

The Raft of the Medusa: The Political Shipwreck of France?

17th June 2016 will mark the bicentennial of a catastrophe at sea: the shipwreck of The Medusa. Immortalised by a daring French Romantic painter Theodore Géricault in 1816, the masterpiece of neo-Baroque emotion encapsulates not just an historical moment, but a general air of malaise. As such, it caused a *furore* at the Salon of 1819, as the attended throng was all too aware of the government error which led to the shipwreck itself.

The work pertains to Delacroix's doctrine that "Romanticism should be a defence of the ugly." In that sense, Géricault's work is the antithesis of Neoclassicism and the School of Jacques-Louis David.

The artistic climate of what Kenneth Clark coined *The Romantic Rebellion*, explored such themes as restlessness, the worship of ungovernable forces and man against nature. In the arts, Delacroix, Gros and Géricault were the three musketeers who led that rebellion in France during the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Theodore Géricault (1791-1824) was born in Rouen into a wealthy family, which crucially meant that he could be independent artistically, as he wasn't dependent upon prescriptive commissions. His heroes were Scott and Byron. Géricault has been hailed as the first great modern painter and the leader of Romanticism in the arts. Yet just three paintings were shown publicly in his lifetime, and he sold none. His aim remained, however, "to shine, to illuminate, to astonish the world."

In contrast to the retrospective outlook of Neoclassicism, "Géricault was consistently the chronicler of those modern events that struck his own sympathies." (Vaughan). Controversially, "Gericault was to persist in treating the unheroic with all the gravity and dimensions previously reserved for history painting." Thus, he struggled to be accepted by the then stringent Salon jury.

In 1817, Géricault had an incestuous affair with his aunt; the wife of his maternal uncle. Inevitably this caused a family scandal, resulting in his voluntary exile to Rome. Subsequently, 1818 saw the birth of his illegitimate son, Hippolyte. Both events are to have a bearing later on.

The Raft of Medusa 1819

In 1816, Géricault turned to a contemporary event, stating defiantly: “We do not need to look back to the riches of the past, our own times are rich enough.” The theme of disasters at sea was topical at the time, permeating the *oeuvres* of J.M.W Turner and C.D Friedrich, among others.

The Raft was a mammoth 18 month project; 8 of which were spent painting.

In June 1814, émigrés on the French Frigate Medusa were travelling to the colony of Senegal, which England had recently given back to France. On board was the Governor of Senegal, Julien-Désiré Schmaltz.

On the 2nd July 1816, the ship ran aground when it hit a reef. A makeshift raft was erected, measuring 20m x 7m.

Bureaucratic incompetence

The Captain was a returned Royalist émigré who hadn't commanded a ship for 25 years, having gained his position through Royal Bourbon favouritism, thus reflecting the corruptness of the French government at the time. The picture is considered an anti-monarchist statement: the political shipwreck of France, with rudderless politicians on course for national catastrophe.

Allegorically it represents France drifting into the darkness of political conservatism; the Chiaroscuro lighting oscillates between hope and despair. A French soldier's uniform lies abandoned on the Raft as a metaphor for the political and military collapse in France at the time. This 'statement picture' extinguishes the Age of Enlightenment (Age of Reason) and optimism. In the wake of the post-Napoleonic dream, stragglers rally to form a pyramid of hope on the makeshift vessel, reaching out for the unattainable.

The raft contained 150 people, and drifted for 13 days. Only 15 made it to shore and 5 more died on reaching Senegal.

Preparation

Géricault shaved off his hair so that he couldn't go out in public and was thus confined to his *atelier*; a space he'd hired to accommodate the massive 7 x 5m canvas (378 ft squared). Géricault made studies of amputee victims in the Beaujon Hospital and of the severed heads of criminals executed by guillotine in a local morgue. One head remained in his studio for 15 days so the artist could observe the various stages of putrefaction in real time. He allegedly dragged dead bodies into his studio only to be observed doing so on one occasion by his landlady. Shades of Leonardo and Michelangelo, no less.

Géricault studied the waves at Le Havre and had a replica raft set on the water so that he could observe it respond to the elements. He even had a smaller model raft made by the original carpenter (Joseph) upon which he arranged wax models so as to experiment with different figurative groupings. Like a magistrate investigating a court case, Géricault interviewed Dr. Correard & the surgeon Savigny (to the right of the mast). They were fined and served a brief prison sentence for petitioning. His friend and fellow painter Eugene Delacroix posed for him.

Working Methods

According to Géricault's studio assistant, Monfort, the artist worked non-stop and in silence, from sunrise through to sunset. Monfort was instructed to wear carpet slippers so as to not break his master's concentration.

The painter used fast drying oils; complete sections were done quickly almost à la fresco. Géricault also used quantities of bitumen, which, with time, tends to darken and the surface begins to bubble. As such, it has subsequently practically become a monochrome: *"Is it really so dark?"* (Géricault). Furthermore, the giant canvas has become so damaged through the unavoidable ravishes of time, it will never leave the Louvre again.

Artistic Licence

The raft in Géricault's final piece represents a floating coffin of five corpses and fifteen survivors. However, earlier on Day 7, thirteen dying were thrown off the raft, begging the question, have some been placed back on board? This relates to a 'theme within a theme' which the artist explored, in terms of The Last Judgement process of selection on board the raft, in turn relating back to his exile to Rome and former visit to the Sistine Chapel.

The artist adopts a tempestuous climate in the painting, replete with crashing waves, elegiac sky and a mast bowing with the pressures of the prevailing winds. Contemporary weather reports, however, suggest a rather different climatic scenario; one of apparent calm, no less, such is the Romanticist's tendency to worship the ungovernable forces of nature, however contrived they might be. One must observe also, the fact that Géricault's bodies are very powerfully built and muscular; not, arguably the emaciated forms of those who had drifted into the arena of the unwell for 13 days, having resorted to drinking their own urine and cannibalism. The corporeal paradigms are surely Michelangelo's figures in the Fall of the Damned where Charon beats the condemned with a paddle.

Influences

One could cite a myriad of influences on Géricault's masterpiece, yet Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel figures, seen on Géricault's exile to Rome, is perhaps the most commonly referenced source, along with the Medician Chapel tomb sculptures in the church of San Lorenzo by the same artist. Yet also Michelangelo's Dying Slave (now in the Louvre), Caravaggio's chiaroscuro, the Baroque pyramidal compositional *leitmotif*, Giambologna's Rape of the Sabines in Loggia dei Lanzi of the Piazza della Signoria, Florence, even the Parthenon frieze and the Bayeux Tapestry are all potential points of reference!

Themes

Whilst the Raft is clearly a secular work, there are undoubted non-secular analogies one can draw from the scene: the Last Judgement, for example, in the debate on the raft over the saved and the damned; there is even a cross of salvation on the raft. There is, too, the obvious theme from the Old Testament, the Deluge or the Flood, the Drunkenness of Noah and also the sacrament or the communion in the eating of the flesh and the drinking of the wine. We note, on the raft itself, the bloodstained axe – perhaps one of two oblique references to the cannibalism that had ensued during the desperate times. The father cradling his son in the guise of Michelangelo's Pieta, is a reference to Count Ugolino from Dante's Inferno – the victim of conspiracy formed by the Archbishop of Pisa, and who was trapped in a Pisan tower with his sons and his grandsons whose dead bodies he ate; again a reference to the cannibalism on the raft. Through the theatrical tenebrosity of light against dark, Géricault suggests the oscillation between hope and despair. In hope the bodies form the dynamic of a musical crescendo, reaching its zenith at the apex in the negro waving a makeshift flag. The pictorial configuration is based on auditory reminiscence of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. The time of day is crepuscular to signify the dawning of a new day. The wild flailing of draperied forms at the apex of the chief pyramid was initially futile; we know for a fact that once the survivors had spotted the Argus on the horizon it disappeared for at least four hours. It suggests the unattainable, and, in Géricault's case, allegorically his love for a forbidden woman or the reaching out for his illegitimate son, Hippolyte. As a comment on slavery at the time, Géricault poignantly places a negro figure at the apex of the signaling pyramid; the African slave trade was not abolished in France until 1848.

Exhibition and Reception:

In short, the picture's exhibition was a disaster. Initially, it was felt the picture was hung too low and then the Salon officials winched it up too high, so that Géricault's figures "disappeared like little mannequins" as the artist himself put it. His intention was that for maximum empathetic effect, the viewer's perspective was on the raft itself. This was never quite realised.

Varnishing Days

At the Salon, a few days before the exhibition opened, there was time to put the finishing touches to a given work. This was known as varnishing days. Géricault noticed a gap on the lower right hand side of the canvas, whereupon, in virtuoso fashion, he decided to add a figure in there and then to strengthen the triangle. This figure was drawn from the crowd who'd gathered to inspect Géricault's controversial exposure of what was perceived to be a governmental failing. The title of the work was changed to 'A Shipwreck Scene' to make it less specific / topical, yet its impact wasn't lost on the spectators, becoming '*A work for the delight of the vultures*' (French Gazette).

The work travelled to England to the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, where it was better received due to greater artistic liberalism and the shared disdain for the School of David. It then travelled on to Dublin.

Whilst Géricault felt that the whole project was a failure, on inspecting the canvas at length, Louis XV111 famously commented: "*Monsieur Géricault, your shipwreck is certainly no disaster.*"

Perhaps unbeknownst to him, Géricault had created the Manifesto painting for Romanticism.

'This ghastly scene is perhaps the key picture of Romanticism. Death in the most dreadful manner, with human beings at the mercy of the elements; all painted with a waxen realism – nearly disgusting.' (M. Levey)