

An *opéra-comique* after an easel painting

Pierre Sérié

‘No one is unfamiliar with Gérôme’s celebrated painting.’
(Félix Régner, music critic, *Le Journal*, 25 May 1893)

Does our reader know Phryne? Probably not, and Saint-Saëns’s contemporaries would certainly have said the same thing, if a successful painter of the Second Empire had not made Phryne a commonplace. That painter was Jean-Léon Gérôme. His canvas is entitled *Phryné devant l’aréopage* (Phryne before the Areopagus) and, at the time, everyone knew it. The public had crowded around it at the 1861 Salon. They were able to see it a second time at the Exposition Universelle of 1867, but that was all, because a collector had bought it for a small fortune. It hardly mattered, though, because in the absence of the original, the reproduction of works of art by engraving, printing and then photography had made the picture available to everyone. It could be found in the illustrated press, in books or, as an object in its own right, in the form of engravings and photographs. Goupil, Gérôme’s dealer, had even commissioned a young sculptor to produce a version of Phryne in the round, stripped of her clothes. This time the copy had an advantage over the original: the viewer could walk around it and examine Phryne from all angles.

What had happened to Phryne to make Gérôme think of her? Her story appears in the *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle* published by Pierre Larousse between 1866 and 1876. Here is an abridged version of the article:

Phryne: famous Greek courtesan, born in Thespieae (Boeotia) around 328 BC. As a child she sold capers; then she became a flute player in Athens,

and as she presented a physical perfection rare even in Greece, she soon held the first rank among those who, in her day, traded their charms. Praxiteles took her as his model and his mistress. [...] The perfection of the beautiful courtesan's forms was such, according to the accounts of the ancients, that the most magnificent productions of Greek art [...] did not surpass it. [...] Only once, at the festival of Neptune in Eleusis, did she bathe in the sea; then, in full view of the Greeks, she emerged from the water, wringing out her wet hair. Apelles, the happy painter who had the most famous Greek courtesans as his models – Laïs, Campaspe and others, each in her turn – was there, and from this vision he sketched his *Venus Anadyomene*. [...] The hetaera, accused of impiety, was brought before the court of the heliasts. [...] Just as she was about to be condemned, she was saved by a splendid gesture on the part of her lawyer, Hypereides, and by an argument that could be called, more appropriately than any other, *ad hominem*. The defence lawyer, in a swift and unexpected movement, removed the veil, the peplos that draped his client, and showed all the secret splendours of her beauty. At the sight of these charms, which had served as a model for the greatest artists, the judges were seized with a quasi-religious awe and did not wish anyone to lay hands on this likeness of the goddesses.

Let us state at once that this article is inaccurate on one point at least. When Pierre Larousse relates that Phryne's lawyer undressed her before her judges, he does not respect the historical sources. The classical authors say that Hypereides uncovered just one breast. And this is a remark that several critics levelled at Gérôme in 1861. His naked Phryne was a pure invention. Was Larousse duped into printing this error by Gérôme's painting? It is quite possible, and it shows what a strong impression *Phryne before the Areopagus* had made on contemporaries. From then on, Phryne was only known through the image created by Gérôme. Painting obscured history. And it was the painting that led to Saint-Saëns's *opéra-comique*.



THE POWER OF IMAGES

In 1861, Gérôme had taken up a subject that rarely been treated by visual artists until then (we shall come back to this point). This absence of visual references gave him complete freedom to appropriate it for himself. Only scholars would be likely to spot the liberties he took with the historical sources. They did not miss their chance. The reaction of the critics was generally hostile. Gérôme was accused of rewriting history because he had undressed Phryne ('the licence is strong and oversteps the mark', wrote Paul de Saint-Victor in *La Presse* dated 2 June 1861), and for many other reasons too. Thoré-Burger concluded that 'everything in M. Gérôme's painting is therefore false: the melodramatic gesture of the lawyer, the prudish attitude of Phryne, the debauched and ridiculous facial expressions of the members of the Areopagus' (*Le Temps*, 22 June 1861). Everything might be false, but what a success it enjoyed! The critics might rail against it, but the painting won the admiration of visitors to the Salon. In fact, *Phryne before the Areopagus* coincided perfectly with the expectations of the public at the time. Gérôme did not report the episode of Phryne's judgment as a historian. He was not talking about the past. He was using Antiquity to deride his contemporaries.

To laugh at the Greeks and Romans was to attack a traditional view of the fine arts, that which clove to the hierarchy of genres and 'la grande peinture' (just as there was such a thing as 'le grand opéra'). By depicting desire or embarrassment rather than aesthetic admiration on the faces of the judges of the Areopagus ('an assembly of lecherous, grimacing monkeys', as *Le Figaro* wrote on 30 May 1861), Gérôme transposed the great repertory into farce. He addressed a non-academic public on its own level. He turned a history painting into a genre painting, just as Offenbach slyly transformed the stories of Orpheus or Helen from opera into *opéra-bouffe*. As Thoré-Burger said (albeit disapprovingly), 'what a descent from David's Greeks to M. Gérôme's Greeks. [...] David, with austere conviction, depicted Leonidas at Thermopylae; M. Gérôme offers the young ladies of Paris an undressed doll in front of unkempt, lecher-

ous old satyrs, who grimace as if they had a real naked woman before their eyes for the first time. [...] There is nothing ancient, nor above all Greek in this ugly composition' (*Le Temps*, 22 June 1861). Setting art aside, to ridicule the highest degree of the magistracy (the Areopagus) was tantamount, metaphorically, to mocking any form of institution. With Gérôme, art became an entertainment enabling the bourgeoisie to laugh at itself. Such paintings were simple and amusing, and people could recognise themselves in them (or, if they lacked a sense of humour, they could recognise their neighbour). Finally, the male viewer could give free rein to his scopoc drive. He was an authorised voyeur. For Gérôme's Phryne endures her nudity. She is undressed by her lawyer and is ashamed of it. Unable to hide her nudity, she turns in on herself, averts her head and protects it with her arms.

Augé de Lassus, the author of the libretto of *Phryné*, did not content himself with taking advantage of a painting by Gérôme that belonged to the common culture of the time. He made the power of painted or sculpted images (and Gérôme was also a sculptor) an integral part of his text. The two-act piece opens and closes with the unveiling of a statue (a bust in the first act, Praxiteles' *Aphrodite* in the second). The idea of a work so plausible that the viewer mistakes it for reality is reminiscent of the ancient Greek anecdote in which the artist Zeuxis tries to draw aside a curtain in order to examine the painting by Parrhasius of Ephesus that is supposedly behind it, only to discover that the curtain is the painting itself. In this case, the work in question is a sculpture (namely Praxiteles' *Aphrodite*) and the character who is fooled by it (Dicéphile) seeks to embrace it, to put it euphemistically. The loss of a person's bearings, the fascination of marble (which in ancient Greece was painted) and the awakening of the senses evoked in the plot allude here to the myth of Pygmalion falling in love with the statue made by his own hands. Here again, Gérôme may have served the librettist as a reference. For at the Salon des Artistes Français in 1892 he exhibited a life-size *Pygmalion and Galatea* in coloured marble. This long-term project had already produced two small paintings dated 1890. Could the references to Gérôme's work be

multiple, embracing both easel painting and polychrome sculpture? What is certain is that the artist had created an updated image of Phryne, an image onto which his contemporaries could project themselves, and that this image, in turn, had permeated their imagination. By 1893, the historical episode existed only as refracted through the memory of his painting.

Saint-Saëns's *Phryné* is therefore an *opéra-comique* based on an easel painting, but with the constraints inherent to the performing arts. It was unthinkable to put on stage a *tableau vivant* of Phryne before the Areopagus (even if the critics suggest that the male audience hoped this was what they would be getting). Something else had to be found, a story paralleling Gérôme's, replaying in the minor mode, as it were, the episode of the courtesan's unveiling. Hence the idea of substituting a statue for Phryné when she supposedly abandons herself to Dicéphile's gaze. On the other hand, it was important that the actress playing the title role should be physically attractive, and this was certainly a major factor in the choice of Sybil Sanderson. This *opéra-comique* does not show any nudity in the literal sense, but figuratively speaking, it has constant recourse to the idea, at least in Act Two. In the second scene, Phryne relates that one day, as she emerged from bathing in the sea, some fishermen mistook her for Venus. This parenthesis is of little dramatic interest, except perhaps to foreshadow the future confusion between the model and her statue. But it allows the audience to be transported to another level where they themselves are mentally present at the birth of Venus. Once again, the librettist appealed to the visual culture of an audience familiar with the Venus Anadyomene paintings of Ingres, Cabanel and Bouguereau. A year earlier, in 1892, Joseph Blanc had exhibited at the Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts the first painting that, to our knowledge, depicts this 'apparition of Phryne' to fishermen who believe they are seeing Venus herself. The episode described by Phryne is therefore in the listeners' minds, with the result that they can look beyond what is actually before their eyes and visualise the naked woman whom they are not shown. The intertwining of words and images, and their

combination with a view to evading the limitations of the stage and perhaps keeping the audience's desire alive, undoubtedly form an essential mainspring of the piece.



AESTHETICS: PHRYNE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF BEAUTY
IN NATURE

The story of Phryne is not the innocuous subject it might seem. It even raises some very serious questions. The first of these concerns visual artists, because the physical perfection of the courtesan leads to the idea of the possibility of beauty in nature. When the painter Apelles and the sculptor Praxiteles reproduced her features to represent Aphrodite, they admitted the aesthetic equivalence between a mere mortal and a goddess. Obviously, this is a unique case. Phryne is not just any woman. She is the most beautiful woman of her time. Nevertheless, the theoretical implications of this exception are enormous, for they overturn the Platonic rule of the fundamental incompatibility between the idea of a thing (the thing in itself, the essence, the truth) and the actual thing (the thing as it is, the appearance, the reality). Let us explain this by taking the example of an apple. The idea we have of the thing named 'apple' is a perfect sphere, absolutely smooth and brightly coloured (green or red depending on its variety). But when this 'apple' thing hangs from a tree in a garden, its shape is never completely regular, its surface never completely homogeneous, its colour never strictly uniform. Ideas and things do not coincide. Ever since the Renaissance, aesthetic reflection and academic discourse have been founded on this dualism between idea and matter, the true and the real. Raphael is said to have explained it to his students as follows: 'You must not paint nature as it is, but as it should be.' In short, a model, however beautiful, cannot be copied as she is to represent Aphrodite. The artist must create Beauty from his or her brain alone. What nature offers him or her is necessarily imperfect. At the same time as G erome

was painting *Phryne before the Areopagus*, Charles Blanc recalled this teaching of Plato and Raphael:

The artist's task is to summon the ideal among us once more, that is to say, to reveal to us the original beauty of things, to discover their imperishable character, their pure essence. Art defines and illuminates the ideas that nature manifests in a confused and obscure form.

(*Grammaire des arts du dessin*, Paris: 1867)

Within such a conceptual framework, it is not surprising that, until around 1850-60, artists almost never painted or sculpted Phryne. They were idealists, and this courtesan pleaded in favour of realism. It was, precisely, the realists, the Goncourt brothers, who would update the story of Phryne in *Manette Salomon*. The work was published in 1867, and was almost contemporary with Gérôme's painting:

Nature is a great and irregular artist. There are thousands, millions of bodies that she seems barely to have knocked the rough edges off, that she casts into life half-formed and that seem to bear the mark of vulgarity, of haste, of negligence of productive creation, and of commonplace fabrication. From the clay of humanity, she seems to draw, like a workman crushed by his labour, whole peoples of ugliness, multitudes of rough-hewn, failed living beings, summary likenesses of man and woman. Then from time to time, in the midst of all this worthless humanity, she chooses a being at random, as if to prevent the example of the Beautiful from dying. She takes a body which she polishes and finishes with love, with pride. And then a true and divine being of art emerges from the artistic hands of Nature. Manette's body was one of those bodies: her nudity had suddenly brought into the studio the radiance of a masterpiece.

(Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Manette Salomon*, Paris: 1867)

Phryne is therefore, aesthetically, a modern subject. She raises at least one more issue: that of the relationship to beauty and of its sexualisation.

Although Phryne is a courtesan, her acquittal does not mean that the judges gave in to the charms of woman. The ancients understood this denouement, rather, as a tribute to Beauty, an example of disinterested, purely visual (that is, aesthetic) pleasure. So, in 1861, the art critics denounced a misinterpretation. Gérôme shows old men goaded by desire. Phryne arouses their lust and they behave as if they were in a brothel or a slave market. The atmosphere of a temple and the worship of deities (or, to draw a comparison with Gérôme's world, the atmosphere of a museum) would have been more seemly. Let us hear the verdict of a survivor of Jacques-Louis David's studio, an octogenarian who had witnessed the genesis of *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799) and *Leonidas at Thermopylae* (1814) and was thus a partisan of the great Greco-Roman repertory, Étienne-Jean Delécluze (1781-1863):

There were two ways of interpreting this singular anecdote: seriously, or from a comical and ridiculous standpoint; and M. Gérôme has opted for the latter. Instead of contenting himself with the explanation given for this story by the admiration that the Greeks had for beauty in general, he has preferred to explain the judges' indulgence [to Phryne] by the lascivious expression of their faces at the sight of Phryne entirely naked.

(*Journal des débats*, 15 May 1861)

And so Gérôme had got it completely wrong. He was deviating from history, and no doubt was doing so knowingly. For his invention lies entirely in the reversal of values (ridiculing classical culture). Phryne's undressing session in front of an assembly of old men is part of a larger project to revisit Antiquity. Gérôme offered his contemporaries the experience of a barbaric Greece and Rome: grotesque, cruel, or both at the same time. In 1857, he painted his first slave auction in *Achat d'une esclave* (Buying a Slave Girl) and, two years later, his first gladiatorial combat (*Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant*, 1859). These subjects were entirely novel. Gérôme was to make a speciality of them. He would sometimes reuse Phryne's pose as a painterly device. *Marché romain d'esclaves* (A Roman Slave Market, 1884)

cites the nude he had invented in 1861, but turns her through 180 degrees. A slave trader replaces the lawyer; the unfortunate woman, stark naked, stands on trestles and not in the hemicycle of the Areopagus; this time she is viewed from the rear, and, exposed as she is to all eyes, her optical rape is identical to that of *Phryne before the Areopagus*. Better still, trapped between the painted viewers and the real ones (among whom we find ourselves), the woman is more than ever reduced to the status of an object. Gérôme persists in mingling aesthetic pleasure and sexual attraction.



SOCIETY: STRONG WOMAN OR WEAK SEX?

What was Phryne's status in the city? The hyper-sexualisation of the courtesan and the way Gérôme makes her react to her optical rape is unequivocal: Phryne belongs to the weaker sex; she is a victim. Once again, Gérôme speaks in the present tense, as a man of the nineteenth century, not as a historian. The ancient sources evoke a Phryne proud of her beauty. If she had been undressed before the Areopagus (which did not happen to her), she would certainly not have blushed. Degas is often called as principal witness to remind us of the misinterpretation perpetrated by Gérôme. In truth, though, he was only repeating what others had already expressed in 1861.

What can we say of the painter who made *Phryne before the Areopagus* a poor shamefaced woman who hides herself? Phryne did not hide herself, could not hide herself, since her nudity was precisely the cause of her glory. Gérôme did not understand, and by that very fact made this painting a pornographic picture.

(Degas to Jeannot, undated)

This royal courtesan is no more than a little girl, thoroughly ashamed and frightened. She hides her face in a gesture which would be appealing in a

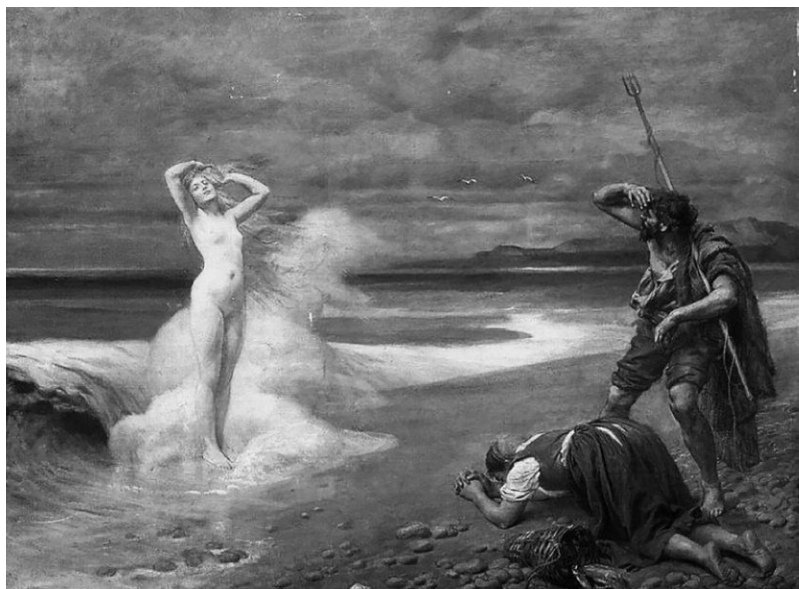
boarding-school girl, but which is merely ridiculous and absurd in her case. I can understand that the great Phryne should feel some surprise when her lawyer tears off her veils and delivers her naked to the admiration of her judges; but once the first moment had passed, with what pride she must have looked them in the face!

(Jean Rousseau, *Le Figaro*, 30 May 1861)

Phryne, as understood by Gérôme, has nothing of the Greek courtesan about her. She is a courtesan of the Second Empire. Or is she a prefiguration of Saint Agnes, also stripped of her clothes, but in order to be taken forcibly to a brothel? 'Phryne must proudly expose herself to the eyes of her judges', said Paul de Saint-Victor in 1861 (*La Presse*, 2 June 1861). Well, that is how she behaved on the stage of the Opéra-Comique. Freely inspired by Gérôme's painting, the libretto set the historical record straight in this respect. Phryne uses and abuses her charms. The librettist did not follow his model, nor did the producer at the Opéra-Comique. The sculpture commissioned from Daniel Campagne to stand in for Praxiteles' statue in the second act shows a 'victorious Phryne' (Fourcaud, *Le Gaulois*, 25 May 1893). We will have to take the journalist at his word here, because, unfortunately, no visual source has survived to keep the memory of this Phryne alive. And yet a plaster model of the statue appeared at the same time at the Salon de la Société des Artistes Français, and the following year Campagne exhibited the marble at that same venue. But neither of them was reproduced in the illustrated catalogue of the Salon. Let us admit that this is really bad luck. Nevertheless, we have a possible lead to follow. For several patinated bronzes and even small marble sculptures of a nude Phryne signed by Campagne circulate on the art market. It is a safe bet that these are commercial casts of the statue commissioned by the Opéra-Comique. This is all the more plausible since the gold bracelet mentioned in the libretto can be found on the right arm of the sculpture. We should also note the leaning head, as if, placed on a pedestal, Phryné were posing for a viewer (Dicéphile?) standing below her, another concordance with the stage directions of the libretto. If this

is indeed Saint-Saëns's Phryné, she certainly displays no modesty. An 'exhibitionist' of this kind may be counted among those strong women who are mistresses of their destiny and protagonists of history.

So why does the document in the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra in Paris which purports to be a poster for Saint-Saëns's work show the *Medici Venus* from the Uffizi Museum? This Roman replica, based on a lost Greek original derived from Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Knidos*, does not correspond in any way to the spirit of the libretto. The *Medici Venus* is depicted in an ambiguous gesture. She covers her breasts without it being clear whether she wants to conceal them or, on the contrary, to indicate them to the viewer. In any case, she does not reveal her nakedness to Dicéphile. Perhaps this document is nothing more than a title page for a later vocal score of the work? A vocal score for which the publisher may have thought it unnecessary to pay Daniel Campagne any royalties... One further remark in conclusion. The commission of a life-size nude from a sculptor who was still young, but who was already exhibiting in the Salons, and the fact that the work in question was shown there, was a highly unusual event. This is an exceptional encounter between the arts; in a sense, a total work of art.



Phryné before the Fishermen by Paul-Joseph Blanc.
Private collection.

Phryné devant les pêcheurs par Paul-Joseph Blanc.
Collection particulière.