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Details:
TITLE PAGE: John Constable, *Yarmouth Jetty* (cat. 73)
OPPOSITE COPYRIGHT PAGE: Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Bathers of the Borromean Isles* (cat. 89)
PAGE VIII: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Woman Crocheting* (cat. 267)
PAGE X: Claude Monet, *Seascape, Storm* (cat. 222)
PAGE XII: Jacques-Louis David, *Comte Henri-Amédée-Mercure de Turenne-d'Aynac* (cat. 103)
PAGE XVI: William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Nymphs and Satyr* (cat. 33)
PRECEDING PAGE 2: Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Snake Charmer* (cat. 154)

117

Ferdinand-Victor-Eugène Delacroix

French, 1798–1863

117 | **Two Horses Fighting in a Stormy Landscape**
c. 1828

Oil on canvas, 36.8 x 45.9 cm
Top left corner: 81 [label]
2006.1

This small, energetic work is one of a number of images Delacroix made of horses in the 1820s. Some of these were truly simple studies, in which the artist probably stood before his subjects and transcribed their appearance in static poses against undefined backgrounds, paying attention primarily to the animals' overall anatomy and to the color and texture of their coats.[1] In contrast, *Two Horses Fighting* is clearly a work of imagination, in which the animals are much more freely painted, yet still based in part on the art-ist's knowledge of anatomy accumulated from the simpler studies. The drama inherent in the horses' violent confrontation and the harsh, roughly sketched setting further suggest some type of narrative, rather than a straightforward portrait-like depiction.

Delacroix likely developed his interest in horses prompted by the work of Théodore Géricault—his friend and contemporary—Carle Vernet (1758–1836), and English artists including Sawrey Gilpin (1733–1807) and perhaps the best known painter of horses, George Stubbs (1724–1806). Delacroix probably knew Stubbs's work initially through prints, but his 1825 trip to England directly exposed him to English animal painting. More specifically, he certainly saw a work by Gilpin, *Horses in a Thunderstorm* (1798; Royal Academy of Arts, London), when he visited the Royal Academy because he copied one of the secondary animals in it in a watercolor of that year or shortly thereafter, *Horse Frightened by Lightning* (1825–28; Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest).[2] The motif of horses fighting similarly, though less directly, relates to several sources.

Géricault had made a lithograph of *Horses Fighting in a Stable* (1818), which was preceded by Carle Vernet's lithograph *Two Horses at Liberty Fighting* (undated), and Stubbs had treated the subject a number of times, at least one of which had been reproduced as a print.[3]

Delacroix's approach to the subject in the present painting, however, differs considerably from these examples in its freedom of handling and the suggestive nature of the image overall. The violently twisting posture and streaming, flame-like mane of the white horse, while recalling some of Stubbs's frightened horses, particularly distinguish Delacroix's depiction, as does the lunging motion of the dark horse, and the sheer force of their encounter. Even the wave-shaped hollow in the ground on which the scene takes place, and the resulting off-center composition, heightens the energy of the image and contributes to its strange, almost dream-like atmosphere. Delacroix invested several other animal pictures of this period with a similar energy, including a lithograph of a *Wild Horse* or *Frightened Horse Leaving the Water* (1828), which exhibits the same strongly twisting posture and long, streaming mane, and a watercolor of a *Tiger Attacking a Wild Horse* (c. 1828; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), in which the antagonist is a more powerful predator rather than a combatant of equal strength.

These scenes of conflict between animals illustrate the particular fascination with the natural world prevalent among artists in the Romantic period. Animals could represent elemental aspects of human character, and the simultaneous beauty and horror of Delacroix's images of noble animals locked in fierce combat relate to concepts of the Sublime that were also frequently invoked at the time. Delacroix even went so far as to suggest that animal forms could literally be found within human ones; as he was dissecting a lion at the Jardin des Plantes with Antoine-Louis Barye (1795–1875), the sculptor who also regularly depicted animals in combat, he is said to have noted that "the back paw of the lion was a monstrous human arm, but twisted around and reversed. According to him [Delacroix], there are thus, in all human forms, more or less perceptible animal forms to be disentangled," as well as links between human and animal instincts.[4] This sense of kinship with the power and spirit of untamed animals surely informs Delacroix's depiction of *Two Horses Fighting*.

The painting was sold directly to Paul Verdé-Delisle from the artist's posthumous sale—although curiously, the catalogue described the horses as playing though they are clearly fighting—and remained in the family until its sale to the Clark. Indeed, the numbered label "81" from the posthumous sale remains on the surface of the painting. It was therefore known for many years only by the small print after the painting with which Alfred Robaut illustrated it in his catalogue raisonné of 1885. SL

dark graphite. The front legs of the white horse have the most visible line work. The front legs of the brown horse are closer together in the underdrawing, with the final right front leg placed in a wider stance. The paint is very thin and sketchy for the most part, leaving areas of nearly exposed ground color visible throughout the image. The background was laid in after the horses were painted, except in the manes and tails, which have a more interlaced, wet-into-wet character. Some veils of color are so thinly applied that they look like stains. The brown horse's upper right front leg has an alligatored bituminous pigment which had to be inpainted to allow the leg to recede visually. There were other dark passages which exhibited less severe cracking associated with bituminous pigments. Black ink may also have been used for several strands of the dark horse's mane.

1. See, for example, Johnson 1981–89, vol. 1, pp. 30–33, nos. 41–52.
2. The relation between the Gilpin and Delacroix's watercolor is mentioned in London–Minneapolis–New York 2003–4, p. 178.
3. For the Géricault, see Grunchec 1978, pp. 150–51, no. INC 11. For the Vernet, see Dayot 1925, pp. 169–70, no. 216-2. Stubbs exhibited a painting on enamel of *Horses Fighting* at the Royal Academy in 1781, itself a version of an earlier oil painting (location unknown), and showed an oil of the same subject in 1787, again at the Royal Academy. This later painting was also reproduced as a mezzotint. See Egerton 2007, pp. 448, 498.
4. Taine 1865, p. 428; translation from Jobert 1998, p. 58.
5. Listed incorrectly as lent by Monsieur Boulanger-Cavé.

Eugène Deshayes

French, 1828–1890

118 | **A Swiss Lake** Possibly 1850s

Oil on canvas, 25 x 33 cm
Lower left: Eug. Deshayes
1955.711

Little is known about Eugène Deshayes, a situation that is further complicated by a frequent confusion of his name with that of Eugène-François Deshayes (1868–1939). He principally produced landscapes of locations ranging from sea coasts to forest interiors to mountain lakes and villages, and he exhibited at the Paris Salon from 1848 to 1867. Perhaps his most distinguishing characteristic is that some of his work

is based less on reality than on a slightly exaggerated, fanciful vision, somewhat similar to that of Gustave Doré (1832–1883), while other images, like the present canvas, appear to be careful studies of specific locations. In *A Swiss Lake*, the buildings of a small village cluster at the edge of a lake ringed by high mountains, the most distant of which are covered with snow. The sharply peaked roofs of the buildings along with the rugged terrain suggest a location in Switzerland, though no specific site can be determined.

Deshayes's work appears regularly on the market, and a number of these paintings depict similarly picturesque, mountainous locations. One painting, *The Staubbach Falls in Lauterbrunnen Valley* (c. 1858) is a dramatic yet accurate rendering of a Swiss village with one of the highest waterfalls in Europe cascading from a sheer rock cliff, an inherently breathtaking site that may have particularly appealed to Deshayes as it needed no exaggeration.[1] This work also provides concrete evidence that the artist spent some time traveling and working in Switzerland. Another painting, *Sailboats at Anchor on a Mountain Lake*, has a composition very similar to *A Swiss Lake*, with clusters of small houses at left and right, sailboats on a lake at center, and high mountain peaks receding into the distance, though the configuration of each element is different from that in the Clark work.[2] Deshayes may have based more generalized Alpine views like these on actual sites or simply produced variations on a composition in his studio.

The challenge of characterizing Deshayes's work is demonstrated by a group of small landscapes in the Musées de Mâcon. Two sets of paintings have been framed together since their acquisition by the museum in 1897 (when they were attributed to Charles-François Daubigny). In one set, a classically composed landscape, which has been described as resembling works by Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750–1819) or Achille-Etna Michallon (1796–1882), is flanked by two clearly imaginary vignettes that might almost illustrate a fairy tale, showing buildings with conical or pagoda-shaped roofs, accompanied in one case by an umbrella-like tree.[3] Another painting, *Romantic Landscape* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), depicts fantastically spiky buildings and landscape forms that recall the work of Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516). While *A Swiss Lake* clearly belongs to the more traditional side of Deshayes's output, it is fascinating to consider whether he may have included some degree of imaginative invention in this seemingly straightforward representation. SL