Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)

Jean-Léon Gérôme was born in Vesoul in eastern France in 1824. At the age of only sixteen and having completed his school studies, he moved to Paris to study with the painter Paul Delaroche whose popular and much frequented studio was a veritable college of artists. Over the following years Gérôme worked in Delaroche’s studio, out of doors and in the Louvre, completing his training at the École des Beaux-Arts. In 1842 he held his first public exhibition in Vesoul and one year later travelled with Delaroche to Italy where he became acquainted with classical art at first hand. «Suddenly a vast horizon opened up before me», Gérôme noted. He was fascinated by the figure of the gladiator and could not understand why it had not inspired any previous artists: «They have all […] been here and have seen this, but none has thought of depicting a gladiator. »

On his return to Paris, Gérôme worked in the studio of Charles Gleyre where he improved his draughtsmanship and learned to simplify and refine his forms. Gérôme was one of the group known as the Neo-Greeks, together with Aubert, Hamon, Auguste Toulmouche and Timoléon Lobrichon, who were considered the successors of the Neo-classical artists. They rejected a serious, sober classicism in favour of lighter, more spiritual subjects.

In 1847 Gérôme followed Delaroche’s advice and presented The Cock Fight at the Paris Salon, winning a third class medal. He was now considered the leader of the Neo-Greek movement and the art critic Théophile Gautier became his principal champion. «This subject, so apparently ordinary, acquires a rare elegance and exquisite distinction through Gérôme’s fine pencil and delicate brush», Gautier wrote.

In 1855 the artist travelled to Egypt for the first time, a trip that he repeated on several occasions and which led him to discover the desert and the pyramids of Giza, as well as other Near Eastern countries such as Algiers, Israel, Turkey and Syria. The numerous sketches that he made provided Gérôme with an increasingly wide range of subjects for his paintings.

Shortly after this date, Gérôme began an association with Adolphe Goupil who would later become his father-in-law. Well connected with numerous international art dealers, Goupil had various branches abroad that enabled him to sell Gérôme’s paintings and reproductions of his works. In 1863 the artist married Marie Goupil and settled in Paris. He sent The Prisoner to the Salon, a composition that would subsequently become one of his most celebrated. The teaching programmes at the École des Beaux-Arts were updated and restructured and three painting studios were established, of which Gérôme directed one.

In 1869 the artist was made an honorary member of the Royal Academy in London, where he exhibited in 1870 and 1871. He painted The Turkish Bath, his first work in a series on hammams, as well as Prayer at the Mosque, which was also the first of his series on mosque interiors.

In an exhibition held in Paris in 1873 Gérôme presented For Sale. Slaves in Cairo and his famous Pollice Verso, both of which were also shown at the Universal Exhibition in Vienna. A year later he presented L’Éminence grise, Rex Tibicen and A Collaboration at the Salon and was awarded a gold medal for these works. Some critics and members of the public protested at the award of a gold medal to a genre painter.
In 1876 Gérôme was appointed a member of the Conseil Supérieur des Beaux-Arts. At the 1878 Paris Universal Exhibition he was awarded a medal of honour in the category of painting and exhibited his first monumental sculpture, entitled Gladiators. Although only awarded a second class medal, from this date onwards Gérôme increasingly focused on sculpture rather than painting.

In 1883 Gérôme painted one of his most important works inspired by the history of Rome, entitled The Last Prayer of the Christian Martyrs. He continued to work in marble, creating a group sculpture of historical figures on horseback entitled Napoleon entering Cairo.

At the inauguration of the Universal Exhibition of 1900 Gérôme made his famous attack on modern painting. Just as the President of the Republic was about to enter the room devoted to Impressionist paintings, Gérôme exclaimed: «Stop, M. le Président, here lies the shame of France!»

In 1902, after four decades of teaching activity, Gérôme left his position as head of the studio at the École des Beaux-Arts. A year later he showed his last two canvases at the Salon, Preaching in the Mosque and View of Medinet El-Fayum.

Gérôme died on 10 February 1904 aged 80. Many of the numerous marbles, bronzes and plaster sculptures that remained in his studio were taken to the Museum in Vesoul. Huge crowds attended his funeral at the cemetery in Montmartre. Gérôme was an extremely prominent figure and news of his death reached as far as the United States. At the time his oeuvre was considered to comprise around 600 paintings (most of which had been sold abroad), sixty sculptures and hundreds of drawings and studies.