2 Théodore Géricault (1791–1824) on Genius and Academies

Géricault was one of the foremost representatives of the Romantic tendency in French painting. His reputation was established with The Raft of the Medusa, exhibited in the Paris Salon in 1819. This was on the scale of the largest history painting — almost five metres high by over seven wide. Its theme, however, was the aftermath of a recent disaster at sea, and the sufferings of those involved. Among some one hundred large paintings in the Salon that year it was the only one not officially commissioned. In 1820 Géricault arranged for the work to be exhibited in England, with viewers charged an entry fee. The following text asserts his belief in the creative power of individual genius. It was probably intended as part of a longer work, which the artist was prevented from pursuing by his early death. While Géricault stresses the importance of David's role in purifying the style of French art after the ancien régime, he makes clear that the older painter's legacy is now exhausted. The artists of the future will not be those who adhere to the programmes of study defined by the Academy, but rather those who maintain their individuality and originality in spite of them. Strictures against formal teaching were by no means novel by the 1820s, but the concerns Géricault raises were typical of a growing conflict between academic principles and concepts of genius and individuality at a time when the authority of classical canons was waning. The Prix de Rome was awarded to the most promising graduate of the École des Beaux-Arts on the basis of a historical composition, securing for its holder the opportunity for further study in Italy and thus the promise of a respectable career. It was central to a system of academic training and reward. Géricault competed for the prize in 1816, but was excluded. The text was found in a notebook after his death. It was cited by L. Batisser in his 'Biographie de Géricault', Revue de XIX Siècle, Paris, 1842, and was published from the original manuscript in C. Clément, Géricault, étude biographique et critique, Paris: Didier et Cie, 1868. The following version is taken from the latter in the 'definitive' edition of 1879, pp. 239–49, translated for this volume by Jonathan Murphy.

For an unusual reason, the superiority of the old schools of Italy, Flanders and Holland is so widely recognized that one can always refer to it without running the risk of wounding the pride of any modern school, even if we no longer praise them to the skies and recommend a long apprenticeship in their tradition to anyone wishing to pursue a career in the arts. In a rather ridiculous fashion, it was long supposed that the geographical climate was a major factor in the development of these schools; that Italy, for example, produced talented draughtsmen in the same way that the Americas produce coffee, and that the dampness of Holland was a necessary precondition for the creation of good colourists. A swift riposte, as effective as any erudite refutation of this ridiculous assertion, would be to say that today, Italy is no longer the equal of France, and her art schools are no longer centred around drawing, and that while Holland no longer produces great colourists, her dank mists remain unchanged.

So I will try here to assign a quite different cause to the greatness that these different countries have successively achieved. The arts flourished in Venice when it was a rich and powerful republic; Holland, when master of the seas, equally marked her greatness with masterpieces in all the arts. Yet the diminution of their power and wealth was inevitably followed by a disappearance of artistic talent. The most temperate climes, with the coming of liberty, have seen the talents whose birth they witnessed disappear, and for sure, the ancient laurels of Greece will not flourish anew in a land once again haunted by the spectre of slavery.
The arts then have never been a primal necessity, but are rather the fruits of abundance, ripening when more elementary needs are satisfied. When man no longer wants for his basic needs, he seeks a pleasure to stave off the boredom that contentment will inevitably bring. Luxury and the arts become a necessity, to nourish the imagination, which is truly a second life for any civilized man. The arts grow through this combination of need and fortune, and become indispensable to a great state; but they have no place assisting at the birth of a nation.

The wealth of talent to be found in France today seems a sure guarantee of the argument I am trying to develop here.

My purpose however, is to demonstrate the manner in which poor planning, and the misuse of the means at our disposal, may in fact be harmful to the national spirit, and even paralyse the happy concord of circumstances which would normally serve to assure our superiority. Here I would ask the reader to lend his full attention, and not refuse a little indulgence for the difficulties which I will find at each step, when talking of a subject which no one, as yet, has dared to address.

The Schools of Painting and Sculpture, and the Competition for the Prix de Rome

The Government has set up public schools of Drawing, open to all young students, and maintains them at great expense. Frequent competitions in these schools generate tremendous public interest, and at first glance these institutions seem to be not only of great use, but also the surest means of encouragement which could possibly be given to the arts. Never, in Athens or Rome, did the citizens find opportunities for the study of the arts or sciences the like of which are offered in France today by numerous schools. But since their creation, it is with some sorrow that I have remarked that the effect they have produced is quite different to the one expected. Indeed, rather than being to the public good, they are perhaps a major inconvenience; all they have done is create thousands of mediocre artists, and they cannot in any sense boast of having formed the most distinguished men amongst our painters, since these distinguished men were rather the founders of the schools, or were at least the first to preach the principles of taste.

David, clearly the most important artist working in France today, and the rejuvenator of the French School, owes the success which has brought him to the attention of the whole world to nothing but his own genius. He owes nothing to any school; on the contrary, the influence of a school might have been extremely detrimental to his talent if his own taste, at an early stage, had not shielded him from such influences and inclined him instead towards a complete reformation of that monstrous and absurd system which at the time was in the hands of Vanloo, Boucher, Restout and so many other profane of great art. A prolonged study of the great masters, and a visit to Italy, combined to inspire the great character which is always to be found in his historical compositions, and he became the model and leader of a new school. The principles of his painting have caused new talents to bud and grow, and several artists, now well-renowned, did not tarry in proclaiming the glory of their master, and sharing in his triumph.

After these glorious beginnings, and that great leap towards a noble, pure style, enthusiasm could only diminish, although the excellent lessons in discernment were retained, and the Government strove to maintain the momentum to the best of its abilities. But the flames of that sacred fire, which alone can produce great things, each day glow more dimly, and exhibitions, although numerous, perhaps too numerous, each year become less interesting. One no longer encounters those noble talents which were once crowned by a generous public eager for beauty and greatness, nor those talents which once bred such widespread enthusiasm. Men like Gros, Gérard, Guérin and Girodet have looked in vain for rivals worthy of their talent, and now, when they are entrusted with the teaching of a new generation of painters filled with generous emulation, it is to be feared that at the end of their careers they might experience some justifiable regret at seeing no worthy replacements rise up to take their place. And yet to accuse them of not lavishing sufficient care and attention on their pupils would be to do them an enormous disservice. What, then, could be the origin of this tremendous dearth of talent, at a time when we have the Prix de Rome, the constant awarding of medals for excellence, and regular competitions at the Académie? It has long been my belief that a good education was the indispensable base for entry into any profession, and that it alone can assure veritable distinction in whichever career one chooses to follow. Education broadens the mind, expands its capacities, and illuminates the goal one strives to attain. No one can truly be said to be making a choice before they are in a position to weigh up its advantages and disadvantages, and with the exception of a few precocious temperaments, one rarely sees a talent of any great import declare itself before the age of sixteen years. At that age one begins to know what one wishes to do in life, and one still has all the necessary aptitude for study in a profession which one elects by choice, or into which one is compelled by an imperious force. My desire then is that the Drawing Academy should not be open to anyone who has not attained at least that age. The nation, surely, is not attempting to create an entire race of painters through this establishment, but rather to offer true genius the means to develop itself; what we have obtained instead is a whole population of painters. The lure of the Prix de Rome and the facilities of the Academy have attracted a whole crowd of competitors who would never have become painters for love alone, but who would have been worthy additions to many other professions. They pass the time of their youth in a quest for a prize that will inevitably pass them by; thereby wasting precious assets they might have employed in a manner far more profitable to themselves and their country.

The man who truly has a vocation has no fear of obstacles, as he is sure to overcome them; they often provide themselves the means to overcome them. The fever they provoke in his soul serves a purpose, apt to become the cause of the most astonishing productions.

It is towards such men that the attentions of a well-intentioned government should turn, for it is by encouraging them, appreciating them, and employing their faculties to the full that the glory of the nation will be assured; and it is through such men that the century which discovered them and put them in their rightful place will be remembered.

Even if one supposed that all the young people admitted to the schools were blessed with the same talent, would it not be dangerous to see them study together for years
on end under the same influence, copying the same models, and following in some fashion the same path? How can one hope after this that they might conserve some spark of originality? Will they not, despite themselves, have exchanged the particular qualities that they might have had, and fused together into a confused unity those unique means by which, more properly, each of us perceives the beauty of nature?

Any nuance which might survive this group experience becomes imperceptible, and it is with genuine distaste that one sees every year ten or twelve compositions, of almost identical execution, whose every stroke is painstakingly perfect, offering no germ of originality whatsoever. Having abandoned long since their own sensations, none of the competitors have managed to retain any of their individuality. The same drawing style, the same palette, minor variations in an identical system, even the same gestures and facial expressions, everything that we see in these, the sad products of our schools, seems to come from one source, inspired by one single soul — if indeed one can conceive of a soul here, lost in the midst of such anonymity, struggling to conserve its faculties and preside over these lamentable works.

I would add to this that although obstacles and difficulties frighten mediocre men, they are the necessary food of genius. They cause it to mature, and raise it up; if the way is easy it withers and dies. All that obstructs the path of genius irritates it and inspires a state of feverish agitation, upsetting and overturning those obstacles, and producing masterpieces. These are the men that a nation must strive to produce — men who allow nothing, not poverty nor persecution, to stand in their way. They simmer like volcanoes, bound to erupt, for such is their nature, burning to light up the way and astonish the world. Would we create men thus? The Academy, alas, does too much: it extinguishes the sparks of this sacred fire, it smothers it, not granting nature the time to allow it to catch. A fire must be nurtured, yet the Academy throws on too much fuel.

6 October 1822

It must not be thought that just because I rejected a thing once, I must ignore it when it shows itself today. A book in which I had never found anything worthwhile may have a moral, read with the eyes of a more mature experience.

I am borne, or, rather, my energy is borne, in another direction. I will be the trumpeter of those who do great things.

There is in me something that is often stronger than my body, which is often enlivened by it. In some people the inner spark scarcely exists. I find it dominant in me. Without it, I should die, but it will consume me (doubtless I speak of imagination, which masters and leads me).

When you have found a weakness in yourself, instead of dissolving it, cut short your acting and idle circumlocutions — correct yourself. If the spirit had merely to fight the body! But it also has malign penchants, and a portion of it — the most subtle, most divine — should battle the other unceasingly. The body's passions are all loathsome. Those of the soul which are vile are the true cancers: envy, etc. Cowardice is so loathsomely it must needs be the child of body and soul together.

When I have painted a fine picture, I haven't expressed a thought. Or so they say. What fools people are! They deprive painting of all its advantages. The writer says nearly everything to be understood. In painting a mysterious bond is established between the souls of the sitters and those of the spectator. He sees the faces, external nature; but he thinks inwardly the true thought that is common to all people, to which some give body in writing, yet altering its fragile essence. Thus grosser spirits are more moved by writers than by musicians and painters. The painter's art is all the more intimate to the heart of man because it seems more material; for in it, as in external nature, justice is done frankly to that which is finite and to that which is infinite — that is, to whatever the soul finds to move it inwardly in the objects which affect the senses alone.

At midnight, 22 or 23 December 1823

[...] Let us do everything calmly, let us react emotionally only to fine works of art or noble deeds. Let us work tranquilly and without haste. As soon as I begin to sweat and my blood to boil, beware. Cowardly painting is the painting of a coward. [...]