ASPECTS OF ART LECTURE

JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID: A PERSONAL INTERPRETATION

By ANITA BROOKNER

Read 30 January 1974

IF there are any purists in the room, let them leave now. I want this evening to follow in the steps of the great Stendhal who stated, in 1824, 'My aim is to make each spectator question his own heart, articulate his own feelings, and thus form a personal judgment and a vision based on his own character, tastes and predominant emotions—providing, that is, he has emotions because unfortunately they are essential for the appreciation of art.'[1] After this ringing declaration, Stendhal, in his capacity of hired art critic, went on to tell a number of lies about himself, as was his wont, and to give a disappointing performance by applying his judgement to all the wrong pictures assembled to impress the spectator at the Salon of 1824. In the course of this lecture I shall endeavour not to tell lies, although I shall certainly not avoid inaccuracy; the performance will, I think, be disappointing, but of one thing I am quite sure: I have not chosen the wrong pictures. And as a fervent Stendhalian, I must insist that you, the audience, play your part, and allow yourselves to experience a range of feelings—including, I hope, happiness, the ultimate Stendhalian proof that a work of art has succeeded in its purpose.

My subject is Jacques-Louis David, who, as recently as 1972, was type-cast yet again as a Neo-classical painter.[2] Neo-classical, Romantic: perhaps these distinctions do not matter very much, yet in David's work there exists a very definite progression from one state of being to another for which alternative terms have not yet been coined. One should, therefore, perhaps continue to use them.

If you remember, we saw at the Neo-classical exhibition in 1972 two images which seemed at first sight to provide the final

[1] Stendhal—Salon of 1824. H. B. Stendhal, *Du Romantisme dans les Arts*. Editions Miroirs de l'Art. Hermann (Paris, 1966).

[2] 'The Age of Neo-Classicism', Arts Council of Great Britain, Royal Academy of Arts, 1972.

triumphant crystallization of all the eighteenth century's attempts to break away from a corrupt, aristocratic, and light-hearted view of the world and to create an ideal vision of austerity, utility, and virtue. Both pictures were by David: one was the *Oath of the Horatii* (Plate I*a*), the other the *Death of Socrates* (Plate I*b*). When one comes to analyse these paintings it can be proved that they contain many layers of meaning; it can also be proved that for a brief moment in time—between 1784 and 1787—David achieved a style devoid of ambiguity. It is as if all the loose ends of the Neo-classical enterprise had been tied together in a triumphant unity of image, in which formal and emotional intention were, after years of disparate effort, completely fused. In that last sentence I included the word 'emotional'. I hope that enough has been said by now to persuade us all that Neo-classicism as a movement contains, in addition to its scrupulous historical and archaeological pre-occupations, an element of the purest hope of creating a better, or at least an alternative, world in which virtue, morality, and the desire for good would prevail. My intention this evening is twofold: it is to prove that David's career epitomizes both the consummation and the disintegration of this hope; and that David was precipitated by the urgency of a historical evolution which broke away from the control of the intellect, to become that complex, complicated, and indefinable phenomenon: a Romantic.

Let us look a little more closely at these two images. In 1784, David, after a career which revealed him as an effortless portraitist, an accomplished pasticheur of earlier Baroque and Rococo excitements, and an inept manipulator of traditional religious imagery, went back to Rome and painted for the King of France a picture which purported to relate an incident that had taken place in the remote days when Rome itself was a kingdom. As written by Livy, by Plutarch, by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, three Roman brothers, the Horatii, were elected by the people to do battle with three heroes from the neighbouring kingdom of Alba, the Curiatii. The Horatii and the Curiatii were intermarried; as the Horatii brothers swear an oath to their father, the women of the family collapse in an anticipatory stupor of grief at their approaching deprivation of either brother or lover. Now the story ended curiously. The Horatii won the battle but on hearing this news, Camilla, who was both sister to the Horatii and betrothed to one of the Curiatii, accused her brother of murder. Whereupon he simply turned round and

killed her. The grief-stricken father appealed to the King for clemency for his son and after some hesitation the King gave his pardon.

As you see, David has shown none of this unfortunate family infighting. He has isolated the moment of resolution before battle, the oath of allegiance sworn to the father as he hands over the sword to his sons. After many years of unquestioning acceptance, it emerged that David had cribbed this motif of the oath which occurs in none of the written accounts. And he had cribbed it from an unexpected source, a picture of a totally different subject by a slightly older contemporary, Beaufort (Plate II*a*). Beaufort's picture, exhibited in the Salon of 1771, was about the oath of Brutus who swore three friends to avenge the rape of his sister Lucretia by the Emperor Tarquin. Now the message of Beaufort's picture is simple: we depose the tyrant, we take the law into our own hands. This is, if you will, a declaration of intent. David, who, when he painted the *Oath of the Horatii*, was living happily on his wife's fortune and working for the Establishment, was painting an episode from a story destined to throw into high relief the clemency of the King. But a curious thing happened. At some point in the process of adapting and rearranging, David became influenced by the ethic of Beaufort's stagy canvas. To such an extent that the crystalline imagery of the *Oath of the Horatii* became, in the painter's mind, a call to arms, a stirring of dissatisfaction and hope. Here we have an almost unique example of art influencing life (Plate II*b*). For when another kind of manifestation took place in the Royal tennis court at Versailles on 20 June 1789, the participants took it upon themselves to swear an oath of allegiance to a father figure, just as the Horatii had sworn their oath, so ambiguous in intention and so compelling in appearance. David, officially commissioned by the Assembly to make a record of the Oath of the Jeu de Paume, even toyed with the notion of turning Barnave and Robespierre and Sieyès into Romans—Robespierre fighting for breath as he had done in the steamy atmosphere of the Jeu de Paume—but he abandoned the idea (Plates III*a* and *b*). For he realized that a point had been reached when reality had to take over from the ideal. And reality had suddenly become more exciting. For here the representatives of the Third Estate—that is to say, those who did not belong to the nobility or the clergy—swore that 'Wherever its members are gathered, there shall be the National Assembly . . . members will swear never to separate and to foregather whenever circumstances

shall demand it until the constitution of the Kingdom shall be established and strengthened on a solid basis'. So exalted was this moment that members of the other two estates joined in. We see before us the most solemn and inspiring moment of the century and even at this distance we can recapture something of its greatness. Imagine then the state of soul of the participants when at the moment of their dedication a violent thunderstorm broke out and the chapel of the palace was struck by lightning. The prophecy of that Royal favourite, Mme du Barry, 'Après moi le déluge', seemed to be coming all too literally true.

The *Oath of the Horatii* is remembered for its formal austerity and clarity. The Oath of the Jeu de Paume—the event, not the image—is remembered for its moral austerity and gravity. Life had turned out to be rather more impressive than art. It is reported that between 1791 and 1794 David was in a state of exaltation bordering on insanity. And why not? To give you the key to this exaltation, this literally unnerving emotion, let me present you with two more pieces of evidence. The first comes from a letter written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau to d'Alembert in 1758. This letter, apart from being a seminal treatise for certain aspects of Revolutionary propaganda, contains this beautiful passage which anticipates and explains the ardour of those who took part in the Oath of the Jeu de Paume.

> In the midst of the pomp of great nations and their dreary magnificence, a secret voice must cry from the depths of the soul, 'Ah, where are the games and festivals of my youth? Where is the concord of the citizens? Where is brotherly love? Where are pure joy and true joyousness? Where are peace, liberty, equality, innocence? Shall we go in search of them again?[1]

And now let me take you forward to 10 August 1793, on which day the people celebrated the Festival of the Republic One and Indivisible, completely imagined and organized by David. A crowd assembled on the Place de la Bastille before dawn so that the Assembly could be blessed by the rays of the rising sun. As the sun rose, representatives of various regions drank a cup of water from a symbolic Fountain of Regeneration, passing the cup to one another to the accompaniment of trumpet and drum. When the cup was passed to the President of the National Assembly, a salvo of artillery was fired and this was repeated as the cup was then passed to his confederates. When

[1] Rousseau, *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les Spectacles*, 1758. Editions Garnier-Flammarion (Paris, 1967).

all had drunk, they sang the Marseillaise and exchanged the kiss of brotherhood. They then formed a procession and marched to the Place de la Révolution. The first detachment of the procession carried a banner showing the Eye of Surveillance piercing a cloud of obscurantism. The second detachment carried an Ark of the Covenant containing tablets engraved with the Rights of Man and the Act of the Constitution. The third detachment dragged a rudimentary hearse on which lay the emblems of royalty. On the Place de la Révolution these were burnt and as the flames died down a flight of birds was released. Then the crowd proceeded to the Champ de Mars where it passed under a great level—le Niveau national—to a symbolic altar. Here all raised their arms and swore to defend the Constitution. Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive and to be young was very heaven. But to be middle-aged—and David was 45 at the time—and to have engineered this leap from the imagined to the real—was to be marked for life.

Let us now go back to the *Death of Socrates*, painted in 1787 and dubbed by Sir Joshua Reynolds as the most perfect picture of its kind. An edifying moment in the annals of antiquity. Death, always an uncertain business, is here brought firmly under control. Socrates takes the cup of hemlock without ceasing in his flow of improving words. He points to Heaven in the manner of Raphael's Plato in the School of Athens. The *Death of Socrates* was a private commission for one of David's friends, Trudaine, and the subject has a long and very obvious eighteenth-century pre-history. It was the favourite subject of Diderot, for many reasons. Socrates had an almost totemistic significance for the *philosophes* as a whole and for Diderot in particular, for Socrates was proof that a high standard of morality could be achieved outside the confines of a Christian world view. Socrates was Diderot's personal hero; he signed his letters with a Socrates seal and he described the ideal staging of the last tableau of a Socrates drama in his *Traité de la Poésie Dramatique* of 1758. It was a recognized exercise of eighteenth-century painters to try and match Diderot's text. Challe and Sané produced their attempts in Diderot's lifetime and in 1780 the government commissioned a *Death of Socrates* from David's rival, Peyron. In 1787 David himself undertook the subject. He began with a characteristically literal reading which he later modified in the light of a bizarre mixture of influences. Diderot had seen Socrates actually holding the cup: 'Holding the cup in one hand and turning his eyes towards Heaven, he

said, "O gods who summon me, grant me a fortunate passage".'[1] This is how David originally intended to paint him until the poet Andre Chénier pointed out that the Stoic aspect of the incident could be underlined more effectively: 'Socrates, entirely absorbed by the great thoughts he is expressing, should stretch out his hand for the cup; but he should not seize it until he has finished speaking.'[2] Diderot is careful to give Socrates' pupils a handsome variety of expressions.

> Some wrapped themselves in their cloaks. Crito had got to his feet and he wandered moaning about the prison. Others, silent and still, looked towards Socrates in heavy silence with tears coursing down their cheeks. Apollodorus sat on the bed, his back turned towards Socrates, his face lowered towards his hands, stifling his sobs.[3]

David's critics were unsure whether the figure at the foot of the bed represented Plato, Crito, or Apollodorus, nor did they much care, as it was clear that there were more than the regulation number of disciples present—a point which needs some attention—but Chaussard, writing in 1806, makes this interesting comment: 'Everyone has admired the pose of Crito, swamped in grief. The artist once told me that he had got the idea from Samuel Richardson. This attitude is the one given by the sublime novelist to Uncle Harlow during the reading of Clarissa's will.' This unexpected fidelity to Richardson is interesting; it is one of which Diderot himself would have approved and it indicates that David could encompass both the annals of stoicism and the rubbish of sentimental fiction without being diverted or diluted.

But unlike the *Oath of the Horatii*, the strength of the *Socrates* rests less on its overtones than on its appearance, its purely formal solution to a compositional problem. Poussin here is the obvious source, appropriately enough for in the eighteenth century Poussin was considered not only a classical painter but a Stoic one as well. With one obvious exception—the Raphaelesque hand—we need go back no further than Poussin's *First Sacraments* and note that if Poussin's *Extreme Unction* (Plate IV*b*) is stoical in appearance, then David's *Death of Socrates* is decidedly eucharistic in flavour. It can hardly be a coincidence that there are twelve disciples present, although admittedly

[1] Diderot, *Traité de la Poésie dramatique*, 1758. Quoted by Jean Seznec in *Essais sur Diderot et l'Antiquité* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1957).

[2] J.-L. Jules David, *Le peintre Louis David, Souvenirs et documents inédits* (Paris, Havard, 1880).

[3] Diderot, op. cit.

PLATE I

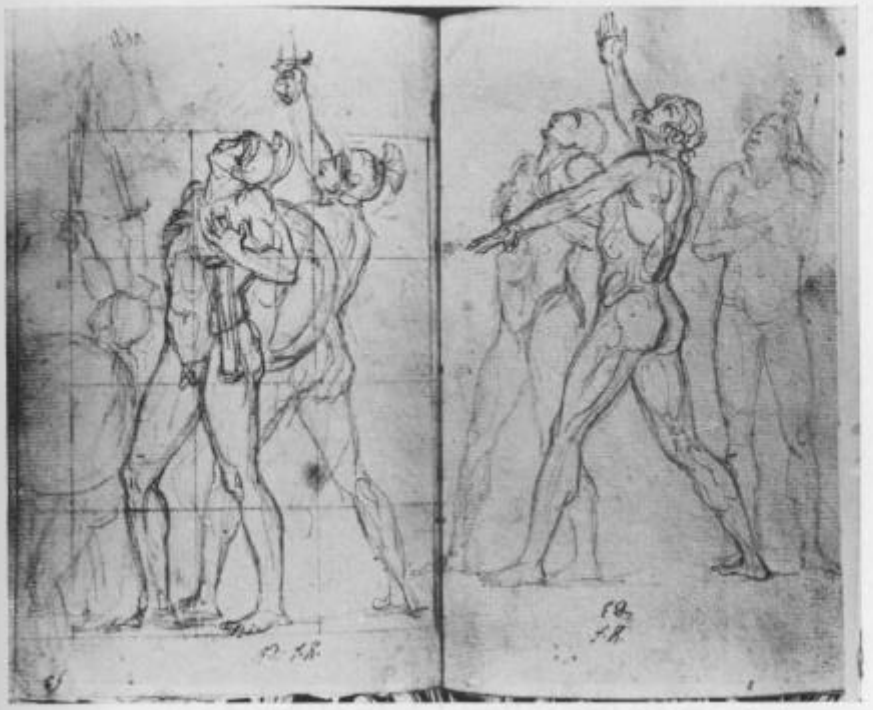
a. The Oath of the Horatii, J.-L. David, Paris, The Louvre

b. Death of Socrates, J.-L. David, New York, Metropolitan Museum

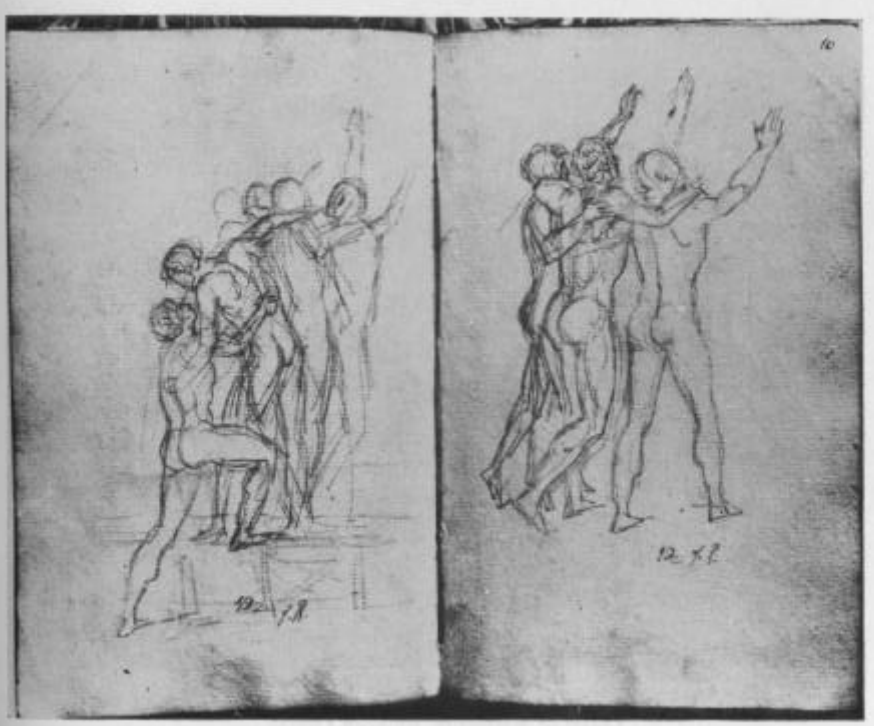
PLATE II

a. Oath of Brutus, J. A. Beaufort, Private collection

b. Oath of the Jeu de Paume, J.-L. David, Musée de Versailles



a. Drawing for *Oath of the Jeu de Paume*, J.-L. David, Sketch book, Musée de Versailles



b. Drawing for *Oath of the Jeu de Paume*, J.-L. David, Sketch book,

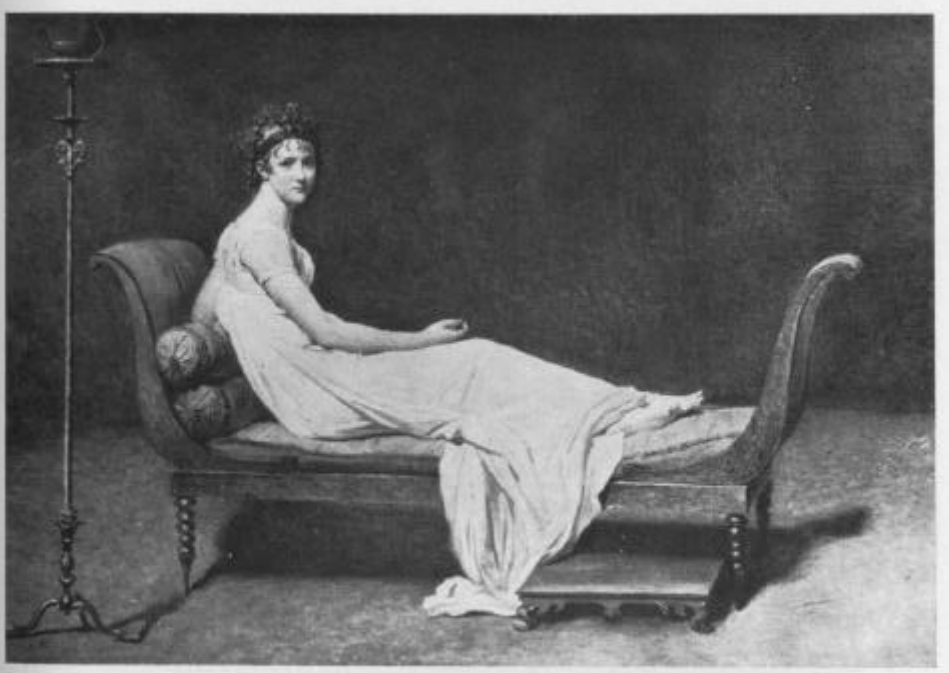
PLATE IV

a. The Death of Marat, J.-L. David, Brussels, Musées Royaux

b. The First Sacraments, Extreme Unction, Poussin Collection of the Duke of Rutland, Belvoir Castle

PLATE V

a. Self-portrait, J.-L. David, Paris, The Louvre



b. Madame Récamier, J.-L. David, Paris, The Louvre

PLATE VI

b. Napoleon in his Study, J.-L. David, Washington, National Gallery

a. Sketch for Portrait of Napoleon, J.-L. David, Paris, The Louvre

a. Mars disarmed by Venus, J.-L. David, Brussels, Musées Royaux

b. Mars Crowned by Victory, A. J. Gros, Paris, The Louvre

PLATE VII

PLATE VIII

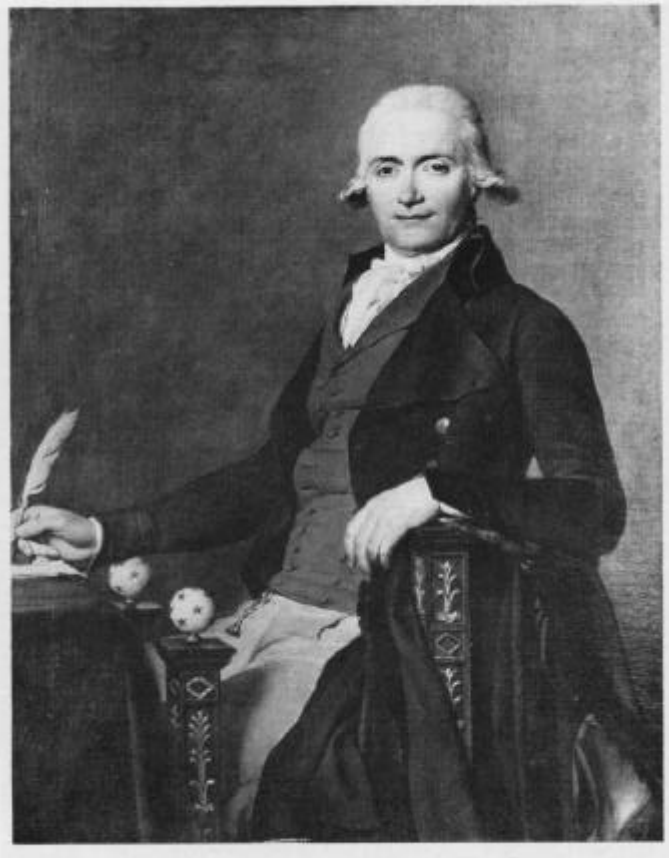
a. Napoleon Visiting the Plague Hospital at Jaffa, A. J. Gros, Paris, The Louvre

b. The Raft of the Medusa, T. Géricault, Paris, The Louvre

a. M. Rivière, J. A. D. Ingres, Paris, The Louvre

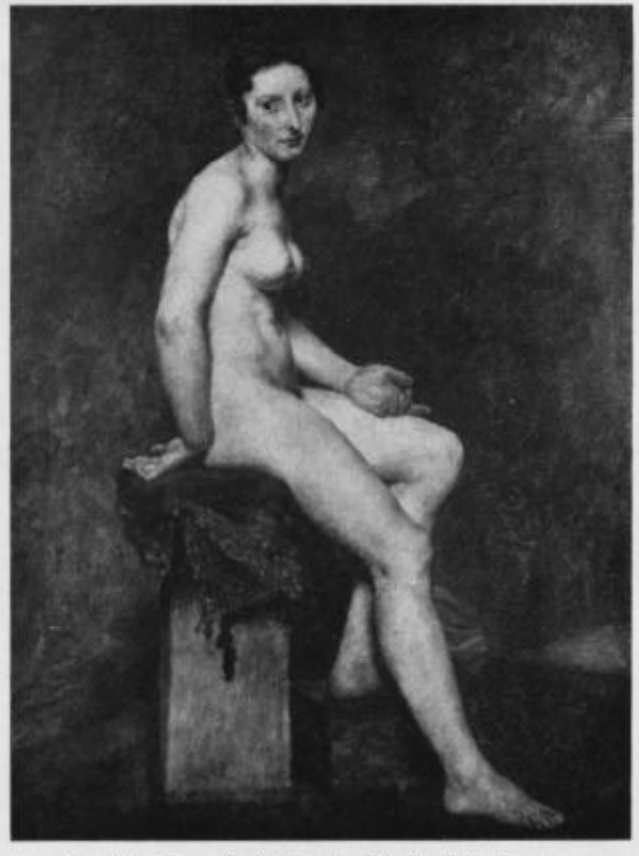
b. Grande Odalisque, J. A. D. Ingres, Paris, The Louvre

a. M. Bochet, J. A. D. Ingres, Paris, The Louvre



b. M. Meyer, J.-L. David, Paris, The Louvre

a. M. Sériziat, J. A. D. Ingres, Ottawa, National Gallery

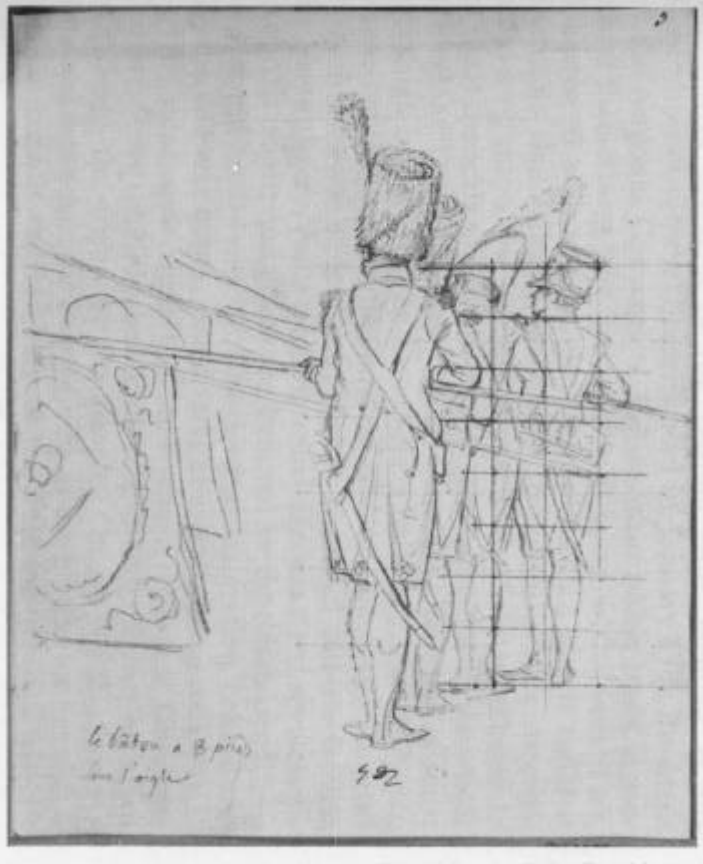


b. Mlle Rose, E. Delacroix, Paris, The Louvre

PLATE XI

a. Mme Hamelin, J.-L. David,
Washington, National Gallery

b. Massacres at Chios, E. Delacroix,
Paris, The Louvre



a. A Page from the Chicago Sketchbook, J.-L. David

b. A Page from the Chicago Sketchbook, J.-L. David

PLATE XIII

three of them are barely visible. This is an interesting example of that displacement of association, and in particular that dislocation of piety, that painters of the next, Romantic generation, will learn to exploit.

The *Death of Socrates* was conceived in a secure eighteenth-century world in which attention to the classics, obedience to the *philosophes*, and the permitted emotions of sentimental fiction were the moulding influences. But in 1793 there occurred a death more spectacular and more sordid than that of Socrates, the death of Marat, in which David was involved as a friend, supporter, and almost witness (Plate IV*a*). Once again the movement of history has taken over, the painter is involved in reality rather than an assessment of prototypes. By 1793 David had become a thoroughly political animal although he was ill-fitted for this calling, being over-emotional, lacking in calculation, and hampered by a large tumour of the mouth which did not prevent him from uttering speeches of inordinate length. He was an aggressive but vulnerable man who, in an early quarrel with the Academy of Painting, had found unexpected support from the sinister and powerful figure of Jean-Paul Marat. In the course of 1793 David held many political offices, becoming successively member of the Committee of Public Instruction, president of the Jacobin club, member of the Committee of General Security, and in January 1794 President of the National Convention. He was thus rather more in evidence than Marat who was usually at home in the bath. This, I hasten to add, was for therapeutic reasons; Marat suffered from a skin disease—probably psoriasis—which necessitated long periods of immersion in a bath of water, sheeted to prevent the scaly sores from coming into contact with the wood. Here Marat, who had renounced a lucrative position as court physician in order to run a news-sheet entitled *L'Ami du Peuple*, wrote endless articles denouncing real or imaginary Royalist plots. Marat was undoubtedly slightly paranoid and was famous for his battle cry 'Nous sommes trahi!' He was a red revolutionary with no antique polish; he believed in the death penalty—he insisted on it—and he was the real inspiration behind the Terror. He was hated, feared, and above all, dangerous.

The scene now shifts to Caen where citizeness Charlotte Corday, after reading her Plutarch, made up her mind to assassinate the friend of the people. On 23 April 1793 she obtained a passport for Paris, giving as the pretext for her visit a need to consult the Ministry of the Interior about a friend's

affairs.[1] On 11 July 1793 she arrived in Paris and booked in at the Hôtel de la Providence, rue des Vieux Augustins. On Saturday, 13 July, she bought a kitchen knife and called at Marat's house. She was not received, so she returned to her hotel and wrote him a letter saying she had information about Royalist plots in Normandy and the Vendée—this, of course, was precisely the sort of thing Marat liked to denounce. She posted her letter, then changed into a white muslin dress, pink shawl, in the folds of which she concealed the knife, and enormous hat decorated with a black cockade and green ribbons. Returning to Marat's house at 7 p.m., by which time she knew her letter would have been delivered, she found the door guarded by Marat's mistress, Simone Evrard. They exchanged some heated words, and Marat, who was in his bath with cold compresses held in place by a rudimentary turban, called out to have her admitted. He was just reading her letter. Corday sat down and began to talk, then stabbed him in the right lung. He called out to Simone Evrard, 'A moi, chère amie, à moi'. She rushed in with two other members of the household who knocked Corday to the floor. A dentist who inhabited the apartment below was sent for to make a bandage; Marat was extricated from the bath, but by the time the doctor arrived, at 7.45, he was dead.

The next day, at the Convention, a very Roman exchange took place. The acting president demanded, 'Où es-tu, David? Il te reste un tableau à faire.' To which David replied, 'Aussi le ferai-je.' However, more mundane considerations required his immediate attention. He had to advise on the lying-in-state and the funeral and the problem was that owing to Marat's sickness the body was decomposing rapidly. There could be no question of showing him triumphantly nude, like an antique hero. A compromise was found. In the deconsecrated church of the Cordeliers, at the end of Marat's street, the body, partly draped, was exhibited on a dais with one arm hanging over the side, and very dimly lit. The funeral took place at night to the accompaniment of muffled drum-beat and cannon.

Thinking back now to the noble but polite lip-service paid to the death of Socrates, one can see that David is here totally immersed in the experience of dying. There was no need to consult friends or find prototypes, for this time David had a memory in mind. He had visited Marat the day before his

[1] I am now quoting from the admirable article by George de Batz in the *Art Quarterly* for 1945.

death and had found him in the bath working. David particularly remembered the upended packing case he was using as a desk, and the pen and inkwell. And it is this marvellous still life to which the eye returns for comfort, a still life in the manner of Chardin, in which the specifically Chardinesque device of a protruding object is used to break what would otherwise be an oppressive horizontal, and a thick, creamy dribble of paint down the side as dense as anything Chardin ever painted. The rest of the picture is a cult object, an Ecce Homo, an act of piety. The letter, in David's own handwriting, is turned into a plea: 'Il suffit que je sois bien malheureuse pour avoir droit à votre bienveillance', while the other paper orders a gift of money to be made to a soldier's widow. This aspect of Marat's charity—a consideration, as it were, for ultimate beatification—is underlined by his self-denial: the patch on the sheet. In fact Marat was not particularly hard up; we have it on record that his bathroom was fairly luxurious, with white wallpaper decorated with illusionist pilasters, a pair of pistols, and a map. David, however, has transposed him to the Cordeliers with its dim religious light. The inscription, which has the brevity of great emotion, occupies little space. The head is one of tremendous beauty, although dying and death are not intrinsically beautiful processes, as Géricault was to find out. The picture not only shows a great genius at full stretch, relying entirely on his own resources; it opens the door to the nineteenth century, as we shall see a little later.

It is perhaps appropriate that from this height of political eminence David should tumble into a situation which, although full of personal humiliations, enabled him to set his art on yet another course. At the end of July 1794 he was arrested for being too ardent a supporter of Robespierre and imprisoned in the Luxembourg where he painted the famous self-portrait (Plate V*a*) in which he appears to be semi-traumatized by the shock. After several months detention he was released, re-arrested, and finally amnestied in 1795. Wisely, he abstained from political comment and turned his attention to portraits. Perhaps the best-known of his sitters was Mme Récamier, a famous beauty at whose feet men fell in battalions (Plate V*b*). It was a well-guarded secret, which I shall now obligingly reveal, that Mme Récamier kept her virginity until she was 41.[1] And David, although he has remained faithful to the relaxed classical forms of the Directoire, has used his now sharpened

[1] Stendhal, *Napoléon* (Paris, Charpentier, n.d.).

perception to convey a hint of sexual fear, of inhibition, in the tense emptiness of her room. Mme Récamier was displeased. David then did something which anticipates the pride of the archetypal Romantic painter. He wrote her a letter: 'Madame, ladies have their caprices, so do artists. Allow me to satisfy mine.' And with these words he took the portrait back to his studio where it remained until his death.

Heroes, the Romantics decided, should die young. Napoleon, a Romantic himself, did not oblige. David, enraptured by the scrawny hero of the Italian campaign of 1797 (Plate VI*a*), remained faithful to the bulky autocrat of 1812 (Plate VI*b*). And with true Romantic idealism David signed away his own freedom with that of Napoleon in 1815 and went into exile in Brussels. In February 1824 David was knocked over by a cab while returning from the theatre. He was able to get up and make his way home but his physical decline dates from this incident. He died over 18 months later, on 29 December 1825. Ironically, the body was not allowed back into France for burial. The Belgian government organized an impressive funeral cortège, perhaps faintly reminiscent of the Revolutionary funerals; it moved off to Ste Gudule in detachments, the most touching of which must surely have been the figure of David's valet, walking alone, in deepest black, and carrying his master's uniform of member of the Institut de France.

To many people in France David's death came as a surprise for it was thought that he had been dead for years. French painting had moved so far from the standards set by David that he had become a historical figure long before his actual physical disappearance. Of the four great Romantic Salons—1812, 1819, 1824, and 1827—three took place in David's lifetime, yet all represented an escape from his authority. It therefore came as something of a shock when a small exhibition of David's works was held in Paris in May 1824. The object of this was to show the late and disastrous *Mars disarmed by Venus* (Plate VII*a*) of 1823. Thiers, the critic who had written so brilliantly about Delacroix's *Dante and Virgil* in 1822, was perceptive and honourable enough to marvel at David's vigour and the intensity of his colouring. But later in the same year, this curiosity was eclipsed by the exhibition in the Salon of Delacroix's *Massacres at Chios* and this immensely complex and sophisticated work seemed to put paid to the emotional innocence of David and the various ways in which it had been expressed.

At about this time it became a commonplace to deplore the

influence of David on painters of the younger generation and to represent him as a short-sighted autocrat who imposed his manner on all his pupils. Gros was presented as proof of the destructive power of David. Yet Gros is a classic example of self-destruction, a Romantic tragedy in which David plays only a symbolic role. This most brilliant of David's pupils was also the best-loved; David treated him like a son, overlooking his royalist principles, providing him with a safe-conduct to Italy in 1791, and applauding the outstanding success of Gros's *Napoleon at Jaffa* (Plate VIII*a*) in the Salon of 1804. Gros, like many morbidly sensitive people, had an over-active sense of guilt; thus, while ostensibly painting the clemency of Napoleon, he identified involuntarily with the victims of Napoleon's territorial ambitions, and the soldier who is suffering from the plague is a giant of a man on a totally different scale from the other figures. By the same token, Gros perceived that although this picture—and the *Battles of Aboukir* and *Eylau*—showed his gifts at their most characteristic, they constituted a disloyalty to David simply because they were different from the *Horatii* or the *Socrates*. After David's exile, master and pupil entered into one of those fatal sado-masochistic conspiracies all too common among people attached by strong bonds of love and jealousy. David's letters to Gros are filled with unacceptable advice: 'Quick, quick, read your Plutarch. You still haven't painted a real history picture'.[1] Gros's letters to David are filled with feeble expressions of loyalty: 'If only you were here you would stop the French school from falling apart'.[2] But Gros was the weaker man and although he had a flourishing atelier, he continued to think of himself as a pupil of David. In 1824, when Charles X visited the Panthéon, the cupola of which Gros had just decorated, and named him a Baron, Gros begged the King to allow David back to France. The King refused. At the end of the same year Girodet, a fellow pupil, died. At the funeral, Gros delivered himself of this astonishing statement: 'I accuse myself of being one of the first to have given the bad example which has since been followed, in not imparting to the subjects that I chose that severity which our master recommended and which he never ceased to demonstrate in his own works.'[3] Having said this, he collapsed at the graveside. The death of David himself in 1825 was a traumatic occurrence for Gros. He tried to make

[1] Quoted by J.-L. Jules David, op. cit.
[2] Ibid.
[3] L. Delécluze, *Louis David, sa vie et son école* (Paris, Calmann-Levy, 1855).

posthumous amends by turning his style into a parody of David's last and weakest manner. The Louvre ceilings of 1827 (*Mars Crowned by Victory*) (Plate VII*b*) are based on David's *Mars disarmed by Venus* which, ironically, was only partly painted by David. The laughable result was understood as further proof of David's autocracy by Gros's own pupils and the effect was irreversible. Gros lived a hollow life and painted hollow pictures for another eight years, then in 1835 committed suicide.

And yet the influence of David, which paradoxically is slight in Gros, remained pervasive for some time. It was consciously acknowledged only by Géricault, from whom David was flattered and delighted to receive a visit in 1820. Géricault, already two-thirds destroyed by his nervous instability and his tuberculosis, had left France for England the previous year after the fiasco of the state's attitude to *The Raft of the Medusa* (Plate VIII*b*), exhibited in the Salon of 1819. The fact that Géricault, like David, was left with this giant masterpiece on his hands, gave him considerable fellow-feeling with the painter of the *Oath of the Jeu de Paume* and the *Coronation of Napoleon* which had suffered the same fate. But Géricault was uniquely endowed to perceive the emotion that had gone into David's works. He alone seems to have understood the tragic drama of *Leonidas* and when painting the *Medusa* he is said to have paid special attention to this picture, possibly because it dealt with men whose death was almost upon them. Into the *Medusa* went much conscious emulation of David, particularly of *Leonidas* yet that profusion of powerful dying bodies with their great trailing arms signals to us reminiscences of David's earlier works, in particular the *Marat.*

I have said that David's emotional innocence made him appear curiously dated in and around 1824. Yet does this innocence not reappear to haunt the sophistication of the two painters who dominate the first generation of the nineteenth century, Ingres and Delacroix? Ingres, with his iron rigour and his violent emotions is close to David in character although he lacks the latter's humanity. To David's eighteenth-century Parisian alertness Ingres brings a more southern ease and sensuality, together with an obstinate and astonishing individuality which is amply demonstrated in the early works. Ingres became David's pupil in 1798; he was used as assistant when David painted Mme Récamier and in fact he executed the lamp. The effect of this famous beauty on an impressionable young man from the provinces can be adduced from the fact

that mentally he divested her of her white lawn dress and turned her into a harem fantasy; the *Grande Odalisque* (Plate IX*b*) was painted 14 years later but the connection is strong and unmistakable. Many of the beautiful early portraits of Ingres also betray an almost familial connection with those of David, yet the alterations are as significant as the similarities. M. Rivière (Plate IX*a*) sinks into his cushions, whereas M. Meyer (Plate X*b*) is perched on the edge of his chair, giving the impression of interrupted action and potential movement. The charming M. Bochet of Ingres (Plate X*a*) takes a secret pleasure in his own elegance; the equally charming M. Sériziat (Plate XI*a*), although equally elegant in his goffered shirt and brass-buttoned coat, looks outward rather than inward. The amorous sleekness of Ingres's sitters, their luxurious cat-like quality, differs vastly from the repertory of David's portraits which are of people no less beautiful but much busier, more purposeful, more distracted by events. Yet without a training in the studio that produced such portraits it is almost inconceivable that Ingres would have found his way and achieved technical mastery so rapidly.

And what of Delacroix, so often rushed forward to prove the demise of David's rule? How is it possible to view Delacroix's early development without thinking back to David, possibly with a certain grim amusement? The Romantic agony of Delacroix, although undoubtedly the product of his own powerful temperament and his inheritance from Gros, can also be seen, when compared with certain pictures by David, to be little more than a series of technical adaptations. The exquisite figure of Mlle Rose (Plate XI*b*), painted in the very early 1820s, connects with certain portraits painted by David in about 1800. Here is Mme Hamelin (Plate XII*a*). As she was a creole, like the Empress Josephine, David has allowed her to assume a certain languor in her pose. Nevertheless, her shoulders are braced and her head upright, whereas Mlle Rose appears to be taking the line of least resistance—note, incidentally, the packing case on which she sits and the rubbed grey ground that spell out an awareness of David's techniques. Yet the inclination of her head, her bent wrist and upturned palm signal to the world a kind of emotional resignation which is at the heart of Delacroix's personality, just as the involuntary tension of David's sitters betrays the emotional temper of the latter. And in the *Massacres at Chios* itself (Plate XII*b*), mixed up with the quotations from Poussin and Rubens and Velasquez and

even Ingres, is there not, once again, a memory of the *Marat*, the most powerful, the most haunting image of a world in flux?

Yet since his death David has never known a wide popularity outside a very restricted circle of devotees. The exhibition held in Paris in 1948 to mark the bicentenary of his birth misfired, for the shame of Vichy and Marshal Pétain was still too raw in the French consciousness to permit an unemotional reappraisal of David and his changing allegiances. The nineteenth century was not so blind. Yet even in the nineteenth century only Baudelaire had the imaginative equipment to interpret the complexity of David which David himself always manages to translate into images of deceptive simplicity. In 1846 there was a retrospective of French painting since 1789 at the Musée Classique du Bazar Bonne Nouvelle.[1] When Baudelaire saw the *Marat* in this exhibition he was drawn to the image as though it were a bottomless pit. I should like to quote at length the extraordinary words he wrote on this occasion.

> The divine Marat, one arm hanging out of the bath and letting slip his pen, his breast pierced by the sacrilegious wound, has just breathed his last breath. The water in the bath is red with blood, the paper is smeared with blood; on the floor the kitchen knife is steeped in blood. On the miserable construction of planks which was the indefatigable journalist's only furniture are the words, 'À Marat, David'. These details are historic and real, like a novel by Balzac. The drama is there, alive in all its lamentable horror, and by an extraordinary tour de force which makes this picture David's masterpiece and one of the great curiosities of modern art, there is nothing trivial or ignoble about it. The most astonishing thing about this unexpected poem is that it is painted with extreme rapidity, and when one appreciates the beauty of the design, the imagination is dumb with respect. This is the bread of the strong and the triumph of the spiritual; as cruel as nature, the picture has the fragrance of the ideal. Where is that ugliness that holy death has effaced with the tip of her wing? Marat can now defy Apollo; death has kissed him with her loving mouth and he rests in the calm of his metamorphosis. There is in this work something that is both tender and painful; in the cold air of that room, within those cold walls, around that cold funereal bath, a soul hovers. Will you permit us, politicians of all parties, and even you ferocious liberals of 1845, will you permit us to weep before this masterpiece by David?

How can one follow this? Only, I think, by taking a risk oneself. David may have been eclipsed by the Romantic movement and the more poetic and seductive conceptions of Dela-

[1] C. Baudelaire, *Le Musée classique du Bazar Bonne Nouvelle. Curiosités Esthétiques* (Paris, Calmann-Levy, 1928).

croix. But in another sense, David *is* the Romantic movement, or rather that part of it that survived when the enthusiasm for Gothic ruins and the novels of Sir Walter Scott had died a natural death. Throughout the nineteenth century writers from Stendhal to Zola were preoccupied with the concept of modernity. Baudelaire went so far as to ally Romanticism with the heroism of modern life. David's ability to illustrate the heroic quality of contemporary events, to live unremittingly in the present—his present—was his greatest gift to the generations that succeeded him and those who inherited the gift were sometimes only dimly aware of it. In 1860, for example, Baudelaire wrote a long essay which he entitled *The Painter of Modern Life*. The moral purpose of this book was to extol and give proper recognition to those who bear witness to the richness and complexity of the world, 'la saveur amère ou capiteuse du vin de la Vie', and the artist whom Baudelaire elects to demonstrate his theories in this instance is Constantin Guys, professional journalist and illustrator, whose vignettes of contemporary life delight the embittered but still humble Baudelaire. Through the images of Guys Baudelaire's sick spirit can digest the marvellous and multiform delights of the pageant of life. With typical generosity Baudelaire endows Guys with qualities and ideas which Guys certainly did not possess, but this wonderful piece of writing conveys a manner of seeing and relating which reminds me irresistibly of David, particularly when I look at drawings like those illustrated in Plate XIII*a* and *b*, both from the Chicago sketchbook. Here is Baudelaire on Guys:

> A regiment passes, going perhaps to the ends of the earth, filling the street with bugle calls as volatile and as persuasive as hope itself. In an instant Mr. G.'s eye has already seen, analysed, examined, the weapons, the appearance, the physiognomy of this troop. Glittering equipment, martial music, bold determined glances, heavy solemn moustaches—he has taken them all in, and in a few moments the resulting poem will have been virtually composed. See how his soul lives with the soul of that regiment, which marches like a single animal, proud image of delight in obedience . . .

Baudelaire continues (I omit a great deal here):

> Few men are endowed with the ability to see, fewer still possess the power of expression. Now, when others sleep, the artist is at his work table, concentrating on to a sheet of paper the gaze that was so recently fixed on the world, battling with his pencil, his pen, his brush, splashing water, wiping his pen on his shirt, driven, violent, active, as if he feared the images might escape him. And the images are born again on the

paper, natural and more than natural, beautiful and more than beautiful, singular, and endowed with a life as intense as the painter's own heart. All the information jumbled in his memory is classified, arranged, harmonized, and given the stamp of that kind of idealization which is the result of childlike perception, that is to say a perception sharp and magical by virtue of its innocence.[1]

And now, if I may, I should like to conclude by coming full circle. In the grim Paris of 1948, when the David bicentenary exhibition passed almost unnoticed, so irrelevant is art to the business of survival, one sensed a sort of national shame which extended to the painter whom the French were purporting to celebrate. Delécluze, his earliest biographer and critic, was the first to experience an embarrassed irritation with his subject's political flounderings, those changes of heart and of party which art historians feel themselves privileged to ignore. For how, in 1855, the date of Delécluze's study, could one make a hero out of one so manifestly, so obstinately, pig-headed and irrational? The only answer to this dilemma is to travel across the boundaries of scholarship to those of literature. One of the dearest of Tolstoy's characters, Levin, in *Anna Karenina*, makes this memorable remark about his half-brother: 'He lacks the necessary weakness.' This judgement is delivered in tones of indulgent distaste. Here I must declare my interest: I am with Levin. Fallibility, not perfection, seems to me the touchstone of humanity in an artist. And when common human frailty can rise to such heights of vision that Baudelaire recognized in the effigy of Marat, we witness something very great in the panorama of human creativity. David possessed in abundance the necessary weakness and also its indispensable corollary, the endless desire of the heart. Opinions still vary as to the validity of his endeavour. Many people will continue to take David at face value, that is to say, at the level of his subject matter, and to deplore, like Delécluze, his lack of fantasy and pictorial imagination. Others will be consumed by the energy that burns like a fire in nearly all his works up to and including 1814. They will discover, in this superficially repressive figure, a power of sensibility, of excitability, of emotional generosity which have their roots in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, perhaps a stronger and more positive force than the Romantic movement, which has always had a better press. Adherents of this latter group, far from deploring David's lack of imaginative

[1] C. Baudelaire, *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (Paris, *Le Figaro*, Nov.–Dec. 1860).

richness, may be reminded, as I am, of a concept dear to Stendhal, that of the happy few. The happy few, you remember, are those who remain emotionally alive, who never compromise, who never succumb to cynicism or the routine of the second-hand. The happy few are not necessarily happy. But they are never corrupted and rarely bored. The happy few possess what Baudelaire calls 'impeccable naïveté', the ability to see the world always afresh, either in its tragedy or in its hope. For the happy few, art and life are indistinguishable. I should like to leave you with the suggestion that the true place of Jacques-Louis David is with this small number.