

Judith Jammers - Delacroix, Liberty leading the people

JUDITH JAMMERS: I'm Judith Jammers. And I teach the A level history of art. My past research focused on the work of Eugene Delacroix. And today I'm going to talk to you about his well-known painting Liberty Leading the People.

The first thing to say is that this is not a painting about the famous revolution of 1789 but about the 1830 revolution. The revolution kicked off on the 26th of July when printers and journalists reacted violently against the four decrees that were released by Charles X. Within a day, a huge number of people were mobilised. And 4,000 barricades were erected.

And on the 29th, the Tuileries Palace was taken. As if to paint a little bit of evidence of that into the picture, Delacroix painted a tiny tricolore flag on the top of Notre Dame, which you can see in the background. The tiny flag echoes the large tricolore, which is held right in the top centre of the painting held by liberty herself, or Marianne as she was called since the revolution, and who herself became an icon or symbol of the revolution.

The red, white and blue flag is deliberately evoked throughout the painting. And particularly, the red would have been even more obvious before Delacroix overpainted some decades later and toned down Liberty's bright red Phrygian cap, another symbol of the revolution.

Delacroix himself was politically rather conservative and decided later in life to overpaint the rather revolutionary message. Red, white, and blue appears in the colours of the crowd, the fallen soldier in the front to the right, and most notably the fallen man with a headscarf looking up to Liberty.

You could also argue that the billowing smoke clouds in front of the blue sky and the red mist above the city in the background are atmospheric reflections of the tricolore. Delacroix knew how to create atmosphere. He's considered the master of colour. If you look, for example, at the sketched-out roof lines and the translucent dabs of paint suggesting gunpowder clouds enveloping the buildings, you understand why the next generation of painters hailed him as the leader of the new Romantic movement and why the modern critics saw here the roots of Impressionism.

He pitted himself against the neoclassical school of David and Ingres. And while he complained that Ingres produced cold, grey, bloodless pictures, Ingres shot back that Delacroix neglected the line and was a shoddy draughtsman. Delacroix himself, however, was not comfortable with the Romantic notion either.

If you analyse the composition, you will notice that it is based on a completely balanced classical structure. You have a horizontal base, created through repeating lines, that you can follow with your eye along the torsos of the fallen and a midline through the girdles of the forward-storming men.

This is surmounted by the central pyramidal structure with a tip of the tricolore at its apex going beyond the frame of the picture. You don't get more classical than that in composition. And we know that he made many sketches and composed this painting carefully. These kinds of contrasts continue when you analyse the figures and the scene.

The scenery is completely invented. In fact, there is no such view of Paris. It's the people who make the fabric of the city. And here also Delacroix has invented his figures. The faces seem quite individual. And he might well have had models to pose. In fact, the facial features of the top-hatted man have so much similarity to his own, that for a while art historians speculated whether they might point to a self-portrait of the artist - a theory, which has been dismissed.

But each figure as real as it may seem represents a type. You enter the picture reading from left to right with horror as a light is shone onto the bare groin of a dead man who has also only got one sock on his feet, completely stripped of his dignity.

This is just where your eye height is when you stand in front of the picture. This is a direct allusion of the king's practice of invading insurgents' houses, dragging them out into the street, killing them, and leaving them there as a warning. The figure kneeling and propping himself up is interesting too. He is the only one looking directly at Liberty.

I think there is no doubt his clothing marks him out as a print worker as illustrations of the time show. It makes total sense also as a printers initiated the uprising. We can see blood trickling from his side onto the boulder on which he leans, looking upwards with a last effort. He marks the threshold from the living to the dead who are splayed out on the ground.

The man behind him in the top hat is usually seen as an artisan. The young boy, who is actually running ahead of Liberty and who inspired Victor Hugo's Gavroche, can be identified by his cap as a student, fearless and guns a blazing. But to the key figure name giver of the painting, Liberty, viewers at the time would have understood immediately that she is an allegory and not a real woman. She is larger than life, larger than the rest of the figures. She is elevated and follows, of course, a long tradition of using the female figure as an embodiment of ideas and concepts.

Delacroix drew a lot in the Louvre from famous classical sculptures like Polyclitus' Amazon and infused them with what he considered modern life. The type of dress that looks like a Greek chiton, and might remind us of a victory goddess' billowing garment, exposes both breasts. And the cloth itself is not a diaphanous drapery, but brown and coarse cloth.

She is barefoot like the gods. But her toenails look suspiciously dirty. And under her armpit is a dark shadow that looks like hair.

Her face is in a classical profile with straight long nose. But the colouration and the full red lips remind one of the women of Algier he painted after his visit to Morocco. Delacroix wrote in his diary that this is where you would find the modern inspiration for the classical Greek subjects.

Heinrich Heine, the German poet, journalist, and critic who arrived in Paris in 1831 after the revolution, went to the Salon to see the painting. He called Liberty a mixture of Phryne goddess

and fish wife. Phryne was the beautiful courtesan who supposedly inspired Praxiteles to create his Venus of Knidos.

Liberty is surrounded by a halo of light, turning her indeed into a godlike apparition. But at the same time, she has the physical presence of a real-life market woman. The painting caused a sensation at the Salon, where it was bought immediately by the government of Louis Philippe.

But why was it hidden from view? Unlike David whose paintings of clean, clear messages of self-sacrifice for the higher cause, Delacroix paints the force of the crowd as something dangerous. Beyond the patriotic message, Delacroix has made us see the dynamic forward pushing mass of breathing and bleeding bodies, and Liberty about to walk over the dead who sacrificed themselves for her. There is beauty as well as terror. And in this ambivalence lies the power of the painting.