

Changing Times, Changing Allegiances: Jacques-Louis David

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One of the most controversial painters of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Jacques-Louis David is known for his numerous political paintings.¹ After successfully establishing a career as a Salon painter with his grandiose history paintings, David was swept up by the French Revolution. David, a fervent believer in radical republican politics, instilled popular republican idealism in his revolutionary paintings and worked hand-in-hand with the revolution's foremost leaders, including Robespierre. Although a champion of republican politics during the Revolution, David refused to advertise his political opinions following the end of Robespierre's Reign of Terror.² Turning his attention to artistic success and reestablishing his reputation, David would later become court painter to France's next monarch: Napoleon Bonaparte.³ Serving as artist and propagandist for times as opposite in ideals as the French Revolution and Napoleon's regime, David was an artist ultimately concerned with patronage, protection, and reputation.

In the years leading up to the French Revolution, David received much critical acclaim for his paintings in the Salon. It was his painting *The Oath of the Horatii* that laid the grounds for Neoclassicism, an artistic reaction against the popular Rococo style, known for its flowery decoration and light color. In *The Oath of the Horatii*, David's use of austere lines that meet at the central focal point of the crossed swords and his use of darker, moodier colors create an atmosphere and style completely unique from the Rococo style. The excavation of the Roman ruins at Herculaneum and Pompeii in 1748—the same year David was born—had sparked the public's interest in themes from antiquity. David embraced the heroic themes of the Romans and strove to achieve accuracy in costume and setting. *The Oath of the Horatii* achieved the “quiet and noble grandeur” of art from antiquity, as stated by art historian of the time Johann Joachim Winckelmann.⁴

Although an important painting artistically, *The Oath of the Horatii* is also significant politically. Exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1785, David's masterpiece was seen as representative of the importance of loyalty.⁵ The painting depicts the moment when the Horatii brothers pledge allegiance to Rome, giving up their lives to fight the Curiatii brothers from the enemy state of Alba.⁶ When the painting was exhibited, political unrest was developing between the aristocracy and the lower classes of France. The painting, later to become one of the defining images of the French Revolution, was viewed as a call to the republican values of ancient Rome. By depicting an image of self-sacrifice in the name of the republic, David was using events from ancient history to represent the political turmoil in France and suggesting the republican ideal of loyalty to state. *The Oath of the Horatii* caused a sensation and reaped large profits for David.⁷ David fervently believed in the radical republicanism that he portrayed in these pre-revolutionary paintings, and the majority of public opinion agreed with his politics, reaping enormous benefits for the artist.⁸ Although David would always sympathize with republican politics,⁹ his painting would tend to side with the opinions that promised the most profits and protection.

David's other paintings in the late 1780s were also images of self-sacrifice in the name of nationalism and loyalty to the state. *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons to be Buried*, exhibited in 1789, is another painting that was one of the Revolution's most defining paintings. Another image of self-sacrifice in the name of the state, the painting tells the story of Brutus. After leading the war to overthrow the Roman monarchy and establish a republic, Brutus is forced to condemn his own sons to death for conspiring to reinstate the monarchy. Forced to make a decision between his love for his sons and his love of state, Brutus chooses his country and republic.¹⁰ The portrait shows the moment the bodies of Brutus' sons are returned

for burial.¹¹ A controversial painting, *Brutus* captured the pre-revolutionary atmosphere of France and helped seal David's reputation as a master painter.¹²

The republican politics in David's pre-revolutionary paintings made him a champion for the republic, and he became a leading figure in Robespierre's Reign of Terror. Elected as a Deputy of the National Convention and a member of the Committee of National Security, David was a close ally with Robespierre and aided in the suffering of those who "failed to fit perfectly the republican mold."¹³ Safe and secure next to Robespierre, David completed very few paintings during the Terror, instead focusing on propaganda and revitalizing the French art community.¹⁴ As the "art dictator" of France, David used his painting to establish new standards by which to judge art. David abolished the Royal Academy and the old art regime with it, claiming that reason and philosophy should be the guiding force behind great art. David expounded to the National Convention in 1793,

The artist must be a philosopher. Socrates the skilled sculptor, Jean-Jacques [Rousseau] the good musician, and the immortal Poussin, tracing on the canvas the sublime lessons of philosophy, are so many proofs that an artistic genius should have no other guide except the torch of reason.¹⁵

David completed only two major works during the Terror: *Death of Lepeletier de Saint-Fargeau* and *The Death of Marat*. The former of these is lost, but *The Death of Marat* remains and is considered by modern art historians to be among David's greatest works. The picture portrays the final moments of revolutionary leader Jean-Paul Marat. Plagued by a skin condition, Marat would sit in a soothing bath and write lists of the names of people he suspected of being enemies to the new republic of France. He was assassinated by Charlotte Corday when

she sneaked into his room in disguise and stabbed him.¹⁶ David turned Marat into a martyr, painting him as a hero, the victim of a heinous murder. Marat still holds his quill and list of suspects even as he collapses, working until he takes his last breath.¹⁷ Called the “pietà of the Revolution,” *The Death of Marat* was inspired by David’s republican ideals.

In 1794, Robespierre was overthrown, and the new Executive Directory established. David, having been a close ally of Robespierre, was arrested by the National Convention and held in prison for several months, just barely escaping the guillotine. While in prison, David worked on a self-portrait, unusual in that he shows his brushes and paints in the work, as if to emphasize that he was just a painter.¹⁸ David, in a letter written to the National Convention from prison, denied any criminal intent on his part, claiming that his nationalism and participation in the Revolution were the result of being misguided by Robespierre. David wrote,

For three months I have been languishing under the weight of a suspicion made all the more troubling because its source is none other than the excess of my love of country and of liberty. If the false virtues of Robespierre stirred my patriotism, the error that misled me was less the effect of the personal feelings that attached me to him than the result of the universal esteem in which I saw that he was always held.¹⁹

After just barely escaping the guillotine following the Reign of Terror, David avoided public politics and would not openly acknowledge his republican views. Popular opinion once again favored the Royalists, and David, sensing danger, sought to reclaim *Marat* and *Le Peletier*, which had been given to the National Convention in 1793. Perhaps David, by reclaiming these pictures, was trying to hide his radical political past from the public.²⁰ He still harbored republican sentiments, however, known from David’s subscription to the journal of Gracchus

Babeuf, one of the Executive Directory's harshest republican critics. These republican beliefs would lead David to later adore the young republican general, Napoleon Bonaparte.²¹

David and Napoleon met in 1797, just after Napoleon returned to Paris following his brilliant victories in Italy against the Austrians. David admired the young general for his rise to power through merit and achievement rather than through class and privilege.²² Both David and Napoleon had worked with Robespierre during the Reign of Terror. Robespierre had praised Napoleon's "transcendent merit," and in 1794, he was appointed commandant of the artillery in the French Army of Italy. Following Robespierre's downfall, Napoleon—like David—was briefly imprisoned on charges of treason, considered by the National Convention to be Robespierre's protégé.²³ In the years after the Reign of Terror, both David and Napoleon were individuals with broken reputations seeking to find identities in the changing political atmosphere. Such similarities encouraged David's admiration for the young general. After meeting Napoleon, David allegedly exclaimed to his students,

Oh, my friends, what a fine head! It is pure, it is grand, it is as beautiful as the ancients!...Here is a man to whom altars would have been consecrated in the classic times!...Bonaparte is my hero!²⁴

Napoleon, through his brilliant military victories and rapid rise to power through hard work and talent, appeared to embody the French Revolution and republican ideals. David immediately began work on a portrait of Napoleon, dignified and confident with his head held high, but the portrait was never finished.²⁵

David's brief period of Napoleon-inspired republicanism was short-lived, however. In 1799, Napoleon—convinced that a military dictatorship was the only way to prevent the return

of France's monarchy—staged a coup d'état against the Directory, establishing the Consulate and appointing himself as First Consul.²⁶ This “republican disaster” shook David's confidence in his hero Napoleon, yet David chose not to abandon his military hero and kept his republican values to himself. In 1801, when one of David's students was put on trial for conspiring to assassinate Napoleon, David remained silent as his student was condemned to the guillotine.²⁷ David's silence was probably in part his attempt to erase his republican past and fear in opposing Napoleon, who was known to be intolerant of opposition.²⁸

In the years following the Reign of Terror, David was quick to regain his reputation as one of France's leading artists by painting in the shadow of public opinion, working quietly as a portraitist for wealthy patrons. In 1795, David was elected a leader in the new Institut national des Sciences et des Arts, a new cultural organization that taught and encouraged the arts. Art historian Philippe Bordes writes, “It is easy to conclude that after the Revolution, he painted for money.”²⁹ David had begun sketching *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* during his imprisonment in 1794. When his finished painting was exhibited in Paris Salon of 1799, he once again took the public by storm. The painting tells the story of the conflict that arose between the Romans and the Sabines. Under Romulus, the Romans had abducted the daughter of Tatius, the leader of the Sabine people, and other Sabine women. The Sabines confronted the Romans in battle, but the Sabine women threw themselves and their children between the warring nations to bring peace and end the conflict.³⁰ The painting shows the moment the Sabine women throw themselves between the warring leaders.³¹ David writes of his painting,

Romulus holds the javelin in the air, ready to throw it against Tatius. The cavalry general puts his sword back into its sheath. Soldiers raise high their helmets in sign of peace.

Feelings of conjugal, paternal, and fraternal love spread among the ranks of both armies.

Soon the Romans and the Sabines embrace each other and form only one people.³²

Although still a scene of conflict, the picture suggests a peaceful resolution. Critic Pierre Chaussard suggests David was sending a message of reconciliation between the then-popular Royalist party and the remnants of the radical republicans. The public, however, interpreted David's painting to be suggesting reconciliation following Napoleon's coup d'état two months earlier, contrary to David's original intentions.³³

Napoleon was well aware of the value of great art as propaganda, and saw in David's magnificent history paintings a grand opportunity for glorification.³⁴ David not only saw in Napoleon a chance to rebuild his tarnished reputation, but to also achieve his dream of becoming First Painter to the King. David hoped to achieve the same level of influence and importance as Louis XIV's court painter Le Brun.³⁵ He also drew inspiration from his cousin, Boucher, First Painter to Louis XV. David wrote in his unfinished autobiography,

Nothing but painting appealed to him [David], and that the wealth, esteem, and renown of Boucher, First Painter of the King, was enough to justify his choice, even despite the protests of his aunt, who kept objecting that his plans would be reasonable only if he could rise to the level of his cousin [Boucher].³⁶

In 1801, David painted his first piece of Napoleonic propaganda, *Napoleon Crossing Mount St. Bernard*, a painting commissioned by the King of Spain. David insisted that Napoleon pose for the painting, but the First Consul replied, "It is not an exact duplication of features, a small mole on the nose, that constitutes a likeness... The one essential thing is to recognize their genius."³⁷ *Napoleon Crossing Mount St. Bernard* is one of the most regal and iconic Napoleonic

images, and David took Napoleon's words to heart to ensure that it be so. Napoleon is shown oversized on a rearing horse. Inscribed in the rocks at the bottom left of the painting are the names Bonaparte, Hannibal, and Karolus Magnus (Charlemagne)³⁸, the only three generals in history to cross the Alps. David was associating Napoleon with two of the greatest military minds, linking him to the great traditions of antiquity and distancing Napoleon from the contemporary politics of France. In the two years that followed, David would make four more copies of *Napoleon Crossing Mount St. Bernard*, one for himself and three for Napoleon.³⁹

By 1801, David was a government painter under the First Consulate, and in 1804, he was appointed First Painter under the Empire. Napoleon, well aware of David's radical republican past, chose David—still the leading painter of the day—to paint his image, a reference to the ideals of the French Revolution. David, forever attempting to erase his political past, accepted the offer. Napoleon would frequently consult David on artistic matters in the early years of his rule, receiving advice on propaganda and decoration. David was also enlisted to capture official imperial moments, most notably the Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine.⁴⁰

David's enormous 20 by 30 feet *Emperor Napoleon Crowns the Empress Josephine at Notre Dame*, also known as *Le Sacre*, is a prime example of Napoleonic propaganda. As art historian Todd Porterfield explains, *Le Sacre* succeeds in three ways: by providing the public with the illusion of participation in the coronation, by shifting the focus away from Napoleon crowning himself and to the crowning of Josephine, and by the distracting challenge of trying to identify the one hundred and fifty plus figures in the painting.⁴¹ The view of the painting is from off to the side in the choir stands of the Cathedral, providing an excellent view of Napoleon and Josephine, who are painted life-size. The painting is done in such a way that it appears as though the viewer is part of the image itself. Upon seeing the painting, Napoleon exclaimed, "How all

the objects are in relief! That is very beautiful! What truth! This is not a painting; one walks into this picture!”⁴² At the Coronation, Napoleon took the crown from the Pope and placed it on his own head, superseding the power of the Pope and crowning himself Emperor. While doing so, he clutched his sword to his chest, as if to suggest, as David wrote, that “he who knew how to conquer the Crown will know as well how to defend it.”⁴³ For his painting, David instead painted Napoleon crowning Josephine, shifting focus from the aggressive and controversial move of self-coronation. Additionally, David altered the pose of the Pope to make his raised hand look like a blessing. The numerous individuals in the picture also detract attention away from the Coronation. David even included individuals in the painting who were not present at the ceremony but that he felt should be included in the painting, such as prominent writers and artists of the time, David’s teacher Vien, and Napoleon’s mother. A grand achievement of both art and propaganda, David’s *Sacre* made favorable impressions on both Napoleon and the public. When displayed at the Louvre in 1808, a “multitude of the curious” was observed viewing the painting, a “crowd [that] renews itself constantly.”⁴⁴

David’s final Napoleonic painting, *The Emperor Napoleon at His Study in the Tuileries*, was not an official portrait.⁴⁵ By 1811, David’s title of First Painter was a name only. The Emperor was beginning to prefer a younger circle of painters, and many of David’s royal commissions were canceled and one rejected. Despite the court’s waning interest in him, David still admired Napoleon and in 1815 would pledge his allegiance to Napoleon, whose popularity was waning.⁴⁶ Commissioned by a Scottish lord, *The Emperor Napoleon at His Study in the Tuileries* is more realistic in its depiction of Napoleon. Because David was not bound under the requirements of court painting, the painting depicts a weary and older Napoleon, heavier and worn.⁴⁷ Dressed in official uniform, he rises to greet his troops after spending the night working

on legal documentation. The clock to the right shows the time 4:13 a.m., and the candle on the desk is burned low. David claimed that this portrait of Napoleon captured “that air of benevolence, composure and penetration that never forsakes him.”⁴⁸

As a government painter and one of the leading artists in France, David enjoyed the benefits of security and profit. He was paid exorbitantly high amounts for many of his paintings, though he usually asked more than he received. For *Le Sacre* David received the astounding sum of 100,000 francs. For his painting, *The Distribution of the Eagles*, another Napoleonic painting the same size as *Le Sacre*, David received 65,000 francs. The King of Spain paid David 24,000 francs for his *Napoleon Crossing Mount St. Bernard*, and he received 15,000 francs for each of his three copies for Napoleon, though he asked for a higher price. For his official portraits, David also received high sums: 10,000 francs for his portrait of Pope Pius VII and 12,000 for two copies. The royal government of France paid him 100,000 francs for his *Intervention of the Sabine Women* in 1819 during his exile to Belgium following Napoleon’s downfall. The highest paid artist of the time, David was wealthy enough to afford a countryside home in his later years.⁴⁹ Just as he had enjoyed artistic security and protection under the reign of Robespierre, David enjoyed security and patronage under Napoleon.

Although painted only three years apart, the two self-portraits of Jacques-Louis David represent these radically different times in David’s life. The first self-portrait was painted in 1791, just after David had established himself as a leader in Neoclassicism at the Salons. The Bastille had been stormed two years earlier, and David, a fervent believer in radical republican politics, championed the demise of the French monarchy. David had also become leader and spokesperson for a group of artists seeking to overthrow the elite, government-associated Royal Academy. Coming from humble artistic origins, David believed that merit and talent should be

awarded over privileged birth and class. In 1791, David was successful and powerful in the art community. His republican views and status as an artist would later gain David a position of leadership in Robespierre's Reign of Terror.⁵⁰ In his first self-portrait, David looks out blankly, his clothes tidy, and the portrait suggests little of his artistic success.⁵¹ Painted in 1791, however, his first self-portrait shows David at his most successful and profitable time yet, a leader in the art and political worlds.⁵²

Painted only three years later, David's second self-portrait was done from prison. In 1794, Robespierre's tyrannical rule came under the suspicion of the National Convention, and he, along with the other leaders of the Reign of Terror were arrested by the Convention and executed. David, as an ally of Robespierre, was also arrested and only narrowly escaped the guillotine. With a ruined reputation to rebuild, David renounced his political association with Robespierre. The second portrait, more unpolished and rough, shows David as first an artist, clutching his paints and brushes, perhaps as an attempt to draw attention away from his political involvement in the Revolution. Art historian Philippe Bordes writes of David's self-portrait,

David's *Self-Portrait*...is usually interpreted as a move to reaffirm his status as practicing painter. The dirty shades of earthy pigment...aptly characterize the dreary atmosphere of the prison. Less expected is the deliberate show of the instruments of the painter's craft...In the *Self-Portrait*, the association of an unaffected accoutrement and a determined pose suggests that David strides a fine line between a position of humility and one of pride. He shows himself ready to compete once again in the artistic arena.⁵³

David, after his negative association with Robespierre, was likely trying to establish his independence as only an artist without a political agenda. Never again would David openly

acknowledge his republican views, even while serving as First Painter for Napoleon.⁵⁴ The two self-portraits are from the two main artistic periods in David's life: his confident and successful younger years leading up to 1794, and his tumultuous post-revolutionary years where he constantly sought identity, patronage, and protection.

The real David was an artist always seeking an identity in the changing political tides of eighteenth and early nineteenth century France. Even in his exile, David clung to the identity of First Painter that Napoleon had given him. In exile in Belgium with the Bonaparte family, he kept close ties with them, painting portraits of Napoleon's nieces and exchanging letters. In a letter to the Bonapartes written the year before his death, David wrote,

I shall never forget the signs of esteem and affection by which you and your family have always honored me. Please be assured...of the profound respect with which I am honored to be your humble servant. David, former First Painter of Emperor Napoleon I and Commander of the Legion of Honor.⁵⁵

Ultimately concerned with his reputation and safety, David was able to swallow the republican beliefs that he embraced during the French Revolution and become First Painter to Napoleon under the Empire. David was an artist whose passions and artistic subjects changed with the changing political tides of France, moving from radical republicanism of the French Revolution to hero-worshipping France's last Emperor until the days of his death.

¹ The Getty Museum. *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile*, Last modified 24 April 2005, accessed 15 Dec. 2012. <<http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/david/index.html>>.

² Philippe Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 1-2.

³ Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David*, 20.

⁴ "Jacques-Louis David," Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2012, accessed 15 Dec. 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/152567/Jacques-Louis-David>.

⁵ "Jacques-Louis David," Encyclopædia Britannica.

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- ⁶ Jacques-Louis David, "The Oath of the Horatii," 1785.
- ⁷ "Jacques-Louis David," Encyclopædia Britannica.
- ⁸ Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David*, 13.
- ⁹ Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David*, 5.
- ¹⁰ "Jacques-Louis David," Encyclopædia Britannica.
- ¹¹ Jacques-Louis David, "The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons to Be Buried," 1789.
- ¹² "Jacques-Louis David," Encyclopædia Britannica.
- ¹³ Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David*, 1.
- ¹⁴ Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David*, 2.
- ¹⁵ "Jacques-Louis David," Encyclopædia Britannica.
- ¹⁶ "Jacques-Louis David," Encyclopædia Britannica.
- ¹⁷ Jacques-Louis David, "The Death of Marat," 1793.
- ¹⁸ Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David*, 1-3.
- ¹⁹ The Getty Museum, "David Defends Himself to the National Convention," in *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile*, accessed 15 Dec. 2012.
- ²⁰ Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David*, 9-10
- ²¹ Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David*, 5.
- ²² "Jacques-Louis David," Encyclopædia Britannica.
- ²³ "Napoleon I," Encyclopædia Britannica.
- ²⁴ "Introduction" in *David and Napoleonic Painting from The McCall Collection of Modern Art* (New York: The McCall Publishing Company, 1970), 4.
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- ³² Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David*, 6.
- ³³ Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David*, 6.
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- ³⁷ "Introduction" in *David and Napoleonic Painting*, 2.
- ³⁸ Jacques-Louis David, "Napoleon Crossing Mount St. Bernard," 1800.
- ³⁹ The Getty Museum, "Napoleon Crossing the Alps at Grand-Saint-Bernard," in *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile*, accessed Dec. 15 2012.
- ⁴⁰ The Getty Museum, "What was David's Relationship to Napoleon?" in *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile*, accessed Dec. 15 2012.
- ⁴¹ Todd Porterfield, *Staging an Empire: Napoleon, Ingres, and David* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 122.
- ⁴² Todd Porterfield, *Staging an Empire*, 122.
- ⁴³ Porterfield, *Staging an Empire*, 129.
- ⁴⁴ Porterfield, *Staging an Empire*, 124.
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⁴⁹ The Getty Museum, "How Much did David Charge for His Paintings?" in *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile*, accessed Dec. 15 2012.

⁵⁰ The Getty Museum, "Timeline" in *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile*, accessed Dec. 15 2012.

⁵¹ Jacques-Louis David, "Self-Portrait," 1791.

⁵² "Jacques-Louis David," Encyclopædia Britannica.

⁵³ Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David*, 2.

⁵⁴ Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David*, 5.

⁵⁵ The Getty Museum, "What was David's Relationship to Napoleon?" in *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile*, accessed Dec. 15 2012.

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