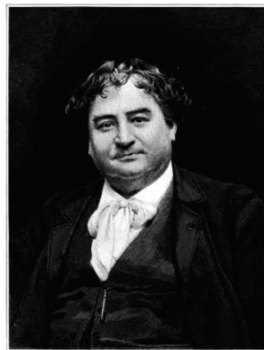


# Jean Georges Vibert



Jehan Georges Vibert, n.d.  
Photographer unknown.

Born on September 30, 1940, in Paris, Jehan Georges Vibert was one of France's most acclaimed Academic genre painters. The son of an engraver and publisher, Vibert learned to read and write in Greek and Latin as a child, but spent more time drawing in his copy-books than paying attention to lessons. He began his artistic training at a young age under the instruction of his maternal grandfather, famed engraver Jean-Pierre-Marie Jazet (1788–1871). More interested in painting than engraving, primarily due to the use of color, he began studying with porcelain painter and miniaturist Félix-Joseph Barrias (1822–1907) before entering the École des Beaux-Arts at age sixteen. Barrias, a strict teacher at the École, required his students to draw for three years.

Vibert remained at the École for six years under the tutelage of Barrias and later François-Edouard Picot (1786–1868). In 1860 he met Spanish artist Eduardo Zamacois (1841–1871) who inspired Vibert to make several trips to Spain.

There he collected objects that he later used to create authentic settings for his compositions. During and after these visits, Vibert was fascinated by all things Spanish and executed a number of works based on his experiences abroad. He maintained his friendship with Zamacois, and the two worked together on their Paris Salon of 1866 entry *Entrée des Toreros* (*Entrance of the Toreros*), which was unusual since a collaboration like this was rare at the time.

After his first trip to Spain, Vibert debuted at the Paris Salon of 1863 with the works *La Sieste* (*The Siesta*) and *Repentir* (*Repentance*). In his early years, the influence of Picot is obvious; like his teacher, he painted large-scale mythological subjects, including *Narcissus Transformed into a Flower* (1864), for which he received a medal, and *Daphnis et Chloé* (1866). He also painted Christian subjects, grand symbolical works, and historical paintings. Unfortunately, these early paintings were largely unappreciated by the public, forcing Vibert to explore subjects with broad appeal. He discovered that small-scale, exquisitely-finished paintings had a ready market among the rising French middle-class and thus became a master of amusing, anecdotal scenes. Critic

Eugène Montrosier wrote, “Not being able to bring the amateurs to his doors, [Vibert] resolved to follow their tastes...he boarded the ‘genre’ as bravely as he had the ‘grand style,’ and with much more tangible success.” An expert in satirical realism, Vibert became known for his piquant and technically superb paintings of clerics. In an era rife with criticism of the Catholic Church's corruption, the artist's cynical treatment of the clergy, in which they are often shown partaking in irreligious activities, was relished by his patrons. The refined wit of his depictions was widely praised, so much so the Duke of Guermantes in Marcel Proust's *The Guermantes Way* remarks that Vibert's “got wit to the tip of his fingers.”

Like many painters of the period, Vibert traveled extensively in the Middle East and North Africa. He shared with these Orientalist artists an interest in ethnography and careful attention to detail, producing several paintings that markedly resemble those of Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876), one of the earliest European painters of Algeria. Too fond of his clerical subjects to become an Orientalist, he returned to France from these expeditions shortly before the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. Vibert served as a volunteer sharpshooter in the French army and was wounded at the Battle of Malmaison. For his courage, he was awarded the Légion d'Honneur, the highest French decoration for excellent civil or military conduct.



Jehan Georges Vibert (French, 1840–1902), *A Cardinal Reading*, n.d., watercolor on paper, 10 1/2 x 14 1/4 in. (26.67 x 36.83 cm), Joslyn Art Museum, Gift of Francis T. B. Martin, 1991.6

Though primarily a painter, Vibert was multitalented; he served as his own architect, worked with iron and wood, and even upholstered his own furniture. Upon recovering from his war wounds, he wrote numerous plays and staged many productions in which he was often an actor. Many, like *Le Médecin Malade* (*The Sick Doctor*), poked fun at major social institutions. He also penned a number of stories for *The Century Magazine*, often based on scenes from his paintings, which served as a convenient way to advertise his works to



## Jehan Georges Vibert (French, 1840–1902)

### *The King of Rome*

1900, oil on canvas on panel, 32 1/2 x 47 in. (82.55 x 119.38 cm)  
Joslyn Art Museum, Gift of Francis T. B. Martin, 1990.7

First exhibited at the Universal Exhibition of 1900 in Paris, *The King of Rome* by Jehan Georges Vibert depicts Emperor Napoleon I declaring his son, Napoléon François Charles Joseph Bonaparte, or Napoleon II, the King of Rome. The painting contains around thirty figures and starting with Napoleon I, elevated on a platform, the Emperor sits with his infant son in a gold armchair. Cardinal Ercole Consalvi, the pope's diplomatic representative, passes reverently – and perhaps resentfully, judging by his somewhat sullen facial expression – in front of the Emperor while Napoleon's uncle, Cardinal Fesch, gestures dramatically with his biretta (hat) in the left foreground. A host of officials appear behind Cardinal Consalvi at the right, including a seated Empress Marie Louise, Napoleon's second wife and the child's mother. Other attendees include Napoleon's marshal and brother-in-law, Joachim Murat, who wears the plumed hat, and Prince Poniatowski, a marshal of France, who appears against the wall in the extreme left background.

Vibert had a significant interest in the First Empire, stating in his autobiography that he “loved only Napoleon and roses.” In the late 1890s, he painted a number of Napoleonic scenes, choosing ceremonial or private events rather than military subjects like those of Édouard Detaille (1848–1912) or Ernest Meissonnier (1815–1891). Clearly exalting Napoleon's reign, *The King of Rome* capitalized on the Napoleonic legend, which grew rapidly in France after the Emperor's death in 1821. The scene itself is more “the stuff of legends” than real circumstance; though the figures in the work are identifiable, this work's composition is imaginary. As Napoleon's private secretary Baron Claude François de Méneval recorded, Napoleon actually gave his son the title of King of Rome upon his birth rather than at an official event. De Méneval noted that after Napoleon's son drew his first breath seven minutes after birth, that “In the effusion of his joy Napoleon bent over the child...carried it to the door of the drawing-room in which all the grandees of his Empire were assembled and presenting it to them said: ‘Here is the King of Rome.’”

Although this work departs from his usual works overtly satirizing clergymen, Vibert's historical painting of Napoleon and his son contains a subtle critique of Church authority. The title “King of Rome” historically belonged to the Holy Roman Emperor, whom Napoleon had ousted in 1806. Although Napoleon II may have had a claim on the title because his mother was a member of the former Holy Roman Emperor's family, the title was



Jehan Georges Vibert (French, 1840–1902), *The Cardinal*, n.d., watercolor and gouache over pencil on paper, 9 1/2 x 6 1/2 in. (21.4 x 16.5 cm), Private Collection

traditionally dependent upon coronation by the pope. However, at the time of Napoleon II's birth in 1811, the relationship between the French government and the Catholic Church had significantly deteriorated. In 1808, after occupying Rome and imprisoning the past pope, Pius VI, once previously, Napoleon's armies re-occupied the city. In 1809, Napoleon annexed all the remaining Papal States and declared that the current pope, Pius VII, no longer had any temporal authority. Pius VII responded by excommunicating the Emperor, who promptly arrested the pope and imprisoned him in France.

Though the pope returned to Rome with the restoration of the Papal States after Napoleon's defeat in 1815, the legacy of fraught relations with the Catholic Church persisted. At the time *The King of Rome* was painted, the country was in the midst of the Dreyfus Affair, in which a young Jewish artillery officer was framed by the French army and wrongfully convicted of treason. An infamous example of antisemitism and miscarriage of justice, the scandal built on existing divisions in French society to pit pro-army, Catholic, and conservative citizens against pro-Republic, anticlerical, and progressive ones.

## Discussion Questions

How did Jehan Georges Vibert determine what subjects to paint?



Why do you think Vibert demonstrated his wit in his works?



What is Vibert's legacy, and how does it compare to other artists' legacies?

Teachers: go to [www.joslyn.org/education](http://www.joslyn.org/education) for this poster's related academic standards and lesson plans.

## a biography



Jehan Georges Vibert (French, 1840–1902), *The Preening Peacock*, n.d., oil on panel, 14 3/4 x 18 1/4 in. (37.4 x 46.3 cm), Private Collection

Owing to his potent combination of wit, popular content, and extraordinary technical skill, the artist earned wide renown and commercial success during his lifetime. A critic writing for *Brush and Pencil* magazine lamented that “France...lost one of her most noted masters of genre painting,” when Vibert died suddenly of heart disease on July 28, 1902.

# Timeline



The collection of tales now known as *Aesop's Fables* originated in Ancient Greece. According to the Greek scholar Herodotus, Aesop was a slave who lived on Samos in the sixth century BCE. He won his freedom by telling stories, or fables – short tales with anthropomorphized animals that conveyed a moral or lesson. Numbering around 725, they were disseminated through word of mouth until the fourth century BCE, when Demetrius of Phalerum compiled the fables into a written collection. No longer extant, the earliest surviving collections of the fables date five centuries later. In the late seventeenth century, Jean de la Fontaine popularized the fable genre with his twelve-volume collection *Fables*. Gathering tales from a wide variety of sources, both Western and Eastern, he adapted them into French free verse. The first six books, compiled in 1668, are adapted from fables attributed to Aesop found in the writings of Phaedrus (first century CE) and Babrius (second century CE). Nuanced and humorous, they were intended originally for adults, but soon entered the educational system and today are considered classics of French literature.

Jehan Georges Vibert drew his inspiration for *The Grasshopper and the Ant* from a story in volume one of La Fontaine's *Fables* called “La cigale et le fourmi.” The artist first exhibited the painting at the Paris Salon of 1875. In La Fontaine's original tale, a frivolous grasshopper wastes the summer chirping while an industrious ant collects food. When winter approaches, the desperate grasshopper pleads for food but is spurned by the ant, demonstrating the high cost of folly and carelessness. The scenario illustrates the virtues of planning and hard work, which has been used for generations to teach the perils of improvidence. Some versions state a moral at the end such as “to work today is to eat tomorrow” or “idleness brings want.”

As Vibert explains in his book *La Comédie en Peinture* (1902), an engraving of La Fontaine's



Jehan Georges Vibert (French, 1840–1902), *The Grasshopper and the Ant* (*Le Cigale et la Fourmi*), 1875, oil on canvas, 24 1/4 x 33 1/2 in. (61.6 x 85.1 cm), Joslyn Art Museum, Gift of Francis T. B. Martin, 1995.44

fable hung in his childhood home. After his mother explained the story, he dreamt of the fable recast with a minstrel and a monk instead of insects. As seen in the painting, a traveling musician has approached a group of monks, but only one stops to hear his pleas. When pressed for alms, the monk asked the minstrel about his work during the summer. When the minstrel responded that he was playing music, the monk snidely advised the minstrel to dance.

Even in Aesop's time this harsh response was distrusted, and an alternative tale represented the ant's behavior as mean and self-serving. La Fontaine's delicately ironic retelling widened the discussion to include themes of charity and compassion. Since the eighteenth century, the debate has expanded to include the place of culture in society, with the grasshopper's woes representing the plight of the artist. In La Fontaine's version he makes no final judgment, and disagreement over the fable's ambivalent meaning has continued since his work's publication, documented in various adaptations or reinterpretations in visual art, literature, and music. In these tales, often the ant and the grasshopper are depicted as women. Not only have women and the feminine, generally and historically speaking, been associated with frivolity and flightiness, but both words for the insects are of the feminine gender in French (and in most Romance languages).

Thus, it is unusual that in Vibert's work neither of the “insects” is female; instead, he used the painting to criticize the clergy, as he did in the paintings of red-robed French cardinals for which he was most famous. In *The Grasshopper and the Ant*, he carefully contrasted the men's appearances brimming with food and game, while the minstrel is hunch-backed and scrawny, shivering because his threadbare tights no longer keep out the cold. The turkey plumes protruding from the monk's

bag clash with the miserable peacock feather in the minstrel's cap. The choice of feathers was intentional; the turkey, the traditional bird of feasting, symbolizes the monk's frivolity while the peacock is the Christian symbol of the resurrection. This links the minstrel to Christ, reminding the viewer of the biblical parable of the “Good Samaritan,” in which mercy and kindness towards all is valued.

Vibert also used the physical appearances of the two men to depict the insects of the fable. The brown-robed monk with his rounded figure and rucksack strapped to his back distinctly resembles an ant with a heavy load, while green trappings and long, thin limbs identify the minstrel as the grasshopper. The peacock feather resembles an eye, and the lute strapped to the musician's back lends him additional insect-like qualities. Vibert's zoomorphic rendering of the monk and minstrel clearly connect his characters to those of the classic parable while illustrating their all too human behavior and values.



Jehan Georges Vibert (French, 1840–1902), *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, 1875, watercolor, with touches of gouache, on cream wove card, 12 1/2 x 16 1/4 in. (31.6 x 41.5 cm), Art Institute of Chicago, Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1938.1960

*The Grasshopper and the Ant*, like several of Vibert's other works, was executed in both small and large versions; the smaller is entitled *The Ant and the Grasshopper* and currently held at the Art Institute of Chicago. Like the majority of Vibert's self-copies, the works, aside from size, are identical. Thus, some have suggested that Vibert employed a photographic-mechanical method in order to create replicas of different dimensions, which would have been typical of Vibert's commercial acumen. Particularly near the end of his life, when his popularity was highest, Vibert's contemporary patrons eagerly sought replicas like these.



**JEHAN GEORGES VIBERT**  
French, 1840–1902

**THE KING OF ROME**  
1900, oil on canvas on panel, 32 1/2 x 47 in. (82.55 x 119.38 cm)

**JOSLYN ART MUSEUM** OMAHA, NEBRASKA  
Gift of Francis T. B. Martin, 1990.7