

On Jean-Léon Gérôme and Shaping Western Identity

“The European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached, always ready for new examples of ‘bizarre jouissance.’ The Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness.¹” These were the words of Palestinian professor Edward Said, who feverishly studied how the West chose to depict other cultures. Over the course of his prolific career, he examined ways in which the West looked at the Orient; defining it as inherently different, backward, and static. This movement proliferated into Western art, literature, music, and thought, justifying colonization as a civilizing force of good. Said’s nearly 30 years of research and thought are exemplified by his magnum opus, *Orientalism*, a survey of the West’s “contempt” for civilizations on their periphery. On the cover of this work sits *The Snake Charmer* - an oil-on-canvas painting depicting a nude boy wrapped in a python as a mixed group of turban-wearing men look on in pleasure. This painting, the work of French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme, has become synonymous with Orientalism and the Western gaze. Gérôme’s work is not limited to just this one depiction of the vague and ever-threatening “East.” Born in 1824 provincial France, Gérôme’s academicism or history painting earned him the title “the world’s most famous living artist” in 1880². With a long career and over 770 works to his name, Gérôme shaped the Western identity by providing it an other for one of the first times in art history.

During the early stages of his career, Gérôme first earned a name for himself as a history painter. As a boy, he visited Florence, Rome, and Pompeii, finding inspiration for his studies of Greco-Roman mythology and exotic locals. This interest in the distant past was in vogue at the time, particularly in the academic circles of Paris, and garnered him his first entry into the Salon in 1846 with two more entries in the following year³. His career was effectively launched to

¹(Keita 2013, 62-75)

²(Ackerman 1986, 20-32).

³Ibid., 20-32.

stardom following a positive review of his 1846 *The Cock Fight*. Done in the Néo-Grec style, this oil-on-canvas painting depicts two roosters in combat, as a nude man pushes the losing rooster forward and a scantily clad woman leisurely watches. This idyllic seaside background complements the dramatic scene in the foreground. The “Néo-Grec” style benefited immensely from a Neoclassical Revival spurred on by the excavations in Pompeii and Herculaneum⁴. As such, the two are surrounded by the remains of some ancient Greek or Roman temple and abundant greenery while the viewer also catches a glimpse of the round coastline in the background. This combination of ancient backgrounds and contrastingly modern subjects formed the basis of Gérôme’s later works. In his early career, backgrounds ranged from provincial France to Greek and Italian townscapes, areas that were still in the “Western” sphere of civilization, albeit on the outskirts. *The Cock Fight* and a number of his other works constantly pushed the bounds of what was “Western” to the academic circles of Paris and offered a glimpse into the “queerness” of those outskirts that piqued the interests of the Parisian public.

After early success in the Salon and art institutions throughout the continent, Gérôme was quite financially secure. Using the small fortune he had acquired, Gérôme took to traveling the Middle East and observed “distant” lands like Turkey, Egypt, and Syria from 1854 to 1856⁵. It was these travels that drew him to depict the Orient and show a Western view of the outside world. In an effort to show what non-industrial life was like and the simplicity of foreign peoples, Gérôme began depicting static subjects performing daily rituals with elaborate and ornate backgrounds behind them. The static images read like the popular history paintings of French masters, but the subjects themselves were wildly different from the Greco-Roman ideals shown in the Salon. Borrowing heavily from his own studies of history painting, the end result

⁴(Dorkin 2019).

⁵(Ackerman 1986, 20-32).

was a collection of art that showed the Orient as inhabited by men and cultures stuck in time surrounded by intricate repeating patterns. The world was reproducible and the people were simple. This concept is perhaps best showcased in his 1876 *Pool in a Harem*, a modestly sized oil-on-canvas work depicting a daily bath in the Sultan's Harem. The piece is composed of two notably white concubines leisurely bathing and speaking with an African attendant. In the background stand various veiled and darker-toned women who remain unidentifiable to the viewer. The viewer is immediately drawn to the three central figures, locked in a conversation. Gérôme's women are completely devoid of musculature, they are round and relaxed, lacking the rigidity that dramatic historical paintings of the Salon possessed. The African attendant stands above them holding hookahs in hand. Aside from the face and his hands, the attendant is covered head to toe in dense and heavy fabrics. The figures' drastically different skin tones and social status are used as a commentary on the backwardness of Muslim and oriental societies compared to the recently emancipated French society. Compared to the "liberté, égalité, fraternité" of contemporary Paris, the Harem appears stuck in time with dated and immoral racial codes that the "civilized" and "enlightened" French would find shocking. Beyond the reposed subjects and the static cultures they imply, the background is divided into two - a muted lime-washed series of arches and an intricately tiled vague "structure." This ornate background is the product of repeating patterns, systems, and engineering - all of which culminate in a very mathematical and lifeless scene. Unlike the rough, natural, and non-geometric form of the coastline in *The Cock Fight*, this bath house is reproducible. The repetitive motifs could be anywhere - Istanbul, Cairo, Tunis - just not in the West. Gérôme has given the viewer a glimpse into an environment whose only geographic marker is its inherent otherness compared to the more organic Paris.

As Gérôme's career continued, he began experimenting with new mediums like sculpture and bronze-working and even returned to traditional history painting⁶. However, his most interesting work remains his orientalist pieces, perhaps none as profound as his 1887 *The Carpet Merchant*. If *Pool in Harem* was the Western take on Oriental women, *The Carpet Merchant* is a perfect foil and foray into the ideas of masculinity in the Orient. The mid-sized oil-on-canvas painting depicts an Egyptian Rug Market that Gérôme was said to have visited in 1885⁷. In the foreground on the floor, we see a group of merchants discussing the works in front of them, flanked to the sides by servants and veiled mystery figures. The merchants themselves are in a garb similar to African attendant's in *Pool in Harem*, they stand almost completely covered in a series of long robes and elaborate head coverings. The men are all given long beards and frail compositions. Though they only show their hands, we can see these figures are much more slender than the White subjects Gérôme had portrayed in *The Cock Fight* and other works. These figures are non-European and non-Western and hence do not convey the Western idealized body type. They are minuscule compared to the size of the rugs and the space surrounding them. These figures are well past their prime like, Gérôme argues, the culture they inhabit. While we are uniquely informed that this is a Cairo Market, the background once again employs the same techniques observed in *Pool in Harem*: muted and lime-wash walls surround the figures, and repeating geometric patterns define the midground of the composition. Despite having a definite location this time, the painting once again feels man-made, unnatural, and almost lifeless. There is a level of dust and grime to the painting that pairs with the dark lighting to create a damp and claustrophobic feel to the painting. Unlike his brightly colored Tangara workshops, concourses in

⁶(Ackerman 1986, 20-32).

⁷(Ackerman 1986, 20-32).

Versailles, or even Napoleon in the same city, these traditional Muslim and “other” spaces evoke discomfort and unease in the viewer.

Understanding Gérôme is fundamental to understanding Orientalism and how art history shapes the Western identity. For the majority of the semester, the course has taken an insular survey of Western art and identity; Western artists have only depicted themselves and the cultures they exist in. This creates a narrow definition of what “the West” is. There has always been a civilizational “other” to the West, one that represents the superiority of the West through its own backwardness. The Achaemenids, the Carthaginians, the Gauls, and the Muslim world—all have been used as foils to define the West in contrast with some other civilization. While this idea of “the other” is intensely political and brings with it concepts of racial superiority, it is a part of history and ought to be studied. The West defined itself in contrast with Gérôme’s subjects, and to ignore them in a course devoted to exploring the Western identity would be a mistake. This political nature of the “other” is also important because it has shaped the course of human history. Orientalism and Gérôme’s work created a perception of inferiority and backwardness that was used to justify colonialism and the subjugation of entire continents as a civilizing mission. It’s no coincidence that around a decade later, Kipling published his *White Man’s Burden*. The effects of orientalism continue to this day too, in 2019 alone Gérôme’s work was co-opted by alt-right German parties to stoke fears of Syrian refugees entering the country⁸. All in all, orientalism, Gérôme, and their controversial histories ought to be included in the Art Humanities curriculum to show a unique moment when the West used art to define its identity in relation to the world around it.

⁸(Delistraty 2019).

References

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