of Asian art into its stylistic vocabulary. The diversity of this stylistic vocabulary enabled Nielsen to engage Asian artistic style without disengaging from his European artistic roots; he could move between Asian texts such as *The Thousand and One Nights* and European texts such as *Hansel and Gretel* without creating a disjointed effect. This fluid movement is noteworthy because it stands in contrast to the culture of Orientalist illustration, as exemplified by its champion, Dulac, who confined Asian influence to the depiction of tales set in Asia.

In order to understand the significance of Nielsen’s work as a unique expression of early twentieth-century Orientalist visual culture, it is necessary to rebuild the conditions and environments that cultivated his work. Chapter One will recontextualize Nielsen by briefly addressing the meaning of the book in the industrial era and the role of Orientalism in the genre of gift book illustration. Chapter Two will examine Nielsen’s opportunities to be exposed to Orientalist culture and Asian art. Chapter Three will explore the Orientalist culture in fantasy gift book illustration by examining Nielsen’s diverse body of work.
CHAPTER ONE

THE FANTASY GIFT BOOK OF THE BELLE EPOQUE

This chapter will identify the genre of fantasy gift book illustration and its relation to photography and Orientalism during the early twentieth century in order to account for some of the conditions that shaped Nielsen’s unique response to Asian art. This step is necessitated by the lack of preexisting scholarship on the subject. The relative obscurity of gift book illustration culture is largely due to the historical shadow cast by the Arts and Crafts movement, a movement that protested the use of design as a “marketable affair, controlled by the salesman and the advertiser, and at the mercy of every passing fashion.” The Arts and Crafts movement’s devotion to the book arts has led to a degree of intellectual contempt or disinterest for consumer print culture of the same period as being kitsch and ephemera. Consequently, the work of Nielsen and his peers have generally been reprinted for nostalgic value, without context, analysis, or criticism. Additionally, there is often a misconception that the work of Nielsen and his peers does not manifest a unique and noteworthy artistic culture, but is instead an extension of other cultures. This mindset has brought about several misleading labels, such as the “Golden Age of Children’s Book Illustration” which greatly oversimplifies the relationship

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5 Michael Felmingham’s *The Illustrated Gift Book 1880-1930, with Checklist of 2500 Titles* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1988) remains the only book devoted to the topic, and is more devoted to collecting raw data than to scholarly interpretation and criticism.

between fantasy gift books and childhood. Fantasy gift books and their illustrations are also frequently described as Art Nouveau products, or Art Deco products in the case of Nielsen, due to the enormous presence that those movements had in the field of illustration. In actuality, stylistic diversity is arguably the most distinguishing quality of fantasy gift book illustration. Illustrators strove for individuality and avoided the graphic clichés of these larger cultures. Consequently, this chapter will take the genre of fantasy gift book illustration in the Belle Époque on its own terms in order to expose the conditions peculiar to Nielsen and his peers.

The Gift Book

The creation of the gift book was simultaneously enabled and necessitated by the Industrial Revolution’s radical changes to the printing industry in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Cast iron and steam-powered presses were invented alongside papermaking machines such as the Foudrinier machine, vastly increasing book production and lowering costs, while the sudden growth of the urban middle class provided a market to support this meteoric rise of publishing. The mechanical proliferation of standardized books fostered literacy, but also made it obvious that the artistic tradition of bookmaking was disappearing. The public was being inundated with books produced under a rapidly moving capitalist system, which prioritized speed and efficiency rather than finesse. Those early nineteenth-century book buyers who sought refinement or sentimentality were left searching for something special amongst a sea of books designed to be neutral capsules of knowledge.
Consequently, a niche market arose to satisfy this desire. Numerous publishers began producing “gift books”: lavishly designed yet affordable books designed to assert their appearance over their textual content, and to readily serve social and symbolic roles such as that of a memento, a token of friendship, or a keepsake. Quite often their titles made their intended purpose apparent: *The Forget-me-not* (1823), *Friendship’s Offering* (1824), *The Bijou* (1828), and *The Keepsake* (1828). The usage of a gift book was not unlike that of a modern coffee table book; they were displayed in the home, and appreciated for their aesthetic beauty. Their exteriors were often dressed with a slipcase, tie ribbons, and gold. Their interiors were often perused for the etched and engraved illustrations, but rarely read in the sense that one reads a novel or a history. Consequently, the text of a gift book was reduced to ambience; its presence only necessitated for the completion of the aesthetic of book illustration and decoration.

Conceptually, this emphasis on book illustrations and embellishments provided an analogue to the Arts and Crafts movement’s return to medieval book culture. However, gift books were mass-produced rather than sold to wealthy connoisseurs. Consequently, they represent the democratization of the book arts rather than the return to the exclusivity of the scriptoriums and reliquaries of the medieval period. By opening the book arts market to the middle class, gift books added to the growing impetus for more sustainable and efficient mediums for printing in bulk. Beginning in the 1820s, the longstanding tradition of copper engraving was replaced by steel engraving, which was in turn replaced by wood engraving by the mid century. Unlike previous methods of

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printing images, a wood engraving (as opposed to a woodcut) could be locked up with type, inked, and printed in one pass through a press. This process made printing illustrations exponentially faster and cheaper. Consequently, illustrations proliferated, and individual illustrators became acknowledged and marketed for the first time in Western history. Consumer cults soon formed around their names and returned in droves every Christmas to buy gift books or Christmas books including their illustrations.

Photography and the Illustrator in the Belle Époque

The technology of mass production during the middle of the nineteenth century altered the cultural role of the illustrator, but this transition pales in comparison to the effects of the economical and efficient application of photography to visual culture during the 1880s and 1890s. Photography quickly monopolized the representation of reality and prompted the reevaluation of illustration’s role in visual culture. The wider field of illustration during the nineteenth century was journalistic and concerned with topography and architecture, as evidenced by the engraving of Bourges Cathedral (ca. 1840; fig. 3), and therefore easily supplanted by photography. Yet, photography did not render illustration antiquated as printing had done to the scribe. A culture of imagination and style existed in the nineteenth century amongst illustrators such as Beardsley, Gustave Doré, Grandville, John Tenniel, Ernest Griset, Honoré Daumier, and Richard Doyle. This culture expanded when photography freed illustration from the inhibitions and homogeneity of documentary realism and the engraving process. Prior to photographic reproduction, the engraver functioned as the interpreter of every original illustration. The fluidity and spontaneity of the contours found in original illustrations were frequently lost.

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in the translation to dense plates and wood blocks, and the linear language of the engraver’s tools effectively prohibited the use of painterly materials. Photography, on the other hand, was capable of re-presenting every detail of an original illustration with relative perfection, regardless of the style, any medium, or size. Naturally, an illustrator’s voice and finesse could be clearly reflected in every line and eventually in every field of color. Consequently illustration transitioned from a medium of journalism and stylistic homogeneity to a medium of imagination and stylistic individuality exemplified by Rackham’s illustrations for *Rip Van Winkle* (1905; fig. 4).

![Figure 3 (left): Drawing by Thomas Allom, engraving by J.H. Le Keux, *Bourges Cathedral*, ca.1840. *Deutschland und die Welt*, Hans Adolf Jacobsen (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1964).](image)

![Figure 4 (right): Arthur Rackham, illustration from *Rip Van Winkle* (London: William Heinemann, 1905).](image)

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10 It is interesting to note that even after the perfection of color reproduction in 1905, European illustrators kept to the linear styles pioneered by nineteenth century illustrators such as Beardsley, Doré, Grandville, Tenniel, Griset, Daumier, and Doyle. There is a very anachronistic quality to fantasy gift book illustration in Europe. On the other hand, American illustrators, such as Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth, generally abandoned linear art and became strongly concerned with verisimilitude.
The expression and individuality encouraged by the photographic reproduction of illustrations were out of place in the Victorian journalistic environment, but were heartily welcomed in the new field of fantasy illustration, where virtuoso displays of romantic and exotic style were embraced. In short, the illustrator had been evicted from the mundane world and became the visualizer of Europe’s collective dreams and fantasies. This transition was of course painful for illustrators, even for those who ultimately benefited from the upheaval. The most widely acknowledged gift book illustrator of the twentieth century, Arthur Rackham, was in fact a magazine illustrator before becoming an illustrator of fantasy. In 1925, Rackham wrote an article, titled “The Worst Time in my Life,” that looked back on the initial impact of photography, remarking that “the camera was going to supplant the artist in illustrated journalism, and my prospects were not encouraging.”

Rackham’s fantastical style did not mature until 1905, with his illustrations for *Rip Van Winkle*, one of the first books to use the newly upgraded system of color separation. His publisher, William Heinemann, predicted such great success with this book that he ordered a signed limited edition of 250 copies. The public had a voracious appetite for Rackham’s work, supporting the sales of multiple books illustrated by him every year until the genre began to wane in 1920. Gift book production in the Belle Époque was so rapid and profuse that a magazine that routinely devoted space to the appreciation of gift books and their illustrations, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, criticized the genre in 1913 for bowing to commodity culture at the expense of artistic integrity. Incidentally, this criticism came in the same article that reviewed Nielsen’s debut book, *In Powder and Crinoline*:

The increased and increasing output of colour books – due to the continued cheapening and improvement in process – is far from beneficial to the art of book illustrating. For as a result of it artists are willing to undertake work with much less care and foresight than formerly. They no longer, in many cases, illustrate a book on account of an inherent sympathy with the book author urging them to interpret and complete his work; the only attitude which can justify the attempt. Instead, the publisher and illustrator seem to plot together to attract the Christmas market; not infrequently, it is to be feared, the subject over with the artist is to exercise his talent is one of the least important factors in their bargain. Colour prints produced in these circumstances can only be regard as excrescences….12

The cult of the illustrator grew to such heights in the Belle Époque that illustrations were frequently viewed without their texts. The work of the most popular illustrators, Dulac and Rackham in particular, were collected and reprinted without any text other than their captions, which served as their titles. Original illustrations by successful illustrators were viewable in prominent galleries, much like the longstanding practice of academic paintings illustrating absent texts by classic authors such as Shakespeare or Homer. The interest in viewing original illustrations in person and possibly buying them was made lucrative by the freedom photographic reproduction granted to illustrators. Original illustrations needed only to match the ratio of height to width in the final printed product. Rackham for instance, tended to work “two-up,” meaning twice the size of the final printed result, but often worked “three-up” once he was a part of the gallery scene.13

Education and the Redefinition of the Fairy Tale

While photography fostered the growth of fantasy illustration, it was the rise of education in the late nineteenth century that enabled people of all ages to view fantasy

12 “Reviews,” *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 24, no. 129 (December 1913): 175.

with a romantic and childlike sense of wonder. The institution of compulsory education reflected and accelerated the growing notion of children as being something other than tiny adults. A more nurturing and romantic sentiment of childhood innocence gradually replaced the doctrine of original sin, and adolescence came to represent a sort of Eden before the fall (puberty). Parents cultivated this paradisiacal environment for their children. Whereas play had previously been equated with idleness or mischief, Victorian adults held playtime and imagination as a healthy and integral part of a child’s development; it even became a part of every school day, as an opportunity for children to embrace their nature and re-create themselves without systemization or indoctrination.

This same value was expressed in the reevaluation and reinvention of the fairy tale. For centuries, the fairy tale had served to teach morals and manners and to caution against sinful behavior, usually by invoking karmic retribution in gruesome ways. With education as a full-fledged institution, adults had no need to perpetuate the overriding didactic or moralizing aspects of the fairy tale. Fantasy’s potential as a medium of wonder and imagination was unlocked. The same shift took place simultaneously in America, producing such literature as L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). In Baum’s own words:

> Modern education includes morality; therefore the modern child seeks only entertainment in its wonder tales and gladly dispenses with all disagreeable incident. Having this thought in mind, the story of “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz” was written solely to please children of today. It aspires to being a modernized fairy tale, in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the heartache and nightmares are left out.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^{14}\) Peter Hunt, *Children’s Literature, an Illustrated History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 131.

\(^{15}\) L. Frank Baum, “Introduction,” in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Chicago: George M. Hill, 1900), 11.
Baum was not alone; many of the fairy tales written in the late nineteenth century carry mostly heartwarming messages rather than harsh didactic ones. It was a great trend to push readers to question and explore their world in wonder rather than putting them in their place. J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan, or the Boy who Wouldn’t Grow Up* (1904)\(^6\) and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)\(^7\) both emphasize the power and beauty of the imagination and offer an escape from the mundane world rather than instructing the reader how to conform to and serve it.

The Adult Gaze upon Childhood Wonder

Illustrators such as Randolph Caldecott, Walter Crane, and Kate Greenaway worked with printer Edmund Evans during the 1860s through the 1880s, to create children’s books that communicated the narrative of a poem or short story even to the illiterate, and consequently would aid the process of learning to read. Paradoxically, the development of the children’s book genre was temporarily set back by the liberation of fantasy and the growing awareness of childhood during the 1880s. Adults took such great interest in the paradisiacal image of childhood that adult tastes dictated the form in which fairy tales were marketed.\(^8\) The fantasy gift book of the Belle Époque was created

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\(^6\) J.M. Barrie’s play, *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up*, debuted in 1904. J.M. Barrie’s novelization of the play was published in 1911 by Hodder and Stoughton.


\(^8\) In some cases, stories written during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century have a fixation on childhood that borders on pedophilia. Suspicion of pedophilia has been directed towards authors Lewis Carroll and J. M. Barrie in particular. Carroll photographed children in the nude, though the cult of childhood during the Victorian era perceived child nudity as an example of innocence, and photography of nude children was not as stigmatized as it would become in the twentieth century, according to Hugues Lebailly in *The Carrollian, The Lewis Carroll Journal*, no 4, 1999, pages 3-31. There is extensive scholarship on the repression and inevitable expression of sexuality in Victorian era, outside of the context of illustration. See Carol Mavor’s *Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) and *Pleasures Taken*.
in the stately image of maturity; every aspect of its composition speaks of formality and refinement, or at least the gaudy imitation of it. Gift book covers were imposing and grand, and their interiors lavishly decorated. The illustrations, while the selling point of the book, represented only ten to thirty pages in a book several hundred pages long. Consequently, childhood fantasy was co-opted by adults.

It is impossible to know exactly what role fantasy gift books played in the family. Such domestic nuances were not surveyed early in the twentieth century. However, it is fair to assume that gift books were simply too expensive and lavishly designed to be routinely turned over to a small child unconditionally as if they were “toy books.” The gift book’s role between generations was likely to have been much more complex. When in the hands of a child, a gift book would have gratified the parents in much the same way as expensive clothing worn by small children. In the words of J. H. Plumb, “Children, in a sense, had become luxury objects [… and] superior pets.” When in the hands of an adult and read to a child, the adult would be allowed to vicariously experience the joys of childhood that the adult was less able to experience in their own childhood in the gritty reality of the nineteenth century.

The illustrations in gift books were also designed more for the adult’s indulgence than the child’s indulgence. The taste for grotesque and decadent imagery championed by Beardsley in the late nineteenth century was still very evident in the work of many illustrators in the Belle Époque, partly because fantasy tends towards extreme beauty or grotesquerie. Nielsen himself is almost always linked to Beardsley in reviews, due in


part to his figures being emaciated and aloof. Beardsley’s influence is most evident on Nielsen in his earliest work, the unpublished *Book of Death* (1911) and his first published book, *In Powder and Crinoline* (1913). It comes as no surprise that in the year of *In Powder and Crinoline’s* release a reviewer stated that the book was “an interesting one, and we commend it as an acceptable present for grown-up persons; it is unsuitable for children.”

*The Thousand and One Nights*

The presence of the adult gaze upon the fantasy gift book is epitomized in the genre’s Orientalist tradition concerning *The Thousand and One Nights*, alternatively titled *The Arabian Nights*. *The Thousand and One Nights* is an epic collection of Middle Eastern and South Asian tales compiled in Arabic in the fourteenth century, and framed with the tale of a storyteller named Scheherazade, a woman imprisoned by her murderous groom, Shahryar. *The Thousand and One Nights* fit perfectly into the library of European narratives. Orientalism offered the same sense of wonder and adventure found in Western tales, but spiced with the adult themes of exoticism and titillation. Furthermore, the history of *The Thousand and One Nights* has been intertwined with the European folktale and fairytale traditions since its first translation into a European language in Antoine Galland’s *Les Mille et Une Nuits* in 1704. Charles Perrault’s *Histoires ou Contes du Temps passé: Les Contes de ma Mère l’Oye* (Tales of Mother Goose) originates from this same era. Further, the three most popular stories associated with *The Thousand and One Nights* (“Sindbad,” “Ali Baba,” and “Aladdin”) were actually inserted into the collection by Galland. The only Arabic manuscripts for *Aladdin* and *Ali Baba*...
were written in Paris after Galland’s French edition, and both have proven to be forgeries. The cultural pedigree of these two tales remains disputed.

In *The Thousand and One Nights*, European illustrators and buyers ceased to dote upon children and instead reveled in the adult fantasy of the ‘Orient.’ There were no Indian, Chinese, or Japanese tales equivalent to the *Nights* in terms of Western popularity, and *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, a Persian collection of poems that was also frequently illustrated, did not resonate with the fantasies of sexuality, violence, and adventure that define the notion of the Orient. The depiction of the ‘Orient’ is the only place where nudity can be found in the wide illustrative tradition of the fantasy gift book. Illustrations of *The Thousand and One Nights* also reveal the genre’s appetite for idiomatic creativity and flavor. The tales of *The Thousand and One Nights* take place in a variety of ‘Oriental’ lands such as Persia, India, and China, and the art from such regions was becoming increasingly available in the imperial capitals of Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Consequently, the numerous editions of *The Thousand and One Nights* offer a clear definition of the fantasy gift book genre: the gift book was an adult’s indulgence in fantasy, exoticism, and virtuoso displays of eclectic pictorial styles. With this understanding of gift book culture and history in relation to Orientalism, Chapter Two will examine Nielsen’s exposure to Orientalist and Asian art.
CHAPTER TWO

NIELSEN’S EXPOSURE TO ORIENTALIST CULTURE AND ASIAN ART

Chapter One established that Nielsen’s stylistic, rather than journalistic, engagement with Asian art was shaped by the liberating effect that photography had on illustration, and by the genre of fantasy illustration’s fixation on Orientalist entertainment. This chapter will account for Nielsen’s viewing of Orientalist and Asian art in Paris and London, in addition to situating Nielsen within the context of Orientalist culture.

Orientalism

Figure 5: Eugène Delacroix, Death of Sardanapalus, 1828. Richard Tansey, Gardner’s Art Through the Ages (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1995).
The tradition of depicting the world beyond Europe’s borders as alien and irreconcilable with the West is referred to as Orientalism. Literature concerning Orientalism is founded on Edward Said’s seminal text, *Orientalism* (1978), which characterizes Orientalism as a system of false assumptions underlying European attitudes towards the East. In short, Said argued that the ‘Orient’ was a construct, created by Europeans to affirm European ideologies of ethnocentrism and the moral authority of colonial rule. Art historian Linda Nochlin and writer Rana Kabbani have expanded on Said’s evaluation of Orientalism by deconstructing the Orientalist imagery in nineteenth-century academic paintings. The paintings purported to record the Near East in a photographic manner. However, Nochlin and Kabbani found them to be selective in imagery and to contain blatantly falsified information. Consequently, they found that Orientalist painting was essentially a manifestation of the repressed desires of Europeans, rather than the product of an earnest investigation of foreign cultures. A violent, orgiastic, and gaudy world was created within the collective imagination of the West. In Kabbani’s words, “The gaze into the Orient had turned, as in a convex mirror to reflect the Occident that produced it.” Paintings such as Eugène Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus* (1828; fig. 5) are iconic depictions of this mentality.

In turn, this vast literature devoted to deconstructing Orientalism was re-evaluated by historian John MacKenzie, in *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (1995). MacKenzie did not seek to dismiss the art historical discourse that has been built upon

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Said’s work, so much as to show how inflexible it is and how selective it has been in choosing examples of the European response to Asian cultures. MacKenzie argues that the European artistic response to Asian culture was not monolithic, and therefore the academic tradition of painting cannot offer a panoramic representation of this response. The very nature of the art academies as state-sponsored affirmations of Western advance (particularly in “the understanding of anatomy, optics, and natural phenomena”) impregnated academic paintings with political discourse and inhibited academic painters from engaging Asian artistic style.24 The manipulation or denial of three-dimensional space found in the “barbarian” styles of Asian art was not only incompatible with the academic tradition, but also considered beneath the Academy’s dignity.

One must also realize that the golden age of academic Orientalist art (1860-1900) coincided with the decline of the academic monopolization of visual art. The culture of art had begun to move out of the official Salons and into independent galleries and markets, where more genuine and appreciative reactions to Asian art could be found in the works of artists such as Vincent Van Gogh, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. MacKenzie recognizes these artists, but also notes numerous examples in architecture, design, music, and theater. The examples tend to come from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular culture where a second form of Orientalism was developing in which the ideology of separation between Europe and Asia was diminished, and the undertones of indulgent entertainment were brought to the fore. However, his reference to illustrators is limited to acknowledging three nineteenth-century illustrators: Beardsley, Kate Greenaway, and Randolph Caldecott. His brevity on the subject of Orientalism in illustration is likely due to the lack of preexisting

scholarship on the subject of Asian influence on illustration during this period. The only strong piece of literature on the subject of Asian influence on illustration was published two years after Mackenzie’s own book, Linda Zatlin’s *Beardsley, Japonisme, and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal* (1998). If sufficient scholarship had been available on fantasy illustration in the Belle Époque, MacKenzie may have discovered an Orientalist culture of entertainment with its own peculiar conditions and products. Light will be shed on this neglected chapter in the continuity of Orientalism in art by charting Nielsen’s auspicious path through the Orientalist wonderland of the Belle Époque, and examining the artistic product of that journey.

**Danish Orientalism**

Any account of Nielsen’s immersion in Orientalist culture must begin with an account of the Danish brand of Orientalism that he was exposed to as a child and to which he contributed as an adult. Danish Orientalist culture was formed in the early nineteenth century from imported English and French components, but the Danes blurred the binary relationship between the Occident and Orient that was so important to Orientalism in England and France at the time. Rather than constructing the Orient as irreconcilably separate from and alien to the Occident, the Danes repeatedly projected one onto another, ultimately weaving the “Orient” into their national identity. This cultural relationship can be seen in the dialogue between European and Asian art within Nielsen’s work as an illustrator, which was deeper and more constant than that of other Orientalist illustrators.

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The unique melding of Orientalist fantasy into the fabric of Danish identity was built around Adam Oehlenschläger’s *Aladdin* (1805), a Danish language theatrical version of the tale from *The Thousand and One Nights* written specifically for the stage.\(^{26}\)

Many of the characters in *Aladdin* were nuanced so that they became representative of the Danish. Aladdin, for instance, filled the role of Danish Romantic hero, wearing the Danish national colors (red and white), and perhaps serving as an analogue of Oehlenschläger himself. Numerous other Copenhageners were inserted under foreign names, some so specific in their behavior that readers could pinpoint the neighborhood of Copenhagen from which the character was derived. The only character that is clearly labeled as the inferior other is the “unmistakably Faustian and ‘German’ antagonist,” the villainous and frail sorcerer, Nureddin.\(^{27}\)

Oehlenschläger himself turned to traditional Scandinavian subject matter for the majority of the remainder of his career. However, the face of the Danish nation changed to reflect Oehlenschläger’s vision in *Aladdin*. During the 1840s, Denmark’s king frequently dressed in Oriental clothes, and Oehlenschläger’s imagined mix of Copenhagen and the Orient was made real through the construction of Tivoli Gardens just outside the city ramparts.\(^{28}\)

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\(^{26}\) Despite being complete in 1717, Galland’s French text was not translated into Danish until 1758, under the lengthy title *1,001 Nights During Which Are Told, in a Delightful Manner, All Sorts of Mysterious Arabian tales and Wonderful Events, as well as Pleasant Love Affairs*. Oehlenschläger had been involved in bringing some of the Grimms’ tales to Denmark in 1816, so it is possible that he was attracted to the romanticism of both sets of tales, and superimposed the nationalist component of the Grimms’ tales onto the *Nights*.\(^{26}\) Elisabeth Oxfeldt, *Nordic Orientalism* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005), 28.

\(^{27}\) Oxfeldt, 25.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 11.
architectural inclusions such as Chinese pagodas or pavilions. Orientalist architecture was so overwhelming at Tivoli that it became the unifying theme of the park, arguably making Tivoli the world’s first theme park. The park’s opening season included a Turkish style concert hall, a Moorish style theater, a Chinese bazaar, and an Egyptian temple. Many structures were added and removed between 1843 and Nielsen’s birth in 1886, but the Chinese styled Pantomime Theatre built in 1874 became a permanent attraction and an icon for the park. Six more Orientalist structures were added to Tivoli during Nielsen’s youth, as part of a major renovation to the park between 1900 and 1912.

A four story, eighty foot tall, “Chinese” style (actually Japanese) pagoda was built in 1900, a Turkish style concert hall in 1902, a Chinese style entrance gate in 1907, the Mughal-styled Restaurant Nimb building in 1909, and a Japanese style entrance gate in 1912. These structures differed from the World’s Fair architecture in London and Paris in that they were built as permanent rather than temporary structures.

Nielsen’s youth also coincided with construction around Tivoli. Copenhagen had outgrown its ramparts during the nineteenth century and formed its new core around the Orientalist microcosm of Tivoli. City hall was built on one side (began 1892, finished 1905), the Glyptotek (opened 1897, expanded 1906), a major museum holding one of the largest collections of Etruscan art on another, and the central train station (1911) on yet another corner. In relation to these three structures, Tivoli functioned much like a town square, and its iconic and highly visible Orientalist structures functioned as the central monuments of Copenhagen. Oehlenschläger’s vision had, in effect, become the physical and metaphysical core of Copenhagen. The influence of Danish Orientalism was inescapable for Nielsen. His family was embedded in the culture of Danish theater,

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29 Ibid., 70.
which was the origin and the seat of Oehlenschläger’s vision. The theatrical tradition of the Oehlenschläger’s *Aladdin* was still very much alive during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Casino Theatre, in particular, staged the show 158 times between 1878 and 1928, and Tivoli itself was a multi-layered Orientalist theater, “that season upon season, day in and day out, puts on the same play according to the program upheld for decades.”

The proximity of the Orient to the Danish national identity possibly played a role in Nielsen’s identity as an illustrator. Orientalism can be viewed as a system of self-definition for Europeans. During the early nineteenth century, the English and French defined themselves in juxtaposition with the ‘Orient,’ whereas the Danish identified themselves through the ‘Orient,’ by way of Oehlenschläger’s vision. The differences between Danish Orientalist culture and the Orientalist culture of England and France diminished during the early twentieth century. The English and French began to role-play with Oriental personas through theater and fashion, and Nielsen witnessed the highpoint of this development during his artistic tutelage in France between 1907 and 1911. However, the dichotomy between the Occident and Orient lingered in English and French Orientalism. Dressing in the form of the Orient was suitable only for certain spaces and times. In the act of role-playing, one’s original identity is unchanged, only masked temporarily by the assumed persona. Consequently, a pattern emerged as Europeans engaged tropes of the Orient, and then disengaged those tropes when they were no longer appropriate. This pattern is diminished in Nielsen’s body of work in comparison to that of his peers in Orientalist fantasy illustration. It is possible that

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30 Ibid., 10.

31 *Illustreret Tidende* (Illustrated Times), 13 September 1885, no. 50, 621.
Nielsen was differentiated by his childhood exposure to the Danish sense of identity, which was a hybrid of the ‘Occident’ and ‘Orient.’

The Union of Theater, Orientalism, and Illustration

Theater played a key role in Nielsen’s artistic development and directly shaped his visualization of the Orient. This influence was not only facilitated by Nielsen’s exposure and contribution to Orientalist theater, but also by the popular relationship between theater and illustration that dated back to Beardsley and Alphonse Mucha in the 1890s. During Nielsen’s artistic education in Paris between 1907 and 1911, Nielsen was undoubtedly exposed to the work of two popular designers who closely linked Orientalist theater and illustration, Paul Poiret (1879-1944) and Leon Bakst (1866-1924).

Poiret was an Orientalist fashion designer who, in 1908, began to market his collections to Parisian socialites through young illustrators such as Paul Iribe and Erté. These illustrations became inseparable from the image of theater, where Orientalism was a frequent theme and the dress of the audience was half the spectacle. Furthermore, Poiret blurred the line between the Orientalist costume and fashion design in 1911 by throwing a scripted and elaborately staged Orientalist party which could only be attended by those in Orientalist costume, and by linking his 1913 fashion collection to the costume designs he produced in the same year for an Orientalist historical drama, *Le Minaret*. The fashion illustrations produced for Poiret’s designs, particularly those by Paul Iribe and Erté (fig. 6), bear a striking resemblance to Nielsen’s early work.
Bakst worked for the Ballet Russes, arguably the most sensational theatrical company of the century. The Ballet Russes staged a series of six Orientalist ballets between 1909 and 1912, two of which Bakst had provided designs for: *Cleopatra* (1909), and *Scheherazade* (1910).\textsuperscript{32} *Scheherazade* is emblematic of the transition from nineteenth-century Orientalism to twentieth-century Orientalism. The play was essentially an orgy of sexuality followed by an orgy of violence, recalling the imagery of Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus*, not as an ideology concerning the depraved nature of the ‘Orient,’ but simply as a means of indulgent entertainment. Furthermore, Bakst’s work on *Scheherazade*, in particular, exceeded the traditional role of designer, by discarding uniform costumes as well as the vacuous space of traditional ballet set design. Nielsen would follow Bakst’s example with his own set design when he returned to his roots for a production of Oehlenschläger’s *Aladdin* at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen.

\textsuperscript{32} *Polovestian Dances, Cleopatre, Scheherazade, Le Orientals, Le Dieu Bleau*, and *Thamar.*
in 1919. The production pushed the limits of theatrical sensationalism by requiring two nights to complete the story, and by the extension of Nielsen’s set over the orchestra pit.

Figure 8 (right): Ida Rubinstein as Scheherazade in the Ballet Russes production of Scheherazade, 1910. http://theatrex.net/Ida/scheherazade.htm

Figure 9 (left): Kay Nielsen, “Aladdin” for the Royal Danish Theatre production of Oehlenschläger’s Aladdin 1919. http://carlnielsen.dk/pages/biography/family-life.php
Figure 10 (right): Johannes Poulsen as Aladdin, in the Royal Danish Theatre production of Oehlenschläger’s Aladdin, 1919. http://carlnielsen.dk/pages/biography/family-life.php
Bakst’s vision was especially relevant to Nielsen due to their shared affinity for fantasy and hyper-stylization. Additionally, Bakst’s original drawings resembled fantasy illustrations and were mass-produced (fig. 7). The realization granted to Bakst’s two-dimensional designs by the Ballet Russes furthered the appreciation of Bakst’s work by fantasy illustrators. In the words of Rodney Engen, the curator of a 2007 London exhibition featuring the work of fantasy illustrators and Bakst, “it was as if the age of enchantment [that] the illustrators had been working towards had come to life and was performing for them on stage. The impact of Bakst can never be underestimated.”

Nielsen relocated to London in 1911 from Paris to pursue a career in illustration. His first exhibition was held in 1912 at Dowdeswell and Dowdeswell on New Bond Street and the displayed work reflected the impact of theater during his formative years. The exhibition was dominated by two series of illustrations: a black-and-white series entitled *The Book of Death* (completed 1910, never published), and the incomplete *In Powder and Crinoline* series. *The Book of Death* followed Pierrot, a tragic clown and theatrical stock character that had become associated with Beardsley’s illustrations and with Tivoli Gardens, where the character was performed daily at the park’s Chinese-themed Pantomime Theatre. *In Powder and Crinoline*, on the other hand, marks the beginning of the resemblance of Nielsen’s art to costume and set design. Many of the characters depicted in this series appear to be modeling clothes rather than enacting a narrative (fig. 11), and the environments around them are open and face the viewer much like a stage set does (fig. 12).

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Each was delicious in her different way, and for the life of him he could not make up his mind, for “Rosanie or The Inconstant Prince,” in In Powder and Crinoline (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913).

The completed In Powder and Crinoline series was published in 1913 as Nielsen’s first gift book. The illustrations were exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in November 1913 to support its publication. This was a very auspicious time and place for Nielsen’s formal introduction to the culture of fantasy gift book illustration. Leicester Square was rife with the connections between illustration, Orientalism, and theater that would later shape his visualization of the Orient. The square was home to one of the oldest, largest, and grandest Orientalist theaters in Europe, the Moorish-styled Alhambra Theatre, as well as Studio magazine, which cultivated Orientalist illustration by holding ‘prize competitions’ between 1900 and 1908 for illustrations of the Arabian Nights. Most important were the Leicester Galleries themselves, in which Nielsen’s exhibition for In Powder and Crinoline coincided with an exhibition of Dulac’s latest series of illustrations, which illustrated Princess Badoura (1913), which was based on a tale from
The Thousand and One Nights that featured a romance between a Persian man and a Chinese woman. Dulac’s depiction of foreign settings in Princess Badoura marked the first time that Oriental-themed fantasy illustration engaged Asian artistic styles. Consequently, Nielsen’s early life can be viewed as an auspicious path through a series of landmarks in the culture of Orientalist entertainment and eclecticism. His youth in Copenhagen was saturated with Oehlenschläger’s theatrical vision of Danish identity through the lens of an ‘Oriental’ narrative, his education in Paris brought him into contact with the Ballet Russes and its indulgence in the fantasy of the Orient, and his early career in London began in close proximity to the Edmund Dulac’s Princess Badoura, the series of illustrations that pioneered the hybridity in Orientalist fantasy illustration.

Edmund Dulac as the Model of Orientalist Illustration

![Figure 13 (left): Edmund Dulac, illustration for the Arabian Nights (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907).](image-url)
It is impossible to discuss Nielsen’s relation to Asian art and the ‘Orient’ without discussing Edmund Dulac. Dulac’s popularity as a fantasy gift book illustrator was second only to Rackham’s, and was based on his work for the *Arabian Nights* in 1907 (fig. 13), in which he essentialized Middle Eastern culture through artifacts and Orientalist caricature. More importantly, Dulac established himself as an entrepreneur in the field of Orientalist illustration in 1910 by making the unprecedented choice of resetting a distinctly European tale, “Beauty and the Beast,” in the Middle East. Dulac’s *Princess Badoura* (1913; fig. 14) represents another milestone in Orientalist illustration culture for its appropriation of Chinese (and/or Japanese) style in the depiction of China, as well as Persian style in the depiction of Persia, and arguably the appropriation of Indian style for the depiction of the “Ebony Island.”

In the fifty years prior to the publication of Dulac’s *Princess Badoura* in 1913, the culture of illustrating *The Thousand and One Nights* and *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* was equivalent to academic Orientalist painting with the addition of caricature. The nineteenth-century founders of this tradition, Thomas Dalziel, Arthur B. Houghton, and William Harvey, actually relied on the ethnographic and topographical information used by academic Orientalist painters. Consequently, when Dulac borrowed from Persian, Indian, and Japanese art to make his illustrations for *Princess Badoura*, he was leading fantasy illustration away from the nineteenth-century binary mindset of Orientalism and towards the twentieth-century Orientalist culture of eclecticism. However, Dulac inherited the restrictions on hybridity that were present in other forms of Orientalist entertainment. The definition and appeal of the Orient as something sensational and
special was generally maintained. Hence, the identity of European artists had to remain distinctly European in order for the construct of the Orient to still exist within their work. This meant that forms of the ‘Orient’ were attached to the Occident rather than integrated. The result was the appearance of numerous ‘exotic appendages’ grafted onto the body of the West, whether they were faux-Japanese furniture in an otherwise European-design home, or architectural structures like the Alhambra Theatre in London, or Dulac’s *Princess Badoura* in his otherwise Occidentalist body of work.

Dulac’s *Badoura* was made distinct from the rest of his work due to his appropriation of Persian, Japanese, and Indian art, and his European identity was temporarily masked behind Asian style in the process. This Asian persona was discarded before returning to European narratives, and assumed again when illustrating other Asian narratives. Dulac repeated this alternating pattern of masking and unmasking when he illustrated four, arguably five, more books of Asian tales and in three individual Asian tales bound in collections that were otherwise Occidental. His artistic vocabulary was expanded by Asian style only temporarily. The continuity of Dulac’s stylistic development was disjointed by the presence of Asian style, rather than enriched. Herein lies the difference between Dulac and Nielsen, and therefore the difference between Nielsen and the standards of Orientalist culture. Rather than restrict the application of Asian style to Asian tales, Nielsen also applied Asian style to his depiction of European tales. More importantly, some of Nielsen’s illustrations of European tales show that he deconstructed Asian art and subtly, sometimes covertly, integrated it into his own stylistic development.

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34 Dulac utilized Oriental style when illustrating *Sindbad* (1914), *Tanglewood Tales* (1918), *The Kingdom of the Pearl* (1920), *The Green Lacquer Pavilion* (1926), and *A Fairy Garland* (1928). Additionally, Dulac utilized Oriental style when illustrating individual Oriental tales bound in the otherwise Occidental collections of *Edmund Dulac’s Picture Book for The Red Cross* (1915), and *The Fairy Book* (1916).
vocabulary. Consequently, Nielsen’s work can be viewed as a heightened expression of the hybridity and stylistic creativity that was valued in Orientalist entertainment and in the genre of fantasy illustration.

**Nielsen’s Individual Exposure to Asian Art**

Nielsen lived at a time when Europeans could view art from nearly every corner of the world, whether through public collections, exhibitions, art dealers, or printed reproductions. However, Nielsen left no record of his exposure to Asian art. He left no indication of traveling to any Asian countries, or of visiting any specific museums or exhibitions. The only documentation that exists on the subject of Nielsen’s individual exposure to foreign art is the closing remark of his self-description for the 1930 publication titled *Contemporary Illustrators of Children’s Book*, which mentions Persia, India, and China. The resemblance of Nielsen’s art to Japanese prints and the absence of Japan from Nielsen’s account of his “artistic wandering” is revealing of the distinction between late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century illustration. During the late nineteenth century, illustrators such as Beardsley, Nielsen’s role model, were greatly influenced by the broad circulation of Japanese ukiyo-e prints. Through their work, Japanese artistic style was internalized into European illustration culture. Therefore, Nielsen did not need to be fixated on Japanese art in order to create art that resembled Japanese art. More importantly, Persian and Indian art became illustration’s Orientalist muse by the early twentieth century.

Overwhelmingly, the form of Persian and Indian art that influenced illustrators was the miniature, a small painting, whether a book illustration or an individual work of art intended to be kept in an album (muraqqa) of such works. The techniques and form of
Persian and Indian miniatures are broadly comparable to the Western and Byzantine traditions of miniatures in illuminated manuscripts, which undoubtedly influenced on Persian painting due to geographic proximity. However, the Persian and Indian traditions of miniature painting are more definitively derived from indigenous artistic cultures and an ongoing dialogue between other Asian artistic cultures. Chinese artistic culture reached Persia through trade and through the Mongol empire, which founded the Ilkhanid Dynasty in Persia during the thirteenth century. The Timurids, a Turko-Mongol dynasty with its own style of miniature painting distinct from the Ilkhanid style, established the Mughal Dynasty in India during the sixteenth century. Persian art during the Safavid Dynasty had a strong influence on early Mughal art, but Indian painting quickly became distinguished from Persian painting by turning to indigenous styles and European art. The Mughal style actually declined well before the Mughal Dynasty fell to European colonialism. During this period, Indian miniature style diversified into different styles in the Pahari region of southern India. Nielsen’s work bears a particularly strong resemblance to Kangra style, a particularly soft and elegant form of Pahari painting. When colonialism took hold of India, Indian painters applied European artistic traditions, particularly perspective, to their own traditions to create Company Painting in response to British tourists and colonists.

The longstanding European presence in and trade with both Persia and India brought a variety of miniatures to Europe. This included Ilkhanid, Timurid, and Safavid miniatures from Persia, as well as Mughal, Pahari, and Company miniatures from India. Nielsen may have been exposed to some of these miniatures in his early years in Denmark through the spoils of the defunct Scandinavian East India Companies such as

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the Danish East India Company, which was involved in India, and the enormous Dutch East India Company, which was involved in both Persia and India. However, Nielsen’s exposure to Persian and Indian miniatures was probably more reliant on the developing collection of Asian art in the system of museums that Nielsen was in close proximity to during his artistic education and early career in Paris and London. In short, miniatures were too few and too valuable to saturate Europe like Japanese prints, which were so numerous that they were used as packaging material for porcelain when shipped to Europe.

Nielsen lived in Paris from 1907 to 1911. During this time, he might have visited the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Musée Guimet, and would no doubt have visited the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and the Louvre as part of his “classical” education at the Académie Julian and Académie Colarossi. The Musée des Arts Décoratifs founded its Islamic book arts collection in 1882, with a number of Mughal pages, to which three Persian pages were added in 1887.\(^{36}\) The Islamic division at the Louvre was created under the Department of Decorative Arts, and a room was devoted specifically to the Islamic collection in 1893. The Louvre’s collection of Indian and Persian manuscripts was built on the spoils of Napoleon’s conquests at the turn of the nineteenth century, eighty-one “Mughal” pages, several of them in fact Pahari.\(^{37}\) A substantial number of Indian and Persian miniatures were added to the Louvre’s collection shortly after Nielsen moved to London. The bequest of the baronne Delort de Gléon added to the collection in


\(^{37}\) Ibid.
1912, but more important was the bequest of Georges Marteau in 1916 which included his collection of forty Mughal paintings, calligraphy, and drawings as well as fifty-one Persian (primarily Safavid) miniatures, among them three pages from the great Ilkhanid Shahnameh. 

However the outbreak of World War I in 1914 likely restricted Nielsen from returning to Paris to see the Marteau bequest until after the war.

Nielsen relocated to London in 1911, and remained until 1916. London’s collection of Indian art originated in the East India Company’s India Museum. This museum divided its collection between the British Museum and the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) in 1880. The British Museum opened the British Department of Oriental Manuscripts in 1867. The Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings was created in 1912 under Laurence Binyon, a connoisseur of Persian and Indian miniatures.

There were also large exhibitions of Islamic art held in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, it appears that Nielsen would not have been able to attend any of these exhibitions unless he made a special trip to Munich in 1910, or London in 1906, or Paris in 1893, 1903 (over 114 Persian and Indian paintings and manuscripts), and 1912 (277 totally devoted to the book arts). However, Nielsen could have seen catalogs of the exhibitions, such as F. Martin and F. Sarre’s catalog of the

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exhibition of Islamic art in Munich in 1910. The same photographic reproduction process that was applied to the work of Nielsen and other fantasy illustrators allowed for high quality reproductions in these catalogs, as well as books such as F. Martin’s *The Miniature Paintings and Painters of Persia, India and Turkey, from the 8th to the 18th Century* (London, 1912), and P. W. Schulz’s *Die persisch-islamische Miniaturmalerei*, published in Leipzig, in 1914. Nielsen also would have had the opportunity to visit the Persian art gallery located in London on New Bond Street, the same street in which his first exhibition was held.

Nielsen’s contribution to the culture of Orientalist entertainment was influenced by the culture and overwhelming presence of Orientalism in Nielsen’s early life in Copenhagen, his artistic tutelage in Paris, and his early career in London. During these different phases, Nielsen was exposed to Orientalist architecture, theater, illustration, and collections and reproduction of Asian art. These various opportunities enabled and encouraged Nielsen to expand his artistic vocabulary with the style of Persian and Indian miniatures in a way that represents and simultaneously transcends the culture of hybridity in twentieth-century Orientalism.

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CHAPTER THREE

NIELSEN’S ILLUSTRATIONS

Nielsen exemplifies, more than any other illustrator, the transformation in the culture of Orientalism during the Belle Époque, from a worldview of moral and social superiority existing parallel to moral and social depravity, to a form of entertainment emphasizing hybridity and indulgence. Nielsen’s illustrations exhibit many of the tropes of the ‘Orient’ that can be traced back to the nineteenth century, but they also exhibit a deeply layered eclectic style that ultimately possessed an unclear cultural pedigree. Nielsen drew from a multitude of artistic cultures to produce diverse series of illustrations for a single narrative, regardless of whether the narrative was European or Asian in origin or setting. This stood in contrast to the work of his peer, Dulac, whose work follows the pattern of restricting foreign influence to role-playing. Consequently, Nielsen carried the twentieth-century notion of Orientalism as a culture of hybridity to its logical conclusion, in which the merging of artistic styles ultimately contradicts and breaks away from the binary worldview of nineteenth-century Orientalism. Furthermore, Nielsen’s illustrations that exhibit a subtle integration of artistic style from Persia and India miniatures stood in contrast to the lingering fixation on Persia as the pinnacle of ‘Oriental’ depravity, which had been the focus of academic Orientalist imagery in the nineteenth-century. Consequently, Nielsen’s work exhibits a degree of admiration for Persian culture, rather than condemnation.
The following analysis of Nielsen’s illustrations will demonstrate Nielsen’s eclecticism in relation to Asian art, primarily that of Persia and India, and will also examine Nielsen’s relation to the ideological construct of the ‘Orient.’ Each section will analyze an illustration by Nielsen in relation to multiple images, to reveal another facet of how Nielsen related to the Asian artistic cultures over the course of his career. Nielsen’s appropriation of Asian artistic style is spread across the full spectrum from replication to internalization, from repetition to innovation, and from subtle to overt. Consequently, some of the relationships between images proposed in this chapter will be clear, while other will ambiguous. However, the issue of ambiguity substantiates the argument that Nielsen ultimately arrived at a hybrid style that no longer possessed a clear cultural pedigree.

It is important to understand that Nielsen’s contemporary European audience was not exposed to all of the images presented in this chapter and was probably not sharply aware of Nielsen’s ongoing dialogue with Asian art. This was largely due to the circumstances under which some of Nielsen’s work was published. For instance, Nielsen created an explicitly Orientalist illustration in for the cover of the June 1916 issue of Harper’s Bazar, which was an American rather than European magazine. His series of illustrations for The Thousand and One Nights was completed in 1922, but was not published until 1977, by which time one of the twenty illustrations had been lost. Lastly, Nielsen created one color illustration and sixteen black-and-white illustrations depicting the tale of “Aladdin” for his final book, Red Magic, which was published in the form of an ordinary book in 1930, long after World War I and therefore long after the crest of fantasy illustration’s popularity. The remainder of Nielsen’s work as an illustrator
primarily consisted of four books published in 1913, 1914, 1923 and 1925, and two series of illustrations published in the *Illustrated London News*, one in 1913 and the other in 1924. This chapter will examine Nielsen’s illustrations, regardless of the circumstances of their publication, in order to reveal the full diversity of his relationship with Asian art and the notion of the ‘Orient’ during his career.


Figure 16 (right): Edmund Dulac, *Her father dropped the rose*, from the tale of “Beauty and the Beast” from *The Sleeping Beauty and Other Fairy Tales* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910).

Like many other illustrators, Nielsen’s career as an Orientalist began with an illustration of “Bluebeard.” Textually, Bluebeard was a European, but illustrators frequently used Bluebeard as a proxy for the Orient. This practice was brought about by several factors. Fantasy illustrators were pulled to Asian narratives due to the popularity
of Oriental fantasy during the Bell Époque, but they were rooted in the image of antique Europe, as demonstrated by Nielsen’s fixation on elaborate rococo dress. Consequently, the opportunity to insert an Asian character as a representative of Oriental fantasy into a European tale was exceptionally convenient. Bluebeard in particular was used as a proxy for the ‘Orient’ for two reasons. His blue beard identified him as being alien, which is one of the primary characteristics of the ‘Orient,’ and his role was similar to that of Shahryar, the murderous groom from framing story of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Consequently, the depiction of Bluebeard as an Asian rather than European man transformed the tale of “Bluebeard” into a condensed and overtly xenophobic version of the most popular Oriental narrative in the Belle Époque. This same cultural model was used by Dulac in *The Sleeping Beauty and Other Fairy Tales* (1910), in his unprecedented choice to set the story of “Beauty and the Beast” in the Orient, literally turning the Oriental man into a monster (fig. 16). This model represents one of the most common, and offensive forms of Orientalist illustration, in its inhibition concerning the direct engagement of Asian narratives, and in its caricature of the Orient as depraved and violent. Both Dulac and Nielsen moved beyond this approach to Orientalism, and consequently these illustrations can be used to contrast their later achievements and form a deeper understanding of hybridity in the culture of Orientalism in fantasy illustration.

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Figure 17: Kay Nielsen, illustration for the cover of *Harper’s Bazar*, June 1916.

Three years after Nielsen’s original illustration for the tale of “Bluebeard,” Nielsen again exploited the Orientalist fantasy of a Caucasian female trapped in a ‘gilded cage’ by an ‘Oriental.’ However, this illustration for the cover of the American fashion magazine, *Harper’s Bazar*, relate more to the Orientalist culture of academic painting than to the Orientalist culture of fantasy illustration. The image of a nude blonde in a harem setting guarded by an armed black slave was used repeatedly by Jean-Léon Gérôme, the famous academic painter. Consequently, this image can also be used as a contrast to Nielsen’s later work due to engagement with Orientalist tropes in this image as opposed to Asian art cultures. Furthermore, *Harper’s Bazar* was strongly associated with Erté, the famed Parisian Orientalist fashion illustrator whose work resembled Nielsen’s own. Lastly, Nielsen’s depiction of the harem setting resembles a stage set
through the appearance of flat surfaces facing the viewer. Theater culture was the epicenter of the pop-culture of Orientalist entertainment, especially in the forms of Oriental role-playing and fashion. Nielsen was well aware of theater’s place in Orientalist culture, due to his exposure to Tivoli and Oehlenschläger’s *Aladdin* during his youth in Copenhagen, and his exposure to the Ballet Russes during his artistic tutelage in Paris.

Figure 18 (left): Kay Nielsen, *She stopped as if to speak to him*, from the tale of “The Twelve Dancing Princesses,” for *In Powder and Crinoline* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1913).


Figure 20 (right): Utagawa Toyokuni, *Shakuhachi*, ca. 1800.

The seven tales that make up *In Powder and Crinoline* were of European origin and selected by Sir Arthur Quiller Couch to match the title and theme of the collection, both of which were dictated by Nielsen himself. The title references rococo fashion, and Nielsen’s illustrations emphasize this period fashion over the narrative. Several of the illustrations in this series could easily be mistaken for fashion illustrations. The
characters in Nielsen’s depiction of a scene from the “Twelve Dancing Princesses” have turned their heads to face the viewer, as if posing and awaiting visual consumption. This series of illustrations also features artifacts of Orientalist culture, such as Chinese bridges and turbans. This particular illustration resembles Aubrey Beardsley’s *The Peacock Skirt* (fig. 19), by way of the singular curve and rich detail of the women’s dress. *The Peacock Skirt* was a well-known illustration produced in 1894 for the tale of Salomé, which recalled the representation of kimonos in Japanese prints (fig. 20), and held a special place in fashion culture. Erté, the famous Parisian fashion illustrator with whom Nielsen shared many similarities, remarked, “Salomé was the most fashionable figure of the period. She was dished up in every possible way. This preoccupation began with Oscar Wilde’s play and Beardsley’s illustrations.”

Beardsley was Nielsen’s role model and a champion for rococo fantasy and the integration of Japanese style through illustration. It is possible that Nielsen was using this illustration to acknowledge this artistic lineage, perhaps through the inclusion of the peacock at the top of the illustration.

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Figure 21 (top left): Kay Nielsen, *No sooner had he whistled than he heard a whizzing and a whirring from all quarters*, from “The Three Princesses in the Blue Mountain,” for *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, 1914.

Figure 22 (top right): John Bauer, Illustration for *Bland Tomtar Och Troll 7*, 1913.

Figure 23 (bottom left): Kay Nielsen: *Detail from The Troll was quite willing, and before long he fell asleep and began snoring*, from “The Tale of The Three Princesses in the Blue Mountain,” for *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, 1914.

Figure 24 (bottom center): John Bauer, Detail from an Illustration for *Bland Tomtar Och Troll 6*, 1912.

Figure 25 (bottom right): John Bauer, Detail from an Illustration for *Bland Tomtar Och Troll 7*, 1913.
Nielsen’s illustrations for *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* reveals his artistic roots in Scandinavian illustration, which greatly resembles theater design. This series of illustrations provided the stylistic base for the remainder of Nielsen’s work, and through its flattened depiction of space enabled Nielsen to more easily appropriate artistic style from Persia, India, China, and Japan. *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* was a collection of fifteen tales selected from the Norwegian equivalent to *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, and as such they represented Norwegian cultural identity. However, *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*’s subtitle, “Old Tales From the North,” suggests an ambiguously Nordic identity, to which Nielsen probably subscribed. Nielsen was raised in Denmark in the aftermath of the Pan-Scandinavianism movement, and Norwegian cultural figures such as Henrik Ibsen were a part of the Nielsen household. Ibsen was a playwright who drew from the same collection of Norwegian folktales as *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* to create a play entitled *Peer Gynt* (1876), featuring an extensive cast of trolls and gnomes. In effect, Ibsen was the visualizer of Scandinavian fantasy in the nineteenth century.

John Bauer (1882-1918), a Swedish illustrator, was Ibsen’s twentieth-century heir, and one of Nielsen’s role models, though, like Beardsley, they probably never met. Bauer’s style of illustration was based on self-imposed limitations. He tended to depict his figures in rigid full profile or three-quarters profile and standing on exceptionally low and level horizon lines. Nielsen’s connection to Bauer was overt in his illustrations for *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*. Nielsen’s illustration for “The Three Princesses in the Blue Mountain,” one of the tales included in *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, is

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44 Peter Christen Asbjørsen and Jørgen Moe, *Norske Folkeeventyr* (Norwegian Folktales) (Christiana: Gyldendalske boghandel, 1876).
almost a direct quote of an illustration by Bauer published a year prior, in which a man stands facing the viewer on an extremely low and level horizon line, and is encircled by birds (fig. 22). Nielsen asserted his identity in the image by forming a more asymmetrical balance, using brighter colors, more elaborate costume, and by activating the stage-like terrain with flowers. The position of the figure in both illustrations causes the viewer to perceive the bottom edge of the image as being a concrete surface upon which objects can rest, not unlike a Greco-Roman or Egyptian frieze, or in the case of Nielsen’s body of work, a theatrical stage with a flat backdrop. Nielsen’s depiction elsewhere in *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* of large-nosed, wavy-haired troll and a slender blonde princess in a white dress (fig. 23) are also quotations of Bauer’s work (figs. 24-25). It is unclear whether Nielsen’s selection of this collection of Scandinavian tales and the similarity of Nielsen’s illustrations to that of a Scandinavian illustrator functioned as a way for Nielsen to pay homage to his homeland’s vocabulary of fantasy, or as a way to capitalize on the relative obscurity of Bauer’s work.
In another illustration in the *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* series, Nielsen depicted the “wild and cross” North Wind in a statuesque Art Deco pose astride a wave that strongly recalls Hokusai’s *Great Wave off Kanagawa* (fig. 27). The sun in the background and the cloud strips also recall the imagery of Japanese prints. Nielsen’s quotation of Hokusai and Japanese visual culture is as overt and unashamed as his quotation of Bauer and Scandinavian visual culture in the same series of illustrations, despite the distinctly Scandinavian identity of the text and the style of illustration that Nielsen used elsewhere in the series. This combination stands in contrast to the work of Nielsen’s peers, specifically Dulac, who enforced a distinction between his illustrations of tales set in Europe and his illustrations of tales set in Asia. However, this illustration was certainly the one of least successful of Nielsen’s combinations of European and
Asian artistic styles. The lower portion of the illustration mirroring Hokusai’s Great Wave of Kanagawa is essentially spliced into the image, rather than integrated. Interestingly, the narrative of quoting a fellow artist to mix the Occident and Orient through this illustration was continued when British illustrator Thomas Mackenzie borrowed Nielsen’s depiction of the North Wind in an illustration of a genie for *Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp in Rhyme* (1920; fig. 28).
Figure 29 (top left): Kay Nielsen, “The Tale of The Two Brothers,” for *Hansel and Gretel* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925).
Figure 30 (top right): John Tenniel, *Jabberwocky*, for *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Macmillan, 1865).
Figure 31 (bottom left): Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Yang Hsiang (Yoko) protecting his father from the tiger*, ca. 1840.
Figure 32 (bottom right): Albert Memorial, London, 1876.
Nielsen’s illustration for the climax of the “Tale of Two Brothers” is an example of the ambiguity concerning the cultural pedigree of his work. Nielsen chose to depict the climax of the tale, in which a hunter confronts a seven-headed dragon. Dragons were symbols of sin and chaos within the Western visual tradition, and were typically depicted as either standing in opposition to a hero, or being crushed and/or stabbed underneath the triumphant hero’s foot. This relationship can be observed from antiquity through the Belle Époque, in depictions of Apollo and Python, Cadmus and the dragon, Sigurd and Fafnir, Zeus and Typhon, and most famously in depictions of St George and the Dragon. However, there are at least two notable exceptions to this Western rule, and Nielsen’s depiction of a flying dragon resembles both: Tenniel’s Jabberwocky for Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1885; fig. 30), and the seven-headed dragon from apocalyptic imagery.

It is also possible that Nielsen’s depiction of the dragon is influenced by the art of the China and Japan, where dragons were considered auspicious rather than corrupting, and therefore depicted in flight. Far Eastern art also favored dynamism in its representation of wrathful figures. This composition is perhaps best represented by the Japanese woodblock prints of Kuniyoshi and his student Yoshitoshi, which depicted monsters and ghosts looming over their protagonists (fig. 32). If Nielsen did draw on ukiyo-e prints to create this image, he created an interesting overlay of Japanese influence over the image of the Albert Memorial in Hyde Park (1876; fig. 31), in which Nielsen has positioned the captive maiden in place of the enthroned statue of Albert.
“The Flying Trunk” is in some ways the reverse of “Bluebeard.” The tale is set in the “land of the Turks” and is concerned with the courtship of the Sultan’s daughter by a wealthy and deceptive European merchant. The merchant successfully fools the princess...
and her family into thinking he is a Turkish angel who has “come down to her through the air.” Unfortunately, the merchant is unable to return to the princess after gaining the Sultan’s approval to marry her, so she waits for him on the roof of her father’s palace indefinitely. This scene gave Nielsen the opportunity to depict an elaborate Oriental setting, but he instead used the roof as his “stage,” rather than framing the view lower and depicting the Sultan’s palace (fig. 33). Furthermore, Nielsen appears to have combined the image of single and double Mughal portraiture to depict a nebulous space, perhaps in an attempt to heighten the loneliness of the Sultan’s daughter. Both single and double-figure Mughal portraiture depicted figures in three-quarter view with the head in full profile. In single-figure portraiture, the figure was usually depicted standing in front of a flat green or blue background (fig. 34). In double-figure portraiture, the figures were seated facing each other in a specific environment (fig. 35). Nielsen’s illustrations for “The Flying Trunk” depicts a single seated figure, against a flat color backdrop. This image is one of Nielsen’s more subtle uses of Asian style. However, Nielsen this illustration strongly resembles another illustration produced by Nielsen that is significantly less subtle in its resemblance to Asian art. Nielsen’s illustration for “The History of Noureddin Ali and Bedreddin Hassan” from The Thousand and One Nights also depicts two figures seated in nebulous blue space (fig. 34), and the inclusion of halos and a marble fountain further the link to the vocabulary of Mughal miniatures. Nielsen’s illustrations for The Thousand and One Nights were completed between 1918 and 1922, but he could not find a publisher for this particular series. It is possible that Nielsen recycled an unused illustration from The Thousand and One Nights in order to diversify his Andersen’s Fairy Tales series or to simply fill out the series quickly and painlessly.
Figure 37 (top left): Kay Nielsen, The Ladies of St. James, for The Illustrated London News, 1923.
Figure 38 (bottom left): Attributed to Rukn al-Din, leaf from a Rasikapriya series, Bikaner region, late seventeenth century. Indian Miniatures (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1985).
Figure 39 (top right): Kay Nielsen, “The History of Noureddin Ali and Bedreddin Hassan,” from The Thousand and One Nights, completed in 1922. Published in The Unknown Paintings of Kay Nielsen (New York: Bantam, 1977).
Figure 40 (bottom right): Detail of Krishna and Radha Making Love, illustration to the Gita Govinda, ca. 1775.
In some cases, Nielsen’s appropriation of Asian style for use in European narratives was done with such subtly that the cultural pedigree of his work is ambiguous. Nielsen’s illustration of a palatial setting for “The History of Noureddin Ali and Bedreddin Hassan” from *The Thousand and One Nights* (fig. 37) closely resembles the white terrace composition in Mughal art (fig. 39). Terrace compositions were built with a high horizon line, and were structurally broken into quadrants. Typically, one of the upper quadrants of a terrace scene depicted the background, which was filled with vegetation, particularly cypress trees, just as in this illustration. However, this illustration also has a loose sense of perspective as well as shadows and foreground objects, lending it a sense of three-dimensionality that is peculiar in Nielsen’s body of work, and alien to Mughal art. If Nielsen did model this illustration after the white terrace composition of Mughal art, he was innovative in his treatment.

Nielsen’s depiction of a rococo palace in his illustration for the short poem, “The Ladies of St. James,” published in 1923 also resembles the white terrace composition of Mughal art (fig. 38). Again, it is possible that when Nielsen could not find a publisher for *The Thousand and One Nights* he borrowed from an unused illustration to create a new illustration to be published in 1923. However, Nielsen might have combined the white terrace composition with the bowered composition of Pahari painting for his illustration of “The Ladies of St. James.” Bower compositions involved no architecture at all and typically depicted Radha and Krishna in romantic seclusion.
Nielsen’s depiction of Aladdin’s genie in *Red Magic* (fig. 41) resembles and may be a recycled version of his own fiery compositions for “The Tin Soldier” (fig. 42),
which was published six years prior in *Fairy Tales by Hans Andersen*. However, Nielsen’s depiction of the genie itself resembles an iconic pose found in the depiction of wrathful Chinese or Japanese deities and guardians, aggressively leaping dynamically with a sash fluttering around them, as exemplified by the famous *Raijin and Fujin* screen (fig. 43). Nielsen used this motif a second time in *Red Magic*, in his illustration for “Bash-Chalek,” a Serbian legend concerning a prince and princess’s struggle against a winged villain (fig.44). Nielsen chose not to depict the villain’s wings, but instead to depict him aggressively leaping out of a black cloud, with his sash catching the wind. In doing so, Nielsen diminished the text that he was to illustrate and instead experimented with integrating a Chinese and Japanese motif.

Three of Nielsen’s illustrations for *The Thousand and One Nights* strongly resemble stage sets, while also engaging the underlying structure of Persian miniatures. This is possibly due to the fact that Nielsen’s illustration work on *The Thousand and One Nights* roughly coincided with his work on a production of Oehlenschläger’s *Aladdin* for the Royal Danish Theatre. Nielsen accomplished this link by revisiting Bauer’s use of the bottom edge of an illustration as a concrete surface for figures and structures to rest on, and by reducing the background to a flat surface. In each of the three illustrations, the viewer is simultaneously inside and outside of the structures depicted. This effect is created in both Persian miniatures and stage design by depicting structures from the outside while omitting the wall that would be facing the viewer. Additionally, each of the illustrations resembles Persian miniatures through flattened patterning and by being broken up into numerous spaces that have ambivalent relations to each other.

For instance, Nielsen’s illustration for the prologue of *The Thousand and One Nights* contains a traditional depiction of a Persian horseback scene, complete with the traditional diagonal action and the Persian equivalent of mille-fleur decoration. However, the placement of a small bower-like structure directly on the bottom border of the image causes a disruption of the illusion of space that is found in Persian miniatures. Atmospheric perspective has little to no presence in Persian miniatures, nor do objects diminish in size as they recede from the viewer. Consequently, a given object’s distance from the viewer is implied only by the object’s position in relation to the top and bottom of the image. By disconnecting the landscape from the bottom edge of the image, Nielsen forces the viewer to interpret the landscape as a flat backdrop.
Nielsen’s illustrations for the “Tale of the First Girl” and the “Tale of the Third Dervish” also depict figures standing on the bottom border of the image, and the backgrounds also depict both the interior and exterior of a structure. However, the backgrounds in these images do not recall Persian miniatures, but instead recall theatrical backdrops. Consequently, Nielsen explored the representation of space in both set design and Persian art, and he used the two interchangeably.
Nielsen’s depiction of the hellish demise of the Dervish’s cousin and sister (fig. 45) is at first glance purely an Art Deco illustration. However, there are several sources that Nielsen might have drawn on to create this image. For instance, Nielsen might have been influenced by *The Kiss* (fig. 51), a famous painting by Gustav Klimt. Just as in *The Kiss*, a man stands in the center of a square composition, wearing a
patterned robe and leaning over a woman to kiss her as his cloak spreads around her. However, the image also resembles motifs from Asian art, such as the large sash flowing dynamically around the figures. Additionally, image recalls the composition of Buddhist Yab-Yum imagery, in which a pair of lovers is locked in an embrace while standing on a pedestal, and frequently surrounded by a fiery mandorla (fig. 50). The stacked pattern of the smoke in Nielsen’s illustration also recalls Buddhist imagery (fig. 53). Consequently, this image serves as an example of what Nielsen’s art had become: a deeply layered style that was constantly transforming and ultimately possessing an unclear cultural pedigree.
CONCLUSION

During the early twentieth century, European’s were only beginning to engage Persian and Indian art, and Nielsen was not only on the cutting edge of that culture, but his body of work bears examples of a wide variety of reactions to Asian art and therefore exemplifies the highly interactive culture of Orientalism that was developing in the early twentieth century. Rather than adopting Asian influences strictly for the purpose of role-playing in Asian-themed narratives such as *The Thousand and One Nights*, Nielsen broadened his stylistic vocabulary and then applied it to narratives regardless of their cultural origin. This lack of a division between European and Asian artistic reference in the work of a European artist naturally draws comparisons with Beardsley, Van Gogh and Lautrec, with the important distinction that Nielsen’s engagement with Asian art was primarily concerned with Indian and Persian art rather than Japanese art. The fantasy of a social dichotomy between a civilized West and a barbaric East was projected primarily onto countries such as Persia and India, as opposed to the China and Japan. This social baggage hindered the engagement of Persian and Indian pictorial style by European artists when Persian and Indian art became increasingly available in the early twentieth century. In comparison, the engagement of Chinese pictorial style by Europeans in the eighteenth century and the engagement of Japanese pictorial style by European in the nineteenth century were considerably larger patterns. Nielsen is therefore peculiar, and
represents an interactive and creative impulse within European art culture’s treatment of an Asian art.

Nielsen’s stylistic identity in relation to Asian art was made possible by the rising availability of Indian and Persian miniatures in Paris during his artistic tutelage there, and in London during his early career. However, this identity was informed by a diversity of cultural influences, such as the peculiar Danish culture of Orientalism, which identified itself through the fantasy of the ‘Orient’ rather than in juxtaposition against it. Nielsen was also greatly influenced by Beardsley’s integration of Japanese style in the nineteenth century, and his own contemporary genre of illustration’s fixation on exploring the ‘Orient’ through art and continually striving for stylistic creativity. Nielsen’s style of illustrations was relatable to that of Persian and Indian miniatures his emulation of fellow Scandinavian illustrator John Bauer. Bauer exemplified the fantasy illustration genre’s turn away from verisimilitude in the face of photographic reproduction. The denial of three-dimensionality, the lack of shadow and foreground objects, and the strict figural profile in Bauer’s art naturally lent Nielsen a bridge to Asian artistic style, as well as the opportunity to bring the image of theater design into his work. Essentially, Nielsen’s style was rooted in the commonalities between Europe and Asia, and he this flexibility enabled him to weave weaving back and forth between his various influences.

As a consequence of his diverse background, Nielsen’s illustrations are complex representations of Belle Époque culture, and functioned as a point of dialogue not only amongst the Scandinavian and English illustration cultures, but also between European visual culture and the culture of Persian and Indian miniature painting. Nielsen was fixated on this dialogue in his art, rather than on the visual transcription of the text he was
illustrating. Consequently, Nielsen created some of the strongest expressions of what the genre of fantasy gift book illustration in the Belle Époque represented: a celebration of the physical possibilities of illustration unfettered by mechanical or social limitations.
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