



Biography

Eugène Delacroix was born in 1798 at Charenton-Saint-Maurice (Ile-de-France), near Paris. There is reason to believe that his father, Charles-François Delacroix, was infertile at the time of Eugène's conception and that his real father was a French diplomat Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, prince de Bénévant, then prince de Talleyrand who was a friend of the family and successor of Charles Delacroix as Minister of Foreign Affairs and whom the adult Eugène resembled in appearance and character. Throughout his career as a painter, Delacroix was protected by Talleyrand and later by Talleyrand's grandson, Charles Auguste, duc de Morny, half-brother of Napoleon III and speaker of the French House of Commons.

His legal father, Charles Delacroix, died in 1805, and his mother Victoire died in 1814, leaving 16-year-old Eugène an orphan.

His early education was focused on the study of Classics and he won awards in drawings. In 1815 he began his training with Pierre Guérin in the neo-classical style of Jacques-Louis David. His basic artistic education, however, was obtained by copying Old Masters at the Louvre where he delighted in Rubens and the painters of the Venetian School.

In 1822, he had his first public exposure at the Paris Salon with the painting *The Barque of Dante* that was purchased by the French State as was *The Massacre at Chios* two years later. This latter work was greatly criticized by mainstream art critics. One of them described the work as "the massacre of painting."

A period of traveling followed. In 1825 he spent some months in England where he studied the styles of Gainsborough and Constable. In 1832, Delacroix visited Morocco where he acquired a wealth of rich and exotic visual imageries which he would exploit to the full in later years.

In his later career, Delacroix became one of the most distinguished fresco painters in the history of French art. His commissions included frescoes in several major buildings in Paris. Some of these frescoes show the unparalleled expression of his mature style, his decorative richness of color and grandiose structural integration. Delacroix was also a fine writer. In his *Journal* he gave eloquent expression to his thoughts on art and contemporary life.

Body of Work

Delacroix's work was prodigious. After his death, at the posthumous sale in 1864, 9,140 works were attributed to Delacroix, including 853 paintings, 1,525 pastels and watercolors, 6,629 drawings, 109 lithographs, and over 60 sketch books. The number and quality of the drawings, whether done for constructive purposes or to capture a spontaneous movement, underscored this explanation. "Color always occupies me, but drawing preoccupies me," he wrote.

Delacroix produced several fine self-portraits, and a number of memorable portraits which seem to have been done purely for pleasure, among which were the portrait of fellow artist Baron Schwiter, an inspired small oil of the violinist Nicolò Paganini, and portraits of Frédéric Chopin and George Sand, a double portrait of his friends, the composer Frédéric Chopin and writer George Sand. The latter painting was cut after his death, but the individual portraits survive.

On occasion Delacroix painted pure landscapes (*The Sea at Dieppe*, 1852) and still lifes (*Still Life with Lobsters*, 1826-7), both of which feature the virtuoso execution of his figure-based works.

Artistic Style

“Romanticism (and Neo-Classicism) arose around the middle of the 18th century as a stylistic reaction against the frivolities and whimsies of the Rococo.” (Artz, p. 219) While Neo-Classicism expressed a deeper examination of classical antiquities and gave particular emphasis to reason and to rational understanding, Romanticism amounted to a reorientation. It brought forth new attitudes toward man and nature and it strongly negated the strict neo-classic rationalism.

The Romantics emphasized emotionality and sensibility and “the belief that it is emotion rather than reason that is basic in man’s nature,” therefore more important. (Artz, p.223) Romanticism praised individuality, subjectivity and freedom.

In art, the Romantics went back to the Middle Ages, to the Orient, and to wild and untamed scenery for their artistic themes. And, more importantly, they brought back in painting the visual power of rich, vibrant colors.

Delacroix always regarded color as the essential element of painting and his style, often ridiculed by the Neo-Classacists, was full of passion, action and contrast and executed in “broad, slashing strokes.” (Artz, p. 232) As for his preferred subjects, Delacroix often chose remote and exotic ones because “The most real things I paint are the illusions I create.”

Delacroix used up to 23 pigments while painting, “encompassing nearly all of those available at the time... He considered color not a localized property, intrinsic to the object, but “*essentially an interplay of reflections.*” (Ball, p.172) It is for this reason that Delacroix was admired by the Impressionists: he wished to capture the play of light.

Eugène Delacroix is rightly considered the greatest French painter of the Romantic movement. Théophile Gautier, a 19th century French poet, dramatist, novelist, journalist, art critic, and literary critic, so defined Eugène Delacroix: “[Delacroix] formed with Victor Hugo and Hector Berlioz the trinity of Romantic art.” What better praise could have been found?

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