

COLOR, COMPOSITION, MOOD, AND LIGHTING

"The Raft of the Medusa" portrays victims of a shipwreck, adrift on the sea without food or water, at the moment they signal to a distant ship. The painter chose to represent a dramatic moment — the instant when survivors regain hope of rescue — but he conveyed their desperate situation through an array of painterly devices. Géricault used the full range of painter's tools — color, composition, mood, and lighting — to convey his theme of man's struggle against nature.

1. COMPOSITION. Géricault divided the scene into two overlapping triangles. The triangle at left, defined by the mast and two ropes, includes the dead and dying. The triangle at right, whose peak is the standing man waving a shirt, is composed of dynamic figures, with arms outstretched to indicate their surging hopes. The placement of this triangle at far right, the direction of glances, gestures, and arrangement of drapery all contribute to the effect of forward thrust and direct the viewer's eye to the focal point of the figures frantically waving.

2. MOVEMENT. Géricault created the impression of motion through contrasting the postures of his figures. The picture as a whole seems to surge upward from the prone figures at lower left to the upper right, with its concentration of sitting and reaching figures. The waving man at the peak of the right triangle is the climax of this mood of rising hope and advancing motion.

3. UNITY AND BALANCE. To prevent the two triangles — one of despair, the other of hope — from splitting the picture into unrelated halves, Géricault overlaps the triangles, with transitional figures appearing in both. An arm cuts across the rope (the strongest line of the left triangle) to point to the peak of the main triangle and unify the two halves. The two off-center triangles also lean in opposite directions, each balancing the other.

4. COLOR AND LIGHT/DARK CONTRAST. Géricault painted the storm clouds and cresting waves dark to create a menacing mood. The horizon — where the rescue ship is located — is bright, like a beacon of salvation. The extreme light/dark contrasts throughout the painting imply the alternating emotions of hope and hopelessness.

5. MOOD. Jumbled lines of the writhing bodies suggest a mood of turbulence, in keeping with Géricault's theme of titanic struggle against the elements.

When looking at any works of art, the viewer should consider elements like these, which artists use to create their intended effects. The more profound the thought, feeling, skill, and invention an artist puts into his or her work, the more it unfolds to an alert spectator. Appreciating art is a gradual, never-ending endeavor, which is why art from all eras still engages and enriches us.

Géricault, "The Raft of the Medusa," 1818–19, Louvre, Paris.

