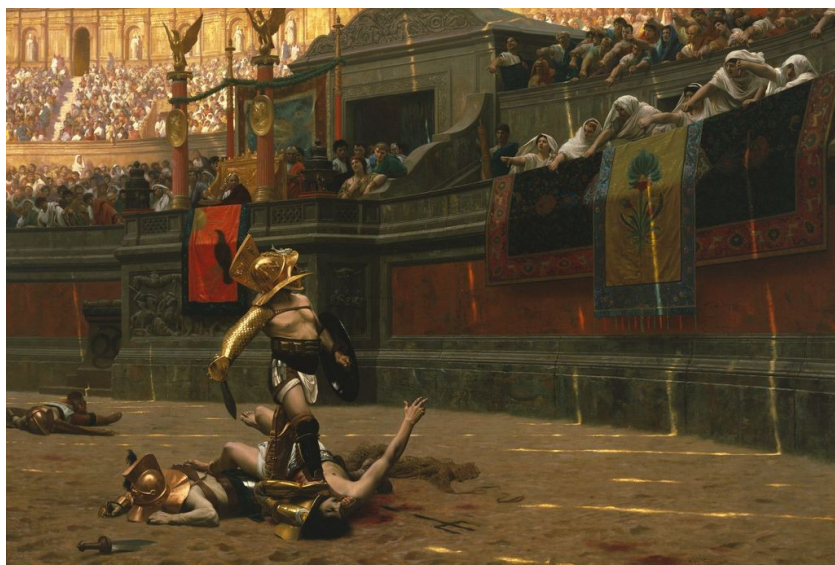


## Press Release



## **Jean-Léon Gérôme** **History Painting on Show**

**Level 0,  
Main exhibition area  
19 October 2010 – 23 January 2011**



**Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Pollice Verso*, 1872**  
Oil on canvas, 97,5 x 146,7 cm  
Phoenix Art Museum, © Phoenix Art Museum

**This exhibition is organised by the Musée d'Orsay, the Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris and the Getty Museum, Los Angeles in collaboration with the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.**

**Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum 15 June – 12 September 2010**  
**Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 1 March – 22 May 2011**

This is the first major exhibition in Paris devoted to the work of painter and sculptor Jean-Léon Gérôme since his death in 1904. During the last few decades, the widely held image of Gérôme has undergone a significant change in France. Stigmatised for many years as the representative of sterile Academic art, Gérôme is today recognised as one of the greatest image creators of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This reappraisal is the result of three factors: historiographical research, led primarily by Gerald Ackerman, the pioneering exhibition in 1981 in his home town of Vesoul, and recent research conducted by the Musée Goupil in Bordeaux into how Gérôme's work reached such a wide audience. The Musée d'Orsay has always shown an interest in this artist, notably with its acquisitions of *Consummatum Est* in 1990, *La Réception du Grand Condé à Versailles* [*The Reception of Condé in Versailles*] in 2004, and the original plaster figure of *Corinthe* [*Corinth*] in 2008.

The exhibition, like the accompanying catalogue, examines all the issues of his work, from his sources to his influence. It aims to reveal and analyse how he developed a prolific visual grammar that at times pushed the illusionist obsession to the point of strangeness, finding a resonance in all of the visual arts, prints, photography and most of all, in the cinema, which was then in its early years. It also aims to revisit his art and offer a new approach to such diverse questions as Gérôme's place in French painting at the time, his theatrical interpretation of history painting, his complex relationship with the Orient, his use of polychromy in sculpture, and his approach to archaeological reference, from the Neo-Grec movement to the instructive role of his work. It also looks at how his personality crystallised the whole anti-Academic struggle of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and finally, how he aroused the interest of American collectors.

Having entered Paul Delaroche's studio at the age of sixteen, Jean-Léon Gérôme very quickly inherited the highly academic style of the great painter whom he accompanied to Rome in 1843. Although he studied briefly with Charles Gleyre, Gérôme never spoke of this interlude but he did acknowledge the direct influence of Jean-Dominique Ingres, an artist who mistrusted Delaroche and never taught Gérôme. Thus the traditional Academic style championed by these two artists blossomed in the paintings of the young Gérôme, in both his history painting (*La République* [*The Republic*], 1848, Mairie des Lilas), and in his portraits (*Tête de femme italienne* [*Head of an Italian Woman*], 1843-1844, Cleveland Museum of art; *Portrait d'Armand Gérôme* [*Portrait of Armand Gérôme*], 1848, London,

National Gallery, possible long term loan to the National Gallery of Dublin; *Portrait de femme* [*Portrait of a Woman*], 1851, Art Institute of Chicago; *Portrait de Rachel* [*Portrait of Rachel*], 1859, Paris, Comédie Française). It was at Delaroche's studio that the painter met Gustave Le Gray. The two men quickly became close friends, as we can see from a photograph taken by Le Gray, probably at The Chalet, the communal studio where Gerome was working at that time (*Groupe d'hommes et une femme assis sur un perron* [*Group of Men and a Woman sitting on the Steps*], 1848, Paris, Musée d'Orsay).

It was with the painting entitled *Le combat de coqs* [*The Cock Fight*] (Paris, Musée d'Orsay), exhibited at the 1847 salon, that a new talent was revealed to the public and Gérôme was proclaimed leader of a new school of painting: the Neo-Grec School. The members of this movement, all students of Delaroche and Gleyre, included the painters Jean-Louis Hamon and Henri-Pierre Picou. Their approach was in keeping with the experimentation in architecture, sculpture and painting that was exciting Parisian society around 1850. The interest in Classical antiquity, revived by a desire for authentic archaeological detail, then became the pretext for charming, sentimental genre scenes, depicting a more human, intimist view of the Classical world in a sometimes archaic style (*Anacréon, Bacchus et l'Amour* [*Anacreon, Bacchus and Aphrodite*], 1848, Toulouse, Musée des Augustins; *Le roi Candaule* [*King Candaules*], 1859, Ponce, Museo de Arte).

Although Gérôme soon abandoned the Neo-Grec style in order to satisfy the appetite for "elsewhere", his desire to present an authentic image still extended to all eras and all places. Gérôme's paintings that took French history as their subject are the least familiar of his works. So, whether he strove to depict modern history (*L'éminence grise* [*Eminence Grise*], 1873, Boston Museum of Fine Arts; *Réception du Grand Condé à Versailles* [*Reception of Condé in Versailles*], 1878, Paris, Musée d'Orsay), or more recent events glorifying Napoleon (*L'exécution du Maréchal Ney* [*The Execution of Marshall Ney*], 1867, Sheffield, City Art Gallery), or even contemporary episodes (*Audience des ambassadeurs de Siam à Fontainebleau* [*The Reception of the Siamese Ambassadors at Fontainebleau*], 1864, Versailles, Musée national du château), Gérôme underlined his originality by rejecting noble themes.

The realism of the anecdotal trivialities of ancient life and his passion for historical detail prevailed over the traditionally instructive role of history painting. The moment he captures might well come immediately before the main action. It might just as easily follow it. (*Consumatum est* [*Consumatum Est*], 1867, Paris, Musée d'Orsay; *Sortie du bal masqué* [*Duel after the Masked Ball*], 1857, Baltimore, Walters Art Museum). In the same way, the success of the narrative is helped by his feeling for composition, an aspect that would later have a significant influence on the framing of the cinema image. Furthermore, his erudite representations of Roman civilisation and his almost obsessive rendering of exact archaeological detail that so irritated Charles Baudelaire, served as authentic references for spectacular, highly coloured historical reconstructions, based on memorable images that were widely circulated. Thus new productions in the epic genre, or "peplum films", were influenced to a large extent by works like *La mort de César* [*The Death of Caesar*] (1867, Baltimore, Walters Art Museum) and *Pollice Verso or Thumbs Down* (1872, Phoenix Art Museum), whether they date from the great era of Technicolor (*Quo Vadis* by Mervyn Leroy in 1951; *Ben-Hur* by William Wyler in 1959) or from much more recent times (*Gladiator* by Ridley Scott in 2000).

The same theatrical interpretation can be seen when the painter turned his attention to Orientalism, be it landscape, religious painting, genre scenes or the female nude. But this still did not hinder his meticulous reconstructions of locale and atmosphere, of picturesque architecture and exotic costumes. Thus his Egyptian paintings on military or Islamic themes (*Le prisonnier* [*The Prisoner*], 1861, Nantes, Musée des Beaux-Arts; *Prayer in Cairo*, 1865, Hamburg, Kunsthalle; *Black Bachi-Bouzouk*, 1869, private collection), find an echo in Turkish compositions that are highly decorative and suffused with sensuality (*Bain turc ou Bain Maure* [*Turkish Bath, also called Moorish Bath*], 1870, Boston Museum of Fine Arts; *Charmeur de serpents* [*The Snake Charmer*], 1880, Williamstown, Sterling and Francine Clark Institute).

This "elsewhere" in Gerome's paintings was therefore no longer the Orient of the previous generation's imagination. His paintings were extremely well researched, created from the preparatory sketches he made during his trips, and the photographs taken at the time by his travelling companions (Auguste Bartholdi, *Mocka*, 1855-1856, Colmar, Musée Bartholdi; Albert Goupil, *Cairo*, 1868, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Department of Prints and Photography), and even from images he produced on the roof of his studio in Paris. (Anonymous, *Modèle masculin vêtu à l'orientale, sur le toit de l'atelier* [*Male model in oriental clothes, on the studio roof*], circa 1855, Paris, Musée d'Orsay).

Gérôme made his official début as a sculptor in 1878 at the Universal Exhibition. Although, at that time, he was regarded by the critics as the most eminent proponent of Academism, he soon decided to oppose this dogma when his concept, expressed in his manifesto painting *Sculpturae vitam insufflat pictura* took him to the centre of the debate and opposition surrounding the question of polychromy in modern sculpture.

It was in the context of archaeological discoveries that he became involved in the revival of chryselephantine sculpture, introduced in the middle of the century. Still following the Classical example, he tinted his marble works with a mixture of wax and pigment. His passion for faithfully executed archaeological detail then moved into illusionism and trompe l'œil (*La joueuse de boules [Dancer with Three Masks]*, circa 1902, Caen, Musée des Beaux-Arts; *Sarah Bernhardt*, circa 1895, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). In addition, *Tanagra* (1890, Paris, Musée d'Orsay), his most famous painted sculpture, is a good example of his taste for self-quotation that is carried on with mirror effects between the sculpted work and the painted work. At the end of his life, the figure of the sculptor at work in his studio even became the favourite subject for many paintings (*Pygmalion et Galatée [Pygmalion and Galatea]*, 1890, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art) and for his self-portraits that became an obsession.

Gérôme was one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century artists who attached great importance to the circulation of their works. The Goupil art gallery and publishing house, run by Adolphe Goupil who became Gerome's father-in-law, went on to ensure a mass distribution of his works from 1859 onwards, through prints and the "photographic gallery", in which he was far and away the best represented living artist. Helped by the publisher's skills in rendering polychromy, Gérôme astutely managed to adapt his work to the actual editorial policy of his father in law. To create strong images that the viewer would remember for a long time, he chose anecdotal themes that were guaranteed to be popular with the general public; he no longer gave priority to the colour of the drawing or the clarity of a well planned composition, instead having regard for the size of the printing plate or the photographic print. The critics were quick to reproach him: Emile Zola wrote in 1867: "clearly, Monsieur Gérôme works for the Goupil publishing house, he creates a painting to be reproduced as a photograph or an engraving and sells thousands of copies".

Recent historiographical analysis has shown that Gérôme's work, vilified by the avant-garde critics of his time, has a more complex relationship with modernity than it would seem. For example, the production of a painted image was often directly determined by a photograph, that Gérôme would use as a model in an effort to produce an image more true to life (Félix Nadar, *Modèle pour la Phryné de Jean-Léon Gérôme [Model for Jean-Léon Gérôme's Phryné]*, around 1860, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Department of Prints and Photography; *Phryné devant l'aréopage [Phryne before the Areopagus]*, 1861, Hamburg, Kunsthalle).

This exhibition therefore aims to go beyond the immediate charm and accessibility of Gérôme's works, to the dual identity, both scholarly and popular, that makes them so valued today by art historians and the general public alike.

**Curators:**

**Laurence des Cars, scientific director, Agence France-Museums**

**Dominique de Font-Réaulx, curator, Musée du Louvre**

**Édouard Papet, chief curator, Musée d'Orsay.**

**Media Partners: Paris Première - Direct matin/soir - Le Journal du Dimanche – La Tribune -  Pixee**

**Around the exhibition**

Exhibition catalogue, joint publication Musée d'Orsay / Éditions Skira-Flammarion, 384 pages, 24 x 28.5 cm, paperback, approx. 400 illustrations, €49

**Music**

- The **Academism** Cycle: 14 October - 4 November 2010

How is Academism expressed in music? Three concerts, including a special concert with violinist Natalia Gutman, will answer this question.

**Symposium**

- 9 and 10 December 2010 / **A Fresh Look at Gérôme**: Researchers from France and around the world come together to take another look at the work of this strange illusionist, his sources and his context.

**Cinema**

- 28 December 2010 - 23 January 2011, **The Epic Film**: influenced by Jean Léon Gérôme's painting, the epic became a major genre in Hollywood films from the 1920s to the 1960s. This festival will present a series of films from the masters of this genre.

**Ciné-concert**

- Tuesday 18 January – 8pm: **Special evening event in the main hall**, Screening of Ben Hur by Fred Niblo (1925) accompanied by Thierry Escaich

**Practical information**

Opening times: daily, except Monday. 9.30am – 6pm, Thursdays until 9.45pm.

Admission: museum entrance ticket: full rate: €8; concessions: €5.50

Access: through the main entrance: 1, rue de la Légion d'Honneur, 75007 Paris

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