Bjoern Hartmann
ARTH 284 Spring 2002
Final Paper, 4/18/2002

Delacroix at Home and Abroad:
A Comparative Analysis of Early French Orientalism.

Introduction

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, a growing preoccupation with the perceived exoticism of the Orient, the geographical area equivalent to contemporary notions of Northern Africa and the Near East, emerged in France and other Western countries. While the Oriental *Other* had fascinated Europeans for centuries, a distinctive confluence of political events, aesthetic tastes and scientific developments created an environment that uniquely enabled and encouraged discourse on the Oriental in artistic and intellectual circles. Critical art history has emphasized the fact that such discourse never takes place in a vacuum - instead, it is inextricably bound to dominant societal ideas and practices. In this exposition, the manifestations of these notions, particularly the early French colonialist ideology of the 1830s, will be investigated through the paintings of Eugène Delacroix.

Though not a pioneer of depicting the Orient, Delacroix was among the first artists in the nineteenth century to travel to Northern Africa and paint from personal experience. He was thus in the position of having had first-hand encounters with two different cultures – French and Moroccan. But as much as this direct knowledge led to an arguably more realistic depiction of contemporary life in the Maghreb compared to his previous artistic flights of fancy, a critical comparison between two paintings linked to Delacroix' visit to Morocco and two paintings of similar subject matter depicting domestic scenes will reveal that Delacroix' images are in fact not objective depictions but instead shaped narratives informed and controlled by Western preconceptions and prejudices. The first pair to be examined consists of a *Self Portrait* from

1837 and *Arab Chieftain Reclining on a Carpet* (1832), one of the numerous watercolor portraits of Arab males executed during the artist's voyage to Morocco. In the second image pair, two urban scenes of crowd agitation, namely the well known *The 28th of July: Liberty Leading the People* (1830) and *The Fanatics of Tangier* (1838) will be contrasted.

From Orient to Orientalism

Before a visual analysis between the four chosen works will reveal striking discrepancies in the representational choices made in spite of similar subject matters, it is beneficial to develop a theoretical framework for interpreting these differences. To this end, a brief historical survey of Western Europe's relationship with its immediate neighbor will be illuminating. Gérard-Georges Lemaire[1] traces the Western construction of the Orient as its antipodal Other to religious roots. Before the advent of the secular state, questions of faith were invariably intertwined with questions of power. Thus the rise and quick expansion of Islam in the seventh century A.D. was seen as a threat not only to the postulated monotheism, but also to the personal power interests of Christian rulers in Europe. The Holy Crusades carried out in the name of the Christian church during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries are a horrific testament to the brutality with which the attempts to quell this perceived threat were made. The further history is one of reciprocal violence. After the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 and the subsequent westward forays of Turkish forces into Europe, Christian dogma firmly established the Ottoman empire as its diametrically opposed arch-nemesis.

Accordingly, the sudden intensification of European fixation on the Orient during Delacroix' time can be seen as a result of bilateral political and military ambitions. In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte launched an ill-fated invasion of Egypt. Even though the expedition

[1] Gérard-Georges Lemaire, The Orient in Western Art (Cologne: Könemann, 2001), 12, 20.

ultimately failed, it had two important ramifications for posterity. First, it staked European colonialist claims to the Levant which were to be pursued with violent as well as diplomatic means[2] on a much grander scale in the following decades. Secondly, as Robert Irwin points out,[3] by way of the Napoleonic machinery of propaganda, a large part of the French population was exposed to depictions and descriptions of the Orient, for example through the aggrandizing battle scenes of Jean Antoine Gros (*The Battle of Aboukir*, 1806) and Anne-Louis Girodet (*The Revolt at Cairo*, 1810). Additionally, the Greek War of Independence, started as an uprising of citizens to divest themselves from the rule of Ottoman Turks, anchored the continuing contraposition of Western and Eastern ideologies in European minds. There was widespread European support for the Greek cause, motivated by ancient Greece's symbolic function as the cradle of Western art and civilization. Delacroix counted himself as a *philhellenist* and was following the conflict closely, as his large oil paintings *The Massacres on Chios* (1824) and *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi* (1826) show. Finally, the popularization of scientific inquiry associated with the Industrial Revolution led, among other things, to an expansion of activities in archaeology. Frederick N. Bohrer[4] demonstrates how discoveries of Assyrian artifacts inspired artists to fantastic depictions of ancient Eastern empires such as Delacroix' *Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827, and John Martin's *Fall of Nineveh*, 1830.

It has been argued above that Europe's relationship to the Orient has been historically defined primarily in terms of authority and power. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism,*[5] asserts that Western representations of the Orient in literature and the arts were not

---

[2] One such diplomatic mission brought Delacroix to Morocco as part of the Comte de Mornay's delegation to negotiate a treaty with the Sultan of Morocco. See Caroline Bugler, "Innocents Abroad: Nineteenth-Century Artists and Travellers in the Near East and North Africa," in The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse, ed. MaryAnne Stevens (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1984), 27.
[3] Robert Irwin, "The Orient and the West from Bonaparte to T. E. Lawrence," in The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse, ed. MaryAnne Stevens (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1984), 24.
[4] Frederick N. Bohrer, "Inventing Assyria: Exoticism and Reception in Nineteenth-Century England and France," Art Bulletin 80, no. 2 (1998): 336.
[5] Edward Said, Orientalism (London: Pantheon Books, 1978), 3, 5.

just *indicative of*, but also *instrumental in* establishing and perpetuating an ideology of Western domination over the Oriental Other. As such, Orientalist works of art are more expressive as reflections of European power ambitions rather than authentic depictions of the Orient.[6] Said maintains that all representation must necessarily differ from objective reproduction, and that any particular representation is guided by hegemonial ideologies.[7] It is this claim that will be investigated by means of a visual analysis in the following paragraphs.

Comparison of Portraits

A first probe into the influence of a Western doctrine of dominance over painterly representation will be made by comparing Delacroix' portraits of familiar versus foreign sitters, specifically the *Self Portrait* from 1837, and *Arab Chieftain Reclining on a Carpet,* from 1832. The *Self Portrait*, executed in oil on canvas, shows the artist in a formally conservative composition – the artist's face is directly confronting the viewer, while his upper body, cropped just below the chest, is slightly tilted. The particularity and sophistication of the depicted vesture – a finely contoured black jacket with a presumably satin-covered collar, combined with some form of elegant dark neckwear – firmly establishes the portrait's contemporaneity, an issue of lesser significance for self-portraits, and more importantly identifies the sitter's elevated class status (or aspiration thereof). However, the focus of the image surely lies on the finely sculpted face, where dramatic directed illumination highlights the left side of the artist's face, specifically his left eye socket. The lack of identifiable props in the background of the composition further emphasizes the artist's face as the locus of primary communication in the image.

Delacroix' probing view combined with the overly upright posture suggest a self-assured individual of strong character with an active, complex mind. Furthermore, the artist's intense

[6] Said, Orientalism, 6, 21.
[7] Said, Orientalism, 20-21.

analytical gaze captures not only his own reflection at the time of the painting, it also catches the spectator and fixes him in front of the canvas in a stunning reversal of roles – the beholder turns into the beheld and vice versa. Through this mechanism, Delacroix sets up an interesting dichotomy: on the one hand the artist depicted and the spectator are clearly separated by their mutual objectification of each other through their respective gazes; simultaneously though, the correspondence of their actions establishes an identification of one with the other. Each acknowledges the other's presence as an individual while sharing a combined occupation of looking at the counterpart.

In contrast, Delacroix altered his representational mode significantly in the *Arab Chieftain* in terms of compositional form, focus, and function of the gaze. That these differences are not just incidental by this author's choice of a convenient counterexample is attested by similar studies such as *Caid Reclining on a Sofa*, the *Arabs of Oran*, or *A Moroccan of the Emperor's Guard,* all dated 1832/33. While the much looser technique of pencil drawing over watercolor mainly speaks of the work's nature as a sketch, other aspects suggest Delacroix assumed a patronizing position of superiority vis-à-vis his subject.

A chieftain, a man of significant authority in his society, is depicted in a meditative state, lying on colorfully patterend carpets covering the floor. Even though his face is the most carefully developed element of the composition, the small area and peripheral location assigned to it in the upper left corner of the drawing redirect the viewer's attention away to more ornamental and decorative elements, such as the intricate bends and folds in the white fabric of the sitter's robes and headdress, and the vivid stripes and stipples of the carpet design. In this way, the chieftain's individuality is de-emphasized and in turn his appearance is fused with other ornamental signifiers of exoticism to function more symbolically as a generic representation of a certain type of person, the quintessential Arab male.

The leisurely pose taken together with the vacant gaze into an uncertain distance under heavy eyelids also suggests a more passively natured personality. MaryAnne Stevens has identified this recurring trait assignment in Orientalist art as a Christian condemnation of the supposed passivism and indolence of Muslim societies.[8] Ascribing to Arabs the "vice of idleness" also served as a forceful affirmation of the "irredeemable [difference]" between the industrious and industrialized Western spectator and the "culturally inferior" Muslim, according to Linda Nochlin.[9] Moreover, the Arab's looking away into the distance ascertains his acceptance of and subjugation to the objectifying gaze of the European viewer. The compositional structure is a thinly veiled evocation of the traditional mode of representation of female nude in Western art who offers herself to be owned and consumed by the beholder.[10] Shown here, then, is a personification of an inferior Orient that lets itself be dominated without any sign of resistance. The following discussion of two more ambitious paintings will show that these Orientalizing tendencies of inferred Western superiority were present in Delacroix' other works as well.

Comparison of Crowd Scenes

Much has been written about *Liberty Leading the People*, finished in 1831, as it surely is "one of Europe's most familiar images."[11] No novel contributions to its analysis will be presented here, but a recollection of some of its more salient features will help to sensitize the viewer to the conspicuous absences[12] in Delacroix' handling of a crowd scene of a different kind, *The Fanatics of Tangier*, from 1838. With his equivocal depiction of the improbably placed

[8] MaryAnne Stevens, "Western Art and its Encounter with the Islamic World, 1978-1914," in The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse, ed. MaryAnne Stevens (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1984), 15-23.
[9] Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient." Art in America (May 1983): 123, 127.
[10] See John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: Penguin, 1972) for a discussion of the female nude in Western art.
[11] Marsha Pointon, "Liberty at the Barricades," in Naked Authority (Cambridge: 1990), 59.
[12] The characterization of an image by its absences was employed effectively by Nochlin throughout her article "The Imaginary Orient."

semi-nude flag bearer in *Liberty Leading the People*, who is neither entirely allegorical nor completely real, Delacroix imbues a contemporary event with the mythical transcendence of a history painting. Even though the gruesome reality of the actual revolt is acknowledged in the gory details of the expired males strewn in humiliating positions in the foreground, the image is ultimately an idealistic one, showing a determined crowd acting in unity to realize a democratic goal. The general projection of all lines and movements along a steep diagonal rising upwards and to the right reinforces this interpretation.[13]

Referring back to his travels to Morocco five years earlier, Delacroix finished another formidable crowd scene, of quite different effect, in *The Fanatics of Tangier*. Again, a mob of agitated people is dashing through the streets, however the reason for their excitement is rather antithetical to the ideological surge displayed in *Liberty Leading the People*. The participants in this crowd are religious dervishes, whose rituals include a progressive excitement culminating in a state of group frenzy. While Delacroix might have been fascinated by this scene,[14] he is certainly not sympathetic. The contorted body shapes and ferocious facial expressions of the five primary actors at the front of the crowd belie their humanity, instead rendering them bestial and barbarous.

Furthermore, carefully placed symbols underscore the depreciative opinion Delacroix had for these strange religious practices so different from his own. The small child seeking safety from the approaching mob is most easily read as a personification of innocence threatened by heretic, violent Arabic lunatics. The recurring image of the waving flag also warrants some further attention. Where in *Liberty Leading the People*, the flag was a unifying manifestation of civic ideals carried by Liberty herself, the green banner here is held by an *Emhaden*, a religious

---

[13] The facts that Delacroix himself was not actually present at the time of the revolt, and the minor achievement of the uprising compared to the previous revolution of 1789 are but mere footnotes to the grand overall ambition and pathos of this image.

[14] His biographer reports that Delacroix actually witnessed a similar scene of storming dervishes in Morocco. See Timothy Wilson-Smith, Delacroix: A Life, (London: Constable, 1992), 98.

leader, who also restrains the dervishes through chains or ropes, according to John Drummond-Hay,[15] a contemporary to Delacroix. Thus a symbol of liberty is transformed into a symbol of enslavement. This enslavement is meant to be perceived as quite literal, rather than metaphorical, as no allegorical figures exist to elevate the painting onto a higher plane of morality.

Finally, the absence of any kind of space for a Western presence in the scene raises questions about the presumed authenticity of representation. Linda Nochlin interprets such the detached, seemingly objective depiction of exotic melee, *sans* the presence of the Western tourist who was after all was there to witness the event, as yet another assertion of Western supremacy: "Our gaze is meant to include both the spectacle and the spectators as objects of picturesque delectation."[16] In conclusion then, Delacroix' depiction of the West in *Liberty Leading the People* becomes a metaphysical vision of enlightenment and civil activism, whereas *The Fanatics of Tangier* delineates a darker conception of the East as characterized by religious irrationalism.

Deconstructing Orientalism

The reader has to be cautioned that what has been developed so far is an overly simplistic view of the subject matter, crafted specifically to expose certain colonialist subtexts present in Delacroix' works depicting the Orient. That reality is somewhat more ambiguous is exemplified by the fact that the artist repeatedly heralded the countless classical qualities he found in Arab males, but not in his countrymen.[17] And while the present discussion has been critical, it has not yet contributed any proactive positions to counter the further perpetuation of the described ideologies, which the progressive activist platform embraced by the author demands. A

[15] As quoted in Wilson-Smith, Delacroix, 98.
[16] Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," 119.
[17] Roger Benjamin, ed., Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 56.

hopefully illuminating argument, adapted from previous, tangentially related work, addresses the question of how to overcome such subconscious propagation of racial and religious stereotypes.[18] It shall be presented here briefly.

To characterize human interaction, the philosopher Martin Buber introduces the primary words *I/Thou* and *I/It*. In an *I/It* association the individual sees herself as different from the other, which is merely *experienced*. Within such an *I/It* association, "nothing in the situation is changed."[19] In contrast, an *I/Thou* connection represents a real relationship, where subjects interact on an equal level. Effective communication leading towards mutual understanding is only possible in the latter connections. Art historian and critic John Berger uses an analogous dyad of concepts when differentiating between a *nude* subject, which is objectified by a spectator distancing himself from what he gazes upon; and a *naked* subject, to which the viewer relates by identifying their mutual similarities.[20]

In light of Buber's and Berger's theories, Edward Said's paradigm of Orientalism becomes but one instantiation of the universal struggle of inclusion versus exclusion, identification versus objectification. By treating the Other as *nude* - or by using *I/It* associations to represent it - a discourse of domination is established by the Orientalist painter. If instead the artist uses the awareness of the mutual humanity between him and his subject to establish a *naked*, or *I/Thou* relationship of equality, the resulting work will not be marred by destructive undertones of domination and repression.

[18] Bjoern Hartmann, "Evaluating religious-based Community Development Projects," Final Examination, Urban Studies 405, Professor Andrew Lamas, University of Pennsylvania, 2001. Available upon request.
[19] Martin Buber. I and Thou, p.44-45.
[20] John Berger, Ways of Seeing.

Apprendix

Works Cited:

Berger, John. Ways of Seeing. London: Penguin, 1972.

Benjamin, Roger, ed. Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee. London: Thames and Hudson, 1998.

Bohrer, Frederick N. “Inventing Assyria: Exoticism and Reception in Nineteenth-Century England and France.” Art Bulletin 80, no. 2 (1998): 336-354.

Buber, Martin. “I and Thou.” The Writings of Martin Buber. Ed. Will Herberg, 43-62. Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961.

Bugler, Caroline. “Innocents Abroad: Nineteenth-Century Artists and Travellers in the Near East and North Africa.” In The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse, ed. MaryAnne Stevens, 27-31. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1984.

Hartmann, Björn. “Evaluating religious-based Community Development Projects.” Final Examination, Urban Studies 405, Professor Andrew Lamas, University of Pennsylvania, 2001.

Irwin, Robert. “The Orient and the West from Bonaparte to T. E. Lawrence.” In The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse, ed. MaryAnne Stevens, 24-26. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1984.

Lemaire, Gérard-Georges. The Orient in Western Art. Cologne: Könemann, 2001.

Nochlin, Linda. “The Imaginary Orient.” Art in America (1983): 118-131, 187, 189 & 191.

Pointon, Marsha. “Liberty at the Barricades.” In Naked Authority. Cambridge, 1990.

Said, Edward. Orientalism. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Stevens, MaryAnne. “Western Art and its Encounter with the Islamic World, 1978-1914.” In The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse, ed. MaryAnne Stevens, 15-23. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1984.

Wilson-Smith, Timothy. Delacroix: A Life. London: Constable, 1992.

Principal Works of Art Cited:

Delacroix, Ferdinand Victor Eugène. Self Portrait, oil on canvas, 1837. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Delacroix, Ferdinand Victor Eugène. Arab Chieftain Reclining on a Carpet, watercolor, red chalk and lead pencil drawing, 1832. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Delacroix, Ferdinand Victor Eugène. The 28th of July: Liberty Leading the People, oil on canvas, 1830/31. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Delacroix, Ferdinand Victor Eugène. The Fanatics of Tangier, oil on canvas, 1838. The Minneapolis Institute of the Arts.

Supporting Works of Art Cited:

Delacroix, Ferdinand Victor Eugène. The Massacres on Chios, oil on canvas, 1824. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Delacroix, Ferdinand Victor Eugène. Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi, oil on canvas, 1826. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux.

Delacroix, Ferdinand Victor Eugène. The Death of Sardanapalus, oil on canvas, 1844. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Delacroix, Ferdinand Victor Eugène. Caid Reclining on a Sofa, watercolor and pencil, c. 1832. Private Collection.

Delacroix, Ferdinand Victor Eugène. Arabs of Oran, etching on cream vergé paper, c. 1833. The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sidney.

Delacroix, Ferdinand Victor Eugène. A Moroccan of the Emperor's Guard, oil on canvas, 1832. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux.

Girodet-Trioson, Anne-Louis. The Revolt at Cairo, oil on canvas, 1810. Musée National du Château, Versailles.

Gros, Baron Antoine-Jean. The Battle of Aboukir, oil on canvas, 1810. Musée National du Château, Versailles.