

Théodore GERICAULT (Rouen 1791 - Paris 1824)

The Plaster-Maker's Horse (Le cheval du plâtrier)

Pen and brown ink, with grey and brown washes, on buff paper.

Signed and dated *Gericault 1821.* at the lower left.

254 x 314 mm. (10 x 12 3/8 in.)

This signed and dated drawing was executed during Géricault's English period; the artist worked in London for a period of several months between April and June of 1820 and again from December 1820 to December 1821. It was during this time that he became particularly interested in scenes of heavy draught horses at work, which he would have seen throughout London. As Grunchec has written, 'In England Géricault was fascinated by the tall, mighty horses that always seemed to belong to some 'shire' or 'Irish draught' breed, a variety then unknown in France.'3 The artist made several drawings and watercolours of draught horses at work in London streets, dockyards and wharves; these were done seemingly for his own pleasure or for sale, although a few were later adapted for a series of lithographs.

This highly finished drawing was later used for the print Le cheval du plâtrier, one of a suite of twelve lithographs of equine subjects commissioned from Géricault by the Parisian printsellers Gihaut Frères after the artist's return from England, where a set of lithographs after his work had met with great success. As Charles Clément, the painter's 19th century biographer, wrote, 'The French public had at last acquired a taste for the lithographs of Géricault; the Gihaut brothers asked him to repeat his great English suite, but they only wanted horses. Six of the subjects of this nature that had appeared in the English publication were kept, and Géricault produced watercolours to serve as models for the other six. He commissioned Messrs Léon Cogniet and Volmar to carry out all the work, directing, revising and correcting here and there.' The series of twelve lithographs, executed in collaboration with the printmakers Joseph Simon Volmar and Léon Cogniet, were published as Études de chevaux par Gericault in April and June 1823.

In his catalogue raisonné of the work of Géricault, Germain Bazin describes the present sheet in some detail: 'The horse is shown tied by a halter to a ring fixed to the wall. It is harnessed to the shafts of a cart with high sides loaded with bags of plaster. He wears a shoulder collar with wide splints decorated

with a tuft of wool and on its head are two pompoms. He is attached to the stretchers by the belly band and a back plate, and has a breeching strap. Its tail is docked. This horse must be of a difficult character, as his eyes are bulging and he paws the ground impatiently; he is a biting horse as he wears a muzzle. His coat is black with four irregular socks. The shadow of the horse and cart falls on the wall, the rubble of which can be seen under the plaster which is peeling and which bears the inscription: PLATRE. Above the wall, we can see a roof forming an awning, supported by a bracket. In the shadow of the warehouse, where the glow of a barred window can be seen in the background, a carter wearing a smock carries a bag on his right shoulder that he is about to load onto the cart.'

A finished watercolour of this composition, which however excludes the figure carrying sacks of plaster at the left, once belonged to the Napoleonic military commander Marshal Louis-Gabriel Suchet, Duc de Albuféra, and is today in a private French collection. Although Lorenz Eitner regarded that watercolour as the model for the related lithograph by Volmar, the fact that it does not show the figure of the plaster-maker, as well as several other differences, such as the lack of stones in the foreground and the grilled window at the rear of the shed, makes this unlikely. Germain Bazin accepts the present sheet as the model for the lithograph, further noting that the bright tonality of the ex-Albuféra watercolour, which he posits may have preceded the present sheet, would have been unnecessary in the case of a preparatory drawing for a print.

A closely related painting on canvas by Géricault of this composition, of similar dimensions, is in a private collection. The popularity of the lithograph of Le cheval du plâtrier among artists has led to the existence of several copies of the composition, in oil, watercolour or black chalk, all of which are in the same direction as the print.

The first recorded owner of the present sheet was Susanna, Duchess of Hamilton (1786-1859), who may have inherited it from her father, William Beckford (1760-1844). In his day one of the wealthiest men in England, Beckford was a novelist, art critic, MP and a noted collector of paintings, furniture and decorative arts.

A fine impression of the related lithograph by Joseph Volmar (Delteil 86), for the series Études de chevaux of 1823, is sold with the present sheet.

Exhibitions

Possibly Paris, Galerie Lebrun, *Exposition des ouvrages de peinture et sculpture exposés au profit de la Caisse ouverte pour l'Extinction de la Mendacité*, 1829, no.100 ('*Charette de plâtrier. (Aquarelle)*'); London, Ewan Phillips Gallery, *Gericault to Ernst*, 1967, no.5.

Literature:

'On Exhibition', *Studio International*, June 1967, p.323, fig.11; Philippe Grunchec, 'L'inventaire posthume de Theodore Gericault (1791-1824)', *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de l'Art Français*, 1976 (1978), p.410, under no.87 and p.420, note 137; Jacques Thuillier and Philippe Grunchec, *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Gericault*, Paris, 1978, p.124, under no.244; François Bergot, *Gericault: Tout l'oeuvre gravé et pièces en rapport*, exhibition catalogue, Rouen, 1981-1982, p.92, under no.80; Lorenz E. A. Eitner, *Gericault, His Life and Work*, London, 1983, p.357, note 76 (as a copy); Germain Bazin, *Théodore Géricault: Étude critique, documents et catalogue raisonné. Vol.VII - Regard social et politique: Le séjour anglais et les heures de souffrance*, Paris, 1997, pp.37-38 and p.173, no.2414.

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.