



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Jacques-Louis David:

IN QUEST OF A HERO

by Elaine Adams

ORPHANED AT NINE, esteemed artist by thirty-three, execution judge at forty-five and exiled at sixty-eight; Jacques-Louis David's (1748-1825) life was led on a tumultuous path while he searched for a paradigm of virtue.

When David was only nine his garrulous father, **Louis-Maurice**, a prominent Parisian merchant, was challenged to a pistol duel and killed. Little is known of David's mother **Marie-Geneviève Buron**, except that after she became a widow she deposited her son in the care of her two brothers.

David's uncles, **François Buron** (1731-1818) and **Jacques-François Desmays** (c. 1720-1789) were both master masons and architects; Desmays was a member of the Royal Academy of Architecture and worked for **King Louis XVI**. His uncles, as well as his aunt **Marie-Josephe** and cousin **Marie-Francoise** all recognized young David's natural skills for drawing and encouraged his talent by posing for him.

David's education began at the **Collège des Quatre Nations** in Paris, but he was an unhappy pupil. He later wrote, "I hated school. The masters always beating us with sticks and worse. I was always hiding behind the instructors' chair, drawing for the duration of the class." David's uncles decided to send him to the medieval painter's guild **Académie de Saint-Luc** for drawing classes.

David's wish was to be introduced to his mother's famous distant cousin **François Boucher** (1703-1770). Boucher was an undisputed leader in the established **Rococo** art movement, and David



Jacques-Louis David
Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Grand-Saint-Bernard, 1800-01
Oil on canvas 103" x 87"
Collection of Musée National des Châteaux de Malmaison et Bois-Préau,
Reuil-Malmaison

had hopes of studying with him. It is not clear how David and Boucher were introduced, perhaps through his mother's intervention, nor is it certain if David actually studied

with Boucher. However, it is surmised that Boucher perceived a petulant disposition in David that would not be suited for the gentility of Rococo. Boucher referred David

to **Joseph-Marie Vien (1716–1809)**, who was gaining recognition as a leader in the burgeoning historical genre painting or *le style grande*.

From 1766 to 1774 David apprenticed with Vien at his studio and studied at the **Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture**. Initially David rejected Vien's doctrine of meticulous realism, preferring Boucher's lively Rococo approach and is quoted to have praised his idol by saying, "Not everyone can paint like Boucher." Ironically, David eventually became a catalyst for the demise of the Rococo style.

Many artists, critics and philosophers of the day grew weary of what they perceived as the frivolity

of Rococo and yearned for classical themes examining virtue, nobility and patriotism. The recent and continuing archaeological findings near the Bay of Naples created a colossal sensation throughout Western Europe and inspired an era of rediscovering their classical Greco-Roman roots in architecture, fashion, philosophy and politics. This was an era that became known as the "Age of Enlightenment."

In 1738 the eighteen-year-old **King Charles of Naples and Sicily** ordered excavations to begin in the areas where fragments of ancient marble, statues and frescoes had been found. The first substantial

unearthing was that of the **Theatre of Hercules**, which led to the confirmation that they had discovered the ancient City of Herculaneum. The next significant discovery at Herculaneum was **Villa dei Papiri**. The villa, once home to **Lucius Calpurnius Piso**, father of **Julius Caesar's** wife **Calpurnia**, with its virtually undamaged frontage of 820 feet lined with sixty-four columns and ninety statues was heralded as an example of the finest artistic magnitude. In 1748, the same year that David was born, the nearby City of Pompeii was discovered. Nine years later, **Francesco Valletta**, secretary of the **Herculaneum Academy**, an institution created by King Charles to study archaeological discoveries, published the first of eight volumes called *Le Antichité di Ercolano Esposte (An Account of the Antiquities of Herculaneum)*. The publication became a major influence on the development of the classical movement in Europe.

In 1774 **Louis XV** died and **Louis XVI** ascended on the throne. In that same year David's entry *Antiochus and Stratonice*, depicting a love story from *Life of Demetrius* by Greek essayist **Plutarch (c. 46 AD-c. 120 AD)**, won him the *Prix de Rome* at the age of twenty-six from the Royal Academy. Before succeeding in winning this award he had entered and failed three times which led him into a deep depression that nearly drove him to suicide by starvation. The annual *Prix de Rome* was a fierce competition of extremely high standards and was entered by a maximum of 100 top male art students, all French citizens and all under the age of thirty. The advantage to receiving the award was that it granted the winner three to five years of extended



Jacques-Louis David
Self Portrait, 1794 (painted while in Luxembourg Prison)
 Oil on canvas 31 7/8" × 25 5/8"
 Collection of Musée du Louvre,
 Departement des Peintures

study at the French Academy in Rome and highlighted the artist's career potential. Prior to David's arrival in Rome the Boucher-enthusiast is quoted to have remarked, "the antique isn't going to seduce me, it lacks life, it leaves you cold."

IN ROME OF THE 1760S THE German art historian, archaeologist and moral philosopher **Johann Wincklemann** (1717-1778) urged artists to study and "imitate" the timelessness of classical ideal forms. His enthusiasm for antiquities gained him an international following of artists that included the German expatriate **Anton Raphael Mengs** (1728-1779), the Scot **Gavin Hamilton** (1723-1798), and the American **Benjamin West** (1738-1820). These classical devotees helped spread the art movement in their own countries.

David was invigorated by the five years he spent in Rome studying from antique casts, classical statues, and the Renaissance masters, which he felt was far more instructive than anything he had learned during his eight years at the Academy. He was particularly inspired by the austere paintings of **Nicolas Poussin** (1594-1665) and the classical lines of **Raphael** (1483-1520), and wrote a tribute to his artistic hero Raphael:

"Divine Raphael! It was you who led me, step by step, to antiquity. It was you, sublime painter, who managed to come closest to these imitable models. You yourself made me realize that the antique was greater even than you. It was you, kindly, helpful painter that set my chair in front of the sublime remains of antiquity. Their beauties were revealed to me by your erudite and graceful paintings. In return for my admiration, will you do me the favour to consider me—even with three hundred years between us—as one of your pupils? ..."

In 1781 David was elected an Associate member of the Royal Academy and exhibited at his first *Salon* (exhibition held in the Salon d'Apollon in the Louvre) with his earliest classical composition, *Belisarius*. It was clear that this latest work with its grandiose architectural features, expressive power and moral message was following Poussin's influence and departing from that of Boucher.

The following year, thirty-four-year old David was made a full Royal Academician with his painting *Andromache Mourning Hector*. Also in that same year he married the seventeen-year old **Marguerite-Charlotte Pécoul** (1765-), daughter of a successful building contractor. David admired and appreciated her as a "woman whose virtues and character had assured the happiness of his life." The following year their first son **Charles-Louis-Jules** was born and in 1784 Marguerite gave birth to their second son **Eugène**.

The public's interest for classical art and the *ancien régime* was gaining great momentum. However, the major collectors were not eager to abandon their beloved Rococo paintings filled with playful themes and soft pastel tones in exchange for buying large-format paintings that emphasized severe forms and strict moral messages. (Note: The term *Neoclassicism* to identify this genre of art was not used until the mid-nineteenth century.) Royal art commissions were invaluable to artists for several reasons including providing opportunities to create large-scale works, gaining entrée into high social circles, assuring inclusion into important collections, and chiefly, promoting artists' careers and thereby building demand for their works.

King Louis XVI granted David a commission to create a historical painting that was unique to the artist. For inspiration and research the artist decided to resettle in Rome for one year. The following year he returned to Paris with a theme that was based on a 669 BC



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Jacques-Louis David
The Oath of the Horatii, 1784
 Oil on canvas 130" × 167"
 Collection of Musée du Louvre

account from *History of Early Rome* written by Roman historian **Titus Livius** (59 BC–17 AD). The story describes the founding of the Roman Republic after conquering their warring neighbour Alba. The painting, *The Oath of the Horatii*, was exhibited in the 1785 Salon and received tremendous acclaim. In the scene three sons of the Roman Horatii family swear oaths to their father that they will defend their country against the plotting Alban Curiatii family. The painting's formal composition and defined linear design was reminiscent of Roman sculptural bas-relief friezes, and its distinct smooth brush and use of balance through colour created a new style that was immediately heralded as the edict of *Classical Art*. David's highly celebrated painting had a wild effect on the French populace and was interpreted as a symbol of national patriotism and a call to abolish the ruling class. Thus *The Oath of Horatii* helped ignite the French

Revolution. The next year, the David household was increased by two, with the birth of twin girls **Émilie** and **Pauline**.

David was an avid supporter of the lawyer and skillful orator **Maximilien Robespierre** (1758–1794) and saw in him an altruistic and virtuous man whose sympathies were with the common people. In Robespierre's 1794 presentation *On the Principals of Political Morality*, he wrote, "Again, it may be said, that to love justice and equality the people need no great effort of virtue; it is sufficient that they love themselves...." Robespierre was the leader of the Committee of Public Safety, as well as the executive committee of the National Convention, and a key mastermind behind the French Revolution.

After 1789 David's classical painting style was modified into a more realistic approach for the purpose of recording scenes of the French Revolution. In 1792 the artist was elected a deputy from

Paris to the governing body of the National Convention. As an influential member of the Committee of Public Instruction and the Committee of General Safety David's duties included organizing festivals and promoting the revolution through the means of his art. The day after the assassination of one of the revolution's leaders **Jean-Paul Marat**, the Convention urged David to memorialize their revolutionary hero. Marat was editor-in-chief of the political propaganda journal, *L'Ami du Peuple* (*The Friend of the People*), who helped spread ideas of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* and justified death to all monarchs. Marat was stabbed to death in his bathtub on July 12, 1793 by the beautiful twenty-five year old royalist **Charlotte Corday**. Corday was guillotined four days later.

As citizen **Guirault**, a deputy member of the Convention, spewed in a fiery speech at the Convention lamenting the loss of Marat, "...the people's boldest champion whose only crime was that he constantly sacrificed himself for the sake of freedom." Another deputy, citizen **Audouin**, implored David, "Return Marat whole to us again!" David was moved to create a painting that would martyr their hero Marat. He completed the masterpiece *Death of Marat* in just three months. The scene was based on David's impeccable visual memory of his last visit to Marat, the evening before he was killed. Marat was in his bathtub then as well, soaking his body to help relieve the pain from a skin disease, possibly a form of psoriasis, while he wrote his revolutionary essays on a board laid across his bathtub. To David, Marat was a symbol of venerable virtue.

David was active in numerous agencies of the reign of terror. He was a political extremist and president of the Jacobin Club, a political party named for the Jacobins (Dominicans) Monastery where they met. He orchestrated the Great Festival of the People on July 14, 1790 in commemoration of the fall of the Bastille, the event



that began the French Revolution the previous year. He also designed uniforms, banners, triumphal arches, and inspirational props for the Jacobin Club's propaganda. In 1793 David was appointed to the Comite de Salut Public, which gave him the authority to sign orders for execution by guillotine, which he did for more than 300 victims, including his first most important art patron King Louis XVI and his family. When Queen Marie Antoinette was led on a gruesome procession to the guillotine David callously saw an opportunity to record history by sketching an un-regal image of her. His wife Marguerite, a royalist, was so disgusted with her husband's role in these executions that she divorced him.

The Revolutionary Tribunal, with Robespierre as its leader, ordered the execution of 2,400 people in Paris by July 1794. Across France 30,000 people lost their lives, most were ordinary people who spoke against the revolution.

David orchestrated an inventory of all national treasures, some collected from guillotined aristocrats, making him one of the founders of France's museums including The Louvre. He became an art dictator and played a pivotal role in the demise of the Royal Academy. One of David's objections to the Academy was the unequal treatment of students. As an example, when a model posed for students, those who were sons of Academicians had the best view advantage, followed by *Grand Prix* winners, then the *Prix de Quartier* or *petits prix*, and at the very end were the common pupils.

In a speech delivered at the National Convention in 1793, David denounced the Academy system:

“I promised I would show the damage the Academicians do to the art they profess, and I shall keep my word. I won't bore you, citizens, with pedantic details, with the poor teaching methods used by the Academy of Painting and Sculpture; it will be easy enough to convince you

when I tell you that twelve professors a year, that is one for each month (note, too, that they were irremovable), vied with each other to demolish the first principles a young artist has learnt, and is learning daily, from his teacher; and as each of these professors approves of no principles but his own, the poor young man has to change his

way of working and seeing things twelve times a year to please each one of them in turn, and when he has learnt his art twelve times over he ends up knowing nothing at all, for he doesn't know what to believe.”

David was instrumental in re-establishing The Royal Academy and in 1795 it became known as



Jacques-Louis David
Death of Marat, 1793
 Oil on canvas 65" × 50 3/8"
 Collection of Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels



École Nationale Supérieure de Beaux-Arts and catered to a larger body of students. David must have been a remarkable teacher, judging by his list of illustrious students, which included Etienne-Jean Delécluze (1781–1863), Francois Gérard (1770–1837), Antoine-Jean Gros (1771–1835), Jean-Baptiste Isabey (1767–1855), Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) and Louis-Leopold Robert (1733–1808).

Trying to keep up with the latest revolutionary heroes must have been quite a daunting task for David. A group of commoners who dubbed themselves the “National Assembly” met on a tennis court

near Versailles and vowed that they would continue to meet until they had established a new constitution for France. David was inspired by what he perceived to be a valorous group of men—symbols of the new French nobility. He decided to glorify them in an elaborate scene. Detailed sketches for *The Tennis Court Oath* were made, but the painting was never completed. As the revolution progressed and certain members of the National Assembly fell out of favour, David had to erase them from his picture.

After the fall and execution of Robespierre and nineteen of his comrades on July 28, 1794, David

was imprisoned for a year at the Luxembourg Prison while facing a possible sentence of execution by guillotine. His students rallied and his ex-wife successfully pleaded for his life and he was consequently released. David’s painting *Intervention of the Sabine Women*, which was begun while in prison, was painted in Marguerite’s honour. The theme being one of love prevailing over conflict was interpreted by the French as a message of reconciliation, and helped re-establish David’s position as an artist of the people. The painting also helped reconcile Jacques and Marguerite and the couple remarried in 1796.



Jacques-Louis David
Intervention of the Sabine Women, 1799
 Oil on canvas 152" × 205"
 Collection of Musée du Louvre



In 1797 David met **Napoléon Bonaparte (1769–1821)** and was captivated by his authoritative character and saw in him a hero who rose up through the ranks. Napoleon saw in David his propaganda painter who could promote his persona as the modern day **Alexander the Great**. Napoleon's image required grandeur, and David accommodated by altering his stern classical style to include elements of opulence and pageantry.

David became a staunch supporter of Napoleon, an association that enabled the artist to regain the dominant social and artistic position he so enjoyed and previously held under Robespierre's leadership. In 1802 Napoleon founded the **Légion d'honneur**, a prestigious Order of Chivalry and France's highest civilian honour awarded for outstanding achievements in military or civilian life. David was made a Knight (*Chevalier*) of the Legion, the fifth rank of order, and in twelve years rose to the third rank as Commandant of the Legion of Honour. Napoleon also bestowed on David the lofty title of "Painter of the Emperor."

David painted a series of pictures glorifying the Emperor's exploits. In 1801 he completed one of his most supreme masterpieces, *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Grand-Saint-Bernard*, a fantastic propaganda painting depicting a heroic, bigger-than-life and very handsome Napoleon on his magnificent white charger rearing in a diagonally upward motion indicating a triumphant future. In the painting David links Napoleon to the legendary conquerors **Hannibal** and **Charlemagne** who also crossed the same pass and succeeded in military victories. In reality Napoleon crossed the Saint Bernard Pass riding a mule and wearing a practical and unassuming grey coat.

Also artistically and historically significant is the elaborate painting, *Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine*, documenting the crowning ceremony that took place at the **Notre Dame**



Mars Disarmed by Venus and the Graces, 1824

Oil on canvas 121" × 103"

Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

Cathédrale on December 2, 1804. The 30" × 48" painting was completed in 1807, three years after the commission was given to David, and shows remarkable details of each person present at the ceremony, including one who was not present, Napoleon's mother. Napoleon was so pleased with the realism of the painting that he remarked "This is not painting; you walk in this work."

After the fall of Napoleon and the return of the Bourbon monarchy, David was banished from France in 1816 at the age of sixty-eight and spent the remainder of his life exiled in Brussels. David's life was closely intertwined with the

sentiments of France, as both David and the people of France searched for their identities and for leadership. As France experienced periods of political upheavals from monarchy, anarchy, republic, imperialism, and back to monarchy, David stayed in step with each move, while continuing his personal search for the ideal image of classic virtue.

David is unique in the annals of art history as not only the foremost artist of his time, but also an influential political figure that helped shape France's government and art institutions. Toward the end of his life and living away from his beloved homeland, one can speculate that David must have contem-



Jacques-Louis David
Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte, 1821
 Oil on canvas 51" × 39 3/8"
 Collection of The J. Paul Getty Museum

plated his childhood as an orphaned boy in need of security and authority. In his virile youth he idolized men of power by portraying them as honourable and heroic figures of leadership in the classical sense. In his serene later years David's commissioned portraits are best described as passive and dignified.

In one of his last portraits, *Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte*, David shows us a different and enlightened interpretation of hero-

ism. A gentle sense of bravery is expressed in the painting of two exiled Bonaparte sisters clinging to each other for support as the more stoic Charlotte holds a letter from their exiled father **Joseph Bonaparte**, once the king of Naples and Spain and elder brother of Emperor Napoleon. The two girls are seated on a red velvet settee covered with embroidered gold "Napoleon bee" emblems, reminders of old glories and a realization that in the after-

math the innocents must endure the deeds of their fathers.

David completed approximately 100 paintings in his lifetime, with his last work being, *Mars Disarmed by Venus and the Three Graces*, 1822-24. Mars, the god of war, succumbs to the virtues of Venus with the help of Cupid and their three virginal attendants, The Three Graces, amidst a celestial and classical Greco-Roman setting. This painting attracted more than 10,000 visitors, and may have been David's final propaganda message; however one that expresses peace within him and the realization that love is triumphant. In a letter the artist wrote in December 1823 he explains, "This is the last picture I want to paint, but I want to surpass myself in it. I will put the date of my seventy-five years on it and afterwards I will never again pick up my brush." Jacques-Louis David died in Brussels on December 29, 1825. The restored French monarchy forbade the David family to return the body of the "king killer" to France. ☐

Notes:

Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile is on view at the **J. Paul Getty Museum** February 1 – April 24, 2005 and will travel to the **Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute** in Williamstown, Massachusetts, June 5 – September 5, 2005. The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue. Research for this article was gathered through the following sources: Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile by **Philippe Bordes**, 356-page exhibition catalogue published by **Yale University Press**, 2005; David by **Antoine Schnapper**, published by **Alpine Fine Arts Collection, Ltd.**, 1982; The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists, published by **Oxford University Press**, 1990; Artists on Art from the XIV to the XX Century, published by **Pantheon Books**, 1945, and www.artrenewal.org.