

Good essay about the painting the raft of meduca

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Theodore Gericault's *The Raft of Medusa* is a canonical piece of art created in the early 19th century - in the wake of Romanticism in France.

Romanticism was not a style, nor was it a manifestation of a singular idea. Instead, Romanticism was a movement, characterized by artists' transfer of personality and mind onto their painting, including social criticism in the best way it could be presented in an art work.

French Romanticism closely followed the Neoclassical movement, which explains Gericault's being strongly influenced by Michelangelo's work (Durbin). Many critics also stated that the painting was influenced by the work of Caravaggio, mainly due to its gloom and somber color scheme. *The Raft of Medusa* - 193 inches high, 282 inches wide - depicts a tragic shipwreck of the French ship the *Medusa* in 1816, which captain was appointed by the government and, thus, gave the French a strong ground to blame the French government for the deaths of over a hundred and thirty-five people (Slavkin). While many contemporary artists depicted historical events, Gericault found a subject for his painting in a recent event, thus revolutionizing the depiction of real events (Spiegelman). The influence of both neoclassic Michelangelo and the Romantic Movement is obvious in the painting with the idealized bodies and romanticized interpretation of a deathly tragedy depicted in the art work. His natural, horrifying and dramatic depiction of the starved and perished passengers, who were less fortunate to be off-loaded on the raft rather than on the boat as those more lucky, is prominent from the first look at the painting. Even without a slightest knowledge on the background of the depicted story, it is possible to feel the desperate and pessimistic mood and emotions conveyed through the

painting.

However, only knowing the pre-story and the governmental impact on the tragedy is it possible to embrace the message conveyed in the painting, since Gericault, as a said initiator of the new movement, simplified the story depicted in the painting and meant to provoke the viewers to interpret the scene and the full scope of emotions within it on their own (Slavkin). The Medusa, a French draft, was on an expedition to repossess the colony of Senegal from Britain when it hit the sandbar and the captain denied the crew any possible attempts to throw extra-weight – cannons – in order to save the flagship (Durbin). Later, this “ultimate failure of refloating operation” was said to “underscore the fatal inadequacy of the leadership” (Miles). This accusation later progressed into common blame of the government. The poorer passengers were forced onto a raft, which was then cut loose from one of the safeboat loaded with wealthier people (Durbin), thus left in the open water and stormy weather with little food supplement, abandoned, hungry and desperate. The conditions the passengers were left at eventually resulted in cannibalism, chaos, suicides and murders – the deeds which invert the human nature inside out and are resorted to only in the cases of utmost despair. The artist managed to depict this horrifying mood perfectly. Everything from the heavy gloomy clouds in the sky, violent, horrific waves crushing onto the raft, to the sail pulled by the strong wind suggests that the situation is hopeless – everything, except for those few people on the back of the raft, who wave to the horizon in the hope of the rescue.

The Raft of the Medusa depicts a particular moment of that deathly journey, when the people on the raft had just seen the Argus – their eventual savior

boat – and were longing for final rescue and the end of suffering (Spiegelman). And much had they suffered, indeed. Cannibalism, induced by hunger and despair, depression, long waiting for rescue to no avail, deaths and uncontrollable chaos are all prominently depicted by the figures of survivors and the artist's choice of dark, gloomy color scheme.

A strong political background which the painting indeed possesses makes the art work relatively hard to percept by a common viewer, since the depicted scene is closely tied to the correspondent tragic event in history, which the French government was massively blamed for (Hudson). The government commanded the convoy to reach Senegal as soon as possible, which resulted in the flagship Medusa taking a straight route. This navigational mistake lead to the Medusa hitting a sandbar, as described in the book composed by the two survivors, Alexander Correard and Henry Savigny (Hudson). The fact that the French regime wanted to suppress the story and saw it as “ a stick to beat the incompetent royalist old guard running France” (Hudson) proves the pronounced crisis this deathly tragedy provoked within a society. The fact that the navigational route was commanded by an incompetent governmental appointee Chaumareys served as another proof of governmental fault (Slavkin). The painting is said to be paradoxically undermining and supporting its critique of the government at the same time (Slavkin).

The mood on the front of the painting is depressing and horrifying – starved figures, mourning over the dead; apathy; resignation; dead passengers slowly drowning into the water; a dead figure in the right bottom of the painting partially fit into the art work signifying the pronounced

insignificance the government put on those unfortunate people when sending them to that risky mission. It is heavy with the critique and reproaches of the contemporary governmental regime ready to sacrifice the innocent life of people for the sake of fulfilling governmental ambitions and acquiring territory control. The back of the raft, however, shows hope and contrasts the front of the painting. The survivors are waving the pieces of clothes to the Argus – their light of hope far on the horizon. The little dot of the Argus seems to have recharged their spirits and undermines the critique of the government – all in all, these people will be saved from the lengthy, tragic mission. While the placement of the dead and suffering passengers on the front of the painting may seem as an emphasis on the shipwreck tragedy rather than rescue of the survivors, the painting does not necessarily has to be read from the front to the back (Slavkin). Just as the historical and political events can be read both backward and forward, showing their background as well as the aftermath, the painting, closely connected to the contemporary event of the artist, can be also read both ways. Moreover, the only way to depict the Argus and turn the survivors' figures toward the savior ship was to place those full of hope and attempts to save themselves on the back of the raft.

The Draft of the Medusa is said to be both realistic and romantic painting (Edward). It signifies for the painting to depict a contemporary event in its realistic dimension and infusing it with author's interpretations and emotional power. Within this context, the painting fit well into the realm of that time – while many other artists depicted mythological and historical events, Gericault had the courage to depict the most recent even of his time

and include the lines of government critique into it. Louis XIII, however, spoke very pleasantly of Géricault. Either denying the governmental role in appointing the captain, due to whose inadequate refloating decision the passengers of the Medusa were forced to load into safeboats and onto the raft; or denying the presence of the outright critique in Géricault's painting, Louis XIII could not deny the crass machinations of society due to which the poorer people died of hunger and suicides on the abandoned raft merely because they were of lower strata and could not take a place in safeboats along with the wealthier passengers (Durbin).

Thus, the background of the event and the common critique of the government that closely followed the unveil of Géricault's painting prove that the artist included criticism into his art work and painted The Raft of the Medusa in both realistic and romantic ways. On the other hand, Géricault, who was said to be a solid subverter of the Romantic tradition, might have not aimed to underline criticism and provoke the masses for critique against the government. The artist integrated his interpretation of the contemporary event into the painting and produced a masterpiece, leaving it for the viewer to decide whether or not some political criticism was included into the canvas. All in all, there is no denial to the fact that the painting was indeed closely connected with the historical events of that time, and, until now, it makes the viewer go back in time and read the hidden feelings and emotions through the brushstrokes of the art work.

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