

Romanticism and the Birth of Modern Art – Part 1

To talk about Romanticism is to talk about Modern Art. The 19th century produced art that was no longer compliant to the entrenched elite. In style and form it was contradictory, unpredictable, often critical and most of all, individual. To mark the death of Eugene Delacroix on the 13th August 1863, Charles Baudelaire, the arch-modernist poet, writer, art critic and social commentator wrote that 'Romanticism is precisely situated neither in the choice of subjects, nor in exact truth, but in a mode of feeling... To say the word Romanticism is to say modern art, that is intimacy, spirituality, colour, aspirations towards the infinite, expressed by every means of the arts'. And Delacroix himself admitted to the critic Silvestre, 'If one means by my Romanticism, the free manifestations of my personal impressions, my estrangement from the standards practised in the schools and my repugnance for Academic recipes, I must avow that not only am I a Romantic, but I was already so at the age of 15'.

It is impossible to discuss Romanticism, without relating it to the historical and societal context. Napoleon's defeat in 1815 at the Battle of Waterloo and the return of the Bourbon monarchy to the French Throne, is often cited as an arbitrary end to the Neoclassical Period and the beginning of the Romantic period, but as previously discussed, the concept of periods of art history is a retrospective construct by art historians to explain the changes and transformations in the Arts in general and no art period has a time scale set in stone. From the Renaissance, High Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassicism through to Romanticism, all these periods overlapped to a greater, or lesser extent. Even individual painters throughout their careers, changed, or modified their styles. So for instance, our own genius Turner, began his career painting very much in the accepted Academic tradition, but from quite early in his career, his style changed quite dramatically and Ingres in his early career, very much regarded as a painter in the Neoclassical tradition and a stalwart defender of the Academic tradition, inevitably also became associated with the label of Romanticism towards the end of his career.

With Jacques Louis-David permanently exiled in Brussels and the French establishment rocked by dramatic, but progressive shifts in patronage and taste, hand in hand with a groundswell of popular enthusiasm for innovation in and commercialisation of the Arts, the scene was set for the most revolutionary period in painting since Caravaggio made his first dramatic appearance in the late 16th century.

So, where are the roots of Romanticism? In writing they undoubtedly lie in the contemporary poetry of Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott's novels and of course Shakespeare, whilst in painting the most influential progenitors were the Venetian painters, especially Giorgione and Titian and the Baroque masters Rembrandt, Rubens and Velasquez. Then the next question must be, in which painter's work, does this new individuality, self expression and freedom from the constraints of the Academic tradition and Neoclassicism first make its appearance. In France, the premier candidate must be Theodore Gericault, although Antoine-Jean Gros' painting of *Napoleon in the Plague House of Jaffa* of 1804, certainly meets some of the criteria for a Romantic label, a novel category, a heroic history painting of a contemporary event, not to be confused with the meticulous description of a battle. However, it is probably Gericault that we must look to for the first French painting critically regarded as being in the Romantic tradition, with

his *The Charging Chasseur* of 1812. We will discuss Delacroix and both Turner, Constable and Richard Parkes Bonington's claim to that accolade in future essays.



Theodore Gericault (1791-1824), an unconventional outsider and painter of outstanding originality, has come down to us as the first great Romantic. He was born in Rouen, but came to Paris as a boy to study, where his professional training was limited to short

spells in the studios of Carle Vernet and Guerin. In an environment awash with mercenary temptations, Gericault managed to revive the revolutionary ideal of the independent, public-minded artist, impatient for recognition and glory, but indifferent to merely monetary reward. He attempted to substitute spontaneity and bravura for sound draughtsmanship and composition to such an extent, that in his early career he was nicknamed the 'pastry cook' by his peers. Nevertheless, at the tender age of 21 and with little previous experience, he produced the monumental, *Charging Chasseur* for the Salon, for which he won a gold medal. He had a great love of horses and riding and so it's probably unsurprising that his first major work was both an equestrian painting and a portrait, the cavalry officer, being an unknown and effectively anonymous individual, Lieutenant Dieudonne. The 11x9 feet painting is not without fault and it's therefore unsurprising that it was largely worked out through colour sketches without preparatory drawing. In fact, concerns over the drawing of the figure would surely have resulted in the painting never having been realised. What sets it apart from its Neoclassical antecedent, David's *Napoleon at the St Bernard's Pass* and confirms its Romantic credentials, is the invented narrative, the dramatic diagonal arrangement and the vigorous paint-handling, quite unlike David's polished technique.



Soon after, in 1814, with the Salon in mind, Gericault produced another similar painting, *The Wounded Chasseur*, of similar dimensions, which he clearly meant as a pendant for the *Charging Chasseur*. The two works would have an interplay of antithesis: active v passive, mounted v earthbound, active v debilitated, but the most obvious of these antithesis which has always dominated commentary on the painting is the one provided by Napoleon's intervening reversal of fortune in the snows of Russia. Again there are faults, for instance the occluded fore-shortening of the horse and the flaccid, perfunctory shape of the right arm, but these failings of execution, are put in perspective by the overall

quality of painting and the magnitude of the conception the young Gericault had attempted. It was only after the production of these monumental works, that the still inexperienced Gericault joined the studio of Horace Vernet, a social centre for young, disaffected ex-officers and artists, bored and antagonistic to the Restoration of the Monarchy, that Gericault found a natural home. Having begun his career as something

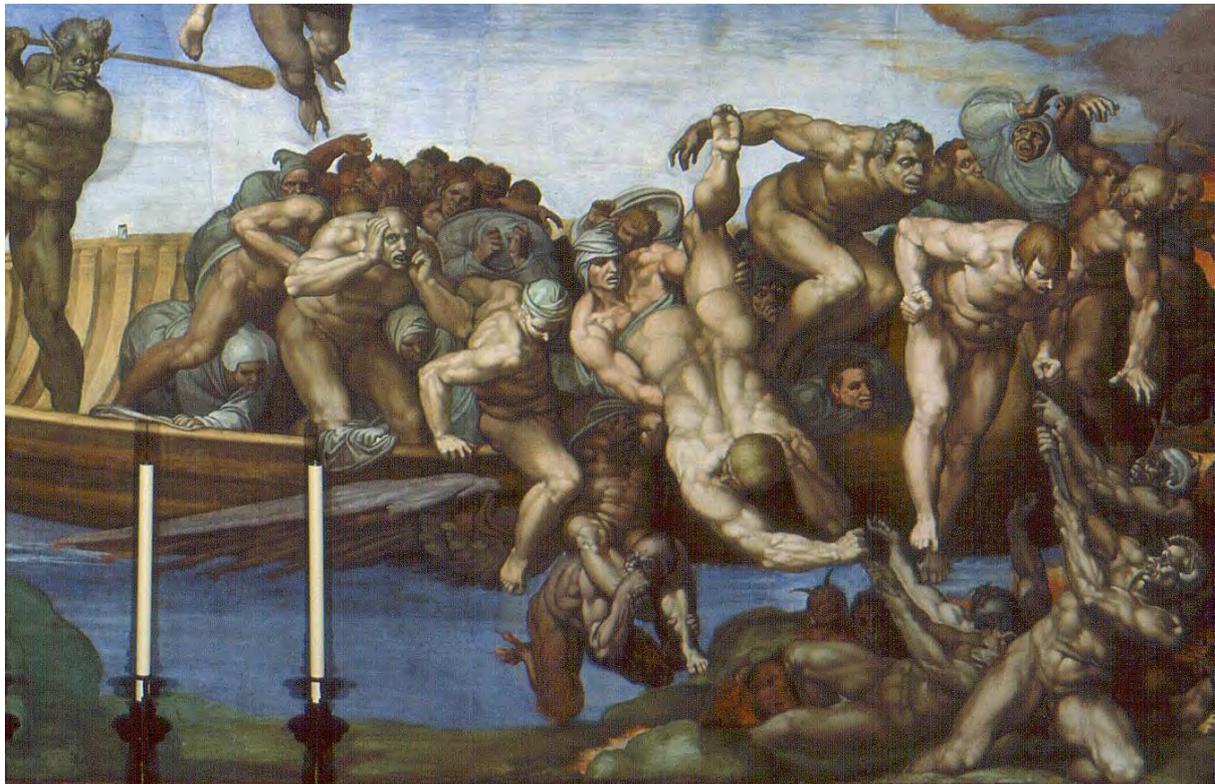
of a dilettante in the acquisition of technical skills, he sought now, perhaps alone in his generation, to reinvest formal values with the moral import they had carried under the republic. Following a visit to Rome and Florence between 1816-18, he became an enthusiastic admirer of Michelangelo and Rubens and honed his drawing and compositional skills. Now in possession of a command of Classical drawing that was doubly remarkable in an artist, who remained essentially self taught, he was much better prepared for the painting of 'the large machines', as Turner would refer to them. Looking for a suitable subject in which to make an impression and demonstrate his new found confidence, the shipwreck of the Medusa in 1816 off the West coast of Africa, was just the opportunity he was seeking.

The incompetently commanded flagship of a small fleet had run aground in the notorious shallows of the Arguin Bank. As the officers and passengers commandeered the inadequate lifeboats, a large raft was lashed together from masts and spars. Some 147 seaman and soldiers were forced to crowd together on the precarious open platform, with no room to do anything other than stand and the structure was so overloaded that the water was flooding over their legs. As soon as the senior officers in the boats realised that their progress was being retarded, they cut the rope with which they were towing the raft, leaving its occupants to their fate. The castaways were then struck from without by a storm and within by an horrific episode of despairing delirium in which factions amongst enlisted men attacked the junior officers, with the intention of breaking up the raft and committing collective suicide. Many of the mutineers were killed, or wounded. This fighting, along with accidental, or voluntary surrender to the waves, reduced their number to less than thirty within six days of their abandonment. With no food, the living began to eat the corpses that remained on the raft, augmented by the deliberate killing of those companions nearest death. Eventually, after 13 days adrift, the 15 emaciated survivors were rescued.



Quite unlike his earlier career, Gericault immersed himself in every aspect of the incident, which quickly became a National scandal, due in part to the incompetence of the French captain and the reports of cannibalism. He was said to have visited hospitals to witness dying men first hand and painted eerily evocative studies of severed heads and limbs. He completed full compositional studies for the final vast painting of 16x24 feet, where the figures in the foreground are actually greater than life-size, so that when seen at its eye-level position in the Louvre, has the effect of drawing the viewer into the action, almost as a participant.

Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, in the Sistine Chapel was the old master work, which most influenced the painting and Gericault said, 'Michelangelo's sent shivers up my spine, these lost souls destroying each other, inevitably conjure up the tragic grandeur of the Sistine Chapel'. And its with this statement, that Gericault admitted that he has moved away from reality, in the sense that although the few survivors of the tragic event were emaciated, the artist has portrayed them as athletic male nudes, granted not as muscular as Michelangelo's, but certainly not 'skin and bone'.



In the end, it was the demands of his artistic ambition to equal the clarified grandeur of Davidian historical painting on his own terms, which exactly coincided with the moral vindication of the raft survivors, that forced him away from reality. Perhaps, he also felt that the horror of decapitated bodies and severed, part eaten limbs, would be a step too far and detract from his monumental depiction of the greater drama taking place in front of the viewer. He chose for his narrative, the moment of the first, agonising sighting of the rescue ship, when nobody on the raft knew if they had been seen and are galvanised into one last collective action in order to attract its attention. The completed painting is a complex hybrid of the traditional pyramidal compositional arrangement of the figures

and the unexpected, building it on a rough sea with a cast of contemporary, semi-anonymous victims.

Gericault's disastrous indecision of the hanging of the painting in the Salon of 1819, haunted him later. His first thoughts that a higher position for such a vast painting would accord with precedent for such grand works, but then realised, but too late, that the painting would be seen to much greater effect at eye-level. The artist and his supporters rightly saw the dramatic force of the work drain away in its elevated position. With the captain of the Medusa disgraced in the subsequent investigation and French Naval policy revised, Gericault had hoped that his celebration of the catalyst for reform, would be honoured by State purchase. He failed in this ambition, although the painting was in fact highly rated and awarded a medal. There was also no private destination for such a painting and as a result, the artist's disappointment was profound.

Nevertheless, a visit to England, where the painting could be seen in a paying exhibition, proved to be very successful and was undoubtedly seen by the ambitious Turner, who by now was a long established leading light in the Royal Academy. His painting of 1840, *The Slave Ship, Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying-Typhoon coming on*, was inspired by another scandal, that of the slave ship Zong, where 133 slaves were thrown overboard, so that insurance payments could be collected and surely his memories of the impact of Gericault's masterpiece, were also in the forefront of his mind.



Gericault's health, both physical and mental, aggravated by horse-riding injuries, would cause his premature death in 1824 at the age of 33. Although he planned new historical

compositions, now on openly liberal themes such as the evils of the slave trade, his now limited energies permitted work only on a more limited scale. Taking up the new medium of lithography, he produced prints for the wider market, documenting scenes of common life, labour, disability, alcoholism, the poor and public hanging. In painting, he produced five of the most remarkable exercises in portraiture, ever produced, *Les Monomanes*. These portraits of the insane, were only discovered fifty years after the artist's death and any original motivation for their production has been lost. There is some evidence that Gericault underwent psychiatric treatment and within advanced medical circles, new humane forms of treatment were being pioneered.

Gericault's surviving portraits, display a sympathetic objectivity, which is at least in keeping with this new scientific attitude. Each sufferer is depicted according to the conventions of contemporary portraiture, the plain dignity of dress and technique with which David had developed in his portraits.



This *Portrait of the Insane Woman*, in the Musee des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, painted in 1822 is one of the most powerful examples of the five remaining works in the series. Her down-cast expression with mouth tense and her eyes red-rimmed with suffering, represent with astonishing veracity the physical effects of the mentally ill, at a time when the genre of portraiture was largely the domain of the healthy, wealthy and famous.

There are four other such works from a series believed to have been originally ten in number, *Portrait of a Kleptomaniac*, Ghent, *The Woman with a Gambling Habit*, Louvre, *Man Suffering from the Delusions of Military Rank*, Private, and *A Kidnapper*, Massachusetts. The paintings pursue one latent

implication of the *Raft's* construction of heroism, that the heroic figure does not necessarily require to be someone worthy. Heroism may be manifest in resistance to forces, which overwhelm isolated and vulnerable individuals. In intent and execution, these paintings had few antecedents, outside of Leonardo's drawings of grotesque faces and Rembrandt's etched and painted self-portraits, where especially towards the end of his life, his merciless depictions of his own age-ravaged face and those of his elderly patrons, have the same hypnotic effect. Velasquez's portraits of the court fool *Pablo de Valladolid* and *The Dwarf, Francisco Lezcano*, are also two wonderful examples of where the Spanish Baroque master has given his sitters, a dignity that to some contemporary observers may have appeared odd, although these individuals were highly regarded within the Spanish Court of Philip IV.

In the eleven years of his tempestuous career, Géricault displayed a meteoric and many-sided genius, which sadly never matured much beyond his masterpiece. His disregard for the orthodox doctrine of conventional types, his Baroque exuberance, with its sense of swirling movement and even in his taste of the macabre, all point in the direction of Romanticism. In summary, if Géricault's brief career was only remembered for his masterpiece, *The Raft of the Medusa*, which was belatedly purchased from his heirs by the Louvre in 1824, that would be sufficient, for in truth it was his audacity in attempting such a project and the monumentality of the work, which heralded the true birth of Romanticism.