



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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20-04
JACQUES-LOUIS
DAVID

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Jacques-Louis David, *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries*, 1812, National Gallery of Art

- This is Section 20 on Neo-Classicism and this talk is on the French artist Jacques-Louis David (pronounced "zhahk loo-ee dah-VEED"). This is his portrait of Napoleon that I discuss later.



Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825),
Self-portrait, 1794, 81 × 64 cm,
Louvre Museum

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *Self-portrait*, 1794, 81 × 64 cm, Louvre Museum

- But first his life— he was **serious, intense and immersed in the horrors and the drama** of revolution and empire.
- He was **born in 1748** in Paris into a prosperous family. His early childhood was marked by tragedy when his father died in a duel when David was about nine years old, leaving a profound impact on him. Raised primarily by his mother, David was exposed to an environment that valued education and the arts.
- In 1775, David won the **prestigious Prix de Rome**, an award that allowed promising young artists to study in Italy at the French Academy in Rome. He spent five years (1775–1780) in Rome, studying Ancient Greek and Roman art, Renaissance masters, and classical sculpture.
- Before his visit to Rome he had explored the Rococo style but on his return he fully **embraced Neoclassicism**.
- Later, he became **the artistic voice of the revolution**, a friend of Robespierre, and even **voted for the execution of Louis XVI**. For example, his work, *The Oath of the Horatii*, became a symbol of patriotism and his *Death of Marat* transformed a political assassination into a symbol of revolutionary martyrdom.
- This **self-portrait was painted in 1794**, when he was 46, during one of the most turbulent phases of the French Revolution when he was a **member and deputy to the National Convention**. The portrait reveals a sober, intense man confronting the consequences of revolutionary violence and political

responsibility.

- He painted this during the **Reign of Terror** when the revolutionaries turned on themselves. He was arrested twice and this was painted **when he was in prison**. Thanks to his friends and even his political opponents who **campaigns for his release** he survived and became the official painter to **Napoleon Bonaparte**. He **probably survived** as he was not seen as dangerous but as useful to the new regime and he continued to paint even after Napoleon's fall and his David's exile to Brussels.
- His influence on art **shaped European art into the 19th century**. He was an artist and a revolutionary, leaving behind a body of work that is visually stunning and historically significant.

NOTES

- He was born on August 30, 1748, in Paris into a **prosperous family**. His early childhood was marked by **tragedy** when his **father died in a duel** when David was about **nine years old**, leaving a profound impact on him. Raised by his mother, he was brought up in a household that valued education and the arts. He showed an early talent for drawing and was sent to study art. He began a rigorous training course under the classicising painter **Marie-Joseph Vien**.
- The austere colour scheme and direct gaze convey seriousness and resolve, reflecting David's involvement in the revolutionary government, including his vote for King Louis XVI's execution. The tight facial expression and stark lighting emphasize his awareness of the gravity of his actions and role.
- By mid-1794, thousands were being executed monthly, causing increasing alarm even within Robespierre's own faction. His growing dictatorial powers, combined with his relentless purges and moralistic governance, alienated many deputies and officials who feared they might be next. The Thermidorian Reaction represented these groups coming together to remove Robespierre to end the Terror and stabilize the government.

BIOGRAPHY

1748

Jacques-Louis David was born on August 30, 1748, in Paris into a prosperous family. His early childhood was marked by tragedy when his father died in a duel when David was about nine years old, leaving a profound impact on him. Raised primarily by his mother, David was exposed to an environment that

valued education and the arts. Showing early talent in drawing, he was sent to study art and began rigorous training under the classicising painter Marie-Joseph Vien. This education grounded him in the principles of classical art and history, which would define his mature work. Growing up in the intellectual climate of Paris, David was heavily influenced by Enlightenment ideals, which would later connect deeply with the political and cultural upheavals he experienced in his lifetime.

1775

In 1775, David secured the prestigious Prix de Rome, an award that allowed promising young artists to study in Italy at the French Academy in Rome. He spent five formative years (1775–1780) in Rome, immersing himself in the study of Ancient Greek and Roman art, Renaissance masters, and classical sculpture. This period was crucial in shaping his style, as he absorbed the austere, noble qualities of classical forms, which he would elevate in his own paintings. David returned briefly to Rome in 1784–1785 to continue his studies. His time abroad refined his neoclassical approach—a clear, moral, and rational style portraying virtues like sacrifice and patriotism—positioning him as a leader of the movement against the Rococo style prevailing in France.

1783

By 1783, David's career had advanced significantly, culminating in his acceptance as a member of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris. This was a marked recognition, confirmed by his early successes with painting historical subjects. Among these, "The Oath of the Horatii" (1784) brought him fame and established his reputation as the leading figure of Neoclassicism. The painting's emphasis on austere design, heroic themes, and moral rigor appealed strongly to the aristocracy and intellectual class. His ascent into official recognition also coincided with his growing social circle; in 1782, he married Marguerite Charlotte Pécoul, with whom he had several children. The stability of his family life supported his expanding influence in both the artistic and social realms.

1789

The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 marked a turning point both in France and in David's life. An active supporter of revolutionary ideals, David was elected a deputy to the revolutionary parliament and played a significant role in arts reform, including the abolition of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. His work echoed the political climate, as he produced

powerful revolutionary imagery, including "The Death of Marat" (1793), memorializing the murdered radical leader Jean-Paul Marat with poignant political symbolism. David was deeply connected with the Jacobin radical leader Maximilien Robespierre and effectively presided over revolutionary arts policy, shaping much of the official propaganda. This period was tumultuous yet productive; David's art fused political commitment with neoclassical ideals, promoting the sacrifice and civic virtues of the new Republic.

1794

In 1794, David's close association with Robespierre ended dramatically when the latter was executed and David himself was imprisoned during the Thermidorian Reaction. The fall of Robespierre saw the end of the Jacobin Terror and a cooling of the revolutionary fervor that David had helped to energize through his art and political involvement. Following his release in 1795, David turned largely toward teaching and mentoring young artists, influencing the next generation of French painters. His revolutionary zeal diminished somewhat as he adjusted to post-Terror France, yet he remained a significant cultural figure, increasingly oriented toward the new power rising in France.

1797

David first met Napoleon Bonaparte in 1797 and quickly became an admirer. His association with Napoleon shaped his later career as he transitioned from revolutionary artist to imperial court painter. After Napoleon's successful coup in 1799, David was commissioned to celebrate key moments of the new regime, including the famous "Napoleon Crossing the Alps" (1801), depicting Napoleon heroically atop a rearing horse. David's style evolved into an Empire aesthetic during this period, characterized by warmer colors and imperial grandeur, aligning with Napoleon's ambitions to link himself with classical emperors. David's influence was central in crafting Napoleon's visual mythology and political legitimacy.

1805

Between 1805 and 1807, David completed one of his most ambitious projects, "The Coronation of Napoleon," documenting the elaborate ceremony at Notre-Dame where Napoleon crowned himself Emperor. This monumental painting involved intensive preparation: David attended the event, made numerous sketches, and even arranged sittings with important figures like Empress Joséphine and Pope Pius VII. The painting entailed heroic scale and precision, symbolizing the fusion of ancient imperial ideals

with Napoleonic modernity. On Napoleon's behalf, David became the official court painter, receiving high honors including the Legion of Honor. This period witnessed David at the zenith of his career, blending artistic genius with the political grandeur of Empire France.

1815

Following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and the subsequent Bourbon Restoration in 1815, David's fortunes reversed. Because of his prominent role in revolutionary politics and his association with Napoleon, David faced political exile and chose to live in Brussels, Belgium. In exile, his artistic output slowed and shifted; he no longer produced grand history paintings but focused on smaller works and teaching. His later years were marked by relative quiet and reflection, though he continued to exert influence through his pupils. A carriage accident in 1825 severely weakened him. David died on December 29, 1825, in Brussels. Because of his political past, he was buried in Belgium, but his heart was returned to Paris, symbolizing his enduring legacy in French art history.

REFERENCES

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-Portrait_%28David%29



Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *Andromache Mourning Hector*, 1783, 275 × 203 cm, Louvre Museum

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *Andromache Mourning Hector*, 1783, 275 × 203 cm, Louvre Museum

- This is ***Andromache Mourning Hector*** (pronounced "an-drom-uh-kee") and shows the moment from Homer's *Iliad* where Andromache, widow of Hector the Trojan prince, grieves over his dead body amid the devastated city of Troy. Hector was crown prince of Troy and commander-in-chief of the army during the ten-year siege. He was admired by both Trojans and Greeks for his courage, nobility, and sense of duty. He was **killed by Achilles** after being **tricked by the goddess Athena** who appeared to Hector as his brother offering to help him. After killed Hector Achilles **dishonoured his body by dragging it** behind a chariot around Troy's walls. Later, Achilles was killed by Hector's brother Paris who shot an arrow into Achilles heel, his one weak spot. The arrow was guided by the god Apollo.
- The figures are **monumental and sculptural**, with great composure and dignity rather than overt emotion. The tightly controlled composition reflects Enlightenment ideals of reason and moral seriousness. The choice of subject mirrors David's growing interest in history painting as a vehicle for teaching civic virtue through sacrifice and noble grief.
- It was influenced by the art he found in Rome. After four failed attempts David won the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1775. This funded promising young artists to study at the French Academy in Rome. He spent five years there, immersing

himself in the study of Ancient Greek and Roman art, Renaissance masters, and classical sculpture. This period was crucial in shaping his style, as he absorbed the austere, noble qualities of classical forms, which he would elevate in his own paintings.

- On his return he rejected the elaborate and frivolous Rococo style in favour of Neoclassicism. This was an 18th- and early-19th-century art movement inspired by the art and culture of classical antiquity. It favoured simplicity, clarity, and disciplined form based on the ideals of harmony, proportion, and restrained emotion found in classical sculpture, architecture, and literature. Neoclassical works emphasises clean lines, balanced compositions, and often depict historical or mythological subjects that carry moral or civic messages.

NOTES

- Around this time, David was becoming more involved with the Royal Academy in Paris and establishing his reputation as a painter who combined classical form with contemporary political values. David's method was deeply influenced by **classical sculpture**, and it is often said he studied statues like the Laocoön to capture the tension between pain and restraint. This work prepared the ground for his later revolutionary masterpieces by focusing on themes of **honour, duty, and the costs of war**. The painting remains a striking example of early Neoclassical history painting and marked a turning point in David's artistic career.
- David secured this prize with his painting "Erasistratus Discovering the Cause of Antiochus' Disease." The subject was set by the judges and required the artist to depict a complex narrative from classical antiquity. David had attempted to win the prize four times, facing repeated disappointments and even reportedly staging a hunger strike after one of his losses. Upon finally winning in 1774 with this composition, he departed for Rome the following year, accompanied by his mentor Joseph-Marie Vien, who had just been appointed director of the French Academy in Rome.

REFERENCES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andromache_Mourning_Hector



Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825),
The Oath of the Horatii, 1784/85,
 329.8 cm × 424.8 cm, Louvre
 Museum

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Oath of the Horatii*, 1784/85, 329.8 cm × 424.8 cm, Louvre Museum

- When Jacques-Louis David completed ***The Oath of the Horatii*** in 1784–85, he was already an ambitious artist, but **this work transformed him into the leading figure** of French Neoclassicism. **Commissioned by Louis XVI** for the new Salon space in the Louvre, the painting was intended to **promote themes of loyalty and duty**. David chose a **story from Livy's history of early Rome**: three brothers, the Horatii, are called upon to settle a war with the neighbouring city of Alba Longa by fighting three champions, the Curiatii. Victory would spare hundreds of lives, but the cost could be the brothers' own.
- David shows the **decisive moment**: the father holds out three swords, his arm rigid like a column, as the brothers reach forward in unison to swear their oath. On the right, **the women collapse in grief**—one is the sister of the Horatii but engaged to a Curiatius, the other a sister-in-law to both families. The painting is built with the clarity and balance of Roman architecture: three arches frame three distinct emotional groups—duty, command, and sorrow.
- This composition was no accident. David had just returned from Rome, where he **spent hours sketching ancient ruins**, studying sculpture, and absorbing the principles of classical design. He was **determined to break from the soft, decorative Rococo style** still popular in Paris. Instead, he embraced hard outlines, subdued colours, and moral seriousness.
- An interesting anecdote: David originally planned a **more chaotic, battle-ready**

scene, but while in Rome he saw the **potential in stillness and restraint**. By freezing the moment of commitment, he gave the work a moral weight that appealed to both royal patrons and reform-minded intellectuals.

- When it was exhibited at the **Salon of 1785**, the painting caused a **sensation**. It was read not only as a call to civic virtue but—by some—a **veiled call for political reform**. In the years leading to the French Revolution, *The Oath of the Horatii* would be **remembered as a turning point** where art, politics, and history converged on one monumental canvas.

NOTES

- Completed in 1784, the **Oath of the Horatii** is widely regarded as his **breakthrough masterpiece**. It encapsulates the Neoclassical ideals that he championed: **heroic sacrifice, patriotism, and loyalty to the state** above personal interests.
- The painting depicts a Roman legend in which **three Horatii brothers swear an oath to defend Rome**, pledging to sacrifice their lives if necessary. The rigid, angular poses and the severe composition embody Enlightenment notions of discipline, rationality, and moral clarity. The women in the background, in contrast, illustrate the personal toll of political conflict, their poised sorrow balancing the brothers' stoic determination.
- The story dramatises a conflict between the cities of **Rome and Alba Longa**. Rather than engage in all-out war, the two cities agreed to resolve their dispute through combat between three champions from each side. The Romans chose the **three Horatii brothers**, and the Albans selected the **three Curiatii brothers**. The tragedy is that one of the sisters of the Horatii was engaged to one of the Curiatii and a sister of the Curiatii was married to a Horatius brother. So whoever won there would be personal grief in the family. In the duel two of the Horatii brothers are killed, but the surviving Horatius cleverly defeats all three Curiatii, securing victory for Rome. Upon returning, the sole surviving brother is confronted by his sister Camilla, who grieves the death of her fiancé who is one of the Curiatii. In a fit of rage, Horatius kills Camilla for mourning the enemy, leading to a trial where he is acquitted, emphasizing the supremacy of public duty over private feeling.
- David rejected the frivolity and ornamentation of Rococo art to create this powerful moral narrative, presenting his figures almost as living statues drawn from classical bas-reliefs. The painting struck a chord as **France**

approached revolutionary upheaval, becoming **a symbol embraced by revolutionaries** who valued duty to the republic. Notably, **David used live models** and studied Roman sculpture meticulously to achieve the clarity and emotional impact. The Oath of the Horatii solidified David's reputation as a pioneering history painter capable of marrying classical aesthetics with urgent contemporary messages. It is often seen as a precursor to his more explicitly political works during the Revolution.

REFERENCES

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oath_of_the_Horatii



Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Death of Socrates*, 1787, 129.5 × 196.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Death of Socrates*, 1787, 129.5 × 196.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

- David completed the *Death of Socrates* in 1787 during a period of rising intellectual ferment in France. The painting depicts the philosopher Socrates choosing to drink poison hemlock rather than compromise his principles—a **symbol of moral integrity, courage, and commitment to truth amid adversity**.
- The orderly geometry of the composition and the calm, muscular figure of Socrates contrast with the sorrow and agitation of his followers, highlighting the **triumph of reason over emotion**. Painted just before the Revolution, the work implicitly addresses **issues of justice, law, and conscience** that were vigorously debated at the time.
- Socrates's pointing hand gestures toward the heavens, symbolizing transcendental ideals beloved by Enlightenment thinkers, with whom David closely associated. The **stoic acceptance of death** embodies values that David admired and sought to propagate through his art. David's careful study of classical sculpture and philosophy is evident in the precise anatomy and dramatic narrative. This painting **marked his technical and intellectual maturity**, and reinforced **his position as the leading Neoclassical artist in France**. *The Death of Socrates* foreshadowed many of David's later works that featured themes of sacrifice and civic virtue in revolutionary contexts.

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_The_Death_of_Socrates_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jacques-Louis_David_-_The_Death_of_Socrates_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436105>



Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, 1789, 323 × 422 cm, Louvre Museum

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, 1789, 323 × 422 cm, Louvre Museum

Depicted people Lucius Junius Brutus, Vitellia, Titus Junius Brutus, Tiberius Junius Brutus

- Painted in 1789, *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* depicts a harrowing moment in Roman republican lore. **Lucius Junius Brutus** (pronounced "loo-key-ous tar-quni-ee-ous superb-ous"), founder of the Roman Republic, is shown **sitting grimly in the foreground** as the **bodies of his sons**—condemned for **treason**—are brought to him. The painting dramatises the tension between **private grief and public duty**, capturing **Brutus's stoic sacrifice** for the State above personal sorrow.
- Brutus overthrew the last king of Rome, **Lucius Tarquinius Superbus**, to **establish a republic**. Soon after, a conspiracy aimed at **restoring the monarchy** was uncovered, and **Brutus's own sons** were found among the conspirators. Bound by his commitment to republicanism and the rule of law, **Brutus was compelled to condemn his sons to death for their betrayal**. The painting does not depict the execution itself, but imagines the wrenching aftermath: the bodies of Brutus's sons are returned for burial by the lictors (official Roman guards), as Brutus sits in shadow, stoic but visibly tense, clutching the decree of execution. On the other side of the scene, his wife and daughters react in anguish, dramatising the deep personal cost of his civic duty.
- This was a powerful allegory for late 18th-century France, which was on the cusp

of revolutionary change. The severe, classical forms and somber tone aligned with the spirit of political sacrifice promoted by revolutionary leaders. David was by then deeply involved in revolutionary politics, increasingly supporting the Republic and its ideals. The painting initially stirred controversy and faced challenges exhibiting because of its political sensitivity. However, it became an important symbol call for republican virtue and the willingness to sacrifice for freedom.

- The composition carefully arranges **grief-stricken women opposite the resolute men** to emphasize the **emotional costs of revolution and justice**. Anecdotes from the period suggest that David consulted classical sources for accuracy and was aware that the painting would resonate deeply in the charged atmosphere of 1789 Paris. It remains an enduring statement on loyalty and loss at the birth of modern republicanism.

NOTES

This story symbolizes the principle that loyalty to the state and to republican ideals must come before personal affections, no matter how painful the sacrifice. When David exhibited the painting in 1789, just as the French Revolution was beginning, its themes of virtue, sacrifice, and the defence of republican liberty resonated powerfully with contemporary audiences and contributed to its fame as an allegory of political conviction and responsibility

REFERENCES

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lictors_Bring_to_Brutus_the_Bodies_of_His_Sons



Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Tennis Court Oath (Le Serment du Jeu de paume)*, 1791, oil sketch, 65 × 88.7 cm, Musée Carnavalet

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Tennis Court Oath sketch*, 1791, 66 × 101.2 cm, Musée National du Château, Palace of Versailles

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Tennis Court Oath (Le Serment du Jeu de paume)*, 1791, oil sketch, 65 × 88.7 cm, Musée Carnavalet

- France was divided into Estates, the First Estate was the clergy, the Second Estate the aristocracy, who made up only 2% of the population, and the Third Estate the vast majority of ordinary people including merchants, businessmen and professionals. The Third Estate paid most of the taxes.
- The country was almost bankrupt and the controller general of finances called an assembly of 'notables' and proposed increasing taxes on the nobility (the Second Estate). The notables (mostly the Second Estate) refused and suggested a general assembly of the Estates-General which had not met for over 150 years. It finally met on 5 May 1789 and could not agree on the voting system and the Third Estate declared themselves a National Assembly.
- On 20 June 1789, the members of the French Third Estate took the **Tennis Court Oath** (French: Serment du Jeu de Paume), vowing "**not to separate, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the kingdom is established**". It was a pivotal event in the French Revolution and inspired a wide variety of revolutionary activity across the countryside. In August feudalism was abolished and the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen** was passed by the Third Estate by then known as the National Constituent Assembly.
- Jacques-Louis David was commissioned to paint the scene of the Tennis Court

Oath but political reversals and financial difficulties meant that he was never able to finish the canvas.

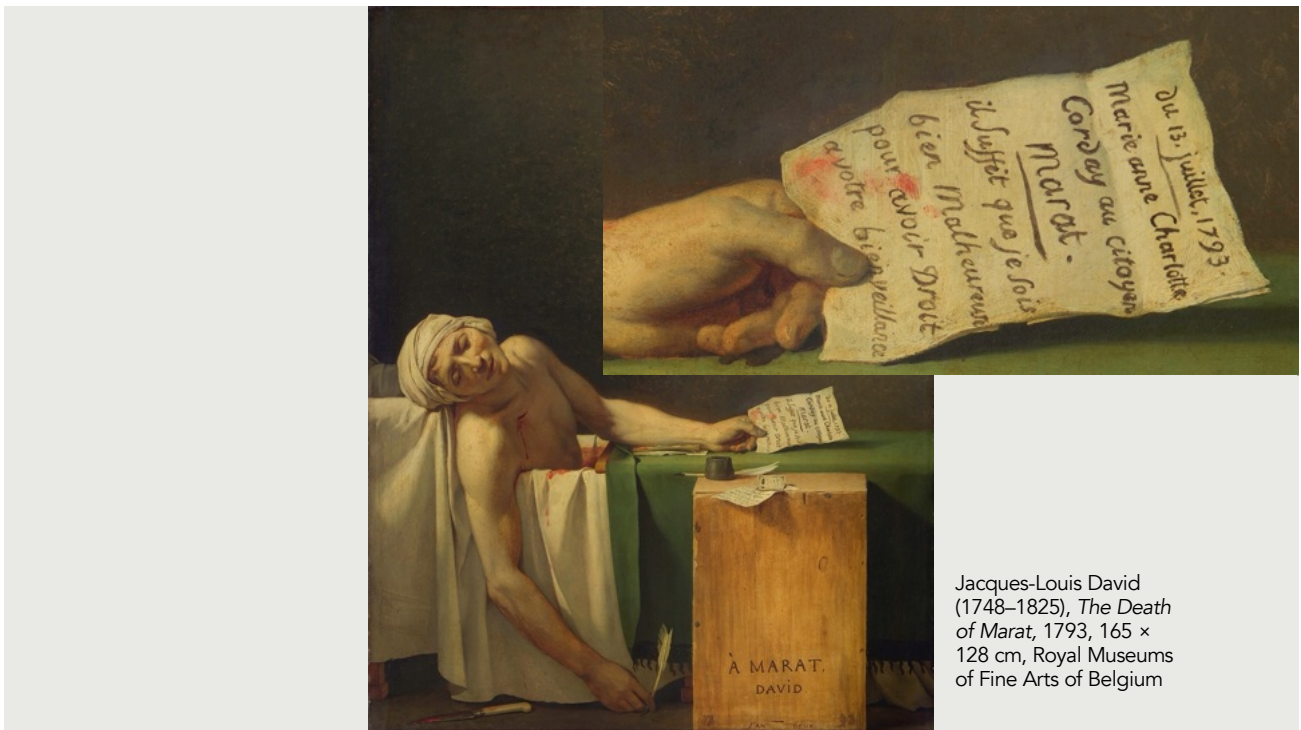
- (CLICK) This is the unfinished painting.
- Many of the 'heroes' of the Tennis Court Oath in 1789 had become traitors of the State and were guillotined during the Reign of Terror.
- David supported the revolution, was a friend of Robespierre and voted for the execution of Louis XVI and managed to survive through the Reign of Terror.

NOTES

- At the centre the three figures are the Protestant Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne (1743-1793), the Carthusian monk Dom Christophe-Antoine Gerle (1743-1801), and the Abbé Henri-Baptiste Grégoire (1750-1831, center). By 1791 when this was painted Gerle was an enemy of the Revolution as he opposed all the clergy being made civil servants. Grégoire was an opponent of slavery and advocate of equal rights for Jews.
- Reading the oath is Jean-Sylvain Bailly (1736-1793) who became mayor of Paris but but 1793 was executed as a counter-revolutionary.
- The figure on the far right of the sketch is refusing to take the oath.
- On the left with his arms raised is to Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794) who was little known at this time but became the feared leader of the Reign of Terror.
- David heightens the drama by showing a storm blowing through windows reflecting the political storm blowing through the country.

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- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tennis_Court_Oath_\(David\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tennis_Court_Oath_(David))



Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Death of Marat*, 1793, 165 × 128 cm, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Death of Marat*, 1793, 165 × 128 cm, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

- **The Death of Marat** (pronounced "mah-rah") was painted in 1793 following the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat, a prominent radical journalist and politician during the French Revolution. **David and Marat were close friends** and allies within the Jacobin faction.
- Marat was murdered by **Charlotte Corday** while bathing to ease a debilitating skin condition. She used the letter as a manipulative technique to gain access to Marat. David transformed Marat into a secular saint or martyr of the Revolution using Christian iconographic parallels: the bathtub as altar, the bloodied knife, and the calm martyr figure **holding a letter**.
- (CLICK) The letter reads "**I only need to be very unhappy to be entitled to your kindness**" (in French, "Il suffit que je sois bien malheureuse pour avoir droit a votre bienveillance"). The blood and water stained letter still survives.
- The composition is stark and minimalist, focusing attention on Marat's pale, emaciated body to evoke sympathy and revolutionary zeal. The painting became potent propaganda for the Jacobins at the height of the Terror, encouraging political fanaticism and justifying extreme revolutionary sacrifice. David was deeply involved in revolutionary politics and rushed to immortalise Marat's death in this dramatic, emotionally charged image. Anecdotes indicate David continued to promote this painting widely to bolster Jacobin morale. It remains one of the most famous and iconic images of political martyrdom in

Western art.

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Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, 1799, 385 × 522 cm, Louvre

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, 1799, 385 × 522 cm, Louvre

- Completed in 1799 during the **uneasy post-Terror period** of the French Revolution, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* depicts a legendary episode from early Roman history where the **Sabine women intervene to stop a war between their Roman husbands and their fathers**. The painting is a powerful **allegory for reconciliation, peace, and the restoration of social order** after revolutionary chaos. David uses dynamic groupings to contrast the aggressive postures of men with the protective gestures of the women, symbolizing maternal love as a force for unity. The rocky background resembles the Bastille prison ruins, a veiled reference to France's recent past.
- **Painted after David's own imprisonment and personal hardships** during the Revolution, the work can be read as both a political statement and a reflection of his personal desires for harmony. It is **also connected to Napoleon's rise**, representing the **hope for stability under imperial rule**. David **laboured over the painting for four years**, highlighting its importance to him. The work demonstrates David's shift from pure revolutionary propaganda toward a message of peace and social cohesion as France transitioned **from Revolution to Empire**. Contemporary audiences saw it as a moving plea to end factional violence.

REFERENCES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Intervention_of_the_Sabine_Women



Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *Portrait of Madame Récamier*, 1800, 173 × 243 cm, Louvre Museum

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *Portrait of Madame Récamier*, 1800, 173 × 243 cm, Louvre Museum

- Painted in 1800, this portrait of **Juliette Récamier** (pronounced "ju-lee-et re-ka-mee-ay") captures the **elegant socialite and literary salon hostess** amid the refined cultural milieu of post-Revolutionary Paris. Madame Récamier reclines simply on a directoire style sofa wearing a **white muslin gown inspired by classical Greek drapery**, in tune with **Neoclassical fashion**. The sparse background and soft lighting focus attention on her delicate features and graceful pose.
- The painting marks a departure from David's monumental history scenes to an **intimate, refined portrayal** of contemporary high society. The **austerity** reflects the era's classical taste mingled with emerging **Empire style**. However, Madame Récamier reportedly **disliked the portrait for its severe simplicity**, finding it too restrained compared to her vivacious personality.
- David's connections to intellectual salons, where Enlightenment ideals persisted alongside evolving politics, placed him in close contact with such figures. The portrait exemplifies David's ability to balance formal classical influences with individual character study. It remains a celebrated example of early 19th-century French portraiture.

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- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Madame_R%C3%A9camier

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Jacques-Louis David
(1748–1825),
*Napoleon Crossing
the Alps*, 1800, 259 ×
221 cm, Château de
Malmaison

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, 1800, 259 × 221 cm, Château de Malmaison

Bonaparte has an orange cloak, the crispin (cuff) of his gauntlet is embroidered, the horse is piebald, black and white, and the tack is complete and includes a standing martingale. The girth around the horse's belly is a dark faded red. The officer holding a sabre in the background is obscured by the horse's tail. Napoleon's face appears youthful.

- Painted in 1801 **after Napoleon's rise as First Consul**, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* glorifies the military and political leader at a pivotal moment. It celebrates Napoleon's **daring 1800 crossing of the Alps to launch a surprise attack against Austrian forces in Italy**. Rather than depicting the difficult and **slow real crossing on a mule**, David's idealized image shows a heroic, calm Napoleon atop a spirited, rearing horse, commanding nature itself.
- The classical composition and dramatic movement evoke ancient heroic equestrian portraits, underscoring Napoleon's destiny and unrivaled leadership. This painting marked **David's transformation into the official artist of the Napoleonic Empire**, helping to build a **cult of personality** around the emperor. **Multiple versions** were painted for various patrons across Europe. Anecdotes reveal that David deliberately chose heroic fiction over realism to **create a propaganda piece**, which successfully shaped Napoleon's image as a military genius and saviour of France. The work combines classical grandeur with

contemporary political propaganda.

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Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *Coronation of Emperor Napoleon I and Coronation of the Empress Josephine in Notre-Dame de Paris, December 2, 1804*, 1805-7, 621 × 979 cm, Louvre Museum

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- In 1804 **Napoleon crowned himself Emperor** and this **colossal 1807 painting** conveys the **opulence and spectacle the event in Notre-Dame** Cathedral. The painting served as **official imperial propaganda** emphasizing Napoleon's secular supremacy over the church. **David painted more than a hundred figures** with painstaking detail, including dignitaries, clergy, Napoleon, and Josephine.
- The tableau showcases **imperial power** and authority as well as subtle theatricality: Napoleon's act of self-coronation was a dramatic break from traditional coronation rituals, highlighting his control over his destiny. **Josephine's reverent yet elegant pose** and the **presence of Pope Pius VII**, depicted seated and almost passive, reflect the complex relationship between Church and State.
- David's work required **months of on-site sketches** and involved **multiple assistants** due to its size and complexity. This painting solidified David's role as the premier court artist and architect of Napoleonic visual propaganda and remains one of the greatest examples of history painting from the Empire period.

NOTES

Joséphine kneels before Napoléon during his coronation at Notre Dame. Behind him sits pope Pius VII.

Depicted people include:

- Maria Letizia Bonaparte: Napoleon's mother, seated in a prominent position.
- Napoleon's Siblings: Louis, Joseph, Elisa, Pauline, and Caroline, all present at the ceremony.
- Charles-François Lebrun: The Arch-Treasurer, holding the scepter.
- Jean-Jacques-Régis de Cambacérès: The Arch-Chancellor, holding the Hand of Justice.
- Louis-Alexandre Berthier: Holding the imperial globe.
- Cardinal Fesch: A relative of Napoleon, present among the clergy.
- Halet Efendi: An Ottoman ambassador, though not officially present.
- Jacques-Louis David: The painter, depicted in the painting itself, sketching the scene.
- Other Dignitaries: Eugène de Beauharnais, Bernadotte, Caulaincourt, Murat, Sérurier, Moncey, Bessières, Ségur, and Belloy, are also depicted.

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Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries*, 1812, 203.9 × 125.1 cm, National Gallery of Art

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries*, 1812, 203.9 × 125.1 cm, National Gallery of Art

- Painted in 1812 at the **height of Napoleon's power**, this intimate portrait shows Napoleon alone in his study working late. The familiar pose with his hand tucked inside his waistcoat expresses **authority and contemplative leadership**. The "hand-in-waistcoat" pose was an 18th and 19th century convention widely used by artists to communicate ideals of **leadership, dignity, and calm authority**. According to an etiquette guide (François Nivelon's *A Book of Genteel Behaviour*, 1737) it signifies "**manly boldness tempered with modesty**". The pose was recommended by the classical Greek orator Aeschines (pronounced "ESS-kih-neeze"). It was this painting that associated the pose so closely with Napoleon although George Washington, Simon Blivar and Mozart also used the same pose.
- This work diverges from the grand heroic equestrian images to reveal a man consumed by governance and responsibility. The surrounding objects—**books, papers, clock**—symbolise **discipline** and intellectual command amid tumultuous times.
- Painted by David as **official court painter**, the work captures the **psychological dimension** of power and burden. The Empire style's warm tones and subtle textures create an approachable yet imposing portrait. By this time, Napoleon's military ambitions were expanding but tensions and challenges were mounting. Anecdotes recount that David had **privileged access to Napoleon** during his

long working days which enriched the painting's authenticity. This portrait **humanises the emperor** while reinforcing his role as a tireless guardian of the state.

NOTES

- Napoleon had one legitimate child and at least two illegitimate children.
 - Napoleon II (Napoleon François Joseph Charles Bonaparte): Born to Napoleon and Marie Louise on March 20, 1811. He was given the title "King of Rome" and was intended to be Napoleon's heir. He died on July 22, 1832, at the age of 21, of tuberculosis.
 - Charles Léon Denuelle: Born in 1806, his mother was Éléonore Denuelle de la Plaigne.
 - Alexandre Colonna Walewski: Born in 1810, his mother was Maria, Countess Walewska. He became a prominent French statesman and diplomat.

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Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *Cupid and Psyche*, 1817, 184.2 x 241.6 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *Cupid and Psyche*, 1817, 184.2 x 241.6 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art

- David lived long enough to see Napoleon defeated at Waterloo in 1815 and die on St Helena in 1821.
- Among David's final major paintings is *Cupid and Psyche* (1817), a departure from his earlier austere history paintings to a **softer, more romantic theme** grounded in classical mythology. **Created during his exile in Brussels after Napoleon's fall**, the work reflects a more intimate and tender tone. It depicts the mythological lovers surrounded by luminous light, embodying timeless human passion and beauty. The delicate handling of forms, graceful poses, and warmer colour palette contrast with earlier revolutionary and imperial grandeur.
- David used the story of Cupid and Psyche to explore the conflict between idealized love and physical reality. Cupid, lover of the beautiful mortal Psyche, visited her nightly on the condition that she not know his identity. Cupid was usually depicted as an ideal adolescent, but here David presents him as an **ungainly teenager smirking at his sexual conquest**. David took inspiration from a number of ancient texts, including an obscure, then **recently published ancient Greek poem** by Moschus (pronounced "mo-shos") that describes **Cupid as a mean-spirited brat** with flashing eyes and curly hair.
- David's late work also shows his continued commitment to classical aesthetics and idealized beauty. Around this time, David influenced many young artists and underscored his legacy as a founder of modern French academic painting

through his teaching in exile.

- ***Mars Being Disarmed by Venus*** is the last painting produced by the French artist Jacques-Louis David. He began it in 1822 (aged 73) during his exile in Brussels and completed it three years later, before dying in an accident in 1825.

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Jacques-Louis David,
Cupid and Psyche, 1817,
Cleveland Museum of Art

- Jacques-Louis David's rose from an aspiring Parisian boy to the most influential neoclassical painter of his time, closely intertwined with the political dramas of revolutionary and Napoleonic France. His major artworks and stylistic evolution reflect his deep engagement with the ideals and upheavals of his era.



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