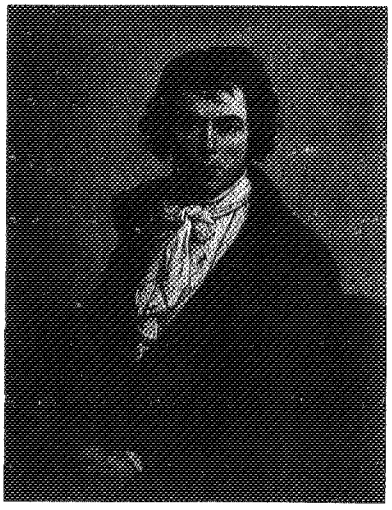
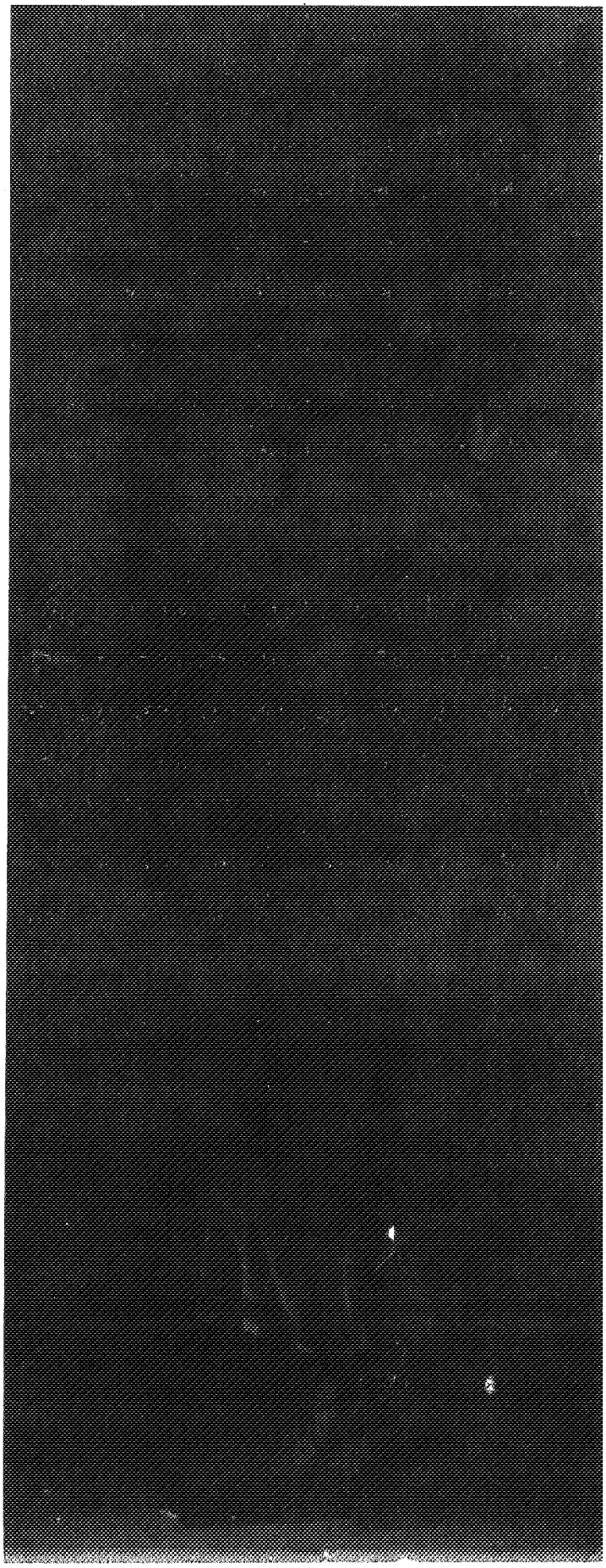
Reconstructing David

A wealth of new scholarship has dramatically recast our understanding of the life and art of Jacques-Louis David. Below, a survey of the fresh views that emerged from the massive retrospective and colloquium in Paris.



BY ROBERT ROSENBLUM

Of the countless reconstructions of history that marked the bicentennial of the French Revolution on both sides of the Atlantic, the two most spine-chilling were not unveiled until the last months of 1989. The first was to be seen in New York at Wildenstein's exhibition "The Winds of Revolution."[1] There, in a back gallery, was an actual guillotine of the type originally designed by Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotin with the Enlightenment goal, democratic as well as humanitarian, of providing for both the most lowly and the most aristocratic of convicted criminals a painlessly efficient finale. Its wood-and-metal structure of lucid geometries—circles, triangles and rectangles—eerily recalled the shapes of pure reason that pervade the more reformatory styles of late 18th-century art. Still more ironically, the Wildenstein guillotine, from Feurs, near Lyons, was the very death machine that performed for the infamous-



Above, Jacques-Louis David: Self-Portrait, *1794, oil on canvas, 31¾ by 25 inches. Musée du Louvre.*
Opposite, Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons, *1789, oil on canvas, 123 by 160½ inches. Musée du Louvre.* © *Photo R.M.N.*

Portrait of Henriette de Verninac, ***1799, oil on canvas, 55 by 41 inches. Musée du Louvre. © Photo R.M.N.***

ly sadistic and violent Jacobin, Claude Javogues, who hoped that blood from it would flood the streets of the town—now better remembered as the site of a two-star restaurant—like cleansing rainwater after a downpour.

Spine-chilling in a different way, because of its re-creation of both the exalting and murderous realities of French history, was the full-scale resurrection at the Louvre (Oct. 26, 1989–Feb. 12, 1990) of another universal symbol of the Revolution, Jacques-Louis David, whose last major retrospective was held decades ago, in 1948, the bicentennial of his birth. In the intervening 41 years, scholars have reinterpreted this artist as thoroughly as they have the Revolution itself. To see him finally spread large, extending even to an annex of the exhibition at Versailles, where three of his most colossal canvases permanently hang, was a pageant of breathtaking scope, both immediate in its visual and visceral impact and enduring in its reverberating memories.

David's long and many-chaptered career mirrors directly the swift succession of drastic changes at the origins of the historical epoch we may still claim as our own. Beginning in the late 1760s within the conventions of Boucher, whose style and world he would willfully annihilate but who was in fact a distant relative (the first cousin of his maternal grandmother), David worked his way up the academic ladder of the ancien régime, inventing by the 1780s a tragic pictorial universe of implacable law and order, couched in antique language. By the summer of 1789, he was to leap, arm in arm with France, into the awesome void opening behind the crumbling structures of church, state and society. Thereafter, David's unfolding as an a seemed at one with the history of his nation and even of the We world, instantly exalting the bloodcurdling heights and depths o Terror; then relaxing for a moment into the comforting tor elegance and reconciliation that marked the Directory; once marching forward with the drumroll ascent of Napoleon anc armies to a new vision of imperial power; and finally respondi the collapse of the Empire in 1815, which meant exile for regi like David himself and, in his particular case, a strange postscrip the supreme chronicler of modern history's early decades of b and utopian blueprints: a final decade in Brussels, where he pai as if the world of the new provincial bourgeoisie had totally ecli the lofty rhetorical dramas of the recent past.

If this epic historical sweep did not provide enough to rivet spectator, there was the probity of the art itself, an antholog astonishing diversity in which David kept constantly shifting gro in order to record head-on the rush of new experiences that rounded him. These paintings seem to encompass the fullest s trum of human facts and aspirations, both private and public. T range from the distillation of abstract ideals of heroism and sa fice—they show us how to die, if necessary, for a principle or f country, or to create Day One of a perfect new society—to sharply focused observation of the look and costume of individu scrutinized one by one. Who can forget the tense, dour expressio Louise Pastoret in 1791–92, the steadfast mother who, with her

Portrait of Louise Pastoret, ***ca. 1791–92, oil on canvas, 52⅜ by 39⅜ inches. Art Institute of Chicago.***

yet unpainted sewing needle in hand and her plain white dress lowered for breast-feeding, presides alone over her infant's simple wooden crib while we almost feel the menace of the Revolution o[illegible] her domestic walls? Or the remote, Olympian hauteur and beauty of Henriette de Verninac, dressed *à la grecque,* a woman disguised as a perfectly polished classical marble to be worshipped from afar? Or, at the opposite, terrestrial extreme, the almost comical candor of Mme. David herself, whose plain and homely face, surrounded by her Sunday best of ostrich plumes and satin, can rival any portrait by Goya, David's almost exact contemporary, for truth-telling about a new kind of person we again recognize as belonging to our modern world?

It was, in fact, as a portraitist that David's reputation as a great artist was preserved for many earlier 20th-century generations who found that his official history paintings, especially those culled from antiquity, were cold-blooded machines, rigid in structure and impersonal in touch, a lingering prejudice that may account for the absence, at the Louvre retrospective, of those throngs of art lovers who rush to any exhibition related to the Impressionist dynasty. Such a prejudice, however, has long been challenged and indeed buried by the growing ranks of scholars, both inside and outside the discipline of art history, who have been discovering that David provides grist for every conceivable mill. He now looms as a giant whose infinite potential for interpretation has even begun to rival Picasso's for scope, variety and layered meanings.

In the 1950s and '60s, the first wave of intensive David research tended to concentrate on the still knotty problems of attribution created by our then scanty knowledge of the work of David's hundreds of clonelike students, and by his own (and other people's) habit of putting the David signature on paintings largely or totally executed by somebody else. Now, however, the record of his actual pr[illegible]ion has been set much straighter, and the Louvre exhibition could reflect the more knowledgeable faith of its prodigiously industrious catalogue authors (Antoine Schnapper for paintings; Arlette Sérullaz for drawings) in the authenticity of the works included; although one textbook classic, the Louvre's own *View of the Luxembourg Gardens*, a little landscape that has always been a beautiful anomaly in any David anthology, is by implication strongly doubted.[2] But complementary to the shrinking canon of David's genuine oeuvre, a field of study that relies on documentation and connoisseurship, there has been a rapid expansion of areas of study that can merge with every other aspect of David's art, life and historical milieu, fomenting an eagerness to enrich (or some might still say, pollute) his visual achievements by viewing them from angles that lie far outside the edges of the canvas.

David territory, in fact, has been proving fertile for many different seeds: feminist questions of gender roles; inquiries into 18th-century attitudes toward child-rearing; investigations of the lowest order of popular imagery as sources for the lofty achievements of high art; psychoanalytic speculations about the covert projection of an artist's personal traumas in work destined for public view; Marxist efforts to see the changing structures and subjects of art as inevitable corollaries of radical social change—in short, what is often referred to as the "new art history." At the same time, it should be said that David's involvement with the Jacobin branch of the Revolution, whether as artist-chronicler, costume and pageant designer, or member of the National Convention who could vote for the death of Louis XVI and recommend the destruction of monuments from the vilified Christian era of feudalism and idolatry, has alwa[illegible]een very much part of what was literally "old art history." Already, back in the 1930s, following the lead of the Russian revolutionary Georgi Plekhanov, many Marxist-oriented art historians—Agnès Humbert, Milton Brown, Frederick Antal—attempted to view

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Portrait of Charlotte David, ***1813, oil on canvas, 28¼ by 24¾ inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. © Photo Art Resources.***

David's art as synonymous in style and subject with the triumphant emergence of the people in this primal episode of class struggle. Indeed, even the most narrow formalists of past decades have found it difficult to exorcise from David's art his total immersion in revolutionary and Napoleonic myths and politics.

That David's art could support and, in many cases, profit from such kaleidoscopic shiftings of interpretation was more than demonstrated by a marathon event that took place in the Grand Auditorium of the Louvre under the I.M. Pei pyramid. Orchestrated by Régis Michel of the Louvre, with the assistance of two other formidable younger-generation Davidians who have thrown much scholarly fuel into revolutionary fires, Thomas Crow and Philippe Bordes, some 45 scholars, myself included, were summoned to con-

David's portrait of the two exiled daughters of Joseph Bonaparte radiates a poignant sympathy for those who have climbed to and fallen from the heights of glory.

The Sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte, *1821, oil on canvas, 50¾ by 39¼ inches. J. Paul Getty Museum.*

front each other and the public in a lengthy colloquium. Its title, "David contre David," echoed the rumblings of controversy set off by recent politicizing interpretations of David that would read his first decade of classicizing masterpieces, whether such seemingly innocuous erotic mythologies as *The Loves of Paris and Helen* of 1788 or the more obviously inflammatory *Brutus* of 1789, as both covert and overt expressions of radical beliefs exploding, at last, at the Bastille. (Such controversy continued, in fact, in many of Schnapper's catalogue essays and entries where he locked horns with Thomas Crow, the most persuasive and articulate defender of David's protorevolutionary beliefs.) For five physically numbing, but at least for Davidians, mentally bracing days (Dec. 6-10, 1989), from 9:30 in the morning until, at times, 8 in the evening, lecture after lecture, discussion after discussion took place before and together with an audience of hundreds, whose egalitarian components extended from the usual contingent of nomadic art historians to anybody at all who wanted to drop in free of charge before paying the entrance fee to the museum. Yet even if one had somehow managed to hear all 45 lectures (I missed about ten of them), one would still have been amazed at how much of David had been left untouched. Often only surfaces seemed to be scratched, or new vistas only glimpsed; and many major chapters of his work, especially his Napoleonic productions, were barely mentioned at all. Large as it was, this international community of scholars from France, Belgium, Germany, Italy England and the United States could only sparsely populate the awesomely expansive territory now dominated by David.

As for politics, which played a lesser role than expected, considerable new material emerged to blur the black-and-white polemical image of David as a pure revolutionary spirit into the more truthful shades of gray that are the stuff of history. Arlette Sérullaz and Lina Propeck, for example, discussed the startling political anomaly of David's commission, in September 1791, to paint for the National Assembly none other than Louis XVI himself presenting the new constitution to the Dauphin, a project explored in many drawings included in a sketchbook for the *Tennis Court Oath* but, given the course of history, inevitably abandoned. Another paper, by Colin Bailey, similarly blurred political edges before the deluge of 1789 by demonstrating how often David's paintings of the 1780s (which, according to many interpretations, contain clandestine, protorevolutionary messages) were sponsored by aristocratic patrons who apparently appreciated David's radical new structures and veneration of Greco-Roman stoicism without feeling in any way threatened by what we can now read retroactively as political premonition.

In fact, for all the fierce absolutism of his Jacobin fervor during the frenzy of the Revolution, David clearly displayed the chameleon pragmatism of any successful artist who had to shift patronage as quickly as the seat of power changed. If he could paint a Crucifixion for the chapel of the ultra-Catholic de Noailles family, he could also paint a classical love story for Louis XVI's brother, the comte d'Artois. If he could depict revolutionary oath-taking, martyrs and rational deities to disseminate to all the people the articles of faith in a new religion, he could later show his *Sabines* at a private exhibition to any Parisian well-heeled enough to afford the entrance fee of 1,80 francs for his personal till. If he could paint for the Consulate and Empire the myths of Napoleon's prowess as military hero, pageant-leader or hardworking statesman, he had no compunctions about fulfilling, during the Napoleonic wars, a commission for a Russian prince or, later, for a Bavarian count. Often billed as a passionate ideologue, the enemy of church and monarchy and, like Marat, the friend of the people, David was also an astute capitalist businessman. But such commonsense flexibility was perfectly familiar to most artists of the period, who were obliged to be politically engaged. For instance, David's own student, François Gérard, was both a revolutionary and a royalist, since in 1794 he won a prize with a project for a huge painting that would document the insurrection of Aug. 10, 1792, when the royal family was menaced by mobs at the Tuileries Palace, whereas in 1825 he was happy to take on a commission to record the coronation at Reims Cathedral of the last successor to the Bourbon throne, Charles X, the aged, ultraroyalist brother of Louis XVI.

On many other levels, too, the connections as well as the discrepancies between private lives and public history loomed large at the colloquium. Women, children and families moved to center stage in lectures by Norman Bryson and Simon Schama. Bryson reconsidered the often-mentioned duality of David's heroic, active men, who serve the state to the point of death, versus his passive, hearth-keeping women, who stay at home to weep, sew and tend the children. He then carried this polarity into an illuminating contrast of the two penned notes in *The Death of Marat*. In one hand, the martyr clings to the treacherous entreaty for an audience with him

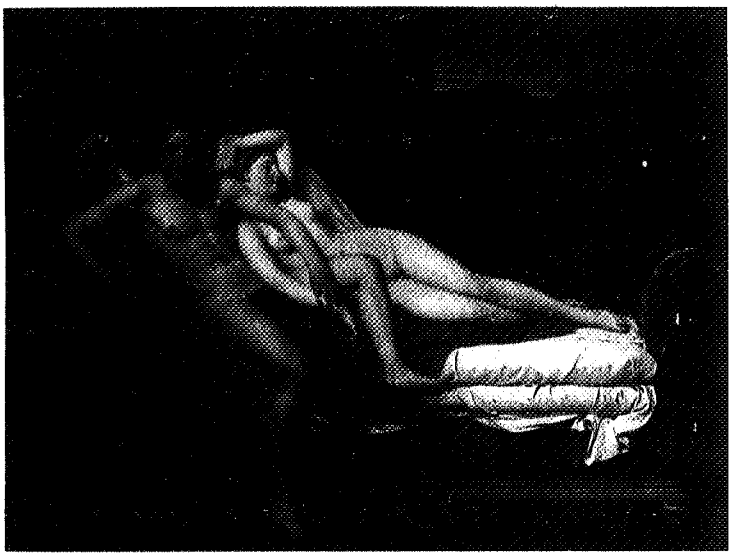
The Farewells of Telemachus and Eucharis, ***1818, oil on canvas, 34¼ by 40½ inches. J. Paul Getty Museum.***

th[illegible]as written by his murderess, Charlotte Corday, the archetype of an "unnatural" woman, unmarried and childless; whereas just below it, on the makeshift, packing-crate writing table, is a request that was written by Marat for an *assignat* to aid a "natural" mother, who has five children and whose husband has died for his country. Schama, with unusual eloquence and precision of visual and factual detail, traced the imagery of children in David's work, absorbing a wide range of cultural resonances, from the Rousseau-inspired belief in "back-to-nature" breast-feeding to the use of children as generational symbols to establish the utopian republic of the future, and ending with the seldom-mentioned group portrait of David and his own family which the artist included among the ranks of elite spectators attending the coronation of Napoleon in Notre Dame.

Schama's was the kind of lecture that for me, at least, set into motion old data and new speculations that might add further layers of complexity to an understanding of David's work. It is rarely mentioned, for instance, that among David's varied and sensational anthology of paintings at his 1781 Salon debut, where a postclassical tragedy (*Belisarius*), a Christian altarpiece (*St. Roch*) and an aristocratic equestrian portrait (*Count Potocki*) got the lion's share of attention, he also exhibited a lost painting, last seen in 1846, titled "Une femme allaitant son enfant." This nursing mother, should she ever turn up, would add an unexpected dimension to David's achievement, offering what one imagines might be a more somber and dignified version of a theme often treated by David's more sentimental predecessors such as Greuze in a way that would milk smiles and tears from their audience. But the connection between family matters and David, I realize more and more, may also open more speculative terrains on which to build psychological correlations between his personal life and his art.

Régis Michel, in his marvelously succinct, informed and vivid little monograph, *David, l'art et le politique*, published for the bicentennial, has already indicated the relevance of the artist's childhood trauma—when he was nine years old, his father was killed in a duel—to the recurrent display of corpses in his work; and with this in mind, the great *Hector and Andromache* of 1783, with which he was unanimously received into the Academy as a full member, may yield, I think, still more personal messages. In contrast to earlier artists' versions of this theme of archetypal mourning for a dead hero killed by the sword, David offers the intimacy of family grief—mother, son and dead father—isolated in domestic confines. The lone child here, Astyanax, appears in the year of the birth of David's own first son, Charles-Louis-Jules (whose portrait as a five-year-old he would later paint with an intensity that projects his own self-image), a correlation that may seem less coincidental when one begins to realize that in David's next masterpiece, the *Oath of the Horatii*, the despondent mother in the background comforts not one but two children, now corresponding to the birth of David's second son, Eugène, in 1784, during the early gestation of the painting; and that, moreover, this scene of public ramifications again takes place within the intimate walls of a domestic realm, where husbands and wives, sisters and brothers are rent asunder. And in the *Brutus* of 1789, the family, like the tragedy, increases. In 1786, twin daughters, Emilie and Pauline, were born to the David family; and in the painting, where the narrative is again moved from the public domain to a domestic one, we see the shattering of a Roman family with four children. On the left, the two executed sons, Titus and Tiberius, are being brought in on litters behind the grimly isolated but resolute father; and on the right, the two daughters, who seem twinned in age as they are in grief, shield their eyes and swoon as their mother attempts to enclose and comfort them with one embracing arm.

For all of his Jacobin fervor during the Revolution, David clearly showed the chameleon pragmatism of any successful artist who may have to shift allegiances quickly.



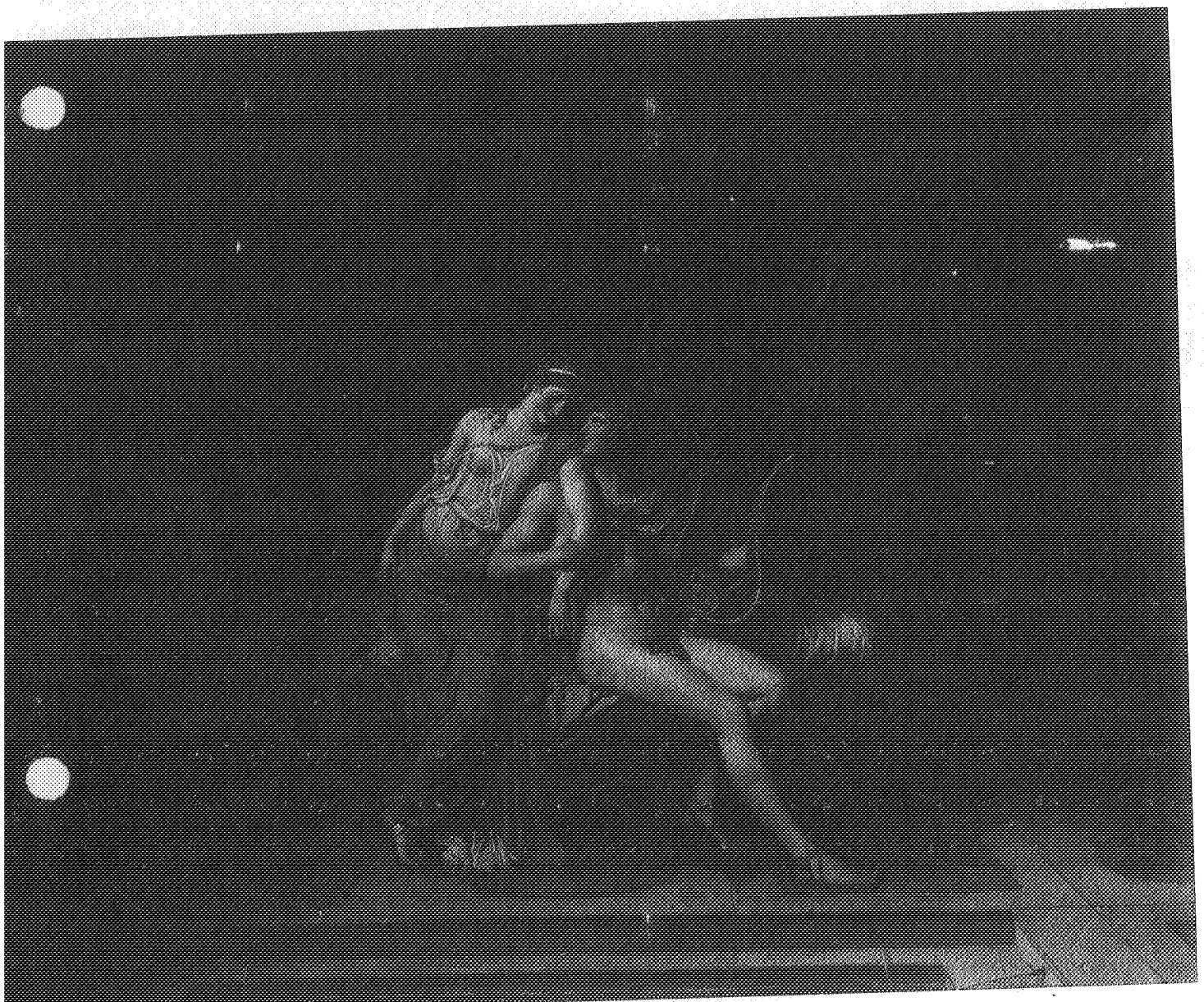
Cupid and Psyche, ***1817, oil on canvas, 72½ by 95⅛ inches. Cleveland Museum of Art.***

To fan further these fires of Davidian psychodrama, there is the narrative, in both life and art, of his family strife during the Revolution. By a law of Sept. 20, 1792, the ancien régime's concept of the shackled sanctity of marriage was swept away, liberating individuals to get swift divorces. One of the first artists to enjoy this freedom was Greuze, who, in August 1793, left his notorious shrew of a wife, whose image, together with other allegories of marital discord, he had translated into drawn and painted domestic dramas in the 1770s and '80s. And Monsieur and Madame David followed suit soon after, divorcing officially in March 1794, under the reign of Robespierre, with Jacques-Louis taking the sons and Marguerite-Charlotte taking the twin daughters. But then, echoing the political reconciliations of 1795, they were just as easily remarried in 1796, at a time that David was plotting his ambitious pictorial return to a classical theme, the *Sabines*, choosing the unusual episode when the Sabine mother, Hersilia, pleads for a cease-fire between the opposing factions of Romans versus Sabines. Often interpreted as a transparent allegory of peace after civil war, of the reconstruction of shattered families after the Revolution, the *Sabines*, with its nightmarish proliferation of grieving women and helpless children, may well be, too, an allegory of David's own domestic reconciliations. The old woman baring her breast in the foreground is, in fact, modeled after the David family nurse, Catherine (who may make an earlier appearance as the muscular old nurse in the *Brutus*); and the echo of family twins—shades of Romulus and Remus (who also make an appearance, as relief sculpture, in the *Brutus*)—resonates in a telling detail. Beneath the outstretched right arm of Romulus, a desperate Sabine mother clutches an exactly duplicate pair of naked infants who, in the original drawing for the painting, were not two but one. Having begun to learn as we have about the way in which a comparable artist-giant, Picasso, could weave, consciously or not, the psychodramas of his own life into a universal imagery, it is now tempting to do the same for David, even if such terrain, especially for an old master, is risky.

Risky, too, are the interpretative problems triggered by what has begun to be noticed as the strong current of homoeroticism within the milieu of David, a theme that was given broader treatment at a recent symposium at Yale University.[3] Indeed, soon after the *Sabines* was completed for public view in 1799, David began to work on a classical theme involving an even fuller panoply of male nudity, *Leonidas at Thermopylae*, in which a craggy mountain pass is populated exclusively by naked warriors. In this scene of what might be called intensive male bonding, in which there is a high incidence of the embracing of bare flesh, some of the Spartans are conspicuously mature, others conspicuously adolescent, while, with one exception, all are supplied with a classical *cache-sexe*, a sword sheath or a gust of drapery. As in so many of David's paintings, we recognize the look of a costume drama, a theatrical performance disclosed within an imaginary proscenium in which earthbound actors confront the audience. In this case, the very theme of preparation for battle, with the taking of arms, the tying of sandals and the adjustment of draperies, strangely underlines the disconcerting realism of the scene, as if a community of athletic male actors were seen in a state of theatrical dress and undress, the Davidian equivalent of a classical locker room. Put another way, *Leonidas* offers the sexualized male counterpart to such images of eroticized female populations as, say, the view of a Turkish bath by Jean-Jacques LeBarbier, a painting shown at the same Salon, that of 1785, as David's gender-splitting *Oath of the Horatii*, and re-created much later by David's greatest pupil, Ingres.

But constructing, as I have here, such houses of art-historical cards may be the most ephemeral as well as the most precarious of pursuits, fired by contemporary urgencies to relate this discipline to some of the more compelling human issues of recent decades. David, needless to say, also remains solidly entrenched within more data-based, history-bound and visually oriented methods of art history, as evidenced by the majority of papers offered at the colloquium. In many cases, David was examined in terms of his dialogues, both esthetic and biographical, with older painters, such as Fragonard (Pierre Rosenberg) and his precociously Neo-Classic teacher, Vien (Thomas Gaehtgens), or with his students, such as Girodet (Thomas Crow) and Rouget (Alain Pougetoux). Or at times, a single masterpiece, *The Death of Marat*, was scrutinized not by one but by three German art historians (Matthias Bleyl, Jörg Treaeger and Klaus Herding) from different but related angles. They considered how this hypnotic painting drastically altered a variety of conventions, from traditional deathbed portraiture of the deceased to the rendering of a Christian saint; they also considered how the work raised complex new issues of temporality in which this secular saint, with his heavy-lidded but not quite closed eyes, appears to fuse the past agonies of a corporeal expiration—the document of a contemporary murder—with the miracles of future resurrection. The translation of reality into icon was also a theme in Werner Hofmann's paper, which focused on, among other things, the recurrence of lucid triple motifs in David's work as a means to fixed, emblematic ends.

From such sublimities, art historians could also descend to the vulgar and feisty domain of popular imagery, an area that has recently attracted, in both 19th- and 20th-century studies, unusually thoughtful and fruitful inquiry. In the context of an anthology of obscene revolutionary prints, vilifying every kind of enemy, from monarchs and clergy to filthy foreigners, James Cuno discussed



e Loves of Paris and Helen, *1788, oil on canvas, 57¼ by 71¼ inches. Musée du Louvre. © Photo R.M.N.*

ıvid's own two startlingly coarse and scatological attacks on the itish army and king—the gross and infantile id, as it were, to the eat artist's superego. David's own shrill and complex personality in self offers a huge potential for interpretation (his face as well as s speech were severely marred by a parotid tumor on his left ıeek, which clearly affected his public persona; and we know that hen, in 1772, he lost the Prix de Rome contest a second time, he tempted, like many Werther-like fictional heroes of his generation, starve himself to death). This compelling topic was approached in n unexpectedly oblique but revealing way by Udolpho van de Sandt, ho studied the actual dimensions of David's history paintings of the 780s, indicating the degree to which his passionately assertive and mbitious nature prompted him to defy the conventional proportions nd s of his large formats in order to gain more esthetic freedom nd to attract more attention in the public forum of the Salon.)avid's personality was approached as well by T.J. Clark, who oncentrated solely on the ferociously confrontational self-portrait xecuted in prison in 1794, which he chose to discuss only in the context of later 18th-century, Rousseau-based literature of confessional self-disclosure rather than in the visual milieu of other self-portraits by David and his contemporaries.

The constant fluctuation in David's art between public and private was again felt in the discussion of David and the theater. Often treated generically or, in the case of Michael Fried, wholly theoretically, the topic, as presented by David Alston, proved to be a very real and documentable subject, given the number of actual historical and visual connections between David's paintings, from the 1780s on, and the gestural rhetoric, the sets, the costumes, and the famous actors and actresses of the living Paris stage. And the familiar illusion of looking behind parted curtains when we contemplate David's painted re-creations of ancient history was further elucidated by Ewa Lajer-Burcharth's efforts to establish and reconstruct the use of an actual mirror at the paying public exhibition of the *Sabines*, a prop that permitted spectators to see David's canvas in a

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