

## Form and Function: Comparing and Contrasting Two Portraits

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**Keywords:** Form and function, Painting art, Work analysis

**Abstract:** Painting creation reflects reality, expresses aesthetic feelings, and expresses thoughts and feelings through content, composition, space, color and technical expression. In this way, the formal beauty of the painting is naturally integrated into the work, thus realizing the unity of the beauty of form and the beauty of content. The interior of the painting form implies questioning the long-term rigid definition of “form” and “function”, which leads to new thinking about the content that is inseparable from the form, and the form itself also contains content. , Have a long history. In its development process, a rich variety of forms also appeared. The elements that should be included in a successful portrait should include the following: the figure's appearance, appearance, and physical characteristics; the character's charm and personality; the character's identity, life background, and experience. Important factor. In the era of diversified painting art, the head of a black man by Théodore Géricault is compared with the portrait of a Neapolitan woman by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. The analysis of these two portraits integrates “form” and “function”, enriches the painting language and broadens the aesthetic horizon.

### 1. Introduction

Théodore Géricault (1791-1824) is known as the pioneer of French romantic art[1]. In just 33 years of his life, Théodore Géricault's talent and courage have had an indelible influence on the French painting scene. Silico was born in Rouen, France, and moved to Paris with his family when he was young. In 1808, he learned painting from the famous horse painter Vernet. Xirico is committed to innovation and pays attention to the expression of personal emotions. His works often reveal a sense of grandeur and movement like Michelangelo. Xilik often draws inspiration from real life, Géricault's short career had a huge impact on the history of modern art and the evolution of French 19th century painting in particular. His radical choice of subjects taken from contemporary life, his fusion of classical forms with an atmospheric, painterly style, his passion for horses, his attraction to sublime and horrific subjects, and his compassion for the weak and vulnerable in society make him a singularly complex artist, but one who helped set the path for Romanticism's emphasis on emotion and subjectivity. His most famous work, Much of Gericault's work relied on keen observation, social awareness and at times a politically engaged view of the world around him. Indeed, a unique combination of realism and raw emotion can be seen in many of his works, including the late series of monomaniacs and his earlier “portraits” of guillotined heads.

Jean-Honoré Fragonard was born in a merchant family in Grasse in the south of France. He had no intention of being a lawyer and went to Chardin's studio to learn painting. He discovered Boucherna fan at the age of 16. Yan and attractive works were invested under Boucher. He studied for 4 years and became independent at the age of 20. Therefore, Fragonard is Boucher's student and heir. At the age of 24, he won a royal scholarship to study at the French Academy in Rome. Afterwards, he traveled and inspected Italian art historical sites and carefully studied the achievements of masters such as Tiepolo. He returned to Paris at the age of 29 and was soon elected to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. In Fragonard's art, he was influenced not only by Boucher and Italian art but also by the colors of Rubens from the north and Rembrandt's chiaroscuro, which enabled him to build on a broad foundation of artistic essence. , And finally formed its own unique artistic style[2][3] Fragonard's work elevates erotic symbolism that would have been easily comprehended by his contemporaries, finessing this in such a way that his images provided multiple intellectual layers. He regularly used settings, activities and small details to heighten tension and

encourage the viewer to consider relationships between men and women, humanity and nature, and the concept of time itself. Fragonard's use of such symbolism was unprecedented in its complexity and subtlety, providing intellectual weight that set his scenes apart from others working in similar modes.

Fragonard's use of setting was unique in the degree to which it heightened narrative drama. His compositions are often framed as if stages, with light used to direct the viewer's eye in such a way that the sequence of events becomes clear. Statuary and trees serve to convey mood, with stormy skies and windswept branches indicating unease or tension while placid backdrops suggest a resolution.

Across Fragonard's work, the physicality of art making is itself on display; visual pleasure is an end in itself rather than a means of representation. Fragonard's application of paint is clearly visible on canvases, with long, fluid strokes indicating folds of clothing or rushing water alongside short, abrupt dashes conveying leaves and flowers. This is complemented by Fragonard's use of color and tone, with dramatic contrasts between light and shade. Examined at close range, the paintings abstract their subjects; in this way, Fragonard's work anticipates the attitude to painting that would dominate the late-19th and 20th centuries.



Fig.1 ThÉOodre gÉRicault



Fig.2 Jean-HonorÉ Fragonard

## 2. Painters Compare Their Works

Théodore Géricault completed *Head of a Black Man* in 1819, depicting a profile view of a black man who slightly stretches out his neck leftwards and gazes upwards. The scale of this portrait is roughly 10 by 7 inches. Another *Portrait of a Neapolitan woman* created in 1774 by Jean-Honoré Fragonard shares similar dimensions and yet portrays the half-length of a well-dressed Neapolitan

woman in a frontal view. These two portraits have similar formal qualities, both emphasizing intense contrasts through the shading and lighting on human figures[4].



Fig.3 Head of a Black Man



Fig.4 Neapolitan Woman

### 3. Work Analysis

However, there are also major differences in how the subjects are treated by the artists, namely, who is allowed autonomy, individuality, and status, and who is not. Furthermore, the distinctions between the two figures reflect their different psychological states under the social hierarchies of their times.

Firstly, the most shared formal quality between these two portraits is the medium of black chalk. In Géricault's work, the contour of the black man is loosely sketched. The swirling lines of his hair and the blurry curves around his neck convey a sense of unfinishedness. The use of black chalk also appears in Fragonard's portrait. More swirling lines render her curly hair wrapped in a white turban, and more faint curves compose her v-neckline dress. The contour lines of the Neapolitan woman are more finished and subtle than those of the black man. Yet, the rough texture of black chalk is less distinctive on the Neapolitan woman, because there are additional layers of brown wash brushed over its contour lines.

The shared medium of black chalk and the specific medium of brown wash applied to the Neapolitan woman both produce an intensity of shading. In the *Head of a Black Man*, the tonality of shading varies gently from his hair to his neck. The soft gradation of value is created by a stump smudging layer of black chalk, which delineates the bone structure of his face. From the shading on the black man's neck and hair, we are still able to view numerous chunky and linear strokes applied by stumping. But other than the figure, the rest of the paper is left totally blank. While there is no spatial context for the black man, the layered application of brown wash creates a black background for the Neapolitan woman. In this background of shadow, solid linear strokes of shading used on the

black man are also detectable. The gentle gradation of value is also applied to describe the delicate texture of the woman's dress and jewelry. However, the subtle shading is mostly drawn on the Neapolitan woman's dress and background, the things and the space she owns, while only a few strokes of shading are actually visible on her pale face, which is very different from the intense shading directly portraying the physicality of the black man.

Moreover, the position and texture of shading in both portraits indicate light sources and give more information about the two figures' different identities. The Neapolitan woman's figure is emphasized by a dark backdrop that casts her body in light. This contrast between dark and light draws us more attention to the illuminated figure. The necklaces and earrings she wears are all reflecting shimmering light that dazzles the audience. Her dress is layered with fine fabrics and decorated with exquisite embroidery. These objects she possesses show herself as a woman from a wealthy family, though the title of the drawing doesn't tell us much about her social status. But the black man Géricault depicted has nothing but his own body as head and neck depicted to offer labor. The light coming from the upper left corner hits on his high cheekbone. Other parts of his body are drawn with the rough black chalk, as mentioned above. But he has no spatial backdrop nor any clothing to suggest his autonomy and individuality. He can possibly be any black man under the slavery of the 19th century. The texture of his body is similar to that of the black background of the Neapolitan woman. He can even be the object owned by the wealthy woman.

On closer inspection, we can see different emotions expressed from the gaze of the black man and that of the Neapolitan woman. The black man is looking upwards with a sense of hope, and his frowning eyebrows convey his seriousness. Yet, from this small piece of work by Géricault, we are not sure what the black man is exactly struggling for. Different from the black man's gaze, the Neapolitan woman placed in a frontal view is actually directly gazing at the audience with her peaceful smile. When we look at her, she is also looking at us. The Neapolitan woman has an equal and nearly communicative relationship with the viewer. However, the black man when gazing upwards is not addressing the spectator, but rather in a subjective position being viewed.

In conclusion, even though the two portraits have similarities in the medium of black chalk and the technique of shading, the Neapolitan woman is rendered with more details indicating her high socioeconomic status and individual agency, while the black man is portrayed with more emphasis on the roughness of his physical appearance. Additionally, when we engage with these two portraits, we are also able to sense different psychological states of the two figures from different social hierarchies, and to further perceive the power dynamic between the figures and ourselves.

#### **4. Conclusion**

To complete a good painting, you need to do the following: 1. Observe the object carefully. 2. Understand the object and its various characteristics. 3. Feel sincere and express your feelings. 4. Have superb professional skills. With the development of history and the change of ideology, there will be more forms, but to achieve the perfect expression of the character image, the above four characteristics are indispensable.

By comparing the two portraits of Theodore Greco's black head and Jean Honoré Fragonard's Portrait of a Naples woman, we have a better understanding of painting. The two portrait works have similar dimensions and similar form qualities. The creator emphasizes the strong contrast through the shadows and lighting of the characters, and expresses the deeper meaning of the work through the clothing, demeanor and background of the characters.

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