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Théodore Géricault

Early Life

Jean-Louis-André-Théodore Géricault was born in Rouen, France on September 26, 1791 (Eitner 11). He was born into a family of property owners, lawyers and businessmen who personified the practical ambition and materialism of the provincial middle class (Eitner 11). There is little evidence to suggest that his family had much impact on his artistic and intellectual pursuits. His first schooling was at the Lycée Imperial where he conducted classical studies under René Richard Castel, the poet and botanist (Eitner 13). He was a lackluster student, described as ‘exquisitely lazy’ by his schoolmate, the Countess de Pracontaz (Eitner 13). He received little artistic training early at the Lycée, and his artistic talent was manifested seemingly. His fellow students recognized his ability to create incredibly realistic drawings based on observation. During this time his family often vacationed in rural Normandy, where he likely developed his fascination with horses, and taught himself the skills of horsemanship.

Informal Study

On March 15, 1808, Géricault’s mother passed away. She left him a hefty annuity that would free him from financial worries for the majority of his life. His schooling ended later that spring, and he left ‘with the joy of a convict released from jail’ (Eitner 13). He decided against re-entering school the next year, instead choosing to begin a career as a painter. In order to avoid quarrel with his father, he began a business apprenticeship with his uncle, who allowed him to frequent the studio of Carle Vernet rather than work at his offices. Vernet was a fashionable painter of the time, who chose to let alone the classical and national themes of his contemporaries and depict sporting scenes and equestrian portraits instead. Vernet made little effort to teach the young Géricault, but allowed him to work in his studio and copy as he pleased. Vernet evidently had little influence on Géricault’s style and composition, but the introduction of non-classical imagery would have a profound impact on Géricault’s later work.

Formal Study

In 1810 Géricault sensed the futility of his casual study in Vernet’s studio, and sought out more formal training. He found Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, the most methodical of the leading masters at the French School. Guérin was a pupil of Jacques-Louis David, and had assimilated many aspects of classical Davidian style, which he employed with the aid of aesthetic theory and geometric experimentation. Guérin modeled his studio after David’s famous atelier, and in contrast to Vernet’s milieu, Guérin’s studio

was a private academy with an almost scholarly tone. Géricault studied regularly there for about six months from 1810 to 1811, but would visit intermittently until 1816.

Independent Study

By 1810 neoclassicism had begun a steady decline into stale routine. Painters were urged by Napoleon to depict modern scenes of military triumph and glory. This push was reflected in the work exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1810, where Géricault saw Antoine-Jean Gros' *Battle of the Pyramids* exhibited. Gros' use of modernist coloring and composition; a method which challenged traditionally classical style, had a profound influence on Géricault, and he would soon abandon much of his classical training for bold style and modern history imagery. He set up his easel in the halls of the Musée Napoléon to begin his independent study. There he copied masterworks by Titian, Fabricius, Gros, Rubens, Raphael and Poussin. Compared to his short lived, sporadic study with Vernet and Guerin, his study at the Musée was remarkably sustained, and he studied intensively there until 1815.

The Charging Chasseur



In the spring of 1812 Géricault entered the Prix de Rome competition; first signs of his yearning for academic distinction. He did not get past the first round, and so he set his ambition towards a submission into the Paris Salon of 1812. He struggled for a time reflecting upon a subject for his first large scale painting. He supposedly found his picture passing a caravan near the Saint-Cloud fair, when a grey horse reared back, unaccustomed to its load (Eitner 28). He began producing sketches for the painting soon after, and toyed for a time with it's composition. It is thought that he

drew compositional inspiration from the hunting paintings of Rubens, and the detailing of the Chasseur's uniform recall watercolors by Guérin. Once his preparatory work was complete, he was ready to transfer his image for *The Charging Chasseur* to a large canvas. He rented out a vacant shop near his uncle's home and began work on a fresh canvas measuring 9ft 6in by 6ft 4in. By the time he had begun work on the final piece scarcely three weeks remained before the Salon opening. Under the pressure of necessity Géricault painted his piece in a surge, without hesitation or pause. The swift execution worked to his advantage, giving the composition the liveliness of a sketch. The piece was exhibited at the Salon, and was met with largely positive reviews and a gold medal. However, the director of the Musée Napoléon made no move to purchase the piece, and this left Géricault disappointed.

The Wounded Cuirassier



France's war with Russia left the country tired of battle. Hastily trained and ill equipped soldiers were conscripted to wage war in Napoleon's army, but to the relief of many Frenchman, defeat at Leipzig sealed the empire's fate. Géricault witnessed the collapse as a fascinated but passive spectator, managing to avoid conscription for a second time. The fate of France weighed heavily on his mind as he contemplated his next projects. In the time between the Salon of 1812 and the Salon of 1814 Géricault focused on military subject matter and modern history scenes. He produced a number of finished oil paintings, including the *Polish Lancer*, a piece reminiscent of his *Charging Chasseur*. When it was announced that the Salon would be held in 1814 Géricault decided that he would enter, and once again barely completed his submission in time. He completed the piece, sized nearly the same as *The Charging Chasseur*, in less than three weeks. The image was shown next to his first submission,

and was meant to be seen as a pendant to the original piece. Whereas *The Charging Chasseur* represented France on the eve of great battle, *The Wounded Cuirassier* represented the fall of an empire. The piece was met with poor reviews, and many critics ignored his submission altogether. Géricault would later recognize his own dissatisfaction with the piece and its somewhat vacant physiognomy.

The Grey Musketeer

Géricault continued to be productive in the years following his failure at the Salon of 1814. He produced a number of finished military paintings, including *Trumpeter of the Chasseurs* and *Portrait of a Carabinier*. He had applied a few months prior to the *Grey Musketeers*, a mounted regiment of royal bodyguards. His enlistment was accepted in 1815, and he spent a little more than eight weeks in active duty. His reasoning for joining the regiment are not fully known; his father's royalist sentiments, the example of other fashionable young men and a touch of snobbery were no doubt partly to blame. Napoleon returned from Elba later that year, and King Louis XIII fled towards Belgium. Géricault resolved to escort the King, but was formally dismissed after six days and was forced to disguise himself on his return. Upon returning home, his forbidden love affair with Alexandrine-Modeste Caruel, his maternal aunt, became a terrifying and irresistible disturbance. In order to avoid the shame of discovery by his family, he resolved to travel. In the year preceding his journey he produced less work than at any other point in his career.

Prelude to Italy

In Italy, Géricault began to grow disillusioned with his own abilities. He began to regret his informal training, and sought to revamp his method through intensive study. He began the process with drawing modeled after the styles of Michelangelo especially, and self-taught himself in classical style. In this period his sketchbooks were filled with figures in antique costume and positional improvisations on classical themes. He abandoned subtleties of line and tone for sculptural definition and thick contours. Between 1814 and 1816 he experimented with other mediums, and discovered a natural talent for lithography and sculpture. His subject matter changed as well, as he chose to abandon his usual military scenes altogether. His style shifted towards heroic stylization and tense control of the brush.

Italy

In Italy Géricault continued his self-taught classical retraining, and sought out an image for his next large-scale piece. His focus was on scenes from modern life, and he produced a number of drawings depicting the Italian street. He found his inspiration for a monumental composition at the Piazza del Popolo in Corso in 1817. There he witnessed the stampede of riderless Barberi horses, and found his next project. He hoped to enter the piece in the Salon of 1817, and was once again in a crunch for time. He attacked his project with characteristic thoroughness, and

produced a number of detailed studies. He created several versions of the same scene with wholly different compositions and styles, and left for France with a final design. Géricault ultimately abandoned what would have been his most ambitious project. The reasons for this are largely unknown, though dissatisfaction with the final composition and an alarmingly unrealistic deadline were probably to blame.

Return To France/ The Raft of the Medusa



Back in France, Géricault continued his depictions of modern scenes. He resolved to create an image for the Salon of 1819 that was concerned with immediate events and circumstances and appealed to the viewer's emotions. His work with descriptive realism and stylistic discipline in this period worked to give him inspiration for his next large-scale piece. Reports of the tragedy of the Medusa had spread about France for three years when Géricault decided to depict the scene of its marooned raft. The Medusa was a French ship that had run aground in Senegal, and dignitaries onboard took the only lifeboats and abandoned the crew on a makeshift raft. Onboard crewmembers cannibalized one another, and ultimately only a few survived. Based on accounts from survivors he began his composition for the piece in preparation for the Salon. He left himself more time to prepare than with his previous entries, and allowed himself to compose the piece thoroughly and at a comfortable pace. The Raft of the Medusa was exhibited at the Salon of 1819, and met with sensational reviews. Initially its topicality blinded many viewers to its masterful composition. Royalists saw the piece as overly sympathetic to the crew, and took the piece as unwarranted criticism of the captain who ordered the raft to be abandoned. Leftists applauded the piece, and saw it as a moving portrayal of the crew's plight. Showings of the Medusa around the world would make Géricault relatively rich and well known.

Portraits of the Insane



Géricault traveled for a time in England following his success with the *Medusa*. There he continued to experiment with lithography, and upon his return to France his health was ailing. His behavior became erratic and self-destructive, and through repeated riding accidents and reported suicide attempts he became gravely ill. Moreover, he managed to lose almost all of his fortune in bad investments, and was no longer financially independent for the first time in his career. Despite a downward trend in his mental and physical health, Géricault produced perhaps his most striking and original images in his final years. He befriended Dr. E.J. Georget, a pioneer in psychiatric medicine, and created a series of 10 portraits of his patients. The series was historically significant for a number of reasons. First, Géricault's eye for expressiveness and his boldly spontaneous execution of the portraits made them unique masterworks of their time. However, the context in which the pieces were developed made the portraits unlike most pieces of the time. Georget commissioned the works, and gave permission on behalf of the sitters for the portraits to be painted. Moreover, the portraits were intended to be scientific studies that could provide Georget's students with examples of physical manifestations of mental illness. The paintings were done at a time when psychiatric medicine had shifted towards the study of facial features as a way to identify mental weakness. They stand as a testament to the power of context; without knowing that the subjects were clinically insane would the viewer be able to tell? His last pieces are perhaps his most influential in the ways they force the viewer to rethink the conventions of how a portrait is viewed. January of 1824 Géricault passed away due to a tubercular spine infection at the age of 32.

Annotated Bibliography

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