Odalisque with Slave, 1842, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (French, 1780-1867) oil on canvas, (76 x 105 cm)

An odalisque (female member of a harem) reclines exposed in the harem listening to a servant’s lute music. This painting was commissioned by King Wilhelm I of Württemberg and was executed by Ingres with the assistance of his pupil Paul Flandrin. A version of this subject painted three years earlier shows the odalisque in an enclosed room rather than with the garden vista in the background (Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts). This exotic composition, which was inspired by a passage from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s Turkish Letters (1763), may have been conceived by Ingres in response to his rival Eugène Delacroix’s success as a painter of Near Eastern subjects.

Ingres painted this icily erotic Turkish fantasy to discharge a debt. When it was exhibited in Paris in 1840, the painting revealed an aspect of his art rarely seen before. The odalisque, or concubine in a harem, allowed Ingres to reinterpret the ennobled, Renaissance tradition of the female nude in the modern context of the Middle Eastern “other.” The marquis de Custine wrote: “The execution is irreproachable, the conception poetic: yet the viewer remains unmoved before the form of a nude woman of Grecian beauty. . . . The painter has depicted his dream; he has painted neither that which he has seen, nor seen that which he thought. The painting is none the less his masterpiece and what is more, a masterpiece.” Two years later, Ingres traced the painting for a new version commissioned by the king of Bavaria, which features a landscape background painted mostly by Ingres’s student Paul Flandrin.