

EUGÈNE DELACROIX, *Liberty leading the people*, oil on canvas, 1830,
Louvre Museum, Paris



Although Delacroix completed this painting during same year in which the event occurred, it is, at its core, a history painting. Indeed, Delacroix depicts an event from the July Revolution of 1830, an event that replaced the abdicated King Charles X (r. 1824-30)—a member of the Bourbon family and the younger brother of the guillotined King Louis XVI (r. 1774-1792)—with Louis Philippe I (r. 1830-48), the so-called Citizen King. This uprising of 1830 was the historical prelude to the June Rebellion of 1832, an event featured in Victor Hugo’s famous novel, *Les Misérables* (1862), and the musical (1980) and films that followed.

Liberty

Delacroix’s painting, *Liberty Leading the People*, at first seems to be overpowered by chaos, but on closer inspection, it is a composition filled with subtle order. The first thing a viewer may notice is the monumental—and nude to the waist—female figure. Her yellow dress has fallen from her shoulders, as she holds a bayoneted musket in her left hand and raises the tricolor—the French national flag—with her right. This red, white, and blue arrangement of the flag is mimicked by the attire worn by the man looking up at her. She powerfully strides forward and looks back over her right shoulder as if to ensure those who she leads are following. Her head is shown in profile—like a

ruler on a classical coin—and she wears atop her head a **Phrygian cap**, a classical signifier of freedom. This is an important bit of costuming—in ancient Rome, freed slaves were given one to wear to indicate their newly liberated status, and this **headwear** became a symbol of freedom and liberty on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Clearly, this figure is not meant to be a portrait of a specific individual, and Delacroix did not mean to suggest that there was a **half-naked** woman running around carrying a loaded firearm and a flag during the *Trois Glorieuses*—the Three Glorious Days as it came to be known—of the July Revolution. Instead, she serves as an **allegory**—in this instance, a **pictorial device** intended to reveal a moral or political idea—of Liberty.

A revolution for everyone

But if the female figure represents an allegory, those who surround her represent different types of people. The man on the far left holds a **briquet** (an infantry saber commonly used during the Napoleonic Wars). His clothing—**apron**, working shirt, and sailor’s trousers—identify him as a factory worker, a person in the lower end of the **economic ladder**. His other attire identifies his revolutionary leanings.

This factory worker provides a counterpoint to the younger man beside him who is clearly of a different economic status. He wears a black **top hat**, an open-collared white shirt and **cravat**, and an elegantly tailored black coat. Rather than hold a military weapon like his older brother-in-arms, he instead **grasps** a hunting shotgun. These two figures make clear that this revolution is not just for the economically **downtrodden**, but for those of affluence, too.

This revolution is not only for the adults—two young boys can be identified among the **insurgents**. On the left, a fallen adolescent who wears a light infantry *bicorné* and holds a short saber, struggles to regain his footing amongst the piled **cobblestones** that make up a barricade. The more famous of the pair, however, is on the right side of the painting. Often thought to be the visual inspiration for Hugo’s character of Gavroche in *Les Misérables*, this boy wildly wields two pistols. He wears a *faluche*—a black velvet **beret** common to students—and carries what appears to be a school or cartridge satchel across his body.

A modern subject

With no less than five guns and three blades among these six primary figures, it is not surprising that the ground is **littered with the dead** (to be littered with= to contain a lot of something). Some are members of the military, note the uniform decorated with shoulder epaulettes on the figure in the lower right, while others are likely revolutionaries. In total, the painting accurately renders the **fervor** and chaos of urban conflict. And it is, of course, an urban conflict. Notre Dame, perhaps the defining architectural monument of Paris (at least until the Eiffel Tower arrived at the end of the nineteenth century) can be clearly seen on the right side of the painting. Importantly, Delacroix **signed** and dated his painting immediately underneath this monument.

Although not everyone can pick up a **weapon** and stand a post in a war, Delacroix would have us believe that everyone can be a revolutionary. When corresponding with his brother on 28 October 1830—less than three months after the July Revolution, Delacroix wrote, “I have undertaken a modern subject, a barricade, and although I may not have fought for my country, at least I shall have painted for her. It has restored my good spirits.”

Source: Essay by Dr. Bryan Zygmunt, edited by Flaminia Barbato and taken from the website

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