

Eugène DELACROIX (Charenton-Saint Maurice 1798 - Paris 1863)

A Lioness Asleep

Pencil, on a page from a sketchbook.
212 x 180 mm. (8 3/8 x 7 1/8 in.)

Eugène Delacroix had an abiding interest in the study and representation of wild animals, inspired by such earlier works as the paintings of lion hunts by Rubens and the drawings and prints of George Stubbs and James Ward. In the late 1820s and 1830s, he began to make regular visits, often in the company of the animalier sculptor and draughtsman Antoine-Louis Barye, to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and the menagerie at Saint-Cloud. There he made numerous studies of animals, and in particular the wild animals and beasts of prey that were kept there. (In the summer of 1829, the two artists were also given permission to draw from the carcass of a dead lion at the Jardin des Plantes.) Delacroix continued to make study drawings of wild animals from life well into his later career. These studies of felines became the basis for a number of lithographs, as well as for the paintings of lions and tigers that began to occur frequently in his work from the 1840s onwards, culminating in the remarkable hunting scenes of the 1850s.

As one scholar has written, 'Delacroix's animal drawings range from synoptic studies to more finished renderings...He was responsive to the full range of feline behavior, from the almost humanly affectionate interaction of a lioness playing with her cubs...to the predatory beast stalking and attacking its prey.' The present sheet may be likened stylistically to such drawings by Delacroix as a pencil study of A Struggle Between a Lion and Tiger of c.1854, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and a drawing of Heads of Roaring Lions and Lionesses in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon. A similarly posed lioness at rest appears in a pen and ink drawing of Two Studies of a Lioness in the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, MA, and in a sheet of studies formerly in the Barye collection which was on the art market in New York in 1960.

The present sheet, drawn on a page of a sketchbook, does not bear the Delacroix studio stamp, and must have left his possession in his lifetime. It was once part of a small collection of drawings and sketches by Delacroix, all previously unpublished and unknown to most scholars, assembled by the French artist Henri Bénézit (c.1904-1998). A number of Bénézit's drawings were acquired from the

heirs of Delacroix's childhood friend Jean-Baptiste Pierret (1795-1854), who had assembled a number of albums of drawings by the master. Delacroix was a frequent dinner guest at Pierret's, and on each visit would give his host some drawings, which would then be mounted into albums. These albums were broken up after Pierret's death in 1854 and some of the drawings - none of which bear the artist's studio stamp, since they left his studio well before his death - were in turn acquired by Bénézit.

Provenance:

Possibly Jean-Baptiste Pierret, Paris, and thence by descent
Henri Bénézit, Paris
Thence by descent until 2015.

Artist description:

Eugène Delacroix has long been recognized as one of the finest draughtsmen of the 19th century in France. Adept in a variety of techniques – notably pen, pencil, watercolour, charcoal and pastel - he produced a large and diverse number of drawings of all types. As a modern scholar has noted, 'For their number, variety and importance he attached to them, drawings are an essential, if not fundamental part of Delacroix's oeuvre…they represent the most faithful testimonies of the man and the artist with his foibles but his greatness as well.'

However, Delacroix's output as a draughtsman remained almost completely unknown and unseen by scholars, collectors and connoisseurs until the posthumous auction of the contents of his studio held in February 1864, six months after the artist's death, which included some six thousand drawings in 430 lots. The sale included not only preparatory compositional sketches and figure studies for Delacroix's paintings and public commissions, but a myriad variety of drawings by the artist, including studies of wild animals, landscapes, copies after the work of earlier masters, costume studies, scenes from literature, still life subjects and the occasional portrait, as well as finished pastels. In the words of the Delacroix scholar Lee Johnson, 'It came as a surprise to many that an artist who had been so consistently criticized throughout his career for incompetence as a draughtsman and laxity in composition was revealed by the many hundreds of graphic works, the fifty-five sketchbooks, and scores of oil sketches at his sale to have been a draughtsman of extraordinary versatility and one who went to infinite pains to elaborate the compositions of his paintings through preliminary studies of many kinds, from the inchoate scribbles of an idea in germ, to more articulate designs, to detailed drawings of pose and gesture.'

The largest single collection of drawings by Delacroix, numbering almost three thousand individual sheets and twenty-three sketchbooks, is today in the Louvre.