



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Documenting California's Traditional Arts Heritage for More Than 100 Years

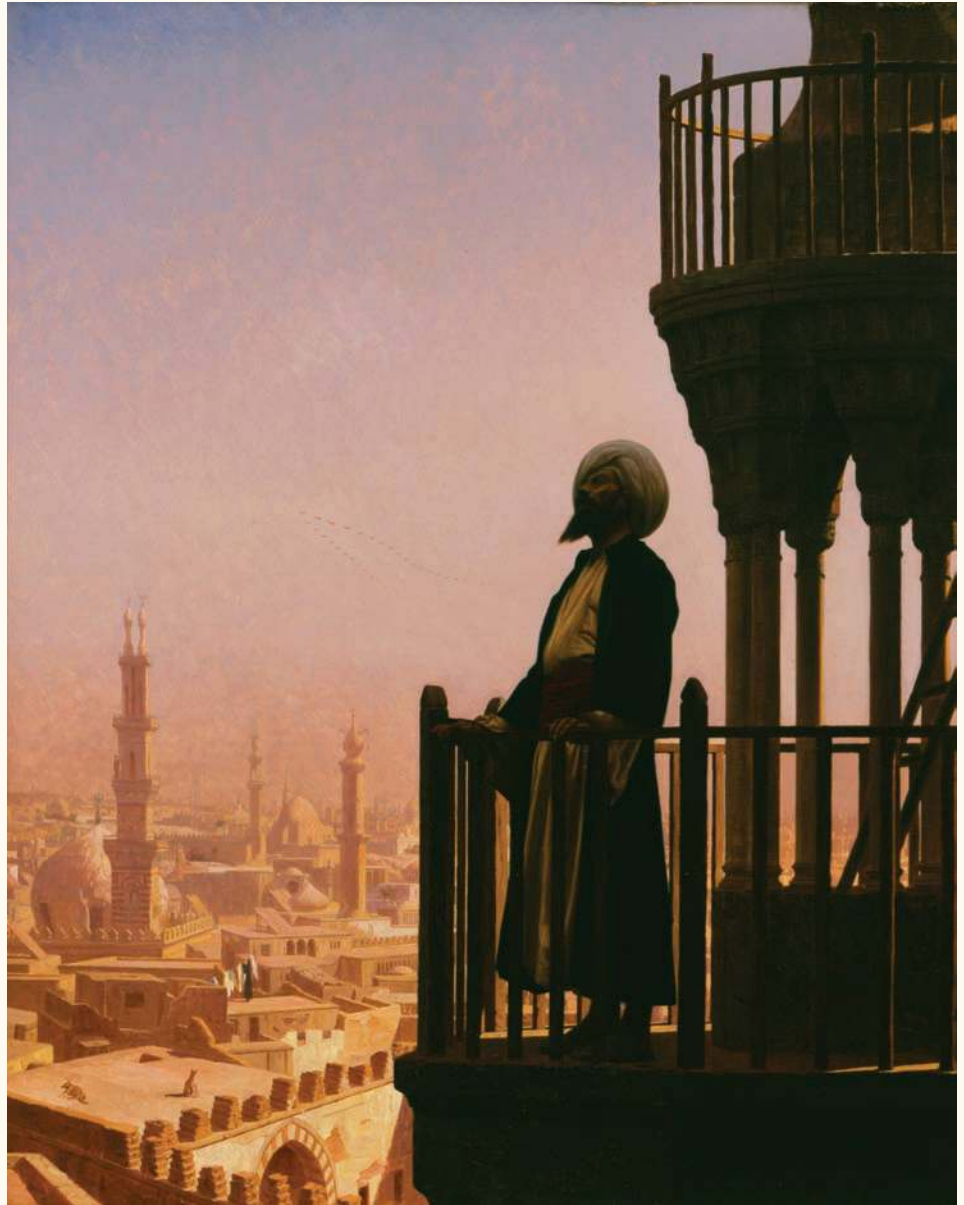
Jean-Léon Gérôme: RECALLING THE PINNACLE OF FINE ART

by Elaine Adams

WHAT THE AVERAGE public knows about nineteenth century art is only a small fraction of its extensive reality. Ask someone what was the most popular art movement of the late nineteenth century, and most would respond *French Impressionism*, completely dismissing the popular and simultaneous art movements of the *Pre-Raphaelites*, the *Barbizons*, the *Neo-Classicalists*, the *Naturalists*, *Art Nouveau*, and the *Symbolists*. And what does the average public know about the painter and sculptor, **Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)** who started out as a *Realist* and an *Orientalist*?

The road that was built on centuries of aesthetics based on the art of the Classical Greeks and Romans and the Italian Renaissance divided in the late nineteenth century. The split became evident with *Post-Impressionism* followed by *Fauvism*, *Expressionism*, *Dadaism*, *Cubism*, *Bauhausism*, *Abstract Expressionism*, and *Conceptualism*—leading further and further away from the natural and spiritual, and moving closer to the existential and experimental. While these “isms” monopolized critical praise and museum notoriety, *traditional art* continued its course—although the road was less travelled and generally unnoticed by the public.

Today, a number of fine art scholars are re-examining art history and, like archaeologists, are uncovering layers of truth buried by decades of corrosive misinformation. One maverick contemporary historian is **Dr. Gerald**



The Muezzin, 1865

Oil on canvas 32" × 25 1/2"

Gift of Francis T. B. Martin, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, JAM 1995.37

M. Ackerman who spent twenty years researching the life and works of Jean-Léon Gérôme, an extraordinary feat that resulted in the quintessential *Catalogue Raisonné* on Gérôme. Dr. Ackerman believes that art history has done the world a disservice by having ignored the

entire gamut of the nineteenth century's torrent of tremendous creativity. He considers this neglect to have been detrimental to art history, succeeding only in hindering and damaging the natural flow of artistic progression.

Dr. Ackerman asserts, “We have been



Pollice Verso (Thumbs Down), 1872

Oil on canvas 38 3/8" × 57 3/4"

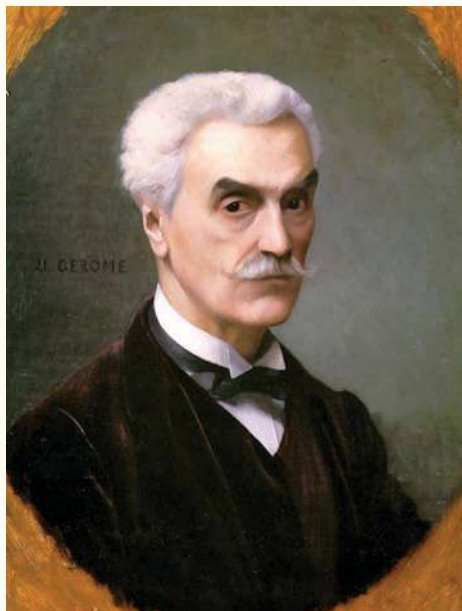
Museum Purchase. Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona, 1968.52

Photograph by Craig Smith

trained to look upon the nineteenth century as a period of struggle for artists. We are taught to think of it in dramatic terms as a time when an *avant-garde* of "true artists" struggled for recognition, but were held back by the active and officially supported aggression of "phony artists" favoured by the establishment. As a result, the popular history of nineteenth century art is that of the French *avant-garde*. The history of nineteenth century painting developed upon this myth is defective; it makes artistic development in France chaotic, artistic development in other countries incomprehensible, and it will not even support an accompanying history of nineteenth century sculpture and architecture. Successful artists of traditional schools are described as if they were insincere opportunists with no aesthetic purpose."

Many fine nineteenth century artists have been unfairly judged by art historians, not because of a lack of talent, but because they were perceived to be on the wrong side of the cutting edge of *Modernism*. One such artist is Jean-Léon Gérôme.

Born on the 11th of May, 1824 in the town of Vesoul, approximately 200 miles southeast of Paris. Jean-Léon was the first child of **Pierre and Claude Françoise Melanie Gérôme**. As a youth Gérôme attended the **Collège de**



Self Portrait, 1886

Oil on canvas 12 4/5" × 10 1/4"

Collection of the Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums

Vesoul (now bearing the artist's name as the **Lycée Gérôme**) where he did well in the school's strict curriculum, which included studies in Latin, Greek, geometry, chemistry, physics and art. After taking five years of drawing classes, which he began at the age of nine, Gérôme advanced into oil painting. The

drawing master at the college, **Claude-Basile Cariage (1798–1875)** was a product of the strict academic tradition, and thus, did not permit his students to work with oil until they had perfected their draughtsmanship.

IN 1840 AT THE AGE OF SIXTEEN, Jean-Léon Gérôme received his Bachelor of Letters from the Collège, and with a letter of introduction written to the painter **Paul Delaroche (1797–1856)**, he started out for Paris. Delaroche, with his combined style of academic *Neo-Classicism* and *Romanticism*, was at the height of his popularity. Gérôme was an eager student who was dedicated to the teachings of his master. Referring to his staunch training in Classical Greek art, Gérôme remarked that, "(Monsieur Delaroche) prescribed the study of Phidias, always Phidias, nothing but Phidias."

After three years studying in the atelier of Delaroche, Gérôme followed his master to Rome where he spent one year improving his skills. It was during this trip that Gérôme became inspired by Roman antiquities, subjects that were later to become prevalent in his work. He was particularly excited when he first saw the Pompeian gladiator's armour at the **Naples Museum**, commenting, "Think of it, all the painters, all the sculptors who came here, saw this, and they didn't dream of recreating a gladiator!" The gladiator became a favourite subject of Gérôme's.

In early 1845, due to a lack of funds, Gérôme returned to Paris hoping to win the coveted **Prix de Rome** competition which would grant him five years residence in Rome as an art student. In Paris he entered the atelier of the highly respected **Charles Gleyre (1806–1874)** who had taken over the atelier of Delaroche. Gleyre was recognized for his classical genre scenes as well as for his *Orientalist* subject matter. There, Gérôme studied for a brief three months where he developed an interest in *Orientalism* and colour technique. (Note: The term "Orientalism" is generally used to describe the works of nineteenth century artists who depicted the cultures of North Africa and Western Asia, based on their travels.) Gérôme never did win the Prix de Rome; nevertheless, a great destiny laid before him.



The Death of Caesar, 1859-1867
Oil on canvas 33 11/16" × 57 5/16"
Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, 37.884

GÉRÔME'S IMPRESSIVE STATURE and confident presence often positioned him as a leader among his peers. During the 1848 Revolution in France, he became a member of the National Guard and was appointed Captain of the Staff at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. His political sympathies were with the Republican Government. At this time Gérôme lived in a building near the Luxembourg Gardens which had been subdivided into ateliers. The painters who resided at this compound were referred to as "l'école de Gérôme." It is believed that it was here that Gérôme and a group of young artists exchanged ideas and philosophies which resulted in the development of *Neo-grecism*.

The ancient sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum were frequently in the news, as they continued to be further excavated. Artists whose works were inspired by these historic discoveries were at times called the *Pompeistes*. These archaeological discoveries not only became subjects of interest to these artists, they served as an inspiration to their *Neo-grec* movement. Gérôme eventually worked his way out of this style while the others remained fairly faithful. *Popular Realism* (painting contemporary scenes), combined with his interest in archaeology slowly moved Gérôme into developing his own style.

In 1857 Gérôme travelled to Egypt for the first time, "...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..." confessed Gérôme. He made frequent and extensive trips into the Near East, often leading safaris through the Egyptian deserts. These subjects became the focus of many of his paintings. At the Salon exhibition of 1857, the response for Gérôme's paintings of the Near East started his career as an *Orientalist* or a *Peintre Ethnographique*. Although by this point he basically abandoned his earlier interests in Neo-grecism, he continued the attention to detail so prevalent in that style and added a new dedication to an academic and objective *Realism*.

During the late 1870s, perhaps due to his solid financial security or due to his failing eyesight, Gérôme began seriously sculpting in marble. According to research material provided by the **Dahesh Museum**, "This was also the decade in which the discovery of numerous small painted figurines at the ancient Greek city of Tanagra profoundly affected the art world. Gérôme's interest in *Classicism* and colour converged in the field of polychromy, or painted sculpture. Even more significantly, the genre subject matter of many of these small figures confirmed the authenticity of Gérôme's own Classical work. The *Tanagras*, as they were called, represented for many the missing link between Classical and contemporary society?"

In the nineteenth century, the artist's studio functioned as the artist's stage where the artist and his work were the



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SUMMER 2010

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centre of attention—all carefully scripted and directed to intrigue potential patrons. Gérôme's four-story studio was quite legendary for its opulence and eccentricities. The interior space included medieval armour, a collection of objects from his exotic travels, and a pet monkey who often escaped, turning the studio into shambles and terrorizing the neighbourhood.

Many celebrated personalities visited Gérôme's studio. In addition to the most eminent French artists of the day, his studio was frequented by English painters, **James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)** and **Lord Frederic Leighton (1830–1896)**, as

well as authors, **Alexandre Dumas** and **George Sand**, and operatic composer **Charles Gounod**, and the actress, **Sarah Bernhardt**. In October of 1889 the **Moulin Rouge**, whose cancan performers were made famous through the works of **Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901)**, opened directly across the street from Gérôme's studio and home. At a costume ball held at the cabaret, Gérôme appeared dressed as a Chinese Mandarin, while his students carried a float bearing a nude model posed as *Tanagra*.

Gérôme's lively personality nearly got him killed when in 1861 at a party, there was an exchange of harsh words,

and he was challenged to a duel. Gérôme had never before duelled, whereas his opponent had the reputation of being an expert. Fortunately, just minutes before the duel, the doctor at the site recommended that Gérôme turn sideways as he shot from his pistol. The advice saved Gérôme's life. The bullet struck him in his right wrist and travelled through his arm lodging itself above his shoulder blade. The injury may have resulted in the loss of his painting arm, but miraculously he recovered. The reason for the duel is not clear and was kept very secret; however, we can only assume it was over a woman. In a letter written by the artist **Rosa Bonheur (1822–1899)** addressed to a mutual friend of hers and Gérôme's, she wrote, "May it be a lesson to him and may he in the future prefer painting to women."

Gérôme's reputation and influence within the French academic art world of the 1850s earned him tremendous public respect. By 1860 he was quite famous. People came from great distances to see his works, including many Americans who bought his paintings fresh off the easel. In the United States these works can be seen today in the collections of the **Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, California Palace of the Legion of Honor, Art Institute of Chicago, Cincinnati Art Museum, Detroit Institute of Arts, J. Paul Getty Museum, Haggin Museum, Metropolitan Museum, and Phoenix Art Museum**, to name just a few.

In 1863 artists of varying schools and styles petitioned **Emperor Napoleon III** (including Gérôme and Manet) pointing out the recent unfairness by the *École des Beaux Arts* regarding the exclusion of many artists from the **Biennial Salon Exhibition**. This particular exhibition resulted in showing the works of 988 painters, compared to the previous 1,289. The *École des Beaux Arts*, the world's most prestigious art institution, was founded in 1648, originally as the **Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture**. The *École's* Salon exhibitions represented one of the few opportunities artists had to sell their works, since so few dealers represented living artists. The artists who were rejected from the 1863 Salon were not turned away entirely due to the conservatism of the *École's* academicians, as so many have been led to believe, rather the "unfairness" in the selection of works was due to the lack



Pygmalion and Galatea, c. 1890

Oil on canvas 35" × 27"

Gift of Louis C. Raeger, 1927 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 27.200

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of seriousness on the part of the jury. According to Dr. Ackerman, "...many able painters on the Salon Jury did not show up for the judging of the paintings. The selection was made by only eight painters, along with seven sculptors, seven architects, three engravers and seven amateurs—the leftovers of forty-four originally chosen jurors."

Emperor Napoleon immediately acted on the artists' petition by issuing a decree that would reform the *École des Beaux Arts*. The reformation involved a separation between the Salon and the *École* (school) resulting in two different administrations as opposed to the previous single administration. With these changes, three-fourths of the Salon Jury was now to be selected by previous Salon award winning artists, while the remaining one-fourth was to be chosen by the government—hence, taking the power away from the academicians. This reformation was widely resisted by those who favoured the classical system.

IN 1863 AT THE AGE OF THIRTY-nine, Gérôme received the honour of being officially appointed to the newly reformed *École des Beaux Arts*. He was asked to be one of the school's three painting masters, and soon afterwards, was recognized as the school's most important master. Although Gérôme had a *Neo-classical* past, his recent direction towards *Realism* and *Ethnographic* scenes made him modern and daring for his time. Some of his illustrious American students included, **Frederick Bridgman (1847–1928)**, **Edwin H. Blashfield (1848–1936)**, **Thomas Eakins (1844–1916)**, **William MacGregor Paxton (1869–1941)**, **Theodore Robinson (1852–1896)**, **Edwin Lord Weeks (1849–1903)** and **J. Alden Weir (1852–1919)**.

Also in 1863, Gérôme married **Marie Goupil (1842–1912)**, daughter of the international art dealer and publisher, **Adolphe Goupil (1806–1893)**. Monsieur Goupil was Gérôme's art dealer, and by the 1880s, Gérôme's paintings and sculpture gained widespread international notoriety, due to the help of M. Goupil's promotion and publication of large-edition photogravures of Gérôme's works.

Gérôme, a man of modest beginnings, became famously recognized in his day as an extraordinary artist, an adventurer, an historian, and basically an intriguing character. He was warmly accepted into the finest aristocratic circles, and was a regular guest at



The Snake Charmer, c. 1870

Oil on canvas 32 13/16" × 48 1/16"

The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1955-51

Photograph by Michael Agee

Princess Mathilde's soirées and various Imperial functions. Dr. Ackerman notes, "Since the early Renaissance in Italy, painters and their apologists had argued that painters were the peers of poets and philosophers, that they deserved entry into society not as practitioners of a trade or of a servile art, but as intellectuals, practitioners of a liberal art, worthy of free men, and capable of communicating through their art the highest wisdom and truth. Gérôme and the successful artists of his time not only lived like princes or gentlemen, they counted the most important of their contemporaries—in all fields—as colleagues in learned societies, clubs, on hunts and expeditions, in social gatherings and salons. Their success was the climax of the century-long struggle for the social recognition of the painter. This accomplishment is perhaps just as important in the history of art as the appearance of the avant-garde in the middle of the century."

Not since Gérôme and his peers have artists been able to bask in the glory that was once bestowed upon them by an anxious audience. Gone are the days when the public eagerly stood in long lines at the Salon and museums to view the latest works by their favourite contemporary artists. Hopefully, the triumphs that were painstakingly made

by artists over the centuries have not been all in vain—and that it is not too late to restore the artist's persona as a scholar, adventurer and great thinker. ■

Notes:

This article was revised from a December 1996 article that appeared in the California Art Club Newsletter, written by the same author. This author wishes to thank Dr. Gerald M. Ackerman for his valuable research and contributions to art history. Sources for this article include Dr. Ackerman's publications, Jean-Léon Gérôme—Manuscript Volumes I & II, published by the American Society of Classical Realism and Les Orientalistes: Jean-Léon Gérôme, Monographie et Catalogue Raisonné published by ACR Édition Internationale, Courbevoie (Paris). Additional information was provided by Dr. David Farmer, former Director of the Dabesh Museum.

*The exhibition, **The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme**, is on view at **The Getty Center** from June 15 through September 12, 2010, and was organized by the **J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles** and the **Musée d'Orsay, Paris**, in association with the **Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid**. See Exhibitions listings for further details.*