

THE SPECTACTULAR ART OF JEAN-LEON GEROME  
JUNE 15-SEPTEMBER 12, 2010 THE GETTY CENTER

Some things look better the second time around. Fashion designers know this- they're specialists at taking the very worst of the past and reconditioning it for the now. Somehow, what was once a cringe inducing embarrassment is transformed into a daring public declaration that *someone* has moved past those former humiliations. This farcical playing out of an absolution ritual has a kind of savvy where the originals could only be tragic. That might be another way of saying that what can happen the second time around is that context can smother content.

In Art, it's important to reconsider even the least meritorious and most repudiated work - not just to exhibit our tolerance for embarrassments of the past, but to make sure that we have not succumbed to the tastes of our time and missed something pivotal. It's in this spirit of the thing not seen nor understood- the 'Other'- that is at issue here, as Jean-Leon Gerome (1824-1904) is perhaps the finest and most notorious of the Orientalist painters working in France just as the first modernists began to undermine the authority of the Academy. Not at all 'Other' himself, Gerome was the embodiment of the Institutions by which the French government positioned its cultural authority. A professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, member of the Institute de France and the Legion of Honor, he was even in his own time cast as a kind of moribund academic obsessed with the minutia of getting things historically accurate in paintings which seemed utterly uninflected by the artist's own hand. Worse, his subjects were not the high-minded history painting that befits someone of this caliber, but ones which played to the basest instincts and prurient fantasies of the public at large. Painting the 'Orient', a kind of 'living antiquity', was the alibi that made this contradiction viable, but eventually left him open to the scathing inquisitions of Edward Said and Linda Nochlin a century later<sup>i</sup>. Nochlin's rather incontrovertible critique of his contributions to the discursive misrepresentation of an 'Imaginary Orient', constructed of Imperialist fantasies and cultural stereotyping, implies that even admirers of this work are suspect of misdemeanors against humanity.

This, of course is where a reconsidering requires more than just rehangings, it includes the writing of new texts<sup>ii</sup>, which describe the impetus for the reconsideration in the first place. In a sense, the paintings come to illustrate the arguments being made and to act as a presentation of the source material. The over arching theme of this accompanying scholarship is that in the very ways that Gerome's art exhibited a kind of degradation from the Academic standards of the day, it finds itself in accordance with what constitutes modern - or more to the point, contemporary- artistic values. His work is described as 'cinematic' in its presentation of narrative, his fixation with factual detail is recast as 'Realist', and much is made of the mechanical reproduction of his work into prints for mass circulation. The beauty of such post-structuralist readings of 'texts' is that nearly any argument can be asserted, if not as a text's overt message, than within the interpretation of its repressed opposite. I am pressed (by Said) to question, who does this refiguring of Gerome's artwork empower? In any case, these arguments don't convince me that Gerome was more of an artist than I thought; it only convinces me that Hollywood is the Academie des Beaux-Arts of our time. Mass appeal, believability and the creation of dramatic suspense are,

of course, the stock in trade of today's movie industry. It should be of no surprise that they- even in this day and age- do in fact have an Academy, whose annual awards ceremony rouses cries of discrimination, conservatism, and commercialism.

Since 9/11, images of the Orient, that is to say, the Near and Middle East, have become common in the news: shaggy backlit date palms, desert landscapes under a halo of dust, pointed arches, beautiful script flaking off concrete block walls, soldiers in poppy fields, men sitting on blankets, women with veils. In contrast to Gerome's depiction of an Orient arranged for a viewer's prurient and moralizing delectation, Westerners have infiltrated these images, heavily laden with munitions, camouflaged, their Gaze now corroborated by cameras affixed to their helmets. Thousands of miles removed, and fed a steady diet of fear, believers and infidels have never been so at odds. Rather than improved mutual understanding since the time of Gerome, or even Said, the extremists on both sides are spiking our anger with suspicion while we are goaded toward hostile postures. The issue of understanding the 'Other' has never been so urgent, yet surprisingly little art seems to have sprung from this need.

Los Angeles is a good place to contemplate the possibilities of understanding. We are the farthest Western outpost of Western civilization: far enough from Rome that we can almost see the Orient from the other side. Still, a kind of colony, but one whose civilizing message has dissipated into something like, "do your own thing"<sup>iii</sup>. This is a place where otherness is celebrated and often remunerated, a place that defines itself in terms of subcultures, sprawl, and the vagueness of its own boundaries. It is where Occidental rationalism and the Oriental indefinite find symbiosis; where science and art assist one another in the development of new forms of communication and culture. Filmmaking, video game development, artificial surfing reefs - or the surfboard itself - whose evolving form is a conversation between hydrodynamics and personal expression- are examples of an interaction that also provided the impetus for LACMA's Art and Technology program in the late '60's.

This is where we share a particular kinship with Mr. Gerome. Despite what one may think of his fascination with "ethnographic studies", Gerome saw that part of his mission as an artist was to document, with a kind of taxonomic accuracy, the minute variations and features of the world beyond. His interest in the exacting detail of the visages, dress, armaments and architecture- not just of the Orient, but also of ancient Greece and Rome- was nothing short of scientific, and the result of close observation and dedicated research. This accounts for what Nochlin calls his "self-effacing" brushstroke- a painterly style which proposes a kind of authorless transparency, a "documentary realism". Perhaps in his hand, that equates to an "artless" painting, but what is interesting here is the potential of art to be an instrument of investigation and the bearer of real knowledge. Knowledge is power, and this of course, regardless of his Humanist intentions, is where Gerome gets himself into trouble.

To the East of Los Angeles things take on a sense of the Oriental. The landscape opens as the vegetation thins, it could be featureless or it could be beautiful, and that is contingent on the location of the sun in the sky, or the temperature on the ground, or the stillness of the air. The vastness feels destabilizing like a landspeed record, and tranquil like a garden of

decommissioned airplanes. You can see the horizon, it shimmers in heat. The depressions where the land is flat turn dark like pools of water, they appear yielding: feminine, a void, fertile, entropic, corrupt. It is a land less regulated, populated by the deluded and disenfranchised, where messiahs use handcuffs and shamen smoke Marlboro Reds, where psilocybin is harvested and anti-freeze is boiled, where morality is local and ideologies procreate. It's where our troops are training for Afghanistan. And it too is a place where artists go to find inspiration. The desert is a natural home for the 'Other'.

The staging of this exhibition, in this place at this time, more so than simply the content of Gerome's body of work, should make us self-conscious as to our role in the issues at hand. As Gerome trends his way out from the dustbin, we can no longer simply indulge in the illicit pleasure to be had admiring these fallen masterpieces tucked away in the minor museums of secondary cities. They describe biases which have since become dangerous, yet they also make a case for the artist-emissary, and the notion that art can participate somehow in the transference of real knowledge. As Los Angeles matures into a city with mature institutions and endeavors to explain the layering of its cultural identity, it must recognize in its own sprawling mis-en-scene all of the actors in the Gerome morality play. Perhaps within these folds we can excavate a response to the issues Gerome's art now poses for us.

-Christopher James

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<sup>i</sup> Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York, 1978; Vintage Books Edition, 1979) is a touchstone of post-colonial studies. Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," *Art in America* 71, no. 5 (1983)

<sup>ii</sup> The accompanying text, "Reconsidering Gerome", edited by Scott Allan and Mary Morton (Getty Publications) includes 10 essays.

<sup>iii</sup> See Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles The Architecture Of Four Ecologies*, Harper and Row, 1971