

with luck, courage, and perseverance, I'll perhaps finish it. I won't talk more about it for now; but if I'm lucky enough to succeed, you can be assured that I won't spare you a single detail: I'll probably wear you out.⁴

By the end of April 1848, the work was completed. On the 29th, he wrote thus to Foley: 'My completed drawing has been mounted, framed, carried to the Louvre, not without running a few risks. It is now hanging on the wall down there and from time to time I have the satisfaction of seeing an interested person stop by it.'⁵

In referring to the Louvre, Meryon is not of course talking primarily of the art museum we know today, but of the Salon, the annual government-sponsored art exhibition which then offered virtually the only way for artists to make themselves known to the public. Over the preceding years antagonism to this institution, with its restrictive rules and selection committees of questionable ability and partiality, had been building up. The Revolution of February 1848 cleared the way for a radical revision of the Salon's organization, and the selection committee was abolished. All works submitted were exhibited. The result was predictable. The critic of the *Revue des Deux-mondes* referred to 'The acceptance of everything which has been submitted to the Salon this year' in writing of the difficulty of his task,⁶ another critic wrote of the 'tom-foolery of the present Salon',⁷ and cartoonists added their satirical comments.⁸

In this context, the exhibition of Meryon's first major work appears to have attracted no comment from the critics, but it did attract the attention of the etcher Eugène Bléry, with profound consequences for the future.

The letter of April 1848 to Foley from which I have already quoted, contains the following long description of the work, precious not only because it allows us to see Meryon at work, but also because it situates the composition firmly in the centuries-old tradition of narrative painting.

The subject is the assassination of Marion in the Bay of Islands. While he is peacefully seated in the middle of the natives, and a young girl treacherously offers him a parrot, the murderer raises with fury the weapon which will shatter his skull. Although plotted, arranged in advance, the crime has an instantaneous effect on the characters present.—Of two women in the group, one stands up suddenly, the other cannot restrain a nervous movement which I have tried to show in the arm and the hand. Three chiefs in the circle, placed in front of Marion, are influenced in different fashions. One, the oldest, appears struck with compassion; another readies himself to rise and assist in the crime; the third remains cold and impassive.