the latter crime. This is a free adaptation of Corneille’s final scene, where the elder Horatius pleads for his son’s pardon before the king of Rome. But the final composition does not depict the event described in his commission. The defense of the murderous victor is forgotten; the new subject is a pledge by the three sons to triumph or die for the honor of Rome, an event imagined by the artist to have occurred before the fateful combat (this oath appears nowhere in the play or in any of Corneille’s ancient sources). In order to equal the visual impact of any other painting in the Salon, he enlarged without permission the previously agreed dimensions of the canvas by fifty percent.

Thus David was also taking over responsibility for setting the scale and subjects for his paintings, despite their being paid for by the state. This went hand in hand with calculated defiance at the level of style. His invention of the oath-taking allowed him to distill the complexities of the story into a striking unity, an almost primitively elemental configuration of bodies. It would demonstrate how much strength history painting could gain from an austerity of means that seemed at one with the stoicism of these early Romans. At the same time, David took advantage of the inherent problem faced by history painters in communicating to the Salon audience from the heights of the room (all large canvases were hung near the distant ceiling, as can be seen in contemporary engravings). Like no one else’s painting, it would be its narrative across the spaces of the crammed exhibition, and leave its starkly calligraphic configuration of male bodies as a permanent image in the memory of its viewers.

The abrupt transitions and dialectical sharpness of the new painting, its austere and declamatory voice, stood in pointed contrast to the intricately embellished pictorial rhetoric of his academic colleagues. An example would be The Death of Acestis, shown in the same Salon by his principal rival Pierre Peyron (1744–1819), whose theme, taken from the drama of Euripides, is a wife’s self-sacrifice so that her husband might live. David’s innovations made Peyron’s compactly interwoven grouping of figures, emerging from a darkened, softening atmosphere, seem a thing of the past, too subtle and self-involved to make an impact in the civic arena. That David retained a similar mode of composition in his self-contained group of female figures, but exclusively there, made the contrast all the more emphatic.

David’s withdrawal from Paris and his gathering of the independent forces of his studio helped strengthen his resolve to overturn the accepted conventions of narrative in painting. The impact of the painting is inseparable from its violations of his audience’s habitual expectations as to how such a scene should be organized. It implicitly rejected the developed compositional skills of generations of academic painters. To press all of the figures into the same foreground plane, to join the male and female groups with no mediating transitions or mutual recognition between them, to offer no release into deep space beyond the starkly symmetrical colonnade—by every contemporary standard, these were all daring and dissonant simplifications.

It was through this rhetoric of style that David’s painting spoke most forcefully to feelings of patriotic discontent with the established cultural order. In the eyes of its admirers, its harsh notes and impatience with compositional subtleties elevated the mind and moved private emotions away from center stage; the pride and inflexibility of the early Romans, so foreign to modern mores and so telling a reproach to them, had come alive on canvas.

THE ENTERPRISE OF WOMEN

The initiatives of David and his group depended on a large and secure level of state subsidy for history painting, the sheer scale of which left room for dissenting gestures. Such support had been in place for no longer than a decade. Previously official sponsorship of the highest genre had been more often a matter of lip service rather than actual funds; artists relied on income from private commissions for portraits and decorative works. From 1775 onwards, however, the ambitious male talents of the new generation were drawn into the production of highminded (and usually mediocre) public paintings, and this left a vacuum in the other genres of art. Almost instantly a cohort of talented women came to the fore. The year 1783 saw the admission of two women to the Academy (there were places for only four)—Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749–1803) and Elisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun (1755–1842). In terms of both quality and patronage at the highest levels, they would go on to dominate portraiture during this final decade of the Old Régime—including portraits of the royal family, which were virtually equivalent in status to Classical history paintings.

The latter artist, 28 years old at the time of her reception, had the easier path to recognition. Her father, Louis Vigée, had been a portraitist and teacher in the lesser Academy of Saint Luke (the survivor of the old artists’ guild). By the age of 15, her precocious talent was attracting well-born and wealthy clients, and in 1779 she sealed what would be a continuing relationship with the young Queen Marie-Antoinette. She married a successful art dealer, J.-B.-P. Lebrun, and conducted herself as a significant figure in society, presiding over her own soirées and attracting regulars from the upper spheres of Parisian culture and state administration. The reigning tone was one of elegant simplicity on antique models.

Vigée-Lebrun and David maintained a wary social relationship; the latter’s education and style made him a natural colleague, but his patriotic commitments occasionally caused
him to recoil from her cosy alliance with the royal house. Her portraits indeed served as a medium for the incorporation of certain Enlightenment attitudes into the style and self-image of the ruling elite. She moved the genre away from conventional attitudes and costume intended to convey rank and station, toward a cultivated disdain for affectation and a corresponding emphasis on individual feeling. Her self-portrait with her daughter (1789) set a kind of standard in this new pursuit of innocent candor. In it she defines herself in terms other than those of her energetic professional prowess. The clothes are simple and unpretentious; they belong to no precise social location but serve to suggest an imaginative community of grace and feeling; the natural freshness of skin is at one with the natural spontaneity of the embrace.

The compression and intertwining of the two figures into a compact oval at the same time represents a survival of one of the favorite devices of Rococo decorative artists from the early decades of the century: a familiar old form is made to perform a new duty. And Vigée-Lebrun’s version of the natural is characterized throughout by a reassuring consistency and absence of the unexpected. Having already demonstrated that sort of reliable performance early in her career, she was handed one of the most important and most delicate public commissions of the 1780's.

This was not a didactic history painting, but a state portrait of the Queen with her children. By the middle years of the decade, Marie-Antoinette had become a focus for popular resentment against state policies and the government’s endless crisis of indebtedness. A tide of published political dissent took delighted advantage of her reputation for unprincipled extravagance and scandalous public behavior, particularly in the company of her rakish and reactionary brother-in-law, the Comte d’Artois. Vigée-Lebrun’s portrait displays the traditional pomp of regal portraiture, provided by the setting in the Versailles Palace with the magnificence of the Hall of Mirrors visible to the left. The Queen’s pose is properly upright, and the artist has arranged the group into the solid pyramid ordained by the most sanctified academic teaching. That seriousness of bearing and self-presentation was crucial in the intended effect of the painting, in that the King’s foreign wife was widely seen to have distracted the amiably simple monarch from his paternal devotion to the nation.

The portrait’s stress on her role as mother was meant to answer further charges that she had failed in her conjugal duties. The studied precariously of the baby’s seat in her lap, flanked by gestures of loving emotion from the older children, was designed to show the Queen as not only having grown into her role as mother to the royal heirs but as being a good mother in the natural, nurturing manner celebrated by the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility. It was no fault of the artist’s competence in rendering this balancing act that the state, out of fear of a negative public response, withheld the portrait from the official opening of the Salon of 1787. Any positive benefit was annulled in the general ridicule, and the empty space in the hanging was quickly equated with the looming fiscal deficit. Vigée-Lebrun herself left France at the first outbreak of the Revolution and found an eager clientele at princely courts throughout Europe.

The career of Labille-Guiard followed a substantially different course from that of her more luminous rival, and it demonstrates the widening options that opened up (albeit grudgingly and briefly) to women artists during this decade. She was six years older and had received her most important training from a history painter, F.-A. Vincent, rather than a specialist in the portrait genre. She achieved a rank not unlike Vigée-Lebrun’s, in 1785 becoming portraitist to Mesdames, the King’s unmarried aunts, but her sense of vocation displayed a greater intellectual and professional gravity. This she projected with confidence and conviction in the self-portrait which she submitted to the Salon of 1785. At over six feet in height, the canvas presents her on a queenly scale of her own. Instead of any comforting domesticity, she advertises herself as already a teacher and master of her genre: two attentive students hover behind her chair. The setting is
unabashedly a place of work, as the prosaic stretcher bars and tacked canvas make plain. A sculpted bust of her father in the severe Roman mode (from an actual work by Pajou) looks on, but no living male intrudes on the studio’s enterprise. This would have been a point of some importance to the artist, since both she and Vigée-Lebrun were subject to the slander that men had actually produced their paintings, a back-handed but galling tribute from a sexist culture. Labille-Guillard’s link to Vincent remained intimate—they would marry in 1790—so she was especially vulnerable to this reflex suspicion. The finery of her dress and hat, perhaps incongruous to modern-day eyes, would have been deemed an expected and correct outward sign of status and accomplishment. At the same time she encourages a worthy simplicity in the dress of her students.

This self-portrait stands as a reminder that enlightened pedagogy as a feature of the artist’s new intellectual independence was not necessarily limited to the cruder pursuits of male Classicists. Labille-Guillard herself took a sympathetic part in the coming Revolution and painted one of the few known portraits of Robespierre.

THE CIRCLE OF MEN

After his return from Rome, David was some time in reorganizing the collective work in his own studio. A combination of injury, illness, and indecision prevented him from making a start on an equivalent successor to the Horatii, though he had a royal commission in hand. In the end, he capitalized on new friendships in order to keep his name before the public at a lower cost to his time and resources but with little or no lessening of impact.

Early in 1786, a wealthy young jurist named Trudaine de la Sablière, a scion of one of the country’s most distinguished families of royal administrators, presented himself as the patron of David’s Socrates at the Moment of Grasping the Hemiack (1787). He paid more than handsomely for the honor of commissioning it: 7000 livres to begin with, according to one report, augmented to 10,000 livres in the end as an expression of his delight with the results (this for a cabinet-sized picture when the state was paying only 6000 livres for a full-scale historical canvas like the Horatii).

The story comes from the writings of Plato, who had been a student of the martyred philosopher, and more recently from a retelling of the suicide by the French philosophe Denis Diderot. Despite its stark prison-setting and theme of self-sacrifice, the Socrates calls into question the tendency to classify all of David’s history paintings of the 1780’s under the heading of an austere and militant virtue. His formal choices were made within a rhetorical conception of painting, one in which style was less the mark of an artist’s unique personality and more a considered adjustment to the demands of the subject matter and the occasion. This smaller canvas, offered as an emblem of personal friendship, called for a more harmonious and interwoven compositional order.

In philosophical terms, it is a more complex theme than the tale of the Horatii, emblemizing subtle constitutional and moral questions in place of Corneille’s broadly brushed nationalist legend. It catches the ambivalence Trudaine would display toward any expansion of the principle of free expression to incorporate popular participation in political life (he would go to the guillotine in 1794 for that reluctance). The suicide of Socrates is the result of a prior and more fundamental renunciation of political action under conditions of democratic sovereignty: from the moment of his indictment forward, he accepts without resistance the judgment of the democratic assembly the better to reject the legitimacy of the authority behind it. What more fitting purchaser to have than the man who would go on to translate the American Federalist Papers into French, including James Madison’s strictures against unrestrained factions and the potential “tyranny of the majority” in democratic legislatures?

The treatment of the male body is also changed from the strained austerity of the Horatii in a way that corresponds to masculine bonds in Greek society and in Platonic thought. The figure of the anonymous cupbearer—in its scale, placement, color, and sensual attractiveness—functions as a balancing element of the composition equal in weight to the figure of Socrates himself, a Ganymede assisting at the passage to immortality. In Plato’s account of the suicide, the jailor hearing the poison is only a minor, anonymous presence, but this prominence given to the physical for its own sake evokes another facet of Plato, one in which the contemplation of the beautiful male body is enlisted for the purposes of enlightenment. The speeches of the participants in Plato’s Symposium describe the contemplation of the beautiful male adolescent by the mature citizen as a potential means to lead the mind upward from the realm of the sensual to an understanding of universal good. Though Socrates is allowed his “philosophical” refusal of the sexual seductiveness of Alcibiades, there is a great deal of humorous carousing and delicious reminiscence of erotic feeling on the part of the wealthy Athenians present. And in the end the sexual abstinence of Socrates is meaningful only because of the palpable desire stimulated by the proximity of the beautiful male beloved. In David’s painting, Socrates reaches for the cup and for the boy in the same gesture.

Later, in his monumental history painting Leonidas at Thermopylae (1814), David would put on display his understanding of the central place held by same-sex eros in the warrior culture of ancient Greece. The Socrates likewise is