

H-France Review Vol. 4 (November 2004), No. 111

Elisabeth A. Fraser, *Delacroix, Art and Patrimony in Post-Revolutionary France*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xi + 261 pp. Color plates and figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-521-82829-5.

Review by Heather Belnap Jensen, Brigham Young University.

In her excellent book, *Delacroix, Art and Patrimony in Post-Revolutionary France*, Elisabeth A. Fraser joins the ranks of scholars attending to the complex relationships between history and painting in the early nineteenth century.[1] This text frames Eugène Delacroix's early work in terms of the family metaphor, a conceit which is used to articulate how these paintings were bound up intimately in issues of inheritance, lineage, and authority. Because one of the defining characteristics of the artist's development and of Restoration culture was this anxiety over legitimacy, the author contends, this concern saturated his output during the 1820s, as manifest in works such as his *Dante and Virgil*, *Massacres at Chios*, and *Death of Sardanapalus*. Moving from Delacroix's personal quest to establish an appropriate artistic genealogy to the nation's concern over rightful political authority, Fraser builds a convincing case for the significance of patrimonial issues in the formation and reception of Delacroix's early history paintings.

This book follows the trajectory laid out in Lynn Hunt's *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, in which cultural developments are related to the rubric of the family.[2] Fraser contends that one of the primary issues at play in the reformulation of the political imaginary during the Bourbon Restoration was that of patrimony--defined as both cultural heritage and familial inheritance--and that Delacroix's paintings executed during the 1820s should be read as negotiations through this difficult enterprise of selecting father figures, establishing suitable familial bonds, and querying paternal authority. The pervasiveness of the family metaphor in Restoration culture is demonstrated by means of myriad examples from visual culture, ranging from celebrated Salon paintings to illicit popular prints. Fraser also makes abundant references to contemporary literature and administrative correspondence; the foregrounding of art criticism is particularly effective in outlining the variegated contours of the art world under the Bourbon monarchy. Writing in a clear and compelling fashion, Fraser urges the reader to consider the art of Delacroix as imbricated in the patrimonial discourses of the period.

In the first chapter, Fraser unpacks the issue of Delacroix's personal and artistic heritage. She enters into this subject by excerpting comments offered over the course of the last two centuries that suggest the artist's father was actually the statesman Talleyrand. This genealogical charting is an effective means of foregrounding how considerations of Delacroix have been framed in terms of origins and inheritance. Conventional discussions of the artist's training argue that he was essentially self-taught and thus, in true Romantic fashion, autogenerative. However, Fraser contextualizes Delacroix's casting about for artistic role models in such a way as to demonstrate that this quest was not just motivated by personal ambitions but was related to the leadership crisis in the school of the artist Jacques-Louis David. His search for potent father figures in the realm of art and culture--and concomitant construction of his own family romance--led him to Michelangelo, Dante, and Géricault; these artists celebrated a masculine virility that stood in contradistinction to the creeping feminization of David's followers and matched his vision of greatness.

The following two chapters are given over to considerations of how Delacroix's *Massacres at Chios* engages with national paternalism. Fraser argues that this work, conventionally viewed as anti-establishment and anti-monarchical, actually conforms to the dominant rhetoric of colonization that cast the French nation as the protector of the weaker constituents of the Western family. The painting, which was subtitled *Greek Families Awaiting Death and Slavery*, is situated amidst the plethora of contemporary paintings and prints focused on the family and is characterized as an epic treatment of a typically genre subject. The author gives close attention to the ways Delacroix made strange these relationships in order to remind the French public of the devastating effects of war on the family--and to further underscore the nation's obligation to unite in its cultural imperialism.

Furthermore, Fraser shows that the state's purchase of this painting signaled the paternalistic royal art ministry's desire to assert its power over private collectors and public taste. By linking this painting to current practices in art collecting and criticism, Fraser demonstrates how the *Massacres at Chios* was implicated in debates over the production, exhibition, and collection of art in Restoration France. Questions of political legitimacy and authority, as well as concern over control of the public sphere, were at the heart of these discussions. In one of the many instances in which the author disputes commonly held notions regarding Delacroix and his *oeuvre*, she shows that despite the appearance of an apolitical and egalitarian cultural policy, the Bourbon administration devoted much care and strategy to such matters. Concerned over how the fraternalism of private collectors and unruly nature of the press might undermine their authority, the royal art ministry was determined to maintain the upper hand. By means of extensive citations from debates carried out in the periodical press and appendices that include unpublished administrative correspondence related to the purchase and exhibition of Delacroix's early history paintings, Fraser firmly anchors such discussions.

In perhaps the most persuasively argued chapter in the book, Fraser shows how concern over the sacralization of the royal body informed the creation and reception of Delacroix's contentious *Death of Sardanapalus*. This painting foisted upon the French viewing public an incendiary representation of a polluted royal figure at a time when the legitimacy of the Bourbon monarchy was under attack. Pictured as a kind of emulation of David's *Death of Socrates* and repudiation of Devéria's *Birth of Henri IV*, the author declares that Delacroix's painting contested royal authority in a strident, inflammatory fashion. Fraser posits that the disordered figure in this painting emblemized the disarray of the royal household, a common subject in popular prints of the Restoration. The citations of numerous popular prints troping "a disordered, irrational, perverse, and gender-confused royal body" (p. 120) fortify the author's position that Delacroix's audience well understood the allusions made by his representation of Sardanapalus to the Bourbon monarchy (the author notes that the term "sardanapalien" was widely understood to signify a depraved ruler). Within her sustained analysis of this painting are eloquent, provocative descriptions of the means by which Delacroix achieved the effect of this desacralization, and one readily accedes that the tension described between the physicality of the paint and the disintegration of corporeality does indeed connote a stretching--even rupturing--of the royal body.

Fraser's use of the family romance conceit is apt, and her reading of Delacroix's early history paintings as manifestations of personal and cultural anxieties over patrimony is convincing. Also, the author successfully conveys the significance of the Restoration, a period which serves as "an essential passage between the Revolution and modernity" (p. 7).[3] That said, it is important not to gloss over how the intervening years of the Napoleonic era contributed to this discourse. Issues of inheritance, authority, legitimacy, and so forth were paramount in the years immediately following the Revolution proper, and certainly contributed to the development of the political imaginary during the Restoration. Moreover, the Napoleonic era was a critical time for the establishments of those patterns in art patronage, exhibition, and criticism that ultimately formed Delacroix's career. Perhaps even more attention could have been paid to this formative period.

One of the most significant contributions of *Delacroix, Art and Patrimony in Post-Revolutionary France* is that it declares the necessity of grounding this most quintessential of Romantic artists to the realities of Restoration culture. Fraser argues that conventional approaches to Delacroix's art of the 1820s--which insist upon its uniformly oppositional stance to monarchical rule and equate artistic avant-gardism with liberal political persuasions--deny the complexities attending this cultural production. Indeed, the artist's work was contentious to some extent with all factions in that its treatment of the relationship between the public and private, as well as the family and the state, marked these as contested arenas. She carefully situates Delacroix within the matrices of the early nineteenth-century French art world by outlining how significant shifts in patronage and exhibition opportunities, as well as developments within the paradigm of the school of David, affected the formation of his *oeuvre*. Fraser repudiates the notion that Delacroix suffered from ignominy in his early career by foregrounding his remarkable success as a young artist; she notes that the state purchased most of his early history paintings and commissioned several works from the artist, and that he had a retinue of powerful and wealthy private patrons. In the end, we are forced to acknowledge that Delacroix made choices guided by material, professional concerns and was not necessarily a renegade avant-gardist, as we are wont to believe. Moving in and out of the roles of founding father, trusted brother, and prodigal son, the figure of the artist Delacroix is allowed to emerge ambivalent.

To some degree, this text participates in the generational mode of interpreting developments in early nineteenth-century French art.[4] However, unlike other treatments of this subject that are not adequately historicized or that preclude women's involvement in this dynamic, this book intimates the constant gender negotiations at play in Delacroix's art specifically and in Restoration culture generally. It is a difficult task to argue for Delacroix's fascination with virile masculinity and paternal legitimacy, as well as the cultural saturation of the patriarchy, while simultaneously maintaining a sensitivity to gender ambiguities. While the topic of gender is addressed unevenly in the body of the text itself, the epilogue, "Gender and the Family Politics of the Restoration," articulates the need to consider more carefully this category in assessments of early nineteenth-century French culture, and lays the groundwork for much-needed scholarship on this subject.

Delacroix, Art and Patrimony in Post-Revolutionary France is an impeccably researched and cogently argued book that provides rich material for scholars in many fields. Although the figure of Delacroix is certainly the focus of this text, its scope extends well beyond the bounds of the traditional monograph. Indeed, Fraser's text offers promising alternative readings of developments in early nineteenth-century French culture.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, *Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) and Beth S. Wright, *Painting and History during the French Restoration: Abandoning the Past* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[2] Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

[3] Fraser is building upon the argument for the Restoration's historical significance given in Sheryl Kroen's *Politics and Theater: The Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815-1830* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

[4] Key examples of such meta-narratives include Thomas Crow, *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) and Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Heather Belnap Jensen
Brigham Young University
heather_jensen@byu.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 4 (November 2004), No. 111

ISSN 1553-9172