

Géricault

THE size, dramatic effect, and flattering position in the Louvre of his masterpiece, all the good said of him by Delacroix, a century's respect, a romantic life and tragic death notwithstanding, Géricault was underrated till 1924. Necessarily so: for not till the centenary exhibition of that year were amateurs in a position to appreciate him. Not until they had seen that astonishing assemblage of capital works, sketches and studies could they have realized that Géricault, had he lived, would surely have filled, and filled even more gloriously perhaps, the place of Delacroix in the history of nineteenth century painting.

In 1815 he was twenty-four years old, a superb specimen of the new generation, ardent, high-spirited, intelligent, perplexed and inconsistent withal: witness, his accompaniment of the flying king as far as Béthune, his sudden change of mind, disguising of himself, and precipitate return to Paris. Also he was rich and cultivated. Indeed it is clear that the new generation was in every way and above all artistically, more cultivated than the old.* "Les musées," says Huet, "deserts sous David, se remplissaient;" and at that moment the musée du Louvre was dominated by the genius of Rubens. By some accounts it was the restitution of the pictures plundered by Napoleon, and the bringing out, to fill the gap, of the Marie de Médicis series, which created the vogue. Be the cause what it may, certain it is that Géricault and his contemporaries were profoundly impressed by the Flemish monster; and certain also that students enamored of his glorious freedoms, the sumptuous quality of his paint, his brave brush-work, and his power of composing in monumental masses, would not long be satisfied with the dry precepts of the school. Already in 1812 David, eyeing discontentedly the young master's first capital work, *l'Officier des Chasseurs*, had exclaimed, "D'où cela sort-il? Je ne connais pas cette touche." Had he known better his Louvre of that date even, he might have guessed.†

He could afford to travel—and in those days French painters seem to have thought much less of journeys and long absences than they do now—so towards the end of '16 he set out for Florence and Rome. Appropriately, since he was to be reckoned a romantic, the motive of his exile was not so much artistic as sentimental. It may be added that he lived up to his reputation, cherishing a broken heart throughout life, enjoying periods of blackest gloom, losing his money, talking of suicide, and

riding entire days and sometimes on unbroken horses. In Italy the work begun by Rubens was carried on by the seventeenth century masters. Also, having seen genuine antiques Géricault noticed what you might have supposed would have struck any observant tourist—that the works of the school were not in the least like them. Antiques, however, were not what he had come to see. His pictures have been called sculptural, and so they are: himself, he had fingered a chisel and dreamed of expressing his epic conceptions in the imperishable medium. That monumental style of his, however, comes rather I think from Rubens and the Renaissance painters than from Michelangelo. Of his love of opposing moulded mass to mass, and of binding them together by an ample, and perhaps slightly dramatic, use of deep shadows, we need not seek an explanation outside the teaching of his proper masters.

What he looked at were the pictures; and at them he looked with eyes as catholic as those of Sir Joshua but far more intense. He looked at everything—except perhaps the Primitives, at Raphael and Michelangelo, and at the Carracci. And he found something to admire in them all. Shall I risk setting against him all our painters, poets and musicians by quoting his written opinion? Well, here it is: "Each school has its own character; if one could succeed in uniting all their qualities, wouldn't he have reached perfection?" The pedantic blather of a doting old eclectic, is it not? Only you must remember that this eclectic of five-and-twenty was one of the most vigorous, full, blooded, daring, experimental, original and gifted painters of the individualistic century.

Equipped by Rubens and the masters of the full Renaissance, Géricault returned to Paris in the autumn of '17 to struggle with his own epic conceptions. Whether the painting of *Le Marché aux Boeufs*, a work too little seen by amateurs and perhaps even finer, though on a smaller scale, than *Le Radeau de la Méduse*, preceded by some months the execution of that masterpiece, I know not; nor does it matter. *Le Radeau*—the final composition of which was determined as innumerable studies and sketches prove only after prolonged cogitation—hangs in the Louvre for all the world to see, and was first exhibited at the Salon of '19. Its success was immediate and normal; that is to say, it was greeted with a storm of vulgar and senseless abuse by academic painters and schoolmasters, by the public which believes in such people and the critics who take tips from them, and with enthusiasm by the sensitive and intelligent. The judicious Kératry judged the color "monotone et uniforme"—a sentence which seems in every sense excessive: in the drawing Emeric Duval of *Le Moniteur* discovered

* Baudelaire seems to have supposed that because David, Guérin and Girodet found subjects in Homer and Virgil they read them.

† To be sure, David professed for Rubens the sort of admiration which the Archangel may have felt for Beelzebub.

"de l'incorrection, de l'exagération et tout à la fois de la sécheresse": while *Le Drapeau Blanc* accused the painter of having calumniated the whole ministry of Marine.

That the taste of the government in 1819 was neither vulgar nor reactionary goes without saying, since it was directed by the excellent M. de Forbin; and Géricault seems to have expected of it not only a medal but a purchase. A medal he got, but no cash; which vexed him. In this he was unreasonable, not to say silly; for *Le Radeau*, besides being a great work of art, is unmistakably a political tract. At that moment the incident was being used freely as a stick wherewith to belabor the government. Not unnaturally: the story was of the most damaging. In June, 1816, the frigate, *La Méduse*, bound for Senegal, became detached from the squadron in a storm and foundered off Cape Blanc. The captain, an ex-émigré, took to the boats, taking in tow a raft on which he put the bulk of his crew—149 souls in all. Under stress of weather, though some say the cables parted, it seems probable that the boats cut loose, leaving the wretched men on the raft to fend for themselves. Twelve days later the corvette *Argus* picked up fifteen survivors—all that remained of the crew of *le radeau de la Méduse*. Amongst the survivors were the surgeon, Corréard, and a seaman of some education, Savigny. These, at the end of 1817, published a detailed account of the incredible horrors—hunger, despair, murder and madness—of their ordeal. By 1821 the little brochure had run through four éditions and become a staple of liberal declamation. Géricault appears to have consulted frequently both authors as well as the ship's carpenter, all of whom he induced to pose. For the other figures he preferred to professional models his friends; and curious visitors to the Louvre may be amused to know that the adolescent body flung across the left side of the canvas is said to be that of Delacroix.

Naturally, the picture caused some commotion in circles which knew and cared nothing for painting; and Géricault complained, disingenuously enough, that the general public judged it on political rather than æsthetic grounds, that admirers turned out to be merely anti-Bourbon and detractors merely royalist. It may be doubted whether Géricault himself was much swayed by political passions, but seeing that of the two great compositions which were in train at the time of his death, one was to be called *The Slave Trade* and the other *French Soldiers Opening the Prisons of the Spanish Inquisition*, it is to be feared that he was not insensible to the profit to be drawn from them. Had these compositions been executed, they must have taken an important place in the career of the artist and the history of nineteenth century painting, not on account of the admirable sentiments insinuated, but because they would have been the ripe fruit of a revolutionary experience. This experience was to give a twist to the road that Géricault was opening, to modify his

technique, and open his eyes to an entirely new conception of art. Early in '19 he arrived in London; and in London he was to stay, not only fascinated by the life and thrilled by the art, but himself eagerly productive, for the best part of three years.

The influence of England on the art of Géricault cannot be gauged from the famous little racing picture in the Louvre. To appraise it you must study some of the pictures of horses in their stalls or at exercise which he produced during or just after his stay. Géricault had ever cherished an intense, and as it turned out unfortunate, passion for horses: it was as a result of a third riding accident within a few years that he died in January, 1824. From Constable he learned to observe them; and Constable it was who helped him to a technique wherewith to express his acute, one may almost say gloating, observations. This technique, however, was so modified by the intelligent admirer of Rubens and the Renaissance that his little studies often thrill one with a fat and glossy *matière* which seems to anticipate Courbet. Also, in England he picked up a taste for all that is most characteristic in human beings. This new passion reveals itself most happily in a series of lithographs of street-scenes and queer types executed and published in England—at that time the home of this comparatively unknown process; and to less advantage in the studies of idiots, in oil, done after his return to Paris. These last are, to my mind, of little value; but they display unmistakably the influence, ill-assimilated, of Hogarth and the English portrait painters. Nevertheless, the work of these last years with its rich color, succulent paint, and vivid characterization, suffices to convince me that, had he lived, Géricault, not Delacroix, would have become chief of that school which was to deliver French painting from the Greeks and the Romans.

Alive, Géricault was never hailed as a chief. Indeed, not till after his death was he hailed as a romantic, though his last picture, *L'Épave*, is furiously, and worse, in that manner. In proof of his loyalty to the scrool, disciplinarian professors are fond of quoting, and falsifying, as professors will, a saying of his—"David, le premier de nos artistes, le régénérateur de l'École," omitting to conclude the sentence which continues "*n'a dû qu'à son génie les succès . . . etc.*" They omit also to remind us of how Géricault, watching one day a child scribbling on the wall, exclaimed "*Quel dommage l'École gâtera tout cela.*" The fact is Géricault believed in absolute liberty and a catholic taste; so perhaps, after all, he would never have made a chief of any school or party. He lacked the necessary stupidity and intolerance. He was a man of the world rather than the conventicle, who set art above orthodoxy and life above loyalty. He was as much a gentleman as a painter. Such a one, you would say, could never become leader of a revolution, were it not that almost such another was Eugène Delacroix.

CLIVE BELL.

He's A Bear

MR. OSCAR BINNS opened his morning paper at the financial page. "Well, Elmer," he said, "the bull drive is still going strong."

Mr. Binns once dabbled lightly in stocks and since he was fifty-seven dollars ahead of the market on the day his broker blew up, he properly regards himself as a thwarted Napoleon of finance.

"There's been a great buying movement ever since election."

"How come those simps manage to snag all those green certificates?" asked the newsdealer innocently.

"Somebody sells them, of course."

"Then it would be just as easy on your face to call it a great selling movement," said Elmer. "Every time one bird blows himself to a share another one gets out from under."

"Ah, but prices have been going up for a month."

"Sure I know. The cheerleaders have got the edge on the grouches, but what's the answer in round numbers? Is Wall Street buying chips on a hunch or are the insiders unloading on the goats?"

"The public's in the market."

"So is spring lamb."

"A bull movement means prosperity."

"It does that little thing, for the wise guys that get theirs out of every sale. The brokers are putting on the old nose-bag all right. They're so busy they won't let the ink-slingers work crossword puzzles. They're jazzing up stocks that haven't give a wiggle since Rockefeller passed the eighty dollar mark."

"Every ticker has got a hot box, but does that raise my temperature any? Selling things to brokers won't nail the 'help wanted' sign on the gate. A wave of optimism is sweeping over the country—from the East River to Trinity Church—but the amount of steel rails, crude oil, Coca Cola and calico they gobble up down there wouldn't buy the workman's baby many shoes. Those tickerhounds don't produce and they don't consume. They only holler, 'I betcha.'"

"The Stock Exchange is a barometer of business."

"Barometer is right, Oscar. Did you ever know one of those things that wasn't on the blink? Ours always reads 'partly cloudy' but what's that got to do with the annual rainfall? A bull movement may mean there's a good time coming or it may mean that a lot of guys would rather buy into somebody else's game than take a chance on their own the way things look."

"Just the same the market is a very sensitive instrument," said the retired financier.

"Too sensitive, if you ask me. It's like that dumbdora, Sweet Alice, who wept with delight when you gave her a smile and trembled with fear at your frown. When they're playing them Wall Street blues you'd think we'll all be hanging out the

S. O. S. by Saturday night, and the next time you look everything is the cat's pajamas and the sky's the limit. They tell business to play dead or jump over the moon and business ups and does exactly what it was going to do anyhow. They might just as well be rolling the bones or playing the ponies.

"Look at 'em now, Oscar. Coolidge is elected and they can hardly believe their ears. Oh, boy! now we'll have high prices and low wages and a high tariff and a whale of a foreign trade. Take it from your Uncle Dudley, that's too big an order for one misses' size President to deliver."

"The railroads yammer, 'Now Washington will leave us alone.' Will the shippers leave 'em alone, too, or will they pester 'em to haul stuff? Manufacturers are grinning from ear to ear and return because nobody is going to butt in on their nice juicy tariff and they can get away with murder. Can they or can't they? You are entitled to two guesses."

"What I mean, Oscar, all this bullcon is played on a wishbone. The dope peddlers say things are all set to get rosy and I hope they are calling the turn. But steel isn't any better than it was last spring and textiles are a wet rag and motors are missing on one cylinder and the drummers say trade is rotten. Some things look Ritzie and some not so good."

"Spotty," said the technical Mr. Binns.

"As an expert, I don't qualify," Elmer went on. "I tried to horn into the Stock Exchange once when giving the old burg the double-o, but the big stiff at the door asked me did I have a ticket from a broker. I slipped him a ticket from a pawnbroker, but he gave me the pickle eye so I hoofed it down to the Aquarium instead. I saw a fish there that looked like Hon. Horace W. Witherspoon."

"All the same I soak up a lot of this hop from the financial sharps. When we're off of politics there's a dull spot in the news between the Army-Navy game and spring training. Sometimes I get so desperate I read Times editorials. So I trail along with the market once in a while and place my bets on the back of an envelope. I'm no shoestring speculator, either; I sling a mean eversharp. Probably I owe the game ten thousand berries in stage money right now. And I can't get it out of my bean that there's a good deal of that phony stuff splashing around Broad and Wall, too. They can't tell me people are coughing up real smackers for all that junk."

"No yowl of mine will ever throw a scare into the tape fiends, but if I had a wad of jack and wanted to make a killing, I'd sell now while the stock-absorbers are doing their Christmas shopping early. My hunch is that those cloud-hoppers are ringing the old joybell too hard. Something is due for a crack."

"You're a bear," said Mr. Binns severely.

"I'm a bear," said Elmer proudly.

FELIX RAY. 1