



Truth



Debate

Paradox

Courbet
Géricault



“Man is born free;
and everywhere
he is in chains”

Jean-Jacques
Rousseau

Romanticism (Realism)

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From the Museum

Theodore Géricault: The Raft of the Medusa: 1819;

Louvre, Paris

Gustave Courbet: The Painter's Studio: 1855;

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The Raft of the Medusa is an iconic, history-style painting of a then contemporary shipwreck (French frigate *Méduse*, June 17, 1816) that paradoxically helped realise the truth of the actual event despite widespread news coverage. Here, the Neoclassicism of the Enlightenment gives way to the passion filled realism of Romanticism. Classical pyramidal composition is no longer accompanied by an ideal beauty but by dark turbulence and the cruel reality of the ever-present scramble for life over piled-up corpses. Géricault's violent visual portrayal was a triumph of feeling that infused the debate regarding the shipwreck with a visceral aesthetic that dramatically widened the lens of truth through which society saw itself. Historically, post-Napoleonic France was “adrift” at the time and “*the whole of society was aboard the Medusa*”: from the incompetent captain to the corrupt system that had appointed him; from the lifeboats reserved for the wealthy to the poor souls left behind to fend for themselves; from the disaster of the shipwreck to the nightmare of animal brutality and cannibalism on the raft (with few survivors left to tell the tale). The painting stands as a synthetic view of human life abandoned to its fate and as such fascinated and upset the public, divided critics and generated much debate.

Géricault decided to represent the very moment when “*the ruin of the raft may be said to be complete*” and the possibility of rescue fleetingly presents itself on the horizon (the *Argus*). The whole composition is oriented from desperation towards hope in a rightward ascent culminating in a flag-waving black figure (nature *versus* nurture, natural law and slavery debates). The dramatic foreshortening of the raft on the left draws the viewer in whereas the orientation of the raft's apex upwards and to the right thrusts him forwards. The elongation of the painting through space and time and its contextual span all create an impression that “one truth” is being used to address “other truths” and perhaps even “the whole truth”; thereby inviting us to debate definitions of truth in terms of absolutes and relativities. The simultaneous existence of two contradictory states therefore creates paradox that can lead to higher truth and more grounded understanding. Hence, paradox is “truth standing on its head to attract attention” and truth is “paradox crying out to be transcended”.

Whereas Géricault's passionate temperament and disregard for convention meant that he extensively searched and prepared for his ideal “shock” realism subject, Courbet broke the rules by simply adopting every-day reality as his new aesthetic. In *The Painter's Studio*, the world “turns around” Courbet as he works on a landscape while facing away from a nude model (traditional academic art symbol); surrounded by people from all levels of society (left) and friends/associates (right). The painter's new role as contemporary historian, commentator and critic are now consolidated with his new relationship with clients, colleagues and the citizenry. Like Géricault, Courbet was a gifted and influential realist painter; however, he was also a successful entrepreneur fully immersed in the business of his society and a political activist during a period of significant social and political turbulence and unrest. In the end, both men lived, breathed and painted their own form of realism – interested in the paradox of many truths and therefore a slave to none.

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