



Haig Aivazian on Eugène Delacroix

Eugène Delacroix's dynamic brushwork and dramatic imagery has been in my visual field since childhood, with the artist popping up in school books under the guise of a historical painter. In his iconic works, he often incorporated anachronistic allegorical figures, referencing antiquity to address issues of his time. This is probably why I took Delacroix to be a neoclassicist and a romantic without looking much beyond these classifications. It wasn't until many years later, while doing research on the role of artists in the often very violent "encounters" between the West and the Orient, that I would become reacquainted with Delacroix as a more complicated figure who embodies sticky ambiguities.

I was in Morocco preparing for the (now defunct) Marrakech Biennial in 2016 when I took an interest in the letters, sketches, and aquarelles that Delacroix made while accompanying a French diplomatic mission to Morocco in 1832, just two years after France had invaded Algeria, and three decades after Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt. The trip to North Africa was profoundly influential for the painter. In letters to his friend who worked in the Interior Ministry in Paris, Delacroix claimed that "Rome is no longer in Rome." His encounter with Moroccans was in fact a date with antiquity in vivo, nothing like the stiff carcass endlessly reanimated in European paintings. "Imagine my friend," he wrote, "what it is like to see lying in the sun, strolling in the streets, mending old shoes, consular figures, Catos, Brutus's. . ."

At first glance, Delacroix's sketches and aquarelles seemed to come from an impulse similar to the one that produced the hefty *Description of Egypt* (1809–29), compiled by the 167 "savants" from all fields of knowledge who, as part of Napoleon's expedition, documented the country's flora and fauna, its trades and crafts, political figures, and ancient architectures, while spreading the values of the Enlightenment. In my research, I was trying to determine how different my own impulses as a contemporary artist could be from these encounters, given that I too was looking for inspiration from across disciplines and cultures.

But there was another, weirder lesson to be learned, one that has to do with the complex relationship between theory and practice. Delacroix was fascinated by the nature of perception and the imprint of colors on the cornea. He had begun using complementary colors alongside each other, letting them enhance one another without blending them. His conviction that the mind's eye would do the mixing would only be amplified by the harsh sun of Morocco, which, according to him, presented objects as containing "neither light or dark shades," but rather as a "colored mass."

For its part, the Egyptian sun had played devilish tricks on Napoleon's troops, taunting them with hallucinations of non-existent bodies of water in the distance as they crossed burning deserts. Gaspard Monge, one of the scientists on the journey, came up with a hypothesis for how the optics of mirages work; later, the chemist Michel Chevreul developed a series of scientific observations on contrast and complementarity in colors, and their effect on optical perception. Chevreul's observations were uncannily close to Delacroix's own notes. But the painter was not looking to illustrate these theories; he was instead profoundly invested in getting to them through practice. And rather than seek to bring the reassurance of scientific explanation to the trickery of perception, he chose to bask in the hallucinatory nature of painting, remaining at a distance that was, in philosopher Eric Alliez's words, as "remote from the coarse stability of objects as from the constancy of our intentional schematization." Indeed, Delacroix's watercolors and hurried sketches seemed to be grappling with "volatile motifs that disappear without our ever truly having been able to assure ourselves of their existence."

Delacroix constructed a pictorial space that channeled scientific and ethnographic observation but, unlike Napoleon's army of savants, it was not a space solely predicated on the tidy taxonomies of modernity. When he painted a tiger, it was not merely in a bid to classify the North African fauna, for



EUGÈNE DELACROIX, study for *The Sultan of Morocco and His Entourage*, 1845, graphite, squared in white chalk, 59.7 × 49.7 cm. Courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

example, but rather to observe the magical animism of a creature that was at once figure and ground. There, in the heat of Morocco, among the dizzying patchwork of Oriental fabrics, *zellige* tiles, and woodwork, the painter reflected a world that was as vibrant and disorienting as nature itself, writing that "everything is reflected in nature" and that "all color is but an exchange of reflections." Close to 80 years later, Paul Signac would identify Delacroix's theories on light and the division of colors in painting as the foundations of Impressionism, in *D'Eugène Delacroix au neo-Impressionisme* (1911).

Perhaps it is the Oriental sun or the majestic tiger that I should cite as influences on my practice, or certainly credit them as the non-human drivers of Western art and scientific knowledge. For me, they offer a way of thinking that decenters the rational human and grapples with the intelligence of other life-forms. But the manner in which Delacroix arrived at his observations—despite, and perhaps because of, his uncomfortable association with Orientalism, his often problematic writings and degrading representations of women, his proximity to power and colonization—has posed persistent problems that I have continued to find productive since the series of sculptures I made in Marrakech, titled *Rome is not in Rome* (2016–19). Delacroix is a prism through which to reflect on two essential considerations: the relationship between interdisciplinary research and its formal and aesthetic resolution within a work; and a heightened awareness of the power relations around artistic production, in an industry predicated on the violence of looking.