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Géricault and The Raft of the Medusa:
Reflecting French Society

By Veronica Ventura ‘11

Introduction

Théodore Géricault was a French Romantic artist in the early nineteenth century. During that time period, the political climate was fluctuating between the empire of Napoleon and the monarchy. French society was constantly changing whenever there was a shift in power. The subsequent revolutions affected the culture tremendously.

Géricault used the current events around him to create works indicative to his times. When Napoleon was in power, his paintings reflected the Bonapartists’ view of the emperor’s army. After the monarchy was restored, the painter produced a work that voiced the uncertainty many felt concerning the new government.

Eventually, his greatest piece, The Raft of the Medusa, would be the artwork that encompassed many aspects of nineteenth century French Society. Based on a shipwreck caused...
by insensible royalist leaders, the painting stirred the public. Royalists were offended by this supposed attack, while Bonapartists were delighted in believing that Géricault was glorifying their struggle against the monarchy. One feature of the painting in particular, the “Father” figure, embodied these conflicting emotions and sensations of many Parisians.

In addition to this, the character of the “Father” was an allusion to Ugolino, an icon of cannibalism. The “Father” also hinted at madness. Géricault was fascinated by darker subjects. His interest is analogous to the rising interest in the gruesome and morbid in France. The Raft of the Medusa not only presented French society with its own struggles, but the painting also introduced society to the uprising Romantic Movement.

The Early Works of Géricault

The Salon was the appellation of the esteemed art exhibitions in Paris, France that Louis XIV started in 1667. 1 Since 1737, the Salon was an annual event in which many artists participated. When Napoleon Bonaparte was First Consul in 1799, he became a great patron to the arts and used the popular style of Neoclassicism to help enhance his political image. The Salon changed noticeably after Bonaparte was crowned Emperor in 1804. 2 Artists were now painting images glorifying the emperor, and they continued to do so until Napoleon had to renounce his throne in 1814. France would be a monarchy again.

However, despite the extreme political changes that were already underway, it was announced that the Salon would still continue to display the arts during the summer of 1814. Many people, particularly artists, wondered why the king would allow the Salon to continue that year, since Napoleon had been using the Salon for his preferred subject matter. The recently restored king may have wanted the Salon held in order to show the public that the new government was steady. This exhibition would be the first time in over two decades that artists had to conform to royal standards. 3 Artists had the predicament of switching from the subject of Napoleon to Louis XVII in less than a year, giving artists little time to create new works under a regime where the artistic guidelines had not been drawn. Artists were allowed to submit past works for that year, perhaps to help alleviate the problem of finding a new subject for their paintings. 4

It was in the 1814 Salon that the artist of focus, Jean-Louis-André-Théodore Géricault, presented both his past Salon submission Charging Chasseur (Figure A), and his new work, Wounded Cuirassier Leaving the Field of Battle (Figure B). Unlike other painters of that day who entered pieces that strayed away from political subjects, Géricault submitted these two together, and uncomfortably reminded the viewers of the rise and fall of the emperor.

The Charging Chasseur was originally submitted to the Salon in 1812. It is a massive 2,920 millimeters high by 1,940 millimeters wide, and depicted an officer of the Imperial Guard. Its subject matter fits with the norm during the time of Napoleon’s rule, since the piece depicted a sentry in the act of running into battle. The sentry sits atop the horse on a leopard skin with his sword out. This act of rushing into battle corresponds to how Napoleon was during his Wars, and thus was accepted favorably during the Salon of 1812.

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2 Ibid, 382.
4 Ibid, 61
As large as it is, it was impressive how long it took for Géricault to complete it. Eitner states that the painter probably had at most three weeks to start the actual artwork. The brief amount of time to create such a large piece led Géricault to have some compositional errors. The foreshortening of the horse’s leg was rushed and is slightly off. It is almost out of proportion with the rest of the animal’s body. His brushstrokes vary throughout the painting, as well. Certain areas on the horse’s face were painted with bold, large strokes; other parts of the body are painted with smaller patches of color. Besides the horse, the colors throughout the painting are vibrant, and the hue of the smoke gives the work an intense atmosphere. Overall though, the painting has bravado, a massive figure charging into battle along with his animated steed.

For the Wounded Cuirassier to be shown along with the fighting Imperial guard was a bold action for Géricault. The meaning of the two in juxtaposition would not have been lost to the audience. Cuirassiers were heavily armored cavalry soldiers that Napoleon used frequently. The soldier in this painting appears defeated, looking back at the battle as if it had been lost. In addition to this, he is holding his agitated horse back. Instead of bold colors, the Cuirassier has more muted tones and the soldier is larger. Perhaps he is depicted larger to focus on the defeat in his countenance. Géricault’s brushstrokes are less bold. The defeated soldier would have been a representation of Napoleon’s defeat and the consequences of the Restoration. How mighty Bonaparte and his army had been, only for many to be defeated.

This hint at the recent war most likely affected the Salon critics’ opinions toward Géricault’s latest work. Once again, Géricault had about three weeks to complete a larger than normal painting, this time 2,929 millimeters high by 2,270 millimeters wide. His composition was similarly rushed as his last submission, however, this time some critics were more prone to disapprove while the others were content with ignoring the painting. Some weaknesses the evaluators found were that, “Not only does the horse’s head appear to be joined directly to its rump, but there is a conflict in its very motion...The animal’s spine, besides being too short, seems broken in the middle.” Unlike the Salon of 1812, the royalist reviewers did not overlook the faults of the painting, since they were trying to publicly disapprove of the empiric reminder. Regardless of these prejudices, Géricault had presented the otherwise dull Salon with an original

5 Eitner, Lorenz. Géricault. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1971, 64.
6 Ibid, 34.
9 Eitner, Lorenz. Géricault, 71.
10 Eitner, Lorenz. Géricault: His Life and Work, 64.
painting. It struck a chord with the public and presented them with reality. Napoleon was gone, and France was vulnerable.

**History of The Raft of the Medusa**

Géricault painted exactly what was happening in society and, having the bravado youth brings, did not hold much back. The painter’s next submission to the Salon would be grandiose. His masterpiece, *The Raft of the Medusa* (Figure C), was presented during the Salon of 1819.  

This dramatic work illustrated the scandalous shipwreck that occurred in 1816. The artist wanted a scene painted that would be as truthful as it could be. He wished to make the reality of it apparent, so the painting has impressive dimensions of 4,910 millimeters high by 7,160 millimeters wide.  

As the wrecked and dilapidated raft rides the precarious waves, the few survivors are signaling to a distant, almost invisible, ship. There are corpses on the raft, and a distraught castaway holding a body. The colors that compose the painting are mostly muted greens, blues, and browns. Eitner states that Géricault used these somber colors to better complement and focus on the severity of the scene. These colors give the painting a glow, as if there was a special lighting that emphasized the figures. Such a large piece of work makes the viewer feel as if they are part of the raft itself, trying to see the ship toward which the others are waving.

Many French onlookers would have known the context behind the painting that spectators of the present day may not. Géricault was obviously acquainted with the story, and sympathetic to the victims of the real raft for which the painting was based. For the purposes of further in-depth discussion, the history behind the event will be explained.

While on its way to Senegal, *La Méduse* crashed against rocks on the West African coast, even though the sea was tranquil. Hughes Duroy de Chaumareys, the captain, was incompetent and failed to safely guide the ship in clear waters. It is almost inconceivable that someone unqualified for the duties of a captain could have received such a title. However, de Chaumareys had received his title, not through merit as a sailor, but through official favor. As *La Méduse* had to be abandoned by the four hundred aboard, de Chaumareys, along with the other officers, went on one of the six lifeboats that could only hold about two hundred and fifty. The other unlucky passengers had to cram onto a makeshift raft. On this raft, many were killed from both nature causes and extremely unnatural causes. They were found by another ship, the *Argus*, which rescued the final fifteen.

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11 Ibid, 185.
14 Ibid, 158-159.
15 Ibid, 162.
Two survivors of the abandonment, Alexandre Corréard and Henri Savigny wrote *Naufrage de la Frégate la Méduse* in 1817 that described the horrors of raft. During the first night course at sea, the winds were so strong that many could not stay on the raft. The next day, many men were drinking heavily and became enraged at the situation. There was a mutiny between those who were attempting to tear the raft apart and those attempting to save it. Many died, but the raft was not destroyed that night. However, darker events were to occur. Since they were abandoned and left with little food, the starved individuals eventually resorted to cannibalism on the fourth day. As the days stretched on, many men became insane; others became sick, and then killed in order to save rations. By the end of thirteen days, only fifteen men were left. It is provocative to note that all the survivors were former Napoleonic soldiers.

Géricault read the *Naufrage* and met with Corréard and Savigny when he arrived back in France after a trip to Italy. He was sympathetic to their experiences; causing him to eventually decide to make his next work about the shipwreck. Eitner states that Géricault found it difficult to pinpoint exactly the image the artist wanted to portray. The painter:

...struggled to translate the words of Corréard and Savigny into images, grasping at anything that might help him give substance to their tale – popular lithographs of the shipwreck, the talk of survivors, a scale model of the Raft, built for him by the Médusa’s carpenter.

After receiving all of this information, he started his preliminary sketches for the painting. He had many ideas and images in mind; Géricault was attempting to find a scene on which to focus.

**Finding the Subject**

Even though Géricault was sympathetic to the situation of the survivors, it would not be particularly correct to say that the artist was making a radical statement with his painting. Eitner states, as well as a few other scholars, that Géricault was not particularly political. He was sympathetic to causes, but he was not trying to anger the government at all. His interest in modern subject matter led him to paint events or people that were relevant. During his first Salon exhibition, his subject, a charging soldier, was appropriate to the ongoing Napoleonic Wars. His *Cuirassier* piece depicted a general feeling of confusion and uneasiness the people may have had after the fall of the emperor. *The Raft* depicted an event that stirred debate within the French viewers about the government. While the French in the Bourbon Restoration could have taken certain sentiments from Géricault’s painting, present day society can learn much from his masterpiece about French nineteenth century society. Although Géricault may not have intended it, *The Raft of the Medusa* represents certain aspects of French Romanticism, particularly its interest in morbidity, which can be seen in the themes surrounding the artist’s "Father" figure in the painting.

In order to further discuss the figure, it would be valuable to elaborate on the themes of Romanticism. As it is further explained, it will become clear that the artist lived before the artistic movement was popular. In addition to the condensed history of the movement, it would also be helpful to talk of Géricault’s own influences.
The beginning of the Romantic Movement is difficult to pinpoint, as its influence came in at different times in various countries. A forerunner of Romantic ideas was the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who lived from 1712 to 1778. His Social Contract inspired the French Revolution, which stressed the idea of people ruling over themselves, as opposed to being ruled by a government. Rousseau’s other work, Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire, focused on nature and how it influenced humankind. While his more political work inspired the French Revolution, his “return to nature” view was for the most part ignored at first. Romantic historian Lillian Furst states that once the Reign of Terror took over there was little imaginative writing. It seems reasonable to follow that art would have been limited to that of the Revolution and, later, Napoleon. French Romanticism became popularized much later than the German or British Romanticism. Romantic ideas include: nature influencing man’s character, acknowledging nature’s beauty, nostalgia for the past, a religious influence, adventure, and individual freedom and creativity.

Another important aspect of Romanticism was “the cult of the sublime.” Edmund Burke published A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful in 1757. Burke’s book reflected on the aesthetics of art, and how there was an “irrational” fascination with pain and death, along with beauty and life. The themes of the hideous and beautiful are elements of the “sublime.” It is this idea of morbidity that became popular with Romantics and has its beginnings during the Bourbon Restoration. Indeed, historian Alice Killen states that real and paranormal horrors, such as murder, suicides, ghosts, and demons, became popular in literature due to the changing psychological climate in France after the Revolution. An example of the entertainment value of horror can be seen in the fantastagorie shows that Parisians would view. These magic-lantern shows were intended to scare the audience with lights, sounds, and moving figures portraying apparitions and cadavers.

Géricault admired poets such as Byron, Miller, and Tasso. Near the end of his life, he was in need of money and decided to illustrate poems and works by Romantic poets and writers for publishers. However, besides his 1822-1823 oil sketches from Byronic works, such as Mazeppa (Figure D), the artist was not inspired to paint from literature. The fact that Géricault did not want to choose topics from literature identified him as an original thinker. While there are hints in the Raft to Dante, most of his works show that he was much more interested in modern events that were happening. Unlike the work of his contemporaries, because he painted from real-life, his works contain the realism that many other paintings lacked.

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21 Adams, Laurie Schneider. A History of Western Art Revised, 367.
23 Adams, Laurie Schneider. A History of Western Art Revised, 394-395.
24 Ibid, 405.
27 Ibid, 611.
30 Ibid, 259.
around him constantly shifted and changed toward a seemingly daunting future, the artist would be influenced by the pessimistic atmosphere.

Géricault was definitely interested in macabre subjects, if not completely charmed by them. During the years of 1815-1816, the artist was distressed and guilty about his furtive, passionate love affair with Alexandrine-Modeste Caruel, his young aunt that was married to Géricault’s uncle, Jean-Baptiste Caruel.31

Caruel had done much for Géricault. While the artist had a father, Georges-Nicolas Géricault, the two were not close. Georges-Nicolas did not wish for his son to be a painter. So after Géricault left home at seventeen, he stayed with his uncle. Caruel allowed Georges-Nicolas to believe that Géricault was working at the uncle’s firm.32 After doing so much for his nephew, in return the artist was in love with Camel’s wife. This pain was too much to bear.

It was most likely because of his need to escape that Géricault decided to leave for Italy. There, he studied mostly Michelangelo, which caused his style evolved. According to Eitner, he began using more chiaroscuro, defined as the interplay of shadow and light. The artist was also interested in the sculptural quality in human forms.33 Even though his trip was enlightening, he was still troubled and sad. There are letters that Géricault wrote to his friend Dedreux-Dorcy where the artist frequently expressed his disheartened moods.34 What exactly created these moods id not known, but it could be attributed to the guilty affair that he left in France, or perhaps the doubt he felt about his own talent after seeing the masters in Italy.

During 1815, something else may have affected Géricault’s disposition, as well. In his home country, the Second White Terror began. After the Hundred Days, King Louis XVIII was restored on the throne. In Marseilles, there was an extensive termination of anyone attached to or loyal to Napoleon. A famous example of this system of elimination is seen in the case of Maréchal Ney, a Bonapartist, was judged and then secretly shot. The White Terror consequently put the Bourbons in a bad light for many French citizens and must have affected the out-of-country artist when a few of his relatives were murdered.35 His stance on politics began to lean toward the old empire, as a result.

When Géricault returned from Italy in 1817, there was a period of great personal crises. After being away from his lover for so long, Alexandrine and he continued their affair until she became pregnant with his child. Within months his uncle would be aware of the betrayal and Géricault would have to endure the consequences. In order to deal with this, he became more interested in painting than normal, paid further attention to the news, and was more willing to become influenced by his friends. Being involved in other peoples’ lives was better than being entangled in his own. Géricault lived in “La Nouvelle Athènes” where his neighbors were creative individuals, such as actors and writers. They lived on one side and on the other side resided Napoleonic veterans, including Colonel Louis Bro. He spent much time in the studio of a popular French artist at the time, and next-door neighbor, Horace Vernet. Being friends, Vernet influenced Géricault with his outspokenness against the Bourbons and his interest in modern subjects.36 As he tried to paint something that would make him renowned, Eitner states that Géricault had started to change his thought-process:

31 Ibid, 75.
33 Ibid, 106.
34 Ibid, 134.
He understood that in his too-exclusive concern with formal expression he had neglected an important resource...The true alternative to the falsity and boredom of official history painting was not the elimination or the neutralization of subject-matter, but the use of more vital subjects, taken directly from contemporary life and capable of touching the viewer’s nerve.  

He felt that his talent could be used and applied to modern subjects and things that would have struck his audience emotionally. Current events would be his inspiration. These new subjects would be taken and, using what he learned from the old masters in Italy, painted in such a grand and personal way that they would impress those who saw them.

**The Power of Emotion**

As he continued to work in Vernet’s studio, Géricault began to teach himself how to create lithographs. Impressive considering that he was new to the medium, most of his print work dealt with the Napoleonic veterans who were now poor and desolate, living on half-pay. Once again, he was influenced by the people and subjects around him that were motivating. To reiterate, though, the artist was still not political, he was simply being sympathetic to the unfortunate. While his friends were Bonapartists, he was more liberal. Géricault’s works never truly set out to voice an opinion against or for the royal government. The topics he chose to depict created emotions within himself that he may have felt would have the same effect on the audience.

While the artist now had the idea of choosing contemporary subjects, he was not sure of what his next project would be. Even though he had heard of the *Medusa*, there were other subjects that interested him. This other subject provides a glimpse into Géricault’s personal interests, and how it eventually led him to choose the shipwreck.

In 1818, at the same time he was starting sketches for the *Raft*, he was also contemplating whether to work on the scandalous murder of a former official, Fauldès, in the South of France. The magistrate had been dragged out of his house, murdered, and then dumped in a river by thieves. Géricault had been hoping to create a “heroic” piece from the newspaper accounts. However, Eitner tells of how someone had shown Géricault a print of the murder that was superior to his own lithographs and he decided not to go through with a whole painting devoted to Fauldès. It would have also been difficult to create emotion from the French audience, as the event dealt with petty robbers and a gruesome murder. While this sensational murder was appropriate for newspapers, it perhaps would not have gotten praise from art critics.

Géricault’s lithographs give an example of his new realism. There was more humanity in his works, instead of making the figures bland and stoic. Like the *Wounded Cuirassier*, his lithographs depicted Fauldès and the veterans with pity. Emotion, and the power it held, was to aid the artist’s focus.

When he felt intensely for the subject, it helped center his vision. An example of this is when he and Colonel Bro found his friend General Letellier in bed after committing suicide. General Letellier had just lost his beloved wife and died wearing her scarf over his head. Géricault quickly drew the General in his state (Figure E). The sketch is very realistic; not a hint

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37 Ibid, 148.
38 Ibid, 154.
39 Ibid, 156.
of exaggeration. Death was powerful in itself, and to add anything extra to the scene would have taken away from the beauty of deceased.

This incident serves as another example of Géricault’s Romantic qualities. He was moved by this morbid subject. The idea of suicide was probably on his mind at the time, as well. During the time he had found the deceased General, his love affair was about to be revealed. In the summer of 1818 Alexandrine-Modeste was a month away from having their child, and the affair would be exposed. To avoid the shame and scandal must have been desirable. Even though this personal connection prompted his necessity to draw this sketch, the idea of suicide was, in fact, popular in Paris at the time.

Before and after Géricault’s lifetime, suicide accounted for two-thirds of deaths in Paris. Most were poor Parisians who were stuck in their undesirable social situation. When a person did not have enough money to live properly, he or she just did not wish to live at all. The sketch of the general, while it is specifically about one man’s hopelessness, was also a representation of other Parisians’ dejection.

With Letellier’s death fresh in his mind, Géricault had already decided to further his project of the Raft. While he had decided that the Méduse would be the subject, he now had to choose a specific point on the raft to depict. As stated above, Géricault had contacted the raft’s carpenter and had a scale model built. In addition to that, he also started to collect documents about the raft in order to get more data to stimulate his vision. From early sketches and designs,

41 Eitner, Lorenz. Géricault, 22.
44 Eitner, Lorenz. Géricault: His Life and Work, 165.
he was interested in about five incidences according to the survivors: the mutiny, the cannibalism that took place, the rescue of the raft, the sighting of the Argus, and the hailing of the Argus. The order in which the artist drew his scenes was fairly straightforward. The surviving first drafts are on simple figures, and then he would develop on the character or objects further. Through this process, historians were able to tell that the painter first was mostly interested in the scenes of the mutiny, rescue, and cannibalism the most in the beginning, and later decided he would focus on the sighting and hailing of the raft. These preliminary drawings show how Géricault was fascinated with the more gory details from the accounts of Corréard and Savigny. While the rescue of the shipwrecked sailors was a topic that the artist did not depict often, he concentrated at first on the mutiny and the cannibalism that took place.45

He had quite a few sketches and pen illustrations on the mutiny. Here, the scenes were intense. In one pen sketch, there are figures twisting around each other in a struggle to the death (Figure F). Some are desperately holding onto the raft to avoid drowning in the harsh sea. There is a figure of a man holding onto a woman and a small child, presumably his wife and son. In a black chalk, wash, and gouache picture, it is a similar scene except the figures are larger and less of the sea is shown, perhaps in a way to highlight the conflict (Figure G).46 A change was made to the man holding his family, though. Now the man is only holding one person, saving him either by rescuing him out of the sea or from going into the sea.

Even though there is only one saved drawing that depicts anthropophagy, it is a finished work of black chalk, wash, and gouache. As it has been stated above, the more developed the work, the greater the probability that Géricault had been progressing to that point. Once again, Géricault depicts a topic that may not have sat well with the audience, as cannibalism is rarely

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depicted in Western art. From the *Cannibalism on the Raft* piece, it can again be seen that the sensationalism of the event interested the artist greatly (Figure H).

Through all the preliminary sketches of the mutiny and cannibalism, the same theme of an older man, the “Father” figure mentioned, kept constant. Another aspect that was constant in the beginning was the arrangement of the figures. The events, such as the mutiny, the rescue, and the cannibalism, were all displayed as if the raft were a stage. As he further experimented on the composition, Géricault had the idea of moving the raft closer to the foreground and having the figures leaning toward a focal point, in order for the viewer to feel as if they were another castaway on the raft. This was first used in the hailing of the *Argus* drawings. After these sketches, the painter felt he had found his subject. The hailing of the ship invokes anxiety, hope, and disappointment. Once he had decided on his subject, he began to carefully decide what figures and aspects would be in the final painting. There are many pages that Géricault sketched only certain characters and features that would eventually be integrated into the *Raft*. One of the main figures, and the focus of the essay, was the man holding the body of a younger man.

This theme of the “Father Mourning his Dead Son” was a basis for much of the painting, and was the foundation from which the viewer starts and follows through the piece. This figure, perhaps out of all the figures in the composition had, perhaps, the most personal connection to Géricault. As a man who had been separated from his lover, his son, and a betrayer of the uncle whom had raised him, the artist may have thought the father mourning his son was indicative of his situation. The thought of a man losing his son and the guilt and despair he felt may have been what the artist wished his uncle to feel. This idea comes from the fact that at the end of 1818, Géricault had just prepared a studio where he could concentrate on his project. At the same time, Alexandrine-Modeste had recently given birth to her nephew’s child. Géricault’s uncle had been incensed and sent her away while the child, Georges-Hyppolite was registered as an orphan. The painting would be his way of escaping the scandal and guilt.

When he had finally decided to begin the final composition, Géricault shaved his hair in order to prevent the temptation of leaving. As a man so particular about his appearance, the cutting of his hair was intense. He stayed secluded in the studio and slept in a room attached to the building. A few friends would come to visit, and sometimes pose for him. Some famous painters who posed include Eugène Delacroix, Robert-Fleury, and Steuben. He even made sure two figures in the painting were likenesses of Corréard and Savigny. The figures, it shall be seen, were given much thought and attention.

**Interest in the Macabre**

Géricault favored black chalk, crayons, pens, and pencils when he started the sketches. Quite a few drawings focused on the light and shadows the figures or objects would cast. While this exercise of sketching before embarking on a huge painting was normal, his other preparatory studies were more bizarre. To better understand the feeling and emotion the men on the raft must have felt, Géricault began to paint studies of limbs, severed heads, and terminally-ill patients from the Hôpital Beaujon. Eitner believes he did this to keep himself emotionally charged while being isolated in his workspace (Figure I and Figure J). As he studied how the body decayed, he

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48 Ibid, 168.
49 Ibid, 169.
50 Ibid, 175.
51 Ibid, 175, 99
could possibly have felt as if he were there on the ship. This allowed the final product of the Raft to have a quality of authenticity in its figures. It is important to note that these are fully finished paintings of the limbs and heads, as opposed to just rough sketches, like the other scenes in the Raft. These morbid still-lifes were singular and kept his attention for a while during the Raft’s preparation.

Géricault was able to get these body parts from the local hospitals and morgues. He kept the bodies until the stench was too much. When certain friends visited, they would be upset that they had to model near such corpses. While the artist’s behavior may seem very odd, remember that there was a great fascination with death and horror, in general, with Parisians, as stated above. In addition to viewing light shows meant to frighten, Parisians had been frequenting morgues since the late eighteenth century.

The beginning of public display of dead bodies started in the basse-geôle of prisons. Basse-geôle was a place where people were brought in to identify the bodies of their missing family members. Eventually, the basse-geôle was known as “the morgue”. In 1718, the word “morgue” was added to the dictionary of the Académie with its definition being, “a place at the Châtelet [prison] where dead bodies that have been found are open to the public view, in order that they be recognized.” Already, the viewing of the dead was a normal part of French culture. A morgue was not just a place where the dead were kept, but it was also a place for the dead to be publically observed.

While it was possible to see the bodies in the prison, the area where the bodies were kept was not ideal for recognizing people. The lighting was poor and individuals had to view corpses through bars. When the main prison in Paris, the Châtelet, was destroyed in 1804, the morgue moved to a building made specifically for the public presentation of bodies. The new building was reminiscent of a Greek temple in the Marché-Neuf, which was a popular location in the heart of Paris. As Schwartz writes, “Other European cities also had their morgues, but only in Paris were corpses displayed behind a large glass window through which the public might freely pass.” As this quote implies, there was something about French society that made morbidity almost conventional. The motive of moving the morgue to the Marché-Neuf was to help police identify bodies. However, Parisians found the morgue to be a free place to go where corpses were presented in a grand display. While death in itself is a natural part of life, the Parisian society transformed death into a form of entertainment.

Vanessa Schwartz states that there is a scholarly idea that the revolutionary crowd and the Parisian crowd were closely related, since Paris was wrought with numerous upheavals in government. Linked to both the revolutionary crowd and the Parisian crowd, Géricault represented both parts of French society. With family fortune keeping him financially stable, and having political friends such as Bro and Vemet, the painter was both a part of high society, as well as the revolutionary crowd. By this account, his works are even more indicative of French
society. Going back to the figure of the “Father,” his representation of death and cannibalism show how French culture was interested in terror and the “sublime”.

The “Father” and His Implications

In the *Raft*, the “Father” was depicted as an older man who looks away from the ship. He wore a red head cloth as he held a youth, the “Son”, in one hand, while resting his head on the other hand. Out of the nineteen figures, and out of the fourteen living figures, the “Father” was the only one completely unaffected by the faint ship. Even though one man was holding his hair out of frustration and another man was looking away in or to call attention to the *Argus*, it was the “Father” that does not react in any way to the possible salvation. Géricault placed this older man in the foreground of the painting. The “Father” is the first image to strike the observer. This figure could be understood in several ways during that time period.

The “Father” in Géricault’s has been linked to Dante Alighieri’s portrayal of Count Ugolino from the *Inferno*. Count Ugolino was a traitor to his nephew, Nino de’ Visconti, a leader of a political group in Pisa. He worked alongside the Archbishop Ruggieri. However, Ugolino was then betrayed by the Archbishop. The Pisans captured the Count and his four sons and shut them up in a tower. They were left to starve and Ugolino was infamous for eating his dead children. Cannibalism in the *Inferno* is “an allegory of men preying upon one another in an unjust society.”

In the *Raft*, the men on the ship are portrayed as wronged men who are trying to save themselves. However, in order for them to have lived for so long on the raft, they had to prey upon the other castaways and be the most ruthless and tough. They survived mutiny, literally preyed upon the bodies of the weak, and threw overboard those who were sick so as to preserve rations. The *Inferno* uses cannibalism as an allegory of men using each other, and so does Géricault. The “Father” that may represent Ugolino, points to the cannibalism and the unjust society that placed those men on the raft. The royal government allowed de Chaumareys to become a captain solely because of his birth. There was no need to test his merit in the flawed royalist government. If there was a competent captain behind the *Méduse*, the chances of so many people dying would have gone down exponentially.

The “Father” even wears a military medal on his chest, the Legion of Honor. The Legion of Honor was an order of merit for military and civilians who were examples of liberty and equality created by Napoleon. In order for him to have earned the medal, the “Father” either had spent 20 years doing peacetime service or was an excellent war hero. This old man has served under Napoleon and now must suffer under the unjust royalist government. As Boime suggests, the leaders of the Restoration purposefully intended to have the old supporters of the emperor murdered. Murdered or, as seen in the “Father”, mentally incapacitated. It could be implied that he was able to survive for so long because he had the Bonapartist mentality, or he was an upstanding citizen that was being punished by the prejudiced Restoration leaders. Considering the White Terror, this is not so remarkable.

While there was no actual depiction of a man eating another, unlike the *Cannibalism* piece, there are corpses strewn over the boards, and the “Son” that is held by the “Father”

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60 Boime, Albert. *Art in an Age of Counterrevolution, 1815-1848*, 143.
62 Boime, Albert. *Art in an Age of Counterrevolution, 1815-1848*, 143.
appears to have stumps at the end of his legs. While the older man holds the younger man who is missing limbs, it also recalls the cannibalistic Count. In Dante’s epic poem, Ugolino feels great remorse and horror at his own actions. The Father’s countenance is also reminiscent of this idea. He is one of two people in the Raft that does not look toward the Argus. However, he was alone in his grief for another.

Even though there is no factual proof that the painter was thinking about his personal issues when creating the “Father,” bearing in mind his tendency of using currents events as inspiration, he may have had his uncle in mind when creating the “Father”. As stated before, it was almost an unconscious idea through all the preparatory sketches to keep the theme of a father holding his children. At first it started with a man holding his whole family in the Mutiny, and then to just a man holding his son. Perhaps Géricault identified with the idea of going mad with guilt. However, this time he hoped his uncle, who had been supportive of his nephew’s artistry only to be betrayed, would still be mournful if Géricault died. Grief and sadness were large elements in their connection. There is a link between Ugolino and Géricault’s paternal relationships.

Indeed, the “Father” also calls attention to the madness that certain castaways felt before they committed suicide on the real raft. One would have to be slightly mad at any rate to resort to anthropophagy. In the painting, the older man’s face was mostly covered in shadow, his head supported by his hand. He looks away from the others toward the sea in a blank stare. The position the “Father” poses is the same pose as the melancholic madman. Also, the “Father” figure hides his hands slightly when covered by his hair. All these characteristics point toward the traditional iconography that implies insanity.63 What was the cause of his madness? His reason was lost when he could not face the injustice that happened to him and his “Son.” Like Ugolino, this “Father” will forever be punished by his guilt. French society was aware of Dante’s Ugolino and many who viewed Géricault’s painting may have seen the allusion to the Count. The critics may have noticed the hint at madness, as well. There was a trend involving the signs of madness.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, there was an important book written by John Caspar Lavater that dealt with the physiognomy of humans.64 Lavater’s book was translated into French and was immensely popular, especially with its numerous illustrations. This novel allowed many artists to see the signs of insanity in a person, and used these signs in their works. As Gilman states, “It was the artists who themselves transmuted this tradition into new manners of seeing insanity as well as being influenced by it.” 65 While Géricault was using a combination of melancholy and madness on the figure, other artists in France were experimenting with physiognomy, likewise.

The way Géricault depicted the madman, or the “Father”, was more empathetic and portrait-like, as opposed to painting the madman using stereotypes. As stated above, he had sketched patients in the local hospitals. While this is unusual, he was not the only person to do this. There was a Swiss artist who made a sketchbook of patients of a Zurich asylum during Géricault’s time.66 So he was not alone in his thoughts of treating the mentally-ill as people, rather than all of them being raving lunatics. The “Father” had grown crazy due to the harsh

64 Ibid, 62.
65 Ibid, 131.
66 Ibid, 69.
conditions he was put through, not because he was evil or possessed. Similar to General Letellier
and the poor, forgotten Napoleonic soldiers, life was severe.
Gilman writes, “The concept of a portrait of a single insane individual embodies the new
status of the insane as citizens within the state, not outcasts from it.”67 This quote describes
Géricault’s project of painting portraits of patients in an asylum for his friend, Georget. While
this was one year after the exhibition of the Raft, the artist’s sympathies toward the oppressed
were most likely unchanged from the year before. After being friends with forgotten soldiers and
oppressed Bonapartists, for one to think he had compassion for the burdened and stereotyped
mentally-ill is not implausible. He was one of the initiators of a new way of depicting asylum
patients as humans in French art.

**Salon Reviews**

The fact that people were interested in the states of insanity again points to the increased
attractiveness of the “sublime” and the beginning of fashionable Romanticism. As Delacroix
looked upon the many sketches for the Raft, he was impressed at how “truly sublime” they were
and how these pieces, “demonstrated the power of art to transfigure what was odious and
monstrous in nature.”68 While certain subjects may have been dreadful, at the same time they
were compelling.

This new way of enticing the viewer was so bold that critics were divided in their reviews
of the Raft. However, in order to further discuss the critics’ reactions, the Romantic qualities of
the painting should be mentioned. In this way, critics’ disapproval or praise can be understood
better after explaining the innovation of the artwork.

One of the key properties in Romantic art is the importance of Nature. The men in the
Raft were faced with the immense power of the seas; and also faced with human nature. Nature
affects humans’ behavior, and so these men were forced to act in ways never thought possible.
Since the Argus was depicted with the size of a speck, the sea appears even more expansive, and
the possibility of the ship rescuing the castaways just as miniscule. If the viewer was concerned
for these hailing men, when he or she stepped in front of the impressive painting, the observer
may have felt like one of the survivors. The chances of the faraway ship seeing the raft would
have been slim and while hope was there, so was disappointment.

Another Romantic idea was the nostalgia for the past. As Géricault had visited Italy, and
studied Michelangelo, Raphael, and other great Italian painters, his figures in the Raft, recall
these influences. As the artist painted the large figures, they have the build of sculptures. Toned
and brawny, these are the survivors; quite different compared to the way the actual starved and
dirty castaways looked when they were saved. The colors and shadows highlight the figures even
more so. The motions of their actions were emphasized by the odd studio-like lighting.69 As the
main figure at the top of the pyramid of sailors attempts to hail the speck, all the bodies are
twisting and directed toward the point in the horizon. These bodies were most likely inspired by
Michelangelo’s use of gigantism, or the increase in body proportions, as the figures are so large
and muscular. There was also an influence of Peter Paul Rubens’ use of multiple forms working
together.70 Using these masters’ works as inspiration, the Romantic nostalgia for antiquity was
achieved after recalling the Renaissance and Baroque art periods.

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67 Ibid, 90.
69 Ibid, 189.
70 Ibid, 192.
With a sense of adventure and danger, *The Raft of the Medusa* was a grand example of Romanticism. After eighteen months of constant work, the piece was finished. The public reaction to the painting was quite curious. The Salon of 1819 was strikingly similar to the Salon of 1814; both years observed the return of the monarchy. In charge of the biggest exhibition since the Bonaparte ruled were both the director of the Royal Museum, Comte de Forbin, and the secretary-general of the Musée du Louvre, Vicomte de Sennones. They wanted the theme of the 1819’s exhibition to focus on the triumphs of the royal government. It is interesting that, while he was supportive of the monarchy, Forbin was actually friends with Vernet and the artist’s group. As artists began to enter their works, many paintings dealing with mythology or classical themes were rejected. This was evidence that there was censorship against most subject matter that could allude to Napoleon or the empire. However, Géricault’s piece was still accepted even though it was clearly a piece about the *Méduse* scandal. Boime believes that there had to be a “token” liberal picture allowed in the Salon. Another possible reason for why the *Raft* was admitted may be that since Géricault was part of Vernet’s circle, Forbin must have been acquainted with Géricault. This association may have opened a spot in an otherwise exclusive exhibition.

In either case, those in charge knew that the *Raft* made some sort of statement, and wished to suppress it slightly. The original title, *The Raft of the Medusa*, was listed in the Salon Catalogue as “Scene of Shipwreck”. Almost everyone knew what particular shipwreck it depicted. The response to the painting varied between artistic oppositions and political oppositions.

There were some reviewers, like Landon writing in *Annales du Musée*, who did not appreciate the painting because the subject matter was not appropriate for a canvas that large. Landon was upset that Géricault had chosen such a dreadful scene to depict and he believed no one would want to buy the painting. Why would anyone buy a work that constantly reminded the viewer of despair and horror? This would be an especially important question considering the royal funding. Landon believed that, “history painting was designed to perpetuate the memory of elevating events that were of general interest (such as a coronation) or emotions whose description would be of general benefit (patriotism or piety).” To Landon, there was no point in painting such a sad piece that did not “elevate” the viewer. On the contrary, the shipwreck was startling news and was probably of great interest to the audience. Emotions run deep through the painting, and while there were certain pressing issues addresses, there was also a sense of hope and the strength of humankind to survive. Compositively, some critics did not think the somber tones were agreeable; the “blackness” was too much. However, this “blackness” may have been due to the placement of the *Raft*. Géricault made the mistake of hanging the painting high above one of the leading doors into the Salon; the already somber colors appeared to darken the higher it rose. Other reviewers thought that the figures were arranged in an “obviously pyramidal” fashion, or that the work had “lack of a ‘centre.’” Critics disagreed with each other, of course.

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71 Ibid, 185.
72 Boime, Albert. *Art in an Age of Counterrevolution, 1815-1848*, 145.
75 Ibid, 188.
76 Ibid, 189.
Those who did enjoy the so-called “pyramidal” structure and the center of the Raft, which the other reviewers apparently overlooked, praised Géricault’s composition. They found the figures compelling and moving. The Comte O’Mahony was a writer for the Conservateur and wrote how the changing of the title of the painting in the Salon catalogue did not hide the actual event depicted. He commended Géricault’s brash brushstrokes and the vigor it expressed. The overall color of the piece was appropriate for the subject matter. Overall, O’Mahony said of the painting “What a hideous spectacle but what beautiful picture.”

The scene was powerful without the extra layer of political theories because the vision itself spoke of all the horrors in life. This idea fascinated many of the general audience.

For the reviews that focused on the political implications, there were two sides: royalists and the left-wing liberals. Some royalists were upset that the men in the painting had nothing to denote class or nationality. Without such indicators, they were unable to understand the supposed message of the piece. Most royalist reviewers did not sympathize with the victims of the shipwreck, and instead believed Géricault failed to stir up pity using the images of agony. These wounded men were being used as “misguided attempt on the part of ‘an obscure circle of a despised party’ to gain the benevolent attention of the throne and of legitimism”. Instead of seeing the men on the raft as victims, he saw them as objects used to gain the acceptance of the royalist opinion. Géricault painted in order to stir emotions within the audience, but the royalist side thought it was a device to gain support for the opposition.

The opposition, on the other hand, was supportive of the artist’s subject matter and the political issues it raised. Henri de Latouche was appalled by the change in title and accused the royal jury for hiding the incident for which the government was responsible. De Latouche was, unlike the royalist critic, compassionate toward the castaways. Another writer, this one for Le Constitutionnel, was greatly affected by the Raft and formed a parallel between the castaways and Napoleonic veterans. Seeing the Legion of Honor on the “Father’s” chest, the critic was grateful of the link between the castaways and the soldiers. It is interesting to note that some of the royalist critics missed the Legion of Honor. Both groups were forgotten and abandoned, left to survive with nothing. However, they were still beautiful and strong throughout their situations.

The general public was “disturbed and fascinated” by the Raft. In fact, as Étienne Delécluze, an art critic, recalled the Salon of 1819 years later, he stated that the Raft had “extraordinary success” as it stirred up many reactions. Compositionally, it was a break from the Neo-Classical school of Jacques-Louis David. It was bold and emotional. These men were fighting to survive, and the viewer was almost forced to feel the same. The horrors of the Raft were enticing to the society that was used to visiting morgues and frightening shows. Now they could feel as if they were a part of a tragedy as they stood at the base of the outspread canvas.

Conclusion

Géricault was seriously injured in a horseback-riding accident that left him weak and feeble. He never fully recovered and passed away the twenty-sixth of January, 1824. He was thirty-two and four months old. Even though he died so young, Géricault left an enormous mark on Romantic art. Interested in current events, his works constantly dealt with modern topics.

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77 Boime, Albert. *Art in an Age of Counterrevolution, 1815-1848*, 147.
81 Eitner, Lorenz. *Géricault: His Life and Work*, 188.
82 Ibid, 191.
83 Ibid, 279.
and issues. From his first painting in the Salon of 1812, the Charging Chasseur, where he depicted how society viewed Napoleon and his armies as valiant and unstoppable, to the Wounded Cuirassier in the Salon of 1816 where he expressed the uncertainty of the people to the new government, Géricault was not afraid to paint what he desired. While he was from a wealthy class, this did not hinder his ability to feel compassion for the veterans, painters, and writers. As he grew up in constantly shifting political times, his politics were also slightly affected, mostly through the influence of his friends.

As he changed, so did society with him. French individuals must have constantly worried about what would happen to their country next. Would the emperor come again or would the monarchy finally be stable? Their future was unclear, and so they attempted to entertain themselves by transforming death into a form of entertainment, rather than worry about the future. While the Romantic Movement had not yet become popular in France, peoples’ tastes were on the verge of change. They were already fascinated with the beauty of the “sublime.”

Géricault was interested in the beauty of the horrible. His morbid still-lifes were rendered with care and not exaggerated with drama. After seeing and sketching the suicide of his friend, he knew the power of emotion would translate beautifully into art. Combined with his renewed love of modern subjects, his final Salon entry in 1819 was to be his masterpiece. Once he heard the story of the castaways of La Méduse, abandoned by their royalist captain, and the horrors they went through, the painter knew what the topic would be for his greatest work. The Raft of the Medusa was an intimidating piece to stand before. The audience was struck with not only the size, the surprising light, and the color, but the realistic men who were portrayed. These men were united in pain, hope, and uncertainty.

The “Father” was perhaps one of the most disturbing characters as he was beyond hope. Instead of rejoicing at the sight of rescue, he was lost in his own mind. Whether by madness or grief or both, he was unable to be rescued. Recalling Count Ugolino, he represents the cannibalism and murder that occurred during the real shipwreck. The “Father” had been driven to eat his own kind, perhaps his own kin, identical to Ugolino. Whether Géricault intended it or not, the “Father” could also represent the type of struggle to survive in France at the time.

As the Hundred Days and White Terror showed, many persons would perish before there was a glimpse or sighting of peace. As the suicide rates were always high, many Parisians were growing despondent and may have wished for an end to the suffering. When the French audience gazed upon the Raft, they may have understood a touch of what the castaways felt. If the viewer was not sympathetic to the raw emotion in the painting, then he or she would at least notice how different the work was compared to past exhibition pieces. Géricault was a Romantic artist who was able to have his daring works presented before those who would debate and contemplate on the compositions and subjects. Influenced and influencing, The Raft of the Medusa represents emotion, ambition, and French society.
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