

## The Romantic Eugène Delacroix and Orientalism

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*In my study, I tried to give a brief description of how the Orient was perceived by the West, mainly focusing on the first hand experience that the Romantic currents leader in painting, Eugène Delacroix had before and during his travels to the Maghrebian lands. Also I analyzed and presented this East – West clash, based on of the paradigm launched by Edward Said, Orientalism.*

Key words: Eugen Delacroix, Orientalism , Romantism, art.

### ➤ Critical Background:

Usually when we talk about the concept of the Orient, we tend to refer to it only in just simple geographical terms as a far-away eastern land that starts at the eastern edges of Europe, represented by Turkey, and stretches its territories till the eastern shores of Japan. But the Orient means a lot more than just simple geography it represents a variety of different cultures, religions, habits, political structures, that mostly were shaped by the Western (European) powers during their “Golden Ages” that culminated in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. Because of this role, the one of the educator, that the West always used to legitimize its actions, sometimes just simply calling it “the white man’s burden”, the Orient (East) and its inhabitants got the permanent brand of inferiority, and second rate, in every political or cultural discourse, or just simply having the name of barbarians or savages. Even more, the Orient was mainly used by the Western Great Powers to define themselves in contrast within every aspect (social, cultural, political, artistic, etc.), thus inaugurating the permanent East – West contrast (clash) commonly known as “Orientalism”.

This permanent clash between the West and the East was very well represented and argued by Edward Said in his book, entitled “*Orientalism*” (1978). In it he exposed a large set of ideas that presented the patronizing attitude of the West (“us”) towards the East (“them”) in every aspect, that culminated in a permanent power struggle between these two entities: “*Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)*”<sup>1</sup>

A more proper definition of Orientalism, formulated just by Said is the following: [Orientalism can thus be regarded] “*as a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient. The Orient is taught, researched, administered, and*

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin, 1979, p. 43, in Jocelyn Hackfort-Jones, *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture*, Malden , Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 136.

*pronounced upon in certain discrete ways.*"<sup>2</sup>; or from my point of view we could just call it a *simple labeling* of the East, by the imperialist (XIX<sup>th</sup> century) West. I refer to it as simply labeling because the West never tried to fully understand, comprehend, or just discuss on equal terms with the East, mainly being preoccupied with the role of the plunderer, and developed all sorts of *manias* (Egyptomania, Indomania, Japanism) in the detriment of the Orient that always were backed by brutal force. At this point the West made a primordial mistake (that will have disastrous consequences after World War I and during decolonization), the lack of capability to understand the special role of the Orient in the Western European experience.

According to Said, "*the Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West)*"<sup>3</sup>, a role that the West never comprehended although it organized a series of missions (diplomatic, political, cultural, etc.) to the newly conquered lands in order to ease its "white man's burden", missions of which the leader of the French Romantic current in painting, Eugène Delacroix was part once.

In my study I will present the ways in which the Orient influenced the work and even the character of Eugène Delacroix before he actually visited the Orient and after his visit, mainly focusing on his three major themes of inspiration (*freedom - national independence, literature - mythology and the Orient*), that many times were key elements between the Western travelers, scholars and their Oriental exotic subjects. Within these themes of inspiration I will present Delacroix's view regarding the concept of superior (Western) and inferior (Oriental); if there was any preconception of this relation of Occidental superiority before he visited the Maghrebian lands; or if this idea still remained during and after his visit; also which was the attitude of the native population in (Morocco, Algeria). Another aspect that I will focus on is related to his *Oriental legacy* for the future painters, mainly *Paul Cézanne* and *Pierre-Auguste Renoir*, who continued what their precursor started (the fascination and attraction towards the Orient) even during the harsh current of anti-Orientalism that took place during the early years of the XX<sup>th</sup> century.

### ➤ **Historical background of the „Permanent Revolution” (XIX<sup>th</sup> century):**

In the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, the *feeling of safety* (meaning that until you painted what was dictated from above –Academy, Monarch and Church – artists were not criticized and could earn their living, even if this meant the stop of free

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 188.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 19.

imagination) of artists disappears at the same time with the French revolution (1830), which caused the rupture with tradition (*Ancien regime*). Painters thus received countless opportunities it only depended on them to choose to paint landscapes or historical scenes, classical topics or in the fanciful manner of the masters of Romanticism. During this century a huge gap was imbedded between the successful artists, who taught the "*official art*" (Academy) and the so called "*non-conformists*", who in general will be valued only after their deaths. There was a big difference between artists who by temperament and conviction were willing to obey the wishes of the public and those who freely acceded with their isolation. Probably the best description of these non-conformists was made by Ernst Hans Gombrich in *The History of Art*: "*The art of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century should be seen as the history of rather lonely people who had the courage and perseverance to be non-conformists, to reject all conventions without fear, thus creating new possibilities of expression*".<sup>4</sup>

The theatre of these dramatic episodes was Paris, because it had become the "*artistic capital of Europe*" of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, as was Florence in the XVI<sup>th</sup> (Golden Age of Italy) and Rome in the XVII<sup>th</sup> (Renaissance). Artists from all around the world came to Paris to study with the masters and especially to take part in meetings in cafes of Montmartre where new theories about art were forged. If the XIX<sup>th</sup> century is considered as a century of "*permanent revolution*", then one can say that in Paris the so called "*official art*" (Academy) represented by the foremost conservative painter, Jean-Auguste Ingres, the successor of Luis David, has been shocked by three revolutionary waves:

- the first wave was Romanticism, initiated by Theodore Gericoult but reached its apogee during its leader Eugène Delacroix.
- the second wave in the mid-century was Realism, inaugurated by Francois Millet but denominated by Gustave Courbet in 1855
- the third and final revolutionary wave, Impressionism, although was initiated by Eduart Manet, later it was misnamed by Claude Monet in 1864.

### ➤ **Biographical data:**

The leader of the Romantic current in painting, Eugène Delacroix was born on April 26, 1798 in the small town of Saint-Maurice, near Paris, and died on August 13, 1863 at 65 years. After finishing high school, in 1816, he enrolls in the workshop of Pierre Guerin where he will have as colleagues, Theodore Gericoult ("*The Charging Chasseur*"- 1812; considered to be the first Romantic painting<sup>5</sup>) and Ary Scheffer. The untimely death of Gericoult leaves Delacroix at the forefront of the Romantic current. He unleashed himself in painting with the violence of a mutiny: "*If through my romanticism, free manifestation of some personal impressions, my antipathy for invariably calked types in schools, repulsion towards academic*

<sup>4</sup>Ernst Hans Gombrich, *The History of art*, London, Phaidon Press, 1995, pp. 30-45.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibidem*, pp. 60-65.

*scripts is understood, then I must admit that I am a romantic.*"<sup>6</sup> He chose subjects from different sources of inspiration: contemporaneity, medieval history of France, the Revolution of 1830, the defense struggles of the Greeks, literature of the great classics (Dante, Shakespeare, Byron), but also themes from a mysterious and exotic place that fascinated the Occident, the world of the Orient.

In the upcoming part of my study I will briefly describe the first two themes of inspiration *freedom - national independence* and *literature - mythology*<sup>7</sup> because even in these early paintings we can already see elements of Orientalism. In the later part I will mainly focus on his third theme of inspiration, a theme that had a huge impact not just on his later works, but also on those of the upcoming painters: the Orient.

Delacroix made his debut at the Salon of 1822, with the painting "*Dante and Virgil in Hell*" or "*The Barque of Dante*", which was his first step in becoming a renowned painter. The theme of the painting is inspired from the "*The VII<sup>th</sup> song from the Divine Comedy*" of Dante Alighieri.<sup>8</sup> The subject is fantastic and lugubrious. Since then Delacroix has become one of the masters, he didn't imitate anybody and without a hesitation he conquered in time his originality. This painting which broke so suddenly with the academic traditions brought at the same time huge enthusiasm but also a big amount of defame, thus opening the fight that continued throughout his life.

### ➤ **Themes of inspiration:**

Eugène Delacroix had three major themes of inspiration: freedom and national independence, mythology and literature, and the Orient. In the first two themes of inspiration we can also find from a briefer to a more extended number of elements inspired already from the Orient mainly representing the superiority in brutal force of the East (the Ottoman Empire) but at the same time inferior to the West was the sentiment of freedom that became more powerful every year after the French revolution (1830). Also here we can see that his attitude was clearly that of a superior Western person who condemned the authoritarian political system ruled by the Ottoman sultan that resembled the etatist French previous regimes that were overthrown by the two French revolutions. Here we can't fully connect it to the Orientalist paradigm, because this experience was common to the whole Romantic current and representatives, not just for him. All of them acted and stated their opinions mainly based on previous personal experiences, and also they, with Delacroix as their leader condemned only the political aspect of the East (mainly the Ottoman Empire) and not the whole system.

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 66.

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Brion, *L'oeil, l'esprit et le main du peintre*, Paris, Plon, 1966, pp. 103-107.

<sup>8</sup>Giulio Carlo Argan, *L'arte moderna 1770/1970*, Florence, Sansoni, 1970, p. 88.

I will start by presenting the first two themes of inspiration, focusing on new Eastern (Oriental) elements and finishing with a broader description of his third and major inspiration the Orient.

THEME I: freedom and national independence. Delacroix has rendered the ideals of struggle for freedom and progress of the society. For him and for the Romantics, freedom meant national independence, an independence that the Orient was seriously lacking compared to the West, where the authoritarian, etatist systems were gradually replaced with republics elected by the people. So in this aspect and connecting it to the East-West relation, we can say that the Occident was superior, where human rights and the primacy of the individual was progressing compared to the stagnation in the Orient, where the leaders still gave death sentences according to their own will. Delacroix, like many Romantics, had an almost obsessive fascination for the Near East (mainly the Ottoman Empire), the threshold of the Asiatic world, that fascinated the Europeans since the travel of Marco Polo (to the land of the Saracens). His attention has already been attracted to this geographic area, the Near East, by Jacques Louis David's and Baron Gros's colorful accounts of Napoleon's glorious campaign in Egypt, which enriched these artists visual repertory with colors, lights, costumes, physiognomies, and subjects of a totally new flavor.

The Ottoman Empire was an important matter for the French economy, not just as a vast commercial crossroad but as a partner, albeit an unequal one<sup>9</sup> (an inferior one, mainly due to the legacy since Ancient Greece and Rome, that "barbarians are at our gates" and that the Ottomans almost conquered Vienna twice, thus trying to open a road towards the West), to whom the French sold their new metal at a profit. Here, *barbarians*, refer to those who were not from their culture (Greek, Roman), and in the present situation, French (Western) and Ottoman (Oriental), an aspect that can easily be put in the Oriental paradigm. The French vied with other European powers for favored nation status as a trading partner with the Ottoman Empire, but were more eager to enjoy preferred treatment than the Turks were to bestow it, and therefore negotiated at a disadvantage. This will change after the two French Revolutions when the authoritarian Ottoman rule will be condemned specially by the middle class from France, of which Delacroix was part of. Another clear aspect of the unequal West-East relation could be clearly observed in the behavior of the French merchants, who created problems for themselves by lacking in cross-cultural sensitivity, in courtesy, failing to pay the necessary tributes and homage to the local powers with whom they wanted to do business. Here we can see that the capitalist Occidental powers (because not just France lacked this good manner in dealing with a foreigner, on its own territory) were clearly following their plunderer intentions, not even trying to mask it publicly, or at least attempting to

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<sup>9</sup>Michele Longino, *Orientalism in French Classical Drama*, New-York, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 116.

talk on equal terms with an Eastern power, but mainly assaying on exploiting their every weakness for their own benefits. If the French felt a pressing need to communicate with the Ottomans, this was not mutual. Not only did the Ottomans not need the West, by many accounts, they were indifferent to the West. I need to connect this lack of support from the West for the Ottoman Empire, with the present state of tensions between the European Union and Turkey, who at first desperately needed the E.U. (but was sort of put on a waiting list, because the European powers were debating the impact of the religious Muslim population that Turkey has), but now it's the other way around, where the West needs the East (Turkey) mainly for economic reasons and manpower. This situation clearly fits in the frames of the Orientalist paradigm, 300 years ago, as well as in present daily life. Even now we can clearly see that the level of discussion is not held on equal grounds, the West (E.U.) just states a series of demands, which the East (Turkey) has to accept and fulfill, in order to be accepted. This is a sort of a paradox because, now and during the Age of Imperialism, the West somehow is more and more dependent on the barbarians from the East (raw materials, merchants, manpower, etc.), that they desperately tried to kick out from Europe a few centuries ago.

It was clear that French-Ottoman relations were in need of repair and that the French infrastructure around the Mediterranean – political and commercial – was in need of revision.<sup>10</sup> This situation was aggravated after the Greek war of independence (fitted the Romantic era) and Crimean War, leading finally to the role of the “superior” Western society, to deal with “*The Oriental question*” – What to do with the Ottoman Empire? The more recent struggle of Greece for independence from Ottoman domination (1821-1828) revived the interest in the Oriental world and injected a new note of dramatic reality. Delacroix soon began to demonstrate his increasing emphatic interest in the Greek-Turkish war in his choice of subjects. In the 1820's he began consciously to study the colorful costumes of the combatants on both sides, drawing individual figures or sketching various episodes from this war, which in turn led him to paint other subjects of oriental flavor.

Eugène Delacroix was 24, he had already made his mark with “*Dante's Boat*” in the 1822 Paris salon, but he was still poor, still reduced to pouring boiling water on last night's dregs to make his morning coffee. He had dabbled in Eastern subjects since he was 19 years old, copying Persian miniatures; he had already done a sepia portrait of a Turkish officer and an oil painting of “*Turkish Horseman in Battle*”.<sup>11</sup> Now he thought he had a big subject, big enough even for Rubens, whose mantle he believed he had assumed. Gradually his first major oriental work evolved, the “*Massacre at Chios*”, which he exhibited in the Salon of

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 117.

<sup>11</sup> Roderick Cavaliero, *Ottomania: The Romantics and the Myth of the Islamic Orient*, New-York, I. B. Tauris, 2010, p. 88.

1824. The early studies reveal Delacroix's enhancement in discovering the lively colors of the various oriental costumes: the Suliots (Greek costumes originating in the Suli Mountains in Epirus), the Palikares (uniforms of the Greek militia fighting in the war of independence), and those of the Ottomans.<sup>12</sup> Delacroix reproduces the exact moment in time of the repression against the Greek population who had risen against the Sultan. In the first plan of the painting we can see a man deadly injured; in the second plan there is a naked captive (his model and mistress, Emilie Roberts) being dragged off by a Turkish horseman; giving her the requisite appearance of quiet despair and exhausted languor. The massacre takes place during the sundown. Calm light lies over all the horrification reproduced by the painting. The contrast between the azure sky (upper part of the painting) and the scene of the massacre (the bottom) increases the chromatism. On the first hand Delacroix did not think much of the finished painting and found it depressing, lacking light, but within four days he transformed a picture which had taken him seven intensive months to paint. Baudelaire thought he was "*witnessing the gradual unfolding of some tragic mystery*"<sup>13</sup>, for the scene of death and servitude was merely a preface to the achievement of glorious liberty. That scene of grief rendered in its tragic moment without the thoughtfulness of conveniences sparked that huge rage after which the jury has often closed the doors in front of Delacroix and his future exhibitions. The picture raised to a limit the anger of the Classical school. Within the same theme follows "*Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi*" in 1826 that will be exposed with great success in London together with the painting "*The Execution of Marino Faliero*". Common elements inspired from the East (Orient) for these two paintings "*The Massacre at Chios*"<sup>14</sup> and "*Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi*"<sup>15</sup> was the presence of the Turkish soldiers, painted in their traditional military uniform. Also another relevant characteristic of these soldiers was their skin color, the rider had a pale yellowish skin (Caucasian), but the soldier from the second painting is represented as being totally black. This aspect of skin color can be connected to the Orientalist paradigm, of Western superiority towards Eastern superiority, based on racism and skin color, where the white European color represents purity and superiority and the yellowish or dark skin is the symbol of inferiority (at that time the Ottoman Empire reached its territorial limits, comprising many ethnic nations and cultures of different origins).

The main piece of work for this theme (freedom and liberty) was the painting "*Liberty Leading the People*" ("*Barricade*") finished in 1830. It is the first political picture of the history of modern painting. It glorifies the uprising in July 1830 that ended the "white terror" of the Bourbon monarchy. It's not a

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<sup>12</sup>Camille Bernard , *Some Aspects of Delacroix's Orientalism*, p. 123 in *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, Vol. 58, No. 4, Apr. 1971.

<sup>13</sup>Corrado Maltese, *Guida allo studio della storia dell'arte*, Milano, Mursia, 1975, p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> Appendix.

<sup>15</sup> Appendix.

historical painting because it does not represent a concrete situation instead it is a clue towards a new direction.

THEME II: Another area from which Delacroix assumes the subjects of arrays was mythology and literature: "*Death of Sardanapalus*", 17 lithographs for Shakespeare's "*Hamlet*", "*Hamlet and his Father's Ghost*", "*Hamlet and Horace in the Graveyard*", etc.

Within this theme of inspiration I will focus on the painting "*Death of Sardanapalus*", because it's more relevant to the theme of the Orient, and also this painting was finished in 1827, long before he actually visited the it in 1832 and *really discovered it*. This painting is relevant from more points of view: first it is inculcated from actual events, from a literary subject, inspired at least in part from Byron's play of the same name, about an Assyrian king whose enemies were about to destroy him and who according to the ancient historian Diodorus of Sicily: "*built an enormous pyre in his palace, heaped upon it all his gold and silver and every article of the royal wardrobe, and then, shutting his concubines and eunuchs in the room which has been built in the middle of the pyre, he consigned both them and himself and his palace to the flames.*"<sup>16</sup>. Secondly we have again represented the black slave (character common to the upcoming Oriental themed paintings), and thirdly it is the start of the representation of the Eastern (Oriental) harem that was so mysterious and exotic for Westerners and especially for Romantics. "*The Death of Sardanapalus*" is a tableau of savage execution perpetrated by obvious Orientals at the foot of the tyrant's deathbed. The nudes, fair skinned and Caucasian were more obviously appetizing than his mistress Emily in the *Massacre*; they were after all among Sardanapalus's most prized possessions, which were not to survive him, and vied for pride of place with a spirited stallion.<sup>17</sup> Also this painting is one of his most controversial ones because in the original part of Lord Byron's play Sardanapalus dies alone in his chamber, but in the painting, Delacroix added concubines and slaves (black and Caucasian ones) producing in a way more destruction and mayhem, but the facial image of Sardanapalus creates a sort of dissolution. As usual this painting was criticized for its clashing colors and its odd perspective. What I find really striking in this painting and also can be connected to Said's Orientalism, is that while all the concubines are represented as having a pure white skin color (superior), Sardanapalus and his slaves skin color varies from a faded yellowish (Sardanapalus) to black, slightly depicting the human degradation. Also the facial aspects of Sardanapalus are that of a superior Oriental despot, that seemed to be commonly attributed to every Oriental (Eastern) ruler, by the West.

Up until now we can clearly see that in most of Delacroix's works that already embrace the theme of the Orient, even if these influences are only in

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<sup>16</sup> Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Orients and Colonies: Delacroix Algerian Harem*, in Beth Wright, *The Cambridge Companion to Delacroix*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 69-87.

<sup>17</sup> Roderick Cavaliero, *op.cit.*, pp. 89-91.



their early stages, his knowledge of the East is based on either books or his imagination. So at this point we can state that most of his figures or ideas of the Orient were preconceived, mainly based on political influences and memories that reminded him of the *Ancien regime*, or from books that were describing the Ancient times.

THEME III: Was his attraction towards the Orient. Delacroix *really discovered it* in 1832 when he visited the Maghrebian lands, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Some of his main works that are centered entirely on Orientalism: "*The Lion Hunt*" (first work after his return), "*Women of Algiers (in their Apartment)*", "*Arabs of Oran*", "*Jewish Wedding in Morocco*", "*Moroccan Saddles His Horse*", "*Arab Horses Fighting in a Stable*", etc.

Before I describe the oriental context that he had to face and also the portrait of the Orient in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, I have to mention some aspects that made him choose the Maghrebian desert and not the Ottoman Empire; also I have to explain why these arid lands fit the Oriental layout.

As I already mentioned, France's political and economic relations with the Ottoman Empire after the French Revolutions worsened, thus the possibility to travel to a foreign country that was politically in isolation towards the Great European Powers and also devastated by constantly new revolutions and uprisings all out its territories, represented a very dangerous choice. Thus faced with this mainly political problem, the leader of the Romantic current, Eugene Delacroix, had to look for other options that fitted his Oriental schema. Because he was fascinated mainly by the Near and Middle East, his only other option normally would have been Egypt, a country that after Napoleon's disastrous campaign fell under British rule. This was hardly an option, because the Egyptian's still maintained a hostile attitude towards the French due to Napoleon's campaign, and resented the plunderer attitude of the Western British forces that started on a full scale the so called "Egyptomania".

When we usually define the Middle East strictly based on geographical notions, we include besides the Arabian Peninsula, Turkey, Iran, Egypt and Sudan, the later ones representing Northern Africa. If we define it based on religion and culture we get a completely new map. This was the same case for Eugène Delacroix, who identified the same religious and cultural habits, political system, similar in natural land, etc. in the Maghrebian desert, on the North-Eastern shores of Africa, in the brand new French colonies, of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. So based on the cultural, religious and political context, these three countries fit the Oriental layout that I mentioned before; even more the same paradigm of superior-inferior was applied here by the Occidental representative, France. Also according to Said's, *Orientalism*, most of these choices made by many artists, not just Eugène Delacroix, were fundamentally a hierarchical and binary one, always related to pairs such as – *West–East, colonizer–colonized, us–them*,

etc. – where power is not evenly shared, but rather exerted by the stronger, Western party over the weaker, Eastern one<sup>18</sup>.

➤ **Portrait of the Orient:**

One of the earliest descriptions of the Orient from the XIX<sup>th</sup> century that stirred the imagination of the Western society was put forward by Victor Hugo in his famous *Les Orientales* (1829): "Today for a thousand reasons all of which foster progress, the Orient is of more concern than it's been ever before. Never before have oriental studies been explored so deeply. In the century of Louis XIV one was Hellenist; today one is an Orientalist ..."<sup>19</sup>

A fascination for the world of the Orient is a leitmotif that runs through the history of Western culture, yet the XIX<sup>th</sup> century still distinguishes itself from other periods, the leaning towards the East continued apace and Orientalism experienced an unprecedented boom. The context was favorable: social shifts in Europe, the increasing mobility of goods and people and current events that brought the Orient endlessly into the international spotlight (Greek War of Independence, the colonization of Northern Africa, etc.). All these new foreign and exotic things had an even bigger influence on the society of artists, and mainly those of the Romantic current, that just began, who ultimately tried to adapt in their works many of these free Eastern things (animals, habits of common people, landscapes, etc.) in contrast to the suffocating Western cosmopolitan society.

Eugène Delacroix was not an exception from this rule, he as many other Romantic painters embraced the theme of animals, which represented an even more important subject in his eyes. For him fighting animals showed the irrational uncontrollable urges and mystery, both sources of violence. He never remained attached to romantic fantasy, which can be viewed in his fondness towards horses ("*Moroccan Fantasia*", 1847), always giving details of saddles, formations and everything relevant to horses.

His first work that is fixed entirely on Orientalism was "*The Lion Hunt*"<sup>20</sup> (he made several versions of it later). This first painting is very relevant because it shows us what changes occurred in his later works. In the version he made after his visit to Morocco the animals express the same sense of instinctive, aggressive ferocity as the riders on horseback. He endowed his models, the beasts, with almost human qualities, as they were set against each other in a struggle to the death. He always argued that the Orient was a place where everything is uncaged, where natural freedom dominates, comparing it to the Western society

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<sup>18</sup>Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>19</sup> Emily A. Haddad, *Orientalist poetics: the Islamic Middle East in nineteenth-century English and French poetry*, Michigan, Ashgate, 2002, p. 56.

<sup>20</sup>Appendix.

where everything is caged, boxed, like animals in a zoo. If we put it in the West-East context, we can clearly see that this aspect favored the Orient.

➤ Delacroix's visit to Morocco:

The decision by the French to conquer Algeria in 1830 must be seen as the culmination of the aims of the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt. The new climate of North African colonization gave Delacroix the opportunity to experience the Orient, rather than simply imagine it, like most of the painters who were cooped in their Western workshops and only fantasized about it. Basically he got a non-European experience at first hand. Here I have to quote what Raymond Escholier said about the experience of Delacroix and the Orient: "*Artists ignored the Orient that Delacroix was to discover. In the Maghreb lands for Eugène Delacroix the ancient life will reveal itself. After him, Théodore Chassériau and everyone else won't do anything other than to acknowledge this wonderful discovery [...]*".<sup>21</sup> So we could argue that Delacroix was the initiator of this Oriental pilgrimage, to a far-away land, that initially was condemned by the West. Delacroix went to Morocco, a country which France not only did not possess but with which it had hostile relations. It was a shock to the system, a *visual shock*<sup>22</sup> in the eyes of Westerners and especially for Romantics, such as Delacroix, for whom this was a completely different adventure. The light was very intense in this period (important element for his influence on Impressionism), the noise, the light and color overwhelmed him: "*I am like a man in a dream, seeing things that might vanish from me*".<sup>23</sup> Here we can see that Delacroix, as probably many other Occidentals, had a preconceived idea of the East, a description that was only based on either gossip or written texts that most of the times were made-up for different purposes. He recorded everything in his sketchbooks because he was afraid that by coming back to France everything would fade away. We can see a clear difference even in his sketchbooks: the first one was disorganized, he recorded everything in haste in order not to forget something (so huge was the impact of the Orient), but the second sketchbook was more organized, with new ways of painting. The striking thing is the freedom of the sketches, because most of them were made on his horse using only a pencil. Also one of his major issues was the hostility of the people during his sketches, because he had to stop in the middle of the road in order to make a quick drawing of objects, persons and this was alien to the local community. On foot and between camps (because he traveled from Tanger to the capital, 130 miles) he observed the Moroccan landscape and way of life: "*At every step you could make a picture that could bring fame and fortune for 20 generations of painters*".<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Arthur F. Jones, *Introduction to Art*, New-York, Harper Collins Press, 1992, pp. 24-30.

<sup>22</sup>Helene Gill, *The Language of French Orientalist Painting*, New-York, Edwin Mellen Press, 2003, pp. 50-63.

<sup>23</sup>Eugène Delacroix, *Journal*, in *Eugène Delacroix: The Moroccan Journey*, documentary by Linda Walsh, 2001.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibidem*.

The Romantic Eugène Delacroix and Orientalism, *Astra Salvensis* 2, p. 27-42

Said's *Orientalism*, puts forward the idea that the West in most of the cases had the attitude of a superior person who looked down on the inferior Easterner, not trying to talk on equal terms, to learn their customs, to consider them as even in order to better understand them. Delacroix's attitude was quite the contrary, he was insinuating himself in the gradual customs of the country to be able to draw many Moorish figures quite freely. He said that the dresses were uniform and simple, but the various ways of arranging them would confer some certain nobility; we could link this idea of nobility to the Western thought regarding the "noble savage". The picturesque meant for Delacroix figures, objects and sites that were striking, intriguing and unfamiliar. Also he wrote in his diary that the trees and bushes were memories from his childhood. He was certain that more could be accomplished there than what he did, and that he will only bring back a faint shadow of the Orient. Here we can see that while the Oriental system (nature, people, habits, etc.) was kept intact, without importing anything from the West, however the Occident always tried to "domesticate the exotic"<sup>25</sup> East; instead of talking in equal terms, the Great European Powers every time tamed these elements, even by using brutal force.

He was also confronted with a cultural identity, because the expedition took place during an early stage of French expansionism in Africa. Delacroix was part of an imperialist adventure we could say that this was an expedition organized under the famous "white man's burden" motto. When he arrived in Morocco he only had the intellectual idea of the Orient, 5 months later his opinion completely changed. For him the Orient meant Antiquity, a living one: *"Imagine, my friend, what it is to see, lying in the sun, walking the streets or mending shoes, men of consular type, each one a Cato or a Brutus... all in white like the senators of Rome and the Panathenaic procession of Athens ... beauty passes through the streets ...the Romans and the Greeks are there at my door."*<sup>26</sup>

Delacroix's art expresses more complex ideas than a simple model of cultural imperialism could imply. He had an opinion of those French painters who were over-influenced by admiration or wished to copy the classical works of the past. In Morocco he felt that this was a world of the Ancient one. He saw an essence of humanity in the clothing of Orientals from which the Westerners astray. We can notice that for him the Oriental simplicity was far superior to the Western trends that suffocated the cosmopolitan man.

As I already mentioned one of the most unknown elements of the Orient for Westerners was, the harem, of the East, which since Ancient times played many roles, be that political, cultural, social or artistic one. Now I have to compare the context of the harem and its exotic women, to other Western

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<sup>25</sup> [Ina Baghdiantz McCabe](#), *Orientalism in Early Modern France: Eurasian Trade, Exoticism, and the Ancien Régime*, Oxford, Berg, 2008, p. 205.

<sup>26</sup> Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Orients and Colonies: Delacroix's Algerian Harem* in Beth Wright, *The Cambridge Companion to Delacroix*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 100-110.

“manias” that were promoted by the Occident in the detriment of the Orient. As I earlier noted in the Oriental paradigm, the West always managed to seek, by any means necessary, all the secrets of different Oriental cultures and countries, always being on the superior side of the discussion: India was governed with an iron fist by the British, China was “divided” among many nations with interests, Japan was literary forced to open its “two century” closed doors to the West; all had to share their most well preserved secrets, that became simple decorations for the “superior” Western societies. Whereas the Oriental Near and Middle East against all Western pressures managed to preserve one of its most sacred possessions, the Oriental harem (at least from the dominant Occidental males). This curiosity towards women, mainly those of Islam, rose even higher in the case of Romantics, a curiosity going back to the first translation of *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments (One Thousand and One Nights)* in 1714.<sup>27</sup> The harem became a major obstacle to East–West understanding, despite ever-increasing knowledge of Islamic society. There was also a good deal of idleness and gossip, not unknown in households in the West, and it was not the odalisques of Ingres but the bored looking, hookah-smoking, card-playing ladies of a domestic harem whom Delacroix was allowed to observe in Morocco who proved to be nearer the mark.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding the women, that Delacroix could actually paint, were not generally Muslim women but also Jewesses. On the 21st of February 1832 he was invited to a Jewish wedding where he noted all the details in his sketchbook (“*A Jewish Wedding in Morocco*”)<sup>29</sup>. He already had an idea that he could make a painting of this cultural event (he mentioned in one of his diary entries). So here we could argue that he had another fascinating encounter with another Oriental culture, this time a Jewish one, that in most of the cases was labeled as “inferior” by the Western societies.

➤ Delacroix’s visit to Algeria:

North Africa was about to pass under European conquest and Delacroix captured the elemental courage, and savagery, with which the Moorish states had long been identified, and which reasserted itself in the Algerian struggle for independence in the 1950s (here we can again see the strong connection towards national independence).<sup>30</sup> But the greatest impact during his 5 months travel was the encounter with the women from the city of Algiers. The capital city of Algiers, was not just any colonial city, it was the leading city of what France considered to be its Southern Mediterranean “departments”.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Roderick Cavaliero, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibidem*, p 33.

<sup>29</sup>Appendix.

<sup>30</sup>Roderick Cavaliero, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>31</sup>ZeynepCelik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers Under French Rule*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, p. 37.

This fascinating encounter will inspire his famous “Women of Algiers (in their Apartment)”<sup>32</sup> depicting the famous and mysterious Oriental harem. The Algerian conquest meant for him a once in a lifetime opportunity to gain access to this sacred place and paint it (not imagine it like other Western painters). A French customs inspector, Leopold Victor Poirel apparently gained him access: “Delacroix spent a day, then another in this harem, a prey to an exaltation which translated itself into a fever which was hardly calmed by sorbets and fruits”.<sup>33</sup> At this point I can argue that between the Western-Eastern cultural clash, the West gained the upper hand because it allowed a man, even more a Western one (Oriental men were banned too) to enter this sacred and well-kept place, since Ancient times. Here a very important question was raised by Arlette Serulaz, director of *Musée Eugène Delacroix* from Paris: *Did he interpret the lives of Oriental women through the eyes of a dominant western imperialist man?*; and Delacroix’s answer would have been the following: “It is beautiful, it is like Homer’s time, the woman in the gymnasium took care of her children ... embroidered the most marvelous fabrics, this is the woman as I understand her”.<sup>34</sup> It is hard to put this statement in the Orientalist paradigm and draw a conclusion of who was superior –West or East– mainly because he admits that the women of the harem are beautiful but never compares them to the Occidental ones. Also he only spent two days in this sacred and exotic place, which for centuries was debated and fantasized by the West. If we compare these Oriental concubines that he saw with his eyes, and with those concubines that he read about, or painted in “*The Death of Sardanapalus*”, we have quite a contrast.

Delacroix actually painted two paintings of “*Women of Algiers*”, which at the same time have many things in common but also differ in various places. The first one was painted in 1834, after his return, and the second one in 1849. There is a lot of sensuality in both paintings but as we can see, in the first painting the subjects are huge, almost life-size, the onlooker is almost invited to join in, to transgress into the forbidden area; the room is decorated with Oriental objects which are very relevant. The second painting is different in its impact, smaller and not so much of an invitation, a more homely picture. The light comes naturally from the entrance giving the whole scene a less theatrical atmosphere. There are many debates that the second picture is still characteristic of Romanticism or he already moved on to a new cultural wave. Also one character of the second painting, the lady in the blue dress (middle) was executed only through his imagination, because there is a clear difference to the other ones (on her he used the *impasto* technique)<sup>35</sup>. After this short, but valuable journey, we can see some relevant changes in his art, mainly because now all the Oriental themed paintings will be based on actual events, facts, persons, and feelings of what he

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<sup>32</sup>Appendix.

<sup>33</sup>Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-69.

<sup>34</sup>Eugène Delacroix, *Journal*, in *Eugène Delacroix: The Moroccan Journey*, documentary by Linda Walsh, 2001.

<sup>35</sup>Theophile Gautier, *Scriseri despre artă*, București, Ed. Meridiane, 1980.

saw and felt there. Now he managed to see, feel and make contact with the so far inferior labeled Orient by the Occident.

➤ The Oriental legacy of Eugène Delacroix:

Although Eugène Delacroix continued to hold on to the values and fantasies of Romanticism, this didn't prevent his work from being a major force for change. He had a great influence on painters of the later XIX<sup>th</sup> century - the Impressionists, in particular in the new way of discovering color threads and light – mainly Paul Cezanne, who is considered by many specialists to be the most important painter of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The following fragment of Paul Cezanne's and Joachim Gasquet's discussion in the Louvre in 1898 describes Eugène Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* as: *"We're all in this Delacroix, when I speak of the joy of color for color's sake, this is what I mean: these pale pinks, these stuffy cushions, the slipper, all this limpidity. I don't know how it enters your eye, like a glass of wine going down your throat and you are immediately intoxicated. One doesn't know how, but one feels lighter. He knows how to differentiate a silk as a fabric and face's flesh, the same sun, the same emotion crosses them, but differently. And it is in his colors that he knows it and does it, he makes contrasts ... creating harmony that they give"*.<sup>36</sup> By this he meant the effects of color that Delacroix discovered, the ways in which harmonies can be created out of color, but also the way it affected the sense of textures. These new discoveries of Delacroix according to most art specialists are only because of his travels to the Orient *"he found something there that he hadn't seen before and if was critical for him"*<sup>37</sup>, the power of light.

Also another famous painter that followed in Delacroix's footsteps was Pierre-Auguste Renoir; by this I refer to his journey to visit the Orient, more specifically to Algiers for one month in 1881 and two months in 1882. This aspect has a great significance because Renoir's "pilgrimage" took place during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the obsession of the Oriental harem still did not fade away, thus many painters were searching for Oriental women that will pose as their models: *"The women so far are unapproachable; I don't understand their jabber and they are very fickle. I'm scared of starting something again and not finishing it. It's too bad, there are some pretty ones but don't want to pose... The figure, even in Algiers, is getting more and more difficult to obtain. If only you knew how many bad painters there are here. It's insane, and especially some Englishmen who spoil the few available women. It's insupportable."*<sup>38</sup>

We can clearly see that Renoir during his travels to Algiers, while searching for models for his own Oriental harem and after painting his famous *oriental bath scenes*<sup>39</sup> (another common theme that fascinated the West) was very

<sup>36</sup>Eugène Delacroix: *The Moroccan Journey*, documentary by Linda Walsh, 2001.

<sup>37</sup> William Vaughan, *Romanticism and Art (World of Art)*, London, Thames & Hudson, in *Eugène Delacroix: The Moroccan Journey*, documentary by Linda Walsh, 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003.

<sup>39</sup> Roger Benjamin, Claudia Einecke, *Renoir in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*, Berlin, Hatje Cantz, 2010, pp. 50-60.

much inspired by Delacroix's "*Algerian women (in their Apartment)*". Specially the second one was critical for him, which was more close to Renoir's impressionist style, which according to many art specialists was already promoted by Eugène Delacroix in his final years (open to discussion). After his visit, Renoir will paint his famous "*Mademoiselle Fleury in Algerian Costume*" in 1882 (although the painting was completely Oriental themed, its model was a French little girl).

What I found most striking was that, both Cezanne and Renoir, began to be fascinated by the exotic Orient during the anti-Orientalist tide that was in full flood; Renoir even painted in 1875 an exact copy of Delacroix's, 1841, "*Jewish Wedding*", thus continuing the Romantic current leader's legacy. So we could argue that the fascination towards the Orient didn't fade away, during the many trends that shock the artistic world since Delacroix's Romanticism.

I will end my study with one of Delacroix's last quotes from his diary, and with a conclusion of his view of the West – East relation: "*In this short time I have lived 20 times more intensely than in several months in Paris. If you ever have a few months to spare, come to barbarity and there you will see those natural qualities that are always disguised in our countries, and you will feel the rare and precious influence of the sun which gives an intense light to everything*".<sup>40</sup>

We can clearly see that this short (only a few months) journey to a foreign, and hostile land with people who were oppressed by the West, and who never even tried to deny this circumstance, didn't really change Eugène Delacroix's opinion of them, at least from a political perspective. He called them "barbarians" because although these Maghrebian lands became French colonies, there were locally ruled by authoritarian monarchs (sultans, pashas) and to whom ideas such as "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" didn't have any value. From this point of view Delacroix always considered the West (France) as being superior at least what concerns the political leaders (Louis Philippe I – "King of the French ... by the will of the people"). What concerns his opinion of the general population, the Orientals reminded him of the simplicity that conferred certain nobility that the Westerners lacked.

From the other perspective, that of a social and cultural one, he sided on the superiority of the Orient. For him these desert lands and its people represented more freedom than he ever imagined. These lands that once were a part of the Roman Empire, but now belonged to these Oriental persons, reminded him of Ancient Greece and Rome, thus sharing a common heritage and bond that he as an imperialist westerner managed to discover and understand. This common heritage through Orientalism was also stated by Edward Said, according to whom its origins go "*all the way back to Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides*".<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Eugène Delacroix, *Journal*, in *Eugène Delacroix: The Moroccan Journey*, documentary by Linda Walsh, 2001.

<sup>41</sup>Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 196.