



Jean-Léon Gérôme, French, 1824-1904
Pollice Verso (Thumbs Down), 1872
oil on canvas
Museum purchase

MEET THE ARTIST

Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) was a French painter who had a career as both an artist and teacher. Despite being well-known and highly successful, he was also criticized by contemporary artists for his choice of style. The historical, sometimes mythological subjects of his paintings went against the new trend that art should portray the realities of everyday life. Because of this, his critics viewed him as a “people pleaser” who won his audience with theatrical scenes filled with sensation, emotion, drama, and beauty.

Even if Gérôme did attract popularity through his work’s entertainment value, he did so with an appreciation for research and precision. His desire to remain true to the literary or historical sources of his scenes results in detail so rich that his style is often deemed “archeological.” For example, he created reproductions of bronze artifacts to have as models while painting the gladiator helmets, armor, and weapons in *Pollice Verso*. This academic, methodical approach brings life to his subjects and speaks volumes for his devotion to his craft.

To learn more about the artist, visit the following websites on recent exhibits of his work:

<http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-musee-dorsay/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay/article/jean-leon-gerome-25691.html?cHash=3c1e3e427a>

<http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/gerome/>

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

Romanticism, an artistic style that appealed to emotions over reason, held reign over the French art scene from the late 1700s to early 1800s. Just as Romanticism came about as a reaction to the rational thinking of the Enlightenment, by the mid-1850s artists began to reject Romanticism in favor of Realism. Artists began to gravitate towards depicting reality over idealized imagery. While this genre overlapped with Gérôme’s career, his work tends more towards the formal, calculated, and dramatic style of Romanticism and Orientalism – the very characteristics that Realism rejected. His subjects often draw from historical figures and mythology.

Pollice Verso (Thumbs Down), is a companion painting to an earlier gladiatorial work of his. This oil painting depicts a gladiator in the Roman Colosseum pinning down his victim as he stares up at the Vestal Virgins. In Roman Religion, these were six priestesses representing the daughters of the royal house, responsible for tending the temple of Vesta, Goddess of the Hearth.

The title of the painting, which more accurately translates to “with a turned thumb,” refers to the hand gesture of these women, who held a place of honor in Roman society, as they lean over the stadium walls.



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Historically, a “turned thumb” signaled to the gladiator that he should proceed with killing his victim, while a different gesture might have indicated that he should instead be spared. Because the name itself, *Pollice Verso*, does not specify direction or intent, the term and type of gesture is often up for reinterpretation. Given the title, Gérôme chose to depict the “*pollice verso*” gesture as a downturned thumb. Between his reputation for well-researched detail and the spectacular excitement, drama, and glory of the scene, his painting has greatly influenced today’s interpretation of the “turned thumb.”

LOOK CLOSELY

Questions to start a conversation:

- What details in the painting stand out to you?
- Gérôme was very serious about accurately researching the events, histories, and cultures that inspired his artworks. What are your thoughts about the costumes, setting, and overall actions of the scene? Do they feel real or “make-believe” to you?
- What other aspects of the ancient world come to mind when you think of gladiators and Rome?
- How does the artist render light? What is its effect on the painting?
- Observe the body language and expressions of the gladiator. What do you imagine him thinking, feeling?
- What reactions do you feel from the audience? Do they appear to support the victor or the victims?
- Given the ambiguity described in “Consider the Context,” how do you think Gérôme interpreted the *pollice verso* (“with a turned thumb”) gesture? How do you interpret the gesture?
- How would you feel being a member of the audience at this spectacle?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

HISTORY/ SOCIAL STUDIES

Political “Mother May I?”

1. Have the students engage in competition, such as through a spelling bee, trivia, or another game which involves clear correct/incorrect answers or moves.
2. Divide the class into “Vestal Virgins” and “citizens.” The citizens will play the game first while the Vestal Virgins will be referees.
3. Before each citizen answers a question or makes a move, they must first seek permission or guidance from a Vestal Virgin. The Vestal Virgins will signal with a “turned thumb” whether the citizen should answer/move correctly or incorrectly.
4. Have the class switch roles.
5. Have the students discuss their experience. As citizens, how did you feel? Did you feel in control of your decisions? Relate this back to the gladiator in the painting. Does your experience change your view of how the gladiator might have felt in his position?

SCIENCE

Archaeology of a Gladiator

To tie in the archaeological aspects of Gerome’s work (specifically, his use of bronze molds of gladiatorial equipment to correctly model his subjects’ costumes after), this experiment will demonstrate how copper (an element of bronze) will decay over time. Think about preservation concerns for historical objects as you complete the exercise. This project is an adaptation of an activity found on <http://m.wikihow.com/Oxidize-Copper>.

Materials:

- Hard boiled eggs w/ shell attached
- New, shiny pennies
- Re-sealable, transparent plastic bags (sandwich/quart sized)
- Spoons
- Small dish-like containers (try using lids from sports drink bottles – so long as they are wide enough to hold a penny comfortably, they will work)

Setup:

1. Boil eggs, about 1 per student. Do not worry if the eggs become overdone. Leave the eggs unpeeled. For best results, eggs should still be warm when the students begin the experiment.
2. Have enough supplies for each student – 1 spoon, penny, plastic bag, and lid will be sufficient.

Instructions:

1. Hand each student a hardboiled egg inside a plastic bag, a spoon.
2. Seal bag so that it is mostly closed, leaving around an inch open to allow air to escape. Using the spoon and/or their hands, students will mash the eggs into pieces, keeping them inside their bags.
3. Once the eggs are smashed, pass out a penny and container/lid to each student. Have them place their penny inside the container/lid, and slide the container/lid into the plastic bag, making sure the mashed egg does not touch the penny (touching the container/lid is OK).
4. Re-seal bag completely. This will trap the sulfuric fumes of the eggs inside the bag, which will make the copper penny “age.”
5. Set bags aside and await the results! The pennies could begin to darken within 15 minutes, but the process could take several hours.
6. After enough time has passed (e.g., the end of the same day, the next day, or whenever the pennies look aged enough), remove pennies from bags. If any egg has touched the pennies, clean surface with water.

WRITING**A Day in the Life**

1. Examine the painting in detail, thinking about the people and events that are unfolding. Imagine what was going on before the scene, or what happens next. Think about the background of particular subjects in the scene – who are they, why are they here, and what are their lives like as a whole?
2. Use these newly constructed “characters” to create a dialogue or short story. You can choose to focus on the scene in the painting, or imagine a new scene that would have occurred before or after the moment that Gerome has created. Alternatively, you can remove yourself a bit further and focus on a life of one of the subjects in the painting. For example, what does a typical day look like for them? What are their goals?

ART STARTS**FOSSILS**

Like the *Archaeology of a Gladiator* activity, this Art Start will help students think about the preservation of history and Gerome’s reliance on historical artifacts when creating art. This activity is adapted from

<http://www.wikihow.com/Make-Fossils-Using-Plaster-of-Paris>.

Materials:

- Newspaper (to cover work stations)
- Small objects (could be student’s choice; suggestions include sea shells, whole leaves, or other solid objects)
- Petroleum jelly
- Plaster of Paris
- Water
- Small disposable containers (such as a yogurt or butter tub)

Instructions:

1. Gather materials for each student, making sure that their chosen object fits inside their container.
2. Coat object thoroughly with petroleum jelly to prevent the plaster from sticking to the object (and to make removing it much easier).
3. Following the directions for the plaster of Paris (about 2:1 ratio of water to plaster), mix plaster and water into each container. Once thoroughly stirred, let mixture sit for a couple of minutes.
4. Push object into plaster mixture – not so deep that you cannot retrieve it later, though!
5. Let project sit overnight to dry. This could take a full 24 hours, so plan accordingly.
6. Once dry, “pop” object out of the plaster to reveal your fossil imprint!

LEARN MORE

About the Artist:

Ackerman, Gerald M., Evans, Bruce H., and Richard Ettinghausen. *Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)*. Dayton, OH: Dayton Art Institute, 1972.

Allan, Scott, and Mary Morton, Eds. *Reconsidering Gérôme*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010.

About Art, Culture, and Society:

Overview of French history, 19th century: <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/10/euwf.html>

Timeline of modern art from 1850 – Present: http://jmhosting.space/mea_timeline/

Overview of 19th century French Realism: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rism/hd_rism.htm

Overview of 19th century French Orientalism: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd_euor.htm

“Games in the Colosseum [Video],” *A&E History Channel*:

<http://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/colosseum/videos/games-in-the-coliseum>

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