

Evening, Landscape with an Aquaduct

Jean-Louis-Andre-Theodore Gericault (1791-1824)
French 1818

A Review
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Neoclassicism & Romantic Art

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“Evening, Landscape with an Aquaduct”

Jean-Louis-Andre-Theodore Gericault (1791-1824)

French 1818

250 x 219 cm (98" x 86")

Oil on Canvas. One of three monumental landscapes

I approached this reaction paper with great enthusiasm. Having received the benefit of studying other periods in art history, I found a sense of *renew* in Neoclassicism, pun intended. Within this new focus, consequently, the challenge only presented itself in delineating the characteristics that separate Neoclassicism and Romantic art.

My first visit to “the Met” was extremely productive. Once I entered 19th Century Art, I found several rooms with artwork suitable for my purpose. As I entered a particular room and glanced about, I knew I had found my first object. Indeed, I was surrounded by its imposing size.

“How can a non-living *object* ‘surround’ you,” you might ask? My response would be – “when the object is a painting called ‘Evening, Landscape with an Aquaduct,’” by Gericault. It took quite a while for me to absorb and, as a matter of fact, savor all the facets of this composition. And to my delight, I discovered it was the creation of Gericault, a familiar name in my Neoclassic and Romantic studies. Further research of Gericault affirmed the idea of Neoclassicism’s characteristic physical beauty, perfection, and grandeur, all of which are present in this composition. Yet I found Gericault described not only as an avant-garde outsider, but also as the first great Romantic artist.

Since many of his paintings reflect his sense of morbidity as well as his penchant for horses, I was surprised that this composition had neither. Gericault paid more attention to land, water, and sky in this piece. In fact, the human component is minimal. Interestingly, he has placed them in the lower middle section of the painting, surrounding them with dark, calculated, and perilous landscaping composed of rigid, unyielding terrain. Perhaps it was merely my height and, therefore, my close proximity



to that portion of the painting, but I was drawn to the lower left and center quadrants. They included deep variations of shade in a painterly manner. Adding to that, the men were depicted in familiar Greek and Roman style discussed in class, with clear and distinct attention paid to exacting muscular definition. Their activity was pleasant, lighthearted, and buoyant. These well-sculpted men frolicked in the water, heads turned in all directions emphasizing their perfect forms. Befitting the time, there were no women in this painting. My glance was then tugged upwards towards the sky and its bright shades of gold and yellow.

The sky seemed to soar with brilliance looking out over all else. It gave rise to thoughts of religious aspects. Although its deepest concentration was in the upper portion, its rays connected with the entire composition, illuminating and stirring the entire massive canvas. The light source originated in the upper left corner in warming reds and orange hues, and sent the dark, contrasting clouds across the top. The grays and blacks in the pigment contributed to the smoky, chiaroscuro feeling, casting an ominous sense to the section. Cutting into the midsection of the painting between the ample rocky grandeur was a bridge. Water is nestled, almost hidden, at its base in the shadows. It is tranquil, unshaken, and idle. As the eye travels down, and in direct contrast to most of the lower portion of the composition, the water takes a different texture. This is where the influence of Greek and Roman art becomes evident. There are figures of men in the water and on the terrain, which are almost obscured in the center bottom. The scene holds a sense of something taken from the imagination, yet with impeccable detail, along with a religious essence bearing down on the viewer. Indeed, was Gericault's purpose to settle the viewer from the dramatic terrain in the background? Does he intend to give the viewer pause to contemplate the more peaceful side of nature within these parameters?

Gericault seems to have paid attention to most every color on the palette, making strong use of the darkest shades for the mountains and rocks, the solids of reality and life. He added grays to the sky and deposited hints within the background to add perspective and softness. Its existence in the soil as it gets closer to the viewer creates depth in a painterly fashion. The purples, blues, reds, and greens in the



background give it a misty, surreal look, while the red and blue stand out in the very foreground to call attention to the one person who is clothed. Reds and bright yellows in the sky and in meticulously placed areas of the landscaping in center add dramatic highlighting.

In general, my eye is attracted to a variety of colors for different reasons. The way in which color affects me for purposes of this paper is of epic proportion. An artist of Gericault's caliber seems to have established his ideas with ease. There is a sense of humanity in this composition, a quality of nature and religion ever present in the landscaping, the houses, and village shown with perspective in the background. The bridge towards the center suggests a transport for humanity, whether intended for people or goods. The water itself in its abundance, and being a natural resource, suggests a certain gracefulness and life. Further, the placement of the erratically designed mountain rising majestically underneath an arched opening is reminiscent of a Christ-like period in history. Further, it is placed at its apex, high atop the composition overlooking all, and omnipotent. This quadrant of the painting is set at the closest point to the viewer, I suspect, to beckon.

The arched opening implies a religious structure, perhaps from the resurrection. The glow of sunlight, naturally lighting, shining through from sun lend a rather ethereal feeling. *Nature versus man* is the essence. People frolicking, having a good time, enjoying themselves as the sun illuminates the earth. Clouds and darkness appear on the surrounding pieces supporting the composition, yet drawing my eye upwards albeit slowly, toward the sky. This proposes awareness to be taken seriously by the bathers, who are in an area giving them a spot of intense privacy.

A substantial and meaningful piece, "Evening, Landscape with an Aqueduct" provoked wonder in my mind. What did the men at the bottom, on land have to do with situation, while several others frolicked in the water just behind them in all their glory? Who were they? Was that a masculine thing to do during that time in history, or would women having been illustrated as such be deemed more appropriate? Of the two on land, why was the man standing, hunched over, posed and pensive, the *only* one clothed as he spoke to the man seated on the edge of the cliff, who was *without*

clothing? Why were they both set higher than the water below? Why was this significant to the painting? Was it to add color, or was it to lighten up the mood, and show contrast? How did the surrounding majesty of the irregular, lofty mountains in the background affect the men?

A quote taken during my research from an Internet article can describe the feeling I got from this composition. "The true painter will be one who can snatch from the life of today its epic quality, and make us feel how great and poetic we are in our cravats and over patent-leather boots." I took that to mean that a gifted person, one who sees and has a sense of the subject as larger than life, and who holds an artist's brush in his/her hand can easily depict on canvas that essence. Regardless of the time they are in, it may be translated as such at any other time in history.

Certainly, the piece was composed in very deliberate triangles all pointing upward toward the sky, or heaven. Conceivably, "Evening, Landscape with an Aquaduct" could be translated as a complex psychological account such as his "The Charging Light Cavalryman," but meant to leave the viewer with the idea that the human element in life over nature is the foundation for all else, after God and/or preferably religion. It left me to speculate about the rationale portraying humanity and reason, nature and Christ, or religion.