

## Jacques-Louis David: Artistic Interpretation in Tumultuous Times

Una Birch calls Jacques Louis David a talented painter, supporter of the Revolution, Jacobin, Friend of Marat and Robespierre and later Napoleon.<sup>1</sup> If that was all there was to say about David, his name would not have survived the centuries. He was more than a man in the right place at the right time. He was a talent, a great artist and choreographer of epic events. This paper will discuss the following works by David *The Oath of the Horatii*, *Tennis Court Oath*, *LePeletier de Saint-Fargeau on his deathbed*, *Death of Marat*, *Napoleon crossing the Saint Bernard* and *Sacre* and how they were important for their time.

King Louis XVI commissioned David to paint the *Oath of the Horatii*. Carlotta Lenzi contends, “never before had the concept of neoclassicism been expressed so boldly in painting.”<sup>2</sup> Its subject is from the ancient Romans. The setting is solemn in contrast to the color of the robes worn by those in the scene. The men stand to the left of the painting as excellent specimens of heroism. The women who are to the right, in contrast are grieving as the men prepare to go off to battle. The father stands in the center of the painting portraying a combination of the emotions; he is both determined and distressed. He has the swords raised in front of him taking the oath from his sons and praying to the gods for his family. *Oath of the Horatii* signaled that virtue was no longer for the old; it was now passed to the young.<sup>3</sup> Thomas Crow believes that the painting’s message was not the only nonconformist statement David intended to make, when it was commissioned it was to be in square format, about ten feet for each side.<sup>4</sup> This was a typical size for second tier Salon paintings. David took it upon himself to expand the horizontal length. Not only was this painting the wrong size but also it was not completed on time. Despite this, the *Oath of the Horatii* established David as the eminent painter of history.<sup>5</sup>

Though David would eventually hold office during the French Revolution he was not always a political person. In 1789, David was only an art student and president of his group of nonconformist artists. The following year he was invited to paint the mayor of Nantes. Later that year he took part in the Oath in the Tennis Court. He would later sketch his interpretation of this scene. This work earned him status as the “semi-official” painter of the Jacobins.<sup>6</sup> He already had many great salon works to display including, *Brutus*, *The Oath of the Horatii* and *Socrates*. During the revolution David did little painting, some drawing and some engraving. During the time the Jacobins were in power he painted *Death of Marat* and *LePeletier de Saint-Fargeau on his deathbed*. He was also the choreographer of the great events in the revolution such as the funeral for Marat.

---

<sup>1</sup> Una Birch, *Secret Societies: Illuminati, Freemasons and the French Revolution*, ed. James Wasserman (Lake Worth: Ibis Press, 2007), 212.

<sup>2</sup> Carlotta Lenzi, *Neoclassicism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2007), 212.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 213.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 213-214.

<sup>5</sup> Carlotta Lenzi, *Neoclassicism*. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2007) ,217

<sup>6</sup> Robert L. Herbert, *David: Brutus*(London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1972), 68

In 1791, David displayed a new kind of history painting. This history was actually quite recent. David's *Tennis Court Oath*, is on a canvas measuring twenty-three feet by thirty-three feet. It was a new *Oath of the Horatii*. The Jacobins had commissioned it.<sup>7</sup> In this work he portrays intelligent, enlightened men "swearing an oath not to disband, whatever the consequences to themselves, they embrace fraternally, they hold up their hands jubilantly and they clasp their hands in devout thanks."<sup>8</sup> Warren Roberts explains the energy displayed in the painting. There is an apparent gust of wind on the left, possibly meant to signify the winds of change.<sup>9</sup> There is a storm delivering a lightening bolt to Jean –Sylvain Bailly and electrifying the painting with energy and excitement.<sup>10</sup> This is balanced by the one delegate who refused to sign the oath, Martin Dauch from Castellane beseeched by a fellow delegate to join the group while another delegate who is trying to get the delegate to leave Dauch alone because it was a personal decision to enter into an oath.<sup>11</sup> By centering the action on his painting David allows the viewer to become part of the scene. Though Jean Louis Prieur's version of the Tennis Court Oath is more historically accurate, David's work was more a tool to promote unity. It is important to note that "oath" paintings were important. It was a return to the ancient mode of entering into a contract.<sup>12</sup> Roberts explains that the oath was, "would inaugurate a new age by restoring or regenerating the forms and ideals of the past."<sup>13</sup> The oath David portrays is an action of resolution in the tense political climate of 1789. The delegates' goal was to stand together and force the King to accept the change of the Estates General to the National Assembly. In a bit of irony, the center display of unity was not factual at all. The characters in this piece of fiction are Christophe-Antoine, dom Gerle, abbe' Gregoire and Rabaut Saint-Etienne. In April 1790, dom Gerle made a motion for declaring Catholicism the state religion.<sup>14</sup> This sparked debate, which deeply divided the group. Dom Gerle was not even present for the Tennis Court Oath. Abbe' Gregoire was a Jansenist and Tabaut Saint-Etienne was a Protestant, both were strongly opposed to making Catholicism the state religion.<sup>15</sup> This is hardly a group of men who would be shaking hands and embracing. Showing these men together was David's attempt to show the ultimate in unity but even in David's time it drew criticism. David also took a little creative license when he included the sans-culottes and Marat in the painting. Roberts believes that David made both inclusions because he realized their importance and the impact they would have on the Revolution.<sup>16</sup> David also includes women looking down from the galleries at the deputies who are swearing their oath. Though women were beginning to be more politically active and certainly were in the circles David moved in, their political rights would be significantly curtailed during the

---

<sup>7</sup> Crow, *Painters and Public Life*, 256.

<sup>8</sup> Warren Roberts, *Jacques Louis David and Jean Louis Prieur, Revolutionary Artists* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 228.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Starobinski, *The Emblems of Reason*, Translated by Barbara Bray. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1982), 102 quoted in Warren Roberts, *Jacques Louis David and Jean Louis Prieur, Revolutionary Artists* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000),229

<sup>13</sup> Roberts, *Jacques-Louis David and Jean-Louis Prieur*, 229.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 244.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 245.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 249.

Jacobin Reign.<sup>17</sup> The work later served as inspiration for two of David's students Francois Gerard and his painting *The French People demand Removal of the Tyrant in the Insurrection of 10 August* and Pierre-Etienne Le Sueur with his work, *Execution of the Tyrant, 21 January 1703*.

A preparatory drawing of the *Tennis Court Oath* is in the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Eva Lajer-Burcharth believes that this sketch clarifies the "Structure of the central masculinist assumption behind this project."<sup>18</sup> In it the male form is expressed as an ideal and the Third Estate delegates are "athletes of the Revolution...they are anatomically enhanced, their musculature amplified, their posture heroic...."<sup>19</sup> The open spaces between the groups on this sketch allow the viewer to appreciate the individual scenes of endearment. For example, in the left corner there is an elderly deputy being carried in on a chair. Right next to that scene is a sequence of three couples embracing. In the center of the sketch there are two groups flanking an incomplete President Bailly. In the right corner are the sketches of naked deputies including Dauch with his arms across his chest and head down in disagreement with the proceedings.

Donna Hunter believes that Jacques Louis David's painting of *LePeletier de Saint-Fargeau on his deathbed* was a very important work in the Jacobin controlled government of the French Revolution. LePeletier was assassinated the night before Louis XVI was supposed to be put to death.<sup>20</sup> Hunter believes that Jacques Louis David's painting of Le Peletier, which hung in the room where the delegates of the Convention met, may have determined the proceedings in that room.<sup>21</sup> The painting hung to the right of the speaker's platform. The painting itself was lost but an engraving of the work survives. It is believed the lost work of art measured approximately five and a half feet high by a little more than four feet wide.<sup>22</sup> Because of the presumed size of the painting, it is believed that the sword would have measured three feet long and LePeletier's body may have been portrayed as life size. There are many significant details in this painting; for example, the sword is hanging from a single strand of hair. The strand is identified as hair, Hunter points out, because of the distinct curl in it. Another striking feature is the hilt of the sword, which is shaped like the head of a cockerel the symbol of the French Monarchy.<sup>23</sup> The sword has an engraving "PARIS/ GA.../DU ROI" referencing Paris who assassinated LePeletier.<sup>24</sup> The sword has pierced a piece of paper on which was written, "Je vote la mort du tyran".<sup>25</sup> This is a reference to the sentencing of Louis XVI in 1793. This is not historically accurate because the votes were not cast on written ballots. David created this work, according to Hunter, as a form of Jacobin

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 255.

<sup>18</sup> Eva Lajer-Burcharth, *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David after the Terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 106.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Donna Hunter, "Swordplay: Jacques-Louis David's Painting of Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau on His Deathbed" in *Representing the French Revolution: Literature, Historiography, and Art*, ed. James A.W. Heffernan (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992), 175

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 169

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

propaganda.<sup>26</sup> Hunter points out that in various speeches during the Reign of Terror the sword was mentioned. Because so many speeches were made in front of David's painting of LePeletier de Saint-Fargeau on his deathbed, the references may have been about the sword in this painting in particular.<sup>27</sup> The sword became the tool of both terror and virtue. The flaw with Robespierre's common reference to swords is that "the sword in David's painting is precisely the sort of 'single unity' that combines disparate and contradictory sources."<sup>28</sup> The sword symbolism became a confusing political instrument since the sword was used to symbolize true patriotism in this time, evidenced by the speeches by Robespierre, thus making the sword in David's painting generate some discrepancy. David does not leave the weapon in the hands of the assassin that would be a contradiction to his Jacobin beliefs. Regardless of his political beliefs the fact of the matter was a sword used by a former royal bodyguard, ended the life of a Jacobin. The situation and the painting begged the question as to who was the real patriot. Robespierre recognized this flaw and addressed it but his response does not really separate the sword of the would-be despot from that of the would-be champion.

Hunter argues that the painting addresses all the characters in this time frame, not only LePeletier and his assassin but also Louis XVI and all those in the convention who votes for his execution. It also speaks for those who were against the execution and those who lived in fear of the revolution and the Terror to come.<sup>29</sup> What did the painting say to those who viewed it at this time? "I remind you (the regicides) of the risk you run, and I cause you to reflect on what it means to decapitate a King"; "I embolden you (all those the Jacobins would describe as Patriots) to prosecute counterrevolutionaries"; "I threaten you (any one the Jacobins would describe as counterrevolutionary) with similar fate"; "I legitimate your (Jacobin) use of the sword, i.e. the guillotine."<sup>30</sup> Hunter contends that LePeletier did not want to be king but he did wish to abolish monarchy, his and his fellow Jacobins called he king a tyrant.<sup>31</sup> The painting does not warn of the threat of the tyrant for he was executed, but warns of the servants of that tyrant, like the one that used the sword to murder LePeletier and by virtue of that act threatened the others who voted for the King's death.<sup>32</sup>

David was concluding his month as the president of the Jacobin Club when he learned of the assassination of Jean Paul Marat. David had been in Marat's company earlier in the week. Marat had received David while in his medicinal bath. When David was asked by the convention to paint Marat, David memorialized him in the way he had last seen him. Albert Boime asserts the Death of Marat "is a moving testimony to what can be achieved when an artist's political convictions are directly manifested in his work."<sup>33</sup> The upper part of the painting is left black to draw the viewer to Marat in his tub. David has Marat in the foreground. David took the liberty of painting Marat

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 171.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 181.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Revolution, 1750–1800* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 454.

without his grotesque skin disease.<sup>34</sup> He is lying in his tub with a white sheet reminiscent of Christ. Marat has a turban on his head; reminiscent of a halo, for Marat, the “Friend of the People” was a “Martyr to Liberty.”<sup>35</sup> The blood from his chest wound stains the bath water. The dagger is lying on the ground next to the tub. Marat’s hand is resting on the ground still holding the quill pen. In his other hand, Marat holds the note that Charlotte Corday used to gain access to Marat. On the wooden box that serves as Marat’s desk lay an assignat and note asking that the money be given to a widow with five children who lost her husband in defense of the country.<sup>36</sup> Like the Horatii and LePeletier, Marat is an example of a good, virtuous man who died for his beliefs.

According to Albert Boime, David was to become one of Napoleon’s favorite artists. In 1804 David would be awarded the title of First Painter to the Emperor.<sup>37</sup> Before such a title could be bestowed, David had to earn Napoleon’s favor. David’s first work for Napoleon was “propagandistic”.<sup>38</sup> The painting represents the transiting of Napoleon and his army through the pass of St. Bernard. In the work, David is foreshadowing the victory of Napoleon over the Austrians at Marengo. The painting was commissioned as part of a remodeling project at the Hotel des Invalides, a former veterans hospital, which was going to be converted into a monument for Napoleon’s army. In the painting, David has Napoleon as the central focus, on his horse, which is rearing up. Both the horse and Napoleon are pointing to the mountain they are climbing. In an act of not so subtle symbolism, David has Napoleon’s name carved on a boulder with the names of Hannibal and Charlemagne who also crossed through the pass. Boime believes that this was a way of saying, “that in the new era, brains and talent count for more than birth and privilege.”<sup>39</sup> Again David took artistic license with the work by putting Bonaparte at the head of the troops on a majestic horse. In reality Napoleon crossed with the rear guard on mule lead by a peasant.<sup>40</sup> David did try to capture some of the reality. In the middle of the painting, visible in the distance is the army pulling the cannon. David also reproduced Napoleon’s uniform in great detail. The painting was very important to promoting the image of the great leader that Napoleon wanted. Though the painting was far from being historically accurate it did much to promote Napoleon as a national hero.

Todd Porterfield called Jacque Louis David’s *Sacre* “an epoch-making picture”.<sup>41</sup> Porterfield asserts that the *Sacre* is the foundation for “reactionary modernism.”<sup>42</sup> The painting was first exhibited in 1808. According to Porterfield the painting succeeded in three ways: “in conveying a sense of access to the coronation event while blocking critical thinking; in disassembling the regime’s source of power; and in lulling spectators

---

<sup>34</sup> Robert Luehrs, *Early Modern Europe and the French Revolution: Audio Presentation 14: Descent into Terror*.

<sup>35</sup> Lenzi, *Neoclassicism*, 217.

<sup>36</sup> Luehrs, *Early Modern Europe and the French Revolution*.

<sup>37</sup> Albert Boime, *Art in the Age of Bonapartism, 1800-1815* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 39.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Todd Porterfield and Susan L. Siegfried, *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres, and David* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 115.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

into complacency and uselessness through a two-hundred-year-long game of identifying the scores of portraits in the painted scene.”<sup>43</sup> Plainly stated the painting amazes the viewer, drawing their mind away from the gravity of the situation, which was the revolution that had overthrown a monarchy, was coming full circle. David could have chosen the moment when Napoleon crowned himself, that event being the pinnacle; but perhaps David felt the shameless act of self-coronation might not have been as well received. Porterfield contends that it was David’s intention that the viewer would think of the self-coronation when viewing the *Sacre* without him actually depicting it.<sup>44</sup> For the detail of painting David did not rely on the ceremony alone, he also referenced “older, national prototypes, from medieval, Renaissance, and baroque paintings, prints, manuscripts and printed books.”<sup>45</sup> This process started a new trend, troubadour painting.<sup>46</sup> Troubadour was an alternative to neoclassicism. According to Porterfield it was a post-revolutionary response by the artists to get back to their national origins as opposed to universal or classical.<sup>47</sup> The *Sacre* is an example of the lack of activity typical of troubadour paintings, as Porterfield contends, “historic interiors are occupied, fabulous costumes are worn; ostensibly time-honored gestures are reenacted; and with barely a visible moment, a new regime is installed.”<sup>48</sup> This painting is dominated by Napoleon. In David’s usual improvisational spirit, he includes himself as one of the spectators as well as his former master, Vien. Another creative addition was including Letizia Bonaparte, Napoleon’s mother. Though Letizia Bonaparte was actually in Rome at the time of the ceremony, David gives her a place in the center of the festivities. David portrays Josephine as subordinate and Letizia as doting, just the qualities Napoleon wanted in the women in his life.<sup>49</sup>

David skillfully navigated the tumultuous times of the Revolution and portrayed major events of the time. David was successful at creating works of art that were also works of propaganda for those in power. He was not a painter of accurate history but captured emotions of the people and events and beautifully displayed the on canvas.

Monica K. Wendt, M.L.S (Hist.)  
Fort Hays State University, U.S.A.

Monica K. Wendt  
159 West 117<sup>th</sup> Street  
Cut Off, LA 70345

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>45</sup> Dorothy Johnson, Jacques-Louis David: Art in Metamorphosis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 194-196, quoted in Todd Porterfield and Susan L. Siegfried, *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres, and David* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 141.

<sup>46</sup> Porterfield, *Staging Empire*, 141.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 141.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>49</sup> Boime, *Art in the Age of Bonapartism*, 204-205.

**Bibliography**

- Birch, Una. *Secret Societies: Illuminati, Freemasons and the French Revolution*. ed. James Wasserman. Lake Worth: Ibis Press, 2007.
- Boime, Albert. *Art in the Age of Bonapartism, 1800-1815*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Boime, Albert. *Art in an Age of Revolution, 1750 –1800*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Crow, Thomas E. *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Paris*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.
- Herbert, Robert L. *David: Brutus*. London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1972.
- Hunter, Donna. "Swordplay: Jacques-Louis David's Painting of Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau on His Deathbed" in *Representing the French Revolution: Literature, Historiography, and Art*, ed. James A.W. Heffernan. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992.
- Johnson, Dorothy. *Jacques-Louis David: Art in Metamorphosis*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, 194-196, quoted in Porterfield, Todd and Siegfried, Susan L. *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres, and David*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.
- Lajer-Burcharth, Eva. *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David after the Terror*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.
- Lenzi, Carlotta. *Neoclassicism*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2007.
- Luehrs, Robert. *Early Modern Europe and the French Revolution: Audio Presentation 14: Descent into Terror*.
- Porterfield, Todd and Siegfried, Susan L. *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres, and David*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.
- Roberts, Warren. *Jacques Louis David and Jean Louis Prieur, Revolutionary Artists*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2000.
- Starobinski, Jean. *The Emblems of Reason*, Translated by Barbara Bray. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1982, 102 quoted in Roberts, Warren. *Jacques Louis David and Jean Louis Prieur, Revolutionary Artists*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2000.

\* \* \*