Revolution, Death, Transformation and Art: Delacroix’s *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios*

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“Of all foreign artists, Delacroix is the one whose name is most closely associated with the Greek Revolution of 1821.”¹ By examining this famous Romantic painting, *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios*, it will become apparent that the particular characteristics and life of this artist, who empathised on a deeply personal level with the Greek cause, enabled him to produce a work of enduring meaning and relevance.

**Introduction**

Ferdinand-Victor-Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) was an artist with empathy, compassion and intelligence accompanied by great talent, whose life was punctuated by significant personal loss. It is not surprising therefore that his first two Salon submissions, namely *The Barque of Dante* in 1822 and *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios* in 1824, focused on death and grief, despair and loss. A powerful anti-war document, *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios*, was arguably as much a reflection of personal grief as it was on the reign of terror during the French Revolution and of the massacres during the Greek War of Independence. As Mirka Palioura has written, Delacroix was “the painter of the Greek soul” (Palioura, 2002:108). Delacroix’s empathy with the pain of the Greeks² is what generates the emotional force in the painting by interweaving pathos, defeat and death.

During Delacroix’s lifetime (1798–1863) the violent political and social changes set in motion by the French revolution unfolded steadily. Marked population growth, industrialisation, urbanisation, nationalism, liberalism, democracy and socialism were

¹ “Απ’ ολους τους ξένους ζωγράφους ο Δελακρουά είναι αυτός που συνέδεσε το όνομά του πιο στενά με την Ελληνική Επανάσταση του 1821...” (Palioura, 2002:108). Author’s translation.

² Barthélémy Jobert (1998) comments that Delacroix was notoriously apolitical all his life, except for his fervent support for Greek independence.
the outcomes of two coinciding revolutions (Talmon, 1967:10) the British industrial Revolution and the French Revolution were referred to as “The great revolution of 1789–1848...” (Hobsbawm, 1975:1).

Delacroix was six years old in 1804 when Napoleon was crowned Emperor of the French, and only sixteen when Napoleon abdicated and the Bourbon Monarchy restored to the throne.

Artistic life was also in turmoil. Artistic freedom won during the revolutionary period was exploited by a monarchy that wanted to gain artist’s co-operation for their own propaganda purposes by offering generous official support for contemporary art (MacNamidhe, 2006:276). Artists were tacitly encouraged to create images about
religious and family values depicting the monarch as a benevolent father figure with a continuous historic lineage predating the Revolution (Fraser, 2004:10). Since artists needed government patronage to survive and gain more work most artists complied. Delacroix himself was very interested in gaining public acceptance and mainstream success and he decided early to capture public attention by creating works, for instance *The Barque of Dante* (1822), that were both “...familiar and strikingly novel” (Eisenman, 2011:77).

At the same time, Delacroix was fascinated by the Romantic Théodore Géricault, whose painting, *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–9), was deemed too radical for the state to purchase, on account of its perceived criticism of the government of the day. It was however the inspiration for Delacroix’s submission to the Salon in 1824, *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios*, a painting almost as daring as Gericault’s *Medusa*. Scio also showed a contemporary event with no centrally significant figure, and because it depicted defeat instead of a triumphant topic from antiquity, or a portrayal of French military victory, it created a “...storm of controversy that persists even today...” (Fraser, 2004:39). Fraser suggests, nevertheless, that this painting is not as transgressive as it might appear to be on the surface, insofar as it conforms to hegemonic values of the time about family life and patriarchy (Fraser, 2004:39). On that point there is no argument. Delacroix was indisputably conventional in his attitudes towards family.

By the age of twenty-six, Eugène Delacroix, born into considerable wealth and privilege, had lost most of his family and his financial security. Delacroix’s elder brother, Charles-Henri, had been a military man who had enjoyed the rank of general, Aide-de-camp of Prince Eugène and title of Baron but was retired on half pay under the Restoration (Jobert, 1998:20). Eugène’s father, Charles Delacroix, a senior bureaucrat and diplomat under the Directory and under Napoleon, died in 1805; Delacroix’s youngest brother was killed in action in 1807 and his mother died in 1814. Raymond de Verninac, Delacroix’s brother-in-law, died in 1822, and his widow, Henriette, reduced to poverty, spent her remaining years as a lady’s companion and died in 1827; a sad end for a woman whose married life in 1798 began as the wife of “a diplomat of the Revolution” (Jobert, 1998:20).

In a letter to George Sand on 25th January 1846, Delacroix alludes to the family’s loss of favour under the Bourbons, telling her about discovering his father’s desecrated grave from which the body had disappeared3 (see Stewart, 2001:267). A complex person like Delacroix, sensitive, thoughtful, highly intelligent, experiencing a series of deaths in his immediate family, bereavements compounded by family bankruptcy and loss of social status, could not but be profoundly affected. From all that is now understood about the effects of bereavement on children, particularly the early loss of parents, it is likely that Delacroix’s bereavements had a transformative impact on his personality and his outlook. Fortunately for him and his legacy, instead of embittering him, which can happen in such cases, these losses had the effect of deepening his

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3 Charles Delacroix had voted in favour of the execution of the king during the French Revolution.
capacity for empathy and his sense of social justice as the following pages will reveal. It is not surprising therefore that he was drawn to paint themes about death and loss, these being the most powerful experiences in his whole young life.

On Tuesday 27th January, he wrote about Théodore Géricault’s death: “This morning I received a letter announcing the death of Géricault. ... It has made me leave my work and paint out all that I have done” (Wellington, 1995:21). On Thursday 1st April he wrote: “I have seen the death mask of poor Géricault. ... What hands and heads!” (Wellington, 1995:24). In April 1824 he heard of the death of Lord Byron at Missolonghi, a poet whose works inspired many of Delacroix’s paintings such as The Combat of the Giaour and Hassan, the Tasso series and the Death of Sardanapalus. Delacroix drew inspiration from both Géricault and Byron the rest of his life.

One of the greatest literary painters of all time, Delacroix read voraciously and wrote prolifically, letters, journals, essays and articles, in his search to define “the fundamental principles of all art...” (Friedländer, 1972:108). Beth Wright described him as the painter of thoughts (Wright, 2010:3). Michele Hannoosh reports on his great reliance poetry and literature for inspiration for his paintings. She writes: “Whoever says art says poetry. There is no art without a poetic purpose” (Hannoosh, 1995:24). Delacroix was a sufferer of ennui, perhaps in modern terms, a form of depression. His battles with ennui are discussed by Hannoosh who quotes “‘The terrible enemy’ ennui is the shadow of death within the life of mankind, threatening human existence at every moment ... Ennui is a kind of illness, a monster, an ‘indifference’ and ‘torpor’” (Hannoosh, 1995:11).

The Painting

The painting is described in the Salon Livret of 1824 as: Scenes from the Massacres at Chios; Greek Families Awaiting Death or Slavery, etc. (see the various reports and newspaper accounts). It depicts Greek families, nameless people, awaiting death or slavery, their torment visible in ravaged faces and bodies. The figures in the foreground, sitting or lying listlessly, express acquiescence, anguish, shock, defeat, vulnerability, subjugation, resignation and despair. The following images are details photographed from the original painting. They show Delacroix’s precocious mastery of emotional expression.

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4 Beth Wright discusses the importance of text and the written word in an understanding of history that influenced artists such as Gericault and Delacroix. They presented subject matter emphatically rather than descriptively, consequently compositions were an “assemblage” rather than “hierarchically closed action” as in traditional neoclassical history painting.

5 Delacroix loved storytelling and the narratives of legends and excelled in the narrative power of the painting.

6 In her doctoral dissertation Nina Athanassoglou-Souyoujoglou (now Athanassoglou-Kallmyer) says that the massacres on the island of Chios in 1822 was “the first large-scale Turkish war crime to be extensively published in the French daily press. It remained in the news for several months, from May 17, 1822 until late August” (Athanassoglou-Souyoujoglou, 1980:39).
The painting’s disquieting effect is partly the result of tensions generated by the juxtaposition of opposites. The faces of the Greeks are luminous; shock, desolation, fear and anguish painted in detail and full colour, contrasting against the shadowed impassive faces of the Turkish guards.
A pyramid structure provides a sense of strength and stability to the composition of a traditional history painting, but Delacroix disturbs the equilibrium by using two pyramids, on the left and right of the canvas with war and fire raging in the distance.

The viewer’s attention is divided. On the left the figures are immobile, while on the right, a disproportionately large horse and rider dragging a struggling woman destined for sexual slavery, a dominating, dynamic and erotic motif, erupt out of a group of apathetic, acquiescent figures. The woman’s white skin has a luminous glow against the shadows. The rearing horse, a Romantic symbol, representing the sublime — wildness, potency, freedom and beauty, disrupts the silence of the painting with its energy and scale, evoking fear. The canvas is bisected diagonally by the rearing horse in the lower right of the canvas, its raised foreleg evoking the war in the middle ground and leading the viewer’s eye to the burning harbour in the distance on the upper left of the canvas. As he was to paint later in Entry of the Crusaders into Constantinople (1840), the vanquished glow with colour, the victors are in shadow.
Delacroix prepared for the painting by reading newspapers, travelogues, biographies, and eyewitness accounts (Wright, 1997:149), acquiring authentic artefacts, as props for his painting. The progress of the painting was detailed in his journal. As Wright understands it, both the painting’s attractions and its flaws were judged by contemporary critics to be the inevitable results of the painter’s attempt to carry out this historian’s task.

French Painting 1789–1830

From 1789 until 1830, forty-one years of social disruption and chaos transformed French society and culture. The restoration of hereditary monarchy after the defeat of Napoleon failed however to deliver stability and social cohesion. Deep divisions were forming between Republicans/Bonapartists and monarchists. Veterans of the Napoleonic wars were reduced to half pay or dismissed and replaced by faithful royalists, leaving the veterans frustrated. Those who had served under Napoleon found themselves without work or opportunities under the Restoration (Talmon, 1967:32). As previously cited, Delacroix himself witnessed the Restoration’s desecration of his elder brother’s military career and the desecration of his father’s grave. Romanticism found expression in the tumult of change. Dramatic variations in painting styles emerged despite the efforts of the monarchy to control the production of art in order to legitimise its own authority. The regime provided opportunities to emerging artists by purchasing their works, offering public commissions and emphasising “civic humanist ideology” namely, that the primary role of the artist was to “enhance the moral conditions of public life...” (Craske, 1997:17). History painting, depicting figures involved in momentous or morally edifying scenes in the Grand manner, was considered superior to genre painting (Chilvers, 2009:295). The ambitious young Delacroix “...submitted history paintings to the salon ... sold them to wealthy patrons, displayed them in the major galleries ... was [patronised] by the duc d’Orléans or the duchesse de Berry, [and] longed for commissions from the state or through public competition” (Wright, 2010:14).

Of the dominant styles of the time, Pierre Francastel has written: “a new style in art means the appearance of a new attitude of man towards the world”. If Romanticism

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7 Scenes from the Massacres at Chios was the only painting that Delacroix detailed most extensively in his journal.
8 Beth S. Wright, Painting and history during the French Restoration: Abandoned by the Past, 1997:154–60. The flaws of the painting, The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero and the flaws of Scenes from the Massacres of Chios are similar and point to Delacroix’s emotional and ethical preoccupations at the time. Both paintings were painted within two years of each other. Both paintings are concerned with injustice and the fate of the powerless and the marginalised in society.
9 Napoleon had been a skilful and successful proponent in the propaganda value of art to legitimise and strengthen his authority by employing the greatest artists of the age, particularly Jacques-Louis David and Baron Gros.
10 Cited in W. Sypher (1960), Rococo to Cubism... New York.
represents a new style,\textsuperscript{11} or indeed a range of styles, it can be argued that the emergence of Romanticism at this point in time, around 1788, parallels new attitudes, emerging out of the transformations wrought by the French and the industrial revolution. Paradoxically Delacroix was both conservative and apolitical,\textsuperscript{12} yet there were repeated controversies surrounding his work. He was called a revolutionary and a Romantic, then considered pejorative titles, when \textit{Scenes from the Massacres at Chios} (1824) was exhibited (Wellington, 1995:xii).

Delacroix actually considered himself a classical painter within the historical meaning of the term in French art, according to the Style of Louis XIV (1643–1715) — “the grand style – grand goût”. A style intended to combat vice and teach virtue (Mora, 2000:57), it became a synonym for “highest achievement” like the High Renaissance in Italy, or the age of Pericles in ancient Greece; emulating classical antiquity; with the balance and restraint found in the classic styles of the High Renaissance and ancient art (Janson, 1972:433). In the history of French art therefore, there is an unbroken continuity in the evolution of style and subject matter between Renaissance and Baroque art and architecture. Delacroix’s assertion that he was “pur Classique” (Friedlaender, 1972:vi) was uttered within the meaning outlined above.

On the other hand the early stages of the Orientalist style that was to become prominent in nineteenth century European art, resulted from European colonial expansion in the middle east (Said, 1979). Oriental textiles, ornamentation, sensuality and sexual fantasies about unattainable women locked away in harems were popularised in France after Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign from which he returned in 1809 with fabulous art and artefacts looted from the museum. Delacroix’s orient “...was deeply rooted in French colonial history” (Grigsby, 2001:69) and focused on Egypt and Syria. But the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence in 1821 provided French artists in the 1820s, with a contemporary oriental theme.

In \textit{Scenes from the Massacres at Chios} Delacroix could satisfy his urge for colour and sensuality, painting gorgeous textiles, ornaments and oriental bodies and faces. The fashion for orientalism, the evocation of medieval Crusades that the struggle between Christianity and Islam in the Greek Revolution highlighted also recalled a major artistic \textit{thématicque} of Delacroix’s relating to death and consequent loss of status.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} No one style epitomises Romanticism.

\textsuperscript{12} Barthélemy Jobert (1998:27) comments: “His work is amongst the least political of the century, or in any case one of the least committed to the service of any cause, except Greek independence”.

\textsuperscript{13} The fascination with the orient and the mythology associated with it had a long history in both France and Europe. France was the first European country to form an alliance with the Ottoman Empire in 1536. The Franco-Ottoman alliance endured until Napoleon’s campaign (1798–1801) in Egypt which was then Ottoman territory.
Dualities and culture wars

Delacroix’s personal philosophy in the 1820s was based on a view of the world struggling between opposing moral values; evil versus good, intelligence versus savagery, civilisation versus barbarity. Delacroix’s “...characteristic duality of theoretical procedure [is evident] ... in his ability to appreciate the contrasting virtues of both Ancient and modern art...” (Mras, 1966:62), and to integrate them in the execution of his painting. In the Scio, dualities are portrayed in a scenario depicting the consequences of war without reference to glory. On the one hand, in the minds of Europeans, the war represented the struggle between Christianity and Islam, between civilisation and barbarity, between good and evil. Delacroix, commented Haskell, “was embarking on something quite new in art. ...there were no real precedents for the large-scale painting of contemporary brutalities...”,14 adding, “why the picture proved to be of such overriding importance was that its break with conventional drawing and composition confirmed ... the existence of a new school of French painting which was at once called Romantic and which attracted to it a great many talented young artists. Hanging in the same exhibition15 ... was Ingres's Vows of Louis XIII ... And this made it seem that French painting was divided into two great rival and opposing schools, and that critics, the public, and artists would be forced to choose between them”.16

Delacroix’s brilliant use of colour, his focus on contour to define form (Wellington, 1995:25), his dynamic drawing, and the emotional content of his painting refer back to Leonardo, Michelangelo, Rubens and the Venetian painters. His great rival Ingres believed that the ancients Greeks and the Romans had already achieved perfection in art and there was no need for artists to look elsewhere. Delacroix’s, use of flamboyant colours and his turbulent composition were considered heretical. Ingres believed that colour appealed only to the uneducated, the vulgar mob.17 Conversely Delacroix believed that beauty was found in many forms. The conflict between the Rubenistes and Poussinistes, while superficially an argument about technique and visual matters, that is, drawing versus colour, calm versus movement, sharply focused action on a few figures versus scattered crowds — was in essence a struggle between stasis and change. Delacroix’s romanticism drew him to subject matter that expressed the extremes of the human condition, the romantic agony, the darkest extremes of suffering and pain.

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15 The Salon of 1824 was remarkable in the range and variety of exhibits and in the calibre of work on display. The Massacres of Chios... was the most controversial of all but Delacroix also showed other significant works including the beautiful preparatory study entitled Girl in a Cemetery, and his famous Tasso in the Madhouse and several paintings based on Byron's poem The Giaour. Delacroix's greatest rival at the time, Jean-August-Dominique Ingres, showed his Vow of Louis XIII, to great acclaim. “...next to the works of Ingres and of Delacroix, the exhibits of the English produced the greatest sensation” (Friedlaender, 1972:114).


17 See Friedlaender, David to Delacroix, 1972:3–6.
He was driven by passionate intensity, a burning imagination, and ambition. Like his hero Michelangelo, Delacroix was inclined to dwell on images of dread (Néret, 1999:7). Baudelaire wrote: “his work contains nothing but devastation, massacres, conflagrations; everything bears witness against the eternal and incorrigible barbarity of man. Burnt and smoking cities, slaughtered victims, ravished women, the very children cast beneath the hooves of horses or menaced by the dagger of a distracted mother — this whole body of this painter’s works, I say, is a hymn composed in honour of destiny and irremediable anguish” (Baudelaire, 1964:59). The Scio embodies all of Baudelaire’s aforementioned themes. The strongest binary embodied in the Scio is the tension between East and West. Philhellenic passion was inflamed by a new crusade, to rescue the Greeks from the Turks, Christians against Moslems, civilisation against barbarity.

In 1838 Delacroix would paint Médée Furieuse, an image of “children ... menaced by the dagger of a distracted mother” (Baudelaire, 1964:59), also a work of universal and eternal significance. The Greek War of Independence was seen as a holy war, yet in the painting Delacroix’s fetish for oriental exoticism dominates, in the sensuous execution of ornaments, weapons, and drapery. By comparing the Scio to many works on similar themes from the period however, Haskell shows that Delacroix managed to avoid the pitfalls of his time, particularly its sentimentality and gratuitous voyeurism. His view is that Delacroix’s work reveals a rare genuineness of response to monstrous events, that next to the work of many other artists of the time he exclaims how “nervously ‘modern’ ... Scio actually was in its own day”. In that painting Delacroix depicts pain, suffering, defeat and desolation with the authority and dignity of a religious work by Raphael or Michelangelo.

Conclusion

Scenes from the Massacres at Chios by Eugène Delacroix, is a symbol of suffering and oppression in the struggle for freedom and self-determination. Death is ubiquitous in the history of modern Greece, and there seems little respite from it even today. The scale of the casualties suffered by Greeks from the War of Independence and in subsequent struggles for sovereignty is staggering, taking into account the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913, the disastrous campaign in Asia Minor in 1822, the dispossession of around two million Greeks in the process of which many thousands perished from persecution, disease and starvation. It has been argued in this paper, that the personal life of the artist Delacroix, also marked by the deaths and subsequent loss of status and social humiliation of many of his loved ones, coupled with the Romantic zeitgeist of that time, and anti-Islamic sentiment, disposed him to sympathise with the Greek cause. As Jobert points out, “The only event of his time that truly attracted his interest ... was the struggle of the Greeks against the Turks ... his continuing enthusiasm for the Greek struggle never stopped translating itself into his work” (Jobert, 1998:120).

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