
Review by Shaw Smith, Davidson College.

The resurrection of the reputation of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904), after a precipitous fall from the international heights he achieved during his lifetime before he was blasted by Emile Zola for being “commercial” and “anecdotal,” began with a series of small American exhibitions in 1972. This resurrection was continued by the work of Gerald M. Ackerman and Albert Boime, but came to a furious head when John Rewald, a proud champion of Impressionism, condemned Thomas Hoving for even mounting an exhibition of Gérôme’s work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1973.[1] The history of this rise and fall—and rise again—of this paragon of official art is outlined in Scott Allan’s very helpful introduction to *Reconsidering Gérôme*. As he notes, the challenges led by Edward Said and Linda Nochlin again placed Gérôme’s reputation not only on the wrong side of modernist history in terms of purity, the modern teleology of abstract painting, but also on the wrong side of the deconstruction of Orientalist painting and ideology, and the slick slope of downright commercialism, despite Ackerman’s Herculean efforts to create a more complete and more detailed picture of the artist with a *catalogue raisonné* and monograph in 1986.[2] In contrast to the years of inattention to both Gérôme specifically and this under-examined block of artists more generally, known as “mere” academic, official, and *école* painters, other scholars, in addition to Ackerman, have begun to investigate this area of nineteenth-century art. Moreover, assumptions, such as the confused identities of official, academic, salon, and *école*, are being reexamined much in the way that other terms such as impressionism and modernism have been reexamined and revised.[3]

This new collection of essays, edited by Scott Allan and Mary Morton, reopens the book on Gérôme by shifting the argument from the backward, critical glance at Gérôme’s *retardataire* relationship with the past toward an expanding vision of a modernist future by “challenging old critical biases as well as laying out productive new avenues of inquiry and research” (p. 3). Published as a supplementary set of essays in conjunction with the monumental exhibition and recent catalogue of Gérôme’s work at the Getty, this engaging group of perspectives “by this younger generation of scholars” (p. 3) attempts to redefine key terms and practices and contests the notion that Gérôme’s detailed images were intended for merely “passive consumption” (p. 2).

What emerges from the collective development of these essays challenges the binary constructions of modernism which often coincidentally deal with the theme of death. The reductive nature of past criticism of Gérôme’s work employed oppositions such as history painting/ genre painting, fine art/commercial art, still photograph/motion picture, tactile/visual, original/replica, et cetera. The new perspectives deconstruct such binaries with fresh interpretations.[4] Allan Doyle, identified in the List of Contributors as a Ph.D. candidate at Princeton, in his essay, “Groping the Antique: Michelangelo and the Erotics of Tradition,” compares two paintings, *Michelangelo Showing a Student the Belvedere Torso* (1849) and the *End of the Session* (1887). This comparison, despite Théophile Gautier’s accusation of Gérôme of being a *Néo-Grec*, challenges the studio practices of the Davidian school by taking “aim at such sentimental rhetoric” found in the nineteenth-century responses to “the touching figure of the blind
sculptor” (p. 8). Analyzing the reversal of the role of master and pupil and the homoerotic legacy of “tactility, vision and desire” in the first painting, Doyle claims that Gérôme rebuts the “Michelangelesque confusion of tactility and opticality” (p. 9) and declares a “disavowal of the fragmented, homoerotic origins of neoclassicism” (p.18).[5] Moreover, Doyle points to themes of cleansing in Gérôme’s work, including sponge baths and prophylactic metaphors, which parallel “the removal of any trace of the artist’s hand” (p. 12). In the painting of the aged and infirmed Florentine, Gérôme portrays Michelangelo as “sandwiched between ephebic immaturity and a mutilated totem of hyperbolic masculinity” (p. 11). Conversely, End of the Session asserts heterosexual desire, a riposte, to take Doyle’s delightfully chosen word, to the uniquely male linkage to antiquity and the homoerotic overtones of David’s atelier. By examining this paragone of the tactile and the visual, Gérôme challenges the “cold rigidity” of Davidian classicism, and, albeit in very different ways, seeks “a living antiquity,” as Delacroix did before him. As a result of Doyle’s work, one awakens to the many poignant depictions of the tactile, such as the examination of decorative tiles of a palace or the clinched teeth of a slave girl in Gérôme’s œuvre.

Emerson Bowyer, a doctoral student at Columbia University, in his “Monographic Impressions,” also reconfigures the notion of touch. He documents new forms of book production by focusing on Fanny Field Hering’s Gérôme: The Life and Works of Jean Léon Gérôme, published in 1892.[6] This expensive, full-length monograph featured a new print medium called “photoxylography,” a controversial hybrid medium of engraving and photography. This Warholian production of the collapsed oppositions of artist’s gesture and mechanical reproduction retain “direct traces of the artist’s hand” (p. 29) while at the same time providing multiple copies, what Bowyer evokes as Ryle’s dualism of “ghosts in a machine” (p. 22) and “a theater of indexicality” (p. 32). Here too we see how this “younger generation of scholars” examines concepts of time in Gérôme. Invoking the traditional notion of the “pregnant moment” of heroic action in academic history painting, and animated by the Pygmalion myth, so famously exploited by Gérôme, Emerson ironically “enlivens” the cliché as a vibrant symbol. He recognizes its performative role in classicism through its eternal repetitions of form and clicking sounds as well as its function as a mechanical device in expanding time and in particular the pregnant moment of artistic conception. Using Barthes, Benjamin, and Deleuze, he demonstrates how such a hybrid of the personal and the machine destabilizes “the image and the authority of its origin” and redefines the “newly fluid borders between art and industry” (pp. 32-33).

Another doctoral student at Columbia, Emily Beeny, and Marc Gotlieb, who teaches at Williams College, confront the spectacular nature of Gerôme’s art. In “Blood Spectacle: Gérôme in the Arena,” Beeny reflects on the spatial role of the crowd, while Gotlieb focuses on the modernized notions of cinematic time. In both we find a “revolution in history painting,” to use Edgar Wind’s vintage phrase.[7] Beeny establishes the parallel of crowds in the arenas and consumers in the modern age which are joined in the notion of “the mob” of massive consumption. Gérôme admitted that he “worked for those people” (p. 41), as Zola charged, but, as interpreted here, in a different way than has been suggested before. Gérôme followed David’s practice of using the effect of psyché mirrors which the older artist had placed before his Intervention of the Romans and the Sabines (1799) to include the viewers in the reflected image of the painting.[8] Without simply serving up scenes for mass consumption, Gérôme locates the Parisian crowd in the city of spectacle as his subject, allowing us to “hover between the sands and the stands” (p. 47), but this time he performs “the mirror trick” without a mirror. Such a mass audience, in Beeny’s view, has been gendered in terms of “antique femininity” and associated with “supposed irrationality and violence,” as for example in Pollice Verso (1873), the inspiration of Ridley Scott’s film, Gladiator (2000). Following the work of Guy Debord,[9] she projects Gérôme not as a panderer to commercial interests, but as an ambivalent participant, if not an outright self-conscious critic of his own crossover reputation as a fine artist who is nonetheless a producer for mass consumption.
Gotlieb’s article, “Gérôme’s Cinematic Imagination,” is a game-changer which refreshes our vision of the licked surfaces of Gérôme faster than a 1080p HD-TV. Unapologetically anachronistic, Gotlieb also explodes the pregnant moment of traditional history paintings by his insights into Gérôme’s narrative practices. In Pollici Verso and The Christian Martyrs’ Last Prayer (1883), for example, these cinematic moments include, among others, a single moment of action; the simultaneous panoramic expansion and depth of the field; and, finally, the use of “bullet time” whereby the viewer rotates in slow motion around a speeding projectile in mid-air. By collapsing the oppositions of still photographs and motion picture dynamics, the pregnant moment of traditional history painting has been stretched into moments of variable speeds and perspectives. Obviously Gérôme was not “anticipating” cinema, but rather seeking to do in his paintings many of the same things that would be done later in cinema. This elongation allows the suspension of resolution and the deferral of meaning ironically not unlike some feminist interpretations of modern abstract art, from Claude Monet’s water-lily embodiments of Henri Bergson’s durée to Jackson Pollock’s all-over paintings.

The modern narrative forms of Gérôme are also examined by Gülru Çakmak, a Ph.D. candidate at Johns Hopkins University, in “The Salon of 1859 and Caesar: The Limits of Painting.” Çakmak proposes that the obsessive minutiae attacked by critics of Gérôme’s works (“small details of archeological curiosity which left the viewer unaffected,” p.66) are not a regressive, academic pandering nor commercial pacification. In fact these details provide the entrance into a new kind of narrative which also stretches out the pregnant moment, thus providing another moment of deferral. Çakmak calls this a new “highly charged axis of looking” (p. 76), since, in a very Friedian manner (not surprising given the author’s thesis advisor) the viewer is asked to shift from one side of the painting to the other (Death of Caesar, 1859). These shifts allow adjustments for the “anamorphic foreshortening” (p.73) of key details such as the corpse and other truncated forms. They also embody the theme of dismemberment across the canvas suggesting separate events which take place over time and not in the single, specific moment that traditional painting had institutionalized. This multiplicity of time splinters against the grain of the paragone argument that Delacroix and many others maintained: that the linearity of literary narrative was seen as a train slowly passing before us, but visual art was seen all in an instant. Clearly for Gérôme the heroic moment was not always the central dynamic of his new sense of pictorial narrative.[10]

In “Crime, Time, and The Death of Caesar,” Nina Lübbren, a senior lecturer in English at Anglia Ruskin University, further expands this idea of narrative time to the special relationship that time has with moral perspectives. In this case she examines the idea of justifiable homicide. She analyzes the structures of nineteenth-century crime fiction through Bakhtin’s conception of “heterglot polyvocality of the modern novel” and “open-ended” time (pp. 84-85), a sharp contrast to the traditional, pregnant moment of linear narratives in history paintings. Shifting from a single moment of grand gesture, details are strewn about allowing the viewer to interrogate the scene from different points of view. The scattered semiotics of the tyrannicide, such as open spaces in which the empty throne replaces the fallen body, evoke the haunting legacy of the French Revolution. But the ambiguity of the “nexus of cause and effects” (p. 89) represents a modern tribute to the obsessive collecting of evidence worthy of a scene from Balzac’s La Comédie humaine.[11] The collapsing of oppositions such as grand manner regicide and daily crime story also embody the debate over history painting versus genre painting and the paragone of the brush and the pen (p. 65). Such relative, moral structures thus require a modern reconfiguration of the notion of exemplum virtutis in a destabilized world of change.

Claudine Mitchell from the University of Leeds considers the notion of time yet again, but this time from the perspective of the “beholder as eyewitness” in “The Damaged Mirror: Gérôme’s Narrative Technique and the Fractures of French History.” Clearly Gérôme’s painting, December 7, 1815, 9 o’clock in the Morning/The Execution of Marshal Ney (1868), provides ample opportunity to discuss time both microscopically in its details, as well as ideologically in its approach to the grand manner. Taking as her thesis “the relation between aesthetic conceptions and history” (p. 93), Mitchell proposes an expanded audience who would read this painting depending on their understanding of the semiotics of Paris itself
and according to their perspectives as Bonapartists or Ultra-Loyalists. The beloved Marshal Michel Ney, who had defended Napoleon so loyally, was condemned by the Bourbon Restoration to execution before the wall of the Luxembourg Garden. But the details of time, place, clothing, gestures, medical evidence, and graffiti in the painting recreate the narrative from many points of view, despite the seemingly factual precision of the reportage suggested in the title. While there are smoking guns portrayed, there is no smoking gun with which to conclude the actual narrative, the appearance of an eyewitness not with-standing. Is this an official military execution? A random murder in the street? an act of revenge? A heroic act of noble sacrifice in the style of Socrates? Or an act of class warfare which proclaims “the disintegration of history painting and the idea of the disintegration of the social order” (p. 101)? Death is contextualized in the ambiguity of semantic oppositions which leaves open the question of a formal execution or a random killing. It is all in the details.[12]

The critical issue of the abundance of detail in Gérôme’s paintings is taken up by Peter Benson Miller, an independent scholar, in his “Gérôme and Ethnographic Realism at the Salon of 1857.” Miller proposes that we see Gérôme’s ethnographic realism as an alternative ideal to the classical beau idéal. The question is what form of realism did Gérôme embrace? Sometimes aligned with the positivism of science and praised for his “direct engagement with the physical world,” Gérôme was criticized by some for his collection of “ethnological types” (p. 108). Others praised his “ethnographic exactitude” (p. 115), yet others criticized his “inaccuracies” (p. 113), even in his more flexible position as Orientalist painter of exotic visions. Realist critic Castagnary called him “escapist” in his “stalwart opposition to the Realist and Impressionist paintings” because of “his reliance upon an obsolete literary tradition opposed to and eclipsed by avant-garde realists” (p.106). In short, Gérôme has been attacked over time from many sides, a victim of his own hybrid nature, outlook, and production. Confronted with these stringent categories of grand manner and genre painting, Miller shows that Gérôme tried to re-establish “the brief heyday of ethnographic realism” at the Salon of 1857 in which past and present were combined in the modern constructions of realism (p.106).

The last two essays shift our perspective of viewing, and our position for seeing Gérôme again, but in this case in terms of the reception of his work in Turkey and of his legacy in the Academy. Mary Roberts from the University of Sydney, in “Gérôme in Istanbul,” literally relocates the dynamic of the reception of his work. Using The Snake Charmer (1880), a painting which has served as the iconic image for Orientalist charges against Gérôme, she displaces and then replaces our views of the silent voice of Orientalist reception, namely the Turkish collectors of Gérôme’s paintings such as Halil Bey and Turkish photographers such as the Abdullah brothers. Working to create a corrective to European Orientalist stereotypes, she skillfully shows how class, rather than ethnicity, is the more important deciding factor about the reception of “picturesque, eroticized” views of the Orient, including those of the homeland in the Topkapi Palace (p.119). To presume that collectors in the Orient desired only the unchanging taste of a static and unchanging past is itself an Orientalist position. To underscore that irony, she draws mesmerizing parallels between the collections of the Sultan’s court and the commercial gallery of Adolphe Goupil, father-in-law of Gérôme.[13] And yet she refocuses her investigation once again as she clarifies the diverse natures of Anatolian collectors and Ottoman collectors, reminding us of the challenge to not see the Orient as a faceless block. Not only does this group of fine essays shift our view within the painting; it shifts our views outside the painting as well!

In “An Artistic Enmity: Gérôme and Moreau,” Peter Cooke, who teaches at Manchester University, examines the relationship between Gérôme and fellow painter, Gustave Moreau. Three archival letters from Moreau to Gérôme suggest that they were respectful friends, but other public commentaries reveal another binary to be deconstructed: the personal and the professional. Despite the moderate pleasantries of these personal exchanges, these artists had very different conceptions of the proper direction of modern history. Gérôme advocated for the “ethnographic realism” of the Orient or Antiquity (p.139); Moreau pursued “a reinvention” of the symbolic, modern understanding of the Orient (p.146). Each deplored the course of the other, with Moreau accusing Gérôme of amassing disdainful details for crass
public consumption while Gérôme, “bitter” about the new mythical trend (p.147), blamed Moreau for hindering the careers of his many students. Although one might have wanted to hear more about the implications of these legacies, we do sense yet another binary being challenged on yet another level, one of the main contributions of this publication.

This small, yet handsome book contains beautiful color plates, useful black-and-white images (are these the best film stills available?), detailed notes, and an index. The book offers a new format for museums doing such grand shows accompanied by such monumental catalogues—a kind of “Read about It More” opportunity. These consistently well-crafted essays are certainly valuable as free-standing articles, but take on greater power as a group in this timely and thoughtful reconsideration of Gérôme.

Only two suggestions come to mind. First, while this book shifts the direction of looking at Gérôme from retardataire academic to cinematic modern, it is important to maintain the balance with the past as well. In this sense, it would be helpful to reconsider the relationship to Jacques Louis David (although this is done to a degree in Doyle’s essay) and Eugène Delacroix as noted above.[14] The evidence of commercialism in David and the dynamics of movement in Delacroix might evoke yet further considerations of Gérôme’s modernism within the context of his debt to the past. That being said, there was no reason given for the selection of these particular essayists. The contributors, ranging from holders of named professorships to doctoral candidates (yet another set of oppositions), create a book which risks, but overcomes the potential problem of being uneven. Information explaining these choices would have been helpful in understanding why certain subjects were chosen, while others were omitted. The co-editor Scott Allen, for example, wrote an essay in both the exhibition catalogue and here, but co-editor Mary Morton wrote in the catalogue, but was not featured as an author in this volume.

Second, it would have been interesting to see an essay addressing the notion of “detail” in the paintings of the two main antagonists of the period, Gérôme and Caillebotte. How might one consider the idea of “detail” in both painters, given their public conflicts? Could it be, despite their own professional enmity, Peter Cooke’s theme, that they were not so far apart in terms of their investigations into the physical world around them, one looking at objects in motion (i.e. a new way seeing) and the other dealing with the perception of the motion of objects (i.e. a new way of seeing)? Given the forward-looking direction of this set of essays and its revisions, could the traditional binary of these oppositions be problematized usefully? Nevertheless, this insightful book gives us a remarkable new look at Gérôme and his works without completely reframing him for contemporary eyes alone—as he remains a “moving picture” of a revolution in history painting.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Allan Doyle, “Groping the Antique: Michelangelo and the Erotics of Tradition”

Emerson Bowyer, “Monographic Impressions”

Emily Beeny, “Blood Spectacle: Gérôme in the Arena”

Marc Gotlieb, “Gérôme’s Cinematic Imagination”

Gülru Çakmak, “The Salon of 1859 and Caesar: The Limits of Painting”

Nina Lübbren, “Crime, Time, and The Death of Caesar”

Claudine Mitchell, “The Damaged Mirror: Gérôme’s Narrative Technique and the Fractures of French History”
Peter Benson Miller, “Gérôme and Ethnographic Realism at the Salon of 1857”

Mary Roberts, “Gérôme in Istanbul”

Peter Cooke, “An Artistic Enmity: Gérôme and Moreau”

NOTES


[3] In addition there have been major exhibitions of academic painters such as William-Adolphe Bouguereau (Montréal, 1984), Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier (Lyon, 1993), Paul Delaroche (London, 2010) and important initiatives by the Dahesh Museum. However, only limited selections from the Dahesh collections have been shown from time to time as, for example, “The Essential Line,” on view at the Lubin House in New York City during the winter of 2011.
Allan presents these essays in his introduction in an order different from that in the book. Asking the reader to determine the reason for his choices, he strategically establishes an interchangeable narrative as a meta-model of the new narratives presented in Gérôme’s work.

According to Giorgio Vasari, Michelangelo’s sculptural proclivities derived from the fact that he “was nursed on the chisels and hammers of a stonecutter’s wife.” See Giorgio Vasari, The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors… (1550).


This reviewer recently tested this multiplicity of time by carefully examining Arabs Crossing the Desert (1870) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In fact, from the sharp focus of the lifted foot of the horse traveling left to right (against the grain of sun and sand) to the out-of-focus group of riders in the distance at the left rear of the painting, the viewer can clearly see this kind of cinematic time.

Cuban liberation writer José Martí (1853-1895) will take up this same issue of the justifiable homicide in his critique of The Death of Marat (1875) by Santiago Rebull (1829-1902), a Mexican painter who spent a few months working in Paris during the middle of the nineteenth century.

In fact some modern investigations have tried to suggest that this event was not a death, but a theatrically-staged execution prior to Ney’s escape to the Carolinas in America. See H. H. Bradshaw, Execution Denied: The Story of Marshal Ney, Napoleon’s Bravest of the Brave (Baltimore, MD: Publish America, 2004). Also see the documents and personal belongings of Peter Stuart Ney (1769?-1846), who claimed to be the “true” Marshal Michel Ney, in the Rare Book Room of the Davidson College Library. Ney had been unsuccessfully defended in his trial by Pierre-Antoine Berryer (1790-1868), a great jurist of mid-century Paris and cousin of Eugène Delacroix.


Shaw Smith
Davidson College
shsmith@davidson.edu
Scott Allan is assistant curator in the Department of Paintings at the J. Paul Getty Museum. Reconsidering Gerome is a helpful edition to the writings about Gerome and Orientalist art in general. While the book suffers from a general lack of any kind of catalog combined with a less than clear organizing theme, several articles contained in this volume are very helpful to those wanting more depth and nuanced discussion of Gerome as well as a broader contextualization of his work. Gérôme’s painting fed his sculpture, and he painted his sculpture both literally (many of his works are in polychromed marble) and on canvas. He was also an early and enthusiastic photographer, who helped establish photography as a fine art at a time when most painters were hoping that it would just go away and leave their business alone. It is often suggested that this series of works relate to the Dreyfus affair in France, but as they predate Zola’s famous article J’accuse! of 1898, that is unlikely. I agree with more recent proposals that this Truth is the culmination of his themes of what is seen, visual revelation, and truth, particularly to nature. ISBN 978 2 867 70137 5. Scott Allan and Mary Morton, eds. (2010) Reconsidering Gérôme, Getty. Scott C. Allan and Mary Morton (ed.), Reconsidering Gérôme, Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010, in: Art Bulletin 94 (2012), No. 2, pp. 312–316. Turner, J. - Grove Dictionary of Art - Oxford University Press, USA; new edition (January 2, 1996); ISBN 0-19-517068-7. Catalogue of the exhibition in the Musée de Vésoul (August 1981).