



**OPINION**

# Uncovering the Layers of Gérôme: Qatar's revisionist look at Orientalism



1 Comment

December 22, 2024 at 2:43 pm



Installation view of Seeing is Believing The Art and Influence of Gérôme Courtesy of MATHAF Arab Museum of Modern Art and Lusail Museum Doha



Call it “owning the narrative”; call it “historicising the Orientalist stare in order to move forward”; or “revisionism by showing the nuances.” The only sure thing is that there is something inherently interesting about presenting the work of the artist who came to represent Orientalism in art to the very people his art was about.

That’s what I thought as I entered the blue rooms of the exhibition *Seeing is Believing: The Art and Influence of Gérôme* at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. The French artist, who lived and worked in the 1800s, was extremely influential in his depictions of the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, shaping Western perceptions of these regions during the very century when colonialism and so-called “Oriental Studies” were entrenching global power dynamics.



Gérôme the black bard 1888 Lusail Museum Qatar

Organised by the future Lusail Museum — an institution under development in northern Doha that will house the largest collection of Orientalist art — the major exhibition also borrowed works from institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Islamic Arts Museum in Malaysia. It featured new scholarship, previously unseen works, and a historical and biographical approach to Jean-Léon Gérôme’s life, timed to celebrate the 200th anniversary of his birth. The show also had a photographic section, curated by Giles Hudson and dedicated to visions of the Orient from the artist’s time until today, and a section

dedicated to star-curator Sara Raza showcasing how contemporary artists rebelled against the Orientalist stare and turned it on its head.

### The artist and his influence

Clearly, when faced with Gérôme’s painting, we are confronted with a master. The Doha exhibition emphasizes his technical mastery and his artistic process, going as far as using X-ray and infrared technology to reveal the evolution of his paintings.

However, the exhibition mostly focused on Gérôme’s biography and artistic development as one of the most influential, marketable and successful artists of 19th-century France. His reputation was international, extending to America, Britain, Japan and Russia, and his fame was largely fuelled by his father-in-law and dealer, Goupil.

**READ: [Qatar reopens embassy in Syrian capital after 13 years](#)**

“Lithographic volumes of his works were distributed globally, and medals were cast in his honour,” explained American curator Emily Weeks. “His paintings became icons.”

66

*He became best known for his Orientalist works*

### Latest news [See all](#)

Uncovering the Layers of Gérôme: Qatar’...



Israeli opposition leaders accuse...



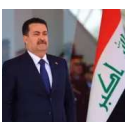
Houthi report US-UK airstrikes in Yemen's Al-...



Israeli government still far from...



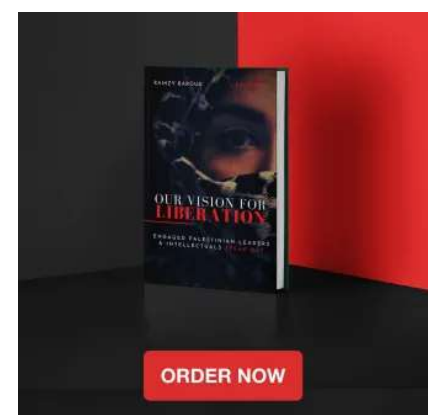
Iraq PM Sudani receives official invitation to vis...



### Subscribe to our newsletter

Email Add

Sign up



While Gérôme early on tackled a variety of subjects, including Roman gladiators and scenes of exotic Italians from Naples, he became best known for his Orientalist works. The show also included some of these early works that he painted in Italy, showing his initial fascination with light, architecture and people, and a “romanticisation” of “the other” that transcended the orient, to embrace other times in history, Europeans and so on.

These visions shaped a worldview, constructing perceptions of the Middle East and beyond, creating a number of epigones who followed in his footsteps. His contemporaries used to write: “If you want to learn about life as a farmer in Egypt, look to Gérôme.”

The interplay of reality and representation is a thread that runs across the entire exhibition, and is exactly what the discussion on Orientalism is about. And of course, art by definition is always a blend of imagination and realism. Of personal sensitivity encountering the spirit of the times. Of the personal and the political. And sometimes this gets problematic.

### **Revisionism or owning the narrative?**

As I was writing a first draft of this article in the Café Zazie in the Metro in Rome, my colleague Antonio from *La Repubblica* stormed in. He had visited the exhibition with me and a group of journalists just weeks earlier and not being familiar with the artist at the time, he had done his own research as soon as he got home.

“

*“Gérôme is a pig,” announced Antonio*

He slammed a book on the table — a biography of the artist— and declared, “I knew it!” I glanced at the cover of the book, where Gérôme had represented himself as an imposing Zeus-like figure, reminiscent of the famous Ingres painting. “Gérôme is a pig,” announced Antonio. It was not only Gérôme’s exoticism; what disgusted him most were Gérôme’s depictions of harem scenes and slave markets, which exploited women and their sexuality in a demeaning way.

Even before entering the exhibition in Doha, Antonio had seen this coming, and he felt that in the curator’s selection there was a part of the story which was missing.

There was no way that my excitement for good painting would make him re-evaluate the artist. The Qataris could try to present a selective view of Gérôme all



they wanted, but for Antonio, there was no possible salvation; no revisionism that could save this guy.

### **It is not what it seems**

While guiding journalists across the show, Weeks would say that it is not what it seems. She did not shy away from the fact that Orientalist paintings were tools of imperialist propaganda. At the same time, she pointed out that not all Orientalists are alike.

#### **READ: France to host Syria meeting, cautious on aid, sanctions lifting**

Indeed, unlike other artists who compiled "Oriental types" and collections of drawings that were highly racist and fostered stereotypes, what made Gérôme unique was his first-hand engagement.

"He travelled to Egypt, Istanbul and other parts of the Middle East numerous times, embedding himself in local culture and even curating art for the Ottoman Sultan," explained Weeks, while showing drawings where he wrote the name of the subjects depicted, giving them an identity, rather than having them fade under the categorisation of race.

"This historical grounding helps visitors understand Gérôme's approach to Orientalism," continued the curator. "In the 19th century, Orientalism meant non-indigenous artists' representations of the region, full stop," said Weeks. "This was Gérôme's context."

Of course, as Antonio pointed out, having made me browse through the book which showcases paintings that were not included in the Doha show, Gérôme's legacy is undeniably controversial. I'd argue that it is quite normal that in a curated show, there are things that are included and things that are left out, in order to convey a narrative.

And clearly the narrative that the Doha show was to convey is an empowering one for the Arab world, which now has a strong museum structure, able to dictate the new rules for art criticism, and rewrite art history. As in the case of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the way that

Gérôme veiled circassian lady 1876 Lusail Museum Qatar

the Gulf countries are doing this is by giving room to Western institutions and Western artists, and through a cooperation of sort, rewriting the narratives.

At Mathaf, visitors were confronted with a digital version of Gérôme's *The Snake Charmer*, a painting that became emblematic of the worst aspects of Orientalism. The painting was presented alongside early editions of Said's and Nochlin's works, creating a dialogue between past and present interpretations of Gérôme's art.

And while Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Linda Nochlin's *The Imaginary Orient* did not specifically address Gérôme's works, the exhibition's final section highlighted their critiques of Orientalism as imperialist propaganda. "In this section, we are no longer looking at Gérôme's paintings as examples of brilliant technique or creativity," Weeks pointed out. "We are examining them as part of a larger narrative about power and representation."

The whole exhibition grappled with a critical question: Can good painting justify representations that are politically or morally problematic?

### **History in the making**

By hosting *Seeing is Believing*, Qatar is making a statement. It is embracing Gérôme's work while asserting control over the narrative surrounding Orientalism. The exhibition suggests that by embracing Gérôme, these images are harmless and that they are in control of the narrative of "the Orient", which is ultimately the narrative about themselves.

““

*Is this revisionism part of a larger policy?*

Yet, one cannot help but wonder if this revisionism is part of a larger policy. Qatar's ties with France are strong on a cultural level, as we saw a lot of French art and artistry in Qatar, especially in the intersection of the luxury market and art.

A few days before seeing the Gérôme show, I bumped into a Hermes special booth at the National Museum of Qatar, and another well-curated show of jeweller Chaumet at the contemporary art complex M7.

Whether soft power has anything to do with the Mathaf show or not, what is evident is the opening up of a space for critical discourse on Orientalism and its lasting impact from the perspective of one of the Arab countries which, with a top-notch museum structure, has the power to advance the discourse on Orientalism in art.

Ultimately, the Doha exhibition succeeded in rebalancing the two dimensions of politics and beauty, reality and imagination, recontextualising Gérôme's works within the framework of postcolonial studies, and leaving any answers to the viewers.

"The reading of Gérôme's art is not over," said Weeks at the end of her exhibition tour. "It's up to you to decide what to make of it."

**READ: Qatar vows to stop EU gas sales if fined under due diligence law, FT reports**

*The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Middle East Monitor.*

1 COMMENT

Unless otherwise stated in the article above, this work by **Middle East Monitor** is licensed under a *Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License*. If the image(s) bear our credit, this license also applies to them. **What does that mean?** For other permissions, please **contact us**.

**Spotted an error on this page? Let us know**

---

**Trending**

**Today** **This week**

---

**NEWS**