

Horace Vernet

Exhibition at Versailles



The artist "Horace Vernet". © Franck Raux.

■ by *Judith Wenning*

Until March 17th 2024, the Palace of Versailles is dedicating a major retrospective to the painter Horace Vernet (1789–1863). Situated in a suburb southwest of Paris, Versailles is one of the most famous and grandest palaces in the world, renowned for its opulent architecture, extensive gardens, and historical significance.

Horace Vernet created some of the most important Arabian horse artwork. His depictions of fiery Arabian horses and Mamelucks, fighting Arabs on horseback or impressive hunting scenes are truly eye catching.

A key figure at Versailles during the reign of King Louis-Philippe, the artist produced, over a time of 13 years, some of the most beautiful paintings in the Historical Galleries, making Versailles home to the largest collection of his works today. More than 40 years after the last exhibition dedicated to Vernet, this retrospective of some 200 works provides an opportunity to discover many exceptional masterpieces, as well as sketches and drawings demonstrating how the artist worked. Many of them are heretofore unexhibited works.



Several portraits of Horace Vernet. © Chateau de Versailles, S. Gilles.

From a family of artists, Horace Vernet was a prominent French painter of the 19th century. He was born in the Louvre in Paris on June 30, 1789. Horace Vernet was the grandson of the maritime artist Joseph Vernet and the son of Carle Vernet, an exceptional equestrian painter who created numerous Arabian horse artwork. A worthy heir to the family dynasty, despite failing to win the Prix de Rome, Horace Vernet quickly became a favourite of Napoleon I and his entourage.

Vernet's Career and Breakthrough

Horace Vernet learned how to paint horses from his father Carle, yet developed his own, unique style. He gained fame and fortune at an early age. Initially, part

of the Romantic movement of the 1820s alongside his friend Théodore Géricault, Vernet developed an easy and seductive style before discovering the medium lithography. He became the favourite painter of the Duke of Orléans, the future King Louis-Philippe. Moreover, Horace Vernet rapidly gained a degree of celebrity himself, which led him to pose for several of his colleagues. The exhibition at the Palace of Versailles presents also some of these portraits by his contemporaries. Especially impressive is a large sized bronze sculpture showing Horace Vernet on an Arabian horse. This status was created by Arthur Le Duc in 1913 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Horace Vernet's death and was commissioned by the French government. It portrays Vernet in the saddle "sketching on the battlefield of Isly". It underlines Horace Vernet's



Some of the impressive works shown at the exhibition.
© Chateau de Versailles, S. Gilles.

love for Arabian horses and horse-riding. In 1929 this sculpture was installed in the Smalah Courtyard.

Horace Vernet is known for his works depicting historical and military scenes, as well as Orientalist themes. He gained significant recognition for his skill in portraying action and drama in his paintings, often capturing the tumultuous events of his time with vivid detail and emotion. Vernet's art was highly sought after, and he received numerous commissions from both private patrons and the French government. His work remains influential in the history of French painting.

**"A man in oriental costume", oil painting
by Horace Vernet, 1818.**





“The Battle of Isly“, a monumental oil painting on canvas by Horace Vernet is the centerpiece of this room. It has the measurements 10,4 x 5,14 meter! © Chateau de Versailles, S. Gilles.





Large sized bronze sculpture by Arthur Le Duc showing Horace Vernet. © Christophe Fouin.

Born into a family of artists, Horace Vernet was always a painter. By 1822, at the age of thirty-three, he was already famous. That year, however, his works were rejected at the Salon, because, in the midst of the Restoration, the artist had depicted tricolored cockades in his battle scenes. He then organized an exhibition himself and showed some fifty canvases in his studio - a great success! It was the breakthrough for a long career. Elected to the Institute in 1826, he became, against all odds, director of the French Academy in Rome in 1829. Horace Vernet shared Théodore Géricault's enthusiasm for contemporary subjects - which he treated as history - and for English literature. His compositions, framing, rapid technique, and sometimes sketchy touch make him a major Romantic artist.

“The Seizure of Abd-el-Kader’s Camp (Smalah) in 1843”, history painting in oil, stretching over 4,8 meter x 21,3 meter. © Franck Raux.





Horses were among the favourite subjects for Horace Vernet's art. © Chateau de Versailles, S. Gilles.

The Influence of Vernet's Travels

The exhibition in Versailles highlights the importance of Horace Vernet's trips, especially in Italy and Algeria. Appointed director of the French Academy in Rome in 1829, Horace Vernet discovered the great classical Italian works and tried his hand at historical painting. Then in 1833, he became interested in Algeria and travelled there on an official trip. Travelling to the East was dangerous and often uncomfortable at Horace Vernet's time. High expenses, unreliable itineraries and the risk of disease overshadowed such endeavours. However, Horace Vernet was certainly both, a gifted artist as well as an adventurer. His numerous, extensive journeys led him to Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Turkey and the Crimea. During these travels, he was not afraid of strains and efforts. He took any means of transport available, be it horse, camel or mule and often camped in the open air if necessary!

Vernet then concentrated on Orientalist painting, depicting a variety of civil, religious and military subjects. Two years later, he was commissioned to paint the military conquests of King Louis-Philippe's heirs for the Africa rooms at the Palace of Versailles. His monumental Orientalist canvases are breathtaking!

Orientalist art refers to a genre of Western art, primarily from the 19th century, that depicts scenes and subjects from the "Orient," which generally refers to regions of North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Orientalist artists were often fascinated by the exoticism and perceived mystery of these distant lands, and their works typically portrayed romanticized and idealized images of Oriental cultures, landscapes, and people.

One of his most significant Orientalist paintings is "The Battle of Isly" (1844), which portrays a military engagement between French forces and Moroccan



The Artist's Studio, Horace Vernet, 1820 – 1821, private collection. © Christophe Fouin.

troops near the Isly River in Algeria. This painting reflects Vernet's interest in depicting military conflicts. No wonder that Vernet is today called "The top reporter of the tumults of the 19th century".

Horace Vernet became famous for his battle scenes for which he received many important commissions. His fighting sceneries are imposing, first of all through their motives, but often also because of their large dimensions, being painted on vast panoramic canvases. Spectators who had the privilege to watch him working always marvelled at the incredible speed with which he painted.

One of Horace Vernet's most well-known pictures is certainly "The Lion Hunt", an oil painting dated 1836. This work is full of action and dynamic. While the Wallace Collection in London owns the original, lithographs of this motif are popular collector's items.

The oil painting is in these days one of the top attractions of the exhibition at Versailles.

Another important Orientalist work by Vernet is "The Arab Tale-teller" (1833), which depicts a peaceful scene. In this painting, Vernet captures the exoticism and tranquility of a group of Arab men resting and listening to a tale teller. The artwork is notable for its attention to detail and the atmosphere.

Vernet's Orientalist works demonstrate his skill in capturing the allure and mystery of the Orient, as perceived through the lens of 19th-century Europeans.

This period of major commissions also encompassed numerous trips to the East and to Russia. Under the Second Empire, Vernet's career was recognised with a retrospective of his work at the Universal Exhibition of 1855. Horace Vernet became professor at the Paris



“The Lion Hunt in the Desert”, oil on canvas by Horace Vernet, 1836, owned by the Wallace Collection, London.

School of Fine Arts and developed enormous influence on the artistic organizations of his time. This earned him immense public renown. Horace Vernet left a large production with some 500 paintings and around 200 lithographs. Arabian horses always fascinated the avid rider and were again and again his popular subject. Horace Vernet died in his hometown of Paris in 1863 at the age of 74 after having received the medal of Grand Officer of the Legion of Honour. Horace Vernet’s grave can still be visited today at the cemetery of Montmartre in Paris, not far from where his father Carle was buried.

The Current Exhibition

A prolific painter, Vernet was both acclaimed and derided by critics, and aroused strong feelings among his contemporaries. This retrospective emphasises the

painter’s easy style and the breadth of his preferred subjects, revealing his love for horses and hunting, his attachment to the Napoleonic saga and military exploits, his fondness for Romantic literature and Lord Byron, and for depicting his family background. A talented painter, Horace Vernet shone in all genres, especially portraiture. The exhibition showcases many of his artwork kept in private collections.

This retrospective wraps the painter’s entire career, delving deep into the 19th century of Horace Vernet. For the occasion, the canvases in the Africa rooms will also be available to view. The exhibition is curated by Mme Valérie Bajou, General Curator at the National Museum of the Palaces of Versailles and Trianon.

Today, Versailles is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a major tourist attraction, visited by millions of



The famous painting “Mazeppa aux Loups”. © Ville d’Avignon, Musée Calvet.

people from around the world each year. It stands as a testament to the grandeur and splendor of the French monarchy and remains an enduring symbol of France’s rich cultural heritage. □

The exhibition takes place during the opening hours of the Palace until March 17th, 2024.
An exceptional catalogue published by Editions Faton with the supervision of Mme Valérie Bajou is available.

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