Jacques-Louis David

The incidents of the Revolution demanded a contemporary and official; documentary art. David commemorated the famous Tennis Court Oath, at which the members of the Assembly resolved not to disperse until they had adopted a Constitution for France. In his Serment du Jeu de Paume of 1791, David only got as far as a sketch of the painting. The commemoration of a contemporary event in the dress of the day was a novelty. Lebrun, and others, had commemorated the acts of Louis XIV but in an allegorical fashion. David followed Benjamin West’s innovations and drew the Deputies in contemporary dress. This is important. David, having to choose between antiquity and realism, opts for realism. The influence of realism acting within the neo-classical style and eventually transforming it altogether is a stylistic factor which, thenceforward must be watched.

The Tennis Court Oath Drawings helps us to gain a glimpse of David’s method. He made free preliminary drawings from life to establish stance and gesture realistically. Then he made a large finished drawing: this one has been preserved at Versailles. Note that he draws them all nude before he draws their garb. And note too that he paints up the faces quite closely in monochrome to establish the features before he paints the bodies or background or glazes the colour over later. This is the typical method of a neo-classical painting which David established in Paris through his enormous school in the Louvre.

The passions released by the Revolution created its martyrs: and David, painter to the Revolution, was expected to celebrate them. The first was Lepeletier de Saint Fargeau*, murdered at the beginning 93 by a counter revolutionary. The painting is today only known through an engraving. He lies back in bed, the sward wound showing: the pose reminiscent of a Pieta or Deposition Figure of Christ. Compare Michelangelo’s Pieta for example. Passion could thus be transferred from sacred to secular icon by this process of borrowing attitudes. David used a pose simpler to the LePeletier pose when he painted his most famous Martyr picture, his Death of Marat*. But here tradition unites with documentary realism. David in the true spirit of classic tragedy does not show the act: but the silent moment after the act: the Kairos—the still point in the moving tragedy. He had chosen the same still moment in his depiction of the Oath of the Horatii. David knew Marat well: indeed, he had visited him the day before his death on the instruction of the Jacobin club to which both belonged; and he portrayed him as he remembered him; in his bath, because of his incurable skin disease. ‘I thought’ wrote David ‘that it would be good to depict him in the attitude in which I had discovered him’. The relaxed head and limp hand remind us even more strongly of Michelangelo’s slain Christ. This is David’s most memorable conjunction of classicism and realism: the whole reduced to its bare elements: the blank grey wall: not even a Doric arcade. A box for a writing desk, the knife, instrument of assassination, Charlotte Corday’s letter seeking an interview.
The strength of shadow and form has much to do with the influence of the early baroque art of Caravaggio and his followers.

The third martyr is the unfinished *Bara*. Bara was a young drummer boy who took part in the war in the Vendee and was shot down by Legitimists. Here David has taken his reductionist principle even further and painted the boy naked and alone as he is dying on the ground: curly hair, rather effeminate hips: Friedlander has noted that it bears a resemblance to Poussin’s picture of *Narcissus at the Spring*. David considered the Marat and the LePeletier his best works; he painted them, his pupil Decluse wrote ‘as if in a trance’.

David’s school in the Louvre is a fascinating study in itself. They consisted of drop-outs with a talent for drawing, or promising young men from the provinces which the revolutionary committees were sending up from country towns with minimum financial support. At first, like David himself, they were enthusiasts for the Revolution with utopian ideals for a glorious republican future presided over by the goddess of Reason. But the ceaseless executions of the Terror of 1793 and the emergence of highly centralised bureaucracy in both the state, under Robespierre and his successors, and in art under their mast David, caused them to have second thoughts. Some began to turn to religion for consolation: they grew long beards in opposition to David’s clean shaven generation; and called themselves the Primitives, or Thinkers or Bearded Ones (Les Primitifs, Les Penseur, Les Barbus). They dressed themselves in long gowns like Hebrew prophets. They were in fact the first of the modern Bohemians: alienates from provincial or suburban families, from revolutionary optimism and, most importantly, occupying a most precarious situation in the economy. Throughout France the first days of the Revolution had released a great iconoclastic frenzy: religious sculpture and paintings through the country in churches and monasteries were sought out and destroyed. David, in his new position, did much to save what was felt to be the better work, much was brought to the Louvre as a national collection. But the future of the young artist in the new secular society was insecure: during the Revolution much of the time of David and his pupils as taken up in making pageants and sets to the numerous festivals to the goddess of Reason, and Revolutionary fete days. The Barbus turned away increasingly from revolutionary realism, criticised their master’s work because it was too Roman, and sought themselves to go back further to the original Greek. Little is known about the Barbus: only through David’s pupil Decluse, and an interesting early Romantic from Franch-Comte, Charles Nodier [No-day]. Their leader was a certain Maurice Quai. Quai dressed himself up in a Greek mantle and grew a long beard. Nodier described him as the most beautiful and lovable human being he had ever seen. They went to Homer, Ossian and the Bible. So at this time did William Blake in England, and they sought deliverance in discovering the most ancient traditions.
It is generally believed that this group of students were able to influence David’s own style: which after the height of the Terror began to turn from Roman toward a Greek manner. This is to be seen in his painting of the *Sabine Women Ending the Battle between Romans and Sabines*.

If we compare the Horatii with the Sabines, I think you will see, though the distinction is perhaps subtle, the difference between David’s Roman and his Greek Style. In the Sabines the use of depth and shadow is less emphatic. The significant contour as in a Greek vase. The warriors were now portrayed in the nude and the colour was considerably heightened: it was from this painting that the style of Ingres, David’s most famous pupil takes its point of departure. Nevertheless it was not primitive enough for the Barbus, who criticised t for not being sufficiently Greek or Etruscan (the Etruscans, note, at this time, were believed to be earlier than the Greeks).

David, however, did not follow up and develop this new Greek mode. The times gave him a new hero to celebrate: Napoleon. When the young general, only 21 but famous, came to visit David and his Louvre sit-ins, David said in ecstasy ‘Viola mon héros’: and painted his hero devotedly through all the stages of his career; though Napoleon was always so busy that the longest sitting he ever got was this brief oil sketch from nature. But as he painted him as a young commander leading his troops across the Alps at the St Bernard Pass* on a rearing charger. The exploits of the French cavalry under Napoleon made the equestrian rider a continuing feature of French painting and sculpture until about 1850. Note again the centralising flash of the red cloak against the grey background. The obvious parallel with Hannibal is made explicit by words cut on the foreground rock *Bonaparte, Hannibal, Carolus Magnus*. David in the first place had wanted to depict Napoleon actually on the battle field, with sword in hand. Napoleon pointed out that that was not the way wars were won: he wanted something that would give the troops confidence and asked that he be shown of calm bearing on a highly spirited horse; and this David has done, with the General pointing onward and upward.

David was made premier peintre to Napoleon; and painted a number of huge ceremonial paintings: perhaps the most famous is *Le Sacre* or Napoleon Crowning Josephine. He found these commissions took an enormous time because he had to make careful studies of each participant, which he did scrupulously. Tom Roberts had the same difficulty when he accepted the commission to paint the opening of the first Australian Commonwealth Parliament.

David’s other large Napoleonic history piece is his *Distribution of the Eagles*, painted in 1810; in which Napoleon is seen with his Battalion commanders in the courtyard of Fontainebleau Palace. In his own work during the first ten years of the nineteenth
century from 1800-1814 he worked on a huge work, *Leonidas at Thermopylae*. The patriotic deference to one’s native land, *pro patria mori*, is of course the ruling sentiment of the Napoleonic era, and the *Leonidas* seeks to arouse this. It is a good example of the Greek manner which his pupils were seeking, and which he had begun with the *Sabine Women*. It has an overstudied and overworked look which is not surprising considering the time the artists worked on it.

Today it is difficult for most of us to arouse enthusiasm over these great history pieces: David’s reputation has survived more for his exceptional abilities as a portrait painter. Here the sense of realism which is present in all his approach to art: his determination to draw everything from life is given a free reign and released from its classical trappings, and created an important tradition continued by his students, especially Ingres.

Here is his portrait of Francois Devienne, Flautist 1792. Smooth, firm, splendid drawing, an informal ease. Madame Chalgrin, painted a year later in 1793. Note the simplicity of pose: the pale background against which the figure is silhouetted almost in contour. See also Whistler.

The painting skill of these portraits is not readily revealed in these pictures. He handled backgrounds with delicacy, scumbling over warm grounds, akin to Gainsborough: but David’s portraits usually have a much firmer and compelling presence than Gainsborough’s.

The portrait of Napoleon’s Empress Josephine painted in 1805 shows the change which had taken place in 10 years. This is the Greek style which came in with the establishment of the Directory and the end of the years of Terror. Short sleeves, very high waistline, drawn immediately beneath the breast, low cut, but flowing to the feet. Not that the empress is painted enjoying the delights of nature. It has been noted that it was only when the insecurities and excesses of the Revolution were over with, the establishment of the Directory, that fashion began to imitate those Greek fashions which the philosophers had so long extolled before. Directory fashion is best seen in the well-known portraits of Madame Recamier of 1800 and of the Empress Josephine of 1805.
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