

# Eugène Delacroix and 21st Century Art

## The Enduring Power of Image

**Eugène Delacroix**'s work was not only crucial to the formation of later 19th and early 20th century avant-garde art, but his conception of the image remains pertinent for artists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Cezanne famously said: "You can find us all... in Delacroix." Art history has since posited that Delacroix's oeuvre carried seeds of impressionism, post-impressionism, symbolism and expressionism. But then, in what ways is Delacroix's oeuvre relevant for today's artists and viewers? He inspired many artists with his unparalleled treatment of diverse themes, and his complex, yet controlled compositions populated by vibrant and loose gestures that imply a bold break with tradition. What does this painterly freedom in representation mean in relation to the immediate social and political resonance of his subject matter?



Eugène Delacroix, *Seated Lion in a Landscape*, Watercolor on paper, 7 5/8 x 10 5/8 inches

This essay discusses how contemporary artists' interest in Delacroix's work-his methods and his treatment of subject matter- has contributed to a redefining of our concept of modernity. It proposes the shift from the question "Is Delacroix modern or not?" to a discussion of the ways in which modernity is redefined by the artists who followed his path, and how his approach to art is relevant to the 21st century where it reverberates in artists' practices today.



Left: Cecily Brown, *Christ Asleep During the Tempest (After Delacroix)*, 2016, Monotype, image size: 30 x 40 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Two Palms, NY.

Right: Eugène Delacroix, *Christ on the Sea of Galilee*, ca. 1841, Oil on canvas, 18 x 21 ½ inches, Metropolitan Museum of Art object number 89-16.

One of the artists in the exhibition, **Cecily Brown**, not only uses Delacroix’s paintings as source material, but her compositions are in direct dialogue with his unique way of achieving balance between tight compositional control and loose, energetic brushstrokes. Her works after Delacroix are testaments to her desire to visualize and respond to the images that attract and confound her. Painstaking and obsessive in her effort to work and rework either an entire scene or the slightest gesture, Brown’s drawings take the act of looking as their very subject.<sup>i</sup> In the monotype with watercolor, pencil and pastel, *Untitled* (2016), Brown reimagines Delacroix’s painting *Christ Asleep during the Tempest* (ca.1853) in a vivid composition of bodies depicted among swells of color and gesture. The iconography of *Christ on the Sea of Galilee* stems from a dramatic scene made popular in the Mannerist and Baroque periods.<sup>ii</sup> Delacroix specifically chose this moment described in the Gospels when Jesus calmly sleeps during a storm, while the apostles are stricken with terror as the waves attack the ship from all sides. His composition followed Rubens’ version (*Christ Calming the Sea* ca. 1608-9), in which the water overtakes the protagonists in a tipped forward, diagonally placed ship. In contrast to the high rhetoric of the struggling poses of the apostles, the sleeping figure of Jesus offers a symbolic visual rest – a moment when he is either blissfully unaware of the present danger, or deeply convinced of God’s protection. Brown’s deliberate choice of vivid color evokes pleasure in viewing and underlines her interest in emotionally connecting the viewer with the scene she has represented. In her treatment of Delacroix’s composition, lines and washes overflow the physical boundaries of the figures. The resulting representations of the poses of the bodies symbolize the moment when man loses control, and hints at the dissolution of the solid human figure. Instead of trying to prove her mastery in drawing, Brown has placed the emphasis on learning how Delacroix achieved this unique state of flux. Her work emphasizes the liveliness of the processes of making and viewing -- and illustrates the

dialogue between artists across the centuries, as well as between the viewer and the work.

**Peter Doig's** etching *Lion in the Road* (2016) depicts the lion that can be linked to the multifaceted symbolism of the wild cats ubiquitous in Delacroix's oeuvre. Delacroix made many relentless studies and drawings of diverse cats that illustrate the supple and carnivorous nature of these "nervous and febrile creatures," in the words of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French art critic Champfleury. Throughout his career, Delacroix depicted lions with a stupendous sense of animalistic force. In contrast, Doig's work evokes the animal's symbolic power, as it combines with both the psychological landscapes of his Trinidadian island life, as well as the local mythology. The artist offers an insight into the lion's genesis in his work:

"I took lots and lots of photographs of the lions at the zoo in Trinidad—the first zoo I went to as a child growing up there. It hasn't changed much. The idea for the lion comes from seeing depictions of the Rastafarian Lion of Judah on the walls of buildings, galvanized fences and T-shirts in Port of Spain. The iconography of the Lion of Judah is something you see quite often. It's a stand-in for a painting of Christ. I got attracted to the different interpretations of this mythic figure and the fact that people would leave them on the wall. These lion drawings have nothing to do with graffiti—they aren't stylized or generic—but more to do with someone trying to interpret the lion from their imagination. The prison you see is the one in the middle of Port of Spain...built by the British as their detention center and it takes up a whole city block. I've never been inside but I know people who have, unfortunately, and it's a pretty grim place. In the cells you are very aware of the streets so I began to think about what it must be like to be in there where you can hear the city and especially at Carnival time, when you can hear the music and revelry but you're locked away. Seeing this poor lion in the zoo banging his head against one of the doors of his cage, I thought about the lion being inside of the cage and outside of the prison and flipped them." <sup>iii</sup>



Left: Peter Doig, *Lion in the Road*, 2016, Etching, ed of 40, paper size: 22 x 36 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Two Palms, NY.

Right: Eugène Delacroix, *A Lion and a Lioness*, c. 1855, Pencil on paper, 6 7/8 x 9 inches.

**Elizabeth Peyton**'s delicate small-scale portraits of celebrities, friends, and historical figures have a romantic sensibility that takes its cue from Delacroix's intimate portrayals of sitters such as Chopin, George Sand, or his housekeeper Jenny. Peyton sometimes even makes direct copies of works by Delacroix, following his positioning and cropping. Her painting *Flaubert in Egypt (After Delacroix)* (2009-10) is based on a fragment of Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* (1834), while the title evokes the parallel and contemporaneous inspiration, Flaubert's memoir of his voyage to Egypt in 1849. The painting thus becomes a repository of emotional memory, evocation of the past, and subjectivity: "The image from Delacroix's painting became a place to put all my feeling about *Flaubert in Egypt*," Peyton has explained.<sup>iv</sup> The etching *Belle Belle Belle!* (2018) carries the artist's conviction that the the artwork should not be descriptive, but should evoke feelings through expressive brushstrokes that convey the figure's subjective presence. The work is characterized by the transparent washes of pigment and a jewel-tone palette, as her unique graphic sensitivity transforms her subject, imbuing the image with a sense of beauty that transcends the everyday.



Left: Elizabeth Peyton, *Belle Belle Belle!*, 2018, Etching ed. of 20, paper size: 37 ¼ x 28 inches  
 Courtesy of the artist and Two Palms, NY.

Right: Eugène Delacroix, *Lion Attacking a Serpent*, Pen and ink on paper, 5 ¼ x 7 ¾ inches





Kara Walker, *The Pool Party of Sardanapalus (after Delacroix, Kienholz)*, 2017, Sumi ink and collage on paper, 125.5 x 140 inches, © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Right: Eugène Delacroix, *Study for the Lithograph “Hamlet and Laertes at the Grave of Ophelia,”* c. 1853 Pencil on paper, 10 3/4 x 7 3/8 inches.

Many other artists have drawn inspiration from the master. Kara Walker’s majestic *Pool Party at Sardanapalus (after Delacroix, Kienholz)* (2017) brings to the fore the formal composition of Delacroix’s dynamic vision and reveals the eponymous protagonist’s disdain for the dignity of human bodies. On a thematic level – the artist follows Delacroix’s conviction that the genre of historical painting had the power to influence contemporary history.<sup>v</sup> Taking Delacroix’s lesson, Walker’s description of racism, violence and misogyny in our society today is the most eloquent argument for the importance of contemporary history painting. The strength of Walker’s vision is her ability to utilize the genre of history painting to depict the recent event that happened in McKinney, Texas, where in 2015, at a local pool party, a white policeman forcefully threw a black teenager to the ground. Walker’s painting, heroic in proportion, shows characters in sequence of actions: a hooded black man with a white man draped over his shoulders wields a dagger, as he points the blade at another, naked black man, as if taking instruction; a woman is stabbed, another one does the stabbing; to the left, a man disinterested; to the right, a man forlorn.<sup>vi</sup> The artist’s composition is employed to engage the viewer to see black girls in bathing suits taking actions. The unique strength of Walker’s method is her deliberate conflation of here and there, now and then, that unequivocally testifies to the persistent grip of racism and misogyny on our country today. The artist not only collages the historical epochs, but she merges victims and oppressors in a “universally shameful chaos of degradation.” As viewers are invited to become active witnesses of white cruelty and black suffering as well as of the futility of revanchist fantasies, they too become complicit in these grotesque undertakings.

Peter Saul's *Sardanapalus* (2005), is another contemporary painting which elaborates on Eugène Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827). Saul's painting, according to the artist's own account, takes place twenty minutes after the eponymous king's dramatic suicide. This version leaves behind Delacroix's painterly style in favor of a hard-edged figurative one in which distorted anatomy, acidic psychedelic colors, and an all-over, chaotic composition create an animated drama and tension within the frame of the canvas. Saul's highly charged cartoon style serves as a commentary on the barbarity of today's world, while his signature use of the grotesque signifies the political imagery of freedom.



Left: Peter Saul, *Sardanapalus*, 2005, Acrylic, oil on canva, 78 x 86 inches  
 © The Artist. Private Collection, courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London.  
 Right: Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapolis*, 1827, Oil on canvas, 154 3/8 x 195 1/4 inches  
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Walton Ford's recent paintings in his 2018 show *Barbary* provocatively depict a fictional scene in which the lion has eaten Delacroix. In this artist's whimsical account, Delacroix came too close to his subject – and in attempting to capture the animal so thoroughly, the artist brings on his own demise. Ford's precise painting technique seems to allude to the impossibility of Delacroix accurately capturing the wild beast, i.e. the symbolic alter ego of the painter.

**One of the essential lessons** in Delacroix's work can be summed up in his acute emphasis on the mission of painting to perform ethical tasks. When Delacroix reaches for historical topics he has in mind his contemporary audience and the moral challenges of his own time. His painting thus portrays a moral lesson in an instructional manner while implying the ethical dimension of human existence throughout history. Delacroix achieves this with a bold, experimental approach to drawing and painting that deliberately breaks with the tradition of

painterly conventions. It is said that the greatest, most interesting violence in his *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) is actually in the realm of representation: the upheaval and flattening of pictorial space.<sup>vii</sup> Art historian Ewa Lajer-Burchardt, in her perspicacious review of the recent exhibition of Eugène Delacroix at the Metropolitan Museum and the Louvre, focused on the artist’s emotional prowess in affecting the viewer:

“He believed that painting possessed a unique capacity to communicate—that it provided a “mysterious bridge” between the soul of the represented figures and that of the spectator. To bring about this intimate subjective connection “The art of the painter is all the nearer to man’s heart because it seems to be more material,” Delacroix wrote in his journal.”<sup>viii</sup>

His specific interest in materiality was furthered by his use of tactility and color to establish a more direct and multisensory, rather than merely visual, connection between his paintings and the viewer.<sup>ix</sup> His insistence on the emotional potential of the image and his cultivation of the “mysterious bridge” between the work and the viewer remains the single most influential feature of his method. It can be said that Delacroix both invoked the materiality of painting -- and transcended it. The contemporary artists assembled here -- Cecily Brown, Elizabeth Peyton, Peter Doig -- engage with different media, at once conceptual and material, playful and critical, and bring unique insights into Delacroix’s art by illuminating and reframing his assumptions about the artwork and its impact on the viewer.

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<sup>i</sup> *Cecily Brown: Rehearsal*, The Drawing Center (October 6 - December 18, 2016), exhibition press release.

<sup>ii</sup> Sébastien Allard, and Côme Fabre, "The Sphinx of Modern Painting," in *Delacroix*, (exh.cat.), The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2018, pp. 191-93.

<sup>iii</sup> Doig’s quote from: [http://www.twopalms.us/news/2017-02-08\\_peter-doig-two-new-etchings](http://www.twopalms.us/news/2017-02-08_peter-doig-two-new-etchings). Poet Derek Walcott has written poems in response to Doig's paintings, a dialogue on the Caribbean’s colonial legacy, politics, and the sheer physical beauty of island life. Several of the poems refer to Doig's theme of a lion in the streets.

<sup>iv</sup> As cited in the press release of the recent exhibition, biggest survey of Peyton’s work in Japan <http://www.haramuseum.or.jp/en/hara/exhibition/281/>

<sup>v</sup> Sébastien Allard, and Côme Fabre, "The Sphinx of Modern Painting," op.cit., p. 50 – 53.

<sup>vi</sup> Selin Thomas, “Kara Walker’s Nightmares Are Our Own,” *The Paris Review*, October 2017. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/10/04/kara-walkers-nightmares/>

<sup>vii</sup> Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” *Art in America*, May 1983, pp. 123-25.

<sup>viii</sup> Ewa Layer Burchardt, “Through the Past Darkly,” *Art Forum*, November 2018.

<https://www.artforum.com/print/201809/ewa-lajer-burchardt-on-the-art-of-eug-232-ne-delacroix-77267>

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.