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Gülru Çakmak, *Jean-Léon Gérôme and the Crisis of History Painting in the 1850s*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017. xiv + 229 pp. Color plates, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 US (cl.). ISBN 978-1-78694-067-4.

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In titling her work *Jean-Léon Gérôme and the Crisis of History Painting in the 1850s* Gülru Çakmak asserts that Gérôme, recognizing that modern historical painting was in crisis, created works directed toward inventing a “momentous solution” (p.9). In these works, pictorial strategies are employed by which historical painting could be responsive to modern sensibilities. The spectator is acknowledged “as a historically situated and embodied subject” and history painting itself “as the painting of the historical processes that underlie and sustain the present” (p.2).

A brief introductory chapter situates Gérôme’s decision to set out on an experimental path to modern historical painting after his *Age of Augustus and the Birth of Jesus Christ*, 1855 (Musée Picardie, Amiens) failed to gain an enthusiastic response at the Exposition Universelle of 1855. Chapter two centers on Gérôme’s *Duel after the Masquerade*, 1857 (Musée Condé, Chantilly), a subject which ordinarily would have been considered under the rubrics of *genre historique* or *genre*. Çakmak asserts that previous scholars have misunderstood Gérôme’s approach to historical representation, assuming that it followed contemporary approaches distinguishing accurate *genre historique* from the more elevated *peinture d’histoire*: “From Charles Blanc to John House, many nineteenth-century critics and modern art historians alike have contended that the artist ‘reduced history painting to a form of genre painting.’[1] Such readings have traced in Gérôme’s preoccupation with history and truthfulness a narrow-minded focus on archaeological accuracy and a misguided realism in the meticulous depiction of such superfluous details as furniture, architecture, costumes, and ethnic types. ... A major objective of my project is to prove that, while he experimented with new compositional structures and subject matter in the late 1850s, Gérôme did not give up his ambition to create—in fact, to redefine—history painting” (pp.5–6). Çakmak emphasizes the impact of *The Assassination of the duc de Guise*, 1834 (Musée Condé, Chantilly) by Delaroche (Gérôme’s teacher) on Gérôme’s *Duel after the Masquerade*, a work which demonstrates the mechanism she terms “clue structure”: “Showing up at the crime scene in the aftermath, the viewer’s imagination is triggered to play a central role in reconstructing the incident, thereby experiencing what she could not have witnessed, the assassination that took place at the Château de Blois in 1588” (p.47).[2] Çakmak examines clues in costume, setting, quotation of past works to conclude that Gérôme’s participants, dressed anachronistically and unable to obey the ancient rules of dueling which

maintained a code of honor while preventing a murder, are “victims of their attempt to emulate the past, its rituals, its models of heroism. ... What is tragic in modern times is that contemporary French men live under the tyranny of the past whose precedents they re-enact unwittingly and compulsively” (pp.89-90). As Pierrot’s pose repeats that of David’s Marat, it underscores modern historical painting’s inability to inspire heroic, virtuous actions: “the modern period no longer offers any meaningful avenues for heroism beyond anachronistic--and often fatal--repetitions of the past” (p.91).

Chapter three centers on *Prayer in the house of an Arnaut Chief* (1857, lost), created after Gérôme’s trip to north Africa 1855-56, and the ethnographic, scientific direction in modern painting. Çakmak argues that Gérôme did not intend works in this vein as modern *genre* scenes but as historical commentary, invoking the Parthenon’s frieze of Greeks in procession: “historical ancestors of the modern-day Arnauts, Greeks, Bulgarians, and others lined up in prayer in *Arnaut Chief*--a selection of contemporary ‘Orientals’ who retained the most direct link to the foundational primordial types, and whom Gautier described as ... ‘the human clay less altered by civilization’ [...] enabled Gérôme to give visual form to the fundamentally modern notion that each human being was the most recent link in a chain of long-established historical processes, and to cast the artist as a scientist who distilled general laws pertaining to the human condition” (p.131).[3]

Chapter four examines Gérôme’s *César*, 1859 (lost, known to us through a photograph), which was exhibited in the Salon of 1859, and *The Death of Caesar*, 1859-67 (Walters Art Museum, Baltimore). The latter, exhibited at the Maison Goupil and in Brussels in 1860 and in the Exposition Universelle in 1867, had been seen by critics in Gérôme’s studio in 1858 and 1859 and was included in their commentary on the Salon of 1859. In this chapter the author extends her insight regarding the spectator’s imaginative role in reconstructing past action by analyzing the clues left behind to include the physical experience of spectatorship both during the past event and during the present-day viewing of its depiction. Instead of a unique moment in which to view an act from the past, the viewer is provided with multiple viewpoints, including those of present-day spectators of the painting who view it obliquely. Three different axes of sight are discussed in *The Death of Caesar*: from right to left (the obese senator with clenched fist to the petrifying view of Medusa in the floor mosaic), from Caesar’s foreshortened corpse into depth to the disorder in the colonnaded hallway, and from left to right across the “charged foreground [...] whose gravitational pull extends into the viewer’s space” (p.172). “The cumulative effect of these multiple viewpoints is not only an extended and attentive viewing experience, but also a dynamic and emotionally charged one, as the viewer is solicited to move her own body and ideally experience an element of thrill at different passages where a somatic experience is simulated, and where at times the body’s integrity is threatened” (p.173). Historical painting can never succeed if it feigns to be a voyeuristic look backward at a moment in the past. It must be recovered by subjective and physiological experience of the spectator in partnership with the artist.

Paradoxically, while the pictorial work represents the past, its physical construction of paint on canvas makes it impossible for the spectator to see the past. In the final chapter Çakmak explains Gérôme’s decision to turn from painting to polychrome sculpture in the 1890s as tied to both his wish to reveal the past and to avoid brushwork’s insistent recollection of the modern painter’s construction of the work in front of the spectator. “What led Gérôme to sculpture late in his career was his definition of painting as an art of ‘layering’ as well as his

realization of a certain limitation of the canvas ground: marks made on the canvas, which he referred to as ‘epidermis,’ remained above the surface. For Gérôme it was imperative to mark the physical presence of the past beneath the surface, and to develop a facture that did not evoke a fictitious immediacy. ... the artist’s marble statue *Tanagra* ... thematizes an underlying sense of the radical alterity of history, one which is irretrievably lost, and yet whose debris is fantasized as populating the substratum of the present time” (pp.11-12).

Gülru Çakmak’s close reading of her selected works offers intriguing insights. Of signal importance is her discussion of the spectator’s participation in viewing the past imaginatively and somatically. More than one-third of the illustrations are details or lateral views: 6 of 13 color plates and 11 of 36 black and white figures. Given her extremely close study of selected works it would have been helpful to signal the color illustrations (often full-page) of the works she discusses which are in the catalogue of the monographic exhibition *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)*.^[4] Although she notes the importance of this monographic exhibition (p.3, note 2) she does not integrate its insights or information into her discussion save for one brief mention in regard to the Baltimore *Death of Caesar*, and other relevant scholarship is not incorporated.^[5]

Çakmak’s promise to analyze the crisis in historical painting in the 1850s is weakened by her narrow definition of historical painting as the “transparent representation of past events as if witnessed by a bystander” (p.9), which denies Gérôme’s experiments the context they deserve. There were many ways of depicting and writing history in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s reflecting very different approaches in temporality and narratology, and scholarship is available on both Delaroche and Gérôme.^[6] Delaroche changed his style of painting according to his subject and his historiographic sources, which varied from Chateaubriand’s *Les Quatre Stuarts* (1828) and Vitet’s *Les Etats de Blois* (1827) to Lamartine’s *Histoire des Girondins* (1847), which inspired Delaroche’s *Marie-Antoinette at the Tribunal*, exhibited in 1851.^[7] Critics recognized that Delaroche’s varying *facture* and spatial address exemplified a historical viewpoint, and praised him for this: “... he knew how to vary his visual approach, to accommodate it to the times, places, people, the historical or philosophical idea represented by these accessories. At the same moment when, in literature, a new philosophical and historical school began to paint, M. Paul Delaroche created it in painting.”^[8]

Another area requiring examination is Gérôme’s relationship with Adolphe Goupil (his dealer, publisher and, after 1863, father-in-law).^[9] Assessing a photograph taken of a detail of the Baltimore *Death of Caesar* while it was still in progress (a work which allows us to have a clearer sense of the lost *César* exhibited in the Salon of 1859), Çakmak cites Mathilde Stevens’ Salon review: “It is said that [*César*] was initially conceived differently: ... commissioned by a publisher as a pendant to *Death of the Duc de Guise* by Paul Delaroche” (p.148).^[10] The “publisher,” identified neither by Stevens nor Çakmak, was Goupil, as Stephen Bann has demonstrated in his recent discussion of Gérôme’s *The Death of Marshal Ney (December 7, 1815, 9 O’Clock in the Morning)*, 1868 (Galleries and Museums Trust, Sheffield): “After Delaroche’s death in 1856, Goupil had in fact commissioned another painting of an assassination, Gérôme’s *Death of Caesar*, with the aim of reproducing it photographically as a pendant to the *Duc de Guise*.”^[11] There are important implications to Goupil’s commissioning Gérôme to produce a pendant to Delaroche’s *Duc de Guise* nearly twenty years after the duc d’Orléans (owner of Delaroche’s painting) had commissioned a pendant to it by Ingres: *Antiochus and Stratonice*, 1840 (Musée Condé, Chantilly).^[12]

For this reader, Gülru Çakmak's book offers intriguing insights and a demonstration of the power of close analysis but does not fulfill the promise in its title. Advanced students who are already familiar with the issues and examples of nineteenth century historical painting will benefit from considering its argument.

NOTES

[1] John House, 'History without Values? Gérôme's History Painting,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 71 (2008): 261-276, p.276.

[2] Delaroche's *Assassination of the duc de Guise*, 1834, (Musée Condé, Chantilly) is discussed extensively (pp. 44-48, 52-54, 89, 91-93, 148, 156, 168, 174) but recent scholarship on this important work is not provided. See Stephen Bann's discussion of a watercolor and graphite preparatory sketch (1830, Musée Fabre, Montpellier) in Stephen Bann and Linda Whiteley, *Painting History. Delaroche and Lady Jane Grey* (National Gallery Company, London, distributed by Yale University Press, 2010), catalogue 51, pp. 98-100 and Stephen Bann, "Delaroche off stage," in Sarah Hibberd and Richard Wrigley, eds., *Art, Theatre and Opera in Paris, 1750-1850. Exchanges and Tensions* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 145-157, where Bann compares Delaroche's "opening up painting to this dimension of side-to-side scanning, rather than up/down movement" to Gérôme's pre-cinematic axial compositions (p. 155).

[3] Çakmak does not mention Horace Vernet's influence on the modern style seeking ethnographic truth; his first voyage to North Africa took place in April 1833. In 1839, Vernet and the painter and photographer Frédéric-Auguste Goupil-Fesquet travelled to Egypt and Malta to take daguerreotypes. Goupil-Fesquet published *Voyages d'Horace Vernet en Orient* (Paris: Challamel, 1843) with the daguerreotypes (now lost) reproduced as lithographs. Vernet was one of the four artists honored by a retrospective exhibition at the Exposition Universelle in 1855, where he received a *grande médaille d'honneur*.

[4] Laurence des Cars, Dominique de Font-Réaulx, and Édouard Papet, eds. *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)* (Paris, Los Angeles, Milan: Musée d'Orsay, Getty, Skira, 2010).

[5] "The most recent monographic exhibition *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)* ... brought the spotlight onto Gérôme's work. Nonetheless, some of the articles and entries in its otherwise carefully researched catalogue reproduce the same biased categories (e.g., Orientalist, mercantilist, anecdotal paintings catering to the public's vulgar taste) in their analysis of Gérôme's work" (p. 3 note 2). Laurence des Cars' entry for catalogues 67-69 is mentioned for *The Death of Caesar*, 1859-67 (Walters Art Museum, Baltimore) but not Scott C. Allan, "Gérôme Before the Tribunal: the Painter's Early Reception," pp. 89-99, which assesses critical commentary between 1847 and 1867. Pierre Sérié, *La Peinture d'Histoire en France 1860-1900. La lyre ou le poignard* (Paris: Arthena, 2014) provides extensive coverage of Gérôme as well as many color details and plates. Sérié discusses the lost *César mort* (fig.40) on pages 23, 43, 56, 58, 66, pp. 217-219 and *La Mort de César* (Baltimore) (fig.177) on pp. 217-219 and p. 525, with full provenance and exhibition history for the works exhibited in the Exposition Universelle of 1867.

[6] Nina Lübbren, in “Crime, Time, and *The Death of Caesar*,” in Scott Allan and Mary Morton, eds., *Reconsidering Gérôme* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010), pp. 81-91) compares Gérôme’s dispersed foci to Mikhail Bakhtin’s “heteroglot polyvocality of the modern novel” and describes the obese senator (who she recognizes to be awake) as a “focalisor” (a narratological term employed by Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal) (p.84).

[7] The influence of Ludovic Vitet’s *Les Etats de Blois, ou la Mort de M. de Guise. Scènes historiques* (Paris, 1827) on Delaroche’s *Assassination of the duc de Guise* is discussed in Beth S. Wright, *Painting and History during the French Restoration. Abandoned by the Past* (Cambridge UP, 1997), pp. 113-116.

[8] Horace, comte de Viel-Castel, ‘Beaux-Arts. Paul Delaroche,’ *L’Artiste* 4 (1832), 301-2, p. 301 in Beth S. Wright, “Delaroche and the Drama of History: Gesture and Impassivity from the *Children of Edward IV* to *Marie-Antoinette at the Tribunal*,” in Hibberd and Wrigley, eds., *Art, Theatre and Opera in Paris, 1750-1850*, pp. 185-202, p. 202, note 42. Viel-Castel was writing on the occasion of Delaroche’s election to the Académie in 1832.

[9] See H. Lafont-Couturier, *Gérôme & Goupil. Art et entreprise* (Bordeaux: Musée Goupil, 2000-1 and New York: Dahesh Museum of Art, 2001; Pittsburgh: The Frick Art & Historical Center, 2001); Pierre-Lin Renié, “Gérôme: Working in the Era of Industrial Reproduction,” in *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)*, pp. 173-178.

[10] Mathilde Stevens, *Impressions d’une femme au Salon de 1859* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1859), p. 14.

[11] Bann and Whiteley, *Painting History. Delaroche and Lady Jane Grey*, in Bann’s discussion of Gérôme’s *The Death of Marshal Ney (December 7, 1815, 9 O’Clock in the Morning)*, 1868 (Galleries and Museums Trust, Sheffield), catalogue 86, p.152, citing Ernest Chesneau, *Salon de Paris 1859* (Paris, 1859), p.35.

[12] On this commissioned pendant see Wright, *Painting and History*, pp. 116-119.

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