

GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
EXHIBITION GALLERY, THE GETTY CENTER

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# WALLS *of* ALGIERS

## NARRATIVES OF THE CITY

The city of Algiers, renowned for its white walls cascading to the Mediterranean, historically sheltered a diverse population. During the Ottoman centuries (1529–1830), it was home to Arabs, Berbers, black Africans, Turks, and *kulughli* (offspring of Turkish soldiers and Algerian women). When the French occupied Algiers in 1830, this pluralism was enhanced by an influx of European immigrants from southern Italy and Spain, in addition to French settlers. Under Ottoman rule, Algeria had been a semi-independent province of the empire, and its heyday was the era of the legendary corsairs of the sixteenth century, who expanded Ottoman power throughout the Mediterranean. French rule transformed Algeria. European norms and the French system of governance were imposed. The land was mapped, its peoples surveyed and classified, and dramatic interventions to urban fabrics enforced a new duality. In Algiers, the “Arab” city on the hillside, known as the Casbah, was separated from the “French” or European city that spread out in districts below and around the Casbah. This division, engraved into the spaces of Algiers, endured during the 132 years of French rule that ended with the War of Independence (1954–1962).



Cover Image & Fig. 1  
Charles Marville, Rue de la Marine, 1850s. Research Library,  
The Getty Research Institute (95.R.100)





Fig. 2  
 Pierre Trémaux, Gallery around the courtyard of the former residence of the secretary of the dey, in Pierre Trémaux, *Parallèles des édifices anciens et modernes du continent africain* (Paris, 1850s), pl. 16. Research Library, The Getty Research Institute (95.R.34)

## Reconsidering the Colonial Archive

History shifts according to the angle from which it is perceived; records are always fragmented and biased. *Walls of Algiers* presents visual sources from private and public archives of the colonial era and reconsiders them with the help of historical voices drawn from government and military reports, scholarly essays, travel accounts, novels, and poems. These records are annotated by later critics, including the architect Le Corbusier, philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo, psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon, novelist Assia Djebar, and artist Dennis Adams. They broaden and complicate the discourse, often from contradictory points of view.

The exhibition narrates several stories about colonial history and, in the process, raises questions about the authority and resilience of the “colonial archive” on which that history depends. Some of the objects on display reflect colonial policies (figs. 1–3), others challenge them (figs. 4, 5).

Among the early interventions to Algiers, the enlargement of the rue de la Marine in the 1830s was surrounded by controversy, in part because it required the demolition of a section of Mosque al-Kebir, dating from the late eleventh century. To create a new facade for the mosque, French army engineers attached an interior arcade taken from the eighteenth-century Mosque al-Sayyida, which recently had been torn down to bring geometric order to the city’s main square. The resulting colonnade erected along the rue de la Marine had a Parisian “rue de Rivoli” effect but with an Islamic flavor (fig. 1).

The French reconfiguration of Algiers entailed the appropriation of the residences of the Ottoman elite, who were forced to leave the city and whose mansions were often transformed into military compounds, religious headquarters, museums, and libraries. Trained at the *École des beaux-arts* in Paris, the architect Pierre Trémaux documented the houses of Algiers in meticulous detail. In one

drawing, he depicts the space that soon became shorthand for the Algerian house: the inner courtyard and its surrounding gallery (fig. 2).

One of the earliest photographic representations of odalisques (fig. 3) evokes Eugène Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (1834), which had come to symbolize the French occupation. Like the Romantic painter, the photographer stages women languishing among decorative props to fulfill an Orientalist fantasy established in the minds of Europeans versed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels and travel literature.

An album of eighty-nine photographs relays, through its decoration and selection of images, a story about Algeria and Tunisia uncontaminated by colonial occupation (fig. 4). Foreigners and foreign influences are absent from its portrayal of urban and architectural spaces. The captions, in Arabic and Judeo-Arabic, complement the style of this unusual album’s presentation and prompt questions about why and for whom it was made.

More recently, the American artist Dennis Adams revisits the spaces of Algiers to evoke the turbulent history of the city and its implications for the present (fig. 5). In a series of constructed images that insert the figure of Patricia Franchini (Jean Seberg) from Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Breathless* (1959) into stills from Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), Adams uses the fluidity of the photographic medium to comment on how modern news reporting shapes perceptions of war. Seberg in the role of a young American selling the *New York Herald Tribune* on the streets of Paris is, in the words of the artist, “recast as an allegorical figure wandering the war-torn streets of Algiers, where she traces the fault line between the roles of messenger bearing the news and frontline witness to its making.”

—Zeynep Çelik, New Jersey Institute of Technology  
 Frances Terpak, Getty Research Institute



Fig. 3

Circle of Charles Marville, Women of Algiers, 1858.  
Research Library, The Getty Research Institute (2008.R.3)



Fig. 4

Album of photographs of Algeria and Tunisia, and case, 1881.  
Research Library, The Getty Research Institute (2001.R.20)



### Related Publications

The following publications are available at the Getty Museum Bookstore:

Zeynep Çelik, Julia Clancy-Smith, and Frances Terpak, eds., *The Walls of Algiers: Narratives of the City through Text and Image* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute/Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2009).

Dennis Adams, *Double Feature* (New York: Kent Gallery, 2008).

### Colloquium

*Walls of Algiers: Reconsidering the Colonial Archive*  
May 28, 2009  
3:00–8:00 PM  
(Reception 5:00–6:30 PM)  
Museum Lecture Hall  
The Getty Center

This event situates the exhibition in a theoretical and historical context and considers the (colonial) nature of the documents. In addition to the exhibition curators, the participants include Dennis Adams, Nadjib Berber, Julia Clancy-Smith, Jean-Louis Cohen, Nabila Oulebsir, and Mary Roberts.

Explore highlights of the exhibition at [www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu). To view the postcards of Algiers displayed on the lobby monitor, visit [www.flickr.com/photos/gettyresearchinstitute](http://www.flickr.com/photos/gettyresearchinstitute).



Fig. 5

Dennis Adams, *Double Feature*, 2008. Courtesy Dennis Adams and Kent Gallery, New York

