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**Art as Revolutionary Propaganda in David's *The Death of Marat***



PHYSICIAN, SCIENTIST, POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER, journalist, diseased misanthrope, paranoid, regicide, inciter of mass murder – Jean-Paul Marat shed his skin several times before discovering a talent for fanaticism. By mid-1790, however, anyone whose revolutionary fervor did not burn as ferociously as his was a reactionary who must be eliminated. His newspaper, ironically called *L'Ami du Peuple* (The Friend of the People), was a fiery pulpit of revolutionary propaganda, his sacred podium for the denunciation of the people's enemies. While belonging to no political party himself, Marat led the Jacobin assault against the nobility, saying that Louis XVI's death would be good for the people. He also used his paper to blast the Girardin party, portraying them as foes of republicanism. His greatest contribution to the French Revolution still awaited, however. In the summer heat of 1793, Marat's assassination set the stage for his ultimate metamorphosis. The catalyst of this transfiguration was a work of revolutionary art, the greatest tableau of one of France's most celebrated painters,

Jacques-Louis David. Poignantly, his triumph would also prove his undoing. The masterpiece that



Figure 1. Portrait of Marat, Joseph Boze, 1793

caused viewers to swoon at its unveiling eventually precipitated the exile of its creator in 1814. At his death in 1825, only David's heart was permitted burial in France. His body was laid to rest in Brussels and his infamous painting, *The Death of Marat*, had been kept in seclusion for 30 years, viewable by appointment only. Through the medium of oil and canvas David transformed Marat, the pustuled militant and embodiment of the terror, into a beatific martyr canonized by the blade of a vituperous, educated, aristocratic female.

On the evening of 13 July 1793 Charlotte Corday, a young woman from a Girondist family of penurious nobility, dressed in a shabby hotel. She hoped to bluff her way into an audience with Marat. Before slipping into the Parisian streets she sewed her certificate of baptism to her dress along with a letter of explanation for the act she was about to commit.<sup>1</sup> Although bearing a fabricated list of Girondist fugitives to whet his appetite, she was almost turned away until Marat yelled downstairs for his mistress to let her in. Presented to him as he sat in the cold bath that provided his only succor from the painful skin lesions that covered his body, Marat interrogated Mme. Corday. When he appreciatively concluded the interview saying that all the traitors would be guillotined within a week, she drew a knife and plunging it into his chest severing the carotid artery. His attendants and hangers-late. Marat bled to death on rushed in and seized the assassin, but too perfidly, in the National Convention the Jacobins cried to the heavens for the return of Marat and called on David, a representative of Paris, to immortalize the victim normally silent David, he mumbled, "I'll do it," stammering around the large tumor in his cheek, the consequence of wound received in a fencing match.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 2. David self-portrait, 1794

While David eventually was named a member of the Committee of General Security – his signature sending many suspected enemies to the scaffold's bloody terminus, even during his formative years he had the spark of a revolutionary. He spearheaded the late 18<sup>th</sup> century revolt against the decadence of rococo flummery exemplified, interestingly, by a distant cousin of David's mother, François Boucher.<sup>3</sup> David's studies in Rome had imbued in him the spirit of the classical masters and

he rejected rosy cheeked cherubs in favor of modern allegories of Roman and Greek heroes. And although, like most artists of the time, he relied on the patronage of the wealthy – indeed becoming the most sought after portrait artist of the day – even his pre-Revolution paintings evince a sentiment of republicanism. Take for instance David’s painting of Antoine Lavoisier and his wife Marie-Anne Paulze. Finished a few months before the Revolution’s outbreak, it shows Lavoisier, a famous chemist and part of the progressive nobility who felt the Old Regime needed to evolve, seated at his desk. While his clothing betrays his noble heritage, he does not dominate the scene. Rather, he is gazing up at his wife and collaborator who is physically above him – center stage, not a background decoration. This was rare in portraits of the day perhaps presaging sentiments of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Voltaire and Rousseau had planted the seeds of revolution. Beaumarchais’ play, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Danton’s speeches had supplied the spectacle to excite the masses. The revolutionaries now needed imagery to spark the people’s imagination. David would show, rather than tell, the people what it meant to be a citizen in more ways than one.



Figure 3. *Mr. Lavoisier and Wife*, David, 1788

Despite this intimation of egalitarianism, David’s art often betrays a less than kind perception of women. His father was killed in a duel when he was nine whereupon his mother left him to be raised by uncles. And although he did eventually find a wife, in an age where wit and conversation was



Figure 4. *Oath of the Horatii*, David, 1784

prized his disfigurement and speech impediment must have made it difficult to mix in society.<sup>4</sup> The first painting to bring him major accolades was the *Oath of the Horatii*. It is very much a representation of male virility and patriotism; loyalty to the father becomes loyalty to *la Patrie*, the fatherland. The women, in despair over impending widowhood, are emotional, colorless, and segregated from their husbands and brothers. In *Marat*, David eradicates Charlotte Corday completely. Any representation

of the lovely 24-year-old virgin who sought the role of tragic heroine might elicit sympathy therefore detracting from noble aesthetic of Marat’s sacrifice. All the observer sees of Corday is her bloody knife

on the floor – in reality, she made no attempt to flee and had left the knife embedded Marat’s chest – and her letter, bloodstained, still clutched in his hand. To demonize her further, David not only uses the subjunctive tense in her assertion of having the “right for his benevolence” to emphasize her noble background, but appropriates part of her will that left whatever remained of her estate to the victims of the terror. He even creates a second, fictitious letter from Marat sending charity to an unknown widow to highlight the Friend of the People’s generosity.<sup>5</sup>

But, the sham of kindness to an anonymous woman was just the most explicit example in the painting of the concept of secular religion developed during the Revolution in the overt attempt to



Figure 5. *The Entombment of Christ*, Caravaggio, c.1603

reeducate the citizen using language and symbols borrowed from the church. Often compared to Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, *The Death of Marat* also calls to mind Caravaggio’s *The Entombment of Christ*. One sees Marat, healed of his festering sores by David’s brush, at the moment of death slumped serenely in the bath. The light has no distinct source. It diffuses softly on the alabaster skin of this victim of counter-revolutionary violence, only focusing sharply on the letters. His head is turned to the side, the angle making it difficult for the viewer to examine the face.<sup>6</sup> The laceration gapes, but is nearly bloodless and evokes the wound in the side of Christ. The stark whiteness of the sheets and turban illuminate the scene and shroud the martyr. The tub is his sarcophagus, the blackness of the walls his sepulcher. In contrast, the rest of the scene is almost

ordinary, that of a man of the people who has divinely surpassed his humble station. The quill, which he wielded to protect the citizens, falls from his grasp. His inkwell atop the coarse wooden desk and the threadbare baize declare his unity with the common man. He is all “simplicity and grandeur.”<sup>7</sup> The only color is the green of the rug and the crimson of the bathwater. Marat is transformed, a new, secular saint of the Revolution.

The insoluble dilemma posed by this heartbreakingly beautiful painting is that the viewer must necessarily excise from memory the horrible events that led to its creation, for Marat was not David’s archetype of righteousness, but a “necrotic demagogue” for whom no amount of killing could ever be enough.<sup>8</sup> The Revolution was fueled by the terror of his pen. For Marat, this was the end in and of itself. He saw plots and conspiracies everywhere and his paranoia beat a drum in time with the lock step of the condemned scaling the guillotine’s dais. Marat was political violence personified. But,

David's mission was to create new secular myths for a new France. He had done so earlier just after the storming of the Bastille prison in his painting, *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*. In it Brutus sits stoically refusing to look at the bodies of his sons whom he had ordered beheaded for conspiracy against the Republic. The message was clear. If Brutus can kill his own children to preserve the nation, can you do no less? As the Reign of Terror grew, Marat answered for them when he declared that thousands must now die, because the people had not had the nerve to kill a few hundred at the outset. When *The Death of Marat* was unveiled David exclaimed to the assembled viewers, "Oh despair! Our indefatigable one is dead...without even having the means for his own burial. Posterity, you will avenge him...Humanity, you will tell those who called him bloodthirsty that Marat, your cherished child, never caused you to weep."<sup>9</sup>



Figure 6. *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, David, 1789

David's masterpiece is a cult icon that turns reality on its head. The horrid persecutor of tens of thousands attained the sacred and the virtuous maiden who reaped vengeance upon him is reviled. Meanwhile the viewer is encouraged to suspend disbelief based simply on its tragic beauty. David sold his soul to the Revolution and his brilliant paintings became the progenitor of its myths – but then David was always as mercurial as his genius. Born into minor wealth and at one time under the patronage of Louis XVI, with a studio and apartment in the Louvre, it was a petty desire for revenge against the Royal Academy, who had snubbed him thrice for the coveted *Prix de Rome*, that heavily influenced the course he took into the Jacobin terror machine. When the revolutionary dictatorship finally fell, David had sworn to “drink the hemlock” with Robespierre, but was mysteriously ill the July day in 1794 when the Jacobin leader met the guillotine.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 7. *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, David, 1799

Imprisoned for a short while afterwards, his subjects turned once more to classic historical subjects, such as *The Sabine Women*, and bourgeois portraiture. However, having narrowly escaped retribution

for his role in the Terror, such a talent as his could not linger in the shadows. It was not long before he was rehabilitated by Napoleon who appointed him the imperial court painter and his huge canvases glorifying the Emperor still hang in Versailles. Nevertheless, *The Death of Marat* stands as “one of the finest examples of political art of all time.”<sup>11</sup> The poet Baudelaire, who helped bring the painting back from obscurity, wrote its epitaph, “The drama is here, vivid in its pitiful horror... This is food for the strong, the triumph of spiritualism. This painting is as cruel as nature but it has the fragrance of ideals. Where is the ugliness that hallowed Death erased so quickly with the tip of his wing? Now Marat can challenge Apollo... a soul is flying in the cold air of this room, on these cold walls, around this cold funerary tub.”<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Simon Schama, *The Power of Art* (Frome, UK: BBC Books, 2006), 218.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 74.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>7</sup> John L. Heineman, “French Revolution – Neo-Classicism,” *Art in European History*, Boston College, [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/cas/his/CoreArt/art/neocl\\_dav\\_marat.html](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/his/CoreArt/art/neocl_dav_marat.html).

<sup>8</sup> Burleigh, 73.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 846.

<sup>11</sup> Burleigh, 72.

<sup>12</sup> Heineman, np.

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