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## **Don't Deny Us Delacroix!**

A Fraternité of Washington Art-People Decide Americans Aren't At Liberté To See Delacroix. So, In The Name of Egalité, Our Intrepid Reporter Journeys To Frankfurt, Germany To See What Americans Won't. And What Those Art-People Can't.

By Sally Ruth Bourrie

One of the ironic things about living in a city with a world-class art museum is you never see its impact on other places. Right now, objects loaned by the Art Institute are making a major contribution to understanding one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's most important painters, Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863). For a retrospective exhibition in Frankfurt, Germany, the Art Institute lent 12 prints and drawings, nearly one-tenth of the works on paper in the show.

Generally speaking, Delacroix can be best understood as the link between the Impressionists and the Old Masters who came before. While he is most often identified with Romanticism—and rightly so—his work developed far beyond its initial sensuality and limitless emotion. For him, the feeling his work evoked in the viewer was always primary, more valuable than verisimilitude—which he equated with mere reportage. Like the Old Masters of the past he revered, Delacroix painted the grand historical and mythical subjects even though they were becoming anachronistic to his avant-garde contemporaries. At the same time his free brushwork and explorations in color theory were among the most advanced of his day, helping to create the path followed by the Impressionists.

Delacroix was so revered by this younger generation that after his death, Fantin-Latour painted a group portrait of admirers in homage to him, including Whistler, Manet, and Baudelaire. Delacroix was Monet's favorite painter. Picasso said about him, "That bastard. He's really good."

Though Delacroix and his painting, the icon, "Liberty Leading the People," are on the 100 franc note and his Paris home is a French National Museum, he's not well-known in America. Few of his greatest works hang in American museums, largely because he was so successful during his lifetime. The French government bought most of his famous early paintings, which now hang in the Louvre, and commissioned him to fill the walls of its buildings with murals. Most of those buildings, still in use, are closed to the public. By the time American investors made their way back to Europe, Delacroix was dead and those who took up his explorations into color, the more seductive and cheerful Impressionists were on the market.

Why, if he's so important, did the National Gallery decide against the exhibition?

*The New York times* contends that the National Gallery pulled out because J. Carter Brown, its director, feels his "admittedly somewhat unsophisticated public" (his description) would find Delacroix too difficult. Brown himself claims the National Gallery never agreed to display the show without certain loans from the Louvre—even though it allowed itself to be listed as one of

the exhibitors on special stationery from early 1986 on—and when those loans were refused late in the year, Brown didn't think the show would be worthwhile. When the decision was actually made is unclear. The National Gallery stated nothing official until mid-March, and the exhibition was to open in Zurich in June.

The art world grapevine has it that the opinion of the National Gallery's exhibition designer carries a great deal of weight. After a trip to Europe to see the paintings, he felt they were too small and too dark to make an interesting exhibition. If that's true, then our tax dollars are used to pay an interior designer to make art historical judgments.

The National Gallery's 11<sup>th</sup> hour decision not only provoked anger and disappointment among art cognoscenti both here and abroad, it robbed Americans of an opportunity to get to know a major artist so rare here. Since museums, especially the major ones, usually book their galleries years in advance, it was too late for another one to take the show.

All background and gossip aside, what exactly are Americans missing?

The paintings section of the exhibition did have great gaps, some of them unavoidable. For example, the murals are, of course, impossible to bring into a museum. But most deeply missed are Delacroix's early great paintings, of which the Louvre would lend only one, *Dante and Virgil*.

The installation would have benefited from some large signs explaining the development of Delacroix's work. He is neither an easy nor a particularly accessible artist and three or four rooms of his work with no explanatory material can be discouraging for the unacquainted.

Ironically, it is in the exhibition of prints and drawings—mostly black-and-white—that the color genius, Delacroix, is best represented. It is also here that the strength of the Art Institute's contribution is felt.

Another indication of the organizational quagmire in which this exhibition seems to have continually foundered is that, while this section was to have been displayed throughout the tour, it was finally shown only in Frankfurt because its curator, Margaret Stuffman, found herself unable to shoulder exhibitions in all three places.

Even though Delacroix is correctly admired most for his work with color, he was a superlative draftsman. This was a thrilling part of the exhibition because Ms. Stuffman pulled together all his best works to prove it. Although painting was his passion and his love (he wrote in his journal, one of history's most illuminating documents on the artistic struggle, "I go to my work as other men hurry to their mistress..."), drawing and sketching were critical in capturing the immediacy of an event or experience.

In fact, perhaps his most treasured works were the watercolors and sketches he made on his 1832 trip to Morocco. The Frankfurt show included preparatory sketches for many of these prints, as well as experimental sheets showing Delacroix's doodles and experiments on the lithographic stone.

A remarkable thing about Delacroix's work, in color or in black-and-white, is its movement. Each line gyrates and wiggles as though it can hardly bear to stay fixed on the page. In "Weislingen Attacked by men of Goetz," only the spear seems firmly implanted, its purpose simply to bring your eye over to the action. Everything else is leaping and moving, tails and clothing flashing in a mass.

One thing we also see is Delacroix's fascination with animals. Consistently they have more personality, more tenderness, than his people. The horse that turns to see its master in battle wears a sage complexity of emotions equal to a human portrait.

Baudelaire once wrote that Delacroix was "passionately in love with passion." It's a pity for Americans that certain curators don't share Europe's passion for Delacroix. You can see two Delacroix paintings at the Art Institute. When you do, look at the flowing brushstrokes and bright greens and reds and think about an old man looking in his youthful sketchbooks and remembering a trip he once took.

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**MISTAKE!**

In Sally Ruth Bourrie's story last issue on the Delacroix exhibit not coming to Chicago, the preparatory sketches of prints in the Frankfurt show should have referred to illustrations of literature, especially of Goethe and Shakespeare, not to watercolors and sketches he made on his 1832 trip to Morocco.