Eugéne Delacroix's MOROCCAN SKETCHBOOKS

By Mary Strupp
Abstract:
This paper covers one of the primary artistic leaders of French Romanticism, Eugène Delacroix. Specifically focusing on the main crux in his oeuvre, the French diplomatic mission to Morocco in 1832 along with the works he produced in this six-month period. While in Morocco, he kept detailed notes and sketchbooks about the surrounding culture and events that transpired. The sketchbooks and watercolors are of particular note and stand out in his life as a unique and inspiring artist journal. These illustrate theories of romanticism and the developing thought process to impressionism.
The Romanticist art movement first developed as an English literary movement in the late 18th century but grew to include the visual arts all throughout Europe. Romanticism emphasized emotion in a bold, dramatic manner. It wanted to depict nature in its untamed state, or other exotic settings filled with dramatic action, often with an emphasis on the past. It rejected the cool reasoning of Neoclassicism. Classicism was nostalgic, but Romanticism was more emotional, usually discontented, and even melodramatically tragic. The main goal of Romanticism was somewhat vague, except for the need to challenge art and the status quo. One figure, Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), stands out amongst 19th century French artists as a unique and fiery soul, able to blaze the way for those to flourish later. Delacroix was often described as the leader of the 19th century French Romantic movement. He would often reject the title due to his overall varying talent and his love of the old masters, and could not be defined by one movement alone.¹

Romanticism was the most important artistic movement within the early 19th century French avant-garde. Delacroix was typically defined as “avant-garde” in his time. Originally, “avant-garde” referred to the troops that marched at the head of the army.² Figuratively, avant-garde described any artist group or style that was considered to be significantly ahead of the majority in technique, subject matter, or application of an artistic medium. The avant-garde artist explored new artistic methods or experimented with new techniques to produce better art. Delacroix pushed the boundaries of painting into modernism with the use of improvisational, expressive mark-making and bold use of color that derived from his trip to Morocco in 1832. At his death, Delacroix was one of the most revered artists in France and a hero of the avant-garde.

Delacroix would participate in the break from Neoclassicism. Neoclassicism developed as a reaction to the Rococo period in the 18th century. It wanted to renew the ideals of ancient Greek and Roman art. The Neoclassicists used classical forms to express their ideas about courage, sacrifice, and a love for their country. Delacroix’s contemporary rival, Jean August Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), enforced Neo-classicism’s focus on the academic aspects of art. Romanticism emphasized the imagination, subjectivity, tendency for revolt, longing for the unknown and unattainable, and the primacy of the individual.

Deeply pessimistic, Delacroix was conservative in his views and manners. He disliked the 19th century and he hated progress.³ His predilection for pessimism helps explain his range of subject matter of pathos and tragedy.⁴ Theophile Silvestre (1823-1876) the French art critic and art historian noted that Delacroix defined the feelings of the Romantic movement and embodied the emotions of the artists of Romanticism: “But [Delacroix] is above all the man of our time full of moral anxiety, betrayed hopes, suffering, sarcasm, anger, and tears.”⁵

Early Years

Ferdinand Victor Eugène Delacroix was born in Charenton-Saint Maurice, the fourth child of Charles Delacroix and Victoire Obin. Charles Delacroix was Foreign Minister under the French government and Victoire Obin was the daughter of a renowned cabinetmaker to Louis XV (1710-1774). Victoire Obin also had a half-brother, Henri François Riesner, who had spent

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¹ Brigstocke, 2001, 175
² Mayer, 1991, 27
³ Harrison, 1996, 637
⁴ Harrison, 1996, 646
⁵ Theophile Silvestre, Histoire des Artistes Vivants, 1856. Quoted in Wright, 2001, 8
time painting at the Russian court. Their other children were Charles-Henry (1779-1845), who retired at the rank of general along with the title of Baron de l’Empire after the defeat of Napoleon; Henriette (1780-1827) who married Raymond de Verniauc Saint-Maur, “Former ambassador of the Republic to the Porte” in Turkey; and then Henri (1784-1807) who was killed at the battle of Friedland (1807).

The Delacroix family would move to advance the political career of Charles Delacroix, first to Marseille in 1800 when Charles Delacroix was named Prefect. They moved to Bordeaux in 1803, where Charles Delacroix served as Prefect until his death in 1805. Even though Charles Delacroix’s involvement in Eugène’s life was relatively short, the residual effects of his political career and their social status provided Eugène Delacroix with necessary connections later on in his career.

After his father’s death the Delacroix family returned to Paris where Mme Delacroix took up residence with her daughter Henriette de Verninac. Eugène attended the Lycée Impérial (Louis le Grand) to study classics, philosophy, history, and literature. He remained there from 1806 until 1815. During these years, Delacroix won his first honorable mention in a drawing competition. 7

Charles Delacroix’s death in 1805 left his family in a precarious financial situation. In 1814, Napoleon I abdicated and Louis XVIII was crowned king. That September, Mme Delacroix died when Eugène was sixteen, leaving her children in even more dire financial circumstances. 8 Eugène was left in the care of his sister Henriette. Financial problems strained relations between the siblings. Eugène Delacroix’s childhood was riddled with financial issues, which climaxed just when he needed to choose his career. He had always admired his uncle, the painter Henri-François Reisner (1767-1828), and was encouraged by his own artistic success. Reisner was aware of Delacroix’s interest in the arts and was able to introduce him to the Neo-classicist painter Pierre-Narcisse Guérin (1774-1833). 9

In October of 1815, Delacroix entered Guérin’s studio for Neo-classicist instruction. Early in Guérin’s artistic career, he won the most prestigious award for young French artists, the Prix de Rome. 10 Guérin was a natural teacher who attracted sons of the middle class as his pupils. An attractive feature of his instruction was the fact that Guérin realized he did not need to reproduce clones of himself. Instead, he helped students to develop their most important artistic qualities on their own. His students were taught linear perspective which Delacroix never mastered; copying while subtly idealizing the studio model, reproducing the approved antique techniques and devotion to line. 11 This classical instruction had little effect on Delacroix, however.

Instead, to quench his thirst for artistic inspiration, Delacroix copied the old masters Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, and Rubens in the Louvre. 12 While using the Louvre as a resource, he was able to explore Michelangelo’s modeling of figures and the semblance of life or even death that he brought to a canvas. Delacroix was drawn mostly to Ruben’s works and started exhibiting aspects of Rubénisme in his color and brushwork. Rubénisme is the set of guidelines stating that color and texture, rather than form and detail, were the most important element in an artwork. Rubénisme came about as a reaction to Poussinisme, which valued the prominence of drawing and the linear style of Nicholas Poussin (1593-1665). Both of these were

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7. Wright, 2001, 10
8. Wilson-Smith, 1992, 35
9. Harrison, 1996, vol 8, 638
10. Wilson-Smith, 1992, 44
11. Wilson-Smith, 1992, 44
12. Landi, 2002, 15
active movements during the Baroque period, which Delacroix was drawn to as a source of inspiration in the Louvre.

Theodore Gericault (1791-1824) would occasionally come to draw from the nude at Guerin’s studio at the time. Gericault exhibited a multifaceted genius, but was never able to reach his full potential due to his early death. He gained much of his knowledge from making copies of the old masters in the Louvre.13 Gericault also had a unique interest in human psychology and made portraits of the insane (1822). These works would later be known as his portraits of madness.14 His compositions also favored the dynamically energetic Baroque exuberance of Rubens. His fascination with the macabre, his interest in modern subject matters, and the sense of realism in his work became many of the key developments for later 19th century painting.15 Gericault was known as an extremely passionate man with a love for living recklessly and embraced drama.16 All of these traits made Gericault an inspiration for artists to follow in his footsteps, most specifically Delacroix.

Delacroix encountered Gericault several times in Guerin’s studio. Gericault was several years older than Delacroix, but they were comfortable acquaintances. Delacroix stated fondly about Gericault,

“Although he received me familiarly, the age difference and my admiration for him put me in the position of a respectful student in regard to him. He had been with the same teacher (Guerin) and when I was starting out, I had already seen him as a famous painter, do several studies at the studio. He let me see his Medusa while he was working on it in a peculiar studio he had near Ternes. The impression that I got of it was so vivid that when I left I ran like a madman all the way to rue du la Planche, where I was living then.”17

Delacroix even modeled for the Raft of the Medusa in 1818. In 1820, Gericault asked Delacroix to take over a government commission for the cathedral of Nantes: The Triumph of Religion; completed in 1820, currently at the cathedral of Ajaccio.18

In 1816 Delacroix entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. This opened his life up to new sources of inspiration in the form of new friends and fellow artists, along with a traditional academic education. Many of his contemporaries had thought of themselves as self-taught artists, whose real school was the rich resources of the Louvre. Among the copyists, he met the young English watercolorist Richard Parkes Bonington (1801-1828) who was four years younger than Delacroix.19 During this period, Delacroix and Bonington shared a studio together in Paris, becoming close influences on one another. His usage of watercolor became a major influence on Delacroix. He was later inspired by his friend to travel to London in 1825.

One of the first works Delacroix submitted to the Paris Salon of 1822 was The Barque of Dante (Fig. 1), which was accepted. This particular work had the common theme of a fragile craft in rough water, derived from Gericault’s Raft of the Medusa. Its composition combined elements of both Michelangelo and Rubens. Delacroix depicted swaying upright figures and horizontal naked bodies of the doomed who cling to the boat.20 This particular piece had the fictional literary subject matter of Dante Alighieri’s Inferno as its source. The palette he chose was somber in tone, but rich, The Barque of Dante made use of unblended colors that would only take on a cohesive form when viewed from a distance. This would later become a key technique for the Impressionists, especially Claude Monet (1840-1926). With its unusual techniques, The

14 Brigstocke, 2001, 278
15 Brigstocke, 2001, 278
16 Landi, 2002, vol.2. 100
17 Manuscript memoirs of Delacroix, cited in Piron, Delacroix, Sa vie et ses œuvres, 61
18 Sérullaz, 1998, 16
19 Jobert, 1997, 25
20 Turner, 1996, 638
Barque of Dante received mixed reviews but helped Delacroix get a foothold in the French Art world.

Then Géricault’s premature death in 1824 affected Delacroix deeply,

“What a different fate seemed promised by such a strong body, so much fire and imagination! Although he was not exactly my friend, this calamity breaks my heart. It has made me avoid my work and erase everything that I had done.”21

The Salon of 1824 exhibited Delacroix’s *The Massacre at Chios* (1824) (Fig. 2), which was shown along with several other works. This particular work was large and was inspired by contemporary events in the Greek war of Independence.22 *The Massacre at Chios* was a way to display Delacroix’s personal reactions against the genocide by the Sublime Porte (Turks) against the Greek people on the island of Chios. Before this painting was created, Delacroix knew nothing about Greece or the Turks. The imagery was solely based on newspaper reports, eyewitness accounts and studying costumes and accessories in the collection of his friend, the amateur painter M. Auguste Vacuierie (1819-1895). The public received *The Massacre at Chios* positively, but conservative critics labeled this piece “The Massacre of Painting.”23 At the same time *The Massacre at Chios* was on display at the Salon, the English artist John Constable’s *Haywain* was also showing. The *Haywain* had an effect on Delacroix unlike anything he had ever seen before with its innovative brushwork that even caused Delacroix to repaint the background of *The Massacre at Chios*.24 The French government purchased *The Massacre at Chios* for 6,000 francs, which then enabled Delacroix to travel to England for the summer of 1825.

Delacroix was exposed to more of the landscape works of John Constable when traveling through England in 1825. John Constable’s luminous tonalities became a lasting influence on Delacroix and led to creating lighter change in color. Copley and Thalès Fielding’s works were also available to Delacroix while in England with their luminous landscape watercolor techniques.25 These both became a strong influence that carried through all of his later works. *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827), (Fig. 3) was the next notable work that Delacroix submitted to the Salon. This piece provoked more hostility than any other previous painting. Delacroix was even warned by the minister of the Fine Arts to make a change in style to keep receiving State commissions.26 The scene itself was conceived from Delacroix’s own imagination, which stirred up the public’s opinion on the painting. *Death of Sardanapalus* was based on Lord Byron’s play, *Sardanapalus* (1821), the last king of Assyria. The story is of the legendary Assyrian king aware of military defeat destroying all of the possessions that gave him pleasure before committing suicide. The scene that Delacroix depicted differed from the end of the play, where Sardanapalus commits suicide on a pyre with his favorite concubine, Myrrha.27 It was a difficult composition, with tangled bodies set in a frieze-like foreground. His treatment of color gives off a whirling chaotic expression fit for such a gruesome topic. The women’s bodies surrounding the tall dais are reminiscent of writhing flames, twisted about in anguished complex positions. With negative responses to *Death of Sardanapalus*, it had caused Delacroix a loss in favor with public commissions. Despite the loss of public interest, this period of disapproval

22 Turner, 1996, 638
23 Landi, 2002, vol. 2, 16
24 Jobert, 1997, 70
25 Jobert, 1997, 94
26 Turner, 1996, 640
27 Jobert, 1997, 81
allowed Delacroix to experiment with topics he wanted to explore such as animal studies of lions and tigers, oriental scenes, sensuous nudes, and chaotic battles.  

His next work, *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) (Fig. 4) was the work that garnered Delacroix the most fame. It’s one of the best-known works of French Romanticism, combining fact with allegory. It represents a scene witnessed by Delacroix near Pont d’Arcole that occurred during the French July Monarchy of 1830. Portraying the heroic struggle for freedom from the oppression of the monarchy, it called to the hearts of the public. The allegorical depiction of France, modeled after a portrait of a young working class woman, commands attention in the piece. She is shown bare breasted and unashamed, hoisting the flag of France behind her to rally the common people. Overall, the piece had a sobering mood compared to Delacroix’s other pieces and it used more muted colors to help the emphasize on the realism of history taking place. The public and the critics were united in their praise of Delacroix and his art. *Liberty Leading the People* even earned Delacroix the Légion d’Honneur, from the government of King Louis Philippe.

**Events Leading To Morocco**

Delacroix’s trip to North Africa occurred due to prior political problems that needed resolution. During the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815), the British had assaulted the port of Algiers to punish the French. What made the situation worse was the fact that the French took a diplomatic incident and blew it out of proportion. Hussain, the Dey of Algiers slapped the French consul Duval with his fan. Charles X (1757-1836) turned this diplomatic blunder into an excuse for an all-out war. Charles X had nearly half of the French army already in Northern Africa just before he was overthrown in a domestic revolution. The new king Louis Philippe (1773-1850) had inherited the conflict with Algiers from the overthrown Charles X.

After the 1830 Revolution succeeded, King Louis Philippe had to decide if the war that Charles X started should continue and, if so what benefits it would produce. He owed his new position as king to the revolution that put him there. Their original intention for the revolution was to install a constitutional monarchy. Louis Philippe considered that a colonial war would give employment to ageing Napoleonic veterans who had turned on the Bourbon forces in Paris. A colonial war would also restore France’s prestige and glory in the western world. On the other hand, Louis Philippe wanted to make sure that Algiers could not call for aid to start a larger Islamic holy war against the French infidels. He made sure of this by displays of French military power in the straits of Tangier with French warships. He concluded that the course of action to take was with the taking of Algiers in 1830, essentially seizing Algeria as a colony. The seizing of Algeria and the war with France had adverse consequences. The neighboring country of Morocco was trying to avoid war with France. Morocco was already welcoming Algerian refugees into their boarders. France’s retaliation to this was that they executed two Moroccans as spies.

King Louis Philippe wanted to attempt to repair the serious diplomatic conflict with neighboring Morocco with several main goals. The mission was given to ambassador Comte Mornay in 1831 to resolve the countries’ differences. One of the first objectives was to obtain

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28 Eitner, 2000, 218-219  
29 Turner, 1996, 640  
30 Eitner, 2000, 219  
31 Neret, 1999, 51  
32 Wilson-Smith, 1992, 93-94  
33 Wilson-Smith, 1992, 94  
34 Neret, 1999, 51  
35 When Charles X was still in power.
the safe return of three French ships that were taken by Algerian forces and kept in Morocco’s ports.36 The second was to settle the boarders of the new colony between countries.

Mornay had apprehensions about being assigned to a mission that would last several months in tense foreign territory. He had an idea to add an artist to the trip to document and to make the long days away from Paris a bit more bearable.37 So he began his search for an accompanying artist. Delacroix’s chance to join this trip was due to his social connections through his old acquaintance with Duponchel, the Director of the Paris Opera. The connection was a Mlle Mars.38 Mlle Mars was a celebrated middle-aged actress and a favorite mistress of comte Mornay. She suggested Delacroix as an alternate traveling companion for comte Mornay in Lettres Intimes (1832),

“Eugène Lacroix [sic.], a young painter with wit, talent, worldliness, and excellent character, which is not to be despised if you have to spend four or five months together and probably suffer some privations, for the trip is not easy or agreeable in all respects, and resolution is necessary; it is Duponchel who introduced them. Charles [Mornay] definitely did not want to go alone and I understand it; he first thought of the younger Isabey, the son, but he had been to Algeria and he refused, not tempted by curiosity; then I asked Duponchel to find someone amongst his artists acquaintances who would be happy to make the trip, and the thing was arranged to the great satisfaction of both parties. The government gave its permission and our diplomat has gone in good amiable company.”39

Delacroix was also chosen for this trip for his fame as a history painter with exotic places in the Near East such as Greek and Mesopotamian subject matter, for example his works Massacre at Chios and Death of Sardanapalus.40

Before this, Delacroix had not traveled much.41 Most of his travels were local, visiting friends and family or at a doctor’s recommendations. Delacroix dreamed of visiting places like Egypt and Syria, like Antoine-Jean Gros and Lord Byron, but that seemed remote until this opportunity presented itself.42 He never purposefully sought out a foreign region where he could surround himself with unfamiliar motifs.

He barely had a month to prepare for the diplomatic excursion. Delacroix wrote animatedly,

“My dear friend, I am about to take off for a fairly important affair. I will probably leave for Morocco next week. Don’t laugh; it’s perfectly true. I am therefore very harried.”43

The French government accepted his joining the embassy on the condition that he had to pay for his own food and expenses, since the Royal Treasury was only funding transportation for the voyage.44

Before his trip to Morocco, Delacroix had only second-hand knowledge of North Africa,45 derived from the influence of Orientalism. Orientalism is a popular western concept during the 19th century that refers to the depiction of aspects of Near Eastern cultures. It arose out of the public fascination in exploration and learning about other cultures vastly different from the West. The problem with Orientalism was how the near east appeared in art. Many artists depicted oriental subject matters were on stereotypes or literature from people that traveled to the East, rather than knowledge from traveling themselves. Orientalism skewed perceptions of what the Near East truly looked like. In France, Orientalism had a larger presence, since the most prestigious painters chose to depict eroticized Orientalist subjects. The trip to North Africa would allow Delacroix to create a reference for exotic Arabic subject matter that would be true to life, and break the stereotypes set by Orientalism. Delacroix appeared unaware that the 1830’s

36 Jobert, 1997, 140
37 Jobert, 1997, 140
38 Jobert, 1997, 140
39 Jobert, 1997, 140
40 Wright, 2001, 71-72
41 Jobert, 1997, 140
42 Wright, 2001, 69
43 Delacroix, Correspondence vol.1, 502
44 Neret, 1999, 51
45 Jobert, 1997, 140
were full of turbulent change for North Africans, and that these changes were primarily due to Western power and influence. Also, he had no knowledge of Arabic. Delacroix’s watercolors and sketchbooks from North Africa suggest a sense of detachment and separation for the sake of clarity and truth due to the strict limited access to the people and the interior of their homes.

Between January and July of 1832, Delacroix accompanied comte Mornay to Morocco, Algeria, and Spain. Delacroix brought many artistic materials and media to document the diplomatic voyage. These materials would develop into his extensive and detailed notes, sketches, and watercolors. These provided him with a wealth of material to work from for the rest of his life. His accompanying personal correspondences to friends also offered an intimate and unique view of North Africa from a Western viewpoint, being as true to life as possible.

Morocco

The trip to North Africa and his corresponding sketchbooks and watercolors mark a distinct crux in Delacroix’s oeuvre. His work, while traveling in North Africa, also posed a completely new set of challenges for a painter so used to his Parisian studio and the availability of female models. The delegation was to spend six months in North Africa, mostly in Morocco, especially in the port city of Tangier. With this excursion, Delacroix was put into contact with a civilization and people whose customs few artists had known before, and that he could not have imagined before his departure. This small stop at the beginning of his travels gave Delacroix a vivid first impression of Spain, which he wrote emotionally, “All Goya throbbed around me.” Delacroix would be able to deepen his impressions of Spain at the end of the North African embassy trip several months later. The delegation then sailed for the port of Tangier.

The embassy arrived in Tangier (Fig. 5) on January 24th 1832. As far as Europeans were concerned, Tangier was the most crucial city in the country, a bustling major trade post, across from Gibraltar, commanding the Straits. The delegation stayed six weeks in total in Tangier. Upon arriving in Tangier on the French warship La Perle, Delacroix wrote to a friend of his first exciting experiences:

“I have just gone through the city. I am giddy with all that I have seen… we have landed amid the most extraordinary people…A person needs twenty arms and forty-eight hours in a day to do a passable job conveying all of this…I am at this moment like a man who dreams and who sees things he fears will escape him.”

Right after they arrived in Morocco on January 25, 1832, the holy month of Ramadan began. There was also the death of one of the Sultan’s brothers that prevented the trip from traveling to Meknes where the Sultan resided. As they waited to receive word from the Sultan to resume their diplomatic mission, Delacroix immersed himself in the rich secular cultures and

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46 Turner, 1996, 641
47 Jobert, 1997, 142
48 Wilson-Smith, 1992, 105
49 Jobert, 1997, 141
50 Wright, 2001, 73
51 Wilson-Smith, 1992, 100
traditions. While assimilating, he wrote to a friend of the architecture and culture, and even how
lush the simplest aspects could be:

“The picturesque is all around you. At every step there are ready-made pictures, which
would make the fame and fortune of twenty generations of painters. You believe yourself
in Rome or Athens without Atticism, but with the robes, togas, and a thousand other of
the most authentic touches. A scoundrel who repairs the upper part of your shoe for a few
pennies has the dress and the bearing of a Brutus or Cato of Utica.”

While in Tangier, he frequently visited the home of the British representative, Sir
Drummond Hay. Both Sir Drummond and Delacroix shared a love of horses. Sir Drummond’s
wife also had some talent as a watercolorist that Delacroix was interested to see. Delacroix’s
time in Tangier was mostly filled with sketching in various mediums. His routines were well
established after the second week in Tangier. Delacroix had thought he had found Greek and
Roman antiquity, alive, hidden away in North Africa. His North African sketchbooks show rich
picturesque vignettes of the native people as well as everyday objects, making them out to be
amazing live historical finds that had to be documented (Fig. 6 and 13). Delacroix was not
accustomed to the stronger light of North Africa. His style evolved significantly in North Africa.
The bright light enabled Delacroix to see color in a more vivid manner, giving his colors a jewel-
like sparkling quality.

“Even when the sun is not yet very strong, the glare and the reflection of the houses, all
of them painted white, tire me greatly.”

Delacroix would later be able to reflect on the topic of light and color again in his Notes for a
Dictionary of the Fine Arts,

“Light is a veritable accident: all true colorists consist in this- I mean color that gives the
impression of depth and of the radical difference that must distinguish one object from
another.”

He also began using a personal technique of vibrating adjacent tones.

Despite the exhaustion and discomfort of travel, Delacroix did not let a single detail of
the grand panorama of North Africa elude him. He was aware that this excursion was his only
chance to travel to an exotic region, and this gave his sketches and watercolors a sense of quick
accuracy. He aimed to capture every detail, drawing rapidly, even from horseback. He kept
meticulous accounts of his travels by adding all of the minute details, such as color, light, and
texture in annotated form. This was so when he returned to Europe, the memories and smaller
intricacies could be recalled (Fig. 6). The amount of subtle detailing he had put into his ‘painters
notes’ is obvious in some of these examples:

“The shadow of white objects, highly reflected in blue, the red of saddles and the turban,
almost black;” “Observed the shadows that stirrups and feet form. Shadow always
outlining the curve of the thigh and the lower leg… the spur and the clip of the harness
breastplate very flat white. Gray horse. Bridle, worn white velvet”

Few of these sketches and watercolors were ever made into paintings, but all of the notes and
colors he recorded daily provided him with a vibrant source of inspiration and reference for
many years to come.

Delacroix encountered several situations of the negative view that Moroccans had of
artists, especially European artists. He would try to get around these prejudices to draw by any
means necessary,
“Little by little I am insinuating myself into the ways of the country, so that I can easily draw many of these Moroccan figures. They have enormous prejudices against the fine art of painting, but a few coins here and there settle their scruples. I am making excursions into the outskirts by horse, which gives me immense pleasure, and I have moments of delectable indolence in a garden at the gates of the city, under the profusion of orange trees in flower and covered with fruit.”

The suggestion that prejudices were easily put aside with bribery is misleading. The hostility of the Moroccans was not aimed at art itself, but towards him as a foreigner. This was especially due to the recent conflicts between the French and the Moroccans caused by France’s taking of Algeria, which borders with Morocco. To avoid confrontations and cultural blunders, Delacroix frequently would draw in a crowd, occasionally safeguarded by regiments of soldiers and by his guide, interpreter and dragoman of the French consulate, Abraham ben-Chimol. Ben-Chimol would say when Delacroix was safe to have his sketchbook out.

Delacroix wrote of his frustrations about being excluded from most of the local peoples, “This people is completely antique. This exterior life and these houses carefully closed: the women retired.”

Muslim men were everywhere visible, even in ways that seemed to render their private behaviors public, but Muslim women remained everywhere invisible. Their private houses and terraces were off limits, especially to foreigners. To remedy the lack of access to the local women, he turned to Jewish women (Fig. 10). Jewish women and their households were more accessible to him, thanks to the mediation of Abraham ben-Chimol. To compensate for the lack of Moorish women as an authentic reference, he drew the Jewish women as the Muslim women to fit the part he required.

While still in Tangier, he was able to attend a Jewish wedding and take meticulous long notes. Much later he made this into the painting *Jewish Wedding In Morocco* (Fig. 11). The décor of the *Jewish Wedding in Morocco* had the benefit of copious detailed notes and sketches. The piece is a replica of the watercolor version in his sketchbook (Fig. 9). It was exhibited at the Salon of 1841, after *The Women of Algiers in their Apartment* in 1834. (Fig. 16)

Authorization to travel to Meknès (Fig. 12) was finally granted on February 15, 1832. Abraham ben-Chimol and his nephew joined the embassy troop traveling to Meknes. The Moroccan authorities also escorted the embassy because the roads were not always safe. On their travel from Tangier to Meknes, Delacroix had many prime opportunities for sketching. To accommodate the Europeans, short stops were added into their journey. These short stops allowed Delacroix even closer contact with various Moroccan villages and people, allowing new experiences and sketches to be made daily. On the 15th of March, the convoy finally reached the imperial city of Meknes. They would spend three-weeks there. Once the embassy reached Meknes, the amount of freedom Delacroix was able to exercise while in Tangier for sketching was severely diminished due to cultural and political protocol.

In Meknes, the population was less accustomed to Europeans. The atmosphere was completely different from Tangier, to Delacroix’s disappointment, and even less welcoming. Their arrival in Meknes was long and tense, with the sultan ordering everyone in the city to have a good time and entertain the embassy, under threat of severest penalties. Delacroix wrote to a friend of the strange pomp and circumstance that they were subjected to,

“We knew that during the reception for the Austrians, who came six months ago, a dozen men and fourteen horses were killed by accident. Our little group found it hard to keep

62 Sérullaz, 1998, 246
63 Wright, 2001, 76
64 Wright, 2001, 76
66 Wright, 2001, 78
67 Neret, 1999, 57
68 Jobert, 1997, 145
69 Jobert, 1997, 146
together and to keep in touch amidst the thousands of rifle shots that went off in our faces.”

Delacroix also wrote of the cacophony that lasted from morning till afternoon and how their entry into Meknes felt like they were being marched to the gallows. The embassy was conducted to the sultan’s guesthouse where the party was told they were to remain in isolation for 8 days total until the imperial audience. They were instructed to do this mostly for protocol reasons, but also for security reasons. To stay confined in each other’s company and in one building for so long put the party in a restless mood. Delacroix’s artistic inspiration weakened the more he was forced to be in one spot,

“...the sensations wear out after awhile and the picturesque so blinds your eyes at every step that you end up by becoming insensitive to it.”

Finally on the 22nd of March, the embassy was able to have their official audience with the sultan. The audience was followed by a tour of the royal apartments within the palace. The tour of the royal apartments was actually a rare occurrence and a mark of favor for their company. The day after their audience with the sultan, the group was allowed to see Meknes, but without the same freedom as the delegation had in Tangier. If anyone from the embassy wanted to travel about the city, they had to be escorted by soldiers, which annoyed Delacroix. When he would go out, natives of the city would create a crowd and would push and shove to be able to make faces and throw insults directly to Delacroix’s face. Even drawing the simplest of things within the city was difficult,

“I’ve spent most of my time here extremely bored because it has been impossible to be seen drawing from nature, even a tumbledown house; even going up on the terrace exposes you to stones or gunshots. The Moors are extremely jealous, and the women usually go to the roof terraces to get some fresh air or to see one another.”

His correspondences show what he truly felt, “how tempted one feels to get angry”. His sketches of these incidents display some of this violence (Fig. 6).

During their stay, the sultan also arranged for the embassy to visit his stud farm and his personal zoo. He even sent the embassy his personal musicians one evening as a source of entertainment. The negotiations went forward on the disputes between France and Morocco. The negotiations ended on 4th of April, and the embassy was able to start their trip back home. They took gifts from the sultan including a lion, a tiger, two ostriches, two gazelles, an antelope and four stallions for the king of France. Each member of the embassy also received a horse from the Sultan, including Delacroix. They left Meknes on April 5th and reached Tangier on the 12th.

While in Tangier, there was another waiting period while the open letter they received at Meknes during the negotiations had to be approved by Paris and then sealed by the Sultan.

Back in Tangier, Delacroix wrote of his impressions of the Moroccans,

“We notice a thousand things they lack. Their ignorance gives them peace and happiness: we perhaps have reached the final stage of what a more advanced civilization can produce. They are closer to nature in a thousand ways. Their costume; the shape of their sandals. Also beauty goes with everything they do. We by contrast with our corsets, our rigid shoes and our stiff clothes. We have gained technology, they have preserved grace.”

They were picked up on the 10th of May by La Perle for a short stay in Spain. The ship landed at Cadiz on the 16th of May and they were able to explore after a week of quarantine to make sure that there was no chance of cholera. The delegation was able to stay in Spain for a
For Delacroix, the visit to Spain was first a prolongation of his Moroccan trip. It was also a confirmation of what he had experienced with the works of the Spanish artists Velasquez and Goya. Delacroix was able to make some quick notes in his notebook and some twenty drawings. He wrote one important letter of his experiences in Spain.

“I saw Cadiz, Seville, etc. In this short time, I have lived twenty times more than in several months in Paris. I am very glad to have been able to get an idea of this country. At our age, when one misses an occasion like that, it doesn’t come again. I found in Spain everything that I had left among the Moors. Nothing has changed but the religion; the fanaticism, incidentally, is the same.”

The embassy and Delacroix returned to Tangier for another week before leaving for France. During this weeklong period, Delacroix was able to purchase materials he promised he would buy for himself and as gifts for friends, such as Moroccan clothing and objects that he would also use later for reference. He kept these Moroccan keepsakes till his death.

La Perle left for France on June 10th, but it made a stop at Algeria from the 25th to the 28th. This last stop on the trip was where Delacroix was finally able to visit a harem. While in Morocco, he had had no chance to view the interior of a Muslim home, but he renewed his attempts while in Algiers, which was then a French possession. The chief engineer of the port, Poirel, put him in contact with one of his assistants who after negotiation, allowed Delacroix into his harem. Delacroix made no mention of visiting a harem in his notes, and his first account of the visit dates to 1833. The accounts of Delacroix’s visit were in retrospect, written by reminiscences of Mornay, Poirel, and the French painter Charles Cornault, who had lived in Algiers previously. This is Cornault’s retelling of that event.

Secrecy was promised on both sides. The woman, warned by her husband, dressed herself in the richest costumes and waited, seated on a divan. Algerian women are thought by the Orientals to be the most beautiful on the Barbary Coast. They know how to bring out their beauty by rich fabrics of silk and velvet, embroidered in gold…. When, after traversing some dark corridor, one penetrates the part that is reserved for them, the eye is really blinded by the vivid light, the fresh faces of the women and children appearing suddenly amid this mass of silk and gold. For a painter, that is a moment of fascination and strange happiness.

Delacroix could barely contain his excitement once he was finally within the confines of the harem, and wanted to ask the women everything about their life. The owner of the house acted as his interpreter and had a hard time following Delacroix’s animated rapid questions. Delacroix was able to note down the names of the women, along with making notes on the colors of their dress. (Fig. 14 and 15) Frequently, Delacroix would excitedly exclaim:

“It’s beautiful! It’s just like Homer’s time! The women in they gynoecium took care of her children, spun wool, and embroidered the most marvelous fabrics. This is woman as I understand her!”

He would later use the several sketches and notes produced from this encounter to create the sensational painting The Women of Algiers (1834)(Fig. 16).

At the end of the expedition, Delacroix noted in a letter his lasting impressions of North Africa and how it had changed his view on the importance of the modern lifestyle lived by the modern Western world.

“We are about to leave for poor France. Your newspapers, your cholera, your politics, all these things unfortunately detract me from the pleasure of going home, if you knew how peacefully men live here under the scimitar of tyrants; above all, how little they are concerned about all the vanities that fret our minds.”

On Sketchbooks

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78 Jobert, 1997, 146
79 Jobert, 1997, 147
80 Jobert, 1997, 147
81 Jobert, 1997, 147
82 Wilson-Smith, 1992, 107
83 Jobert, 1997, 147
84 Wilson-Smith, 1992, 108
85 Jobert, 1997, 147
86 Stewart, 1971, 193
The Moroccan sketchbooks produced became a truthful record of Delacroix’s North African experience. They offer an exciting and intimate look into Delacroix’s adventures in this new environment and how he handled the challenges. Delacroix’s work in Morocco brought forth a new sense of realism and a systematic use of colors and forms, calculated to help emphasize truth, but inventive too, to compliment his artistic style. According to the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire, Delacroix “had a passion for notes and sketches and made them wherever he was.” This was especially true in North Africa where creating art was his main goal every moment. Delacroix later wrote on the fundamental value of sketches in his Journal, “A fine suggestion, a sketch with great feeling can be as expressive as the most finished productions.”

Delacroix’s sketchbooks were done primarily in pen, charcoal, graphite, and sanguine, and they were frequently highlighted with watercolor. His sketch work can be rapidly sketched or sometimes carefully constructed and observed (Fig. 19). Delacroix’s work depended on nervous energy, and his approach was fluid, emotional and painterly. Some of his travel sketchbooks have barely any notes on color or situations, but others are laden with noted details too hard to capture in the entirety of their moment.

When Delacroix made oil paintings, he used traditional reddish brown base to unify his canvas and colors. The English painters John Constable and Richard Parkes Bonington led Delacroix to create lighter tonalities in color and a more energetic surface. When working with watercolors, he used white paper to help create a fresh and bright color that revealed his clear-cut vision uninhibited by time constraints or pre planning. The red, pink, and blue watercolor that Delacroix used in Morocco was exaggerated by the whiteness of the paper to capture the brightness of his surroundings. Delacroix’s watercolors show how he allowed himself to surrender wholeheartedly to nature.

The pen sketches that Delacroix produced would often use whorls, ovals, and spirals. He started at the inside of a sketch and worked his way outward, emphasizing importance on the main body of a figure. Delacroix stated that nature was a “dictionary” housing “words” that could be used in combination with anyway the artist chose. Throughout Delacroix’s career, he was avant-garde for the fact that he would experiment with many techniques, old or new, in strokes and color.

Many of his sketchbooks from North Africa have architectural motifs of windows, doors, archways, walls and battlements (Fig. 20). These all share the re-occurring theme of closed doors and forbidden entries, which defined a major portion of Delacroix’s trip. They were forced to stay confined to certain areas and not allowed into many homes because the Moroccan empire deliberately kept strict rules as to where visitors could be and what they could see. These sketches allude to possibilities that could have been if those areas were open to Delacroix at the time.

By the time Delacroix returned from North Africa, he had seven notebooks filled with drawings and watercolor sketches, but only three survived the trip. Most likely the rest of the

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87 Turner, 1996, 647
88 Marks, 1972, 246
89 Marks, 1972, 245
90 Turner, 1996, 644
91 Marks 1972, 248
92 Marks, 1972, 249: The oval shapes are called boules, which is a technique visible in Leonardo da Vinci’s works.
93 Marks, 1972, 249
94 Marks, 1972, 249
95 Turner, 1996, 645
96 Fraser, 2010, 142
97 Fraser, 2010, 144
pages of the sketchbook were torn and divided as gifts or used for other purposes. Delacroix later wrote in his Journal on the topic of the sketch versus a finished piece:

“Perhaps the sketch of a work is so pleasing because everyone can finish it as he chooses. The artist does not spoil the picture by finishing it; only, in abandoning the vagueness of the sketch he shows more of his personality by revealing all the range but also the limitations of his talent. To finish requires a heart of steel: one must make a decision about everything.”

Influence of Morocco on his later years.

There were a handful of large major works based on Delacroix’s sketches and notes from Morocco. They include, The Jewish Wedding in Morocco (Fig. 11), The Fanatics of Tangier (Fig. 17), The Sultan of Morocco and his Entourage (Fig. 18), and most notably The Women of Tangiers (Fig. 16). These paintings were each revisited several times in Delacroix’s later career, each revision changing with faded memories worn by years of distance.

Delacroix wrote years later in reflection on his North African journey, “I began to make something tolerable of my African journey only when I had forgotten the trivial details and remembered nothing but the striking and the poetic side of the subject. Up to that time, I had been haunted by this passion for accuracy that most people mistake for truth.”

After Morocco, Delacroix’s paintings and drawings were handled more freely and his colors became more opulent, vibrant, and deep.

Morocco is seen as Delacroix’s turning point in his artistic style, develop into his most mature style, which exhibited a concern for traditional subject matter and monumental works. His work after this point has a grander nature, but yet it is grounded in trying to represent a quieter truth. His work remained expressive, restrained, and yet massively powerful and monumental.

98 Marks, 1972, 254
99 Miller, 1998
100 Sérullaz, 1998, 248

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