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Eugène Delacroix, The Last Words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, undated, Oil on canvas, 65.1 x 80.6 cm.

The van Asch van Wyck Trust.

Santa Barbara Museum of Art Uncovers and Authenticates New Work by Eugène Delacroix

Debuts in Fall Exhibition Delacroix and the Matter of Finish

May 29, 2013 - It may not come as a surprise that Santa Barbara has recently added a star to its list of celebrity residents in a city that boasts the likes of Steve Martin and Oprah Winfrey as "locals." However, in this case, the newsworthy resident is not a star in the Hollywood—or even human—sense, but an easel-sized oil painting by one of the most revered French painters in the history of art, Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863).

The canvas, which features the subject of *The Last Words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius*, recently surfaced in a Santa Barbara private collection, and after a few years of scholarly and technical examination was authenticated by Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA) Assistant Director and Chief Curator, Eik Kahng. It will make its public debut in the Museum's upcoming fall exhibition *Delacroix and the Matter of Finish* (on view October 27, 2013 – January 26, 2014), before traveling to the Birmingham Museum of Art (on view February 22 – May 18, 2014) and will be published for the first time in the accompanying catalogue.

Just how did this work get overlooked for more than a century? The lack of signature on the painting is not uncommon among works by Delacroix. The artist would often retain cherished paintings in his studio, keeping them for future reference or to give to friends as gifts—therefore not requiring his signature.



Left: Eugène Delacroix, *The Last Words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius*, 1844, Oil on canvas, 256 x 337.5 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon.

Center: Eugène Delacroix, *The Last Words of Marcus Aurelius*, sketch, 1843, Oil on canvas, 26 x 33 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon.

Right: Pierre Andrieu? after Eugène Delacroix, *The Last Words of Marcus Aurelius*, undated, Oil on canvas, 37.3 x 46.2 cm. Collection of John S. Newberry IV.

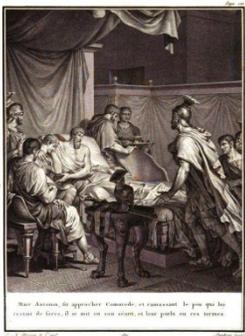
Further, the composition—that of philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius on his deathbed, commending his son, Commodus, to his most faithful officers and supporters—is absolutely by Delacroix, who painted a monumental, nearly life-size version for the Salon of 1845, now hanging at the Musée des beaux-arts, Lyon (above, left). In his magisterial catalogue raisonné of Delacroix’s paintings, art historian Lee Johnson (1924–2006) also documented a small preparatory sketch for the painting, likewise in Lyon, as authentic (above, center). However, Johnson attributed yet another, loosely painted version, now in the collection of John S. Newberry, IV, to one of Delacroix’s students, Pierre Andrieu (above, right).

Whatever the status of these multiple versions, what perhaps presented the initial mystery to anyone who had previously seen the painting in the home of the private collector was the work’s subject matter. In recent years, Delacroix has probably received most notoriety for his Orientalist pictures—such as *Collision of Arab Horsemen* (*Collision of Moorish Horsemen*) (1843–44) and *The Fanatics of Tangier* (1857), both featured in SBMA’s forthcoming exhibition—as subjects from his Moroccan travels have been of greatest interest to post-colonial scholars. These works, with their bold brushwork and exotic subject matter, also fit more easily into the Romantic style for which Delacroix is best known. Yet the artist was also drawn to highly dramatic moments in Greek and Roman history, and frequently refers to the writings of the stoic philosopher-emperor, Marcus Aurelius in his personal diary.

When Kahng finally set eyes on the work in a private collection in Santa Barbara, she initially assumed it was another preparatory sketch for the monumental version in Lyon. Kahng notes, “But as I studied the painting at length, it became clear that this was not a study so much as a variation that subtly reinterprets the psychology of its subject matter. The relative degree of finish within the painting derives...from Delacroix’s wish to simplify the emotional dynamics in concentrating on just four of the figures rather than all nine...[and] the diffused light of the Santa Barbara variant is quite distinct from the more theatrically lit prime version.”

In addition to recognizing Delacroix's hand in the newfound Santa Barbara painting, Kahng also sought to find the link between Delacroix and the dramatic subject depicted, for which, curiously, there existed no immediate visual precedent. Kahng poses this question in her essay in the exhibition catalogue, "But where would Delacroix have found the specific subject of *The Last Words of Marcus Aurelius*? After all, there is no pictorial precedent for it. While the Stoic emperor was glorified in revered sculptural monuments ... there is no antique or post-Renaissance pictorial model for this particular deathbed scene."

In her catalogue essay, Kahng traces the subject matter of the *Marcus Aurelius* to the 18th-century artistic tradition of the *exemplum virtutis*, moralizing history paintings whose subjects center on a moment of rhetorical declamation, a form perfected by earlier artists such as Jean-Baptiste Greuze and Jacques-Louis David, painters with whom Delacroix is not often immediately associated. The *Marcus Aurelius* not only shares this 18th-century thematic trope, but also some of its specific iconography. An illustration invented by French engraver Moreau le Jeune and reproduced in Louis and Anne Dacier's 1800 edition of *Marcus Aurelius' Meditations*, presents itself as one of the bridges connecting Delacroix's ideas for the *Marcus Aurelius*. It is clear that Delacroix drew inspiration directly from Moreau le Jeune's engraving in his earliest doodles for the composition, as in the depiction of Marcus Aurelius encircling Commodus with one arm and gesturing to him with another. Kahng notes, "...the uncanny relationship between some of Delacroix's preparatory drawings for the *Marcus Aurelius*, as well as the very idea for this deathbed scenario of prolonged declamation, and the Dacier's version of the life of Marcus Aurelius seems difficult to refute."



Left: Jean-Michel Moreau le jeune, "Death of Marcus Aurelius," in *Réflexions morales de l'Empereur Marc Antonin*, trad. Dacier (Paris: Didot Jeune, 1800), 126. Haas Arts Library, Special Collections, Yale University. **Right:** Eugène Delacroix, *Studies of Figures in Antique Dress*, undated, Brown pen and ink, and brown wash on paper, 18.7 x 33.4 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

The strength of the catalogue and exhibition lies not just with the announcement of a newly discovered Delacroix, or with the new scholarship presented on a classical theme that apparently obsessed the master to a degree previously under-recognized by many specialists. Through the exhibition and catalogue, Kahng hopes to open discussion on the problems of attribution that have plagued Delacroix studies, particularly given the artist's reliance on students as collaborators. Some of these students, such as Louis de Planet and Pierre Andrieu, made copies of Delacroix's work. The purpose of such copies remains little understood, but the gulf in technical skill distinguishing these

small canvases from the works we know to be by the hand of Delacroix is enormous. As Kahng asserts in her essay, "Precisely because Delacroix's touch is so difficult to imitate...paintings like the Santa Barbara variant cannot possibly be anything but authentic inventions by Delacroix. The chromatic complexity, psychological nuance, and bravura brushwork are absolutely beyond the means of Delacroix's best students."

The Santa Barbara Museum of Art is excited to present this newly authenticated work from a Santa Barbara private collection together with approximately 30 other paintings and 18 works on paper, showcasing the variety of finish in Delacroix's practice. The show is the first to take on the challenge of recognizing the hand of the master and to invite museum-goers to do the same.

The Santa Barbara Museum of Art is a privately funded, not-for-profit institution that presents internationally recognized collections and exhibitions and a broad array of cultural and educational activities as well as travel opportunities around the world.

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State Street, Santa Barbara, CA.

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