Orientalism

cultural field of study

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**Orientalism**, Western scholarly [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline) of the 18th and 19th centuries that [encompassed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encompassed) the study of the [languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language), [literatures](https://www.britannica.com/art/literature), [religions](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion), [philosophies](https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy), histories, [art](https://www.britannica.com/art/visual-arts), and [laws](https://www.britannica.com/topic/law) of Asian societies, especially ancient ones. Such scholarship also inspired broader [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) and artistic circles in Europe and [North America](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-America), and so *Orientalism* may also denote the general enthusiasm for things Asian or “Oriental.” Orientalism was also a school of thought among a group of British colonial administrators and scholars who argued that India should be ruled according to its own traditions and laws, thus opposing the “Anglicanism” of those who argued that India should be ruled according to British traditions and laws. In the mid-20th century, Orientalists began to favour the term *Asian studies* to describe their work, in an effort to distance it from the colonial and neocolonial associations of *Orientalism*. More recently, mainly through the work of the Palestinian American scholar [Edward Said](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edward-Said), the term has been used disparagingly to refer to the allegedly simplistic, [stereotyped](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stereotyped), and demeaning [conceptions](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conceptions) of Arab and Asian [cultures](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultures) generally held by Western scholars.

As a scholarly practice, Orientalism emerged in late 18th-century European centres of learning and their colonial outposts, when the study of the languages, literatures, religions, laws, and art of East Asian societies became a major focus of scholarly attention and intellectual energy. In that era, the number of Europeans doing research on East Asia dramatically increased, and new forms of institutional support in universities and scholarly associations encouraged such studies and their dissemination. A frequent theme of that scholarship was that Asia had once been host to great civilizations that had since fallen into their current state of decay. Many Orientalists, as they came to be called, were connected to a colonial [bureaucracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bureaucracy), but others were not, and their positions on [colonialism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Western-colonialism) varied. Orientalism as a scholarly field was dominated by research in the [French](https://www.britannica.com/topic/French-language), [English](https://www.britannica.com/topic/English-language), and [German](https://www.britannica.com/topic/German-language) languages and associated centres of learning, and its subjects ranged geographically from the North African Mediterranean to East and [Southeast Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Southeast-Asia). One of the most significant discoveries of Orientalists was that [Sanskrit](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sanskrit-language) and many European languages were related to each other, which implied that Europe and India shared historical origins. That discovery has been credited with giving rise to the comparative method in the [humanities](https://www.britannica.com/topic/humanities) and [social sciences](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-science).

In the wake of that Orientalist research, scholars and artists took up ideas about Asian societies, art, and traditions in their intellectual and creative works, and images of and ideas about Asia or specific peoples or parts of it became common tropes in popular literature and even decor. Thus, Orientalism was a significant philosophical and [aesthetic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/aesthetics) movement that reached well beyond the specialized circle of Orientalist scholars, especially in the 19th century.

The terms *Orientalism* and *Orientalist* first took on a markedly political meaning when they were used to refer to those English scholars, [bureaucrats](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bureaucrats), and politicians who, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, opposed changes in British colonial policy in India that had been brought by the “Anglicists,” who argued that India ought to be ruled according to British laws and institutions. The Orientalists, in contrast, insisted on the primacy of local laws and traditions; some of those Orientalists conducted research on ancient or traditional Indian laws and legal structures in an effort to codify them for use by a colonial bureaucracy. Ironically, however, British efforts to understand, codify, and govern according to what they believed to be local tradition often brought about significant changes in social and political life in India.