

Théodore Géricault

The Raft of the Medusa, 1818



Fig. 1 Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, study for a figure, 1818 ca. Oil and pen on canvas, 55x45 cm. Montauban, Musée Ingres.

Choice of Theme and Realisation

The Raft of the Medusa is Géricault's most important work as is suggested by its noteworthy dimensions (almost five metres high by seven metres in width) and by the number of preparatory sketches he executed (about fifty including both drawings and sketches in oil and watercolour). The artist took his theme from a **tragic current event** that had taken place in 1816 just off the West African coast: the sinking of the ship *Medusa*. The disaster resulted in 150 people floating adrift on a raft for many days, in a crescendo of horrifying conditions. Finally the ship *The Argo* came to their rescue but, by then, there were only fifteen survivors.

For a long time the painter was unsure of what moment to choose in the series of desperate events. He considered the ship's actual sinking below the waves, the instant when the masts broke, as well as the mutiny that took place on the raft. He finally opted for a moment of extreme psychological and dramatic tension when the ship-wrecked men, deluded, hope that they have been sighted by a ship on the horizon.

During the painting's preparation Géricault scrupulously gathered facts on what had happened, interviewing survivors and drawing cadavers in the morgue. Right from the beginning, however, his intention was not to reproduce the event but rather to give the scene a **universal character**, in a kind of synthesis between faithfully representing truth and mak-

Fig. 2 Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1818 (exhibited in 1819). Oil on canvas, 491x716 cm. Paris Musée du Louvre.



ing visible his conceptual intent. A comparison between the preparatory sketches and the painting itself reveals the artist's desire to accentuate the scene's dramatic nature which is able to communicate both horror and pathos.

The Final Choice

In his painting Géricault represented, throughout the mass of people on the raft, "all shades of physical pain, moral anguish": from the father in the foreground, dazed from grief over his dead son, to the dying figures surrounding him as well as the handful of bodies stretching their hands across the wave-beaten raft. They all turn towards a small point on the horizon, a ship that we understand, intuitively, will never sight the ship-wrecked group. For the first time the epic style and the gigantic dimensions of the artwork, until that time reserved for heroic or grandiose subjects (Biblical episodes, the undertakings of classical heroes, kings or modern generals) were being used to represent the suffering of common people.

The scene thus represented becomes a **Romantic metaphor for life**, as man struggles with all his strength against adversities, **and for destiny**, divided between desperation and hope, between life and death.

Compositional Considerations

The scene is constructed according to a system of diagonals that converge in two triangles; the apex of one is found in the raft's mast while the other is situated in the shirt being waved by one of the survivors. In this way a tension is created that leads **the eye to the horizon** where possible rescue is sailing off into the distance.

However the wind is blowing in the other direction as can be seen in the swelling sail that preludes an imminent storm. The sea inexorably pushes the raft, and its suffering human cargo, backwards.

Even the red reflections of the sunset, as they reverberate throughout the scene with charged symbolic content, serve to accentuate the dramatic tale.

The picture is Romantic in its intent and in its subject matter but from a formal point of view it recalls **classical models**. Drawing clearly defines the sharp outlines of the figures while the chiaroscuro renders them dynamic; their bodies, which recall the busts of heroes and athletes, are arranged in a pyramidal structure whose vertex is in the man whose naked back recalls the *Torso del Belvedere*, one of the most widely studied models of ancient statuary during the Neoclassical period.

Reactions: the Public and Critics

The painting caused contrasting reactions when it was presented at the 1819 *Salon*. (Founded in Paris in the 17th century the *Salon* was a periodic exhibition of painting and sculpture which soon became a renowned point of reference not only for art in France but also in all Europe.)

The public admired the powerful representation but critics were perplexed by the scene's apparent lack of order as well as by the colours considered to be excessively sombre. On the one hand, Géricault's "*patriotic paintbrush*" was praised, on the other the picture was controversially understood as a political composition, "*inciting France to revolt*". However, in truth, interpretation of the canvas should be widened beyond the contingent political situation and France's national borders, to embrace all of humanity: the depicted tragedy makes visible man's shared destiny of suffering and death, thereby making the raft a universal allegory.

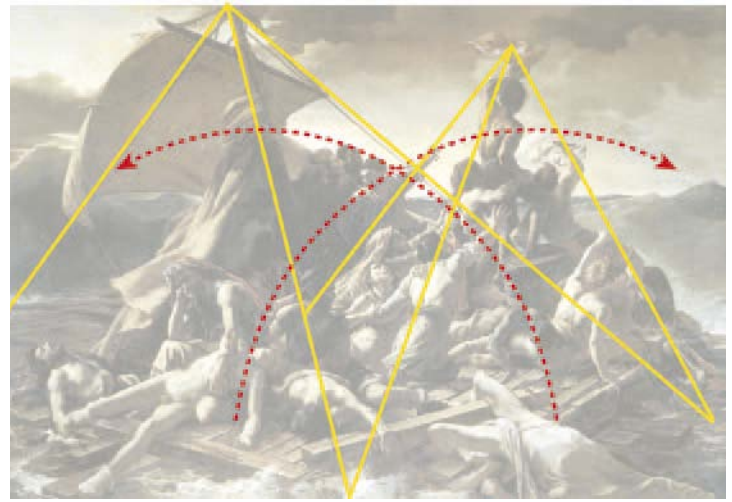


Fig. 3 Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, compositional diagram.



Fig. 4 Théodore Géricault, *Cut Limbs (Still Life of Arms and Legs in Evening Light)*, 1818 ca. Oil on canvas, 52x64 cm. Montpellier, Musée Fabre.



Fig. 5 Théodore Géricault, *The Race of Riderless Horses*, 1817 ca. Oil on paper on canvas, 45x60 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. This painting was done one year before the Raft and here, too, a current event is elevated to an epic dimension, in a compositional arrangement dominated by diagonal lines and pyramidal structure.