‘Never was any such event so inevitable yet so completely unforeseen’, was how the great historian Alexis de Tocqueville characterized the coming of the French Revolution. From a distance of more than two hundred years, we can see that the Revolution was the result of a series of social, economic and political pressures which, though manageable in themselves, had the cumulative effect of toppling the monarchy and changing the course of French and European history.

By the mid-1780s the whole framework of the ancien régime seemed close to breakdown. As a legacy of its expensive involvement in the American War of Independence (1778–83), France was facing bankruptcy and the government was forced to borrow more and more money to cover its deficits. The public was also aware of how the lavish and extravagant expenditure of the court added to the nation’s debts, and they were outraged at the waste. Tensions also existed between the aristocracy and the emerging middle classes, with the latter group trying hard to gain social acceptance and a rise in their influence and status. Of course these issues of politics and class were of little importance to the poor, the vast majority of whom lived in degradation and misery trying to scratch a living from the land. They laid the blame for their misfortunes squarely at the feet of the Church and the aristocracy which claimed crippling tithes and feudal dues (70). Then, to make matters worse, the 1788 harvest was disastrous, raising bread prices and threatening the poor with starvation.

Besides the economic and social problems, an ideological campaign was also being fought, with the democratic and
Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, a radical clergyman, published a pamphlet entitled *What is the Third Estate?*, which was a call for a complete change in the system of government (71). The three Estates of France were the Clergy, the Nobles and the Commons, and while the first two accounted for under half a million men, the Third Estate represented about 25 million commoners. Sieyès wrote: 'What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been in the political order until now? Nothing. What is it asking for? To become something.'

He argued that the Third Estate should become the dominant force in the government and wrestle authority away from the nobility. Following the example of Sieyès, other pamphlets and petitions on similar themes were published and distributed throughout France. An active gutter press also churned out smutty and titillating stories of sexual depravity in high places, and this socio-political pornography helped form notions of a decadent, debauched and wasteful royalty and aristocracy.

written word in creating political awareness cannot be underestimated, and it is no coincidence that the most ardent support for the Revolution came from the most literate parts of France – the Île-de-France, the North and the East.

Early in 1789 no solution to the nation’s problems had been found, and so Louis XVI convened the Estates General (France’s national parliament) at Versailles for the first time since 1614. Though they represented the commoners of the country, the Third Estate members who went to Versailles were far from poor peasants, they were successful men in their own right: lawyers, bureaucrats, bankers, merchants and industrialists who sought change and reform in the shape of equality, justice and liberty.

The discussions reached a stalemate; on 17 June the Third Estate seized the initiative and proclaimed itself the National Assembly. On 20 June the new Assembly, now joined by some of the clergy, found itself locked out of the official meeting hall, and so, at the suggestion of the Parisian deputy Dr Joseph Guillotin, they met in the tennis court of the palace, situated just outside the complex of royal buildings. (The tennis court still stands and is now a museum.) There they swore a solemn oath not to disperse until a constitution for the nation had been established (72); this was a key event in the political course of the Revolution, with the new Assembly setting itself up as the true representatives of the people and the real power in the land.

Meanwhile, in Paris and in the provinces, popular disturbances took place with the people fearful of the king sending in troops and forcibly dissolving the Assembly. A climax was reached on 14 July 1789 when the Bastille prison was stormed by an insurrectionary mob of 800–900 people who were seeking weapons and gunpowder for future struggles with royal forces. In popular myth the Bastille was seen as a symbol of despotism and unjust imprisonment, but in reality it held only a few prisoners, kept in reasonable conditions. The majority of its conquerors were civilians, many of whom were later executed or guillotined.
– from the nearby poor quarter of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Once inside, the crowd found the desired stocks of muskets and powder but no evidence for the gaol’s sinister reputation; only seven prisoners – four forgers, two lunatics and an aristocrat accused of incest – were discovered. The Bastille’s unfortunate governor, the Marquis de Launay, who had ordered his troops to fire on the mob, was seized and summarily butchered, and his severed head was paraded on a pike – a grim foretaste of future blood-letting (73).

The king seems to have been little disturbed by the events in Paris, as he wrote in his diary for that day ‘nothing’. Similarly, the nobles and aristocrats had little inkling of the direction or speed of events that would first challenge and then sweep away their age-old privileges. However, the magnitude of the popular victory soon became clear. On 17 July the king travelled from Versailles to Paris to be greeted by cries, first of ‘Long live the Nation!’, then ‘Long live the Nation and the National Assembly!’, and finally ‘Long live the King and the Nation!’ He then addressed the crowd from the steps of the town hall, and his endorsement and acceptance of the Revolution was shown by his agreement to wear the tricolour cockade made up of royalist white and the blue and red heraldic colours of the city of Paris. Royal absolutism had come to an end and there was widespread rejoicing, though for the rest of the summer France was in the grip of the ‘Great Fear’, a hysteria fed by alarms over possible foreign or aristocratic intervention and by famine and near anarchy.

In 1789 David was a successful public figure of some reputation who had a vested interest in the establishment, working for both the Crown and for aristocratic patrons. Yet, like many of his liberal friends, he welcomed the Revolution as it promised reform and a greater degree of liberty. But just as the Revolution moved from optimistic ideas of national unity to repressive terror, David’s political involvement changed
radicalism. He does not, however, emerge as an active revolutionary until April 1792; although he eventually became fully committed to the cause, the process of change was, as with his art, gradual rather than sudden.

At the Salon of 1789, which took place against the backdrop of the capital’s civil and social unrest, David exhibited two paintings. One was The Loves of Paris and Helen (74), an important private work for the Count d’Artois, the king’s dissolute brother, and the other was a Crown commission, The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons (see 77).

David had begun work on The Loves of Paris and Helen in 1786, and had originally intended to have it ready for the 1787 Salon. However, due to an injury to his achilles tendon sustained in October 1786, and a long illness in 1787, the work was not completed until 1788. The Loves of Paris and Helen was a work on a new theme, and to express the amorous nature of the subject, David greatly modified the uncompromising and severe style of his previous paintings. The two figures are smooth and sculptural and are bathed in subtle light, a clear move away from the dramatically lit and sinewy characters of the Horatii (see 62) and Socrates (see 66). David took great trouble over the details in this painting of courtship and physical attraction. A statue of Venus, goddess of love, is placed on a column at the left, and we also see two wreaths of myrtle, an evergreen sacred to Venus and an emblem of conjugal fidelity. The painting examines the differing emotions that Helen feels towards Paris because, according to Homer’s account in the Iliad, Paris won Helen over even though he had been defeated in combat by her husband Menelaus. This seduction had the tragic consequence of starting the Trojan War, when Paris took Helen back to Troy as his wife and the incensed Greeks laid siege to the city for ten years. Helen stands, her head inclined, attracted by the handsome Paris yet still harbouring doubts. Paris’ passion is understated and
added, although incorrect, detail in the background, David included four caryatids (columns in the shape of female figures) copied from the Salle des Cent-Suisses in the Louvre.

In *The Loves of Paris and Helen*, David went to great lengths to show his versatility and to demonstrate that he was not just a painter of heroic and masculine scenes. He described the painting as ‘in the Greek and thoroughly antique manner’, and the subject matter determined the elegant and refined treatment. It has been suggested that *The Loves of Paris and Helen* was a satire on the well-known scandalous and licentious behaviour of the Count d’Artois, and was thus a condemnation of royalty, although the count happily accepted the painting and nobody at the time detected anything political or subversive in it. But with the delicate political situation in Paris at the time, the fact that the painting belonged to the king’s brother was omitted from the exhibition catalogue.

David’s second exhibit of 1789, *The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of his Sons* (77), was much more controversial from the start. Its full title was *J Brutus, First Consul, returned to his house after having condemned his two sons who had allied themselves with the Tarquins and conspired against Roman liberty; the lictors return their bodies so that they may be given burial*. This was the fulfilment of the Crown commission for the 1787 Salon that had not been delivered, and it seems likely that as a disciplinary measure Pierre attempted to have David excluded from carrying the work forward to the next Salon. But the order stood and David changed the subject from Coriolanus to Brutus, although it is not known whether or not this was done with the permission of the Direction des Bâtiments du Roi.

Lucius Junius Brutus (not to be confused with Julius Caesar’s assassin Marcus Brutus, who lived some 500 years later), had helped to rid Rome of the last of its kings, the tyrannical Tarquin the Proud. This came about because Tarquin’s son Sextus had raped the virtuous Lucretia. She then committed
The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons.
1789.
Oil on canvas; 323 × 422 cm, 127 1/8 × 166 1/8 in.
Musée du Louvre, Paris
suicide in the presence of both her husband Collatinus and Brutus, who withdrew the knife from the fatal wound and swore on Lucretia's blood to avenge her death and destroy the corrupt monarchy. Tarquin was exiled, and the first Roman Republic was established in 508 BC, with Brutus and Collatinus elected as co-consuls. As the picture's title tells us, Brutus' two sons, Titus and Tiberius, were drawn into a royalist conspiracy to return Tarquin, and their father condemned them to death. This was another picture about Roman patriotism, and David's

first idea had been to show Brutus dispassionately witnessing the execution of his two sons (75), but he then decided to shift the scene from the public to the private and show Brutus in his own home. So the Brutus, like the Horatii, became a painting about the conflict between duty to the nation and the love of the family, and also about how men and women respond differently to such a dilemma. Brutus' extreme patriotism had long been a recommended subject for painters, and he provided a very potent symbol of unflinching devotion to the state. Yet when looking at David's painting today, we should be careful of using a knowledge of the future course of the Revolution to colour our view of it. Although Brutus was instrumental in ridding Rome of the last of the kings, the Tarquins, and Louis XVI was sent to the guillotine in 1793, such a course of events was not envisaged by even the most ardent revolutionary in 1789. The removal of Louis came only as a last resort after all efforts at a constitutional monarchy, as in Britain, had failed. It should also be remembered that David had actually thought about painting the subject as early as 1786. But although the Brutus was not a call for the abolition of the monarchy, this does not mean that it was entirely without a political dimension. David would have been fully aware of the capacity of the Brutus story to provoke controversy. In the crisis years of 1788–9 patriotism and the national good became even more topical, and any painting on those subjects was likely to attract attention. In fact some attempt was made by the Direction des Bâtiments du Roi to prevent the painting being shown at the Salon, but when news of this leaked out, the popular outcry made such an action impossible. In all
the inconsolable women are brightly illuminated and one could be forgiven for thinking that they are the picture’s main subject (81). The centre of the picture is taken up by a still life of a sewing basket, an emblem of domesticity, which is rendered in stark clarity. As well as using his past Roman sketchbooks for details, David also produced drawings for antique style furniture which were then made by the famous cabinet-maker Jacob for him to copy from and incorporate into the picture. He also asked Wicar in Rome for help with the hairstyle of the fainting daughter and posted a drawing of her to him requesting that he fill in the correct details from a sculpture of the Bacchantes. In the ancient world the Bacchantes were roused into ecstatic frenzy by the god Bacchus and their poses were often used in Roman art to suggest hysterical and unrestrained grief. David must have been thinking about such figures when planning the pose of the daughter who collapses in sorrow.

David invites the spectator to judge Brutus. Is he the ultimate patriot who does not shrink from sacrificing his own sons, or is he an unfeeling monster who tears his family apart? Plutarch wrote that Brutus’ action was ‘open alike to the highest commendation or the strongest censure’, and that his character was ‘at one and the same time that of a god and that of a beast’. Even more so than in the Horatii, the picture is fragmented and broken up by the reactions of the figures to the arrival of the bodies. Pierre is supposed to have said to David: ‘You have in your Horatii given us three personages in the same plane, something never seen before! Here you have put your principal actor in shadow ... but where have you seen that a composition can be made without using the pyramidal line?’

In reality Pierre could never have seen the finished work as it was not completed until late August, and he had died on 15 May – it is possible that he saw the sketch or examined the work in progress. Critics seeing the work remarked upon its novelty and used such adjectives as ‘noble’, ‘severe’ and ‘virile’ to describe it, and almost all of them considered David once David’s picture acquired a topicality that he could not have foreseen and its dreadful subject and memorable image entered the public’s consciousness. At the end of a performance of Voltaire’s play Brutus at the National Theatre on 19 November 1790, to the thunderous applause of the audience, the actors and actresses grouped themselves into a living representation of David’s famous picture.

Politics had a more direct effect on another of David’s works which should have been shown in 1789, the Portrait of Antoine-Laurent and Marie-Anne Lavoisier (82), painted in the previous year. Lavoisier was an eminent experimental physicist and chemist, a very wealthy tax farmer (an investor in a company hired by the government to collect duties on commodities – something for which he was later guillotined) and a member of the liberal intellectual élite that advocated moderate reform. He was also a Freemason which was possibly his point of contact with David. As a scientist he was also Commissioner for Gunpowder and had nearly been lynched on 6 August in a riot at the Paris arsenal when it was thought that gunpowder stocks were being removed from the city. With the supply of arms and munitions such a sensitive concern at the time, it was thought imprudent to allow a portrait of the commissioner to be shown and so it was suppressed. The portrait is strongly reminiscent of The Loves of Paris and Helen (see 74), the main difference being that while Lavoisier’s wife, Marie-Anne, engages the viewer, Helen averts her gaze. Madame Lavoisier leans like an inspirational muse against her husband’s shoulder, almost like a decorative addition, though this was far from the role she actually occupied. In reality she was an indispensable assistant who studied drawing with David in order to illustrate and record her husband’s experiments and learned English so that she could translate the work of British scientists. Her drawing portfolio rests on the chair and she probably also gave David drawings of the experimental apparatus on the right. These expensive items, custom-made for Lavoisier, are
and to locate the couple in their working environment. In the centre of the table is a gasometer, and to the right a simple barometer and a pneumatic trough, while at Lavoisier's feet is a glass flask with a stopcock. For this very grand full-length work David was paid the considerable sum of 7,000 livres—more than he had received from the king for the Horatii.

The precise observation present in the portrait is worthy of Lavoisier's own meticulous recording of scientific data, and although painted as a commercial transaction, it appears almost like the tribute of one enlightened and cultivated individual to a couple of equal rank and intelligence.

On 26 August 1789, shortly before the Brutus reached the walls of the Salon, the National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (83) which had as its first principle: 'Men are born and remain free and equal in rights'. For some little time David had been agitating against the Academy, and the Revolution gave him the opportunity to mount a sustained attack against it. Years of discontent and brooding malice against the Academy meant that David felt a disgust for its officers and their undemocratic privileges, and for its blinkered and repetitive teaching methods. He was joined in his attacks by a few dissatisfied fellow Academicians and by rebellious students, and his apartments in the Louvre became the regular meeting place for the dissidents. David first demanded that his lamented pupil Drouais should be made a posthumous Academician, so that his works could be shown as a memorial at the next Salon. This was refused and the Academy's officers presented such stubborn opposition that David and his colleagues had to call on the sympathetic politicians of the Paris Commune, the National Assembly and later the radical Jacobin Club, a political pressure group so called because they held their meetings in the former monastery of the Dominicans of St James (Jacobus in Latin), for leverage. But David gradually moved from pushing for reform to demanding the complete abolition of the Academy, and he clearly saw himself as the head of a new artistic order.
stance against privilege irrevocably alienated him from this royal favourite. As director of the Academy and the king's First Painter, his former master Vien also had to endure many attacks, mostly directed at his position rather than at his person, and though estranged for a while, they were later reconciled. Perhaps most importantly, these struggles with the Academy had a longer lasting significance and were David's political training ground, providing a platform for his entry into politics proper.

From 1789 to 1791 David, although supportive of the Revolution, played no active part in it and was concerned only with artistic matters. In December 1789 he was approached by two former fellow students in Rome, the architect Mathurin Crucy (1749–1826) and the sculptor Jacques Lamarie, to create an allegory commemorating the role played by the city of Nantes in the events leading up to the Revolution. Since allegory was unfamiliar territory for David, he had some reservations about how such a subject might be approached but he agreed to go to Nantes in March 1790 and stayed a month. There he was warmly welcomed and feted as France's leading painter and at one reception drew the head of Brutus to give his hosts an idea of his recent Salon success (84). But the Nantes authorities never gave him a formal commission and the project was abandoned with just a few figure drawings completed (85). But although nothing came of the Nantes allegory, it made David aware of the opportunities that the Revolution gave to history painters and he wrote: 'I am making it my duty to answer the noble invitations of patriotism and of glory that will consecrate the history of the most felicitous and most astonishing Revolution.'
On 27 September 1790 a new democratic art society was founded, the Commune des Arts, with 300 members and David as its leader. Perhaps in an effort to placate him, in July 1792 the Academy appointed David an associate professor, but when in April 1793 he was called to exercise his duties of posing the model in the life class, David wrote a terse note which read: ‘I was formerly of the Academy.’ Finally, in his role as deputy of the National Convention (the successor to the Assembly), he delivered a speech to his fellow deputies on 8 August 1793 which signalled the end of the Academy and his total victory. This speech contained a multitude of personal details and observations and was the summation of over twenty years of dissatisfaction with the Academy. It ended: ‘In the name of humanity, in the name of justice for those who love art, and, above all, in the name of your love for youth, let us destroy, let us annihilate those sinister Academies. They must not be allowed to exist in the reign of liberty.’ On 12 August the Convention decreed that all Academies should be suppressed, their buildings sealed and their property and equipment sequestered. David was appointed to the committee charged with overseeing this operation. But although he was a very active figure in denouncing the iniquities of the Academy, his actions alone did not achieve its closure. Since 1791 the Convention had required the wholesale reform of all learned academies as well as guilds and corporations of craftsmen, and this process was concluded by the August 1793 decree that rid the nation of these exclusive and privileged bodies. Ironically, though, the Academy came to be replaced in 1795 by an even more elite body, the Institute, and David had no qualms about being a founding member.

Personal vengeance and dissatisfaction were the prime motives for his attacks on the Academy; a disinterested concern for the training of young students and the professional development of colleagues were only marginal issues. Some alleged that David was frustrated by his lack of promotion within the official system and that he wanted to be an artistic dictator. His direct adversary in the battles over the Academy, its secretary Antoine Renou, gave a shrewd, if biased, opinion: ‘Apart from his talent Monsieur David is a negligible man. Moreover he is full of pride and contempt for his colleagues; he wants to destroy the Academy by force of slander because the King has not made him Director of the French Academy in Rome, a position he is quite incapable of filling, because it is almost a diplomatic post ... Such a post could not go to a man who, outside the limits of his talent, does not know how to comport himself and cannot speak properly.’

Inevitably David’s activities against the Academy led to the sacrifice of personal friendships. A permanent rupture took place between David and Madame Vigée-Lebrun because his
At the time that he was starting work on the Nantes painting, David undertook a project for an even more important and prestigious commemoration of a revolutionary event – The Oath of the Tennis Court. The first anniversary of this event had recently been celebrated and great significance was already attached to it as the real start of the Revolution. The painting was proposed by the Paris Jacobin Club, of which David was a member from September 1790, and it was to be paid for by 3,000 subscriptions of twenty-four livres, with every subscriber receiving a print of the finished work. But this method proved unsuccessful and the government stepped in to guarantee the project. David considered this to be a good business venture as well as a piece of committed revolutionary painting, particularly because the political upheaval meant that work for the king had dried up.

David planned an epic depiction of the event, with the 600 deputies gathered together experiencing the emotion, drama and exhilaration of their momentous decision to remain in session until France was given a constitution. The painting was to be immense, about 7 x 10 m (23 x 33 ft), a size in keeping with the importance of an event that gave birth to a new France, and it was to be prominently displayed in the meeting room of the Assembly. David showed a highly finished drawing of The Oath of the Tennis Court at the 1791 Salon, where it was actually one of the few depictions of the Revolution. Perhaps in order to emphasize the unified actions of the deputies as a collective body, the Salon Livret stated: ‘The author has not intended to show a true likeness of the members of the Assembly.’ But David had prepared lists of the most prominent foreground figures and many of them are recognizable. The central figure of the work is the Assembly President Jean-Sylvestre Bailly, who turns to address the spectator and gazes out impassively. This was an obvious piece of artistic licence because Bailly, as one might expect, actually faced his fellow deputies; he is turned around as a direct appeal to the spectator. Just below him appear a group of three ecclesiastics who joined the members of the Third Estate and welcomed the Revolution. On the left, in his Carthusian monastic habit, is Dom Gerle (who was not actually present), the Abbé Grégoire and Rabaut Saint-Etienne. They represent the regular clergy, the secular clergy and the Protestant church respectively. Their fraternal embrace symbolizes the creation of a new order, where division and factionalism are a thing of the past. All around, the massed ranks of the deputies raise their arms to swear the oath and also raise their hats into the air. To the right of Bailly, Maximilien Robespierre places both hands on his chest to signify his unbridled devotion. The very opposite to this committed action is seen in the right corner where Martin Dauch, the one deputy who refused to take the oath, sits with his head lowered and his arms folded obstinately across his chest. At the extreme left, the elderly Maupertit de la Mayenne is carried in from his sickbed to join the momentous event and to his right the priests Thiebault and Rewbell repeat the fraternal embrace of the ecclesiastics. On the window ledges and at the entrance on the left a variety of ordinary people hang onto vantage points and even climb up ladders eager to see what is happening and to witness this great event. Parents bring their children to see history taking place: on the left a mother supports her young daughter, while on the right the group in the first window is said to include David’s two sons, Charles and Eugène. Beyond them, on the tiny balcony, is a group that includes a Royal Guard raising his sword, and a journalist, perhaps Jean-Paul Marat, writing his report. Although it was actually a hot summer’s day, a storm is depicted to heighten the drama; a powerful wind blows the curtain, turns an umbrella inside out and causes onlookers to hold onto their hats. The violence of the weather is suggestive of an act of cleansing from which the land emerges renewed and invigorated. While some aristocratic critics saw this detail as indicative of a desire to destroy the royal family, David said that it represented the destruction of despotism. His Freemasonry may again have played some part in the
visualization of the event, and indeed some of the deputies, including Bailly, were Masons. Masonic lodges, meeting places combining business and philanthropic undertakings, helped spread the liberal ideas that fuelled the Revolution and the symbols of Freemasonry, especially the all-seeing eye (symbolizing vigilance) and the square or level (symbolizing equality) became part of revolutionary imagery.

David’s drawing was warmly greeted by the popular press and by his friend André Chénier who dedicated an ode entitled ‘The Tennis Court’ to him. Chénier called David ‘the King of the learned brush’, and thought that the artist had done a great service to the Revolution by commemorating the creation of the nation’s newly won liberty. Royalist critics, on the other hand, strongly objected to the work and accused David of treason.

Such an ambitious project as The Oath of the Tennis Court required an enormous amount of preliminary work and David filled two sketchbooks and many individual sheets with details and figure studies. He went to Versailles and drew the empty tennis court (87), and experimented with the poses of the deputies (88). As he hadn’t witnessed the oath, he wrote little notes on his sketches to remind himself of how characters should appear, and which small but telling details to include: ‘do not forget to show the deputies moved to tears and holding their hands to their eyes’, ‘remember to show the dust that was raised by the movement of the action’ and ‘remember the bell’ (used not very successfully by Bailly to call the noisy and animated deputies to order). David saw the oath as a modern and greatly expanded version of the Horatii and the deputies became the equivalents of the heroes of antiquity.
After showing the drawing, David moved on to the full-size canvas, and for this massive undertaking he was allocated a large studio in the nave of the deconsecrated church of the Feuillants, conveniently next door to the Tuileries Palace where the National Assembly met. On 4 October 1791 the following notice was published in the newspaper *Le Moniteur Universel*:

‘Monsieur David requests the deputies who were present at Versailles for the Oath of the Tennis Court, and whose likenesses he has not been able to paint, to send him their engraved portraits; unless of course, they are able to make the journey to Paris during the time when he will be working on

The painting of *The Oath of the Tennis Court* was never completed and today only an unfinished fragment remains with the clergy and other figures outlined and the heads of four deputies finished (90). From the left these are Edmond-Louis-Alexis Dubois-Crance, Père Gérard, the Comte de Mirabeau and Antoine Pierre Barnave. The painting had to be abandoned in the winter of 1791-2 because events had overtaken it. By then David’s rather naïve vision of the Revolution which stressed fraternity and national unity was out of date. Some of those swearing the oath were now discredited and later went to the guillotine – Bailly had to resign as the Mayor of Paris in July 1791 after using the army to disperse a crowd and was guillotined in November 1793; Mirabeau had died in April 1791 just before his dealings with the king to establish a constitutional monarchy with himself as prime minister were discovered; Barnave was in the midst of converting to support the monarchy and was imprisoned in August 1792 and executed ten days before Bailly. Moreover, all the deputies that David had planned to commemorate were part of an elite middle class and by 1792 the Revolution had moved on to embrace ‘the people’ – those whom David confined to the position of excluded spectators in his version of the event. To continue might have been dangerous and led to awkward questions about David’s intentions and motivations, and so he stopped work.
vicissitudes of both the Revolution and of his own career and reputation. He kept the huge canvas in the Feuillants studio where it was damaged on 10 August 1792 when the Royal Swiss Guards took refuge there and were slaughtered by the revolutionary National Guard – six bayonet holes have been found in it. David planned to complete the work around 1799-1800, but could not attract sufficient financial support from the government. It was rolled up and deposited in the Louvre in 1803. David retrieved it in 1819 and put it into the studio of Antoine-Jean Gros (1771-1835) for safe keeping. Just before the posthumous sale of the contents of David's studio in 1826 it was cut down to its present size, but still remained unsold. It was bought by the French state in 1836 when it was suggested that the four painted heads should be cut out. Finally, the canvas was placed in the Château of Versailles in 1921.

To David and many people in France it must have appeared that the excitement of real life was surpassing all the deeds of the heroic past. History was being made and they were part of it. People could see themselves as the equals of the noble and patriotic Romans, and antiquity, along with Freemasonry, provided the example for much revolutionary rhetoric and symbolism. As early as 7 September 1789, a delegation of twenty-one women artists and artists' wives, including Madame David, went to Versailles and handed the president of the Assembly a casket containing their jewels which they were donating for the benefit of the nation. This was a conscious re-enactment of a famous incident from Roman history when the noble ladies offered up their jewellery in a sacrifice to Apollo.

The Revolution brought David's paintings many new admirers. When the 1791 Salon was declared open to all artists, David decided not only to show the Oath of the Tennis Court drawing, but also to re-exhibit the Horatii, Socrates and Brutus. In the moral and patriotic climate of the Revolution, their direct and heroic messages seemed even more compelling and topical.
than before and it was even said that 'they inflamed more souls for liberty than the best books'. David was rapidly becoming a public figure of some influence and no little ambition, but he was still some way away from being a political activist and continued to paint portraits of the cultivated upper classes and aristocracy. In 1790, a year of social calm, he had painted the Marquise d'Orvilliers (91) and the Countess de Sorcy (92). These two women were the Rillette sisters, Robertine and Anne-Marie-Louise, who had both married rich and titled husbands, and David shows them dignified and at ease, wearing the simple fashions of the day.

In 1791 the pressures of the Revolution began to tell. David painted a Self-Portrait in that year (93), looking slightly dishevelled and with a piercing gaze, very different from the normally relaxed pose of his sitters and perhaps an indication of the internal conflicts that eventually led him to become a fully committed Republican. Around this time he also painted Madame Adélaïde Pastoret (94), who, although of the upper class, is shown as a wife and mother without display of finery. The politics of the day called for homely virtues to be emphasized and any display of rank or status would have been considered suspect. Like so many of David's paintings of the Revolution, this work was not finished, as we can see from the incomplete quickly brushed shimmering background (frotté) and the absence of a sewing needle in Madame's hand. In all probability there was a split between the Pastorets and David over the latter's increasingly extreme politics, which meant that the portrait was left in its present state.

In the spring of 1792 David received a most unexpected commission. This was to paint the king in the act of showing the constitution to his heir, the Dauphin. David was certainly no royalist and the fact that he actually started work on the
picture meant that he thought it could be a positive contribution to the course of the moderate Revolution and also reminds us of the intrigues and complexities of the time. As well as studies for *Louis XVI Showing the Constitution to his Son, the Dauphin* (95), David also made drawings for an *Allegory of the French People Offering the Crown and Sceptre to the King* (96). The implication of the image was that power could be withdrawn if the king did not respect the constitution. But this work, too, was never completed, this time because of Louis's refusal to co-operate with the constitution which led to the creation of a Republic. Later, when the political climate turned against David, he vehemently denied that he had ever been involved with such a project and declared, 'the painter of Brutus was not made to paint kings'. The plans of many other artists of the time suffered the same fate as David's projects simply because the course of the Revolution was so rapid and so convoluted that paintings were out of date before they could be completed.

David's decisive intervention in politics came in September 1792 when he was elected as deputy for Paris at the National Convention. In April of that year he had helped to arrange a successful revolutionary festival in favour of the soldiers of Châteauvieux who had mutinied against their officers in 1789, been condemned as galley slaves, but who were now rescued and honoured as heroes of the Revolution. This show of commitment perhaps made David an acceptable political candidate, although it began a final and irrevocable split with André Chénier who thought the soldiers were rebellious murderers and public enemies. David probably first sought elected office as a way of sharpening his attack on the Academy, but once a member of the Convention, he took a radical stance on practically all matters and aligned himself very closely with the Mountain group whose members included Maximilien Robespierre, Jean-Paul Marat and Georges Jacques Danton. Of these the most prominent was Robespierre (97), a lawyer from Arras in northern France who was serious, possessed great...
intellectual clarity and whose fervour for scrupulous democracy and refusal to compromise with the royal court earned him the nickname of 'The Incorruptible'. Though ten years younger than David he was a figure with whom the artist increasingly identified as the course of the Revolution turned towards violent repression. Following his election to the Convention David became extremely active in politics. He was President of the Convention for a month, Nivose Year II (January–February 1794), served a term as President of the Jacobin Club, and was a member of the Committee of General Security and the Committee of Public Instruction. On the floor of the Convention David made many impassioned speeches, although the increasing size of his mouth tumour made him very difficult to be understood, so much so that many people were forced to read them later when they were printed in Le Moniteur, the official journal of record. An unsympathetic account of 1797 described David thus:

Nature, or rather disease has incapacitated David from being an orator. A frightful tumified cheek has not only distorted his features to a great degree, but, at the same time, disqualified the organs of speech from uttering ten words in the same tone of voice; so that a grave subject, in his mouth, notwithstanding the sensibility of the man, loses its dignity: at best he is only able to give a silent vote.

Although his other duties meant that he could not attend all of the sessions on the Committee of General Security (he attended 134 out of 315), some of David's work was mundane bureaucracy, but he also signed many arrest warrants with the consequence that people had their property confiscated, were imprisoned or even sent to the guillotine. David's avid desire to rid the Republic of its actual or perceived enemies meant that former patrons such as the Marshal de Noailles and his wife and the Count de Sorcy were the subjects of his attention. But although the Noailles were later executed, it seems far-fetched to think that David had been nursing a grievance ever since the 1783 Christ on the Cross commission (see 52): it is more probable that their arrest and condemnation were part of the relentless and severe revolutionary legal process rather than the result of his vindictiveness. Doubtless David and his former protector, the Marquis de Bievre, would also have found themselves on opposite sides of the political divide, had not the marquis died at the age of forty-two in 1789.

David the politician was a highly complex and volatile mixture of personal grudges, private insecurities, artistic ambition and democratic righteousness. He was said to be in a state of near delirium as he tackled his duties with the vigorous intensity of a zealous convert. The American artist John Trumbull recorded that he was 'a naturally kind and warm hearted man, but ardent, sometimes even violent in his feelings, an enthusiastic admirer of the Roman republic', and, 'This gave to his public life the imprint of a ferocious monster while, as a private individual, his primitive character of kindliness resumed its sway.' As with many people in times of crisis, the Revolution seems to have brought out the best and the worst in him. On one hand he was generous, anxious to help the unfortunate, and capable of tolerance and leniency. Yet he could also be a fanatic, an inflexible patriot and able to ignore pleas for help. Some stories, perhaps apocryphal, tell of his rabid and extreme anti-monarchical sentiments. He is reported to have drawn a sketch of the king at the guillotine, his head severed, with the inscription, 'The head of the tyrant will soon fall like this', and once at dinner he said he hoped that Queen Marie Antoinette would either be strangled or cut to pieces by the mob. Then, in June 1794, the horse and battle painter Carle Vernet (1758–1836) approached him to intervene on behalf of his sister Emilie Chalgrin who had been arrested for possessing items stolen from the royal château of La Muette, and which now belonged to the Republic. David categorically refused to act, though it is possible that the affair was too far advanced for anything to be done, and Madame Chalgrin went to the guillotine. Thereafter Vernet blamed David and held him responsible for his sister's death. David was, however, particularly sympathetic towards
his fellow artist Fragonard who was experiencing hard times because artistic taste had moved away from the charming, decorative and delicate Rococo to weightier and more noble subjects – a change that David had been instrumental in effecting. David remembered Fragonard’s kindness over the 1773 Guimard commission and, although their art was by now poles apart, David still held the older artist in high regard. In October 1792 he intervened with the Minister of the Interior, Roland, to get Fragonard lodgings in the Louvre, and a year later helped him become one of the first curators of the newly established Musée du Louvre.

On 21 September 1792 the Convention (the new republican assembly) abolished the monarchy, and from November debates took place concerning the king’s fate. Although no court in the land had legal jurisdiction over him, from 11 December Louis XVI was put on trial as a tyrant and a traitor. In fact Louis’s rule in France was by no means the most oppressive in Europe and he was actually a sensitive, kindly, though ineffectual man. His crimes, if crimes they were, amounted to indecision, evasion and the refusal to become a constitutional monarch. He was, however, considered a dangerous and unreliable double-dealer because of his ill-judged attempt to flee the country with the royal family – the so-called ‘Flight to Varennes’ of 20–25 June 1791 – to seek foreign support and rally exiled royalists. On 16 January 1793 the deputies of the Convention unanimously found the king guilty and immediately turned to the sentence. Each deputy had to make a statement before his peers concerning his decision and this voting occupied twenty-four hours from the evening of 16 January. The hardline Mountain group, which included David, insisted on the death penalty, while more moderate alliances, such as the Girondins, favoured imprisonment or exile. Finally, by a majority of 387 to 334, the Convention decreed that the king should be executed. A subsequent motion asking for a reprieve was denied. Louis was

of the formal verdict. By now the official method of execution was beheading by the guillotine, a new invention to give all of the condemned, no matter what their status, an equally swift death. Though Dr Guillotin had suggested a machine to ‘separate the head from the body in less time than it takes to wink’, it was actually constructed by a piano maker and engineer called Tobias Schmidt and it was much to the shame and embarrassment of the well intentioned doctor that his name became forever associated with this feared instrument of death (98). For the king’s execution the guillotine was set up in the Place de la Révolution (formerly the Place Louis XV and today the Place de la Concorde) and Louis was accompanied to the scaffold by his priest and confessor the Irish-born Abbé Henry Edgeworth. As the king mounted the steps (99) the Abbé delivered his famous phrase: ‘Son of Saint Louis ascend into heaven’ and Louis XVI approached his death with uncharacteristic fortitude and nobility. He addressed the crowd and forgave his executioners, but a drum roll cut short his speech. At the fall of the blade he was heard to scream, his fat neck had prevented decapitation at a single stroke. One of the young guards picked up the severed head and showed it to the crowd (100), while some onlookers rushed forward to dip handkerchiefs or pieces
89
Charles
Benazech
Louis XVI at
the Foot of
the Scaffold
1793/4
Oil on canvas
42 x 36 cm
16 1/2 x 22 in
Musée
National du
Château de
Versailles

100
The Death of
Louis XVI, 21
January 1793
Coloured
effect print
18.1 x 43.2 cm
14 1/4 x 17 1/4 in
Musée
Carnavalet,
Paris

101
James Gillray
The Blood of
the Murdered,
Crying for
Vengeance
1793
Etching
New College
Oxford
University
The crowned heads of Europe were plunged into shock, horror and fright when news arrived of Louis's bloody end, and even liberal supporters of the Revolution outside France changed their opinions and felt that anarchy and violence had replaced the ideals of freedom and equality (101). As the king had always proclaimed that he was the state and ruled by divine right, it was as if France had turned on and executed herself. For fear of an export of radicalism from France, both England and Spain introduced severely repressive measures.

In Paris the guillotine soon became a familiar sight, although many of the crowd were disappointed because everything was over so soon when compared to the spectacle of former methods of public execution. Local residents and shopkeepers disliked the unpleasant smell and the packs of dogs drinking from the pools of spilt blood, and so the guillotine was periodically moved around the city. The black humour of guillotine jokes also surfaced, and ladies of fashion could even wear earrings in the shape of the 'philanthropic decapitating machine' from which the decapitated heads of the executed hung down.

The execution of the king had great repercussions for David's private life. His wife was appalled at her husband for having voted in favour of the death penalty and instituted divorce proceedings, the final decree being granted in March 1794. Tensions within the marriage had been present for some time and although Madame David had supported the Revolution in its early stages, she neither shared nor approved of her husband's extremist stance. As early as August 1790 David had authorized his wife to enter a convent, a contemporary euphemism for a separation. Without his wife's money David's finances were very limited and the blow of these reduced circumstances may have given greater impetus to his already intense behaviour and extremism.

By this time David had pledged his brush to the republican cause and he came to commemorate three martyrs of the Revolution in a group of extraordinary pictures. A prelude to the king's execution gave him his first subject. On the eve of the execution a deputy of the Convention, Louis Michel Le Pelletier de Saint-Fargeau, had been assassinated by one of the king's former bodyguards named Paris while at dinner. Le Pelletier was a former aristocrat and something of a political opportunist and had voted for the death of the king. After his death he was hailed as a martyr of liberty and given an impressive state funeral. His body was displayed in the Place Vendôme, a laurel crown placed on his head and his torso uncovered so that the fatal wound could be seen (102). Le Pelletier's torn and bloodstained clothes and the sword used by Paris were also included in the spectacle. David originally proposed a marble monument, but then decided to produce a painting. In a speech to the Convention on 29 March 1792 he explained his intentions:

the true patriot must seize any opportunity of enlightening his fellow citizens and must constantly show them the sublime face of heroism and virtue ... I shall have done my duty if one day I cause an old father surrounded by his large family to say: 'Children come and see the first of your representatives to die for your freedom. See how peaceful his face is — when you die for your country, you
die with a clear conscience. Do you see the sword hanging over his head by just a hair? Well, children, that shows how much courage Michel Le Pelletier and his noble companions needed to rout the evil tyrant who had oppressed us for so long. For, had they set a foot wrong, the hair would have broken and they would all have been killed. Do you see that deep wound? You are crying, children, and turning your heads away! Just look at the crown; it is the crown of immortality. The nation can confer it on any of its children: be worthy of it.'

The painting was finished in time for the 1793 Salon which opened on 10 August. Le Pelletier appeared like a nobly dead ancient warrior, not unlike Hector in *Andromache Mourning Hector* (see 43), and for a nation still experiencing the guilt of having executed their king, here was a republican saint and martyr to make amends for their sins. The assassin’s sword, with its pommel shaped like the Gallic Cock and decorated with the royal fleur-de-lys, is hung by a single strand of hair above Le Pelletier’s gaping wound, inspired by the proverbial ancient tale of the sword of Damocles which illustrated the insecurity of power and position. This sword pierces a piece of paper on which is written ‘I vote the death of the tyrant’, and as a tribute at the bottom right of the picture David placed the inscription ‘David to Le Pelletier. 20 January 1793’. The picture combined the ideas of heroic sacrifice and the precarious realities of the revolutionary process – the deputies who voted for the king’s death knew that they endangered their own lives from the vengeance of royalists and here was an example of how devotion to duty exacted the ultimate cost. David, in his first fragmentary autobiography, written in April 1793, said that the work showed Le Pelletier expiring after his dying words: ‘I am content to spill blood for my country; I hope it will be a lesson to her enemies.’ Unfortunately this powerful painting has not survived. Le Pelletier’s daughter Suzanne grew up
to be an ardent royalist, bought the picture from David's heirs for the massive sum of 100,000 francs and had it burnt shortly before her death. Such was her determination to rid the world of this image that she also gathered copies of the engraving by Pierre-Alexandre Tardieu (b.1756) and destroyed them as well as the original plate. Our best reminders of the work are a torn engraving (103) and a drawing by David's pupil Anatole Devosge (1770–1850; 104). Although removing the visual evidence of David's memorial to her father, Suzanne had her portrait painted by David in 1804 to commemorate her engagement to her second husband (105). This work was acquired by the J Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles in 1997.

Just over three and a half months after presenting the Le Pelletier painting, David was called upon to depict another assassinated deputy of the Convention, the radical journalist Jean-Paul Marat (106). Formerly a physician, Marat had practised in Harley Street in London and on returning to France attended the guards of the king's brother, the Count d'Artois. Before the Revolution Marat had sought recognition of his scientific credentials but his ambitions had continually been thwarted by the officers of the Royal Academy of Science who denied him admission to their elite body. Such rebuffs made him bitter and self-righteous. Like David he attacked and condemned privilege, and in the early days of the Revolution he published and edited a newspaper called The Friend of the
from the hostile criticisms of moderate Girondin deputies at the Convention. David also recounted that: ‘On the eve of Marat’s death the Jacobin Society sent us, Maure [a fellow deputy at the Convention] and me, to hear how he was. I was struck by the circumstances in which I found him. He had a wooden block beside him with ink and paper upon it, and his hand, stretched out of the bath, was writing down his latest thoughts on the salvation of the People ... I thought it would be appropriate to show him in the attitude in which I saw him that day, writing for the greater good of the People.’

David also made plans for an elaborate funeral, but these had to be cancelled because the corpse had begun to decompose rapidly in the summer heat. Instead it was briefly exhibited, in the manner of Le Pelletier, draped with a damp cloth and the wound exposed, and flanked by the bathtub and his bloody shirt at the deconsecrated Cordeliers church between 14 and 16 July. The odour of putrefaction was disguised by aromatics and vinegar. David had intended for a very moving spectacle to be created by placing the body upright as if at work, but this proved impossible because of the effects of decomposition and rigor mortis on the body. Neither Marat’s eyes nor mouth could be closed and the lolling tongue had to be cut out. Both the head and torso had become so green that white make-up had to be applied. The Marquis de Créqui, admittedly an unsympathetic witness, described a grisly scene and claimed that the right arm had so stiffened that it was removed and replaced with another from the local morgue that then had Marat’s quill pen placed in it. One mourner was horrified and alarmed to find that it came away as he rushed to kiss the hand of ‘The Friend of the People’.

David probably drew Marat while the body was on display and this drawing, with its network of crosshatching in the manner of an engraving, isolates the head and produces a macabre yet powerful portrait of the deceased. As with the bi...
People. Within its pages the deeply suspicious Marat detected and denounced royalist plots and called for even more radical reforms than those already carried out. Marat was often a fierce government critic; his entry into official politics in 1792 was arranged as a method of enlisting his support, and that of the volatile ranks of the sans-culottes that formed his power base. The sans-culottes (literally ‘without knee-breeches’) were radical and committed small property owners and artisans who took part in many of the most extreme acts. Indeed so popular and influential was Marat that he became known as ‘The Friend of the People’. France was moving towards the bloody period of the Reign of Terror that was instigated by Jacobin activists, notably Robespierre, who called for the preservation of the Revolution and the creation of a ‘Republic of Virtue’. The atmosphere of war, treachery and internal conflict required the ruthless purging of all hostile elements (even including fellow Convention members) and the ends were seen to justify the extreme means. Marat was also one of the leading figures in these events, saying that ‘Liberty must be established by violence’, and his strident and vigorous attacks also included denunciations of speculators and hoarders for causing high food prices. In April 1793 he was arrested after calling for the forcible removal of the moderate Girondins from their position of power in the Convention. He was acquitted by the Revolutionary Tribunal and two months later the Girondins were indeed arrested and control of the Convention passed to the radical Mountain group of which he was a member.

Marat was assassinated on 13 July 1793 by the 24-year-old Charlotte Corday from Normandy (107), who decided that he was a mad and dangerous fanatic who had diverted the Revolution on to a murderous course. Travelling from Caen to Paris, she saw his removal as both a patriotic duty and a quasi-religious act. Considering herself a modern Judith (slayer of the Assyrian general Holofernes), she wrote: ‘I expected to sacrifice him on the summit of the Mountain of the fourth anniversary of the Revolution so that the significance of her deed would be immediately recognized. Finding out that Marat was too ill to attend the Convention and thus forced to change her plan, she tried to gain access to his home in the rue des Cordeliers, but was at first turned away by his common-law wife, Simone Evrard. Very astutely Charlotte Corday then wrote him a note with news of counter-revolutionary activity in Caen, just the thing to excite his curiosity. All of this plotting was done with an extraordinary degree of calm calculation and sense of purpose – she even had her hair done in the afternoon before returning to Marat’s apartment. Again refused entry, she slipped inside when Simone Evrard’s attention was distracted by a newspaper seller. Marat heard the raised voices and called out for her to be admitted. She found him working in his bath, where he was obliged to soak to gain relief from a painfully irritating skin disease, with a vinegar soaked turban wrapped around his head. He asked for more information about the traitors whom she had written about in her letter and took down their names, saying that ‘they would all soon be guillotined in Paris’. At that point she took out a newly purchased five-inch butcher’s knife from her dress and plunged it through his right side next to the collarbone, severing the aorta and piercing the heart. Marat cried out for Simone Evrard and died in a matter of minutes. Her mission accomplished, Charlotte Corday then made no attempt to escape, knowing that her punishment would be death.

The following day, at the Convention, the deputy Guirault, after demanding a torture worse than death for Charlotte Corday, spoke out, saying: ‘A patricidal hand has robbed us of the most courageous defender of the people. His only crime was that he always sacrificed himself for the sake of freedom. Our eyes are still seeking him among us ... Where are you, David? You have transmitted to posterity the picture of Le Pelletier dying for the nation, and here is another painting for you to do’ - ‘And I shall do it’, the artist replied. David knew Marat personally (both were Freemasons) and had previously defended him.
painting there is no suggestion of the violent act that had taken place, and in the four corners David wrote À MARAT/ L'AMI/ DU PEUPLE./ DAVID (To Marat, the Friend of the People, David), retaining this tribute in the final canvas. In the following year this image became widely available thanks to a very faithful engraving by Jacques-Louis Copia (1764-99).

After the body had been displayed, Marat's funeral took place by torchlight on the evening of 16 July. A cortège processed around Paris for six hours, and then arrived back at the Cordeliers. The main oration ran: 'O heart of Jesus! O heart of Marat! ... Like Jesus Marat loved the people ardently ... Like Jesus, he led a poor and frugal life.' His body was then interred in the garden of the Cordeliers under, as David said, 'the trees where he used to take pleasure from instructing

porphyry urn that was suspended from the ceiling of the Cordeliers. Though much was made of Marat's poverty in life, in death his funeral cost the huge sum of 5,000 francs, the embalming of the body 7,500 francs, and his tomb, by the sculptor Jacques-François Martin, 2,400 francs.

The following day Charlotte Corday was sent to the guillotine; all through her ordeal she retained the composure that she had so steadfastly exhibited during her arrest and trial, even sitting for her portrait in prison (109). It was a bitter irony that even without her intervention, Marat would probably have died anyway, so serious was his illness, and his murder, calculated to save France from bloodthirsty anarchy, only created a popular martyr, assured the political victory of the Mountain faction and brought forth even more death and violence. On 5 September 1793 the chilling declaration was made that 'Terror is the order of the day', and on 17 September the 'Law of Suspects' was passed which gave the Committee of Public Safety sweeping powers of arrest and punishment against any person suspected of counter-revolutionary activity. If not demonstrably supportive of the Revolution, people came under suspicion and an even more intense period of violent repression began that did not end until July 1794.

David completed the Marat on 14 October 1793 and immediately asked permission to loan the work and the Le Pelletier to the Section of the Museum for a ceremonial procession in honour of the two martyrs. Significantly this was to take place two days later, the same day as the execution of Queen Marie Antoinette, and it seems clear that the afternoon ceremony was meant to rival the morning execution. In Paris there were forty-eight Sections, or units of self-government, and that of the Museum, the neighbourhood of the Louvre, was at that time seeking to become affiliated to the Jacobin Club. It is likely that by honouring the memory of Marat and Le Pelletier they were seeking to prove their revolutionary credentials at a time when proofs of orthodoxy were needed. The procession
consisted of drummers, a marching band, members of the Section with banners, deputies of the Convention, conscripts carrying busts of Marat and Le Pelletier with oak crowns held over their heads, and bouquet-carrying mothers dressed in white leading their children by the hand. Throughout the parade the army were heavily represented. At the end of the route, in the courtyard of the Louvre, David's Le Pelletier and Marat were set up on two sarcophagi under a temporary covering, perhaps made of branches and tricolour drapery. Witnesses said that the effect was like a funerary crypt. The two paintings were not displayed out of doors for long and were then put on public view in David's studio in the Louvre, before being given to the Convention. To an even greater degree than the Le Pelletier, the Marat was a kind of republican altarpiece, since the citizens of Paris were encouraged to bring themselves and their children to gaze at the image and be instilled with a mixture of awe, reverence and revolutionary fervour.

David's painting of Marat (110) represents the peak of his involvement in the Revolution where invention, style, fervent belief and devotion combine to produce one of the most perfect examples of political painting. David presented the painting to the Convention on 14 November and said:

Citizens, the people ask for their friend again, their sorrowful voice wished itself heard – my talent is roused, they want to see again the features of their faithful friend: David! they cry, seize your brushes, avenge our friend, avenge Marat; let his vanquished enemies grow pale again at the sight of those disfigured features, reduce them to such a state that they could envy the fate of him whom they were cowardly enough to have killed when they could not succeed in corrupting him. I heard the voice of the people; I have obeyed.

Gather round! mother, widow, orphan, oppressed soldier; all you whom he [Marat] defended at the peril of his life approach! and contemplate your friend; he who watched over you is no more; his
He is dead, your friend, giving you his last morsel of bread; he is dead without having even enough to have himself buried. Posterity, you will avenge him; you will say to our descendants how many riches he could have possessed, if he had not preferred virtue to fortune...

It is to you my colleagues, that I offer the tribute of my brushes; when gazing at his livid and blood-soaked features you will recall his virtues, which must never cease to be your own.

Never a natural orator, David resorted to melodramatic and sentimental appeals to his audience and such a long-winded and overblown speech was the complete opposite to the eloquent and poignant simplicity of his painting. David called the painting Marat Breathing his Last, and the painting is clearly not of a dead but of a dying man. Even more obviously than with the Le Pelletier, in the Marat David turned to religious art to consecrate this second republican martyr. The pose recalls the Deposition or Entombment of Christ and the chill and silent void of the background, animated only by the shimmering brushwork, is reminiscent of Caravaggio’s religious works (see 34). Marat had already been compared to Jesus at his funeral oration and David, who was perhaps present, seized on this association. Marat’s nudity also brought to mind the dying heroes and philosophers of antiquity. The lighting, from a high and invisible source, has a supernatural quality which suggests Marat’s assumption into a Jacobin hereafter. Some elements of the body’s exposition at the Cordeliers are also included and a contemporary painting of the lying in state, attributed to Fougeat (111), has light effects similar to the Marat as well as showing the bath and the wooden case exhibited on a step below the body.

In common with most propaganda images, David’s Marat is less to do with facts than with the creation of an accessible, credible and persuasive image. Marat’s room actually had white wallpaper decorated with illusionistic pilasters on which hung a map of France and a pair of crossed pistols, but such mundane and insignificant details were suppressed to create a spiritual realm far removed from Marat’s sordid and brutal death. Bathroom murders are inevitably gruesome and, as exploited by makers of sensationalist prints and later by many makers of horror films, the mixture of blood and water creates a messy and disturbing aftermath. But in David’s Marat a supreme calm reigns which dissipates the violence of the attack.

Marat’s ugly face was considerably improved and rejuvenated, and a reading of the picture’s accessories leaves the viewer in no doubt as to Marat’s virtue, humanity and generosity. The sheets that protected his fragile scaly skin from the copper lining of the wooden bath have patches on them, indicating his frugality, a virtue that was also much emphasized at his funeral. In his left hand he holds Charlotte Corday’s deceitful note that reads (in David’s own handwriting): July 13 1793: Marie-Anne-Charlotte Corday to citizen Marat/ It is enough for me to be truly wretched to have a right to your kindness’ (112). Corday’s actual note to Marat had ended: ‘I am being persecuted for the sake of Liberty; I am unhappy, that is sufficient to give me the right to your protection’, and the change in wording suggests that she accomplished her murderous deed by appealing to Marat’s kind-hearted
sympathy. On top of the packing case or crate is another short letter and a bank note. The letter from Marat reads: ‘you are to give this assignat [a bill issued as currency during the Revolution] to this mother of five whose husband died for his country’, and is yet further proof of his concern for others. Apart from the two letters, David placed the words TO MARAT, DAVID, YEAR TWO, on the packing case and thus transformed it into a form of tombstone. The new revolutionary calendar, which counted its years from the proclamation of the Republic in 1792 and also renamed the months (reflecting the progress of the seasons), had only been officially adopted on 6 October 1793, when the work was nearing completion, and the smudged arabic numerals of 17 and 93 can also be seen in the corners of the packing case. By definition Marat’s assassin must have been abnormal and a traitor to the Revolution, and the two notes help shape this perception of her. She dates her note using the old royalist calendar, and instead of employing the more egalitarian ‘tu’ form of address, uses the ‘vous’ form with its associations of feudalism and deference. Corday’s letter is placed in close proximity to Marat’s own generous and benevolent note to the widow and children. Corday was a spinster; therefore, at a time when the family unit and the birth rate were much promoted in revolutionary rhetoric, in more ways than one, she was considered an ‘unnatural woman’. The culmination of this negation of Charlotte Corday was to banish her from the scene altogether and to turn the picture into a whodunit. As well as her treacherous note, the bloodstained knife of the assassin lies on the floor and her traces are revealed by the blood stains on the white handle – in reality the handle had been black but David changed it to make the blood clearly visible. Thus Corday’s recent presence is indicated by these metonyms, though she herself is not seen. All these accessories are rendered in high detail and serve as the equivalents of the attributes of a Christian martyr. If St Catherine had her wheel and St Lawrence had his gridiron, then Marat had his butcher’s knife, quill and inkwell.

In *Marat*, as with *Belisarius* (see 45), *Andromache Mourning Hector* (see 43), *Le Pelletier* (see 104) and the later *Bonaparte Crossing the St Bernard Pass* (see 144), *Sappho and Phaon* (see 173) and *Leonidas at Thermopylae* (see 177), David used the written word to provide the viewer with telling extra pictorial information. David’s use of words to complement and amplify the image was a legitimate tactic according to late eighteenth-century artistic theory. In his entry on ‘Inscriptions’, P C Lévesque wrote in his *Encyclopédie Méthodique* of 1788-91: ‘We praise the artist when he uses plausible means to make known his subject, his main character ... which then makes easier the understanding of the actions or feelings represented. This may be achieved by a short inscription on a portico, on the base of a column, on a rock, by the title of a book or by a few words on the page of an open book.’ In the case of his paintings of revolutionary martyrs, which were to reach all levels of society, David only used French, but in the histories and mythologies a more learned viewer was presupposed and Latin and Greek were employed.
The Convention decreed that both Marat and Le Pelletier should be engraved and afterwards placed on either side of the president’s chair in the hall of the Convention. There they hung until 9 February 1795, and on 27 October David was given permission to take them back. Once again David had proved himself adept and tenacious at regaining possession of works that had been painted for others – by this time he had also managed to retrieve the *Horatii* and *Brutus*.

As a political loose cannon, Marat was actually much less of an acceptable martyr to the Mountain than Le Pelletier, and Robespierre had been anxious to avoid a public funeral that might give the assassinated deputy cult status and attract and inspire a populace that was not easily controlled. But events moved so rapidly that ‘The Friend of the People’ became ‘The Martyr of the People’. Processions, speeches and apotheoses of Marat were enacted all over France, towns and villages were renamed after him, and Marat became popular as an anti-Christian name for children. David’s painting both reflected and helped shape this transition.

The third and last of David’s republican martyrs was not an established politician but a youth of thirteen whom the artist had never seen. Joseph Bara had been killed in the civil war in the Vendée on the Atlantic coast on 7 December 1793 (17 Frimaire Year II) after refusing to hand over two horses to royalist soldiers (113), shouting ‘up yours, you fucking crook’. The Convention, and Robespierre in particular, anxious for a young martyr to inspire the nation, made up an official account of the event whereby Bara met his death for refusing to shout ‘Long live the King’, and died exclaiming ‘Long live the Republic’ – defiant and patriotic gestures much more in keeping with the creation of a national legend. This third martyr painting was never completed, and the unfinished *Death of Bara* (114) is possibly the most puzzling of all David’s works, its incomplete state only adding to the mystery. A nude Bara lies on the ground holding a letter and a revolutionary cockade.

Although it was often David’s working practice to draw and sketch figures nude and then clothe them, it seems that it was his intention for Bara to remain nude. David probably had in mind the beautiful youths of antique sculpture such as the *Apollo Belvedere* (115), and Bara appears androgynous, almost feminine, a sinuous figure far removed from any conventional image of a soldier-patriot. Isolated on the canvas, and with no other figures from which to draw a comparison, the undeveloped body of Bara evokes the image of a slightly older figure – an ephebe (a Greek youth of seventeen or eighteen). Perhaps David was aware that such youths were taken away for military training as a kind of rite of passage into manhood and civic responsibility. Although Bara’s body has none of the imperfections of the mature male body, great liberties have been taken with his anatomy – the lower half of his body has been turned in and twisted at the hips and knees to an impossible degree to conceal his genitalia. At the left there is the suggestion of a group of soldiers with a banner – perhaps his murderers – and this, coupled with his nudity, also gives a hint that Bara was not only killed, but stripped and violated as well. As with the *Marat*, the details are telling – the tricolour.
cockade denoted love of La Patrie (the Fatherland), and is clutched to the breast as is the letter, which would probably have had some phrases of filial devotion to his mother. Although David had both the factual and fabricated details of Bara’s death available, he decided not to follow them and by eliminating practically all of the historical details and depicting a nude hero, the overall effect of the painting was to be timeless, spiritual and even ecstatic. The beauty and purity of Bara are all the more extraordinary when one considers that David was working on the painting when the Reign of Terror was at its height. All three of his revolutionary martyrs are deliberately distanced from the violence of their deaths, and painted either ‘at their last breath’ (Marat and Bara) or in peaceful repose (Le Pelletier) to suggest a consoling afterlife. Beauty and tranquillity were associated with immortality and rebirth.

David’s art could also display a ruthless and fanatical streak that was in marked contrast to the heroism and patriotism of his revolutionary martyrs. David at his most savage is seen in his rapid drawing of Marie Antoinette on the Way to the Guillotine, done on 16 October 1793 (116). He observed the queen from an upper window and his profile drawing is brutally frank.

Marie Antoinette was only thirty-seven, but a year’s imprisonment had made her look much older. Her hair was prematurely grey and, robbed of her false teeth, wig and corset and seated on a wooden plank on the back of a tumbril, she looked a pathetic figure. After a brief loss of composure she met her end with great fortitude, dignity and calm, even apologizing to the executioner for having accidentally stepped on his foot.

Painting actually occupied only a fraction of David’s time during the Revolution. He wanted the arts to reach all levels of society and so was also occupied with projects for the embellishment of Paris. David also made designs for civic uniforms (117), for money and official seals and even produced two crudely drawn and vulgar caricatures that mocked the English (118). Since the Revolution his views on the English had clearly changed and he no longer felt them to be the epitome of a free nation. According to the print’s caption the English government ‘is personified by the figure of a Devil skinned alive, monopolizing commerce and covered with all the Royal decorations. The portrait of the king is located at the rear end of the government which vomits on its people a myriad of taxes which overwhelm them.’ David also saw himself as the artistic
patriarch of the nation, and on 14 January 1792, with great pomp and seriousness he undertook the training of twin brothers, Joseph-Boniface (1774-1833) and Jean-Pierre Franque (1774-1860), shepherd boys from the Drôme department in southeast France who had shown great natural gifts. Their precocious talent, like the tale of Cimabue finding Giotto, had been discovered by a passing nobleman, who was impressed by the figures and landscapes they had engraved onto the rocks. From 1786 they studied in Grenoble, and during the Revolution the department assumed responsibility for their education and brought their case to the attention of the National Assembly. They were then placed with David who was proud to have been chosen as, 'the first teacher of these young men who can be justly called the children of the nation since they owe everything to it'. Refusing payment for tuition, he virtuously declared: 'The love of money has never troubled in my soul the love of glory which I value above all else.' Both the brothers went on to enjoy moderate success in painting and Jean-Pierre was briefly a studio assistant to David.

The aspect of David's work that reached the most people was his organization of the great festivals or feasts which involved hundreds of thousands of the populace of Paris. As the 'Pageant Master of the Republic', he was responsible for four of these and contributed to two others. Such popular spectacles, which were themselves based on traditional Catholic festivals, were meticulously planned and choreographed and meant to be both socially unifying and celebrations of key revolutionary events. They were also calculated to bring order and control to the chaotic masses by overawing them with the sheer scale and strict organization of the operation. David was the head of a group of workers that included his pupil Gioacchino Giuseppe Serangeli (1768-1852), the architects Auguste Cheval Hubert (1755-98) and Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand (1760-1834), the carpenter Duplay and the musicians Bruni, Sarette and Méhul. He made designs for the costumes, the ceremonial architecture and the props which were then made by this very capable team. These festivals took the form of great processions which went from one place to another.
where speeches were made and symbolic dramatizations enacted. The whole procession would then meet for a grand finale at a large open space. In 1793, to celebrate the first anniversary of the overthrow of the monarchy (10 August 1792), David planned the Festival of Reunion or the Festival of Unity and Indivisibility. In this festival the history of the Revolution was turned into an allegorical pageant. The enormous crowd met at the site of the Bastille where a huge statue of an Egyptian-looking goddess of nature was seated at the top of a flight of white steps. Her hands cupped breasts from which water spouted into a sarcophagus-like basin below. The president of the Convention, Hérald de Séchelles, stepped forward holding an antique chalice and after filling it, poured it on to the ground to re-baptize the soil in the name of Liberty. This was then repeated by eighty-six old men, each representing a department of France. The second station was a triumphal arch dedicated to the women of 5 October 1789 who had brought the king back from Versailles to Paris. At the third station in the Place de la Révolution, a great statue of Liberty stood where once the statue of Louis XV had been placed, and at its feet were piled the debris of monarchical despotism - busts of past kings, flags and trophies etc. As this symbolic heap was set alight, a great cloud of three thousand white doves was released into the air. The fourth station was a huge statue of Hercules, representing the French people, crushing the hydra of federalism. The fifth and final station was an altar to the Fatherland. The whole was thus a mixture of Christian ritual, masonic imagery, patriotism and popular theatre. David's propaganda techniques were highly thought of, but this festival marked the final rupture with André Chénier who called the whole thing, 'the atrocious madness of the stupid David whom I once praised'.

Ilie greatest of David's revolutionary pageants was the Festival of the Supreme Being, which took place on 8 June 1794 (or 20 Prairial Year II, according to the revolutionary calendar).
called the Temple of Reason). According to David, the Hercules would perpetuate the triumph of Reason and citizens would be further instructed by the engraving of key words on the body. On his forehead the word ‘light’ would be inscribed (a rather obtuse way of referring to intelligence); ‘nature’ and ‘truth’ would be placed on his chest, ‘strength’ on his arms and ‘work’ on his hands. In one of his hands Hercules would hold small figures of Liberty and Equality, while in the other, his deadly club would be carried. Two competitions for the figure were suggested but such a huge and costly project, extravagant even under a stable regime, had little chance of success in a country whose industry and manufacturing was geared towards war production.

To David, Hercules was a very potent revolutionary symbol; he is the principal figure in two designs made by him for The Triumph of the French People (121). These were probably part of a project for the curtain to a five-act sans-culottes play, The Meeting of the Tenth August or The Inauguration of the French Republic. This entertainment, by Gabriel Bouquier (1739–1810, a painter and deputy to the Convention, and by P L Moline, its registrar, had its first performance at the Paris Opéra on 5 April 1794. The play’s content and sets relied heavily on David’s creations for his festivals, and his own curtain designs both show how some of his processional floats would have looked and reveal his own pantheon of revolutionary actors. Hercules sits atop a triumphal chariot with Liberty and Equality on his knees and personifications of Science, Art, Business and Plenty in front of him. A team of four oxen draw the chariot which crushes symbols of royalty and feudalism beneath its wheels. Victory holding a spear flies above the oxen and in front two patriots stab a fallen king. Behind come ancient, medieval and modern political heroes. These include Cornelia, the Roman woman who referred to her own children as her jewels, who holds their hands as an example of patriotic motherhood; and then Brutus; William Tell with his son on his shoulders; Marat displaying his wound; Le Pelletier placing his hand over his bleeding side; and behind them are Pierre Bayle (or Baille) and Charles Beauvais de Préau, both Girondins in
Toulon who had been handed over to the English by royalists when the city fell in the summer of 1793. Bayle had hung himself on the night of 1–2 September 1793 and is shown pulling at his neckcloth. Although released from prison in December 1793 after the recapture of Toulon by republican troops, Beauvais de Préau died, it was said, as a result of his harsh treatment and thus rattles the chains that once held him. Created at a time when the Reign of Terror was at its height, these drawings show David at his most radical and extreme, and are perfectly in tune with the current inflexible and violent phase of the Revolution. The creation of Robespierre's 'Republic of Virtue' would be achieved by the spilling of blood to consecrate martyrs and to purge the enemy within. Due to the Opéra moving premises and decisive changes in the political climate, like so much of David's revolutionary work, the curtain was never painted.

Seven weeks after the highly successful Festival of the Supreme Being, on 9 Thermidor (27 July), Robespierre and his closest supporters were overthrown by a temporary coalition of both left- and right-wing dissidents in the Convention, and they were sent to the guillotine in the days following. It soon became clear that it was a victory for the conservative deputies such as Jean Lambert Tallien and Louis-Stanislas Freron. The Reign of Terror, which had lasted nearly ten months and had seen between 30,000 and 40,000 people killed, was over. So too was David's political career.