

Gérôme and His Circle in the Middle East

“Gérôme and His Circle: Travel, Art and Business in the Middle East,” a winter exhibition at the Walters Art Museum (November 14, 2015–February 7, 2016), focused on the nineteenth-century international fascination with Turkey and Egypt. Most of the seventeen works on view were acquired or commissioned by the museum’s founder, William T. Walters (1819–94). This compact in-house show bristled with subjects for discussion—about how individuals built museums out of their personal collections, about the intersections

between art and commerce, about the fraught subject of Orientalism.

Jean-Léon Gérôme (1828–1904), the marquee name here and perhaps the artist most identified today with Orientalism, was represented by just a few works,



Jean-Léon Gérôme
Arab Standing in Prayer, 1884
COURTESY WALTERS ART MUSEUM,
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

including the colorful oil *Basbi-Bazouk Singing* (1868) and the elegant graphite drawing *Arab Standing in Prayer* (1884), a study for his painting of the same year, *Prayer in Cairo*. These originals were supplemented by photogravures and engravings produced by the art dealer Adolphe Goupil, whose great success testifies to the widespread interest in the subject. Gérôme strengthened his position as an artist-entrepreneur by marrying the dealer's daughter, Marie Goupil.

The other artists in the exhibition may be less well-known, but they are worth attention, both on their own merit and as evidence of a complex phenomenon in art history. Charles Bargue (1826/27–83) influenced generations of artists (including Vincent van Gogh) with his figure drawing lessons, collaborating with Gérôme in his studio. The Walters exhibition featured four drawings, all depicting Arabs kneeling in prayer. Without the gorgeous architecture and sumptuous color of finished Orientalist paintings, the drawings explore the anatomical and gestural vocabulary of the human body.

Walters commissioned *Prayer on the Housetop* (1864) by another French artist, Alexandre Bida (1823–95). In brush and ink over graphite, Bida's highly finished drawing is a superb composition. Two figures dominate the foreground; the man in a white turban kneels, while another man, in black, stands, monumentally silhouetted against a diaphanous sky. In the background are domes, minarets and other rooftops with tiny praying figures. Bida accurately notes ethnic and ethnographic details but conveys the dignity of the principal figures.

Another work commissioned by Walters, *Mohammedan at Prayer on Housetop* (1867), is by an Italian, Alberto Pasini (1826–99). Again, two figures—one kneeling, one standing—dominate the foreground, but Pasini blurs the outlines of city walls, focusing instead on the vastness of the sky. He judiciously highlights a face, an arm, the rug, making velvety shadows more eloquent. Pasini is an artist worth exploring: his street scenes—Istanbul, Cairo, Damascus—capture the magnificent architecture and the luminosity of the air.

Orientalism is a multifaceted phenomenon, often and too easily dismissed as a vehicle of exotic—and sometimes erotic—tourism. That kind of Orientalism, which finds sublimity in the harem pictures of J.A.D. Ingres, stands alongside the Biblical researches of William Holman Hunt and James Tissot, the fine archaeological images of David Roberts, and other pursuits. One of the most important aspects of the phenomenon was design. William Morris studied examples of Middle Eastern textiles, his colleague William de Morgan drew on medieval Iznik ware (with its Ottoman palette) for his pottery, and Frederic Leighton turned his London home into a shrine for blue tiles, wooden window grills and fountains. (Leighton had collected a thousand tiles during his trips to the Middle East.)

Gérôme himself collected Islamic glass, and the Walters's eclectic holdings include some lovely examples, which helped round out the show. Nineteenth-

century glass makers revived the enameling techniques of the fourteenth-century Mamluks in Egypt; these revival pieces were shown at world's fairs and avidly collected. The examples in the Walters exhibition were stunning mosque lamps, elegant in shape, refined in workmanship and demonstrating the pliable beauty of calligraphy as a design element. Walters Art Museum, 600 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21201. Telephone (410) 547-9000. thewalters.org

—Gail Leggio

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