

Themes in Art & Architecture: War

Title: *'Massacre at Chios'*



Key Facts

Size: 4.19m x 3.54m

Material: Oil on canvas

Date: 1824

Location: Louvre, Paris

Eugène Delacroix, 'Massacre at Chios', 1824, oil on canvas, 419 cm x 354 cm. Collection Louvre (INV 3823 ; C 3). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

Art Historical Terms and Concepts

Subject matter: A strikingly dressed Ottoman soldier rears upwards on his white horse, around him and filling the scene lie a writhing mass of bodies. A baby clutches at its dead mother, a pair of dying lovers embrace. Left and right, figures are cut down by the soldier's scimitar. He takes a young woman captive, while at his feet looking upwards we see an elderly Greek woman with an expression suggesting a plea for mercy. In the background the island of Chios is in ruins. The frenzy of the scene is matched by the wild eyes of the soldier's horse.

Colour: Analyse Delacroix's use of colour.

Composition: Analyse the composition. What is the focal point? What 'typical' compositional devices has Delacroix employed within this painting?

Figure handling: Describe the figures. How are they depicted? Look at gestures, poses, facial expressions etc.

Line: How does Delacroix use line within this image?

Depth: How have depth and space been implied? What effect does this have on the image?

Historical Context

Greece had been under the rule of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire for centuries. However, between 1821 and 1832 Greek revolutionaries fought with renewed spirit for their independence. The people of Chios, a prosperous Greek island which lies close to Turkey, had no wish to participate in the uprising against Ottoman rule. However, in March 1822, with the fight for independence gathering momentum, Greek insurrectionists from the mainland and a neighbouring island arrived at Chios and attacked Turkish troops. Accounts vary as to how many civilians from Chios fought against the Turks but Ottoman reprisals were swift and ferocious. Over the next four months approximately three quarters of the island's population of 120,000 were either killed or enslaved or had died from disease. The event prompted huge international outcry and was widely perceived as a battle between European 'civilisation' and Eastern barbarity.

Revolution, Death, Transformation and Art: Delacroix's Scenes from the Massacres at Chios

Areti Devetzidis, 2013, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies - Special Issue*, pp209-220.

<https://dspace.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2328/26845/Revolution%20Death.pdf?sequence=1>

Dualities and culture wars

Delacroix's personal philosophy in the 1820s was based on a view of the world struggling between opposing moral values; evil versus good, intelligence versus savagery, civilisation versus barbarity. Delacroix's "...characteristic duality of theoretical procedure [is evident]...in his ability to appreciate the contrasting virtues of both Ancient and modern art..." (Mras, 1966:62), and to integrate them in the execution of his painting. In the *Massacre at Chios* (in French, *Massacres de Scio*) or Scio, dualities are portrayed in a scenario depicting the consequences of war without reference to glory. On the one hand, in the minds of Europeans of the time, the war represented the struggle between Christianity and Islam, between civilisation and barbarity, between good and evil. Delacroix, commented Haskell, "was embarking on something quite new in art...there were no real precedents for the large-scale painting of contemporary brutalities..."¹ adding, "why the picture proved to be of such overriding importance was that its break with conventional drawing and composition confirmed...the existence of a new school of French painting which was at once called Romantic and which attracted to it a great many talented young artists. Hanging in the same exhibition"²...was Ingres's '*Vows of Louis XIII*'.

And this made it seem that French painting was divided into two great rival and opposing schools, and that critics, the public and artists would be forced to choose between them".³ Delacroix's brilliant use of colour, his focus on contour to define form (Wellington, 1995:25), his dynamic drawing and the emotional content of his painting refer back to Leonardo, Michelangelo, Rubens and the Venetian painters. His great rival Ingres believed that the ancient Greeks and the Romans had already achieved perfection in art and there was no need for artists to look elsewhere. Delacroix's use of flamboyant colours and his turbulent composition were considered heretical. Ingres believed that colour appealed only to the uneducated, the vulgar mob.⁴ Conversely Delacroix believed that beauty was found in many forms. The conflict between the Rubenistes and Poussinistes, while superficially an argument about technique and visual matters – that is, drawing versus colour, calm versus movement, sharply focused action on a few figures versus scattered crowds – was in essence a struggle between stasis and change. Delacroix's romanticism drew him to subject matter that expressed the extremes of the human condition, the romantic agony, the darkest extremes of suffering and pain. He was driven by passionate intensity, a burning imagination, and ambition. Like his hero

¹ F. Haskell, "*Chios, the Massacres, and Delacroix*". In *Chios. A Conference at the Homereion in Chios, 1984*, ed. J. Boardman and C.E. Vaphopoulos-Richardson. Oxford: 1986.

² The Salon of 1824 was remarkable in the range and variety of exhibits and in the calibre of work on display. The Massacres of Chios...was the most controversial of all but Delacroix also showed other significant works including the beautiful preparatory study entitled 'Girl in a Cemetery', and his famous '*Tasso in the Madhouse*' and several paintings based on Byron's poem '*The Giaour*'. Delacroix's greatest rival at the time, Jean-August-Dominique Ingres, showed his '*Vow of Louis XIII*', to great acclaim. "...next to the works of Ingres and of Delacroix, the exhibits of the English produced the greatest sensation" (Friedlaender 1972:114).

³ F. Haskell, "*Chios, the Massacres, and Delacroix*", 1986: 350.

⁴ See Friedlaender, David to Delacroix, 1972:3–6.

Michelangelo, Delacroix was inclined to dwell on images of dread (Néret, 1999:7). Baudelaire wrote: “his work contains nothing but devastation, massacres, conflagrations; everything bears witness against the eternal and incorrigible barbarity of man. Burnt and smoking cities, slaughtered victims, ravished women, the very children cast beneath the hooves of horses or menaced by the dagger of a distracted mother – this whole body of this painter’s works, I say, is a hymn composed in honour of destiny and irremediable anguish” (Baudelaire, 1964:59). The *Scio* embodies all of Baudelaire’s aforementioned themes. The strongest binary embodied in the *Scio* is the tension between East and West. Philhellenic passion was inflamed by a new crusade, to rescue the Greeks from the Turks, Christians against Muslims, civilisation against barbarity.

In 1838 Delacroix would paint *Médée Furieuse*, an image of “children...menaced by the dagger of a distracted mother” (Baudelaire, 1964:59), also a work of universal and eternal significance. The Greek War of Independence was seen as a holy war, yet in the painting Delacroix’s fetish for ‘oriental exoticism’ dominates, in the sensuous execution of ornaments, weapons and drapery. By comparing the *Scio* to many works on similar themes from the period, however, Haskell shows that Delacroix managed to avoid the pitfalls of his time, particularly its sentimentality and gratuitous voyeurism. His view is that Delacroix’s work reveals a rare genuineness of response to monstrous events, that next to the work of many other artists of the time he exclaims how “nervously ‘modern’...[*Scio*] actually was in its own day”⁵. In that painting Delacroix depicts pain, suffering, defeat and desolation with the authority and dignity of a religious work by Raphael or Michelangelo. ‘*Scenes from the Massacres at Chios*’ by Eugène Delacroix, is a symbol of suffering and oppression in the struggle for freedom and self-determination. Death is ubiquitous in the history of modern Greece, and there seems little respite from it even today. The scale of the casualties suffered by Greeks from the War of Independence and in subsequent struggles for sovereignty is staggering, taking into account the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913, the disastrous campaign in Asia Minor in 1822, the dispossession of around two million Greeks in the process of which many thousands perished from persecution, disease and starvation. It has been argued in this paper that the personal life of the artist Delacroix, also marked by the deaths and subsequent loss of status and social humiliation of many of his loved ones, coupled with the Romantic zeitgeist of that time, and anti-Islamic sentiment, disposed him to sympathise with the Greek cause. As Jobert points out, “The only event of his time that truly attracted his interest...was the struggle of the Greeks against the Turks...his continuing enthusiasm for the Greek struggle never stopped translating itself into his work” (Jobert, 1998:120).

Q: Why were the events at Chios seen as a battle between “intelligence versus savagery, civilisation versus barbarity”? Who fought on which side?

⁵ Haskell: 1986:357–358.

Q: How does this painting differ in narrative and 'outcome' to *Liberty Leading the People*?

Q: When looking at the content and rendering of *Massacre at Chios*, do you agree that "Delacroix managed to avoid the pitfalls of his time, particularly its sentimentality and gratuitous voyeurism"?