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THE ICONOLOGICAL AND ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF PAUL DELAROCHE'S WORK THE EXECUTION OF LADY JANE GREY – THE QUEEN FOR NINE DAYS

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Abstract: The character Lady Jane Grey, whose authorship is attributed to the French painter Paul Delaroche, became known worldwide as the “Queen for Nine Days”. Delaroche, who visited the place where Lady Jane Grey was executed, for example: The Tower of London in the 19th century, was moved and inspired by the tragic story of the queen. With his ability to produce works from a theatrical perspective, Delaroche managed to represent the figure of the young queen as a martyr and her execution as a fatality, allowing the viewer to immerse themselves and, consequently, to get closer to the historical/iconographic scenario that characterizes the work under study.

Keywords: Iconography. Lady Jane Grey. Paul Delaroche.

INTRODUCTION

Delaroche was characterized as a painter of historical scenes, a “troubadour”, a contemporary of David and Ingres. Thus, his works were generally representative of this period, with great detail appropriate to the time in which they were being painted.

In accordance with the main characteristics of Delaroche’s repertoire of works, the work entitled: ‘‘The Execution of Lady Jane Grey’’ (1833) exposes, above all, theatricality, suffering and martyrdom, in addition to allowing the association with the lives of other martyrs, who were relatively recent in relation to the execution of the work, such as the royal family of France, which was exterminated during the French Revolution, providing a character very similar to the way in which Lady Jane was portrayed.

The work was forgotten at the Tate Gallery, located in the city of London, due to the damage caused by the flood of the twenties. The restoration, in turn, was resumed and exhibited at the National Gallery of London, where it remains to this day. This analysis aims

to examine the composition of the painting, explore the artist’s motivations and historical context, and analyze its symbolism and lasting impact on art and historical iconography.

STATE OF THE ART

Delaroche was a painter born at the end of the Bourbon dynasty in France, and was a contemporary of Jacques-Louis David and Ingres. His name is associated with the young painters of the new “romantic” school and, like his colleagues, Delaroche painted historical scenes (Smyth, 2022). However, he can still be considered a “troubadour” painter, whose designation refers to painters who preferred situations set in the Middle Ages (Bann, S., Guy, J, Whiteley, L., et al., 2010), thus producing works with details adapted to the historical moment.

Delaroche was also known for his *mise-en-scène* technique, for example: staging with live models in a small theater, even with stucco models adapted to his proposal. Delaroche visited England a few times, but mainly in 1827, in preparation for the creation of his work *The Princes in the Tower*, he possibly visited the Tower of London and, motivated by the forbidding atmosphere of the fortress until then used to hold his prisoners, Delaroche continued with the ‘Tower narrative’ with two perspectives, the perspective of Lady Jane Grey and the perspective of Strafford on the Way to Execution.

The Death of Lady Jane Grey is one of the first historical scenes by Delaroche exhibited in the Paris Salons, praised by critics and aristocrats, who commissioned paintings from him for their residences in the new empire. However, at the time, some critics and painters were of the opinion that the work must be appreciated for its artistic greatness, and not for the vastness of feelings that allowed the common viewer to feel closer to understanding what the painter wanted

to convey with his work. Unlike many of his contemporaries, as well as many other artists, Delaroche achieved great fame during his lifetime, receiving numerous commissions from aristocrats while continuing to paint his historical scenes. There was also a great deal of criticism at this time, directed not only at Delaroche, but at all artists who traveled to the Salon, according to which the “amateur” spectators sought feelings and sensations before anything else and were eager to know as much information as possible, as well as intimate details of how the work was conceived (Smyth, 2022). Until then, Delaroche’s works provided this relief among the many works of other artists at the Salon, whose main concern was to please the Academy of Fine Arts. Delaroche, for his part, had already found, during his lifetime and at the beginning of his career, the great success and recognition desired by many. Théophile Gautier, a poet and writer who was a contemporary of Delaroche, stated in his article on Delaroche that the painter’s work was not art, but rather occult literature (Smyth, 2022) and that he was thus dedicated to the philistine, who no longer had much interest in art and its technical aspects. From this perspective, literature would be available to any literate person of the time who had access to it and, therefore, could interpret Delaroche’s works without understanding the technical field. This is evident in one of Delaroche’s first major works, when Lady Jane Grey endorses the progress of her empire until her subsequent martyrdom.

The painter became popularly recognized for his character of illusionism and the possibility of immersing the spectator in the historical scene depicted, characterized by a new type of “theater” that went beyond the stage on which the scene was taking place.

The spectator, in this context, would be able to sense the fragile emotional state of a young girl as she is guided to the block

where her inevitable outcome would occur, and visualize the expression contained in the blindfolded figure who tries to feel indifferent to this moment, in a mixture of ambiguous feelings that involve her salvation and her condemnation, simultaneously and, finally, the “consolation” of approaching the block “in which so much fear and so much pain are painted” (Souty, 1834).

AN ICONOGRAPHY BY OBRA DE DELAROCHE

The scene takes place within the shadowy confines of a dimly lit execution chamber. At the centre of the composition is Lady Jane Grey, depicted in a state of vulnerability, dressed in a bright white petticoat that contrasts sharply with the surrounding darkness. This attire not only highlights her innocence, but also seeks to set her apart from the other figures in the painting, drawing the viewer’s attention directly to her. Lady Jane Grey is shown blindfolded, symbolising her impending doom and perhaps her innocence in the political machinations that led to her downfall. She is being gently guided towards the execution block by an advisor, demonstrating her trust in those around her in her final moments. Around her are several ladies-in-waiting, overcome with grief; some are on the floor, unable to watch the scene unfold. The portrayal of this anguish lends a layer of emotional depth to the depiction, emphasising the tragedy of the moment. The executioner, a passive and imposing figure, stands waiting to carry out the sentence. Her presence in this context is a clear warning of the painting’s somber context. The background of the work is deliberately silent, seeking to focus the viewer’s attention on the central figures, particularly Lady Jane. The theatrical lighting used outlines shadows and highlights, creating a sense of depth and contributing to the painting’s hazy atmosphere (Piper, 2024).

Jane, this way, is represented in an innocent manner (Ives, 2009). For Delaroche, Jane is seen as a victim of the situation imposed on her by her father and father-in-law.

Although Jane's reign was historically of insignificant value to England, due to the short period of her reign, the symbolism of this moment remains to this day, along with the recognition of similar historical facts regarding other women of the past, for example: Anne Boleyn, considered the main reason for England's collapse with the church in Rome, or Mary Stuart, Elizabeth I's cousin. It is only in recent years that these characters have managed to regain their voices and are no longer victims of the stereotypes that were created throughout history, for Jane is a martyred victim who was persecuted by her cruel cousin, a tyrant Catholic who usurped the throne and the life of an innocent girl (Bann, S., Guy, J, Whiteley, L., et. al., 2010). Painted at the height of the moment – just minutes before the young Lady Jane Dudley was beheaded at the behest of her cousin – the work demonstrates the feeling shown by Jane in her correspondence to her sister, in which she describes, almost in advance and with absolute resignation, that her destiny had arrived, and that she would be losing her earthly life; in the meantime, she would be gaining a heavenly and joyful life, in which she could move away from a corrupt context to an unblemished one (Grey, 1615).

The feelings of fear and pain are also identified in other historical paintings by the painter, in which the transparency of the emotions of the central characters is the main focus in order to provide the viewer with the question of what is happening beyond that scene, and what will happen after that moment. Works such as *The Princes in the Tower*, which, like Jane, had their lives taken from them in the Tower of London when they were still very young, and in which it is

possible to observe the feelings of fear and anguish of the two boys and their little guard dog that watches over the dark path that leads to their cell, provide the viewer with a mixture of sensations in which it becomes possible to witness the pain and fear, foreseeing the tragic fate of the characters in the work.

For the work about the life of Jane Grey, Delaroche probably used the engraving technique inspired by other works by other artists. The main inspiration cited by Wright (2007) concerns an engraving of John Opie's work, "Execution of the Queen of Scots". Currently, the original work has been lost, however, from the engraving one can perceive the intense references that *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* makes to Opie's work.

The Queen of Scots, Mary, is similar to *Lady Jane's* work, as both became victims of their own stories and their times. In the two historical scenes depicted, the two ladies are represented in an almost angelic manner, with light, white clothing, the intention being to convey the idea of innocence and fidelity, with *Lady Jane* using her wedding ring as a way of demonstrating her devotion to her husband and family.

Delaroche's work can also be inspired by Boydell's work, in which the former kings Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn are situated in the center of the scene, with the king acting as his wife's guide to the center of the ball, after which he would send her to execution, as depicted in *Lady Jane*. In this context, the king adopts the role of the sergeant of the tower, benevolent enough to guide the lady to her tragic destiny.

The traces of martyrdom present in *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, but also in other historical works by Delaroche, were used by both the author and other artists of the time, and also in allusion to the martyrs of the French Revolution, a historical episode contemporary to the composition of the work. The characters

chosen by Delaroche were intentional, martyrs and sufferers of the past, whose main focus is to provide the viewer with remembrance and recollection through painting and theater. This way, the observer could make associative incursions to the martyr characters and the French Revolution; to Louis XVI and Charles I, to Marie Antoinette and Lady Jane, and to the little Dauphin and the Princes in the Tower, since the link between these characters would be their tragic outcome. Despite his short career, and approaching the year of his death in 1856, Delaroche was able to witness his influence and the growing public opinion about his works, when he began to paint mainly sacred works and biblical scenes exhibited in the Paris Salons, unlike when he exhibited the work of the Execution of Lady Jane Grey, in Paris, and, as such, soon fell into public oblivion.

Just like the life and trajectory of Lady Jane, which, like her portrait, became forgotten over time, Delaroche's work went through great challenges so that it could, today, remain on permanent display at the National Gallery in London. Delaroche was supposedly inspired by his great friendship with Félicie de Fauveau who, like the painter, had an immense interest in the Middle Ages and its iconographic components. Likewise, both had a notable affinity with the issue of politics and power, an element presents in multiple works by Deladroche, and with Fauveau acting as a romantic monarchist, which possibly contributed as inspiration for the work of Lady Jane Grey. Originally completed in 1833 using the oil on canvas technique, the work was exhibited by the painter only once at the Paris Salons in 1834, where it caught the eye of Anatole Demidoff, an art collector who kept the painting in a villa in Florence until his death in 1870. The work was later acquired by Lord Cheylesmore, and his son, the second lord, who donated it to the

National Gallery in London after his death in 1902. The work remained on display at the Gallery until the 1920s, when Delaroche's elements of theatricality and drama ceased to find fervor among the Gallery's viewers, and it was transferred to the Tate Gallery's reserves, where it remained for several decades (Bann, S., Guy, J., Whiteley, L., et. al., 2010). At the end of the 1920s, with the flooding of the River Thames, the painting was in such a poor state of conservation that it was declared destroyed. In the 1950s, it was reported that curators were unable to locate the work. In 1973, a curator, while searching for the painting "The Destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii," located Delaroche's painting. After an extensive restoration process, the painting was exhibited at the National Gallery, where it remains to this day, being acclaimed and received with such interest by the public that barriers had to be placed around it to prevent spectators from getting too close, a situation that had rarely occurred at the museum until then (Higgins, 2009).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

With immeasurable success during his lifetime, Delaroche found remarkable inspiration for the execution of one of his most invaluable works, providing the viewer with iconographic elements of theatricality characteristic of his works. With such assertiveness, he intended to demonstrate the conflict that the characters experienced, as well as the martyrdom and resignation mainly due to their faith, which also became an important component in his compositions. The anguish present in the historical female figure translates into a reminder with the purpose of remembering the dramatic moments of the French Revolution, and alludes to the martyrs who preceded and succeeded Lady Jane, converting her into a stereotype of people who sacrificed themselves for a purpose. The work *The Execution of*

Lady Jane Grey is a demonstration of the preponderance of historical narrative and the emotional depth of Paul Delaroche. Through the detailing of its composition, the painting invites the viewer to immerse themselves in the iconography, aesthetics and politics, contextualizing universal themes such as iniquity, bravery and the human capacity for

resilience and empathy. Delaroche's work not only highlights a tragic element, but also raises awareness of the vulnerability of the human condition. This way, the painting contributes significantly to a timeless historical moment, offering insights that surpass its origins in the 19th century while remaining aligned with the contemporary public.

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