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21-02

THÉODORE GÉRICAULT

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Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa* (detail), 1819, Louvre

- This is Section 21 on Romanticism and this talk is on the French artist Théodore Géricault an early French Romantic artist who died young. Romantic art took over from Neoclassical art and focused on emotion, individualism, imagination, and the power of nature.

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Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *Portrait of an Artist in His Studio*, c. 1820, 147 × 114 cm, Louvre Museum

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *Portrait of an Artist in His Studio*, c. 1820, 147 × 114 cm, Louvre Museum

- **His career lasted just fifteen years** but he produced some of the **most original work** of the nineteenth century. For many years he was known for his major work ***The Raft of the Medusa***, for his protracted **illness** and for his **passionate and disastrous love affair** with his uncle's wife who bore his illegitimate son.
- This self-portrait conveys his **brooding intensity** and emotional depth. It captures a moment of self-reflection. He is not dressed to paint, **his palette hangs unused on the wall** below a skull and body parts. Bottom left a classical sculpture points out of the frame. The painting embodies the Romantic era's emphasis on emotion, individualism, and the exploration of inner experience.
- He was **born in Rouen**, the **son of a lawyer** and as a child was **fascinated by horses** and sketched them constantly. When he was 17 the family **moved to Paris** and **his mother died** leaving him a **substantial fortune**. With the support of his uncle and **against his father's wishes** he studied with **Carle Vernet—a celebrated painter of equestrian scenes** and battles. He fell out with his tutor over the way to depict horses. Géricault famously remarked "**One of my horses would have devoured six of his**". Following a brief stay with another artist (Pierre Guérin) he decided to train independently by visiting the Old Masters in the Louvre including **Rubens, Michelangelo, Titian, Velázquez, and Rembrandt**.

BIOGRAPHY

- **1791**: Théodore Géricault was born on September 26, 1791, in Rouen, France. The son of a lawyer and a mother from a wealthy family, young Théodore enjoyed a comfortable upbringing—although it's said he was famously restless even as a child. As a teenager, he exhibited a singular fascination with horses—the sort of child who asked for a pony and then meticulously sketched the unfortunate beast from every angle instead of riding it. This early obsession would do more than shape his subject matter; it gave his work its trademark sense of animal vitality and muscular drama.
- **1808**: By the age of 17, the Géricault family relocated to Paris. In 1808, his mother died and he inherited her fortune. With the support of his uncle and against his father's wishes he studied with Carle Vernet—a celebrated painter of equestrian scenes and battles. Vernet's studio, however, was not to be the cradle of Géricault's genius. In fact, the relationship soured rather quickly; when Vernet suggested his horses were too spirited, Théodore retorted, "One of my horses would have devoured six of yours!" The anecdote sums up both his stubborn independence and his lifelong tendency to make friends and enemies with thrilling speed. Paris at the turn of the century was writhing with the energy of Revolution and Napoleonic ambition, and Géricault absorbed both the turbulence and the possibilities of this new society.
- **1812**: The confident young artist's earliest exhibited works quickly attracted attention. He studied briefly at the conservative École des Beaux-Arts, but always with one foot out of the door, haunting the Louvre and copying Rubens and Michelangelo with feverish zeal. Inspired by the Old Masters, he imbued his subjects with the drama and muscular dynamism that would become his signature. Yet even as his techniques matured, Géricault was impatient with tradition—much preferring to shock the juries of the Paris Salon than to earn their approval. He painted The Charging Chasseur and in December received a gold medal at the Salon. The following year he painted The Wounded Cuirassier and as it conjured up the French defeats of 1813-14 it received negative reviews.
- **1816**. Having failed to win the Prix de Rome the second time he decided to go to Italy in his own. He had an affair with the young wife of his uncle. In September, the first reports of the shipwreck of the Medusa are reported. In 1817 he sketches the race of the barberi horses and in March he went to Naples to visit Paestum. He returned to Paris in September.
- **1818**. He creates lithographs on the theme of the napoleonic Wars and a

politically charged painting called The Murder of Fualdès. In February he biught a large canvas and began what was to become ***The Raft of the Medusa***. He explored various themes around the story before settling on the sighting. In August the wife of his uncle gives birth to Gericault's son and the family keep the scandal a secret. In 1819 he completed *The Raft of the Medusa*. It is the centre of attentio but receives mixed reviews because of its political sensitivity. He leaves for holiday with a friend and falls severely ill. In December Medusa revives a gold medal.

- **1820**. He leaves for England. The Medusa is displayed in the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly and received 50,000 visitors and he earns 17,000-20,000 francs. He visits Brussels to meet the exiled Jacques-Louis David. The following year Medusa is exhibited in Dublin. He is invited by the English portrait painter Thomas Lawrence to a banquet and becomes influenced by English sporting and landscape paintings. He vists the Epsom Downs Derby.
- **1822**. He suffers financial losses because of bad investments and has to paint works to make money. His illness returns after sporting accidents. He paints ten ***Portraits of Insane Patients*** for a physician acquaintance. The following year his illness returns, a tubercular infection of the spine. After several operations his condition does not improve and he plans several vast painting in a last effort. A friend sells some of his work for 13,600 francs. He makes a will leaving his estate to his father and his father passes his property on to his illegitimate son Georges-Hippolyte, aged five.
- **1824**. He dies in January and his studio content is sold for 52,000 francs. His close friend buys The Raft of the medusa and sells it to the Louvre in November.
- **Anecdote**: There's a persistent legend that Géricault, once caught in a rainstorm while sketching at a horse market, protected his drawings with the only thing he had handy—his own coat—leaving himself drenched but declaring that paper "catches a cold more easily than people." Whether apocryphal or true, it perfectly captures the intensity and eccentricity that coloured every phase of his brief but extraordinary life.
- With this portrait, you see not just a young artist but a stormy mind wrestling with ambition, romance, and doubt—a face at once classical and startlingly modern, poised at the turbulent dawn of French Romanticism. This slide launches our journey through the impassioned, sometimes reckless, but always vivid world of Théodore Géricault.

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Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *Officer of the Mounted Chasseurs of the Imperial Guard, Charging*, 1812, 349 × 266 cm, Louvre

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *Officer of the Mounted Chasseurs of the Imperial Guard, Charging*, 1812, 349 × 266 cm, Louvre

- Yet even as his technique matured, he was impatient with tradition—much **preferring to shock the juries of the Paris Salon** than to earn their approval. He painted this, *The Charging Chasseur* and in December received a **gold medal at the Salon**.
- He was still **very young, just 21**, when he produced it. It might look conventional at first sight but is actually **subtly original**. Many artists of his day depicted **horses in movement** – a difficult exercise that allowed them to demonstrate their technical skills – and since the Middle Ages there had been plenty of battle scenes and portraits of people on horseback. But this composition is entirely structured around the horse's movement, while the **officer's absent-minded, distant gaze is far from heroic**. Although the smoke-filled sky and low, threatening horizon line suggest a war scene, Géricault's work is a long way from contemporary paintings of famous battles designed to glorify the Empire." (based on the Louvre's description)

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Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *The Wounded Cuirassier Leaving the Battle*, 1814, 358 × 294 cm, Louvre

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *The Wounded Cuirassier Leaving the Battle*, 1814, 358 × 294 cm, Louvre

- The following year he painted ***The Wounded Cuirassier*** (pronounced "KWIRR-uh-seer"). Instead of glorifying heroism and victory, Géricault depicts a **lone, anonymous French cavalry soldier retreating** from a battlefield on his nervous horse. The cuirassier, an armoured cavalryman, appears **weary**, using his **sword as a makeshift crutch** while his horse's anxious stance and uneasy footing emphasise the precariousness of their situation. The muted colour palette and volatile sky further contribute to the painting's **atmosphere of sadness and despair**, reflecting the **disillusionment following France's disastrous campaign in Russia**.
- His biographer (Charles Clément) described the shift between the two military paintings, "**in 1812 success was still in the air, whilst in 1814 everyone knew they were facing defeat… Hearts were full of fear and terror**". He saw *The Wounded Cuirassier* as **a requiem for the then fading Napoleonic era**. It received a mixed reception at the 1814 Salon as **critics found** the subject matter, **a defeated soldier, less appealing** than depictions of victorious battles yet despite this it stands as a pivotal work in his artistic journey.

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Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), Head of a Horse, 1815, 65.5 × 54.5 cm, Louvre Museum

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), Head of a Horse, 1815, 65.5 × 54.5 cm, Louvre Museum

- Théodore Géricault's *Head of a White Horse* is a **notable work**, likely dating from around 1815, that exemplifies his skill in depicting animals, particularly horses. The painting, often cited for its **realism and dynamic portrayal**, captures the head of a white horse with a focus on its form, musculature, expressive features and powerful presence.
- His work bridges **Neoclassicism and Romanticism**, and this painting is a **good example of that transition**. He uses light and shadow to highlight the horse's features, creating a sense of volume and texture. The painting conveys a sense of strength, nobility, and even a touch of serenity. Briefly, Neoclassicism can be seen as a **celebration of reason and order**, looking to the past for inspiration, while Romanticism embraced **emotion, imagination, and the individual experience**, often looking towards the future and celebrating the power of the natural world and human emotion.

Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), *Riderless Racers at Rome*, 1817, 44.9 × 59.5 cm, Walters Art Museum

Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), *Riderless Racers at Rome*, 1817, 44.9 × 59.5 cm, Walters Art Museum

- Having **failed to win the prestigious Prix de Rome** the second time he decided to go to Italy in his own. There, in 1817, he witnessed a **race of Barberi horses**.
- From the mid-15th century until 1882, the **spring carnival in Rome** closed with a horse race. Fifteen to 20 **riderless horses**, originally imported from the **Barbary Coast** of North Africa, ran the **length of the Via del Corso**, a long, straight city street, in about two and a half minutes. This sketch depicts the "**la mossa**," the **start of the race**, where riderless horses are being **agitated and goaded** to begin their run. Throughout his career, Géricault **lovingly depicted** the horse as a **metaphor for unfettered emotion and power**. He planned to paint a canvas of this subject more than **nine metres**, **30 feet, in width** and he completed 20 small oil studies but then decided to abandon the project.

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Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), *Three Lovers, c.* 1817–1820, 22.5 × 29.8 cm, Getty Center

Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), *Three Lovers, c.* 1817–1820, 22.5 × 29.8 cm, Getty Center

- Around 1817 he painted **his only known erotic painting**, this small oil sketch depicts two lovers locked in a passionate embrace while their companion watches from the left. **Her nudity and relaxed pose** are the classical tradition of **representing rest after lovemaking**. The woman in white is an **active participant** in love making and with a modern directness, he captures the intensity and energy of human sexuality in a manner **very different from the idealising conventions** of his age. The painting would only have been intended for **private viewing**.
- **It was in 1817 that he had an affair with the young wife** (Alexandrine-Modeste Caruel de Saint-Martin) of his **uncle** (Caruel de Saint-Martin). This was the **same uncle** that had **encouraged him in art** despite his father's disapproval. She was **28 years younger than her husband** and eight years older than Géricault. The affair resulted in the **birth of their son, Georges-Hippolyte**, in August 1818. When his **uncle found out** he stopped all support for Géricault and rejected a series of paintings he had commissioned.
- The affair and its consequences had a profound impact on Géricault. **He reportedly never saw Alexandrine or his son again**. The emotional turmoil, coupled with other struggles in his life, contributed to a period of sadness and possibly even **mental health issues.**
- He returned to Paris in September 1817, the month the first reports of the shipwreck of the Medusa were reported.

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819, 491 × 716 cm, Louvre Museum

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819, 491 × 716 cm, Louvre Museum

- This **enormous** canvas, measuring nearly five metres by over seven metres (16 by 24 feet),is by far his **most famous work** and it it became an iconic work of **French Romanticism**. Unusually for this time he began work **without having been commissioned**. It is a history painting, but based on a **recent event** rather than a noble historical subject. The figures in the scene are **not mythological heroes or brave warriors**, but victims of a shipwreck, forced to resort to **cannibalism to survive**. The painter chose the bleakest moment, when they saw the ship that would **eventually rescue them sailing away** in the distance.
- This painting, first exhibited in **1819**, was more than just a depiction of a tragedy. After the **fall of the First Empire in 1815**, the **Bourbon kings had returned to power** and the **shipwreck discredited the newly restored monarchy**: the **captain** of the Medusa had obtained his position on the **strength of his connections** with power rather than his competence; in fact, **he had not sailed at all in the past twenty years**. The captain **ignored all advice** and the ship ran aground. The life rafts did not hold the 250 crew and so **he left 147** of his crew to drift on a makeshift raft. The survivors endured **thirteen days of hardship**, including **starvation, dehydration, and cannibalism**, before being rescued. **Only 15 survivors remained**. Accounts of the tragedy are harrowing and I have no wish to abbreviate or simplify the **long, drawn out horror** on board the raft but the full story would be a complete talk in itself. So, I recommend you read a blog by **Aengus Dewar** referenced in my notes or

Google "Aengus Dewar Medusa".

- It is notable for its focus on ordinary, rather than heroic, figures and for its depiction of a recent historical event, rather than a classical or mythological subject. It is considered a **seminal work of French Romanticism**, a movement that emphasized **emotion, individualism, and the power of nature**. The painting was also seen as a **criticism of the restored Bourbon monarchy**, as the captain's incompetence and the subsequent suffering of the survivors reflected poorly on the new regime. It was a political comment at a time when former revolutionaries were being rooted out of society, fired from their jobs and were unable to find work.

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Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), *The Epsom Downs Derby*, 1820-21, 91 × 122 cm, Louvre

Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), *The Epsom Downs Derby*, 1820-21, 91 × 122 cm, Louvre

- Géricault visited London twice in the early 1820s in order to exhibit ***The Raft of the Medusa***. It had received a **mixed critical reaction in Paris** but it **London it was a success**. It was displayed in the **Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly** and received **50,000 visitors and he earned 17,000-20,000 francs**.
- His second, longer visit allowed him to further immerse himself in London life and culture **particular the world of horses**.
- This is ***The Epsom Derby*** depicting the famous horse race at Epsom Downs in England. It is notable for its dynamic portrayal of **horses in motion**, influenced by English sporting prints of the time. It captures the **energy and speed** of a horse race, with horses in a "**flying gallop**" towards the left, their legs extended in a manner that was later understood to be **anatomically inaccurate when Eadweard Muybridge** took a succession of photographs in 1878 there is always a leg in contact with the ground..

NOTES

- Théodore Géricault visited London twice in the early 1820s. He arrived in Dover on April 10, 1820, and returned to Paris in June of the same year. He came back to London in November or December of 1820 and stayed for a year.

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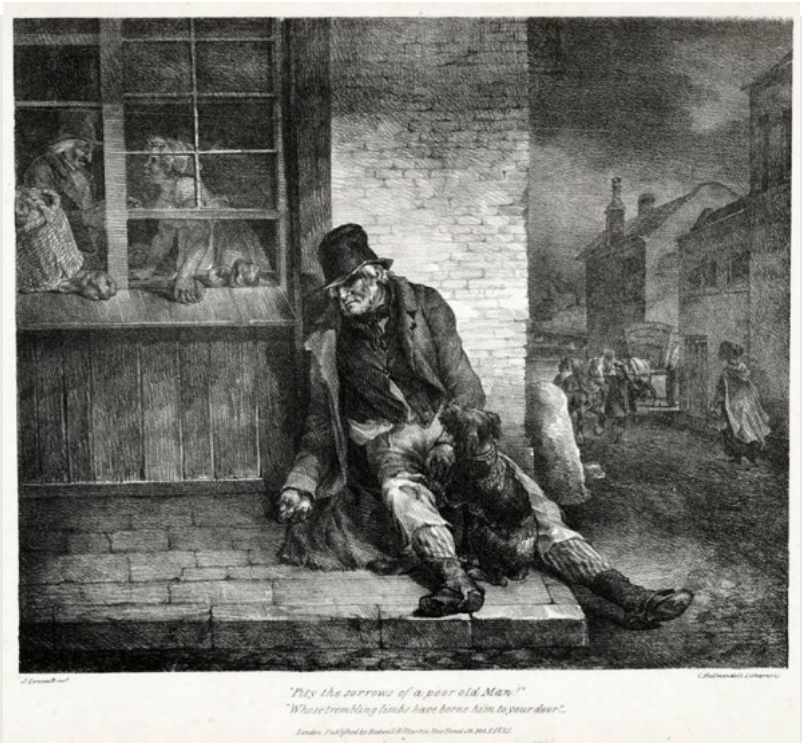

Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), *Pity the Sorrows of a Poor Old Man! Whose Trembling Limbs Have Borne Him to Your Door,* 1821, lithograph, 31.6 x 37.6 cm, from *Various Subjects Drawn from Life and on Stone*, also known as the *English Series, p*rinted by Charles Hullmandel, London; published by Rodwell and Martin, London

Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), *Pity the Sorrows of a Poor Old Man! Whose Trembling Limbs Have Borne Him to Your Door,* 1821, lithograph, 31.6 x 37.6 cm, from *Various Subjects Drawn from Life and on Stone*, also known as the *English Series, p*rinted by Charles Hullmandel, London; published by Rodwell and Martin, London

- Géricault was **deeply affected** by his time in London. He witnessed the **stark realities of urban poverty and social inequality**, which found expression in a series of **powerful lithographs** depicting scenes of daily life known as the *English Series*. He focused on the working class and those living in destitution rather than famous sites and the upper classes.
- His lithographs are not sentimental observations but matter-of-fact reporting that show what the artist saw as the dilemma of urbanisation. The series was successfully marketed to the English public and later copied and reissued in France.
- During his visits, Géricault made a notable choice of lodgings, staying in a neighbourhood **off the beaten path near Cato Street**. This location was close to the site of the **Cato Street Conspiracy,** a plot to **murder all the British cabinet ministers in 1820**, and subsequent executions, which Géricault may have witnessed firsthand and potentially depicted in his art.

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Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), *Le supplice, 1820-1824* (the 'torture', 'torment' or 'agony'), watercolour and pencil on paper, Museum of Rouen

Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), *Le supplice, 1820-1824* (the 'torture', 'torment' or 'agony'), watercolour and pencil on paper, Museum of Rouen

- Géricault's drawing titled ***Le Supplice*** or the torture or torment also called a ***Scene of a Hanging in London*** shows the last minutes of the **Cato Street conspirators** publicly hanged in London in 1820. Géricault, who was in London at the time, likely drew the scene from a window overlooking the scaffold, capturing the moments before and during the execution of these plotters who had planned to assassinate the British cabinet.
- Géricault's work shows figures in various states of preparation for their deaths, with one prominent unhooded figure likely representing Arthur Thistlewood, one of the leaders of the conspiracy, his eyes fixed on the viewer. The May 1st execution highlighted the barbaric nature of the legal system that these men sought to overthrow.

NOTES

- Five men from the initial 11 sentenced to death for their roles in the Cato Street Conspiracy had this sentence carried out. These men were, Arthur Thistlewood, Richard Tidd, James Ings, William Davidson, and John Thomas Brunt. How each man conducted himself in their last moments is an essential component in understanding the character of the men involved in the conspiracy, and as such play a principal role in the wider history of the Cato Street Conspiracy.

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Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *Portrait of a Kleptomaniac*, c.1822–1823, 61.2 × 50.2 cm, Museum of Fine Arts Ghent

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *Portrait of a Kleptomaniac*, c.1822–1823, 61.2 × 50.2 cm, Museum of Fine Arts Ghent

- In 1822, Géricault suffered serious financial losses because of bad investments he had made and he had to paint works to make money.
- One unusual commission was to paint ten ***Portraits of Insane Patients*** for a physician acquaintance.
- This *Portrait of a Kleptomaniac* is part of that series that he painted between 1821 and 1823.
- The series was **unprecedented** in its attempt to **treat people** classified as "mad" or "insane" **as individuals**, giving each person **a direct, dignified, and almost scientific scrutiny**. The project was deeply associated with the emerging psychiatric discourse in France, which challenged **Enlightenment ideas** that madness was a **purely individual failing** deserving only punishment or ridicule.
- Géricault had **personal impetus** as well—his **own family had histories of mental illness**, and he **suffered a nervous breakdown** himself following the completion of *The Raft of the Medusa*. In this context, his approach was **radical**: instead of portraying his subjects as deranged or monstrous, as had been typical in art, he depicted them with **intense realism**, focusing on their **humanity** and the pathos of their inner torment. These paintings aimed to **evoke sympathy** and to challenge society's prevailing prejudices about mental illness.
- The **patron** behind the series was **Étienne-Jean Georget** (pronounced "JOR-

jay"), a **pioneering psychiatrist** and chief physician of the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris. Georget wished to "**correct popular misconceptions of the insane and emphasize the comparative normalcy of their life and conduct**," and used Géricault's skills to illustrate various forms of "**monomania**"—a popular diagnostic category then which described **obsessive fixations**. These portraits became **teaching tools**, intended to humanise patients for Georget's medical colleagues and students, and to assist in psychiatric study and reform.

NOTES

- There are accounts that suggest Georget and Géricault may have met due to the artist's own struggles, or through the medical circles at hospitals like Beaujon, where Géricault studied anatomy.
- Three main theories exist about the commission's origins:
    - 1) as a gesture of thanks after Georget helped Géricault recover from breakdown;
    - 2) at Georget's encouragement, as a form of proto-art therapy;
    - 3) or, most widely accepted, as a direct commission for Georget's collection and scientific study.
- Details on the fee Géricault received for the commission are scarce and not well documented in contemporary sources. The most likely scenario is that the payment was modest, as the works were not meant for public exhibition or grand patronage, but as private scientific and educational material for Georget. Unlike major Salon commissions, this was an intimate, almost experimental collaboration, valued more for its medical and social implications than for commercial gain.
- Initially, Géricault painted ten portraits, each representing a different "monomania" or form of madness. Today, only five are known to survive:
    - Portrait of a Kleptomaniac
    - A Woman Addicted to Gambling
    - A Man Suffering from Delusions of Military Command
    - A Woman Suffering from Obsessive Envy
    - A Child Snatcher
- The fate of the others has been the subject of art historical mystery. For over a century, the lost five remained elusive, with no firm documentation of their whereabouts. A few were rediscovered in the 1860s in Baden-Baden,

Germany, in the attic of a house owned by Dr. Adolphe Lacheze, who had acquired them from Georget's estate. Recent advances have traced at least one of the missing portraits—"The melancholic man"—to a private collection in Spain. There may still be other missing works in private holdings or lost permanently.

- It is said that Géricault, in search of accuracy and authenticity, spent hours observing patients in asylums and even studied the faces of guillotine victims at the Paris morgue. He aimed to capture the fleeting expressions and subtle symptoms of each condition—so dedicated, in fact, that modern psychiatrists still marvel at the clinical acumen in his paintings.
- Géricault's "portraits of the insane" thus stand as pioneering works at the crossroads of art and psychiatry—testimonies both to the era's growing compassion and the continued struggle against the stigma of mental illness.

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Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *A Madwoman and Compulsive Gambler*, c. 1820, 77 × 65 cm, Louvre Museum

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *A Madwoman and Compulsive Gambler*, c. 1820, 77 × 65 cm, Louvre Museum

- The painting portrays an **elderly woman, dressed in simple clothing**, her face dominating the composition. Her downcast, red-rimmed eyes and tense mouth convey a sense of **deep distress and anger**, suggesting the **internal struggle and pain** associated with her condition.
- Géricault's artistic style in this piece is characterized by a blend of realism and emotional intensity. He uses **expressive brushstrokes** that some critics suggest reflect the "**disordered thoughts of the patients**". The **dark background** further emphasizes the subject, highlighting her **isolation and inward focus**.
- This painting, like many of Géricault's works, offers a glimpse into the psychological complexities of the human experience. He depicts the madwoman **not as a grotesque caricature** but as a person experiencing **intense suffering, fostering empathy** and challenging the prevailing views on mental illness during his era. The intensity of her gaze, though averted, invites viewers to contemplate her inner world and the profound impact of her condition.

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https://smarthistory.org/gericault-portraits-of-the-insane/

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *Man with Delusions of Military Command, c. 1820,* 81 × 65 cm, Museum collection Am Römerholz

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *Man with Delusions of Military Command, c. 1820,* 81 × 65 cm, Museum collection Am Römerholz

- *Man with Delusions of Military Command* offers a poignant glimpse into the mind of a man afflicted by a **specific form of monomania**, a type of mental illness characterized by an obsessive fixation on one particular subject. In this case, the subject's delusion is one of **military grandeur**, and he believes he is a high-ranking military official, **perhaps even Napoleon himself**.
- His shown with a **melancholic expression** possibly reflecting the widespread disillusionment felt in France after **Napoleon's defeat**. He wears a **military medal**, but its dullness and the **improvised string** it hangs from hint at the **illusory nature** of his grandeur. His **tasseled hat and cloak** further emphasize his belief in his military importance. The **muted colour palette** and shadowy background create a **somber atmosphere**, highlighting his **isolation and the internal struggles** he faces.
- It was executed quickly, perhaps in a **single sitting**, captures a sense of raw emotion and psychological depth. The focus remains primarily on the man's face, drawing attention to his **facial expressions** and the **psychological complexities** of his condition. Despite its origins in **the study of mental illness**, this painting **transcends a purely clinical purpose**, offering a **sympathetic and insightful portrayal** of a man living within the confines of his own delusions. It reflects a growing **Romantic interest in the human psyche** and the **individual experience**, even in its most challenging forms.

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *The Monomaniac of Child Theft*, 1822-3, 65 × 54 cm, Springfield Museums

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *The Monomaniac of Child Theft*, 1822-3, 65 × 54 cm, Springfield Museums

- This is *The Monomaniac of Child Theft* offers a disturbing yet insightful portrayal of a man suffering from monomania, a 19th-century term for an obsessive preoccupation or mental illness characterized by a single, all-consuming obsession. This particular monomania is focused on the impulse to steal children.
- In modern terms is is easy to think of him as a pedophile but this was not recognised at the time as a specific obsession and child theft was motivated by many things, such as poverty where the child's clothes could be sold or to assume a motherly or fatherly role with the abducted child being treated as one's own.
- The painting depicts an older man, in a half-length portrait against a dark, undefined background that enhances the somber and melancholic atmosphere. He is dressed in a dark brown coat and a matching hat, conveying a **sense of respectability** despite his condition. His face, though **partially veiled** by the shadows of his hat, is etched with lines that **suggest age, worry, or perhaps the toll of his illness**.
- The **most striking aspect** of the painting is the **man's expression**. His eyes, though partially obscured, convey a mixture of emotions – **fear, sadness, and possibly even desperation or despair**. He looks **desolate, isolated in the darkness**, with his eyes wandering to the side. Géricault's ability to portray the man's internal struggle and suffering **without resorting to caricature** reflects a

compassionate approach to mental illness that was ahead of its time.

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *Portrait of a Demented or Jealous Woman,* c. 1819-1822, 72 × 58 cm, Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *Portrait of a Demented or Jealous Woman,* c. 1819-1822, 72 × 58 cm, Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon

- *Portrait of a Demented or Jealous Woman* sometimes called *Portrait of a Woman Suffering from Obsessive Envy*, according to Hypercritic (also known as the "**Hyena of Salpétrière**" (pronounced "sal-pete-ree-air"), reflecting the societal perception of mental illness at the time. A **powerful and unsettling exploration** of the human psyche grappling with a specific mental illness - the monomania of envy. It delves into the suffering associated with this condition rather than presenting a romanticised or clinical view of madness.
- The subject is depicted as an elderly woman, portrayed in a half-length bust, against a somber, mottled dark-brown background. Her worn and shabby clothing, including a thick brown coat, a simple white cap with salmon-pink stripes, a red scarf shaped like a viper's warning "V", and a hint of a shirt or blouse, underscore the patient's humble background. One source suggests her respectable attire indicates **she still clings to conventional habits** despite her illness. Her pale face is framed by the bonnet and escaping gray hairs, drawing attention to her deeply troubled expression.
- The most striking aspect of the painting is the woman's face, etched with the torment of her condition. Her eyes, described as small, red, and mean, are downcast and avoid the viewer's gaze, yet they convey a **piercing intensity** as she focuses on an unseen object of her obsession. **A slight greenish tint on her pale face** and the “hyena-like” expression, as noted in her case notes, further highlight her illness. Her tense mouth and tightly clenched lips suggest an

internal struggle and the potential for a sudden, passionate outburst. Géricault masterfully captures a sense of anger and resentment within her gaze, portraying the bitterness and malice associated with obsessive envy.

- Envy and jealousy are feelings that many can suffer from over long periods of time which raises the question of where do the boundaries lie. When is a person cast into an asylum for such feelings. When do a feelings become categorised as a monomania? It is easy to search for what we could call "signs of madness" but we could also see this woman as neatly dressed with a clean bonnet and clothes, signs of modesty but tormented by her feelings. Overall, it is a powerful and empathetic portrayal of a person grappling with deep emotions that cause great suffering. The painting's realistic and empathetic approach to mental illness was groundbreaking for its time, laying the groundwork for a more humane understanding and treatment of those considered "insane".

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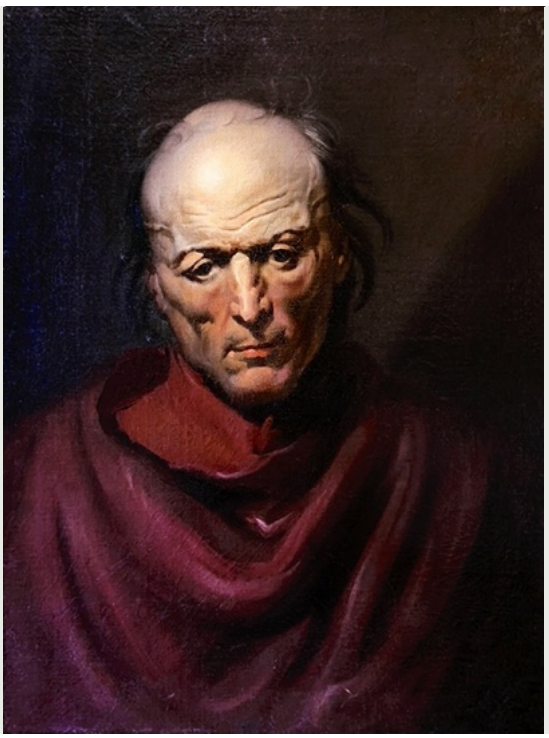

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), The Melancholic Man, 1821-4, private collection

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), The Melancholic Man, 1821-4, private collection

- Finally, *The Melancholic Man* was discovered in 2019 by Javier S. Burgos, a Spanish scientist, in Ravenna, Italy. It is believed to be part of Géricault's series "Les Monomanes" (Portraits of the Insane), created between 1821 and 1824. This painting depicts a man with a furrowed brow, dressed in a red robe, exhibiting **features consistent with melancholia**.
- Burgos identified this work as **potentially the sixth painting** in Géricault's monomania series. The discovery came about when Burgos, intrigued by Géricault's portraits and psychiatric research, watched a promotional exhibition video from Ravenna and later verified the painting's size and attributes against known features of the series. The facial expression, notably the "**melancholic omega**" wrinkle on the forehead—a traditional sign for melancholy. The term refers to the shape of the Greek letter omega and the horseshoe of inverted "U" furrows of the forehead formed by the contraction of the corrugator muscles, known as the "grief muscles". The condition was described by Charles Darwin in 1872 and even today melancholic features are recognised, including psychomotor agitation or retardation, that is restlessness or slowing of movements, which can include facial expressions, are specifiers for a major depressive episode.
- The attribution of this painting to Géricault remains contentious. While many scholars consider it an authentic Géricault, some experts call for more conclusive evidence, highlighting stylistic and provenance uncertainties. If fully accepted, it would mark significant progress in reconstructing the original

series, as only five of the ten portraits have been definitively attributed and held in museum collections until now.

- *The Melancholic Man* is currently held in a private collection in Ravenna, and has generated scholarly interest not only for its art historical value but for deepening understanding of the intersection between Romantic art and early psychiatric visual documentation. More scientific analysis is required to confirm that this is truly part of the series. If it is, it will be an important discovery.

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *Portrait of a Child with a Dog*, c.1821-24, 62 × 51 cm, Harvard Art Museum

Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), *Portrait of a Child with a Dog*, c.1821-24, 62 × 51 cm, Harvard Art Museum

- The following year, **1823, his illness returned**, a **tubercular infection of the spine**. After several operations his condition did not improve and he planned several vast painting in a last effort.
- This is a small portrait of the **five-year-old son, Oliver, of Colonel Louis Bro**, a cavalry officer knighted by Napoleon.
- The small boy's serious expression suggests adult concerns, such as the seriousness of war. This is highlighted by the bare wall behind, the **sabre he carries** on his soldier and the **fierce dog** he controls.
- The **sword belonged to his father**, who is said to have used it at the **Battle of Waterloo**. In 1821, however, **the empire was over**, Napoleon was in exile, and Bonapartists such as Colonel Bro had been searched out, dismissed and were out of power. They were also often spied on by the royalist government and found themselves unable to gain employment.
- Géricault uses **a child to represent the seriousness and danger of war**, and its larger effect on French society and he gave the painting to Olivier's family as a token of friendship. (based on Harvard Art Museum description)

REFERENCES

https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/342196#:~:text=Géricault painted the colonel's five,in for a cavalry horse.

Ary Scheffer, *The Death of Géricault* (26 janvier 1824), 1824, 36 × 61 cm, Louvre

Ary Scheffer (1795-1858), *The Death of Géricault* (26 janvier 1824), 1824, 36 × 61 cm, Louvre

- **He died in January 1824 aged thirty three** and this is a death bed scene by the **Dutch-French Romantic artist Ary Scheffer.**
- **The cause** of his death is a **partial mystery**, He seems to have **suffered from an infection** following a riding accident but he **had other ailments** that he neglected. He also **suffered from depression** and is said to have **attempted suicide**.
- His **studio content was sold for 52,000 francs** and a close friend bought *The Raft of the Medusa* and sold it to the Louvre in November. Géricault will left his estate to his father but he **passed the estate to *Géricault* illegitimate son Georges-Hippolyte, then aged five**.
- **Romanticism** contributed to the idea of the **heroic, tragic artist** with its emphasis on individualism, emotion, and imagination. This fostered a **new appreciation for the artist as a unique, sensitive genius, often at odds with social conventions**. The artist became seen as a **visionary, often misunderstood** or even ostracised by the mainstream, whose creative energy stemmed from deep personal experience and often-turbulent emotions.
- **Géricault's life and death certainly fits this Romantic image** but we must recognise that while emotions can inspire art, true mastery requires immense skill, hard work, and technical expertise. Equating artistic brilliance with a single, simple interpretation trivialises the struggles of the artist who is shaped by a

range of cultural, personal and socio-political factors.

- **His death can be viewed as a tragic** inevitability as he struggled to gain recognition **but we must recognise the complexity of his artistic journey** and avoid **reducing his legacy** to a simple narrative of torment and lack of recognition. He was a pioneer of Romanticism whose impact on art history is far more nuanced and significant than a romanticised portrayal might suggest.

NOTES

- He was deeply mourned by his friends and we can see his small room in the Rue des Martyrs. His favourite sketches and pictures are on the wall above.

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21-02

THÉODORE GÉRICAULT

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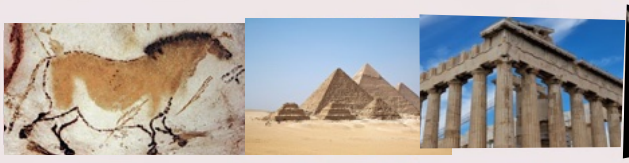
Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa* (detail), 1819, Louvre

- **He was a pioneer of French Romanticism** who influenced later artists such as Delacroix, covered in next week's talk.
- (CLICK) In fact, **Delacroix is here**, this figure was modelled by the young Delacroix who was so moved by the painting that **he ran from the studio** after each session.
- Thank you for your time and attention and I look forward to giving my next talk in the series.



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