

# *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer

An American Copy of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*?

*Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2007)

---

Citation: Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, "An American Copy of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*?" *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2007), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring07/new-discoveries-an-american-copy-of-gericaults-raft-of-the-medusa>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

## New Discoveries

---

### An American Copy of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*?

by Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer

The New York Historical Society (NYHS) owns a painting that reproduces, in reduced format (130.5 x 196.2 cm), Théodore Géricault's 1819 masterpiece *The Raft of the Medusa* (491 x 716 cm; Louvre Museum). I came upon this work by sheer luck, led by research while writing a book on Géricault. It lay forgotten and miscatalogued in the reserves of the New York museum. Persistence and the help of the museum's curators helped locate the painting and assign it to the American painter George Cooke (1793–1849), in keeping with period sources. (fig. 1) The picture entered the collections of the museum in 1862 as part of the bequest of three paintings owned by Uriah Phillips Levy (1792–1862), a U.S. Navy commodore and a well-traveled and, by all accounts, cosmopolitan man who also acquired a large fortune in real estate speculation in New York. In need of conservation, the painting is now being restored as part of the joint Winterthur Museum-University of Delaware Program in Preservation Studies. A contemporary of Géricault, Cooke was in Europe between 1826 and 1831, shortly after Géricault's death. The painting is especially compelling to the historian of nineteenth century art for it represents an early testimony of not only the interest aroused by the *Medusa* tragedy in America—as we shall see—but also of an expanding artistic curiosity that led some American artists abroad to seek out and prize the works of the French modernist avant-garde, thus modulating the prevailing view that early-nineteenth century Americans traveled to Europe in search of Old Master prototypes and academic models almost exclusively.



Fig. 1, George Cook, Copy of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, ca. 1826-1830. Oil on canvas. Photo Lauren Cox. [\[larger image\]](#)

The story of Géricault's monumental painting has often been told. Inspired by a resounding political scandal in Bourbon Restoration France that erupted in July 1816, the painting alluded to the ordeal of about one hundred and fifty passengers of the shipwrecked flagship *Medusa* consigned to a makeshift raft set adrift in the ocean off the coast of West Africa for thirteen days during which they knew every kind of horror—hunger, thirst, mutiny, murder, insanity, suicide, and cannibalism. The scant fifteen survivors were finally rescued by a brig

named *Argus*. Two of the survivors, the *Medusa*'s surgeon Henri Savigny and its engineer/geographer Alexandre Corréard, published an account of the wreckage in which they exposed the royal government's corrupt practices, such as appointing an inept aristocrat to be captain of the *Medusa*. Exhibited at the Salon of 1819, Géricault's painting depicting the final episode of the ordeal, the sighting of the *Argus* by the desperate castaways on the raft, elicited controversial reactions from the critics, polarized by its politicized subject and bewildered by its groundbreaking realism. Nevertheless the painting's pioneering significance was acknowledged by all, a fact that led to its purchase by the fine arts administration and its placement on view, following Géricault's untimely death, in the Salon Carré of the Louvre.

Despite its damaged state, the overall high quality of the painting at the New York Historical Society is manifest. The muscular bodies of the shipwrecked sailors emerge powerfully modeled from underneath the darkened varnish, and glimpses of the green-brown tonalities of the palette match the hues of the original closely. There are some surprisingly abstract sections in parts of the draperies and in the rendering of hands. The brushwork is at times very broad and bold, at times more meticulous. The surface is rough and grainy. But such observations are still tentative pending the restoration of the picture. One important difference between original and copy, however, is immediately noticeable. The rescuing brig *Argus*, a bare speck in the horizon in the Louvre original, is made to look much larger in the copy. We know that, as he composed his painting and in order to enhance its emotional charge, Géricault gradually reduced the size of the *Argus* to near invisibility. By contrast, later reproductions of his work, especially lithographs, increase the size of the brig, perhaps in order to improve the legibility of the narrative.

A web of uncertainties surrounds the NYHS picture. Levy's will refers to it as a work by Géricault himself: "I also give and bequeath to the Historical Society of the City of New York my three valuable and rare paintings, the 'Wreck of the Medusa Frigate by Géricault!..." At some unspecified later moment, however, the painting was considered to be only a copy of Géricault's original and attributed to Cooke. But here another problem arises. For according to period sources, Cooke had created a full-scale near 400-square-foot large copy of Géricault's *Raft*, a huge discrepancy from the New York painting's mere 24-square-foot surface. What follows considers two main possibilities for the NYHS painting: (a) Is this indeed a painting by Géricault (or his circle) as suggested by the bequeathing document? (b) Is it the work of the American painter Cooke albeit in reduced size of Cooke's own full-scale copy? What justifies (or not) this attribution?

Nineteenth-century copies of Géricault's great *Raft* were created both during the painter's lifetime and following his death. According to Germain Bazin, author of the multivolume catalogue raisonné of Géricault's oeuvre, copying was part of the culture of Géricault's entourage of disciples, studio assistants, and close friends. In Géricault's large studio on the rue du Faubourg-du-Roule, rented to accommodate the enormous canvas of the *Raft*, the painter's disciples Jamar, Lehoux, and Montfort, and his friends Pierre-Joseph Dedreux-Dorcy, Charles-Emile Callande de Champmartin, Charles Steuben, Alexandre Colin, and Robert Fleury, often copied or made variants of Géricault's studies, such as, among others, his paintings of human limbs and cut heads, as well as his preliminary studies of the *Raft*. At least three reduced copies of the *Raft* were ordered by Géricault himself. The painter asked

Montfort to create a small copy of his picture for Corréard; he asked Lehoux to make another reduced copy for the mezzotint engraver Samuel William Reynolds, who had undertaken to reproduce the *Raft* in print; and when bedridden and too ill to get up, he asked Lehoux to paint yet another reduced copy to be placed near his bed. Géricault himself produced no copies of his own painting being temperamentally averse to such tedious exertion. This rules out the attribution of the NYHS picture to the master himself. The donor's designation of the painting as by Géricault simply reiterates a common practice in nineteenth-century American art circles to name copies after their original sources.

After Géricault's death more copies of the *Raft* came into being. Bazin lists two full-size copies and about ten reduced copies. Of the two full-size copies, one was the work in 1860 of two academicians, Pierre Désiré Guillemet and Etienne Antoine Eugène Ronjat (Museum of Amiens); the other, also from the 1860s and on a slightly larger canvas than the original, was done by the Italian Tito Marzocchi (Palazzo Pitti, Florence). According to Bazin, the ten reduced period copies of the *Raft* have often been regarded, albeit erroneously, as authentic works by Géricault. Of these, only one can be firmly attributed to an artist, Ronjat (Museum of Fines Arts, Rochefort). The other nine are listed as anonymous. Three are in provincial museums in France (Angers, Bordeaux, Rouen); one is in Bucarest (Romania); and one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York. While one of the four remaining copies is in an unspecified private collection, the location of the other three is unknown. Can any of these three lost anonymous reduced copies be the painting at the New York Historical Society? And what about the still untraced studio copies mentioned earlier created during the last years of Géricault's life? Certainly these possibilities cannot be ruled out, but no evidence exists so far that would confirm them either.

By contrast, the second of our two suggested options, that of a reduced version of Cooke's full-scale copy created by Cooke himself, is enticingly buttressed by circumstantial evidence. It also poses the question of the reception of the "Medusa story" and of Géricault's painting in America in the first half of the nineteenth-century. Echoes of the sinking of the *Medusa* and of the ordeal of the raft castaways reached both Paris and the American press in early September 1816. Newspapers along the east coast repeated more or less the same story made up of a blend of actual news reports and excerpts from Savigny's narrative, a short version of which was first published in the *Journal des débats* and leaked out to the *Times* of London shortly thereafter. The wreck was the object of consistent interest until at least the 1840s. In 1820, interest attached to a related topic, Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, exhibited at the time in the London gallery of the entrepreneur William Bullock, known as the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly. American reports echoed English reviews which uniformly acclaimed the picture as "chef-d'oeuvre of French painting" and spread the news so widely that even the obscure *American Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser* of September 14, 1820 could inform its readers that "the work far excels anything we have ever seen of the school to which it belongs." Resonances of Géricault's painting persisted through the 1830's and 1840s, with the *New Hampshire Sentinel* of June 20, 1833 admonishing its readership to visit the "antechamber of the Louvre gallery" (the Salon Carré) where Géricault's painting hung, for "no man of taste, no lover of the arts can ever visit this noted collection without pausing to admire this chef d'oeuvre of sea pieces." Popular productions, panoramas, plays, novels, and poems inspired by the shipwreck spanned the 1830s and 1840s. In a newspaper

of 1842 we even find a serialized version for children, "Tales of Shipwreck. Grandfather Felix Tells About the Wreck of the Medusa."

Cooke's copy grew out of this climate of sustained fascination with the naval wreck and admiration of its pictorial rendering by Géricault. Born in Maryland, a student of the portrait and still-life painter Charles Bird King (1785–1862), Cooke, like many of his fellow American artists at the time, aspired to widen his artistic horizons in contact with European art. In the summer of 1826 he sailed to Europe and stayed there for more than four years. He lived in Paris (1826), Florence and Rome (1827–28), Naples (1829) London (1830) and again in Paris from 1830 till 1831. He combed museums and galleries throughout making copies, as many as thirty in all, of masterpieces by Veronese, Rubens, Raphael, and Correggio among others. His erudition in matters of European art was impressive and is reflected in a series of articles titled "On the Fine Arts" published later, in 1835–40, in the journal *The Southern Literary Messenger*. It is some time during his last years in Paris, in 1830–31, that Cooke completed a full-scale copy of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* which he took back with him to America. Given its enormous size the painting could not fit in the hold of the ship but, allegedly, had to cross the Atlantic on deck. Upon arrival, Cooke arranged for its exhibition. In September 1831 the picture was shown at the American Academy of Fine Arts, in New York. In 1833 it was exhibited in Boston (the *New Hampshire Sentinel* of June 20, 1833 writes: "A faithful and highly finished copy of this picture—the only one that has ever reached our country—is now exhibiting in this city." In early 1835, the painting was in Washington on display in Charles Bird King's studio-gallery. It was advertised in the local press as "covering 400 square feet of canvas, and containing more than twenty figures, large as in life." In 1840 it was back in New York on show at the Apollo Association where it was listed as a copy "from the original of the same size 24 feet 6 inches by 17 feet 9 inches." After that, its history becomes murky. In December 1844 with the help of the southern industrialist Daniel Pratt, who became his close friend and patron, Cooke opened a gallery in New Orleans to which he gave the rather grand title of National Gallery of Paintings. In it, along with works by his most prominent contemporaries, such as Thomas Cole and Thomas Sully, he exhibited his copies of European Old Masters, including his large copy of the *Raft*. All works were for sale. Upon Cooke's death in 1849 his New Orleans gallery passed into the hands of the artist-dealer Charles Galvani (1805–1866). In a letter of February 8, 1853 written from Athens, Georgia, to the wealthy New Orleans financier James Robb, an art collector and another of Cooke's patrons, Cooke's wife Maria expresses concern about Cooke's paintings left behind at Galvani's, especially the celebrated copy of the *Raft*. This is the last we hear of Cooke's large copy. What became of the enormous canvas after 1853? Did it stay in the South? Did Pratt or Robb eventually acquire it for their collections? Robb's collection of sixty seven pictures was sold at auction in 1859, but no Cooke copy of the *Raft* (or of any work by Géricault, for that matter) is recorded in that sale. During the Civil War, Pratt's own gallery adjoining his house in Prattville, Alabama, closed and its holdings dispersed (the 1853 catalogue of the collection contains no reference to a Cooke/Géricault painting). Was the painting destroyed during the Civil War? Does it lie rolled-up and undetected in a museum or collection somewhere between Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana?

The NYHS painting is not—we will recall—that untraced full-scale copy of Géricault's *Raft* but a reduced version attributed to Cooke. We know that at least in one instance Cooke reproduced one of his own paintings in a different size. In 1847, Daniel Pratt asked Cooke to create an enlarged replica of his *The Interior of Saint Peter's, Rome* (Chapel, University of

Georgia, Athens) done, during Cooke's stay in Rome, after an original by Giovanni Paolo Pannini. Measuring roughly 17 x 23 feet (391-square feet) the enlarged version is close in size to Géricault's original *Raft* and its reportedly 400-square-foot copy by Cooke. Cooke could therefore work out his subjects on multiple scales, and may have done so more than once in his career.

But why a reduced copy? There could be many reasons why an artist would create a reduced copy of a famous larger work; foremost of all were market considerations and the wishes of patrons. In that regard, it is compelling to speculate that Cooke may have reduced his famous large copy in response to a specific patron's request, perhaps the reduction's final owner, Commodore Uriah Phillips Levy.

Born in Philadelphia of Jewish descent, Levy took to sea while still an adolescent, and at some point was even shipwrecked along with fellow sailors in the Caribbean, "exposed in a gale of wind" for a whole five days and nights, according to his biographer Ira Dye. The highpoint of his brilliant, if occasionally bumpy, career in the U.S. Navy came during the War of 1812 against Britain. Levy served onboard a brig named—just like in the "Medusa story"—*Argus*, a heroic vessel which defied the British naval blockade repeatedly until it was finally sunk by the Royal Navy's *Pelican*, her captain and most of the crew perishing in the wreckage. (Some sources offer a different version: the *Argus* was towed to Plymouth, England, as a prize of war and sold by the Admiralty.) Levy missed this fateful event having been assigned to a different mission on that day, but the memory of the *Argus*'s triumphant exploits stayed with him. Later in life Levy would proudly describe himself as "the last surviving wardroom officer of the *Argus*." A full-scale portrait of Levy in his naval uniform at the U.S. Naval Academy Museum features, in the upper left background, a painting of two warring battleships, referring to the momentous *Argus* versus *Pelican* encounter.

The sea aside, Levy's other lifetime passions were France and Thomas Jefferson. The American commodore visited France frequently, spoke French fluently, and had contacts with French artists. In Paris, sometime after 1823, he was introduced to the Marquis de Lafayette. Levy and Lafayette shared the same admiration for Jefferson—himself a Francophile. On a subsequent trip to France in 1832, Lafayette helped his American friend meet the sculptor David d'Angers—who had been part of Géricault's circle of friends—in order to commission a life-size sculpture of Jefferson. (Levy donated the sculpture—now in the Capitol Rotunda—to the "people of the United States" and its plaster model to the City of New York.) Moreover, in 1834–36, Levy purchased and restored Jefferson's house, Monticello. Levy's own collection of European paintings in Monticello—of which three including the Géricault copy were bequeathed to the NYHS—may be seen as another act of emulation of Jefferson, whose art collection in Monticello included several French paintings.

Did Cooke and Levy know each other? They could have met in France in the 1820s, in the circle of Lafayette. Writing to his brother Charles on July 22, 1826, as he was about to board the ship that was going to take him to Europe, Cooke outlines the itinerary of his trip: "We shall pass through Paris, call on General Lafayette, cross the Alps and take up our residence in Florence." There were further meeting possibilities. In 1834 Cooke was painting in Virginia while the sale of Monticello was in progress. An issue of the *Family Magazine* of 1837

reproduces an engraving after an (unlocated) painting by Cooke representing Monticello. A biographical note by Cooke's brother in 1849 (published in 1853) states that Cooke created his copy of the *Raft* at the behest of "a gentleman in London from New York." Could that gentleman be the New York based Levy? Was the commission of a (reduced) copy after Géricault's *Raft* the result of such acquaintance and, in the case of Levy, a testimony to a (shipwrecked) seaman's intense interest in the story of a French shipwreck uncannily linked to his own by the presence of a brig named *Argus*? The enlarged size of the *Argus* in the Cooke copy, a true point of divergence from Géricault's original as we saw, could militate in favor of such views and could be ascribed to a patron's specific request.

It is attractive to believe that the NYHS's *Raft* copy is indeed a reduced copy of Cooke's lost large canvas. Levy, the *Argus*, the *Medusa* and Cooke spin a fascinating, romantic yarn of adventurous recklessness and cultural enthusiasm that captures well the spirit of the early American nation. And yet even this option is open to doubt. The execution of the copy—as much as we can tell in its current pre-restoration state—with its broad brushed sections and rough, grainy surfaces bears little resemblance to other known Cooke copies characterized by high finish, melded brushstroke, and meticulous attention to detail (unless, of course, Cooke tried to imitate Géricault's technical bravura?). After all, the attribution to Cooke is—as we saw—entirely circumstantial. So perhaps yet a third scenario suggests itself at this point, that of a mysterious, unknown master who may have been the author of Levy's Géricault copy.

Research in progress and the restoration of the NYHS painting to its original state will undoubtedly resolve some of these dilemmas (and raise others). In the meantime, awareness of the existence of this important American echo of Géricault's grand painting brings valuable insights to the early history of modernism's intercontinental migration.

Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, University of Delaware  
With contributions by Marybeth De Filippis, New York Historical Society

---

## Notes

—With thanks to Andrew Cosentino, Lauren Cox (Winterthur Program in Preservation Studies), Wendy Bellion (University of Delaware), Judith Bonner (New Orleans Historical Society) and Frances Van Keuren (Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia, Athens)

## Illustrations



Fig. 1, George Cook, Copy of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, ca. 1826-1830. Oil on canvas. Photo Lauren Cox. [\[return to text\]](#)