

**The Paintings of Jacques-Louis David:
Windows for Viewing the French Revolution of 1789
By Megan Casey**

Original research questions:

1. How are political issues relevant in the paintings of David?
2. In following David's painting of the era of the Revolution, are there any watershed moments that show up?
3. What was significant about the way art was consumed during the Revolution?

Brookner, Anita. Jacques-Louis David. London: Chatto & Windus, 1980.

Brookner follows Jacques-Louis David's life from the beginning of his career in 1757 until the end of this illustrious career in the the 19th century. She uses what correspondence and primary sources she could find to draw conclusions about "his character, behavior and loyalties," (90). She claims that David didn't change the course of revolutionary events, or affect the outcome in any way. However, she subsumes his endeavors in three categories: his attempts to overthrow the Academie, his work with the revolutionary festivals, and his partisanship of Marat and Robspierre.

This book is packed with information relating to David's life and artwork. But the aspect that really helps to answer my research questions regarding student-artist life are in the description of David's relationship with one of his students. Brookner goes into detail on the relationship between David and his students, especially Drouais. David is said to have compared the young artist to Raphael, Poussin and Le Sueur. Upon the death of Drouais, however, David spiritually goes on a downward spiral which Brookner says will determine his political future as an ardent republican. His initial contempt for the Academie about the showing of Drouais' work after his death will evolve to his eventual intense political involvement.

**Hunt, Lynn. "Hercules and the Radical Image in the French Revolution."
Representations 2 (1983): 95-117.**

In her article, Hunt captures the essence of the Radical Movement called the Terror by analyzing the symbols used for the statues and festivals of the period. She states that representation through symbols and festivals are always political issues, and by looking at them one gains a better understanding of the deputy-to-common-people relationship. Hunt traces the evolution of the Hercules figure from 1793 when Jacques-Louis David first utilizes the symbol, until the fall of the Radicals in 1794. By looking at the festival and its symbolic and allegorical figures, one can see David and the Deputies in action using the arts for effacing old ideas and keeping social control. This is

important for my research because Hunt casts light on the role of David in the shaping of ideas during the Terror.

Hunt quotes some of David's original texts, "Que cette image du peuple debout tient dans son autre main cette massue terrible dont les anciens armaient leur Hercule!" (99). David proposes Hercules as a powerful image of the people: a giant male figure in contrast to Marianne. Hunt goes on to explain the role of the Herculean figure in the execution of the festivals put on by David. There were several elaborate festivals during this period of the Revolution which were used to orchestrate the implementation of new symbols of society and to efface ideas from the Ancien Regime and to send allegorical messages through morality plays. In one festival on August 10, 1793, David symbolizes the four stages of the revolution: First the figure of nature on the Bastille, second an arch of triumph dedicated to the heroines of October 1789, third a statue of Liberty memorialized the execution of the king, and lastly a colossus representing the French people using its club to smash the hydra of federalism. Hunt explicates the symbol of Hercules and its use by David as a method of social control and persuasion.

Johnson, Dorothy. Jacques-Louis David: Art in Metamorphosis. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.

Instead of using the common biographical schema for analyzing David's oeuvre, Johnson divides the works themselves into sections which correspond to the social and political environment of their time. As the title of this book points out, she stresses the importance of David's aesthetic and intellectual development and metamorphosis. David's adoption of the modern, "metamorphic model" shattered the belief that an artist must have the unitary, unchanging style of the classically trained. She describes his style as "permanently revolutionary," (5). She also points out the interdisciplinary thread of the late Enlightenment: the studies of psychology, physiology, evolutionary biology, geology and many other "--ologies"

In answering my research questions, Johnson's book, especially in Chapter II, "Painting Words and Deeds: The 'Grands Hommes' and the Representation of Revolution," reiterates David's power as a peintre-philosophe. David had the ability to re-write the history of the revolution through his commemoration of events and people. It is through this commemoration that he asserts his power. Johnson portrays David as an "artiste engagé" in the monumentalization of Revolutionary events. Some of the martyrs he creates are Bara, Marat and Lepelletiere de St. Fargeau. He also discourses on the meaning of the "grand-homme." David is said to have been influenced by the *Encyclopedie's* version being one of moral virtue and noble motivation. He puts this definition into a revolutionary sense in his *Oath of the Tennis Court* where he applies the sculptural rules of portraying greatness (gestures and body language) to the subject of "the people." It is David's rejection of the Academie's rules on subject and theme that leads David to denounce the school because of its liaison to the Ancien Regime's structures and mores.

Kelder, Diane. Official Painting and Philosophic Art, 1789-1799. New York: Garland, 1976.

Kelder, in this work, endeavors to explain the moral and social force of French painting, especially Jacques-Louis David's. She explains the painters of this period as being philosophers in search for solutions to the problems of mankind. Art was thus used as a force for furthering the dogma of the revolution. When she writes on Neoclassicism she states that it is a cult of "great men," while this also coincides with the cult of Reason, as shown in the Festival of Reason and of the Supreme Being.

This approach helps to answer my research questions because she addresses the moral usefulness of art as an instrument in projecting the revolutionary ideas. She writes that David is, "Projecting the concept of personal and public excellence into a powerful and moving political document," (52). She discusses in great detail the painting, *Brutus with Lictors Bearing the Bodies of His Sons*. The work is seen as a preparatory, philosophical phase in the revolutionary movement. The Neoclassic style dramatizes a cult of "great men." This "cult" also coincides with that of Reason, as shown in the Festival of Reason and of the Supreme Being because it is secular. The morality and civic virtue, as seen in *Brutus* with the sacrifice of his sons in the name of his country, epitomizes the new philosophic spirit in art as the shaper of a new order founded on a secular ideal.

Paulson, Ronald. Representations of Revolution (1789-1820). New Haven: Yale UP, 1983.

Paulson deals closely with the neoclassical style and its complicated "language" as a reflection of the French Revolution of 1789. Within this framework of rationality, geometry, and historical figures, Paulson finds the manifest and latent content in Jacques-Louis David's works. Paulson also describes Jacques-Louis David's relationship with the Académie, and his art students.

This book is important for my study of Jacques-Louis David's work during the Revolution of 1789 because it gives complex readings of the subject matter of his paintings. Paulson also describes David's relationship with the Académie as a microcosm of the revolution itself because of his problems with the Académie. *The Oath of Horatii* is one painting that Paulson looks at as a precursor to the Revolution because of its latent content. The painting is set as Horatii takes the oath to go to battle. We should know of the battle of the son's of Horatii and the Curatii family (their cousins) but this we do not see. It is the latent subject of the painting. Furthermore, Paulson aligns the stories of Lucius Junius Brutus with that of Horatii. He takes this even further to connect with Marcus Brutus, the assassin of Julius Caesar. This all relates back, finally, to the Revolution and the fall of the Ancien Regime. Paulson does similar readings with *Brutus with Lictors*, and other paintings as well. All in all, this book has expanded my knowledge of the neoclassic stories as they are told in reflection of the French Revolution.

Roberts, Warren. Jacques-Louis David and John-Louis Prieur Revolutionary Artists. New York: New York UP, 2000.

Roberts begins his book by defining the importance of “the people” in the Revolution of 1789 as one of the driving forces against the Old Regime. Roberts illustrates that the painting of the period acts not only as a reflection of the political climate, but as a means of social control. Roberts examines each image from the Revolutionary Period as, “if they were documents, evidence used by the historian to understand images of the past, and places them in context,” (XV). Jacques-Louis David’s paintings, and Roger’s analysis of the images and festivals, provide a guide for reflecting on the storm-tossed socio-political climate of this period.

This book helps to answer my research questions by shedding light on the political importance of David’s work. First, in his detailed analysis of *The Tennis Court Oath*, one can see the cohesive, unifying atmosphere between the deputies of the Revolution as they swear not to disband. I am now aware of the “Roussoist” discourse that takes place in this painting and also in the *Oath of Horatii*, great men captured on canvas in the midst of heroic acts. Secondly, Roberts informs the reader about the relations and interconnectedness of the artists and leaders of the time. Cheniers, (*Jeu de Pomme*) and David, for example, greatly influenced each other’s work. They also collaborated in the creations of the revolutionary festivals. David worked so closely with Robespierre, that after his fall, David was imprisoned. Finally, I have seen how David’s work (especially the portraits of Marat, and Bara) creates epitaphs for revolutionary martyrs.

Starobinski, Jean. 1789 Les emblems de la raison. Paris : Flammarion, 1973.

Starobinski stresses in this work the importance of art in the revolutionary era surrounding 1789. The immense diffusion of imagery as propaganda and counter-propaganda abounds and shows up in the art of the period. He states that the works of art during this time cannot stand alone, but that they are only results from the period. “L’art et l’événement s’éclairient l’un par l’autre” (7), states Starobinski in the first chapter of the book. In order to have a good understanding of the period, one can look at the arts and the traces of revolution therein.

The chapter in which I find my research questions best answered is “Le Serment: David.” Here the neoclassical style is explicated through David’s work. Furthermore, David’s influence on the art of the Revolution is also explained. David played an integral role in the Revolution and Starobinski proves this in this chapter. The neoclassic style that David uses is the restoration of republican principals of ancient times. Secondly, the oath or “serment” is an important aspect of David’s work during this time especially *The Oath of Horatii* and the *Tennis Court Oath*. The grand themes of defending “la patrie” at the dawn of a new Republic are again relevant. Sacrifice, victory, duty, and military might are all themes that Starobinski details in David’s work. Also, the theatrical nature of the neoclassic style helps to lay out contrasting sentiments. Starobinski ends the chapter on David with this, “Dans la création théâtrale comme dans la peinture, la Révolution a voulu que l’imagination fut contrôlée et guidée par la raison, et la raison trouvait son appui dans des formes qu’elle redécouvrait en deca des déformations, des

alanguissements, des éparpillements, des amenuisements, des parodies prodigues par l'esprit du rococo. L'on voulait vivre, en toute conscience, une seconde Renaissance, mieux éclairée par l'histoire, » (95). The reshaping of ideas during this time was indeed comparable to a sort of Renaissance. This book, with its profound explication of art during the Revolutionary period aids my own interpretation of the paintings of Dav

Project Overview: The original research project was formulated to uncover salient facts regarding Jacques-Louis David's involvement in politics and society during the French Revolution of 1789. Art as a vector for viewing a society is a relevant and important area of study. David is by far the most well-known painter of this period. His artistry flourished during this tumultuous period; thus, he is the artist on which this research project is based. In sum, the basic facets of the endeavored research project deal with the political arena as seen in the paintings and the social climate as seen through the production and consumption of art.

10 Through this endeavor, the importance of academic research is reiterated. Discovering that each scholar has different points of view regarding their subject is one of the greatest results of this project. Not only has the process of research been one of academic growth, but the subject matter itself is much clearer after this extensive process.

I have gained a much more nuanced perspective of Jacques-Louis David's experience in the Revolution. First of all, authors such as Kelder, Hunt and Warren and Johnson and Starobinski all appeal to the David's ability to commemorate and memorialize important figures, dates, events and symbols for his republican stance. Through the detailed interpretation of several paintings, specifically *The Oath of Horatii*, *Brutus with Lictors Bearing the Bodies of His Sons* and *The Tennis Court Oath*, these

20 authors illustrate the importance and usefulness of David's art in creating a new market for revolutionary ideas.

Next, I have gained a better knowledge of the neoclassical style and its utility for David. As Paulson points out, this style is one of reason, antiquity, and rationality but is also laced with rich allusions to the ancient world. It is in his unraveling of the meaningful stories of antiquity that I can better relate David's oeuvres to the Revolution of 1789. As Kelder, Starobinski, and Johnson point out, the neoclassical style is one that commemorates "grands hommes" and these men, as depicted by David, are the models of the ideal republicans and patriots.

30 Thirdly, all of the authors (Brookner and Johnson especially) describe David's rupture with the Académie and David's studio conduct. This illumination of studio and student-artist's life is important in my research because it is evidence of David's rupture with the Ancien Regime and its rules and regulations regarding society and regarding art. David's dismissal of the Academie was a powerful moment in his involvement artistically and politically in the Revolution.

Lastly, the most salient point that I take away from this research is David's genius in effacing the Ancien Regime's structure and creating a new social mentality through festivals and plastic arts. His creation of a new, secular dogma around Enlightenment values of reason through his art and symbology is truly incredible. He epitomizes the new philosophic spirit in art as the shaper of a new order founded on this secular ideal.

40 Through the extensive reading and analysis on the subject of Jacques-Louis David and his involvement in the French revolution, I have achieved a more nuanced perspective on the way art is utilized, produced and consumed in the social and political

arena. This nuanced perspective is achieved through the appraisal of several scholars with different attitudes on the broad spectrum of possibilities for this subject.

[Note: required length for Final Projects in Fall 2006 was 35-50 full lines]