The most beautiful palette in France: on Eugène Delacroix

The extraordinary influence of Delacroix is tackled in a new exhibition and accompanying catalogue

by MICHÈLE HANNOOSH | 16 February 2016

Delacroix's Convulsionists of Tangier (1837-38) © The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

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“Nous peignons tous en lui”. Paul Cézanne’s famous statement about the extraordinary influence of Eugène Delacroix on the development of Modern painting sums up the thesis of this catalogue of the exhibition Delacroix and the Rise of Modern Art (at the National Gallery, London, 17 February-22 May). Patrick Noon and Christopher Riopelle seek to show that Delacroix was the creative and intellectual force that drove Modern painting, inspiring artists from Manet to Matisse across all the major movements, from Impressionism to the dawn of Abstraction. Delacroix’s art, thought and persona, they argue, fed the imagination and creativity of Modern painters as they worked out their own pictorial languages, styles and aesthetic values.

At first glance, the thesis seems unsurprising—Delacroix has long held a place in the genealogy of Modern art—but, as this work suggests, the reasons may have been more complex. As a mythologised revolutionary and outsider to the academic establishment, Delacroix appealed to a generation that identified with the figure of the refusé. As a painter’s painter, who wrote that “the first merit of painting is to be a feast for the eye”, he was enthusiastically received by those who looked beyond subject matter and anecdote to seek the meaning of painting in visual effect. His bold and dramatic colour led Cézanne to call his palette “the most beautiful in France” and inspired in Matisse
some of his most brilliant experiments with colour. Perhaps most important—Delacroix was a thinker’s painter, one of the very few artists who wrote eloquently and absorbingly on art, literature, music, nature, society and humankind. Steeped in literature, music and the grand tradition of painting, a keen observer of forms and the effects of light in nature, a perceptive interpreter of the work of others, a thoughtful analyst of his own goals and practice, Delacroix provided the model of a painter of ideas, expressed through the material medium of painting. Frequently cited by Renoir, Fantin-Latour, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Signac and Matisse, Delacroix’s reflections were for all a spur to thought and to innovative pictorial practice.

Noon’s essay, “What is Delacroix?”, draws its title from Baudelaire’s article of 1863 that did so much to fix Delacroix’s image—as a man, a painter, a thinker, a writer, a modern—for the younger generation. Noon provides a good overview of Delacroix’s life and career, his ideas on painting and their relation to those of his time, including British Romanticism. Riopelle furnishes a lively and wide-ranging essay, understatedly entitled “Afterlife: Delacroix’s Posthumous Fame”, which offers a perceptive account of Delacroix’s importance for the main painters represented in the exhibition. Beginning with Fantin-Latour’s Hommage à Delacroix (1864), he shows how Delacroix enabled painters—especially Renoir,
Cézanne, Gauguin, Signac and Matisse—to theorise and experiment with a new kind of painting, exploring their own pictorial and professional concerns through engagement with his work. In his emulation of and response to Delacroix, Renoir emerges a truly interesting thinker about painting, concerned with the limits of mimesis and with the relation between representation and pure painting. His Arab Festival of 1881, inspired by Delacroix’s Moroccan paintings and his own trip to Algeria that year, is a striking example of this, as Riopelle writes, “open-ended, encrusted with paint, flirting dangerously with formlessness”. Riopelle also gives an excellent account of Signac’s restricted view of Delacroix in his D’Eugène Delacroix au Néo-Impressionnisme of 1898—a manifesto of the scientific colourist method meant to justify the pointillist style, and thus to establish Neo-Impressionism (rather than Impressionism) as the true heir to the master.

After these two substantial essays, there are page-long entries on each of the 84 paintings, arranged in loose thematic groups. The first, “Emulation”, covers the practice of copying Delacroix (Manet’s Barque of Dante (around 1854), Renoir’s Jewish Wedding (around 1875); collecting his work (Degas, Bazille, Cézanne); referring to it pictorially (Gauguin depicted in two paintings a sketch after Delacroix’s Expulsion of Adam and Eve (1845)); and mythologising him
(Cézanne’s Apotheosis of Delacroix (1890-94), Fantin-Latour’s Immortality (1889)). The second thematic group, “Orientalism”, brings out how Delacroix’s paintings on North African subjects inspired in Renoir, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Matisse an interest in the light and colour of the south, as well as Oriental themes in Fromentin, Chassériau, Renoir, Bazille and even Cézanne. Section 3, “Narrative Painting at a Crossroads”, is a rather eclectic grouping of works on religious, historical and mythological subjects. The final section, “Delacroix’s Legacy in Paint and Prose”, brings out the debt of fundamental elements of the Modernist credo to his art and thought. This is perhaps the most interesting section, in which we see Gauguin, Renoir, Van Gogh, Redon and Matisse grappling with the expressiveness of colour through flowers and still-life, Cézanne developing a practice of landscape through imitation of Delacroix (one of the very few Modern artists he copied), and Matisse finding inspiration in Signac’s book on Delacroix for his Luxe, calme et volupté (1904), only to move beyond this in an even more Delacroix-inspired turn to brilliant Fauvist colour, especially after his own trip to Morocco in 1912.

Not all the connections are equally compelling. Manet’s Music in the Tuileries Gardens (1862) has little to do with Delacroix but is offered as an “oblique” model for Fantin-Latour’s Hommage à Delacroix,
itself not included in the exhibition. Where Orientalism is concerned, Fromentin and Chassériau testify to a more literal, thematic influence than does Cézanne, whose Bathers (1874) seem very different from Delacroix’s. (His Abduction (1867), on the other hand, has the bold, sinewy lines of Delacroix’s Hercules and Antaeus (1852), with which it has obvious compositional similarities.) More examples from the rich corpus of copies by these painters might have brought out all the more forcefully their formative engagement with his work.

The catalogue is beautifully produced with excellent illustrations. One might only have wished for all relevant works to be illustrated—for example, the print of Delacroix’s Pietà (1850) that inspired Van Gogh’s version, or Degas’s sketches after Delacroix (especially the Ovid among the Scythians, since the original is in the exhibition). It would also have been welcome to have more specific information about the provenance of the Peonies (around 1848), since Pierre Andrieu is not recorded as having purchased flower paintings at Delacroix’s posthumous sale. The text follows the 2009 edition of Delacroix’s Journal but inexplicably quotes Achille Piron’s 1865 text for some passages that are available, corrected, in the new edition, thus occasionally perpetuating errors—for example, “verify” (vérifie) should be “enliven” (vivifie). There are some small errors—for
example, “courses” for “coursers”, “pressing” for “fearing”. These are, however, minor defects in an otherwise informative and thought-provoking catalogue which gives substance to an idea long accepted uncritically but rarely considered in itself.


Delacroix and the Rise of Modern Art
Patrick Noon and Christopher Riopelle
National Gallery Company, in association with the Minneapolis Institute of Art, distributed by Yale University Press, 272pp, £35/$60 (hb); £19.95 (pb)

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