



# ART REVIEW: From Delacroix, Elegance in the Eye of the Romantic Tempest

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by Charles A. Riley II

“I want a hero: an uncommon want,/When every year and month sends forth a new one.”

These opening lines of Lord Byron’s epic poem “Don Juan” sound the right note to herald Eugene Delacroix, who arises as nothing less than a Byronic hero in the operatic exhibition lavished on him by the [Metropolitan Museum](#) at [The Met Fifth Avenue](#). In an age of irony and shallowness, the exhibition’s brooding dark walls of a dozen rooms laden with 150-plus works are a rare and welcome means of extolling the heroic aspect of an artist who has so clearly earned that designation.

Like Byron, whose poems are the inspiration for several works in this show, Delacroix was an aristocrat who hobnobbed with others of his rank in terms of genius, including close friends George Sand, Frederic Chopin and Franz Liszt. Rumors abounded that he was the illegitimate son of Talleyrand (the resemblance was strong, and the public commissions Delacroix scored fueled gossip). He was chosen by Baron Hausmann to serve for 10 years on the powerful Municipal Council that reshaped the urban design of Paris, and his stupendous mural commissions still dominate the public spaces of palaces and museums.



Eugène Delacroix (French, 1798–1863). “Self-Portrait with Green Vest,” ca. 1837. Oil on canvas, 25 9/16 x 21 7/16 inches. (65 x 54.5 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre). Michel Urtado. Image Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

He cut a cavalier figure, as attested by the splendid *Self-portrait in a Green Vest* that confronts the visitor from the center of the wall in the second gallery. This audacious and magnetic painting is a tour-de-force of technique and the color sense for which Delacroix was justly famous, especially in the superb ribbon of translucent emerald green that flows down the chest from the neck to evoke the green vest. The vest was a part of his “Scottish” attire—in addition to Byron, there are references to Sir Walter Scott in the show.

Delacroix’s wonderful journals present opportunities for admiration on every page, not just in terms of the company he kept (“audience with the emperor” in Tangier) but for the insights they offer any

artist seeking advice or instruction. Several of the original notebook manuscripts are on view in the show and quotations from the journals are the meat of the wall texts.

Among the many pearls of wisdom to be mulled while viewing the paintings is this attribution of unity to nature itself rather than to its artistic representation: “Nature creates unity even in the parts of a whole.” An uneasy balance also unifies the exhibition, in the same way the Neo-classical foundation supports the surging emotional symphonies of Brahms or firm prosody keeps Byron’s poems in rhythmic check.

Despite all the clichés about the messy Romantic tempest in which Delacroix was supposed to have lived and worked, it is vital to understand that for him, as for his circle of Chopin, Liszt, Sand, Baudelaire and Flaubert, elegance was essential. This mandate derives in part from the compositional security that presides over even the most chromatically and kinetically wild works in the show. Elegance is evident not only in the portraits but in the early Salon triumphs such as *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi* and even the massive if occasionally vacuous portraits of lions and tigers. Animal art, for me, rarely slips the collar and leash of cliché unless it roars, as the huge *Lion Hunt* near the end of the show manages to do.

Among the most elegant paintings is the perpetually controversial *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, painted in 1834 and bought from the Salon by Louis-Philippe to be displayed at the Musée Luxembourg and eventually at the Exposition Universelle in 1855. At the posthumous retrospective of 1864, it remained the star of the show, as it is a highlight, too, at the Met.

Too familiar in reproduction, which flattens the details in the rippling silk and satin harem pants or steals the glint from the arm bracelet and ring on the dark skin of the standing figure on the right, the painting has a somnolent charm that culminates in the closed eyes of the nodding woman whose left hand still holds the mouthpiece of her half-empty hookah. Viewers eager to come to terms with Delacroix the colorist can fasten their gaze on the open red doors in the background, limned in a luminous orange that looks ahead to the glow of Gauguin.



Eugène Delacroix (French, 1798–1863). “Women of Algiers in Their Apartment, 1834. Oil on canvas. 70 7/8 × 90 3/16 in. (180 × 229 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Photo: Franck Raux. Image courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Among the Byronic pictures is the genuinely eccentric, even disturbing drama of [\*The Death of Sardanapalus\*](#), a vast (14 by 16 feet) canvas he painted in 1828 that is represented here by a study as well as a smaller, later version shown side-by-side.

The oddities of spatial effect—set on a stage so deeply raked that the figures seem to tumble from the king’s vast bed down toward the viewer in a cascade of Michelangelo bodies and colors—are

unquestionably Modernist (think of the tilting floors in the van Gogh interiors from Aix). Degas, van Gogh, Signac, Matisse, Kandinsky, and Delaunay all used Delacroix's work and writings as the basis for their own theoretical approaches to color.

Of course, Delacroix without color is another matter entirely. The *Faust* series of etchings as well as the drawings are testimony to the fastidious academic training that Delacroix received under Guerin. An incentive to visit the Met earlier than the closing of the big show in January is offered by the opportunity to catch the drawings show (from the Karen B. Cohen collection) that opened back in July and is on view only until November 11, 2018.



Eugène Delacroix, (French, 1798–1863). *Faust*, plate 1: Mephistopheles Aloft, 1826/27. Lithograph on chine collé; first state of seven. Image: 11 15/16 × 9 13/16 inches. (30.4 × 25 cm). Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux Arts de la Ville de Paris. © Petit Palais / Roger-Viollet. Image courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art.

There is a temptation to push Delacroix in the direction of proto-Modern, especially on the basis of the dashes of the Fauve palette that seize the attention in so many of the works. One of the highlights in terms of color at the Met are the immense, large-format flower paintings that he submitted to the Salon of 1849. Admittedly, of all the tired genres—overrun by amateurs and trampled by sheer quantity, adding tier after tier of canvases in the museums across Europe—floral still life might seem the least likely for a breakthrough in painting. But Delacroix felt he was creating “a pure classic” with them, and he neither sold nor gave away any of the ones created in 1848 and 1849. They were in his studio upon his death.



Eugène Delacroix (French, 1798–1863). “Basket of Flowers,” 1848–1849. Oil on canvas. 42 1/4 x 56 inches. (107.3 x 142.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot (1876–1967), 1967 (67.187.60). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The further the artist worked into the series, the more wildly chromatic they became, like the sunflowers of van Gogh. Weak and pallid in reproduction, in the flesh they explode in intense colors, such as the loud, and louder still, reds against bright whites of *A Basket of Flowers Overturned in a Park*. The glowing orange reds are offset by the shadowy, greyer greens of the background, reminiscent of Poussin's landscapes. Aside from playing complementaries against one another (red

vs. green) the dissonances can be volatile, the red and brilliant, undivided white that Delacroix had the guts to place dead center of the painting.

Théophile Gautier called the Delacroix floral still lifes “an orgy of color, a feast for the eyes.” For Rudolf Arnheim, who used Delacroix in part to discuss the psychology of color effects in painting, this play of complementary red and green was the key to what he called “completeness,” bringing us back to the “unity” Delacroix extolled in the Journals. This unity is no mean feat when it comes to the unruly element of color, strongest of tools in the painter’s toolbox but not the easiest to control; “the marriage and adultery of colors” was J.K. Huysman’s little joke about Delacroix’s mixing.



Gallery view of Delacroix at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (September 17, 2018-January 6, 2019). Photos courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

For Van Gogh, writing in 1885, Delacroix was a model for his own aspirations to transcend physicality: “What I find so fine about Delacroix is precisely that he reveals the liveliness of things, and the expression and the movement, that he is utterly beyond the paint.”

The Met is to be congratulated for putting together this substantive and comprehensive show, rich in all the romance, elegance, erudition, innovation, and sublime artistic achievement one might expect of a hero like Delacroix.



Eugène Delacroix, (French, 1798-1863). Young Tiger Playing with Its Mother, 1830. Oil on canvas. 130 x 195 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre) / Franck Raux. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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**BASIC FACTS:** “Delacroix” is on view September 17, 2018 to January 6, 2019 at The Met Fifth Avenue, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10028. [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).

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