

The Road from Rome to Paris: The Birth of a Modern Neoclassicism

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DURING THE 1770S DAVID WAS A STUDENT IN PARIS and Rome. He began his studies at the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris and became terribly frustrated by the constraints of academic education, which he believed were designed to suppress artistic genius and originality, particularly his own. This frustration led him to rebel against the despotic institutions of the ancien régime during the Revolution, including the Royal Academy itself, which he helped to abolish in 1793. In 1774, after he won the coveted Prix de Rome on his third attempt, David was privileged to spend the second half of the decade in the Eternal City, where he beheld with his own eyes the original masterpieces of a hallowed past, works that he had previously experienced through drawings and prints. As has already been pointed out, David was simply overwhelmed by what he saw—not only by the ancient treasures but also by the works of famous Italian artists from the Renaissance and baroque periods.

When he left Rome after several years of arduous study and returned to Paris, David faced the challenge of establishing his career amid stiff competition. He intensely pursued his artistic objectives and achieved great success within a very short time. In the early 1780s he was seen as a promising painter and was warily watched by leading artists and art authorities in Paris with a mixture of hope and some jealousy, because his talent appeared well suited to new governmental policies toward art. By the end of the 1780s, David was considered to be the father of the neoclassical school, the most influential instructor at the Academy, and perhaps the most important painter of France and even Europe.

This chapter will describe this remarkable road to success and show that such a career was possible because France was undergoing cultural transformations that would lead the country from the ancien régime to the Age of Revolution. The term “revolutionary” can also be used to describe David’s radical break with prevailing traditions of composition and style as he forged a new mode of making art.

Even though David had been traumatized by his repeated failure to win the Prix de Rome in the early 1770s and consequently loathed the Academy’s system of training and established practices, he was also aware that he could only achieve his own goals by first succeeding within this system. Because of his desire to establish his career in Paris as quickly as possible, he turned down the offer to stay an additional year in Rome. He produced work in Paris in the early 1780s designed primarily to ensure his entrance into the Academy and to secure his place and reputation within it. We must keep in mind that the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture was considered to be the cultural branch of the French monarchy and therefore held in very high esteem. But David was not to be intimidated by the stature of the Academy. From the very beginning of his official career David conducted himself with boisterous self-confidence and confronted his “superiors” unflinchingly on equal ground, be it Jean-Baptiste Pierre, the director of the Academy, whom David greatly mistrusted, or Count d’Angiviller, whose title of *surintendant des bâtiments* placed him at the top of the entire French art establishment. On his own initiative David altered the subjects of paintings commissioned by the government, changed the size of paintings that had been ordered, and then demanded higher prices based on the enlarged canvases and altered meanings. He did this with the highly successful *Oath of the Horatii*, which established his reputation as the greatest artist in Europe, as well as with the more controversial *Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, paintings we will discuss later on in this chapter. He was thus following the principle that success usually comes to those who demand as much as possible for their work from the very start and refuse to compromise.

David’s first major commissioned painting was completed before he even returned to Paris. This is *St. Roch Interceding for the Plague-Stricken*, found today in the Musée des beaux-arts of Marseilles. The signature “*L. David faciebat/Romae. 1780*” reveals that this work was entirely planned and executed by the artist

while he was still in Rome (plate 2).¹ As was common practice for history painting in the eighteenth century, this 2.60 m × 1.95 m painting was commissioned and conceived for a specific purpose. The municipal public health agency in Marseilles wanted an altarpiece for the chapel in its hospital and approached the director of the French Academy in Rome, Joseph-Marie Vien, who turned the commission over to his student David. The painting was finished in early May 1780, but before it was delivered to Marseilles, which would not take place until March 1782 despite the protests of its patron, the work was exhibited in Paris due to the express wish of d'Angivillers. In 1781, it was shown in the Salon, the place reserved for exhibition of works by members of the Academy and by far the most important public exhibition space for French painters of the ancien régime. Much to David's satisfaction, this is where his work was displayed for the first time to a large audience. The painting was well received overall, except for a few critical remarks aimed indirectly at its innovations. As an introduction to David's work of the 1780s, we will now take a close look at this painting, for it embodies many elements characteristic of his art.

It was hardly a coincidence that the public health agency of Marseilles ordered a painting honoring Saint Roch, the saint invoked against the plague. As late as the nineteenth century, Marseilles had been the European entranceway for the plague, which depopulated Europe several times during the early modern period. The particularly ferocious epidemic that ravaged the port city in southern France in 1720–22, in which tens of thousands of people died, was to be commemorated specifically by this commissioned painting.

Saint Roch was particularly appropriate for the iconography of such a work. Since the late Middle Ages he had been worshiped as the ultimate intercessor in times of plague. Prayers to him were believed to be the best way to escape the consequences of the disease. On his return journey from a pilgrimage to Italy, where legend says he cared for those sick with the plague and consequently became ill himself, he appears to have been healed with the miraculous help of benevolent angels. In southern France Saint Roch is also very popular because he came from the city of Montpellier, not far from Marseilles.

In David's painting, we see Saint Roch in the middle right praying to the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child in the upper left. The sick and dying are on the ground beneath him. Discernible by his walking stick, his pilgrimage robes, the boil on his upper thigh, and the dog that supplied him with food during his solitude, Saint Roch serves as the pictorial intermediary between heaven and earth. He implores Mary with upwardly outstretched, folded hands, and she gestures to him

below with a movement of her hands. The two spheres are kept distinct from one another through fields of color. Whereas Mary is clothed in luminous blue and red robes, the lower half of the painting is dominated by darker, brown tones, thus evoking the suffering on earth caused by the epidemic. This suffering is evinced not only by the sick in the foreground, but also by the scene at the middle right, where some victims of the plague are being carted away while others vegetate in a lifeless stupor.

David established the uniqueness of this painting, notable for its remarkably intense expressivity, by the victims in the foreground whom Saint Roch seeks to help with his prayers and above all by the unique compositional features which highlight this expressivity. Critics at the time were impressed by the foreground figures, particularly by the man wearing the turban. David was so proud of this figure that decades later during his exile in Brussels he copied the head in a slightly altered form. David's friend Pierre Chaussard, the critic and man of letters who wrote extensively about the art of David and his school, stated in 1806: "This figure is one of the most beautiful to have come from the brush of M. David, and perhaps from that of one of the great masters of the French school."² With a facial expression that is considered by this same critic to be "stoic" yet simultaneously seems devoid of all hope, this figure turns to the viewer almost reproachfully to lament his misery. In this dark mood, he appears both to allude to the "titanic" spirit of an artist like Michelangelo as well as to herald the coming of romanticism. Without any difficulty, one could imagine him on Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819, fig. 49), one of the best examples of the French school of romanticism. This figure is accompanied by only slightly less expressive companions in misery, one of whom wails in pain toward the heavens and wrings his hands despairingly, while another clutches his wrist and knee and reaches forward in horror.

In addition to a very expressive characterization of gesture and physiognomy, we see another element in David's painting that helps to further enhance the psychological intensity of the scene. This innovation becomes clear if we compare David's painting with an earlier work from the Saint Roch iconography, namely, the altarpiece by Peter Paul Rubens for the Church of Saint Martin in Alôst (fig. 20). Rubens has placed Saint Roch on a small bridge where the saint is half-standing, half-kneeling in prayerful devotion to Christ, who appears to be showing Saint Roch both the angel-borne message reading "Eris in peste patronus" and the sick below the saint who need his care. Several plague victims, some with outstretched arms, implore the heavenly scene above them for mercy.



Figure 20. Rubens, *St. Roch Interceding for the Plague-Stricken*, c. 1623–26. Alôst, St. Martin's Church. Oil on canvas, 412 × 258 cm. Copyright © IRPA-KIK, Brussels.

If we compare the plague victims in these two works we see that Rubens pictures the sick as hopeful, whereas David depicts them in complete despair. In Rubens's painting the plague-stricken see in Saint Roch and Christ their saviors, and their pleas to the heavenly hosts have a purpose. The sick portrayed in David's work, however, seem lost and doomed. One of them stares at the viewer in silent reproach yet clearly does not expect to find help; another endeavors a frantic, forwardly inclined movement, the purpose of which is unclear; and even the third, whose appeal is directed upward to where the Virgin Mary sits on her throne of clouds, gestures aimlessly with closed eyes. The impact on the viewer of these two representations is altogether different. Because the figures in David's work are tightly grouped together yet so psychologically isolated from one another, and because their efforts are so

aimless and their pleas unheeded, they have a disturbing effect on us—or at least more so than Rubens's plague victims, whose heavenly salvation is manifested before our eyes through the close compositional interlocking of the two spheres.

In portraying the relationship between Saint Roch and the Virgin Mary, David emphasizes the disruption of their interaction rather than their communication with one another. Their hands seem to be on the verge of touching, yet they gesture clearly past one another. It is as if two figures, situated parallel to the canvas, are placed behind one another and separated by a glass partition. Mary gestures downward, but not—as the compositional arrangement would lead one to expect—to Saint Roch, but behind him to the scene in the middle ground. In his *St. Roch* Rubens's uses the characteristically baroque compositional element of diagonals found frequently in his art as a device to connect zones and figures organically, in order to establish a connection from Christ to the saint, then down the steps to the beseeching sick and from them through their various visual angles back to the intercessor and his lord. David, however, eschews these baroque compositional conventions. In his painting the diagonal lines that connect the group of ailing souls, Saint Roch, and Mary, do not link the figures into a narrative unity. David has freed the diagonals from this expected, conventional function. The new autonomy of line that he achieves is a radical innovation and produces disturbing effects.

The disruption or lack of connection between the heavenly and earthly realms suggests that David's Saint Roch may be understood as an expression of eighteenth-century religious reforms. One thinks immediately of Jansenism in France. Adopting many elements of Augustinian-inspired teachings of salvation that emerged during the Reformation, Jansenism strove to separate the secular from the spiritual world, a separation that played a much less important role among reformers within the Catholic Church. In concise terms, the result of this distinction was that the worldly and transcendental domains became significantly independent of one another, leading, paradoxically, to secularization in many places, since the temporal world appeared to be no longer permeated by the spiritual. We can interpret the disjunction of the spheres in David's *St. Roch* as an aesthetic equivalent of Jansenism. We know of David's familiarity with the Jansenists through his interest in the affairs of the Parlement de Paris, where Jansenist philosophy was widely accepted.³ The development of David's own art seems to support this interpretation, since from this point on he virtually gave up painting religious themes from Christianity and the lives of the saints and instead turned to the secular heroes of ancient history for his examples of virtue.

The principal exception is the commissioned painting *Christ on the Cross* of 1783.

One form of secular morality that is illustrated by a hero of the late Roman era became the subject of David's next major work, the *Belisarius Begging Alms*, which the painter began in late 1780 and planned to use as a preliminary entry submission for acceptance into the Academy (plate 3).⁴ Measuring 2.88 m × 3.21 m, this painting is larger than the altarpiece for Marseilles and larger than would have been necessary for the purpose of gaining acceptance into the Academy. This has led many to believe that the work was conceived from the start as a piece to be offered to the king for purchase. Today, it can be found in the Musée des beaux-arts in Lille.

The *Belisarius* raises a question that leads us to one of the most intensely debated, most hotly contested issues in the field of David studies—namely, how should we interpret the artist's prerevolutionary political commitments?⁵ Was David a neoclassicist, who was solely interested in advancing his own career and who perceived himself as an artist devoted to the service of his king, or did David soon become politically critical of the monarchy and express this politicization in his art? Many art historians, such as Thomas Crow, go so far as to speak of a "prerevolutionary radicalism" and consider David to be a radical, enlightened, intellectual artist, whose involvement later in the Revolution was the logical conclusion to the development he had been undergoing (see David Carrier's chapter). According to Crow and others, the first clearly identifiable sign of this is indeed the painting *Belisarius*, which did actually play an important role in the enlightened culture of France.⁶ Who was Belisarius? As a general serving the Byzantine emperor Justinian I, he succeeded not only in stabilizing the shaky empire, but in enlarging it. Procopius, who wrote an account of the life of Belisarius, describes him as a remarkably noble man, loyal to his ruler, but who nevertheless fell from grace. Justinian became convinced he was a conspirator, which caused his downfall.

Many eighteenth-century artists, especially in France, depicted Belisarius during this period of disgrace in his life. In David's painting, a blind Belisarius, accompanied by a child, begs a woman for alms, which she is about to give him. In the background, a former soldier who had served Belisarius throws up his hands in shock at having just recognized his former commander. The most interesting aspect of this composition is that it is arranged perpendicular to the viewer's line of vision, so that the viewer—unlike in baroque compositions—does not feel addressed directly, but experiences the scene more like an intruding observer. The viewer's angle is mirrored in the figure

of the shocked soldier, who is also an observer of the scene between Belisarius and the almsgiver.⁷

As mentioned above, the story of Belisarius, well known in France during the Enlightenment, was a theme used not only in painting but also in literature. In 1767 the Enlightenment author Jean-François Marmontel vehemently advocated for justice and tolerance in his famous novel, which presents Belisarius as the victim of monarchical and especially aristocratic intrigue. It seems fair enough to assume that David's painting also includes a similarly critical perspective, especially when we take into account that he decided on the theme at about the time that Voltaire was championing and eventually securing the rehabilitation of the French general Lally-Tollendal, who had also been charged with treason. Like Belisarius for Byzantium, Lally-Tollendal had fought bravely and victoriously for France.

At first, it may seem hard to believe that David would seek recognition from the king, his potential patron, and from the Academy by choosing such a politically sensitive topic. However, we do know that the policy of Louis XVI toward the arts had indeed incorporated elements of the Enlightenment and that the aforementioned Count d'Angiviller initiated political programs nationwide that were thoroughly influenced by these ideas. Therefore, it is also conceivable that the theme of the suffering protagonist Belisarius was meant as a plea for a just regime, and the painting was not aimed against the existing system but sought to affirm its liberality. The issue cannot be settled here; it will arise again and even more intensely in connection with two other works, *The Oath of the Horatii* and *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, which will be discussed shortly. First, however, mention should be made of the painting *Andromache Mourning Hector*, which David completed in 1783, for this work again raises the important aesthetic questions posed in connection with *St. Roch*.

David used this 2.75 m × 2.03 m painting, which today hangs in the Louvre, in his successful bid for final acceptance into the Academy (plate 4).⁸ It depicts the corpse of Hector adorned with a laurel crown and stretched out on a magnificent bed before his mourning widow, Andromache, and their son, Astyanax, who attempts to console his mother. The monumental architectural setting indicates that this is a scene from antiquity. Hector, the Trojan leader in the war against the Greeks, had been slain by Achilles in revenge for the death of his friend Patroclus, whom Hector had killed in battle. This is the story Homer recounts in the *Iliad*, and this is the same story the painter represents with the help of narrative accessories such as the text excerpted from Homer on the candelabra at the right and the relief

on the bed frame. David uses compositional devices to enhance the gloom of the scene. Similar to the separation of figures that we have seen in the *St. Roch*, the area surrounding the corpse and that enveloping the grieving widow do not intersect, despite their close spatial proximity. Critics noted the apparent separation and isolation of the figures. The lack of a bodily embrace makes each of the figures appear more isolated. The hands illustrate this best: the hand of Andromache, which could grasp her husband's limp arm, merely gestures helplessly. This scene bears little resemblance to the one described by Homer, in which the wife flings her arms around the head of her dead husband. The expression on Andromache's face was greatly distorted by emotion in a study done for this work. In the painting, however, her expression is reserved and lacks pathos, thereby allowing viewers to project upon her whatever feelings they choose. This made *Andromache* particularly moving to critics of the time.⁹

The painting that was to make the artist famous throughout all of Europe and that crowds actually thronged to see when it was exhibited first in Rome and then in Paris, the work that still today is considered to be the epitome of neoclassical painting, is *The Oath of the Horatii* of 1784–85 (plate 5). The extreme sobriety of this painting, set with an architectural background unimaginable without knowledge of the then recently discovered Temple of Paestum, mirrors the bold spirit of a highly moralistic perception of antiquity that flourished in the late eighteenth century. David, now the recognized head of the neoclassical school, had delivered the definitive response to what was understood as the effete spirit of aristocratic rococo. The work was executed in Rome in 1784 during David's second stay in the Eternal City, a stay he had indeed intended to devote entirely to this project. However, the idea to depict this subject had come to him much earlier. The first sketches date back as far as 1781. So far as we know, the artist then postponed this project in order to devote himself to painting *Andromache* and thereby to gain acceptance into the Academy.¹⁰

The scene depicted in the *Horatii* is an episode from the early history of Rome. The choice of this subject is revelatory, since generally the early Roman period was thought to be characterized by a heroic spirit of patriotism. In a Doric atrium the viewer is presented with two groups. One group consists of four men, of which the three younger ones are positioned across from an older man. The other group consists of three women and two children. The men are standing and swearing an oath with their arms raised over a bundle of swords; the women are sitting and sadly consoling one another or the children. What has happened? From the history of Rome told to us by Livy, we recognize the

story of the Romans and the inhabitants of the city Alba Longa. The ongoing conflict between these two people over territory in the fifth century BC is to be settled once and for all through a contest between three young men from each side. Horatius and his brothers are selected to fight for the Romans; Curiatius and his brothers have been chosen to fight for Alba. What is tragic about these choices is that the two families lived at the border between their lands, had intermarried, and now were being turned into enemies for political reasons. Horatius was married to one of the Curiatian women, and his sister was engaged to Curiatius. Regardless of how the conflict ends, these families will endure personal suffering, as the women situated on the right of the painting are meant to indicate.

There has been much speculation about the literary source the artist used as inspiration for this scene.¹¹ Earlier sketches indicate that David contemplated another moment of this story. In one, the artist depicts Horatius's murder of his sister, who had reproached him after he returned victorious with the news of her husband's death. In another sketch, he represents the father of Horatius, who defended his son's act of murdering his own sister as a patriotic deed and thus saved him from execution (fig. 21).¹² Although d'Angiviller apparently commissioned David to paint the latter subject, David changed this on his own initiative and painted the oath scene instead, a scene he might have known from Rollins's widely read *Histoire romaine* from the eighteenth century or from Noverre's play of 1777.¹³ Speculation notwithstanding, the oath scene had the advantage that it was associated iconographically with patriotic deeds; Johann Heinrich Füsseli's *Rütli Oath* in the Zürich city hall had appeared just a few years before. In addition, David's choice of subject allowed him to juxtapose two widely divergent narrative elements, thereby continuing his use of an artistic strategy we have witnessed in each of the works mentioned above. On one side there are the men, who stand like pillars rammed into the earth, with muscles of steel and inspired by a corps d'esprit. This reminds us of a famous passage in Rousseau's educational novel *Emile*: "A citizen of Rome was neither Caius nor Lucius; he was a Roman. He even loved the country exclusive of himself."¹⁴ On the other side we see the women, each defined by a delicately flowing outline, who are melancholic and devoid of the almost unbearable fervor found in the men. In an anonymous critique during the year the painting was on exhibit, we find this general assessment:

It is much more agreeable to the eye, as it is to the hand, to peruse an object in its entirety without encountering asperities, gaps that interrupt, that repel, when its sensibility



Figure 21. David, *Horatius Defending His Son*, 1784. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Drawing, 0.216 × 0.289 m. Copyright © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

wants to be led softly and to glide effortlessly over the interlinking parts of the composition without difficulty. . . . Based on this, the painting of the Horatii is flawed: it presents three planes that are barely distinguishable—the group of brothers, then a gap; the old Horatii, then a gap; and finally the group of the women. . . .¹⁵

This quote pinpoints the contrast between the styles of baroque and neoclassicism, or more poignantly, between those of classicism and neoclassicism. While in baroque composition the different picture planes are integrated as much as possible, as in Rubens's *St. Roch*, neoclassical art juxtaposes these planes with an almost violent clarity. Viewers are not confronted with the picture as a seamless whole but rather with a fragmented structure in which they themselves must project a sense of coherence. It is necessary here for viewers to employ their own imagination, to read the picture for themselves, and to decide which of the sides presented in

the *Horatii* is the right one, the patriotic cause of the men on the left or the familial cause of the women on the right.

There is much to be said for the idea that David thought the public would probably identify more often with the men in the increasingly radicalized politics of the prerevolutionary years, and indeed the men are also placed more prominently in the picture. However, Enlightenment thinkers were ambivalent about the issue of patriotism or civic-versus-private virtue. Rousseau writes near the beginning of *Emile* from 1762: "Public instruction no longer exists and can no longer exist, because where there is no fatherland, there can no longer be citizens. These two words, *fatherland* and *citizen*, should be effaced from modern languages."¹⁶ Rousseau found that a public, civic spirit existed in antiquity, but the world he lived in appeared to him to be splintered into a myriad of individual interests. This is a radical statement. If we apply it to David's *Oath*, the

patriotic appeal is reduced to absurdity, or more specifically, such patriotism is historicized in such a way that it can only be applied to the epoch in Roman history represented here. This is not to say that David's painting has nothing to do with patriotic appeal, but it contains important elements that transcend simple prerevolutionary radicalism. The depiction of such deeds, in fact, in which public welfare overrides private welfare so forcefully, often met with a distinct lack of understanding, if not outright rejection, among contemporary observers.¹⁷

The French revolutionaries, who became enthusiastic participants in a change of historic proportions only half a decade following the creation of *The Oath of the Horatii*, particularly liked to quote Rousseau, but they believed that the time had come in which it was once again possible for a public institution to flourish. In the long run and knowing what we do about the aftermath of the Revolution, one is tempted to admit that Rousseau was right to think that such times were gone forever and that individual bourgeois interests would eventually prevail over those of the common good. However, the same revolutionaries also referred with great emphasis to another one of David's major prerevolutionary works in which a conflict similar to that of the Horatii became the subject. I am referring to *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (plate 9), a painting that David began in 1787 after having changed the entire subject, not merely an episode, without any authorization from d'Angiviller, who had originally commissioned him to do another subject, taken from the history of Coriolanus.¹⁸ The painting was exhibited at the Salon in 1789, almost simultaneously with the outbreak of the Revolution. Whereas the fatal conclusion to the events depicted in *The Oath of the Horatii* is still to come, in *Brutus* these events have already occurred and the terrible consequences are just starting to unfold in the depicted scene. Brutus, founder and first consul of the Roman republic, felt it was his patriotic duty to have his own sons executed because they had collaborated in a conspiracy of monarchical supporters to overthrow the republic. The painting was one in a series of *sujets tragiques* that Count d'Angiviller commissioned and that appear in their gruesomeness to portend the themes of romanticism. In David's *Brutus* the emotionality of the scene has become the actual focus of the artistic intent to such an extent that the didactic message is almost forgotten.

Like the *Oath*, the scene is set in a Roman villa, or more precisely in the courtyard of such a villa. Again, as in the *Oath*, the painting is divided into two distinctly different spheres; however, this time with a different emphasis. The light falls on the larger area to the right, which is sectioned off by a series of columns

typical of atrium architecture and is filled with a group of mourning women and girls. Several of these face left, where the lictors mentioned in the painting's title are carrying in the corpses of Brutus's dead sons. The mother is the most prominent among these women. Her outstretched, greatly elongated arm with the splayed fingers becomes a glaring symbol of horror.¹⁹ In front of her, in the shadows, sits Brutus, who has apparently been shaken out of his grieving stupor by the wails of the women and who is towered over by the darkly foreboding statue of the Dea Roma, for whose "cause" Brutus acted.

David has created a highly melodramatic scene. Brutus is particularly imposing. The protagonist is an apathetic, brooding victim; he is not depicted here as a man of action, but as a man of reflection. His victimization becomes almost a bodily feature: his legs are so severely turned to parallel the surface of the canvas that this seems almost anatomically impossible. The unusual composition of the painting also underscores its content: Brutus is not placed in a prominent position, as would have been the practice in traditional academic art, but has been pushed into an unlit side of the painting.²⁰ In the middle stands the sewing basket, now devoid of any narrative content.

Brutus's empty, stony-faced expression is meant to prompt viewers to contemplate and vicariously experience what has happened, much like in the *Andromache*. A chill ran down the spine of most of the viewers seeing the painting when it was exhibited, because they were being confronted with a deed that appeared to make no sense to them in light of their own political realities. For them, public life consisted of the intrigues, plots, and schemes that prevailed at court. Even in the opinion of liberals, such a depiction of Brutus was rejected as a "hero to be almost hated" and a "denatured patriotism," but it is important to remember that Rousseau had conceived and glorified this type of denaturalization as a characteristic of the premodern citizen.²¹ We see here the same gap between public and private interests that we observed in the *Oath*, and this gap can be considered to be one of the most important emblems of modern civic society.

Several modern critics have interpreted *Brutus* as a depiction of the conflict between republic and monarchy and therefore as a sign of David's prerevolutionary ideas. What speaks against this interpretation is that in 1789 (unlike in 1792), the issue at hand did not revolve around abolishing the monarchy. Moreover, such images as David's had a tradition of their own within the art of the French Enlightenment, in which they were used in a general sense to exemplify virtue. It is also odd that David made no allusion to contemporary events in his commentary on the painting, which he very well

could have, given the heated political situation following the storming of the Bastille. Here, too, the interpretation of the work in the political context of the times was one that only evolved later. France as a republic could easily relate to David's painting and reinterpret it as a legitimization of the nation's own actions.²²

During the revolutionary years David was more preoccupied with current political events than he was with representing the classic iconography of antiquity. Once the times he lived in had attained historical greatness, it no longer seemed necessary to turn to the distant past for examples of heroism; the French themselves had become heroes. Themes from antiquity were not revived, notably, until after the fall of Robespierre, which at the same time temporarily ended David's political career. When we turn our attention to the famous *Sabine Women*, which David exhibited from 1799 to 1805 in a well-attended private exhibition, we discover that he created a specific postrevolutionary work with regard to iconography and composition. He had worked on the concept of this painting during his imprisonment following the overthrow of Thermidor (plate 11).²³ The topic is once again taken from the early history of Rome. But rather than depict the popular episode of the abduction of the Sabine women, David chose instead a seldom-portrayed event that apparently took place years later when armed Sabines are said to have come to Rome to battle for the return of their abducted sisters and daughters. Since the women have long since become contented mothers in happy Roman families, the purpose of this action is a mystery to them. Bravely they throw themselves between the warring parties, and this is the moment David has chosen to show us. On the left stands Tatius with his army lined up behind him, on the right Romulus with his. Both are naked, a fact that caused considerable dismay and bewilderment among viewers at the time. In the middle is the actual heroine of the event, Hersilia, who keeps the two military leaders and their troops apart with an impassioned gesture. This concludes a line of development that is particularly notable for the change it signifies in the position of women before and following the Revolution: from their rather subordinate position in the *Horatii*, women develop into figures of equal standing in *Brutus* and then into dominating ones in the *Sabines*. As such, they are typified in what would later become a gender-specific role as the champions of private values and the family, values that were being appreciated anew following the suppression, and even destruction, of all things private during the Revolution's Reign of Terror.

With this colossal 3.85 m × 5.22 m work, now preserved in the Louvre, David sought to return to the true origin of art, which he believed he had found in the art of the ancient Greeks, especially in their

sculpture. Knowledge of Greek art was becoming more widespread by the end of the eighteenth century. Books such as *Antiquities of Athens* by Stuart and Revett, published in London in 1762, were instrumental in popularizing Greek art, as were the writings of Winckelmann, which were well-known in France and throughout Europe.²⁴ In essence, all things Greek became a metaphor for all that was original and pure, for all that had not been contaminated by the artificiality of a developed culture. The *Sabine Women* made David one of the first representatives of archaism, which would later influence various nineteenth-century avant-garde art movements that sought to topple the reign of Academic painting. Prior to the Nazarenes and the Pre-Raphaelites, David appreciated archaic styles. He was one of the first admirers, for example, of the Pre-Raphaelite art of the so-called "Primitives," whose members ranged from Giotto to Perugino.²⁵

In the *Sabine Women* David was inspired by the Greek ideal of sculpture. This is especially notable in the nude figures of Tatius and Romulus. In writing his own defense of the painting in a published pamphlet that accompanied the exhibition, David pointed out that such nudity was commonplace in the works of Greek artists. The highly stylized character of the figures is realized through their nudity as well as their affected gestures. This is especially poignant in Romulus, who balances his spear on his fingertips in such a way that it would be impossible for him to throw it, an element that restrains the narrative function of this figure. Romulus is an icon of arrested movement, a metaphor for the halt in the battle. Similarly, Tatius appears to play at combat rather than actually fight in a battle, so graceful is the pose he strikes. Several other individual episodes in the painting stand out that do not seem to relate directly to the context of the scene and therefore also have an iconic effect. These include the officer on horseback on the right, who is sheathing his sword; the helmet thrown into the air behind Romulus's shield that signals the end of the battle; and the commander on the left, who holds his men in check with a halting gesture. Through their conspicuousness these figures assert their independence from the main narrative and, at the same time, their gestures lose plausibility in terms of narrative realism. One critic of the time stated this with a mixture of awe and bewilderment: "And one sees, as though through a type of enchantment, the captains of each army immobilize their bodies, stopping in a single gesture."²⁶

This painting is Greek in a rather artificial and highly constructed sense, especially because it resembles—at least in the foreground—a collection of reprises from different classical Greek statues and because experts among David's contemporaries were correct to point

out that even the Greeks clothed their heroes when depicting battle scenes. Also, critics alerted David to the fact that early Rome had little to do with early Greece, so that his amalgamation was questionable for historical reasons. However, the painter himself was not particularly interested in creating a historically accurate or authentic scene. He wanted the *Sabine Women* to be appreciated solely as a work of art rather than as a recreation on canvas of the historical past, and its beauty was to be justified by abstract qualities and not by any claim to historical accuracy. He did express greater historical authenticity in one of the studies for this painting that adheres more closely to the principles of traditional history painting. In a compositional study in the Louvre David depicts a more realistic image, as evinced in details such as the firmly held spear in Romulus's hand and the fact that Tatius and Romulus are clothed.²⁷ Perhaps most convincing, however, is the relationship between foreground and middle ground. This relationship differs noticeably between the painting and the sketch. In the painting, the action in both foreground and middle ground is occurring concurrently when logically the action in the middle ground should take place subsequent to that of the foreground. In other words, the figures in both foreground and middle ground indicate by what they are doing that they realize the fighting is over, although it does not make much sense that the news of Hersilia's intervention, which is happening in the foreground as we watch, could travel so quickly to the rest of the troops. In the study, the fighting continues unabated in the middle ground because, realistically, the soldiers have yet not learned of the peacekeeping action of the Sabine women.

The climax of David's pursuit for artistic purity, a purity free of both academic prescriptions and adherence to historical realism, can be found in the painting *Leonidas at Thermopylae*, completed in 1814 and the last of David's works we will discuss. In this painting, David used not only a Greek style but also an episode from Greek history (plate 13). This incident is one of the most famous in the history of all antiquity. In 480 BC, the Persians invaded Sparta, and Leonidas's private army of three hundred Spartans, widely known for their uncompromising patriotism, fought heroically under the leadership of their king against the invaders. At Thermopylae, a narrow pass in central Greece, the Spartans threw themselves at the massive armies of the enemy and delayed the Persian advance, a feat that ultimately led to the Greek victory in the war. This painting should be interpreted in direct connection with the *Sabines*, for David intended the two works to be seen as pendants. As in the *Sabines*, the heroes in *Leonidas* are nude and are not fully integrated into a dramatic context within the scene; instead, each is meant to

have an individual impact.²⁸ Thus, they become citations of works of art, and in creating his central figures David borrowed generously from existing works, such those found in Winckelmann's publications. In the mid-foreground in which Leonidas is positioned centrally and his brother-in-law Aegis is seated next to him, David appears to be mirroring this process even within the painting itself. Aegis is almost a duplicate of Leonidas, a duplicate that seems only to have been copied from another perspective. And Leonidas, the protagonist of the story, is not shown at the moment in which he leads his faithful troops into battle. Like so many of David's heroes, the artist depicts him instead in quiet reflection, a reflection that should inspire the viewer to reflect on the course of the world. The other figures—such as the old man who is limping into the picture from the left, or the soldier binding his sandals with a perfectly formed but very unnatural back, or the youths offering the wreaths in the outstretched pantomime of a balletic dance—should also be interpreted more as autonomous works of art than as elements of a cohesive narrative. The affectation of these youths borders on the parodic, for if we mistakenly interpret the painting as a representation of a coherent historical narrative, then we would realize that the figures are on the verge of tripping over the altar that is placed in front of them.

The artifice of David's art described here became quite apparent, especially after the Revolution. "I want at least to show my patriotism on the canvas," David is supposed to have said, according to Etienne Delécluze, his most important biographer.²⁹ Against the backdrop of this suggested interpretation, a surprising facet of David's assertion comes to light: his demand for freedom, which he had hoped to realize politically, could only be expressed in the radical autonomy of his art. One can therefore speak of the utopian character of David's painting, an element of his aesthetics that is thoroughly modern.

In the eyes of the viewer today, the radical aestheticism expressed in the *Leonidas* almost seems caricatural. Yet it must be understood in contrast to the work David was expected to produce as an artist of Napoleon's court. In the Napoleonic paintings he was compelled to paint in a very realistic manner out of a pressing need for propaganda. However, during the duration of his service to Napoleon, David remained preoccupied with the *Leonidas*, and it was in this painting that he fulfilled his artistic ideals of autonomy. With this in mind, one can attribute a deeper meaning to Napoleon's purported surprise at David's choice of a military defeat as subject matter. And we should not rule out the possibility that the painting was understood at the time as a clandestine form of propaganda.

At war with the more powerful Holy Alliance, the Frenchman could picture himself as one of the valiant, fighting Spartans ready to die for the cause of freedom. Later, during the Restoration, the subject matter of David's painting was used specifically to justify the Greek struggle for liberation against the Turks, and more generally to advocate the liberal cause of granting autonomy to peoples throughout the world.³⁰

Notes

1. Antoine Schnapper et al., *Jacques-Louis David, 1748–1825* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1989); hereafter, *David* (1989).
2. "Cette figure est une des plus belles qui soient sorties du pinceau de M. David, et peut-être de celui des grands maîtres de l'Ecole française." Pierre Chaussard, *Le Pausanias français: État des arts du dessin en France, à l'ouverture du XIXe siècle; Salon de 1806*, quoted in *ibid.*, 106.
3. Thomas E. Crow, "The Oath of the Horatii in 1785: Painting and Pre-Revolutionary Radicalism in France," *Art History* 1 (1978): 440.
4. *David* (1989), 130f.
5. From the extensive body of literature, here are but two opposing positions: Crow, "Oath," cf. note 3; Carol Duncan, "Fallen Fathers: Images of Authority in Pre-Revolutionary French Art," *Art History* 4 (1981): 186–202.
6. Albert Boime, "Marmontel's Bélisaire and the Pre-Revolutionary Progressivism of David," *Art History* 3 (1980): 81–101.
7. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 154ff.
8. *David* (1989), 130f., 146f.
9. Hubertus Kohle, "La modernité du passé: David, la peinture d'histoire et la théorie néo-classique," in *David contre David*, ed. Régis Michel (Paris: Documentation française, 1993), 1098–1100.
10. *David* (1989), 164.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *David* (1989), figs. 52, 53.
13. Jean-Georges Noverre had given a "ballet tragique," *Les Horaces* in 1777. Charles Rollin, *Histoire romaine depuis la fondation de Rome jusqu'à la bataille d'Actium* (Paris, 1752).
14. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, ed. and trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 40.
15. "Il est bien plus doux à l'œil comme à la main de parcourir un objet dans toute son étendue, sans [. . .] rencontrer des aspérités, des trous qui l'arrêtent, le repoussent, sa sensibilité veut être conduite mollement et parcourir sans peine toutes les parties de la chaîne d'une composition. [. . .] D'après ceci, le tableau des Horaces est fautif; il présente trois groupes sur trois plans peu distincts; le groupe des frères, puis un trou; le vieil Horace, puis un trou; et enfin le groupe des femmes. [. . .]" Madame E.A.R.T.L.A.D.C. . . . , *Avis important d'une femme sur le salon de 1785* (n.p., 1785), 29f.
16. Rousseau, *Emile*, 40.
17. Stefan Germer and Hubertus Kohle, "From the Theatrical to the Aesthetic Hero: On the Privatization of the Idea of Virtue in David's Brutus and Sabines," *Art History* (1986): 168–84.
18. *David* (1989), 195f.
19. On the increased relevance of gestural expression in David's art, which he brought to bear against the traditional, more physiognomic expression, see Dorothy Johnson, "Corporality and Communication: The Gestural Revolution of Diderot, David, and *The Oath of the Horatii*," *Art Bulletin* 71 (1989): 92–113.
20. On the meaning of this compositional characteristic, see Thomas Puttfarcken, "David's Brutus and Theories of Pictorial Unity in France," *Art History* 4 (1981): 290–304.
21. Maximilian Forschner, *Rousseau* (Freiburg: Alber, 1977).
22. Robert L. Herbert, *David, Voltaire, "Brutus" and the French Revolution: An Essay in Art and Politics* (London: Allen Lane, 1972).
23. *David* (1989), 323ff.
24. James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, *The Antiquities of Athens and Other Monuments of Greece*, delineated and illustrated by C. R. Cockerell and W. Kinnand (London: G. Bell, 1881).
25. Etienne-Jean Delécluze, *Louis David: Son école et son temps. Souvenirs* (1855; reprint, Paris: Editions Macula, 1983), 219.
26. "Et l'on voit, comme par une espèce d'enchantement, les capitaines de chaque armée suspendre les corps et s'arreter d'un seul geste." Alexandre Lenoir, *Examen du tableau des Sabines et de l'école de M. David* (Paris: Hacquart, 1810), 6.
27. *David* (1989), fig. 152.
28. On the following, see G. Stemmrich, "David's 'Leonidas bei den Thermopylen': Klassizistisch vollzogene Kunstautonomie als 'patriotisme sur la toile,'" in *Frankreich 1800: Gesellschaft, Kultur, Mentalitäten*, ed. Gudrun Gersmann and Hubertus Kohle (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1990), 64–80.
29. "Je veux au moins montrer mon patriotisme sur la toile." Delécluze, *Louis David*, 230.
30. Nina Athanassoglou, "Under the Sign of Leonidas: The Political and Ideological Fortune of David's *Leonidas at Thermopylae* under the Restoration," *Art Bulletin*, 1981, 633–49.