Critical Perspectives

On Women of Algiers in Their Apartment by Eugène Delacroix

"Delacroix is the most suggestive of all painters,..."
— Charles Baudelaire, "The Life and Work of Eugène Delacroix," 1863

"Upon his return to Paris [from Algeria], the painter will work for
two years on the image of a memory that teeters with a muted and un-
formulated uncertainty, although well-documented and supported by
authentic objects. What he comes out with is a masterpiece that still
stirs questions deep within us."
— Assia Djebar, Women of Algiers in Their Apartment, 1980

"On a eu raison de dire qu'avec Les Femmes d'Alger Delacroix
concilie romantisme, classicisme et réalisme. Mais s'en tenir à ces
classifications, c'est ne plus voir l'œuvre en son, prise dans son ensem-
ble; sujet et peinture pure, nature et composition savante. Relisez à
toute analyse, le tableau, dans tous ses sens du terme, appartient à la
grande anthologie de l'histoire de la peinture." ["It's correct to say that
with the Women of Algiers Delacroix was reconciling romanticism,
classicism, and realism. But confining oneself to these classifications
means not seeing the work in itself, taken as a whole; subject and pure
painting, nature and skillful composition. Reread any analysis, the
tableau (picture, scene, painting), in every sense of the word, belongs
to the great anthology of the history of painting."]
— Guy Dumur, Delacroix au Maroc, 1988

"Delacroix's Women of Algiers is a painting that continues to
invite probing but whose meanings defy closure. Perhaps this is the fi-
nal point: that successful art provides infinite richness for the process
of interpretation."

Not long ago I asked one of my colleagues, an art his-
torian, how she had become interested in archival research. She sent back this note:

What I like to tell my students is that as I was growing up,
I really wanted to be a secret agent, a detective. (Perhaps

this isn't so unusual: remember that Sir Anthony Blunt,
the great English art historian, was accused of having
spied for the Russians during World War II.) As I did not
care for guns and violence, and I was sure that I could not
endure being tortured, becoming an art historian seemed
the next-best career option. Searching to reconstruct what
happened, to understand how a work was created, dis-
played, and evaluated, is one of the most fascinating as-
pects of being an art historian.

All researchers are detectives, closely examining the
physical evidence before them and pursuing a paper trail
of clues left by earlier travelers along the same route. This
chapter provides an overview of the investigative meth-
ods by which critics and historians over the years have
examined a single work of art, Eugène Delacroix's Women
of Algiers in Their Apartment (1834; Color Plate 8; fig. 10.2).
The purpose of this sampling is to acquaint you with the
range of perspectives from which any text can be explored.
The fact that the subject of this chapter has been written
about by numerous observers over the past 150 years does
not limit further inquiry. Images continue to evolve with
their audience. This chapter invites you to take up the dis-
cussion where other researchers have left off.

I've chosen Women of Algiers as the subject of this de-
tective story for several reasons. To begin with, the paint-
ing is rich and strange and absolutely ravishing in its or-
chestration of form, color, and texture. Little wonder it
has influenced generations of artists. This is the canvas
Renoir called "the most beautiful painting in the world," a
work whose limpid colors, according to Cézanne, "en-
ter your eye like a glass of wine going down your throat."
Picasso paid frequent visits to the Louvre to study Women
of Algiers and in 1954–1955 created a series of variations on
the painting. In 1980, the author Assia Djebar composed lit-
erary variations on the themes of Delacroix's painting in
her collection of stories about women's lives in postcolonial
Algeria. Houria Niati based her mixed-media installation,
No to Torture (1982–1983), on Delacroix's painting. Clearly,
Women of Algiers inspires repeated viewing.

At the same time, Women of Algiers provides an inter-
esting study of how a work of art becomes part of the
canon. When the painting was first displayed at the French Salon of 1834, one could scarcely have predicted its present status as a masterpiece. Instead, most critics turned their attention to other works hanging in the Salon such as Paul Delaroche’s *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* (see fig. 10.6), paintings more in keeping with contemporary tastes for minute realism and historical subjects. Yet it is Delacroix, not Delaroche, who has been canonized in art history courses today—in part, perhaps, because of subsequent generations’ preferences for the subjectivity of Romanticism and the ambiguities of modernist painting. Our survey of critical responses to *Women of Algiers* reveals shifting attitudes toward themes and stylistic categories in the history of art.

Equally important, the body of writing on *Women of Algiers* illustrates how responsive a single text can be to an array of critical approaches—“biographical,” “formalist,” “feminist,” and so on. These methods are by no means mutually exclusive, as we shall see. The literary critic Hans Robert Jauss suggests that to its contemporary audience, each work of art implies a question and an answer arising from certain shared expectations or an understanding of the genres, forms, and subjects of already familiar works. Naturally, viewers in succeeding eras come to the same work with different kinds of questions about form and content. This is how works of art continue to speak to their present-day viewers.

By way of a rather literal-minded detective story, I’d like to relate the circumstances of a recent visit to the Louvre Museum in Paris, where *Women of Algiers* is hung. For several weeks in the summer of 1999, the national museums in Paris were shut down by a strike—strikes being rather common occurrences in that city. I was disconsolate. I had come to Paris on a Delacroix-seeking mission, and although I was on speaking terms with reproductions of *Women of Algiers*, it had been some years since I’d visited the painting in person. Fortunately, an acquaintance who works as a curator at the Louvre secured me an hour’s pass into the deserted museum. My privileged entry into rooms closed off to the public had for me all the drama of Delacroix’s famous visit to the harem depicted in his *Women of Algiers*. My guide led me up the great staircase of the Denon wing of the Louvre, past the
Winged Victory of Samothrace, past gilded doorways to fabled galleries, past a lone man polishing the parquet floor. I felt vaguely guilty for having trespassed on forbidden territory, but like Delacroix in the story, I was dazzled by the vision down the long corridor.

I record this anecdote to suggest the ways in which encounters between objects and viewers are shaped by context—first of all, by personal and physical circumstances. I had never been so alone with this painting, nor sensed its physical pull. By this I mean that Women of Algiers is one of those large and silent paintings—Seurat's Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte is another—that you find yourself falling into, their very stillness exerting the force of gravity.

Then too, the walls of the room were weighted with history. Delacroix had scaled the huge piece to be exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1834, and a gallery in the Louvre, I said to myself, is where it is ideally viewed. The painting now faces the theatrical masterworks of Géricault, Delacroix's most influential predecessor, and is flanked by paintings Delacroix executed before and after Women of Algiers. Next to the teeming canvas of Delacroix's Death of Sardanapalus (1827–28; fig. 10.1), the stillness of Women of Algiers emerges in relief. The balance and tranquility of its composition appear to have constituted, in some measure, the artist's response to his critics, who had denounced Sardanapalus as a flamboyant and incomprehensible mess.

At close range, certain details in Women of Algiers now emerged more clearly from the painting's slightly smoky atmospheric effects. I could discern the outline of a glass bottle on a shelf in the half-opened cupboard and the tiny watch suspended on a necklace worn by the cross-legged figure at the center of the canvas. I noted with some surprise that the reclining figure at the left of the composition does not look directly at the viewer but stares into distant space. None of the gazes in the painting, in fact, connects with any other. Eventually I began to trace the network of iconography that viewers have come to associate with Western depictions of "the Orient": the Arabic lettering; the smoking paraphernalia—narghile (water pipe), coal brazier, tongs; the sumptuous clothing and patterned surfaces; the ornately framed mirror; the vaguely Islamic architectural forms; the languid poses of harem women attended by their servant.

Yet the more I looked, the more these signs seemed to baffle rather than clarify. The watch face, the Arabic cartouche, the mirror with its blank surface, the oblique and shadowed human glances, the figure of the black woman turning her back to the spectator: all these faces were averted, as if refusing to be read. Or perhaps I should say, I was trying to read these signs as part of a seamless pictorial discourse on Orientalism, but the objects weren't cooperating. It was difficult to get one's bearings in the ambiguous space of the Algerian women's apartment. The wall on the left, frankly defined by its patterned tiles, trails off into obscurity toward the middle ground of the painting. Still more disorienting: the angle of the receding wall contradicts the angle of the floor, which tilts upward slightly. Each decorated surface opens one doorway into the scene and seals off another. At length the painting seemed to me a gorgeously seductive maze.

Which leads me to my second point, that we encounter a work of art not only as an object in space but as a process, a movement through time. Each successive pass over the surface of the object raises as many questions as it resolves. Works of art are never perceived in a vacuum; they live in a dialogue with other works of art, other eras, other viewers.

I've said I was alone with the painting, but that's not quite true. As Cézanne observed, "We are all here, in this Delacroix." A whole cast of characters was gathered in front of the painting in the Louvre: the crowds attending the Salon exhibition in the spring of 1834, successive generations of professional critics, and Cézanne, and Picasso, to say nothing of me, my guide, and the floor polisher, all jostling and talking at once. I gave up looking for one thread, one system of meaning to take me through the maze, and began to think of the painting instead as a site where all these strands of discourse meet and intersect.

The critical commentaries quoted in this chapter show how a variety of observers have deepened our perception of the painting over the decades. Interestingly, although Delacroix has been the subject of a number of large-scale
exhibitions and studies in recent years, he has yet to be
given a full-fledged "revisionist" critical considera-
that is, a reevaluation in terms of contemporary critical
to the underlying assumptions and traditional
categories of art history. Some observers might argue that
this is merely trendy repackaging. Others would reply
that rereading and revising keep the text vital. I'd add
that critical methodologies are not flavors of the month,
tasted and then forgotten. Each interpretation incorpo-
rates and enriches the last.

In addition to providing samples of published com-
mentary on the painting, I wanted to focus on new criti-
cal work in the field. I turned to two scholars who
specialize in nineteenth-century French painting and asked
them how they would apply their research methodolo-
gies to a discussion of "Women of Algiers." Taken toget-
the selections below will acquaint you with the range of
critical perspectives and methods you are likely to
counter in your own research projects—not only in art
history but in the current literature of all the academic
disciplines. Naturally, you'll find some approaches more
congenial to your way of thinking or more relevant to
a particular topic or assignment. As you read through
this chapter, take note of what clues and shades of mean-
ing each commentary contributes to your view of the
painting.

Before you read what others have to say, it's important
to record your own description of the painting and your
responses to it. As we've seen in Chapter 2, the first task
of art criticism is to look closely and reflectively, to iden-
tify and describe, and to think about the choices the artist
has made with regard to technique, composition, color,
patterns of light and dark, and so on. Your observations
pave the way for further analysis. After you have de-
scribed what you see, note questions or uncertainties you
have about the scene before you. What do you infer about
the identity of these figures, about their roles and rela-
tionships? What is taking place?

As a side note, you might also compare the painting of
1834 with a version Delacroix painted of the same subject
some fifteen years later (fig. 10.3). What changes do you
detect from the first version to the second? If you prefer
one painting over the other, can you explain your prefer-
ence by describing features in the painting that particu-
larly appeal to you?

Case Study
Critical Approaches to a Work of Art

What follows is a survey of the interpretive methods
commonly used in art history and criticism. The focus
here is on what each approach can contribute to our
study of a single painting, Delacroix's "Women of Algiers.
Please keep in mind that an overview of this kind is
bound to be oversimplified and reductive, rather like
those whirlwind package tours that offer fifteen Euro-
pean capitals in seven days. Art and art writing resis-
ting pigeonholed. Categories overlap. Like most areas of
study, art history has increasingly borrowed theoretical con-
cepts from other disciplines. As you'll see, the writers quoted
in this case study often make use of a range of analytical
tools rather than confining themselves to a single perspec-
see consult the references listed at the end of the
chapter.
Biographical Studies

Researchers often begin their projects by looking into an artist’s life, using original materials such as autobiographical papers, letters, and accounts by the artist’s contemporaries. We’re fortunate that Delacroix documented his life and his artistic concerns to an unusual degree in his copious journal entries and correspondence. We also have an extensive visual diary of notes, sketches, and watercolors Delacroix executed during a trip he made to North Africa in the company of a French diplomatic mission in 1832. His journey yielded material for Women of Algiers and was to be a lifelong source of inspiration.

These autobiographical data provide us with more than a fascinating glimpse into the artist’s working methods: they are works of art in their own right, like Leonardo’s notebooks and Vincent Van Gogh’s letters to his brother Theo. In a double leaf from one of the Moroccan sketchbooks (fig. 10.4), we see how Delacroix, although unaccustomed to travel and troubled by physical
aliments, became a dervish of artistic activity. His drawing is sun-drenched, prolific, free.

For secondary sources of information on an artist's career, we turn to biographical studies. The art history biography is a literary subgenre whose conventions for mythologizing the life of the "artist-genius" reach back to Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists (first published in 1550). Charles Baudelaire's tribute to "The Life and Work of Eugène Delacroix," published in three newspaper installments following his friend's death in 1863, contains all the elements that characterize this genre. Baudelaire emphasizes Delacroix's "volcanic" temperament and prodigious talent, his kinship with the great masters of painting, his "never-ceasing preoccupation" with technique ("In that respect he comes close to Leonardo da Vinci, who was no less a victim of the same obsessions"), his competitiveness, and his concern for his own artistic legacy. Traditionally in artists' biographies, women are cast in subordinate roles, at best serving as handmaidens or idealized muses. Baudelaire offers the following passage as evidence of Delacroix's single-minded devotion to his art.

From The Life and Work of Eugène Delacroix

by Charles Baudelaire

Sentimental and affected women will perhaps be shocked to learn that, like Michelangelo (may I remind you that one of his sonnets ends with the words 'Sculpture! divine Sculpture! thou art my only love!'), Delacroix had made painting his unique muse, his exclusive mistress, his sole and sufficient pleasure.

No doubt he had loved woman greatly in the troubled hours of his youth. Who among us has not sacrificed too much to that formidable idol? And who does not know that it is precisely those who have served her the best that complain of her the most? But a long time before his death he had already excluded woman from his life. Had he been a Mohammedan, he would not perhaps have gone so far as to drive her out of his mosques, but he would have been amazed to see her entering them, not being quite able to understand what sort of converse she could have with Allah.

In this question, as in many others, the oriental idea dominated him keenly and tyrannically. He regarded woman as an object of art, delightful and well suited to excite the mind, but disobedient and disturbing once one throws open the door of one's heart to her, and glutonously devouring of time and strength.

I remember that once we were in a public place, when I pointed out to him the face of a woman marked with an original beauty and a melancholy character; he was very anxious to be appreciative, but instead, to be self-consistent, he asked with his little laugh, 'How on earth could a woman be melancholy?,' doubtless insinuating thereby that, when it comes to understanding the sentiment of melancholia, woman is lacking in some essential ingredient.

We might begin by asking how much of this passage expresses Baudelaire's own views of women. Still, particularly in light of Baudelaire's "Mohammedan" analogy, it's tempting to speculate as to how Delacroix's views of women might be reflected in his painting of Algerian odalisques, or inhabitants of the harem. Going forward in time, we might ask how future generations of psychoanalytically trained critics would interpret the preceding passage.

Psychoanalytic Approaches

Some fifty years after Delacroix's death, Sigmund Freud introduced psychoanalytic theory into the literature of artists' biography with his psychosexual study of Leonardo da Vinci. Although the specifics of Freud's conjectures about Leonardo's art have since been questioned, Freud's interpretive principles have influenced generations of biographers. Applying Freudian psychoanalytic theory, a critic would interpret the passage from Baudelaire quoted above as an indication of Delacroix's unresolved childhood conflicts and repressed sexual desires, unconsciously expressed in the adult artist's work. The art historian Jack Spector has analyzed the sadistic and orgiastic nature of the harem scene depicted in Delacroix's Death of Sardanapalus (fig. 10.1) in these terms,
citing the artist’s extreme attachment to his mother and subsequent emotional distance from other women, whom he either idealized as maternal figures or held in low esteem.

We might say, then, that psychobiographies restate the features of Vasari’s Lives of the Artists in Freudian terms, focusing on what Freud described as the “family romance” of the oedipus complex. Freud took the name for this stage in a young boy’s development from the Greek tragedy in which the hero, Oedipus, unwittingly kills his father and marries his mother. Freud argued that this scenario is the unconscious wish of every male child, who subsequently attains maturity by repressing his incestuous and violent impulses and learning socially acceptable behavior. From a Freudian perspective, the artist’s obsession with the creative process is seen as a channeling or sublimation of sexual drives, and his professional competitiveness is analyzed in terms of the artist’s rivalry with his siblings and his identification with his father. The artist’s work is then examined in part for what it reveals about the artist’s subconscious fears and desires.

A recent example of the psychoanalytic approach to an artist’s work is particularly relevant to our discussion of Delacroix. At the opening of this chapter I referred to Picasso’s series of variations on Delacroix’s Women of Algiers, and toward the end of the chapter you’ll find a reproduction of a lithograph from Picasso’s series (fig. 10.8). In her study of Picasso’s Variations on the Masters (1996), Susan Grace Galassi sees Picasso’s obsessive reworking of Women of Algiers as prompted by his lifelong competitiveness with the artistic “fathers” who inspired him, beginning with Delacroix. Picasso’s work on the series was spurred on by the recent death of his friend and rival, Matisse, whose Orientalist subjects Picasso was now free to adopt. Indeed, Picasso jokingly said of the series, “When Matisse died, he left me his odalisques as a legacy, and this is my idea of the Orient, though I have never been there” (quoted in Galassi 137). Finally, the paintings commemorate the aging Picasso’s latest exchange of one mistress for another, a woman whose features appear on one of the nude figures in Picasso’s variations on the harem theme.

Since the late 1960s, traditional psychoanalytic approaches to criticism have been modified through the intertwined influences of poststructuralist criticism, feminist scholarship, and the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. The result is a rethinking of some of Freud’s tenets, beginning with the oedipus complex—a patriarchal master plot from which girls are conspicuously absent. Kristeva, especially, focuses on an earlier, prelinguistic phase of childhood development, when the infant is closest to the mother in a symbiotic and fulfilling relationship. Once the child enters the oedipal stage, this feminized relationship is repressed through the processes of language acquisition and socialization; yet the pre-oedipal phase survives in the adult’s life as a subversive impulse that opposes the repressive discourse of patriarchy.

Poststructuralist approaches to psychoanalysis like Lacan’s conceive of the unconscious as structured like a language, with all its slippery ambiguities. What we call the self is constructed within a social sphere as a fluid rather than fixed subject position. Expressions of gender and sexuality are seen as the result of cultural conditioning as much as of biological fact. Increasingly, psychoanalytic applications in art criticism have shifted attention from the creative struggles of the individual artist to the psychodynamics of spectatorship, a point we’ll explore further on in this discussion.

Owing to these developments in theory, the artist’s biography nowadays is more likely to be considered a starting point for critical analysis rather than an end in itself. Biographical and psychobiographical approaches to art history assume an apparent and meaningful causal relationship between the artist’s life and work. These connections, however, are speculative and dependent on the reliability of surviving documentation. As an illustration of the challenges posed by biographical sources, let’s take the famous anecdote of Delacroix’s visit to a harem in Algiers in 1832. Most critical discussions of the painting cite this narrative as corroboration of the “documentary” origins of Women of Algiers. Here are the basic elements of the story:

Delacroix has been frustrated throughout his travels in North Africa by his inability to observe and sketch
Muslim women, whose living quarters are strictly off-limits to male outsiders. Delacroix’s friend Monsieur Poirel, the chief engineer of the harbor of Algiers, has an employee who agrees to let Delacroix enter the harem in his home. Accompanied by the husband and, probably, Poirel, Delacroix traverses the length of “some dark corridor” and at last “penetrates” the harem. “It’s like Homer’s time!” Delacroix exclaims; “The woman in the gynaeceum [women’s quarters] took care of her children, spun wool, and embroidered the most marvelous fabrics. This is woman as I understand her!” Intoxicated by the spectacle, the artist begins to sketch.

The tale is only told in retrospect, twenty years after Delacroix’s death. It comes to us, moreover, third-hand: Monsieur Poirel, presumably a witness, reports the details of the adventure to his friend Charles Cournault, who then writes up the account. Oddly, on the subject of the visit Delacroix himself is tantalizingly mum. It’s possible that Delacroix never made such a visit, yet the story is repeated, for the most part unchallenged, in most commentaries. The biographical assumption is that the incident is not only factual but somehow important to our understanding of the painting. How so? As we’ll see, one art historian takes this question as the starting point of her research, excerpted later in this chapter.

Formalism

The analytic approach known as formalism coincides with the rise of modernism in the early twentieth century. Formalism assumes that the significance of an artwork, and its principal appeal to the viewer, have little to do with the artist’s biography or with the cultural context in which the work is situated. Rather, meaning resides in the “intrinsic” features of form itself. Formalist analysis examines painting, for example, as a combination of purely plastic elements such as color, drawing, composition, brushwork, and so on, each element contributing to the overall aesthetic effect of the composition. In this view, art is a self-contained category of human creativity with its own history.

Art history is thus often presented as the story of the evolution of form or stylistic change in visual art. These changes may be characterized as a cycle of stylistic types (e.g., the Early, Classic, and Baroque phases proposed by the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin) or as a chronological succession of recognizable “period” styles whose favored subjects and techniques reflect the spiritual and material concerns of a given era. Period styles are typically defined by means of pairs of opposing formal descriptors. To describe Renaissance versus Baroque styles (or, analogously, Neoclassic versus Romantic styles) in Wölfflin’s terms, we would contrast these pairs: linear versus painterly; closed form (i.e., a comprehensible, boxlike space) versus open form; plane (i.e., an aligned sequence of spacial planes parallel to the picture plane) versus recession (a more dynamic spacial ambiguity); multiplicity versus unity of detail in the overall scheme of a composition; and absolute versus relative clarity in the play of light and color on the surfaces of depicted objects.

In discussions of Delacroix’s work, art historians frequently refer to the contrast between the Neoclassic ideals of late-eighteenth-century artists like Jacques-Louis David and the Romantic impulse that emerged in the following century, with Géricault and Delacroix as its prime exponents. Classicism, defined by art historians in terms of its emphasis on linearity, balance, and clarity, is thus seen in direct opposition to Romanticism, which prizes emotional expressiveness, color, and abstract painterly qualities over precise mimetic representation of the material world.

In the following excerpt from his recent monograph Eugène Delacroix (English edition, Princeton University Press, 1998), Barthélémy Jobert offers a formal analysis of Women of Algiers, bolstered by his research into the life of the artist. Jobert’s thesis is that in Women of Algiers Delacroix manages to reconcile the traditionally polarized styles of Classicism and Romanticism. Jobert’s formal analysis heightens our appreciation of how the picture succeeds as a complex and fluent interweaving of brush strokes, color harmonies, and design patterns. The nineteenth-century commentators quoted by Jobert in the latter half of his analysis (i.e., the artist Paul Cézanne and the critics Gustave Planche and Charles Blanc) similarly focus on the artist’s deft manipulation of form, color, and composition in this painting.

As you read, keep comparing the text with the color reproduction of the painting; you’ll most likely find that
Jobert’s analysis reveals elements and unities in the painting that you hadn’t noticed. At the same time, remember that no description is complete. Which items in the picture have been left out of the account? What is assumed about the subject matter and about the relationships among the figures in the painting? Jobert mentions that the figure of the black servant is an invention by Delacroix, added to enhance the exoticism and verisimilitude of the scene; formally, her standing figure balances the reclining figure on the left. Can you make further inferences about the role she plays in the picture?

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From Eugène Delacroix

by Barthélemy Jobert

Like many of his important works, this last painting was not the result of a commission but of the artist’s own initiative, and its large dimensions mark it as obviously intended for exhibition. It is not so clearly a manifesto as Scenes from the Massacres of Chios or The Death of Sardanapalus, but the evidence shows that it is indeed a painting in which the painter affirms his principles and gives his vision of Orientalism at a time when, in France, this current was taking a new turn provoked by the recent conquest of Algeria. We have already seen the circumstances under which Delacroix was able, once he had returned to France, to paint Muslim women in their most intimate interior, a place normally forbidden to Europeans. But if the finished canvas derives from the sketches done on site, it does not scrupulously transcribe what the painter saw in Algiers, as Elie Lambert has shown. In addition to the studies done on the trip, there was another series of preparatory studies, done in the studio in Paris, using a European model and the clothing and documents brought back from Africa, by means of which the process of transformation was achieved, ending in the final subtle equilibrium. Each of the three seated women derives from an Algerian model (their names are even known, thanks to Delacroix’s notations on the drawings). But their clothes and jewels have been redistributed so as to make a gradation, from right to left, from the simplest clothing to the richest and most complicated. The black servant who, at the right of the picture, draws a curtain to display the harem to the spectator, is, it appears, a complete invention of the artist, since she figures in none of the drawings done in Algiers. Delacroix could of course have seen her in North Africa, but this addition to the original scene appears not to have been dictated by considerations of a strictly realist kind. This figure simply adds to the exoticism of the painting, the verisimilitude of which she increases in the eyes of a spectator familiar with descriptions of Turkish harem’s. She is thus a part of the tradition of European painting since the Renaissance, tying the work to the great Venetian masters, in particular Veronese. As to the setting, if it shows what Delacroix could have studied at Algiers, it has also undergone modifications, particularly in the source of light, which comes from the left in the painting instead of the right, as in the original drawing. Are these liberties in the painter’s use of sources surprising? It is, after all, only the normal procedure of an artist concerned for the plastic aspect of his work. The interest here lies in the minute precision with which Delacroix has painted the costumes of these women, the background of the scene, and the different objects offered to the viewer—the narghile, basket, slippers, carpets, and cushions. The almost purely documentary aspect has been carried so far that the painting served as the basis for an exhibit of the clothing of Algerian women at the period of the French conquest, in the museum of ethnography in Algiers in the 1930s. This shows what extent Delacroix has remained very realistic, as did the other orientalizing painters and engravers of his time, wanting to describe exactly what they had experienced or discovered during their voyages to Africa or the East. But the concern for realism is combined, in Delacroix, with purely formal concerns. The Women of Algiers shows, in fact, a unity in the treatment of light, which, in the details, reveals a range of colors much more varied than the general tonality would at first glance lead one to suppose. Each of the four figures has its own harmony: red, blue, and black for the servant; rose, white, green, and orange for the woman holding the stem of the
Research and Critical Methods

narghile; blue, red, and ochre for her seated companion; red, white, brown, and gold for the one partially reclining at left. The patterns of the rugs, the cushions, and the tiles of the foreground are pretexts for combinations just as refined as those of another kind, on the wall and curtain of the background, left in shadow. The rendition of the light on the various materials takes precedence over the color alliances; the vibration of the curtain contrasts with the flat tone of the tiled floor, the reflections of the mirror with those of the dishes and the objects in the niche and cupboard. Notice also the red of the doors, which relieves the array of browns, somber greens, and ochers in this part of the canvas. All of Delacroix's talent goes into the general harmony that arises from the individual elements. On this point, the effects of the composition should not be underestimated; in placing his four figures almost on the same line, in giving much more detail to the front of the scene than to the background, in concentrating attention on the lower half without, however, falling into artifice and monotony—thanks to the standing figure of the servant—he leads us to appreciate the whole as much as the detail, to contemplate the scene in its totality before letting our eyes turn successively to each of the figures. The direction of the gaze of the four figures, going from one to another, explicitly invites us to move toward the figure at left, and finishes outside the canvas, directed toward the spectator. It is not only the still life of the foreground that invites us to wander from harmony to harmony, with the slippers tossed down as if by chance next to the narghile and the basket sitting on a bit of carpet, to discover contrasts and consonances: the composition would be ineffective except for what Delacroix has been able to do with the rendering of light, particularly noticeable on the flesh. This is what Cézanne felt when he said to Gasquet: "We are all there in this Delacroix. When I speak of the joy of color for color's sake, this is what I mean. . . . These pale pinks, these stuffy cushions, this slipper, all this limpidity, I don't know how, it enters your eye like a glass of wine going down your throat, and you are immediately intoxicated. One doesn't know how, but one feels lighter. These nuances lighten and purify. . . . And it is all filled up. Colors run into each other, like silks. Everything is sewn to-

together, worked as a whole. And it is because of this that it works. It is the first time that anyone has painted volume since the great masters. And with Delacroix, there's nothing to say; he has something, a fever that you don't find among the older painters. It's the happy fever of convalescence, I think. For him painting comes from marasmus, from the Carracci malady. He is knocking up against David. He paints by irisation. . . . And then he is convinced that the sun exists and that one can wipe one's brushes in it, do one's laundry. He knows how to differentiate. . . . A silk is a fabric, and a face is flesh. The same sun, the same emotion caresses them, but differently. He knows how to put a fabric on the Negress's thigh that has a different odour from the Georgian's perfumed culottes, and it is in his colors that he knows it and does it. He makes contrast. All these peppery nuances, look, with all their violence, the clear harmony that they give. And he has a sense of the human being, of life in movement, of warmth. Everything moves. Everything shimmers. The light! . . ."

The impression given by the forms and by the management of color finally counts for more than the strict documentary representation of the Women of Algiers. Criticism, when the canvas was shown at the Salon, oscillated between these two poles, with the most perspicacious critics, for example Gustave Planche, recognizing how far Delacroix had gone beyond his original subject: "The figures and the setting of this painting are prodigiously rich and harmonious. The color everywhere is brilliant and pure, but never crude and clashing. . . . This canvas is, in my opinion, the most brilliant triumph that M. Delacroix has ever reached. To interest the viewer by virtue of the painting, reduced to its own resources—without the support of a subject that can be interpreted in a thousand ways and that often distracts the eye of superficial spectators, who are busy judging the painting according to their dreams or conjectures—is a difficult task, and M. Delacroix has fulfilled it. In 1831, when he so happily framed historical reality in allegory, his pictorial power did not act on only the minds of the curious. The imagination regularly aided the skill of the brush. In the Women of Algiers, there is nothing of the kind; it is painting and nothing more, frank, vigorous painting, vigorously pronounced, with a Venetian boldness, which,
The Social History of Art

Analysis of the social contexts of artistic production, a critical approach formulated in studies of the 1940s and 1950s, came into prominence in the 1970s and 1980s. Contextual analysis can be seen as a reaction to the limitations of strict formalist analysis. “Social history” is a broad category that subsumes a number of overlapping approaches to contextual analysis, such as Marxism, gender studies, postcolonial theory, and ethnic studies. All these approaches proceed from the premise that a purely formalist interpretation fails to account for the social, political, and economic factors that go into the making and viewing of art.

Marxist Theory

Marxist theory, deriving from Karl Marx’s critiques of political economy in the 1850s, maintains that artistic production, like the other practices and institutions that constitute our social lives, both reveals and supports the underlying power structures of wealth and class in the surrounding culture. Social historians would ask to what extent Delacroix’s work of 1834 participated in the economic and political ideology of his powerful patrons—the French government and the growing bourgeois class of art spectators and consumers.

There are many social sites we might visit to get a fuller picture of the conditions of cultural production in Paris in 1834. One way to understand the role art plays in its cultural milieu is to look at the critical reception of the work. A reception history considers the ways in which critics have written about an individual piece or a group of artworks over a period of time. In the foregoing excerpt, Barthélemy Jobert quotes several nineteenth-century critics who praised Delacroix’s painting. A study of critical reception inquires further: How was Women of Algiers judged by the majority of Delacroix’s contemporaries?

To examine the original reception of a work of art, we need to understand how critical discourse functioned in a particular era. I’ve asked Véronique Chagnon-Burke, a scholar who specializes in reception theory and nineteenth-century French painting, to provide us with background for understanding the critics’ appraisal of Delacroix’s canvas when it was first shown in the 1834 Salon. Professor Chagnon-Burke (who, incidentally, is the would-be spy quoted at the opening of this chapter) will also take us through the steps of her research, as this process has wider applications for any library project.

About Critical Reception

The Women of Algiers by Eugène Delacroix

by Véronique Chagnon-Burke

Among the multitude of approaches that one can choose to interpret paintings, critical reception attempts to provide a reading of a specific painting, a body of works, or even the entire career of an artist, that is grounded in

*Because of space constraints, lengthier quotations from the French critics have been omitted.
historical context. As is often the case in art history, critical reception is a methodology that was originally used in literary criticism; it is based on the study of texts that have been written about a specific work. Connections between the work of art and its milieu are emphasized. Such a study might ask, for example: Which epoch privileged a more formal reading of the artwork, focusing on issues of style and artistic practice? Were some critics more interested in the significane of the subject matter than in the painterly quality of the work?

Most important, critical reception acknowledges that our perception and understanding of a work of art can change over time. The reaction of the public and critics who saw the Women of Algiers when it was exhibited at the Parisian Salon, in the Louvre Museum, in 1834, is unlikely to be the same as the responses of viewers who live in a postmodern, postcolonial era. Works that were considered minor or even failures in 1834 may, as time passes and standards change, become masterpieces. Critical reception provides a window into the history of taste, as well as a window into the ways critics and historians project the concerns of the present onto a work of the past.

Reception theory has greatly benefited from revisionist art history, which in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s proposed an alternative to formalism. Formalism, the offshoot of Modernism, emphasizes an interpretation of art based on the analysis of the stylistic components of a work; it insists on the physicality and the autonomy of the artwork, rather than seeing it as a cultural product. Critical reception, while recognizing the specificity of the visual language employed by painting, seeks to restore a more holistic understanding of a work, by pointing to the relativity of the interpretive domain.

Obviously, space constraints do not permit a complete study of the critical reception of Delacroix's Women of Algiers from its first exhibition in 1834 to the present. Instead I have chosen to focus on the year 1834 and to look at a sample of art reviews published at the occasion of the Salon.

First we need to set the stage. In the 1830s, if one wanted to become a successful artist, one needed to exhibit at the Salon, which was held every spring throughout most of the nineteenth century in the Louvre Museum and lasted for three months. For this occasion, the permanent collection of old master paintings was hidden from view behind scaffolding; the contemporary paintings were then hung from floor to ceiling on the green fabric that covered the scaffolding. To exhibit at the Salon the artists needed to have their works accepted by a jury composed of members of the Academy. The Salon was a very official affair; as the State of France controlled the Academy, the selection of the Salon jury reflected the dominant ideology and conservative taste for Neoclassical art. At a time when private art galleries in the modern sense did not exist, the Salon was truly the only way for an artist to be recognized and to gain patronage. From an average of 4,000 works submitted every year, only a third were accepted, which still provided for a rather spectacular show. Because of the high rate of rejection, it became a tradition for the art critics to start their reviews of the Salon by lamenting about the inconsistency and incompetence of the Salon jury.

At this time, during the July Monarchy in France (1830–1848), the profession of art critic was still a seasonal activity, practiced by a wide variety of writers with established careers in other fields such as politics, literature, and even public administration. The Salon reviews were published as a series in every major daily newspaper in Paris, as well as in weekly and monthly magazines, for the duration of the exhibition. They appeared on the front page, occupying the space usually devoted the rest of the year to the serial, a popular novel published in daily installments. The extent of coverage of the Salon in the daily press points to the extraordinary importance of such an event in the cultural life of Paris. Everybody came to the Salon; it was free every day but Saturday, which was the day the upper classes met and mingled in front of the artworks. In 1846, it is estimated that one million visitors came to the Salon, which was more or less the entire Parisian population at that time. A contemporary satirical painting of the Salon by François-Auguste Briard (fig. 10.5), exhibited in the Salon of 1847, shows the crowds that were drawn to the exhibition.
In its infancy, then, professional art criticism was essentially a journalistic exercise having little to do with the scholarly field of art history as we know it now. Critical reception of Delacroix's Women of Algiers in 1834 shows the confrontation of different points of view published in newspapers with opposing political orientations. Our recognition of a newspaper's political stance is of particular importance when the critical reception of French art is at stake. In France, as we've seen, the arts were strictly controlled by the government through the French Academy, or the Institut as it was known then, which was a bastion of Neoclassical ideals. In that highly politicized cultural milieu, if a writer opposed the artistic choice of the Academy, he or she could be seen as challenging the government's opinion.

This situation sometimes actually served the writers who wanted to disagree with the government but could not do so openly for fear of censorship. The art critics implicitly accepted that the health of the cultural life reflected the health of the nation. So writers and journalists created culturally coded discourses in which praising or damning art could be read by the public as the equivalent of praising or damning the government. By the 1830s this phenomenon had become an accepted tradition, practiced by writers to avoid censorship.2

With this understanding of the social and political conditions for the production of art criticism in 1834, researchers can begin to survey the Salon reviews published in some of the major Parisian newspapers. You must first select a group of newspapers and journalists most relevant to your topic. Obviously, you can apply different standards of judgment for your selections—based, for example, on the journal's circulation or political tendencies, or the quality of the writing, or the quality of its other news coverage. The important thing is to justify your choice in the introduction of your essay, explaining why you have chosen these specific publications for your analysis. Then the detective work really begins. After having chosen some possible newspapers, check their availability, usually on microfilm. Accessibility can impose real limitations on the scope of your study, since collections of older newspapers, especially those of short duration or small circulation, are often hard to find or incomplete. This is why it is best not to set out to demonstrate a preconceived thesis through these articles: before you formulate a thesis, read quickly through the available material and try to become familiar with the language of the past.

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In the field of critical reception of the paintings exhibited at the Salon, we are extremely fortunate to benefit from the extraordinary work accomplished by Neil McWilliam, who has compiled a Bibliography of Salon Criticism in Paris (Cambridge University Press, 1991), listed year by year. This means that in the case of the Women of Algiers, one only needs to go to the year 1834 to have a complete list of each Salon review published that year. The next step is to access and skim these articles to decide how Delacroix’s painting was received by the critics that spring—to try to see what patterns emerge and how the critics were divided. Was Delacroix a popular artist, and was this particular painting considered a success?

We discover, for instance, that the Women of Algiers was not one of the great successes of the Salon. Every newspaper, regardless of its political leanings, recognized that the three paintings that stole the show were Ingres’s Martyrdom of Saint Symphorian, Delaroche’s Execution of Lady Jane Grey (fig. 10.6), and Granet’s Death of Poussin, one a religious subject and two in the tradition of historical genre.

These three paintings belonged to the classical tradition supported by the Academy. Classicism emphasized drawing over color, a tight brush stroke, and legible narrative content. The Gazette de France, a journal opposed to the July Monarchy and supportive of the old aristocracy, went as far as devoting an entire article to the three paintings cited above and did not even mention any of the five paintings Delacroix exhibited that year. This made perfect sense, as the Academicians saw in Romanticism another sign of the decadence that was plaguing the country since the Revolution. Actually, most critics spent more time discussing Delacroix’s Battle of Nancy than they did the Women of Algiers. Here the pro-government agenda in publications such as Moniteur Universel (the official government paper) is quite clear. Delacroix had received the commission for this military painting from the government as part of King Louis-Philippe’s effort to create in the palace of Versailles a museum to the glory of French history, where large paintings would commemorate the greatest achievements of France’s past leaders. History painting was still considered the highest form of painting, mainly because of the general belief that art had to have a didactic and moral content. It was widely held that a good painting should enlighten, guide, inspire, teach a lesson, and these were things that only paintings with narrative content could do. One finds this hierarchy enforced in the Salon reviews: each critic started by reviewing history painting and proceeded down from there to genre painting (the depiction of scenes from contemporary everyday life), then on to portraits and landscape painting. Delacroix’s Women of Algiers was relegated by most of these critics to a subcategory of genre painting, a scene from foreign life, created to charm rather than to teach.

When they did discuss Women of Algiers, the critics concentrated primarily on its formal execution. We generally
find the art world of the 1830s divided between those who have pledged allegiance to the tradition of Classicism, best suited for the noble subjects of history painting, and the supporters of Romanticism, who valued color over drawing and personal expression over telling the “right” story in clear pictorial terms. In the Salon reviews, the supporters of Romanticism praised the colors and the loose handling of the paint in Women of Algiers, finding sensuality in the paint, as if they were transferring the potentially sexual connotations of the subject onto the quality of the paint itself—as, for example, in the review appearing in L'Artiste, [Vol. 7 no. 6], a journal that supported the cause of Romanticism and leftist politics and was one of the rare publications to praise the painting without reservation. Opponents of Romanticism criticized Delacroix’s lack of rigor and technique, the critic from Le Constitutionnel going so far as to call Delacroix’s handling of the paint “negligent” (March 15, 1834).

Perhaps the most striking difference between the interpretations of today and the readings of 1834 is the lack of interest on the part of critics of 1834 in the specificity of the subject matter. No one questioned the meaning of the subject. In the Salon reviews I’ve unearthed I find no allusion to France’s recent colonization of Algeria under Louis-Philippe, no insight into the status of the women depicted, no questions about the veracity of the scene. It is all taken for granted—a scene to distract and to please, to be enjoyed, to be visually consumed. It remains for art critics in a postcolonial world to question the critical assumptions of the preceding century.

In her concluding paragraph, Chagnon-Burke remarks that none of Delacroix’s contemporary reviewers questions the meaning of the subject of Women of Algiers. In other words, reception theory also takes into account what is missing from the official record. Let’s take this notion a few steps further. If François-Auguste Briard’s comic picture of the 1847 Salon is any indication, the French viewing public around this time was a lively mix of men and women (and children)—some conversing, others gazing up appreciatively, one fainting in the heat of the crush. Yet the opinions and questions of this larger viewing public are by and large absent from the archives of critical reception. Their preferences, to the extent that they differed from the professional critics’, are less likely to have gone into the formation of the Western art history canon. Reading further into the absences in the historical record, we might inquire into the ways other contemporary observers might have received Women of Algiers. How would an Algerian Muslim of the time, for example, have assessed the accuracy of the harem scene?

The foregoing study of critical reception ends by urging modern observers to take up questions like these. The following critical approaches, again subsumed under the more general study of the social history of art, provide us with a vocabulary and methods for examining artists’ representations of ethnicity, race, class, and gender.

Gender Studies, Feminist Criticism, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Queer Theory

Gender studies, feminist criticism, and gay and lesbian studies all take as their premise that gender definitions are determined as much by ideology and convention as by physical differences. Thus visual representations of men and women are not reflections of some natural external reality but rather an encoding of social roles. From the perspective of gender theory, art historians consider how “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics are interpreted by artists and spectators in different societies and eras. Who is being looked at in a given work of art, and who is doing the looking?

In the case of Women of Algiers, observers might ask: By what visual signs does Delacroix portray these female figures? How do their costumes, poses, and surroundings connote gender, status, and sexuality? In what ways, for instance, is “female of higher rank” distinguished from “female of lower rank”? And what kind of audience is implied or constructed by the painting? If indeed a male spectator is positioned by the painting, how is masculine subjectivity structured around images and acts of viewing?

Feminist criticism since the early 1970s has worked toward several interlocking goals. One objective, as I’ve
suggested above, is to examine the depiction of women and men in art and popular culture. Another ongoing project of feminist scholarship has been to recover female artists whose work has been overlooked or shuffled to the margins of art history. For example, in the course of her research on the Salon of 1834, Professor Chagnon-Burke unearthed glowing reviews of the work of Madame de Mirbel, a female portraitist (as well as a published Salon critic in her own right). One reviewer went so far as to call her group of miniatures a masterpiece, *un cadre de chefs d’oeuvre*. Today one finds scant mention of Mirbel, apart from occasional scholarly citations.

A related project of feminist criticism has been to analyze the often arbitrary and gendered processes by which canons are formed. To continue with the previous example, traditional art historians would argue that Mirbel's work does not merit study because it is “minor”—small in scale, local in reference, and of a subject matter customarily placed, along with still lifes, low down in the hierarchy of genres. (Judging from the Salon reviews Madame de Mirbel wrote, staunchly upholding the conservative ideals of her bourgeois class, Mirbel herself would probably have concurred with these critical standards.)

Feminist critics would point out that such rankings are essentially artificial and reinforced over the years by the male-dominated professions of artist and critic. As female artists were excluded from the French Academy until well into the nineteenth century, and therefore had fewer opportunities for drawing figures from life, they were less likely to attempt large-scale historical or religious subjects than portraits and still lifes. It might be argued from this evidence that the latter genres were defined, *de facto*, as minor, in the same way that “crafts” came to be distinguished as lesser forms of artistic expression than “fine arts.” As further evidence of the way the canon reflects and perpetuates the prevailing ideology, feminist critics cite the general omission of women artists from survey textbooks until the 1970s—even of major figures such as Artemesia Gentileschi and Rosa Bonheur, who were known during their lifetimes for excelling at painting “big” subjects on a grand scale.

Gay and lesbian studies and, more recently, queer theory also question how the dominant culture construes notions of sexual difference. Psychoanalytic and gender theorists in the past several decades have challenged the traditional psychoanalytic assumption of a “naturally” patriarchal social structure, with its overdetermined differences between masculine and feminine roles and sexual preferences. Much of this work has focused on the acts of looking and being looked at, or the psychology of “the gaze.” In an early and influential feminist article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), the film theorist Laura Mulvey argued that Hollywood cinema structures the visual experience as a voyeuristic pleasure that eroticizes females and presumes a “masculinized” point of view—regardless of whether the viewer is male or female. Current gender theory, however, offers more nuanced descriptions of spectatorship, rejecting the traditional binary oppositions of subject/object, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual.

Thus while *Women of Algiers* may be said to privilege a certain male viewership (insofar as the producers and patrons of such paintings have traditionally, though not always, been white males), the painting admits other subject positions or vantage points from which it can be read. What differences might there be in the nature of an artist’s or viewer’s perception and aesthetic pleasure if that artist or spectator is a lesbian or male homosexual or female heterosexual? In an article titled “Making Trouble for Art History: The Queer Case of Girodet” (1996), James Smalls concludes that Girodet’s homoerotic painting *The Sleep of Endymion* (1791) “make[s] us aware of the numerous ways in which multiple sexual identities can be encoded in art produced prior to our own time, as well as the equally numerous ways in which homophobic and heterocentrist forces can operate to suppress them in art history” (27).

We’ve noted that gender criticism often works in tandem with other critical approaches to reveal the underlying social strategies of pictorial discourse. In the case of *Women of Algiers*, before we analyze Delacroix’s depiction of women in the harem, we need to understand how representations of gender and sexuality are typically intertwined with representations of social class and ethnicity.
For example, as the author of our next commentary points out, Delacroix's painting faintly suggests a subtext of lesbianism that will reappear in “Orientalist” art throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Turkish Bath* of 1862–1863, shown in fig. 10.7, seems to suggest the theme more explicitly.) How does this particular construction of female sexuality become a recurrent motif in Western images of “Eastern” and “African” Others? And what are we to make of the racial hierarchy in these paintings, where darker-skinned figures are usually relegated to the background or margins? One sees the same marginalizing of African-American figures in paintings produced in the United States during this period. Postcolonial theory, another of the contemporary critical perspectives that have influenced the way we look at art, helps us make these connections.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory examines art and literature in the context of the history of the colonial enterprise. The popularity of Orientalist art in France and England was concurrent with the growth of these nations as colonial powers in North Africa and the Near East. In France, Napoleon's Egyptian campaigns toward the end of the eighteenth century stimulated the public's interest in North African scenes. The Orientalist movement in the visual arts picked up momentum with France's colonization of North Africa in the 1830s, as painter-travelers (like Delacroix in 1832) accompanied France's emissaries to the colonies. There followed a procession of Orientalist paintings to satisfy the growing middle-class consumer market for exotic pictures of an alien culture.

Among the more popular Orientalist subjects were caravans in the desert, slave markets, Turkish baths, and odalisques (i.e., inhabitants of the harem, both servants and concubines) at leisure. Most of the artists who dabbled in these subjects had not traveled to the East but instead relied on pictures in libraries and museums. Such was the case with Ingres, one of the most prominent painters to present Orientalist themes.

As empires collapsed during the 1960s and 1970s, cultural theorists began to discuss “Orientalism” as an essentially Western formulation that supported the programs of slavery, imperialism, and colonialism. In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said analyzed the representation of the Eastern Other in Western literature as “a mode for defining the presumed cultural inferiority of the Islamic Orient . . . part of the vast control mechanism of colonialism, designed to justify and perpetuate European dominance.” The art historian Linda Nochlin, in an
influential review entitled "The Imaginary Orient" (1983), applied the postcolonialist critique to a discussion of Orientalism in the visual arts. In her analysis of artists' portrayals of exotic, passive figures in a fantasy landscape, Nohlin set the stage for our consideration of the political ramifications of Delacroix's depiction of Muslim women in *Women of Algiers*.

Joan DelPlato is an art historian who has written extensively on nineteenth-century harem pictures from the perspectives of postcolonial and feminist criticism. I've asked Professor DelPlato to share with us the ways in which these analytic methods have informed her research and writing on Delacroix's painting. Here is her commentary (again, owing to space constraints, some of the longer citations have been omitted).

Passivity and Politics in Delacroix's 1834
*Women of Algiers*

by Joan DelPlato

Delacroix's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* offers us the opportunity for a case study in how scholarship opens up a well-known text, using primary sources, historical research, and contemporary theory. When I first looked closely at the critical literature on *Women of Algiers*, I discovered that the issues of colonialism and gender did not figure in the responses of the painting's viewers in 1834. Why did their perceptions differ from mine? Art is rarely direct in its treatment of politics, of course, but in what subtle ways might Delacroix’s masterpiece have been political?

Through the investigative methods of cultural history, an initially “silent” painting can reveal how and what it might have communicated to its original audiences as well as to us as historically informed readers today. The painting suggests a range of historical questions about femininity, ethnicity, racial hierarchy, exoticism and colonialism, themes that are in fact intertwined.1 Given the number and complexity of the issues the painting raises, I would like to limit my focus here to one theme: *Women of Algiers* as a representation of passive women and the implications of this fact. The scene covers a life-size canvas, a scale conventionally reserved for paintings of profound themes. How is it that a nondidactic, nonheroic genre subject of women at rest—a domestic scene about an extreme and foreign femininity—was taken so seriously by one of the most talented young painters of his day?

In reading what other art historians had written about the painting, I was struck by the recurrence of a strange story: that, under an oath of secrecy and with the help of a Monsieur Poirel, Delacroix had managed to get into a real harem during his mission’s three-day layover in Algiers from June 25 to June 28, 1832. I discovered that this story had developed into an elaborate mythology which has become the standard explanation for the painting: that it shows an authentic harem because Delacroix saw it with his own eyes. However, the evidence for the claim of Delacroix’s firsthand experience is hearsay and highly tenuous, given the strictly observed Muslim prohibition of such a visit. Delacroix himself wrote nothing specific about the incident in his famous journal.

My own belief is that Delacroix never entered a harem.2 Yet regardless of whether he did or not, my real interest is in the way art history has treated the question. First, uncritical acceptance of the story reinforces the cult of the artist-genius, a figure traditionally constructed as a daring risk-taker and transgressor of social convention. An important element of the stereotyped artist-genius persona is a presumptuous and masculine sexual prerogative. (Significantly, the verb often used by commentators is that Delacroix “penetrated” the harem.) Second, it is generally presumed that because Delacroix gained access to a harem, *Women of Algiers* is an authentic painting about “the Algerian character.” The conventional thinking is that a representation is “truer” if the artist directly experienced the scene. This reasoning fails to account for lapses in memory or for the crucial matters of artistic invention and social construction. Whether Delacroix himself ever entered a harem, we need to consider the ways in which the artist constructs a fictional scene as well as a fictional male spectator entering it.
I: Passivity and Eroticism

The full title indicates that the painting shows women of Algiers in their apartment. Numerous elements in the portrayal of the decor and inhabitants indicate that this apartment is located within a harem—that is, the women's quarters, the heart of the upper-class Muslim home where multiple wives, concubines, unmarried female relatives, and children lived, sometimes guarded, in seclusion.

The players in *Women of Algiers* are engaged in no noteworthy activity. They are not busy attending to children or to clear-cut household duties. The two harem inmates seated on the right smoke a narghile, or water pipe. The woman on the left reclines languidly and looks out from the picture plane. The servant to the three women performs a (seemingly) minor action: she pulls aside a curtain to reveal this scene of inactivity.

While the harem itself suggests a sexual hierarchy, the arrangement of the women suggests an internal social hierarchy. The seated women's lower level of activity indicates their higher social rank; they are the "leisured" class. The standing servant occupies the lowest rank of the four; the reclining woman at left, aloof from the others, is possibly the first, highest-ranking of the wives sanctioned by Islam. The close pairing of the women seated on the right suggests an intimate friendship of peers. In scores of other harem pictures in the tradition to which this picture belongs, a pairing of women more explicitly alludes to lesbianism. This is a long-standing notion in France and England concerning the nature of sexuality in the harem, *de facto* aberrant, since several young and beautiful women await infrequent visits from one wealthy man who might satisfy several women's material needs but not necessarily their sexual ones. Delacroix's pair alludes very subtly to this conception, which is quite explicit in the literature of Orientalism—in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721), for example, and in the rather bawdy earlier accounts by travelers who claim to report the truth about the harem women's oversexed nature. In downplaying the lesbian theme, Delacroix again reinforces his women's inactivity. Delacroix's pre-

sentation of passive women allows them to function less as individuals and more as ethnographic types. Note the similarity in body and face shared by all three seated women, who together constitute "the Algerian woman."

The women's passivity is underscored by the Orientalist trappings of the harem, perhaps most prominently the narghile, which helps explain the deep *chiaroscuro* of the smoky atmosphere. The widespread habit of smoking opium in North Africa is described during the 1830s by Edward William Lane, whose *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* quickly became an authoritative source consulted by innumerable artists. Lane says opium-smoking is enjoyed by the middle and upper classes throughout Egypt and is a "perricious and degrading custom." (At the same time, in France and England, opium-smoking took on a cult status among anti-bourgeois artists and intellectuals.) In the painting's narrative, opium-smoking provides a cause for the bodily passivity of the women.

The setting is cluttered with ciphers of conventional femininity, though here they are "orientalized"—elaborate jewelry, finely textured clothing, an ornate mirror, and sumptuous furnishings. These objects function in the painting as fetishes. In Freud's definition (1927), these are objects that serve to reinforce the distinction between the male (viewer) and the female (viewed), and thus to reduce masculine anxiety about gender difference. More important, although these women are clothed, they are, by Muslim standards, exposed, unveiled to the sight of trespassers in the harem. This knowledge helps define the hypothetical male viewer more concretely as a transgressor and heightens the erotic component of the scene at the level of fantasy.

Thus *Women of Algiers* is erotically charged not only because of the women's passive receptivity and the array of feminine and Orientalist ciphers but also because of the exposing of a forbidden scene. This act is accomplished in the narrative of the painting by a figure that functions here as the artist's surrogate: the standing servant who pulls back a curtain to reveal the room to the spectator. In Orientalist paintings, the figure of the black
woman is typically marginalized. In Delacroix’s painting, too, the servant, although bejeweled and graceful, is conceptualized as invisible; pushed off to one side, she is shown from the back, and her body proportions are smaller than those of the women she serves. In the critical literature on the painting, as well, the figure of the black woman is rendered transparent. She is simply a servant or slave, whose stance and dress provide contrast for her splendidly leisureed mistresses. I would like to bring her center stage. The figure of the black woman requires a deeper, revisionist reading.

In point of fact, there was a harem hierarchy in Muslim societies of North Africa, but generally speaking it was not as strict and racially based a hierarchy as it tended to be in Western slaveholding societies. Slavery was a condition acknowledged by Islam as long as it was judiciously maintained. In the Islamic world, any non-Muslims, whether fair Georgians or dark Abyssinians, might be bought as slaves. In other words, not just the black woman, but any of the seated women depicted in the painting might have been a slave, though if the woman served as a concubine (or “odalisque”), she would be ranked higher than a domestic servant. And a slave elevated to the rank of wife would be freed. Thus in depicting the image of a black woman serving white women, Delacroix—along with many painters of Orientalist subjects—presumes a social system more familiar to his Parisian audiences, a time when Antislavery Societies in Paris and London were arguing for the abolition of slave markets. The painting subtly reinforces the institution of slavery in a scene meant to be enjoyed by French viewers.

II: Passivity and Colonization

Women of Algiers functions on one level as sexual fantasy lightly clothed as serious ethnography. The passivity of the harem inmates in Delacroix’s painting also functions at another level, pertaining to France’s colonization of Algiers. Interestingly, art critics in 1834 failed to link the painting to the colonialist venture in Algiers, despite Delacroix’s title. Instead many of them claimed that the painting is about pure painting, about Art.

Although Algiers was not officially declared a French colony until July of 1834, the French had occupied Algiers since 1830. In the intervening four years the French were engaged in a series of commercial and military ventures that included French massacres of rebellious insurgents. Opponents of colonization saw the venture as too expensive or morally objectionable, while proponents stressed its economic potential. At precisely the moment that Delacroix’s painting hung on the walls of the Salon, Parliament was debating whether and how France would continue its policy of colonization in Algiers.

How does the painting participate in the political debate? The belief that the colonized subject, male and female alike, is passive or indolent is a recurrent justification for colonialist intervention and political dominance, as Edward Said asserts in his now-classic study of Orientalism. Akin to the long-standing stereotype of “the lazy native,” the passive subject is incapable of running his own economic and political affairs and dependent on modern, industrialized overseers to attend more efficiently to his “needs” and advance his “progress.” These judgments provided the moral underpinning even for well-intended efforts such as abolitionism and religious missionary work in the colonies throughout the nineteenth century. Delacroix’s passive Algerian women are depicted as the “raw material,” if you will, the “before,” thought to be in need of colonial revision, which is the “after.” That harem women are represented in Delacroix’s painting as indolent suggests not only their attractive primitivism but also their moral immaturity in belonging to a polygynous institution sanctioned by Islam, an infidel religion to many viewers in predominantly Christian France.

The theorist Homi K. Bhabha notes that the Western colonizer approaches the colonized with the ambivalence that Freud described in his writing about the fetish—that is, with feelings of attraction and repulsion, love and hate.4 His analysis is relevant to our understanding of the history of readings of Delacroix’s Women of Algiers: the painting was attractive to French viewers in 1834, and it
also evoked moral indignation. Beautiful but idle women, sequestered in a harem, smoking opium, could hardly be considered virtuous in a bourgeois society that encouraged its women to be industrious homemakers.

I believe that Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers* worked not only as a focus for psychosexual fantasy but also as pro-colonial propaganda, supporting the controversial program of French colonialism in Algiers. In this way the painting was a kind of domestic (and therefore subtler) counterpart to French military paintings of the time depicting mounted officers ready to do battle. Precisely because *Women of Algiers* was thought to reside in the realm of the domestic-ethnographic genre of Art, it could function as a powerful ideological tool for high politics. Because the painting was considered ahistorical and apolitical, its assertion of female passivity was all the more convincing as ethnography, a piece of the “truth” about how Algerians lived. “Art” functioned to disguise politics.

**Notes**


2. The painting is less likely a record of Muslim women of Algiers and more likely a depiction of Jewish models whom Delacroix sketched in North Africa. His preparatory sketches for the painting may have been executed at the home of the translator Abraham Ben-Chimol, a Jew living in Tangier in February 1832.


5. The work was purchased by minister of the interior Louis-Adolphe Thiers and not King Louis-Philippe himself, whose taste was less the flamboyance of Delacroix and more the cool hyperrealism of the military painter Horace Vernet. Exactly why it was purchased is still a matter of conjecture. Thiers, who had supported Delacroix as early as 1822, may have wanted to justify the recent awarding of a government commission to Delacroix to decorate the Throne Room of the Bourbon Palace in 1833. Or he may have sensed the potentially explosive nature of the work and purchased it in an attempt to check its circulation and thus limit its interpretations.

The recognition of contingent meanings that defy closure is the foundation of poststructuralist analysis, a set of critical methods we’ve already alluded to above. The following discussions of structuralism and poststructuralism touch on some of the key concepts that inform discussions of art in the late twentieth century.

**Structuralism, Semiotic Theory, and Iconographic Analysis**

Structuralism flourished in the social sciences and humanities until the mid-1960s. Structuralist analysis was formulated in studies of *semiotics*, or sign systems, by the nineteenth-century American philosopher Charles Pierce, and in Ferdinand de Saussure’s theories of linguistics, published posthumously in 1916. Saussure described language as consisting of signs, or *signifiers*—made up of the sounds or words referring to something—and their meanings, or *signifieds*. Signifiers derive their meaning by being different from other signifiers.

In this view, language and culture are structured in the form of binary oppositions of basic elements, such as light/dark, culture/nature, male/female, West/East, and so on; in each pair, a term is defined by the way it differs from its opposite term. Anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss applied structuralist principles to their study of myths, kinship systems, and other cultural practices, to discover the underlying structures or universal laws by which those systems operate. Similarly, as we’ve noted in our discussion of formalism, art historians have analyzed the formal properties of an artwork in terms of contrasting pairs of basic elements—line/color, light/dark, surface/volume, and so on—to explain how the parts work together as a whole.

Semiotic theory, which examines how signs and sign systems derive meaning, has long been used by art
historians to analyze the significance of images in art, most notably in the form of iconographic studies. Early iconographic analysis decoded the language of visual images by pointing to the literary texts or art-historical precedents to which these images refer. Erwin Panofsky’s celebrated explication (1953) of Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini wedding portrait, for example, pointed to the underlying ecclesiastical significance of the objects and figures in the painting. According to Panofsky, these domestic images—mirror, candle, dog, and so on—would have been “read” by contemporary viewers as conventional Christian symbols of purity, faith, and salvation, and thus would have underscored the sacramental nature of the wedding ceremony depicted in the scene.

More recent semiotic analyses remind us that a sign within an artwork can be seen to refer to a number of different systems of meaning; an observer focuses on one system and overlooks another as a result of the conventions and beliefs of his or her era and interpretive community. For instance, in an article published in 1989 on the Arnolfini wedding portrait, Linda Seidel, citing evidence from contemporary legal documents and household books of the Florentine merchant class, reads the same group of domestic images as a visual record of an essentially financial transaction, the transfer of the bride’s dowry. Seidel describes the goal of her iconographic analysis as “an expansion of the issues on which inquiry into the painting may be based and an exploration of the ways in which we talk about what we see” (59).

Returning to the example of Delacroix, we can contrast two interpretations of the iconography of Women of Algiers: DelPlato’s, quoted above, and Jobert’s, quoted earlier in this chapter (pages 226–230). Jobert essentially regards the features of Delacroix’s harem as documentary facts, references to or representations of objects that exist in an external setting; Jobert’s analysis focuses on the ways in which the artist has altered and rearranged the images to create aesthetic balance and harmony. DelPlato, on the other hand, reads these signifiers as encoding contemporary discourses on race, gender, and class. Seen in this light, the iconography of the painting is a semiotic system that articulates and reinforces the social and political ideology by which colonial powers exercise control over the Other. In an article on “Semiotics and Art History” (1991), Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson describe how semiotic theory has been complicated by the poststructuralist view of the indeterminacy of meaning:

... the contemporary encounter between semiotics and art history involves new and distinct areas of debate: the polysemia of meaning; the problematics of authorship, context, and reception; the implications of the study of narrative for the study of images; the issue of sexual difference in relation to verbal and visual signs; and the claims to truth of interpretation. (174).

Poststructuralism

In some ways, poststructuralism isn’t so much a turning away from structuralism as it is a chronological descendant, for both approaches seek to demonstrate that the connections between the word or image and the thing it signifies do not occur naturally but rather are determined by society. The later approach, however, formulated amidst the political upheavals and anticolonialist movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, is marked by profound skepticism regarding the ultimate truth of any interpretation.

In poststructuralist analysis the meanings of words and images are shown to be inherently unstable and dependent on context. As we’ve noted in our discussions of gender and postcolonial theory, traditionally defined categories of meaning such as male/female, subject/object, West/East, begin to blur and shift under scrutiny. Rather than describing natural or universal principles, these pairs seem to be arbitrary oppositions in which Western culture habitually assigns greater value to the first term in each pair. Abandoning the agenda of finding a unified set of underlying rules for interpreting a text, poststructuralist critiques argue that fields of knowledge are constructed through ideology—that is, through the dominant discourses of a given culture. Developed during the 1960s and 1970s in the work of the French theorists Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, the critical methods
of *discourse analysis* and *deconstruction* seek to destabilize and dislodge these traditional patterns of perception.

To illustrate the methods and aims of the poststructuralist critique, this final section of our survey will look at how three artists—two visual artists and one writer—"deconstruct" Delacroix in their own artwork. That is to say, each work discussed below functions, in effect, as a deconstructive analysis of *Women of Algiers*. These multiple variations on a theme remind us that every act of interpretation is a re-creation of the text. Each re-creation brings to the surface some of the hidden assumptions that viewers bring to Delacroix’s painting.

**Pablo Picasso’s *Women of Algiers, After Delacroix***

Picasso’s series of variations (fifteen paintings plus numerous sketches and prints, executed in 1954–1955) constitutes the most famous and most extensive revisionist reading of Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers*. Like a number of twentieth-century observers, Picasso sees Delacroix’s work as an early and influential expression of Modernism. From this viewpoint, the painting’s strange compression of space, its tilted perspective, and its self-conscious passages of explicit brushwork are seen as evidence of Delacroix’s experimental shift from a naturalistic rendering of three-dimensional form to a modernist emphasis on forms and colors as abstract elements on a flat picture surface.

Picasso brings forward the subtle ambiguities of the Delacroix canvas. His variations explore competing modes of pictorial representation in the twentieth century: for example, in the lithograph shown in fig. 10.8, Picasso contrasts the more volumetric figures at the left and center of the print with the Cubist form of the reclining nude (with legs raised) on the right side of the picture.

In Picasso’s variations, the realistic and ethnographic features of Delacroix’s harem are abstracted or erased. As a result, the figures are more easily read as models in an artist’s studio, demoted and shifted from canvas to canvas; their features are interchangeable, at times obliter-

ated. The dark background of Delacroix’s painting, framed by a theatrical curtain, becomes in Picasso’s series of pictures a doorway, a picture frame, or possibly a mirror. As Susan Grace Galassi suggests in *Picasso’s Variations on the Masters*, Picasso’s various transformations destabilize the visual language of Delacroix’s painting: "the notion of any fixed relation between representation and reality (or sign and symbolic content) is held up to question. . . . The subject of the harem itself is fused with the studio and the brothel to become an allegory of creation" (147).

**Assia Djebar’s *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment***

More recently, working in nontraditional forms such as literary fragments and multimedia installations, artists of the postcolonial era have actively intervened in the history of Orientalism. The postcolonial feminist project has been to "decenter" the notion of artists and spectators as predominantly white, male, and Western—as well as the notion of artists’ models as interchangeable objects of desire. One such response to Delacroix’s painting is a literary text—part memoir, part art criticism, part fiction. Assia Djebar appropriates Delacroix’s title for her collection of essays and stories: *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (1980; English translation 1992). In a piece from the