

DELACROIX AND HIS FORGOTTEN WORLD

The Origins of Romantic Painting

Margaret MacNamidhe



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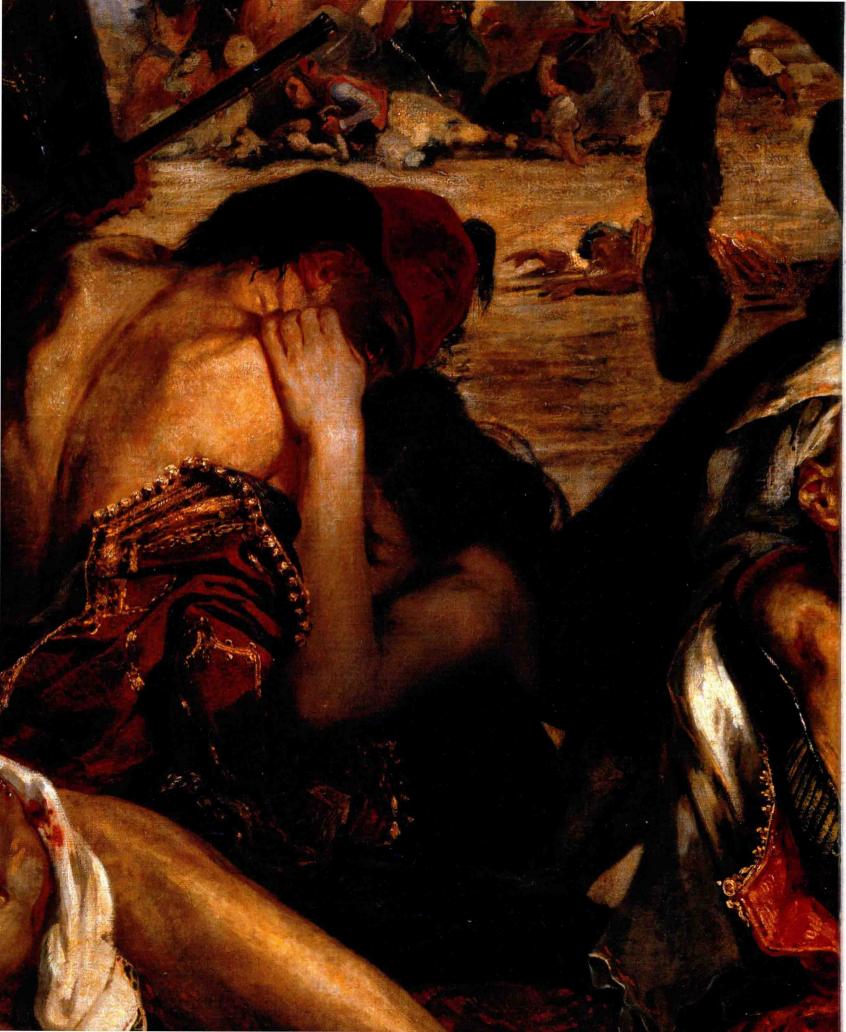
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Dedicated to Martha Ward



Preface

Let me simply state the central, polemical move in this book. I suggest a new route to the paintings of Delacroix, one that does not start with his Salon début, the *Dante and Virgil in Hell* (1822), but rather begins with an examination of the 1824 Salon. This context included work by artists who are now obscure—Xavier Sigalon, Léon Cogniet—and it was filled with critical voices of enduring and yet neglected relevance for French painting, such as the novelist Stendhal (Henri Beyle) and Étienne-Jean Delécluze, a former student and later biographer of Jacques-Louis David. This rich, fascinating context is the one in which I understand Delacroix: the kinds of work he did in the 1820s and beyond were shaped by the setting of the 1824 Salon, along with all its participants.

The six decades' worth of Delacroix's oeuvre still gleams, page after fatiguing page, from many a coffee-table dreadnought. And yet no individual canvas by Delacroix, let alone Sigalon or Cogniet – artists who shaped exactly what contemporary French viewers would think of as their home-grown Romanticism—has consistently received the kind of fascinated revisiting that has sealed the indispensable status of Gustave Courbet's Studio of the Artist (1855) and of Géricault's Raft. This book awards complex, previously overlooked paintings an intensity of analysis previously reserved for more canonical productions. My arguments turn on concepts of temporality and drama. After all, how else can we explain the electrifying effect Sigalon's Locusta had on no less a figure than Stendhal, in contrast to the bafflement elicited by his at the time less successful peer? The Chios is defined by a complete lack of action—this from a painter reflexively associated with the representation of turbulent scenes, all stuffed to the gills with characters from Walter Scott or the Jardin des Plantes. Such perceptions largely result from modernist squeamishness. The defining characteristic of many paintings by Delacroix-such as the simultaneously overwrought and utterly listless figures in the Crusaders Entering Constantinople that captivated Baudelaire—still remains partly beyond the reach of the political contexts, gender roles, or other concerns that have helped articulate Delacroix's arthistorical reception.

Chapter 1, "Delacroix's Elusive Paintings," defines the history of the sometimes overlapping, often baffled versions of Delacroix-from Baudelaire, through the painters Henri Fantin-Latour and Paul Signac, the early twentieth-century art historian Léon Rosenthal, and on to Clement Greenberg. The polemics that have often converged on the painting of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres differ from the reverence he received immediately after his death. By contrast, refracting Delacroix through multiple lenses has sustained a reverential image of an august artist with an august oeuvrewith that perception initially frozen into place by posthumous tributes to Delacroix. At the same time, however, Romanticism's interpretative relevance for nineteenth-century French painting—that great underwriter of the modern museum—has received quite a buffeting. In setting the compass to Jacques-Louis David, Thomas Crow, for example, offered an alternative route to French Romanticism, but circumvented a need to mention previous paths to his destination, even though they included densely trod intersections of the literary and artistic. When Jonathan Crary encouraged us to look at unsung achievements by artists from the 1820s and early 1830s, Delacroix's significance was refreshed by a proleptic form of modernism.

Chapter 1 assesses both old narratives and art-historical gingerliness about the character of Delacroix's painting. I also consider Delacroix's approach to the *tableau*—a key aspiration for French painters—by awarding new prominence to the obscure religious painting *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (1827).

Chapter 2, "Isolation in David and Delacroix," considers a compliment coaxed from Delécluze by just one figure in Delacroix's Chios. The Chios ostensibly depicts an episodic aftermath of violent events from the Greek War of Independence (1821–7), but its slumped figures and oddly lulled atmosphere do nothing to earn this description; Delécluze was drawn to a part of the painting that concentrated those effects. Delécluze's writings overall provide vital support for my analysis. For example, I take a look at an intriguing novella he wrote (it hasn't been looked at before). Delécluze was a seemingly staid force in changing times. Precisely because of his unique background, we can trace across his work a remarkably intense meditation on the links between Delacroix's work and the heroic subjectivity sought by other artists, including David. What's more, Delécluze's opinion of those artists fresh from David's studio was so withering as to undermine Crow's claims that a Davidian training continued to be important almost three decades into the nineteenth century. Like-minded art critics shared Delécluze's general pessimism about the contemporary representatives of the Davidian tradition. Nonetheless, great differences separated reviewers sometimes shunted together as conservative; the intriguing divisions between them are also examined in Chapter 2.

Delacroix's brushwork and color are routinely described as defining characteristics of his work, but they haven't always been pressed into the service of specific arguments about individual paintings. Chapter three, "Paint that Divides and Gathers," concentrates on two female figures in the Chios. Like other prominent figures in the painting's foreground, these two women are paired together, but the state of suffering afflicting them puts each beyond the connective reach of her neighbor. The same might be said of all of the couples Delacroix portrayed in the Chios. In fact, the critic Charles-Paul Landon referred to the Chios's "figures, or rather half-figures because none of them offers a complete development." Chapter 3 agrees with Landon's comment. I argue that the irresolution of condition seen in the collapsed female figure near the center of the painting-critics wondered whether she looked alive or dead—was effectively the result of packing brusquely variegated brushwork and color into the smallest of areas. Conclusions reached by this analysis are then extended both to the Chios overall (especially its toying with the motif of the couple) and to the tradition of generalized appreciation for Delacroix's fluency with paint.

Few paintings by Delacroix evoke the unities of depicted gesture and purpose that course though Géricault's work. Nonetheless, his works are often disadvantageously compared to those by his predecessor, especially the Raft of the Medusa (1819). At the same time, the most acclaimed canvas of the 1824 Salon-not by Delacroix-aspired to a pictorial unity founded on animated drama (albeit bereft of Géricault's multi-figure emphases). Chapter 4, "The Lost Romantic," asks why Delacroix's now-neglected peer Xavier Sigalon achieved an unrepeatable Salon triumph with the trio of figures he portrayed in his painting, the Locusta (this is the short title of Sigalon's painting). The solution I offer to the mystery of the Locusta's evanescent success clarifies why Delacroix adopted the directions he did at the beginning of his career directions resolutely different from those pursued by his then closest rival. When the question of Sigalon's rise and fall has come up previously in the literature on the period, it has been as a minor matter of ill-starred biography. Yet the Locusta is a painting I consider indispensable for an understanding of French painting in the 1820s and beyond.

Chapter 5, "Stendhal's Art Criticism Reconsidered," looks at how Stendhal, the *Locusta*'s greatest champion, described the objects of his enthusiasm or opprobrium, whether he located them on the stage or at the Salon. The overlap between Stendhal's responses to painting and drama hasn't received sustained attention, while his "Salon of 1824," his most ambitious engagement with the art of his times, remains virtually untouched. Stendhal couldn't bear to throw more than a few exasperated lines in Delacroix's direction during his "Salon."

His critical energies went instead to cataloging the faults he saw both in history paintings by David and in the work of David's followers. As for praise, the Locusta claimed most of what few compliments Stendhal had to spare for contemporary French painting. Such asymmetric choices provide Chapter 5 with its justification. Stendhal's art criticism of the 1820s was progressive in tone—or so it has been routinely said—and Stendhal's disparagement of David conforms to that evaluation: it has been noted more frequently than either Stendhal's rush past the Chios or his prediction that Sigalon would endure as a "great painter." These swerves from prescience have been absorbed into general descriptions of the negative response that greeted Delacroix's early paintings. Chapter 5 shows instead the deep roots underlying Stendhal's writings on art in the 1820s, his strident opinions included. When Stendhal looked at paintings, he could be dyspeptic or elated. So far, no art historian has listened to this captivating, exasperated voice. Stendhal formulated criteria essential for Delacroix's development, even though he chose not to follow those criteria directly.

The book concludes with an Envoi on how these arguments may bear on our understandings of Romantic painting in the decades after the 1820s, when Delacroix, Ingres, and others continued to develop. I also note with gratitude some interesting currents in scholarship, exemplified by Michèle Hannoosh, Susan Siegfried, Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, Ralph Ubl, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, David O'Brien, Marc Gotlieb, and others, and I end with some thoughts on future directions in the historiography of Romanticism.

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Chapter 1

Delacroix's Elusive Paintings

Ferdinand-Victor-Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) remains one of the most famous nineteenth-century French artists. He is known as a painter of action and movement, who endlessly depicted Romantic scenes of high emotion. Central to Delacroix's reputation, so it is said, are his gifts for brushwork and color. While the paintings' subject matter is diverse—an abundance of literary sources, contemporary history, episodes from his 1832 trip to North Africa—narratives or events rich in dramatic activity are their characteristic focus.

Bland, generalized, familiar: such an overview would hardly be draped across the careers of Gustave Courbet, Édouard Manet, or indeed Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Delacroix's supposed rival in the nineteenth century. For those not specialized in nineteenth-century French art, Delacroix's work may have settled into undisturbed contours, having not attracted the same intensity of interest or polemical activity as his equally canonical compatriots. My ploy in beginning with this invented summary is to emphasize the stasis in the perception of Delacroix's painting, even as scholarly attention to him increases. As a once-reverential fog gradually lifts, the general perception of Delacroix remains, as Beth Wright, editor of a collection of essays on the artist, has remarked, that of an illustrious rather than a well-known figure.¹

Delacroix had a nearly six-decade-long career, but that fact has become surprisingly easy to forget. Scholarship on his career's different phases remains unevenly distributed. I believe that unevenness is more than an ordinary result of growing scholarship; I think it is also symptomatic of several deeply embedded traditions in the reception of Delacroix's work. In particular I think that a previously unnoticed inability to settle upon a series of works as representative of his painting has characterized some leading traditions of commentary on the artist. Although methodologically diverse, these studies center on the years 1822 to 1834, when Delacroix was first exhibiting at the Paris Salon. Paintings from this period remain generally well known; they include *Dante and Virgil in Hell* (1822; fig. 2), *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827; fig. 3), and *Liberty Leading the People* (1830; fig. 4). Virtually all of these canvases set large numbers of depicted figures on tilted or uneven grounds;

Eugène Delacroix
Scenes from the Massacres at Chios: Greek
Families Awaiting Death or Slavery, etc., 1824
Oil on canvas
13 ft. 8 in. × 11 ft. 7 in.

PARIS, MUSÉE DU LOUVRE



Eugène Delacroix

Dante and Virgil in Hell, 1824

Oil on canvas

3 ft. 15 in. × 6 ft. 14 in.

PARIS, MUSÉE DU LOUVRE

the remarkable pyramidal arrangement of Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819; fig. 5) offered Delacroix a compositional template for this. The ready evidence of borrowing, however, means that Delacroix cuts a poor figure in some influential accounts of French nineteenth-century painting—for example, Thomas Crow's.² From the opening decade of Delacroix's career, the *Liberty* remains perhaps his most famous canvas, and the literature on it forms something of an island unto itself, thanks to the painting's identification with the July Revolution of 1830. The same isolated intensity attends the *Women of Algiers* (1834; fig. 6).³ By contrast, much of the period from the mid-1830s to the late 1850s offers a comparatively untraversed prospect. Nonetheless, some of Delacroix's mural commissions have come in for important scrutiny, with

Michèle Hannoosh considering them in close relation to Delacroix's writings, including the Journal.4

I believe that a previously unnoticed inability to settle upon a series of works as representative of Delacroix's painting characterizes some leading traditions of commentary on the artist. Within that context I will examine twentieth-century responses to Delacroix by Michael Fried, Clement Greenberg, and others; from the nineteenth century, I will consider accounts by Charles Baudelaire and the Neo-Impressionist painter and theorist Paul Signac. My aim in this introductory chapter is to revise the now-routine description evoked in my opening paragraph by suggesting the existence of an unexamined interpretative tradition of dispersed responses to Delacroix's painting. My inquiry will also address the longstanding claim for the priority of depicted action in Delacroix's painting—one of the commonplaces included in that first paragraph. That priority cannot be read, for example, in either Signac's or Baudelaire's responses.

For his large canvas painted to honor Delacroix in 1864, Henri Fantin-Latour didn't choose any exemplary work by which to represent the recently deceased



Eugène Delacroix The Death of Sardanapalus, 1827 Oil on canvas 12 ft. 11 1/2 in. × 16 ft. 3 in. PARIS, MUSÉE DU LOUVRE