



**NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS  
AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE**

**VOLUME ONE**

Edited by Sarah Lees

With an essay by Richard Rand  
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

With contributions by Katharine J. Albert, Philippe Bordes, Dan Cohen,  
Kathryn Calley Galitz, Alexis Goodin, Marc Gotlieb, John House,  
Simon Kelly, Richard Kendall, Kathleen M. Morris, Leslie Hill Paisley,  
Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,  
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**154 | Snake Charmer** c. 1879

Oil on canvas, 82.2 x 121 cm

Below center, left edge: J.L GEROME.

1955-51

Ever since 1978, when this painting was illustrated on the cover of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Snake Charmer* has been seen as emblematic of a complex ideological discourse. Said defined Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."<sup>1</sup> In this light, Gérôme's depiction of a young boy giving a provocative performance before an ethnically varied group of armed spectators can be seen as a means of representing a non-European culture as exotic and mysterious, thereby producing a sense of superiority in the European audience for which the painting was primarily intended. Since he defined his project as an examination of textual representations, Said never once mentioned Gérôme's painting, but numerous subsequent authors have examined aspects of the artist's work, and this painting in particular, in relation to the concept of Orientalism that Said defined. These

studies have focused not only on the nature of the narrative depicted, particularly its erotic and homoerotic subtext, but also on the individual components of the painting and Gérôme's meticulous attention to their details.

Gérôme drew most of his subject matter in both painting and sculpture, which he took up later in his career, from classical and historical sources, the traditional material of French history painting, or from his travels around the Mediterranean basin. After spending several months in Italy at the age of nineteen with his teacher Paul Delaroche in 1843, Gérôme traveled further east ten years later, to Constantinople. It was the first of many such journeys, for, as he is said to have commented, "My brief stay in Constantinople whetted my appetite, and the Orient was the most frequent of my dreams."<sup>2</sup> He next visited Egypt, spending eight months in 1856 along the Nile and in Cairo, making sketches of locations and of people and beginning to collect the objects and costumes on which he would base many of his subsequent paintings. In the following years, Gérôme returned numerous times to the Near East, often in the company of other artists, including photographers who made additional documents that served as source material for his paintings.

The concern for accuracy in specific details of architecture, ornament, and costume characterizes Gérôme's work and creates the impression of overall accuracy in his images as a whole; it seems to imply that his depictions are faithful to an event that actually occurred at a specific place and time. *The Snake Charmer*, however, brings together widely disparate, even incompatible, elements to create a scene that, as is the case with much of his oeuvre, the artist could not possibly have witnessed. Snake charming was not part of Ottoman culture, but it was practiced in ancient Egypt and continued to appear in that country during the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Maxime du Camp, for example, described witnessing a snake charmer in Cairo during his 1849–51 trip with Gustave Flaubert in terms that are comparable to Gérôme's depiction, including mention of the young male disrobing in order to obviate charges of fraud.<sup>4</sup> The artist has placed this performance, however, in a hybrid, fictional space that derives from identifiably Turkish, as well as Egyptian, sources. As Walter Denny has noted, Gérôme copied the arch-shaped tile work of the back wall from three panels located in the Golden Passage (or *Altın Yol*) of the harem in Topkapi Palace in present-day Istanbul (though they were originally designed for a bath chamber).<sup>5</sup> He also copied the left-hand portion of the long frieze of inscriptions along the top edge of his painting from the Golden Passage tiles, but supplemented them with a longer band of text that appears on part of the Baghdad Kiosk, also in Topkapi Palace.<sup>6</sup> The floor, in contrast, closely resembles that depicted in the artist's *Prayer in the Mosque* (1871; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York),<sup>7</sup> which shows the mosque of 'Amr in Cairo.<sup>8</sup> Even the snake resembles several distinct species but cannot be definitively identified as a particular type.<sup>9</sup>

Given the varied nature of the elements he assembled, it is difficult to state precisely what sort of space Gérôme intended to represent. Many commentators have assumed that the scene occurs in a mosque, but the artist was familiar enough with Islamic practice to know that such a performance, before armed spectators, would not have taken place in a sacred building. Du Camp, in his narrative, stated that he invited the snake charmer into his own rooms, and perhaps Gérôme's richly decorated chamber is intended to show the quarters of the turbaned chief, where such a tile-lined room might be found, although little suggests that these figures are at home in this space. Gérôme later painted another image of a snake charmer (Isaac Delgado Museum of Art, New Orleans),<sup>10</sup> reusing ele-

ments such as the large wicker basket presumably used by the performer to transport snakes, but set it in the clearly public space of an exterior, partially covered courtyard, very different from the present work.

The figures seated before the young boy represent a range of ethnic types, and must have resulted from Gérôme's studies of individuals during his travels, as well as from the collection of costumes, weapons, and other objects he kept in his Paris studio. The lineup of soldiers with a turbaned leader recalls both *Egyptian Recruits Crossing the Desert* (1857; Nadj Collection) and *Prayer in the Home of an Arnaut Chief* (1857; location unknown), two paintings produced after his first trip to Egypt and exhibited in the 1857 Salon.<sup>11</sup> One man on the left side of the group in *Snake Charmer* wears an unusual helmet that Caroline Williams identified as a Persian object collected by Albert Goupil, Gérôme's brother-in-law, on his travels;<sup>12</sup> it is a prominent feature in several other paintings, including *A Weapons Merchant in Cairo* (1869; private collection),<sup>13</sup> where it appears alongside the same round shield with five studs that hangs on the wall in the present work.

Although *Snake Charmer* is clearly a pastiche, Gérôme was faithful to his sources to a considerable degree. The inscriptions in the tile work, in particular, have been described contradictorily as both readable and illegible but have not been properly understood in relation to an original. When the painting is compared to the three existing panels from the Golden Passage, it becomes clear that Gérôme made an effort to reproduce the Persian verse inscriptions, but did so inconsistently.<sup>14</sup> He created an almost exact transcription of the two cartouches of the left-most panel, including such details as the small tulip that pierces one of the characters, but he elided a few characters and omitted most of the diacritics that appear in the original tiles. In the next panel to the right, the artist reproduced the left-hand cartouche reasonably closely, but in the right-hand cartouche he fused numerous characters that appear as multiple short strokes in the originals into long, curling forms in his painting. The third panel from the left is itself a hybrid: Gérôme repeated the arch-shaped field of flowers on a dark ground from his first panel, but topped it with two cartouches, themselves quite faithfully copied, that appear above a decorative field with a light ground in the original tiles, and he shifted these decorative tiles to form the fourth panel in his painting. Although the floral pattern of the fourth panel matches one in the original tiles, its inscribed cartouches do not, and it appears that Gérôme may

have invented scriptlike forms in these and the remaining three cartouches to the right that are, in fact, meaningless.<sup>15</sup> For the long band of inscriptions at the top of his canvas, the artist similarly copied tiles from the Golden Passage and portions of the frieze of Qur'anic verses of the Baghdad Kiosk quite accurately in many passages, but not throughout.<sup>16</sup>

It is almost certain that Gérôme based his highly detailed depiction of this imaginary space on photographs, and he may never have seen the original tile work in situ.<sup>17</sup> This process might initially be inferred from the colors he employed, for although the predominance of blue and white in the painting corresponds approximately to the original tiles, the panels of the Golden Passage employ much more red than Gérôme depicted, a fact he could not have ascertained from black-and-white photographs. More specifically, the artist had contacts with and probably collected images produced by the Turkish photography firm of Abdullah Frères, and one of their prints shows precisely the section of the Golden Passage that Gérôme used as his source.<sup>18</sup> This photograph is very rare, yet Gérôme depicted the wall in his painting from approximately the same angle at which it is viewed in the photograph, making it highly probable that he knew this print.<sup>19</sup>

Gérôme was clearly aware that the inscriptions in the tile work were not simply decorative but carried meaning, yet a fundamental incomprehension, his inability to read and correctly transcribe Persian script, does render even the three left-hand panels partially unreadable. Even here, however, the artist may have known more about his sources than this usage of them would suggest. As he so often did, Gérôme reused certain elements of this composition; Denny noted that some of the arch-shaped tiles appear in *Bathers in the Harem* (c. 1901; private collection), and that two of the inscribed cartouches appear, greatly enlarged but again quite accurately copied, in *The Bath* (c. 1880–85; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco).<sup>20</sup> That both of these are bath scenes might even suggest that Gérôme was indeed aware of the content of the inscriptions and their reference to the panels' original location in a room adjacent to the harem baths in Topkapi palace.<sup>21</sup>

Tracing the sources and the recurring elements of Gérôme's work is not an end in itself, however, but rather helps to underscore the high degree of synthesis each painting entailed and to counteract the powerful reality effect that the artist's attention to detail produces. While this synthesis might be partially

understood as the result of academic training, which taught artists to compose history paintings based on careful study of historic artifacts, the practice is not neutral—"Gérôme," as Linda Nochlin noted, "is not reflecting a ready-made reality but, like all artists, is producing meanings," in this case meanings that participate in an Orientalist discourse.<sup>22</sup> Further, although Said suggested that in identifying Orientalism, "the things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original,"<sup>23</sup> in fact, for Gérôme, it was *also* precisely the correctness of the representation that enhanced his images' capacity to render their subjects exotic, effectively heightening the distance and difference between these subjects and their European observers. As he himself stated in reference to another painting (*Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant*, 1859; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven),<sup>24</sup> "It is here [in the costume of a gladiator] that the truth to detail is important, for it adds to the physiognomy and gives the figures a barbaric, savage, and strange appearance."<sup>25</sup> If the depiction of non-European people and practices as barbaric and strange is problematic now, in the aftermath of the colonialism that gave rise to such perceptions, it was far less so in Gérôme's time. The artist's prominent status during his lifetime, as well as the high price of *Snake Charmer* when it was sold to an American collector shortly after its completion, testifies to Gérôme's success at presenting such heterogeneous elements and imagined spaces as a seamless, convincing, even mesmerizing whole.

Albert Spencer, the collector of Barbizon as well as Academic paintings who bought this work from Gérôme's dealer Goupil, owned *Snake Charmer* for only eight years before selling it at auction, where it was purchased by Alfred Corning Clark, Sterling Clark's father. Clark lent it to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, and it hung in the Clark home for a number of years, first at 7 West Twenty-second Street, and then, after Alfred's death, in the house he and his wife had built on Riverside Drive, as photographs attest. Around the turn of the century, however, Elizabeth Clark sold it in partial exchange toward the purchase of a very different work, Géricault's *Trumpeter of the Hussars* (cat. 149). Forty-three years later the work again appeared at auction, and Sterling Clark, who recalled admiring the painting in his parents' house, acquired it for his own collection. By this time, Gérôme had fallen so out of favor that

the purchase price had dropped from the \$19,500 that his father had paid in 1888 to just \$500 in 1942, but it was a mark of the independent nature of Sterling Clark's taste that he considered it, nonetheless, "a masterpiece for that kind of painting as it used to be considered and is today!!!"<sup>26</sup> SL

**PROVENANCE** The artist, sold to Goupil, 24 Aug. 1880; [Goupil, Paris, sold to Spencer, 5 Oct. 1880];<sup>27</sup> Albert Spencer, New York (1880–88, his sale, Fifth Avenue Art Galleries, New York, 28 Feb. 1888, no. 66, sold to Clark); Alfred Corning Clark, New York and Cooperstown (1888–d. 1896); Elizabeth Scriven Clark, his wife, by descent (1896–1899/1902, sold to Schaus Art Galleries);<sup>28</sup> [Schaus Art Galleries, New York, from 1899/1902]; August Heckscher, New York (d. 1941); Virginia Henry Curtiss Heckscher, New York, his wife, by descent (d. 1941, her sale, Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, 22 Jan. 1942, no. 86, sold to Durand-Ruel, as agent for Clark); Robert Sterling Clark (1942–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Chicago 1893, p. 62, no. 2925, as *Le Montreur de Serpents*, lent by Alfred Corning Clark; Williamstown 1955, no. 51, pl. 36; Williamstown, 1958b, pl. 25; Munich 1972, p. 106, no. 351; Rochester–Purchase 1982, pp. 99–101, no. 41, fig. 103; Williamstown 1988c, no cat.; Williamstown 1993c, no cat.; Sydney–Auckland 1997–98, p. 99, no. 40, ill.; Williamstown–Baltimore–Charlotte 2000–2001, p. 130, no. 5, ill.; Williamstown–New York 2006–7, pp. 22, 33n15, fig. 27; Los Angeles–Paris–Madrid 2010–11, pp. 21, 190, 262–63, 278–79, no. 160, ill., as *The Serpent Charmer* (exhibited in Los Angeles and Paris only).

**REFERENCES** Strahan 1879–80, vol. 3, pt. 12, p. 123; Strahan 1881, pt. 8, ill. (print after the painting); Champlin and Perkins 1885, vol. 2, p. 129; Stranahan 1888, p. 319; Hering 1892, pp. 241, 261, ill.; Metropolitan Museum of Art 1897, p. 50, no. 173; Metropolitan Museum of Art 1897–98, p. 46, no. 173; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 67, ill.; Ackerman 1971, p. 27, ill.; Dayton–Minneapolis–Baltimore 1972–73, pp. 18–19, fig. 5; Sellin 1975, p. 45, ill.; Said 1978, ill. on cover; Harding 1979, p. 89, ill.; Verrier 1979, no. 42, ill.; Brooks 1981, pp. 46–47, no. 19, ill.; Vesoul 1981, p. 59, ill.; Larson 1982, p. 159, ill.; Boime 1983, pp. 67–68, fig. 9; Nochlin 1983, pp. 119–123, ill. (repr. in Stuttgart 1987, pp. 172–73, fig. 1.; Nochlin 1989, pp. 34–37, fig. 1; Schwartz and Przyblyski 2004, pp. 289–91, fig. 31.1); Ackerman 1986a, pp. 110, 119, 244–45, no. 282, ill. (rev. French ed., pp. 118, 298–99, no. 282, ill.); Le Pichon 1986a, pp. 117, 187, ill.; Ariès and Duby 1987–91, vol. 5, p. 275, ill.; Néret 1990, p. 97, ill.; Hastings 1992, p. 140; Luderin 1992, p. 144; Denny 1993, pp. 220–22, fig. 1; Montgomery 1993, pp. 17–18, fig. 20; Williams 1993–94, pp. 137–38, fig. 10; MacKenzie 1995, p. 46; Célestin 1996, p. 123, fig. 3; Kern et al. 1996, p. 58–59, ill.; Leppert 1996, pp. 266–68, fig. 10.7; Lewis 1996, p. 113;

Williamstown 1996–97, p. 65; *Antiques* 1997, pp. 525, 527, ill.; Lubar 1997, pp. 76–77, fig. 19; Dessaix 1998, p. 209, ill. bet. pp. 232–33; Lafont-Couturier 1998, pp. 68–69, ill.; Porterfield 1998, pp. 207–8n43; Scherer 1998, pp. 18–20; Flowers 2000, p. 15, ill.; Bordeaux–New York–Pittsburgh 2000–2001, pp. 19, 42; Fernandez 2001, pp. 216–18, ill.; Rand 2001a, pp. 19, 24, fig. 14; Balemi 2003, pp. 118–19, ill.; Washington and others 2003–5, p. 164, fig. 7; Barcelona 2003–4, p. 34, ill.; Davies 2005, pp. 18–19, ill.; Mortimer 2005, p. 58; Dalwood and Ireson 2005, p. 71, ill.; Nehamas 2007, pp. 109–10, ill.; Rome 2008, p. 37, 39, fig. 3; Madrid 2009–10, pp. 30–31, fig. 6; Watson 2009, vol. 2, p. 344, ill. bet. pp. 386–87; Allan and Morton 2010, pp. 3, 29, 44, 107, 119, 131n3, 151, pl. 3.; Madrid 2010–11, p. 29, fig. 14.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The original support is fine-weave linen (at least 22 threads/cm). The picture was wax-resin lined in 1977 to two layers of very fine-weight linen (29 threads/cm), following the removal of the failing 1942 Beers Brothers' starch-paste lining. A discolored varnish was also removed during the 1977 treatment. Minute age crackle is scattered throughout the paint film, with small traction cracks in many areas. A vertical line of mechanical cracking, caused by an old blow to the reverse, is located 20.3 cm in from the right edge and runs 8.9–20.3 cm up from the lower edge. There are a few old losses in the lower left corner, and retouches in the lower right corner and along old frame abrasions. In ultraviolet light small patches of old natural resin varnish can be seen on various figures.

The ground layer is white, evenly applied, and probably commercially prepared. The underdrawing appears to be executed with thinned black ink applied with a nibbed pen, as the lines are double tracked. Under low magnification, these lines are still visible around individual floral forms in the tile designs. Some ink lines lie on top of the paint as well, reinforcing these outlines. Although not particularly visible using infrared reflectography, it seems likely that a thin, particulate black ink underdrawing lies below most of the image. Only in one location was a shift in design from the drawing to the paint stage noted: in the calves of the young boy sitting cross-legged on the floor to the left. Below the tiled wall a preliminary gray color was painted with a brush 2.5 cm wide. There seems to be a brown sketch layer below the figures, and the final paint, which is applied and blended using small, thin to moderately thick vehicular strokes, shows almost no artist reworking. Parts of the shading and tonal gradations are executed in a hatching style reminiscent of a drawing technique.

1. Said 1978, p. 3.
2. Quoted in Moreau-Vauthier 1906, p. 113: "Mon court séjour à Constantinople m'avait mis en appétit, et l'Orient était le plus fréquent de mes rêves."
3. Denny 1993, p. 220.
4. Du Camp 1852, pp. 92–94. Snake charming was also

- practiced in India, though this was less likely to be Gérôme's point of reference.
5. Denny 1993, pp. 220–21.
  6. Denny 1993, fig. 3, reproduces a small fragment of the upper inscription of the Golden Passage tiles, which appears just as Gérôme depicted it. Denny also identified and reproduced the tiles from the Baghdad Kiosk, built to commemorate the second conquest of Baghdad by Sultan Murad IV (fig. 4).
  7. A 200.
  8. This similarity was first identified in Williams 1993–94, p. 137.
  9. There are several letters in the Clark's curatorial file with differing opinions as to the species of snake depicted. One possibility is suggested in a letter of 26 Dec. 1979 by Richard G. Zweifel, a herpetologist from the American Museum of Natural History, who commented that "the snake looks more like a South American boa constrictor than anything else," a possibility that would add yet another layer of hybridity to the image. Gérôme could perhaps have studied such an animal at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris.
  10. A 485.
  11. A 67 and A 71.
  12. Williams 1993–94, pp. 120, 144n15, and 144n16.
  13. A 194.
  14. These tiles are illustrated in Denny 1993; Washington–Chicago–New York 1987, p. 282, no. 210 (the left-most of Gérôme's inscribed panels); and Öz n.d., black-and-white pls. XLVI, XLVII (the left and second from left panels). Öz gives an Arabic transcription of the verses in two of the panels, while English translations appear in Istanbul 1983, p. 201. Taking the panels from right to left, the verses read: "God, may this structure be as permanent as the North Star in the heavens, and this sultan's shadow touch all the peoples of the earth"; "May it bring good fortune and blessings to the auspicious sultan of the age, and remain in this exalted place until doomsday"; and the final lines state that the *şahnişin*, or arches, of the exalted bath were completed in 982 (a.d. 1574/75).
  15. I have not yet located reproductions of tiles in Topkapi that correspond with the five right-most cartouches. It might be noted that Gérôme surely conceived the viewing of his painting from left to right in the manner of a reader of French, and thus from more to less accurate, whereas a viewer who could read Persian would presumably start from the right-hand, least-readable side.
  16. See Denny 2004, pp. 146–47 (the Baghdad Kiosk). I wish to thank Finbarr Barry Flood for identifying the verses from the Qur'an, chapter 2, verse 256: "There is no compulsion in matters of faith. Distinct is the way of guidance now from error. He who turns away from the forces of evil and believes in God, will surely hold fast to a handle that is strong and unbreakable, for God hears all and knows everything," and the beginning of verse 257: "God is the friend. . ."
  17. This pertains especially to the arched tiles in the harem, to which the artist is unlikely to have gained access, though he may well have seen the Baghdad Kiosk. That Gérôme did record certain monuments on site is suggested by a small sketch in the Musée de Vesoul (945.2.20, no. 9; reproduced in Vesoul 1981, p. 139) that can be identified as the *mihrab* of the mosque of Rüstem Pasha in Istanbul. Gérôme likely painted it before the motif, and it reproduces an inscription quite faithfully.
  18. Abdullah Frères, *Interior of Topkapi Palace*, c. 1865, albumen print (private collection). Reproduced in Los Angeles–Paris–Madrid 2010–11, p. 261.
  19. See Mary Roberts in Allan and Morton 2010, p. 119; and Los Angeles–Paris–Madrid 2010–11, pp. 262–63. Only six inscribed cartouches are visible in this photograph, further suggesting that Gérôme invented the right-hand cartouches because he had no source to copy.
  20. A 380 and A 520.
  21. Öz n.d., p. ix, gives transcriptions of the four left-most cartouches.
  22. Nochlin 1983, p. 123.
  23. Said 1978, p. 21.
  24. A 110.
  25. Moreau-Vauthier 1906, p. 151: "C'est ici que la vérité du détail est importante, car elle ajoute à la physionomie et donne aux personnages un aspect barbare, sauvage et étrange."
  26. RSC diary, 23 Jan. 1942.
  27. Goupil Stock Books, vol. 10, p. 127, no. 14822. See also Bordeaux–New York–Pittsburgh 2000–1, pp. 19, 42.
  28. *The Snake Charmer* is recorded as being on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from Mrs. Alfred Corning Clark (Elizabeth Scriven Clark) by April 1897 until at least April 1898. See Metropolitan Museum of Art 1897, p. 50, no. 173, and Metropolitan Museum of Art 1897–98, p. 46, no. 173. In his diaries, Sterling Clark later recalled that this work was sold in partial exchange for Géricault's *Trumpeter of the Hussars* (cat. 149), commenting in 1944 that "my mother had turned [*Snake Charmer*] in to Schaus for \$10,000 to \$12,000 around 1899 as part payment for the *Trompette de Hussards* at \$35,000" (RSC diary, 11 Nov. 1944). Unless it took place in two separate steps, however, this transaction could not have occurred in 1899, since *Trumpeter of the Hussars* was with its previous owner until 1902.