

Art and Revolutionary Propaganda in France

While Britain prospered after the American War of Independence, France was plunged into revolution and political chaos. The American revolt against British rule had shown the French how citizens could fight for freedom and equality, and they did not wait long to follow suit.

The French Revolution (see *Major Events of the French Revolution, 1789–95*, page 96) had a complex origin. Periodic food shortages, a political system in which the rapidly growing middle class was entirely excluded from political power, and an intellectual climate dominated by *philosophes* who preached social and political reform combined to make a volatile mixture. The spark that set off the explosion was an attempt by Louis XVI (ruled 1774–92) to raise taxes. The King hoped to legitimate the tax increase by obtaining the backing of a select ad hoc committee of aristocrats, high-ranking clergymen, and wealthy bourgeois. Reluctant to become the target of public criticism, however, the committee advised the King to summon the Estates General, a political body composed of 300 elected representatives of the aristocracy, an equal number of clergymen, and 600 members of the third estate (commoners). This development was unexpected, for, although it had been in existence since the fourteenth century, the Estates General had not been summoned since 1614.

Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*, 1793. (Detail of FIG 4-6.)

The elected representatives of the Estates General met first at Versailles on May 5, 1789. Not surprisingly, they were equally divided between the aristocrats and the clergy, who sided with the King, and the members of the third estate, who wanted to reform the tax system and the government in general. Convinced that they could never gain the upper hand within the framework of the Estates General, the third estate formed a new governing entity, the National Assembly. At a meeting in an indoor tennis court near the official meeting room, they swore that they would not disperse until they had given France a new constitution. Unable to control them, the King told the clergy and nobility to join the third estate in a "Constituent Assembly" charged with writing a constitution. Meanwhile, he prepared the army to take action if necessary.

While these events were taking place in Versailles, food shortages had created unrest in Paris and provincial French towns. Hunger, and fear caused by the sight of gathering troops, led to riots. On July 14, 1789, an angry mob stormed the Bastille fortress in Paris and freed the political prisoners held inside. The Constituent Assembly saw only one way to pacify the violent crowds. On August 4 it officially abolished the existing absolute regime. Three weeks later (August 27) it issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which granted liberty and equality to all Frenchmen. When the King refused to ratify the decisions of the assembly, a large mob marched to the royal



du 10 juillet 1793
Mère de Charles
Corday au Croyon
Mardi.
Allezte que je fais
bien. M. de la
pour vous dire
après quelques

À MARAT,
DAVID.

Major Events of the French Revolution 1789–1795

May 5, 1789	Estates General convene at Versailles
June 20, 1789	Oath of the Tennis Court
July 14, 1789	Storming of the Bastille
August 4, 1789	Constituent Assembly abolishes absolute monarchy
August 27, 1789	Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which became the preamble of the constitution of 1791 and most subsequent French constitutions
October 5–6, 1789	Parisian mob walks to Versailles and forces the royal family to come to Paris
July 12, 1790	Civil Constitution of the Clergy (reorganization of the Roman Catholic Church in France on a national basis)
September 3, 1791	First Constitution; Constituent Assembly replaced by Legislative Assembly
April 1792	Beginning of the French Revolutionary Wars
August 10, 1792	Attack on the Tuileries Palace in Paris, followed by suspension of the monarchy
September 21, 1792	First assembly of the National Convention; the monarchy is abolished and the First Republic proclaimed
January 21, 1793	Execution of Louis XVI
April 6, 1793	Establishment of Committee of Public Safety
June 22, 1793	Adoption of Second Republican Constitution
July 1793	Robespierre enters Committee of Public Safety
September 1793	Beginning of Robespierre's "Reign of Terror," during which 17,000 people are executed
October 16, 1793	Execution of Marie Antoinette
July 27, 1794	End of Robespierre's reign
July 28, 1794	Execution of Robespierre
July 1794	Disbanding of the Committee of Public Safety
August 22, 1795	Adoption of Constitution of the Year III, which establishes the Directory

palace in Versailles and forcibly took him and his family back to Paris.

Meanwhile, the Constituent Assembly proceeded to write a new constitution based on the principles set forth in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The initial plan was to create a constitutional monarchy in which the King would remain, with his powers severely curtailed. But the King's unwillingness to compromise eventually led to the abolition of the monarchy and the proclamation of the French Republic. A new governing body, the National Convention, condemned the King to death for treason. Louis XVI went to the guillotine on January 21, 1793; his wife, Marie Antoinette, followed on October 16.

The revolution ended the old world order, in which kings had been sacrosanct and people had accepted the place in society given to them by birth (see *Absolutism*, page 19). It ushered in a new era of political equality and social mobility, in which power and wealth had to be earned rather than inherited, and in which the law of the land, rather than the whim of the ruler, governed.

Marie Antoinette, Before and After

Nothing illustrates the drama of the French Revolution better than the juxtaposition of two portraits of Queen Marie Antoinette, painted at an interval of fifteen years. The first portrait (FIG. 4-1), by the renowned French portraitist Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755–1842), is a traditional ruler portrait. The Queen appears in a low-cut gown, her formidable skirt propped up by a panier or whalebone frame, against the obligatory backdrop of column and drapery. Abundant flounces, ribbons, ruffles, and tassels enhance the dress, which is completed by a long train. The Queen's towering hairpiece with ostrich feathers accentuates her regal stature. A marble bust of Louis XVI on a ledge, and the royal crown on the table, mark her position as the most powerful woman in Europe.

4-1 (opposite) **Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun**, *Portrait of Marie-Antoinette*, 1778–9. Oil on canvas, 9' x 6'4" (2.73 x 1.94 m). Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.





4-2 Jacques-Louis David, *Queen Marie Antoinette on the Way to the Scaffold*, 1793. Pen on paper, 6 x 4" (15 x 10 cm). Musée du Louvre, E. de Rothschild Collection, Paris.

Compare this image of Marie Antoinette, imperious and remote, with a drawing of her by Jacques-Louis David, made on October 16, 1793 (FIG. 4-2). It shows the former queen, hands tied behind her back, seated on a wooden cart that is taking her to the guillotine. Removed from the protection of the palace, she is exposed to the prying stares of the crowd, as well as to their obscene shouts and angry gestures. Gone are her tall, powdered wig and the elaborate gown that bespoke her unlimited wealth. In her simple, coarse prison dress, with a linen bonnet carelessly flopped on her short greasy hair, Marie Antoinette, only thirty-eight years old, looks like an old hag. Only her bold upright pose still gives a hint of her former glory.

In three years the French monarchy, once one of the most powerful institutions in Europe, had been annihilated. France had changed for ever, and the fate of Marie Antoinette in particular embodied that change. Outsiders watched the events in France in horror and stupefaction. Perhaps Edmund Burke expressed their feelings most succinctly, when he said, in a short speech commemorating Marie Antoinette's death:

O, what a revolution! And what a heart must I

have, to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall! Little did I . . . dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her, in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honor, and of cavaliers!

David's Brutus

Coincidentally, the official opening of the Salon of 1789 came the day before the proclamation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Jacques-Louis David, by now a celebrated painter and sought-after teacher in France, had submitted three paintings to the Salon. The most important of these was the belated product of a commission by the King's Director of Royal Buildings, Count D'Angiviller. The painting's subject, *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons for Burial* (FIG. 4-3), was not unlike that of *The Oath of the Horatii* in that it invited the viewer to think about man's conflicting loyalties to family and society.

After having led the movement to oust the last Roman king, Tarquinius, in 509 BCE, the Roman consul Lucius Junius Brutus discovered that there was a plot to reestablish the monarchy. As the plot was unraveled, it appeared that his own two sons had been involved. They were scourged and decapitated on Brutus' orders. The Roman historian Plutarch, who recorded the event in his *Lives*, commented that Brutus' deed was "difficult . . . either to praise or to blame sufficiently." How, indeed, should one judge a man who, for the sake of the republic (the *res publica* or "public cause"), kills his own two sons? David addressed this moral question in his painting.

David's painting represents the interior of Brutus' home as the lictors (the ancient equivalent of today's policemen) return the bodies of his two sons. As the first body enters the house on a stretcher, Brutus remains seated on his chair, purposely turning his back to the entrance. He feigns indifference, but his gestures indicate his tension. Seated on the edge of the chair, his legs are crossed, his toes curled tightly. In his left hand he grips the letter implicating his sons, while his right arm is raised in an indecisive gesture that might be read as a sign of self-accusation.

While Brutus tries to be stoical in the face of his sons' deaths, his wife and daughters are devastated at the sight of the bodies. As the mother tries to run towards her sons, one of her daughters faints in her arms. The other shields her eyes, so as not to see the horrendous spectacle. A female servant turns away, not in apparent indifference, like Brutus, but to hide her grief and wipe away her tears.

Light plays an important role in the painting, and the carefully organized *chiaroscuro* adds significantly to its dramatic impact. While Brutus is enveloped in darkness, indicative of his mood of inner strife and despondency, the group of grieving women in the center is strongly lit. Yet the greatest *chiaroscuro* contrast exists between two



4-3 **Jacques-Louis David**, *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons for Burial*, 1789. Oil on canvas, 10'8" x 13'11" (3.25 x 4.25 m). Musée du Louvre, Paris.

inanimate objects—the allegorical statue of Rome, set in almost total gloom near the entrance, and the highlighted sewing basket placed near the center of the painting, on the table. This is certainly no accident. For these two objects encapsulate the conflict between nation and family, and between duty and love, that is at the heart of this painting.

Although David had begun *Brutus* in 1787, well before the revolution, the painting, when exhibited two years later, seemed a comment on the events taking place at the time. Brutus' act of toppling the monarchy and returning the power to the senate could be compared with the abolishment of the old regime and the restoration of power first to the Estates General and later to the Constituent Assembly. Few people in 1789, however, seem to have seen the painting that way. Instead, critics focused on the moral tenor and the emotional impact of the painting, which several of them characterized as "sublime." They also commented on the painting's masterful execution, praising its powerful *chiaroscuro* effects.

As the events of the revolution unfolded, however, the story of Brutus came to be seen as the classical example for modern revolutionaries. Brutus was viewed as a revolutionary hero and martyr, who had made the ultimate sacrifice to the republican cause. When David exhibited *Brutus* again two years later, at the Salon of 1791, one critic wrote: "Brutus, your virtue has cost you dearly . . . Rome pities you, but Rome will inscribe these words in marble: *To Brutus, who sacrificed his children to his grateful Fatherland.*"

Commemorating the Heroes and Martyrs of the Revolution

Although David's *Brutus* became very closely associated with the French Revolution, it is uncertain whether and to what extent David intended it to be a revolutionary work. When D'Angiviller commissioned the painting in 1787, it was agreed that the work would be delivered in time for the Salon of that year and that it would depict

the legendary Roman hero Coriolanus. David not only failed to deliver the painting in time, he also changed the subject (though it is not known whether he did so with or without the count's permission). To some art historians, David's attitude toward the commission was merely cavalier; to others it was nothing short of a sign of rebellion against the artistic establishment of his day.

In either case, David was certainly interested in the events of his time. Like most members of the third estate, he was dissatisfied with the old regime. As an artist, he was particularly opposed to the French Royal Academy, which, like the nation itself, was ruled by a select few who guarded their own special interests. It was to reform the Academy that David became involved in politics. In 1790 he joined the radical "Jacobin" group. Between the summers of 1792 and 1794, when the Jacobins were in power, he held several government positions. He was elected deputy to the Assembly, where he voted for the deaths of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. In 1793 he served as president of the Jacobin club. In that capacity, he played a major part in abolishing the Academy, which was replaced in 1795 by the Institut de France, or French Institute.

In 1791 the Jacobin party commissioned David to paint *The Oath of the Tennis Court*, which, had it been completed, would have been the first major painting to memorialize

a revolutionary event. The huge canvas was to be hung in the meeting hall of the National Assembly, and the funds were to be raised through advance subscriptions to print reproductions of the painting.

Like Copley's *The Death of the Earl of Chatham* (see FIG. 3-19), painted a decade earlier, *The Oath* was a contemporary history painting that involved a great many portraits. Six hundred and thirty men had signed the oath, and many more had been present to witness the event. It was, of course, impossible, to paint individual portraits of all those who had been in the tennis court. Yet it was important that the leaders were portrayed well enough for the public to recognize them.

David worked on *The Oath* for more than a year, preparing a large preliminary drawing and sketching the composition on the canvas. He had already made some progress on the individual portraits when, in the spring of 1792, he decided to abandon the painting. This decision was certainly due to the turbulent political events of the early 1790s. The revolutionaries, though unified at first, had quickly become divided between radicals (Jacobins) and moderates (Girondins). So extreme was their conflict that, depending on which party was in control, many of the former heroes of 1789 became enemies of the state. When we learn that the central figure in *The Oath*, a

4-4 **Jacques-Louis David**, Preliminary drawing for *The Oath of the Tennis Court*, 1791. Pen, brown ink, and brown wash, heightened with white, on paper, 26 x 42" (65 cm x 1.05 m). Musée du Louvre, Paris (on long-term loan to Musée National du Château de Versailles).





4-5 Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Tennis Court* (fragment of the unfinished painting), 1791–2. Oil on canvas, 11'9" x 21'3" (3.58 x 6.48 m). Musée National du Château de Versailles, Versailles.

Girondin, was guillotined by the Jacobins in 1793, it is easy to understand that for David to complete the picture would have been not merely irrelevant but outright dangerous.

David's preliminary drawing for *The Oath* (FIG. 4-4), which was exhibited at the Salon of 1791, suggests how the finished painting might have looked. The scene is set inside the bare wooden walls of an indoor tennis court. In the center, standing on a table, the soon-to-be-guillotined Jean-Sylvain Baillie (1736–1793), president of the third estate, reads the oath to the deputies on either side of him. They cheer him on, waving their arms and shouting their approval. In front of Baillie, three liberal clergymen of the day—a monk, a priest, and a Protestant minister—embrace and shake hands. (This detail was a figment of David's imagination, but it helped to symbolize the new political order, in which old divisions such as religion and class were obsolete.) A strong wind blows through the open windows, causing one of the curtains to billow like a flag. Bending over the window sills, men, women, and children watch the scene. Pointing down at the deputies, a father impresses upon his sons the importance of the historic event that is taking place under their very eyes.

In the unfinished canvas, which measures some 11 feet by 20, portrait heads of several signatories of the oath, painted from life, are placed on meticulously drawn nude bodies (FIG. 4-5). David, no doubt, intended to clothe them in the end, as we know from the preliminary drawing for the painting. But by using nude bodies, he sought to gain better control of the poses and gestures in his final com-

position. Although it may seem unusual to us today, David's method conformed to contemporary practice, which was centered on life drawing.

David did not receive any other official commission for paintings commemorating revolutionary events. Instead, his artistic skills were put to use in designing new republican fashions and in organizing revolutionary parades, festivals, and funerals of "martyrs of the revolution." In connection with the last, he painted three major works in 1793–4, all representing men who had died for the revolutionary cause. Of the three, *The Death of Marat* (FIG. 4-6) is by far the best-known. Painted in 1793, it represents Jean-Paul Marat (1743–1793), a Jacobin journalist who was murdered in his bathtub. Marat, who suffered from a skin disease, used to take medicinal baths while writing. On July 13, 1793, Charlotte Corday (1768–1793), working for the Girondins, entered his house under false pretenses. Once admitted, she drew out a hidden knife and stabbed Marat in the heart.

David had known Marat well and had visited him in his house on the day before his murder. He was put in charge of Marat's public funeral, and was inspired to paint a commemorative work as well. His painting, in effect, was based on the memory of his visit, when he had observed the "block of wood by [Marat's] side, on which stood paper and ink, and his hand, emerging from his bathtub, [which] was writing his thoughts about the salvation of the people." In the painting, Marat is represented after the murder. His body is slumped towards one side of the tub; his head, wrapped in a linen towel, is resting on the back. In his right hand



4-6 Jacques-Louis David,
The Death of Marat, 1793.
 Oil on canvas, 65 x 50"
 (1.65 x 1.28 m). Musées
 Royaux des Beaux-Arts de
 Belgique, Brussels.

he still holds the quill, in the left a letter from Charlotte Corday asking him to receive her. On the wooden block, next to the inkstand and quill, we see letters and papers and, inscribed on its front, the words: "A [to] Marat, David."

David represents a national hero in a very unusual way. His painting differs from Flaxman's monument to Nelson (see FIG. 2-25) and Barry's posthumous portrait of William Pitt the Elder (see FIG. 3-17), for example. The allegorical imagery and grandiose architectural settings that were customary for memorial images in the eighteenth century are absent here. Marat looks vulnerable, even pitiful, as he slouches, naked, in the tub. David has cleverly kept the image from being absurd, however, by transforming the ridiculous into the sublime. He uses a vertical canvas, so

that Marat's body stands out dramatically against the dark green backdrop. (David may have been inspired by his own design for Marat's wake, in which the body was laid out in the tall, dark sanctuary of an unused church building; FIG. 4-7). In addition, he has minimized the grisly details of the murder, such as bruises and blood stains. Instead, Marat's body and face express serenity and dignity. It is not coincidental that the pose of his right arm resembles that of Christ in Michelangelo's *Pietà* in St Peter's in Rome. We are, in effect, led to compare Marat's death with that of Christ—to see it as a martyr's death for the "salvation of the people."

It is instructive to compare David's painting with any one of the numerous prints that were circulated after Marat's



4-7 **Anonymous**, *The Funeral of Jean-Paul Marat in the Church of the Cordeliers*, 1794. Oil on canvas, 11 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 18 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (29.6 x 46.8 cm). Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

4-8 (right) **Anonymous**, *In Memory of Marat, Friend of the People, Assassinated 13 July 1793*, 1793. Etching and aquatint, 7'11" x 11'2" (2.41 x 3.41 m). Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.



death. In nearly all of them, Marat, the "friend of the people," is contrasted with the "heinous murderess" Corday. An anonymous print of 1793 (FIG. 4-8) shows Marat in his tub casting a final glance at Liberty, seated by his side. Meanwhile, the fleeing Corday, accompanied by a dragon, is pulled back by her hair by the allegorical figure of Vengeance. Placing David's *Marat* in the context of this and other popular images, we can truly appreciate David's unique conception. By eliminating all action, all allegorical references, and nearly all allusions to Marat's violent death, he has created a true icon of the revolution.

Less than a year after Marat's death, the Jacobins fell from power and David lost his prominent political position. Imprisoned twice, he was lucky to avoid the guillotine.

Ironically, David, who had once upheld the ideals of the revolution—liberty, equality, and fraternity—became one of the favorite artists of the man who was to embody imperialism, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Creating a Revolutionary Iconography

Under the old regime, power had been the exclusive privilege of the monarch. The traditional image of government was, therefore, the image of the king's body, a perfect illustration of the famous dictum of Louis XIV, "The State, it is I." The king's image was enhanced by the use of emblems, symbols representing abstract concepts related