

Delacroix at the Metropolitan Museum, NYC. 11/16/18

I kept thinking, "So talented! So skilled! And all so stupid!" Intellectually and emotionally driveling.



Peter Schjeldahl in his *New Yorker* review spoke of Delacroix's incessant desire to impress. (Not his exact words, but the gist.) I agree. I felt like I was hearing a voice repeatedly exclaiming, "Watch me! Look at this!", like a child trying to impress, trying to please the adults with his antics – tumbling on the floor, spinning around,....



An exception to this — and there were a few, mostly from his earlier years — an exception to this was the self-portrait he did in his late thirties.



Self-portrait 1837

It is not fancy, no literary conceits, no polished brushstrokes. There is no allegory, no historical references — just a study, in rather hurried and unpolished strokes, of young man. Interestingly, Delacroix never exhibited this but kept it to himself and retained it throughout his whole life, and in his last documents referred to it specifically as the portrait of himself “in the green scone Scottish coat” (or some such phrase). It was clearly important to him. Perhaps he knew that it was truthful in ways his other popular, admired, and excessive artwork was not — just an image of a young man looking back at. Forget all about how talented and clever and important and famous the painter of this image was (or was to become). Just a very clear-eyed study of a very smart young man, full of the promise of youth and full of the promise of intelligence.

Sigh.

But he *was* good — in color, in form, in line. And he was innovative in those. What a shame he couldn't or didn't turn those abilities to more substantive thoughts. I wonder if this is some of what Picasso was thinking when he said of Delacroix, "That bastard! He was good!". Picasso did an extensive series derived from Delacroix's painting, *The Women of Algiers*. Picasso clearly thought highly of Delacroix. I suspect it was those

formal qualities. (Picasso was anything but maudlin or intellectually shallow.)



Femmes d'Alger, 1834

Compare this to the compositional complexity in Picasso's riff on this image.

And if you look at Delacroix's female figures, they're almost cartoons, so relentlessly pretty, perhaps equivalent to the

a n i m e
female
characters
of
today.



Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1955

And then these, which are the sort of thing he became famous for. To my intellect, they're very shallow. They are exaggerated and silly. (Though not entirely sometimes; the blood on the stone beneath Greece's feet is subtle, powerful and visually striking for its subtlety.) Most of what we see here is grandstanding and theatrical — and, as if that



Liberty...

were not enough, repeatedly using sexual titillation to hook the audience.



Greece...

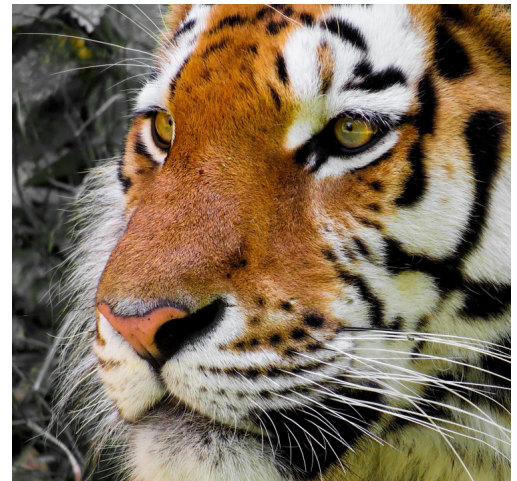


La Mort de Sardanapale

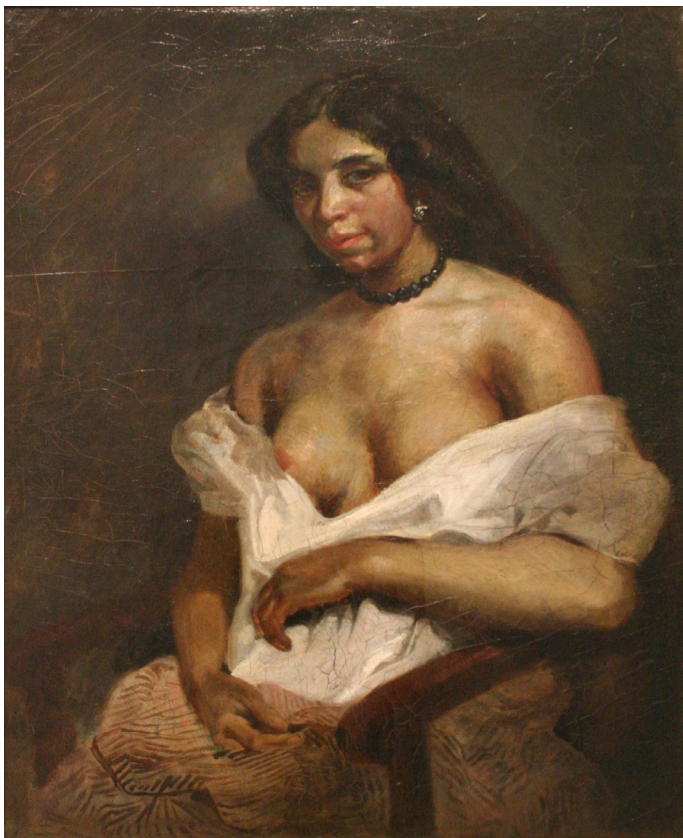
Peter Schjeldahl, who is normally so perceptive, raved about Delacroix's portrayal of animals. I think he was wrong. I think Delacroix's portrayal of animals is as romantic as his portrayal of humans.



His famous tiger painting is one Schjeldahl and many others rave about. But what I saw immediately was the artificiality of *maman's* eyes. "Si je m'abuse, "I thought, "tigers eyes are not that large or slanted or almond shaped." And indeed they are not. If we were as perceptive about tigers physiognomy as we are of humans, we would see this immediately. This strikes me as a prettification of the animal, just as he prettified his humans. Delacroix's quick drawing studies of lions and tigers, by contrast, are striking. It seems that when drawing he was not "performing". The drawings, in contrast to the finished paintings are true-er.



And, of true-er paintings, true-er artwork, here again is the young-ish Delacroix's self-portrait. There is a simplicity to this. He's very haughty. All of the portraits – self paintings as well as photographs taken by others – present him as haughty. He was apparently a very self-important guy. He is still young, he is talented, good-looking, ambitious, on top of the art world, full of himself. Later, in his 50s, he should have gotten over it. But judging from the photographs, he didn't.



And finally this from the early, not yet self-conscious, not yet posing and impressing Delacroix. This study was apparently of a studio model, Asphasia. It turns out he did several paintings of her, all of them very simple, straightforward and in my view respectful. The Met says that he referred to this painting much later in life in a document, that he knew and valued the painting, and referred to the model by name.

The Met suggests they were lovers. I expect they were. I expect Delacroix had a deep fondness for her and it sounds like he retained that. Given, however, that she drops out of the picture (so to speak), it would seem they did not continue. I wonder if Delacroix as he became increasingly famous and the darling of the literati could not afford to be involved with an uneducated mulatto. And if she were a studio model she was probably not educated either. And Delacroix was of the very upper class. His father had been Foreign Minister. (In the U.S., this would be Secretary of State). Not to be seen at the grand openings of the Salon exhibitions with an uneducated mulatto girl. But it seems there was some real affection between them, judging from the number and the tenor of the paintings. Got to bless them for that.



Looking at these two and the self-portrait and comparing their emotional and intellectual honesty to the *Liberty* and *Greece* images — Mon dieux! Quelle différence! Quel horreur! When he was studying, painting or drawing for himself, he was terrific. When he was presenting to the world, he was exaggerated and bombastic.

The *Delacroix* exhibition is at the Metropolitan Museum, NYC, Sept 17 - January 6.