Classicism and Anti-Classicism in the Quintessentially Romantic

Grace Rochfort

(Editor's Note: The two Delacroix paintings mentioned in this essay are available through these two links: **www.mystudios.com/.../delacroix-dante.html** *and* **www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/delacroix/***)*

At the turn of the nineteenth century, two different groups of idealists had formed; both were unhappy with the state of the world, but each had its own ideas about how to effect change. It was a battle between the head and the heart. Classicists chose to use intellect and had a responsibility toward civic duty, while Romantics opted to follow emotion and were individualistic. Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra* is a quintessentially Romantic work that defies all Classicism. Contrasting this are Eugène Delacroix's paintings, which are a combination of Romanticism and Neo-Classicism. When compared, the distinct themes of Classicism and anti-Classicism help to create a tension between the works and give them intrigue.

Eugène Delacroix was an innovative and revolutionary Romantic painter who embellished his creations with imaginative detail. His earliest paintings were based on hearsay, legends, and the imagination of other writers and artists. In 1832, he traveled to Morocco, where the subjects and themes that he was seeking in many of his paintings came to life. In the same year, Irving published *Tales of the Alhambra*, a short story that captures the exoticism of the palace in Granada, Spain. Irving got so caught up in the foreign culture that one evening, when

he met a turbaned Moor in the Court of Lions, "the fictions of the place seemed realized: an enchanted Moor had broken the spell of centuries and become visible."[1]

Like Irving, Delacroix threw himself into an unfamiliar world of dark-skinned, turbaned "barbarians," desert landscapes, unfamiliar architecture, and rich color exaggerated by brilliant light. What he experienced first hand in Morocco was beyond anything he could have conceived. His journal, once orderly and organized, became filled with disjointed scrawling, indicating his haste to record everything because he was afraid that he could not absorb it all. From these scribbles and hasty sketches, Delacroix was able to express emotions through his observations that he had recorded.[2]

To fully understand Delacroix's work, one must realize that he is not strictly a Romantic artist. He is, in fact, one of the most analytical painters ever to handle a brush. He worked from theory and calculations rather than from feelings and spontaneity, yet he achieved a high level of emotion in his work.[3] Delacroix's work ethic is similar to how Irving describes the Moorish palace: "calculated to inspire kind and happy feelings, for everything is delicate and beautiful."[4] Believing that he understood the Classical spirit, Delacroix regarded himself as a true Classicist rather than a false Classicist who simply replicated the standards of Classicism.[5] He worked to generalize the human understanding into symbols so that it did not focus on the individual and was able to attain emotion intellectually.

Working in a calculated way, Delacroix still wanted to maintain the impression of spontaneity. He was able to achieve this effect by beginning with color. He loosely applied

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[1]Washington Irving, 1832, "Tales of the Alhambra," in *Shaping Truth: Culture, Expression, and Creativity*, ed. Barbara Rothermel, Vol. 3. 3rd ed, (Xlibris Corporation, 2005), 499.
[2] John Canaday, *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, 2nd ed. (United States: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, Inc., 1987), 73.
[3] Ibid., 67.
[4] Washington Irving, "Tales of the Alhambra," 497.
[5] John Canaday, *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, 67.

paint in individual strokes of color called *flochetage*, which was a part of the color theory he developed. His inspiration for his use of color came from John Constable's *The Hay Wain*, 1821. Rather than blending the colors, Constable left the spots juxtaposed, requiring more participation from the viewer. After this initial inspiration, Delacroix experimented with color for the rest of his career, resulting in new considerations for the impressionists. Delacroix did not believe that a blue object was solely blue. According to physics or the artist's interpretation, it could contain any other color in order to unite different forms. This blue object might be highlighted with purple and orange, or a pinky flesh may contain flecks of green in the shadows. Delacroix described his reasoning for his use of color: "When we look at the objects around us, we observe a sort of *liaison* between them, produced by the atmosphere that envelopes them and by all kinds of reflections which somehow make each of them partake of a general harmony."[6] Delacroix's style of painting allowed form and color to enhance one another; color became both the foundation and expression of his paintings.

Delacroix's second and more famous version of *The Lion Hunt*, 1861, is, visually, a Romantic work. It depicts the exoticism of a foreign culture as Moroccan men are in the midst of a battle with two lions. The artist, however, does not focus on the individuals or on a specific moment in time, as would be the focus of a typical Romantic painting. Delacroix instead captures a collective representation of emotions. Charles Baudelaire described Delacroix's work as, "a kind of remembrance of the greatness and native passion of the universal man."[7] Furthermore, the subjects of this work are not frozen in an instant. Their flowing drapery and graceful movements seem to suspend the hunt in time and allow the viewer to imagine the continuation of the hunters' and lions' actions. On the far left of the composition, a lion has

[6] Vernon Hyde Minor, *Baroque and Rococo: Art and Culture*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1999) 253.
[7] John Canaday, *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, 68.

knocked a horse to the ground, and its rider is depicted mid-fall. The reader is able to envision this entire sequence—from the lion's pounce to the rider's contact with the ground—because of Delacroix's loose brushwork and use of vibrant color.

For Delacroix, color was the point of departure. In *The Lion Hunt*, his innovative use of brilliant colors and the juxtaposition of complementary colors lends to the turmoil and the emotions in the painting. Delacroix is successful in capturing the motion and spirit of the hunt. Similarly, Irving describes the spirit of the Alhambra. Through a conversation in Spanish, a Moor reveals to Irving the Romanticism of times past: "[The Moors] thought only of love, music and poetry. They made stanzas upon every occasion, and set them all to music… In those days, if anyone asked for bread, the reply was, Make me a couplet" (sic).[8] Like Irving, Delacroix captures the Romanticism and spirit of the exotic with his loose strokes of color, by which the critics of the day were offended. Maxime Du Camp, a French critic, wrote that the color in *The Lion Hunt* "is at its most extravagant and verges on raging madness… As a classical writer once put it: Monsieur Delacroix is the leader, not of a school, but of a riot. This Lion Hunt is the height of eccentricity and does its utmost to rival the grotesque."[9] His defiance of contemporary norms through his style of painting helped to emphasize its Romantic qualities because it stressed the individuality of the artist, something for which Romantics strove.

While the use of color in *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, 1822, is not as innovative as in *The Lion Hunt*, this painting was Delacroix's first success. The theme was inspired by Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, in which an imagined portrayal of Virgil leads his successor over the River Styx. History often provides appropriate themes for neoclassical artists, but it was not only from this subject that Delacroix drew on the past; the figures depicted in the water surrounding Dante

[8] Washington Irving, "Tales of the Alhambra," 499.
[9] Roger Kimball, "Delacroix reconsidered. (Eugene Delacroix, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)," *New Criterion*, 17.1 (Sept 1998): 9(1), http://find.galegroup.com (accessed 25 November 2006).

and Virgil's boat were inspired by Michelangelo, an artist of the Renaissance who also looked to antiquity. The nude male alongside the boat bears a strong resemblance in form to the Adam in the creation scene of the Sistine Chapel.[10] These references to history are what lend classical elements to *Dante and Virgil in Hell* despite its classification as a Romantic work.

The Romanticism of this work is clearly recognized through the aspects of nature and the emotion of the subjects. The rough seas, in which Dante and Virgil stand, demonstrate that man is subjected to the power of nature. The fiery glow of the background gives the viewer a sense of impending doom. The intensity of this work is built upon by the expressions and emotive actions of the figures in the sea. Struggling to save himself, the central figure tries with all his strength to climb aboard the boat while another figure on the left bites the boat in agony. This emotion sets the reader on edge and creates a tension similar to that found in *Tales of the Alhambra,* when the Moor expresses his belief that the Alhambra should still rightly be under Muslim control. He believes that the treason of Boabdil, the son of a powerful ruler, led to the Moors' downfall and exclaims, "May the curse of God light upon him for his treachery!"[11]

There is a tension between the quintessentially Romantic works of Washington Irving and Eugène Delacroix because each emphasizes Romanticism differently. Irving's writing is so descriptive and emotional that it is anti-classical, while Delacroix's paintings combine emotion and intellect. Delacroix uses descriptive brushwork to convey emotion in *The Lion Hunt* and *Dante and Virgil in Hell* but executes his application of paint in a calculated and organized way. Contrasting this, imagination and nostalgia characterize *Tales of the Alhambra*, embodying Romanticism. Jacques-Louis David, a quintessential Classicist, stated, "Art should have no other

[10] John Canaday, *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, 68.
[11] Washington Irving, "Tales of the Alhambra," 500.

guide than the torch of Reason."[12] While Irving, Delacroix, and the Romantics would disagree with this claim, the ideals of Classicism and Romanticism were simply guides. When given the choice, an artist had to know whether he would allow his head, his heart, or a combination of both to lead him. Both movements produced timeless works of art, and sometimes a work contained both categories of ideals. According to Canaday, "creative genius transcends the limits of a category."[13]

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[12] John Canaday, *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, 06.
[13] Ibid., 68.