

## GERICAULT - PRANCING GREY HORSE - 35/271



### CAPTION ONE

This dramatic oil sketch has the intensity of a poetic vision. In a dark wasteland, filled with clouds of smoke, a horse, lit by a sudden flash, rears up. The horse wears a leopard skin. Although such skins covered battle chargers in earlier paintings by Rubens and Giulio Romano, the public of Géricault's day would have recognised it as a direct reference to the leopard skins that served as saddle cloth for Napoleon's elite cavalry.

This oil sketch is a study for Géricault's painting *Cavalry Officer making a Charge* (Louvre, Paris) - the artist's first major work, exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1812. Although the sketch shows the basic idea from which Géricault developed his painting, it does not have a specific subject, something Géricault, in keeping with his time, believed was necessary if a painting was to be thought worthy of being exhibited.

### CAPTION TWO

Although Géricault's image of a rider-less horse is a more impressive evocation of war than most conventional battle compositions, by the standards of the time it would not have been considered a suitable subject. Géricault, aware of this, and inspired by the French army's approach to Moscow during the autumn of 1812, made deliberate changes to the composition.

He imagined the horse mounted by an officer of the Chasseurs of the Imperial Guard giving the signal for a charge. He developed this idea by again making various preparatory studies, including several rapidly executed drawings and an oil sketch (Louvre, Paris). In the final composition the horse, like the raging animal in our sketch, still rears to the left.

### CAPTION THREE

Unlike so many of his contemporaries Géricault's art was free of learned principles and dogmatic ideas. His art was formed largely by impressions of his youth in Rouen and by his passion for horses. Where did the idea for our painting come from? Géricault's biographer Clement describes how, during September 1812, the artist, searching for a suitable subject to paint, rode to the popular fair held at Saint-Cloud.

On his way Géricault passed 'a large van, of the kind Parisian workmen hire for such occasions and transform into omnibuses, pulled by a grey horse, not at all beautiful, but fiery and of marvellous colour. Unaccustomed to its load, the excited animal, frothing at the mouth, its eyes bloodshot, reared in a sunlit cloud of dust.' Clement continues, the 'animal's rage was like a discharge of the tensions that filled the air. This is the sun of Austerlitz, this dust the smoke of battle. This is the horse of War, intoxicated by the smell of gunpowder, the glint of arms, and the thunder of guns.'

#### **CAPTION FOUR**

After the French Revolution the predominant artistic style in France was that of Neo-Classicism. This style, based on hard outlines and minute finishing, was derived from a re-examination of the classical art of ancient Greece and Rome. Notions of morality were tied to this style- for example, it was thought that if an artist painted in a free and sketchy manner, this implied immorality.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century some artists, feeling constrained by this intellectual and excessively rational attitude to art, championed a freer approach which put more emphasis on the imagination and the senses. This movement came to be known as Romanticism. Gericault's Prancing Grey Horse painted in 1812, embodies the lively and fiery spirit of Romanticism. Even the paint, thickly and quickly applied, seems in sympathy with the theme.

#### **CAPTION FIVE**

As the first Keeper of The Burrell Collection, William Wells, pointed out, it is fascinating to compare and contrast The Prancing Grey Horse with the other major Gericault in The Burrell Collection, The Trumpeter of The Lancers of The Guard.

As Wells has written 'in so far as mood and execution are concerned, they offer a complete contrast, the one wild and dynamic, with the rearing horse hardly more than a flash of lightning in the surrounding gloom, and the other precise and disciplined with the trumpeter on his rearing charger poised almost sedately against the stormy sky above the valley in which a bridge is visible to the right.

#### **CAPTION SIX**

The Prancing Grey Horse remained in Gericault's studio throughout his short life. It was bought at the Gericault studio sale, held in 1824, by the artist Leon Cogniet. Cogniet's name is inscribed on the stretcher as are the words 'par Gericault1.

The work later entered the collection of another prominent Glasgow collector, William Allen Coats (1853-1926). Coats owned six works by Gericault. Coats' collection was sold at auction in June 1927 and the remainder was sold at Christie's on 12 April 1935. William Burrell must have instructed the dealers Reid & Lefevre to bid for him at this sale for he purchased the work from them on April 23 1935 for £283.10.0.