

## Two Exotic Horse Paintings by Eugène Delacroix

Lee Johnson

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# Two Exotic Horse Paintings by Eugène Delacroix

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LEE JOHNSON

University of Toronto

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In the first decades of the nineteenth century, French artists produced a large number of images of horses of various breeds accompanied by their grooms or owners, who were often shown simply holding their mount by the bridle in profile, as though keeping it still to have its portrait taken, but sometimes saddling, mounting or riding it. These images occur most commonly in prints, such as Géricault's series of twelve lithographs of horses published in 1822, but also in small paintings.

Delacroix, though less addicted to horses than Géricault, made several essays in the genre in the 1820s, characteristically favouring horses with

attendants in exotic dress. He made three aquatints in those years, *Turk saddling his Horse* (Fig. 1), *Mameluke holding his Horse* and *Turk mounting his Horse*<sup>1</sup>; and in the Salon of 1827-28 he exhibited a small painting under the title *Jeune Turc caressant son cheval*.<sup>2</sup> A unique and particularly delicate treatment of this kind of subject is found in a minute picture which Delacroix gave to his friend Baron Rivet. Reproduced here for the first time

<sup>1</sup> Loys Delteil, *Le Peintre-Graveur illustré*, III: Ingres et Delacroix (Paris: l'Auteur, 1908), nos 9-11, all illustrated.

<sup>2</sup> Lee Johnson, *The Paintings of Eugène Delacroix: A Critical Catalogue, 1816-1831* (Oxford University Press, 1981), I, cat. 38, II, pl. 33.



FIGURE 1. Eugène Delacroix, *Turk saddling his Horse*, 1828. Aquatint, 227 × 187 mm (Photo: Bibliothèque nationale, Paris).

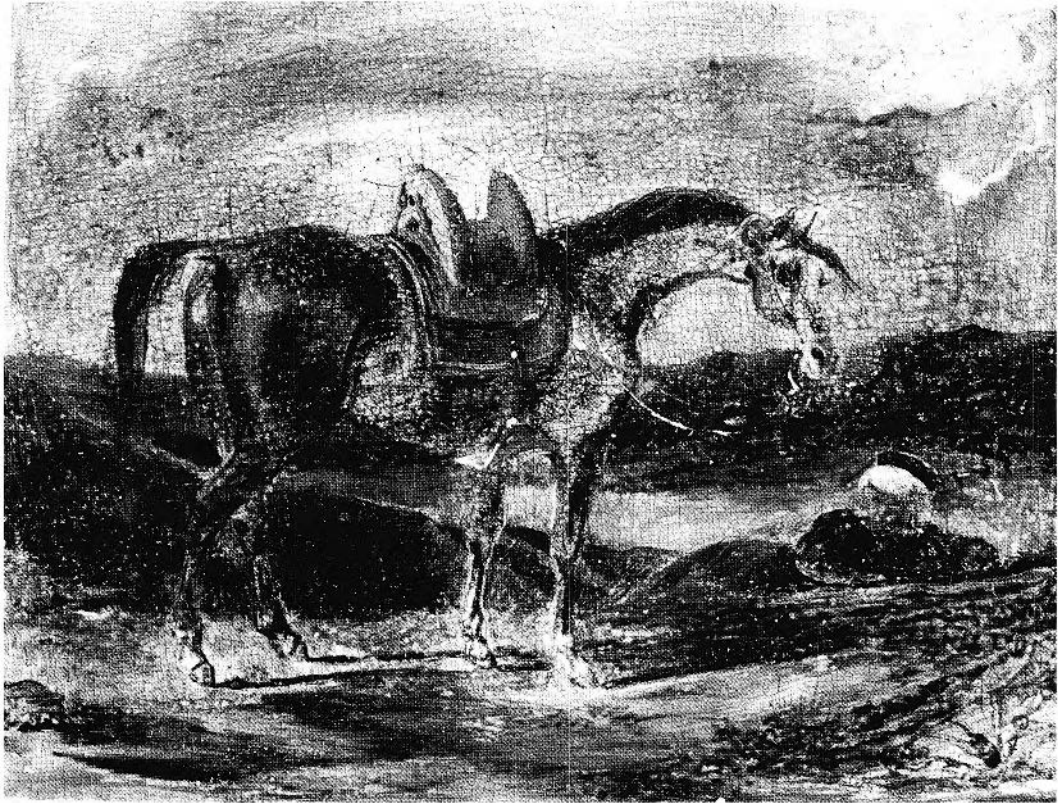


FIGURE 2. Eugène Delacroix, *Arab resting and his Horse*, 1832. Panel, sight size 10.5 × 14 cm. Paris, private collection.

from a photograph (Fig. 2), it is painted very thinly in oils on a wooden panel with scalloped edges and is titled *Cavalier turc au repos* by the nineteenth-century cataloguer of Delacroix's work, Alfred Robaut, who dates it to 1832.<sup>3</sup> In this case the date seems acceptable both on stylistic grounds and because it may well be based on reliable information from the Rivet family. The identity of the figure is more problematical, since the costume is too summarily rendered to be identified with confidence and a different title from Robaut's, *Cavalier arabe au repos*, was given at the Delacroix exhibition at the École des Beaux-Arts in 1885, when the picture was owned by Baron Rivet's widow and last exhibited (n° 171).

Problems of both dating and subject are posed by a small, signed painting by Delacroix depicting a saddled and bridled horse held by a man in eastern dress (Fig. 3), a picture which in design is very

much in the tradition of the more static horse portraits from the earlier years of the century but would be a rarity, in its relative immobility and broadside placing of the horse, in the late work of Delacroix. Perhaps for this reason, and also because of a tendency to group 'oriental' subjects that are awkward to date close to Delacroix's North African journey of 1832, it has been assigned dates ranging from ca. 1828 to ca. 1835. It has also been generally known as *Mameluke Horseman*, which is the title used by the Wadsworth Atheneum, where it has been part of the permanent collection since 1906. But Mamelukes (members of the powerful military corps of Egypt, originally composed of slaves and exterminated by Mohammed Ali in 1811) normally wore turbans, not a metal helmet with a cloth-piece hanging from it as here, and are so depicted by French artists in the early nineteenth

3 A. Robaut and E. Chesneau, *L'Œuvre complet de Eugène Delacroix* (Paris: Charavay Frères, 1885), n° 374.

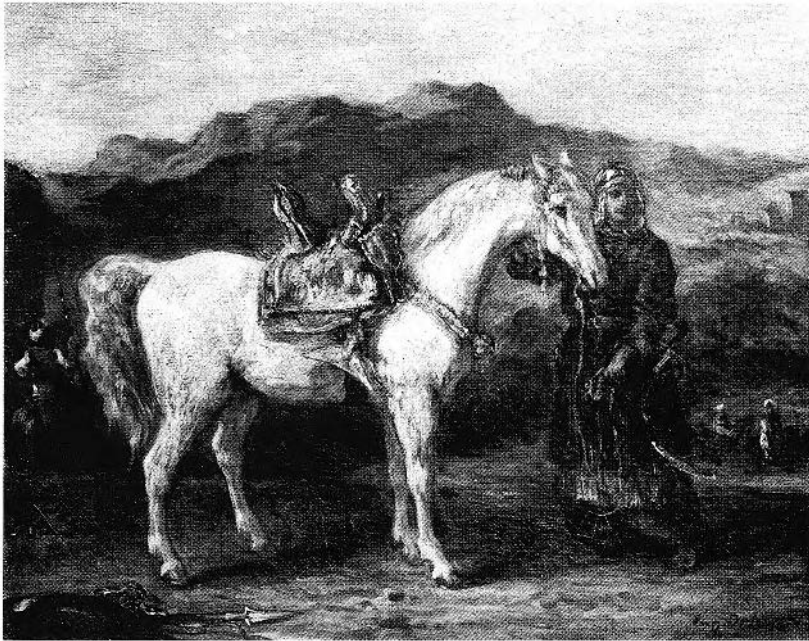


FIGURE 3. Eugène Delacroix, 'Circassian' holding a Horse by its Bridle, ca. 1858. Canvas, 32.4 × 41 cm. Hartford, Conn., Wadsworth Atheneum, Inv. 06-1 (Photo: Museum).



FIGURE 4. Baron Gros, *Mameluke Leader summoning Help*, 1817. Lithograph, 368 × 273 mm. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Ron Vickers).

century: by Gros (Fig. 4), by Géricault (Fig. 5) and by Delacroix himself in the aquatint already cited (*Mameluke holding his Horse*), to mention only the most distinguished artists. There also appears to be no documentary support for the current title in the early Delacroix literature. Robaut evidently did not know the picture, as it is not listed in his catalogue, probably because it was in the Borie collection in Philadelphia by 1880 and had thus left France at least five years before his catalogue was published<sup>4</sup>; and it has been all but ignored in the subsequent literature, other than American exhibition catalogues from 1930 on, which con-

tribute nothing new. It can, however, be reasonably identified as a painting that passed in the Baron sale in Paris on 23 March 1861 (Lugt 26100), during Delacroix's lifetime, under the title of *Circassien tenant un cheval par la bride*, the dimensions being listed in the sale catalogue as 32 × 40 cm.<sup>5</sup>

While the details of the costume seem too indeterminate to identify it securely as that of a Circassian (a member of a tribe of the Caucasus region), there can be little doubt, on the evidence of the description in the catalogue of the Baron sale, that is what Delacroix intended it to be, and not a Mameluke's outfit. Further weight is added to this argument if the date is revised to a period only two or three years before Baron sold the picture – recently enough, that is, for him not to have forgotten its correct title. Such a revision is called for on stylistic grounds and in the light of a dated drawing that has not previously been connected with it but is clearly a study for it. If the design may be backward-looking, the technique is, in the rendering of atmosphere and softening of form through supple, modulated brushwork, characteristic of Delacroix's late years and quite unlike his manner in the period 1828 to 1835.

<sup>4</sup> It is listed in A. Strahan, ed., *The Art Treasures of America* (Philadelphia: n.d. [1880?]), 154, as being in the collection of the 'late Mr. A. E. Borie,' a former Secretary of the Navy who died on 5 February 1880, and described thus: 'The smallest sketch by Delacroix represents "A Groom and Mare," showing an Arab or Persian Groom who stands and holds his master's white mare – a study of grace and beauty.'

<sup>5</sup> Robaut, n° 1075, identifies the picture in the Baron sale as the *Arabe syrien avec son cheval* that Delacroix showed at the Salon of 1849, but the horse does not wear a bridle in that picture, which is now with a New York dealer, and the Arab walks ahead of it. Moreover, it was lent by Diaz to an exhibition in Paris in 1860 and sold in his sale on 4 April 1861, which makes it extremely unlikely that it would have belonged to Baron in that period, let alone passed in his sale less than two weeks before passing in the Diaz sale.



FIGURE 5. Théodore Géricault, *Mameluke defending a Wounded Trumpeter*, 1818. Lithograph, 345 × 280 mm (Photo: Bibliothèque nationale, Paris).

The drawing, which is known to me only from Robaut's facsimile (Fig. 6), is dated in the artist's hand '9 avril 58' and shows a similar concern, in a different medium, with the vibrant play of light on form and the troubling of contour by atmosphere. A mountainous background with figures is added in the painting and the horse's hind-quarters are dexterously shifted into profile, but the essence of the finished work is already present in the study and they are surely not far apart in date. If some spontaneity may have been sacrificed in the painting, it is more than compensated for by the gain in subtlety of handling and beautiful colour. The white horse stands against hazy green hills, its whiteness echoed in the clouds above. Touched with pale yellow, its mane,

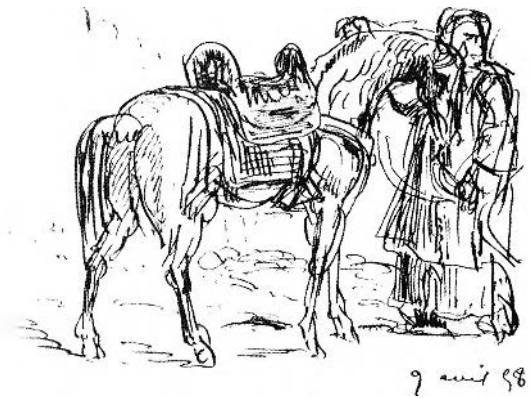


FIGURE 6. Eugène Delacroix, *'Circassian' holding a Horse by its Bridle*, 1858. Pen and ink, 100 × 140 mm (Robaut facsimile).

tail and hoofs match the golden stirrup and harness. The green saddle, also trimmed with gold and flecked with white highlights that attenuate the contrast with the horse, rests on a red saddle-cloth. The 'Circassian' wears a deep blue tunic over red pantaloons.

Whether or not the Hartford picture is an ethnologically accurate portrayal of a Circassian and his horse's furniture, it is a delightful work that can now be safely re-dated to within five years of the artist's death in 1863. Though of minor importance in the totality of Delacroix's vast oeuvre, it has a special individuality in being of an unusual subject and design for so late a work, treated with an exquisite touch.