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Gleyre, Marc-Charles-Gabriel, *Penthée poursuivi par les Ménades*, 1865, huile sur toile, 121,1 x 200,7 cm (Objektmass), Kunstmuseum Basel, 249, 1974

#### Documentation level



#### Name

Gleyre, Marc-Charles-Gabriel

#### Dates of birth and death

\* 2.5.1806 Chevilly, † 5.5.1874 Paris

#### Municipality of origin (CH)

Cuarnens (VD)

#### Nationality

CH

#### Brief biography

Peintre académique actif à Paris après 1838 ayant parcouru l'Italie et le Moyen-Orient. Maître d'un atelier fréquenté notamment par les futurs impressionnistes

#### Fields of activity

peinture, dessin, aquarelle, peinture à l'huile

#### Lexicon article

The orphaned son of a farming family, Gleyre was sent to Lyon to his uncle François, who steered him towards the decorative arts. In 1825, he joined the studio of the painter Louis Hersent in Paris, thereafter attending the Ecole des beaux-arts, where he perfected his watercolour technique, probably under Richard Bonington. Gleyre completed his artistic training in Florence in 1828, before settling in Rome in January 1830, where he became friendly with a family acquaintance, the painter François Keisermann. Gleyre also became an habitu  of the circle of Horace Vernet, director of the Acad mie de France in Rome, where he met other Swiss artists, including [L opold Robert](#), [Jean-Etienne Chaponni re](#) and [Jean-L onard Lugardon](#). Although he occasionally gave lessons to tourists and expected to obtain portrait commissions, Gleyre had his fair share of hardship during this period in Italy.

In April 1834, John Lowell Jr., a wealthy American

industrialist who was undertaking a trip around the world, employed him as a draughtsman. The pair went to Sicily and Malta before visiting Corfu, Albania, Turkey and Greece. In accordance with his patron's wishes, Gleyre made innumerable sketches and watercolours of important sites, various topographical studies, and drawings of costumes and physiognomies. In March 1835, in Luxor, Gleyre abandoned watercolour to devote himself exclusively to topographical or archaeological drawings, as well as portraits and Egyptian physiognomies. He was in delicate health, suffered from the desert climate, and had difficulties in accepting Lowell's demands. The two men separated in Khartoum in November 1835 after "19 months, 6 days," as Lowell wrote. Having sent the approximately 155 watercolours by Gleyre to his family in Boston, Lowell died in Bombay of a fever in March 1836. Gleyre, himself ill and almost blind due to ophthalmia, remained another year in Khartoum, went to Cairo, and then stayed in Beirut for some months before returning to France. He did not disembark in Marseille until 1838, once more settling in Paris after an absence of almost ten years.

With the help of his friends Horace Vernet and Paul Delaroche, Gleyre secured his first commissions. In 1840, he was hired to decorate the Ch teau de Dampierre, a property near Paris belonging to the Duc de Luynes, under the general direction of Ingres. The decorations on classical themes painted by Gleyre were subsequently erased, partially under Ingres' orders, for reasons as yet unexplained. In 1843, Gleyre rose to fame thanks to his painting entitled *Le Soir* (*Evening*), which he exhibited at the *Salon*. Thanks to this considerable success, Paul Delaroche gave him his own studio, where he taught, free of charge, until 1870, and which would be frequented by, among others, the future impressionists Bazille, Monet, Renoir and Sisley, as well as the great white hopes of the Swiss School, [Albert Anker](#), [Fran ois Bocion](#) and [Albert de Meuron](#).

After a second great success at the *Salon* of 1845, Gleyre travelled to Milan, Padua and Venice, where he copied hundreds of mediaeval and renaissance works. On his return to Paris, the State of Vaud commissioned him to paint *Le Major Davel* (*Major Davel*, 1850, partially destroyed), portraying the Vaudois hero on the scaffold. Gleyre exhibited at the *Salon* once more in 1849, but ceased to participate thereafter, in protest against Napoleon III's government.

During the years 1850 and 1860, Gleyre cultivated friendships with key figures of French culture, including Gustave Flaubert, Alfred de Musset and Maxime Du Camp. In 1867, he was appointed to organise the pavilion of Swiss painters at the *Exposition universelle* held in Paris. During the Franco-Prussian War, Gleyre took refuge in Switzerland in 1871, returning, exhausted, to Paris in 1872. He died of an aneurysm in May 1874 while attending an exhibition at the

Palais Bourbon, leaving on his easel a sketch on the theme of *Paradis terrestre* (*Earthly Paradise*, 1869–1874). Gleyre's best friend, the art critic Charles Clément, inherited his works and, in 1878, published the first biography dedicated to the artist, accompanied by a catalogue raisonné.

Gleyre painted his first pictures during his sojourn in Rome. In 1833, he sent three portraits – now lost – to the *Salon* in Paris, which, however, went unnoticed. It was during this period that he executed his first masterpiece – *Les brigands romains* (*The Roman Brigands*, 1831) – which, however, he refused to exhibit, probably due to its scandalous subject matter.

During his travels in the Middle East, Gleyre was inspired by exotic locations. His watercolours of Athens demonstrate his consummate mastery of this technique. His images of Egyptian locations have their own special value, for they sometimes portray important monuments unprecedented in the artistic and historic literature of the period.

In 1839, after returning to France, he drew portraits of the writers Voltaire and Rousseau, the painter Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, and General Louis Hoche, among others, for the popular periodical *Le Plutarque français*. At the same time, he painted canvases inspired by the Orient, such as *La reine de Saba* (*The Queen of Sheba*, 1839). He also conceived his first large-scale religious work, *Saint Jean à Patmos* (*Saint John on Patmos*, 1839), which was exhibited at the *Salon* of 1840, where it received rave reviews, particularly from Gustave Planche, an intimate friend of the painter. At the same time, Gleyre copied for himself a large number of his Egyptian works, which the owners, Lowell's family, had loaned to him. These copies, which remained unknown until the artist's death, were sold as originals to the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne in 1908.

In 1843, Gleyre exhibited the decisive painting of his career, *Le Soir*, later known as *Les illusions perdues* (*Lost Illusions*) at the *Salon*. The work was bought by the French State. Inspired by a little-known mythological subject (the story of Thamyris, a blind Greek poet) and conceived in a style that oscillates between romantic and academic, the picture definitively established Gleyre's reputation. In 1845, he painted *Le départ des Apôtres* (*The Departure of the Apostles*), which was praised by the critics at the *Salon* – with the exception of Baudelaire – and also acquired by the French State.

*Le Major Davel* was the first of Gleyre's historical works commissioned by the Canton of Vaud, thanks to the testamentary dispositions of [Marc-Louis Arlaud](#), founder of the Musée Arlaud in Lausanne. The picture's iconography, based on the historical writings of his friend Juste Olivier, occupied Gleyre for several years, a period during which he created other works, notably *La danse des Bacchantes* (*The Dance of the Bacchantes*, 1849), acquired by the King of Spain and the last of Gleyre's works to be exhibited at the *Salon*. *Le Major Davel*, not delivered to Lausanne until 1850, caused a sensation. This considerable success encouraged the Vaudois authorities to commission a second painting, *Les Romains passant sous le joug* (*Romans Under the Yoke*, 1858), a subject chosen by the artist himself. The realisation of this large canvas, which includes more than 50 figures, required the collaboration of the cantonal

archaeologist, Frédéric Troyon, who provided information on the depicted event's presumed location in Vaud. The painting's reception in 1858 was again a triumph. Gleyre then received a third official commission – he was never to complete the work – as well as portrait commissions of notable Vaudois citizens, including General Antoine-Henri Jomini, Louis Vulliemin and William Haldimand (1860).

Following his usual procedure, Gleyre executed official commissions in parallel with several other important paintings, including *Le déluge* (*The Deluge*, 1856), a prehistoric panorama unprecedented in Swiss painting, as well as two canvases depicting similar subject matter: *Ruth et Booz* (*Ruth and Boaz*) and *Ulysse et Nausicaa* (1853–54). During the 1860s, he continued to paint mythological subjects, particularly, in 1862, *Hercule aux pieds d'Omphale* (*Hercules at the Feet of Omphale*), which was acquired by Fritz Berthoud, a Neuchâtel banker and artist. Three years later, commissioned by the City of Basel, Gleyre painted *Penthée poursuivie par les Ménades* (*Pentheus Pursued by the Maenads*, 1865). This last picture, of a subject rarely explored by artists, exemplifies the artistic and iconographic originality characteristic of Gleyre's later works. This originality was particularly evident at the major monographic exhibition, subtitled *Le génie de l'invention* (*The Genius of Invention*), staged by Lausanne's Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts in 2006.

In 1866, Gleyre became friendly with the industrialist Vincent Dubochet, who commissioned a portrait of himself (now lost), as well as *Minerve et les trois Grâces* (*Minerva and the Three Graces*) to decorate the main salon of the Château des Crêtes in Clarens. In 1867, Gleyre painted *Sapho* (*Sappho*), and in 1868, *Le bain* (*The Bath*), followed by a series of portraits. During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Gleyre took refuge with Fritz Berthoud and Charles Clément in Fleurier, Switzerland, where he drew portraits of Vaudois personalities: Louis Ormond (1870–71), Victor Ruffy, and the painter François Bocion (1871). Returning to Paris in 1872, Gleyre undertook his last completed picture, entitled *Le retour de l'enfant prodigue* (*The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1873), in which the moving figure of the mother plays an unexpectedly central role.

Works: Kunstmuseum Basel; Lausanne, Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts; Montargis, Musée Girodet; Neuchâtel, Musée d'art et d'histoire; Paris, Musée du Louvre; Vevey, Musée Jenisch.

William Hauptman, 1998, updated 2015  
Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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