Lion appears elegant and controlled by comparison. Ward's picture does not appeal, as Stubbs' work does, to our finer feelings, but to areas less susceptible to sensibility.

To those artists who had undergone the rigours of the French Academy, the English seemed enviable for their informality and emotiveness but ultimately devoid of more controlled qualities. Even Delacroix, for all his emulation of the expertise of Constable and Lawrence, felt 'all the great English painters' had the 'defect of exaggeration'. When reviewing the work of the school in his diary on 8 February 1860 he decided that this tendency to over-emphasis prevented them from achieving 'that quality of eternal youth characteristic of the great masterpieces'. Such an opinion highlights the principal dilemma that both Delacroix and Géricault felt in their art: how to paint in a lively and modern manner, to revel in sensation – and yet produce an art that was as sustained and penetrating, as continuous in its revelation, as that of the great masters.

Théodore Géricault

No work produced a more convincing answer to this problem than *The Raft*
183 *of the Medusa* by Géricault (1791–1824). This vast canvas, so disconcertingly dominant at the Salon of 1819, became as much a talisman for the young
38 artists of the Restoration as David's *Oath of the Horatii* had been for those of the Revolution.

Nothing underlines the disparate emphasis of these two great innovators more than their motivations. Both wished to produce an art that was powerful and arresting – Géricault's recorded ambition was 'to shine, to illuminate, to astonish the world'. Yet David's State-commissioned enactments of resolution and achievement are the converse of Géricault's presentations of defeat, conflict and disease. David's emotions served his sense of public duty; Géricault's bore witness to a private obsession.

Géricault's eager, febrile disposition keenly felt the disturbances that followed Napoleon's downfall. His own affiliations were uncertain: so much so, in fact, that he could celebrate the military prowess of the Empire in his first exhibited work in 1812, join the Royalist guards three years later, and in a further three years paint a searing indictment of the Restoration government. The son of a prosperous and indulgent – if uncomprehending – father, he was free from external pressures. He need exhibit at the Salon only when he had a special purpose (there were three such occasions); and when he received a Government commission that was not to his liking, he simply passed it on to his young acquaintance Delacroix.

Géricault's impetus was, therefore, fully at the mercy of his temperament. His career began casually enough with an apprenticeship in 1808 to the easy-

177 GÉRICAULT *Portrait of an Officer of the Chasseurs Commanding a Charge* 1812

going animal and battle painter Carle Vernet (1758–1836). Two years later, however, he transferred to the studio of Pierre-Narcisse Guérin (1774–1833), the master of a spirited classical style who also trained Delacroix and Huet. From Guérin, Géricault received a thorough grounding in the mechanics of monumental painting, the laborious study and assemblage that goes into the construction of the grand historical piece. From this time – at first in a dilatory manner, and then with mounting conviction – Géricault moved
183 towards the creation of such a work: *The Raft of the Medusa*. Yet the equivocation with which this was received discouraged him from further concentration on such a project. Only on his death-bed, when it was too late, did he dream of creating some other *grande machine*.

Géricault was consistently the chronicler of those modern events that struck his own sympathies. During the Empire this accorded well with the action and modernity of Carle Vernet's horse paintings and battle scenes. He was never personally close to Gros, the master of the modern epic; yet he studied his style and shared his admiration for the colour and effect to be found in Venetian and Baroque painters. During his youth the Musée Napoléon was still intact, and he made free copies there of pictures by such masters of realism and drama as Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Rubens and Velazquez.

177 Géricault's first Salon exhibit, the *Portrait of an Officer of the Chasseurs Commanding a Charge*, was enthusiastically received. Painted while Napoleon was on his Russian campaign, it excelled even the military portraits of Gros in its vibrancy and action. The reception of its sequel,
178 *Wounded Cuirassier Leaving the Field*, was more uncertain. Exhibited at the time when Napoleon was imprisoned in Elba, it is redolent of defeat. It was not the frank topicality of the work that dismayed the critics; they were concerned more that the brilliance and vividness of the 'Chasseur' had been replaced by leaden tones and a subdued design.

The *Wounded Cuirassier* also taxed the critics by its scale. Since *Officer of the Chasseurs* had been exhibited as a portrait, there had been little objection to its being life-size. However, it was felt to be inappropriate that the *Cuirassier*, a mere genre piece, should have been painted on a scale reserved for weightier themes. Géricault, however, was to persist in treating the unheroic with all the gravity and dimensions formerly reserved for history painting.

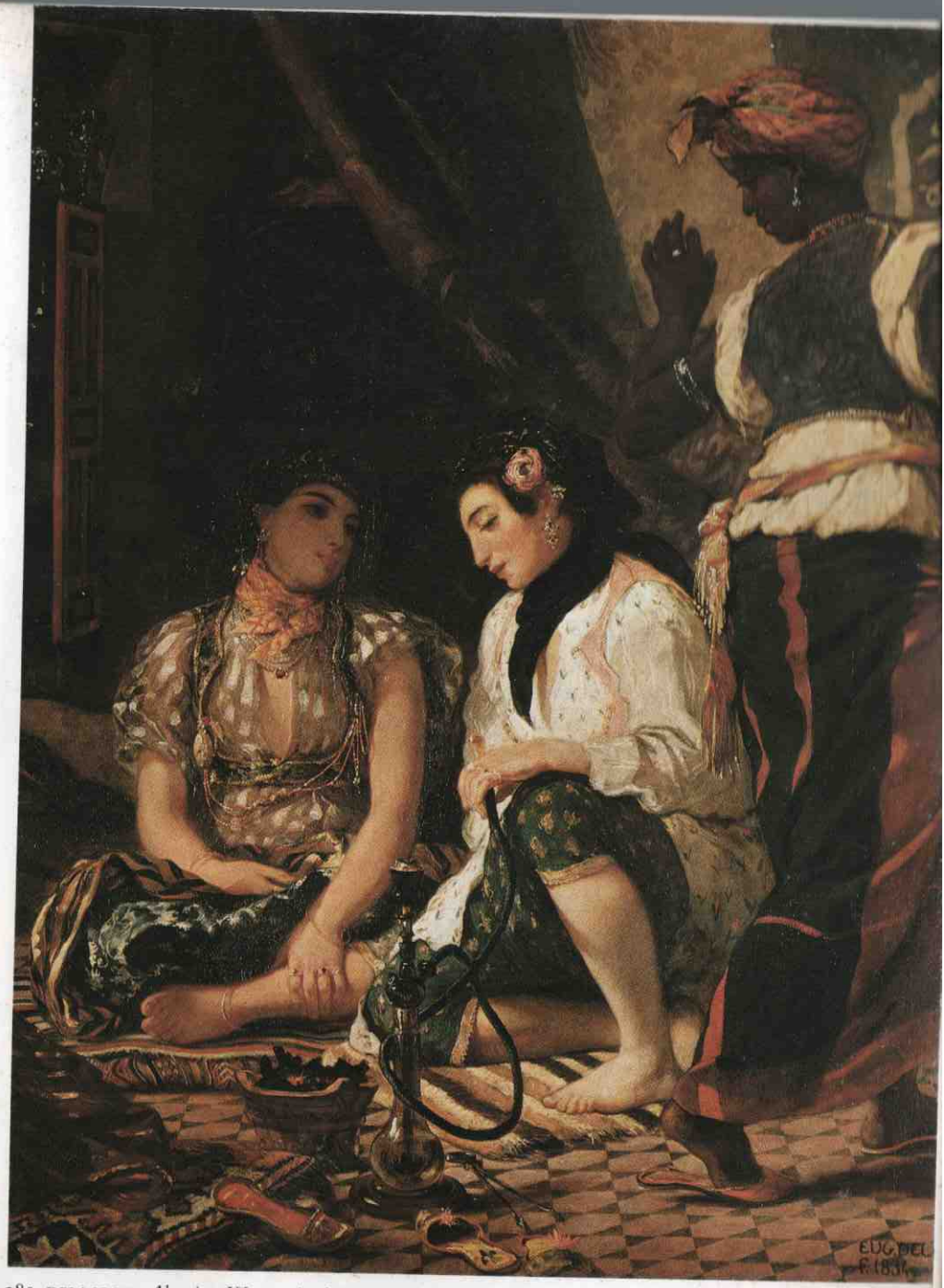
The contemporary disillusion which Géricault monumentalized here was soon to be reinforced for him by a private torment. For around this time he began a near-incestuous liaison with the young wife of his maternal uncle. The diplomacy of Géricault's father managed to prevent the scandal becoming known outside the family, but within it the rift was irreparable. He began to find the 'terrible perplexity into which I have recklessly thrown

178 GÉRICAULT *Wounded Cuirassier Leaving the Field* 1814

myself' unbearable. His decision to go to Rome in 1816 was taken as much to escape his predicament as to complete his artistic education. Having failed to win the Prix de Rome, he left in the autumn of that year as a private student. In little more than a year he had been driven back to Paris – and to his mistress – by depression and loneliness.

If it did not solve his personal dilemma, Géricault's stay in Rome certainly enhanced his artistic potential. He was overwhelmed by the inner energy of Michelangelo's figures and the unsuspected vigour to be found in certain classical statues. He also found a modern subject that seemed capable of receiving these impressions, the popular race of riderless horses that took 181
place along the Corso in Rome every year at carnival time. It was his intention to paint an immense, thirty-foot canvas on the theme, and during his last six months in Rome he was preoccupied with making studies for it. These show a gradual narrowing down of interest from the general bustle of the event to the single action of conflict when Roman peasants are struggling to keep the excited horses in control just before the start of the race.

179 DELACROIX *Dante and Virgil in Hell* (detail of 187)



180 DELACROIX *Algerian Women in their Apartment* (detail of 190)

The final preparatory study is clearly based on a classical frieze in its design, in its profiling of forms, and even in the way all the individual features have become generalized. Perhaps there is a direct tribute to the horsemen of the Parthenon frieze, which had been brought to England by Lord Elgin in 1806 and which Géricault knew from plaster casts. Yet it is a classicism on the point of disruption. The horses are savage beasts, struggling to break loose. And while the underlying design is clear, its lines are broken up by the lighting. Instead of articulating the figures, light falls across them in arbitrary diagonals. The foreground man and horse are caught by a sunbeam, in a brief moment of equilibrium; but around them in the shadows are more frenzied silhouettes.

Géricault shared the Romantic fascination with the horse as an image of
177 superhuman energy. A recurrent theme in his art from the time of the *Officer of the Chasseurs*, it also grew from personal proclivities. For he was himself a fanatical horseman, and in his last desperate years a series of reckless riding accidents hastened his untimely death.

Soon after Géricault left Rome he abandoned this painting; perhaps he felt it was too timeless and formal to startle the Salon. He now began to frequent the jovial, faintly Bohemian milieu of his master's son, Horace Vernet, entering into its stylish concern for the bizarre and the topical: for the political and social undercurrents of a world without momentous events. Like Horace Vernet and their mutual friend Nicolas-Toussaint Charlet (1792–1845), he turned to the new and rapid journalistic technique of lithography to chronicle the debris of the Napoleonic campaigns. Yet unlike his colleagues he dwelt in his scenes of the campaigns not on the humorous or the anecdotal but upon brutality and degradation.

Géricault's obsession with violence may have been temperamental; but it was also an attempt to make an unheroic age aware of the existence of extremes. And just as he was drawn by the vivid sense of *reportage* that could be gained from lithography, so he found that news stories provided him with appropriately sensational subject-matter. Already in 1817 he was turning to such sources in search of a suitable theme for the work with which he intended to dominate the next Salon. At first he considered using a current scandal, the brutal murder of a former provincial magistrate, Fualdès, in which it was suspected that an ultra-Royalist gang had been involved. He made a number of designs for this, but abandoned it in favour of a slightly older scandal which seemed capable of more epic dimensions.

183 The story of the shipwreck of the *Medusa* on 2 July 1816 had even more serious political implications than the Fualdès affair, since it implied governmental incompetence. The *Medusa*, flagship of a convoy carrying French soldiers and settlers to the colony of Senegal, had run aground off

181 GÉRICAULT *Race of the Riderless Horses c.*1817

West Africa, largely as a result of the ineptitude of the captain, a returned royalist émigré. As there had been insufficient lifeboats, 149 men and one woman were forced to board a makeshift raft, which it was intended would be towed by the lifeboats. However, the crews of these, in their eagerness to reach the shore, soon cut the raft adrift. There followed fifteen days of terrors, which included mutiny, cannibalism and a bitter moment of false hope at the sighting of a ship from their convoy, the *Argus*, which failed to notice them. When the raft was eventually found by the *Argus*, only fifteen of the 150 were still alive.

The Government tried to cover the whole incident up. The captain received a lenient sentence, and when two of the survivors, the doctor Savigny and the engineer Corréard, tried to sue for compensation, they were dismissed from Government service. Savigny and Corréard published a book which became a sensation throughout Europe.

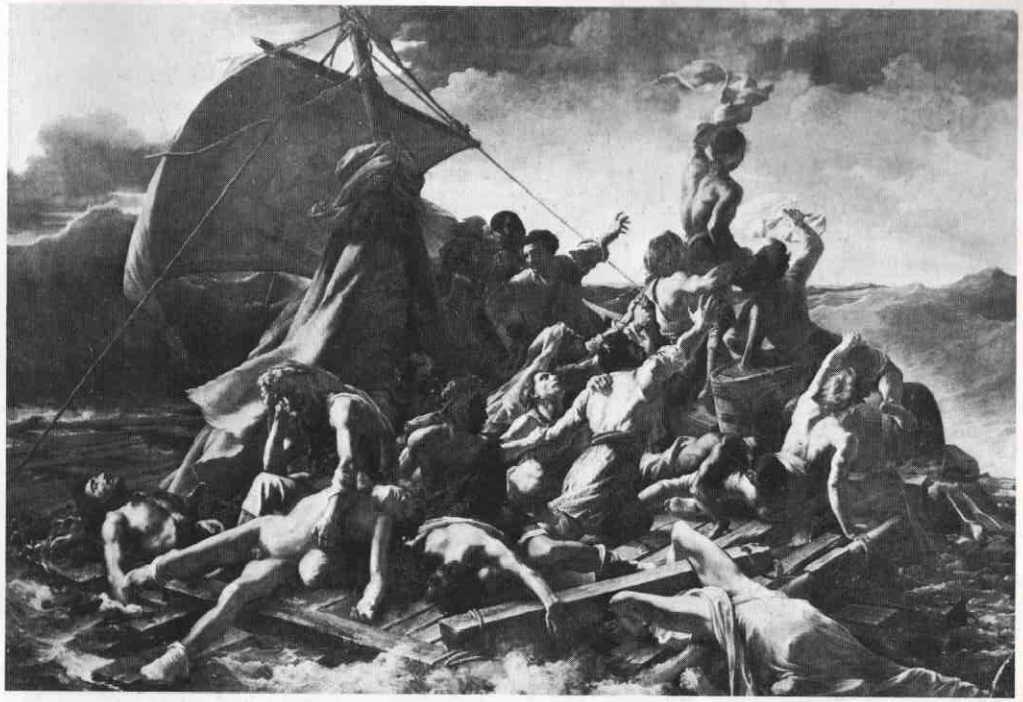
Géricault met Savigny – possibly through Horace Vernet – and worked at the project for eighteen months. It was the kind of immense undertaking

that most artists would have contemplated only with the support of a Government commission. Even for Géricault, a man of means, it was a strain on his resources. He hired a studio especially to work on the vast canvas; and the confined space made its impact all the more overpowering to those who came to visit him at work. Delacroix, after seeing the picture there, found himself breaking involuntarily into a run down the street.

Géricault took some time to decide on which moment of the disaster to depict, toying with such violent and morbid incidents as the mutiny and the outbreak of cannibalism. In the end, however, he chose a less horrific but more emotionally distressing event; the first sighting of the *Argus*. The picture itself shows a gradual crescendo from despair to false hope. In the foreground a brooding figure sits among the dead. Behind him other survivors gradually turn to face the horizon; two are waving their shirts. But the ship they are hailing is a tiny speck, hardly discernible between the dark rolling waves. It is clear that they must be invisible to it; and some have already sunk back into a desolate torpor.

This ebb and flow of moods is controlled by a composition that combines movement with precision. The final design has replaced the classical frieze by a series of diagonals moving up from the foreground towards the divergent apexes of mast and group of waving figures. Instead of a surface unity there is a sense of dispersal as the light picks out the distinct actions of the separate groups: and the sense of randomness is enhanced by the way in which the figures involved in the main incident are turned away from the spectator. Yet the position of every figure is so precisely thought out, so clearly described, that the conflicting gestures are held in a coherent pattern
181 that has the powerful simplicity of truly monumental art. As in the *Race of the Riderless Horses*, the semi-nude figures are posed academy studies. These victims of fifteen days adrift show no emaciation. Their bodies are grand and vigorous, turning the sensation of the moment into a timeless drama.

182 GÉRICAULT
Severed Heads 1818



183 GÉRICAULT *The Raft of the Medusa* 1819

Yet for all his careful planning and use of generalized forms, Géricault's picture gains an actuality from his obsessiveness. The dead and diseased bodies of the foreground were derived from studies that Géricault had made in his studio of dead bodies and severed limbs gathered from the hospital and 182
the morgue. Like the picture itself, these represent an amazing feat of control, of clear-sighted description in the face of the extreme. None of them was directly used for the final picture, but their lurid presence can be felt in it, from the dead bodies in the foreground to the bruised green and purple tones of the sky.

To Géricault's bitter disappointment the reception of his work was not so much hostile – it was prominently reviewed, and the artist was awarded a medal by the Government – as tepid. Most criticism was of a niggardly kind – complaining that Géricault had dared to treat 'genre' on a monumental scale, or that the colours were too dark, or that the record of the incident was not sufficiently faithful: all remarks that failed totally to appreciate the new direction that Géricault was attempting. The Government medal, too, was a way of acknowledging the artist without approving his work. All

suggestions that the work should be acquired by the State were pointedly ignored until after the artist's death.

Even Géricault's friends could not understand why the mildly favourable reception of the work caused him so much distress. When the artist Gérard asked him what it was that he wanted, he replied 'what I want is the trial of misfortune'. Nothing could show up the bankruptcy of society more than the way it had responded to his affront.

Géricault's picture received a somewhat more enthusiastic reception in London, at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, in 1820. There a dislike of the Davidian school and a less strict insistence on the decorum of the genres could lead to a more liberal appreciation of the way 'the bold hand of the artist has laid bare the details of the horrid facts with the severity of Michelangelo and the gloom of Caravaggio'. Géricault went to London for the exhibition, and became one of the first of the younger French artists to respond to the spirited spontaneity of Lawrence, Ward and the landscape painters.

The visit brought no relief from his obsessions. In London he was attracted not only by the British passion for sport, but also by the image of a city in the throes of an unprecedented urban expansion. The city which Gautier was later to call the 'native town of *spleen*' was already in the grip of that horrifying process of dehumanization that was to fascinate so many artists.

184 GÉRICAULT *Draymen at the Adelphi Wharf* 1821

185 GÉRICAULT *The Cleptomaniac*

To record this Géricault turned once again to lithography, in an unsuccessful effort to make a commerical success out of a medium that was still a novelty in England. Like his scenes of the Napoleonic campaigns, these images show figures persisting in a world that has lost all human scale or relevance. 184

Géricault returned to Paris in December 1820, still exhausted in mind and body from the exertions of the *Medusa*. He was never to undertake another major work; but his unflinching observation never left him. He could still produce works as remarkable as the series of portraits of madmen and madwomen for his friend the psychiatrist Georget, one of the earliest specialists to see madness as a disease that could respond to sympathetic treatment. However, one should not overestimate the extent of Georget's advances. Just as the 'natural philosopher' of the day could still find a use for the descriptive penetration of the artist, so psychology was still at that stage where it could be supposed that inner disturbance could be diagnosed from external features. More sophisticated than Lavater, Georget nevertheless still sought to classify madness through physiognomic observation. And while Géricault's portraits of mental patients – of which five now survive – are 185

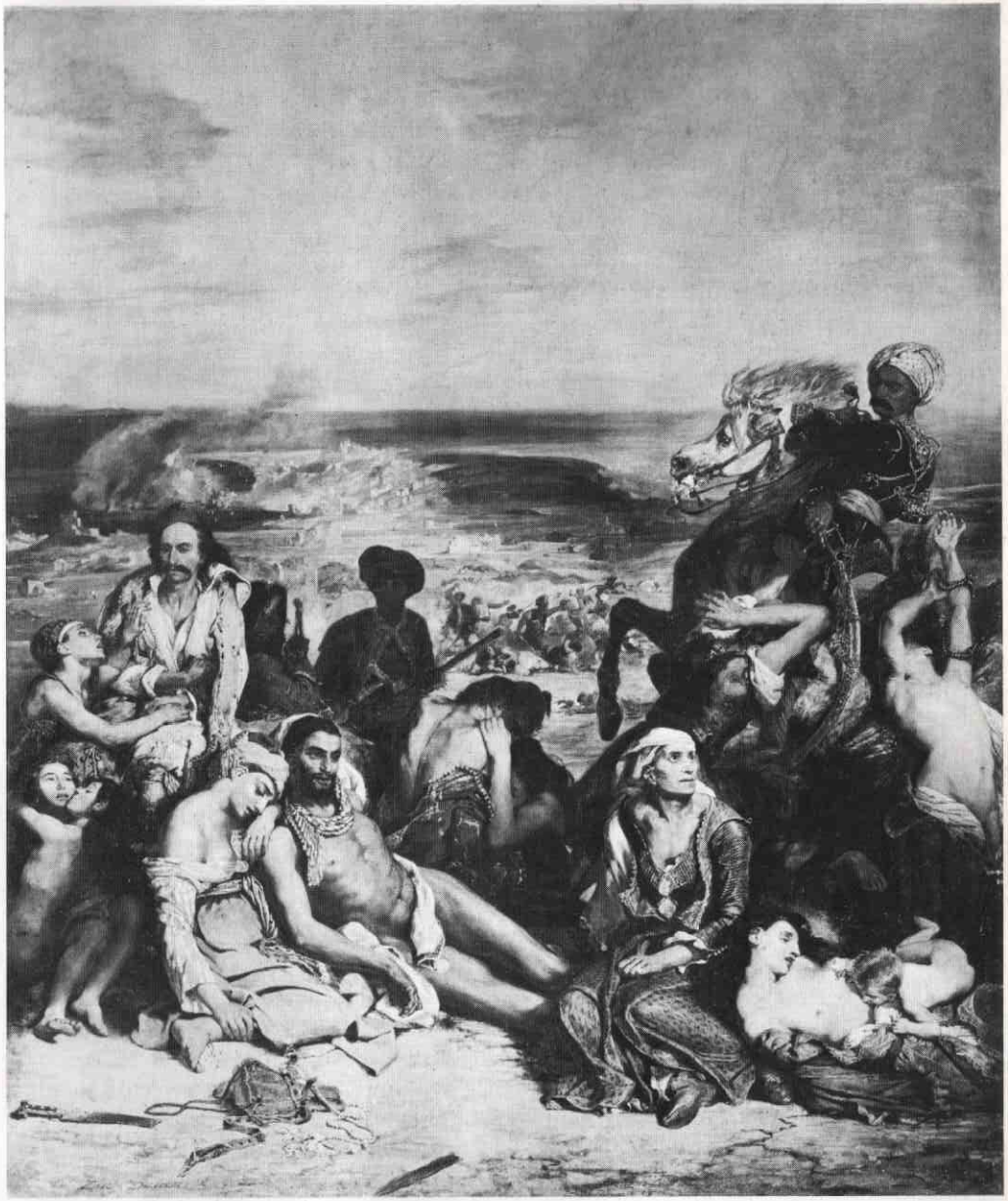
different from those used by Georget in his book *De la folie* (1820), it has been suggested by Klaus Berger that they were used as demonstration material in courses on pathology. In the sympathy that they arouse these works exceed the bounds of medical illustration as the *Medusa* rises above pictorial journalism. Yet in both cases the emotion grows out of the frankness of the observation, out of the ability to record without flinching. The portrait illustrated here does not epitomize kleptomania (or is it homicide? – the confusion over the title makes its own point about Georget's theories). But it is an incomparable evocation of a man preoccupied and debilitated by his own inner obsessions. No other artist of the period but Goya could capture the world of derangement with such insight; but while Goya seeks to invoke the mental state, Géricault proceeds always from a clear description of actual appearances.

As his death approached, Géricault felt, characteristically, that he had
183 failed. His *Medusa* seemed too incomplete a record of his aspirations. Yet in its strange morbidity, its heroic desolation, it provided an authentic alternative at last to the school of David. He had created a path for the Romantics to follow, and had resolutely shown that the bizarre and the topical were not simply a matter for the minor genres, but were of central importance to an age of disenchantment.

Eugène Delacroix

The year in which Géricault died, 1824, was that in which Delacroix (1798–1863), as he put it, 'was enlisted willy nilly into the Romantic coterie',
186 as a result of his contribution to the Salon of that year, *The Massacre of Chios*.

This timing has made it customary to see him as a successor to Géricault, a Titian to his Giorgione – the longer-lived survivor who brought the young innovator's work to fruition. Delacroix certainly learned a lot from Géricault (and was deeply moved by the tragedy of his death), but he was never particularly close to him either personally or artistically. Géricault, passionate and unstable, threw himself into the immediate and topical with obsessive vigour. Delacroix, on the other hand, concealed all emotion
12 beneath an iron control. With the exception of *Liberty Leading the People*, he painted nothing that had overt bearing on contemporary France. Most of his scenes were from history and literature, and those that were modern were set in distant lands. His exploration of violence and sordidness never interfered with the purely pictorial thrill of brilliant paint surfaces and vibrant colour harmonies. Only one sentiment seems ever to have rivalled these concerns as a motivation in his work: and that was *spleen*, a Baudelairean sense of tedium that can be felt lingering even in the most impassioned of his paintings, and
180 which is unmistakable in the *Algerian Women*.



186 DELACROIX *The Massacre of Chios* 1824