

The Spectacular Art of GÉRÔME

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THE GETTY MUSEUM DEBUTS FIRST MAJOR MONOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION OF GÉRÔME IN NEARLY FORTY YEARS

Exhibition includes Gérôme's most iconic works from his classicizing beginnings to his dramatic history paintings to his popular Orientalist works



Jean-Léon Gérôme. *Pollice Verso (Thumbs Down)*, 1872. Oil on canvas. Museum purchase, Phoenix Art Museum. Photograph by Craig Smith.

The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme

At the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center
June 15 – September 12, 2010

At the Musée d'Orsay, Paris
October 18, 2010 – January 23, 2011

At the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid
March 22 - June 12, 2011

LOS ANGELES—Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) enjoyed the heights of artistic and commercial success in the second half of the 19th-century as a powerful academician and respected professor at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris; however, with the eventual triumph of Impressionism, post-Impressionism, and the modernist avant-garde—which defined itself against establishment figures like Gérôme—his reputation suffered greatly in the early 20th-century.

Organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and the Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris, in association with the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid, *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme* is the first major, comprehensive exhibition of the artist's work in nearly 40 years and proceeds from a new wave of scholarship that is reconsidering Gérôme's importance both as a painter and sculptor. On view at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center, June 15 – September 12, 2010, this special exhibition will include iconic paintings and sculptures that span Gérôme's entire oeuvre from his "néo-grec" beginnings to his tremendously popular and often controversial history paintings and Orientalist works.

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"The influential French writer Émile Zola famously remarked that there wasn't a living room in France that didn't have an engraving or print by Gérôme during the late 19th century," explains David Bomford, acting director of the J. Paul Getty Museum. "It is surprising, therefore, that his achievements in both painting and sculpture have been so greatly overlooked by scholarship for the past century. Gérôme's success brought academic painting to an artistic pinnacle—having an immeasurable impact on future generations of artists as well as to the new mass entertainments of the 20th-century, especially film."

Bomford continued, "The Getty is delighted to build upon a renewed interest in this seminal figure among young art historians, and to give scholars and the general public the first opportunity in decades to see so many of his masterpieces in one place."

The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme will trace the artist's career thematically and chronologically. The exhibition will address Gérôme's imaginative use of antique themes and sources, his inventive strategies as a history and genre painter, his complex relationship to Orientalism, and his contribution to the history of sculpture. The exhibition will simultaneously consider his productive engagement with photography and the legacy of his art in early 20th-century cinema.

Gérôme's artistic career began in the studio of Paul Delaroche in Paris in the 1840s and he accompanied the master to Italy to continue his studies. He returned to Paris and attended the École des Beaux-Arts, entering the Prix de Rome competition in hopes of returning to Italy, but he failed to qualify for the final stage in 1846 because of his inadequate figure drawing. Consequently, Gérôme became obsessed with painting the perfect nude—an ambition he would harbor throughout his life.

For the Salon of 1847, he submitted *The Cockfight* (1846; Musée du Louvre), which featured two scantily-clad adolescents and two fighting cocks in an idyllic classical landscape. The picture received great acclaim because he used a refined, classicizing manner to depict a witty, light-hearted scene about adolescent sexuality on the grand scale of serious history painting. The novelty and appeal of such accessible genre scenes provided Gérôme entree into the art world as the head of the so-called "néo-grec" movement.

Despite his proclivities as a genre painter, Gérôme also manifested serious ambitions as a history painter, for history painting remained the highest genre in the theoretical hierarchy authorized by the French Academy and inculcated by the École des Beaux-Arts. He announced these ambitions at the 1855 Universal Exposition in Paris, where he exhibited a huge allegorical composition entitled *The Age of Augustus* (1855; Musée d'Amiens), an official government

commission which sought to flatter Emperor Napoleon III who was frequently compared to Augustus. The painting was based on a passage in Bossuet's *Histoire Universelle* (1681) that evoked the apogee of the Roman Empire under Augustus' *pax Romana* in the first century A.D. and the simultaneous advent of Christianity with the birth of Christ. Gérôme's theatrical arrangement features an enthroned Augustus receiving the homage and tribute of a tumultuous host of subject peoples, in the midst of whom Mary and Joseph kneel in adoration over the Christ Child. Monumentally ambitious in size and conception, *The Age of Augustus* was nevertheless a critical failure, and Gérôme would subsequently turn his attentions to the far more lucrative arena of small-scale historical and Orientalist genre painting.

Starting in the late 1850s, Gérôme proved incredibly canny in choosing popular historical subjects ranging widely from ancient Greece and Rome to modern-day France and staging them in instantly memorable ways. He imbued historical scenes with a heightened degree of "realism" that reflected the scientific, positivist ethos of the period with its emphasis on visual observation and tangible facts. He refused poetic generalizations and idealizations when rendering his protagonists, faithfully executed archaeological details, and devised new compositional strategies that helped create a dramatic sense of eye-witness immediacy. In *The Death of Caesar* (1867, the Walters Art Museum) for example, Gérôme went to great lengths meticulously reconstructing the Roman Senate, offering the viewer a commanding panoramic overview. With cool, photographic detachment, he focused on the inglorious aftermath of Caesar's assassination—the unceremoniously abandoned corpse, the overturned throne and blood-spattered statue in the foreground, and the exultant group of Senators exiting the hall in the remote background. The charged void between them, accentuated by the vastness of the surrounding architectural space, imbues the solemn scene with tremendous dramatic power.

Alongside such historical scenes, Gérôme also regularly exhibited Orientalist genre paintings in the Salon. In 1853, thanks to the government commission for *The Age of Augustus*, Gérôme was able to finance a trip to Constantinople, the first of many journeys to the East that would provide Gérôme with endless pictorial inspiration. Much coveted by collectors, his Orientalist scenes were also universally acclaimed by the critics for their incisive characterizations of ethnic types, their extremely high level of precise detail, and their ostensibly photographic exactitude. However, emblematic works like *The Snake Charmer* (c. 1870, the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute), which shows a naked boy handling a python for the pleasure of a group of mercenaries, were fantasies with an often tenuous basis in reality, combining elements from diverse sources and playing upon popular cultural stereotypes about the East.

Throughout his career, Gérôme was inspired by antique sculpture and he was a staunch proponent of an academic style based on the mastery of the human figure, so it comes as no surprise that he refocused his attentions from painting to sculpture in his later years. He debuted his first sculpture at the Universal Exposition of 1878, exhibiting a large bronze gladiator trampling on his victim, a figure extracted from his painting *Pollice verso* (1872, Phoenix Art Museum, illustrated on page 1). Inspired by the discoveries of modern archeology, he would go on to experiment actively with polychromy and mixed-media, producing works that ranged from full-scale, tinted marbles to small bronze and ivory statuettes. He enjoyed cross-referencing his painting and sculpture, painting himself, for instance, as a sculptor in his studio at work on one of his statues. He also mythologized his role as sculptor in paintings like *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1890; The Metropolitan Museum of Art), which refers to the ancient Roman myth about a sculptor who fell in love with his own creation and succeeded in bringing her to life through the intervention of a goddess.

Like many painters at the time, Gérôme highly valued the new medium of photography. The exhibition will include a small cluster of paintings and photographs from the 1850s to illustrate Gérôme's engagement with the medium from the beginning of his career. Photographs taken by the artist's companions on his adventures—as well as images he might have seen while abroad—that are thought to have influenced composition and subject matter in many of Gérôme's paintings, will also be included. The influence of the medium can be seen in his works' smooth surfaces, high level of detail, and strong contrasts of light and shadow, as well as their assumed stance of matter-of-fact neutrality.

His technique was well-suited for photographic reproductions of his work, which would be printed in mass and sold extensively internationally by the dealer and print editor, Adolphe Goupil, who happened to be his father-in-law. Gérôme's important association with Goupil will be illustrated in the exhibition by archival materials from the Getty Research Institute's collection, including a rare, limited-edition volume of photogravures issued by Goupil in the United States.

Gérôme's realist innovations were proto-cinematic and his more sensational images would have a major impact on film. Directors ranging from the early silent era to contemporaries like Ridley Scott have openly acknowledged his influence on their productions. This relationship will be illustrated through the reproduction on the gallery walls of several film stills that quote directly from some of Gérôme's most sensational paintings.

The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme is organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and the Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris, in association with the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid. This exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanity. The Getty's presentation is curated by Scott Allan, assistant curator of paintings at the Getty Museum, and Mary Morton, former associate curator of paintings at the Getty Museum and presently curator and head of the department of French paintings at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Additional curatorial support for the exhibition has been provided by Laurence des Cars and Dominique de Font-Réaux of Louvre-Abu-Dhabi, Edouard Papet, curator of sculpture at the Musée d'Orsay, and Guy Cogeval, president of the Musée d'Orsay. After premiering at the Getty this summer, the exhibition will travel to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, where it will be on view from October 18, 2010 – January 23, 2011, and then to the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid from March 22 - June 12, 2011. The exhibition will also be accompanied by a full-color catalogue published by the Musée d'Orsay in English and French as well as a smaller scholarly publication, which will present recent scholarship on the artist, published by the Getty.

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