

Rehabilitating a Fallen Artist: Jean-Léon Gérôme Revisited

The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904).

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French Academy painters of the 19th century are not exactly famed for being radically progressive. The tremendous success of their crowd-pleasing *peinture* – with a vehement emphasis on painterly finesse, the display of the naked female body and a penchant for forest-nymphs and gladiators – in a brittle and restless century of artistic revolutions still puzzles the modern beholder. Epithets such as ‚trite,‘ ‚pompous,‘ or ‚sterile‘ have often been applied to the style of the official image production in the Académie Française. Within a conservative academic climate that would consciously shut itself off from the new ‚trends‘ of photography and the radicalism of the Avantgardes, one painter managed to establish himself as the superstar of the Academy: Jean-Léon Gérôme. After a long period of silence, a major exhibition now zooms in on the extremely productive and successful artist.

The show is one more step towards a re-evaluation of European art in the 19th century. After the clearly pronounced preference for the paradigm of the Avantgardes by 20th century art historians up to

the post-modern era (and beyond), time seems to be up for such a revision at the beginning of the 21st century. If the prices on the art market are a valid indicator, Salon painting is really *en vogue*. The art world finds itself in the midst of an anti-modern counter-strike. The trend, which started with the opening of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris in 1986, is now – 25 years later – essentially highlighted by the current Gérôme retrospective. The French museum was probably the first European art institution to intersperse its remarkable collection of realist, impressionist and post-impressionist paintings (moved from the Jeu de Paume into the Gare d'Orsay) with painters of the French Academy – Bouguereau, Cabanel, and Gérôme, among others. A new spectrum of 19th century art was opened. The museum kept to its mission and, in September 2007, organized a much-noticed symposium on the „History of 19th Century Art (1848-1914). Evaluation and Perspectives,“ raising the question „Where are we with the history of art of the 19th century?“ However, when the Gare d'Orsay opened its doors, no one would have foreseen the recent boom of academic salon painting.

RE-EVALUATING 19TH CENTURY ACADEMY PAINTING

A look at recent publications and exhibitions reveals that the revisionist approach towards 19th century art may be more than just a short-lived trend to attract the crowds. It rather seems to be a proper reflection of western neo-conservative and neo-‚liberal‘ trends in politics and society. The US audience and market, with a traditional penchant on Impressionist art – still the major crowd magnet in any collection – seem to have developed an increasing sense for pictorial ‚realism‘ on the one hand and large narratives on the other. Enticing story-telling à la *Arabian Nights* and its elusive qualities might fulfill the function of an escapist re-

medy in rougher economical and social times. However, why then are museums in some of the undoubtedly prospering countries on the Persian Gulf simultaneously starting to build their own collections of Salon paintings? The current ‚trend‘ raises intricate questions of cultural imperialism and exchange and it might lead to a re-evaluation of the critical modernist ‚readings‘ of history altogether.

Above all, it reflects what one might call the ‚Hollywood-Syndrome‘: the audiences’ desire for compelling, spectacular large-screen narratives. Some examples: William Bouguereau, the most notorious of all Academy painters whose works freely embrace kitsch, has recently received considerable scholarly attention, culminating in a luxury volume including a catalog raisonné by Damien Bartoli and Frederick Ross (2 vols., publ. by the Antique Collector’s Club, January 2011).

Alexandre Cabanel, an Academy painter who gained more fame for his refusal (together with William Bouguereau) to allow impressionist painters, among them Édouard Manet, to the Salon of 1863 than for his paintings, was lately the star of an exhibition in the Musée Fabre in Montpellier, accompanied by an impressive volume. The show has partly travelled to the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne (till 15 May 2011; the much smaller German catalogue, ed. by Andreas Blühm, carries the somewhat prissy title *Die Tradition des Schönen*). And even the presumed hard-core realist Gustave Courbet is being read against the grain in an exhibition organized by the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, the largest Courbet retrospective in over 30 years (see the review by Olaf Peters in this issue, pp. 119-123). Gérôme discarded his paintings, no surprise here, as „grey dirt.“ The exhibition in Frankfurt explicitly aims to tear down the demarcation between Avantgarde and commerce, including pleasurable and ‚marketable‘ works by Courbet, such as hunting scenes, portraits, and flower still-lives.

All this is yet topped by the current ‚resurrection‘ of Dutch-born painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Like a phoenix from the ashes, „Alma-Tadema is back in style“ (*Art News*, January 2011). His colorful monumental painting *The Finding of Moses*

(1904) was sold in 1955 by a British dealer for \$ 900 to a couple who cut out the painting and left it in a nearby alley, just taking the frame. It sold again last November at Sotheby’s New York for the record price of \$ 35.9 million (with a pre-auction estimate of ‚just‘ \$ 3-5 Million). The painting certainly is a fine example of Victorian bombast and might well have served as a model for an early Hollywood costume drama, yet one wonders what a buyer might see in it to pay this absolutely fabulous sum.

ORIENTALISM

The case is slightly different with Jean-Léon Gérôme, however. His fantastic career as an artist began with a painful (and formative) failure: After a Grand Tour through Italy, the ambitious student of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris applied for the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1846. His plan was to return to Rome with the money and study Italian art. Yet he was refused the prize with the jurors criticizing the ‚inadequacy‘ of his figure painting. Ironically – or maybe consequently –, the depiction of the human body would become one of the key elements of his enormously successful artistic career. And the dandy-like artist whose many self-portraits are characterized by an astonishing psychological elusiveness and detachedness became an almost fanatic traveler. He loved the Middle East with its fabulous scenarios, colors, and exotic backdrops, while also developing a well calculated penchant for female nudity, a pleasing combination, which catapulted him to fame in the later 19th century – and thoroughly stigmatized him in the eyes of art and cultural historians of the later 20th century (see Petra Bopp, *Fern-gesehen. Französische Bildexpeditionen in den Orient 1865-1893*, Diss. Hamburg 1990, Marburg 1995).

Whoever might have picked up Edward Said’s then brand new book on *Orientalism* in 1978 – and many people did and have done since, as the publication immediately attracted a large amount of attention – saw Gérôme’s painting *Snake Charmer* (1860) on its book-jacket (*fig. 1*). Even though Said in his influential book (it essentially triggered post-colonial studies) neither touches on Gérôme nor on the visual arts, the French painter became the



Abb. 1 Jean-Léon Gérôme, Charmeur de serpents, 1880. Williamstown, The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute (Kat.nr. 160)

poster-boy of western hegemonic interpretations of oriental cultures, and the whipping boy of its critics (for a discussion of Said's thesis see: Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung Asiens. Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jh.*, München 2010, 21-24; 409-412; id., Edward W. Said und die „Orientalismus“-Debatte. Ein Rückblick, in: *Asien-Afrika-Lateinamerika* 25 [1997], 597-607).

Only four years after Said, Linda Nochlin took a similar line in her publication *The Imaginary Orient*, a lucid and radical essay based on Foucault, Said, and Barthes. Nochlin's razor-sharp article focuses on the visual imagery of the 'orientalist' Gérôme – one is tempted to say: an easy target. The article deconstructs the 19th-century sweetened stereotypes of the Orient as a land of milk and honey, populated by naked, lascivious beauties and exotic men in boldly colored costumes. What the anti-academic Avantgardes of the later 19th century dismissed as bourgeois and phony, now received a post-colonial kiss of death.

Nochlin's well-argued feminist essay is a full broadside against Gérôme and his paintings. She dissects Gérôme's images and their underlying colonialist ideology quasi from the bone, deconstructing their strategies of mystification. The *Snake Charmer* now actually serves as a case in point: According to Nochlin, the young boy's naked behind clearly invites (homo-)erotic fantasies, while the observer does not actually see his sex – he is forced to 'imagine' his front. The boy's rosy buttocks thus epitomize the sexually charged mystery

of standard 19th century orientalist ideology and the principle of „picturesque delectation,“ which the artist exploits to disseminate and affirm the western mystification of the East. With the rise of post-colonial studies, critical modernists bluntly disqualified Gérôme's and other academic painters' work as kitschy claptrap catering to the smug conservative fantasies of the 19th-century Babbitt.

Be this as it may. Whoever has actually stood in front of one of Gérôme's paintings will know the feeling of amazement and admiration for the suggestive presence of his grandiose narratives and his technical mastery. Even the harshest critics will have to admit his remarkable talent as a painter and mediator between painstaking realism and the imaginary. At the same time, one is struck by Gérôme's very own 'kitsch dilemma'. An irritatingly passionless, almost anonymous brush stroke appears somewhat pretentious in its detached demonstration of skill, while at the same time it forces the idea of the painting as a window or mirror of reality towards the boundaries of pre-cinematic illusionism. The negation of the brush stroke and the fetishism of surfaces so characteristic of Gérôme's oeuvre create a 'painterly realism', which suggests in a rather disconcerting way that the 'realities' and scenarios envisioned by the artist correspond to *actual historical* realities and locations.

Roland Barthes has noticed a similar effect, which he calls 'l'effet de réel,' in the poetry of Gu-

stave Flaubert. There is indeed a compelling clarity in the ‚reality-effect‘ produced by Gérôme’s history painting, something staged yet inevitably convincing, a pretended authenticity. The larger history paintings altogether display the artist’s exceptional sense in capturing the ‚pregnant moment.‘ The academy painter in a strikingly modern way anticipates the film director’s eye for drama – an early Ridley Scott, so to say (see the lucid article by Marc Gottlieb on Gérôme’s ‚cinematic imagination‘ in the small but informative volume *Reconsidering Gérôme*, ed. by Scott Allan/Mary Morton, Los Angeles 2010, 54-64). Take his *Death of Cesar* (fig. 2): The Roman general’s stabbed dead body is moved away from the center toward the foreground, where its upper part remains in a shady off. His throne has been tilted to the side while the senators, in fluttering, white togas, flock toward the background in triumph. The group of murderers in their gleaming white garments is highlighted by a theatrical spotlight effect, with the rest of the scene left depressingly empty and dark. Gérôme’s ‚cine-

matic‘ imagination, like in many of his history paintings, focuses on the vacuum-like effect of the moment after, creating a convincing unity of time and space – a perfect fiction of a historical *fait accompli*. Théophile Gautier remarked on the image: „Si la photographie eût été connue du temps de Jules César, on pourrait croire le tableau fait d’après une épreuve obtenue sur place, au moment même de la catastrophe” (in: *Artiste 1858/II*, 18; see also: Matthias Krüger, *Das Relief der Farbe. Pastose Malerei in der französischen Kunstkritik 1850-1890*, München/Berlin 2007, esp. 241ff.).

Looking at the exhibition, one is tempted to speak of the ‚auratic‘ quality of the paintings, in the sense of Walter Benjamin, the aura being created by an oscillating tension between the observer pushed into the position of an immediate eyewitness on the one hand and the painting’s remote artificiality on the other. This particular tension can be seen both as the paintings’ strength and as their weakness. Gérôme’s eyewitness-style and his appealing play with objectivity, theatricality, and ba-



Abb. 2 Gérôme, *La mort de César*, 1859-67. Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum (Kat.nr. 67)



Abb. 3 Gérôme, Le marchand de tapis au Caire, 1887.
 Minneapolis, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Kat.nr. 150)

Abb. 4 Gérôme, *Sculpturae vitam insufflat pictura*, 1893. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario (Kat.nr. 174)



nality both largely re-defined history painting in the 19th century. His paintings are free of the moralizing political pathos Jacques-Louis David enforced upon the genre.

AUTHENTICITY OR EXOTISM?

Yet this approach becomes a problem in his images of the orient, which admittedly are the aesthetically most compelling and visually strongest. In his many depictions of slave markets and harems, of colorful bards and ecstatic belly dancers, he produces an image of the orient characterized by a cultivated fetishism for decorative details (fig. 3). These details, often taken from photographs, claim a high degree of ‚authenticity,‘ while the paintings’ scenarios complacently and affirmatively reproduce western clichés of oriental cultures. Gérôme’s extended travels to Constantinople, Jerusalem, the shores of the Black Sea, and northern Africa, his first-hand knowledge of exotic places – they guaranteed, in the eyes of his clients, the ‚authenticity‘ of his paintings. Yet the presumed ‚realism‘ was more of a ‚truism.‘ Not that the artist was ignorant about what he found and saw. On the contrary: Away from home, he turned into the most avid draftsman, drawing after nature as well as using photographs in order to improve the plausibility of his paintings. They did, however, clearly serve the refined yet conservative taste of central Europe’s bourgeoisie.

Apart from the exotic sceneries, nudity came in handy as an eye-catcher. Immaculate and marble-like female derrières populate the artist’s oriental paintings, clearly inspired by antique types of the Venus-Kallipygos. Hardly ever were paintings so directly produced for the male gaze as in Gérôme’s

paintings. Yet they are not even half as sensual as Delacroix’s nudes – mainly because they are sleek ‚statues turned pin-ups.‘ In one of his most impressive orientalist paintings, *Slave Market (or For Sale)*, we become close witnesses of a scene that takes place in a dusty courtyard. A marble-like young beauty exposes her completely naked body almost frontally towards the onlooker. Her relaxed *contrapposto* seems awkward and a bit out of place given that she is the only nude amongst a fully dressed crowd. Opulently dressed men assess her body’s value, and a partially veiled, potential buyer inspects her teeth by sticking two fingers into the girl’s open mouth while she dreamily submits to the procedure. Voyeurism, explicit sexual innuendo, and alleged ethnographic authenticity (the ‚customs‘ of a foreign culture) are mixed boldly and with a cool mind. Gérôme’s leitmotif – the naked, white, female marble-body – betrays his business acumen as well as his classical western education. As much as the artist strives to disappear behind the sleek, almost photographic reality of his painting, as much does he resurface on the other side – as a male producer of female sex-appeal clichés, which he ennobles by classical ideality.

Gérôme’s paintings and sculptures are anything but ‚politically correct‘, and they are for the male-gendered eye, that’s for sure. But they also are ‚spectacular.‘ Their puzzling fascination results largely from a pristine, pre-cinematic quality

operating with wide-angle ‚shots‘ (even in smaller formats), precisely arranged by a detached director’s eye. It does not come as a surprise that the directors of more ambitious ‚sword and sandal‘ movies borrowed directly from Gérôme’s paintings: William Wyler’s mega-epos *Ben Hur* (1959) bases its set-design on the background of Gérôme’s *Chariot Race* of 1876, and Ridley Scott’s blockbuster *Gladiator* (2000) adopts the architectural backdrops, angles, and poses of paintings such as *Pollice Verso* (1872), a dramatic gladiator scene, which had already been reconstructed in every detail in Enrico Guazzoni’s early silent movie *Quo Vadis* of 1913. Gérôme’s paintings were Hollywood spectacles *avant la lettre*. And they were no less popular. Their opulent and polished evocations of historically and geographically remote counter-worlds anticipated the cinematographic feats of the 20th in the Salons of the 19th century.

STRATEGIES OF REPRODUCTION

One more thing: Jean-Léon Gérôme, the anti-hero of modernism, was a modern thinker in many ways. The exhibition here proves to be quite an eye-opener. First of all, he was an extremely sensitive draftsman, often enough stepping outside his academic training in little romanticizing capriccios. Secondly, he had an infallible sense for the meaning and potential of modern mass media and techniques of reproduction. Not only did he work directly from photographs, he also used the new medium for the mass distribution of his own paintings – a clever move that contributed largely to his international fame. Émile Zola, who accused Gérôme repeatedly of being more interested in commercially spoon-feeding an uncritical mass audience than actually producing something meaningful, remarked quite bluntly that the artist „fait un tableau pour que ce tableau soit reproduit par la photographie et la gravure et se vende à des milliers d’exemplaires. Ici, le sujet est tout, la peinture est rien: la reproduction vaut mieux que l’œuvre“ (Nos peintres au Champ-de-Mars [1867], in: Émile Zola, *Le bon combat. De Courbet aux impressionnistes. Anthologie d’écrits sur l’art*, hg. v. Jean-Paul Bouillon, Paris 1974, 97).

Thirdly, and this distinguishes Gérôme from other successful salon painters, his images show a remarkable degree of self-referentiality. It was a wise choice to include some of his sculptures in the show. The artist’s life-long obsession with creating the perfect naked figure reflects in his paintings and his sculptures likewise. And his paintings repeatedly depict traditional art historical *topoi* such as ‚the sculptor at work‘ and ‚Pygmalion and Galatea.‘ His painted studio scenes are full of intellectual references to the *paragone*, the idea of the ‚living‘ artwork, and the role of nature and antiquity as the two points of reference for his artistic production, the most fascinating example probably being his allegory of *Painting Breathes Life into Sculpture* (1893; *fig. 4*). In a bold volte-face the artist inverts his strategy of turning the beholder into a voyeur in making voyeurism the subject of one of his most ambiguous and self-referential paintings: *Kandaules*, king of Lydia, secretly shows his wife’s perfect naked body to Gyges. The painting merges typical requisites of Gérôme’s studio scenes and his history paintings and can easily be read as a witty programmatic commentary on nudity in salon painting.

The artist’s own sculptures often appear as protagonists of his paintings, and so does the artist himself. Self-reflexivity, in the case of Jean-Léon Gérôme, seems to have come late – but is then staged with verve. The studio-paintings perpetuate the image of an artist who lived with, through and even in his works of art.

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