

Théodore GERICAULT (Rouen 1791 - Paris 1824)

A Groom with Two Horses

Pen and brown ink and grey wash, over an underdrawing in black chalk, with framing lines in black chalk.

Fragmentary sketches in black chalk and brown ink on the verso.

205 x 186 mm. (8 1/8 x 7 3/8 in.)

Théodore Gericault was, from a very early age, 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 young 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 Grunchec has noted, 'Throughout his career, Gericault 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 attribution of this little-known drawing to Gericault was confirmed in 2001 by Lorenz Eitner, who dated the sheet to c.1814-1815. Dr. Eitner noted that 'This composition of a (black?) groom holding two horses is, I believe, a fairly early work by Gericault. It exhibits the heavy, angular contour drawing that is characteristic of his work in pen and ink wash from around 1814/5. The drawing is not related, so far as I can tell, to any of Gericault's known projects – certainly not to the Race of the Riderless Horses that occupied Gericault in 1816/7 and with which one might be tempted to connect its subject. It is, nevertheless, a strong and characteristic work in its energetic abbreviations, and even in its roughnesses and occasional incoherences (as in the horse's legs).'

Among a handful of stylistically similar early pen and wash drawings by Gericault is a study of A Group of Cavalrymen and Officers in a private collection and a drawing of Louis XVIII Reviewing Troops on the Champ de Mars of c.1814-1815 in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon, as well as a pen and ink study of a horse drawn on the inside front cover of the so-called Zoubaloff sketchbook of c.1814-1815 in the Louvre. Also stylistically comparable is a study of two male nudes formerly in the collection of Hans Bühler and now in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. A horse in a nearly identical pose to that in the present sheet is found in a small painting attributed to Gericault in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Béziers.

Literature:

London, Flavia Ormond Fine Arts Ltd., Master Drawings 1525-1905, exhibition catalogue, 2003, unpaginated, no.17, and a detail illustrated on the cover; Horace Wood Brock, Martin P. Levy and Clifford S. Ackley, Splendor and Elegance: European Decorative Arts and Drawings from the Horace Wood Brock Collection, exhibition catalogue, Boston, 2009, p.156, no.111, illustrated p.113; Sebastian Smee, "? = Beauty", The Boston Globe, 22 February 2009.

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.