

Le lit défait (or Mark's unmade bed)

by Kathryn Allan

Le lit défait, 1827 (Louvre)

[Le lit défait - Louvre Collections](#)

'The task of an artist is to make his picture transcend the means by which it was made.' (Jelley, 2018, p.203)

Eugène Delacroix's *Le lit défait* deceives us into thinking that water is fabric, wood and wall. This small – at 18.5 x 29.9cm it is roughly A4 in size – almost 200-year-old painting stands in for an object much larger: the bed. What pictorial tricks lie beneath its sheets, so carefully – exquisitely – concealed that the viewer might take physical rest and refuge within it? How has Delacroix made his picture transcend material and brushstroke in order for us to not to be gazing at flat paper and pigment, but at soft fabric and folds? By answering the questions at the back of *Learning to Look at the Visual Arts**, this essay attempts to get beneath the covers of the French painter's unmade bed.

Composition: Where are the dominant lines of organisation?

Acton tells us, *'These are not lines in the literal sense, but a way of relating different parts of the composition together so that it forms a coherent whole.'* (Acton, 2009, p.1).

First, there is the dominant horizontal line of the bed base, with an echoing shadow, taking our eye from one side of the picture to the other – a literal firm base. Above this, a mass of curved creases appears at first chaotic, however the vertically-draped fabric on the lefthand side of the composition – the cascading folds reaching from floor to pillow – creates a stabilising right-angle and leads our eye upwards to the pillows and *into* the bed. The receding lower line of the pillow, angled slightly from left to right, leads us inwards further. The horizontal line at a right-angle to and extending to the right of the pillow echoes that of the base bed, helping to create an impression of layers, of fabric strata. In the middle of the bed as we now are, our eye can wander amongst its cloth geometry and our experience becomes bodily – one of feeling with *limbs*. With

this, the little picture conveys bodily scale; we, of metres, fit into its centimetres. Above its middle stratum is a wall-like backdrop, making for a quite abstract composition of horizontals. One could imagine Rothko taking refuge here, or Sean Scully contemplating his next stripe.

It is, as Acton tells us, '*by forming relationships between the composition and all the other elements that the artist creates the whole*' (Acton, 2009, p.28), thus we must also examine Delacroix's manipulation of other pictorial elements when considering his articulation of 'the whole'.

Space: Where are you in relation to the picture? Is it much larger or much smaller than you expected?

Before we climb into the composition for warmth, comfort or a few extra minutes of a lie-in, we find ourselves in front of the picture plane as though looking through a window onto the scene. Delacroix creates the illusion of a three-dimensional bed through single-viewpoint perspective, the diagonal lines at the bed's top and bottom receding towards the back of the picture (although as the depth of the image is very shallow, a vanishing point is not visually resolved and foreground, middle distance and background are compressed). The diagonals hold a series of orthogonals in place across the picture's surface – the base of the bed, the base of the mattress, the pillow nearest to us, the centre line of the bed, the pillow furthest away, the wall at the back. The artist further enhances the sense of space in the image by describing the intervals around the solid bed – shadows underneath its wooden base and those cast on the wall behind the bed's dressing.

Delacroix's creation of the illusion of space creates a magical duality: an image small enough for us to peer *into* quizzically, yet one metaphorically large enough to place ourselves *within*. It is both larger than us and smaller than us at once.

Form: Is there a three-dimensional feeling about the picture? If so, where is it? Is it in some parts of the picture and not others?

Delacroix renders the plasticity of the bed – Acton’s *‘feeling of volume’* (Acton, 2009, p.56) – convincingly. Above the bed’s base to the right, the artist describes the mattress – just a small, triangular glimpse of blue, a minute area of the painting’s surface, but sufficient evidence of a solid underworld that we read the sheets as having a firm foundation. The chiaroscuro here, leading off to the left, convinces us as spectator that the mattress extends beneath the drapery. Look at the painting with this patch of blue covered and the three-dimensional illusion falters. Delacroix’s rendering of fabric is also crucial to a three-dimensional reading: bed devoid of body must work hard to convince us of form, but the artist’s exquisite capturing of light on fabric – of fold and crevice – pushes cloth towards us and away from us so that we read it as having weight, however light might be the covers. It is as though Delacroix is describing the structure of an absent body – we see, for example, the area of pillow where a head recently rested, Titian’s *‘structure of the body within’* (Acton, 2009, p.59). And in the same way that Claes Oldenburg plays around with our visual expectations, Delacroix takes water (*aquarelles*), applies it to a flat surface, and turns it into form, into a sensation of three-dimensional touch.

Tone: What part does light and dark play in the picture?

Is it too declarative to say that this picture *is* tone? That is it light and shade? We see it everywhere – in the contrast between the shadow under the bed and the bed frame, throughout the drapery which is an interplay of dark, medium and light tones, and where fabric and wall blur together at the back of the picture. The light source appears to come from the right, resulting in lighter tones at the foot end of the bed, decreasing to darker tones where the pillows are portrayed. Whilst Delacroix’s figure is absent, his careful use of tone expresses emotion, in a similar way to Rembrandt’s *Saskia Asleep in Bed*. Atmosphere is also created through tone: the almost spotlight-like focus on the pushed back sheets at the righthand side is dramatic, expressive of action just happened. More than this though, the picture’s tonal presentation

reverberates through its subject matter: the light and dark of day and night and 'bed' as liminal space where this transition occurs, dawn to dusk, vacant to occupied.

Colour: Is colour part of the structure of the picture or is it used more for expression?

The small triangle of primary blue, describing the mattress, is complemented by the strip of orange to its right (a blanket perhaps?) – they influence one another, making the other more intense beyond their intrinsic hues and, as we saw above, are part of the structure of the picture. We see a similar blue coming through the wall colour on the righthand side at the back of the painting. The watercolour medium creates natural translucencies across the surface of the image, with an expressive interplay of tints and shades of browns, ochres and creams creating an overall warmth and the lightest highlights quite luminous – *'Watercolour has considerable advantages in the creation of luminosity because the white paper can show through the translucent paint medium.'* (Acton, 2009, p.121)

Subject-matter: How does the subject-matter, or lack of it, affect the way you see the picture?

'The bed' has featured in art throughout history and is universal in its relatability: when thinking of bed-lore, we think of Emin, Van Gogh, John and Yoko, of Whiteread's cast mattresses, of Rauschenberg's quilt, Manet's *Olympia* – many other slumbersome examples. We share in others' moments of intimacy, being able to climb into, as we can, Toulouse-Lautrec's *Bed* paintings. We think of our own and of those bedsides at which we have found ourselves: for me, severely premature nephews [Antony Burgess in *On Going to Bed* writes, *'Between simplicity and elaboration come the functional incubator and the cradle created for Napoleon Bonaparte's son...'* (Burgess, 1982, p.12)], a sick parent – emotional, both. Delacroix's *Lit* does not appear religious, mythological, historical or literary, nor does it appear outwardly moral-carrying. Rather, its subject seems expressive of emotion, devoid of a human form yet carrying of all the emotion of the absent figure. Acton tells us, *'Artists of the Romantic movement in the early nineteenth century would have agreed with Rothko that*

painting is about the expression of emotion, but of course the visual language he uses compared with, say, that of Delacroix or Turner, is different because he belongs to the twentieth century.' (Acton, 2009, p.134).

Move over Sean, Delacroix's bed might just be where Rothko dreams of his floating rectangles.

***The Setting** – The Louvre website indicates that the painting was restored in 1998, however I have been unable to find out any more about this aspect of the work.

This essay was submitted for the University of Oxford's Learning to Look at the Visual Arts course in 2023.

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