NEW RESEARCH PAPER

GEROME, Jean-Leon
French, 1824-1904
Born: Vesoul - 1824
Died: Paris - 1904

POLLICE VERSO (THUMBS DOWN), ca.1872
38" h x 58 3/4 w
Oil on canvas
Museum Collection 1968.52

INTRODUCTION

Jean-Leon Gerome believes it is the "obligation on the part of the artist to be true even in minute matters to the period and locality of a work pretending to historical character. […] Of Gerome, it is alleged that he never paints a picture without the most patient and exhaustive preliminary studies of every matter connected with his subject. In the accessories of costume, furniture, etc. it is invariably his aim to attain the utmost possible exactness" (Nochlin 37).

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The title of this painting is *Pollice Verso*, (Thumbs Down). However, research reveals:

> *Pollice verso*, or *verso pollice* is a Latin phrase meaning 'with a turned thumb', that is used in the context of gladiatorial combat. It refers to the hand gesture used by Ancient Roman crowds to pass judgment on a defeated gladiator. The type of gesture described by the phrase *police verso* is unclear. From the historical and literary record it is uncertain whether the thumb was turned up, turned down, held horizontally, or concealed inside the hand to indicate positive or negative opinions. Popularly, it is assumed 'thumbs down' was a signal that a defeated gladiator should be condemned to death: 'thumbs up', that he should be spared (*Pollice verso*).

Gerome, in this work of art, brought the gesture of the thumb signal to popular attention in 1872 with this painting. Gerome's, *Pollice Verso*, is a large painting that reveals the climax of a gladiatorial contest where a man's life is at stake. Viewed from the floor of the Roman Coliseum, one's eye is drawn to the dramatic scene of a grouping of gladiators. The victorious *mirmillo* stands with his foot resting on the supine *retiarius* who has tripped over another *retiarius*, slain, lying beneath him. The defeated gladiator has lost both his net and triton. The *mirmillo* holds his shield in his left hand, his short sword at his side threatening

the vanquished *retiarius*. He looks to the Vestal Virgins asking whether he should kill him. The *retiarius* thrusts his right arm toward the Vestal Virgins pleading for his life. The Vestals lead the crowd with their thumbs down.

The triumphant *mirmillo* is an older, experienced fighter, certainly not a weightlifter, that is obvious in his sunken chest and fat that hangs over his belt. He is obviously cunning and experienced. He is a survivor. It appears he "has won an easy victory over the inexperience of the younger man, and now he tilts his head back to see through the eye holes of his visor, gauging the reaction of the crowd. His insensitivity to the life he is about to destroy shows in the practiced pose of victory" (Ackerman Geromes sculpture 83).

The emperor, seated in his appointed box, "(some thought they recognized Claudius, with Messalina at his side) seems blasé: he will be the last to decide by turning his thumb up or down" (Goupil 105). The crowd condemns the *retiarius* remorselessly by gesturing their thumbs down. Most prominently, the Vestal Virgins are on their feet gesturing their wishes for the kill. The Vestals were priestesses of Vesta, goddess of the hearth. It was their duty to keep the sacred fire burning that could not be allowed to go out. There were six vestals, who were chosen at puberty and sworn to celibacy for thirty years. At the end of thirty years, they could marry. A Vesta's clothing consisted of an *infula* (robe) which was white and made of wool. The *suffibulum*, the white woolen veil, was worn during rituals and sacrifices. Worn underneath their robes were red and white woolen ribbons, "symbolizing the Vestal's commitment to keeping the fire of Vesta and to her vow of purity, respectively. The *pallin* was the long, simple shawl, a typical article of clothing for Roman women. The *palla*, and its pin, were draped over the left shoulder" (Vestal Virgin 4). The Vestal Virgins are seated in the front box calling attention to their function of importance at the event.

Gerome's approach reveals a studied and factual rendition of the archeological and historical detail in *Pollice Verso*. Contemporary sources reveal the Coliseum was commissioned by Vespasian and inaugurated by Titus in A.D. 80 with a hundred days of games. The arena, laid out as an ellipse, was able to accommodate fifty thousand people on its three floors of tiers. Covered by an immense awning that spanned the entire building, it had been maneuvered into position by sailors from the fleet at Misenum. Gladiatoral contests were held at the Coliseum until they were banned in A.D. 404 (Gabucci 42). The Coliseum was built almost entirely of blocks of white and yellow travertine that had been quarried in Tivoli. "The *podium* was the place reserved for the Vestals, the senators, the chief magistrates, […] the emperor and his family. […] in this place of honor [one is] so close to the arena that [one] would be able to clearly see the smallest detail of battle and the facial expression of the dying gladiators" (McGuire 144).

Gerome crafts the flat canvas with a panoramic view that gives the illusion of great space in the Roman Coliseum. This is evident in the height and massiveness of the viewers' stands that rise up over the gladiatorial scene and fade into the background giving one the illusion of the oval curve of the arena and the vast numbers of the crowd to the event. The Emperor's box is flanked by two standard columns.

Gerome uses compositional elements to engage the viewer. His use of color - the dark green walls of the stands give permanence to the overall structure of the immense arena. Gerome's use of red directs the eye of the viewer around the painting notably in the streaks of blood on the floor of the arena; to the lines on the stands, to the rugs; to the emperor's box with its distinctive banner and standard-bearing columns. Gerome uses light in the same manner evident in the lines across the arena floor to the wall; to the vestal's white robes; to the bright sunlight of the peasants sitting in the stands back to the gladiator's helmets. The two gladiators – victorious and supine - are united in a square notable in their parallel arms. Above and behind the gladiators, Gerome forms other squares around the emperor's box and the rugs.

Secondary passages contribute to the scene without competing with the tense gripping moment. They are:

> The great mail sleeve of the *mirmillo*, and the depiction of his heavy body; […] The richness of his armour shows his success. Compare his helmet to the helmet of the fallen *retarius* underfoot. The burnished metal of the fallen gladiator's helmet is a marvel of perception and of accurate values, brightened by the sunlight filtered through the canopy, yet subordinate to the victor's headgear. The foreshortening of the two fallen *retarii* is another remarkable feat of drawing. Gerome employs inventions throughout the painting that complete the atmosphere of the circus: the varying reactions of the curious crowd; the decorations of the coliseum itself; the standards with their griffins; the relief under the emperor's box; the hanging rugs (Ackerman le tout ensemble 32).

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What, then, is the message Gerome wishes to convey about the subject matter he uses in this painting? Ackerman states:

> The painting is about a single idea - the enormous, feted cruelty of the moment - an observation that reverberates throughout the composition. Gerome is severe in his non-heroic conception of gladiatorial combat, and his point of view is modern. He re-examines history - hitherto idealistic - from a realist point of view. His indignant disparagement of 'death for entertainment' is clear and strong. He sees no redemption in death (Ackerman le tout ensemble 33).

The painting is signed at the lower right.

BIOGRAPHY

Jean-Leon Gerome was the son of a well-respected goldsmith who allowed his sixteen-year old son to enter the studio of Paul Delaroche in Paris in 1840. Gerome remained with Delaroche for three years when the student followed the master to Italy. In 1844, Gerome returned to Paris and studied with Charles Gleyre.

In the Salon of 1847, Gerome exhibited The Cockfight which was immediately praised by the poet and critic, Theophild Gautier. Gaining notoriety, Gerome began to paint commissions from the national and municipal governments. He competed for the *Prix de Rome*. In 1855, he composed the decorations for the French Universal Exposition; in 1861, he painted a visit of Far Eastern ambassadors at the French court, all of which were lucrative. Gerome traveled to Egypt many times which heightened his interest in Egyptian life. His early works painted of the Near East were of westernized subject matter. Trips later, his subject matter began to change to subjects depicting activities and scenes more typical of the Near East. Now his subject matter became more serious and realistic which established him as a true ethnographic painter. In 1873, Gerome began to study and produce sculpture.

Gerome became one of the most respected teachers at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* where he taught approximately 400 students, many American, one of whom was the young Thomas Eakins. His father-in-law, Adolphe Goupil, was his master dealer and publisher who produced many photogravures in galleries in London, New York and Paris where he displayed and sold Gerome's works. Because of Gerome's great skill in creating human figures, the detail of his costuming and the particulars of surface and setting in his works, his paintings have been the inspiration for movie producers to emulate his subject matter into the movies. This painting is one such endeavor which was the impetus for the movie, Gladiator.

Gerome researched his subject extensively. The invention of photography in 1839 aided artists in acquiring images of ancient ruins and Greek and Roman sculptures of the Classical world. Photographs helped to inform artists of scenes they could use to supplement their live models in their studios and natural settings.

With the development of Impressionism, Gerome developed a reputation as an anti-Impressionist which tarnished his reputation as to the way 19th Century art is taught and written. Gerome, the academician, believed that drawing was the "grammar of art" and he strongly disproved of the "building up of figures in color tones" espoused by the impressionists. He was very outspoken in his discontent and they spoke and wrote negatively of him as well (Evans 14).

Gerome became the representative of the establishment, a role he seemed to enjoy. He was powerful in artistic circles and did harm to young *avant-garde* artists with his behind-the-scene antics. As a member of the Salon jury, he continually voted against Impressionist entries; he fought the installation of the Manet Memorial Exhibition in 1884 at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* (Evans 14).

No doubt Gerome created ill will. Evans argues:

> These champions of a single *avant-garde* have not only distorted our views of the artistic life of 19th century France, but our notion of the artistic life of the rest of Europe and America as well. For the art historians of all other nations write their national art histories to match the supposed development in France, trying to link their best 19th century painters to the 'main line' in France - to Manet and the Impressionists - while ignoring many obvious parallels and real

> connections of their national schools with the objective realists of the academy (15).

Gerome's political power and popularity declined during his lifetime, and people were made to feel embarrassed if they admired his works. At his death in 1904, Gerome was buried with official praise, public indifference and critical acrimony. The prices of his pictures had already started to drop and continued their decline. For many years his pictures were scarcely on view and critics continued to deride his works as "bad examples" of "typical academic work" (Evans 15). It is through the efforts of contemporary historians that Gerome is being given re-consideration as one of the greatest artists of 19th Century France.

Gerome was a popular man in society in his own right. He was admired by intellectuals, writers, journalists, composers, students. He was an avid hunter and horseman. "Throughout his life he was known as a handsome man who retained a full head of white hair in his old age, wore a trim mustache, had sharp strong eyes and whose bearing remained, until his death, erect and 'military'" (Evans 13).

"By the time of his death in 1904 he had produced 600 canvases and 60 sculptures and his estate was valued at 1 million gold francs" (Goodman 56).

TECHNIQUE

Gerome worked from academic principles. Ackerman espouses that Gerome likely painted with the knowledge of the great theorist, Roger de Piles, who had compiled his academic theory of *le tout ensemble* in 1670-1710*:*

> […] the general effect, how things fit - together was the guiding principle over the four parts of painting in his theory of art. In his writings he stresses the *éclat,* the impact of the first view, the overall effect of a composition: it must be clear, organized in lines, forms and colors in a manner which together make the idea of the painting immediately legible and understood. Des Piles attributes the ability to pull all this off not to training or rules, but to the personal *genius* of the painter (Ackerman *le tout ensemble* 33).

How does this theory apply to this work of art? First of all, the *éclat* is clear, one *retiarius* is slain and another pleads for his life […] "the vitality, beauty and horror of the painting itself surpasses our expectations" (Ackerman le tout ensemble 32). The sober color of the canopied arena is like the shadow of death that falls over the fallen *retiarius*, yet his strong use of color, that enlivens the light of the late afternoon sun, reveals his values. "None of the accessories in Gerome's picture stand out, incredibly painted as they may be. All are enclosed in the soft atmosphere of the darkened arena and disciplined into the general effect" (Ackerman *le tout ensemble* 33).

Evans states: "This ability to make arrangements which underline his ideas without dramatic devices is one of Gerome's greatest skills. The arrangements of figures and other elements

are not only meaningful in the narrative; they are beautiful compositions on the surface of the canvas and in the illusory space of the scene" (12).

D. Cady Eaton, an American painter who had the privilege of watching Gerome work on many occasions, wrote of the refinement of Gerome's oil technique:

> […] no painter had a more absolute control of the elements of his art. He could produce on canvas the exact representation of any given thing, without hesitation, without mistakes, immediately and satisfactorily. His drawing was perfect. He knew the exact amount of every pigment necessary for the production of any required colour, tone or shadow. When the work was finished, his palette was clean (Ackerman 162,163).

Gerome prepared his palette in the morning. It contained: silver white, cadmium yellow, yellow ochre, Mars yellow, vermillion, red-brown, burnt Siena, black lake, purple lake, emerald green, mineral blue, azure cobalt, ivory black. He was so astute in his knowledge of colors that he would paint knowing the color would alter in time.

He probably started a work by painting the principal highlights. He is known to have finished his figures before starting the background which he painted last. Gerome varnished as late as he could. "Since he painted very thinly, he did not have long to wait. Just before he varnished, he added the last layer of glazes. Still wet, these glazes would rise into the varnish, attaining greater transparency" (Ackerman 163).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gerome lived during revolutions and political changes during the 19th and early 20th Centuries in France. Ackerman states:

> Gerome was himself born under a monarch, lived through two revolutions, one republic, an empire and died during another republic, in the early 20th century. He experienced, several times over, the change from monarchial to a democratic society and the weakening of destruction of absolute values. This was basically, a change from idealism to realism - philosophically and aesthetically - which Gerome participated in. He had to adapt traditional and essentially aristocratic, academic principles, to democratic principles (*le tout ensemble* 31).

Guided by the wisdom of the past, Neoclassical thinkers were guided by philosophy and science:

> Neoclassicism was a child of the Age of Reason (the Enlightenment), when philosophers believed that we would be able to control our destinies by learning from and following the Laws of Nature (the United States was founded on Enlightenment philosophy). Scientific inquiry attracted more

> attention. Therefore, Neoclassicism continued the connection to the Classical tradition because it signified moderation and rational thinking but in a new and more politically-charged spirit ("neo" means "new," or in the case of art, an existing style reiterated with a new twist.) (Neo-classicism Smart history 11).

It was during the mid 19th Century that a new vision of history painting engendered a transplant of everyday life into Greek or Roman surroundings. The two artists who had a direct influence on Gerome were Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Paul Delaroche. Ingres' influence resulted in the development of Gerome's first significant style […] "when he revisited his Greek sources of inspiration through the prism of the personal and the everyday, or even the perfectly trivial" (Spectacular 25, 28). The bond that Gerome formed with Delaroche […] " laid down a line of force that was central to the development of history painting in the nineteenth century and its substitution of the principle of narration for that of edification" (Spectacular 28).

His first painting of gladiators, Ave Caesar, was painted in 1859. Gerome felt Ave Caesar fell short of the effect he so desired in his rendition of the gladiator's weapons and architectural aspects. So with more reliable and studied information, thirteen years later, he painted *Pollice Verso*, changed the scene and stated this work would be his best painting because he had reliable documentation. In his own words:

> One of my friends, […] traveled to Rome and to Naples, where he made good molds of gladiators' helmets, greaves, and bucklers, and it was in these molds that the galvanoplasty was done, so that I now have in my possession copies that are identical to the originals. It is also thought that in his research Gerome had access to the pieces of armor kept in the Pourtales collection in the Louvre […] Thus, the vanquished *retiarius* in the foreground of *Pollice Verso* is wearing a shoulder plate just like the one in the Pourtales collection, which can be recognized by the silver crescent moon on the curved part, while a greave from the same collection can be identified in the drawing with which Gerome illustrated an article by Edouard de Beaumont for the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1878 (Spectacular Art 128).

STYLE

The style of this work is Neoclassicism. The Neoclassical period of art is characterized by the return to the ideals and art forms of classical Greece and Rome.

> The Neo-classicists, such as Jacques-Louis David preferred the well-delineated form – clear drawing and modeling (shading). Drawing was considered more important than painting. The Neo-classical surface had to look perfectly smooth - no evidence of brush-strokes should be discernable to the naked eye […] Neo-classicism is characterized by: clarity of form, sober colors; shallow space; strong horizontal and verticals that render that subject matter timeless, instead of temporal as in the dynamic Baroque works; and,

Classical subject matter – or classicizing contemporary subject matter (Neo-Classicism-Smarthistory 11).

TOURING TIPS

One might like to talk about Gerome's expertise in sculpture by using the small gladiator models - *retarius* and *mirmillo* that he used to insure exactness in his gladiator paintings.

Gerome's *Pollice Verso* can be compared and contrasted as to technique to Monet's Flowering Arches or Courbet's Beach at Dieppe.

CONCLUSION

Gerome's *Pollice Verso,* is a magnificent example of Neoclassicism for a variety of reasons. It provides teaching opportunities on expounding on this work of art and its attributes. With his smooth surface, he skillfully projects the Roman Coliseum with all of its architectural details; the major players to the event; perfected costuming; and a narrative so all would be factually correct. Skillfully, he arranges his painting with color, *chiaroscuro* and values to reveal the dominant idea. Gerome was innovative in adapting idealistic history painting to the image of democratic subject matter. His subject matter concerns non-heroic characters that interact with their contemporaries to tell us the story of one such incident in the Roman Coliseum. The gory details of the event teach us how barbaric these events were in Roman times. Yet, the timelessness of this painting, made by Gerome in the 19th Century has given us subject matter for many cinematic opportunities, most prominently the film, Gladiator, in recent years. Gerome said this would be his masterpiece. We are thankful to have Gerome's masterpiece, *Pollice Verso,* in our collection at Phoenix Art Museum.

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