

The Spectacular Art of GÉRÔME

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EXCERPTS FROM *JEAN LEON-GÉRÔME: HIS LIFE, HIS WORK* BY GERALD M. ACKERMAN

IN PARIS WITH DELAROCHE

"In 1840 I was sixteen; I had just finished my classical studies and I left for Paris, where I entered the atelier of M. Delaroche. He was an excellent professor, who gave me and my comrades excellent advice which we followed and we've turned out all right" ...

Paul Delaroche was probably then at the height of his short-lived fame: popular, honored, feted and praised; his style was a mixture of the meticulousness of the academic Neo-classical school and the dramatic subject matter and strong expression of the romantic school. By replacing universal themes with personal psychological studies, Delaroche was helping to turn history painting into genre.

When Gérôme entered his atelier as a student, Delaroche had recently finished his best and most famous work, the fresco in the Hemicycle of Fine Arts in the assembly room of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris...The objectivity, the careful articulation and solidity of the figures, and the authenticity of their costumes: these are strong traits of Delaroche's style which passed on to his students, including Gérôme...

In 1843, Gérôme had a shock: "It was in the third year of studies, when returning from a vacation (in Vesoul) that I learned of the closing of Delaroche's atelier...[I] could...live equally well in Rome where he was going to pass a year, and I wanted to follow him there..."

A ROMAN INTERLUDE

Gérôme referred to this year in Rome as the happiest and best spent time of his life...He practiced drawing everything, he explained, because he knew that later on, in thinking up subjects to paint, he might be obliged to renounce them for lack of skill in certain areas. "My intelligence had developed at seeing so many beautiful things and especially from contemplating and studying up close *la belle nature*, which, in the Papal States leaves nothing to be desired, either in form, color or poetry. I stayed a year in Italy." ...

It was in the Naples museum that he saw the famous gladiatorial armour from Pompei that was to inspire his gladiatorial scenes: "Now that opened an immense horizon for me..."

A CAREER BEGINS

"Once back in Paris in the fall of 1844, Gérôme, following his father's wishes, entered an atelier, that of Charles Gleyre (1806 - 1874) who had more or less inherited the atelier of Delaroche...When Gérôme entered the atelier, Gleyre was at the height of his fame. His painting *Le Soir* or *Les Illusions perdues* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) had been a great hit at the Salon of 1843, its sadness coinciding with the contemporary fashion for melancholy..."



Although he would not admit it, Gérôme learned much while he was with Gleyre. No doubt his drawing improved, and although he resisted the tendency of Gleyre to idealize, he may have learned from him how better to simplify and generalize his forms. He undoubtedly learned the good and safe oil technique which Gleyre practiced, and for most of his life his color range remained bright and "blonde" in contrast to the dark, brownish tonalities of Delaroche. His interest in correct and accurate settings was probably reinforced by Gleyre's archaeological attention to his settings....Gleyre's enthusiasm for the Near East opened a new era for the young painter, probably instilling a curiosity that would later take him to the Near East and -- so to speak -- to his identity...

When Delaroche returned to Paris from Rome, summoned to work on an important commission, Gérôme left Gleyre's studio to become Delaroche's assistant and stayed with him for almost a year...The Salon of 1847 is perhaps best remembered for Couture's large painting *The Romans of the Decadence* (Paris, Musée d'Orsay), but it also marked the beginning of Gérôme's fame. For *The Cock Fight* albeit hung high -- skyed -- was noticed and praised by no one less than Theophile Gautier, the poet and critic who would support Gérôme through most of his career...Thanks to Gautier's authority, the review made Gérôme famous.

GÉRÔME ESTABLISHES HIS REPUTATION

Gérôme held favor with the Republican Government. On the eve of the insurgency, on June 12th, "Citizen Gérôme" was paid 500 francs by the government as "one of the twenty artists chosen by the judges of the open contest for a symbolic figure of the Republic." And, on the second of July, after the insurgents had been put down, Citizen Gérôme was given another commission by the government for a painting depicting Anacreon...*Anacreon* (Toulouse Museum) is a large canvas, over two meters across. The setting is the Greek countryside in the first minutes after sunset. In the center foreground, Anacreon, a lavishly costumed old man, plays his lyre and dances; his skirts swirl around him and between the two putti dancing with him. Gérôme himself described it as: "A dry picture, assembled from bits, the style and invention of which, however, were not bad. If I had then the experience I have since acquired, this work might have been a good thing – it remains mediocre..."

The disturbances of the June Days started soon after the Salon of 1848 had opened, and Gérôme and his friends went through a period of great want, as most artists in Paris did, for art patronage had stopped almost completely...

Indifferent to changes of government, Gérôme followed the road to success: he picked up official commissions, painted portraits, and sent pictures of varied subject matter to the salon. An indefatigable worker, he rose at dawn, worked through the sunny hours, and indulged in social amusements only during the evenings. He was not a grind; he was notoriously joyous in his execution, albeit quite methodical in planning his routine.

Fame followed the official commissions and his prices gradually increased. And if the official commissions gave him little room for invention, he compensated by painting more adventurous works for the Salon. By 1860, the state, which was always looking for bargains, found Gérôme had become too expensive. That caused him no trouble; prosperous, he could do without state orders, which often required a long preparation, the submission to periodic inspections, as well as a suppression of his own artistic personality; he felt such commissions obliged him to use a dry, Ingresque style. His salon pictures, however, showed great originality, a merging of his old-fashioned classical interests with the contemporary objectivity of realism...The enthusiasm for Realism in the air would encourage him to record events on his travels which he might otherwise have ignored.

SUCCESS AND FAME

"Departure for Egypt. My short stay in Constantinople had whetted my appetite, and the Orient was the most frequent of my dreams. Probably some Bohemian slipped in among my ancestors, for I have always had a nomadic disposition and a well developed bump of locomotion. I started with friends, being one of five – all of us with little money and abundant spirits! However, living at the time was very cheap in Egypt. The country had not yet been invaded by the Europeans, and one could live there at very moderate expense."

This was the first of what was to be a series of somewhat regular series of trips to the Near East: Asia Minor and Egypt in particular...His masterly studies as a painter of history, his talent as a draughtsman – (refined, elegant, exact and yet full of style) – his personal talent for ethnographic perception...all this qualified him, better than any other artist, to represent this simple interest which modern explorers of the Orient have till now neglected for the landscape, public structures, and mere color...

It was in the Salon of 1857 that Gérôme's first Egyptian genre pictures were shown. Gautier saw in them a true and fresh view of the Near East...The salon marked the beginning of his career as an Orientalist or a *peintre ethnographique*; and it showed a new commitment to an academic and very object Realism – albeit in Egypt and Italy, more than in Paris. Gérôme seems to have abandoned the precocity of the Neo-Grec style while retaining its love for detail...

His selection for the Salon of 1859 ... *Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant*, and the *King Candaules*...[Their] success... established Gérôme and made him famous. He decided to use that fame to get official recognition. In 1860 he applied for a professorship of drawing at the École des Beaux-Arts. He also presented himself for an empty chair at the Institute. He received neither position. At the next salon [1861], Gérôme reaffirmed the richness of his invention with one Egyptian genre piece, four Neo-grec works, and a composition set in the 17th-century...

The Salons of 1857, 1859, and 1861 are the most important of Gérôme's career. The Neo-Grec style would soon drop out of his production for two decades or so, with an occasional exception. Realistic histories would continue to be an important part of his output, but the major part of his *oeuvre*, for the rest of his life, would be the ethnographic scenes of Egypt.

GÉRÔME MARRIES AND SETTLES DOWN

At the end of 1861, Gérôme was planning an eight month stay in Egypt and the Near East. In the January following his return, he was to marry the daughter of Goupil, his dealer... Gérôme's marriage with Marie Goupil was long and prosperous. They had four daughters and one son Jean, who after half-heartedly starting a career as a painter died of consumption in 1891 at the age of twenty-seven...

An imperial decree of 13 November 1863...separated the administration of the École and the salon from the academicians of the Institute, putting them under separate directions. A new curriculum was prescribed for the École; and three painting ateliers were to be founded. Gérôme received an appointment as professor of one of these ateliers...

Gérôme's selections of pictures for the next few salons was made with great care...For the Salon of 1863, *The Greek Comedians* (lost)...*The Prisoner*, borrowed after some wrangling from the Museum at Nantes, and *A Turkish Butcher Boy in Jerusalem*...At the Salon of 1864, Gérôme displayed *The Almeh, or the Belly Dancer* (Dayton, Ohio)...The Salon of 1865 contained the

finally completed *Reception of the Siamese Ambassadors at Fontainebleau* (Versailles)...At the Salon of 1867 Gérôme exhibited the famous *Slave Market* in Williamstown...1867 was also the year of a Universal Exhibition. Gérôme made a very careful selection of twelve of his best works – forming a small retrospective of his career hitherto – for the French pavilion.

THE WAR OF 1870

When the war started, Gérôme's family was already in the country home in Bougival, outside Paris... Gérôme worked in the studio of the Bougival house until he felt the Germans were getting too close to Paris. Then he took his family to England, settled his wife and children and returned to Paris to aid in its defense. But he did not stay through the siege...Gérôme left Paris, making his way to London where he stayed into the summer of 1871...

Soon after the siege finished in June of 1871, Gérôme returned to Paris...The École des Beaux-Arts was being reestablished; it had been abolished by the Commune. Gérôme resumed his teaching. For the next several years he was busy reconstructing the family fortune and his professional reputation, the later somewhat damaged by his association with the fallen empire. He sent no exhibits to the salon until 1874. Very quickly he resumed his trips to the Near East...

The Salon of 1874 was the first salon in which Gérôme participated after his return from England. He evidently wanted to change his old image for a new one; instead of the usual ancient or oriental themes, he showed three genre works set in the baroque era...The jury awarded Gérôme his second Gold Medal. Some critics object that gold medals were not for genre painters...

GÉRÔME RECLAIMS HIS POSITION

In the seventies and eighties, Gérôme continued to travel: Holland in 1874 (to study Hals); Turkey in 1879; Egypt in 1880; perhaps to Greece in 1881; London in 1888; Sicily in 1890 (on the Duc d'Aumale's yacht); and Italy in 1889...

Gérôme had been making plaster models to paint from for some time, and his interest in the structure of the human body seemed to lead naturally towards sculpture. "Facture is nothing but a question of epidermis," he commented, "construction, knowing how to construct, that's what matters." It was his friend Frémiet who encouraged him to become a sculptor, and who gave him the most aid and instruction... Gérôme made his public debut as a sculptor at the Paris International Exhibition of 1878 with his first major piece, a powerful, life-size bronze group, *The Gladiators* (Paris, Musée d'Orsay) based on the central figures of his painting *Pollice Verso*...

With *Anacreon, Cupid and the Infant Bacchus* (plaster in the Salon of 1881), Gérôme returned to a hero of the Neo-grecs. A life-size marble in the Glyptotek of Copenhagen shows a wonderful balance between sculptural masses and surface detail...

GÉRÔME'S OLD AGE

Between 1884 and 1891 Gérôme suffered from a rather cruel cluster of deaths among his intimates, some of his oldest friends and several close members of the family died close upon each other...While ill or in mourning, Gérôme insisted on working whenever he could. He often said to his friends, "Work is the great consolation." ...

At the Salon of 1887, Gérôme exhibited his marble statue, *Omphale* (Vesoul). Life-size, it depicts the Lydian queen watching the enslaved Hercules perform one of the domestic tasks she assigned him. The pose mocks the famous Farnese Hercules. Her body is magnificent rather than voluptuous; Gérôme gave the queen a body to match her soon-to-be lover. Gérôme was proud of his uncanny anatomical accuracy...The government offered to buy the work, but Gérôme refused to sell it. He wrote to the ministry, "In offering to buy my statue...you have given me the most wonderful award for my effort and I thank you for it. I beg of you to let me tell you about my situation and the situation of sculptors in general: it is the state and the state alone who buys their works, who enables them to make a living...if the state ceased to extend its nourishing hands to sculptors, they would starve to death in short time..."

His next sculpture was a masterpiece: *Tanagra* (1890; Musée d'Orsay, Paris), a life-sized marble, lightly polychromed, representing the spirit or *tychei* of the ancient city in Boetia where, in the late 1870s, hoards of small, painted terracotta figurines had been found...The statue appeals not so much for its realism or detail, but for its fleshy bulk, the deep chest, and high-rounded breasts, and the perfect shoulders.

The Salon of 1892 saw another major piece of sculpture by Gérôme, the *Pygmalion and Galatea*, now in the Hearst castle in San Simeon, California. It is a life-sized group; the sculptor reaches up from the floor to kiss Galatea, who is slowly coming to life on the sculpting stand: still slightly rigid, her legs have not completely turned to flesh...The violent *contrapposto* of Galatea-turning her supple upper torso against the constraint of her still marble legs and at the same time leaning over, sideways to kiss her sculptor-presented anatomical problems that would fascinate Gérôme for the rest of his life...

For most of the scattered nine busts he sculpted in the 1890s, Gérôme rejected drama and excitement, preferring the object observation of structure and surface detail. It is this subservience to the facts that makes most of the busts seem passive and bland, less marvelous than they are. Over the years, their modesty has let them become forgotten. During the last decade of his life Gérôme modeled many small sculptures for serial casting... [and] worked almost a decade on a series of historical equestrian figures...Gérôme considered *Frederick the Great* (1899) the best of his equestrian bronzes. It is remarkable for the fineness of its detailing.

THE VERY LAST YEARS

In his last years, Gérôme was frequently described as still hardy, as one who took the stairs two at a time; who ran after omnibuses and boarded them underway; and who stayed up all night at costume balls...

Moreau-Vauthier recounts his last day: "...he went out for dinner. He dined with several friends from the Institute...[who] noticed that his complexion was pale compared to those of his neighbors. Gérôme, however, was displaying his usual good humor...the next morning, in the little room next to his atelier, in front of the portrait of Rembrandt [a photo] and at the foot of [his painting] *The Truth*, the maid found him dead, and already cold. He had succumbed during his sleep. It was the quick and discreet departure which he had always wished."