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Jacques-Louis David and the Enlightenment: The Intersection of Art and Politics in Prerevolutionary France

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Jacques-Louis David and the Enlightenment: The Intersection of Art and Politics in Prerevolutionary France

A Senior Thesis

Presented by Ashley Mullen
to
The Art History Department

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:
AN ARTIST-PHILOSOPHER BECOMES AN ARTIST-PROTESTOR

In looking back on the events of 1789, Karl Marx wrote that the heroes of the French Revolution “performed the task of their time in Roman costume and with Roman phrases.”¹ It was this Roman ideology that influenced the art of Jacques-Louis David during the late 1780’s, causing him to be viewed as a “political prophet” of the French Revolution, a painter of Revolutionary ideals years before the Fall of the Bastille on July 14, 1789.² Following the development of David as an artist within the hierarchical and increasingly turbulent world of the ancien régime, this thesis will discuss the evolution of David’s prerevolutionary Enlightenment ideals through an analysis of the artist’s three major prerevolutionary paintings, *The Oath of the Horatii* (1785), *The Death of Socrates* (1787), and *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789).

It is often overlooked that during the French Revolution, painters and sculptors played a militant role in the liberal and radical politics of the period—David himself would become one of the most active artist-politicians in the Revolutionary government after 1789. But why did a professional Academic artist, who enjoyed wealth, prestige, and royal favor under the ancien régime, rally to the new order of radical revolutionaries, going so far as to condemn King Louis XVI, his most reliable patron, to the guillotine?³

Beginning during the French Revolution, viewers have interpreted David’s prerevolutionary history paintings as covert references to contemporary politics. Many critics claim that David was pursuing a radical agenda throughout his prerevolutionary career, predicting the radicalism of his paintings during the French Revolution, but was this David’s intention? By analyzing the atmosphere of France and the Late Enlightenment during the 1780’s, it becomes apparent that while France was building toward the difficult transition from monarchy to republic, David was making an artistic transition from mythological rococo paintings to neoclassical subjects from ancient history, ultimately capturing in painting form the major ideological shift in philosophy during the Prerevolution period.

**The Prerevolution Period**

The period from 1787 to 1789 has been labeled the Prerevolution. This “prerevolutionary” construct helps historians identify the elements that contribute to a political explosion before it takes place. The purpose of this thesis is not to explain the causes of the French Revolution, but to use the “prerevolutionary” construct to analyze David’s paintings during the 1780’s in order to measure the extent of the artist’s radical liberal politics during the Prerevolution period. Rather than arguing that David’s political radicalism developed during the Prerevolution, this thesis will show how his Enlightenment philosophy and liberal political leanings were planted before the Prerevolution.

The first embodiment of David’s radical ideas can be seen in *The Oath of the Horatii* (1785), which portrayed the spirit of the Enlightenment and the ideals of Rousseau four years before the outbreak of the French Revolution. It was this 1785 painting, and the influences that

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inspired it, which instigated David’s dissent with the glorified Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture and caused him to join the liberal intellectual salons of the philosophes that would encourage his radical political leanings. As such, the development of David’s politicization and radicalization can be traced through the development of his three prerevolutionary paintings.

Jacques-Louis David

David was born in Paris in 1748, but unlike most artists of the eighteenth century, David was of the professional bourgeois class and received an elite classical education. He attended the Collège de Beauvais and the Collège des Quatre Nations, receiving an extensive education in classical literature and history. In 1764, on the recommendation of his distant relative, the rococo painter François Boucher, David joined the studio of the artist Joseph-Marie Vien, the acknowledged leader of the Neoclassical school favored by the Academy. During this time, David trained in the style of rococo art, a style defined by a luxurious, refined, and erotic hedonism that was favored by the French monarchy and aristocracy.

But from the outset of his artistic career in the Academy, Jacques-Louis David was ambitious and proud; he was an artist known to be difficult and quarrelsome with both his colleagues and his superiors. His student Etienne Delécuze later described him as having a character that was “difficult to tame,” yet even before achieving fame and renown as a painter,

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6 Roberts, Jacques-Louis David, Revolutionary Artist, 11.
7 Ibid.
David was restless under the Academy’s system of authority. What sparked that restlessness was the creative drive that would make him the greatest artist of his generation.

David’s style began to change in 1774, when the Academy’s preference for the rococo style was giving way to a preference for a more serious neoclassical style that would inspire “virtue and dedication to the state”; this neoclassicism, brought about by the growth of Enlightenment thought in France, was mainly circulated by the philosophes, the upper-class intellectual elite of France. As influential figures in eighteenth-century society and salon culture, the philosophes spread Enlightenment philosophy through their writings —if the philosophes called for moral and social reform according to Enlightenment principles, Academy officials did as well. During the 1780’s, the writings of the philosophes began to undermine traditional cultural values in France, thereby contributing to the drastic changes in socio-political theory during the Prerevolution period. It is no coincidence that this period of monumental upheaval saw the exhibition of David’s three greatest paintings; it was David’s participation in the Enlightenment salons of the philosophes that exerted a major intellectual and philosophical influence on his Horatii, Socrates, and Brutus paintings.

The Philosophes

Michel-Jean Sedaine, David’s godfather, first introduced the young artist to the salons of the philosophes in 1769. As the secretary to the Academy of Architecture, Sedaine had expansive lodgings in the Louvre, and the 21-year old David lived in his household from 1769

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9 Roberts, Jacques-Louis David, Revolutionary Artist, 11.
10 Ibid.
until 1775. Sedaine was one of the central figures in French theater during the latter part of the eighteenth century, having written numerous successful comedies and *opera libretti*. His *Le philosophe sans le savoir* (1765) would later become the most critically and commercially successful exercise of the *drame bourgeois*, a modern-dress combination of comedy and tragedy pioneered and theorized by Diderot.

Sedaine’s Monday evening gatherings were quite famous in Paris and came to include many prominent figures and aristocrats such as the architect Charles de Wailly, the poet Lebrun, and the philosopher and art critic Diderot. When Diderot frequented the meetings at Sedaine’s lodgings, the young, fervent David was just beginning to participate in the gathering’s discussions of philosophy and drama theory. Diderot’s ideas for the *drame bourgeois*, such as the use of silent *tableaux vivants* of pantomime and gesture on the stage, pervaded discussions throughout the salons of Paris. During the 1760’s, Diderot’s friendship with Sedaine was close enough that he reportedly inquired as to David’s future career prospects. David’s later paintings and philosophy would show the influence of Diderot’s theories, including his thoughts on the “freedom of the creative artist,” which David would fight for later in his career.

Having been exposed to the progressive ideas of Diderot during his early, intellectually formative period, it can only be assumed that the strong liberal tendencies of both Diderot and Sedaine had a profound impact on David during the 1760’s. This immersion into the social circles of the Parisian salons long before the French Revolution reveals that David had a

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
sophisticated awareness and knowledge on how French political institutions functioned, as well as on how the Enlightenment *philosophes* wished to reform them.\(^{19}\)

Because of David’s involvement with the *philosophes*, as well as the reception his paintings received in the Academy Salons, the artist became heavily dissatisfied with the Academy in the years preceding the Revolution, a fact that historians have cited as a possible founding factor for David’s progressive political ideas and his later participation in the Revolutionary government.\(^{20}\) It had initially been the *philosophes* that had glorified the early Roman period as the paradigmatic era of heroic spirit and patriotism; as such, it is no coincidence that in the five years preceding the French Revolution, David painted classical subjects of virtuous patriotism and heroic sacrifice through scenes of ancient Roman history. It is also no accident that David’s monumental *exemplum virtutis* paintings were outward rejections of the colorful and erotic rococo style, and therefore became the artist’s most famous and celebrated paintings in the Academy Salons of 1785, 1787, and 1789.\(^{21}\)

While some art historians claim that David’s paintings were merely products of the popularity of classical subjects during the eighteenth century, others assert that the politicized atmosphere of the 1780’s inspired David to paint radical subjects and republican themes, which ultimately established him as the greatest painter of his generation.\(^{22}\) The question of David’s prerevolutionary radicalism can be answered by analyzing David’s artistic career from 1785 to 1789, by discussing his involvement in the upper-class liberal salons of the *philosophes*, and by

\(^{19}\) Carrier, “The Revisionist Interpretation of Neo-Classical Art,” 211.
understanding the general *esprit de corps* of the Enlightenment and its political theory and philosophy during the late eighteenth century.²³

CHAPTER II

CHILDREN OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT:
THE POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ATMOSPHERE OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

The French Revolution was both a political and ideological movement; it was a revolution based on the Enlightenment ideals of the *philosophes* and intensified by the turbulent social and political atmosphere of the late *ancien régime*. The tension of the early 1780’s grew to disproportionate levels by 1787, shaking the already unstable foundation of the French monarchy and encouraging the *philosophes* to politicize with the intention of reforming the government according to Enlightenment principles.

As the ideas of Enlightenment reform spread through Parisian salons and the liberal circles of the *philosophes*, the traditional institutions of France became controversial and highly-debated topics. By 1783, radical critics had begun mounting attacks against many of the institutions of the *ancien régime*, the most powerful of which was the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture.\(^1\) Armed with the progressive ideas of the Enlightenment, radical anti-establishment critics turned against the Academy, denouncing its stringent rules and hierarchy of privilege. This social upheaval, along with France’s growing debt and the reforms instated to solve it, encouraged the French population into organized political action, and culminated with the King’s call for nationwide elections to the Estates-General in 1789. It was during this Prerevolution period, which lasted from the Assembly of Notalbes in 1787 until the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, that France witnessed the highest levels of democratic idealism and Enlightenment thought in its newly politicized people.

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The Era of Enlightenment, or *Le Siècle des Lumières*, began with the convergence of two lines of thought: Montaigne’s belief that the proper study of mankind is man, and Descartes’ conviction that the truth of an idea must be tested by its reasonableness. The philosophy woven from these two lines of thought was rationalism, which sought to analyze all problems—political, economic, and social—in the light of pure reason. The *philosophes* of the eighteenth century placed their trust in human reason and believed that man’s happiness could only be achieved through the spread of education or “enlightenment.” To the *philosophes*, whatever hindered the spread of Enlightenment was an obstacle to be destroyed.

One of the most famous *philosophes* was the great French publicist Voltaire (1694-1778), who was a deist and believed that the power of reason, rather than religion, would improve the lot of mankind. Voltaire followed Descartes, who declared, “All the things which we very clearly and distinctly conceive are true.” In this vein of thinking, rationalists believed that every established belief, institution, and political body could be restored to a state of health through the science of pure reason.

Using rationalism as a science to solve the social and political problems of the eighteenth century opened the door for a period of unbridled idealism that characterizes the High Enlightenment. The Abbé Mably ironically criticized this influx of idealism in 1768 by asking, “Is society a branch of physics?” But the aim of the rationalist *philosophes* was to reform and perfect the old regime, not to destroy it; their criticism during the Prerevolution period was not

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2 Ibid., 3.
3 Ibid., 9.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 6.
6 Ibid., 4.
7 Ibid., 6.
intended to overthrow the monarchy, but to make society more conservative and therefore more stable.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{Political Theory of the Enlightenment}

Following the rationalism of the \textit{philosophes}, eighteenth-century political thought revolved around the idea of natural law, or the remodeling of human institutions according to nature’s pre-established harmony.\textsuperscript{9} The \textit{philosophes} derived concrete political concepts from classical historians and philosophers, and formed their political ideals in terms of the city-state.\textsuperscript{10}

In 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s \textit{Social Contract} introduced France to the idea that sovereignty resides not with a monarch but with the people.\textsuperscript{11} Rousseau wrote:

\begin{quote}
…the depositaries of the executive power are not the people’s masters, but its officers; that it can set them up and pull them down when it likes; that for them there is no question of contract, but of obedience; and that in taking charge of the functions the State imposes on them they are doing no more than fulfilling their duty as citizens, without have the remotest right to argue about the conditions.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

The dominant trend of eighteenth-century politics maintained that power was strengthened when it was concentrated in one branch of government. While Montesquieu’s \textit{De L’Esprit de Lois} (1748) had advocated for a balance of powers, Rousseau’s ideals held that a balance of powers would be “incompatible with the sovereignty of the people.”\textsuperscript{13} In the end, it was Rousseau, rather than Montesquieu, whose writings were the inspiration for the French

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{11} Bruun, \textit{The Enlightened Despots}, 97.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
Revolution.\textsuperscript{14} During the Prerevolution period, Rousseau’s \textit{Social Contract} was widely read, and references to the work were included in multiple publications, including those of the Jacobin Club. In 1789, these references increased exponentially.\textsuperscript{15}

Rousseau’s doctrines of the social contract, the general will, popular virtue, and popular sovereignty were seen as the principles with which France could be reformed into a “modern state.”\textsuperscript{16} As such, many of the revolutionary leaders, including Robespierre, maintained principles based on Rousseauist thinking. The fundamental political ideas were based on the idea that the embodiment of morality in government was the end of “politics,” as well as the belief that the \textit{peuple} is good and so the will of the \textit{peuple} must therefore be sovereign.\textsuperscript{17} These ideals played a large role at the outset of the French Revolution when revolutionary leaders sought to install a government founded solely on Enlightenment truths. These revolutionaries set out with the hope of creating a constitutional monarchy with a representative government, ultimately following the Rousseauist principles of popular sovereignty and the will of the \textit{peuple}.\textsuperscript{18}

Rousseau’s novels, \textit{La Nouvelle Héloïse} and \textit{Emile}, were almost more influential than his \textit{Social Contract} during the eighteenth century, showing that Rousseau’s influence was not only political, but literary and social as well.\textsuperscript{19} In these 1750’s novels, Rousseau turned against the gilded world of the salons, calling for plain manners instead of the insincere politeness of artificially refined people. What Rousseau admired was not the liberal spirit of ancient Athens,

\textsuperscript{14} Crane Brinton, “Political Ideas in the Jacobin Clubs,” \textit{Political Science Quarterly} 43.2 (1948), 252.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 254.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 258.
\textsuperscript{17} Cobban, “The Fundamental Ideas of Robespierre,” 33.
\textsuperscript{18} Susan Dunn, \textit{Sister Revolutions: French Lightning, American Light} (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999), 18.
which would inspire the *philosophes* of the 1780’s, but the severity, rigor, and discipline of Sparta.\(^{20}\)

Historians have observed that even though the Enlightenment was the “first cultural statement of bourgeois life,” it is “one of the ironies of modern European history” that the Enlightenment “was in large part elaborated not by bourgeois or workers, but by aristocrats,” a group that included the *philosophes*.\(^{21}\) It is important to note that the *philosophes* were not only salon intellectuals with abstract political visions; they were political actors and publicists self-consciously engaged in contemporary political controversy.\(^{22}\) The nineteenth-century historian Alexis de Tocqueville claimed that the *philosophes* served as conduits of public opinion, thereby making them bearers of “enlightenment.” Tocqueville wrote:

> The philosopher’s cloak provided safe cover for the passions of the day and the political ferment was canalized into literature, the result being that our writers now became the leaders of public opinion and played for a while the part which normally, in free countries, falls to the professional politician.\(^{23}\)

While the *philosophes* were advocating rationalism and a reformation of government according to rationalist philosophy, the upper classes of French society remained entrenched in privilege and corruption. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the *philosophes* and their writings had fully undermined the traditional cultural values of France, contributing to an atmosphere of social and political upheaval that would come to characterize the Prerevolution period.

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20 Ibid., 26.
On the Cusp of Revolution

After the death of King Louis XIV in 1715, Richelieu’s dreams of creating a monarchy with absolute authority and a France that was a supreme world power remained the mindset of the eighteenth century. Even though the political hegemony of France began to weaken as the century progressed, Paris endured as the intellectual capital of Europe, with French continuing as the international language of culture and diplomacy.

At the start of the 1780’s, France was afflicted with numerous tensions in the political and economic spheres. After France’s poor performance in the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763), King Louis XVI chose to aid England’s American colonies in their war for independence. This aid allowed for a redeeming victory against England, but the success cost the monarchy an exorbitant amount of money, resulting in massive debt and burdensome taxes on the French people. This atmosphere caused a serious economic and social crisis in France, to which the French public responded with outrage and calls for reform.

Despite the growing turmoil of the 1780’s, it was not yet obvious that France was on the brink of revolution. Even by late 1786, the French government was only just realizing its verge into complete insolvency. Charles Alexandre de Calonne, controller-general since 1783, was faced with solving the monarchy’s financial problems that had turned into the largest fiscal crisis in France’s history. Taking the first step that was to lead to a revolution, Calonne advised King Louis XVI to convoke an Assembly of Notables that would discuss fundamental changes in the structure of the French government. The meeting of the Assembly of Notables in January of 1787 was the beginning of what historians have come to label the “Prerevolution,” a period in

24 Bruun, The Enlightened Despots, 3.
26 Ibid.
which the authority of the monarchy had not yet broken down, but the absolutist system of the *ancien régime* had begun to unravel.27 During this era, in an effort to escape bankruptcy, Calonne proposed more and more progressive reforms that began to undermine the authority of France’s traditional institutions. The 142 delegates that arrived in Versailles in February of 1787 for the Assembly of Notables included noblemen, clergy, and high officials who would examine Calonne’s proposals.

The French scholar Georges Lefebvre labeled this Prerevolution period an “aristocratic revolution” because the most heated and vocal opposition of the royal reform initiatives came from members of France’s titled elite rather than from the representatives of the bourgeoisie and the lower classes.28 These aristocrats—the judges of the parliaments and the *philosophe*s—challenged royal authority in reaction to the political threat of bankruptcy and, with the foundation of rationalism, proposed fundamental changes to the government system.

Although the aristocrats of the Assembly of Notables recognized the need for major reforms, they did not trust the absolutist system to effectively reform itself. As a result, the Assembly challenged the government to convene an elected assembly that would represent all elements of the population: an Estates-General.29 The election for the Estates-General chose representatives from each region of the country, effectively extending the process of politicization to every single town in France.30 On September 25, 1788, the official order to convene the Estates-General was given, and on May 3, 1789, approximately 1,200 deputies assembled in Versailles.31

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27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 22.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 23.
It was the middle classes that raised the cry of social injustice and reform during the meetings of the Estates-General—wealthy bourgeois who envied the nobility, merchants whose profits had been destroyed by tariffs, journalists and writers whose books had been burned by censors—all these intellectual bourgeois members, who were also reading Voltaire and other Enlightenment writers, began to sense the need for more lasting reforms. Just like the *philosophes*, the middle class was dissatisfied with the existing regime and demanded that the Estates-General establish reforms such as equitable taxation, simplified laws, intellectual liberty, and religious toleration.\(^3^2\)

When the Third Estate realized their powerlessness in carrying out reforms in the Estates-General, they proposed to form a single assembly. On June 17, 1789, the Third Estate officially declared itself the National Assembly and on June 20, the Assembly swore to write a new constitution for France in the famous “Oath of the Tennis Court.”\(^3^3\) Just a few short weeks later, on July 14\(^{th}\), social unrest reached the streets of Paris and crowds stormed the prison of the Bastille, an event that historians mark as the official start of the French Revolution.

**The Artist in Eighteenth-Century France**

Professional artists of the eighteenth century were a privileged group with a very prestigious social status. They frequented salons and the great houses of liberal nobles and wealthy bourgeois intellectuals, and some were even received in the royal Court. As members of the intelligentsia and frequent guests at salons, artists were often familiar with the ideas of the

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\(^{3^2}\) Bruun, *The Enlightened Despots*, 17.

philosophes, as well as with Anglo-American constitutional theories. Closely associated with the intellectuals, the artist was considered to be a member of the elite and was ranked in the highest stratum of the bourgeoisie, possessing more social mobility than others of the professional class. Although artists in the lower ranks, such as decorators and house, sign, and carriage painters, were almost indistinguishable from artisans, artists at the upper level included hereditary artist families that ranked in the top tier of the haute bourgeoisie and sometimes in the lesser nobility. Nevertheless, if an artist was not a member of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, their chance of achieving outstanding material success and social advancement was almost nonexistent.

As an artist of the eighteenth century Academy, one provided prestige for his country and for the regime that controlled it. He was considered a “cultural ambassador,” a symbol of national solidarity and success. Because the majority of the French population was illiterate, the ability of the painter to depict and glorify was one of the most powerful tools of influence during the era, and the Academy wielded this tool as a weapon of propaganda.

**Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture**

Throughout the eighteenth century, the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture had been the supreme arbiter in all things concerning the fine arts. As an institution patronized by the monarchy, the Academy was the judge of all the paintings to be exhibited in the official Salon,

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35 Ibid., 128.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 148.
which was one of the rare occasions in the cultural life of the ancien régime where a public audience could assemble in an unregulated space.

The French Academy in Paris emerged in 1648 during the period of the Fronde, a time of crisis, civil disorder, and general discontent similar to the turmoil of the Prerevolution period. In 1663, Colbert completely reorganized the Academy to serve the interests of the monarchy, placing the Academy under the Bâtiments du Roi and ordering all painters to join the Academy or lose their privileges. Even further, the Academy garnered a social and political agenda that was carried out through ideology, rules, and procedures approved by the monarchy. This attempt to marshal and direct French artists extended the absolutist monarchical system to the artistic cultural sphere of France.

Although the Academy insisted upon the preservation of high standards and the encouragement of talent, its leading interests were class-biased and therefore conservative. The Academy had been founded with the promise of granting artists social status, and its students were educated on principles of “high art” that would reflect well on the monarchy. Albert Boime suggests that the Academy used artistic standards from antiquity and the Renaissance for models of a grandiose and monumental style that would express the “spiritual and temporal power of the wealthy classes.”

In the eighteenth century, the Academy was organized in a strict hierarchy with three major subdivisions: at the top, under the Directeur, were officiers who exercised all authority and decision-making, acting as the privileged, aristocratic class of the hierarchy. Below the officiers

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40 Ibid., 207.
41 Ibid., 203.
42 Ibid., 211.
were the *academiciens* who possessed an influential voice, but could not vote. The lowest were
the *agrésés*, who were only Academic candidates and had no rights other than competing in the
Salon every two years.\(^{43}\) With its rigid guidelines and tripartite hierarchy, the Academy reflected
the larger structure of French society, one in which each class was highly demarcated from the
next. Essentially, to be a student within the Academy was to become a cog within the *ancien
régime* institutional machine.

The Academy’s stringent guidelines extended to a hierarchy of genres, which held
*peinture d’histoire* at the top, and portraits, genre scenes, landscapes, and still life paintings at
the bottom. This hierarchy was even used to display paintings in the Academy’s official Salon.
Eighteenth-century prints and the writings of critics show that the vast, high-ceilinged exhibit
rooms at the Louvre displayed monumental history paintings hung just beneath the ceiling, while
portraits, genre scenes, landscapes, and still-lifes were hung on the lower levels.\(^{44}\) This
hierarchical structure, begun with the French Academy of Louis XIV, became an entrenched part
of academic doctrine and created boundaries in which only those who practiced history painting
could climb to the highest tiers of the hierarchy—as *officiers*, the *directeur*, and finally, *Premier
Peintre du Roi*, First Painter to the King.\(^ {45}\)

History painting not only included the traditional category of themes drawn from the
literature and history of antiquity, but also themes of contemporary political significance. Once
Louis XIV had established himself in power, he set a precedent of using the Academy to paint

\(^{43}\) *Almanach royal, année 1789* (Paris, 1788), 517-23; L. P. Deseine, *Notices historiques sur les
anciennes académies* (Paris, 1814), 1-57; J. P. G. L., Comte de Paroy, *Précis historique de


\(^{45}\) Ibid.
subjects that glorified his rule and propagandized on his behalf.\textsuperscript{46} Because the Academy’s power stemmed from the monarchy, the monarchy used the Academy’s art as a political instrument.\textsuperscript{47}

**The Call for a New Kind of Art**

The Academy had originally been founded with the goals of elevating the position of the artist and giving the artist more freedom in creating art, but by the mid-eighteenth century there was a growing dissatisfaction with the institution’s artistic autocracy. While the Academic artist enjoyed the patronage of the monarchy and the prestige of royal favor, he was also subject to the controls of an official agency of the government. Discipline was strict and the emphasis on rules and hierarchy followed the absolutist political system, ultimately militating against the creation of truly free and original art.

In the 1750’s, writers and critics began to speak out against the Academy’s artistic monopoly. Voltaire wrote, “We have not had a great painter since we have had an academy of painting,” and in Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* (1751), Diderot claimed, “academies smother [men of genius] by subjecting them to ruled tasks.”\textsuperscript{48} Diderot’s art criticism came to echo Rousseauist Enlightenment ideals; unlike traditional representations of the passions in art, he called for paintings of *exemplum virtutis* themes that used gesture and pantomime, rather than lavish color and extravagant settings, to display severity and high moral ideals.\textsuperscript{49} Diderot’s criticism ultimately praised Stoic virtue as a cure for the weak and insincere nature of

\textsuperscript{46} Boime, “The Cultural Politics of the Art Academy,” 211.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
contemporary French society and culture. He denounced the erotic and amorous rococo art of the Salons, favoring didactic art that glorified virtue, morality, and ethical values.⁵⁰

In 1754 the famous Salon critic La Font de Saint-Yenne published a short treatise called *Sentiments sur quelques Ouvrages du Salon de 1753*, which promoted the artistic portrayal of Rousseau’s Enlightenment ideals.⁵¹ La Font followed Rousseau in rejecting mythological subjects as absurd and immoral; instead he pled for true history painting that portrayed virtuous and heroic actions, and the courage and passion for honor and for “*le salut de la patrie*.”⁵²

With this call for a new direction in art, radical anti-establishment critics began to speak out against to the Salon, creating a new politicized art public that was hostile to the Academy. Critics threw aside polite formalities and began using confrontational, contentious, and even scurrilous language when reviewing the Academy’s Salons.⁵³ This Salon criticism and discontent with the Academy continued to grow through the eighteenth century, resulting in rebellions and protests within the Academy’s hierarchy. During the 1770’s, under the Comte d’Angiviller, the *Directeur des Bâtiments du Roi*, the Academy’s program became more rigorous and focused on obedience and discipline. The tightening of rules that d’Angiviller established at the Academy in Rome contributed to an artist protest as early as 1779.⁵⁴

**The Growth of Salon Criticism and Public Opinion**

The eighteenth century saw the emergence of *le public* and *public opinion* as ideological constructs, which has been traced back to Rousseau’s 1750 *Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts*...
and through the writings of Malherbe, Condorcet, Turgot, Mercier, and a number of other writers and politicians.\(^5\) In the 1780’s, public opinion had become inundated with the growing turmoil of the whole of French society, as seen in pamphlets and brochures showing the violent libel toward the crises of the declining monarchy.\(^5\)

Numerous historians such as Albert Dresdner and Thomas Crow have attested to the importance of art criticism as an important channel of public opinion during the late eighteenth century.\(^5\) Unlike other forms of public discourse, art criticism had originally been encouraged by the Academy as an exercise of public exhibition and advertisement for the Salon exhibitions. This pact between the Academy and the public, via the institution of public exhibition, soon came to an end when critics gained the courage to express negative opinions on Salon art. Beginning in 1747 with La Font de Saint-Yenne, who put his negative opinions to writing in an anonymous 159-page brochure, Academicians were pitted against the critics.\(^5\)

During the latter half of the eighteenth century, as tensions in French society climbed to unparalleled heights, Salon criticism became a highly politicized discourse. Because the Academy as an institution had always been entangled with the absolutist government that had birthed it, critics were unable to separate Academy art from the aristocratic culture that was its main patron.\(^5\) Additionally, Rousseau’s claim that the corrupt tastes of the wealthy aristocratic elite led the “needy artist to prostitute his talent and forget about the noble goals of his art” was

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\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid., 370.

\(^5\) Ibid.
espoused by *philosophes* like Diderot, as well as by numerous radical critics in the 1770’s and 1780’s.\(^{60}\)

Criticism of Academy art soon began to signify criticism of the social and political establishment of the *ancien régime*, which resulted in unrelenting censorship fueled by Academy officials; the instigation of government and Academic censorship revealed a growing fear of public opinion in the institutions of the *ancien régime*.\(^{61}\) When critics resisted censorship and continued to publish pamphlets in underground publishing houses, Academicians responded with violence and arbitrary punishment similar to a *lettre de cachet*.\(^{62}\) For instance, in 1785, the dissenting art critic Antoine-Joseph Gorsas received a physical thrashing by furious artists; similarly, the critic Fréron was sent to the Bastille to “assuage the resentment of a painter.”\(^{63}\) But, the Academy was unable to fully stifle negative criticism because critics began to join underground radical propagandists whose political ideals they espoused and contributed to disseminate.\(^{64}\)

As the historians Robert Darnton and Thomas Crow have shown, radical pamphleteers distinguished themselves through their rhetoric of purity, virtue, and austerity, which was derived from Rousseau’s Roman ideology and his critique of French aristocratic culture.\(^{65}\) Because this Salon criticism was politically sensitive and subject to censorship and government

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\(^{62}\) *Lettres de cachet*, one of the corrupt privileges of the French aristocracy, were letters that carried a sentence of imprisonment, often without a trial; Robert L. Herbert, *David, Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution: An Essay in Art and Politics* (New York: Viking, 1973), 50.


\(^{64}\) Ibid.

retaliation, pamphlets came to be published anonymously and were written in narratives and with the dialogue of fictional characters that could not be traced back to the authors.\textsuperscript{66} Essentially, the prerevolutionary Salon criticism that endured through the 1780’s was steeped in anonymity and aimed at ruining the image of the Salon as a glorious display of the monarchy’s artistic genius; instead, taking a radical tone, the criticism sought to expose the Salon as one of the excessive displays of a bankrupt monarchical institution.\textsuperscript{67}

\textbf{Conclusion}

The Enlightenment gave birth to a period of social, economic, and political turmoil. The philosophy of the Enlightenment, which the French \textit{philosophes} espoused with verve and enthusiasm in the salons of Paris, essentially laid the foundation for a revolution that would overturn government traditions and societal norms. The writings of Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and other Enlightenment thinkers gave the \textit{philosophes} a new way to solve the social, economic, and political problems of the age and began to take solid form in writings and ideals of the Prerevolution period.

Just as Enlightenment philosophy gave birth to a solution to the social, economic, and political problems of the eighteenth century, it served to unsettle the foundations of French society. Encouraging a more liberal and freethinking outlook, traditional institutions and long-held cultural values came into question, one of the most prominent being the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Liberal intellectual circles and critics turned against the Academy’s authority and artistic hegemony, accusing the \textit{ancien régime} institution of corruption, privilege, and of hindering true artistic talent.

\textsuperscript{66} Fort, “Voice of the Public,” 374.  
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 389.
During this period of turmoil and transition, an artist who appealed to both the leaders of the Academy and to the wider French community came to the forefront of the institution. A student within the Academy’s hierarchical system, Jacques-Louis David attained widespread fame through official Salons and yet, during the Prerevolution, he also gained the support from the radical critics who had turned against the Academy. This variety in David’s audience and followers came as a result of the Enlightenment ideals in his paintings during the 1780’s.
CHAPTER III

A QUESTION OF VIRTUE:
LIVY, ROUSSEAU, AND ROMAN IDEOLOGY

Livy wrote that the value of history lay in offering the reader instructive moral examples.¹ One of these moral examples is that of the Horatii and the Curiatii. In Livy’s story, the king of Rome, Tullus Hostilius, and the dictator of Alba Longa agree to have two sets of triplets meet in a duel to decide the victor of a war between their two states. After killing the three Curiatii, the Roman brother Horatius becomes the hero of Rome, but upon his triumphant return to the Eternal City, Horatius sees his sister Camilla weeping over the slain Curiatii to whom she had been betrothed. Angered at her grief over Rome’s enemy, Horatius kills her, after which King Tullus is forced to bring Horatius to trial, where he is found guilty. But through the actions of Horatius’ father, who appeals to the people for mercy, Horatius is acquitted.²

The story of the Horatii is an example of one of the most important virtues of ancient Rome: the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the good of the state. The heroic act of Horatius was his loyal subordination of himself to the public good, yet this same praiseworthy sacrifice also caused him to murder his own sister. Essentially, Livy’s story is a didactic one, presenting a dichotomy questioning whether the traits of patriotism and civic duty are, in actuality, virtues.³

The moral dichotomy of the Horatii story is the inspiration for Jacques-Louis David’s famous painting, The Oath of the Horatii, which was exhibited in the Salon of 1785 (Figure 1). The Horatii painting encompasses the ideals of the Enlightenment in portraying an exemplum

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid., 255.
virtutis theme that answered Diderot’s call for art of virtue and morality and responded to the Enlightenment principles of Rousseau.

**The Horatii and Rousseauist Ideals**

During the 1780’s, Academy officials began to support Rousseauist ideology and embrace Enlightenment principles that called for a resurgence of classical theory and antiquity. These Enlightenment principles, inspired by Rousseau’s writings on Roman virtue and civic patriotism, inevitably bled into David’s *Horatii* painting. Although David Carrier argues against the *Horatii* as a political painting, it is apparent that the Enlightenment ideals found in the writings of Diderot and Rousseau had, in fact, influenced David in his painting.

The most obvious influence of the Enlightenment on David’s *Horatii* can be found in the presence not only of the Roman setting, but also the accuracy of Roman costume and object, and more importantly, the architectural interior as a historically accurate portrayal of classical Roman austerity. David set his painting in an architectural background similar to the Temple of Paestum, which was a new discovery for David and his eighteenth-century contemporaries. In a Doric atrium, the viewer is presented with two groups: a group of Horatii men taking their oath and a group of women and children, the Horatii family members, sitting and consoling one another.

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The stark sobriety of the Roman scene mirrors the bold and virtuous nature of the *esprit de corps* of the late eighteenth century, which perceived antiquity in a highly moralistic light.\(^7\)

David’s introduction to the artistic representation of Enlightenment ideals can be traced back to his godfather Sedaine, who David lived with in the Louvre and who was often visited by Diderot. Diderot’s criticism of art and aesthetics was well known in Paris during this period, as was his call for *drame bourgeois* comprised of a “simple plot, an imminent catastrophe resolved by a virtuous act, strong emotions, and silent tableaus,” which he advocated in his *Discours sur la Poésie Dramatique* (1758).\(^8\) As a writer of dramas, Sedaine would have discussed these elements with Diderot, and the discussions would have undoubtedly influenced David, whose later pieces would contain the “simple plot,” “virtuous act,” and “strong emotions” that Diderot encouraged.\(^9\) The final *Horatii* painting was one of these pieces.

If Diderot’s influence can be found in the subject of David’s painting, then it can be assumed that Diderot’s influence reached even further to its ideology. In his *drames*, Diderot echoed the Rousseauist ideas of the Enlightenment, calling for plain manners instead of artificial politeness, as well as the severity, rigor, and discipline of Sparta. His writings praised Stoic virtue as a cure for the weak and insincere nature of contemporary French society and culture.\(^10\) Along these lines, the *Horatii* embodies a style that is plain and unembellished, rejecting the artificiality and insincerity of the rococo style of the French aristocracy. Instead, the *Horatii* is a representation of severity, rigor, and discipline with its austere setting, Roman costume, and classical figures.

\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^9\) Ibid.
The *Horatii*’s Roman imagery, and the ideals it represented, were directly drawn from the principles of Rousseau. Having received a classical education in his youth, David would no doubt have been familiar with Rousseau’s educational novel *Emile* (1762). At the beginning of *Emile*, Rousseau writes: “Public instruction no longer exists and can no longer exist, because where there is no fatherland, there can no longer be citizens. These two words, *fatherland* and *citizens*, should be effaced from modern languages.” Rousseau upheld a state led by the natural civic virtue of equal citizens, as in the ancient republics of Sparta and Rome, but he believed that the world of eighteenth-century France seemed to be split by individual bourgeois interests.

In *Emile*, Rousseau continued: “A citizen of Rome was neither Caius nor Lucius; he was a Roman. He even loved the country exclusive of himself.” Rousseau’s writings show a love for *la patrie* and a rejection of the bourgeois in the name of the citizen and of citizen virtue; to Rousseau, citizen virtue was one and the same as public spirit or patriotism. His explanation of Roman virtue places the citizen in the position of doing what is good for the public good, but it did not erase the distinction between the private and the public; instead it sought to bring together private interest and public justice. Rousseau’s principles of the love of *la patrie* and civic patriotism were prominent themes in Livy’s *Horatii* narrative, and as such, they were the underlying philosophy of David’s painting.

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12 Kohle, “The Road from Rome to Paris,” 77.
15 Ibid.
**Literary Sources**

During the eighteenth century, the iconography and theme of oath-taking carried a political connotation that was part of a larger artistic trend in Europe. Robert Rosenblum notes that David’s “choice of the oath motif as an expression of fervent political loyalty was hardly new,” and goes on to analyze and compare paintings of similar subject created during the eighteenth century.\(^{16}\) Paintings such as Gavin Hamilton’s *Oath of Brutus* (1764), Benjamin West’s *Hannibal Taking the Oath* (1771), and Jacques-Antoine Beaufort’s *Oath of Brutus* (1771) all presented themes of political determination.\(^{17}\) But despite the proliferation of oath-taking themes in painting, there seems to be no single definitive source responsible for David’s *Horatii*; instead, the final composition stems from specific literary sources.

Historians claim that the true sources of the *Horatii* painting were the ballet *Les Horaces* by Noverre, produced in Paris in 1777, and more importantly, Corneille’s play *Horace*.\(^{18}\) David’s first sketch for the *Horatii* can be dated back to 1781 with a drawing of the proud Horatius pointing at the dead body of Camilla. This drawing, strikingly different from the final painting, is now located in the Albertina (Figure 2). This sketch is followed by an interval of time where David’s interest in the subject waned. It is only in 1782, after attending Corneille’s play *Horace* at the *Comédie Française*, that David’s interest was revived and he began creating new sketches of the subject.

According to David’s biographer, Alexandre Péron, the artist created a new Horatii drawing directly after attending Corneille’s *Horace*, which Péron notes made a “powerful

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\(^{18}\) Carrier, “Was David a Revolutionary Before the Revolution?,” 111.
impression on him.”¹⁹ In Corneille’s drama, David had witnessed “fierce, resolute Romans whose dedication to Rome transcended personal feelings and family loyalties.” The character of Horatius saw his battle as a noble trial to “test our valor,” proclaiming, “such strength of will is ours alone” and that “the solid manliness of which I have boasted permits no weakness in its firmness.”²⁰ It was the heroic pride and moral outlook of the Romans, whose “solid manliness” left no room for weakness, that David seems to have been attempting to capture in his first sketch. Péron wrote that David remarked:

Comme pouvant être reproduite en peinture, la scène du dernier acte, où Horace père plaide, devant le peuple romain, la cause de son fils, et le fait absoudre du meurtre commis sur sa soeur en revenant vainqueur des Curiaces.²¹

In 1782, David created the drawing *Horatius Killing His Sister*, a design similar to the 1781 sketch, before moving on to a different scene of the story (Figure 3). David’s next drawing, *Horatius Defending His Son*, currently in the Musée du Louvre, represents a scene from the last act of Corneille’s *Horace*, during which the elder Horatius pleads to a crowd of people in defense of his son, who has saved Rome but has also killed his own sister in an excess of patriotic fervor (Figure 4). This 1782 sketch was originally titled: “Horace, vainqueur des trois Curiaces, condamné à mort pour le meurtre de Camille, sa soeur, defendu par son père au moment où les licteurs l’entraînent au supplice, et absous par le peuple touché de ce spectacle et du grand service qu’il vient de render à sa patrie.”²² David’s drawing depicts the old Horatius speaking to the crowd while his son stands proudly at his side, and Sabina, his wife, sits weeping

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next to the body of Camilla. In the background, two judges, attended by traditional Roman lictors, or guards, watch the spectacle from their seats. The judges are the *duumviri*, whom the king has entrusted to judge Horatius and who have just pronounced his death sentence.²³ It is this sentence that prompts the elder Horatius to appeal to the people, the scene that David depicts in his drawing.

Numerous art historians, including Cantinelli, J. Locquin, J. L. Jules David, Charles Saunier, and Walter Friedlander, have agreed that these 1782 events—David’s attendance at Corneille’s *Horaces* and the resulting sketch—were the main stimuli for the *Horatii* painting of 1785.²⁴ But this obvious and oft-cited source for the painting does not explain the various inventions that David includes in his composition. For instance, Corneille’s *Horace* described the setting as “*dans une salle de la maison d’Horace,*” but David’s 1782 sketch changes the setting to a public forum with large Roman columns and a classical temple in the background, displaying a more pictorial grandeur than was present in the play.²⁵ The composition also shows a distinct change in the drama of the scene, which could be attributed to David’s personal ideological beliefs. In an essay published in 1941, Edgar Wind asserts that the 1782 sketch actually seems inspired by a personal protest against Corneille’s last act, during which the elder Horatius tells his son, “*ne crois pas que le peuple stupide.*”²⁶ David seems to reject this notion that the people are “*stupide,*” and instead uses his sketch to depict the elder Horatius addressing the people in a plea of supplication and mercy for his son’s life. In showing Horatius appealing directly to the people for a just sentence, David invented a scene that Corneille’s play did not present, but which was included in Livy’s account of the story.

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²³ Ibid., 124.
²⁴ Ibid.
²⁵ Ibid.
²⁶ Ibid., 126.
Voltaire, who had written the preface to Corneille’s *Horace*, makes it known that Corneille admitted Horatius was condemned by the *duumviri* but absolved by the people, and David’s choice to depict the true Horatii trial scene as written by Livy, rather than the one presented in Corneille’s play, shows his ideological leanings toward Enlightenment principles. In this way, it can be seen that David, seven years before the outbreak of the French Revolution, was already a believer of popular justice, a proponent of the Rousseauist ideals of popular sovereignty and the will of the *peuple*. These were the ideals that would directly influence the events of the Revolution.

David’s deviations from *Horace* prove that Corneille’s play was not, in fact, the only inspiration for the *Horatii* composition. During David’s youth and classical education, Charles Rollin’s *Histoire Romaine* (1738) was the most popular textbook of Roman history and was widely read among the students. This work, which David undoubtedly read during his classical studies, would have been David’s first introduction to the story of the Horatii and would have influenced his conception of the subject, whether the artist knew it or not. Rollin’s account of the story of the Horatii follows Livy’s original plot more closely than Corneille had done in his play. The moral of David’s chosen scene, in which the hero’s father appeals to the people against the *duumviri*, can be understood just by the title Rollin gives the episode: “*Le peuple sauve Horace.*” Although David’s sketch, and his inclusion of the people’s ability to absolve and cast judgment at a trial, originated from a book from his school days, the choice of subject proves that David intended to represent his own belief of the power of “*le peuple*.” David’s sketch directly contradicts the narrative of Corneille, who left the final decision of Horatius’s life in the hands of

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28 Wind, “The Sources of David’s Horaces,” 125.
29 Ibid., 126.
the appointed duumviri, and through them the king. Instead, following Rollin, David places the final decision in the hands of the people, showing them as a united whole that possesses more power and influence than the king alone. Therefore, as early as 1782, David was beginning to assert the very democratic convictions that would go on to influence the French Revolution.

**The Philosophes and the Horatii**

The intellectual circles of the Parisian salons cast an immense influence on David’s artistic career, beginning with his first sketches for the *Horatii* painting. According to Péron, David brought his 1782 sketch, finished after seeing Corneille’s play in 1782, to a literary salon at the home of Madame Chénier, an aristocrat who had established her house as a meeting place for aristocratic and intellectual amateurs of Hellenic culture.\(^{30}\) It was with this elite group of intellectuals that David first discussed his composition and conception of the *Horatii* subject.

The literary gathering at Madame Chénier’s household included David’s godfather Sedaine, as well as the famous playwright Ducis.\(^{31}\) When David showed his sketch to the group, the members reportedly argued that his painting should not represent a scene that depended primarily on the spoken word.\(^{32}\) Sedaine reportedly told David:

> The action you have chosen is practically nil. It’s all words, a marvelous appeal involving many tricks of oratory which attracted Corneille and led him to compose a sort of appendix to his tragedy. Moreover, would our French habits take kindly to the ferocious authority of a father who pushes stoicism to the limit of excusing his son for the murder of his daughter?... We are not mature enough for a subject of this sort.\(^{33}\)

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\(^{30}\) Paul Dimoff, *La vie et l'oeuvre d'André Chénier jusqu'a la Revolution francaise, 1762-1790* (Paris: Droz, 1936), II.

\(^{31}\) The playwright Ducis had made his fame by adapting Hamlet, Othello, Lear, and other Shakespearean roles to the actor Brizard, who played the part of the elder Horatius in Corneille’s *Horace* of 1782; Wind, “The Sources of David’s Horaces,” 133.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.

Sedaine’s opinion influenced David’s conception of the Horatii scene, pushing him to choose a different composition that wouldn’t glorify, or even address, the subject of a father who Sedaine claims “pushes stoicism to the limit of excusing his son for the murder of his daughter.” But as David’s first chosen scene, which is focused on the subject of the stoic justice of Horatius’s father, David shows his adherence to the Rousseauist ideals of civic duty and Roman stoicism. Sedaine acknowledges that the French people, who have just recently been introduced to Enlightenment philosophy, are not yet “mature enough” for a scene of such liberal ideals, moving the debate from the drawing’s aesthetic qualities to the scene’s display of morality and Enlightenment philosophy. In the Chénier salon, the poet Lebrun agreed with Sedaine and, addressing David with the familiar tu, suggested David choose a scene with more action: “take any other subject external to the tragedy, which would be truly your own.”

The members of the literary gathering succeeded in convincing David to replace the Horace condamné subject with the Serment des Horaces scene. David replaced his first narrative with the “moment which must have preceded the battle, when the elder Horatius, gathering his sons together in their family home, makes them swear to conquer or to die.” The philosophes helped David transform his Horatii design from one derived from literature, which only suggests the spoken word, to one using the “simple plot,” “virtuous act,” and “strong emotions” of the drame bourgeois that Diderot, and undoubtedly Sedaine, promoted.

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34 Péron, Examen du tableau du serment des Horaces, peint par David, 28.
35 Brookner, Jacques-Louis David, 75.
36 Gassner and Quinn, The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama, 754.
The Oath of the Horatii

The revised scene for the *Horatii* subject had no basis in literature or history, leading to the theory that it must have been a completely original invention on the part of David. But Edgar Wind questions this theory:

Did David then invent the scene? This is improbable in view of the fact that, when he announced his picture as *Le Serment des Horaces*, everyone seems to have understood what he meant.37

But three later preparatory sketches show the creative evolution of David’s *Horatii* composition, including various drawings in the Cabinet des Dessins at the Louvre, as well as drawings in the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lille.

The first of the preparatory drawings is the 1782 sketch reportedly drawn after David’s meeting with the literary salon of Madame Chénier. The drawing, which resides in the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, depicts the Horatii father, bent at the waist, holding in his lowered arms the swords, which oddly point toward himself (Figure 5). The women are fully drawn and well defined on the right, but the figures of the men are still uncertain, their lines only lightly sketched as if David had been experimenting and revising their positions but was left unsatisfied. On the right, Camilla is huddled on her knees by her sister, and there is a lightly sketched silhouette of another figure that leans over the two women.

In a second drawing, located in the Musée du Louvre, the positions and stances of the three sons have become more defined and resolutely drawn, while the father and the three swords remain as tentative sketches (Figure 6). From its style and composition, it can be seen that the Louvre drawing is a newer version of the 1782 drawing in the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. On the left half of this sketch, the draftsmanship is more confident and the Horatii are given bolder

gestures and straighter stances. David seems to have considered removing the swords completely, only showing the three sons swearing their oath by reaching for their father’s outstretched hand. The right half of the composition lacks coherence and definition. The figure of Sabina has changed and David has replaced Camilla with two unidentified women, who stand entwined behind Sabina. Numerous erasures and corrections reveal David’s evolution of the composition and his hesitant conception of the scene.

The third drawing, located in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lille, reveals the most finished compositional drawing for the Oath of the Horatii (Figure 7). The influence of Poussin’s Testament of Eudamidas can be seen in the figure of the grief-stricken Camilla, as well as the background objects of the lance, shields, and swords hung on the wall, and the table with feet in the form of panther heads. Additionally, the figure of the father, now standing fully upright with both arms raised, holds the three swords in his left hand and, with a grave expression, watches the sons reach for the weapons as they take their oath. Compared with the finished painting, this drawing depicts swords that are smaller, shorter, and much less menacing. These swords take on the historically accurate appearance of the thin-bladed Roman sword, rather than the large, curved Saracen sword that David uses in his final composition. Overall, this last drawing managed to capture the sentiment of grandeur and virtue that David would fully realize in his final painting.

The most finished and detailed sketches of the figures in the Horatii were completed during David’s time in Rome. Located in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Angers, France and the Musée Bonnat in Bayonne, France, the drawings are large sketches of the figures in their final positions. A study of the woman and children grouping emphasizes the drapery and grief-

stricken expression of the figures (Figure 8). Similarly, the study for the figure of Camilla, the key figure on the right side of the painting, shows virtuosity in the depiction of classical drapery, modeling, and gestural expression (Figure 9). The figure of Camilla is depicted with crossed feet, an iconographic expression of grief and sorrow that David would use in his later paintings, such as *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*. The studies for the Horatii brothers is one of the most finished sketches, showing the drapery and modeling of forms in full detail (Figure 10). The sketch of the Horatii father leaves the three swords only lightly sketched, showing David’s plans to change the blades from the historical Roman swords to the menacing blades that would connote deadly intent (Figure 11).

**The Salon of 1785**

The Comte d’Angiviller had commissioned David to paint the Horatii scene, and a description of *Horatius Defending his Son* was noted in the list of royal commissions issued in February 1782.³⁹ D’Angiviller had hoped to exhibit David’s painting in the Salon of 1783, but instead David created subsequent sketches that evolved the composition.⁴⁰ F. Hamilton Hazlehurst notes that David conceived the plan for his final canvas not in Paris but during his second sojourn in Rome.⁴¹ David arrived in Rome on October of 1784 with his wife and his three students. On December 1, Lagrenée, the Director of the *Académie de France* in Rome, ensured d’Angiviller, “*M. David travaille fort et pense à son tableau pour le Roi.*”⁴²

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⁴¹ Ibid.
⁴² Ibid., 40.
According to the conditions of the royal commission, the painting was to have been exactly 10 feet by 10 feet, but David enlarged the canvas, making it a meter wider than the prescribed format. When he was directed to alter the painting’s measurements so that it would conform to official requirements, he refused: “I was told to do it 10 by 10, but having turned my composition in all ways, seeing that it would lose its energy, I ceased to make a picture for the king, and did it for myself.” In a letter, David further explains his reason for the change, writing:

*D'ailleurs quand je l'ai proposé à M. Pierre, je lui ai dit que ce n'était pas l'intérêt qui me guidais et que je le ferais de 13 pieds pour le même prix que si je le faisais de 10. Il m'a répondu que non, que ce serait narguer mes confrères; moi, je n'ai pas vu de cette manière, et n'ai considéré que mon avancement.*

David had chosen to break the rules of the commission, not in an effort to further his “avancement” as an artist, but to follow his own creative drive. Deciding to paint the *Horatii* for himself and for his personal fulfillment rather than under the direction of the Academy and the King, David made his first outward rebellion against the *ancien régime* institution. David, in explaining his disobedience toward the rules of commission size, acknowledged that he had been warned that the rebellion would provoke his colleagues. “*Il m'a répondu que non, que ce serait narguer mes confrères,*” he had written, showing a disregard for the judgments and rules of his colleagues. This public disagreement with the Academy turned David into a controversial artist, and he knew it.

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45 Ibid.
While working on the *Horatii* in Rome, David allowed no one to see the painting until putting it on exhibit in his Rome studio. The monumental painting was an instant success, with crowds flocking to see the *Horatii*. J. H. Tischbein, a German living in Rome, wrote:

> Not only artists, art lovers, and connoisseurs, but even the people troop by from the morning until evening to see it. The enthusiasm is general…At parties, at coffeehouses, and on the streets, we hear one judgment or the other, for nothing else is spoken of but David and *The Oath of the Horatii*. No affair of state of ancient Rome, no papal election of recent Rome, ever stirred feelings more strongly.

The *Horatii* was then shipped from Rome to Paris just in time for the August opening of the 1785 Salon. Although artists usually had little say about where their pieces were hung in the Salon, David wrote to the Marquis de Bièvre, a wealthy connoisseur and friend of the Comte d’Angiviller, asking him to do what he could to have the *Horatii* hung advantageously in the 1785 Salon. David’s appeal to the aristocratic Bièvre shows that he was aware of his unpopular status within the Academy, and the fact that the *Horatii* was exhibited in a location where it could not be seen very well shows the truth behind David’s awareness. After further appeals that the painting be rehung, d’Angiviller ordered that the painting be moved to a better position in the Salon. Pietro Antonio Martini’s engraving, *The Salon of 1785*, shows the central position the *Horatii* was finally given (Figure 12).

Rivalry was common within the Academy’s ranks, and rivals of David threw their support behind the work of Peyron, whose *Death of Alcestis* was also being shown in the 1785 Salon. Nevertheless, David’s superior painting and compositional skills were acknowledged.

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47 Wildenstein and Wildenstein, *Documents Complémentaires*, 17 (136, 16 February 1785).
48 Ibid., 19 (152, 8 August 1785).
Numerous rivals of David judged the *Horatii* to the better painting, such as Nicolas Cochin, secretary of the Academy, who grudgingly admitted, “David was the real victor of the Salon.”

**Public Reception and Salon Criticism**

*The Oath of the Horatii* had created a sensation at its exhibition in both Rome in 1784 and in Paris in 1785, and its fame and influence spread rapidly throughout Europe. The ingenuity in David’s use of the Neoclassical style, with its austere manner and themes of morality and virtue, was praised by radical critics in the unofficial press, the anonymous underground brochures and pamphlets that were known for mocking and satirizing Salon art.

Different from the begrudging praise of Academic officials and establishment critics, the radical critics responded immediately and powerfully to the *Horatii*. They criticized particular faults in the painting, but concluded that those faults were negated by the work’s overpowering impact, which moved them more than any other painting in the Salon.

Although the *Horatii* uses the virtuoso brushwork and exquisite painterly qualities taught by the Academy and favored by establishment critics, the painting disobeyed Academic teachings with its composition, which was seen as disjointed, stiff, and plain. The composition was commented on in an anonymous critique in 1785:

> It is much more agreeable to the eye, as it is to the hand, to peruse an object in its entirety without encountering asperities, gaps that interrupt, that repel, when its sensibility wants to be led softly and to glide effortlessly over the interlinking parts to he composition without difficulty…Based on this, the painting of the Horatii is flawed: it presents three planes that are barely distinguishable—the

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51 Fort, “Voice of the Public,” 368.
52 Ibid.
group of brothers, then a gap; the old Horatii, then a gap; and finally the group of
the women…

The criticism shows an overall awareness of the fragmented, incoherent structure of David’s
composition, which juxtaposes the patriotism of the men on the left with the familial cause of the
women on the right. The sculpturesque definition of forms creates a harsh juxtaposition where
the angular, masculine vigor of Horatius and his sons is contrasted with the passive submission
in the curvilinear forms of the women and children. The art historian Thomas Crow argues that
this caesura, the compositional rift running through the Horatii, contributes to the disjointed
quality of the painting but is proof of David’s rejection of the stylistic canons of the ancien
régime Academy.

In a similar vein of thought, it is reasonable to assume that, because the men are featured
more prominently in the composition, David assumed the public would identify more with the
men in the increasingly radicalized politics of the prerevolutionary years. Just like the radical
critics who used direct, honest language to describe contemporary situations, such as the radical
pamphleteer Jean-Louis Carra, David employed a direct, truthful, and unornamented aesthetic
that portrayed a virtuous act in its simplest terms. This is not to say that the Horatii possessed
the same heated, scurrilous tone of social and political anger that is seen in the writings of the
pamphleteers; it was the simplicity, honesty, and plainness of David’s style that radical critics
vehemently praised.

1785), 29f.
54 Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life In Eighteenth-century Paris* (New Haven: Yale UP,
1985), 273.
55 Jean-Louis Carra was a radical pamphleteer who would become a radical participant in the
56 Ibid.
On the other hand, establishment critics recognized the brilliance of David’s work, but objected to the enthusiasm of the radical critics. Warren Roberts suggests that the less than enthusiastic response of establishment critics stemmed from their objection to some unnamable thing within the painting that bothered them; perhaps it was a rejection of this visible representation of the esprit de corps of the prerevolutionary period, which David was able to capture and which the radical critics readily responded to.\textsuperscript{57} Or perhaps it was David’s altogether new conception of the Neoclassical style—the severe austerity and simplicity that had been called for by famous philosophes, such as Diderot and Rousseau. Nevertheless, there was a sentiment of discomfort within the responses of Academy officials and establishment critics.\textsuperscript{58}

The majority of Salon critics in 1785 commented on the Horatii with similar words: “astonishing,” “sublime,” “inspired in its invention.”\textsuperscript{59} Critics lauded its compositional elements and the frieze-like composition, which used a minimal number of figures in a stage-like setting. This striking simplicity was made even more severe by the expression of moral fervor that was portrayed through the revival of antique vocabulary in the setting, costume, and accessories.\textsuperscript{60} Many critics sought a way to describe this new gestural language, such as one viewer who wrote:

One must absolutely see it to know the extent to which it merits being admired… [It is] a composition filled with energy, sustained by a powerful and frightful expression, that contrasts superbly with the despondency that prevails in the group of the women. Finally, if I judge the reaction of others by my own, one experiences in seeing this painting a feeling that elevates the soul, and if I can use an expression of J.-J. Rousseau, it has something poignant that attracts you.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Journal de Paris, No. 260 (17 September 1785), 519.
Critics compared David’s painting to the writings of Rousseau and showed that the *Horatii* fully realized the language of gesture of Diderot’s *drame bourgeois*, which he theorized in the *philosophe* meetings of Sedaine. It was the eloquent poses and gestural emotions that impressed critics in the Salon of 1785. The expressive pantomime of the *Horatii* figures was a new, revolutionary characteristic in that the human figures themselves possessed clarity and brilliant definition of volumetric forms with an expressive and powerfully “poignant” force that artists and critics of the time were unable to name.

Diverging from the common depiction of oath-taking in eighteenth-century art, David depicted the figure of Horatius holding the three large swords clenched in his left hand while the three Horatii figures create a rhythmic thrust with their outstretched arms. This depiction of the oath was a completely original iconographic invention on David’s part, and it fascinated critics in the 1785 Salon.62 The captivated nature of the criticism can be seen through the many attempts that were made to describe the intangible implications in the painting, such as the significance of the blind allegiance of the sons, which one critic described: “The group of the three Horatii are characterized by an imposing style and a frightful movement because the three arms are all directed toward the same object, THE WEAPONS.”63 Another critic studied the sublime nature of the oath and the symbolic significance it carried:

I will agree that it is a great conception and that it is executed as boldly as it is skillfully and I am as entranced as you are with the action of the Horatii, who embrace each other during their Oath, a sublime and symbolic expression of their union, of the sacred and courageous friendship that unites them, and of the common object that brings them closer and links them to one another until death, these three warrior brothers.64

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63 *Observations sur le Salon de 1785, extraites du Journal General de France; Collection Deloynes*, XIV, No. 339, 4-5.
Antoine-Joseph Gorsas, the radical art critic who would later become one of the most prolific pamphleteers of the French Revolution, also praised the *Horatii* in the 1785 Salon. As a critic who wrote about Salon art in a tone of satire, similar to that of the famous Revolutionary pamphleteers Mercier and Brissot, it is significant that Gorsas wrote a favorable review of David’s painting.\(^65\)

...Aristarchus made me observe with how much soul M. David had rendered the eagerness of the brothers to swear that they will go to conquer or die for their country, and the profound feeling of joy that filled the old Horatius seeing he had sons so worthy of him, a feeling indicated with so much energy in his features, in his eyes, in his attitude and above all in this simple expression, that perhaps would have escaped any other artist but M. David, that of clasping in his hand with emotion the swords with which he is going to arm his sons.\(^66\)

Gorsas interprets the *Horatii* in a political light, focusing on the Horatii’s enthusiasm to “conquer or die for their country,” and the resulting “joy that filled the old Horatius seeing he had sons so worthy of him.” It can be imagined that all of the radical anti-establishment criticism written about the *Horatii* had taken on a similar tone of awe and inspiration in response to the Horatii’s dedication and patriotism.

Though marred by impatience with its compositional subtleties, the salon criticism shows that the *Horatii* elevated the mind with its depiction of the early Romans, whose inflexible pride and patriotism was rare, and therefore awe-inspiring, to David’s contemporaries.\(^67\) It is notable that, in David’s painting, the themes of civic duty, patriotic pride, and virtuous sacrifice took precedence over the less prominent themes of private virtue and family love. Because these themes, which had come to the forefront of salon debate with Rousseau’s writings, were

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inherently political topics in eighteenth-century France, David’s *Horatii* became a communicative vehicle for the political theory of the Enlightenment.

**Conclusion**

Through the controversy surrounding the creation of the *Horatii*, in which David defied the Academy’s prescribed canvas size thereby defying the monarchy itself, David carried out an act of rebellion that no other artist of his generation had attempted. As such, the painting was created in an act of protest, a proclamation of autonomy in which David bravely exercised his artistic rights in the face of an unyielding and unforgiving institution of the ancien régime. But even though David was publicly dissatisfied with the established procedures of the Academy, the *Horatii* still belongs to the very style favored by that institution. The Academy encouraged didactic, heroic art of the *exemplum virtutis* theme, which the monarchy promoted to “strengthen the state and improve society.” Since the Academy’s birth, history painting had been used for distinctly propagandistic purposes, and David’s painting was seen as one of these paintings, albeit a new and different version because it used a more simple and austere Neoclassical style.

Although David’s rebellion against the Academy may not have been a political protest, the *Horatii* painting itself was not without political content. The painting depicts a historical subject that emphasizes the political ideals of patriotism and civic duty. David’s first sketches of the story, showing Horatius’s successful appeal to the people in pardoning his son, showed a promotion of the Enlightenment principles of popular justice and a faith in the will of the *peuple*, two distinctly Rousseauist ideals that would grow in popularity during the Prerevolution period and would prove victorious in the latter half of the French Revolution.

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Early critics claim the *Horatii* to be “fully republican,” but the painting can more correctly be termed “prerevolutionary,” meaning that even though it wasn’t a protest against the monarchy, it still carried the message of Enlightenment reform that would inspire the Revolution. Thomas Crow supports this view of the *Horatii* as a prerevolutionary painting, asserting that in 1785 David was not yet the ardent republican he would become during the Revolution, but instead was an “artist who lived in a world within which revolutionary pressures were developing,” a description that can even be said of the radical *philosophes* that would later become revolutionaries. In 1785, no one in France was a republican revolutionary yet; revolution was not even a thought in the minds of the radical liberal press or the salons of the *philosophes*. At this time, all who would later participate in the Revolution were still only suggesting a reformation of the French government along Enlightenment principles, such as those portrayed in David’s *Horatii*.

As a participant of the *philosophe* circle of Sedaine, David had been fully aware of both the artistic and political implications of his painting. In changing his scene to the Horatii brothers taking their oath, David chooses to illustrate the Rousseauist ideals of civic duty and love of *la patrie*. His eighteenth-century contemporaries would have known the outcome of the Horatii story, where two of the three brothers die and the last brother brutally kills his own sister in a bout of patriotism, but David portrays the scene of the oath as a moment of glory and virtuous honor in order to show that the heinous acts of the end of the story are a reasonable price to pay in order to save the state of Rome. But beyond the theme of civic over private duty and sacrifice for the common good, David provides an answer to the moral question posed by Livy: Are the traits of patriotic dedication and the sacrifice of the individual for the state, which made Horatius

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both a hero and a murderer, truly virtues? David, with the unwavering resolution and fervent patriotism that would characterize the revolutionaries of 1789, paints a resounding yes.
CHAPTER IV

DAVID AND THE PHILOSOPHES:
LA SOCIÉTÉ TRUDAINÉ AND DAVID’S POLITICIZATION

Although critics debate the nature of the protest in David’s *Oath of the Horatii*, it cannot be contested that the environment in which David grew to artistic maturity was heavily inundated with Enlightenment thinking and radical political rhetoric. The Prerevolution period saw an outpouring of writings from dissident critics and pamphleteers whose Enlightenment thinking advocated for government reform. Thomas Crow argues that it was the support of radical critics that enabled David to break away from the official art world of the Academy, under which his artistic talent had flourished and his previous successes had been achieved.\(^1\) After being victim to the intrigues of the Academy during the 1785 Salon, David became embittered and dissatisfied with the Academy’s artistic hegemony and system of hierarchical privilege.

In his early career, David had intermittently attended meetings of liberal intellectual circles, such as those of his godfather Sedaine and Madame Chénier, but after the 1785 Salon he fully immersed himself in the salon culture of Paris. In 1786, David was introduced to the Abbé Delille, “Pindar” Lebrun, the critic Suard, and other literary and social minds at the elite and fashionable salons of Ducreux and of Madame Vigée-Le Brun.\(^2\) In this way, even though David’s introduction to intellectual circles began with Sedaine, it wasn’t until 1786 that David entered the high society of the liberal elite: the Orléanist circles at Saint-Leu, the seat of the Duc


\(^2\) Ducreux was the *Premier Peintre de la Reine* who drew the last portrait of King Louis XVI before his execution; Madame Vigée-Le Brun was the most important female painter of the eighteenth century; Paul Dimoff, *La vie et l’oeuvre d’André Chénier jusqu’a la Revolution francaise, 1762-1790* (Paris: Droz, 1936), 5; Louise-Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Souvenirs de Madame Vigée Le Brun* (Paris: Charpentier, 1869), I, 64, II, 267; Alexandre Péron, *Examen Du Tableau De Serment Des Horaces, Peint Par David* (Paris: 1839), 28.
d’Orléans, and the salons attended by illustrious figures such as the Marquis de Pastoret, Thélusson, and Lavoisier. 3 Documents note:

David est reçu chez le Duc d’Orléans, amené par Madame de Genlis, pour donner des leçons aux jeunes princes, il organise des tableaux vivants. Il rencontre Volney, les frères Chénier, Ducis, Barnave, Lameth, Talleyrand. Il est franc-maçon (le duc d’Orléans était grand maître du Grand Orient). 4

In entering the elite society of liberal intellectuals, David not only became an intimate member of the Orléanist circles, but was also introduced to the Freemasons and the liberal ideas of the Freemason Loge des Neufs Sœurs. 5 Similarly, David was introduced to the writings and ideas of Barnave, the Lameths, Volnet, and others who would later become major participants in the Revolution. 6

**La Société Trudaine**

During the Prerevolution period, David was most closely involved with la Société Trudaine, a liberal salon of cultivated, elite writers and intellectuals. The Trudaine salon met once a week at the luxurious Place Royale hôtel owned by the two Trudaine brothers, Charles-

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3 Louis Philippe Joseph, the Duc d’Orléans, known as Philippe Égalité during the Revolution, was a member of the Royal House of Bourbon who actively supported the French Revolution; “Orléanist” would become the French term for those that favored constitutional monarchy; the Marquis de Pastoret, Thélusson, and Lavoisier were well-known aristocratic intellectuals who would support the Revolution; Philippe Bordes, “Jacques-Louis David’s Serment Du Jeu De Paume: Propaganda without a Cause?” *Oxford Art Journal* 3.2, Propaganda (1980): 22.


5 A prominent Masonic Lodge of the Grand Orient de France that was influential in organizing intellectual support for the French Revolution; notable Freemasons included Benjamin Franklin, Voltaire, Marquis de Condorcet, and the Duc d’Orléans.

Louis Trudaine de Montigny and Charles-Michel Trudaine de Sablière. As the surviving members of the Trudaine family, the brothers had inherited a great fortune and a prestigious lineage: their grandfather had been the creator of France’s modern system of roads and bridges, their father had been the powerful minister of state for finance and the patron of the Academy of Sciences, and their mother had been the hostess of one of Paris’s greatest salons, which had mixed enlightened administrators such as Turgot with scientists like Lavoisier and philosophical intellectuals like the mathematician Condorcet.

Although the Trudaine brothers both had offices in the Paris Parlement, they remained a famous part of the elite liberal intellectual society of prerevolutionary France. The elder Trudaine brother owned one of the richest classical libraries in Paris, while the younger Trudaine was drawn to liberal political ideas, for which he would later translate the American Federalist Papers in 1792. The brothers were also regular attendees of the circle of Grimod de la Reynière, the son of a wealthy financier who was famous in Paris for his weekly “déjeuners philosophiques et nutritifs.” Along with the Trudaine brothers and their guests, Reynière’s lunches were attended by a broad group of visitors, including the liberal court and financial elite, as well as dissident radical journalists like Mercier and Restif de la Bretonne. Conversation topics were notoriously daring, ranging from political discussion to readings from the latest manuscripts of

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7 André Morellet, Mémoire pour les citoyennes Trudaine, veuve Micault, veuve Trudaine et le citoyen vivant Micault-Courbeton fils (Paris, 1794), 74-80.
9 Bordes, “Jacques-Louis David’s Serment,” 20-21; Morellet, Mémoire pour les citoyennes Trudaine, 74-75.
10 Dimoff, La vie et l’oeuvre d’André Chénier, 172.
11 Mercier and Restif de la Bretonne would become influential radical journalists during the French Revolution; Ibid.
radical writers, inspiring the Trudaine brothers to host their own banquets with a similar guest list of liberal intellectuals.\footnote{Ibid., 174.}

It was through the meetings of \textit{la Société Trudaine} that David became close friends with André Chénier in 1786. On meeting David, Chénier had just returned to Paris from a trip to Italy with his two friends, the Trudaine brothers, who had been students with Chénier at the Collège de Navarre.\footnote{Roberts, \textit{Jacques-Louis David, Revolutionary Artist}, 30.} Documents suggest that David first encountered Chénier in the early 1780’s at the Salon of Madame Chénier, but it wasn’t until his introduction to the Trudaine circle that David became close friends with the young classicist who would influence David’s political and artistic views.\footnote{Dimoff, \textit{La vie et l’œuvre d’André Chénier}, 80.}

**André Chénier and the Arts**

Chénier was an avid student of Montesquieu and Rousseau and had taken from their Enlightenment writings the idea that only in the “open and free climate of democracy would the arts remain healthy and the artist be free to develop his talent fully.”\footnote{Roberts, \textit{Jacques-Louis David, Revolutionary Artist}, 32.} Chénier’s writings from 1786 to 1787 criticized the privilege of the aristocratic elite and conveyed views on art and society that were heavily inundated with political implications. In his \textit{“Essai sur les causes,”} he stated:

\textit{Qu’il ne peut y avoir que les talents oisifs et inutiles dans la Tyrannie, encore moins dans l’aristocratie, et que tous les talents sont de l’essence de la démocratie, vraie république.}\footnote{André Chénier, \textit{“Essai sur les causes”} in \textit{Oeuvres complètes} (Paris: Gallimard, 1940), 630.}
Chénier stated not only that the arts could not flourish in an aristocracy, but also that literary associations and academies were harmful to the arts. Under these monarchical institutions, the artist was subject to aristocratic patronage and privilege, and therefore would not have the artistic liberty to develop his talent as he would in a democracy or a republic.

Chénier’s opinions on artistic liberty would no doubt have appealed to David, who had been a witness and victim of the Academy’s hierarchical privilege and stifling rules. The idea that academies and aristocratic patronage were actually detrimental to the arts would have given voice to the sentiments David had felt during the 1785 Salon, when his Horatii was hung disadvantageously and only moved after repeated appeals to Academy officials. Similarly, Chénier’s statement, “No one is judge of the arts but the artist himself” would have spoken directly to David who, after exhibiting his Horatii, had declared, “Never again will anyone make me do anything detrimental to my own glory.”

Chénier’s writings and friendship with David from 1786 to 1788 suggest that David had an interest in the interdependence of art and science, which may have been stimulated by discussions with the Lavoisiers, Chénier, the Trudaine brothers, and their progressive literary and scientific circle. Lavoisier was a respected scientist, economist, Academician, and political progressive who, like David, attended the Collège des Quatre Nations; it is possible that the two men, only five years apart in age, may have first crossed paths during their school days. In the autumn of 1785, Antoine Lavoisier made extensive notations in a Salon livret, commenting

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favorably on David’s *Oath of the Horatii*. In March 1786, documents suggest that David was even giving drawing lessons to Madame Lavoisier. 

On art and artists, Chénier wrote about the “*esclave imitateur,*” the artist who is born and fades away without glory. David’s campaign against the Academy would have been reinforced by his own experiences in the Academy, as well as by Chénier and his critique of such institutions. Following Chénier and his writings about original art not based on imitation, David strove to invent new imagery that would correspond to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment idea of progress and the principle that a direct and “natural” model could reform life in the interest of the common good.

**The Americans and David’s Politicization**

Having become a *habitué* of the prerevolutionary salons of the bourgeois intellectuals and liberal nobles, David became familiar not only with the enlightened ideas of the *philosophes*, but also with English and American constitutional theories. In “*La République*” and “*Hymn to Justice*,” Chénier discussed his political views, which showed his admiration for the democratic ideals of the British constitution and the American Revolution. It is important to note that Chénier was an admirer of the constitutional monarchy form of government and that the majority of the Trudaine circle members were moderate constitutional monarchists, not the radical

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20 Vidal, “David among the Moderns,” 598.
21 Ibid., 604.
22 Ibid., 623.
24 Chénier, “*La République*” in *Oeuvres complètes*, 472.
reformers of the Revolutionary years. Just like the majority of revolutionaries at the start of the Revolution, it is reasonable to assume that David would have admired the constitutional monarchy that Chénier had promoted. As one of David’s closest friends during the Prerevolution period, it can be surmised that Chénier was a prominent influence on David and, having extensively discussed his political views, contributed to David’s politicization during the period.

The Trudaine Salon also introduced David to Filippo Mazzei, an Italian patriot who published the four-volume work Recherches Historiques etPolitiques sur les Etats-Unis de l’Amerique Septentrionale (1788), a political history of the American Revolution that praised America and its recognition of natural rights. Having acted as an agent to purchase arms for Virginia during the American Revolutionary War, Mazzei was a close friend of Thomas Jefferson and as such, was a proponent of Jefferson’s democratic Enlightenment ideals.

In August of 1786, David received multiple visits from Thomas Jefferson’s young protégé John Trumbull, an American artist living in Paris. On August 9, 1786, documents state, “David montre à Trumbull, peintre américain, le tableau des Horaces et celui de Belisaire. Ce dernier trouve le tableau des Horaces bien dessiné, mais froid. Il préfère celui de Belisaire.” Although Trumbull may have found the Horatii painting “froid,” he does admire the painting’s composition for being well designed. The day after Trumbull’s first visit to David’s studio, it is noted that David goes to visit Trumbull: “David va voir les tableaux de Trumbull qu’il critique, dit celui-ci, avec trop de politesse.”

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26 Roberts, Jacques-Louis David, Revolutionary Artist, 30.
27 Ibid.
29 Wildenstein and Wildenstein, Documents Complémentaires, 22 (165, 9 August 1786).
30 Ibid., 22 (166, 10 August 1786).
too polite, or “trop de politesse,” instead of a blunt truth because of David’s respect for the younger painter’s mentor, Thomas Jefferson. The historian Warren Roberts suggests a close relationship had grown between David, Trumbull, and Jefferson, claiming that both Trumbull and Jefferson were enthusiastic about David’s paintings, especially the *Oath of the Horatii*.\(^{31}\) Jefferson was reportedly very impressed with the *Horatii* because of its depiction of Enlightenment themes, such as virtuous patriotism and the sacrifice of the individual to the state.\(^{32}\)

Also suggesting David’s introduction to Jefferson is David’s friendship with André Chénier, who shared an intimate relationship with Maria Cosway, Jefferson’s mistress.\(^{33}\) In fact, it had been Trumbull who had introduced Cosway to Jefferson in August of 1786, the same month when Trumbull began visiting David. Maria Cosway was the wife of an English painter and shared Jefferson’s interest in art and architecture, which would have extended to French art and artists like David.\(^{34}\) In this way, it cannot be overlooked that in the month of August, while a relationship of artistic respect was growing between David and Trumbull, the affair between Maria Cosway and Thomas Jefferson was just beginning.

It is reasonable to assume that Trumbull may have been encouraged to attend meetings at the Trudaine salon after hearing popular praise about the *Horatii*. As such, it would have been Trumbull’s professional interest in David that caused him to introduce Jefferson into the Trudaine circle, suggesting that David, Chénier, Trumbull, Cosway, and Jefferson had all been socializing in the same intellectual circle during the Prerevolution period. Along with Chénier’s writings of democratic states and constitutional monarchies, David’s rapid politicization would

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32 Ibid.
33 Vincent and Klairmont-Lingo, *The Human Tradition in Modern France*, 34.
34 Ibid.
have been triggered by his introduction to Trumbull, who was not only from a country that had recently won its independence and right to self-govern, but was also a close friend of the writer of the famous American constitution and a renowned and respected proponent of democratic freedom and republican government.

**Diderot, Rousseau, and Socrates**

The year of 1786 saw the development of David’s friendship with Chénier and the Americans as well as the commitment and participation of David in the Trudaine circle; 1786 was also the year that David was commissioned to paint *The Death of Socrates* (Figure 13). Rather than a royal commission organized by the Academy, David accepted the commission from the younger Trudaine brother, who wished him to illustrate “Socrates at the Moment of Grasping the Hemlock.” Originally contracted for the sum of 6,000 livres, the traditional sum for royal commissions, Trudaine later increased the payment to 9,000 livres to show his delight with David’s finished painting.

David discussed the details of the *Socrates* composition in the weekly meetings of the Trudaine salon. Having been commissioned by the younger Trudaine, whose interest in liberal political ideas was well known, David would have participated in frequent conversations and debates about the liberal ideas Trudaine wished him to depict in the painting. The story of Socrates, as described in Plato’s *Phaedo*, describes the wise philosopher as a victim of intolerance who chooses to end his life as a citizen of a state that won’t accept his independent

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views. Socrates had been unjustly condemned to death or exile by the Athenian government for his unconventional teachings, which were accused as denying the gods and corrupting the young; in order to remain loyal to his own teachings, Socrates sacrificed himself, thereby maintaining his philosophical integrity and remaining true to his rational principles. Diderot and d’Alembert wrote extensively about the politico-philosophical significance of Socrates and his rational principles in the *Encyclopédie* (1755).

The Trudaine circle influenced David in his creation of a pantomimic drama scene of the death of Socrates, which Diderot had also discussed in his *Discours sur la Poésie Dramatique* (1758). In his *Discours*, Diderot had proposed the death of Socrates as a series of visual tableaux where the philosopher’s dialogue would be best displayed with pantomime. The scene he described is one of Socrates surrounded by his students, sitting on a bed as he prepares to drink the fatal hemlock. Diderot’s passage portrayed Socrates holding the cup in one hand with his eyes turned to heaven, but Chénier argued against using this artistic depiction. Chénier claimed that the Stoic message of the scene would be more effective if “Socrates, entirely absorbed in the great thoughts he is expressing, should stretch out his hand for the cup; but should not seize it until he has finished speaking.” This description becomes the exact scene that David paints in *The Death of Socrates* of 1787.

Chénier’s advice concerning the gesture of Socrates is completely consistent with his artistic and political views. Chénier and the other members of the Trudaine circle possessed an interest in the Socrates story because of its portrayal of democracy and intellectual liberty.

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38 Ibid.
Socrates drank hemlock because his rational views offended the people of Athens; his story was seen as that of a victim of intolerance, popular fear, and oppression. The suicide of Socrates is a historical representation of popular sovereignty; the famous philosopher accepts the guilty sentence given by a democratic assembly, but then chooses to kill himself to be faithful to his rational principles. The narrative that David was instructed to paint was a precise depiction of the ambivalence that the Trudaine brothers and Chénier would display “toward the expansion of the principle of free expression to incorporate popular participation in political life.” It was this exact reluctance that would cause all three men to be guillotined in 1794 during the Reign of Terror.

**The Death of Socrates**

The creation of the Socrates composition was a product of the same process of intellectual debate and artistic evolution that had created David’s *Horatii*. Just like the *Horatii*, the *Socrates* composition originates from a sketch drawn by David in 1782 (Figure 14). This first sketch is found on the backside of one of the *Horatii* studies, *Horatius Killing His Sister*, which suggests a connection between the two subjects and the similar philosophies of popular justice in the two paintings (Figure 3). The *Socrates* sketch is almost exactly the same as David’s final 1787 painting, proving that the subject had been present in David’s mind prior to receiving his commission from Trudaine. After his time in the Trudaine salon, David made one main change

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41 Ibid.  
43 The Reign of Terror (1793-1794) was a period of violence after the onset of the French Revolution and was marked by mass executions by guillotine; Ibid.
to his first sketch in which he added a long barrel-vaulted passage in the background, showing a scene of Xanthippe, the wife of Socrates, waving as she leaves the room.\textsuperscript{44}

David’s final painting illustrates Socrates reaching for the cup of hemlock instead of holding it, showing not only the philosopher’s respect for the rule of law but also his persistence in exercising his rights as a free person. The aged figure of Plato sits at the foot of the bed with his eyes closed, while a youthful man covers his eyes and cringes as he gives the cup of Hemlock to Socrates. The philosopher’s disciples are illustrated on a single horizontal plane, creating a frieze-like chain of figures that are both separated and entwined by gaps and fissures. The disciples are painted with the pantomimic gestural expression theorized by Diderot and as such, they convey emotions ranging from horror to devastation. Socrates ignores the reactions of his disciples and continues to orate his last philosophical lesson.

A sketch of the figure of Socrates shows David’s reliance on ancient Roman iconography in his composition (Figure 15). During his time in Rome, David had copied antique sculptures into his sketchbook, which he undoubtedly used in his Socrates figure. In illustrating Socrates with his forearm raised, David was drawing on an important classical antecedent that used the gesture to indicate a command of attention while the figure spoke.\textsuperscript{45} This prototype was common in Roman art and David copied one of these antique figures in 1784 during his time in Rome, drawing the seated figure of Jupiter raising his forearm in a gesture similar to that of Socrates (Figure 16).\textsuperscript{46} The use of antique models in David’s painting can also be seen in David’s sketch of the students of Socrates (Figure 17). This drawing shows David’s plan of enchainment, a frieze-like style of figures, which originates from one of David’s Rome drawings dated to 1775.

\textsuperscript{44} Padiyar, “Who Is Socrates?,” 27.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 35-36.
(Figure 18). This sketch depicts a symposium that uses the same linear figural arrangement where the figures all remain on one flat plane, a characteristic present in the depiction of the disciples in the *Socrates* painting. The 1775 drawing is a direct copy of an ancient vase painting, showing David’s familiarity with the iconography of enchainment in the depiction of groups of figures.

When David’s *Socrates* was exhibited in the Salon of 1787, it created an immense sensation. In response to the absence of David’s name from the list of painters that were honored by royal “works of encouragement,” critics accused the intrigues of Academy officials and decried it as an “injustice.” As such, these critics wrote in pamphlets such as the *Journal de Paris*, *the Mercure de France*, and the *Nuits de Paris*, and gave David’s painting very high praise. Although its general popularity was not as great as that of the *Horatii*, artists and connoisseurs praised the *Socrates* as the “supreme artistic achievement of the time.” An article attributed to Sir Joshua Reynolds, the founder of the Royal Academy of Arts in England, also praised David’s work in the 1787 Salon, declaring, “les traits philosophiques sont finement exprimés.”

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Conclusion

In the year just before the completion of his *Death of Socrates*, David began attending upper-class liberal intellectual salons of the Trudaine brothers and the Duc d’Orléans, where radical liberalism was abundant and the Enlightenment ideals of Diderot and Rousseau were heavily discussed. Through the politically unsatisfied tone of Chénier’s writings, and his close friendship with David, there is an overwhelming certainty that Chénier’s ideas gave David a political avenue through which he could affirm his protests against the Academy. It can therefore be surmised that Chénier and the liberal *philosophes* of the Parisian salons instigated David’s politicization; it was the debate and discussion in these elite circles which prompted David’s transformation from a dissatisfied Academic painter into an artist-protester during the Prerevolution and later, into an artist-politician of the French Revolution.

Anita Brookner claims that David’s *Socrates* was a product of a stable eighteenth-century world where attention to the classics and “obedience to the *philosophes*” were the primary influences. On the other hand, Thomas Crow argues that the world in which the *Socrates* was created was anything but secure, and even though the *philosophes* had been an important intellectual force during the Prerevolution, they did not inspire obedience. As such, it can more accurately be assumed that, in subject, David’s *Socrates* was founded on the Enlightenment principles the artist learned from his participation in the salons of upper-class intellectual *philosophes*. Although David had drawn the subject as early as 1782, it was his attendance at the intellectual salons that encouraged him to paint Socrates to show a reliance on rationalist philosophy and an overall adherence to the didactic histories of Greece and Rome. The underlying political theme in the *Socrates*, which involves the exercise of popular sovereignty in

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a democratic state, is evidence not only of the influence of liberal intellectual circles on David and his art, but also of David’s expanding political awareness during the Prerevolution period.
CHAPTER V

THE CULT OF ROME: BRUTUS AND PREREVOLUTIONARY PATRIOTISM

In 1786, at the behest of a royal commission from the Academy’s Directeur des Bâtiments du Roi, the Comte d’Angiviller, David proposed two Roman subjects for the 1787 Salon: Coriolanus restrained by his family from seeking revenge or the departure of Attilius Regulus. D’Angiviller ultimately chose the Coriolanus scene, most likely for the subject’s underlying “monarchist” theme, which would have appealed to Academicians, the monarchy, and establishment critics. But in 1787, David’s commission was not fulfilled, as he was occupied with painting The Death of Socrates. In 1788, the commission again went unfulfilled, and in early 1789, official correspondence reveals that the state was still awaiting David’s Coriolanus painting. But the state would never receive a Coriolanus painting from David because, without notifying d’Angiviller or any of the Academy officials, the rebellious artist had changed his subject; while the Academy waited for a Coriolanus painting, David was painting the Roman consul Brutus mourning over the sons that he had ordered to be executed.

Originally, the story of Brutus comes from Livy: Lucius Junius Brutus was a Roman leader who drove out the last of the kings, the tyrant Tarquinius Superbus. Brutus fought off the king’s attempts to regain the throne, but in the process discovered that his own sons had aided the deposed king. In one of the toughest moral quandaries in Roman history, Brutus chooses his duty to Rome over his parental love and orders that his sons be executed for treason.

2 Herbert, David, Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution, 18.
“Throughout the pitiful scene,” Livy wrote, “all eyes were on the father’s face, where a father’s anguish was plain to see.” It is this anguish that David captures in *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* of 1789 (Figure 19).

David had performed a deliberate act of defiance by replacing the monarchical theme of Coriolanus for the republic-themed subject of Brutus. In later years, David would claim that the *Brutus* wasn’t conceived until 1788 or 1789, but this is assertion is refuted by the existence of *Brutus* sketches dated even earlier to 1787. It can be no coincidence that David’s rebellious change in subject matter occurred in the same year that he was introduced to the Trudaine circle, where he discovered the liberal political ideas of the Trudaine brothers and heard Andre Chénier’s ideas about the importance of artistic liberty. In painting the *Horatii*, David had refused to conform to official measurements of a royal commission, and in painting the *Brutus*, David displayed a similar act of defiance and proclamation of artistic liberty. To understand the full extent of David’s rebellion, the entire context of the Prerevolution’s growing turmoil must be examined, including the rise of the so-called “cult of Rome” and the growing popularity of the Brutus story as a portrayal of Roman virtue and the Brutus figure as a symbol of republicanism for the citizens of France.

**The Cult of Rome**

On September 7, 1789, a delegation of women appeared in Versailles, among them the wife of Jacques-Louis David; dressed in white and wearing tri-color rosettes, the women embodied the “soul of the Roman matrons” and presented the revolutionary government’s

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4 Ibid.
National Assembly with offerings for la patrie. The action carried a reprimand toward aristocratic Frenchwomen, who were associated with jewelry, luxury, and corruption, but beyond this, it was also an imitation of the votive offering to Camillus, a famous event from the history of ancient Rome.

The 1789 Versailles march was only one result of the “cult of Rome” after the start of the French Revolution, but throughout the whole of the eighteenth century, the French had been deeply interested in Roman ideas and Roman history. Just like David, French intellectuals of the bourgeois and aristocratic classes had undergone thorough classical educations during their youths at one of the Collèges of Paris; all literature, history, philosophy, and political theory lessons were based on the writings of Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Livy, Plutarch, Plato, or Cicero.

This extensive regime of classical study formed a foundation of Enlightenment thought that aligned with Roman ideas and imagery. This cult of Rome would profoundly influence the arts in the late eighteenth century, and would come to pervade all facets of philosophy, political theory, and in the end, the entire governmental system of the ancien régime.

Eighteenth-century classical education was focused not on politics but on morals. Eighteenth-century ethics were based on moral character and excellence, and for students of classical literature, virtue was defined as sacrifice for the republic. As such, the classical writings used to educate the youth of France upheld ideals of Roman virtue, fortitude, integrity and justice, and the simple life. The philosophes had therefore been trained to portray their ideas

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9 Ibid., 106.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 107.
and principles through the heroic figures of Roman history: Mucius Scaevola, the three Horatii, and Junius Brutus.\textsuperscript{12}

**A Brutus Syndrome**

By the latter half of the eighteenth century, Brutus had become a popular figure in literature, theatre, and art; he was the paradigmatic symbol of virtue and sacrifice, known as the “avenger of woman’s wrong, founder of liberty, restorer of law, inflexible magistrate capable of executing his own sons for the good of the state.”\textsuperscript{13} As such, it has commonly been noted that an overwhelming “Brutus syndrome” accompanied French thinkers during the Prerevolution period.\textsuperscript{14}

The figure of Brutus had been depicted throughout the eighteenth century in numerous plays. In the Trudaine salon, David had met the playwright Vittorio Alfieri, who was in the process of writing *Bruto Primo* (1788), and the two men reportedly discussed Brutus as an admirable example of patriotism.\textsuperscript{15} While Alfieri’s play, and the discussion Alfieri shared with David, would have had an impact on the artist’s conception of the *Brutus* composition, the most prominent influence on the painting was Voltaire’s play *Brutus* (1730-1731).

Voltaire’s play was one of the writer’s less successful works, having had only 15 performances in its first season and only a few scattered revivals throughout the next sixty years; it was one of those plays more frequently read than performed.\textsuperscript{16} The play began after the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Herbert, *David, Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution*, 53.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Kenneth N. McKeel, “Voltaire’s Brutus During the French Revolution,” *Modern Language Notes* 56.2 (1941): 101.
\end{itemize}
expulsion of Tarquin from Rome and ended with the execution of Brutus’s sons, the last scene being inside Brutus’s house as he awaited the news of the deaths of his sons. Most likely because of Voltaire’s play, a particular type of Brutus appeared in the cultural life of France: a dark, complicated, and mysterious figure praised for his indomitable will, a man so determined and resolute in his ideals that he put his own sons to death in order to preserve the republic.17 Playwrights during the seventeenth century had often treated the Brutus story in a very superficial fashion, but Voltaire fully fleshed out his characters’ psychologies and motivations, which would explain the anguish of the moral dichotomy that David depicts in his final painting.18

On January 25, 1786, a revival of Voltaire’s Brutus opened in Paris, but was shut down after only one performance because of governmental pressures.19 Although there are no records to prove that David saw this 1786 revival of Voltaire’s tragedy, the composition of the final painting, which shows the moment just after the play’s ending, renders it virtually inconceivable that David did not attend. David’s knowledge of Voltaire’s tragedy, combined with his classical education of Livian texts, inspired him to produce a painting that conveys the Roman general’s complex emotional reaction to his patriotic sacrifice.20

**David on Brutus and Roman Virtue**

The influence of Roman imagery on David can be traced back to the artist’s first sojourn in Rome, from 1775 to 1780, when David began sketching ancient Roman art, as well as art of

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18 Ibid., 113.
20 Chua, “In the Shadow of David’s Brutus,” 118.
the Renaissance and Baroque periods. During his Rome experience, David made thousands of drawings in his sketchbooks, such as Roman bas-reliefs, sculptural heads, and copies of Poussin’s classical paintings and Caravaggio’s dramatic chiaroscuro.21 David’s attention to Roman subject and style was heightened when he joined the Trudaine Salon and became close friends with André Chénier, who had written in *L’Invention* (1787), “Sur des pensers nouveaux, *faisons des vers antiques.*”22 In this vein of thinking, David began to look to Brutus as an embodiment of Roman virtue, a hero of the Republic, but at this time, the figure of Brutus had not yet become a weapon of propaganda, as most Roman imagery would become during the French Revolution.23

In *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789), David’s Neoclassical style reached full maturity. With a neoclassicism that pushed setting and costume to a level of balanced simplicity, the painting shows a strict delineation of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines. David depicts classical Greco-Roman molding and drapery, but heightens the Roman setting by using an austere setting, like those he used in his *Horatii* and *Socrates*. David does not include any lavish objects or artworks, instead leaving the background with simple, classical architecture of stone walls and Doric columns depicted in a clear geometry of form and linear contours. David’s clean brushstrokes are rendered invisible because of his attention to minute detail, revealing the clarity of the composition and showing a focus on drawing rather than color.

David’s painting is divided into distinct planes, split in half by a shaft of light descending diagonally through the middle of the composition. On the left side of the diagonal is the figure of

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Brutus, who broods in shadow in the foreground, while the bodies of his sons are carried by lictors in the background. Instead of facing his sons’ bodies, Brutus sits in a stiff, unyielding position beneath the stone statue of Rome, an object that alludes to the consul’s resolve and allegiance to the Roman Republic rather than his family. But by his facial expression, David manages to portray Brutus’s indecisiveness—forceful yet guilty. The art historian Robert Herbert asserts that Brutus’s moral dichotomy can be seen in the figure’s physical position; the lower half of his body shows the indecision of a father, while the upper half of the body reveals the gravity and resolve of the consul.24

David uses a number of unconventional aesthetic techniques in the Brutus painting. For instance, Brutus’ spatial position in the far corner rather than in a predictable, central vanishing point shows the artist’s rejection of the traditional pyramidal composition that the Academy encouraged and a preference for his own artistic license rather than Academic compositional standards. Similarly, Brutus sits in an unconventional position, with his feet crossed in an expression of sorrow and grief, a pose that was first seen in David’s Horatii sketch of the figure of Camilla (Figure 9). Through these compositional features, David depicts a “highly specific moment of tension or crisis” that captures a fleeting moment in time; this snapshot-like feature can be seen in the painting’s smallest details, such as the sidelong glance of one of the litter-bearers, the servant’s gesture, and the cushion slipping off of Brutus’s chair.25

The deep shadow around Brutus not only emphasizes his turmoil, but also creates a stark contrast to the other side of the composition, where a brightly lit group of females, the wife and daughters of Brutus, mourn for their sons and brothers. Separated from Brutus by the diagonal gap, David illustrates the women with sloping lines and contours, depicting the daughter in a

24 Herbert, David, Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution, 41.
25 Crow, Painters and Public Life, 252.
severe “s”-curve that is a direct contrast to Brutus’ rigid position. David paints the outstretched hand of Brutus’ wife on the same level as the feet of the bodies, creating a straight horizontal line that is balanced by the vertical line of the central column. In a separation of male and female similar to the *Horatii*, David depicts the women, and not Brutus, facing the bodies of the dead sons. The art historian Norman Bryson concludes, “The striking contrast between the world of men, strong and fierce, and that of the women bent in exquisite arabesques...makes this one of the great themes David invented.”'

A Revolutionary Explosion

In July 1788, as David was beginning to paint the *Brutus*, the French monarchy called on the public to redefine France’s constitution; this measure of representative government showed a trust in the Rousseauist notions of popular sovereignty and the general will. The monarchy invited the *philosophes* of academies and societies to write pamphlets with objections or ideas for the constitution. This call for public opinion seemed to be an embodiment of Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (1762), which argued that even though the people created a constitution, the sovereign body needed to convene regularly to ensure the constitution’s force and presence.

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It was in this atmosphere of change and reformation that David wrote a letter to his student, Jean-Baptiste Wicar. On June 14, 1789, just days before the Third Estate of the Estates-General would declare itself the National Assembly, David wrote:

I am busy with a new painting, badly as I feel. I am in this poor country like a dog thrown into the water against his will, and who has to reach the bank so he will not lose his life…I am doing a painting purely of my invention. It is Brutus, man and father, who has deprived himself of his children and who, having returned to his hearth, receives the bodies of his two sons who are brought back for burial.30

David openly admits to having invented the Brutus scene, and continues in his letter:

Il est distrait de son chagrin, au pied de la statue de Rome, par les cris de sa femme, la peur et l’évanouissement de la plus grand fille. C’est bien beau à la description, mais pour le tableau, je n’ose encore rien dire. Il paraît à ne vous pas mentir, qu’on est content de la composition; mais moi, moi, je n’ose encore rien prononcer…31

It is David’s admission of “je n’ose encore rien dire” that implies the artist’s caution in judging his painting and its theme, perhaps because of the turmoil in Paris at the time. In addition, David’s refusal to explain his meaning and motive for the Brutus shows the presence of some sort of secret intention, which the artist acknowledges as not being safe to put into writing.

A few weeks later, in early July, Jean-Baptise-Marie Pierre, Premier Peintre du Roi, visited David in his studio and critiqued the Brutus painting.32 Pierre conveyed his surprise that, in the Brutus composition, David didn’t employ the “ligne pyramidale,” the traditional and oft-used pyramid formation of the grand history paintings of the Academy.33 As a result, David, whose detestation for the officials of the Academy had reached its peak, later told his students:

31 Wildenstein and Wildenstein, Documents Complémentaires, 27 (207, 14 June 1789).
33 Wildenstein and Wildenstein, Documents Complémentaires, 28 (208, July 1789).
David’s blatant hostility toward the Academy, which he calls a “boutique d’un perruquier,” portrays his growing resentment toward the social class that wore wigs: the aristocracy.

One month after his letter and the hostile outburst to his students, after the National Assembly had already taken its Tennis Court Oath, documents place David at the very birthplace of the French Revolution, the Fall of the Bastille on July 14, 1789: “David assiste à la prise de la Bastille, et dessine la tête de M. de Launay portée sur une fourche.”

David’s sketches of heads on pikes, which were paraded around the Bastille on July 14th, further prove his presence at the momentous event, as well as the profound impact it had on him, insomuch that he would draw the gruesome heads in his own sketchbook (Figure 20).

A month later, David’s Brutus would be exhibited in the Salon of 1789. With the Revolution already underway, the painting evoked ecstatic revolutionary pride and fervent patriotism in the French public. But was the evocation of these patriotic sentiments part of David’s intention? Had he created his painting with the purpose of inciting mass approbation and admiration for the coming revolution?

**The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons**

A large collection of surviving preparatory studies shows the full evolution of David’s Brutus composition, while also revealing that David been considering the Brutus story as a

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 28 (209, July 1789).
painting subject since the early 1780’s. One of the first schematic sketches, made on the verso side of a sketch from David’s Roman album no. 11 has been dated to 1780-1784 and shows the first scene of the subject, Brutus Vowing to Avenge Lucretia (Figure 21). Another compositional study, dated to around 1785, indicates that David had also considered depicting an earlier moment in the Brutus story, that of Brutus ordering the execution of his sons (Figure 22). However, David finally settled on the subject of the lictors returning the bodies to the home of Brutus, thereby opting for an episode that was without pictorial precedent and allowed for an exploration of the most complex and psychologically tense moment in the Brutus story.

After David’s sketches showing different scenes of the Brutus story, the first study for David’s final painting is one in the Musée Bonnat in Bayonne, France, which shows a roughly sketched conception of Brutus, isolated and brooding in the left-hand corner, while a tight grouping of family and servants stand on the right (Figure 23). David’s next sketches focus solely on the figure of Brutus and experiment with different positions that reveal a combination of resolve and inner turmoil. It is here that David introduces the iconography of the “seated philosopher,” a common prototype in ancient Roman art that David may have seen at the Palazzo Spada during his time in Rome (Figure 24).36 In one of the Brutus studies, David experiments with positions for the figure’s right arm (Figure 25). Another sketch shows the final position of the right arm, but introduces the idea of an object in the figure’s left hand (Figure 26). Neither sketch shows the final position for Brutus’s legs, suggesting that David did not come to a conclusive decision about the lower half of the figure’s body until much later.

More finished drawings of the Brutus composition add a more populated background, where the lictors can be seen carrying the corpses of the sons (Figure 27). Additionally, the table

36 Herbert, David, Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution, 35.
that Brutus had previously been leaning on is transformed into a statue-bearing pedestal (Figure 28). This composition is the first drawing where architecture is used to divide the composition into clearly delineated zones, as can be seen in the vague outline of the background wall. In this drawing, David also added an element of gestural expression to the position of the mother, who is shown with her arms spread in a gesture of grief and shock.

David’s first experiments with the mother figure’s gestural expression reside on the verso of a study for the Oath of the Horatii (Figure 29). Focusing solely on the grouping of the mother and the children, David made two different sketches of the grouping: one emphasizing the mother’s outstretched arm and the other showing the pose of the daughter, who collapses to her knees in a twisting pose that portrays her fear and curiosity. The next composition study uses this second grouping, but adds another figure to it: a pensive man standing in the background (Figure 30). In this sketch, David adds hatching in the left foreground, thereby introducing the idea that Brutus is sitting in a deep patch of shadows. This added feature gives the drawing a perspectival depth, as well as a dividing characteristic that sets the figure of Brutus apart from the female group on the other side of the composition. Lastly, a nude study of three female figures shows further changes to the grouping of the mother and children and depicts the mother reaching for her dead sons rather than cringing away (Figure 31).

**Revolutionary Imagery**

A highly finished compositional study in pen and wash, signed and dated 1787, two years before the finished painting, shows a more resolved placement and position of figures (Figure 32). David focuses on dramatic light effects and the details of the furniture, as well as the statue of Rome, at whose feet Brutus sits. The statue and the furniture are all derived from classical
prototypes that David had seen and studied during his time in Rome.\textsuperscript{37} This sketch also includes the detail of the Phrygian cap on a pole behind the lictors, suggesting the influence of the French Revolution and its Roman imagery on the composition. The Phrygian cap was an object from ancient Roman that would later become the paradigmatic symbol of liberty and republic for the French Revolution. Philippe Bordes suggests that, because the Phrygian cap is drawn with a “transparent” quality, it may have been a later addition to the sketch; David could have made the addition during the Revolutionary period when the story of Brutus was seen as glorifying republican ideals.\textsuperscript{38} But Bordes’ theory has no basis in historical or artistic evidence, and it seems rather presumptuous to assume that, during the turbulent time of the Revolution, David would have taken the time to find his old sketches and add Revolutionary imagery to them. These preparatory studies were never displayed to the public, so what motive would David have had for changing his old sketches?

A second highly finished composition contains new details that differ from David’s previous sketches (Figure 33). David placed a scroll of paper in Brutus’s clenched fist, which is thought to signify the decree of execution for his sons. The scroll of paper was a common motif in several of the sketches of ancient statues of rulers in David’s Roman albums.\textsuperscript{39} Finally, David has moved the Phrygian cap on a pole to the foreground, where it leans against the pedestal beside Brutus. Grouped next to the shadowed Roman consul and the statue of Rome, the cap gives the scene a more palpable republican connotation that is heightened even further with the


\textsuperscript{38} Philippe Bordes, *La Mort de Brutus de Pierre-Narcisse Guérin* (Vizille: Musée De La Révolution Française, 1996), 41.

\textsuperscript{39} Perrin Stein, “Crafting the Neoclassical,” 228.
inscription of the word *liberté* on the strap (Figure 34).40 Similarly, the inscription on the statue’s pedestal is lengthened to read, “*Dea Roma fugat...S. Regibus,*” meaning “the goddess Rome after the kings have been put to flight” (Figure 35).41

Just like Philippe Bordes, the art historian John Goodman lends doubt to the authenticity of the Revolutionary images in David’s sketch, suggesting that the cap and inscription may have been added after King Louis XVI’s Flight to Varennes on June 20, 1791.42 Goodman’s reasoning for this theory holds that the two Roman images carried strong republican sentiments that were not present before the King’s failed escape, which had been the cause for an anti-monarchical backlash within the Revolutionary government.43 But Goodman’s hypothesis is unlikely not only because it has no real supporting evidence, but also because it doesn’t take into account the rapidly evolving political notions during the Revolution; an image that strongly represented republicanism at the end of the Revolution could merely have stood for Roman virtue and civic patriotism at the Revolution’s start.44 Goodman neglects to consider that the ideas and philosophies of the Prerevolution and early Revolution periods, as well as the imagery that went along with them, was in a constant state of change and evolution.

Another *Brutus* sketch, located in the Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, shows compositional changes to the Brutus scene’s background (Figure 36). The last of the known compositional studies for *Brutus* is an oil sketch in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm (Figure 37). This final study shows David’s decision to dramatically simplify the composition, removing all unnecessary figures to give the remaining ones a greater force of expression. The elimination of

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40 Bordes, *La Mort de Brutus*, 41.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
figures also creates a starker contrast between the male and female spheres of the scene, with the diagonal lighting further heightening the dark male side and the light feminine side. Rather than an inscription on the pedestal of the statue, David adds a shallow relief depicting Romulus and Remus, showing that the principles of the Roman Republic guided Brutus in his decision. At the center of the composition is a sewing basket holding needlework, a symbol of the domestic sphere, and scissors, which would have been associated with Atropos, the Fate who cuts the thread of life.\textsuperscript{45} Another interpretation of the sewing basket uses the pattern of the fleur-de-lys trim on the fabric in the basket as evidence of the royalist sympathies of Brutus’s wife, making her complicit in the demise of her sons.\textsuperscript{46}

The Stockholm drawing also shows two unique additions to the scene, which were removed from the final painting: a second statue in the background, and two gruesome heads on pikes held by the lictors. As mentioned previously, David had been present at the Storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789 and had made sketches of heads on pikes after the experience (Figure 20). As such, it is possible that the Bastille experience had directly affected David’s \textit{Brutus} sketch, insomuch that the images came into physical being in the final \textit{Brutus} oil sketch before being removed from the final painting.

Essentially, the \textit{Brutus} painting was the result of a long process of exploration and refinement that lasted almost a decade. David’s first sketch has been dated to as early as 1780, and the last sketches in his process were the large-scale drapery studies for the main figures, such as the study of the grieving nurse, located in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Tours (Figure 38).

\textsuperscript{45} Perrin Stein, “Crafting the Neoclassical,” 228.
Throughout the 1780’s, David’s composition evolved according to formal aesthetic principles, as well as psychological experiments and contemporary political events.

**The Salon of 1789**

David submitted the *Brutus* painting to the 1789 Salon sometime after August 15th, toward the end of the exhibition period. The *Brutus* was given the description:

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\text{Brutus, premier Consul, de retour en sa maison, après avoir condamné ses deux fils qui s’étaient unis aux Tarquins, et avaient conspiré contre la Libérté Romaine, des Licteurs rapportant leur corps pour qu’on leur donne la sépulture.}
\]

Radical critics and revolutionaries immediately understood this “Libérté Romaine” in the Brutus story; it was one of the main pillars of the Enlightenment, and one of the main theories behind the government reformation endorsed by the *philosophes*. The exhibition of the *Brutus* was announced in pamphlets such as *Explication des peintures de Messieurs de l’Académie Royale, Journal de Paris, Gazette de France, Mercure de France*, and *Révolutions de Paris, de Prud’homme*. The radical and revolutionary nature of these pamphlets gives an impression of the type of viewers that the *Brutus* attracted; it can even be suggested that this radical group was the intended audience for David’s painting.

On September 17th of 1789, David wrote to his student Wicar to tell him of his success in the Salon:

\[
\text{Je viens d’exposer au Salon mon Brutus. Il me paraît que c’est celui de mes tableaux qui ait fait jusqu’à présent le plus de bruit. On me comble d’éloges, et j’ai soin de n’en prendre que ce qu’il faut. Je ne me laisse en général pas beaucoup gagner à ce langage; il m’encourage, et voilà tout. On loue principalement la pensée de l’avoir mis dans l’ombre. Il y a du Florentin dans la}
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48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
tournure de mon Brutus. Vous le verrez quelque jour, n’en disons pas davantage; j’ai fait ce que j’ai pu, voilà tout ce que je puis vous assurer."

David wrote of the “bruit” that his Brutus caused in the Academy’s 1789 Salon and he goes on to discuss his conscious placement of Brutus in “l’ombre.” David’s choice to show Brutus deep in thought as he sits in shadow was a result of extensive reflection and experimentation on the part of the artist. As was seen in his numerous sketches, David had taken great pains to find this specific placement and position for his Brutus figure; the approval David received for his figure shows not only that his depiction of the conflicted yet resolved Roman was understood by the French public, but also that there was a communal admiration for civic duty and sacrifice for la patrie that David shared with his contemporaries.

While some critics lauded David’s placement of Brutus in the shadowed foreground, there were several critics who complained of the overly sharp separation between Brutus and the mother group, a separation that was intensified by the distinct separation of light and shadow in David’s composition.\(^5\) But these critics found redemption for the Brutus in the painting’s depiction of republican sentiments. The Comte de Mende Maupas, a critic at the 1789 Salon, described the Roman nature of David’s Brutus:

> To appreciate the sublime beauties of this composition, one must go back to the time when Rome built its liberty on the coarseness of its customs, when would-be citizens only dethroned kings in order to reign themselves, when natural feelings gave way to ardent ambition, when a republican phantom consoled the people for the tyranny of its consuls.\(^5\)

The Comte de Mende Maupas’s comment is an example of the cult of Rome in France, as well as the French public’s overall reaction to David’s painting. The artist’s eighteenth-century audience

\(^50\) Ibid., 29 (216, 17 September 1789).
\(^51\) Chua, “In the Shadow of David’s Brutus,” 120.
\(^52\) Comte de Mende Maupas, *Supplément aux Remarques sur les ouvrages exposés au Salon par le C. de MM, Collection Deloynes*, XVI, No. 414.
was educated in classical literature and the history of ancient Rome and therefore innately understood the republican undertones in the *Brutus*. In his mention of the Roman period when “a republican phantom consoled the people for the tyranny of its consuls,” the Comte emphasizes a difference between the Roman Republic and the Enlightenment in the conception of republicanism; in its eighteenth-century manifestation, classical republicanism tolerated no middle ground between liberty and despotism. It is this view of republicanism, which is particular to the eighteenth century, which suggests that David was portraying a radical notion of Enlightenment thought, one that presented a harsh question to the French public: would France be a country of liberty or despotism, a republic or a monarchy?

One critic in 1789 immediately saw David’s radical question, noting that the painting was “virile, severe, terrifying” and claiming that there was something radical and extreme about it that exceeded the emotion of mourning. Critics admired David’s *Brutus* for this radical sentiment and the extreme display of heroism and emotion, such as one critic who described the Roman consul:

> His whole attitude and expression bear at the same time marks of a profound affliction and of an inflexible severity. “I have had to accomplish this, this cruel sacrifice.” That is the feeling which seems to be impressed on his lips but with a somber and withdrawn grief which is sufficient evidence of all the force and constancy he had to muster in order to win so painful a victory, in order to sustain so heroic a devotion.  

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Conclusion

On November 17th and 19th of 1790, the first two revivals of Voltaire’s *Brutus* were shown in Paris. At the end of Voltaire’s tragedy, the theater displayed an imitation and reference to David’s *Brutus*, pantomimining the moment when the death of Brutus’s sons is announced and Brutus seats himself in an antique chair while his sons’ funeral procession passes in the background; it was a portrayal of David’s painting in the form of one of Diderot’s silent *tableaux vivants*.

During the French Revolution, spectators interpreted the play according to current events; they saw Paris instead of Rome, the deputies of the Constituent Assembly rather than Roman senators, and the Bourbon monarchy in place of a Tarquin king. The play’s liberal, anti-monarchical speeches were considered by the revolutionaries to be a powerful display of patriotic sentiments. Brutus became an important figure for the Jacobins, such as Louis Pierre Manuel, who stated in a speech to the Revolutionary government: “Sirs, here is Brutus, who will remind you of all the cases in which, to be a citizen, one must always be ready to sacrifice everything, even one’s children.”

It is important to note that after the fall of Robespierre, there was a reaction to suppress works that glorified rigorous republicanism, and Voltaire’s *Brutus* was the first to be discarded from active repertories. Similarly, Napoleon never permitted Voltaire’s tragedy to be performed in public during his reign.

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55 Ibid., 117; Johnson, “Corporality and Communication,” 94.
57 Ibid., 104.
Brutus—a story with such an overwhelming spirit of republicanism and patriotic fervor that it had intensified a Revolutionary spirit in the French public of 1789.

Viewers at the 1789 Salon had read David’s painting in terms of Roman virtue rather than as a call to overthrow the king, but with the illustration of a man who sacrificed his children for the good of his nation, it is reasonable to claim that the eighteenth-century Salon public innately understood that the painting addressed sovereignty and constitution.⁶⁰

In immersing himself in the contradictions and virtues of Roman history rather than the turbulent atmosphere of 1789 Paris, David was able to offer an acute reflection on political foundation. Like Voltaire’s tragedy, David’s Brutus was understood within the context of the eighteenth century and the cult of Rome because it celebrated Roman virtue and sacrifice for the common good. David illustrated a Roman story about Roman virtue with an authentically Roman aesthetic, thereby bringing to France the noble greatness of the stoic Romans. Ultimately, because politics of the Enlightenment era were primarily concerned with Rousseau’s call for rationalism and morality in government, David’s depictions of Roman virtue and patriotic sacrifice as civic duties were synonymous with the political theory of the Prerevolution period.

⁶⁰ Chua, “In the Shadow of David’s Brutus,” 128.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION:

ARTISTE ENGAGÉ OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Years after the Revolution ended, David confessed that he had wanted to at least show his “patriotism on the canvas,” which was best done through the histories of ancient Rome and Greece.¹ As an intellectual artist who admired the Roman and Greek republics, it was a logical conclusion to his artistic and political development that David would become an artist-politician in the Revolutionary government. Because the majority of the population was illiterate, David’s status as an artiste engagé, who could lend glamor and prestige to the new Republic, became an important source of propaganda for the Revolutionary government.²

The artists of the Academy followed David’s lead in embracing the Revolution with enthusiasm, championing the attempt to save France from bankruptcy by carrying out financial reforms that would align with Enlightenment principles.³ In 1792, when the Legislative Assembly declared, “la patrie is in danger,” it was the young artists of the newly formed Compagnie des Arts who would take the oath “to maintain and to defend Liberty and Equality or to die in the attempt.” In response, the president of the Assembly proclaimed, “The artists have always been the children of Liberty since they cannot live without it. Freedom has no more zealous defenders.”⁴

³ Ibid., 129.
⁴ Session of September 8, 1792: Moniteur, No. 254 (10 September 1792), 1079; Journal des débats et des décrets, No. 348 (9 September 1792), 157.
The French Revolution and the Academy

In 1789, the pro-revolutionary sentiment ran especially strong in students and agréés of the Academy; this radical attitude so early in the Revolution led to violent debates within the halls of the Academy in August of 1789, the very month that David’s _Brutus_ was first exhibited. While revolutionaries in the National Assembly fought against the political, social, and economic feudalism left over from the ancien régime, David became the leader of the artists in the battle against one of the strongest aristocratic cultural institutions, the Academy.

At the start of September of 1789, just weeks after the exhibition of David’s _Brutus_, young Academy artists showed solidarity with David’s suggested reforms for equality of opportunity and artistic liberty. As a group, the artists published the pamphlet _Voeu des Artistes_, which openly attacked Academy officials such as d’Angiviller and other “blind protectors of rampant mediocrity.” While the Academicians publicly disavowed the publication in the pages of the _Journal de Paris_, the Revolutionary journalist Feydel praised the brochure as the work of “a good citizen.”

When he was unable to secure lasting reform, David fully entered politics, appealing in turn to the Paris Commune, the Jacobin Club, and the National Assembly. With his election to the National Convention, David came into his own politically; he took his seat among the radical Montagnards, voted to execute King Louis XVI, and looked to Robespierre for leadership. He became a member of the Committee of Public Instruction, helping to pass laws that would

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7 _Voeu des Artistes_ (Paris: Gueffier, 1789).
8 _Voeu des Artistes; Journal de Paris_, No. 260 (17 September 1789), 1180.
9 Dowd, _Pageant-Master of the Republic_, 28-34.
protect art monuments from vandalism, provide subsidies for the fine arts, and create new artistic institutions for the benefit of the individual artist.  

“Robespierre of the Brush”

Why did the master of the Neoclassical School, the greatest artist of his day under the ancien régime, decide to become the “Robespierre of the brush”\textsuperscript{11} Eighteenth-century artists possessed more prestige, economic security, and social mobility than their peers, so why did David choose to forgo his hard work and fame for the sake of a new political regime?\textsuperscript{12} David made his choice because he believed in the ideals of the Enlightenment insofar that he was willing to sacrifice his financial, social, and professional security for a cause he believed would promote the common good. He put into practice the very ideals that he had painting in his *Horatii*, *Socrates*, and *Brutus*: virtue, a reliance on rational principles, and sacrifice for the good of the state.

Some historians have suggested that opportunism explains David’s progressive pro-Revolution sentiments during the Prerevolution period.\textsuperscript{13} But David was not an artist merely interested in advancing his own career; if the goal of his prerevolutionary paintings had been to do so, he would have realized the advantages of his place within the ancien régime hierarchy, and he would have devoted himself to the service of his king. He would have followed the rules of his commissions—prescribed canvas measurements and contracted subjects—instead of disobeying them at every turn. But David was rebellious and disobedient, and his dissatisfaction

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{10}] David L. Dowd, “Art and Politics During the French Revolution,” *Studies in Modern European History in Honor of Franklin Charles Palm* (New York, 1956): 105-128.
\item[\textsuperscript{12}] Dowd, “The French Revolution and the Painters,” 145.
\item[\textsuperscript{13}] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
with the Academy shows how politically critical he had become of the monarchy and its institutions.

Some of David’s contemporaries asserted that it was his Neoclassical style that had somehow inspired the artist with a rebellious and fervent patriotic sentiment, urging him to re-establish the republican institutions and artistic glories of ancient Greece and Rome. They supposed that it was a “vision of antiquity” that produced David’s “revolutionary spirit,” and there may be some truth to this theory. David’s preoccupation with the idealized heroes of Livy and Plato came through in his prerevolutionary paintings and later led him to join the liberal intellectual salons of the *philosophes*. It is reasonable to assume that David’s preoccupation with antiquity may have caused his attachment to the Enlightenment, and later the Jacobin Club and the French Revolution. In a speech before the National Convention, David declared, “C’est à côté des actions mémorables que dans l’antiquité brillait le génie des arts. Ces vertus reparaissent.” Had David seen Brutus’s patriotism and dedication in the leaders of the Revolution?

In style and aesthetic, David’s prerevolutionary paintings were a bold rejection of the decadent rococo art forms of his day; his *Horatii*, *Socrates*, and *Brutus* showed a return to classical models with austere settings and simplicity of form. In style as much as subject matter, David’s prerevolutionary paintings showed a “precision and objectivity” where “the restriction of the work to the barest essentials…were more in harmony with the stoicism of the

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revolutionary bourgeoisie than any other artistic trend.”¹⁷ David essentially replaced an outdated art style with a style that was more compatible to Enlightenment ideals, so it is reasonable to surmise that in this same vein, David joined the movement that would replace the outdated political and social institutions of the French monarchy. The natural and democratic features of the Greek and Roman republics inspired David’s choices, both stylistic and political.¹⁸

**Politics in the *Horatii* and the *Brutus***

The *Oath of the Horatii* and *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* both had political significance for eighteenth-century audiences. The paintings dealt with Roman virtue and morality, thereby personifying important characteristics of the political theory of the Enlightenment. With his prerevolutionary paintings, David was giving the French public not a political but a moral rendering of classical subjects from antiquity; in glorifying Roman virtue and morality, David was glorifying the Rousseauist republican ideals of the Enlightenment: political sovereignty, liberty, and civic duty.

The scenes that David chose to paint essentially define his prerevolutionary sentiments; it was not the expulsion of the monarchy that he was trying to convey, but a willingness to do what was necessary for the good of France through Roman virtue, patriotism, and sacrifice. In David’s *Brutus*, the artist essentially revisited the image of popular sovereignty that he had so forcefully submitted in his *Horatii*: the resolute trio of brothers made way for the hunched figure of the

Roman consul. Similarly, the spear held by the front Horatii brother seems to have transformed into the staff held by the statue of Rome behind the figure of Brutus.  

It can be concluded that David’s prerevolutionary paintings were not intentionally subversive pro-Revolution works, but they can be seen as prerevolutionary commentaries on the politics of the day. In the turbulent social, political, and artistic atmosphere of the ancien régime during the 1780’s, radical anti-establishment critics lauded David’s Roman paintings; they saw in them the ideals of the Enlightenment—a rejection of the aristocracy’s extravagance at the expense of the lower classes and an acceptance of the stoic virtues of ancient Rome and Sparta, as glorified by Rousseau. And like Rousseau’s Social Contract, which heralded a revolution in social and political theory, David’s Horatii, Socrates, and Brutus were the first proclamations of an artistic revolution brought about by the anti-rococo reaction, just as they were the physical depictions of a philosophical revolution brought about by the Enlightenment. And also like Rousseau, David’s work influenced the French Revolution without any conscious intention on his part.

Conclusion

David’s prerevolutionary paintings appealed to the radical critics of the Salon, but there is no evidence to prove that David shared their political views. In fact, there is a distinct absence of any documentation on David’s political leaning, or of any political interest at all for that matter; this curious blank concerning David’s political thought is mysterious and suggestive, seeing that politics was one of the most debated and frequently discussed topics in prerevolutionary France. Living in an absolute monarchy that conducted a heavy censorship over all writing and art, the

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20 Ibid., 110.
absence of any mention of David’s political views becomes rather suspicious; is this absence the
result of an effort on the part of David, an elite and promising member of a monarchical
institution, to dispose of any incriminating evidence?

David had been a regular attendee at the salon of his godfather Sedaine and was exposed
to upper-class liberal views from a young age. One of David’s biographers, Louis Hautecœur,
has pointed out a connection between Diderot’s philosophy of the arts, specifically his views on
didacticism and democratization, and the administrative reforms David carried out during the
French Revolution.21 David’s use of Diderot’s philosophy during the Revolution reveals the
presence of his progressive liberal ideas throughout his prerevolutionary career.

One could also turn to David’s participation in la société Trudaine as proof of his
political leanings; an important influence on David was his friendship with Chénier, whose
political writings advocating constitutional monarchy encouraged David’s politicization. David’s
interactions with the aristocratic intellectuals of his day, and his regular attendance at liberal
radical salon circles, make it reasonable to conclude that he shared the philosophes’ progressive
thoughts concerning not only artistic liberty, but also political reform and the destruction of the
old feudal structure of French society.22 Only, instead of finding expression in treatises and
essays, like the philosophes of prerevolutionary France, David’s political principles and
Enlightenment ideals were portrayed in the medium of his métier: art.

During the Revolution, it was political action that abolished the Academy’s artistic
monopoly and privileges. Political reform opened the Salon to all artists; it suppressed the artistic
dictatorship of the Academy and many artists espoused the Revolutionary cause, hoping to win
not only individual liberty and civic and social equality, but also artistic freedom and equality of

22 Dowd, Pageant-Master of the Republic, 27.
professional opportunity. These ideals echoed, almost verbatim, the beliefs of André Chénier, and through his writings and influence, David’s beliefs as well. As such, David’s prerevolutionary paintings were not created as propaganda for a coming political revolution, but as a response to contemporary events and a proclamation of Enlightenment philosophy that allowed Jacques-Louis David to capture the esprit de corps of prerevolutionary France.

Figure 1: Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, 1785. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Figure 2: Jacques-Louis David, *Horatius Returning Victorious to Rome (The Death of Camilla)*, 1781. Black chalk with pen and wash. Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina.
Figure 3: Jacques-Louis David, *Horatius Killing His Sister*, 1782. Black chalk on paper. Private Collection.

Figure 4: Jacques-Louis David, *The Elder Horatius Defending His Son*, 1782-1783. Black chalk with pen and wash on paper. Paris, Musée du Louvre.
Figure 5: Jacques-Louis David, Study for the *Oath of the Horatii*, 1782. Paris, École des Beaux-Arts.

Figure 6: Jacques-Louis David, Study for the *Oath of the Horatii*. Paris, Musée du Louvre.
Figure 7: Jacques-Louis David, Study for the Oath of the Horatii. Lille, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

Figure 8: Jacques-Louis David, Study for the Oath of the Horatii. Black chalk heightened with white on paper. Angers, Musée des Beaux-Arts.
Figure 9: Jacques-Louis David, Camilla, Study for the *Oath of the Horatii*. Black chalk heightened with white on paper. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat.

Figure 10: Jacques-Louis David, The Horatii Brothers, Study for the *Oath of the Horatii*. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat.
Figure 11: Jacques-Louis David, Horatius, Study for the *Oath of the Horatii*. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat.

Figure 12: Pietro Antonio Martini, *The Salon of 1785*, 1785. Engraving.
Figure 13: Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, 1787. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 14: Jacques-Louis David, Study for the *Death of Socrates*, 1782. Black chalk and wash on paper. Private Collection.
Figure 15: Jacques-Louis David, Socrates Study for *The Death of Socrates*. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat.

Figure 16: Jacques-Louis David, *Jupiter*, 1784.
Figure 17: Jacques-Louis David, Study for Disciples in *The Death of Socrates*. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat.

Figure 18: Jacques-Louis David, *Sympotic Scene*, about 1775. Black crayon on paper. Paris, Musée du Louvre.
Figure 19: Jacques-Louis David, *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, 1789. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Figure 21: Jacques-Louis David, *Brutus Vowing to Avenge Lucretia*, 1780-1784. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

Figure 22: Jacques-Louis David, *Brutus Ordering the Execution of His Sons*, 1785. New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Thaw Collection.
Figure 23: Jacques-Louis David, *Brutus and his Family*. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat.

Figure 24: *Seated Philosopher*, Palazzo Spada, Rome.
Figure 25: Jacques-Louis David, Study of Brutus Seated. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat.

Figure 26: Jacques-Louis David, Study of Brutus Seated. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat.
Figure 27: Jacques-Louis David, *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat.

Figure 28: Jacques-Louis David, Detail from *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*. Bayonne, Musée Bonnat.
Figure 29: Jacques-Louis David, Studies of the Wife and Daughters of Brutus. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.

Figure 30: Jacques-Louis David, *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 31: Jacques-Louis David, Nude study of the Wife and Daughters of Brutus. Paris, Private Collection.

Figure 32: Jacques-Louis David, *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, 1787. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum.
Figure 33: Jacques-Louis David, *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 34: Detail of Figure 33, Strap of Phrygian Cap, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 35: Detail of Figure 33, Inscription on Pedestal of Statue of Rome, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 36: Jacques-Louis David, *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*. Albi, Musée Toulouse-Lautrec.

Figure 37: Jacques-Louis David, Study for *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, 1789. Oil on paper over canvas. Stockholm, Nationalmuseum.
Figure 38: Jacques-Louis David, Grieving Nurse, study for *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*. Tours, Musée des Beaux-Arts.
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