

Théodore GERICAULT (Rouen 1791 - Paris 1824)

Scene from the Race of the Barberi Horses

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, over an extensive underdrawing in black chalk.

353 x 484 mm. (13 7/8 x 19 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, TORONTO.

In 1816, at the age of twenty-five and having failed in his attempt to win the Prix de Rome earlier in the year, Théodore Géricault decided to travel to Italy at his own expense. He arrived in Italy in October 1816 and settled in Rome the following month. Although he had intended to stay for two years, he remained in Italy for only about a year before returning to Paris in the autumn of 1817. This period in Italy, although relatively brief, was nevertheless of particular importance to the young artist.

This large and impressive 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. It was in February 1817 that Géricault witnessed the annual event known as the corso de' Barberi - a race of wild, riderless horses along the Via del Corso, from the Piazza del Popolo to the Piazza Venezia – that was the highlight of the Roman Carnival. (The untamed horses were of a particular breed originally from the Barbary Coast, and were therefore known, in later years, as Barberi.) As Lorenz Eitner has noted, 'The gaudy vigour of the show, spiced with danger and cruelty, could not fail to fascinate the ardent sportsman in Géricault, and the artist for whom the horse had always embodied nature's energy and passion.' Géricault seems in particular to have been drawn to the periods just before the start of the race (known as 'la mossa'), 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.

Géricault worked on a series of drawings and oil sketches on paper on the theme of the Race of the Barberi Horses for most of his time in Italy - a period of some seven months in all - culminating in a huge canvas, which measured some thirty feet in length. On his sudden return to France in September 1817, however, the painting was abandoned unfinished in his Roman studio, and no longer survives. Nevertheless, some idea of the genesis and development of the composition can be had from the approximately twenty oil sketches and sixty drawings related to the project which the artist brought back with him when he returned to Paris. As Charles Clément, Géricault's early biographer and author of the first catalogue raisonné of his work, has noted, 'The admirable drawings of the Race of the Riderless Horses which have survived are executed, in pen and ink for the most part, with details indicated very

lightly with a few hatchings. One would be very wrong to regard these as improvisations, or mere sketches.'

That the present sheet is indeed related to the theme of the corso de' Barberi is seen in the plume of feathers – worn by all of the horses taking part in the race - on the bridle of the nearest horse. This drawing may represent a Barberi horse being exercised by its groom, either before or after the race itself. As Bruno Chenique has pointed out, however, the same horse is also draped with a richly embroidered blanket, tied with a strap. This is thought to be the attribute of the horse which won the race, and can also be seen in a painting by Géricault of A Groom Leading the Winning Horse, today in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, as well as a related drawing in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Besançon. Like the Thyssen painting and Besançon drawing, the present sheet may be included among a small group of drawings and oil sketches by Géricault that, while inspired by the events surrounding the race itself, do not seem to relate specifically to the composition of the large, unfinished painting of The Start of the Race of the Barberi Horses.

This remarkable sheet is exceptional among Géricault's drawings for its size and scale. The bold handling of pen and ink, applied with a reed pen, is a characteristic of Géricault's draughtsmanship both before and during his year in Italy, and the present sheet may be compared stylistically with such pen studies of the same period as A Man Taming a Bull in the Louvre, a study of a Nude Horseman in Besançon, and drawing of Bull Tamers formerly in the collection of Robert von Hirsch in Basel and Alain Delon in Paris.

As Wheelock Whitney has incisively written of the drawings brought back by Géricault from Italy, 'One of the chief benefits of the Italian year was the maturation it brought about in Géricault's style. The most notable evidence of this advance is the more fluid and confident graphic manner he developed in Italy, in no small part due to his lengthy and complex preparatory process for the Race of the Barberi Horses. The fact is rarely acknowledged, but Géricault was, with Ingres, one of the two greatest draughtsmen of the first half of the nineteenth century. His drawings, whether preliminary studies for ambitious works such as the Race, mere exercises in graphic dexterity or elaborate, finished compositions intended from the outset as finished works of art, fairly vibrate with energy and expressiveness…The drawings done in Italy, where Géricault's graphic style reached its maturity, are marked by an unprecedented freedom of handling and a palpable assurance of touch that he maintained, even as his style evolved, for the rest of his brief career.'

Provenance:

Gérard Ambroselli, Paris and Saint-Pierre-en Port, from 1973
Private collection, Paris
Anonymous sale, New York, Sotheby Parke Bernet, 3 June 1980, lot 132
Private collection.

Literature:

Germain Bazin, Théodore Géricault: Étude critique, documents et catalogue raisonné. Vol. IV - Le voyage en Italie: Étude critique et catalogue raisonné, Paris, 1990, p.68 and p.190, no.1341 (as Deux chevaux au gallop dans la campagne romaine, with location unknown)2; Bruno Chenique, Les chevaux de Géricault, Paris, 2007, p.33, no.30 (as Episode de la course des chevaux libres); Gaëlle Rio and Bruno Chenique, Les chevaux de Géricault, exhibition catalogue, Paris, 2024, p.142, fig.69; Bruno Chenique, Catalogue raisonné des dessins inédits de Théodore Géricault (forthcoming).

Artist description:

When Théodore Gericault 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 Gericault 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.