Allegorizing Representation: Gérôme's Final Phase

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In the last couple of decades, French and British academic art of the nineteenth century has resurfaced in art historical scholarship.[1] Once-famous, but long-forgotten Salon artists have drawn attention of scholars, who are interested in reevaluating their works. Jean-Léon Gérôme is one such name (1824-1904), relevant to virtually any study of the mid- or late nineteenth-century French Academy. During his lifetime, Gérôme was supremely famous as a practicing artist and teacher: in the six decades of his artistic career, he produced a prodigious volume of work that established him both at home and abroad as one of the best painters of his day. In addition, in his four decades of pedagogical practice, he trained countless students of various nationalities, who later became famous in their own rights. But Gérôme's public image had another side to it: among the Academicians of his generation, he was one of the most persistent and vociferous opponents of the avant-garde artists of the late nineteenth century, and a passionate defender of the artistic values of the École des Beaux-Arts. This paper is about the last phase of Gérôme's career; it reconsiders a small, but significant section of his *oeuvre* in a fresh perspective.

While self-representation is practically non-existent in Gérôme's earlier work, several paintings from the last two decades of his life evince his strong interest in representing himself at work in his studio. What is more, this inclination curiously coincides with his enthusiastic pursuit of sculpture. Here I examine his enterprise of sculpture and self-representation in painting with a two-fold objective. First, I demonstrate that in the last phase of his career, the artist was involved in an introspective project of realizing in practice his personal philosophy of representation. This process, I argue, has two crucial aspects: his effort to bridge the gap between painting and sculpture in allegorical terms, and the role of his own image and that of the model in that allegory. Second, I place this aspiration in a historical context, and suggest that this manifestation of Gérôme's ideals at the end of his life can be best understood in the light of his relationship to the avant-garde endeavors of his time.

Painting and sculpture were interdependent in Gérôme's work; making small plaster models as visual aids to paintings was a common practice for him. But it was not until the mid-1870s, when excavations of figurative sculpture in Greece drew his attention, that he seriously considered pursuing that medium. He became especially interested in producing painted sculpture, and made his debut as a sculptor in 1878; *Gladiators*, his first finished sculpture, followed *Pollice Verso,* his highly successful painting of 1872.

In the 1880s, Gérôme executed several of his major sculptures, including *Omphale*, and it is also in this period that he painted what is probably his first image of himself in his studio. This composition, named *End of the Seance* from 1886 (Figure 1), shows two important things: first, despite his apparent lack of interest in painting in this period, Gérôme definitely found time and motivation to paint himself *as a sculptor*, and second, here the model steps out from her usual role as a model and actively participates in covering the unfinished statue of the Lydian queen *Omphale* with wet rags.

After his success with *Omphale* in the 1887 Salon, Gérôme presented *Tanagra* in 1890 (Figure 2). A life-size nude, she represents the *tyche*, or spirit of the city of Tanagra. She sits on a mound at an excavation site, carrying a small statue of *Hoop Dancer* in her left hand, and figurines of different kinds appear half-buried in the mound. The striking naturalism of the marble version was enhanced by the application of paint. Around the same year, Gérôme also made at least three variants of *Pygmalion and Galatea* in painting (Figure 3), and a life-sized, tinted marble group on the same subject appeared in the salon of 1892 (Figure 4). The subject of this work is a Greek legend, in which sculptor Pygmalion's talent and passion, mediated by divine intervention, brought to life the statue of Galatea he had carved. Galatea is still a statue in the lower part of her body, while her upper portion is already vibrant with signs of life. Each painting presents the kissing couple from a different angle and in a slightly different pose, in a setting of Pygmalion's studio.

In 1895, that is, at least five years after completing *Tanagra*, Gérôme produced *The Artist and His Model* (Figure 5).[2] Whereas other self-representations usually have a diagonal view of the room, showing two walls, this is the only one that has a

I am indebted to Dr. Marc Gotlieb for generating my interest in issues such as those I discuss here.

[1] For a critical discussion of this issue, see Neil McWilliam, "Limited Revisions: Academic Art History Confronts Academic Art," *Oxford Art Journal*, 2 (1989): 71-86.

[2] There is, however, another slightly different version of this theme from 1890 that has recently resurfaced, and has been acquired by the Dahesh Museum in New York.

strictly lateral view. The artist is in profile, occupying the center, working on the left leg of the plaster version of the statue. All around him are objects for use in his paintings and sculptures, and on the back wall is one version of *Pygmalion and Galatea.* We feel the demanding presence of the trio on the platform in several ways: first, the claustrophobic, flat wall pushes the figures forward. Second, the strong contrast of the white plaster and the sensuous flesh tint of the model, and that of the upright female forms and the curve of Gérôme's body attract our attention to that area. Finally, the gestures of the *Hoop Dancer* in the background and the bust on the cabinet are such that their gazes seem to focus on the central group. The flagpoles, on the other hand, draw us to the painting on the wall.

Gérôme never represented himself in sculpture in the act of sculpting, nor did he show himself in painting in the act of painting. He made sculptures of characters from his paintings, and vice versa, yet he himself appears only in painting. Therefore we can ask: why is Gérôme's self-representation in painting so conspicuously tied to his production of sculpture? In response to this question, let us have a close look at the subject of *Pygmalion and Galatea*.

It seems to me that while working on this theme, Gérôme faced an interesting emulative problem. In the legend, Galatea is half-human, half-statue. When the subject is rendered in tinted marble, it is only visually, through the colors, that we can distinguish the effect of human flesh from that of marble on Galatea's body. However, tactility, an intrinsic property of sculpture—particularly of free-standing sculpture—resists our understanding of the difference between human flesh and stone surface. Because of our knowledge of the material as marble, we can never really forget that the body of the male, or the upper torso of the female is as much a stone surface as her lower portion. In other words, sculptural rendition of this subject collapses the distinction between a representation (Galatea's upper torso) and a representation *of* a representation (her lower body) by creating a conceptual impasse.[3] According to the French academic realist tradition of painting, however, when a subject was depicted on a flat canvas with the help of paint, the entire discourse of representation could neatly be confined within a world of illusion, where tactility itself was an abstraction—merely a visual experience. A sculpture, when rendered in a painting, is a *picture* of a sculpture, and so it is truly a representation of a representation. As a result, in the painted versions of *Pygmalion and Galatea*, each element successfully performs its assigned role of a representation or that of a representation *of* a representation. Therefore, by painting this subject repeatedly around the same time when producing the sculpture, Gérôme was able to resolve the problem and produce a pure representation of the transformation of cold, hard stone into life. Moreover, in each painting he also provided a different vantage point that we, as viewers, would adopt when beholding the free-standing sculpture group. In short, it was an attempt to use a painting *of* a sculpture as a form of mediation between painting and sculpture, thus bridging the gap between the two disciplines. And herein lies the clue to the significance of Gérôme's self-representation as a sculptor.

Dating from the 1880s, almost every piece of sculpture had at least one colored version. Conversely, in the last half of this decade, for the first time the artist produced paintings with sculptures as center of interest. I argue that Gérôme, in this period, was engaged in an investigation of the nature of representation itself. We can understand his exploration of painted sculpture only if we are willing to see it as a practice complementary to his interest in making paintings *of* sculptures. Then only we recognize that his desire to produce painted sculptures was not only a result of his admiration for a similar Greek tradition, but it was also due to his concern about the nature of the two media and the conceptual problems they presented.

Once, referring to the works of Ingres and François Rude, Gérôme remarked:

> They took up the task of being the reflection of *la belle nature*, and succeeded in their enterprise, for the interpretation—healthy, strong and true—of Nature is the only path that leads to masterpieces. . . .[4]

Furthermore, in December of 1887, he wrote to his American admirer and biographer Fanny Hering:

> The question is, to lead young people into a straightforward, true path. . .to habituate them to love nature [the true], and to regard it with an eye at once intelligent, delicate, and firm, being mindful also of the plastic side.[5]

These comments suggest that Gérôme's idea of truth (*la vérité*) was inseparable from his concept of *la belle nature*. He rejected the optical realism of the Impressionists as well as the idealist form of Puvis de Chavannes, because the "truth," according to him, could only be realized through a (utopian) combination of faithful documentation of nature and purity of form, i.e. the *spirit* of nature. Because fidelity of documentation was so important to him, these statements also explain—albeit indirectly—a vital aspect of his working procedure: drawing from the model, as opposed to working from the memory.[6]

With this understanding, Gérôme probed the ambiguities of representation, and that is why in his works of this period, we find a continuous dialogue between the visual and the tac-

[3] I should point out here that this conceptual problem hardly has anything to do with the aesthetic merit of the sculpture. Just as the marble Galatea betrays the artifice behind its rendition, we are also aware of the fact that artifice is an integral aspect of representation to begin with. The "problem," as I see it, is purely an intellectual one.

[4] Gerald Ackerman, *The Life and Work of Jean-Léon Gérôme: with a Catalogue Raisonné* (New York & London: Sotheby's, 1986) 160, citing Gérôme's preface for Fanny Hering's book *Life and Works of Jean-Léon Gérôme* (New York: n.p., 1892).

[5] *Century Magazine*, 4 (1889): 493.

[6] Ackerman, *The Life and Work* 160.

tile. On the one hand, in his painted sculptures, the visual appears as an agent of illusion, acting in the domain of the tactile, aspiring to present tactility itself as an illusion. In his paintings *of* sculptures, on the other hand, we see the tactile encased in the realm of the visual, and completely subservient to it. I suggest that to Gérôme, sculpture, with its tactility, signified representation of tangible nature, and production of sculpture was the act of imitating nature. The medium of painting, on the other hand, because of its ability to offer the tangible as pure visual representation, showed promise as an ideal ground for realizing *la belle nature*. Hence, his production of painted sculptures and that of paintings *of* sculptures complemented each other, and both groups bear evidence of his effort to realize *la vérité*.

In 1893, Gérôme painted two pictures on the same theme: *A View into a Tanagran Ceramic Shop* and *Sculpturae Vitam Insufflat Pictura* (*Painting Breathes Life into Sculpture,* Figure 6). He himself invented the Latin title for the second one.[7] Each work shows a Tanagran woman (virtually the same woman in both scenes), sitting in a Greek ceramic shop, painting *Hoop Dancer*s, and the actual statue of *Tanagra* is displayed in a niche in the background. The metaphorical quality of this expression leaves no doubt that the artist wanted to unite the two media not just on a physical, but also on a more abstract, conceptual level. The woman working on the figurines can be interpreted as *Tanagra* herself, who has come to life because painter Gérôme put her *in* a painting that "breathed life" into her, as she herself is involved in the act of "giving life" to the statuettes. At the same time, *Tanagra* the sculpture, the *Hoop Dancer*s, and all the other statues in the scene play their part as representations of representations. Having seen the works in this perspective, we can understand that to Gérôme, representing Galatea in a painted form was also an act of "giving life" to her, as in the story Pygmalion brought her to life. And this whole vantage point helps us to see that the 1893 pictures are as much allegories as *Pygmalion and Galatea*.

In his self-representations, Gérôme does not appear inactive, but is engaged in the production of sculpture. This no doubt reflects his sincerity and involvement in the discipline, but I argue that we can also read an allegory in these images. This is most clearly manifest in *The Artist and His Model*, painted only two years after the images of the Tanagran ceramic shops. At first glance, such a work appears to be a banal "window on the world," a veristic presentation of a mundane studio scene; a close analysis, however, penetrates its seeming triviality, and helps us to recognize the artist's awareness of the complications of pictorial unity as well as that of the physical and metaphorical dimensions of the media in question.

The model in this scene partly overlaps the sculpture, creating a juxtaposition of a representation with a representation of a representation. The plaster *Tanagra* on the turn-table does not directly represent nature because it is two steps removed from nature. Instead, the female model serves as a direct imitation of tangible life. Here her relationship with the statue is passive, very different from that in *End of the Seance*; yet in both scenes she is somehow connected to the sculpture. In view of Gérôme's aversion to memory drawing, the conspicuous presence of the model clearly implies his faith in a particular method of emulation, and the juxtaposition of the two females strongly emphasizes the mimetic act. Let us not forget, however, that the production we witness here is itself a *representation* of a production, in which the incomplete plaster statue is not the allegorical female symbolizing an ancient Greek city, but is a double signifier. On the one hand, it is a painted image of the actual plaster *Tanagra*, and on the other, it represents the *painted image* of the model. In short, this represented sculpture is a representation of two representations. Now, if we see this plaster figure with our understanding of painting's allegorical role of "breathing life" into sculpture, we realize that by virtue of being *in* a painting, this figure has a "life" of its own, and from this, we can also see the allegorical dimension of the entire work.

This allegory, however, cannot be understood without considering the role of the self-representation of the artist. He stands apart from the model and the sculpture, yet all the objects in the scene assert his identity as an artist: the oriental paraphernalia, the folios, the gladiator helmet, the painting on the wall and the sculptures, all testify to his success as an artist, his authority in manipulating the visual and the tactile. Thus, secure in his status, the artist in the picture exercises his control over the entire process of production. As a representative of his own culture, he is the one who orchestrates this discourse of representation. Yet as a representation, he himself is not outside this discourse. He is a crucial link in the artist-model-artwork trio, which, from an allegorical perspective, becomes the Culture-Nature-Art triangle. This entire allegory—the allegory of Representation—becomes clear when we recognize this symbolic triangle. Moreover, we realize at this point that this discourse would not be possible in sculpture because given Gérôme's line of enquiry, a sculptural rendition of this subject would present the model-artwork relationship as problematic. So in order to allegorize Representation by using Painting as a touchstone of life, Gérôme had to transfer all his tactile images to the realm of the visual.

The allegorical nature of this work is further confirmed by two other elements. By incorporating *Pygmalion and Galatea* in this scene, the artist not only represented himself as a sculptor with the aspiration and passion of Pygmalion, but he also identified his production of *this* picture with his previous production of the one *represented* in this picture.[8] And this connection suggests that this work too, like the one within it, is an allegory.

The second element is the presence of masks in different works. Most of them are parts of Greek theatre costumes. All versions of *Pygmalion and Galatea* have masks in some form, they dominate sections of the 1893 paintings of the ceramic shops, and appear in *The Artist and His Model*. It is curious

7 Ackerman, *The Life and Work* 141.

8 Ackerman, *The Life and Work* 134.

that masks play prominent roles primarily in works that deal with artist, artistic production, and problems of representation.[9]

Around 1895, the same year he painted *The Artist and His Model*, Gérôme made a portrait bust of the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt (Figure 7). Here fidelity to nature is juxtaposed with idealized, allegorical elements.[10] A bizarre, masked figure, clad in toga, appears at the foot of the bust as the tragic muse, while the putti at the other end stand for comedy. When compared to other portrait busts by the artist, such a combination stands out as unique to this particular work. It seems that in this example the sculptor used this novel approach because he wanted to emphasize Bernhardt's identity as an artist, her involvement with representation. I therefore argue that as a representation of a human face, a mask, in Gérôme's work, represents representation. Because of the allegorical nature of its own presence, its recurrence in certain artworks turns it into a motif; and this motif, in turn, confirms the allegorical nature of those works.

It is time for us to raise another question: why did Gérôme have these strong interests in self-representation and allegorization of representation in this particular period? For a possible answer, we need to consider his projects in a historical context.

Until his death in 1904, Gérôme was an uncompromising enemy of the Realists and the Impressionists, and his attitude and reactions to them were topics of public discussion on various occasions. In 1869, as a part of the salon jury, he was instrumental in rejecting the works of Manet and the would-be Impressionists, which led to the formation of the *salon des refusées*. From then on, he launched a relentless struggle against any attempt to publicize these artists, and he didn't hesitate to be proud of this. He wrote Fanny Hering in December, 1887:

> I claim the honor of having waged war against these tendencies and shall continue to combat them. . .many painters of the modern school, the impressionists, *the plein-air-istes*, the independents, etc., are more or less *fumistes*, some of them humbugs and some ignorant as carps. To-day, when a work is insipid and badly executed,—badly drawn, badly painted, and stupid beyond expression,—it stands a good chance of being a success. . . . [11]

In most of his criticisms of the new trends, Gérôme's central concern was about the education of his students. He taught at the École for forty years, from 1864 to 1904, and followed strict academic methods of pedagogy.[12] Odilon Redon was in his first class for a very short time, and found the training excruciating. Later, Redon remarked in his memoirs, "I was tortured by the professor. . .The teaching I was given did not suit my nature. . .He didn't understand anything about me."[13] The situation, however, changed significantly in the next few decades. Theophile Thoré commented on how the new generation was becoming increasingly interested in *"effet,"* rather than academic polish in art.[14] Later, close to the '90s, the Symbolists and the early Expressionists emerged in the intellectual scene. By the mid-'80s, it was impossible for Gérôme to continue to impose his methods of instruction on everyone; gradually, he had to become much more flexible in his expectations from his students. He even accepted Fernand Léger as an independent student in his atelier in 1903,when young Léger was refused admission at the École. The younger artist later acknowledged Gérôme's liberalness toward his students.[15]

Gérôme lived for the better part of the nineteenth century, and his fame gave him ample reason to believe that his ideas and methods were the "correct" ones. His cultural bias and his unflinching commitment to the values of the École made it impossible for him to mentally accept—much less actively endorse—the new movements. In the last three decades of his life, his deep-rooted beliefs were continuously challenged by the trends of rising modernism, but he couldn't comprehend the nature of those currents. Once he said about Pissaro's work: "Some paint like this, some in dots, some in triangles or what have you; I tell you, they are all anarchists! crazy!. . ." [16]

Yet, except for his occasional success in rejecting Impressionist paintings at the salon, Gérôme lost every battle; despite his protests, the avant-garde eventually established its claim. In 1884, he was against the proposition for a posthumous show of Manet's work, but the exhibition took place anyway.[17] He also objected to the acquisition of Gustave Caillebotte's col-

[9] In 1902, Gérôme produced a female nude called *The Ball Player*. The woman stands in a critical contrapposto and drops balls into the mouths of several masks lying at her feet. There are two things that should concern us here: first, the problems of anatomy and contrapposto that intrigued the artist while representing Galatea led him to explore this particular pose (Ackerman, *The Life and Work* 140), and second, the game shown here was an invention of the artist, because Ackerman found no evidence that any such game existed in the ancient world (Ackerman, *The Life and Work* 152). Therefore, once again we find the appearance of masks in a context of artistic investigation. Furthermore, two almost identical paintings from the same year show Gérôme in his studio, polychroming the masks of this statue.

[10] Ackerman, "Gérôme's Sculpture" 87.

[11] *Century Magazine*, 4 (1889): 493.

[12] Barbara Weinberg, *The American Pupils of Jean-Léon Gérôme* (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum, 1984) 123-33.

[13] Ackerman, *The Life and Work* 168, citing Redon's *A soi-même* (Paris: n.p., 1922) 22-4.

[14] Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986) 99-100.

[15] Ackerman, *The Life and Work* 177, citing *Fernand Léger 1881-1955* (Brussels: n.p., 1956) 25.

[16] Ackerman, *The Life and Work* 143, citing "Enquête â propos de la Donation Caillebotte," *Journal*, III (1895): 530-31.

[17] Ackerman, *The Life and Work* 128, citing Guillemin, *Mémoires* 174.

lection by the state in 1894, and made acerbic public statements against it.[18] Nonetheless, the project was implemented and the collection was housed by 1897. At the Paris World Fair of 1900, Gérôme even tried to prevent the French president from entering the room exhibiting Impressionist works, saying: "Mister President, in that room lies the shame of France!"[19]

If we look at Gérôme's personal life in this period, we see that between 1884 and 1891, several of his close friends and relatives died in a flu epidemic. Among them were Paul Baudry, Gustave Boulanger, Gérôme's brother-in-law and friend Albert Goupil, father-in-law Adolphe Goupil, and above all, his own son, Jean-Léon. Several letters and conversations with Fanny Hering reveal that the artist was deeply affected by these losses, and was growing increasingly melancholic and introspective in his attitude toward life.[20]

Looking at Gérôme's art of the 1880s and 90s in these biographical and cultural contexts, I conclude that his explorations of the intricacies of representation in the last two decades of the century were largely conditioned by these associations. As he continued his experiments with painting and sculpture, his investigation of the visual and the tactile eventually became a silent declaration; a manifesto of his very own theory of representation. And this process intensified in the middle of the last decade, around the time of the Caillebotte bequest. By then, Gérôme had begun to realize that time was changing, whether he liked it or not, and that the radicalism in art, which he despised so much, was in the process of establishing its own hegemony in French culture. Above all, it was clear to him that many of his students had a different frame of mind, which meant that they would not carry his legacy into the next century. In virtually every anti-avant-garde comment he made, Gérôme gave alternative statements about his own views of art, and suggested how they could benefit his students. Therefore, he suffered the greatest loss when, by the 1880s, he had to forego his strict pedagogical principles, and allow—if not actively encourage—his students to experiment with new ideas and techniques. It was a loss no less painful to him than the death of his close ones. He was old and tired, and his constant defeat in combats with the avant-garde drove him more and more into the explorations of the complexities of image-making. By using the model as a sign of his allegiance to nature, he aspired to realize in abstract terms the ideals behind his own art, and the depiction of the confines of his studio clearly implies the introspective dimension of his enquiry.

The practice of artists using their own art in their representations, or referring to the history or legend of art-making, goes far back into the past; one could cite countless examples from ancient Greek, Renaissance or modern art, where the artist exploited such sources. Therefore, it is not difficult to see in this light that Gérôme's portrayal of himself as a sculptor in his studio was a gesture of his reverence for that tradition; it alludes to that heritage as an alternative to what he thought was the bad art of his time. However, what in my view is unique about his work of this period, compared to that of any of his contemporaries is the complementarity between his painted sculptures and paintings *of* sculptures. This entire endeavour for him was at the same time a means of self-renewal, and an assertion of his artistic identity and authority. As Gérôme himself stated, work was the only way he could come to terms with life, and so, in the final phase of his life, he put all his zeal into allegorizing his own doctrine of representation.

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[18] Ackerman, *The Life and Work* 144, citing "Les Legs Caillebotte," *L'Eclair*, 9 March 1897, and from Maurice Guillamot, "La Questions Caillebotte," *La Figaro*, 13 March 1897.

[19] Gerald Ackerman, "Thoughts on Finishing a Monograph on Gérôme," *Arts Magazine*, 60 (1986): 82.

[20] Ackerman, *The Life and Work* 130-131, Fanny Hering, *Century Magazine*, 4 (1889): 497.

Figure 1. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *End of the Seance*, 1886, canvas. Whereabouts unknown.

Figure 2. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Tanagra*, 1890, tinted marble, 60" high. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 3. [*above*] Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, 1890, oil on canvas, 35 x 27". Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 4. [*above right*] Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, 1892, tinted marble, 77" high. Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument, California.

Figure 5. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Artist and His Model*, 1895, oil on canvas, 20 x 15". Haggin Museum, Stockton, California.

Figure 6. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Painting Breathes Life into Sculpture*, 1893, oil on canvas, 19.7 x 27". Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Figure 7. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Sarah Bernhardt*, c. 1895, patinated plaster, 26.5" high. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Tanenbaum, Toronto. Photo: Courtesy of Mr. Tanenbaum.