

Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784, Oil on canvas,
Neoclassicism

Théodore Géricault, *Raft of the Medusa*, 1818–9, Oil on canvas, Romanticism

Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* and Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* are the absolute paragons of the artistic style periods—Neoclassicism and Romanticism they respectively represent. Great works tend to share commonalities with one another. In the case of these 2 artworks, the medium on which they were created is canvas with oil. Another similarity between the 2 is the huge size of both. Giant paintings, in my view, are meant to convey meaningful and resonating messages. Close visual analysis of the composition of these 2 artworks reveals fascinating and distinctive visual elements, characteristic of their respective art styles. Therefore, the transition from renewed interest in classical ideals to the emphasis of emotion and individualism is exemplified by a comparative view of these two paintings.

When the French artist, Jacques-Louis David, created *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), of the Neoclassical period, the dynamic duo of men and women is depicted masterfully to emphasize the moralizing narrative. The three brothers on the left take on a rigid and stern pose swearing the oath of fidelity with their father, a man whose shadow encompasses one of the women on the right symbolizing the reluctance and unwillingness on the female part to sacrifice for the state in contrast to the deterministic spirit of the men. At a first glance, the details in this painting are very much well-lit. Such legible and lucid style is in line with the purpose of its creation—educating and imparting

virtuous and righteous views to the audience. What is not legible and might require a set of trained eyes to notice is the linear perspective that the artist employs. The orthogonal lines, receding into the distance on the floor, meet at a vanishing point which is obscured by the father in the middle, further enhancing the classical order and ideal helpful for the narrative.

Less than 4 decades after David, another French painter, Théodore Géricault, painted a monumental work of art, *Raft of the Medusa* (1818–9), epitomizing everything that is quintessential to Romanticism. A contemporary story of this painting that Géricault treats as grand history is a harrowing tale of cannibalism, starvation, illness, and murder. The makeshift raft carrying every survivor onboard is left drifting alone in a tumultuous sea. The depiction of nude deceased bodies shows the immense sufferings of the people, thus eliciting equally immense sympathy from the viewers. Moreover, the overall greenish-grey color tone throughout the composition together with the huge and dangerous wave to the left of the people directly contribute to a sense of hopelessness and thereby induce emotion in the audience. Lastly, one element that helps viewers key into the storyline and perhaps offers a glimpse of hope for their predicament is the leading figure who waves for a ship at a great distance is a person of color; An important moment in our shared history that at such a critical time, the oppressed can take on the role of hope, which no doubt deepens our understanding of the concept of individualism.

The history of art, similar to the history of many other disciplines, is first and foremost about human endeavors and ideas. Through close-examining these 2 works, one can certainly get a step closer to examining our own inner feelings about the ideas

of religion, morality, emotions, and individualism. The brilliant craftsmanship and rare talents displayed in these 2 paintings not only help us to see clearly the transitional differences between the periods of Neoclassicism and Romanticism but also undoubtedly make them deserving of the admiring status in art history.