Selections from Lorenz Eitner, Gericault's Raft of the Medusa
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THE STORY OF THE RAFT

THE event which had given Géricault the subject for his painting lay three years in the past. On 2 July 1816, the government frigate *La Méduse,* flagship of a convoy carrying French soldiers and settlers to the colony of Senegal, struck bottom in shallow water close to the West African coast, south of Cap Blanc.[1] The main cause of the mishap was the incompetence of the captain, Hugues Duroys de Chaumareys, a nobleman and returned émigré, who owed his appointment to ministerial protection rather than to his seamanship. Outrunning the smaller ships in his convoy, de Chaumareys had steered an erratic course through the shoals along the Mauretanian coast, with the result that, when he ran aground on the sands of Arguin, there were no ships near him to help re-float the *Medusa.* After two days of confused and ineffectual efforts, it became apparent that the ship must be abandoned. Only six lifeboats, of various sizes and different degrees of dilapidation, were on hand (fig. 1). They could take no more than about two hundred and fifty of the *Medusa*'s four hundred passengers and crew. To accommodate the rest, a raft measuring about sixty-five feet in length and twenty-eight feet in width was built with the help of masts and beams crudely lashed together with ropes (fig. 3). On the morning of 5 July, the frigate, which had begun to break up, was abandoned with undisciplined haste. The captain and many of the senior officers, concerned only with their own safety, had the brutality of commandeering the more seaworthy boats, leaving it to the lower ranks and the soldiers to try their luck on the Raft. One hundred and fifty persons, including a woman, were herded onto the slippery beams, which immediately submerged under this weight. The surgeon Savigny, one of the survivors of the Raft, later recalled that "it had sunk at least three feet, and so closely were we huddled together that it was impossible to move a single step. Fore and aft, we had the water up to our middle (fig. 4)."[2]

An agreement had been made beforehand that all the boats should stay with the Raft and together tow it to the nearby shore (fig. 2). But in their haste to reach land, the men in the boats soon cut the cables which held them to the heavy Raft, leaving its crew to the mercy of currents and winds, without means of navigation, without sufficient food or drink for even a short voyage, and so desperately crowded on their flooded timbers as to make every movement an affliction. *"We were not convinced",*

[1] The basic report of the shipwreck is the original submission by the ship's surgeon, Henri Savigny, to the Ministry of the Navy, of which a first, unauthorized publication was made by the *Journal des Débats* on 13 September 1816. *The Times* of London carried a full translation of this report in its edition of 17 September 1816; from this, the direct quotations in the present chapter are taken. Savigny and another survivor, Alexandre Corréard, later produced a fuller version of the original report. This was published as a book under the title *Naufrage de la Frégate la Méduse faisant partie de l'expédition du Sénégal en 1816,* the first edition of which appeared in November of 1817. A second, enlarged edition was published very early in 1818. On this was based the English edition, *Narrative of a voyage to Senegal in 1816,* published in London in April 1818. A fourth French edition, further amplified and illustrated with lithographic plates after Géricault and other artists, appeared in 1821. The first-hand descriptions by Savigny and Corréard are the basis of all later accounts of the Raft's voyage, including Géricault's painting. It is therefore not useless to note that these two men were far from being impartial chroniclers. Their book was designed to incriminate the *Medusa*'s captain, and at the same time to minimize or explain their own part in the atrocities which occurred on the Raft. (See also A. Praviel, *Le Radeau de la Méduse,* Paris, 1934; A. W. Lawrence [ed.], *The Wreck of the Medusa,* London, 1931, which contains the reminiscences of a female survivor of the shipwreck, Mme. Dard, née Picard, but contributes nothing new to the story of the Raft; Commandant J. Tonnele, "Le naufrage de la Méduse," *Revue Historique du Musée de l'Armée,* 1, February 1965, pp. 50 ff.).

[2] *The Times,* London, 17 September 1816, no. 9942, p. 2.

Savigny recalled, *"that we were entirely abandoned until the boats were almost out of sight. Our consternation was then extreme: all the horrors of famine and thirst were then depicted to our imaginations; and we had also to struggle with a treacherous element, which already covered one-half of our bodies. All the sailors and soldiers gave themselves up to despair, and it was with great difficulty that we succeeded in calming them."*[3] The first day passed quietly, with talk of rescue and revenge, but during the night the wind freshened and the waves rose higher. *"A great number of our passengers who had not a seaman's foot tumbled over one another; in fine, after ten hours of the most cruel sufferings, day arrived. What a spectacle presented itself to our view! ten or twelve unfortunate creatures having their lower extremities entangled in the interstices left between the planks of the raft, had been unable to disengage themselves, and had lost their lives. Several others had been carried off the raft by the violence of the sea; so that by morning we were already twenty fewer in number."*[4]

The next day, a mood of depression settled over the men on the raft. Mutiny was in the air. *"Night came on; the sky was covered with thick clouds; the sea was still more terrible than on the preceding night; and the men, being unable to hold fast to the raft, either fore or aft, crowded towards the centre, the most solid part. Almost all those perished who were unable to reach the centre; the crowding of the people was such, that some were stifled by the weight of their comrades, who were falling upon them every moment.*

"The soldiers and sailors, giving themselves up for lost, fell a-drinking until they lost their reason. In this state they carried their delirium so far as to display the intention of murdering their chiefs, and destroying the raft, by cutting the ropes which united its different parts [illegible]. *One of them advanced, armed with a hatchet, to execute this design; he had already begun to cut the ligaments, which was the signal of revolt. The officers came forward to restrain these madmen; that one who was armed with a hatchet, with which he dared to threaten them, was killed with the stroke of a sabre. Many of the officers and some passengers joined us for the preservation of the raft. The revolted drew their sabres, and those who had none armed themselves with knives. We put ourselves in a posture of defence, and the combat commenced. One of the rebels raised his weapon against an officer; he fell that moment pierced with wounds. This firmness appeared for a moment to intimidate the mutineers; but they closed in with one another and retired aft, to execute their plan. One of them, feigning to repose himself, had begun to cut the ropes with a knife, when, being advertised of it by a domestic, we darted upon him: a soldier, wishing to defend him, threatened an officer with his knife, and aiming a blow at him, struck only his coat. The officer, turning about, floored his adversary, and threw him into the sea, as well as his comrade.*

"The battle soon became general: the mast broke, and, falling upon Captain Dupont, who remained senseless, nearly broke his thigh. He was seized by the soldiers, who threw him into the sea. We perceived this, and were in time to save him; we placed him on a barrel, whence he was torn by the mutineers, who wished to dig his eyes out with a knife. Roused by such ferocity, we charged them with fury, dashed through the lines which the soldiers had formed, sabre in hand, and many of them paid with their lives for their madness. The passengers seconded us. After a second charge, the fury of the rebels was subdued, and gave place to the most marked cowardice; the greater part threw themselves on their knees, and asked pardon, which was immediately granted."[5] Some sixty-five men died during this night.

On the following day, the third of the raft's voyage, raging hunger drove some of the survivors to cannibalism. *"Those whom death had spared in the disastrous night which I have just described,"* wrote Savigny, *"threw themselves ravenously on the dead bodies with which the raft was covered, cut them up in slices, which some even that instant devoured. A great number of us at first refused to touch the horrible food; but at last, yielding to a want still more pressing than that of humanity, we saw in this frightful repast only deplorable means of*

[3] *Ibidem.* [4] *Ibidem.* [5] *Ibidem.*

prolonging existence; and I proposed, I acknowledge it, to dry these bleeding limbs, in order to render them a little more supportable to the taste. Some, however, had still courage enough to abstain from it, and to them a larger quantity of wine was granted."[6]

As the days passed, hunger and thirst, exposure, murder, and insanity took their toll of the remaining men. From the fourth day on, all practised cannibalism and supplemented their small ration of wine with sea water or urine. On the sixth day of the Raft's voyage, only twenty-eight survivors remained. *"Out of this number,"* in the opinion of Savigny, the ship's surgeon, *"fifteen alone appeared able to exist for some days longer; all the others, covered with large wounds, had wholly lost their reason. However, they had a share in our rations, and might, before their death, consume forty bottles of wine; those forty bottles of wine were to us of inestimable value. We held a council; to put the sick on half-rations was to delay their death by a few moments; to leave them without provisions was to put them to a slow death. After a long deliberation, we resolved to throw them into the sea. This mode, however repugnant to our feelings, would procure to the survivors provisions for six days, at the rate of three quarts of wine a day . . . Three seamen and a soldier took upon themselves this cruel execution. We averted our eyes, and shed tears of blood over the fate of these unhappy creatures . . . After this catastrophe we threw all the arms into the sea; they inspired us with a horror that we could not conquer."*[7] The fifteen hardy and ruthless men who were now in sole command of the Raft managed to suffer through another seven days without further loss of life.

On the morning of 17 July, *"Captain Dupont, casting his eye towards the horizon, perceived a ship, and announced it to us by a cry of joy (fig. M); we perceived it to be a brig, but it was at a very great distance; we could only distinguish the top of its masts. The sight of this vessel spread amongst us a joy which it would be difficult to describe. Fears, however, soon mixed with our hopes; we began to perceive that our raft, having very little elevation above the water, it was impossible to distinguish it at such a distance. We did all we could to make ourselves observed; we piled up our casks, at the top of which we fixed handkerchiefs of different colours. Unfortunately, in spite of all of these signals, the brig disappeared. From the delirium of joy we passed to that of dejection and grief."*[8]

The brig which the men on the Raft had sighted was the *Argus*, part of the *Medusa*'s original convoy, which had been sent to search for them. When the *Argus* disappeared again, the shipwrecked men lost all hope; they lay down together in the tent which they had rigged beneath the mast and awaited death. Two hours later, they were surprised by the *Argus*'s sudden return. Of the fifteen survivors who were taken from the Raft, half-starved, bearded, sun-burnt, and covered with wounds, five died shortly after reaching land. The Raft's voyage had lasted thirteen days and cost one hundred and forty lives.

Reports of the disaster were slow to reach France. While the government did not entirely suppress the news, it sought to hide or soften its most atrocious aspects, and the Ministry of the Navy took particular pains to keep the public from learning of the incompetence and treachery of the *Medusa*'s captain. The first despatches arrived in Brest on 2 September 1816. Eight days later, their substance was published in Paris by means of an extremely terse note, inconspicuously inserted in the official *Moniteur Universel:*[9]

"On 2 July, at three o'clock in the afternoon, the frigate Medusa *was lost, in good weather, on the shoals of Arguin twenty leagues distant from Cap Blanc (in Africa, between the Canaries and Cap Verde). The* Medusa*'s six launches and lifeboats were able to save a large part of the crew and passengers, but of 150 men who attempted to save themselves on a raft, 135 have perished."*

[6] *Ibidem.* [7] *Ibidem.* [8] *Ibidem.* [9] *Moniteur Universel,* 10 September 1816, p. 1024.

Here matters might have rested, if the government could have had its way. But some of the survivors of the Raft were about to make their way back to France. One of them, the surgeon Henri Savigny, had spent the days of his return voyage in composing a detailed account of the shipwreck and of the horrors of the Raft. On his arrival in France, he submitted his report to an official of the Ministry of the Navy. The Ministry would have been glad to bury it in the files; by mischance, however, a second copy of it fell into the hands of agents of the powerful Prefect of the Police, Élie Decazes, a man of vast ambition, who, as the King's intimate favourite, had designs on the government of France. Since it suited Decazes' strategy of the moment to discredit the Minister of the Navy, Debouchage, he allowed Savigny's account to be leaked to the editor of the widely-read *Journal des Débats,* who published it, without official authorization, on 13 September 1816.[10] This first, full disclosure of the circumstances of the shipwreck of the *Medusa* burst like a bombshell upon the public. It was immediately taken up by the French and the foreign press,[11] and brought on a resounding scandal, which was only aggravated by the Ministry's clumsy attempts to silence or discredit Savigny. The political opponents of the monarchy were quick to seize the opportunity for a broad attack on the government. They represented the loss of the *Medusa* as a political crime, rather than a natural disaster, and put the blame for it on the minister who had appointed the incompetent captain. It was not difficult for them to turn the shipwreck into an illustration of the danger to which France was exposed by a régime which put dynastic over national interest, gave the command of ships to political favourites and allowed aristocratic officers to abandon their men in times of crisis.[12] To the veterans of the Napoleonic reign, many of them idle, reduced to half-pay and furious at having been displaced by courtiers such as the lamentable de Chaumareys, the catastrophe of the *Medusa* summed up the plight of France under the Bourbons.

In February and March of 1817, a naval court was quietly convened aboard a warship in the harbour of Rochefort, to try the *Medusa*'s captain. It sentenced de Chaumareys to be degraded and to serve three years in prison—a lenient penalty for a crime which, according to the letter of the military code, could have been punished by death. Neither the trial nor the sentence was reported in the press.[13]

Savigny in the meantime had been joined by another survivor of the raft, the naval engineer and

[10] See A. Corréard and H. Savigny, *Naufrage de la Frégate la Méduse,* fourth edition, Paris, 1821, pp. 305 ff. Savigny wrote a second account of his experiences on the Raft, in the form of a doctoral dissertation, *Observations sur les Effets de la faim et de la soif éprouvés après le naufrage de la frégate du Roi la Méduse en 1816,* which he submitted to the faculty of Medicine on 26 May 1818, and which was published the same year by Didot. Savigny was suspected of having abused his position as ship's surgeon in organizing the "mercy" killings which decimated the men on the Raft.

[11] Cf the translation of Savigny's report in *The Times* of 17 September 1816, no. 9942, p. 2.

[12] Aside from the charge of negligence and political favouritism to which the disaster of the *Medusa* exposed the government, and particularly the ultra-royalist Minister of the Navy, it also had a direct bearing on one of the crucial political issues of the day, namely the struggle for the domination of the Army and Navy. The aristocratic and ultra-royalist factions were attempting to reserve officers' commissions for members of the nobility, and particularly for returned émigrés. Liberal opinion, on the other hand, demanded that military careers be opened to all qualified men, including veterans of the Napoleonic wars. The king, fully aware of the danger to the security of the state which would have resulted from the exclusion of veteran officers, sided with Liberal opinion and was seconded by his ministers Decazes and Gouvion de St. Cyr. The wreck of the *Medusa* furnished spectacular proof of the incapacity for command of at least some noble émigrés, and thus strengthened the position of the moderates. This was the one aspect of the case which gave secret satisfaction to the king and his confederates. The *lex* Gouvion de St. Cyr, democratizing admissions to the officers' corps, was passed in 1818, and brought to a conclusion this political controversy, while the memory of the *Medusa* was still fresh.

[13] Corréard and Savigny, *op. cit.,* third edition, 1821, pp. 373 ff., see also J. Tonnele, "Le naufrage de la Méduse", *Revue Historique du Musée de l'Armée,* I, February 1965, pp. 64 ff.

geographer, Alexandre Corréard.[14] Together the two men continued to petition the government to compensate the victims of the shipwreck and to punish the guilty officers. The government responded with harassment, fines, and imprisonment. More serious still, both Savigny and Corréard were dismissed from government service. Destitute and despairing of ministerial justice, they decided to put their case before the nation, this time deliberately and with the intention of achieving the fullest publicity. Together they wrote an expanded version of Savigny's original report, adding many further details, and had it printed in the form of a substantial book, first offered for sale in November of 1817. The venture was a success from the start. After only a few months, a second, enlarged edition was required. Early in 1818, a full English translation of this second edition appeared in London. Encouraged, Corréard decided to turn his misfortune into profit. He established himself as a publisher at the Palais Royal and began to issue political pamphlets. His shop, under the irresistible sign *Au naufragé de la Méduse*, remained for years a rallying point for political malcontents and a thorn in the side of the government. Géricault made the acquaintance of Corréard and Savigny in 1817 or early 1818, most likely through his friend Auguste Brunet[15] or through the painter Horace Vernet. It was the book of Corréard and Savigny that gave him the idea for his painting of the *Raft of the Medusa*.

[14] Alexandre Corréard (1788–1857) was aboard the *Medusa* as engineer and geographer attached to the French colonial expedition to Senegal. He had lost the sum of 10,000 francs in the wreck (cf. A. Jal, *Souvenirs d'un homme de lettres,* Paris, 1877, pp. 409 ff.). For an account of the persecution he suffered after the shipwreck, see Corréard and Savigny, *op. cit.,* fourth edition, 1821, pp. 309 ff.

[15] Géricault's close friend, the economist Auguste Brunet, was among the first authors to publish a book with Corréard's firm (*De l'aristocratie et de la démocratie, de l'importance du travail et de la richesse mobilière,* Paris, Corréard, 1819). He may have drawn on Savigny's medical knowledge for another of his publications which appeared the same year, *Influence de la médecine légale sur la morale et sur le jury,* Paris, 1819.

THE WORK IN PROGRESS

Invention

It was at this juncture that Géricault found in the book by Corréard and Savigny, *Naufrage de la Frégate la Méduse,* a subject which answered his needs. The book's first edition burst on the public in November of 1817, a short time after his return from Italy. During that winter, it went from hand to hand and stirred angry debate wherever it was read. Money was subscribed for the Raft's survivors in every corner of France; in the very prison of Rodez, where the accused murderers of Fualdès awaited their sentence, the plight of the shipwrecked aroused pity.[1] Nowhere, however, was the discussion more intense and more informed than in the circle of veteran officers and aspiring politicians round Vernet.

It is likely that Géricault first read the book and met its authors[2] soon after his arrival in France, and that it was then that he received his first strong impressions of the disaster. Exactly when the idea struck him that the story of the Raft might be used for a painting of large dimensions is difficult to guess. His plan may have ripened gradually, in the course of the winter and spring of 1818, while he was busy with his lithographs and the Fualdès drawings. Some of his earliest sketches for the project of the *Medusa* at any rate include details of the shipwreck that were only published in the book's second edition, put into circulation during the early months of 1818.[3] This indication of a fairly late start accords well with Clément's statement that Géricault *"used the spring and summer of 1818 to complete his information and his studies",* worked out the composition in the course of the summer and autumn, and was ready to transfer the completed design to canvas in November of 1818.[4]

The start of the work was slow and difficult. Its very gradual progress can be traced in a chain of preliminary studies, from which it appears that Géricault, at the outset, did not clearly visualize his subject. He was slow to make his choice among the various dramatic episodes which the story of the shipwreck offered. For some time, he hesitated between several incidents of quite different aspect and meaning. The difficulty was to lift from the flow of the narrative a single, significant, and pictorially effective moment; it was the very problem which had occupied him, a short time before, when he developed the subject of the *Murder of Fualdès.*

Géricault did not invent with ease. He needed the spur of experienced reality to start his imagination working. In trying to reduce the drama of the Raft to a single scene, he had to use verbal descriptions as a guide, to which his mind responded slowly. He struggled to translate the words of Corréard and Savigny into images, grasping at anything that might help him give substance to their tale—popular lithographs of the shipwreck ([illegible]),[5] the talk of survivors, a scale model of the Raft, built for him by the *Medusa*'s carpenter ([illegible]).[6] Gradually, he collected *"a veritable dossier crammed with authentic*

[1] A. Jal, *op. cit.,* p. 412.

[2] Clément, *op. cit.,* p. 130: *"Il s'était beaucoup lié avec MM. Corréard et Savigny, les principaux survivants parmi les acteurs de ce drame dont il se faisait raconter toutes les navrantes et horribles péripéties".*

[3] Among the episodes first published in the book's second edition were those involving the sutler's family and the death of the young sailor in the arms of an older man. The publication date of this edition can be deduced roughly from the fact that the English translation of it, *Narrative of a voyage to Senegal in 1816,* London, 1818, includes a frontispiece dated April 1.

[4] Clément, *op. cit.,* pp. 129 and 136.

proofs and documents",[7] evidently not only to give accuracy to his work but to set his fantasy in motion. Many months later, close to the end of his long battle with the picture, he would occasionally expose himself to the sting of a fresh experience, to sharpen his flagging sense of the reality of his subject. This need for stimulation, which was to send him to the beaches of Le Havre to observe marine skies[8] and to Parisian hospitals to look into the faces of the dying,[9] already seems to have been acting on him when he compiled his dossier at the project's beginning.

While he laboured to re-create the actuality of his subject with the help of documents, he also looked for support from a very different kind of authority. Some aspects of the story of the Raft recalled to his mind parallels in art: scenes of battle, torment, and death in the works of the masters. Though these had nothing to do with the historical truth for which he aimed, they struck him as being appropriate to his subject in feeling and expression, and he freely used them as aids in its visualization. In this way, quotations from Michelangelo, Rubens, and Gros entered into his conception of the *Raft of the Medusa* at an early stage, and as the composition developed, became fused with elements taken from his imagination or from observed life.

Preferring to work from definite images in making his choice of the proper episode for full development, Géricault began by sketching several alternative moments of the disaster, a procedure which he had used in earlier projects. Of the first fugitive sketches which recorded his actual invention of these scenes ([redacted]), most are lost. The preserved drawings, with few exceptions, are remarkably precise and developed, giving the impression of being based on ideas already tested and settled in all essentials. To judge from the early drawings which survive, he was initially drawn to five episodes of Corréard's and Savigny's account. In several very elaborate drawings, he treated the ferocious *Mutiny* of the sailors against their officers (figs 6 & 7). In another study, equally detailed, he represented the outbreak of *Cannibalism,* which followed the massacre (fig 8). He explored in detail the incident of the inconclusive *Sighting of the Argus* (figs 13-21) On the morning of the thirteenth day of the Raft's voyage, and the desperate, futile efforts of the men to attract the notice of the searchers. It was this episode which he ultimately chose for his painting. In several drawings and a painted sketch (now lost), he dealt with the moment before the actual rescue, showing the survivors *Hailing the Approaching Rowing-boat* which will take them to safety (figs 9-10 [redacted]). In other drawings, he sketched the *Rescue* itself, and, finally, the empty Raft after the departure of the survivors ([redacted]). It is not likely that he considered all these episodes as possible subjects for his projected picture. Some of them he may merely have sketched as exercises in visualization. This may be true, for example, of the drawings of the *Rescue* (figs 1 & 2), and almost certainly applies to the drawing of the empty Raft. It is strange, on the other hand, that among the preserved studies there is not one which deals with the treachery of the *Medusa*'s

Note: Images to accompany this text are available as a separate file on Blackboard.

[5] The Cabinet des Estampes of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, possesses four contemporary lithographs of the shipwreck, based on the account of Corréard and Savigny, and evidently earlier than Géricault's picture: (1) *Naufrage de la Frégate la Méduse et Embarquement de l'Equipage sur le Radeau et dans les Ambarcations. D'après les renseignements exacts donnés par M. Savigny, l'un des naufragés du Radeau. An* 1817. (2) *Naufrage de la frégate la Méduse . . . départ des Embarcations et du Radeau . . . d'après les renseignemens les plus exacts donnés par Mrs. Savigny et Corréard.* (3) *La Révolte d'une partie de l'équipage,* signed by Hipolyte LeComte, 1818. (4) *Rencontre du Radeau par le brick l'Argus.* Two of the prints, nos. (2) and (4) bear the legend *Par un officier de marine en retraite.* It is probable that Géricault was familiar with these and other popular picture chronicles of the shipwreck and that they formed part of his *dossier.*

[6] Clément, *op. cit.,* p. 130.

[7] *Ibidem,* p. 129.

[8] *Ibidem,* p. 137.

[9] *Ibidem,* p. 130.

captain and the casting adrift of the Raft, though these were the most scandalous incidents of the shipwreck.[10]

At the very outset, Géricault may have toyed with several episodes at once, but as he began to develop their compositions in more concrete detail, he concentrated on one after the other, testing each thoroughly before going on to the next. The actual order in which he took them up in turn can be deduced with fair certainty from the surviving drawings, since they form a progressive sequence. Géricault's characteristic habit of building his compositions by successive additions and transformations, and his tendency to cling to figure motifs once he had invented them, carrying them from one compositional version to the next, give strong clues to the dates of the individual projects. The closer in total effect and in detail a particular study approaches the final solution, the later it is likely to fall within the chain of the preparatory designs. If the known compositional studies are arranged according to this principle of progressive development, it becomes evident that they divide into two main groups. The episodes of *Rescue, Mutiny,* and *Cannibalism* belong together and constitute an early, experimental stage in the development, while the studies of the *Hailing of the Approaching Rowing-boat* and of the *Sighting of the Argus* together form a later stage which leads directly to the final composition.

The scene of the *Rescue* did not, it seems, occupy Géricault for very long. The drawings which treat this subject (figs 1-2) do not so much develop it, as cast it in two totally different versions. In the one, the action is shown from the side of the rescue boat. The survivors of the Raft, forming a confused mass, are seen pressing forward into the rowing-boat. In its general disposition, this sketch oddly resembles a painting which Gros was at that time preparing to send to the Salon of 1819, the *Embarkation of the Duchess d'Angoulême* ([illegible]). It is not impossible that Géricault was influenced by Gros's work, which he may have seen in the master's studio. The other version, by contrast, treats the moment of rescue as seen from the Raft (fig 2). The survivors, conceived as nudes in the "antique" manner, are separately articulated and strike Michelangelesque poses. The experiment of essaying one subject in two quite different modes, the one modern, the other classical, had repeatedly been tried by Géricault during 1817–18; it links the *Rescue* drawings with works from his Italian stay and the period which immediately followed it.

The episode of the *Mutiny,* unlike that of the *Rescue,* held Géricault's full attention for some time (figs 6-7). There can be little doubt that he seriously considered using it for his picture. The several drawings of the *Mutiny* composition which survive give every indication of having been worked out carefully and slowly, in close dependence on the narrative of Corréard and Savigny. They show the Raft at a fair distance, moving to the left, driven by a strong wind, which billows its torn sail. Around it extends a wide margin of sky and agitated sea. The ocean's swell lifts the Raft's prow and causes its stern to sink among the towering waves. Along the downward slant of its timbers descends an avalanche of bodies, tightly crowded and yet in motion, as if spilling from the mouth of a gigantic cornucopia. At first sight, the figures on the Raft seem too numerous and too closely interwoven to be distinguished separately, but on closer look, the mass resolves itself into precisely

[10] E. Chesneau, in *Les chefs d'école,* Paris, 1862, p. 146, mentions a sketch in the Marcille collection showing *"le moment où, d'un coup de hache, le radeau est violemment détaché des canots remorqueurs: il avait exprimé la déception, le désespoir et la rage des victimes de cette trahison"*. No such sketch is known, nor do the catalogues of the various sales in which the Marcille collection was dispersed prove that one ever existed. It seems probable that Chesneau in fact had in mind one of the *Mutiny* compositions.

defined groups. On the Raft's raised prow, at the left, the shipwrecked men are in despair, some have sunk into apathy, others raise their arms in helpless supplication. Near them lie the wounded and the suffering. A father embraces his wife and child; one of the drawings shows, instead, a man who lifts the body of another from the water. Beneath the mast stands an exhausted officer holding a broken sword. Nearby, the battle still rages; hatchets and sabres flail the air, the sailors and officers, some uniformed, many nude, are locked in desperate combat. Brandishing a hatchet, a crazed mutineer throws himself into the sea. Clusters of wounded and dying men tumble from the Raft's stern and disappear among the waves. On the left side of the composition are grouped the defenders of the Raft and the innocent victims, while the right side is given over to the rebellious in their furious assault and final destruction. Nearly all the episodic details derive from the text of Corréard and Savigny, but Géricault has condensed into a single crowded scene various incidents which in actuality had occurred over a period of days. For all its modern detail, the scene of the *Mutiny* curiously resembles traditional representations of the Last Judgement in its separation of the innocent from the guilty, its symmetry of aspiration and damnation, and its spectacular fall of the mutinous. It is clear that Géricault's vision of the Raft trailing a stream of struggling nudes owed something to the famous bark in Michelangelo's Sistine fresco. But an even closer relationship links his *Mutiny* with Rubens' so-called *Little Last Judgement* (Munich), known to him through an engraving, after which he had drawn several careful pencil studies ([redacted]). The tumbling nudes in the *Mutiny* reflect his familiarity with the falling rebel angels in Rubens' composition, which evidently interested him mainly because he found it relevant, in theme as well as form, to his own project.

Géricault at length abandoned the *Mutiny* episode, after having spent much effort on it, perhaps realizing that its intricacy made it unsuitable for execution in a monumental format. In all his subsequent versions, he was to aim for greater simplicity.

Only one of the preserved drawings deals with the outbreak of *Cannibalism* among the survivors of the battles (fig 8). Like the *Mutiny* drawings, it is a fully developed composition, not a groping sketch, and it further resembles them in the position and setting in which it presents the Raft. The figures are fewer, as historical accuracy required; the violence has ebbed, and the teeming cascade of bodies has dwindled to a single cadaver hanging from the stern. In the place of the family group, Géricault has put two naked men who feed on a corpse. This bold motif—cannibalism is one of the rarest subjects in Western art—gives the scene its particular fascination, but it is not enough to overcome the incoherence and meagreness of a design which lacks all the sweep of the *Mutiny* composition. The few principal figures, every one of them nude, are awkwardly aligned along the Raft's edge, somewhat like actors on a stage. The scene amounts to a reduction and stiffening of the turbulent *Mutiny*; what it has gained in legibility it has lost in interest, despite its sensational subject. Géricault, wisely, put it aside—one wonders how his man-eaters would have been received at the Salon—but his passing occupation with it was not entirely a waste. The *Cannibalism* episode contributed several new motifs to the further development of the *Raft of the Medusa,* notably the group of the old man, the "Father" of the final version, who holds a dead youth in his arms (fig 22).

The *Mutiny* and *Cannibalism* compositions shared one important trait: their action was conceived as a dramatic spectacle seen from a distance. They put the viewer in the position of one who watches the Raft as it passes him by, surrounded by water, looking like a floating stage covered with gesturing or battling figures. Géricault's next move in his development of the scene brought a change into it

which deeply altered its form and meaning. He re-oriented the figures on the Raft, turning them away from the spectator toward a point in the depth of the picture. At the same time, he moved the Raft so close to the foreground as to make the viewer feel transported onto its planks and to involve him in its drama as a participant rather than a detached observer.

This decisive change first appears in two drawings and a painted sketch which show the men on the Raft *Hailing an Approaching Rowing-boat* (figs 9-10) This is the moment before the final deliverance, the handful of survivors stand at the Raft's edge or drag themselves forward to greet the boat, which bears down on them from the middle distance, across the crest of a small wave. The Raft, no longer surrounded by water, juts into view from the foreground at the right and points toward the rowing-boat, which approaches from the left. The effect of the scene now hinges on the juxtaposition of near and far elements. The immediate proximity of the Raft encourages the beholder to adopt the view of the shipwrecked men and to identify himself with their action. His eye is led by their excited gestures toward the rowing-boat in the middle distance which, despite its relatively small size, is the emotional centre of this drama of rescue. The entire composition is caught up in a strong, aimed thrust which runs diagonally from Raft to rowing-boat. In the place of the intricate agitation of the *Mutiny,* the composition of the *Hailing* expresses a focused tension. The Raft with its straining figures and the distant boat are the opposite poles of a directed force which spans the space between them. The figures on the Raft, no longer separable into individual groups, are welded into one action, the meaning of which is made clear by the overall design, not by narrative detail: composition and narration have become one.

Composition

In developing the scene of the *Hailing* (fig 9), Géricault had found the dramatic motif and compositional structure which satisfied him. It now occurred to him that another episode in the story of the Raft offered him an even better chance to exploit the tensions and contrasts which gave power to his new-found image. From the episode of the *Hailing* he turned to that of the *Sighting of the Argus* (figs 13-21) His search was at an end: he had found his subject.

There is an important difference between the two episodes. The *Sighting* is not a part of the rescue, it is, rather, the ultimate ordeal of the shipwrecked men. The event occurs on the morning of the thirteenth day of the Raft's voyage. The *Argus* has come into view on the far horizon. The men on the Raft, in an agony of expectancy, respond to this uncertain promise in different ways. Some are stirred to frantic activity, others calculate their chance, some pray for deliverance, still others, past hope, turn their backs. Soon the *Argus* will disappear again.

Much more complex than the *Hailing* in its drama, the *Sighting* is a scene of anxiety, disappointment, and resignation, rather than relief. Yet the formal means by which Géricault expressed this content are similar to those which he had first devised for the *Hailing of the Approaching Rowing-boat.* The new composition grew directly from the previous one and retained its main features: the closeness of the Raft to the foreground, the diagonal recession of the whole, the coherence of the figure groups, and their orientation toward a point in the distance. The main change is in the relationship between Raft and rescue vessel. In contrast to the comforting proximity in which the rowing-boat appeared in the scene of the *Hailing,* the rescue ship is now so far removed as to be scarcely visible. It is too small to

form an appreciable shape within the general design, but it functions powerfully as the magnetic focus on which all movements converge. Throughout Géricault's further development of the scene, he steadily intensified the effect of extreme distance between Raft and rescue. In his final version (fig 22), the disproportion between the overpowering nearness of the figures on the Raft and the infinitesimal spot on the far horizon toward which they gesticulate produces an almost unbearable sense of strain. What had begun, in the scene of the *Hailing,* as a subtle turning of the composition toward the middle distance, became in the end a plunging recession from nearest foreground into farthest distance, a dramatic device of a vehemence unparalleled in the art of Géricault's time.

It was entirely in keeping with Géricault's temperament that he arrived at this bold solution not in one energetic impulse, guided by an intuitive vision of the whole, but by patient, piecemeal effort. The decision to shift to the episode of the *Sighting of the Argus* did not win him any sudden breakthrough. While it enabled him to concentrate on one particular scene, it also made him face a fresh start; a situation which he always found difficult. The idea of his new subject had to be cast into a definite image, and of this he possessed at first only the merest rump, the general compositional scheme first suggested to him by the scene of the *Hailing of the Approaching Rowing-boat.* Accepting this as his base, he proceeded to form a core of figures appropriate to the new subject, then went on to increase this nucleus by fitting more and more figures around it (figs 14-21). In this manner, he cautiously expanded his composition, making it grow unit by unit, not unlike a building under construction.[11] As was his custom, he recorded every step of this process in a separate drawing or painted study. Whenever possible, he borrowed figures from the discarded projects of *Mutiny* and *Cannibalism.* In this, too, his method was rational and economical. He disliked wasting hard-won inventions, and since his imagination was not abundant he deliberately limited himself to a small repertory of motifs which he revised and transformed continuously, driven by restless perfectionism. The composition as a whole, and every part of it, underwent constant change as he worked along, uncertain about the outcome until near the end. The preserved studies show how little he foresaw at the start what form his image would ultimately take. The great ascent of straining figures, culminating in the signalling Negro, which totally dominates the final canvas, was not in his mind when he began, but assumed shape gradually, hesitantly, as the work went forward.

A pen drawing in Rouen (fig 13) may be the earliest of the preserved designs for the *Sighting.* It is exceptional among the early drawings of the scene in giving a fairly comprehensive statement of the whole, while remaining notably vague and irresolute in every detail. These conflicting indications of early and relatively late date make it difficult to place it in the otherwise closely continuous and progressive sequence of designs. It is possible that it reflects that earliest stage in the planning, when Géricault still experimented simultaneously with several different episodes. If so, the sketch in Rouen would indicate that he had dimly envisaged some of the crucial features of his final composition at the outset, then had abandoned them, only to be brought back to them, step by step, in the subsequent evolution of the composition (figs 16-21).

Two tiny, rapid sketches of an old man holding the body of a youth on his knees, in the upper margin of the drawing in Rouen, link this early version of the *Sighting* to the main sequence of designs

[11] Géricault used a small scale-model of the Raft, on which he placed figures modelled in wax, in planning the composition (Clément, *op. cit.,* p. 130). His use of this device may help to explain his peculiarly gradual and piecemeal method of construction, his facility in turning the figures in different views, and the apparent ease with which he managed the distribution of lights and shadows.

leading to the definitive compositions. This seems to be the earliest appearance, as yet not integrated with the composition, of a motif—usually called the "Father Mourning his Dead Son"— which was to become the cornerstone on which Géricault based the intricate figure structure of the *Raft* ([illegible]). After its initial appearance in the Rouen drawing, we meet with it in several separate sketches. One of these, at the Düsseldorf Museum ([illegible]), illustrates the start of his attempt to base further figures on this anchor group.

A very precise pen drawing in Lille shows the group of "Father and Son" for the first time firmly embedded in a complete composition (fig 14). In the arrangement and leftward orientation of its figures, this drawing still echoes the discarded episode of the *Hailing of the Approaching Rowing-boat* (fig 9). To adapt the earlier compositional scheme to the new subject, Géricault has begun to improvise a new set of figures, attaching them to the group of "Father and Son": a cadaver lying forward on its face; a crouching man looking sharply in the direction of the distant *Argus*; a man, seen in back view, dragging himself forward on his knees. They will remain constant elements in the further growth of the composition. The drawing in Lille marks the point from which the final development of the *Raft of the Medusa* can be followed without break.

Géricault's next step was to give the composition greater unity and to increase its dramatic force. To this end, he reversed its orientation,[12] making it face to the right. He also pulled the separate figures together into four main groups, each expressive of a particular emotion. A pen and wash drawing in Rouen ([illegible]) and an oil study at the Louvre (fig 16) mark this stage of the work. In them, what was to become the definitive composition makes its first appearance, though still in rudimentary form.

Both depart from the slightly earlier pen drawing in Lille (fig 14) by sharply pointing the action toward the right. This reversal has a double effect: it accommodates the motion of the viewer's eye and thereby accelerates the directional sweep of the scene; it also draws the viewer into a closer involvement with the action. In the Lille version of the *Sighting* (Plate 14), as already in the episode of the *Hailing* (Plate 9) which that drawing echoes, the rescue vessel came into view first. Moving on, the eye next met the outstretched arms of the men on the Raft. Striving against the motion of the scanning eye, the direction of the gestures gave the viewer the experience of an abrupt encounter, rather than a sense of participation in the figures' motion (fig 16). Once reversed, the scene can be read in one ascending line, starting at the lower left with the men who mourn at the stern, rising toward the right with the straining, motioning figures, and coming to rest at last on the distant rescue ship.

Géricault realized, as he built his many-figured composition, that there was danger in its complexity. To give force and clarity to its action, he decided not to allow a separate role to each of the figures. Instead he gathered the figures into four distinct groups and made them act in concert (Plate 14). By fusing several bodies in one motion, by repeating one gesture many times over, and by drawing all the figures into a single, strong pattern, he not only avoided confusion but actually turned the number of his figures to compositional advantage. Conceived early in the development of the *Sighting* episode, the division into four dramatic groups determined the entire subsequent evolution of the

[12] A similar change from leftward to rightward orientation can be observed in the final stages of the compositional development of nearly all of Géricault's major works. For a discussion of this peculiarity, see L. Eitner, "Reversals of Direction in Géricault's Compositional Projects", in *Stil und Überlieferung in der Kunst des Abendlandes,* III, Berlin, 1967, pp. 126 ff.

composition and set its stamp on the final canvas. The cornerstone of the intricate structure is the group of dead, dying, or despondent men at the stern. It was the core from which the whole composition originally grew and the first group to be fully developed. The six figures which compose it (Géricault by way of afterthought added a seventh, the cadaver at the extreme left, when the painting was nearly finished) occupy all the space of the Raft's lower half, to the left of the mast. Turned away from the distant vision of rescue, lying or crouching in the shadow, they express lassitude, resignation and death. The four men who stand, alert and watchful, on the other side of the mast form a second group, in which Géricault included the portraits of Corréard and Savigny, the chroniclers of the disaster. The attitudes of these men and their subordinate place in the general design characterize them as observers who remain detached from the main drama. This group, too, took shape very early and changed little in the further development of the composition.

After these two quiet and compact groups follows the very different one of the men who struggle to rise to their feet and drag themselves toward the far edge of the Raft, raising their arms in frantic pleading. It is the most vividly pantomimic of the groups, and it gave Géricault great trouble. He showed the men, awakened from death-like torpor by a sudden flash of excitement, expressing the torment of their resurrection in a complicated play of convulsive gestures. Dissatisfied, he kept modifying these figures until the end, gradually increasing their number from three to five.

The fourth group consists of three men who mount some barrels at the Raft's forward end and signal to the *Argus*. Turned to the distance, their faces invisible, their bodies in vigorous motion, they form an extreme contrast to the moribund sufferers of the lower foreground. In these signalling men, and most of all in the dominating figure of the Negro, Géricault brought the aspirations of the victims to a focus and gave them release. It is the most important of the four groups; without it, the dramatic narrative and the compositional structure of the *Medusa* would lack a culmination. Yet it is the last which he invented. The space which it came to occupy remained a blank in the early studies. Géricault went about developing this group with characteristic caution. He began by moving the barrels, which at first had stood useless at the Raft's stern (Plate 14), to its forward end, where they still served no apparent function, save that of adding weight to this side of the composition (Plate 15). Near these barrels, he placed men waving shreds of cloth: a single man in the Rouen drawing, two men in the early oil study in the Louvre (Plate 16). But these two figures gave only a weak termination to the upward thrust of the figures behind them, being neither interesting enough to add anything to the drama of the scene, nor prominent enough to become its visual climax. The long horizon still weighed heavily on the Raft, its line unbroken except for a few hands that reached above it into the vacant sky.

Having come to this point, Géricault solved the problem with one sudden stroke and gave his composition the dramatic centre which it had lacked. In a rough sketch in the Aubry collection and a large, carefully finished drawing in the Louvre (fig 19), the figure of an athletic Negro appears atop the formerly useless barrels. The two men at the prow now are joined to support and raise this crowning figure. The Negro's powerful torso stands out against the sky high above the horizon, the cloth unfurling in the wind from his uplifted arm gives the scene a splendid climax.

Géricault now felt that he was approaching the end of his preparatory work. He seems to have started the large compositional drawing at the Louvre (Plate 19) in the belief that he possessed the whole design, but he discovered while working on it that the group of rising figures in the centre

of the composition was too sparse and formed a weak connection between the much stronger terminal groups at the left and right. He may also have been troubled by the thought that in showing sixteen men on the Raft, only fourteen of them alive, he was being untrue to the fact that at the rescue there were fifteen survivors. He decided, at any rate, to insert two further figures into the middle group, one of a living, the other of a dead man. These additions first appear in a careful pen tracing of the revised figure groups which is in the Buehler collection in Winterthur (Plate 20, cat. 23). From this last drawing he seems to have gone on directly to the large second oil study in the Louvre (formerly in the Moreau-Nelaton collection), which does, finally, present the whole composition in the form in which he decided to execute it (Plate 21, cat. 24). He intended to make a finished painting of this rehearsal for the large canvas, but changed his mind and completed only a few of the figures in oil, letting the others stand as simple contour drawings on canvas lightly shaded with bitumen. Now that the composition was settled, his interest shifted to the Raft's wider setting of water and sky. Released from the mental strain of his compositional work, he took up the brush with pleasure to improvise a luminous cloudscape and a wide expanse of wind-ploughed sea around the Raft. He had spent half a year in preparatory work. The realization that time was growing short made him uneasy. Nervously impatient to go on to the execution of the final canvas, he abandoned this careful oil study, and also left unfinished a third, even larger painted study of the Raft, now lost (cat. 25).

The development of the composition to this point had been remarkably consistent and logical. Starting with the groups around the "Father" as a base ([redacted]), Géricault had built a pyramid of bodies, which, as he increased their number from twelve to eighteen, he gradually raised higher, giving it a strong slant toward the right. Since he added all the new figures to the right side of the composition, he caused it to become increasingly asymmetrical and top-heavy (Plate 16). From a state of balance at the beginning, with six figures to the left and six figures to the right of the mast, its centre of gravity steadily shifted rightward and upward, until in the end its right half contained twice as many figures as its left (Plate 21). At the same time, he made the horizon sink lower in each of the successive designs, giving further emphasis to the towering rise of the figures. He also steadily increased the tension between foreground and distance, bringing the near figures very close, while removing the distant rescue vessel ever farther. Finally, he sought to increase the momentum of the composition by concentrating all its movement in one flow (Plate 22). Like trees bending to a common wind, the figures seem swept by an invisible force which expresses itself in the repeated slant of their bodies and upward reach of their arms.

Before beginning to paint the picture, Géricault made one final change in its composition. The sight of the enormous canvas to which he was about to transfer his design may have given him second thoughts about the effect which enlargement would have on the composition. In tracing it on the canvas, he resolutely narrowed the margins of sky and water which had surrounded the Raft in all the preparatory studies. This cropping had the effect of bringing the Raft and its nearer figures into the immediate foreground, literally within the beholder's grasp. As drawn on the canvas, the Raft appeared larger and closer than in any of the earlier studies. Its figures, enlarged to nearly twice life-size, densely crowd the view. Only small patches of water appear beyond it, and even the sky has become congested with the silhouettes of sail and looming figures. It is evident that Géricault wanted to open his composition to the viewer, while also making it weigh on him with its oppressive nearness. His reduction of the margin of water round the Raft and his heavy crowding of the fore-

ground were later much criticized, as inappropriate to a shipwreck picture, but they were necessary to his purpose. His final enlargement of the figures was intended not only to give them the impressiveness—or "sublimity", to use Delacroix's word—which superhuman scale can confer, it was also to serve an expressive function essential to the meaning of the picture. Without representing the vastness of the ocean directly, Géricault sought to dramatize the isolation of the men on the Raft and the strain of their effort, by withdrawing beyond hope the rescue, toward which they frantically strive. He activated the distance, making it appear as a plunging recession, rather than a horizontal expanse, and intensified the illusion of space by means of radical foreshortenings. The enormous foreground figures push the horizon back; the few inches of canvas which separate the signalling men from the speck which signifies the *Argus* demand to be read as miles. It was clearly Géricault's purpose to draw the beholder into a close, empathetic participation with the action of his picture, and to make him feel the drama of the scene with his muscles as much as with his eyes. But this had to be accomplished by visual means. The accessibility of the Raft and the nearness of the figures were to compel the viewer to place himself in the picture's perspective. His eyes filled with the Raft's wide spread, his vision channelled by the gestures of the men before him, his attention irresistibly drawn to the point on which all motions converge, he was to be made to share the experience of the shipwrecked men.

Execution

The last preparatory studies were finished in the fall of 1818; Géricault now felt ready for the transfer of the composition to the canvas. Sometime during November, he exchanged his studio in the rue des Martyrs, too small and too exposed to the distractions of the *Nouvelle Athènes*, for larger quarters in the comparative solitude of the faubourg du Roule.[13] Here he had the enormous canvas set up, and then shut his door to his accustomed life. He knew that if he was to finish his painting in time for the Salon he must spend the months which remained in total concentration on his work. To make sure that he would not break out of his self-imprisonment, he called in a barber and had him shave his head.[14] It was a Spartan sacrifice for Géricault, who had always taken pride in his well-curled hair.

He worked alone,[15] rarely left the house, ate his meals in the studio, attended by an elderly concierge, and slept in an adjoining bedroom, which he shared with Jamar, his assistant and pupil. Only a few friends and some young painters of his acquaintance were welcome to visit him, to work with him in silence or, occasionally, to serve him as models. Among those who had entry to the studio were Dedreux-Dorcy, his closest friend, the painters Robert-Fleury and Steuben, and two very young pupils of Horace Vernet, Montfort and Lehoux, who had attached themselves to him.[16] Corréard, Savigny, and the carpenter of the *Medusa* came to pose for their likenesses in the painting.[17] Personal friends lent their services: a former schoolmate, the teacher Théodore Lebrun,[18] posed for the head

[13] Clément, *op. cit.*, pp. 130, 136.

[14] A. Etex, *Les trois tombeaux de Géricault*, Paris, 1885, p. 26.

[15] Clément, *op. cit.*, pp. 136 ff.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 137.

[17] *Ibidem*, p. 130.

[18] Concerning Lebrun, cf. M. Tourneux, "Particularités intimes sur la vie et l'œuvre de Géricault", *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français*, 1912, pp. 126 ff., which contains a letter by Géricault's friend, Théodore Lebrun (1788–1861), written in 1836 and giving details about Géricault's work on the *Medusa*, some of which Clément later used for his book. On Géricault's models for the *Medusa*, see Clément, *op. cit.*, pp. 143, 300.

of the "Father"; Dastier, an officer, for the man who attempts to raise himself at the far right; another friend, Martigny, served for the shrouded cadaver at the lower right of the picture, one of the two figures which Géricault added by way of afterthought after the completion of the rest. Eugène Delacroix, then still a pupil in Guérin's studio, modelled the figure of the young man who lies on his face, his left arm thrown forward, next to the group of the "Father". Géricault also used several professionals, the inevitable Cadamour, who lent his athletic body to the "Father", the famous black model Joseph, who seems to have posed for all three Negroes of the *Raft,* and a model named Gerfand, who served him for the cadaver lying on its back at the extreme left, the other of the two final insertions into the composition.

Painting almost without interruption from daybreak to dusk, he finished the enormous canvas in the relatively short time of eight months. By July 1819, in good time for the exhibition, the *Raft of the Medusa* was ready to be transported to the Salon.[19]

Several of the friends who came to his studio during these months later described what they remembered of his manner of work.[20] Their recollections show that he followed a method which David had introduced among French artists, and which Géricault may have learned from his former teacher, Pierre Guérin. He began by transferring the composition to the canvas, producing a huge contour drawing, some sixteen feet tall and twenty-four feet wide. Its appearance can be inferred from the unfinished portions of the oil study in the Louvre (Plate 21) in which the underdrawing is preserved; but on the much larger final canvas the lines bordering the figures, now enlarged to more than life size, must have looked rather sparse and thin. Into the nakedness of this schematic design, he then proceeded to paint the appearance of flesh and cloth, the illusion of body, light, and air. The break between compositional invention and pictorial realization was extremely abrupt. With the concept of the composition in his mind and a contour drawing of it on his canvas, he went on directly to execute the figures from the life. He posed his models singly, placing each in the proper light and the exact position prescribed by the design. Then he painted their bodies, one after the other, into the contours of the huge drawing on his canvas. As the work went forward, the figures sprang into relief on the blank surface one by one (cf. Plate 69), giving to the partly finished canvas the appearance of a white wall hung with fragments of sculpture.[21]

The difficulties of this procedure were formidable. It called for the synthesis of stylized design and nature study in the very act of final execution, and it required that a mosaic of separate life studies be fused into a coherent image. The physical reality of the gesticulating model had to be reconciled with the general form of the imagined composition, a patchwork of figures, painted in the course of many months, posed by a succession of models, in the changing light of winter, spring, and summer, on good days and bad, had to be welded together in such a way as to express the unity of a dramatic action in its encompassing space, light, and atmosphere. The disadvantage of Géricault's method was

[19] Clément, *op. cit.,* pp. 143–144.

[20] Cf. the observations of Lebrun, Tourneux, *op. cit.,* pp. 60 ff. and Clément, *op. cit.,* p. 135; Montfort's account, *ibid,* pp. 138 ff., and Jamar's description of Géricault's palette, *ibid,* p. 141, note 2.

[21] Géricault's earliest biographer, Louis Batissier, writing in 1842, took pains to point to the "eccentricity" of the execution of the *Medusa*: "*Nous dirons encore qu'il ne commençait pas par couvrir toute sa toile, comme la plupart des peintres, pour faire une grande esquisse dont il aurait repris chaque partie en sous-œuvre. Il choisissait, au contraire, une tête, une figure entière, et la peignait sans s'inquiéter du reste du tableau, jusqu'à ce qu'elle fût achevée. Cette manière excentrique de procéder n'empêche pas cependant qu'il ne règne une heureuse harmonie dans l'ensemble de sa composition*". (Quoted by P. Courthion, *Géricault raconté par lui-même et par ses amis,* Vésenaz-Geneva, 1947, p. 44).

its extreme artificiality, its disaccord with the psychology of artistic work. By placing tedious obstacles between the idea and its realization, between the original, vivifying emotion and the piecemeal execution, it was bound to cool the ardour of the most inspired artist. In Géricault's case, the difficulty was compounded by the fact that he was attempting to treat a modern subject with a degree of realism. To evoke past history or to illustrate myth in a work of obvious artificiality was one thing, to treat a contemporary event in this way was quite another. The programme which he had set himself, and his own temperament, prevented him from making a virtue of stylistic artifice. The only way open to him was to try to embrace reality with such passion, to give it such powerful appeal and drama, as to conceal the contrivance which underlay his picture.

All who saw Géricault at work during these months were struck by his concentration. *"His manner of working was quite new to me,"* reported Montfort, *"it astonished me as much as his intense industry. He painted directly on the white canvas, without rough sketch or preparation of any sort, except for the firmly traced contours, and yet the solidity of the work was none the worse for it. I was struck by the keen attention with which he examined the model before touching brush to canvas. He seemed to proceed slowly, when in reality he executed very rapidly, placing one touch after the other in its place, rarely having to go over his work more than once. There was very little perceptible motion of the body or the arms. His expression was perfectly calm; only a slight flushing of the face betrayed his mental concentration. Witnessing this external calm, one was all the more surprised by the verve and energy of his execution. What salience! Especially in their half-finished state, the various parts of the picture had the look of roughly blocked-out sculpture* [Plate 69]. *Seeing the breadth of his manner, one might suppose that Géricault used very thick brushes, but this was not at all the case. His brushes were small, compared to those which I had seen used by other artists of my acquaintance. This can easily be verified by an examination of several of the figures in the picture which are executed entirely in hatchings."*[22] The speed and assurance of Géricault's work impressed all his visitors. His friend Lebrun, who had come to sit for him, once found him in the process of painting a head from memory: *"I saw him improvise, with the vivacity that was peculiar to him, that beautiful head of hair which belongs to a recumbent figure in the middle of the picture* [Plate 22]. *Dissatisfied with the one he had painted first, he scratched it out and repainted it in less than half an hour. I looked at his face while he worked. He said not a word and seemed totally absorbed. It seemed as if he were copying an actual head of hair. When he was done with it, he never touched it again."*[23]

Young Montfort, accustomed to the tumultuous vivacity of his master, Horace Vernet, was particularly struck, and perhaps made a little uncomfortable, by the fanatical seriousness with which Géricault pursued his work: *"Fortunate enough to have been admitted to Géricault's studio, to copy a few sketches, at the time when he was executing his picture, I was impressed, first of all, by the intensity with which he worked, and also by the quiet and reflection which he needed. He generally started work as soon as there was enough light and continued without interruption until nightfall. What forced him to work in this way was usually the size of the piece which, started in the morning, had to be finished the same day. This necessity arose from his use of heavy, extremely fast-drying oils which made it impossible for him to continue on the morrow what he had begun the previous day . . . I was vividly impressed by the care with which Géricault worked. Being still quite young (I was only seventeen), I had trouble keeping still for several hours on end, without getting up and, accidentally, making a little noise with my chair. In the midst of the absolute silence which reigned in the studio, I would sense that this slight noise had disturbed Géricault. Turning my eyes toward the table on which he had mounted to reach the full*

[22] Clément, *op. cit.*, p. 140. [23] *Ibid,* p. 135, and Tourneux, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

height of his figures and on which he worked without uttering a word, I would see him smile at me with a slight expression of reproach. He assured me that the noise of a mouse was enough to stop him from working."[24]

In the confinement of the studio, the unfinished picture made a powerful impression on all who saw it. The enormity and sculptural bulk of the fragmentary figures springing from the naked canvas gave it a terrifying impact. Delacroix retained a life-long memory of his emotion on first seeing the uncompleted *Medusa: "The impression it gave me was so strong"*, he wrote in 1855, *"that as I left the studio I broke into a run, and kept running like a fool all the way back to the rue de la Planche where I lived then, at the far end of the faubourg Saint-Germain."*[25]

The speed and intensity of his work put Géricault under a heavy strain. The price he paid for it was lassitude, occasional discouragement and, in the end, exhaustion.

"When evening came", Montfort recalled, *"Géricault abandoned his palette and took advantage of the last rays of light to contemplate his work. It was then that, seated by the stove, his eyes turned to the picture, he spoke to us of his hopes and his disappointments. Usually, he was very little satisfied, but on some days he thought that he had found the proper way of modelling, that is, of giving relief to his figures, and seemed pleased. The following day, after a day of work equally well spent, he would confess to us that he was not on the right track and would have to make a fresh effort. One day, he had gone to see the* Sabines *and the* Leonidas. *He came back discouraged. What he was doing now seemed clumsy to him, and, referring to the young warriors, on the right side of the* Leonidas, *who rush forward to get their shields, he said to me: 'Ah, well! Those are tremendous figures!'—and he averted his eyes from his picture."*[26]

Studies

Géricault's piecemeal execution of the *Raft* had been foreshadowed in the work's earlier stages by his practice of building the composition, figure by figure, as a composite of separate parts. From the beginning, he had given nearly as much attention to the development of each of his main figures as to the development of the composition in its totality. Groups of figure sketches cluster about each of the successive compositional designs. Several of the main figures went through a long process of changes and adjustments (Plates [illegible], cat. [illegible]). The preserved figure drawings not only form the largest body of studies associated with the project, they are also among the most revealing documents of Géricault's gradually unfolding purpose. They offer insights into aspects of his practice, his stylistic conceptions and thematic intentions which remain hidden in the final work.

The purpose of the sketches which accompanied the early compositional designs was to define postures and placements, to settle main contours and determine broad areas of light and shadow. He drew them from the imagination, rather than from life, nearly always in ink, improvising them in a very characteristic, rugged shorthand which, for all its spontaneity, is remarkably precise. Taut strokes of the pen shape the musculature of the bodies, dense hatchings or dashes of ink-wash give them relief.

The more highly finished figure studies from life, on the other hand, belong for the most part to a later stage of the work (Plates [illegible]). They reflect a composition already determined in its essentials; some of them were probably drawn during the final execution of the *Raft*. For these

[24] Clément, *op. cit.*, pp. 138 ff. [25] Quoted in L. Véron, *Mémoires d'un bourgeois de Paris*, I, Paris, 1856, p. 271.
[26] Clément, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

careful studies, Géricault preferred the softer tonal media of pencil, crayon, and black chalk. Their rather cautious technique lacks the energetic conciseness of the earlier, constructive sketches. It expresses, instead, Géricault's concern with effects of light, colour, and texture during his work on the large canvas. When, as occasionally happens, a single sheet contains drawings of the same figure in each of the two different manners ([redacted]), the contrast between them is very striking. The expressive vigour and linear abstraction in the conceptual sketches and the refined tonality and realism of surface in the studies from life represent the divergent qualities of style which Géricault tried to unite in the final execution of the painting.

While many figure drawings for the *Raft* have survived, painted figure studies for it are conspicuously rare ([redacted]). This probably indicates that Géricault painted few such studies and trusted his ability to achieve the synthesis of compositional design and model study during the actual execution of the large canvas, unaided by preparatory paintings from life. He did, however, paint several portraits in oil of the men who, for the sake of historical accuracy, were to figure in his picture. All of these portraits are simple heads or busts, not studies of attitudes or expressions, and were evidently meant to serve him merely as documents of the features of personages whom he planned to include in his composition in quite different poses ([redacted]).

As he became more and more deeply absorbed by the management of pictorial problems, Géricault tried not to lose sight of the basic significance of his picture. He had begun his work with an attempt to come as close as possible to having a concrete experience of the event which was his subject, in order to be able to give it convincing visual expression. As the work went on, he put his "dossier of authentic proofs" aside and, pressed by artistic necessity, took large liberties with historical facts. He had probably never intended to show the Raft and the men on it as they actually appeared at the time of the rescue: the Raft littered with strips of dried human flesh, the men emaciated, with matted hair and tangled beards, their bodies covered with wounds. Contemporary prints, which he probably knew well, represented the Raft in this way ([redacted]), but at no point in the progress of his work did he imitate their literalism. From first to last, he gave his figures, the living and the dead, the appearance of athletes in vigorous health. His concern with the reality of the event centred throughout on what he regarded as its essential drama, not on its precise aspect. To treat the scene in its detail of rags, wounds, and haggard flesh would have meant giving it a picturesqueness which was not at all part of his plan—he wanted to paint history, not inflated genre. His own experience and Vernet's bad example had taught him, if ever he needed the lesson, that a canvas measuring sixteen feet by twenty-four feet must not be conceived as the enlargement of a lithograph. In avoiding crass and detailed realism, he acted not from a timid sense of propriety, but from a painter's knowledge of what could be done in a picture of monumental size. The special difficulty which he faced in the *Medusa* was to express the human reality of his subject, its content of terror, anguish, and tension, despite the formal restraint which the dimensions of his picture demanded.

To achieve this more fundamental realism, he had to make an effort to keep alive his original, vivid sense of the event and to maintain in himself the emotional tension under which he had begun his work. He must have found it difficult not to become dulled by the months of imprisonment in the solitude and artificiality of the studio, deflected from his main interest by a multitude of formal problems. The sheer weight of his enterprise threatened to extinguish the emotions needed to drive it forward. To refresh his imagination, perhaps also to find an outlet for observations which he could

not incorporate in his picture, he drew and painted many studies from life (Plates 99 ff., cat. 98 ff.). Not meant to be of immediate practical use, they accompanied his work as a stimulation and relief.

The most astonishing among them are the portraits of dying patients, painted at the Hôpital Beaujon (figs 86–7), and the still-lifes of dissected limbs and severed heads, painted in his own studio (, where for a time he kept these human fragments to observe and record their gradual decay.[27] He did not introduce any of these studies into his picture. All the figures of the *Raft*, even the cadavers, were painted from living models.[28] The interest in the intimate aspect of death which these works express went considerably beyond ordinary nature study. Pictorial realism alone did not require him to turn his studio into a morgue, as he did for some weeks, much to the discomfort of his friends and models. But from this exposure to death he may have hoped to gain insight that would help him to give a special authenticity to his work. If his picture was to carry conviction, it had to express genuine experience. Without making himself a cannibal, he familiarized himself with the sights and smells of death, and tried to live with it day by day, as had the men on the Raft. His preoccupation with the cadaverous expressed an effort to seize the reality of his subject, but it also contained an element of the aesthetic. His friend Lebrun, who had retired to the village of Sèvres to recover from an attack of jaundice which had so disfigured him that he terrified passers-by in the street, was met one day by Géricault, who greeted him with the cry: *"How beautiful you are!"* and pressed him to pose for a portrait. It was the year of the *Medusa*, and Lebrun understood that he *"did seem beautiful to this painter who was searching everywhere for the colour of the dying"*.[29]

Some of the studies which resulted from this preoccupation, the two "guillotined" heads in Stockholm (Plate 87, cat. 88), the head in the Dubaut collection (Plate 88, cat. 89), and the still-life consisting of severed arms and legs, in Montpellier (Plate 92, cat. 92), have a pictorial beauty which raises them above most of the other studies and portraits for the *Medusa*. It is impossible not to be chilled by the frankness with which they show an aspect of death usually hidden, but the most lasting effect which they leave with the beholder is an admiration of Géricault's steadiness of heart and eye in the face of an almost unbearable reality. To Delacroix, who saw several of these studies and remembered them all his life, they seemed *"truly sublime"* and *"the best argument for Beauty as it ought to be understood"*, because they demonstrated the power of art to transfigure what was odious and monstrous in nature.[30] Though his emotions were stirred by these macabre objects, Géricault painted them in an objective spirit, without a touch of graveyard horror, adding nothing from fantasy, and betraying his feelings only in the nervous intensity and heightened sensuousness of his handling.

Something of this quality also entered into the execution of the large painting, but only the studies, in a fresher state than the badly damaged *Medusa*, now give a full idea of the richness of Géricault's palette at that time ([redacted]). The heads and limbs in them, about the size of life, are modelled by small, closely blended strokes, while the draperies and backgrounds are very broadly brushed. The marks of the brush follow the surfaces of skin with searching intensity, probing the hollows of cheeks, rounding the bony ridges of noses and foreheads, and giving the flesh a sense of matter beside

[27] Batissier, *op. cit.*, p. 42, Clément, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

[28] The single exception may be the cadaver at the extreme left, for which Géricault may have used one or the other of his studies of severed heads, cf. Clément, *op. cit.*, p. 131, note 1.

[29] Tourneux, *op. cit.*, p. 61, Clément, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

[30] Cf. the Journal entries for 13 January and 5 March 1857 (A. Joubin, *Journal d'Eugène Delacroix*, III, Paris, 1932, pp. 24, 70, 71).

which the stock figures of the Davidian school seem like tinted ghosts. A sharp illumination accentuates the relief. Several of the studies were painted by candle-light. The colours are toned to a dark harmony in which the brownish olive of dead skin is the dominant hue, but which also contains passages of deep brown, of blue-black in the shadows, streaks of glaring white in the draperies, and gashes of red in the bloodied cuts. The surfaces are rendered with the closest attention to the effects of sagging, unresilient skin and of humid gloss where skin is stretched over bone.

Looking at these studies, in which Géricault's realism reaches its extreme, and comparing them with the drawings in which he projected his composition, one realizes how wide was the gap between the compositional planning and the pictorial realization of the *Medusa*. The closing of this gap had to be accomplished in the final execution of his canvas, for it was only in this last phase of the work that Géricault addressed himself to the synthesis of stylized design and realistic life study. The outcome was necessarily a compromise. When it came to the final act of painting, he had to modify both the calculated abstraction of his compositional designs and the direct realism of his life studies. The figures of the *Medusa* in its final state are of a broader, more generalized execution than the studies; the colours are laid on in larger areas, the modelling is simpler, the illumination more artificial. Géricault's occupation with life study, nevertheless, has left its mark on the work. The hard specificity of its figures sets them apart from the elegant stereotypes which fill most of the monumental paintings of the time, even those of Gros which otherwise most closely anticipate the *Medusa*.

Completion

The *Medusa,* in mid-course of execution, was a gathering of superbly painted *morceaux,* vivid fragments set side by side on the white canvas. There came a moment, probably fairly late, after the completion of most of the figures, when Géricault had to direct his main effort to the integration of these separate parts into a coherent whole. He sought to achieve this by binding the figures to a common dark ground, making their saliences appear to be emerging from the depth of an enveloping darkness, or causing their contours to be silhouetted against patches of bright illumination. This meant that he had to introduce pockets of deep shadow among them. The modelled bodies, themselves painted in fairly sombre tones, required an even darker ground to set them off. Géricault was forced to use shadows of extraordinary blackness to suggest the recessions between the figures, and this, in turn, led him to darken the entire picture more than he had originally intended, as is suggested by the lighter tonality of the late oil study for the composition. In his effort to obtain the most intense black possible, he lavishly used bitumen, which gave him a very satisfactory, glossy, raven black, but which also (being chemically unstable) set in motion the slow, irreparable decay of portions of the paint surface.

While welding his figures together, Géricault painted the *Medusa*'s setting of sea and sky. The wide panorama of early-morning sky, with clouds dispersing in the premonitory light (figs. FF, II), is a very considerable feat of landscape painting, not by virtue of its size alone, for which he prepared himself by taking a trip to the seaside at Le Havre.[31] No less than the individual figures, this sky is a "life study" which had to be integrated with the main composition. And its integration was especially difficult, since the diffuse luminosity of morning light could not well be reconciled with the hard

[31] Clément, *op. cit.,* p. 137.

studio light unmistakably reflected in the figures. The reduction of the margins of sky and water lessened, but could not entirely overcome this trouble. There remained a disharmony between the luminosity above the horizon and the cellar light on the figures below; the Raft and its sky represent two different realities ([redacted]).

Géricault must have foreseen and intended the patchy scattering of lights and shadows which his manner of execution brought into the composition. Some of his early wash drawings already had anticipated its effect ([redacted]). One purpose of this unquiet tenebrism was to blur the distinctness of the individual figures, to draw them together and set them in motion. As the light grazes the mass of the Raft, it lifts from the shadows the contours of raised arms, the relief of straining backs and shoulders. Leaping from figure to figure, it underlines the direction of their gestures and gives them a common momentum. But, in the heat of execution, Géricault may have overshot his aim. The chiaroscuro, even making allowance for the subsequent darkening of the colours, is excessively heavy, and yet not quite sufficient to overcome the immobility and separateness of the individual figures. When he was shown a copy of the *Medusa* on his death-bed, in 1824, Géricault anxiously asked one of his friends: *"Is my picture really spotted with black and white like that?"* and was much distressed to have his question answered in the affirmative.[32]

The picture was finished sometime during July of 1819. Before moving it from the studio, Géricault asked his former teacher, Pierre Guérin, to inspect the *Raft*. Guérin came, stayed for more than an hour, praised parts of the composition, criticized others, and spoke at length about "the line". He did not seem dissatisfied. Géricault, *"a respectful rather than submissive pupil"*, listened with attention, and at the end of the visit took ceremonious leave of Guérin. When the master had gone, he danced about the studio, still holding palette and staff. To his assistant, Jamar, who tried to raise objections to Guérin's remarks, he said: *"Jamar, I am to him what you are to me: he is my master and I am his apprentice"*. Guérin had spoken wisely, he insisted, and he would try to profit from his observations.[33]

On seeing his picture outside the studio for the first time, in the foyer of the Théatre Italien where the paintings for the Salon were being assembled, Géricault suddenly became aware of two enormous gaps in his composition. Carried away by the momentum of his design, he had concentrated his attention on the upward sweep of his figures, raised his figure pyramid ever higher, but neglected to adjust its base to this rise. Looking at his picture with fresh detachment, in a new light and different setting, he became aware that he must widen and strengthen the groups of the foreground. With extraordinary speed, if Clément's account is to be credited,[34] he improvised two further bodies, the one at the far left, the other at the lower right of the immediate foreground, bringing the number of figures on the Raft from eighteen to twenty (Plate 22). In performing this feat, he was able to fall back on figure motifs which he had developed earlier and which he now inserted into the composition with only minor modifications. For the cadaver at the left ~~(figs. Y, JJ)~~, he used studies originally made for the figure of the "Son", simply reversing them to suit his new purpose. In composing the half-shrouded cadaver trailing at the right ~~(fig. II)~~, he remembered the figure which he had used in the same place in the scene of *Cannibalism* (Plate 8). As he added these figures, he may also have made several rapid alterations of which traces are visible in the lower part of the canvas. He extended the left leg of the "Son" into the foreground and shifted the position of the Raft's two large beams

[32] Clément, *op. cit.*, pp. 172–173. [33] *Ibidem*, p. 144. [34] *Ibidem*, pp. 126, 144.

which converge in the form of a "V" toward the picture's lower edge. All these final additions and changes tended to increase the weight and proximity of the foreground, and to counteract the oblique rise of the figures above.

After more than eighteen months of constant work, the *Raft of the Medusa* was ready for the exhibition.