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Reconsidering G r me:

The Private Life of *The Snake Charmer* in The United States

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Art History

by

Brandon David Acton-Bond

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Reconsidering Gérôme:

The Private Life of *The Snake Charmer* in The United States

by

Brandon David Acton-Bond

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Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Saloni Mathur, Chair

This paper is a study of Jean-Léon Gérôme's *The Snake Charmer*, 1879 in context with its yet examined life within the United States in the collection of the Clark family. This painting rose to prominence upon publication of Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism*, where it was featured as its cover image. Since then, subsequent art historians have sutured the image to post-colonial methodologies, failing to acknowledge the material contexts with which it was collected and displayed. By examining these key contexts and players, new understandings about American orientalism and the role of race, class, gender and sexuality begin to emerge. Consequently, this paper seeks to unmask hidden readings of Gérôme's artwork, while re-orienting questions about the painting away from its depicted subject matter towards the owner as subject. By examining the mode of its private display next to Gérôme's *Pollice Verso*, 1872, and its relationship to Alfred Corning Clark, an alternative reading outside of existing art historical inquiry comes into view.

The thesis of Brandon David Acton-Bond is approved.

Bronwen Wilson

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University of California, Los Angeles

2021

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Introduction

Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1879 academic genre painting, *The Snake Charmer* (Figure 1), became an instant icon of orientalist art when it appeared on the cover of Edward Said's canonical text *Orientalism* in 1978 (figure 2). While Said never commented on the selection, the feminist art historian Linda Nochlin famously embraced the painting in her 1979 essay, *The Imaginary Orient*, which sutured Said's paradigm shifting theory to art historical analysis.¹ In recent years, scholars have begun to fundamentally alter the way nineteenth-century art is viewed by shifting the focal point away from heroic artist figures towards broader considerations of factors, both within the frame and beyond. For example, Denise Murrell's return to Manet's iconic 1863 painting, *Olympia*, follows the path of the black female figure and identifies Manet's actual sitter, Laure. In turn, her research reveals the hidden, yet integral role of the black model for avantgarde modernists like Manet, a radical departure from the conventional reading of such models as largely irrelevant.² Ultimately this research led to a ground-breaking exhibition that explored the role of black women throughout the modernist oeuvre.³ Similarly, the art historian of African art, Suzanne Blier, has confronted another iconic painting of modernism, Picasso's 1907, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, which raises the stakes surrounding race and gender through a fresh analysis of photographs from the artist's studio and illustrated books published at the time.⁴ These scholars expand the work of

¹ Linda Nochlin., "The Imaginary Orient," in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-century Art and Society* (n.p.: Routledge, 2018).

² Denise Murrell describes the painting as an "emphatically bi-figural work", *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018): 4.

³ "Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today", October 24, 2018–February 10, 2019 at Wallach Art Gallery of Columbia University, New York; March 26–July 14, 2019 at Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

⁴ Suzanne Preston Blier, *Picasso's Femmes d'Alger, the Untold Origins of a Modern Masterpiece* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019). See also Simon Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference." *Modernism/Modernity* 10, no. 3 (2003): 455–80.

another feminist art historian, Griselda Pollock, who has argued in depth for a reconsideration of Van Gogh through the lenses of socio-historical, feminist, postcolonial and queer critical theories.⁵ Such scholars have critically challenged the settled understandings of iconic paintings freighted with decades of art historical analysis by illuminating previously unexplored and unseen aspects of these important works. This in turn, has revealed the problematic boundaries of the discipline of art history itself, and cleared the ground for further scholarly reconsideration of the art of Europe and America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This essay builds on such revisionist efforts by reconsidering *The Snake Charmer*, some four decades after Nochlin's influential reading. By drawing attention to the painting's provenance and the transatlantic encounters that made America the locus of this French painting for the past 150 years, I raise questions specifically about American orientalism, or rather orientalism's place within the United States.⁶ More specifically, I follow the painting's relationship to the Clark family, heirs to the vast fortune of the Singer Sewing Machine Company, arguably America's first multinational organization.⁷ Buying the painting in 1888, Alfred Corning Clark, the painting's second owner, proudly displayed the canvas in his family's New York City drawing room until his death in 1896, to its prompt sale by his widow.⁸ It was subsequently repurchased by one of his art

⁵ See: Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988); Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁶ The painting was initially bought directly from the Jean-Léon Gérôme's dealer Goupil & Cie by the American Albert Spencer for 75,000 francs (Hélène Lafont-Couturier, *Gérôme & Goupil: Art Et Entreprise ; Bordeaux, Musée Goupil, 12 Octobre 2000-14 Janvier 2001 ; New York, Dahesh Museum of Art, 6 Février - 4 Mai 2001 ; Pittsburgh, the Frick Art and Historical Center, 7 Juin - Août 12 2001* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2000), 20.) prior to its entry into the Clark family. It now resides at The Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, MA. Of note, the daughter of Adolphe Goupil, Marie, was married to Gérôme and this prominent Parisian dealership played an integral part to the artist's successful career in Europe, America and Constantinople.

⁷ Jack Buckman, *Unraveling the Threads: The Life, Death and Resurrection of the Singer Sewing Machine Company, America's First Multi-National Corporation* (Indianapolis, IN: Dog Ear Pub, 2016).

⁸ The Clark family biographer, Nicholas Fox Weber has described the painting as being on display in their New York dining room, yet photographic evidence shows it to be on display in their drawing room.

loving sons, Robert Sterling Clark, in 1942 who would eventually donate it to the Clark Art Institute in Western Massachusetts, the institution he established in the post-war period to house his major art collection.⁹ While art historians have analyzed the vast troves of visual details supplied by the painting (the tiled walls, the costumes, the species of snake, etc.), and have begun to consider the queer content of the scene it depicts, including though less explicitly, the difficult subject of pederasty implicit in the narrative, the painting's relationship to its American owners and its broader place within the orientalist imaginary for these nineteenth-century New Yorkers in the post-civil war era, has remained largely unacknowledged.¹⁰ In *The Clarks of Cooperstown*, the Clark family biographer, Nicholas Fox Weber, investigates the ways in which this influential family has collected art over multiple generations and shaped the American art world. *The Snake Charmer's* presence within the Clark's collection, demands particular investigation in relation to the semi-public homosexual life of Alfred Corning Clark.¹¹ In the proceeding pages, I consider the limits of existing scholarship on this iconic painting by Gérôme and point to some of the ways in which this scholarship obscures broader narrative concerns, in order to open up an alternative set of questions grounded in the painting's American context and its particular place within the Clark family.

Regardless, the painting was an important part of a visual vocabulary in the Clark family's rooms of public entertainment.

⁹ While Alfred Corning Clark was a major collector, two of his sons, Robert Sterling Clark and Stephen Carlton Clark were critical art world figures in their own right. Robert would found his own eponymous museum in Massachusetts in 1955, while Stephen was an important trustee and later vice president at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from the 1930s through the second World War. Stephen was also one of the Museum of Modern Art's founding trustees in 1929 and would later serve as chair of the board of trustees during the war years.

¹⁰ Joseph Allen Boone is one of the few scholars to broach the topic. See Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, Paperback edition (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2015).

¹¹ A note on terminology- homosexuality is a historicist term and any contemporary notion of a group identity or demographic belies that what we may deem, queer people during the nineteenth-century, would not have identified themselves as such. Rather the focus on acts and punishment for them was more common. (See footnotes 82 and 83)

Pollock has more recently confronted the disciplinary mechanisms of Art History and its foundations within the German language universities of Europe in her essay, *Whither Art History*.¹² In this examination, she expands on how the discipline was exported to other academic systems across the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She argues that, “One central problem is the historical gesture with which our discipline was founded. [...] The discipline of Art History manufactures a specific, separate history for art as a formal succession of styles, shifting iconographies, self-defining movements periods, and institutions [...]”¹³ Here Pollock reveals what she names the “unmarked neutrality” of the discipline which papers over the alarming operations of certain biases that privilege straight, white bourgeois and male narratives.¹⁴ This has led many art historians working against the grain of the discipline to seek to expose the canon’s apparent neutrality and to challenge the relations between margins and centers defined by western hegemony. As I will show, *The Snake Charmer* has been a key painting for scholars in confronting such theoretical concerns over the past four decades, and an important touchstone for the development of post-colonial methodologies in the discipline. And yet, there remains a consistent focus on certain preoccupations over others, resulting in the significant elision of important aspects of the story of this painting within art historical inquiry.

The Snake Charmer’s Reality Effect[s]

In *The Snake Charmer*, diffused light bounces off an elaborately detailed turquoise tiled wall consuming two thirds of the canvas and providing a backlit background for an assembled

¹² Griselda Pollock, "Whither Art History?," *The Art Bulletin* 96, no. 1 (March 2014).

¹³ Pollock, "Whither Art History?," 9.

¹⁴ Pollock, "Whither Art History?," 17.

congregation seated on the remnants of a dusty tessellated marble floor. In the upper right is a sliver of what appears to be an *alfarje* or wooden ceiling, a typical element of Islamic antique architecture. The earthy hues of the wooden ceiling and floor mirror each other and produce a somewhat claustrophobic interior bisected by the blue tiled wall. Upon closer inspection, and when compared with a source photograph from the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul (Figure 3) to which I will shortly return, Gérôme has made the executive decision to depict more cracked and broken tiles than are present in the photograph. In the segment of tiles on the far left, he makes sure to include a quadrant of four incongruous geometric patterned tiles that mismatch from the rest of the segment's vegetal tiles, a detail that is present in the photograph too. These four tiles would have likely been an authentic reparative solution to broken tiling on the wall at the palace. The juxtaposition of this real-life solution with Gérôme's fabricated broken tiling in the painting is revealing. Furthermore, Gérôme inexplicably places a metal hook directly through one of the tiles, upon which hangs a wrought iron long gun and shield. One result is that the painting enacts a more militaristic view of the Topkapi Palace than that of the photograph. Even if such an object had existed in the wall, it would have been placed in a tile seam to avoid cracking the delicate ceramic tile. Painterly choices like this, as Linda Nochlin has painstakingly shown, work to construct a particular orientalist narrative around the figures and setting of *The Snake Charmer*.

We know that *The Snake Charmer* was painted in Istanbul and later completed in Gérôme's studio in Paris. Throughout his life, the artist had travelled extensively across Europe and parts of the Near East and North Africa (the prime location for the French idea of l'Orient).¹⁵ Mary Roberts has meticulously explored Gérôme's time in Istanbul to reveal a network of relationships and

¹⁵ Between the mid 1870s until his death in 1904, he visited Holland, Turkey, Egypt, Greece, London, Sicily and Italy. For further details see Ackerman, Gerald M. *Jean-Léon Gérôme: His Life, His Work: 1824 -1904*. Paris: ACR Editions, 1997. 108.

cross-cultural interests that work to complicate Nochlin's early interpretation, and Said's general inattention to it. While the Turkish location that inspired the painting is evident from multiple references within the image, Roberts further reveals that the wall tiles are in fact largely legible and she attributes them to two different parts of the Topkapi Palace. She invokes the photograph mentioned earlier of the Topkapi Palace tiling taken by the Ottoman photographer, Abdullah Frères, which closely corresponds to Gérôme's rendering of the wall in *The Snake Charmer*, and explicates the friendship between the photographer and the painter (Figure 3).¹⁶ As Roberts explains, the relationship between Gérôme and Frères was reflected in a letter by the latter from 1877 which offered the French painter "any further photographs that he should need."¹⁷ The evidence of such correspondence allows for a better understanding of the transnational orientations in Gérôme's production of orientalist genre paintings.

Placed within the perspectival lines produced from the floor and wall tiles and the horizon where these architectural elements meet, the painting's twelve figures appear in a way that spatially splits the canvas into a background, midground and foreground. Just as Gérôme's painterly skills are evident in the details of the physical site, the figures too provide an occasion for the painter to indulge. He drapes and swaddles them in an assorted range of textured garments and fabrics: from the extravagant fur of the elderly figure in the green headdress; to the stiff, almost sculptural, umber colored cotton worn by the figure on the far left; or the almost pleated chartreuse wrap of the pipe player. In front of them, the worn, dusty, tasseled carpet lies between the cold floor and the performer's bare feet. Gérôme's painted fabrics facilitate and give life to a scene that appears

¹⁶ For more information see Mary Roberts, *Istanbul Exchanges: Ottomans, Orientalists, and Nineteenth-century Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 77, and 196, footnote 3.

¹⁷ Additionally, Roberts describes in depth the Ottoman palace's purchase of Gérôme's orientalist canvases and the subsequent effect on how the artist chose to depict the orient to correspond with his intended buyer, whether they were Ottoman, French or American. See: Roberts, *Istanbul Exchanges*, 79.

frozen in time. These fabrics provide a tactile point of entry to the viewer and add to the sensations of sight and surface that Gérôme has painstakingly produced. So too, do other details like the wicker ridges of the snake's basket, with its remarkable sense of texture. Sensuous abundance is augmented by Gérôme's use of sheen, which glistens on the snake's scales, the golden glimmer of the older gentleman's sheathed scimitar, or the diffuse glowing light bouncing off the tiled wall. It is sheen that provides a medium that blends the sensorial with the visual and which amplifies the tender yet sinewy musculature and bone structure of the nude child at the center of the picture.¹⁸

This is a *touching* painting, and it is sensation rather than pictorial narrative which most animates the painting.¹⁹ We shall see later how this has influenced some of the preoccupations of art historians, who tend to subsume the narrative elicited by the figures to the painting's sensorial qualities. The multi-generational, all-male audience within the composition are generally perceived as an assemblage of various ethnographic types, or non-western ethnicities in regional costumes loosely belonging to the French perception of l'Orient (North Africa and the Levant). Herein sexual tension, fear and danger saturates the homosocial atmosphere and permeates the diversity of figures in the snake charmer's audience. The child's exposed performing body enraptures the audience as seen in their facial expressions and provides Gérôme an opportunity to perform his own artistic flourish. Some stare mouth agape at the sight, while others smile or grit their teeth, apparently either awed or intrigued. One of the painting's enduring strengths resides in the multiple invisible sightlines that shrewdly bakes into the image a charted network of racialized male gazes. These sightlines land either on the snake, or at the child's out-of-sight sex, eliciting unique facial responses in the audience. Here too, race provides operational coverage for implicit

¹⁸ For a theorizing on sheen in visual culture see: Cheng, Anne Anlin. *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*. Paperback ed. New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013.

¹⁹ The sensorial abundance has infamously caused The Clark Art Institute to encase the canvas in a protective layer of glass as too many visitors couldn't help but reach out to touch the child's buttocks.

and explicit homoerotic and pederastic desires, creating a permission structure for these subversive narratives to exist in plain (and white) sight. Indeed, the painting has remained in private and public collections within the United States since its inception. Later, I will explore the implications of these stealthy narratives operating for a presumptively white and well-to-do viewership within the private spaces of a family home in New York City.

The nude and pre-pubescent snake charmer holds aloft a sizeable constrictor-like snake, providing his audience with a full-frontal view while we only see the figure's posterior. On the performer's right a cross-legged elderly musician directs his pipe instrument towards the child's genital region, a provocative view provided to their audience but only hinted at for us. Without depicting male genitalia, the painting abounds with unsubtle sexualized phallic references, most obviously the snake itself, wrapping around and squeezing the boy, or the myriad guns and swords being gripped by the audience or hanging on the wall, or the pipe, of course, being blown towards the groin. In addition to the contrasting textural sheens, the snake's sinewy form draws attention to the curvatures of the child's body and blends into the audience's draped textiles and the basket's wicker strands. Ruminating on these curves and the rigid lines of the richly decorated space, we perceive a kind of serpentine aesthetic that paradoxically imbues the painting with fluidity, even as it intensifies the stasis of the human figures. The result is a dynamism that practically causes the deterioration of the space, in the symbolism of the broken tiling across the floors and walls. Together, these formal elements turbocharge the painting with homoerotic and homosocial sexual energy.

Because the painting's viewer is implicated in this eroticized spectacle, the racial and geopolitical contexts of its circulation, collection, and display become crucial to consider. This is a painting by a white man, and as we shall see later, was owned by white men and more specifically,

a white man who had relationships with men. *The Snake Charmer* is a scene of cross-racial encounter, both within the painting with its phenotypically diverse figures, and between these figures and the Euro-American audiences and connoisseurs that consumed them. Ultimately, this encounter comes to bear on the racial ambiguity of the nude performer, whose face remains concealed but who has the lightest colored skin in the painting, and whose ambiguous race further leads to the uncertainties of gender. Critics and art historians have always described the child as a boy, but the painter's choice to obscure their sex, along with the figure's extremely fair skin, renders the child a site of instability and a fulcrum for racial and sexual fantasy and anxiety. The absence of the figure's sex is contrasted by the phantasmatic phalluses surrounding them, and the conceit of the snake itself, which becomes a parodic phallus for the child who holds it. What gives this image so much power, ultimately, is its interactivity. It requires the viewer to become dialectically engaged through the scopic act of looking in interplay with powerful haptic elements like texture and sheen.

As a consequence of Gérôme's exquisite skills as a realist painter, an enduring preoccupation for art historians who examine his oeuvre has been what I call a reality effect quest. This search for impressive pictorial details comes out of Linda Nochlin's pioneering analysis and is sustained in the work of subsequent scholars informed by Said-ian postcolonial paradigms, such as Mary Roberts and Joseph Allen Boone.²⁰ For these scholars, Gérôme's tiny brushstrokes and fastidious near photo-realism transforms the painting into a kind of portal, providing a window onto the hazy fever dream of the Euro-Western idea of the orient. Glowing surfaces imbue the scene with a luxuriant tactility that gives the picture plane its heightened sense of fantasy and

²⁰ Mary Roberts, *Istanbul Exchanges: Ottomans, Orientalists, and Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015); Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, Paperback edition (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2015).

dreaminess. The transfixed men sit against what Nochlin describes as, “[a] ferociously detailed tiled wall.”²¹ In addition, Nochlin remarks on how Gérôme takes the time to present a collection of types of men gathered from all over the vast and vaguely defined region of the orient. Furthermore, the turgid snake wrapping around and grasped by the child fails to conform to any identifiable species.²² Nochlin argues that the function of the exquisite detail in the painting promotes and gives license to an authenticating “reality effect.”²³ This is reinforced by the painter’s skill in concealing all evidence of his brushstrokes and the accumulation and inclusion of a myriad of evidentiary props which encourages the sense that the viewer is peering into another very real world. Through miniscule detailing and a strategic accumulation of types, objects and ideologies, the painter achieves a pitch-perfect projection of an imagined reality, the orientalist imaginary.²⁴ In a footnote Nochlin references a conversation with Said who refutes the notion that the tiled wall has legible script, and quotes the author of the 1972 Gérôme catalogue, Richard Ettinghausen, who describes it as “[being] easily read.”²⁵ For decades after Nochlin’s essay, art historians have thus attempted to authenticate the status, location and meaning of the calligraphic script on the tiled wall in pursuit of the painting’s reality effect.

However, Nochlin’s argument returns us to the audience figures, suggesting that the painting should be re-titled “*The Snake Charmer and His Audience*,” a title that serves to include

²¹ Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," 35.

²² Holly Edwards and Brian T. Allen, *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* ; [published on the Occasion of the Exhibition *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures, Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* ; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 6 June - 4 September 2000, the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland, 1 October - 10 December 2000, Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina, 3 February - 23 April 2001] (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), 130.

²³ Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," 38.

²⁴ Gérôme’s many collected objects, photographs and sketches from his travels and fed into his paintings are documented in number upon his death and the division of his estate amongst his wife and four daughters. See Ackerman, “*Jean-Léon Gérôme*”.171.

²⁵ Nochlin, "The Imaginary," 57.

the spectators into the spectacle. “The defining mood of the painting is mystery,” she states.²⁶

Providing an ekphrastic description Nochlin writes:

We are permitted only a beguiling rear view of the boy holding the snake. A full frontal view, which would reveal unambiguously both his sex and the fullness of his dangerous performance, is denied us. And the insistent, sexually charged mystery at the center of this painting signifies a more general one: the mystery of the East itself, a standard topos of Orientalist ideology.²⁷

While acknowledging that the child’s gender *is* ambiguous, Nochlin explains the effect of the figure’s dorsal view as a way of seeing “the fullness of his dangerous performance.” Later on, she states that the painting is full of certain absences: “these absences are so conspicuous that, once we become aware of them, they begin to function as presences, in fact, as *signs of a certain kind of conceptual depravation*.”²⁸ The essay famously provides a list of these absences: time, the figure of the westerner, a sense of history, etc. While Nochlin’s essay discusses the visceral sexuality, and specifically heterosexuality, that saturates the orientalist work of Delacroix, the stark homoerotics of our painting – with its attached ideas of Islamic pederasty, hamam and harem culture, and the figure of the eunuch – remain a glaring elision.²⁹ Tellingly, she does not describe these queer aspects of the painting, alluding only to “a certain kind of conceptual depravation” instead.

In contrast to Nochlin, Joseph Allen Boone’s book, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, does not shy away from this central issue, nor some of the troubling pederastic elements of the image. Boone is careful to ground his analysis in the occidental imagining of oriental sexuality, arguing

²⁶ Nochlin, “The Imaginary,” 35.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ For more on the figure of the eunuch in orientalist art see: Boone, *The Homoerotics*, 98. And Arvas, Abdulhamit. “Early Modern Eunuchs and the Transing of Gender and Race.” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 116–36.

that “[the painting’s] simultaneous appeal and aura of illicitness is rooted, however subliminally, in Western associations of Middle Eastern sensuality with male pederasty.”³⁰ Boone acknowledges that while Said (like Nochlin) evades the subject of non-heterosexual desire in *Orientalism*, they both nonetheless provide a framework with which to take up these considerations, and his book length project is an exploration of exactly this.³¹ In a section describing *The Snake Charmer*, he posits:

[...] what is salient is the degree to which the erotics that reverberate beneath the “innocent” veneer of Gérôme’s painting is the culmination of centuries of literary and artistic imaginings, promulgated by Europeans and Middle Easterners alike, of the youth beloved by men, even as the contradictions that art historians have identified in Gérôme’s masterwork point to the deconstructive elements encompassed by and embedded in this motif.³²

Boone’s analysis thus shifts away from the art historical focus on identifying tiles, snakes, script, and costumes, and squarely confronts what the painting taps into – a motif of pederastic sexuality propped up by myth, writing and visual culture across the occidental and oriental landscapes.³³ In his response to Nochlin’s argument of absences, in particular the notion that the reality effect makes these artworks artless, he posits presences:

Such views overlook the fact that art and artifice are *everywhere* in the painting: from the intricately repeating arabesque patterns of the fabled tile work to the calligraphic design on the upper wall [...], from the music being piped by the flutist to the boy’s performance, from the storytelling element that well may be accompanying his performance to the implied narrative within the painting itself.³⁴

³⁰ Boone, *The Homoerotics*, 54.

³¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Princeton, NJ: Vintage Books, 2008), 188.

³² Boone, *The Homoerotics*, 54.

³³ In the history of the term, legal records show the way that pederasty and sodomy are linked together as a singular offense. In Paris this is explored through a statistical and historical analysis of the arrest records between 1873-1879 in: Peniston, William A. *Pederasts and Others: Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth Century Paris*. Haworth Gay & Lesbian Studies. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004.

³⁴ Boone, *The Homoerotics*, 342.

Ultimately, the experience of viewing the painting results in what Boone describes as a mirror effect, the confluence of painted audience and the gaze of the viewer: “Together these two gazes “create” the totality of the thus entirely eroticized body of the snake charmer—which is to say that “Eastern” and “Western” viewers, rather than existing as opposites, become mirrors of each other, linked in a shared act of homoerotic triangulation that occurs over this boy’s nude body.”³⁵ This triplicate routing of sightlines produces a geopolitical triangulation of homoerotic gazes, where the depicted “Eastern” and the presumed “Western” viewer becomes inequitably ensnared in an eroticized nude dance – a constructed Constantinople of queer desire.³⁶ While this queer desire is marked on the gathering of ethnographic types, the viewer of the painting appears to remain untarnished by the kind of conceptual devaluation described by Nochlin. With this conceptual devaluation unmasked, I want to shift away from Nochlin’s reality effect and Boone’s mirror effect to look at the unspoken biography of Alfred Corning Clark and the historical contexts in which the sewing machine magnate acquired and displayed *The Snake Charmer*.

The Snake Charmer in the United States

While Said wrote prolifically about American imperialism and America’s enduring role as a super-power, his arguments in *Orientalism* were predominantly concerned with European (and mostly French and British) conceptions of the orient. As a result, further attention to orientalism in America, and in particular from a visual culture perspective, has been a productive field of

³⁵ Boone, *The Homoerotics*, 343.

³⁶ For more see: Arvas, Abdulhamit. “From the Pervert, Back to the Beloved: Homosexuality and Ottoman Literary History, 1453–1923.” In *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, edited by E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, 1st ed., 145–63. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

inquiry. In the catalogue for an exhibition at The Clark Institute on *Orientalism in America*,³⁷ Holly Edwards argued that “Orientalism is not a monolithic or static phenomena but rather a complicated and multivocal process that can only be understood cumulatively and retrospectively. In talking about Orientalist visual imagery in this manner, then, it is critical to be specific about time, place, and players.”³⁸ Here, I turn away from the “reality effect quest” that has preoccupied much scholarship on Gérôme’s painting towards the specificities of “time, place, and players” proposed by Edwards and culled from sources and historical materials of the painting’s American life, thus far overlooked by these art historians. Remaining undiscussed by Nochlin, Roberts, and Boone is the critical fact that the painting has resided in the United States since it was first sold by Gérôme’s dealer, Goupil & Cie, to the American Albert Spencer initially and later, in 1888 to the American business magnate Alfred Corning Clark.³⁹ In order to reconstruct some of the empirical stories of *The Snake Charmer*’s existence in America, and how this alters our understanding, I turn now to examine both the site of the United States in the late nineteenth-century, and the extraordinary role the painting had in the life of its second owner, Alfred Corning Clark.

The United States was uniquely situated in its appreciation of orientalist art, especially in the mid to late nineteenth-century. At the end of the American Civil War in 1865, and less than a century after American Independence in 1776, the young country was in a period of upheaval and

³⁷ “Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930”, June 11–September 4, 2000, at The Clark Institute, Williamstown, MA.

³⁸ Edwards and Allen, *Noble Dreams*, 16.

³⁹ For details of these sales see footnote 6. Unfortunately, we know little about Albert Spencer other than the surviving sales records: *Catalogue of the Albert Spencer Collection of Foreign Paintings*. New York: Fifth Avenue Art Galleries, 1888. Along with a New York Tribune article (“Spencer Pictures Sold.” *New York Daily Tribune*, February 29, 1888.) Albert Spencer’s collection was displayed to the public at the Fifth Avenue Galleries and sold for \$284,000 at auction at Chickering Hall to bidders that included Cornelius Vanderbilt. Alongside many European paintings is a subset of orientalist genre paintings from Eugène Fromentin, Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps and Eugène Delacroix. While these paintings sold from between \$2020 and \$6400, Gérôme’s *Snake Charmer* fetched the highest price of this sub-group at \$19500.

social change. Americans faced rapid industrialization and urbanization, territorial expansion into the west, and ultimately a radical economic and class restructuring. This led to entirely new dynasties of stratified wealth, exemplified by the Clark family, who were a part of a small but expanding affluent class who had manufactured their way into the upper echelons of American society. For this moneyed elite, the orient became a fashionable aesthetic and a phantasmagoric touchstone that operated within the ornamental regime of particularly detailed images within highly decorated interior spaces.

By the latter half of the century, American painters converged on Paris, seeking to satiate the desires of the nouveau riche by honing their skills and grasping the techniques directly from the artists most popular in the genre of orientalist art.⁴⁰ In this transformative era, as Edwards has argued, the orient “[...] offered opportunities to imagine, vicariously experience, and ultimately incorporate new options into their lives. Thus, the Orient was both a tool for self-scrutiny and a foil for social change.”⁴¹ For this young nation, caught between a struggle to cast aside a pathologized residue of its own subordinate colony status and its swelling global reach, America appeared to lack a history from which to map its advancement, at least relative to Europe’s long imperial regimes. And this was a lack that the orient could fill. Therefore, the proliferating consumption of an ornamental orient, based on a blend of assumptions about an imagined other, furnished members of the American bourgeoisie with a sense of historicity with which to project, narrativize, and moralize a robust American future via the prosperous present. These powerful

⁴⁰ Jean-Léon Gérôme taught many students during his career including approximately 150 American painters, most famously, Frederick Arthur Bridgman, Thomas Eakins, Edwin Lord Weeks, Mary Cassatt & William McGregor Paxton. For more information see: Helene Barbara Weinberg, *The American Pupils of Jean-Léon Gérôme* (Forth Worth, Tex.: Amon Carter Museum, 1984).

⁴¹ Edwards and Allen, *Noble Dreams*, 16.

ornamental choices directly form the background, like a set design, for the agendas and activities of the affluent industrialist class.⁴²

The Clarks

From the time of its purchase in 1888, *The Snake Charmer* has orbited the Clark family across multiple generations, significantly binding the family with the painting. As previously noted, the painting today remains on display as a highlight of the collection of The Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, MA. The eponymous founder of the museum was Robert Sterling Clark, who acquired the painting during a happenstance encounter at a New York City auction house in the course of an afternoon stroll with his wife in 1942. At the time, the genre of academic orientalist painting had fallen into disregard, and Sterling Clark was the sole bidder for *The Snake Charmer* that day.⁴³ Rarely buying paintings at auction, this stroke of luck presented the opportunity for Sterling to pay a paltry \$500 for a painting that would later become a synecdoche for *Orientalism* after Said's publication.⁴⁴ Sterling was exuberant from this acquisition on two accounts. Firstly, as a major art collector, the *Gérôme* was an exceptional example of orientalist genre painting that typifies the painter's late career style. Secondly, and more importantly, *The Snake Charmer* had a deeply nostalgic value, triggering memories of his childhood home in New York, where it hung across from another, even more famous work by *Gérôme*, *Pollice Verso* from 1872 (figure 5) – a

⁴² This would trickle down to the developing consumer classes of the petit bourgeoisie and provided a powerful tool for nationalistic home building, primarily for women, through orientalist décor and fashion. For further analysis see: Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

⁴³ In contrast see footnote 39.

⁴⁴ Nicholas Fox Weber, *The Clarks of Cooperstown: Their Singer Sewing Machine Fortune, Their Great and Influential Art Collections, Their Forty-year Feud* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 223.

dramatic juxtaposition to which I will return and analyze in more detail at the end of this paper. His father, the chief protagonist of this story Alfred Corning Clark, owned *The Snake Charmer* until his death in 1896 when his widow Elizabeth promptly sold the work.

Before delving into the Clark family saga, we should consider the source of the wealth that gave the Clark's the means with which to be major art collectors. At the time of Sterling's purchase in the early 1940's, the Clark family was several generations into its long-term affluence. Sterling's grandfather, Edward Cabot Clark, was Isaac Singer's business partner at the Singer Sewing Machine Company. Parlaying this money and his business acumen into the lucrative realm of Manhattan real estate, Edward began the Clark's multigenerational investment into property, including the construction of the portfolio's crown jewel – the famous Dakota Apartments on the Upper West Side. As the unlucky result of the deaths of Edward's four other children, and upon Edward's own death in 1882, his son and sole surviving heir, the 38-year-old Alfred Corning Clark, inherited an estimated fifty million dollars, and reluctantly took the reins of the company.⁴⁵ At this point in his gilded life, with a wife, and four young boys himself, Alfred appeared to the outside world a consummate Victorian husband, father, and businessman. Yet he led, what Weber, describes as “[a] carefully divided life.”⁴⁶

In Manhattan Alfred kept three residences: the first was the main family home at 7 West 22nd Street, where he and his wife, Elizabeth, would eventually hang the two *Gérômes* and from which Sterling's memories of *The Snake Charmer* were derived. The second was an apartment for entertainment purposes uptown at The Dakota which would be completed in 1884. And the third was an apartment down the street from the family home, at 60 West 22nd Street, which housed one

⁴⁵ Weber, *The Clarks*, 44.

⁴⁶ Weber, *The Clarks*, 47.

of the key figures of Alfred's "carefully divided life." This was the New York residence of the Norwegian tenor, Lorentz Severin Skougaard, Alfred's semi-closeted male partner.

A Gilded Atlantic

Prior to marriage, family life, and fiscal commitments, Alfred lived a life of leisure across the Atlantic in Europe. In his early twenties, before becoming his father's sole heir, the young man moved to Milan to study piano and art. Shortly after moving to Italy, he inherited the princely sum of around \$500,000 from his grandmother. This injection of cash fueled his nascent appreciation for the arts along with a luxurious European lifestyle, far away from familial or business concerns. At twenty-four, he met Skougaard and began a nineteen-year relationship with the singer, that ended with the Norwegian's untimely death of typhoid fever in 1885. Naming one of his sons Edward Severin Clark after the Norwegian tenor, Alfred openly expressed his cherished relationship to Skougaard. Furthermore, after the singer's death, Alfred would write and fund the publication of Skougaard's biography.⁴⁷

While Alfred is careful to minimize his own presence within this biography during the singer's closing nineteen years, the details with which he describes the Skougaard's exploits suggests otherwise.⁴⁸ This is especially remarkable as Clark partially funded these travels and would have certainly accompanied the tenor.⁴⁹ While the biography speaks of a valued friendship and shared sense of artistic appreciation, there is no mention of either Alfred's family and life on the other side of the Atlantic, or of course, their intimate relationship. In Europe, Skougaard's

⁴⁷ Alfred Corning Clark, *Lorentz Severin Skougaard* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1885).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Weber, *The Clarks*, 54.

Norwegian family regarded Alfred as an honorary member, with Sara Helene, Skougaard's mother, treating him like another son. At Severin's funeral service in Langesund, we are told, she leaned on Alfred as she wept.⁵⁰ Both during Skougaard's life, and after his death, Alfred would continue to holiday in this small Norwegian coastal town. The geographic separation of an ocean and the dispersed lives of Clark's American family, with their homes in New York City and upstate New York (in Cooperstown) helped to provide camouflage for his semi-public queer relationship with Skougaard.⁵¹

Clark's transatlantic lifestyle, funded by his immense wealth, facilitated his shifting social and sexual propensities. In New York, his family and business life took precedence, and he diligently performed the roles his family and American society required of him. His relationship with artists and the arts in Europe presented a partial, no doubt exciting, escape from his heterosexual life and responsibilities in the United States. Weber explains the pressure Alfred faced, "Like his father, he lived on a scale that could not help attract attention, but he comported himself as a good churchgoer, a reader, and a shy, self-effacing man who loathed the idea of drawing attention to himself."⁵² The burden of these social and fiscal pressures were lessened during Alfred's yearly European jaunts. As Weber continues, "It took the distance of an ocean to escape the public gaze."⁵³ These first-class Atlantic crossings were akin to golden tickets out of the glass closet that Alfred Corning Clark occupied in America.

In Europe, and France especially, Alfred had a social network of men who lived openly homosexual lives which revolved around the consumption and support of the arts (and artists).

⁵⁰ Clark, *Lorentz Severin Skougaard*, 245.

⁵¹ I use the term semi-closeted as Severin joined Alfred on family vacations to Cooperstown upstate, and even during some Christmas celebrations. Skougaard was a closely known presence both to Alfred's wife and his children. See: Weber, *The Clarks*, 55.

⁵² Weber, *The Clarks*, 50.

⁵³ Weber, *The Clarks*, 76.

Citing the unpublished notes of another author, Frederick C. Moffat, Weber states that “Clark believed France to be the Mecca of brotherly feeling.”⁵⁴ This description, aligning Mecca with France through the conduit of “brotherly feeling,” is itself revealing: for Americans, France belonged to the East both physically and mentally, projecting a form of oriental otherness to America’s own occident. Paris too has a long history of American intellectuals, artists, and bohemians, unbridling themselves of the puritanical values of the United States and exploring new modalities of art making, socializing, and sexuality. This was certainly true for Clark, whose yearly trips revolved around philanthropy, art, and a social circle of friends with similar queer proclivities.⁵⁵ These transformational ocean voyages provided an entryway for Clark’s sly mode of living outside of conventional societal constraints. Naturally these gilded passages in first-class steamer cabins were undergirded by his immense wealth, access and privilege. Alfred’s multiple crossings stood in stark contrast to the vast majority of Atlantic passengers, who, with their one-way steerage class tickets, sought their fortune in America.⁵⁶

Back on the other side of the Atlantic, orientalist art, like *The Snake Charmer*, provided its owners with new avenues through which to see the world and themselves. Edwards describes these images as “[a] therapeutic mechanism as well as a creative process whereby people might construct models of behavior and society and then move into spaces of power that they have constructed.”⁵⁷ In other words, the display of such pictures in public or semi-public spaces provided a therapeutic

⁵⁴ Weber, *The Clarks*, 57.

⁵⁵ After Skougaard’s death it was this network of queer friends who introduced him to the next great relationship in his life, the Paris-based American sculptor, George Grey Barnard. This important aesthetic and interpersonal relationship, while relevant to understanding Alfred Clark’s queer life, is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. However, Barnard went on to educate Alfred’s sons on art appreciation and would be a key figure in their lives and collecting practices too.

⁵⁶ For a historical analysis of the dialectical relationship between America and Europe via steamboat crossings see: Rodgers, Daniel T. *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998.

⁵⁷ Edwards and Allen, *Noble Dreams*, 17.

function in the uptight world of America in the nineteenth-century, allowing viewers to enact new modes of social behavior and being in society.

Yet at the same time, the decision to hang a painting charged with homoerotic undertones both in the public spaces of the family's New York apartment, in addition to lending the painting to public exhibitions around America, with Alfred's name squarely attached, was a bold gesture. The painting was lent to the momentous 1893 *World's Columbian Exposition* in Chicago alongside a Corot, a Daubigny, three Millets and two by Delacroix.⁵⁸ There, the display of Gérôme's *Snake Charmer* indicated the painters' place within American art appreciation. According to DeCourcy E. McIntosh: "There is no better indication of Gérôme's recognized position in the American pantheon of artists of the time than his presence at the Columbian World Exposition in Chicago in 1892-1893. Indeed, it was not exhibited in the French section, where younger artists predominated, but in the American section."⁵⁹

As Weber acknowledges, "That the Clarks hung this tender rendering of a boy at the brink of puberty, displaying himself to a male audience for all to see, in their New York life, is nothing short of astonishing."⁶⁰ The late queer theorist, José Esteban Muñoz, proffers a valuable mode of thinking through the ambiguous status of such queer evidence:

Queerness is rarely complemented by evidence, or at least by traditional understanding of the term. The key to queering evidence, and by that I mean the ways in which we prove queerness and read queerness, is by suturing it to the concept of ephemera. Think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Weber, *The Clarks*, 91.

⁵⁹ Translated from: DeCourcy E. McIntosh, "Goupil and the American Triumph of Jean-Léon Gérôme," in *Gérôme & Goupil: Art Et Entreprise ; Bordeaux, Musée Goupil, 12 Octobre 2000-14 Janvier 2001 ; New York, Dahesh Museum of Art, 6 Février - 4 Mai 2001 ; Pittsburgh, the Frick Art and Historical Center, 7 Juin - Août 12 2001*, by Hélène Lafont-Couturier (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2000), 42.

⁶⁰ Weber, *The Clarks*, 83.

⁶¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 65.

While Muñoz articulates the difficulty of glancing back queerly, his notion of the ephemeral trace permits an alternative view of the collector's life. It is significant that Alfred purchased *The Snake Charmer* in 1888, only three years after Skougaard's premature death.⁶² So too is the fact that, although the painting may have been tolerated during Alfred's life, his wife Elizabeth swiftly sold it after his passing. While Elizabeth is known to have welcomed her husband's "companions," this expeditious sale, according to Weber, reflects her possible discomfort with the reality of Alfred's companions.⁶³ As I will argue in the next section, the display of *The Snake Charmer*, next to another painting by Gérôme, *Pollice Verso*, within the Clark family home (Figure 6) not only presents us with yet another meaningful queer trace, in Muñoz's terms, which "[hangs] in the air like a rumor," but a glimpse behind Alfred Corning Clark's heterosexual façade of his New York City family home.⁶⁴ In 1881, New York's sodomy laws punished offenders with a maximum of 5-20 years imprisonment. By the time of the painting's purchase in 1888, the infamous Everard Spa and Turkish Bathhouse, a gay bathhouse that operated from 1888 to 1986, had opened down the street, at 28 West 28th Street.⁶⁵ While it is not possible to know if Clark visited this establishment, its presence alongside the state's anti-sodomy laws, establish the increasing visibility (and threat)

⁶² Alfred Corning Clark bought the painting for \$19500 on Feb. 28, 1888 at the Chickering Hall auction house for Fifth Avenue Art Galleries. See: *Catalogue of the Albert Spencer Collection of Foreign Paintings* (New York: New York : Fifth Avenue Art Galleries, 1888), 35.

⁶³ Weber, *The Clarks*, 91.

⁶⁴ While Weber describes the two paintings as hanging in the dining room, the photographic evidence (Figure 6) provided by Weber shows the paintings in the drawing room. Of course, it could well have been that they hung in both locations at various points in their time in the family household. Nonetheless, the Victorian drawing room was the prime public-private intermediary space where guests were entertained and thus was most highly decorated.

⁶⁵ The name was not actually a play on words as it was founded by the financier James Everard, but later in its time the name certainly took on other connotations. The establishment had a long history of run ins with the NYPD vice squad on account of 'lewd behavior,' alongside devastating fires, murders and a celebrity clientele, it would eventually close in the 1980s as a result of the AIDs crisis. See Ephem Glenn Colter and Dangerous Bedfellows, eds., *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1996).

of queer life in New York during this time.⁶⁶ While Clark's wealth and status made him a public player, it also enabled him to shield his relationships with men where others could not.

Dueling Masculinities: Contextualizing the Display of Alfred Corning Clark's *Gérômes*

The Clark's New York City drawing room (Figure 6) throngs with ornate fixtures. Consider the eclecticism of the room's neoclassical details in fluted composite columns and pilasters, competing floral carpeting and wallpaper, substantial chandeliers and expensive furniture of different styles (including what appears to be an orient inspired armchair and a matching bench behind it). This room, in which our painting hangs alongside others, is rife with visual excess. This indulgent ornamentality itself evokes the fastidious overwrought details within *The Snake Charmer* discussed earlier. The drawing room would have been the public face of the private home. Thus, Alfred Corning Clark's decorative choices were an aesthetic welcome mat to the family's home at 7 West 22nd Street.

While it is difficult to make out, across the doorway from *The Snake Charmer* is *Gérôme's* 1872 painting, *Pollice Verso* (Figure 5). *Pollice Verso* was arguably the most accomplished picture within a series of paintings produced by *Gérôme* that focused on the Roman arena. Upon their debut at the Paris Salon in 1873, these paintings were circulated widely via photographic reproduction by *Gérôme's* gallery, Goupil & Cie. Within this nascent form of mass visual culture, *Pollice Verso* was the most popular image. While critics like Emile Zola viewed the artist's commercialism with distaste, throngs of visitors mobbed these canvases when on display at the

⁶⁶ Here I use the term queer to indicate broadly non-heterosexual experiences and lives.

salon.⁶⁷ *Pollice Verso* was also the artist's favorite painting and years later he would make several detailed sculptures of the gladiator figures it depicted.⁶⁸ That Alfred Corning Clark owned what was akin to a celebrity of a painting, even in New York, would have not gone unnoticed by the well-to-do visitors of Clark's Manhattan residence.

Additionally, these details reveal a transatlantic dynamic that was amplified by Gérôme's commercialism. During a stroll in Paris' Place Saint-Sulpice, his friend and sculptor, Augustin Moreau-Vauthier pointed out a reproduction of one of the paintings at a cheap religious print shop. Gérôme noted how the image was highly popular among those who the artist described as "ces gens-là," or "those people."⁶⁹ The art historian, Emily Beeny, interprets Gérôme's reaction to his friend, "as one of coy self-effacement, indicating both a polite disdain for the print trade and a hint of embarrassment at the crass commercialization of his work."⁷⁰ Beeny further notes that the artist's remark is one of ambivalence too. Was it "those people" whom Gérôme appreciated more than the American millionaires, like Clark, with the means to buy the original oil paintings, or was it the few remaining critics who continued to maintain positive reviews of his work?⁷¹ It was by this point in the artist's late career, that Gérôme had experienced extremely lean periods as well as economically successful ones, as exemplified by the lucrative miniature print industry around *Pollice Verso* pioneered by Goupil & Cie. If, for Americans, ownership of Gérôme's spectacular paintings was the height of consumer taste, for Parisian aesthetes like Zola, these were populist images for the masses and somewhat distasteful as a result. The dynamics resulting from this

⁶⁷ The painting was first exhibited at the private Salon des Mirlitons in 1873. See: Emily Beeny, "Blood Spectacle: Gérôme in the Arena," in *Reconsidering Gérôme*, by Scott Allan and Mary G. Morton (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012), 41, 44 and 45.

⁶⁸ Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Notes autobiographiques*, ed. Gerald M Ackerman (Vesoul, 1981), 11.

⁶⁹ Charles Moreau-Vauthier, *Gérôme, peintre et sculpteur, l'homme et l'artiste, d'après sa correspondance, ses notes, les souvenirs de ses élèves et de ses amis* (Paris, 1906), 51.

⁷⁰ Beeny, "Blood Spectacle," 41.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

popular and commercial success, and the correlative decline in critical appreciation, engendered ambiguous feelings about the artist's work and his differing audiences.

What *Pollice Verso* (figure 5) depicts is the terse final moment of judgement during a Roman gladiatorial death match, and it was known to the Clarks simply as *The Gladiator*.⁷² Executed a few years prior to *The Snake Charmer*, Gérôme's 1872 portrayal bristles with the historical details that gave rise to Nochlin's "reality effect." It is a brutal psychological painting that juxtaposes the pleasure that the audience takes over the imminent death of an exhausted and defeated fighter, as a masked, therefore emotionless, triumphant gladiator looks out for the final judgement call.

Within Clark's fussy drawing room, the paired Gérômes, separated by a double door, act as twin portals pulling the attentive occupants out of the more mundane experiences of nineteenth-century American family life (Figure 6). From our perspective, these two paintings are imbued with a cinematic quality that, to borrow from the language of cinema, results in a suspended long shot that includes the gladiator, the snake charmer, and the viewer (both the viewer in the drawing room and the scrupulously portrayed audiences within the paintings). As a result, the figures of the snake charmer and the gladiator act as surrogate devices for the viewers of the paintings, wherein we step into the painting ourselves to be visually consumed by these audiences. Additionally, both paintings are consumed with "otherness" marked by temporal and racial difference. One historicizes a vague point within the heyday of the Roman Empire, while the other, *The Snake Charmer*, evokes an ambiguous distant cultural and chronological place. Both of these paintings pivot on barbarisms set within these strange temporalities.

⁷² This vivid depiction of gladiatorial drama was used to lure the director Ridley Scott into working on the film *Gladiator* (2000).

That strangeness is marked by their hyperreal colouring and considered use of lighting. Both are lit from behind the performer, thus making the viewer themselves a light source while highlighting the central figures from anywhere the viewer stands. While *Pollice Verso* revels in the clear daylight of its outdoor setting, *The Snake Charmer* is furnished with a fantastical haziness of its indoor space. Gérôme's outstanding ability to portray light itself is certainly displayed in these two images. In *Pollice Verso*, brilliant lines of refracted light come from an unseen source and, like a disco ball of death, adjoin upon the coliseum structure. In *The Snake Charmer*, the glistening snake scales contrast against the matted glow of the background tiles. While the precision of the calligraphic strokes on those tiles constructs an exotic interior space that appears so real in spite of its painterly artifice. In addition, the hyperreal colours in each contrast as opposites, with the cool tones of the orient departing from the bright warm tones of the historicized classical period. That neither provides a glimpse of sky or nature, focuses attention on the ethnographic reproduction of cultural elements instead.

Just as *The Snake Charmer* is an image of performance and audience, so too is *Pollice Verso*. In both, it is the audience as much as the central figure, who is on view for the Clark family and their guests. Beeny, expanding on Nochlin's argument, posits that the artist has an entire oeuvre of work that includes these gladiatorial images and *The Snake Charmer* that represent "picture[s] about *looking*."⁷³ In the latter, where our snake charmer performs for the pleasure of about a dozen black and brown all-male audience members, the scene is tinged with an implicit danger. In the other painting, an innumerable crowd is gathered in the outdoor space of the coliseum to witness a public display. Here, however, violence is spectacularized as a result of depicting the triumphant gladiator at the penultimate moment of the battle. Like *The Snake*

⁷³ Beeny, "Blood Spectacle," 44.

Charmer, it too has an abundance of phallic referents in the form of swords, pillars and the outreached arms setting forth judgement on the vanquished gladiator. Yet unlike *The Snake Charmer*, the Roman audience is all white and of mixed genders.

Within that audience, the most stunning group in *Pollice Verso*, are the six Vestal Virgins united in their blood thirst with their thumbs pointed down. Their mouths are agape in outrage, which is echoed in the sea of men behind them, thus forming a mob of emotion collectively calling for the annihilation of the fallen warrior. According to Beeny, for critics in both Paris and New York, these Vestal Virgins represented the Roman crowd as a whole, in addition to evoking the new modern masses at the tail end of the nineteenth-century: irrational, violent and feminine.⁷⁴ Much of the crowd displays emotions like anger, blood lust, sorrow, apprehension and approval. The exposed skin of the central figure and his vanquished opponent imbues the violence with eroticism too. Just above the gladiator's gaze are two figures, a woman who clutches at her necklace, and a man, who both appear transfixed by their pleasure in the scene. Yet critics attributed female bloodlust to the six Vestal Virgins, and it was this description of female bloodlust that most shocked audiences at the time.

The art critic, Earl Shinn, exemplifies the intrigue over these six figures in an essay in the popular American publication of Gérôme's oeuvre, *Gérôme: A collection of the Works of J. L. Gérôme in One Hundred Photogravures*.⁷⁵ Shinn provides a viscerally emotive description to these specific women that is itself revealing:

⁷⁴ Beeny, "Blood Spectacle," 47. "Revolting Art," *The New York Times* (New York), July 5, 1876, 6. Edward Strahan, ed., *Gérôme: A collection of the Works of J. L. Gérôme in One Hundred Photogravures* (New York, 1881), n. p.

⁷⁵ The book has a front cover engraved with a gladiator helmet amongst other classical references (Figure 7), further testifying to the popularity of *Pollice Verso* and the gladiator genre of Gérôme paintings in the United States at the time.

The artist's unequaled piquancy of spirit leads him to seize upon the paradox of the Vestal Virgins—emblems of all immaculacy—*savagely* demanding in a body the death of the vanquished gladiator... It was easy for the artist to imagine a moment when they could be carried away by the rush of the spectacle, and feel their *grim Roman veins throbbing to the point of a wild clamor for blood*. Accordingly we see the chaste creatures in a row in the foreground, excited to the ferocity of fishwives, their *hot mouths* open for cries of death... what artist... has found such a *mighty type*? On the one side, the great achievement of antiquity in the way of subjection of the passions of the body, in religious purity; on the other, the pressure of the only civilization that ever made human death its artistic delight.⁷⁶

For Shinn, who published the book under the pseudonym, Edward Strahan, the Roman period is both a “great achievement” and a time of great barbarism. These Vestal Virgins too are both savage and immaculate, and thus a metaphor for the Roman empire as a whole. In her analysis, Beeny makes sure to point out the sexual language used to describe these women, including the ambiguous class references. For Shinn, they are both “chaste creatures” of “religious purity” as well as “fishwives,” a timeless characterization of working-class women, that would be equally intelligible in the Roman era as in the nineteenth-century.

These white women are placed in the epicenter of the composition and provide a culminating moment in the image's narrative of final judgement. The gladiator directs his attention towards them; the fallen warrior gestures to them; even the emperor appears to be seeking their decision while the crowds to his left crane their necks in anticipation. Their white robes are rendered dramatically against the hanging rugs, and these textiles together provide a separational frame. Likewise, their six individuated expressions, and the drama of their aggressive thumbs down, constructs a certain theatricality around their pivotal role. These Vestal Virgins are here for the blood sport of men and not to be eroticized themselves, even though Shinn, the American critic, does exactly that. In actuality, they are the ultimate purveyors of life and death, women who

⁷⁶ Strahan, *Gérôme: A collection*. n. p.

supersede even the head of the Roman empire himself. That this popular painting hinges on women's power at a time when the British empire is headed by a woman, Queen Victoria, and only two years before she became Empress of India in 1876, is also significant. These considerations of gender also converge on the transnational *Statue of Liberty* project that was being shopped around for funding during 1870s and 1880s in both the United States and France. The gendered icon of the latter is perhaps the best symbol of French appreciation for the new ideologies of a post-Civil War America, as well as France's geopolitical maneuvering to supersede the British as the ascendant nation's closest partner.⁷⁷

The two paintings' similarity as "looking paintings" within Gérôme's oeuvre – pictures that spectacularize their audiences to bear witness to fungible forms of titillation and violence – collide within the interior space of the Clark family home.⁷⁸ As looking paintings, the central figures themselves produce a relationship to the room. Both perform for their audiences and seek approval for very different ends. Weber describes one of Gérôme's primary strengths: "What Gérôme was good at, in general, was eroticism tainted by issues of danger and power.[...] His naked people are in situations where they are possessed by others or on offer, where they are meant for delectation more than their own pleasure, and where there is an element of aggression. [...] he was especially adept at his tender rendering of buttocks."⁷⁹ Gérôme's eroticism is almost always tied to violence or implicit violation and through his hyper-realistic style, these narratives remain consistent across the ancient Roman coliseum or the timeless spaces of the orient.⁸⁰ As "looking paintings," they also lead to further reflection about Clark's private display and the curatorial

⁷⁷ For more information on the story see: Edward Berenson, *The Statue of Liberty: A Transatlantic Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012)

⁷⁸ Beeny, "Blood Spectacle," 44.

⁷⁹ Weber, *The Clarks*, 225.

⁸⁰ See footnote 19.

selections that organize the room. If one painting's audience/performer relationship revolves around an orientalized, queer, and pederastic erotics; the other displays a predominantly heterosexual erotics predicated on violence and hyper-masculinity and affirmed by an empowered set of women who are about to trigger a climactic and sensational death. Put differently, the violence of *Pollice Verso*, in dialogue with *The Snake Charmer*'s implicit queer relations of desire, alongside what we know about Alfred Corning Clark, creates its own intriguing portrait, involving affect, interiority, and the privacy of domestic space.

These contrasting paintings advance a dialogue around masculinity and gender more than they reflect a form of queer escapism. After all, the Roman Empire occupied much of the area classed as the orient and many young men of this region, perhaps even the ancestors of the figures of *The Snake Charmer*, would have fought for Roman sport. Edwards provides an additional illuminating insight regarding the display of such exotic scenes in Victorian interiors:

The purchase of exotic objects was a manifold endeavour, providing the home a veneer of cosmopolitan luxury and the owner an opportunity for fantasy. It also seems to have masked a desire to reconfigure the spaces of social interaction, which had heretofore served the rigid norms of Victorian society. [...] Exoticized spaces carried an erotic charge and invited people to succumb to desires of all sorts. Approximating such a setting in a middle-class parlor must have disrupted the enforcement of propriety previously wrought by Victorian interiors.⁸¹

According to Edwards, nineteenth-century American, consumer preferences for the exotic provided a hidden substructure with which to suture desires to "reconfigure" social interactions within the physical spaces of Victorian society. Exoticism (hand in hand with eroticism) was the raw material and impetus behind the cosmopolitan decorating strategies of bourgeois nineteenth-century American interior spaces. This cosmopolitanism offered a sense of rupture to the propriety

⁸¹ Edwards and Allen, *Noble Dreams*, 32.

of these sites of familial performance. Hiding behind the “veneer of cosmopolitan luxury,” the two paintings in the Clark family’s drawing room together provide a compelling portrait of Alfred Corning Clark’s so-called glass closet.

Consider these two central performing figures, with their contrasting kinds of bodily potency, as having the capacity to act as proxies for the viewer. This surrogate quality is apparent in the haptic sheen, the supple sweat of the child’s skin, and the hard glint of the gladiator’s armor. The views that these figures have, is the same view we have. As a surrogate figure, the snake charmer’s youthful, pliant body registers a certain futural impulse: it is a body at the precipice of life. And yet, the child is wrapped in a thick and muscular snake, whose dynamism contrasts with the child’s statuesque stillness, grinding that temporal dimension to a halt. With its flickering tongue on one end and a wriggling tail at the other, the extremities of the creature further embody this oppositional sense of movement. Gérôme’s painterly strategy creates a vacuum of activity filled by the snake’s gesticulations overlaid onto the child’s nude body. That the performing child is placed by Clark next to the gladiator, serves to highlight these powerful connections between the two.

Within the space of the drawing room, these paired paintings provide a form of gender didacticism. As the threshold between the public and private for visitors to Alfred Corning Clark’s home, it is a potent space of display facilitating insights into the collector. Clark’s privileged life enabled his nineteen-year relationship with a man housed down the street from his family, and with whom he shared his family life too. Alfred’s wealth also facilitated his network of openly homosexual friends in Paris and allowed the businessman to gallivant around Europe spending lavishly on the arts with these friends. This was in stark contrast to the lives of less affluent New

Yorkers, who were more vulnerable to the state's revised sodomy laws.⁸² After this law was revised, according to one historian, "[...]the number of prosecutions increased dramatically [...] and] at least 40 percent—and up to 90 percent—of the cases prosecuted each year were initiated at the complaint of the SPCC [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children]."⁸³ And, in the last two decades of the century, sodomy laws and prosecutions for sex with minors became increasingly entangled in the eyes of organizations like the SPCC.⁸⁴

Alfred's outward display of gender didacticism contrasts with yet another artwork, privately displayed for Alfred alone and housed uptown at The Dakota Apartments. During the summer of 1885, following Skougaard's death, Alfred returned to Paris in the pit of sorrow. It was out of this dark depression that he met the penniless sculptor, George Grey Barnard. The two were introduced by Charles Holman-Black, an American baritone who had worked with Skougaard, and his half-brother, the painter Frank Holman. Both Frank and Charles had an openly homosexual relationship in Paris and were part of Alfred's queer inner circle.⁸⁵ Charles brought Alfred to Barnard's shabby studio that fall, and it was here that Alfred was introduced to a plaster statue that

⁸² The Penal Code of the State of New York, N.Y. Laws 913 (July 26, 1881). For more on early queer life in New York see: Nicholas C. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), and Hugh Ryan, *When Brooklyn Was Queer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019).

⁸³ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 140.

⁸⁴ The popular transatlantic terminology of *street Arab* is alas, beyond the scope of this essay but important to note in this context. Edwards explains its use to describe "Indignant little boys who scrambled to survive on city streets. They were homeless outcast waifs, not necessarily Arab at all [...]" (Edwards et al. 2000, 22) This term was used in London and New York and we also know from Weber that Alfred Corning Clark regularly searched for destitute, young, mostly male, street urchins to "rescue." In other words, Clark was predisposed to lifting a demographic, commonly referred to as *street Arabs*, out of poverty (Weber 2007, 68). For more on the British use of the term see the analysis of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's characters in: Cheetham, Dominic. "Middle-Class Victorian Street Arabs: Modern Re-Creations of the Baker Street Irregulars." *International Research in Children's Literature* 5, no. 1 (July 2012): 36–50.

⁸⁵ Weber, *The Clarks*, 57.

he had begun that year, titled simply *The Boy* (Figure 8 and 9).⁸⁶ Quickly after this studio visit, Alfred offered the sculptor an advance of \$300 followed by another \$600 for a finalized marble version, a sum that both rescued the impoverished artist and that expressed the emotional reaction Clark had to the sculpture.⁸⁷

While the relationship between the wealthy benefactor and the sculptor is beyond the scope of this paper— the sculpture itself, its purchase after Skougaard’s death, and its private display at The Dakota for Alfred alone, are relevant to the outward displays of gender and sexuality embodied by the drawing room’s *Gérômes*. The images we have of *The Boy* depict a muscular, curly haired young nude man, seated while hugging one leg propped up. His curly hair rests against his knee and the figure’s downwards gaze evokes a solitary contemplation. Both the sketch and the photograph from Barnard’s studio show the curling toes of the figure as a focal point, adding to the erotic aspects of the work. Unlike the voyeurism of *The Snake Charmer*, *The Boy*’s private display is revealing in what it ultimately conceals about Clark. Both the title of the sculpture and its three dimensionality – in contrast to Gerome’s painting – leaves the figure’s sex unequivocally out in the open. While *The Boy* was purchased prior to *The Snake Charmer*, it would not be completed for another four years, giving Clark time to plan for its more secretive display in a difficult to access, locked room in the apartment at The Dakota. In this context, Clark’s purchase of *The Snake Charmer* and its display alongside *Pollice Verso* in his drawing room, resonate as an outward performance of gender didactics, with *The Boy*’s more private location at the Dakota, acting as a counterpoint for Clark’s eyes only.

⁸⁶ Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate the statue’s whereabouts and the only visual evidence I have found is from The Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art. In Figure 8 you can see *The Boy* in the bottom right corner of Barnard’s studio, while Figure 9 is a sketch of the sculpture by the artist)

⁸⁷ See: Weber, *The Clarks*, 60. In George Grey Barnard’s papers, upon completion of the sculpture 4 years later, Clark paid \$1,600.

Epilogue

In this analysis, I have argued that the specificities of the American “contexts, players and times,” in Holly Edward’s terms, necessitate an alteration of the way Gérôme’s painting, *The Snake Charmer*, made famous by its appearance on the cover of Edward Said’s book in 1978, should be viewed, interpreted, and understood thus far.⁸⁸ By situating the course of its 150-year life in the United States, and its potent connection with one of America’s closeted darlings of industry, I suggest that *The Snake Charmer* is more than ground zero for Nochlin’s interpretation of Said’s thesis for the orientalist genre of painting, or the reality effect quest of subsequent art historians. Attending to Muñoz’s formulation about the limits of queer evidence, I have nonetheless brought Alfred Corning Clark’s queer subjectivity to the fore through a variety of historical accounts, archives, and works of art. My inquiry suggests a fresh analysis of the painting’s under-examined entanglements within white American masculinity and class privilege, in contrast to its paradigmatic role as an icon of orientalist painting. It also serves to loosen the tight relationship between *The Snake Charmer* and Said’s text within the discipline of art history, itself a phenomenon worthy of further critical exploration.

By considering *The Snake Charmer* in relation to *Pollice Verso*, another painting by Gérôme displayed by Clark in his drawing room, I further investigate the sexualized drama, didactic performances of gender, and homoerotic fantasies of miscegenation at stake in these works of art. As the postcolonial theorist Robert Young posits, “[...] we find an ambivalent driving

⁸⁸ According to Mark Gotlieb, Said encountered the painting at The Clark after visiting The Tanglewood Music Festival in the Berkshires: ClarkArtInstitute, “Objects of Orientalism Symposium: Session I - YouTube,” Youtube Video, May 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZIBtQ1dksw>.

desire at the heart of racism, a compulsive libidinal attraction disavowed by an equal insistence on repulsion.”⁸⁹ Returning to our protagonist, the collector, we are already aware of Clark’s interest in “helping” young men. That the men we know of are all white, points to the racial hierarchies of an era in which, non-white people were generally subordinate. Yet this painting does hint at the operations of race within the interior spatial juxtaposition of Clark’s home. If idealized, yet brutal, violence exists in the gladiator depiction in *Pollice Verso*, then race and sexual pederasty is the subject of *The Snake Charmer*. By linking the painting’s explicit homoerotics to Clark’s own queer proclivities — both, in some sense, on semi-public display — I hope to have shown how racial othering was also integral to Clark’s queer camouflage.

By dislodging Nochlin’s tight coupling of the painting with the thesis proposed by Said’s *Orientalism*, I depart from conventional accounts of *The Snake Charmer* from the late 1970’s on. This is not necessarily to disagree with Nochlin, but to point to a certain flattening of interpretation that has overshadowed the queer and thoroughly American historical coordinates of its archive. Indeed, Gérôme’s depictions of eroticized violence, as seen in the paintings collected by Clark, is not generally considered in relation to the long history of American masculinity and militarism in the Arab region, yet we continue to see evidence that American imperialism in the region is embroiled with myriad forms of queer orientalism.⁹⁰

Although Said’s text remains silent on the painting, *The Snake Charmer* has become art historically linked to his argument, which itself continues to find reverberations through to the present moment. What happens when we trace a *longue durée* of American orientalism, represented by *The Snake Charmer* and its transnational past, its ownership by a gilded age

⁸⁹ Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, 1st edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995, 140.

⁹⁰ See the rest of Joseph Allen Boone’s, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, and also Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Next Wave. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

industrialist and art aesthete who inhabited a double life, and the fame it acquired after the publication of Said's book, and connect it to the contemporary specter of American imperial interventions in the Middle East, where the sexualized violation of brown bodies is epitomized by the events that occurred in Abu Ghraib?⁹¹ While it is of course impossible to craft a clear line connecting Clark's late nineteenth-century drawing room to that despicable moment in the new millennium, we should consider the role of an oriental imaginary in such events. While further analysis is necessary and alas, beyond the scope of this paper, the repercussions of such unspoken fantasia is a problematic that requires much supplementary unpacking. And yet, the oriental imaginary, exemplified by this painting on the cover of a significant book that outlined precisely the contours and processes by which these kinds of events find their roots and flourish, makes visible the veins of violation that undergird the critical exercise of othering pivotal to American imperialism's muscular reach.

⁹¹ For further analysis on the role of race and sexuality during the 'war on terror' see: Razack, Sherene. *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.

Figures



Figure 1. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Snake Charmer*, C. 1879, Oil on Canvas, 82.2 cm × 121 cm. Williamstown MA, The Clark Art Institute.

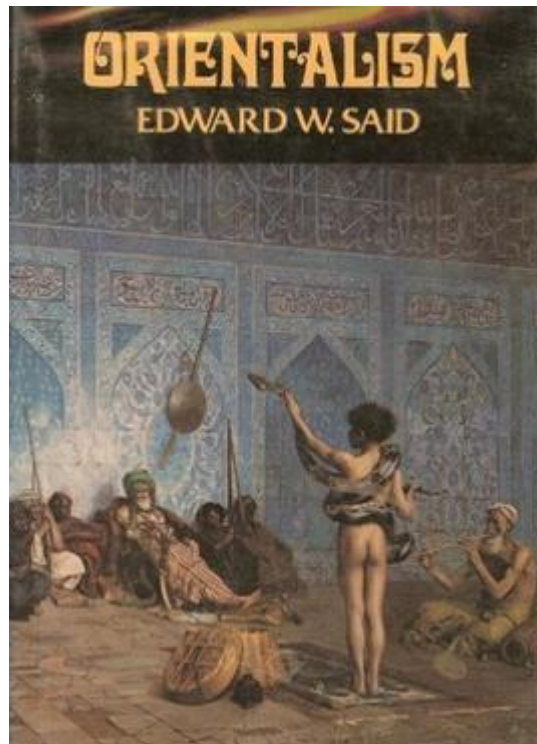


Figure 2. Cover of the First Edition of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, 1978.

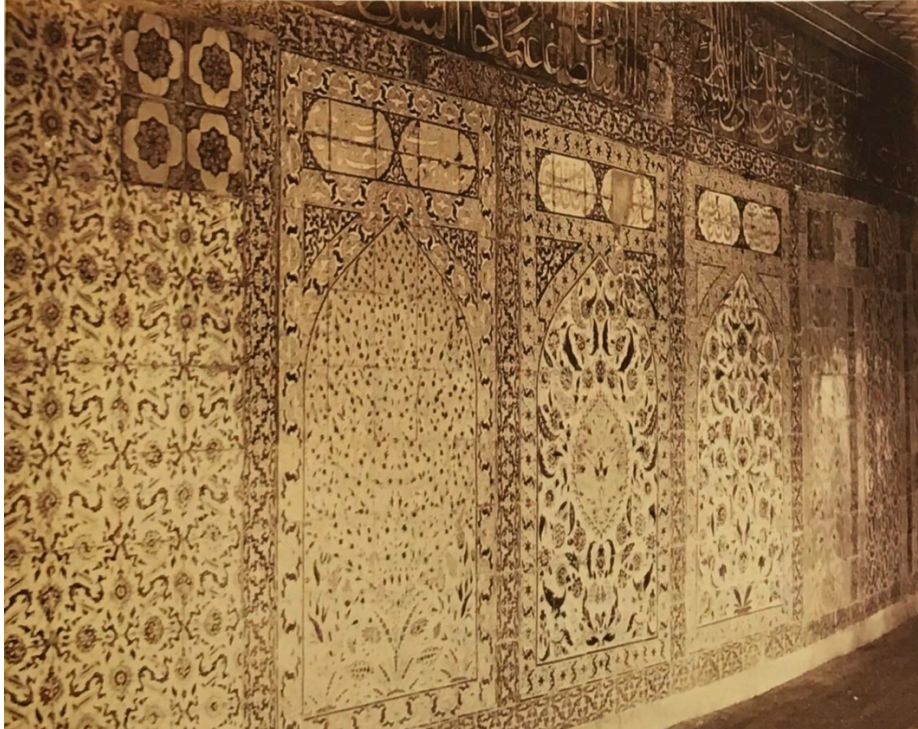


Figure 3. Abdullah Frères, *Polychromatic Tile Panels (C.1575)* from the Imperial Baths, Installed in the *Altun Yol, Topkapi Palace*, n. d. Albumen print, 30 X 24 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.



Figure 4. *The Snake Charmer and its sightlines*



Figure 5. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Pollice Verso*, 1872, Oil on Canvas, 96.5 cm x 145 cm. Phoenix AZ, Phoenix Art Museum.



Figure 6. The Clark Family Drawing Room at 7 West 22nd Street, New York NY. New York State Historical Society: Fenimore Museum Library, Cooperstown NY. Note *The Snake Charmer 2nd* on the left with *Pollice Verso* across doorway to the right of it.

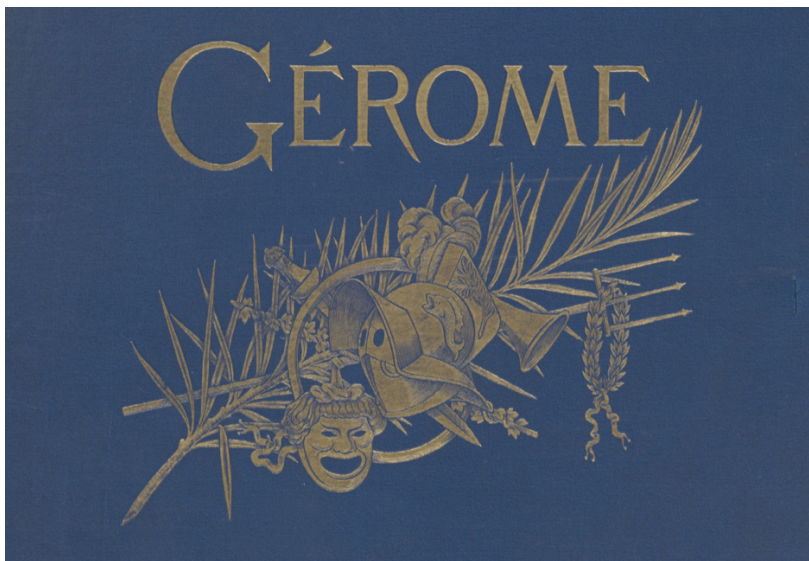


Figure 7. The Front cover of *Gérôme: A collection of the Works of J. L. Gérôme in One Hundred Photogravures*. 1881.



Figure 8. Barnard's Studio with *The Boy* in the Right Corner, image, Box 8, Folder 28: George Grey Barnard in Paris and New York Studios, circa 1880-1938, George Grey Barnard papers, circa 1860-1969, bulk 1880-1938, The Smithsonian, Archives of American Art, Washington D. C.

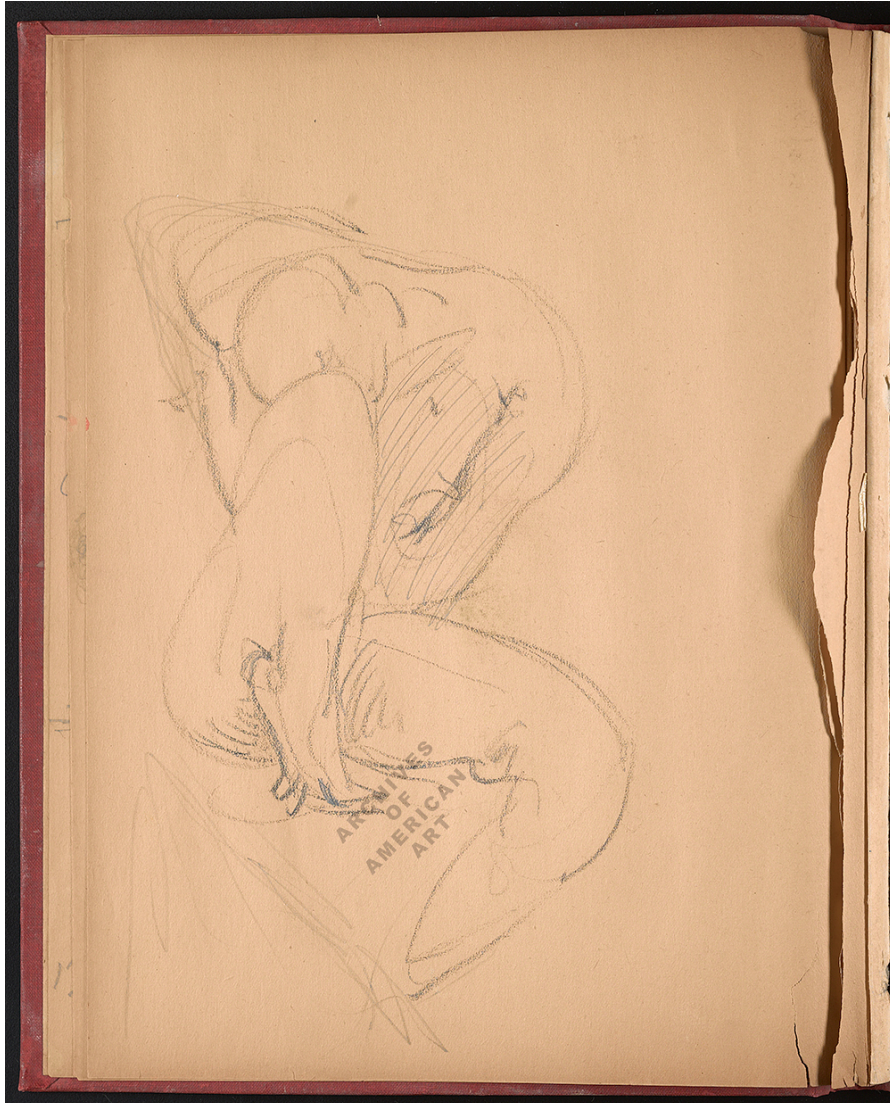


Figure 9. Sketch of The Boy, image, Box 11, Folder 16: Sketchbook/Notebook, circa 1890-1937, George Grey Barnard papers, circa 1860-1969, bulk 1880-1938, The Smithsonian, Archives of American Art, Washington D. C.

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