

Théodore GERICAULT (Rouen 1791 - Paris 1824)

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

Watercolour and gouache, pen and brown ink, with brown wash.

Rapid sketches of horses, riders and other figures in pencil on the verso.

Signed *Gericault* in brown ink at the lower right.

182 x 213 mm. (7 1/8 x 8 3/8 in.)

A recent addition to the corpus of drawings by Théodore Géricault, this signed watercolour is part of a series of drawings and watercolours devoted to a plaster-maker's horse that the artist produced both during his stay in London between 1820 and 1821 and after his return to Paris. The same horse appears, albeit in reverse and hitched to a cart, in a related lithograph entitled Le cheval du plâtrier, executed in 1822 and published in Paris the following year. As the scholar Lorenz Eitner has written of the artist's equine drawings of this period, 'Géricault painted several finished watercolours of English life, perhaps in connection with his lithographic work of 1821, or possibly for sale. They are divided between scenes of fashionable equitation and scenes of heavy dockside labour. The latter are among the most impressive works of his English stay, and among the most personal: it is difficult to tell how much they owe to direct experience and how much to his knowledge of English art. Parallels to some of these subjects can be found in English painting, but there is nothing in the English genre tradition that quite explains his choice and treatment of them. They are essentially his own discoveries, though they naturally bear the traces of his impressions of English art.'

As Eitner has further noted of Géricault, 'Scenes of drayage round London docks, coal waggons toiling up muddy slopes or entering wharves, and waggoners unloading their carts, frequently occur among his English drawings. The colossal forms of draught horses, the athletes and proletarians of their species, had a strong attraction for him. Their constant appearance in his drawings and lithographs of this period can hardly have been a matter of popular appeal; elegant horses would have made more saleable pictures. But these working animals were to him the characteristic embodiments of a form of existence that impressed him in London.' The same scholar added that 'Taking his subjects directly from life, in fact or at least in appearance, he aimed for a sense of spontaneity, often developing his image from sketch to completion in one rapid process and on the same sheet of paper. There is no trace in his English work of the elaborate conceptual planning by which he had earlier built up his compositions step

by step.'

Towards the end of his life Géricault reworked some of his earlier compositions in the form of finished watercolours to be placed with dealers and sold to collectors. The present sheet, of exceptional quality and in superb condition, is a particularly fine example of a signed, independent watercolour of this type. Although based on the lithograph Le cheval du plâtrier and its preparatory drawing, the artist has here chosen to dispense with the cart and the figure of the plaster-maker altogether, in order to focus solely on the powerful, restive horse, freed of its heavy load but still tied, if somewhat tenuously, to the wall. The muscular creature is beautifully and sensitively portrayed, with a confident, masterful watercolour technique that belies the artist's poor health at this time.

Despite suffering from sciatica, unable to ride and sometimes confined to his bed, Géricault managed to produce a number of very fine, highly finished drawings and watercolours in the last years of his career. As Eitner points out of such late works, 'The drawings were certainly made to be seen rather than laid away in his private portfolios, as had been so many of the drawings of his early and middle years. It is difficult to believe that the more highly finished watercolours, at any rate, could have been meant for anything other than sale…His English watercolours are more luminous and richer in hue than the occasional coloured drawings from his earlier periods.'

A watercolour study of the same horse, formerly in a private collection, is an anonymous copy after part of the lithograph of Le cheval du plâtrier and includes the stretchers attached to the unseen cart.

The small sketches on the verso of the present sheet may be dated, on stylistic grounds, to Géricault's English period between 1820 and 1821, and seem to be related to the artist's lithographs of this date. The rapid sketch of a farrier behind a horse, at the right of centre on the verso, may be an early study for the lithograph of The English Farrier, published in London in 1821, while the top-hatted figure seen from behind at the left of centre may be tentatively related to a similar figure, albeit seen from a different angle, in the lithograph Un postillon, ou Les deux chevaux harnachés, published in Paris in c.1823.

Literature:

Gaëlle Rio and Bruno Chenique, *Les chevaux de Géricault,* exhibition catalogue, Paris, 2024, p.165, fig.83; To be included in the forthcoming *Catalogue raisonné des dessins inédits et retrouvés de Théodore Géricault*, in preparation by Bruno Chenique.

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.