Théodore Géricault, *The Oath of Brutus after the Death of Lucretia*, ca. 1815–1816

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Artist</strong></th>
<th>Théodore Géricault, French, 1791–1824</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td><em>The Oath of Brutus after the Death of Lucretia</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Object Date</strong></td>
<td>ca. 1815-1816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medium</strong></td>
<td>Oil on canvas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dimensions</strong> (Unframed)</td>
<td>15 3/16 x 18 5/16 in. (38.6 x 46.5 cm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Credit Line</strong></td>
<td>The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust through exchange of the gifts of Mrs. Raymond A. Barrows in memory of her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Milton McGreevy, Mr. and Mrs. B. Gerald Cantor, the Westport Garden Club, Mrs. Louis Sosland, Mrs. Elmo S. Fisher, Howard P. and Tertia F. Treadway, Mrs. Peter T. Bohan, Mr. William Averell Harriman, Mrs. Marion Mackie, Mrs. Carol Brewster, and Mr. Michael Hall; the bequests of Mr. Milton McGreevy, Mr. and Mrs. William J. Brace, and Helen Foresman Spencer; and other Trust properties, 92-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citation</strong></td>
<td>doi: 10.37764/78973.5.410</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Catalogue Entry**

**Citation**

**Chicago:**


**MLA:**


Théodore Géricault’s legacy as the quintessential French Romantic artist rests primarily on the modern subjects by which he was known to the public during his lifetime. These are the three large paintings he exhibited at the Salon: *Charging Chasseur* (1812), *Wounded Cuirassier* (1814), and *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819), all now in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, as well as a substantial body of published lithographs.\(^1\) Secondarily, there are the contents of the artist’s studio, which came to light after he died, in his estate sale.\(^2\) This latter group comprises thousands of drawings and oil studies related to myriad unrealized projects, among them works like *The Oath of Brutus after the Death of Lucretia*, which testifies to Géricault’s engagement with the art and literature of antiquity. In addition to his penchant for subjects drawn from contemporary life and current events, he was, after all, steeped in the Neoclassical aesthetic of his time.
The subject of this boldly painted sketch is a momentous episode of early Roman history that took place in 509 BCE, as recounted by the Roman historian Livy. Lucretia, wife of the nobleman Collatinus, was blackmailed into submitting to the sexual advances of Sextus Tarquinius, son of King Tarquinius Superbus. After Lucretia committed suicide to protect her honor, her widower’s comrade Brutus swore an oath to avenge her death, which he fulfilled by forcing the Tarquin rulers into exile. This event ended monarchical rule in Rome and led to the establishment of the Republic, for which Brutus and Collatinus served as first consuls.

In the painting, the lifeless body of Lucretia is supported by Collatinus, who kisses her farewell. Brutus, wearing a red mantle over a blue tunic, stands at the center of the picture. He holds Lucretia’s dagger above his head as a chorus of men raise their arms to join him in a pledge to vindicate the tragic heroine.

There are persistent gaps in our knowledge of Géricault’s life, and although important questions about this work’s origins, function, and date remain unanswered, some of the context in which it was produced can be pieced together. The art historian Lorenz Eitner recognized the singularity of The Oath of Brutus as early as 1953, when it surfaced in an exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Winterthur in Switzerland. Eitner convincingly linked it to a stylistic breakthrough that occurred in 1815–16, when, in a departure from the painterly but essentially naturalistic works that Géricault had exhibited at the Salon before that time, he adopted what has come to be known as his “antique manner.”

Yet, apart from the Nelson-Atkins oil sketch, this antique manner is found solely in drawings and watercolors Géricault produced during this period, which coincides with Géricault’s decision to try for the Prix de Rome in 1816. The subject that the competing artists were required to depict was “Oenone refusing to save the wounded Paris at the siege of Troy.” A number of studies made in connection with the Prix de Rome competition (see Fig. 1) exemplify the angular, geometric, graphic style of Géricault’s antique manner, in which the heroic power of the figures is exaggerated in the vein of Michelangelo (Italian, 1475–1564), whom Géricault admired. Paris and Oenone and The Oath of Brutus appear to be the only multifigure compositions undertaken by Géricault before he left for Italy in September or October 1816.

Prior to his departure for Rome, Géricault frequented the studio of his former teacher, the leading history painter Pierre Narcisse Guérin (1774–1833), a strong advocate of the painted sketch as a vehicle for exploring composition. The Oath of Brutus exemplifies its potential as envisioned by Guérin. The architectural setting is not an illusionistic space derived from a rational system of perspective. Instead, it is highly artificial, enhancing the controlled chaos of the action unfolding among the protagonists, who are enmeshed in a shallow, stage-like space immediately behind the picture plane. A veritable pinwheel of bodies and limbs, with Brutus’s clenched fist as its visual fulcrum, unifies the crowded scene enacted here.

The brushwork is quick and summary. Géricault did not apply finishing touches. He constructed the figures intuitively and with breathtaking spontaneity, but not without attention to detail, as revealed by a close examination of Lucretia, Collatinus, and the partial figure immediately to the viewer’s left, who helps to support Lucretia’s body. Here one can see that Géricault began the sketch with a sepia imprimatura layer, which endows the picture with a warm tone overall. He then produced an underdrawing, defining contours with the point of a very fine brush dipped in dark brown or possibly black paint. In some places, for example in Collatinus’s white robes, the underdrawing shows through the subsequently applied paint layer. In other places, as in Collatinus’s head and his companion’s profile, the drawing has evidently been applied on top of or adjacent to touches of colored paint to reinforce a contour or detail.

Géricault worked with impressive facility, quickly alternating between line and color and leaving areas of imprimatura in reserve. The result is dazzling rather than purely descriptive. Especially remarkable in this regard is...
Lucretia, whose glowing, bloodstained white garment clings to her left breast, while her exposed right breast consists of unpainted, essentially negative space defined by the tinted arm of the supporting figure behind her. The eye must navigate the facture in order to make sense of the image, obliging the viewer to reckon with the artist’s material process. (That is, if Géricault had the viewer in mind as he worked.) Another extraordinary detail is the way Lucretia’s head is tilted back, revealing a neck and chin too dark to be decipherable without the surrounding elements for context; her face is essentially obliterated from view at this angle, hidden in shadow beneath and behind her husband, who bends down to kiss her tenderly.

The theme of the Nelson-Atkins sketch had been popular from the 1760s onward. Artists such as Gavin Hamilton (Scottish, 1723–1798) produced works like Oath of Brutus (1763; Yale Center for British Art, New Haven), which in turn inspired the indelible Oath of the Horatii (1784; Musée du Louvre, Paris) by Jacques Louis David (1748–1825), clearly a model for Géricault’s The Oath of Brutus. He eliminated the emphatically horizontal print’s rightmost group of figures to arrive at a composition with a more conventional format and informal symmetry. Brutus stands at the center, facing left. With arms outstretched, he holds a dagger in one hand, around which two oath-takers approach from the left, while his other hand hovers above Lucretia on the right. Géricault intensifies contrasts of light and shadow, eliminating the mannered shallowness of the elegant, relief-like engraving in favor of a more robust depiction of form. Also notable is that, instead of showing Lucretia slumped forward, as in the engraving, Géricault throws back her head, exposing her neck and the underside of her chin, a device that he would use to expressive effect in the Nelson-Atkins picture, as noted above, as well as in other works of the period.

Géricault was directly inspired by a 1795 engraving after the sculptor Jean Guillaume Moitte’s (1746–1810) The Death of Lucretia (Fig. 2), which he reinterpreted in an elaborate drawing that is datable on the basis of style and technique to about 1815–16 (Fig. 3). He eliminated the emphatically horizontal print’s rightmost group of figures to arrive at a composition with a more conventional format and informal symmetry. Brutus stands at the center, facing left. With arms outstretched, he holds a dagger in one hand, around which two oath-takers approach from the left, while his other hand hovers above Lucretia on the right. Géricault intensifies contrasts of light and shadow, eliminating the mannered shallowness of the elegant, relief-like engraving in favor of a more robust depiction of form. Also notable is that, instead of showing Lucretia slumped forward, as in the engraving, Géricault throws back her head, exposing her neck and the underside of her chin, a device that he would use to expressive effect in the Nelson-Atkins picture, as noted above, as well as in other works of the period.

Géricault also treated Lucretia and Brutus in a more freely rendered pencil drawing on green paper (Fig. 4). Here, details have been eliminated. The emphasis is on the massing and choreography of the two groups of figures, with oath-takers on the left and those either supporting Lucretia or grieving her on the right. Brutus remains at the center; however, he now holds the dagger aloft, with his arm in a position paralleled by the rhyming downward motion of the men who pledge themselves to him. These diagonal forms are countered by the swooning, curved body of Lucretia.
A closely related drawing is *Brutus Condemning His Sons to Death* (Fig. 5), which depicts a later moment in the life of Brutus. It is rendered in pencil on the same green paper, of the same dimensions. This second sheet is based on a painting by Guillaume Guillon Lethière (1760–1832) exhibited at the Salon of 1812, the first salon in which Géricault participated. Eitner dated the pencil drawings about 1814–16 and suggested that they were executed as pendants, perhaps with an ambitious project in mind, though Géricault is not known to have essayed *Brutus Condemning His Sons to Death* in oil. It is possible that the artist was simply exploring later moments of the same extended narrative, perhaps to gain perspective on the earlier one. In their simplification of form and discarding of detail, both sheets represent an evolutionary step away from a preexisting model and toward a more independent composition.

If the three Lucretia and Brutus studies were by an artist other than Géricault, such considerable variations in medium, technique, and style might suggest that they were conceived under unrelated circumstances and do not belong to a single creative continuum. Yet the existence of three disparate works treating the same subject from the same brief span of time is symptomatic of Géricault’s intensely ruminative approach to a single theme. The formal differences between them may be said to reflect Guérin’s observation that Géricault “has in him the stuff of three or four painters.” But to understand the relationship of the drawings to the oil painting requires further consideration of the shifts that Géricault imposed on Brutus.

In the oil, Brutus remains at the center. Unlike the preceding drawings, however, in which his body is shown turned to the left, it now faces emphatically to the right, in strict profile. The foremost figures on the left side of the composition have been reduced in number to two: the elderly bearded man who reacts to Lucretia’s death and the clean-shaven soldier behind him, who looks up at Brutus’s dagger. On the right side of the composition, the group consisting of Lucretia’s bearers and mourners has now been augmented by oath-takers arrayed behind them.

It is not easy to follow the reversals of Brutus’s position as they culminate in the oil sketch, but they are significant. Reversals of composition played a crucial role in Géricault’s creative process. Throughout his career, encompassing *Charging Chasseur* and *The Raft of the Medusa* but also including the aborted *Oenone and Paris* project, Géricault investigated multiple pictorial solutions to a theme before he arrived at the stage when he reversed the composition so that the action depicted unfolds from left to right, maximizing the dramatic effect.

There may be other studies by Géricault relating to the Lucretia and Brutus campaign that have not yet come to light; no finished work on the theme seems to have been painted. Yet an epilogue of sorts exists in a work by the 1816 Prix de Rome laureate in the category of history painting, Antoine-Jean-Baptiste Thomas (1791–1834), whom Géricault knew in Italy in 1816–17, if not before. In Rome, in 1818, Thomas made an accomplished wash and gouache drawing reprising the theme of Lucretia and Brutus, which invites speculation about a direct connection between them.
Notes:

1. Charging Chasseur was shown again with Wounded Cuirassier in 1814. Another painting exhibited that year, Gunnery Charge in the Plain of Grenelle, is untraced.

2. Tableaux, esquisses, dessins, études diverses, estampes, livres à figures, etc., appartenant à la succession de feu Géricault, peintre d’histoire, Hôtel Bullion, Paris, November 2–3, 1824. Géricault also sold or gave away a small number of works during his lifetime; see Lorenz Eitner, Géricault, His Life and Work (London: Orbis, 1983), 281.


4. See Eitner, Géricault, 84.


7. Guérin’s pupils were prominent among the successful competitors in the concours d’esquisses established by the Academy in 1816. See John Paul Lambertson III, “The Genesis of French Romanticism: P.-N. Guérin’s Studio and the Public Sphere” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1994), 40–42; Grunchec, La peinture à l’École des Beaux-Arts, esp. 1:46 and 2:12, 83; and Mehdi Korchane, Pierre Guérin, 1774–1833 (Paris: Mare et Martin, 2018), esp. 236–38.


9. See Old Master Drawings, Sotheby’s, New York, January 28, 2015, lot 165. On the reverse of the same sheet is another drawing, The Water Carrier, pen and brown ink over black and red chalk and watercolor.

10. See, for example, Man Rescuing a Woman from a Flood (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Angers, inv. MTC 4854) and two versions of Satyr and Nymph (for the first, see Grunchec, Master Drawings by Géricault, 63, 65, cat. no. 20, recto, in a private collection; for the second, see Dessins anciens et modernes, Drouot-Richelieu, Paris, December 1, 2008, lot 155).

11. The drawings by Géricault illustrated here as Figs. 4 and 5 come from the so-called Album Blanche; they were sold together in a single lot at Drouot-Montaigne, Paris, March 17, 1989, lot 3, as Scène de guerre romaine and Virginius tuant sa fille. There are two versions of Lethière’s Brutus Condemning His Sons to Death. The first, measuring 23 3/8 x 39 in. (59.4 x 99.1 cm), was painted in 1788 and exhibited at the Salons of 1795 and 1801 (Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA, 2018.1.1). The second, measuring 17 5/16 x 30 13/16 in. (44 x 78.3 cm), was painted in 1811 and exhibited at the Salon of 1812 (Musée du Louvre, Paris, INV 6228). The latter was exhibited at the Egyptian Hall, London, in 1816, which would influence Géricault’s own decision to exhibit The Raft of the Medusa there in 1820; Lethière’s son, Auguste, assisted Géricault with the shipping (Lorenz Eitner to Ann Guite of Richard L. Feigen and Co., August 7, 1994, NAMA curatorial files.)
12. “Il a en lui l’étoffe de trois ou quatre peintres.”
According to Géricault’s follower Antoine-Alphonse Montfort (1802–1884), as quoted by the artist Louis-Pierre Henriquel, called Henriquel-Dupont (1797–1892); see Yveline Cantarel-Besson, “Le Manuscrit de Montfort,” in Laveissière and Michel, eds., Géricault, 311.


14. The Oath of Brutus, pen and brown wash heightened with white over pencil on buff wove paper, 10 5/16 x 13 5/8 in. (26.2 x 34.6 cm); signed, dated, and inscribed (lower right): Thomas Rome 1818; Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University, 1975.45. Thomas was a pupil of François André Vincent (1746–1816). On Géricault and Thomas, see Wheelock Whitney, Géricault in Italy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), passim.

Technical Entry
Technical entry forthcoming.

Documentation

Citation

Chicago:

MLA:

Provenance
Purchased from the posthumous sale of the artist, Tableaux, esquisses, dessins, études diverses, estampes, livres à figures, etc., appartenant à la succession de feu Géricault, peintre d'histoire, Hôtel de Bullion, Paris, November 2–3, 1824, lot 12, as Dix-huit esquisses et études représentant aussi des cavaliers et des chevaux, or lot 14, as Douze esquisses: compositions et figure d’étude, by M. G., ancien Pair de France, 1824-January 31, 1853 [1];

His posthumous sale, Tableaux anciens, dont un très beau de Nicolas Poussin, dessins, estampes, etc., provenant du Cabinet de M. G.*, ancien Pair de France, Hôtel des ventes, Rue Drouot, n° 2, Paris, January 31–February 1, 1853, lot 5, as Mort de Lucrèce;

Possibly Maillet collection [2];

Dr. Jean-Jacques Gillon (ca. 1908–after 1971), Paris, by August 30, 1953 [3];

Private collection, Europe;


Notes

[2] See the inscription on the verso on the crossbar: Mr Maillet. Three possibilities for this constituent are Joseph C. Maillet (1751–1811), an engraver who copied paintings; a Maillet who made purchases at sales 1811 and 1816; and Charles Maillet du Boullay (1829–1891), who was a curator at several museums in Rouen and who had a sale on January 22, 1870, that included two
paintings by François Boucher (1703–1770) and Anthelme François Lagrenée (1774–1832).

[3] See letters between Dr. J. J. Gillon of 43, avenue de Suffren, the lender of the Géricault to the 1953 Winterthur exhibition, and curator Dr. Heinz Keller, president W. Dünner, and Hans Bühler, representative of the committee, Winterthur, October and November 1953, NAMA curatorial files. Thank you to Andreas Ehmann, Registrar, Kunst Museum Winterthur, for providing this correspondence.

Related Works

Jean-François Janinet (1752–1814), after Jean-Guillaume Moitte (1746–1810), The Death of Lucretia, 1795, etching with roulette, aquatint, and burnishing, sheet (trimmed within platemark): 11 1/4 x 22 3/4 in. (28.5 x 57.8 cm), Baltimore Museum of Art, 2013.229.

Théodore Géricault, The Death of Germanicus, ca. 1811–12, oil on canvas, 17 2/3 x 21 13/20 in. (44.9 x 55 cm), sold at Hôtel Drouot, Paris, December 1, 2017, lot 61, as La Mort de Germanicus.

Théodore Géricault, The Water Carrier (recto); The Death of Lucretia (verso), ca. 1815–1816, pen and brown ink over black and red chalk and watercolor (recto); pen and brown ink over black and red chalk on prepared paper (verso), 11 x 7 7/8 in. (27.8 x 19.9 cm), sold at Old Master Drawings, Sotheby’s, New York, January 28, 2015, no. 165.

Théodore Géricault, Dying Paris Supplicating Oenone, 1816, pen and brown ink on graphite with brown wash on beige wove paper, 5 2/5 x 8 1/2 in. (13.7 x 21.7 cm), National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 46282r.

Antoine-Jean-Baptiste Thomas (1791–1834), Oenone Refuses to Rescue Paris, wounded at the Siege of Troy, 1816, oil on canvas, 44 22/25 x 57 12/25 in. (114 x 146 cm), Musée de l’École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, Paris, PRP 54.

Antoine-Jean-Baptiste Thomas (1791–1834), The Oath of Brutus, 1818, pen and brown wash, heightened with white, over pencil on buff wove paper tinted, 10 5/16 x 13 5/8 in. (26.2 x 34.6 cm), Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, Museum Purchase Fund, 1975.45.

Preparatory Work


Exhibitions

Théodore Géricault, 1791–1824, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, August 30–November 8, 1953, no. 13, as La mort de Camille.


References

Notice de tableaux, esquisses, dessins, études diverses, estampes, livres à figures, etc., appartenant à la succession de feu Géricault, peintre d’histoire (Paris: Parmentier et Henry, November 2–3, 1824), 2, as Dix-huit esquisses: compositions, figures et animaux ou Douze esquisses: compositions et figures d’étude.

Catalogue de tableaux anciens, dont un très beau de Nicolas Poussin, dessins, estampes, etc., provenant du Cabinet de M. G***, ancien Pair de France, dont la vente aux enchères publiques aura lieu, pour cause de décès (Paris: Maulde et Renou, January 31–February 1, 1853), 4, as Mort de Lucrèce. Esquisse.


Alice Thorson, “Pictures tell a story about evolution of Nelson Gallery,” *Kansas City Star* 114, no. 86 (December 12, 1993): L6, as The Oath of Brutus.


Catherine Futter et al., *Bloch Galleries: Highlights from the Collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art* (Kansas City, MO: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2016), 21, (repro.), as The Oath of Brutus after the Death of Lucretia.
