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(Eugene Delacroix. Liberty Leading the People, 1830. Musée du Louvre, Paris.)

# Liberty Leading the Women: Delacroix's *Liberty* as Transitional Image

One of the most iconic works of revolutionary art is Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, a painting from 1830 that depicts the July Revolution of the same year (Fig 1.). The main figure of the painting is the symbol of Liberty, an allegorical representation of the ideal of perfect freedom. Liberty is represented through the female form, a traditional manner of representation of victory that dates back to antiquity (Fig. 2). Many components of her appearance clearly indicate that she is an allegorical representation and not, in fact, a representation of an actual woman. However, Delacroix's particular symbol of liberty continues to hold relevance today through her reemergence in the contemporary milieu as a symbol that has, perhaps, transcended the allegorical trope and

transformed into a true woman of the people. Delacroix introduces through her figure a level of specificity that transcends her traditional representations as a passive, mythological, or allegorical symbol. In looking to the origins of the figure of liberty, the role of women during the revolutions, the artist's own history, and the reappearance of this figure into our own contemporary world, the evolution of Delacroix's Liberty as an image can be seen to serve as a bridge from a purely allegorical figure to a real woman.

*Liberty Leading the People* is a major work that in many ways announces the Romantic era. *Liberty* is a scene of revolution specifically from July of 1830, when a three-day uprising in Paris called for the

overthrow of the monarchy that had been reinstated shortly after the first French Revolution of 1789 – 99. It debuted in the Paris Salon in 1831 and was met with mixed reactions.

Many were horrified at the depiction of an event in what would have been contemporary history in which a bare-breasted woman was painted leading the people of France. In the same year of its debut, the painting "was censored by Louis-Philippe" and was "hidden from the public for years" because of its controversial and emotionally charged nature.<sup>1</sup>

The State, fearing further insurrection, kept the painting hidden until 1863 when it entered the Luxembourg Museum, only to find permanent residence in 1874 at the Louvre.

The setting of the painting is inspired by the 1830 revolution, where Delacroix allegedly witnessed the revolution from the window of his Paris apartment. The figures in the scene are identifiable by their clothing and weaponry. Both the fallen and fighting figures are dressed in clothes indicative of the time period, which also places them in various classes: from the working class, the military class, the bourgeoisie, the artisan class, and the aristocracy. Delacroix was known to be a patriot and a lover of his country, and believed his

painting to be his contribution to his country. As he stated in a letter to his brother, "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."<sup>2</sup> Thus, Delacroix painted a revolution that is by the people and for the people through his representation of a range of individuals who fight alongside one another. However, all of the figures depicted as fighting are men, except for the figure of Liberty at the center. While these figures are meant to represent actual people, the figure who leads them all is an allegorical representation. She is a symbol of an ideal that is greater than those who fight and encapsulates precisely what they are fighting for. By including a woman as the main focus of his painting, Delacroix follows an established tradition, but also implicitly

calls to attention the historical role of women in the July Revolution and the French Revolution years prior. Her widely acknowledged role as solely an allegory may not be as clear when she is taken into context with the rest of the painting and with Delacroix's specific depiction.

While Delacroix's personal opinion of women is not widely known, inferences can be made through his own personal writings. Eugene Delacroix records several encounters he had with women in his journal, nearly all of whom are cast in a flattering light. One instance is his depiction of his housekeeper, Jeanne-Marie le Gouilleu, a peasant woman who began working for him around 1834 when Delacroix fell ill. In the introduction of his journal, it is stated that Delacroix "admired the courage and integrity she



had shown under great hardship," and in his own words, praised Jeanne-Marie for her "blind devotion in person, she watches over my life and my time like a soldier on guard."<sup>3</sup> It is evident through his writings that Delacroix admired the strength and capability of his housekeeper, going as far as characterizing her as strong and soldier-like, someone who capably watches over him and protects him. In many ways, such a view of women can be projected onto the figure of Liberty, leading the people of France through the chaotic fog and into the light where liberty can be attained. However, in order to tease out her role as an allegory, it is helpful to look at the role of women during this time period and, more specifically, to the iconic figure of Marianne.



(Figure 2: Unknown. *Flying Nike (Victory) Sculpture*, 2nd century B.C.)

Marianne became the symbol of the French Republic in 1792 after the New Republic was formed during the French Revolution. To this day, she remains the specific symbol of the French Republic as the goddess of liberty and reason, and as an allegorical symbol of liberty, herself. It is possible that Delacroix's *Liberty* is merged with her identity.

Marianne is normally depicted wearing the Phrygian cap (Fig 3.) a notable symbol of liberty from the first French Revolution, as well as holding a spear in one hand. One important factor to note, however, is that Marianne is nearly always depicted in traditional, Greco-Roman garb, occasionally with her breasts uncovered. The state of her dress varies with the interpretation of the artist. The most notable feature of Delacroix's *Liberty* is her bare breasts, something that has led art historians to agree upon her identity as exclusively allegorical.



(Figure 3: Antoine-Jean Gros. *Allegorical Figure of the Republic (Marianne)*, 1794.)

Marianne, herself, was a symbol to be worshipped and her name derives from the combination of the Virgin Mary and her mother, Anne.<sup>4</sup> She evoked the “lower classes of the countryside, where the Madonna-like Marianne became an amalgam of the revolutionary goddesses Liberty, Reason, and Virtue.”<sup>5</sup> However, she is seen as a replacement of the religious iconography at the time, introducing a secular France that was no longer under control of the oppressive monarchy or Church.

The French Revolution prompted French Republicans to associate themselves with the ideal of liberty, which ultimately resulted in the figure of Marianne. The figure of Marianne thus became a recurring image of liberty and secularism in French art and culture, both during and after the Revolution. She and Delacroix’s Liberty have both become the “most enduring women warriors of French iconography.”<sup>6</sup>

The name of Marianne “fit the feminine-gendered *la République* and suggested that the Revolution had given power to the lower classes.”<sup>7</sup> To the commoners, Marianne represents a figure that empowered the lower classes through revolution. In comparison to the lower, working classes, the educated classes and the bourgeoisie “preferred classical and masculine allegories” of strength until Marianne came to symbolize France.<sup>8</sup> She became popular among the middle classes after 1800, and her representation and idealization varied depending on class and artist. For example, in one particular play entitled *Marianne and Dumont*, the figure of Marianne was represented through her depiction as a bourgeois woman who is in love with a man who is lowlier than she.

While she is not explicitly depicted as a woman warrior, she exemplifies the spirit of women warriors who were “willing to give up love in order to protect their families.”<sup>9</sup> Thus the meaning of Marianne would vary: to an illiterate peasant woman, she could be a symbol of empowerment and to the bourgeois woman, a symbol of strength and prestige. To many women, Marianne embodied what they wished to attain, much like the symbol of Liberty herself.

While Marianne is normally depicted as a passive figure, a clear symbol of liberty and reason in the Republic, Delacroix’s Liberty is active. French painter Antoine-Jean Gros’ depiction of Marianne, for example, is clearly an allegorical symbol (Fig 3).

With the Phrygian cap on her spear, a level atop a lector bundle that is surrounded by oak leaves, and her tunic, she evokes antiquity surrounded by symbols of liberty and reason, as she stands upright as if she is a sculpture. This is one depiction of Marianne with her breast uncovered, another indication of allegory. Delacroix's Liberty also displays bare breasts, tying her to ancient personifications of liberty and victory (Fig. 2).

However, Delacroix's Liberty transcends a simple symbol of liberty and reason by becoming a fighter, a warrior, and a leader.

While Delacroix's Liberty certainly has ties to the figure of Marianne, her representation also goes further in the specificity of her appearance in ways that transcend Marianne altogether. Instead of Marianne's spear, she holds a bayonet,

a weapon that was used during both the French and July Revolutions. This suggests that she is a soldier and a woman of the people. She wears the Phrygian cap much like Marianne, but she is unlike the delicate Marianne. Instead, Liberty is muscular and robust, a symbol of a peasant woman of France rather than a goddess of antiquity or, possibly, a secularized holy mother. As Eric Hobsbawm in *Man and Woman in Socialist Iconography* states, Liberty is more along the lines of a "woman of the people, belonging to the people, and at ease among the people."<sup>10</sup> Even a poem by French poet Auguste Barbier entitled *La Curée* describes Liberty as "of peasant stock, the very image of the people."<sup>11</sup> The first sketch of Liberty by Delacroix entitled *Study for Liberty* shows a Liberty with an emotionally expressive face as she cries out and leads the people toward victory (Fig 4).

The final version of Liberty, instead, shows a more serene expression that is indicative of the serenity exhibited by the statues of antiquity, but her new role as an active fighter for the cause of the French people remains. Liberty is among the people of France, leads the people of France, and is a woman. However, woman as leader or even equal to men in society was historically not the case in France, even during the French Revolution, the July Revolution and beyond.



(Figure 4: Eugene Delacroix. *Study for Liberty*, 1830.)

Prior to the French Revolution, women were taught to be committed to their husbands and their husbands' interests.<sup>12</sup> Women worked in the home, considered incapable of working outside of the home until the Industrial Revolution when they largely worked in factories, as washerwomen or as prostitutes. Women, overall, were banned from the political sphere with no representation whatsoever, but during the French Revolution, women began to politicize. Political clubs were formed in which women spoke of politics and equality. Clubs like the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women of 1793 were "centrally involved in the mainstream movement for political democracy and social equality, and had even begun to ask for equal rights for women."<sup>13</sup>

Petitions for equal rights were not uncommon at this time, and women played a significant role in both revolutions as they fought alongside men. However, any kind of equality was denied to the women of France after both revolutions. Suppression of women's clubs was widespread, and women never gained full political rights. Any rights that were gained were crushed by the Napoleonic Law Code of 1804 that "proclaimed a uniform regime of patriarchy" and stripped women of rights by officially deeming them second-class citizens in relation to men.<sup>14</sup> Women thus faced a major setback in the fight for equality, despite their role as fighters and champions of freedom. Yet Delacroix depicts Liberty as a woman, one that draws upon the mythological representation of women but is represented as the leader of a real battle.

Women did, indeed, fight alongside men during the July Revolution. Several scholars have suggested that a number of French insurgents inspired Delacroix's Liberty, herself. Given Delacroix's own personal admiration for strength in women, it is not necessarily unlikely. Art historian T.J. Clark claimed that Delacroix was inspired by a "working woman called Marie Deschamps, who fought on the barricades and was decorated."<sup>15</sup> While images of her do not exist, a description of her is found in the official *Narrative of the French Revolution* in 1830, which is considered an authentic detailing of the events that took place. The depiction of her is as follows:

On the Quai de la Cité, a young woman snatched the musket of a citizen who had fallen, and fired briskly upon the Swiss Guards. A ball passed through her gown. This heroine is named Marie Deschamps – her residence is in the Rue St. Victor.<sup>16</sup>

Clark furthered his claim of the influence of Marie Deschamps through observing the female figures of Delacroix, noting that Liberty's sexuality is notably different. He states that Liberty's "nakedness is not one with which Delacroix was endlessly familiar: her breasts and shoulders are those of Marie Deschamps."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Liberty is unique in her depiction and specificity, as a figure who is more like the fighting, workingwoman than a goddess of antiquity. With Delacroix's Liberty she "transitions from the chaste and emblematic representations of Liberty that were commonplace of the period to Delacroix's arresting figure," her representation making her "no more than a woman of the people."<sup>18</sup>

In addition to Marie Deschamps, many other women fought during the July Revolution, and formed, following the revolt, a feminist insurgency that advocated for the widespread support for women's rights.

From 1788 to 1791, there was "widespread support for liberty" with "interaction among social classes," emphasizing a unity at this time that was needed to overthrow the current monarchy.<sup>19</sup> During this time, women became more prominent as active fighters for liberty, including female authors who wrote for their freedom. A 1797 pamphlet written by Constance Pipelet on the role of female authors contains the words, "O women! Take up the pen and the paintbrush; the arts, like happiness, belong to everyone," which emphasizes her belief that women were entitled to a voice despite the constant "scrutiny and redefinition" they faced during this time period.<sup>20</sup>

During this time, "living women often represented revolutionary ideals, such as Liberty, Reason, Nature, or Victory, and the allegorical female figure of Marianne came to represent the Republic."<sup>21</sup> This suggests that real and allegorical women during these turbulent times became the representation of liberty, a representation that was exemplified during revolutionary festivals where women were idealized. During these festivals the position of women in the Revolution was highlighted with "abstract, philosophical depictions of women as Liberty or Marianne [distancing] women from involvement in the pragmatic, everyday workings of politics and [setting] up a model of femininity that was aloof, moral, and abstract."<sup>22</sup>



This serene idealization of women as liberty, which is also mentioned as replacing Catholic figures and French monarchs as symbols of community and nation, changes with Eugene Delacroix's depiction of an active, fighting Liberty, a figure that transcended the ideal of woman and became an embodiment of a female liberty herself.

With the symbol of Marianne, a contemporary woman – neither the Madonna nor an ancient allegory – is chosen to represent the Republic, making a break from the norm. With women now fighting more forcefully for liberty and equal rights, such women thus became living models and embodiments of the goddess of liberty – women such as Madame Roland, Claire Lacombe, Madame de Staël, and other fighters

who politicized and called for equality in rights and opportunity, along with representation. Eugene Delacroix even praises Madame de Staël, a French woman of letters, in his private journal, stating that he uses the same method as she, and that “art, like music, is higher than thought.”<sup>23</sup> It seems likely that his admiration for Madame de Staël and other influential revolutionary women is projected onto his depiction of Liberty as the leader of the revolution. Although idealized versions of Liberty did little to include women in the real politics of France, women looked toward actual figures of liberty to call for equality and political participation. An illiterate woman of France, for example, could find the use of imagery extremely important.

Just like the image of Marianne empowering the women of the lower classes this, in turn, would specifically help to champion feminism during the revolutions and lead to woman-warrior mentality.

Women as warriors were not new to art during the Romantic era, nor was it new to French art. Depictions of Joan of Arc, for example, resulted in the popularization of the idea of the woman warrior in art. Nonetheless, the heroine as subject proliferates in Romantic art. Delacroix's Liberty, herself, is a warrior in that she actively leads the people in battle and is prepared to fight as well, rather than standing immutably in place. Both Marianne and Delacroix's Liberty are enduring women warriors in French iconography with Liberty specifically as an embodiment of the iconic image of the July Revolution and its revolutionary women.

The centrality of Liberty in the painting indicates her role as “woman-as-nation” as she depicts the sincerity of the rebel’s cause by charging into the battle headfirst.<sup>24</sup>

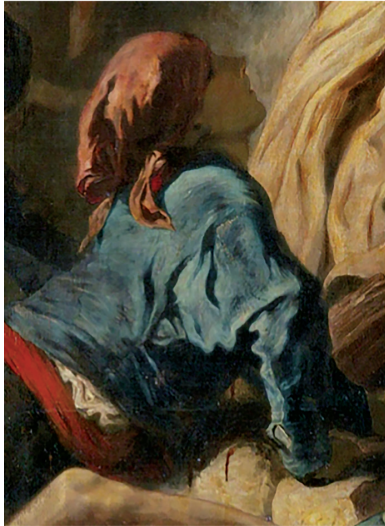
At first glance, *Liberty Leading the People* appears chaotic as a group of armed, fighting individuals are led by a woman whose garments hang off of her body, exposing her breasts. Each figure, however, plays an important role in the July Revolution of 1830, a revolution whose purpose was to overthrow the monarchy of King Charles X of France. In the hand of the woman at the forefront of the fight is the tri-colored flag of France, in the other a bayonet, while she wears the Phrygian cap atop her head. At her feet lay the dead and the dying. The scene is identifiable as a street in Paris due to its landscape and the towers of Notre Dame in the background.

As one begins to look more critically at the painting, the specific time in history can be determined through the depiction of clothing and weaponry the figures carry. It is as if Delacroix’s *Liberty* is more of a journalistic piece than a romanticized depiction of revolution, which would make the presence of a purely allegorical Liberty questionable.

Liberty is the only figure in the painting that is considered allegorical, or simply a symbol. The revolution is historically based and the figures that surrounded her are historically based, as well. We find figures such as a factory worker, possibly of color, who wields a saber and is identifiable through his work shirt, apron, and trousers. Directly next to him is a man wearing a black top hat, a white shirt and cravat, and a black coat, a figure who has been speculated to be a self-portrait of Delacroix, himself, despite his admission that he did not personally participate in the fight.

They stand together, and yet they are strikingly different as they are clearly from separate social classes. Other figures include soldiers, one of whom rises from the left frame of the painting and out of the rubble, another fallen and dead to the right of Liberty, herself. A bourgeois man lies dead as well, his clothes looted and shirt torn. A schoolboy next to Liberty, identified by his school satchel and black beret, is a testament to the younger generation of France who will hopefully keep the fight for liberty alive throughout future generations. Spectatorship and the male gaze are suggested through his representation but with a twist, particularly in the man at Liberty’s feet who looks up at her in worship (Fig. 5).

This man suggests, perhaps, that France is replacing one religion with another when both he and Liberty are considered within the context of the entire painting.

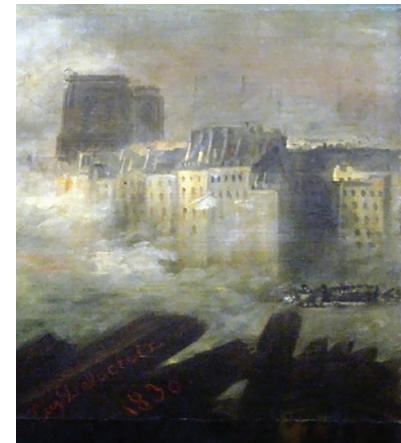


(Figure 5: Eugène Delacroix. *Man at Liberty's feet detail*, 1830. Musée du Louvre, Paris.)

Despite Delacroix's discussion of Catholicism and Christ's influence on him in his journal, dated well after the original July Revolution, a whole new element of the secular is introduced in *Liberty Leading the People*.

With the burning towers of Notre Dame in the background of the painting (Fig. 6), Delacroix seems to call for the abolition of the Church in addition to the monarchy. Notre Dame did go up in flames during the July Revolution; nonetheless, Delacroix seems, at least, to be stressing the importance of secularism particularly in the New Republic, and perhaps is replacing liberty and freedom as a creed to be followed. With many in France at the time viewing the Church as corrupt, a more secular France was insisted upon, a new France that better reflected the people and the people's interests. A secular Marianne who championed liberty replaced the figure of the Virgin Mary. Delacroix's Liberty, in particular, is once again a secular figure of liberty, depicted through a woman, whom the people follow, worship and emulate.

The French writer Alexandre Dumas said of Delacroix's Liberty that "these are real paving stones, real boys, real men of the people, real blood," and that, "Liberty is not at all the classic Liberty; it is a young woman of the people, one of those who fight not to be *tutoyée*, outraged, violated by the great lords."<sup>25</sup> This suggests that the Liberty who leads the people is, in fact, a real woman of the people, and such interpretation continues to be seen through her reappearance into the contemporary world.



(*Notre Dame's towers detail*, 1830. Musée du Louvre, Paris.)

The power of Delacroix's Liberty as a generalized abstract concept cannot be denied when her use in the contemporary milieu is seen. The figure of liberty is a timeless one, a symbol that is evoked time and again across cultures. America's Statue of Liberty, completed in 1886 as a gift from the French, and is a statue that emulates many common depictions of France's Marianne, is considered a symbol of pride that a nation who champions liberty continues to evoke (Fig 7). Liberty in this context idealizes the overarching ideal of liberty. Nonetheless, this figure of liberty has been used specifically to champion equal rights and call for the equality of women.

One particularly important example would be the feminist protest on Bastille Day, July 13, 2013 in Paris when *Liberty Leading the People* was reintroduced as a tribute to a new feminist

movement with the topless Liberty involved. The mural was accompanied by words from the artist himself, street artist COMBO, who stated that "by hijacking such an iconic piece of art ... I want to denunciate the discrimination and other misogynistic behavior that women still suffer too often and to pay a tribute to the activist's fight."<sup>26</sup>



(Figure 7: Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi. *Statue of Liberty*, 1886. New York.)

Entitled *Femen Leading the People*, this referred to the feminist group "Femen" which is comprised of "theatrical, warrior like women" who advocate in public displays of power with bare chests to address issues of sexism, misogyny, and more. A wall mural further depicted five women atop a pile of rubble and fallen bodies, in emulation of Delacroix's painting (Fig. 8). The woman in the center holds the French flag like Liberty, while phrases such as "I Am Free," "Naked War" and "Liberty" are painted upon their bare torsos. Their aim was to take back the objectification of the woman's body as an instrument of patriarchy through striking a power pose, like women warriors themselves. These women are associating themselves with Liberty in order to take her back and take back her form, using their nakedness as a reclaiming of their bodies and their rights altogether.

This clearly suggests that Liberty is no longer purely allegorical but, in fact, transcends its purpose as symbol and occupies a strictly gendered political space.

*Liberty Leading the People*, to this day, continues to be a cultural icon. The representation of a woman as leader personifies the change and social reform that the French fighting in the Revolution sought, as the only woman represented in the battle. She is a testament to those women who did fight and epitomizes the true liberty and freedom for which both men and women fought. Liberty has thus become a figure that is more than her allegorical implications, but rather a symbol that has been recognized as a feminist icon.

Her clothing, weaponry, and position gives her ties to real women who fought in the revolutions, and has now been embraced by women of today who call upon her as a feminist symbol. Delacroix's Liberty stands as a symbol of liberty who real women could look to and emulate, and with whom to evolve.





(Figure. 8 Combo. *Femen Leading the People*, 2013. Paris.)

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lanselle-Bouvet, Violaine and Pommerau, Claude. Musée du Louvre. Paris: Beaux Arts/TTM Editions, 2012, 135.
- <sup>2</sup> Artble.
- <sup>3</sup> Delacroix, Eugène, and Walter Pach. The Journal of Eugene Delacroix. New York: Covici, Friede, 1937, 30.
- <sup>4</sup> Nielsen, Wendy C. Women Warriors in Romantic Drama. Newark: University Of Delaware Press, 2013, 136.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 135.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 136.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Hobsbawm, E. "Man and Woman in Socialist Iconography." History Workshop Journal 6, no.1 (1978): 121-38, 124.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 122.
- <sup>12</sup> Rose, R.B. "Feminism, Women and the French Revolution." Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques. Vol. 21., No. 1 (Winter 1995), pp. 187 – 205,193.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 188.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 193.
- <sup>15</sup> Barry, David. Women and Political Insurgency: France in the Mid- nineteenth Century. Hound mills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1996, 170.
- <sup>16</sup> Colton, C. C. Narrative of the French Revolution in 1830: An Authentic Detail of the Events Which Took Place on the 26th, 27th, 28th, and 29th of July. Paris: A. and W. Galignani, 1830, 321.
- <sup>17</sup> Reynolds, Sian. Women, State and Revolution: Essays on Power and Gender in Europe since 1789. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987, 35.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>19</sup> Montfort-Howard, Catherine. *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*.  
Birmingham, Ala.: Summa Publications, 1994, 239.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Delacroix, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Nielsen, 135.

<sup>25</sup> Jobert, Barthélémy, and Eugène Delacroix. *Delacroix*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998, 130.

<sup>26</sup> Huffington Post.

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