



Géricault, Théodore (1791-1824)

by James Smalls

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Raft of the Medusa
(1819) by Théodore Géricault.

Théodore Géricault may be the best known nineteenth-century visual artist associated with Romanticism. His art glorifies the irrational, the subjective, the morbid, the overly emotional, the unpredictable, and the bizarre.

Although Géricault produced an impressive number of works in a variety of media, he is identified particularly with one signature creation, a gigantic 1819 oil painting entitled *Raft of the Medusa* (Paris, Musée du Louvre). This work deviated from the established rules of neoclassical content and style in that it challenged the kinds of subject matter deemed worthy of grand history painting.

Instead of choosing a theme from classical Greek or Roman history, as was customary in art of the early nineteenth century, Géricault chose a topical theme--an event that, according to a published eyewitness account by two survivors, actually happened--and presented it on a grand scale.

The painting measures approximately 16 feet by 23 feet and each figure is twice life-size, giving dramatic impact to the tragic shipwreck that took place in 1816 off the coast of Senegal. Out of the 150 or so original passengers aboard the makeshift raft, only 15 survived after spending a horrifying week lost at sea with no food and very little water.

Reported instances of madness, violence, murder, cannibalism, and other unspeakable horrors became public knowledge and the calamity became a national scandal in France. The event called into question the competence and ethics of the conservative Bourbon Restoration government (1815-1830) that had awarded command of the frigate *Medusa* to an inexperienced and incompetent aristocrat.

In *Raft of the Medusa*, men share experiences of pain and desire within a confined space. The image consists of several male bodies arranged in erotically suggestive positions, suffering physical and psychological distress and torment. A tension is established by juxtaposing the living and the dead, the muscular and the limp, the alert and the unconscious. Acts of frenetic desperation are depicted alongside poses of willful torpor.

At the pinnacle of the composition is a muscular black man whose back faces us. His physique not only evokes Michelangelo's heroic male nudes, but his presence is socially significant. It signals not only the barely visible rescue ship on the distant horizon, but also the resistance of the oppressed and victimized against the destructive odds of nature and disasters created by man.

Moreover, the chain of intermingled male bodies is palpably erotic. As one man circles an arm around the black man's waist, others strain from below to give him support. In this forced comradeship, flesh presses against flesh (one unconscious figure is shown pressing his face against the buttocks of another). The combining of the morbid, erotic, and social is typical of Romanticism.

Although we do not know much about Géricault's sexual orientation, we do know that the label "gay" or

"queer" can not be applied to him in the modern sense of those terms. Nevertheless, there is a discernible homoerotic sensibility throughout his work, notable in his choice of themes and as well as in their presentation.

Géricault's art highlights masculinity and heroic action. Throughout his career, Géricault remained master of the heroic male nude figure and produced many studio studies in which muscular models are shown in strenuous physical activities (for example, *Study of a Nude Man Pulling on a Rope*; ca 1816; Musée Bonnat, Bayonne).

He produced several works during the Napoleonic period that depict soldiers both on and off the battlefield (for example, *Wounded Cuirassier*, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Salon of 1814; *The Chasseur of the Imperial Guard*, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Salon of 1812).

Underscoring the world of men and the tense, erotic charge between them in the artist's work is the fact that Géricault's oeuvre is marked by an almost utter absence of women. His compositions are nearly always of brawny males who confront the harsh elements of nature, animals, and one another.

The struggle between men and animals is a favorite theme. The artist produced many watercolors and drawings of muscular men attempting to control horses and bulls (for example, *The Bull Market*, 1817-1818, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University; *Race of the Barbieri Horses*, 1817, Musée du Louvre, Paris).

Works like these are intended to symbolize man's destiny and his attempt to harness uncontrollable and potentially destructive forces. These forces include the physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual energies both in himself and in nature itself.

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About the Author

James Smalls is Associate Professor of Art History and Theory at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He teaches and publishes on the interrelatedness of race, gender, and queer sexualities in nineteenth-century and modern art and in twentieth-century black visual culture.