This February the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid will be inaugurating Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), an ambitious exhibition jointly organised with the Musée d’Orsay, the Réunion des musées nationaux and J. Paul Getty Museum. It will be the first major monographic exhibition to be devoted to this French painter and sculptor since the celebrated one held in the United States thirty years ago, and the first to be devoted to the artist in Spain. The carefully selected group of oil paintings and sculptures to be seen in Madrid constitute a reduced version of the exhibition shown in Los Angeles and Paris during the course of 2010. Nearly 60 works will be shown at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, including some of Gérôme’s most famous and important creations, covering all facets of his lengthy and prolific career.

The exhibition is based on the art historical research and cataloguing of Gérôme’s work undertaken in recent years. It aims to present and analyse the artist’s work from a new viewpoint; not just as that of one of the most famous of the French Academic painters, but also as the output of one of the great creators of images in the 19th century, thus reassessing the position that Gérôme occupies within French painting of the period. This new focus will be used to explore the artist’s theatrical approach to history painting, his complex relationship with the Orient, use of polychromy in his sculptures, deployment of archaeological references, combative position against anti-academic art in the late 19th century, and the interesting fact that much of his work found a home in the United States. The catalogue will also analyse Gérôme’s particular visual syntax that at times led him to an obsessive illusionism, as well as his relationship with the visual arts, printmaking, photography and even filmmaking, which was soon to appear as a new art form.

Gérôme was one of the most famous painters of his day, although he was also the subject of criticism and controversy throughout his career. His popularity was largely the result of his careful promotion of his works, which became known beyond the frontiers of France and even reached the United States where he was one of the most admired and collected artists from the 1870s onwards. Gérôme soon became familiar with the new art of photography and, like most artists of his day, made use of photographs when devising some of his compositions. Above all, he made use of the new medium to sell his work. On the request of his dealer and publisher Adolphe Goupil (later his father-in-law), from 1859 onwards Gérôme began to use photographic reproductions and prints to disseminate his works.

Images from left to right:
La fin de séance, 1886. Private collection;
Le barde noir (Le barde africain), c.1888. Qatar Museums Authority, Doha;

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He also adapted his output to suit Goupil’s publishing aims, judiciously combining anecdotal subjects that guaranteed popular success with a type of composition suited to reproduction in the small format of prints or as photographs. While called to task by some critics of the day, Gérôme succeeded in creating striking images that remained in the viewer’s memory.

Perfectly painted, with an absolute precision of line and a masterly use of colour, Gérôme’s works, despite the academic nature of his subjects and compositions, established a more complex relationship with modern art than might seem to be the case at first sight. This issue has been the subject of recent attention on the part of art historians when reassessing Gérôme’s work and artistic personality. He combined the Romantic interest in reproducing subjects from the classical world, the Far East and even French history with a rationalist desire to offer a truthful account, with the latter intention even prevailing over the need to make the composition intelligible and leading him to infringe academic norms on occasions.

Gérôme is thus important for the way in which he used photographs to devise his figures, scenes and landscapes, his desire to offer an authentic, precise representation that was rigorously based on scientific and archaeological research of the day, and his innovative concept of the setting or “set”, which anticipated and inspired scenes from the great historical films, particularly those set in classical Rome and made by directors such as Cecil B. DeMille and Mervyn LeRoy, among others. The fact that Gérôme’s work was so well known in the United States undoubtedly contributed to its role as a source of inspiration for some major Hollywood films. It is this dual nature of his output, at once both scholarly and popular, that makes it so important and appreciated today, both on the part of art historians and the general public.

**Gérôme, heir to Ingres and Delaroche, the “Neo-Greeks”**

Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) entered the studio of Paul Delaroche at the age of sixteen. This was an extremely popular studio and one frequented by numerous young artists, including the photographer Gustave Le Gray, who would become a close friend of Gérôme’s. In addition, the young Gérôme soon came under the direct influence of Jean-Dominique Ingres who, along with Delaroche, was one of the great champions of the academic tradition to which Gérôme’s art conformed during this initial phase of his career in which he worked in the genres of history painting and portraiture. Gérôme presented Cock Fight at the 1847 Salon. It enjoyed great success, revealing him as a new talent, and the artist soon began to receive his first official commissions. He became known as the leading name in a new school, the “Neo-Greeks”. A renewed interest in Antiquity, now inspired by the desire to present archaeological information in realistic detail, became the pretext for sentimental and pleasing genre scenes that present a humanised, domestic, indeed, almost trivial vision of antiquity, depicted through the use of a deliberately archaic style on occasions.
Orientalism

Gérôme soon abandoned the “Neo-Greek” style but his concern to offer realistic depictions continued to be present throughout his oeuvre. Anecdotal realism and an interest in detail were two of the principal characteristics of his art, both in his paintings of Oriental themes and in his great historical compositions. In both cases the artist revealed the same interest in achieving a theatrical and dramatic effect. Whether genre scenes, landscapes or figures, this part of Gérôme’s output reveals a profound concern to achieve a realistic reconstruction of places and settings, as well as an interest in the depiction of the picturesque in the form of buildings and exotic dress. His subjects no longer focused on the imaginary East depicted by the previous generation. Rather, Gérôme’s completely accurate and documented scenes were based on sketches produced during his numerous trips to the Near East, particularly Egypt and Asia Minor, and on photographs taken in situ by his travelling companions.

Gérôme and history

The core of the exhibition comprises an outstanding group of Gérôme’s history paintings, including examples of the principal themes within his oeuvre: Ancient Rome, Napoleonic scenes and episodes from the reign of Louis XIV. In all of them Gérôme’s originality lies in his rejection of the “grand sujet” and of the didactic and morally edifying role traditionally associated with works of this type. Rather than the culminating moment of a historical event, in his historical paintings Gérôme preferred to depict the associated anecdote, recording the episode that takes place immediately before or after the principal one. As a result, his paintings acquire a markedly narrative character, emphasised by the theatrical presentation of the composition and an almost cinematographic conception of the setting. His scholarly depictions of Roman civilisation and his obsession with precise archaeological detail made him a point of reference for films of this type. Paintings such as The Death of Caesar (1867) and Pollice Verso (1872) depict scenes that reveal evident parallels with celebrated films such as Quo Vadis by Mervyn LeRoy (1951) and Ben Hur by William Wyler (1959).

Fantasies and The artist in his studio. Polychrome sculpture

Gérôme’s career as a sculptor began in 1878 within the context of the Universal Exhibition. Despite being considered a model of academicism at that date, Gérôme never hesitated to defend an opposing position with regard to the use of polychromy in modern sculpture – a viewpoint overtly expressed in his painting Sculpturae vitam insufflate pictura - and he thus occupied the central position in contemporary debates. Following the example of classical antiquity, Gérôme added colour to his marble sculptures using a mixture of wax and pigments. His concern for detail and for archaeological accuracy resulted in a degree of illusionism and a use of trompe l’oeil in his paintings and sculptures of this period that borders on the obsessive. One of his most famous coloured sculptures, Tanagra (1890) also reveals the artist’s taste for the self-referential, in this case offering a game of mirrors between sculpture and painting. Depictions of the sculptor working in his studio became the subject of numerous works from his last years, many of them self-portraits.
EXHIBITION INFORMATION

**Title:** Jean-León Gérôme (1824-1904)

**Dates:** 15 February to 22 May 2011

**Organiser:** Musée d’Orsay, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, and Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

**Curators:** Laurence des Cars, academic director, Agence France-Muséums, Dominique de Font-Réaulx, Chief Curator, Musée du Louvre, and Édouard Papet, Chief Curator, Musée d’Orsay

**Coordination:** Leticia de Cos, Department of Research and Further Studies, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

**Number of works:** 57

**Publications:** Catalogue with texts by the three curators of the exhibition and other leading experts. Published in Spanish

**Website:** Spanish and English

VISITOR INFORMATION

**Address:** Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Paseo del Prado 8, 28014 Madrid

**Venue:** Basement, Palacio de Villahermosa

**Opening times:** Tuesday to Friday, 10am to 7pm; Saturday, 10am to 11pm, and Sunday, 10am to 7pm. Ticket desks close at 6.30pm and at 10.30pm on Saturday.

**Ticket prices:**
- Exhibition: general ticket, 7 Euros; reduced price ticket (visitors aged over 65, pensioners, students with proof of status and families comprising at least one adult and three children, or two children if one has Special Needs, all forming part of an accredited “Large Family”), 4.5 Euros
- Combined ticket (Permanent Collection + Exhibition): general ticket, 12 Euros, reduced price ticket, 7 Euros
- Free entry: children aged under 12 and unemployed visitors with proof of status

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PRESS INFORMATION

www.museothyssen.org/microsites/prensa/2011/Gerome