

<p><b>Théodore Géricault,</b> <b><i>The Raft of The Medusa,</i></b> 1818-19, oil on canvas, 491 x 716 cm (193 x 282")</p>	<p>initial analysis</p> <p>The painting was factured in response to the reports in newsprint and by word from word-of-mouth witnesses of the shipwreck of the French frigate <i>Medusa</i> bound for Senegal off the west African coast in 1816. Of the 147 people on the raft cut adrift from manageable boats only 15 survived. Within six months only ten continued to live.</p>	<p>Géricault met and become engaged with the lead survivor Corréard in Paris.</p>
	<p>The horizon marking the edge of the sea is positioned three fifths above the base line. Above it the cloudy sky and sunrise and, faintly on the right hand edge, a ship, <i>The Argus</i>. (Reports that the work uses golden section measurements are mistaken.)</p>	
<p>A make-shift sail billows in the wind and hangs from a jib and mast with three lines attached to the out-of-view flooring. A large wave approaches the raft from the left. The raft carries 19 human bodies, some appear to be unconscious or have died, another group gesticulate towards the ship on the horizon. A black figure waves clothing as a signal in the air. He has one foot on a barrel. A black-haired bearded man points towards the ship gesticulating to three colleagues. He can be identified as Alexandre Corréard. He looks back to his colleague Henri Savigny, his co-author of the subsequent account of what happened. (see page 2)</p>	<p>The first announcement of the loss of <i>The Medusa</i> was on Friday, September 6th, 1816, the news appeared in the <i>Journal des débats</i> on Sunday, September 8th, on the day on which the text of the King's new Ordinance was published. It declared 'of the 150 men, soldiers and sailors who were put on the raft, 135 perished'</p>  <p>Elements of red pigment diagonally connect the older man's head scarf on the left to other elements of clothing on the right. The overall central parts of the composition are constructed from a large pyramid form set upon the rhomboid of the raft which overlaps the smaller pyramidal form of the right-hand group of figures.</p>	<p>The frigate was captained by an officer of the Ancien Régime who had not sailed for over twenty years and who ran the ship aground on a sandbank. Due to the shortage of lifeboats, the crew had to build a raft for 150 of those on board. The raft was roped to the few sea-worthy boats but was subsequently cut adrift leaving it to voyage alone. In that odyssey only fifteen of the 147 lives were saved. The disaster of the shipwreck was made worse by the brutality and cannibalism that ensued. Géricault decided to represent the vain hope of the shipwrecked sailors. The affair became a focussed metonym of the new French regime under Louis XVIII.</p>
<p>Towards the rear of the raft an older man sits with his left arm over the naked body of a young man, perhaps his son. He sits with Biblical gravity or as if in deep thought pondering his and his fellow's plight. (The figure to his left lying face down was posed by Eugène Delacroix.)</p>	<p>Géricault spent a long time preparing the composition of this painting, which he intended to exhibit at the Salon of 1819. He began by amassing documentation and questioning the survivors, whom he sketched; he then worked with a model and wax figurines, studied severed cadavers in his studio, used friends as models, and hesitated between a number of subjects. The result of this long preparatory period can be seen in two sketches now in the Louvre. This was followed by a period of solitary work in his studio, spent getting to grips with a vast canvas measuring five meters by seven.</p> <p>The dark brown hue of the painting is due to the use of bitumen as a pigment.</p> <p>The painting is now in the Musée d' Louvre, Paris.</p>	<p>Géricault's <i>Raft</i> caused an uproar at the Salon of 1819. The authorities retitled it <i>The Scene of the Shipwreck</i> to remove the controversy of the deplorable scenes which implicated the new administration. After its initial high display Géricault persuaded the Salon to rehang the painting at ground level which gave it a more immediate public impact.</p>

The *The Raft of the Medusa* was factured during a crisis in France. Paris became a shambles, following the defeats of the French armies in 1813 in Spain and at Leipzig. A large population entered Paris in fear from British and Prussian troops. There was widespread famine. The Paris asylums were opened to accommodate French troops and the inmates were on the streets. The hospitals were cleared of sick patients to accommodate wounded soldiers. The monarchy returned to power in 1814 and Louis XVIII became king.

The *Medusa* was part of a convoy of three ships which set out under the King's flag to take Senegal back from the English. The country was a rich source of gum, sugar and many of products. The captain of the *Medusa* was Luges Duroy de Chaumareys, an outmoded, old aristocrat, who had remained loyal to the Crown.

After *The Medusa* ran aground and it was clear that all 400 would have to abandon ship, they realised that they had inadequate boats to take all the passengers. They built a raft to carry 150 bodies. By the time forty had clambered aboard the raft had sunk by more than half a metre in some places.

In his report Captain Parnajon of *The Argus*, who rescued the survivors of the raft, wrote 'I found on this raft fifteen people ... These unfortunates had been obliged to fight and kill a large number of their comrades who had revolted in order to seize the provisions ... Others had been taken by the sea, or died of hunger or madness. Those that I rescued had fed themselves on human flesh for several days, and, at the moment when I found them, the ropes which held the mast were covered with morsels of this flesh which they had hung up to dry. The raft was also covered with scraps which further attested to the food which these men were obliged to consume; they had been sustained by a little wine which they handled as carefully as possible; they still had several bottles when I found them.'<sup>1</sup>

The exhaustive account of the events was the result of a collaboration between the ship's second surgeon, Henri Savigny and Alexandre Corréard and published in 1817 as *The Shipwreck of the Frigate, The Medusa*. After the controversial show of the painting at the Salon, it was eventually displayed in London and then Dublin to great acclaim. Its arrival in London had been preceded by a translation of Corréard and Savigny's book and a play by William Moorcrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa, or, the Fatal Raft! – A Drama in Three Acts*.

Géricault took himself out of circulation in order to facture the work. He installed himself at no. 232 faubourg du Roule on the outskirts of Paris with the sole purpose of focussing on the *Medusa*. He had chosen a location only a short walk from the Hôpital Beaujon where he could go to observe human suffering and from which he would obtain severed body parts for private study.

In March 1819 Géricault made a trip to Le Havre to study the effects of clouds over water. He also made a trip across the Channel with Horace Vernet and a retired army officer to England. Otherwise he was mostly in his studio at work on the painting. The painting was completed in eight months.

In the last period Géricault added two figures to the raft to give the painting a better balance. In doing so he had discarded the journalistic verisimilitude provided by Corréard and Savigny in favour of an emotional depth and integrity, to give emphasis to the shift from despair in the foreground to the false hope of the gesticulating man on the barrel.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Miles. *Medusa. The Shipwreck. The Scandal. The Masterpiece*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2007, p.115.