Constable to Delacroix

Théodore Géricault **Severed Heads** about 1818
The National Museum of Fine Arts, Stockholm

5 February – 11 May 2003
British Art and the French Romantics

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TATE BRITAIN

Notes for Teachers

by Miquette Roberts

The argument of the exhibition

The French discovery of British art

This is an exhibition created to illustrate an idea. Its curators believe that, after the battle of Waterloo, French interest in the landscape painting and literature of Britain changed the course of art in France. This is a new argument since most people think of French art as leading the way, culminating in the innovations associated with French Impressionism. The curators of this exhibition claim, however, that Impressionism only came into being as a result of discoveries by earlier French artists of such features in British art as the animated paint surface of John Constable's full-sized oil sketches, the fresh colours of R P Bonington's works on paper and the English tradition of recording the everyday appearance of nature in watercolour.

The process of discovery of things English began as soon as Napoleon's final defeat in 1815 allowed for travel across the Channel. Artists as well as tourists were then able to explore one another's countries which they had not seen for years. Two government sponsored exhibitions held in the Louvre, the Salons of 1824 and 1827, became known as the British Salons because they contained so much British art. French enthusiasm for this work led to a new focus on landscape which had previously only been the setting for figure compositions. Eugène Delacroix was so much struck by the broken colour and flickering brushwork of John Constable's *Hay Wain* 1821, exhibited at the first of these Salons, that he is thought to have repainted the foreground of his *Scenes from the Massacres of Chios* 1824 to achieve a similar effect. In 1825 he travelled to London where his friends Thales and Copley Fielding were watercolourists. Following their example he painted watercolours of London seen from its outskirts.

This exhibition is relevant to many curriculum areas including French, History and English literature as well as Art. Ideally teachers will make a pre-visit to decide what focus to take when they bring their class. For free tickets to our Education Private View on Friday 7 February from 18.30, please phone 020 7887 3959.

The French discovery of British literature

While many French artists placed human struggle at the forefront of their art in larger than life figures taken from the Bible and mythology, their source of inspiration moved to British literature in the writings of, for example, Shakespeare, Byron and Scott. But the most dramatic change of all, highlighted in this exhibition, is the move away from the celebration of a contemporary hero, Napoleon, to the realisation that there are no lasting heroes. Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* 1819, represented the death of the hero writ large. His painting continues to hang in the Louvre but a full-scale reproduction made by academicians in 1859 is on view at Tate Britain and Géricault may well prove to be the real star of this exhibition.

These notes trace changing attitudes to the concept of heroism brought about by the Napoleonic wars but many other approaches would be possible, from the study of the technique of watercolour to the illustration of themes in English literature. Primary teachers could focus on the drama of the Raft of the Medusa and compare the story it tells with the subject of marine paintings not only in the exhibition but in room 13 of the collection displays. Literacy skills will be developed through storytelling and links will be found in the exhibition to themes such as travel, transport and the elements.

French and British art before Waterloo

Before considering the cross-fertilisation of ideas that took place post 1815, let us consider the kind of art that was being produced in each country at the beginning of the nineteenth-century.

1 France

Paintings of heroes on display in the Grande Galerie of the Louvre

From the start of the Revolution of 1789 and the downfall of the Bourbon monarchy, France was in upheaval. Napoleon Bonaparte, at least at the outset of his career, had appeared as a man who could bring leadership to his country and order to its administration. It was thought that through his conquests he would bring fresh glory to France. For as long as Napoleon remained in power the hopes invested in him found expression in the art of a succession of politically engaged artists. Leading painters of the day documented highlights of his career on vast canvases which are now displayed in the Grande Galerie of the Louvre. These works are both too large and too fragile to be moved but they are important for what happened next. In *The Coronation of Napoleon* 1808, for example, J L David celebrated the emperor's self glorification, an act that upset Ludwig von Beethoven so greatly that he withdrew the dedication of his *Eroica* symphony to Napoleon. David's assistant and successor was Antoine-Jean Gros, a man so full of uncertainty about himself and his period that he eventually committed suicide. Although those of his canvases which chronicle the later stages of Napoleon's career remain heroic, the artist never forgot the human being concealed within his hero. *Napoleon visiting the Plague Victims at Jaffa* 1804 shows the emperor's personal courage in daring to touch an infected sore on one of the sufferers' bodies, while the subject of *Napoleon on the Battlefield of Eylau* 1808 is shown exhausted by battle, bringing doctors to look after wounded Prussian soldiers. (This battle had been a pyrrhic victory: nearly 25,000 died at Eylau and the emperor's unquiet gaze may well be the result of self-questioning). The foreground of the canvas is filled by larger than life figures of the dead and wounded which vie with the figure of the emperor for our attention.

War and heroism

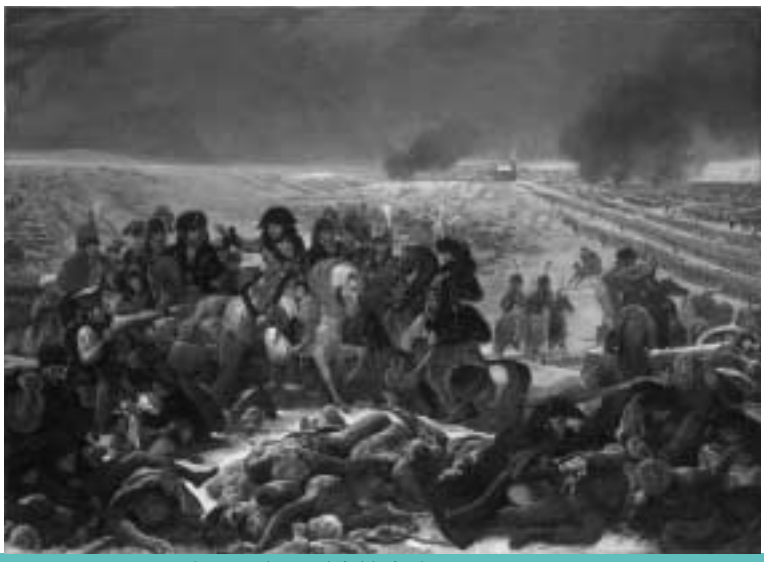
Look at battle scenes by Turner and Gros.
Think about artist's attitude to war and to the leaders who take their troops into conflict and often to death.

- **Can you guess the artist's attitude from the way he paints the battle?**

Look at Antoine-Jean Gros' preparatory sketch for the Louvre painting of *Napoleon on the Battlefield of Eylau* 1807 Toledo Museum of Art

- **What attracts your attention more – the Emperor on horseback or the suffering soldiers?**
- **How do you interpret Napoleon's expression?**
- **Do you think this picture glorifies war?**

Courage, glory and compassion had traditionally been exemplified in art by reference to heroes of the distant, often classical, past. The innovation of these paintings is that they drew attention to the heroism of the present day, which, by association, was seen as equal to that of the past. These were modern history paintings, the genre considered to be the highest form of art because it treated profound human emotions whose contemplation was capable of ennobling the spectator. All other categories of art including landscape and portraiture were considered to be inferior.



Antone-Jean Gros **Napoleon on the Battlefield of Eylau** 1807
Toledo Museum of Art

2 England
Everyday scenes

England had been at war with France with short intervals of peace from 1793 until Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo in 1815. In contrast to the experience of the French, however, everyday life in England had been largely unaffected by the distant war. This is reflected in artists' choice of subject matter, very little of which relates to war. The gulf that existed between the way soldiers experienced life on the battlefield and the way ordinary people reacted to news of war while leading peaceful lives in England is the subject of David Wilkie's *The Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Waterloo Dispatch* 1822. Interestingly the choice of subject matter had been suggested by the Duke of Wellington himself. Unlike Napoleon he did not want a work of self-aggrandisement. Instead he asked for a scene of old pensioners reminiscing outside an inn in the company of younger serving soldiers. This work made a profound impression on Théodore Géricault because it focused on ordinary people's response to momentous events. He saw it in progress in Wilkie's studio in the spring of 1821 and on its second showing at the Royal Institution it was also seen by Eugène Delacroix and R P Bonington.

Because it depicts ordinary people rather than acts of heroism, Wilkie's painting would not have been considered a history painting. History paintings were produced in England but they were not as popular a genre in this country as portraits.

David Wilkie **The Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Waterloo Dispatch** 1822
Apsley House, courtesy of the Trustees of the V&A. Photo V&A Picture Library

Compare two war paintings: Wilkie's *Chelsea Pensioners* and Gros' *Napoleon on the Battlefield of Eylau*.

- **What is the difference in mood in the two paintings?**
- **How does Wilkie convey the fact that war is a distant, almost unreal concept for the people in his painting?**
- **Compare the body language of the figures in the paintings. What kind of shapes do the bodies describe?**

The Battle of Waterloo and its consequences

J M W Turner's *The Field of Waterloo* 1818, is an unusual example of history painting in that it has no heroes, only the dead and the dying and frantic women searching through inert bodies to find their loved ones. Turner attracted a great deal of criticism in England for this picture, a rude awakening at a time when most people were celebrating victory. Turner knew that the Duke of Wellington had achieved his victory at enormous cost to both sides, as his quotation in the Academy catalogue makes clear. 'Friend, foe, in one red burial blent' is taken from Byron's *Childe Harold*. Byron's compassion for the slain of both sides had likewise been condemned by Sir Walter Scott. The dark horror of *The Field of Waterloo* marks the culmination of a series of war paintings, begun by French artists like Gros, in which suffering and loss of life are made plain and the concept of heroism questioned.

Heroic English aristocrats

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the easiest way for an English artist to make a living was by painting portraits of the rich and aristocratic. In the paintings of Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769–1830), President of the Royal Academy, the nobility of the art stemmed from the aristocratic appearance of the sitters. Théophile Gautier drew attention to *Master Charles William Lambton*, exhibited in the 1827 Salon, pointing out that the sitter's 'pearly visage (is) so sombre and clear (that) it conjures the look of the young Byron'. Figures like this looked like heroes even though their appearance was not necessarily backed up by valorous deeds. Aided and abetted by poet Charles Baudelaire's writings in praise of dandyism, French artists turned from heroism on the battlefield to the glamour of good looks and of stylishness of dress. During his visit to London in 1825, Eugène Delacroix visited Sir Thomas Lawrence in his studio and came away with an admiration for the artist which was, at least in part, due to Lawrence's good looks.

J M W Turner **The Field of Waterloo** 1818
Tate

The modern hero is the dandy

Charles Baudelaire was therefore greatly assisted in his championship of the art of Eugène Delacroix by the fact that his subject was also handsome and may have had aristocratic blood. He looked and behaved as if he were 'un parfait gentleman'. And of course the home of such gentlemen was England. Beau Brummell was just one example of a man whose fame owed everything to his tailor. Hence Delacroix's eagerness to promote 'the taste of English style in footwear and clothing' with the help of his friend the British artist R P Bonington. On his return from England in 1826 Delacroix painted his ideal of the English gentleman in *Louis-Auguste Schwiter* 1826–30 which was a tribute to the portrait style of Lawrence. The demeanour of Schwiter, who was a 21 year old painter, is that of a dandy aspiring to perfection through the simplicity of his impeccable dress. What a disappointment for Delacroix then, when Turner visited him in 1829, to discover that far from having the appearance of 'un gentleman', the English artist looked like a 'farmer with his rough black coat and heavy boots.' It was a pity that Turner's ungainly appearance and clumsiness of speech prevented a friendship between two artists who shared so many interests, not least their fascination with colour. Appearance was very important in an age where people believed that the way you looked was the way you were.

Eugene Delacroix **Louis-Auguste Schwiter** 1826–30
National Gallery, London

Find examples of men who appear like heroes because they are well dressed. Compare the fashionable men and women of the early nineteenth-century with today's fashionable people.

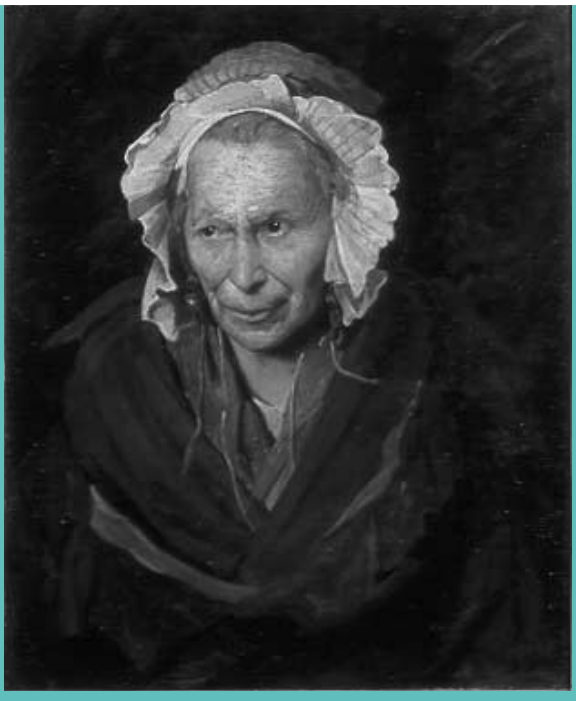
- **Do they have any points in common? Would Louis-Auguste Schwiter look out of place among today's celebs. in the Ivy restaurant or in *Hello* magazine?**
- **Can you understand why Baudelaire thought it a virtue to be fashionable?**

The face reveals all

At the time it was believed that there was a strong correlation between appearance and personality. Features like the shape of a head or the expression in the eyes could provide a clue to personality disorders. For this reason psychiatrist Etienne Georget thought that by studying the face of the woman in Géricault's *Monomania: Portrait of a Excessively Jealous Woman* c1822, he would be able to work out what was wrong with her. For that reason, he commissioned Géricault to paint ten portraits of his clients to use as demonstrations in his courses on pathology.

Human beings were the vehicle through which the French had traditionally explored qualities such as ambition, heroism and sacrifice both on stage and on canvas. The humans engaged in moral struggle in JL David's paintings have much in common with heroes and heroines in the seventeenth-century plays of Pierre Corneille where the choice is always one of love or duty. Even after the heroic times embodied in the person and career of Napoleon Bonaparte were over, people in the grip of strong emotion remained centre stage.

Théodore Géricault **Monomania: Portrait of an Excessively Jealous Woman** c1822
Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon-Studio Basset



Heroes from English literature in French painting

Napoleon's downfall marked the death of the real-life hero for French painters. Instead they looked to literature for examples of the kind of dramas which recent French history had provided. All sources of subject matter were of equal value to Delacroix so long as they allowed him to explore human nature and destiny. He shared a love of Byron's poetry with Turner who felt a kinship with the poet whose sentiments he felt to be so close to his own. Once they were able to journey across the Channel again, the English found renewed pleasure in travel stories and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* 1812–18 owed its popularity to this trend. A market developed for images of places tourists might visit and Turner's views of the Loire and Seine of the 1820s were commissioned by Charles Heath with this clientele in mind.

Théodore Géricault **Horse frightened by Lightning** c1813–14

Artists at this time were interested in naturalist and evolutionary theory, with both Géricault and Delacroix finding parallels in human and animal behaviour. The critic Théodore Sylvestre even compared Delacroix's appearance to that of the tigers he was so skilled at representing. Géricault, who loved horses and riding, died at the early age of 33 following a riding accident. French artists admired English animal painters such as Stubbs and Sawrey Gilpin.

- **Look for paintings of horses by Géricault and Delacroix. What (super)human qualities do you think they admired/envied in the animals they painted?**

Nature as hero in nineteenth-century English landscape painting

While wealthy Englishmen occupied the entire space of a large canvas in the portraits they commissioned, humans in British landscape paintings tended to be depicted as small, insignificant in comparison with the vastness of lakes and mountains, and powerless against the elements. When you look at subjects like A L Girodet's *Deluge* 1806 in the Louvre, where nature and the elements are the source of the drama, it is surprising how little space is given over to wind and sea. The entire focus of the artist is on human struggle. That relationship between man and nature is reversed in English dramas at sea by John Martin, Francis Danby and JMW Turner. Their awe of nature gave it prime importance in their work. As the French became aware of their work as well as of that of the many English watercolourists, they began to accord more attention and more weight to the landscape element in their work.

Find Delacroix's *Combat between the Giaour and Hassan* 1826.

- **Can you work out what is going on?**

The subject comes from Byron's Oriental Tales. It tells of a battle in the 17th-century between a Christian warrior (or Giaour) and a Turkish adversary who has killed the Giaour's mistress. The Giaour wins the battle but not the return to life of his mistress. Delacroix felt that the colour, composition and brushwork of a painting should alert you to its mood from afar.

- **Has he succeeded here? Could you sense the bloodthirstiness of the subject from afar?**
- **Compare the painting with another of the same subject by A-M Colin. Which tells the story more clearly?**

The Death of the Hero

British art allowed French painters to discover new subject matter in nature but heroic figures did not instantly disappear from their work as Delacroix's paintings show. While he found heroes in literature, the boldest move to kill off the concept of heroism at its roots had been made by an older artist much admired by Delacroix. Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* so shocked Delacroix when he first saw it in the confined space of the older artist's studio that he ran, heart pounding, out into the street. The *Raft of the Medusa* struck the last nail in the coffin of the ideal of heroism. Words used by Baudelaire to describe the art of Delacroix seem made for the Raft: 'everything bears witness to the eternal, incorrigible barbarism of man'. It is a work which forces attention on the least agreeable aspects of human nature which include cowardice, cruelty and the desperate need to survive even if that means eating the flesh of another person.

Pierre-Désiré Guillemet and Etienne-Antoine-Eugène Ronjat, after Théodore Géricault
The Raft of the Medusa 1859–1860. Musée de Picardie, Amiens

This painting illustrates the moment that a ship appeared in the distance offering hope to the people stranded on the raft that they would be rescued. The ship did not see them and sailed away.

- **How does the artist suggest the mounting excitement aboard the raft?**

Look at the copy of *The Raft of the Medusa*

The Story of the Raft of the Medusa

At the end of the Napoleonic wars France had very little left of its empire. The ship *Medusa* had been sent to Senegal at the head of a convoy carrying soldiers and official settlers to re-establish that country as a French colony. But the ship ran aground off the West Coast of Africa on 2 July 1816 and was abandoned while its captain, de Chaumereys, with his crew and well over 200 passengers, boarded lifeboats. There were not sufficient of these for 149 soldiers, sailors and passengers. They had to climb on to a makeshift raft which was attached to the lifeboats by ropes. The ropes became untied, leaving those aboard the raft stranded for thirteen days with neither food nor water. By the fourth day those who were still alive had begun to eat their dead comrades. P A de Praviel's *Le Radeau de la Méduse*, published in 1818 to discredit the survivors' account of their ordeal, described them 'lying on the boards, hands and mouths still dripping with the blood of their unhappy victims, shreds of flesh hanging from the raft's mast.' By the eighth day there were only fifteen people left alive and of these five more soon died. Among the eventual survivors, Henri Savigny, the ship's surgeon, and Alexandre Corréard, an engineer and geographer, were incensed by the official cover-up which had exculpated the captain simply because he had royal connections. In 1817, they published their own version of events, a dramatic account of their experiences which turned the story of the *Medusa* into a national scandal, and that only a year after Waterloo. Critic Auguste Jal expressed feelings of national guilt when he wrote 'It is our entire society that is embarked on Medusa's raft.'

Look at the copy of *The Raft of the Medusa*

Working in pairs, describe to one another the people on the raft.

- **How many are dead, how many are dying?**
  Can you spot any cannibalism?
  Can you guess who is likely to survive?
- **Make a sketch of just one of the figures. What is his condition?**
  What made you choose him?
- **Imagine you are the captain of the *Medusa*. How would you feel when you saw the painting?**

By early 1818, Géricault had met the two men, whose account he had read, to hear their story and to sketch their portraits. He chose to illustrate the moment when hope turned to despair as a ship called *The Argus* was seen on the horizon but failed to approach the raft. Those aboard *The Argus* did not notice the raft and only returned to rescue the victims some days later. In his painting, Géricault created an upward swell of bodies leading the eye of the spectator from the dead and hopeless lying on the raft to the eager outstretched bodies of those who have caught sight of the distant boat. At the apex of the triangle formed by the figures is a man standing on a chest supported by his companions, waving aloft a piece of cloth like a flag to attract the attention of those on board *The Argus*. The mounting optimism contained in the upward sweep of bodies is counteracted by the dead bodies hanging off the sides of the raft and by the sunset sky which could be interpreted as the death of hope. Géricault involves spectators in the hope and then despair of the figures because the edge of the raft comes close to the edge of the canvas and makes us feel as if we were there squashed up against the survivors.

Look at the copy of *The Raft of the Medusa*

Choose a figure on the raft

- **write/tell how you feel as the *Argus* approaches**
- **report the story of the Raft from the point of view of the government trying to cover up the scandal/from the point of view of the survivors**
- **draw one of the bodies of the people on the raft as it might really have looked without eating or drinking for several days (see cover image of severed head)**

A subject with no heroes

The painting of the Raft accords well with the heroic canvases of the Grande Galerie where it hangs because of its massive scale (24ft long by 18ft high) and because the whole focus of the work is one of human struggle. The people look heroic because of the way their bodies are painted; inspired by the classicism of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* which Géricault had admired when he saw it in 1816/17. This is an instance where the artist enhances the gruelling nature of his subject matter by disappointing our expectations of heroism. There are no heroes in this exposure of human negligence and callousness. A closer look at the Michelangelesque bodies reveals the greenish pallor of their skin – a result of Géricault's inspection of the dead in Paris morgues.

Although shipwreck was a popular subject for nineteenth century art, the cause of disaster usually lay outside human control in the overwhelming might of the elements. Here the disaster could have been avoided if the captain had made sure that everyone was rescued.

In 1820 the *Raft of the Medusa* was exhibited in the Egyptian Hall in London by an entrepreneur called William Bullock and 40,000 people went to see it, paying a one shilling entrance fee and sixpence for a description of the work. Géricault followed his painting to England where he received a percentage of the takings from the exhibition.

French influence on British art: the impact of the Raft on English painters

Curators believe that the pyramidal composition of Turner's *A Disaster at Sea* c1835 shows that he must have seen *The Raft of the Medusa* when it was exhibited in London. His disaster is just as shocking as Géricault's: the captain of the *Amphitrite* abandoned his cargo of female convicts bound for New South Wales when the ship ran aground off Boulogne. Francis Danby's *Sunset at Sea after a Storm* 1824 is an even more interesting testimony to the fame of Géricault's painting because Danby painted his version from hearsay – the testimony of a fellow Bristolian who had seen and described the *Raft* to him. When Danby saw the actual painting in the Louvre five years later, he described it as 'the finest and grandest historical picture I have ever seen.' The two English paintings are totally different in character from the French. Neither adopts the Frenchman's heroic format. It is the strength of the waves rather than the people that triumphs. Nonetheless they demonstrate that cultural influence was not one-sided.

J M W Turner **A Disaster at Sea** c1835
Tate

Compare Danby's *Sunset at Sea* and Turner's *Fire at Sea* with Géricault's Raft.

- **Which picture involves you most? Why?**
- **Which image gives most space to the sea/the raging elements? How does the artist's focus affect your response to the work? Are you more moved by people or by nature?**
- **Géricault studied the movement of the waves at Le Havre in order to paint the sea around the raft. Do you notice the waves in the copy of his painting on display at Tate Britain and are they life-like?**
- **Turner illustrated an instance of British inhumanity to show that all nationalities, not only the French, are guilty of such crimes. This exhibition puts forward a British claim to have influenced the most famous movement in French art. How much do you think this really matters even if the curators are right?**