

**Work**

**The Raft of the Medusa**

Department of Paintings: French painting

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**Le Radeau de la Méduse**



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**Paintings**  
French painting

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**The Raft of the Medusa—a major work in French 19th-century painting—is generally regarded as an icon of Romanticism. It depicts an event whose human and political aspects greatly interested Géricault: the wreck of a French frigate off the coast of Senegal in 1816, with over 150 soldiers on board. The painter researched the story in detail and made numerous sketches before deciding on his definitive composition, which illustrates the hope of rescue.**

## A contemporary event

Géricault drew his inspiration from the account of two survivors of the Medusa—a French Royal Navy frigate that set sail in 1816 to colonize Senegal. It 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, those who were left behind had to build a raft for 150 souls—a construction that drifted away on a bloody 13-day odyssey that was to save only 10 lives. 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 rescue boat is visible on the horizon—but sails away without seeing them.

The whole composition is oriented toward this hope in a rightward ascent culminating in a black figure, the figurehead of the boat. The painting stands as a synthetic view of human life abandoned to its fate.

## Dissecting the subject

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 (RF 2229, RF 1667). There followed the period of solitary work in his studio, spent getting to grips with a vast canvas measuring five meters by seven.

The pallid bodies are given cruel emphasis by a Caravaggio-style chiaroscuro; some writhe in the elation of hope, while others are unaware of the passing ship. The latter include two figures of despair and solitude: one mourning his son, the other bewailing his own fate. These figures reflect the Romantic inspiration that fueled the work of both Géricault and Gros, and the former's admiration for the latter (see *The Plague-Stricken in Jaffa*).

## A hint of scandal

Géricault's Raft was the star at the Salon of 1819: "It strikes and attracts all eyes" (*Le Journal de Paris*). Critics were divided: the horror and "terribilità" of the subject exercised fascination, but devotees of classicism expressed their distaste for what they described as a "pile of corpses," whose realism they considered a far cry from the "ideal beauty" incarnated by Girodet's *Pygmalion and Galatea* (which triumphed the same year). Géricault's work expressed a paradox: how could a hideous subject be translated into a powerful painting, how could the painter reconcile art and reality? Coupin was categorical: "Monsieur Géricault seems mistaken. The goal of painting is to speak to the soul and the eyes, not to repel."

The painting had fervent admirers too, including Auguste Jal who praised its political theme, its liberal position (the advancement of the "negro", the critique of ultra-royalism), and its modernity. For Michelet, "our whole society is aboard the raft of the Medusa [...]."

## Bibliography

- LAVEISSIERE S., MICHEL R., CHENIQUE B., *Géricault*, catalogue d'exposition, Grand Palais 1991-1992, Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris, 1991.

## Technical description

Théodore GÉRICAULT (Rouen, 1791 - Paris, 1824)

### Le Radeau de la Méduse

Salon de 1819

H. : 4,91 m. ; L. : 7,16 m.

Acquis à la vente posthume de l'artiste par l'intermédiaire de Pierre-Joseph Dedreux-Dorcy, ami de Géricault, 1824 , 1824  
INV. 4884

■ Paintings

Denon wing

1st floor

Mollien

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