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“Romantic Painter”

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On Becoming a Romantic Painter

The French artist Eugene Delacroix was 29 years old when he completed “The Death of Sardanapalus”, a grand painting that portrays the apocryphal last hours of an Assyrian king. Sardanapalus, whose palace is about to fall to rebel forces, orders his concubines, slaves, and horses slaughtered before burning down his palace and killing himself. The king’s decision to destroy himself and his palace is anti-heroic, the last withholding act of a greedy ruler. Sardanapalus is guilty of what the poet Lord Byron — in an 1821 play about the ruined king — calls the “despotism of vice”, of sloth and self-indulgence, “the weakness and wickedness of luxury.”

In Delacroix’s scene, a blood-red bed serves as a stage for unfolding chaos. Sardanapalus’s favorite concubine, Myrrha, lies dead, draped across the bed at the king’s feet. Beneath her, a man wrestles with an elaborately ornamented white horse. Another woman covers her face to avoid the sight of a man stabbing himself in the chest, while a cupbearer stands at Sardanapalus’s bedside. To the right of the king, a woman hangs herself from ghostly rafters, a man stabs another nude concubine, and piles of luxurious Eastern-inflected trinkets lie broken amid vast draped sheets. In the recesses of the painting, smoke obscures vague Classical architecture. The scene is in disarray except for Sardanapalus himself, who props himself up on one arm and sits impassively observing, his legs splayed and his face relaxed. He does not look like a man who is about to die. He looks more like a man in a moment of dreamy, post-coital reflection.

Delacroix presented “The Death of Sardanapalus” to the French salon in 1828, where it was rejected by critics and lost Delacroix, already a notable young painter, the respect of his peers. A
contemporary was said to have claimed that he wanted to cut off Delacroix’s hands to stop him from painting any more grotesqueries, while a critic called the piece a prime example of a “fanaticism of ugliness.” The Salon found the subject matter indulgently brutal and disliked Delacroix’s energetic technique, which broke with the more subdued neoclassical style popular at the time. The French state declined to purchase the work. It took Delacroix another 20 years to sell “The Death of Sardanapalus” and an additional century before it gained acceptance. But despite its unpopular debut, the painting was one of his personal favorites — when a collector finally bought it in the 1840s, Delacroix painted a small replica to keep with him in his studio. It remained with him until his death in 1863. The smaller copy is now in the collection of The Philadelphia Museum of Art, while the original “Sardanapalus”, 12 ft tall and 16 ft wide, is displayed in the hall of major French paintings in the Louvre, alongside massive subject pictures like Jaques-Louis David’s “The Coronation of Napoleon”, Theodore Gericault’s “Raft of the Medusa”, and other Delacroix masterworks, “The Massacre at Chios” and “Lady Liberty Leading the People.”

The painting’s legacy is a prime example of Orientalism, a Western fiction of near-Eastern lasciviousness. The idiom of “the Orient” emerged in French painting at the turn of the 19th century, following Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt. In the painting, the baubles piled on the pyre were actually Egyptian artifacts, commonly available in France at the time. Delacroix was a man of his time; his most significant later work came from travels to Morocco, where he idealized the locals. Post-colonial critics writing about “The Sardanapalus” see the violence of the painting as a response to the collision of North African and European cultures, an intimate and brutal allegory of colonialism. Contemporary artists have dealt with the painting as well, sometimes with a feminist lens; in 1978, the photographer Jeff Wall made a piece called “Destroyed Room”
that directly alluded to “The Sardanapalus” and showed a ransacked woman’s bedroom. In Wall’s photo, the scene is offset by an undisturbed ceramic figurine of a dancer.

In early 2022, I traveled to France specifically to see “The Death of Sardanapalus.” I’d been studying the painting for a year in photographs and planned to spend ten days with the real thing, making sketches. But when I arrived I learned that the piece was temporarily not on view — it had been removed briefly, with no online notice — because it was being studied for restoration. It was the only work missing from the entire hall of major French paintings and it was only off display for the weeks I was there. If I’d planned my trip a week earlier or a week later (or at any time during the preceding century) I would have been able to see it displayed. The picture’s absence felt pointed. In the months leading up to my visit to France, I’d attempted to understand the painting from every direction. I’d been pursuing it and it had evaded me. I’d traveled across an ocean to see it in person, only to have it evade me again.

I’d come to the Louvre because I was learning to make paintings, and to be a painter. I’d spent a lot of time looking at painting, trying to understand its history as a path to the contemporary. That seemed like the correct and academic route. But the more I learned, the more painting alluded me. I would think I’d seen a painting only to find out that I’d missed important cues. So many gestures, colors, and brushstrokes in contemporary painting directed back towards painting itself, an infinite regress. How did the shape of a torso or the position of a woman’s hand connect a contemporary painting with works that came five centuries earlier? Finding out seemed to me a sacred errand because it meant following a line that leads back to the earliest signs of human consciousness, to scratches on the ceiling of a cave.
It wasn’t until I got to the Louvre and found a hole where “The Sardanapalus” should be that it occurred to me I might be dealing with something a bit more mysterious than the history of images. I might be dealing with ghosts.

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My first exposure to Eugene Delacroix was probably when I was 16 in a high school textbook called “Living With Art” (I remember a teacher joking that it sounded like a disease, like “Living With Cancer”), but my second exposure is the one that stayed with me. I was in the second year of a masters program and making frequent visits to the European paintings wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. During one visit, on impulse, I sketched from a 1848 Delacroix painting, “Basket of Flowers.”

“Basket of Flowers” is a highly constructed and brightly colored still life of a variety of garden flowers spilling out of a woven brown vessel. The composition of the painting is weird; an asymmetrical green vine floats in the sky above the basket, while a weak blue light washes out clumps of trees in the background. The whole thing looks a little off. In the Met, I was initially drawn to that unplaceable strangeness and then to the placard beside the painting, which explained that Delacroix painted it quickly when he’d retreated to his country house to avoid the Revolution of 1848. I was compelled by the idea of a painter who dodged the confusion of political unrest to paint imaginary flowers — I identified with the impulse. I decided to read Delacroix’s diaries, one of the more comprehensive records of a life of a painter and of the life of the Paris salons in the mid-19th century.
Eugene Delacroix was born in 1798 to a wealthy political family of Napoleon supporters and was orphaned at 16. He trained in the neoclassical style, but didn’t hit his stride until meeting the painter Theodore Gericault, whose *Raft of the Medusa* is perhaps the first important work of French Romantic painting. Romanticism, as much a literary movement as an artistic one, offered a different model for placing oneself in relation to nature; it emphasized feeling, direct experience, and individual subjectivity. It pictured civilization as a thin veneer that covered our basic brutality. As a young and classically schooled artist, Delacroix had to search outside of France for a new relationship to form and color and he turned especially to British landscape painters such as J.M.W. Turner, painters caught up in an emotive way of looking at the world. In Delacroix’s early works, he broke with the classics, choosing subject matter like Dante and Don Quixote.

Delacroix wanted to paint with feeling and to communicate like a writer: “Why am I not a poet?,” he wrote in his diary in the spring of 1824. “But at least, let me feel as strongly as possible in all my pictures the emotion that I want to pass on to others! I wish I could identify my soul with that of another person.” He was fixated on prestige: “Glory is no empty word for me, the sound of praise gives me real happiness.” He painted pictures because he wanted them to be seen. When he debuted his “The Massacre at Chios” at the Salon, the painting won attention for its content, an unsparing allegory of contemporary political conflicts, and for its embrace of a painterly style, though the style always had its detractors. A critic of the day called it “a massacre of painting.” Nevertheless, the picture launched Delacroix’s career.
In the years leading up to “The Sardanapalus,” Delacroix’s record of his own life alternates between notes about studio visits with peers, concerns about money, ideas about painting and praise of old masters, self-castigation (“I must not eat much in the evening, and I must work alone… moreover, I must try to live austerely, as Plato did”), complaints of loneliness, and bouts of defensiveness. On one occasion, Delacroix writes about a studio visit that went poorly.

“Imagine how they treated my poor creation, which they saw in the most confused state, when only I could tell how it was going to turn out,” writes Delacroix. “… I have to fight against poverty and my natural laziness, I have to feel enthusiastic about my work in order to earn my living, and brutes like these intrude even into my lair, nip my inspiration in the bud and measure me up with their glasses — these people who would not have cared to be Rubens!” His knowledge of his own talent was bound up with regular insecurities; his social life checked by surges of arrogance and misanthropy.

Delacroix did not mind these inconsistencies. He believed in the quest for self-knowledge; that the true subject of art is the artist himself and that one should keep diaries, paint self portraits, and otherwise make a study of feeling. He was in the habit of comparing himself to great (or notorious) dead men: Plato, Titian, Gericault, Dante, his own father. In 1821, he painted a self-portrait of himself as Hamlet, suggesting that he saw himself as more morally suspect than heroic. It is possible that “The Sardanapalus” was something of a self-portrait as well. In the painting, Sardanapalus is pictured as an impartial observer of chaos. Like Delacroix, the king is surrounded by great feeling, but holds himself at a distance.

Part of my attraction to Delacroix is the searching quality that runs throughout his work, the mix of real talent with delusions of grandeur and failures of confidence. Delacroix attempted to know
himself, but in moments of confusion, he relied on allegory. Like Delacroix, I too am more interested in the shadows on the wall of the cave than whatever exists in the light of day.

Delacroix was not a humanist. He was conservative, convinced man was brutal and fixated on myth. These values are Romantic but also the building blocks of nationalism, and the reason why Romantic nationalism is historically entangled with Fascism. Romantic myths unify confused nations. In addition, the Romantic fixation on subjective experience obscures material differences that have real political consequences. We are not politically sorted based on our internal experience, or on shared feeling. We are sorted based on our bodies — White, Black, Jewish, young, old, male, female.

Delacroix was a vast searching spirit, a man working in the shadow of the classics and seeking glory in an age where glory still seemed reasonable. But he was also a 29 year old French man trying to earn a living and date women. He got his Greek history wrong. He frequently had stomachaches.

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My question here, in making paintings and showing them, is the same old question: What am I? When I make a painting, am I the same as whoever sketched bison on the ceiling of a prehistoric French cave? Am I Hamlet, Titian, Gericault, Dante, Don Quixote? Am I Eugene Delacroix? I want to be Eugene Delacroix. Only, I don’t want to be the Eugene that experienced petty rejection and physical problems. I want to be the version that found glory.

So far, I have not found glory, but glory is scarce these days. It is mostly reserved for professional athletes. Being a contemporary painter is certainly not glorified. It’s silly. It’s Paul
McCarthy wearing a clown nose, wandering around a studio set with a comically large
paintbrush, muttering about mark making. Contemporary paintings can sometimes be sold for
ridiculous amounts of money, but this fact elevates rather than obscures the silliness. Delacroix
painted in an age when history felt more coherent, and perhaps I aspire to be him because I’m
jealous of that. But, then again, maybe it wouldn’t have made a difference. History — writ large
— never quite prioritized people with bodies like mine. The feminist writer Shulamith Firestone
wrote that women interested in painting now are like “flies gathering on a corpse.” She meant it
pejoratively, but I welcome the abjection. I aspire to painting not because I believe in it, but out
of love. As the writer Celine Cixous put it, we “advance error by error, with erring steps, by the
force of error. It’s suffering, but it’s joy.” The job is to look for “what escapes the contour, the
secret movement, the breaking, the torment, the unexpected.”

A recent exhibition of Delacroix’s work at England’s National Gallery argued that Delacroix was
the first modern painter. He was also obsessed by “the breaking…the unexpected” in art. He
cared about energy rather than perfection; he wanted his work to feel fresh, often at the expense
of looking incorrect. The drawings he made to prepare for painting “The Sardanapalus” feel like
something that could have been made 100 years after his death. They are caught up in motion.
They allow room for error. This energetic quality — along with his diaries — is why I decided to
spend the past couple years with Delacroix.

There is also a personal aspect that bears explaining.

Delacroix was 29 when he painted “The Sardanapalus.” When I was 29, I was emerging from my
own protracted Romantic crisis. It was the worst year of my life. A few things had happened at
once. The first was that I’d moved from New York City to the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York to accept a job as the editor of a small logging and forestry trade magazine. The Adirondack mountains are six million acres of forests and lakes, much of which is Adirondack Park, a pastiche of public “forever wild” forests and private lands. I knew nothing about forestry and little about rural America. I accepted the job because I wanted to get out of town. It was 2017 and Trump had just been elected. I told my city friends — who wondered why I wanted to move to the woods to work with mostly Trump supporters in an extractive industry — that I was a leftist following select reactionary libertarian impulses, but the truth was that I felt nihilistic. The left was annoying and the right was deluded and scary. I wanted to look at the trees and do my little job and to not think about any of it.

I was also in love. A few weeks after I moved to the woods, Adam, an artist friend who I hadn’t seen in years, came to visit me and decided to stay. That summer together in the woods we spent afternoons playing with my big black dog, swimming in the creek, and identifying and drawing different plants and trees around the off-the-grid cabin where we camped. I felt the way that all people who are in love for the first time do, which is that I was experiencing something that no one before me had ever experienced and no one after me probably would ever experience to the same degree. For a minute, I felt like I’d cracked the code. Other people could engage in the big issues; I would live in the provinces, do honest work, and try to make a home. I would be happy.

The idyll didn’t last. In October of that year, I almost died when the small cabin caught on fire while I was sleeping. I’d removed a wet log from the stove the night before, not realizing it had an ember in it. The next morning, it caught the wind, and the porch of the cabin lit up, blocking my only exit. I escaped the fire with some second-degree burns, but my dog died in the blaze.
Adam was out of town, and when he made it to the hospital that afternoon, he proposed. We tried to pick up the pieces: We moved into a new cabin and adopted a puppy. Adam got a local job and I kept traveling for work, driving many icy miles through the north woods. We did what we could, but I wasn’t myself. Many people told me that I’d probably experienced trauma in the fire but I wasn’t so sure. If I allowed that trauma existed, trauma was all around me. Everyone I met working for the logging magazine had lost a brother or a father or a digit to a chainsaw accident or falling tree. Not to mention other, murkier traumas: We lived on forestland that had been ravaged by a bad logging job. Every time a strong wind came through, more trees would blow down, their roots unable to cling to the disturbed soil.

I’d always trusted nature. In Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, the hero is obsessed by “solitary places, vast views” and feeling “himself for ever and ever and ever alone.” An old man cautions Orlando that the worship of nature is a waste, because nature is a terrible god. I worshiped the same god as Orlando — when I first moved to the woods, I imagined that the pleasure the woods and the creek and the air brought me, the sense of belonging they lent me, were natural. And so I also imagined my body, happy there, as natural. A world-order emerged, a seamless mechanic that enclosed the working landscape, the promise of a family, sex, love, creativity, death, regrowth, holiday decorations, a complete life I imagined in seasons.

But I was growing wary of the forest; the trees and sky felt desaturated and threatening. I’d go on hikes and feel rage about how brown and grey everything was. I also began to have desires that I couldn’t parse. As I became more depressed and detached from the world around me, I fixated on the idea of having a baby. I figured the impulse had arisen from a place beyond reason. Adam didn’t want babies, for personal and social reasons. He liked Donna Harraway’s
climate-change-influenced idea that it is more ethical to “make kin, not babies.” I understood this logically, but I felt desperate. I considered that maybe all wannabe-pregnant women during the climate crisis feel like perpetrators of banal evils, willing to sacrifice the good of our fellow humans and animals for the idiot joy of our tiny little lives. As Adam and I became less able to talk about the future, we became less able to talk about anything. Another summer passed that hardly resembled the first, and in the fall we broke up.

I was devastated, and I knew what my problem was. I had romantic problems, but I really had Romantic problems. I’d worshiped nature, trusted it to deliver me children and love and happiness, and living in the devastation of a poorly logged forest located somewhere upstate of the economic center of our declining country, I’d had a bad break with nature. I felt unable to work, to live where I lived, to get married, to ever have a family. I had to start over with a different premise. I decided to go back to school, to try something different. Maybe I wanted to make paintings because it seemed like a field full of people like me — foolish people who aspired to a grand and creative relationship with nature. I thought that maybe if I couldn’t overcome these ruinous instincts in myself, I could at least deal with them directly. I was also unhappy and I wanted to be someone else, to have someone else’s problems.

That is around the time I found Eugene Delacroix.

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My exhibition, “Romantic Painter”, consists of several parts: First, a large painting, made to-scale with the original “Death of Sardanapalus.” Second, a series of walnut ink drawings, each abstracted from an aspect of Delacroix’s painting. Third, a video appropriated from a 1980 BBC
documentary/drama of Delacroix’s life, called “The Restless Eye.” The audio is excerpted from
the original educational film and the video (20 minutes of me dressed up, role playing as
Delacroix) is my own. To make this body of work, I chased painting — a specific painting, one
of the biggest and grandest I could find — to the extent of my abilities.

What I want you to know is this:

I am Eugene Delacroix. I am on a Romantic quest to make the last painting, the painting that will
solve painting and will end history. I am Sardanapalus. I am heartbroken. I am burning down my
palace. I am a 32-year old woman living in Upstate New York. A fire happened and I survived it.
History isn’t over. I am failing.

When I first saw the gap on the Louvre wall where “The Sardanapalus” should have been, I felt
weirdly unsurprised. I could have decided to devote myself to any other Romantic painting in the
Louvre and those would be there to see. But I’d just happened to pick the only Romantic painting
that was missing. It felt like a cosmic wink. I took that afternoon and did what I could do —
emailed every curator and department of the Museum I could to ask for access to the painting,
contacted people I knew back in the States to see if anyone could intervene for me — but I didn’t
have much hope. I decided I’d make the best of it and spend the week doing other
Delacroix-related activities. I went to his studio, which is now a museum. I dressed up in a
Delacroix costume and filmed myself eating pastries. I went to go see Rubens paintings at the
Louvre, because Rubens was Delacroix’s major influence. I visited Delacroix’s murals in
Saint-Suplice chapel. I got drunk at a bar with a stranger and complained about the situation
using broken French from Google Translate. A week passed and I didn’t hear from any official
sources about seeing the painting. I gave up.
On my second to last day in town, I decided I’d go to Delacroix’s grave in Pere Lachaise cemetery. The neighborhood around Pere Lachaise is full of flower shops. I bought a light yellow rose to put on Delacroix’s grave. It was sentimental, but I’d spent so much time with him by that point, I wanted to give something back. I’d read a thousand pages of his thoughts, been to his house, dressed like him, painted his paintings, wandered around his city. He felt like an insightful, if somewhat imperious, friend. I lingered for awhile at his grave until I got too cold and decided to go get something to eat. As I was walking out of the cemetery, I got an email: The Delacroix curator at the Louvre had responded. I could see the painting the next day, if I could come at a certain time, and only for “a brief moment.” It was a stroke of luck — but it felt like a supernatural intervention.

In person, “The Death of Sardanapalus” underwhelmed me. It is very large, but not so large in the context of the Louvre. Some of the brighter tones of the picture are lost under coats of yellow varnish. The subject, once arresting and graphic, appears overwrought. Delacroix has wanted the painting to look fresh and gestural, but nothing in the gesture or color can exceed the painting’s contemporary presence as an artifact in a hall of artifacts. The drama has turned into melodrama; a theatrically large painting with an unsubtle subject.

When I finally saw it, the painting was propped up behind temporary walls, surrounded by a small team of experts were photographing it with a fancy camera that produced X-Ray images. A curator explained that because of all the varnish, the painting need to be restored. It had been treated poorly over the course of its life; even after it was purchased, Delacroix once visited it in its new home only to find the painting literally falling apart at the seams. The artist had had to
restore it then and, in the years following his death, countless teams had worked to keep it intact. Many of the recent exhibitions of Delacroix’s work around the world had been to drum up interest in the pieces to fund their restoration. “No one living has really seen the painting,” the curator said. “If we remove all the varnish, we can finally see it.”

I was underwhelmed, but I wasn’t disappointed. I felt oddly comforted, surrounded by a group of people devoted to trying to see this ever-disappearing painting. Surely something has to come from all this attempted looking, but I doubt it’s what we expect. I think if Delacroix’s painting comes forward to meet us in our time, it does so as a ghost, a half-appearance at the edges of other, clearer things.

That’s alright. I’m not sure I believe in the immortal spirit of painting, but I do believe in ghosts.
Further documentation of this project is available at [www.eileenhavanttownsend.com](http://www.eileenhavanttownsend.com)
Bibliography:
