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The 'Elephants in the Room': A Political Interpretation of Eugène Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*

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Abstract

Eugène Delacroix's painting *The Death of Sardanapalus* is the epitome of French Romanticism: a violent tale set in the ancient Middle East, replete with vibrant color and brushwork. Critics, however, generally panned the work, and France's Director of Fine Arts, Sosthène de La

Rochefoucauld, withheld his recommendation that the work be purchased. Why was the painting considered so dangerous? A clue may be found in the elephant heads on the bedposts. While previous scholars have identified potential sources, the iconography and meaning of Delacroix's elephants have never been addressed. An examination of earlier artworks depicting elephants, including Delacroix's prints and drawings, supports a subversive political interpretation of the painting, one that de La Rochefoucauld felt was threatening to the regime of the Bourbon King Charles X.

Keywords

Eugène Delacroix – Sardanapalus – elephant – Romanticism – Bourbon Restoration

Eugène Delacroix's (1798–1863) *The Death of Sardanapalus* (**Fig. 1**) was described by the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire as 'a volcanic crater artistically concealed behind bouquets of flowers'.[1] With its complex composition, shocking subject matter, sensuous brushwork, and alluring color, it is the epitome of Delacroix's unique brand of French Romanticism and, arguably, one of the most famous paintings in art history. The largest of Delacroix's paintings displayed in the Salon of 1827–1828, it has inspired controversy from the time it was first exhibited to the present day. On the canvas is a bizarre and tumultuous scene, in which nude women, the king's concubines, are being brutally slaughtered: the voluptuous kneeling figure in the foreground struggles futilely against her attacker; others are already twisted in death. One woman lies sprawled across the bed, another hangs herself in the background. In the foreground,

[1] Baudelaire, *Opinion Nationale*, September 2, November 14 and 22, 1863, cited in L. Eitner, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism*, 129.

slave plunges a dagger into a magnificent horse, its eyes flashing in terror. At the right stands a pile of wood, intended to be the funeral pyre; at the far left, above the woman whose face is covered with her scarf, is the cupbearer who will light the fire. Next to the hanged woman, a eunuch prepares to slay another concubine, who has been thrown against the bed.

Amid the carnage reclines the introspective figure of Sardanapalus, stoically awaiting his death. The palace in the upper right is roiled by smoke and flames; in the foreground spills a cornucopia of treasures: translucent pearls, glittering gems, and other opulent objects. Two golden elephant heads with broken tusks decorate the bed's corners:[2] one just left of center (**Fig. 2**), and another on the right, whose face is mostly obscured by the male figure in front of it (**Fig. 3**).

The scene was inspired by Byron's poetic drama of 1821, which the young Delacroix had read in French. In his youth, Delacroix often dreamed of a career in writing; he wrote two novels when only a teenager, one of which was published long after his death, in 1960.[3] The young artist was fascinated by Byron and seems to have envied him his medium of poetry.[4] Delacroix's version of the tale had been changed, however, from its ancient source, a passage in *Diodorus Siculus II* (derived from the lost *Persica* of Ctesias), which describes the 'dissolute life and spectacular death of the ancient Assyrian king, Sardanapalus, the last descendant of Semirami'.[5]

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[2] Restoration of the painting was completed in 2023; the colors, including the warm yellows of the elephants, are now more vibrant than they appear in older photographs.

[3] See Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *Eugène Delacroix: Prints, Politics, and Satire*, 15, and 128, n. 7.

[4] Spector, *Delacroix: The Death of Sardanapalus*, 62.

[5] Farwell, 'Sources for Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*', 67.

Beatrice Farwell observed that the massacre scene does not appear in either Byron or *Diodorus*[6] and posits that it may have come from another play or literary work, although no direct source has ever been found.[7] John P. Lambertson suggests another possible source for the slaughter, the *Massacre of the Janissaries* by Delacroix's friend Charles-Emile Champmartin (**Fig. 4**).[8]

The *Sardanapalus* is listed in the second supplement to the catalogue as no. 1630; it was entered in the Salon in February of 1828, some months after the opening. The artist probably wrote the following Salon text himself, although Farwell argues that the quotation marks and suspension dots support her theory that he may have taken the text from the synopsis of a play or opera:[9]

> The refugees are besieged in his palace … Lying on a superb bed, atop an immense pyre, Sardanapalus orders his eunuchs and palace officers to slit the throats of his women, his pages, and his horses and favorite dogs; none of the objects that served his pleasure should survive him … Aïscheh, a Bactrian woman, will not allow a slave to kill her and hangs herself from the columns supporting the vault … Baleah, Sardanapalus's cupbearer, finally sets fire to the pyre and throws himself in.[10]

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[6] Farwell, 'Sources for Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*', 67.

[7] Farwell, 'Sources for Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*', 67ff.

[8] See Lambertson, 'Delacroix's *Sardanapalus*, Champmartin's *Janissaries*, and Liberalism in the Late Restoration', 69.

[9] Farwell, 'Sources for Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*', 68.

[10] Jobert, *Delacroix*, 82.

Byron's Sardanapalus is a bourgeois dandy, a fashionable and elegant gentleman; he is an epicure who 'prefers peace and pleasure to war and glory'.[11] Byron did not intend this play for representation on the stage; he wished to use it as an exemplar of the classical unities that would teach a lesson to those contemporary playwrights, who had, in his opinion, abandoned the classical rules of drama. In Byron's version, the entire court is evacuated in safety; although Sardanapalus had intended to die alone, his favorite concubine, Myrrha, who loves him deeply, lights the pyre and then springs upon it: 'Tis fired! I come'.[12] Delacroix's Sardanapalus, in contrast, is not like Byron's noble victim: his despot remains insolent and brooding in the face of death.

Critics assaulted both the space and form; the painting violated the artistic canons and the tastes of his contemporaries with what they considered clashing color combinations, excessive emotionalism, and a lack of clarity in the spatial setting. Delacroix's work opposed the academic standards of linear clarity and emotional restraint. Louis Vitet, an influential political journalist and critic interested in art, discussed the painting in *The Globe* on 28 March 1828: 'Until now we have excused rather than condemned the disorderly caprices of this young innovator; we hoped that his hotheaded temperament would become more moderate day by day, but here he goes beyond the bounds of independence and originality'.[13] Vitet also faulted the spatial construction:

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[11] Farwell, 'Sources for Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*', 67.

[12] Byron, 'Sardanapalus', 1821, III, II, 387ff, qtd. in Farwell, 'Sources for Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*', 68.

[13] Vitet, 'Beaux-Arts', *Le Globe*, 8 March 1828, 253, qtd. in Jobert, *Delacroix*, 81.

the composition, cut short at the sides, lacked order, he writes, and the spectator even feels threatened that '… the gigantic bed that takes up so much space will slide down on his head'.[14] 'Ch.', for whom 'the name Sardanapalus has become synonymous with all that is most ridiculous and vile about debauchery and cowardice', faulted the artist for his handling of the character (based on Byron): it was hardly credible to this critic that an 'effeminate prince should magically become a tactician and a warrior capable of defending Nineveh'.[15] 'Ch.' compared Delacroix's execution technically to Rubens, but outweighing the quality of his color are his faults of 'careless drawing' and 'confusion of the planes in the foregound'.[16] One of the few to defend the work was Victor Hugo: 'His *Sardanapalus* is a magnificent thing, and so gigantic that it escapes small views … this beautiful work … had no success with the Parisian middle class: whistles of idiots are fanfares of glory'.[17] For Hugo, the disdain of the bourgeoisie was the badge of genius.

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[14] Vitet, 'Beaux-Arts', *Le Globe*, 8 March 1828, qtd. in Spector, *Delacroix, The Death of Sardanapalus*, 81.

[15] 'Ch.', *Moniteur universel*, 29 January 1828, qtd. in Spector, *Delacroix, The Death of Sardanapalus*, 80.

[16] 'Ch.', *Moniteur universel*, 29 January 1828, qtd. in Spector, *Delacroix, The Death of Sardanapalus*, 80.

[17] Translation is my own. Hugo, *Le Figaro*, 3 April 1828, qtd. in Johnson, *The Paintings of Eugène Delacroix*, 1:120: 'Son Sardanapale est une chose magnifique, and si gigantesque qu'elle échappe aux petites vues … ce bel ouvrage … n'a point eu de succès près des bourgeois de Paris: sifflets des sots sont fanfares de gloire'.

Elisabeth Fraser found a previously unpublished letter of 11 March 1828, sent by Sosthène de La Rochefoucauld, France's Director of Fine Arts, to the comte de Forbin, in which he protested the placement of both the *Sardanapalus* and Champmartin's *Massacre of the Janissaries* (**Fig. 4**) in the Grand Salon of the Louvre, a 'distinction usually accorded only on the basis of merit'. He continued, 'You are aware that M. de la Croix's painting, specifically when it was submitted to the jury's scrutiny, was admitted only despite a division among the votes. The public has rightly complained of the distinction accorded the two paintings'. In an unusual move, he urged that they be replaced, saying 'I admit that I consider it my duty not to encourage a manner whose imitation would be so dangerous'.[18] It is not known whether the change was made.[19]

Fraser poses the question, 'What was the danger of Delacroix's painting that de La Rochefoucauld feared'?[20] Why attempt to hide it from the public? Certainly not merely because it broke the rules of drawing, space, and brushwork. Delacroix's *Massacre of Chios*, exhibited in the Salon of 1824, was 'violently controversial' (according to Alexandre Dumas, Baron Gros called it the 'massacre of painting'),[21] but it was nonetheless purchased by the state.

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[18] De La Roche-Foucauld, *Letter to the comte de Forbin*, 11 March 1828, qtd. in Fraser, *Delacroix, Art and Patrimony*, 116ff.

[19] Fraser, *Delacroix, Art and Patrimony*, n. 6, 215ff.

[20] Fraser, *Delacroix, Art and Patrimony*, 118.

[21] Dumas, *Causeries sur Eugène Delacroix*, lecture of 10 December 1864, qtd. In Jobert, *Delacroix*, 74.

On the same date of de La Rochefoucauld's missive, 11 March, Delacroix indicated in a letter to his friend Charles Soulier that he feared that the *Sardanapalus*'s poor reception would negatively impact his finances:

> I am bored with the whole Salon. They will end by persuading me that I have created a veritable fiasco … I say they are all idiots, this picture has its qualities and its fault, and if there are some things that would prefer, there are also a good many others that I am happy to have done and that I wish for them … All this is pitiful and not worth spending a moment on—except for what goes straight to the question of material interest, that is, *cash*.[22]

In another letter to Soulier of 26 April 1828, (which happened to be the artist's thirtieth birthday), Delacroix revealed that his fears had come to pass:

> I very recently had a little discussion with Sosthènes [de La Rochefoucauld]. The substance of it was that as long as I do not change my course I can expect nothing from that side [the state]. Heaven helped me keep calm during this conversation, in which this imbecile, who has neither common sense nor any sort of self-possession, was not at all calm. Today is the very day on which at two o'clock, the distribution of favors and honors will take place at the Museum. I'll stop writing now and tell you about it [later].

[22] Delacroix, *Letter to Soulier*, 11 March 1828, *Corr. Gén*., 1:213, qtd. in Jobert, *Delacroix*, 80.

> … Yesterday I went to this session. As I expected, the painting was not bought, and there were no commissions for the future … They mentioned neither my name nor anything I did … This shows that I'll have to turn to other ways'.[23]

It is striking that the contemporary responses to the Sardanapalus, whether indignant, scathing, celebratory, or tinged with humor, have ignored the elephants in the room: the political implications of the subject matter. The vast literature on Delacroix's *grande machine* has likewise ignored the elephants in the room, albeit in this case literally. There have been many attempts to determine the sources of the elephant bedposts,[24] but not their meaning. Why did Delacroix choose elephants? While some scholars in recent decades have discussed the political aspects of the painting, they are relatively rare, and none, to my knowledge, have addressed the iconography of the elephant heads.[25] One of the heads is just off center, an area of the composition with heavy visual weight, so the artist may have consciously decided to use an important motif in a prominent location.

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[23] Delacroix, *Letter to Soulier*, 26 April 1828, qtd. in Spector, *Delacroix: The Death of Sardanapalus*, 88.

[24] See, for example, Farwell, 'Sources for Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*', and Steinke, 'An Archaeological Source of Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*'.

[25] See Lambertson, 'Delacroix's *Sardanapalus*, Champmartin's *Janissaries*, and Liberalism in the Late Restoration'; Fraser, *Delacroix, Art and Patrimony in Post-Revolutionary France*; and Violin-Savalle, 'Qui était Sardanapale?'

The elephant image has been associated with multiple meanings since Antiquity,[26] its iconography intertwined with the stories drawn from art, politics, and natural history. It is possible that traditional elephant symbolism, conflated with political ideology, may have influenced Delacroix's choice of elephants for the bedposts in the *Sardanapalus*.

The elephant had long been used as a symbol of the monarchy in France. Henri Zerner believes that the *Royal Elephant* attributed to the workshop of Rosso Fiorentino,[27] a sixteenth-century fresco in the Gallery of Francis I at Fontainebleau (**Fig. 5**), was borrowed from an emblem register.[28] The west side of the room, where the *Royal Elephant* is located, celebrates the virtues and majesty of the monarch.[29] Its connection with royalty is made clear by the *fleur de lys* decoration on its trappings. The feathers atop the head ornament of the gigantic beast touch the top of the frame, and its feet nearly reach the bottom of the fresco, emphasizing its monumentality. The elephant was a symbol of power, wisdom, and royalty; it also represents chastity, and its presence may also allude to Francis's ability to control himself, a fitting characteristic for a ruler.[30] (The elephant was thought to be so modest that it would not engage in lovemaking while being watched.)[31] This theory is supported by the small stucco scene below,

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[26] For a detailed history of elephant imagery through the centuries, see Heckscher, 'Bernini's Elephant and Obelisk', 155–182.

[27] Zerner, in *Renaissance Art in France*, 84, attributes it to Rosso Fiorentino.

[28] Zerner, *Renaissance Art in France*, 82.

[29] Zerner, *Renaissance Art in France*, 91.

[30] Kilroy-Ewbank, 'The Gallery of Francis I at Fontainebleau'.

[31] Burkhardt, Jr., 'Keynote Address', 21.

that seems to show Francis I as Alexander the Great. The two scenes flanking the fresco depict tales of lust and rape, in contrast to the 'virtuous' elephant: Jupiter, as a bull, abducts Europa, and Saturn, as a horse, approaches Philyra.[32]

In the following century, French naturalists became acquainted with a live elephant given as a gift to Louis XIV by the king of Portugal. The pachyderm lived at the royal menagerie, where it was sketched by the Flemish painter Pieter Boel.

During the reign of Louis XV, architects saw the colossal proportions of the elephant as a 'potential expression of sovereignty' in built form.[33] The French architect-engineer Charles François Ribart de Chamoust proposed a monument to the monarch in 1758 for the Etoile Hill, then on the outskirts of Paris (**Fig. 6**). This rococo fantasy included an interior garden and a ballroom.[34] During the Directory in 1798, two live elephants were removed, or 'liberated', from the collection of the Dutch stadholder William V and were taken to France as spoils of war, symbols of France's military might; their names were Hans and Parkie.[35] To coax the pair to mate, a group of musicians attempted to create a romantic atmosphere by performing a concert for them. There was considerable concern for the creatures, as the elephant was considered the most intelligent of the animals, excepting humans;[36] its sense of decorum, and shyness when it

[32] Kilroy-Ewbank, 'The Gallery of Francis I at Fontainebleau'.

[33] Moon, 'The Sèvres Elephant Garniture', 85.

[34] Moon, 'The Sèvres Elephant Garniture', 85.

[35] E. Lipkowitz, 'The Elephant in the Room', 101.

[36] For a detailed account of the elephants and the myriad reactions they inspired, see Burkhardt, Jr., 'Keynote Address', 20ff.

comes to sexual behavior, has already been noted. The artist J.P. Hoüel spent two months studying Hans and Parkie and published a book on them.[37] A comparison of an illustration by Hoüel depicting the elephants caressing each other (**Fig. 7**) and the elephant bedpost at the right in the *Sardanapalus* (**Fig. 3**) reveals a similar spiral shape in both, curving in the same direction. While the spiral in Hoüel's illustration represents the two elephants' intertwined trunks, the peculiar, stylized curve on Delacroix's elephant seems to depict an ear, although it does not at all resemble an elephant's ear. In the painting, most of the animal's countenance is obscured by the figure in front of it, but its general contour recalls that of the left elephant in the distance in Hoüel's illustration. It is tempting to imagine that Delacroix looked at Hoüel's book, which was published in 1803; a book on natural history would be a likely source if he was seeking images of elephants.

After the Empire was established on 18 May 1804, Napoleon gathered his State Council to choose which of three animals should appear on the new state seal: the eagle, the lion, or the elephant. Jean-Charles-Joseph Laumond, one of the councilors, suggested the elephant, 'perhaps because he knew the *Royal Elephant* fresco (**Fig. 5**) in the Gallery of Francis I at Fontainebleau'.[38] Ultimately, the eagle was chosen. An elephant does appear, however, on a tapestry cartoon for the *portières* in the Gallery of Diana at the Tuileries, painted in 1810 by François Dubois after the designs of Jacques-Louis de la Hamayde de Saint-Ange (**Fig. 8**). In *Asia*, one in the series *The Four Parts of the World*, a female allegorical figure holding a censer

[37] Burkhardt, Jr., 'Keynote Address', 21.

[38] Samoyault, 'The Creation of Napoleon Symbolism', 52.

stands on a dado depicting exotic musical instruments in grisaille, flanked by the heads of a camel and an elephant. Asia's frontal pose, along with a symmetrical composition filled with richly textured weapons, regalia, and jewel-toned fruits, evoke the splendor and power characteristic of Napoleonic imagery. The *portières* would never be hung, however; they were not finished before the fall of the Empire.[39]

Another possible source to consider, perhaps more in terms of iconography than appearance, is Francisco de Goya's '*Animal Folly*' (**Fig. 9**) from the *Disparates* of around 1815–1819 (etching, aquatint and drypoint). Maurice Sérullaz has suggested that, despite some differences, the elephant depicted on a sheet of head studies by Delacroix (**Fig. 10**) could have been inspired by Goya's '*Animal Folly*' elephant[40]. It is known that Delacroix had viewed the *Caprichos*.[41] If Delacroix was, in fact, familiar with the Goya '*Animal Folly*', he may have also considered its message. George Levitine puts forth the possibility that emblem books may have inspired the political implications of Goya's image. Before the nineteenth century, he explains, writers associated the elephant with many benevolent qualities, such as patience, memory, and piety. Levitine also includes chastity among its virtues, a characteristic that was discussed regarding the *Royal Elephant* fresco of Francis I. The elephant comes closest to the human soul, thus evoking pathos.[42] The elephant is a noble creature, but it may be too trusting. In the emblem *Nusquam*

[39] See Bohl, 'The Four Parts of the World', 180, for the story of the *portières*.

[40] Sérullaz, *Inventaire Général des Dessins École Française*, 2:5.

[41] See, for example, Fayos-Perez, 'Delacroix After Goya's *Caprichos*', 474–87.

[42] Levitine, 'Goya's Elephant', 146ff.

Tuta Fides (from G. Rollenhagen's *Selectorum Emblematum Centuria Secunda*), for example, the elephant symbolizes the victim of unguarded trustfulness.

Levitine believes that the elephant could have been used by Goya as a symbol of the Spanish people: although big, powerful, and full of virtues, they could fall victim to manipulation by the government. Goya may have been influenced by emblems such as *Dulcedine et Vi* (from F. Nunes de Cepeda's *Idea de el Buen Pastor*, seventeenth century), in which the elephant is directly compared to a kingdom's subjects who can be trained to do anything. The situation of the people is identical with that of the elephant; the music of the state's laws forces the animal to dance so that it will not be burned by the fire below. In Goya's '*Animal Folly*', a huge elephant is confronted by men in exotic costumes who do their best to contain it in the arena-like setting.[43] The Spanish master has effectively rendered the conflicting emotions of his elephant; tense, wary, its back bristling, it seems to hesitate in confusion, like a vulnerable individual who slowly realizes that he or she has been tricked. If Delacroix did in fact know of Goya's print, perhaps his elephants, planted like decapitated heads on their posts, are a reference to the subjects of Charles X, the French people; benevolent and trusting, but gullible to manipulation by their rulers.

There is some evidence that Delacroix used animals as metaphors for the human characters in his pictures. Allard and Fabre have linked a male lion in the margins of *Mephistopheles Introduces Himself at Martha's House* (1827) (**Fig. 11**) to the feral figure of Mephistopheles: the rounded back of the lion in the bottom left corner of the sheet is repeated in the curved, billowing dark cloak of the predatory character. 'From an expressive standpoint, it appears that the association between the tempter and the lion signals a natural savagery behind Mephistopheles's

[43] Levitine, 'Goya's Elephant', 147.

obsequious attitude'.[44] There are other large feline marginalia (*remarques*) in the lithograph, creating an unsettling atmosphere appropriate to the story. Another example cited by Allard and Fabre is a vicious dog, fangs bared, that appears in a sketch for the *Sardanapalus* (Louvre RF 6860).[45] Could the elephant *remarques* be connected to the figure of the gullible Martha, who is deceived and manipulated by Mephistopheles? The serpentine rhythms of the elephant *remarques* echo those found in Martha's body, her hat, and the dark trim on her dress. When viewed up close, the heavy-lidded, somewhat feminine eye of the larger elephant, with its dark iris, resembles Martha's right eye.

Farwell has pointed out that Delacroix may have consulted Cornelis de Bruyn's *Voyages* in preparation for the *Sardanapalus*. One image from the *Voyages* of a royal tomb depicts a type of pedestal with lions' heads, reminiscent of Sardanapalus's bed. De Bruyn had remarked in the text that the lions were associated with bravery; Delacroix may have decided that lions were not the correct attribute for a dissolute ruler. Farwell offers the elephant in the frontispiece to de Bruyn's *Voyages* (**Fig. 12**) as a possible source for Delacroix' central elephant, noting that the two animals share similar conventions.[46] Steinke proposes a drawing by Delacroix in the Louvre (**Fig. 13**) as evidence that Delacroix must have copied Thomas Daniell's *Jagannâtha Sabhâ*, from *Hindoo Excavations in the Mountains of Ellora*, 1803 (**Fig. 14**).[47] Spector lists an array of

[44] Allard and Fabre, *Delacroix*, 47.

[45] Allard and Fabre, *Delacroix*, 47.

[46] Farwell, 'Sources for Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*', 70–71.

[47] Steinke, 'An Archaeological Source of Delacroix's *Sardanapalus*', 320.

elephant images that Delacroix may have seen, although he does not mention the previously cited *Royal Elephant* at Fontainebleau, or the book by Hoüel.[48]

Athanassouglou-Kallmyer writes that we must interpret Delacroix's important compositions of the 1820s as 'grand moral fables meant to indict absolutism',[49] a theme repeated by Lambertson and Fraser with different emphases. Seen in this light, Delacroix's elephants in the *Sardanapalus* must be more than just a touch of orientalist fantasy. Athanassoglou-Kallmyer has convincingly shown how Delacroix's liberal ideology was expressed in his early satirical prints; she writes, 'Numerous satirical drawings bear witness to the young Delacroix's Liberal Bonapartist sympathies, and conversely, to his distaste for royalty, aristocracy, and clergy'.[50] He was firmly opposed to the policies of Bourbon restoration and made caricatures of both Louis XVIII and his brother, the comte d'Artois who became Charles X (**Fig. 15**). He even made a flattering portrait of Louis Pierre Louvel (**Fig. 16**), who in 1820 murdered the comte d'Artois's son and heir, the Duke of Berry; Delacroix transforms the murderer Louvel into a Romantic hero, with wispy, windblown locks framing a face sculpted with strong chiaroscuro, his saintly expression enhanced by an almost unearthly glow.

Although Delacroix detested the Bourbons, he venerated Napoleon. The young artist's admiration for the emperor is shown in his earliest print, an etching that he made at age fourteen, which includes a nostalgic profile of Napoleon and a mounted Napoleonic officer seen from behind. A lithograph by Delacroix that appeared in *Le Miroir*, 8 March 1822, *Leçon de voltiges*

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[48] Spector, *Delacroix: The Death of Sardanapalus*, 124, n. 56.

[49] Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *Eugène Delacroix: Prints, Politics, and Satire*, 111.

[50] Athanassoglou-Kallymer, *Eugène Delacroix: Prints, Politics and Satire*,15.

(**Fig. 17**), depicts old men in medieval armor, old-fashioned garb, and clerical robes as ridiculous riding school students practicing a kind of airborne equine ballet, or *voltiges*. They represent the Ultras, conservative supporters of the Bourbon regime. Athanassoglou-Kallmyer describes the figures in the center, whose gravitas contrasts with the riders' comic antics:

> The cavalry-man wears the uniform of a Napoleonic officer and carries a banner inscribed with the Grande-Armée motto: 'Gloire, honneur, patrie'. His companion is a representative of the French middle classes whose democratic and progressive ethic, founded on probity, industry, merit and education, the banner in his hand proclaims: Beaux-arts, industrie, commerce, talens, vertus'. The officer's name, the *Miroir*'s commentary explained, was *Senatus Constitutionnel*; that of his pedestrian companion was *Populus*.[51]

Napoleon's famed monument, the *Elephant of the Bastille* (**Fig. 18**), another potential source for Delacroix's pachyderms, has never been mentioned in connection with the painting. It would have been, as Schama writes, 'hard to ignore:'[52] it stood as high as a three-story house.

To Napoleon, the elephant symbolized Caesar and the emperor, and like the Roman-style monuments including triumphal arches and temples, played a role in the imperialization of Paris.[53] The mighty beast, with its orientalist associations, paid tribute to the emperor's Egyptian

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[51] Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *Eugène Delacroix: Prints, Politics, and Satire*, 34.

[52] Schama, *Citizens*, 4.

[53] Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth-Century Art*, 133.

campaigns and called to mind the martial deeds of Hannibal and Alexander the Great. Schama calls the Bastille elephant 'The Elephant of Revolutionary Oblivion', designed to replace memories of chaotic insurrection with the grandeur of imperial conquest.[54] The elephant was originally designed in 1810 by Jacques Cellerier, a Dijon architect who had designed Revolutionary projects;[55] the project was then taken over by Jean-Antoine Alavoine. It was first planned as a fountain in bronze, then marble; water would splash from its trunk, and visitors would ascend to the tower by an interior staircase. Ultimately, it was created in less expensive plaster, as the late Empire was short on cash. By 1830, the giant monument was in an advanced state of decomposition;[56] Parisians watched as 'the plaster corpse' flaked and cracked, and its tail, tusks, ears melted.[57] At some point, the tail fell off.[58] To add to its indignities, it was also overrun with rats. By the time Delacroix was planning the *Sardanapalus*, it must have been

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[54] Schama, *Citizens*, 3.

[55] Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth-Century Art,* 133, n. 100, and n. 101.

[56] Schama, in *Citizens*, 1, writes that 'one tusk had dropped off, and the other reduced to a powdery stump'. The source for this information is not clear. The description of the deteriorating beast in *Les Misérables* mentions tusks in the plural (Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 804). Images of the elephant from the 1830s and later show it with at least one pointed tusk. (See prints and drawings of the elephant after 1830 in Beauhaire, Béjanin, and Naudeix, *L'Eléphant de Napoléon*).

[57] Unknown journalist in *L'Artiste*, qtd. in Beauhaire, Béjanin, and Naudeix, *L'Eléphant de Napoléon*, 38.

[58] César Daly, *Revue Générale de l'architecture et des travaux publics*, vol. 4, qtd. In Beauhaire, Béjanin, and Naudeix, *L'Éléphant de Napoléon*, 31.

already significantly deteriorated. (It was finally demolished in 1846.) Delacroix's elephants in the *Sardanapalus* have broken tusks; they, too, are in a state of decay, even before the conflagration takes place.

After the fall of Napoleon, his elephant lost its association with triumphal militarism. In his novel *Les Misérables*, Hugo paints a picture of the *Elephant of the Bastille* as a magnificent ruin, which became the domicile of the *gamin de Paris* Gavroche. His lengthy depiction, written decades after the *Sardanapalus* was painted, is steeped in Romantic nostalgia, but it offers some intriguing clues as to how the elephant may have been viewed by the young Romantics. Hugo and Delacroix both attended Charles Nodier's *cénacle* in the Arsenal in the 1820s; their contemporaries considered both Hugo and Delacroix artist-poets who possessed special abilities.[59]

In *Les Misérables*, Hugo wrote of the *Elephant of the Bastille*: 'It was huge, condemned, repulsive, and superb, ugly to the eye of the bourgeois, melancholy in the eye of the thinker'.[60] Although the novel was published in 1862, we can imagine that artists like Delacroix, who aspired to greatness, could be considered examples of the type of 'thinker' whom Hugo described as those who perceive what the uncomprehending middle class cannot see.[61]

For Hugo, Napoleon's *Elephant* symbolized the people's power: 'One knew not what it meant. It was a sort of symbol of the force of the people'.[62] He also wrote, 'The Emperor had had

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[59] Hillson, 'The Reputation of Eugène Delacroix and the Modernist Ethos', 70ff.

[60] Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 804.

[61] Hillson, 'The Reputation of Eugène Delacroix and the Modernist Ethos', 70.

[62] Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 804.

the dream of genius; in this titanic elephant, armed, prodigious, brandishing his trunk, bearing his tower and making the joyous and vivifying waters gush out on all sides about him, he desired to incarnate the people'.[63]

The elephant was used as a symbol of the people, powerful and virtuous, in the previously discussed '*Animal Folly*' elephant by Goya, and Delacroix may have been familiar with it. The placement of the plaster colossus in the Bastille, with its frisson of revolutionary fervor, may reinforce this notion, despite Napoleon's intent to replace the memories of 1789 with imperial propaganda. Delacroix's father Charles had entered a political career under the revolution and had voted for the execution of Louis XVI.[64]

It has been established that the *Sardanapalus* was a critique of Charles X's absolutist pretentions, by evoking disarray allegorically through representation of the oriental other.[65] Fraser writes that the painting is about the lack of the ruler's ability to control his passions and his lack of discipline, and exposing his misrule.[66] The elephants, then, do not suggest a virtuous ruler; after all, if Delacroix did not use lions because their bravery was not an appropriate attribute for a dissolute ruler, he would not choose another creature that would endow Sardanapalus with positive qualities. Perhaps the elephants refer instead to the power of the people, a meaning that would have been seen as subversive and threatening.

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[63] Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 807.

[64] Fraser, *Delacroix, Art and Patrimony in Post-Revolutionary France*, 7–8.

[65] See Lambertson, "Delacroix's *Sardanapalus*, Champmartin's *Janissaries*, and Liberals in the Late Restoration', 81.

[66] Fraser, *Delacroix, Art and Patrimony in Post-Revolutionary France*,134 and 158.

The timing of the *Sardanapalus*'s exhibition at the Salon may have heightened sensitivity to any criticism of the Bourbon monarchy. By 1827, the liberals had won a majority in Parliament, and the Ultra government backing Charles X was in a state of crisis.[67] The *Sardanapalus* could have been singled out for particularly vehement criticism because it may have been seen as political cartoon on a grand scale: a jumble of exaggerated figures swirling in an inaccurate space, referencing a moribund regime. The abstract expressionist Barnett Newman described the unusual composition:

> It is what in journalism we used to call circus lay-out: make a mix-up of the page. It's like a 3-ring circus. A lot of things going on at the same time … what is interesting to me here is the spiraling perspective, as against processional or vertical perspective. It is the first successful one I have seen. The picture really swings.[68]

Like the Ultras in Delacroix's lithograph *Leçon de voltiges* (**Fig. 17**), the *Sardanapalus* figures twist, turn, and topple, limbs extended in all directions. Yet the elephant pendants, like the dignified Napoleonic officer and bourgeois in the middle of the lithograph's circus-like arena, are still, their warm, honey-colored hues commanding attention adjacent to reds and blues. As in *Leçon de voltiges*, the viewer hovers in mid-space above the scene, looking down on it. The caricature-like composition contributes to a more overtly political reading of the work at a vulnerable moment for Charles X and his supporters, making the *Sardanapalus* more dangerous

[67] Fraser, *Delacroix, Art and Patrimony in Post-Revolutionary France*, 133–134.

[68] Schneider, 'Through the Louvre with Barnett Newman', 70.

than any of Delacroix's earlier pictures. The painting could have been read as a kind of political satire; the same cannot be said of Champmartin's more naturalistic *Janissaries*, which de La Rochefoucauld demanded be moved, along with the *Sardanapalus*, to a less prominent location.

The elephants, if they are indeed emblematic of popular force, would have been seen as particularly dangerous at a critical time for the Bourbon regime. This interpretation of the elephants is admittedly speculative, as there is no direct evidence of Delacroix's intentions. Nevertheless, the story of the elephant iconography and its relationship to the *Sardanapalus* is compelling, particularly when considered in the context of caricature. Delacroix's elephants, to use another animal metaphor, may have been the straw that broke the camel's back.

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