

TRAGEDY TO TRIUMPH? THE POSSIBLE DESIGN ORIGIN OF THE SEA GALLANTRY MEDAL

by Glenn M. Stein, FRGS, FRCGS

During 1989, it had been many months since I had seen a television documentary about French artist Jean Louis André Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), but Géricault's best known painting kept gnawing at my curiosity, and I didn't know why! Finally, overcome with frustration, I flipped through the encyclopaedia until *The Raft of the Medusa* lay before me in stark black and white – and then it clicked.



The Raft of the Medusa, by Théodore Géricault, 1819. (Source: Louvre Museum, Paris)



Théodore Géricault, by Horace Vernet, c.1822-23
(Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

For some time, I had been developing a keen interest in maritime life saving awards and even joined the Life Saving Awards Research Society (LSARS), after encouragement from Robert J. Scarlett, then editor of the society's journal. In his first letter to me, Scarlett wrote a few notes on what he referred to as 'something of an orphan among British gallantry awards,' namely the Board of Trade Medal for Gallantry in Saving Life at Sea – later referred to as the Sea Gallantry Medal (SGM).

The SGM is the only gallantry medal instituted by an Act of Parliament, and its creation stemmed from powers granted to the Board of Trade in the Merchant Shipping Act of 1854. The Board decided to institute a decoration in silver and bronze for exceptionally heroic acts in the salvation of human life at sea. The new medal was intended to be awarded to British citizens and those serving upon British ships; courageous acts performed by the crews of foreign vessels were recognised by a parallel British Government award – generally referred to as the Sea Gallantry Medal (Foreign Services) – which had first been awarded in the early 1840s.¹

Whether a silver or bronze medal is awarded

.....depends on the degree of risk incurred, or the measure of gallantry displayed, by the rescuer in saving or attempting to save life, always bearing in mind that the gallantry displayed although considerable, falls short of the standard required for the Albert Medal.²

However, in practice, during the 19th century this was not always the case, since many officers in a rescuing boat often received silver medals, while the crew received bronze medals.



Board of Trade Medal for Gallantry in Saving Life at Sea (Victoria, silver), with B. Wyon's name below the Queen's head.

The SGM was first struck in 1855 and represents:

The earliest official British gallantry medal awarded to civilians but in this sense, it is important to note that unlike [the Victoria Cross and Albert Medal] . . . it was not originally intended to be worn.³

The original SGM featured the likeness of Queen Victoria on the obverse, with one of two legends: 1) AWARDED BY THE BOARD OF TRADE FOR GALLANTRY IN SAVING LIFE V. R. OR 2) the rarely awarded 'humanity' legend of AWARDED BY THE BOARD OF TRADE FOR SAVING

LIFE AT SEA V.R. The reverse depicts a group of five individuals stranded on a rocky outcrop amid stormy seas. A man seated upon a broken mast signals an oncoming lifeboat with a length of fabric, while another man is crouched below to his left, supporting an apparently unconscious sailor. Immediately to their right is a seated woman embracing an infant. Just behind her is the end of a spar with a block and rope. This design was approved by Prince Albert, the consort of Queen Victoria.⁴

Details of the recipient and the circumstances of the award are engraved around the edge, and the large medals were issued in titled presentation cases. Five decades later a significant change took place:

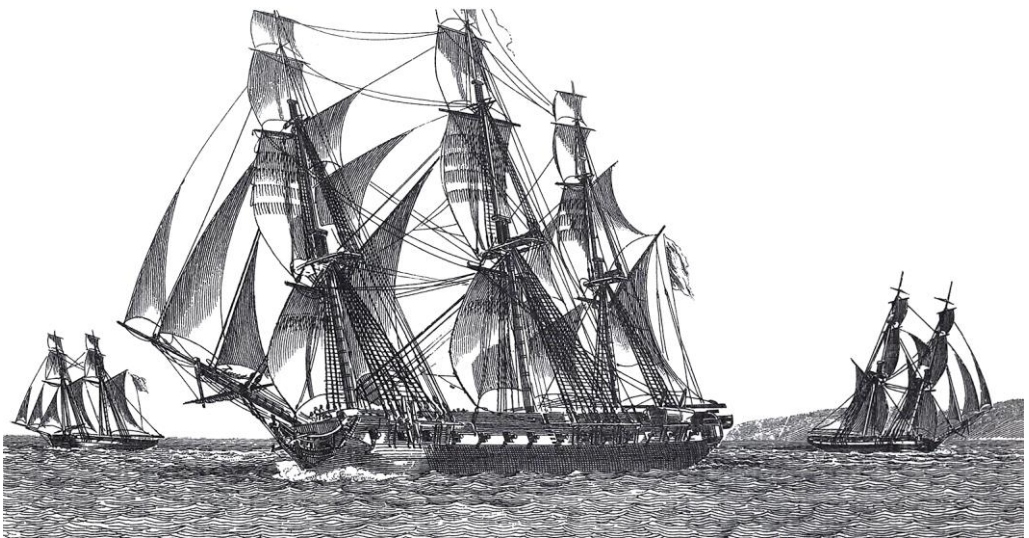
In 1903 King Edward VII, who took a great personal interest in the subject of awards, gave his consent to the proposal that the medal should be reduced in size and made wearable.⁵



Benjamin Wyon
(Courtesy: Highgate Cemetery)

Benjamin Wyon (1802-58), member of the well-known English family of traditional die-engravers and medallists, created the design and engraved the dies for the obverse and reverse of the SGM.⁶ He was the younger brother of medallist Thomas Wyon (1792-1817), under whom he studied. Benjamin succeeded his father, Thomas Wyon Sr. (1767-1830), Chief Engraver of Seals to the Crown, as engraver of Royal seals.⁷ Early on Benjamin struck the SGM, but 'this work was [then] undertaken by the Mint under Treasury Authority dated 23 October, 1857.'⁸

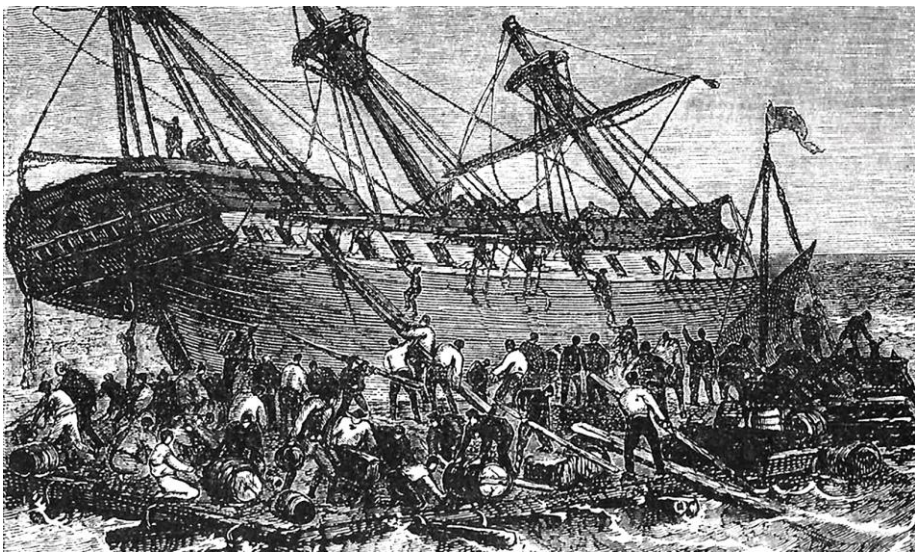
Indeed, it was because of Benjamin Wyon's medallic blueprint that I came to realize another medium of art, and pondered: had Wyon been inspired by Géricault's tragic shipwreck painting? Before venturing along trails of comparison and contrast, an overview of the historical setting is in order.



The frigate *Méduse* (*Medusa*), by Jean-Jérôme Bugean (Source: A. Corréard)

Géricault's massive painting *The Raft of Medusa* (16 x 23 feet or 4 x 7 metres)⁹ was painted during 1818-19, three years after the wreck of the French frigate *Medusa* on the notorious and poorly mapped Arguin Bank, some 60 miles off the northwest African coast. Over 400 souls were aboard: soldiers, sailors, clerks, engineers, pimps, prostitutes and thugs – riffraff and respectability – destined for French Senegal, which had been seized by the British during the Napoleonic Wars and was now generously handed back to France. The *Medusa* was the flagship of a small expedition sent to repossess the colony, which also included the frigates *Loire* and *Echo*, and the brig *Argus*.

Incompetence and poor judgement characterized the voyage and the grounding, and more followed, with tragic results. Because the six ship's boats could only hold about 250 people, a raft was built amid the chaotic atmosphere, with the idea of towing it directly to shore using the boats.



The evacuation of the *Medusa* onto the raft. (Source: A. Dewar)

Thus, onto this poorly constructed contraption, 65 feet long and 23 feet wide (20 x 7 metres), went 146 men and one woman, along with provisions of wine, water, biscuit and flour. After getting only a few miles from the *Medusa*, the tow rope parted, cut or broken, and the boats continued toward land. What followed was a 16-day drifting nightmare for the raft's occupants.

The *Argus* finally found the group of hapless survivors – or what remained of it – as related by the rescuing captain in his July 1816 report:

I found on this raft 15 people . . . These unfortunates had been obliged to fight and kill a large number of their comrades who had revolted in order to seize the provisions . . . Others had been taken by the sea, or died of hunger or madness. Those that I rescued had fed themselves on human flesh for several days, and, at the moment when I found them, the ropes which held the mast were covered with morsels of this flesh which they had hung up to dry. The raft was also covered with scalps which further attested to the food which these men were obliged to consume; they had been sustained by a little wine which they handled as carefully as possible; they still had several bottles when I found them.¹⁰



A model of the raft. (Source: A. Dewar)

Not long after being saved, five of the 15 died. All the *Medusa's* boats made landfall safely, and three of the 17 men left on the ship were rescued 52 days after the grounding. Two of them died soon after arriving in Senegal; the third, who pretended to know many details of the *Medusa's* abandoning, was found murdered in his bed on the eve of his homeward journey to France. A fitting end to a gruesome tale.

The disaster was a major political scandal of its day, and perhaps this contributed to *The Raft* not being well-received by the public when it was first being exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1819:

For the first time, an artist had depicted an event from contemporary history without having received a commission and had filled his composition with anonymous figures in a format hitherto reserved for historical painting.¹¹

From April-June 1820 and at the end of 1820 to December 1821, Géricault was in England,¹² where his *Raft* was shown in a travelling exhibition, firstly in the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly from June 1820 until 20 December.¹³ Here,

...newspaper advertisements and 15-page printed description, which included a summary of the events of the shipwreck and a description of the painting itself, gave the specific context and the moment depicted.¹⁴

The six-month exhibition of *The Raft* was a sensational success, having been viewed by up to 50,000 visitors.¹⁵

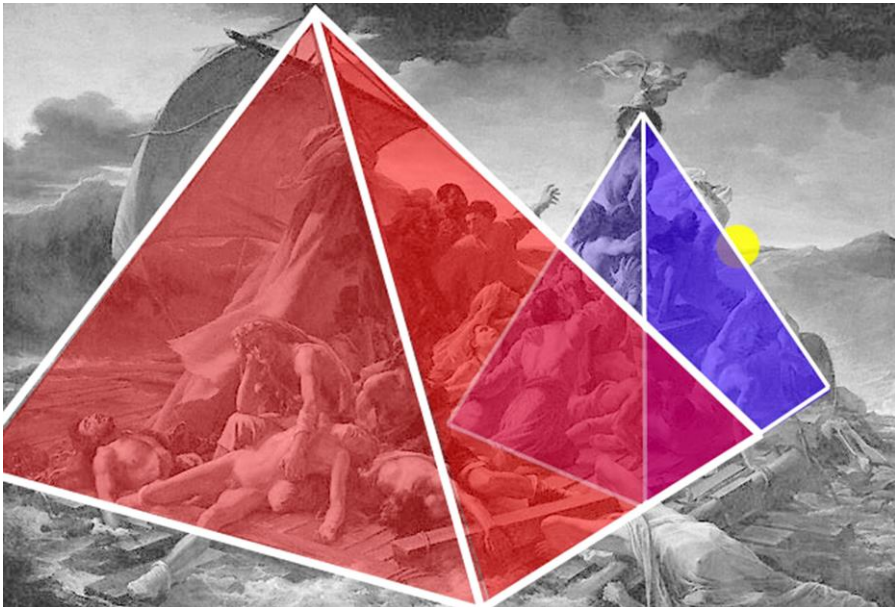
Enter young Londoner Benjamin Wyon, who was born in John Street, Blackfriars and in 1841 lived in the Westminster,¹⁶ both of which were only a few miles away from Piccadilly. It's reasonable to assume he was a city resident during the intervening years and as an artist, one can imagine Wyon being magnetically drawn to Géricault's work.



Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly in 1814 (Source: Wellcome Trust; attributed to T.H. Shepherd)

That Wyon was influenced by Géricault's masterpiece seems more than plausible, and there are striking similarities – and differences – in both works.

Looking at the overall structures, *The Raft's* double pyramidal arrangement immediately presents itself, while in comparison the SGM's structure is that of a single pyramid.



The majority of the occupants are arranged in two pyramidal structures. (Source: Burges)

Both artists designed their works to accommodate the viewer's trained eye (left to right, top to bottom, as one reads European languages).¹⁷ While Géricault's figures display physical disharmony aboard the floating hell, it was necessary for reasons of design and balance that Wyon's victims face the oncoming lifeboat.

Given each artist's marked differences of intent, there exists sharp contrasts in mood. *The Raft's* occupants are a melding of pathos; some of them display utter disbelief that salvation is at hand, while others have sunk into the depths of despair and take no notice of the impending rescue. The SGM's people display anticipation giving way to relief that their ordeal will soon be over.

Looking at the top figures, both are stripped to their waists and waving pieces of fabric. In *The Raft*, there is a black man (one of evidently three in the composition) braced by a companion as he and another man signal the distantly approaching *Argus*.¹⁸ The SGM's man signals a lifeboat, which is coming to the aid of himself and his shipwrecked companions.



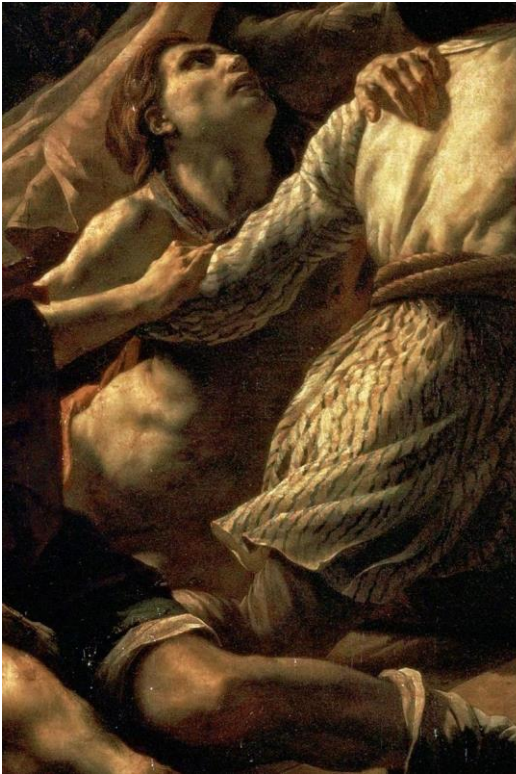
Not obvious at first – but most telling – is the presence of a menacing breaking wave in the middle ground on the left side of each creation. Looking more closely, there is an uncanny resemblance and placement. Yet, in *The Raft*, one can see the crest of another wave just behind. In addition, swells on the right side of the painting seem to be rising up in concert with the breaking wave, in an attempt to crush the raft with watery jaws before the occupants' salvation.



The fluid peril is less pronounced in Wyon's medallic counterpart, due to the need to display the oncoming lifeboat; in addition, the figures are in closer proximity, lessening the waves' effects.



Moving to the painting's lower left, a seated man in utter despair lays his arm upon a nude corpse, while next to him a half-exposed body rests on the raft's corner edge. By comparison, the medal's apparent corresponding figure crouches with his arms supporting a sailor who appears to be unconscious.



Lastly, one can imagine Géricault being severely remiss if he did not include the only woman present on the raft, and so a female in the painting's centre clutches a supporting male figure. The SGM's female clutches a baby (*not* assumed to be her own by the way), conjuring up the practice of allowing women and children to be the first to board lifeboats when abandoning a ship. This tradition is believed to have started only a couple of years before the sinking of HM Troopship *Birkenhead* off the South African coast, on 26 February 1852. The first use of the exact phrase was in the fictional story *Harrington: A Story of True Love*, by William Douglas O'Connor (1860):

'Back from the boats . . . The first man that touches a boat I'll brain. Women and children first, men.'¹⁹

Despite an ardent search – including publishing two articles in 1990 and 2009 – to prove a *definitive* connection between Géricault's *Raft* and Wyon's SGM design, my journey (for now) has come to an end. Records relating to the SGM within The National Archives and The Royal Mint Museum, as well as Benjamin Wyon's personal and professional papers at the Cambridge University Library, all failed to bear fruit in this regard. However, I feel my research contains powerful *circumstantial* evidence in forging that critical link. Indeed, Philip Attwood, formerly Keeper of Coins and Medals at The British Museum, offered his strong support for my theory:

I enjoyed the [2009] article on Benjamin Wyon's medal and I'm sure you're right – the similarities with the Gericault painting are very striking – as are the difference, through which Wyon would seem to be consciously contrasting the callousness and cowardice of the French incident with the charitableness and courage of British life-saving activities.²⁰

In the end, everything may have come full circle, with Géricault imitating life²¹ and Wyon imitating art; and so, perhaps Wyon did seize the opportunity to apply a masterful depiction of human tragedy to a reward for the salvation of life.

Notes

¹ Abbott and Tamplin, p. 271; 'In 1850 the Marine Department of the Board of Trade was formed and in 1854 it received the power to grant rewards for saving life at sea under Section 418 of the Merchant Shipping Act of that year.' (Scarlett, p. 5); Scarlett, pp. 31-32 and 51.

² Quoted from a memorandum in the Board of Trade files, MT9/1581, Request for information on Sea Gallantry Medals for article, 1924 (Scarlett, p. 5); 'With the institution of the Albert Medal in March 1866 with one class to reward '... daring and heroic actions performed by mariners and other in danger of perishing, by reason of wrecks and other perils of the sea' and a second class the following year, the Sea Gallantry Medal fell into disuse, with very few awards being made during the period 1866 to 1876.' (Scarlett, p. 6).

³ Scarlett, p. 5; Abbott and Tamplin, p. 271, fn. 3 and p. 273.

⁴ Abbott & Tamplin, p. 271.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 273, Hocking, p. 200, Scarlett, p. 5; Benjamin Wyon was among The Royal Academy exhibitors of 1858: '1116 Impressions in bronze from dies executed under the direction of the President of the Board of Trade, for medals awarded by the Board for gallantry in saving life at sea.' (Graves, p. 388); I have seen both specimen and issued Victorian large medals having only the signature 'B. WYON, SC.' (SC is Latin for 'sculpsit,' he/she sculpted it or made it) on their obverses, while others additionally have 'B. WYON' on their reverses.

⁷ Redgrave, p. 494; In *Gallantry*, Wilson and McEwan erroneously attribute the SGM's design to Chief Engraver of the Mint William Wyon (1795-1851) – Benjamin's cousin – but he died three years before its institution. However, William was commissioned to carry out the design of the SGM (Foreign Services) in 1841. Incidentally, Wilson and McEwan also wrongly attribute the SGM (Foreign Services) to Mint engraver Benedetto Pistrucchi (1783-1855). Though he was originally asked to carry out the work, Pistrucchi's design was not approved by Foreign Secretary Viscount Palmerston and instead William Wyon was commissioned to carry out the work and his design was approved (Wilson & McEwan, pp. 59-60 and Abbott & Tamplin, pp. 273 & 277).

⁸ Hocking, p. 200; Benjamin Wyon also produced dies for the Plym, Tamar, Lynher and Tavy Humane Society Medal, which began being issued in silver and bronze shortly after the Society's institution in December 1831. The design of this medal is attributed to Lieutenant Colonel Charles Hamilton Smith, KH (Helmere).

⁹ Unveiled as *Scène de Naufrage (Shipwreck Scene)*, the painting later acquired its current title (Christiansen). In June 2006 my wife and I visited the Louvre and viewed *The Raft*.

¹⁰ Miles, pp. 111-12.

¹¹ www.louvre.fr.

¹² Wolohojian & Tahinci, p. 134, fn. 1.

¹³ Miles, pp. 193 & 196; The painting was then exhibited in Dublin beginning in early weeks of 1821, but 'the commercial success of the venture was ironically compromised by competition from an immense panorama shrewdly capitalizing on the current interest in the horrors of the raft' and by the end of March exhibition was forced to close (Miles, pp. 197-98). This was the moving panorama 'The Wreck of the Medusa' (Crary, pp. 16-17).

¹⁴ Riding.

¹⁵ Given that London's population was circa 1.4 million in 1821, up to 50,000 people was a sizeable number of visitors (Historical Overview of London Population).

¹⁶ Forrer, p. 581 and 1841 Census; William's brother Thomas lived in London in 1822 (*Pigot's*, p. 237).

¹⁷ It is often thought English is a Latin-based language, when in fact it is a west Germanic language. The misconception arises because many English words are derived from Latin.

¹⁸ In two studies Géricault depicted the ship in profile, sailing right to left and much closer to the raft. He possibly chose to place the ship just on the horizon in the final painting so as to focus the viewer on the foreground drama. Black individuals and women are also absent in one of these studies. (Studies for *The Raft of the Medusa*, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen and Louvre Museum; also see Riding).

¹⁹ The Phrase Finder.

²⁰ Attwood to Stein, personal communication, 18 November 2014.

²¹ Géricault died in Paris in 1824 and is buried in the Père Lachaise Cemetery. His tomb features his reclining bronze figure, with brush and palette in his hands, above a prominent low-relief bronze panel of *The Raft of the Medusa* (Wikipedia).

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