

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**Théodore GÉRICAUT (Rouen 1791 - Paris 1824)**

## **A Wild Horse Rearing, Held by a Groom**

Black chalk on laid paper.

198 x 256 mm. (7 3/4 x 10 1/8 in.)

From a very early age, Théodore Géricault was fascinated by horses, and became an accomplished equestrian. He may well have chosen to begin his artistic training with the painter Carle Vernet because of the elder artist's reputation as a horse painter. As a student he made drawings of horses at the Imperial stables at Versailles, and many of his most significant works as a mature painter involved equestrian subjects. As the scholar Philippe Grunhech has noted, 'Throughout his career, Géricault painted and drew horses, beginning with the period of his apprenticeship to Carle Vernet and continuing up to his last, consummately finished watercolors.' The same author has added that, 'In fact, the life and art of Théodore Géricault are both indissolubly joined under the sign of the horse. Not merely content to observe the animal from every angle, in drawing after drawing and painting after painting, Géricault would in a certain sense dedicate his entire existence to the horse, from his earliest childhood to his premature and tragic end, brought on by an accident with – a horse.'

The present sheet may be included among a group of drawings and oil sketches by Géricault relating to the most important project of his Roman years; a monumental painting depicting The Start of the Race of the Barberi Horses. Géricault seems in particular to have been drawn to the periods just before the start of the race (known as 'la mosca'), when young grooms would try to restrain the horses behind the starting rope, and at the end of the course, known as 'la ripresa', when the grooms would attempt to recapture the stampeding horses.

When working out his myriad ideas for the Race of the Barberi Horses on paper, Géricault tried out many different solutions to the question of how best to depict the frenzied scene of wild horses and their attendants at the start of the race. (The starting rope is indicated in this drawing, below the horse's front hooves.) As the Géricault scholar Wheelock Whitney has pointed out, '[Another] motif that characterizes the early phase of the final "start" composition...is that of the ramping horse at the right, its forelegs poised over the starting rope. Although this horse continues to appear in every successive compositional study in the series...Géricault's original idea seems to have been to depict the animal without the figure of a youth shown running alongside in later versions, but instead to leave the long,

powerful flank of the animal fully exposed to view. In this presentation...the only brake on the horse's forward motion is provided by the figure barely indicated behind it, who seems to restrain the horse by the head.'

This black chalk study is one of the finest drawings of the particular type noted by Whitney. As another Géricault scholar, Philippe Grunhech, has written of the present sheet, 'This is a study of a Roman groom holding back a horse before the start of a race...At this stage in his planned composition, Géricault displays all his remarkable knowledge of horses: forelegs raised and poised to plunge past the rope, neck arched – for the groom has a strong hold – ears pinned back angrily, eyes bulging, hind legs bent under its weight in the horse's effort to strain forward...every detail has been accurately noted and recorded by a true horseman.'

Also referring to the present sheet, Whitney writes that 'A black chalk study of [a] horse and its groom, now in a private collection, vividly demonstrates Géricault's profound knowledge and appreciation of the equine anatomy as well as his superb graphic powers. (What other French artist working in 1817, apart from Ingres, and perhaps Prud'hon, could have produced a drawing of this quality?). This drawing is clear evidence that at this point in the project he had by no means abandoned the idea of depicting the scene of the start of the race as the modern event he had witnessed in the Piazza del Popolo. Not only is the figure fully dressed in contemporary clothing, but the horse is shown with its tail knotted and wearing a halter, by which the groom restrains it, descriptive touches that plant the image even more firmly in the world of observed reality.'

A related, small-scale chalk study by Géricault of the same rearing horse in profile is today in the collection of Roberta J. M. Olson and Alexander B. V. Johnson in New York, while an identical horse and groom appear as part of a larger composition in a chalk drawing in a private collection. The same group appears as one of three sketches of horses on one sheet in another private collection, as well as in a pen and ink compositional study in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Bayonne. In later, more developed treatments of the start of the race - such as an oil sketch in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the most fully realized version of the subject, an oil sketch in the Louvre - the same horse remains at the right of the composition, though with a groom in front of the animal rather than behind.

The first recorded owner of the present sheet was the noted French financier and art collector Baron Joseph Vitta (1860-1942). Vitta's collection included large and significant groups of works by Eugène Delacroix, Jules Chéret and Auguste Rodin, as well as important works by Albert Besnard, Félix Bracquemond, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and others. Sales of paintings and drawings from Vitta's collection were held in Paris in 1924 and 1926, when this drawing was sold, and again in 1935.

The present sheet then entered the exceptional collection of paintings and drawings by Géricault assembled by the artist and art historian Pierre Olivier Dubaut (1886-1968). As an artist, Dubaut produced paintings, watercolours and prints of horses and equestrian subjects. He was especially fond of the work of Géricault, and organized several important exhibitions of his work. He had planned to publish a catalogue of the artist's work, in collaboration with the Duc de Trévise, but this never came to fruition. Dubaut also owned works by Delacroix, Richard Parkes Bonington and Jacques-Louis David, among others.

## **Exhibitions**

Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Pavillon de Marsan, Les artistes français en Italie, de Poussin à Renoir, 1934, probably no.500; Paris, Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Exposition Géricault, peintre et dessinateur, 1937, no.113; Paris, Galerie Bignou, Géricault, cet inconnu...(1791-1824): aquarelles, gouaches, dessins, 1950, no.32; London, Marlborough Fine Art Ltd., Théodore Géricault 1791-1824, 1952, no.47; Winterthur, Kunstmuseum, Théodore Géricault 1791-1824, 1953, no.161; Paris, Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Gros, Géricault, Delacroix, 1954, no.51; Paris, Galerie Claude Aubry, Géricault dans les collections privées françaises, 1964, no.66; New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, and elsewhere, Master Drawings by Géricault, 1985-1986, no.31; New York, Jill Newhouse Gallery, Théodore Géricault: Drawings, Watercolors and Small Oils from Private Collections, 2014, no.9.

## **Literature:**

Philippe Grunhech, Géricault: Dessins et Aquarelles de Chevaux, Lausanne, 1982, illustrated p.50; Philippe Grunhech, Géricault's Horses: Drawings and Watercolours, New York and Paris, 1984, pp.50-51, unnumbered; Philippe Grunhech, Master Drawings by Géricault, exhibition catalogue, New York, San Diego and Houston, 1985-1986, pp.82-83, no.31; Germain Bazin, Théodore Géricault: Étude critique, documents et catalogue raisonné. Vol. IV - Le voyage en Italie: Étude critique et catalogue raisonné, Paris, 1990, p.69 and p.194, no.1351; Wheelock Whitney, Géricault in Italy, New Haven and London, 1997, pp.131-132, fig.172 (as present whereabouts unknown); Amy Kurlander and Jill Newhouse, Théodore Géricault: Drawings, Watercolors and Small Oils from Private Collections, exhibition catalogue, New York, 2014, unpaginated, no.9.

## **Artist description:**

When Théodore Géricault died in January 1824, at the age of thirty-three, he was best known as the painter of *The Raft of the Medusa*, which had caused a sensation when it was exhibited at the Salon of 1819. The public at large knew little or nothing of his work as a draughtsman, however, so when the contents of his studio – containing some 220 paintings and several hundred drawings and sketchbooks - were sold at auction in November 1824, the works on paper were a revelation, and were eagerly acquired by collectors. Several important collections of drawings and watercolours by Géricault were formed in France in the 19th century – by Alfred Armand, Louis Bro, Philippe de Chennevières, Alexandre Colin, L. J. A. Coutan, Horace His de la Salle and François Marcille, among others - and works by the artist have remained popular with collectors and connoisseurs ever since.