

From Saints to Sunsets

The Late Great Works of Delacroix

By Helen Dudar, *Smithsonian*, September, 1998

You could say that Eugene Delacroix was your average work-obsessed man of art. His needs were basic; he merely hungered for attention, praise, sales, fame and honors, and while he lived, got them in fair, albeit uneven, measure. But even he, a man who rarely questioned his own genius, might have been staggered by what posthumous celebrity has wrought. In this, the bicentennial of his birth, Delacroix became France's tourist event of the year. Beginning in spring, stretching through summer and spilling over into winter, a Delacroix devotee could find at least nine exhibitions around the country. Paris had paintings and drawings at the Grand Palais, a dazzling if nearly indigestible array of 250 works on paper at the Bibliotheque Nationale, and some small treasures at the Left Bank establishment that once housed his studio and apartment and is now a pocket museum bearing his name.

There were Delacroix tributes in six other cities as well, including Rouen, Tours and Bayonne. And after most of the exhibitions had closed down, an insatiable pursuer of Delacroix delights could prolong the pleasure by traveling south from Paris to Champrosay. This is the wooded country town where Delacroix regularly fled the pressures of urban life. In homage, the local governing agency has produced a lavish brochure offering guidance to hearty souls with the stamina and sturdy shoes needed for six long, scenic walks treading "In the Footsteps of Delacroix."

In the interest of balance, it must be pointed out that late last year, Delacroix's face vanished from the hundred-franc note. The replacement—at least until the euro takes over—is Paul Cezanne, a more fashionable figure nowadays, but one who certainly admired and drew inspiration from Delacroix's art.

America gets a small but nourishing sample of France's tributes from September 15 to January 3, when the Philadelphia Museum of Art hosts most of the Grand Palais show—70 paintings and 40 works on paper.

The show is titled "Delacroix: The Late Work" and concentrates on the artist's final labors, from 1848 to 1863, the year of his death. With this focus, it fills the gallery walls with a parade of surprises. Think of Delacroix, and the name conjures up operatic drama: a Byronic warrior, the Giaour, on horseback, fending off an attacking Turk; the moment from Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* in which Rebecca, in a dead faint, is swept off by abductors. Art history inevitably and justifiably considers Delacroix the ultimate romantic artist. Endearingly stubborn, he insisted to the end that he was a true classicist.



Romantic imagery is hardly absent from this exhibition, but the show's organizers were lured into the late period by intriguing contrasts to some of the earlier work. For example, one of Delacroix's landmark early pieces is *Liberty Leading the People* (left), which features an oversize, bare-breasted heroine towering over fevered crowds and brandishing both a rifle and the French tricolor. Presumably, when the French took to the streets to bring Louis-Philippe to power in 1830, Delacroix was, if not swept along, at least observing and possibly sketching notes for the painting to come.

Liberty Leading the People, 1830

So where was he in 1848 when Paris caught fire again and raging mobs made way for the return of the Bonapartes? The question, posed by Joseph J. Rishel, the Philadelphia Museum's senior curator of European Painting and one of the organizers of the show, is rhetorical. With bemusement Rishel tells us: "The man who brought you Liberty some 18 years before was in his country retreat at Champrosay-painting flowers."

A wall of brilliant blossoms is one of the unexpected sights of the show: three paintings overflowing with flowers (plus a fourth abundant with fruits), along with some beguiling watercolors, all done that fateful year of revolution or soon after. They are crowded clusters of nature's gifts, accented as were so many of his paintings by the rich glowing reds particular to his palette.

As far as we know, Delacroix had never before been tempted to fill a canvas with a still life. But in 1848 the artist had undergone the unnerving jolt of a 50th birthday. It may have then seemed essential to him to demonstrate the boundless range of his talent. As the exhibition catalogue notes, he spent some of his last years making his way, methodically and brilliantly, through genres he had ignored in decades past and testing techniques he had never before attempted. Posterity, he was determined, would be compelled to acknowledge a grand master-and, of course, an unblemished classicist.



The opulent rendering of *A Vase of Flowers on a Console* attests to the artist's mastery.



Delacroix painted the golden sunset of *The Sea at Dieppe* from memory, though it has the appearance of a direct study. Its broken brushstrokes anticipate Impressionism.

several others were in Paris. Streaked with reds and blues and oranges, tranquil even when they are tumultuous, they are reminders of how much more than most of us the artist is privileged to see.

And then there are the "cat" pictures. Lions and tigers, fierce and predatory, bestial and beautiful, attacking a rabbit, attacking each other, fighting off attackers. Delacroix loved those jungle beasts, even when he saw them dead, stuffed and stationary. His journal gives us a feverish account of a visit he made to a natural history collection in Paris, where he was so exhilarated by those immobile creatures of the wild that he found himself "gripped . . . by a

Among other unexpected sights are the landscapes. To be sure, Delacroix had painted trees and sky before, but usually as background to some historic or mythic scene. Here, we find him recording just a simple row of trees; the lush foliage of a corner garden; the benign rhythms of the sea in Dieppe; and, above all, a ravishing golden-brown sunset in Champrosay.

In fact, sunsets appear to have briefly become a happy obsession. The catalogue shows a number of sunset pastels, although, for protection against the steady glare of gallery light, only a few will be in Philadelphia;



Delacroix's luminous *Lioness Stalking Its Prey* may portray a puma, not a lion.

feeling of happiness."

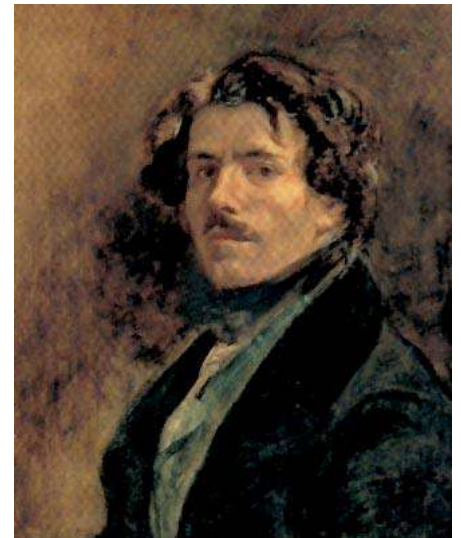
The quiet disappearance of the day and the snarling menace of untamed creatures—each captures Delacroix's notice, each represents the extremes of a difficult nature and tells us a little about the man. But not everything. There are shelves of books about Delacroix, including the journals he filled for years with ideas about art, literature and the burdens of time.

Yet, in some ways, he remains an enigma, a figure of mystery who never allowed himself to be solved. His admirers were apt to garland him with exotic descriptions: "a volcanic crater artistically concealed behind bouquets of flowers," wrote Charles Baudelaire, in an assessment more suggestive of the young poet's literary aspirations than of his subject. It was also Baudelaire, worshiper, interpreter and defender, who, perhaps more accurately, declared his idol to be "passionately in love with passion and coldly determined to seek the means of expressing it."

Consider the religious works. Delacroix painted some memorable pieces, and the exhibition offers a rewarding sampling of his New Testament imagery, including a number of Crucifixions, a Lamentation and an Entombment, all of which suggest devotion. But Delacroix, a child of the Revolution, had never been baptized and did not attend church services. Speculation about his beliefs range from the vague notion that they embodied "spirituality" to the conviction that he was a true skeptic. Yet Rishel is not alone in proclaiming him "the greatest French painter of religious subjects in the 19th century."

We are informed that Delacroix "adored" women. But his adoration managed to avoid any liaison that might have lured him into matrimony, thus distracting him from the more important business of art. He fell in love with a peasant girl named Lisette; he had dalliances with a dancer from the opera and the former mistress of a good friend; he engaged in a long affair with a married distant cousin, Baroness Josephine de Forget. And he ended his days and possibly his nights with his housekeeper, Jenny Le Guillou, an efficient woman who is said to have guarded him with "watchdog ferocity."

It is even possible to be confused about the impact of his appearance. If we are to believe one admirer, writing in 1859 when Delacroix was aging and sickly, he had a "wild, strange, exotic, almost disquieting beauty." Beauty is surely to be found in the magnetic 1837 *Portrait of the Artist*, in the exhibition catalogue. But the little Musée National Eugene Delacroix also displays a commanding carved bust of the artist, an unnerving image with piercing eyes, powerful nose and frightening chin.



The artist's elegance and disarming good looks are clear in an 1837 self-portrait.



The Barque of Dante, accepted for the 1822 Salon, depicts a scene from the Inferno. Although criticized by some for its Baroque qualities, the canvas was purchased by the state.

Characteristically, the circumstances of his birth are shrouded in confusion. He was a late child, the fourth in a family of some social and political standing but relatively modest means. His father, who held a number of government positions, was 57 when Eugene was born, and it seems to have been generally known that

the parents had not lived together as man and wife for years. Gossips proposed the true father to be the great statesman Talleyrand, who had been a houseguest of the family. The legend has survived, although no persuasive evidence for it was ever assembled.

Delacroix was a gifted child: a talented musician (harpsichord and violin), an addicted reader and a deft weaver of words. But it was art that seized him on his first visit to the Louvre when he was about 9 or 10. By the age of 17 he had begun studies at a Paris studio, and within seven years was on his way to fame and infamy.

His first work accepted for the annual Salon, in 1822, was a vision, both stirring and melodramatic, of Dante and Virgil in Hell, the two great poets fearlessly upright in a small boat as it plows through roiling waters over the bodies of doomed souls. The picture was bought by the state. The same recognition was bestowed on *Massacre at Chios* (below), one of his entries to the 1824 Salon. The subject of that painting, however, was far more violent: the Turks' slaughter of Greeks on the island of Chios, a contemporary event that Delacroix had never seen but had imagined from newspaper accounts.



Massacre at Chios, 1824

These honors met with less than universal approval. To be sure, there were admirers; but, as one observer has noted, there was also an "accolade of abuse." "Never," wrote the hyperbolic Baudelaire, who took up Delacroix's cause in the 1850s, "was an artist more attacked, more held up to ridicule or more thwarted."

Baudelaire reported that once, during the decade of Delacroix's early triumphs, the artist was summoned to meet with the director of fine arts at the Academy, the organization that started the Salon exhibitions; the director hoped to persuade the artist to "add a little water to his wine"—in short, to tone down his manner. Diluted Delacroix? The idea defies our imagination as it plainly did his.

Delacroix fell out of favor for a time, but even when he was back in the good graces of the state, when in his later years he was winning commissions to decorate palatial public buildings in Paris, he was repeatedly snubbed by the august Academy. His application for admission was rejected six times before the favor of membership was finally bestowed in 1857.

As a social figure in the early years of his ambiguous fame, Delacroix moved easily and regularly among the guests at elegant Paris soirees. From the dependable Baudelaire, we learn that his manners were brilliantly nuanced: "He possessed quite twenty different ways of uttering . . . 'mon cher Monsieur.'" And he made some important friendships, including a particularly close one with the composer Frederic Chopin. But as time passed, Delacroix's party life diminished. Work demanded more hours, and his production was prodigious. What survives, according to one authority, are at least 800 major paintings, perhaps 1,000 small and minor paintings, and some 6,000 drawings.

Two brief foreign voyages would provide him with subject matter for a lifetime. The state's payment for his *Massacre* picture financed a three-month visit to England in 1825. He may have acquired some English before the trip, and may even have read bits of Byron and Scott. But there was more of the works of these masters to be found on their native ground, and there was the seduction of Shakespearean theater. For years after, those British masters of historic and romantic myth would people his canvases.

Then, in 1832, he was invited to join a diplomatic party dispatched to Morocco on a royal goodwill tour. It was a five-month stay, with brief stops in Spain and Algeria. The impact on his work was profound and enduring. In his youth, Delacroix had studied the works of Peter Paul Rubens, whose canvases were to be seen at the Louvre, and he had drawn his flamboyant style and rich palette heavily, if not exclusively, from that Flemish master of the Baroque. Now, in the northern reaches of Africa, there were new discoveries to be made in color and light, and in the look of the dignified, romantically costumed people who differed so sharply from his countrymen.



A fantasy painted from memories of Morocco, *Arabs Skirmishing in the Mountains* (1863), with its dynamic S-shaped composition, was finished shortly before the artist's death.

Rishel says that one of the reasons for concentrating on the late period in the exhibition was that in his final years Delacroix repeated subjects, often obsessively and always with a slightly new view of the event. These were not multiple images of haystacks or incessant views of Mont Sainte-Victoire—those obsessive landscapes would come from the next generation of artists. What sent Delacroix to his easel was the event. In Philadelphia, for example, we see four variations of the Crucifixion (he painted more), and each portrays the savagery of death on a cross from a different angle and in different colors.

Over a period of 14 years, Delacroix painted at least six versions of *Christ on the Sea of Galilee*, four of them to be seen in Philadelphia. The theme is unchanging: a boatload of panicked disciples making their way through a treacherous storm. Sometimes the little boat has sails that are being torn and carried off by the wind. Through it all, Christ peacefully naps. In a moment, He will awaken and, as Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us, will calm the turbulent waters and then ask his followers, "Where is your faith?"

On Delacroix's return to Paris, memories of the visit provided a wealth of subjects, but what is astonishing is that he continued to draw on those few months for the rest of his life. For example, the show has 12 late works evoking Morocco and Algeria. One of the last, *Arabs Skirmishing in the Mountains* (left), was finished in 1863 when Delacroix was in a perilous state of health, suffering from the tubercular infection of his larynx that would soon end his life.

Those battling Arabs are what we think of as a typical Delacroix subject—all thunder and blood. More surprising is the tranquility of several other evocations of long-past Moroccan days. One, *The Riding Lesson* (right), approaches the definition of cute. When it was shown in 1855, the critics, seldom unanimous about Delacroix's more violent imagery, were in raptures. It pictures a Bedouin family in a desert landscape of great beauty; a pleased young mother sits to the side, watching as her husband gives their young son his first instructions in the saddle. There is also a pet dog looking on. To be sure, it's from the hand of a master, but it takes little imagination to envisage the painting illustrating a children's book about life in Bedouinland.



The Riding Lesson (1855) was praised by critics as a "marvel of color and spiritual grace," but Delacroix had difficulty selling the painting for his asking price.

Where Delacroix's faith was cannot be said with certainty, but his imagination was in flight. The wind-whipped water never looks the same, ranging in color from a menacing midnight green to a sickly shade that suggests the unease produced by a churning sea. Each painting shows the same sleeping Christ and the same frightened passengers; each is subtly or dramatically altered.

Looking at those multiple versions of a single event, the museum explorer must wonder whether Delacroix, aside from any possible financial motivation, was aiming for an ideal effect never achieved to his satisfaction, or was simply playing brilliant games with light, color and form. He is, after all, the man who once wrote, "Artists who seek perfection in everything are those who cannot attain it in anything."

A contemporary critic once accused Delacroix of painting with a "drunken broom." But the young artists who looked at his work and learned from it were not hunting for textbook perfection. Delacroix's surfaces had a somewhat unfinished quality that would later be rendered in coarser terms in the work of the Impressionists. In fact, Delacroix's technique of applying paint in agitated and fragmented stabs of color would become a hallmark of that school of artists.



Delacroix painted numerous versions of *Christ on the Sea of Galilee*; this one dates from 1854.

"We all paint through him,"

Cezanne once announced. Perhaps

"all" is too comprehensive, but the territory occupied by the artists who were influenced by Delacroix is considerable.

Toward the end of a modern book on the master are two pages of copies of his works painted by some of the most famous artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, in the years when they, like many young artists, were learning by imitating.

The copiers included Cezanne, Van Gogh, Renoir, Degas (who collected Delacroix), Manet, Redon and Picasso (who turned out no fewer than 15 versions of Delacroix's *Women of Algiers*). Their source had once declared that "the primary merit of a painting is to be a feast for the eye." Eugene Delacroix was surely smart enough to know that a generation of artists would sup at his table.

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By HELEN DUDAR

A frequent contributor, the author last wrote for *Smithsonian* on Monet, in July 1997.