

## The Life and Works of Jacques-Louis David

“In the arts the way in which an idea is rendered, and the manner in which it is expressed, is much more important than the idea itself.”- Jacques Louis David

Jacques Louis David was a man of many roles. He was a revolutionary, a prisoner, a courtier, and most of all a painter. David was considered a master of the neoclassical style and the corporal aesthetic throughout his lifetime. During the height of the French Revolution he was known for his powerful, allegorical paintings, which were considered visual manifestos for the time. He endured imprisonment, desertion, and rejection only to end up as the famous first painter of Napoleon Bonaparte. Despite his monumental, artistic achievements, David's life ended in exile at age seventy-seven. However, he did not die in anonymity and his legacy is still upheld today in the studies of art students the world round.

### **Early Life and Art Instruction**

Born to parents of the bourgeois class in Paris 1748, David grew up in the cushy lifestyle he would later learn to revile. His father was killed in a duel when David was nine years old and legacy of this loss can be seen in many of his paintings (Jordan, pg. 1). In his late teens, David became convinced that he wanted to be an artist. He began visiting famous master-of-the-rococo-style and distant relative, Francois Boucher for instruction in art. The rococo style of art incorporated delicate colors and lines along with images from myths, most commonly those of baby angels and beautiful young women. Although Boucher never accepted David as a formal pupil, he still had an influence on his early work. However, this influence quickly disappeared as David and other young artists began rejecting the teaching of the French masters and the Royal Academy of Art. The Royal Academy of Art focused on the theories of Le Brun who, “insisted that the facial expression was the principle

means of representing the passions,” (Johnson, pg 14). However the new theory of physiognomy, which was adopted by David, focused on the expression of the whole body, not just the face. This new “aesthetic revolution” showed meaning and emotion through posture, poses, lighting and gesture of the hands, feet, and other extremities (Johnson, pg. 14). David applied this idea to his paintings for the remainder of his career and incorporated it in his teachings. A student of David’s, Paillot de Montabert wrote,

“Gesture, considered as one means of expression, must be recognized at the same time as being the most powerful of all. This is easy to prove. Neither physiognomy, which resides in the facial features, neither color nor chiaroscuro, neither attributes nor the site, etc. is able to produce this great power and moving force which is result of pantomime alone,” (Johnson, pg. 69).

During his time as a student in Paris, David worked under the artist Joseph Vein (Roberts, pg. 12). Vein encouraged David to submit his work to the Prix de Rome, a competition sponsored by the Royal Academy (Roberts pg. 12). The winner of the competition was awarded a year-long scholarship to the art school in Rome. David entered the competition three times before he won in 1774 with his painting *The Illness of Antiochus* (Jordan, pg. 1).

David spent five years in Rome studying the work of Raphael, the Carracci, Caravaggio, and Poussin in order to refine the techniques of Neoclassicism (Jordan, pg. 1). The Neoclassic style was developed during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and used images and philosophies from ancient Roman and Greek mythology and legend. This style appealed greatly to the Age of the Enlightenment because it related to Roman morals of government and civil life (Chilvers, pg. 1). In Rome, David not only studied painting, but also focused on sculpture and drawing. These studies did not come easy to David and he experienced many personal and artistic crises throughout. His difficulties did not go unnoticed and his mentor,

Vein is documented as saying (in reference to David), “We are dealing with a man who is open, honest, but at the same time excitable enough to need careful handling,” (Roberts, pg. 12). Perhaps the biggest of these crises occurred while David struggled to complete his academie, a collection of paintings he was required to do in order to graduate from the academy. This body of work includes *Count Potocki*, *Saint Roch Interceding the Plague-Stricken*, *Saint Jerome*, and *Belisarius Receiving Alms*. This work was received well at the Salon in Paris in 1781, and this positive response fueled David’s desire to enter the ranks of the French Masters. However, this would not come easy as David soon lost the support of the Academy and its teachers.

### **The Revolution**

By the completion of *The Oath of Horatii* in 1784, David had gained independence and confidence as one of France’s most popular and critically acclaimed painters. The next few years in David’s life were spent making new friends with Enlightenment thinkers and Republicans. Some of these new acquaintances included Robespierre, Lavoisier, and Marat. During this time, David completed many allegorical paintings like the *Horatii*. These include *Death of Socrates* (1787) and *Brutus and the Lictors* (1789).

In *Death of Socrates*, David uses the legend of Socrates’ death to convey a call to reason amongst the French citizens (Johnson, pg. 67-68). According to legend, Socrates was given the choice to live out the remainder of his life in exile or face execution. Socrates chose to take his own life by drinking hemlock. The painting was done in the neoclassic style depicting images (Socrates) from Greek and Roman legend. Most importantly, this painting is a perfect example of how David used neoclassical ideas (that of self-sacrifice for the betterment of the state) and images to say something about modern day issues.

In *Brutus and the Lictors*, Brutus is shown grieving with his family as his the dead bodies of his two sons are brought to him. Brutus had his sons put to death for conspiring to bring down the Roman democracy and place themselves in power as the new Roman monarchs. This painting was seen as a Republican manifesto and conveyed ideas of reason and sacrifice (Roberts, pg. 35). *Brutus* is an excellent example of how David used the corporal aesthetic to convey emotion and expression. Brutus' wife is shown in panic with her arm stretched out, palm open toward the corpses of her sons. She struggles to hold up her two grieving daughters who are collapsing in despair. Brutus is shown facing away from the bodies shrouded in shadow. His hand is raised toward hi head as if he is reflecting on what has just happened (Johnson, pg. 68)At the time of *Brutus*'s unveiling (which was received by Thomas Jefferson) David had joined the Republican Convention and voted for the execution of King Louis the XVI and his wife, Marie Antoinette.

David continued to paint portraits of his friends and revolutionaries for the next four years. During this time, David was appointed deputy of the Republican Convention and organized many grand marches, parties, and funeral. Among the most famous of the paintings done during this time include two of the three paintings that made up David's "martyr series". The "martyr series" is one of



a few series that David did that are not considered neoclassical because the depict people ad places from modern times. The second of these paintings *The Death of Marat* (1794, oil) is probably David's most famous. This painting depicts the leader of the Republican Convention drawing his last breath as he dies in his bathtub. Marat was assassinated by Charlotte Corday, a woman who had become disenchanted with the Revolution and

the increasingly violent turn it was taking (Roberts, pg. 80). Marat suffered from a skin condition that forced him to spend hours at a time soaking in a bathtub. It was here that Corday stabbed Marat to

death. In *Death of Marat*, David chose to show Marat facing the audience. The bath water is stained bright red from blood, which is contrasted by the pallid green skin of his body and the deep green shroud covering the tub (Roberts, pg. 82). Because of his skin condition, Marat was not an attractive man. However, David chose to paint Marat as youthful and beautiful, with smooth, clear skin. This was done to emphasize Marat as a figure of admiration and power (Lajer-Burchard, pg. 46). In this way, David mixes the realistic with the idealistic, a technique he continued to use during his term as Napoleon's First Painter.

The last of David's martyr paintings, *Death of Bara*, depicted the death of a young Revolutionary, an event that shocked the country and fueled even more violence. Bara was a thirteen-year old boy who was denied admittance into the rebel army because of his young age. He snuck into one unit anyways and was killed by the French army. The Convention commissioned this piece to show Bara dressed in full revolutionary colors, holding two hoses and gallantly fighting French soldiers. However, David wanted to capture the innocence and spirit of the young boy. Bara is shown lying on the ground, face tilted up in rapture. He is naked and looks androgynous with his hips widened and his long, curly hair falling around his face.

### **The End of the Revolution and Jail**

Shortly after the completion of Martyr series, David's good friend and fellow revolutionary Robespierre was captured and executed along with many of his followers. David's life was spared because he was out of town at the time of Robespierre capture, however he spent a year in jail. During his imprisonment, David and his fellow prisoners were unsure of their fate. It was during this time that David painted his self-portrait. In it, he depicts himself holding a pallot and paint brushes, dressed in simple clothing. This was David's attempt to show himself as a painter, rather than a revolutionary.

### **The Napoleon Years**

After David's release from prison, which was negotiated by his wife, who promised to divorce him, David caught the eye of young General Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon commissioned David to complete a portrait of him in 1797. This marked the beginning of David's long and tumultuous relationship with Napoleon Bonaparte. Three years later, after Napoleon declared himself Emperor, David began serving as Napoleon's first painter. He completed five portraits of Napoleon during his service to the famous Emperor. The most famous of these paintings is *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* completed in 1800. This painting depicts Napoleon rearing up on a strong and beautiful stallion as he leads his troops into victory across the Alps. Napoleon is dressed in elaborate military costume and draped in medals. The event that is depicted in this painting most likely did not include this monumental of a scene, but David chose to mix idealism with historical events to create an image of a

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

“grande homme”, or great man.

*Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1800)

Throughout his career as first painter, David often butted heads with Napoleon. Napoleon refused to recognize commissions and paid David multiple times because he was displeased with the pompous way David chose to depict Napoleon in many of his paintings. The *Coronation of Napoleon* was the source of much debate between David and the Emperor and David was forced to produce multiple drafts of the painting. However, David's last portrait of Napoleon, *Napoleon at His Study* (1812), seemed to settle well with the Emperor. This painting shows Napoleon in an intellectual setting (his study) surrounded by the work he was in the middle of. Little reference is given to

Napoleon's position as Emperor and he is shown decorated with few medals (Roberts, pg. 173). The apparent receding hairline and wrinkles show Napoleon's age, but also emphasize his role as a wise and humble leader. Napoleon was very pleased with the end result and has been documented saying to David, "You have understood me, my dear David; in the night I am occupied with the happiness of my subjects and during the day I work for their glory," (Roberts, pg. 172). This was the last painting David would do for Napoleon and after its completion, David left Napoleon's service.

### **In Exile**

After the fall of Napoleon's empire. David was sent into exile as an enemy of France for his involvement in violent activities of the Revolution years before. David moved to Brussels with his wife, with whom he was reunited during his term as first painter. He continued to paint and teach, but his actions were watched by the police until the day he died. In the years before his death, David stopped painting portraits and focused mostly on neoclassical historical painting. He explored sexuality, eroticism, and the human form through the stories of Amore and Psyche, Paris and Helen, Achilles, and Venus and Mars.

In his last painting, *Mars Disarmed by Venus*, which was completed a year before his death in 1825, David conveys his farewell to painting. In this painting, the powerful hero Mars is shown handing his sword over to the three Graces and being crowned with flowers by Venus. A figure of masculinity, Mars, succumbs to the power of a figure of femininity, Venus. This action is allegorical to David putting down his paintbrush and ending his career as a painter (Roberts, pg. 206).

Jacques Louis David was and still is an important figure in the art world. Through his paintings we can learn how events in the past can be depicted to emphasize ideas and emotions of the present and how the ideal, realistic and historical can be mixed to produce one great message.