

## *Erik Fischer: Eckersberg's Pictures of Thorvaldsen's Return to Copenhagen 17 September, 1838*

Page 224

When Thorvaldsen returned home to Copenhagen on 17 September, 1838, on the frigate *Rota*, after 41 years in Rome, he was given a triumphant reception. The painter C.W. Eckersberg was there at Toldboden (the custom house), and five days later, on Sunday, 23 September, he went back to Toldboden to do studies for a painting of the event.

The first known drawing from this day (fig. 1) was made with the aid of a perspective octant, a drawing instrument he himself had had constructed. The visual angle can be calculated to  $33.4^\circ$ . The composition drawing (fig. 2) was the next stage in the work process, but here the visual angle is smaller,  $28^\circ$ . In the first version of the painting (fig. 3), the visual angle corresponds to that of the composition drawing, while the second version (fig. 4), made for Thorvaldsen, has a broader visual angle of  $36^\circ$ , while certain elements are still seen from the octant's visual angle in the first drawing,  $33.4^\circ$ .

The composition is actually in the historical genre but was executed within the framework of marine painting and has the character of an on-the-spot documentary. The octant drawing (fig. 1) bears

witness to the realism, akin to that in a photograph, with which the location is defined and remains so unchanged throughout the whole work process. It also shows that, from the very beginning, Eckersberg intended to make the frigate Rota and three smaller boats the composition's "main characters" – which they remained in all three subsequent work phases. Then the tradition-steeped apparatus of historical painting was used in the development and definition of the composition, to give the clearest and most balanced division of the four "main characters" in the dynamic force field of the pictorial space. In the course of this process, the frigate Rota is first made larger, then smaller once again, so that more attention can be centred around the absolute "main character", the *chaloup*, with Thorvaldsen himself as its important cargo (fig. 5). In this process, Eckersberg uses all his experience with the theory and practice of the science of perspective and even goes as far as to work with two different visual angles at one time:  $33.4^\circ$  and  $28^\circ/36^\circ$ . The composition's *extras*, the sailing boats and smaller craft, on the other hand, seem to be treated more freely and decoratively: they have to support the action without disturbing it.