

THE DERBY AT EPSOM - Théodore Géricault (1791 – 1824)



Horses were a recurrent theme in Géricault's art. He painted them in various settings: everyday life, antiquity, war, races. Their impetuous nature mirrored his own fiery temper.

In 1819 his masterpiece "Le Radeau de la Méduse" was the butt of such disparaging criticism that Géricault, bitterly hurt, sought refuge in England. There he became acquainted with English landscape painting and fell for that staple of British painting: horse racing scenes.

Commissioned by horse-dealer Adam Elmore the painting entitled "Horse Race" is also known as "The 1821 Derby at Epsom". It shows the influence of English painting on Géricault. The overcast sky looming low on the horizon owes much to Constable.

The horses no longer display heavy muscular frames reminiscent of the Antique or of Rubens.



Géricault: "Course de chevaux libres à Rome " 1817

They are modelled along the archetype of English horse painting.



John Archibald Woodside Sr : "A Race at Bush Hill" 1816

Géricault aims at rendering speed and movement regardless of actual anatomy. It is as if the viewer was witnessing the different stages of the race in a single glance, but with a time lag of a fraction of a second between the horses' necks and their rear ends. It is a snapshot, a frozen frame. Indeed it could well be the mandatory photo of the finishing line in a modern race. Except that photography, chronophotography, to be precise, that ancestor of cinematographic techniques, demonstrated in the 1880s what Géricault could not know in the early 19th century: a galloping horse never has four stretched legs at the same time and always keeps one hoof on the ground.

Géricault's painting was purchased by the Louvre in 1866. I think that contemporary newspapers must have reported on the event, illustrating it with engravings. For it is quite obvious that Lauronce worked from the engravings of the paintings and not from the paintings themselves: printed copies would have been widely available from magazines, catalogues of the Salon or other printers. Lauronce was a talented draughtsman and probably had a liking for painting, but I can't imagine him picking up a sketch-book and going to the Louvre to copy paintings. What a waste of time, better used at supervising the busy printing press.



On my fan, Géricault's painting is printed in shades of brown and dull red on cream-coloured silk satin.

The upper part of the painting has been omitted, drastically reducing the strength of the scene. The overcast sky with the conflicting elements of rain and sunshine no longer echoes the struggle between the competitors.

The horses and their riders are more faithfully depicted, suspended in mid-air like large airborne ships. On the fan the folds of the leaf sharply reduce the unrealistic, elongated shapes of the horses.

The lower part of the fan leaf is much different from the painting. Géricault simply painted the racing track, quite rough compared to the even turf of modern day racing tracks. But Lauronce has the space filled with the same elements found on his gallant scenes: foliage, flowers, even the sturdy wood fence that is the perfect place to put the 'A.Lauronce' signature.

This display of *galanterie* in a sports scene is enhanced by the unknown fan maker's choice of having the leaf embroidered in chain-stich, framing the exerting strength of the horses and the struggle for victory with scrolls and flowers. I am not sure the result is convincing. It seems to me that the leaf would have looked better without any attempt at making it 'pretty'.

However one feels about the aesthetic qualities of this fan, one has to agree that it is an invaluable document in the study of Lauronce's work. It suddenly sheds a different light on the comment made by the jury of the 1878 International Exhibition mentioning the "paintings of the famous masters", which sounded ill-suited when referring to paintings by Rougeron or Pujol, but which quite aptly describes Géricault.
