

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825)
Oath of the Horatii (1784-5)
Oil on canvas 330 x 425 cm
Louvre, Paris

ART & IDENTITY

Patronage: Count d' Angiviller
Director General of the Buildings, Arts and Academies
On behalf of King Louis XVI



ART HISTORICAL TERMS & CONCEPTS

Subject Matter: The Oath of the Horatii is a History painting, top of the hierarchy of genres in the French Academy, on a grand scale. It is based on an Ancient Roman story, considered noble and heroic, originally narrated by the Roman author Livy (59 BCE-17 CE). His intention was to establish the Emperor Augustus' validity after the fall of the Roman Republic. The Roman Horatii triplets were destined to go into combat against the Curiatii triplets from Alba c. 669 BCE; rather than a full scale war, the rulers' sons would represent their states. The painting shows the Horatii triplets on the left, their father in the centre, and their sisters, wives and children on the right. The united brothers salute their father, the ruler, with their swords raised in an oath of allegiance. The oath was not mentioned by Livy, but David's imagination found a moment charged with intensity, and imbued with grandeur; he invented the salute. Viewers at the time would have been familiar with the story, especially as French dramatist Corneille's play *Les Horaces* of 1640 had been performed and seen by David in 1782. The lamenting woman in white is a Horatius, weeping for both her Curiatii fiancé and her brother, the woman in brown is a Curiatius who weeps for her Horatii husband and her brother. The nanny shelters

the children, the daughter hiding her face, the son refusing to shield his eyes - one of many instances of extreme gender binaries in the image. As a young male child, David emphasises



the expectation that he must be as stoic as his father and grandfather to fulfil this archetypal image of patriarchy. The theme of the painting is extreme loyalty and patriotism, expressed in the resolute masculine figures willing to fight to the death for their state while the women are wilting in the corner, powerless, yet full of feeling and emotion.

Previous artists had depicted the violent end of the action: after killing the Curiatii only one Horatii survived; he returned home to find his sister Camilla cursing Rome for the death of her fiancé, and horrified, killed her too. David's initial sketches showed this traditional scene as requested



in the commission by the Count d'Angiviller, director general of the *Bâtiments, Arts et Manufactures du Roi*, who was roughly equivalent to a minister of culture who determined artistic careers. D'Angiviller nonetheless accepted David's radical alternative without hesitation. The strong solid classical Doric order of architecture (in the purest Greek tradition without a base to the columns) supporting round Roman arches, the armour, sandals, hairstyles and clothing of the figures, especially

the three specific helmets and three different swords, are all accurately modelled on Roman models.

Visual Analysis: David's *Oath of the Horatii* is a highly structured work based on a clear, balanced, geometric composition. Vertically divided into three by the columns of the Doric arcade, with each of the three figure groups in a separate zone – three arches, three brothers, three swords, three women. It is also divided into three horizontally with only the hilts of the swords in the top architectural section, and the central square focusing on the hands swearing the oath. The central vertical axis bisects the central arch, and the central horizontal axis aligns with the men's elbows. The golden section is also used twice horizontally, with all the figures in the lower section, and for the placing of the children. David's accurate use of mathematical one-point linear perspective gives a convincing illusion of space, with diagonal orthogonals and horizontal transversals on the floor tiles, with the architectural details leading one's eye to a vanishing point in the centre behind the hand holding the swords. Although David creates a stage-like space, the action takes place on the shallow foreground plane with the background behind the arches shrouded in darkness. There is a single light source from the left which casts long shadows on the paving, to indicate the early morning setting. Light also emphasises the hard metal helmets, and taut muscular arms of the active rectilinear male protagonists; this *chiaroscuro* adds drama. The male figures each have a strong outline, with tonal modelling to give them mass and volume, making them look sculptural.

David's palette consisted of only six pigments – black, white, vermilion (red), Prussian blue, yellow ochre and burnt umber/sienna. The strong red highlights the masculine figures while the women are painted in muted earth colours. Colours also link to the narrative: the central patriarchal figure - head of the family and head of state, and in the foreground Horatius wearing red might indicate he will take over the family, while his white over-garment links him to his sister in white who will soon be sacrificed – her bare feet a symbol of innocence. It has also been suggested the Prussian blue links family members. The limp poses and gestures of the powerless women, with pale skin, soft forms and muted dull monochrome drapery is in stark contrast to the stereotypical strength of the active male protagonists. They think only of their family and inevitable loss.

The image is heavily influenced by Roman culture from the plain 'masculine' (Vitruvius) Doric order of architecture to the classical ideal of the figures – with head to body proportions of 1:7, and heroic male gestures based on ancient classical sculptures. This is in contrast to the passive, emotional poses and gestures of the weeping women, likely to have been based on Roman relief sculpture. The serious, actively outward looking gaze of the men again contrasts with the downward glances of the women. Hence this painting is a very clear example of gendered representation in the newly emerging, Neoclassical style which totally rejected decorative Rococo frivolity. As the German art historian Winckelmann wrote in 1755 '*There is only one way for the moderns to become great ... by imitating the ancients*'.

CULTURAL, SOCIAL. TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) was emerging as the most prominent and influential Neo-classical painter in Europe. He came from a family of tradesmen and enrolled in the school of the *Académie Royale* in 1766, where the focus was on drawing, firstly from antique, and then the nude male from life. He was ambitious and held grievances against the institution over the four years it took him to win the prestigious *Prix de Rome* in 1774. While in Rome and Naples, he drew from the Antique but wrote: '*[it] will not seduce me, it lacks animation, it does not move*'. It did help him to create a rational synthesis of the real and the ideal. His work was also



influenced by the seventeenth century French classical painter

Poussin. In 1783 David became a full

Academician and in 1784 he was

commissioned to paint the Oath of the Horatii.

He returned to Rome to paint it from October 1784 to August 1785. Ancient Roman influences are clear: the musculature, the short curly hair, the poses, the folds and weight of the fabric, as seen in the appropriate subject of the Tyrannicides – tyrant slayers, (fifth century BCE, Naples) and the Apollo Belvedere (fourth century BCE, Vatican).

King Louis XVI still ruled France through a system known as the *ancien régime* established



by the Sun King, Louis XIV, a hundred years previously. It depended on the Divine Right of Kings and a feudal system where political authority lay with a small group of privileged aristocrats, while the peasants were increasingly impoverished. The growing middle class were influenced by the ideas of liberty behind the American War of Independence (1778-83).

The philosophical movement known as the Enlightenment was emerging. It celebrated reason, and the perfectibility of humans over their passions and the environment. It was liberal, pro-science, anti-superstition, anti-institutionalised religion, and believed the state should improve moral and social human conditions. David was profoundly influenced by these ideas, as both his choice of subject and style reveals. He would go on to become an active revolutionary in the new French Republic after the Revolution of 1789.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Such a large scale *grand machine* with life-size figures required a long process from initial sketches to final work. As noted David experimented with various stages of the story before deciding on his chosen moment. His first small scale sketch of this included architectural details, Roman decorative elements - shield and vase, two extra figures, dramatic gestures and greater depth. His final small sketch cut out all unnecessary detail to focus on the main

protagonists. He made the triplets a more united group by having the two furthest away swear with their left hands and hence left legs. This *esquisse* also tests out his choice of colours and is squared up for transfer to full monumental scale for the *ébauche* – the under painted basis for the final work.



Pen and black ink, brush and grey wash, heightened with white, over black chalk, 23 x 33 cm (Lille) 1782

Oil over pen and black ink, squared in black chalk, on paper laid down on canvas, 22.6 x 37.5 cm (Louvre) 1782

The individual studies or *études* for each figure often began with an anatomically accurate male nude, in a single continuous outline drawing, before the figure was 'dressed', and white highlights and shadows added to make them three-dimensional. The final work was even more stark. David's oil technique required great skill and was time-consuming and challenging. With his palette of six pigments, he applied his paint meticulously with small pointed brushes; no strokes are visible on the finished work, with the only *pentimenti* being the repainting of the father's foot. This highly finished technique is typical of the academic system at the time and led to the new Neoclassical style, which was highly appropriate for the ancient Roman subject. The figures look like clear, hard, painted sculptures. David's technical ability was outstanding and he had a large *atelier* of students.



Studies for *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) black chalk with white highlights

WAYS IN WHICH IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

Oath of the Horatii was commissioned by the ministry on behalf of David's royal patron, King Louis XVI. The Marxist art historian Frederick Antal's interpretation in *Classicism and Romanticism* (1966) is summarised by Pooke & Newall as '*an attempt by an absolutist monarchy to demonstrate an enlightened and contemporary taste by choosing a subject and style which was fashionable with some of its wealthier subjects*' (p.64). Nicos Hadjinicolaou's *Art History and Class Struggle* (1978) goes further to claim the painting belongs to the '*visual ideology of the rising bourgeoisie at the end of the Old Regime*'. When first exhibited it was

regarded as an image of Roman heroism, patriotism and loyalty to the ruler, appropriate within a monarchy. When shown in Rome royalty, aristocrats, and churchmen eulogised it, and even the Pope went to see it. David's ongoing dispute with the French Academy meant it arrived late for the Salon in Paris and was then given a poor site. Public dissatisfaction with this forced them to move it, and David then exhibited it for some extra weeks to permit the public to enjoy it and critics to write more about it. To summarise, they appreciated the 'new aesthetic of the body' and the 'modern' treatment of the antique (Pooke & Newall p. 65). *Oath of the Horatii* founded a new aesthetic and a new moral order, and became a model for noble and heroic neoclassical paintings for decades to come.

Rapid political change led to the French Revolution of 1789. Looking back at David's work pre-revolutionary characteristics were identified. The Horatii brothers had sacrificed everything, not for their father, but for their state, indeed he even prioritised love of his state over that of family, his sister Camilla. Despite being painted five years earlier, the painting became an icon of the Revolution and by the 1790s was being interpreted as a revolutionary call to arms. In October 1790 Dubois-Crancé, a member of the Convention, commissioned David to record the June 1789 Oath of the Tennis court, claiming he was '*a French patriot, whose genius prefigured the Revolution*', while the Jacobin Mirabeau confirmed '*the Oath of the Horatii was the precursor of the Oath of the Tennis Court*'. In 1975 Walter Friedländer wrote '*This is a Spartan and Roman heroism, united with the highest civic virtue. Here is created a highly political symbol – four years before the outbreak of the Revolution*'. Were these readings based on David's later associations with revolutionary politics? He was a Jacobin and friend of Robespierre, and voted for the death of the King in 1793; David later went on to become painter to the Emperor Napoleon. While in 1980 Anita Brookner made the case for David being a revolutionary in terms of his technical and formal developments but a 'political innocent' in the 1780s.

Since the 1970s feminist art historians have explored the representation of gender difference within dominant patriarchal cultures in relation to the figure. The formal stylistic binary representation in *Oath of the Horatii* has been noted already and relates directly to power relations. Heinrich Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History* (1915) outlined a formalist interpretation of the painting, and although he applied to Renaissance classicism it can equally be applied to David's *Oath of the Horatii*: linear rather than painterly, plane rather than recession, closed not open forms, multiplicity versus unity and absolute, rather than relative clarity. While a biographical interpretation was offered by Canaday in 1959 '*David's temperament, at once intense and dogged, sensitive yet Spartan. These characteristics appear in his art, where emotion is held in check by icy control.*'

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