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JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID’S NEOCLASSICISM AND THE IDEALS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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The French Enlightenment was a multi-faceted evolution of concepts in the 18th century. Astute intellectuals provided the narrative to turn a critical eye to the political world, while artists provided the visual representation for the Enlightenment ideals presented. The artistic component represented a desire to turn to the morals of the classics. Imagery from Roman and Greek mythology leant itself well to this endeavor and so, Neoclassicism emerged. The most gifted artist of the Neoclassic movement was Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). David produced some of the most iconic Neoclassic work, which effectively reinforced the ideals of the French Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries revolutionized political thought across the Western world. Among the most highly regarded of the thinkers who contributed to Enlightenment canon are the French writers Francois-Marie Arouet, who wrote under the pen name Voltaire (1694-1778), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), and Denis Diderot (1713-1784). While the works of these writers were universally influential in the age of the Enlightenment, they were particularly poignant in France on the eve of political revolution towards the end of the 18th century. They provided social commentary on the natural rights of man and the responsibility of those who governed them. The work Voltaire is best known for is the satirical *Candide* (1759)\(^1\). In *Candide*, Voltaire explores ideas, through the adventures of his characters, that would become cornerstones of the French Enlightenment. The character Candide experienced a variety of tragic and calamitous events throughout the story\(^1\). These experiences tested the philosophy of his tutor, Pangloss\(^2\). Pangloss’s irrational optimism and insistence that this is “the best of all possible worlds” despite much evidence to the contrary is Voltaire’s commentary on blind faith in an all-powerful God over rational and tactile human experiences\(^2\). Voltaire favored reason over faith in religion and the constant adversity that Pangloss faced in a

2. Voltaire, *Candide*, Chapter I.
violent and imperfect world was intended to illustrate that. Throughout the entire novel, every character is subjected to unspeakable horror and adversity. It is not until they are settled onto a farm in Turkey, working hard every day, that they find contentment. "‘Human grandeur’ said Pangloss, ‘is very dangerous if we are to believe the testimonies of almost all philosophers;…” Voltaire’s message is that the path to happiness lies in hard work, not immorality like the events Candide saw and experienced in his pursuit of his love interest, Cunegund.

The work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau builds on Voltaire’s ideals in Candide. In the Social Contract (1762), Rousseau discusses his thoughts about the ideal society and what concessions individuals must make to be a part of that society. The people collectively comprise the sovereign, which is Rousseau’s name for the collective will. It is the best interests of the sovereign as one entity, not of the individuals within the sovereign, that must inform the general will. Rousseau argues that what does the most good for the sovereign is what should guide the creation and implementation of government. It is the duty of the individual to surrender his interest to the general will in exchange for the preservation of his natural freedom as a member of the sovereign. This is the social contract that all men in society must freely enter. Rousseau uses the example of the Roman Comitia, the legislative body of the republic. He offers the Roman Republic as an example that even large states can have a representative government that runs effectively. Rome gave all citizens a vote and they managed an egalitarian form of government, despite their numbers. They also managed to level out government from the

4. Voltaire, Candide, Chapter XXX.
aristocratic class of patricians\textsuperscript{11}. Because of this, Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers thought the Roman Republic to be an exemplar of a reasonable and logical government\textsuperscript{11}.

Denis Diderot was a prolific writer on many subjects. He, along with Jean le Rond d’Alembert, edited \textit{Encyclopedie ou Dictionnaire raisonne des sciences, des arts et des métiers} (1765). He contributed many articles on the topics of government, political authority, and the natural rights of man. In “Legislateur,” Diderot, along with co-author Jean-Francois de Saint-Lambert, discuss the responsibilities of a “lawgiver” to the state they govern\textsuperscript{12}. They discuss the importance of the promotion of community and love of country by the lawgiver\textsuperscript{12}.

Love of the homeland is the only object of passion which unites rivals; it extinguishes divisions; each citizen sees in a citizen only a useful member of the state; all march together and content toward the common good; love of country gives the most noble of all courage: we will sacrifice ourselves for those we love.”\textsuperscript{13} In his \textit{Encyclopedie} article, “Droit Naturel,” Diderot discusses the natural rights of man, as dictated by reason\textsuperscript{14}. Diderot places great value on the ability of man to use reason. Reason is of such importance that any man who refuses to use this natural right should be regarded as a “wild beast” by his fellow man\textsuperscript{14}. Like Rousseau, Diderot also believes in the supremacy of the general will over the desires of the individual. “Particular wills are suspect; they can be good or evil, but the general will is always good: it is never wrong, it never will be wrong.”\textsuperscript{15} Also similar to Rousseau, Diderot believes that submission to the general will of the many is what binds all societies\textsuperscript{16}. On the subject of power and authority, Diderot writes that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Jacques-Louis David, \textit{Oath of the Horatii}, 1784, Musee du Louvre
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Brookner, \textit{Jacques-Louis David}, 29.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Rousseau, \textit{The Social Contract}, 69.
\end{itemize}
power must come from the consent of the people, or it is not legitimate power. All men are afforded liberty as soon as they are able to use reason. Nature does not give any man authority over another man; a prince’s authority over men is bound by the laws of nature and state. If he breaks those laws, he no longer has the consent of the people and therefore, no longer has authority. The prince belongs to the people, not the other way around. These are the ideals presented by Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot. In an ideal society, men freely submit themselves to the general will of the people. Reason and logic reign supreme and the qualities of loyalty, hard work, and virtuousness are the most valued.

The artistic movement, neoclassicism, became attached to the ideals of the Enlightenment because it can be seen as the physical manifestation of those ideals. The Enlightenment became known as the “age of reason.” It valued virtue, hard work, bravery, and patriotism. The Neoclassic movement was a return to the aesthetics of the Classics. It was a restoration of man’s ideal: physical and moral perfection. These objects of perfection could be found in the stories of the Roman Republic and Greek mythology, where brave and patriotic heroes performed tasks that tested morality for the love of their country. These exemplars were natural companions to the Enlightenment, they held the same ideals. Although many painters were attached to the neoclassic movement, none were as evocative as Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). David was an absolute master of the austere sobriety that informs neoclassicism. Characterized by bold color contrasts, clear lines, plus the subject matter of the Classics, neoclassicism stands in clear contrast to the decadent and indulgent rococo styling of the 18th century.
When one Googles the word “neoclassicism,” the David painting, *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) is the first search result. This is for good reason, it is the epitome of the neoclassic style. It depicts a scene from a Roman story. In the story, the Horatii are Roman triplets, chosen to fight as the champions of Rome against their three cousins, the Curiatii from Alba, who were born on the same day the Roman brothers were born. This arrangement was decided so that the champions of both cities would be equally matched, being that they are healthy and strong triplets born on the same day as their cousins. The Horatii agreed to be the champions of Rome, even though it meant a fight to the death against their beloved cousins and breaking the hearts of their mothers and sisters. They did this because they were Romans first and the honor and worthiness of their ancestors to stand as Rome’s champions was of primal importance to them.

David depicts the Horatii making their oath to fight for Rome before their father while their mother and sisters weep beside them. The background is stark, shadowy, and painted in bland colors. The Horatii brothers and their father are quite bright, in bold colors, and angular in their positions. Their solemnity is palpable. The women are more pastel in color and their sorrowful positions evoke the look of movement. The stark austerity of the composition is the antithesis of the rococo styling of the Old Regime. It is meant to be solemn and depict the gravity of the moment. This painting in particular portrays the honor, the sacrifice of self for the good of the state, and the work ethic that is so prevalent in the writings of the Enlightenment, particularly Rousseau’s concept that the “general will” is more important than one’s personal interests. When speaking about the decision by the warriors to battle their cousins in the original source story, Tullius said “Power to sovereignty is glorious when the brave either conquer or are conquered by the brave.” This is a very good condensation of the Roman valor that the Enlightenment so admired.

In 1787, David painted the *Death of Socrates*, as chronicled in Plato’s *Phaedo*\(^3^0\). Socrates was convicted for corrupting youth and sentenced to death via forced suicide by hemlock poison. He faced his death honorably and did not play games to delay his execution even by a few minutes, despite Crito’s pleas\(^3^0\). He asks for the poison at sundown, just as he is sentenced. As the poison takes effect, Plato and everyone else in the room breaks down openly weeping. Even the jailer weeps for Socrates\(^3^0\). Socrates, however, remained calm and peaceful, even happy\(^3^0\). In the painting, he assumes an authoritative posture as he boldly takes the cup of poison\(^2^9\). He is the source of illumination in the image, against a sober grey background with unadorned geometric shapes. The figures around him are all colorful and fluid looking. He is the only person who is composed, even the jailer bringing the poison is bereaved at Socrates impending death. David depicts Socrates bravely and defiantly accepting his fate\(^2^9\). Jean-Edme Romilly wrote in Diderot’s *Encyclopedie* that Socrates was virtuous, even in his death\(^3^1\). Socrates’s unfailing insistence on relying on reason was influential on all the Enlightenment thinkers\(^3^0\). For the Enlightenment, the classics are the epitome of society, as it should be. Socrates embodies this as David presents him, virtuous, and accepting his fate bravely\(^3^0\).


In another look to Greek mythology for source stories, David turns to the death of Hector of Troy in Homer’s the *Iliad* for his work *Andromache Mourning Hector* (1783). Hector bravely gives his life fighting Achilles as the last Trojan left outside the city walls. Even realizing that the gods have tricked him and that he was facing certain death, Hector still fought. Although Achilles abused Hector’s corpse, King Priam was desperate to retrieve his son’s remains, not only because Hector was his son, but also because he was a hero, much beloved by the Trojans. They wanted him back to mourn him. He represented the perfect warrior, kind, brave, loyal to Troy, and honorable. As in the *Oath of the Horatii*, the background of *Andromache Mourning Hector* is dark and cold. The figures of Hector, Andromache, and Astyanax are luminous, and Andromache’s face is the brightest point. David uses Andromache’s expression to impart the
magnitude of Hector’s loss. In the image, she is the living and dynamic figure, as she sits with her dead and static husband. She is full of despair at his loss, looking up in anguish. She reaches out towards him, as Astyanax reaches up for her, creating a snaking line from Astyanax to Hector. Andromache serves as a proxy for all of Troy in this image. The death of Hector was massive, and her grief reflects the grief of them all. David depicts Hector as the idealized warrior he was, strapping and handsome, even in death. His corpse shows no signs of the damage inflicted on him by Achilles in his triumph, he is a perfect specimen. His helmet is beside him, identifying him as a Trojan warrior. Hector is an excellent representation of the idealized and virtuous Enlightenment patriot. He was brave and extraordinarily loyal to Troy. This made the story of Hector a perfect choice for the neoclassical David treatment.

![Image of Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of his Sons (1789) Musee du Louvre]

Returning to the subject of Rome in 1789, David painted a scene from a Roman story that became known as *Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of his Sons* (1789). Two sons of

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35. Homer, *The Iliad*, Book XXII.
the consul of Rome, Lucius Junius Brutus, along with brothers of his wife, conspired to overthrow Rome and restore the monarchy, who were called “tyrants,” to power. Without a moment’s hesitation, he sentenced his sons to a swift execution for their treason and bore their execution without shedding a tear. When the other consul, Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus, pleaded for leniency for the other conspirators, Brutus stripped him of his magistracy for not putting the interests of Rome first against a plot to overthrow the republic.

David’s image is divided into two sections. On the left, the lictors are carrying in the bloodied bodies of the two executed sons. They are illuminated as they are carried in. Below them sits Brutus, a shadowy figure with a troubled expression. To the right, in bright white and red colors, Brutus’ wife and daughters mourn. His wife has her arm outstretched toward the bodies of her sons. One of the daughters shields her face from the sight, while the other swoons. It is an image of complex emotions. David’s Brutus looks almost conflicted, while the Brutus of the original story was strong of conviction. David’s scene accentuates the sacrifice of the act, how selfless Brutus acted as the ruler of Rome as he sits separated from his family. He exemplifies the Enlightenment ideals of virtue, patriotism, and of putting the greater good before his personal wellbeing. Brutus was also a member of the curiae, the governing body of the republic that Rousseau so admired.

The marriage of the Enlightenment to neoclassicism offers a fitting visual companion to the written works. David’s selection of illustrative source material from Classical works offers a metaphorical exemplification of the standards and ideals that made up the cornerstones of the French Enlightenment in the 18th century. A study of these works and the Classical stories that

36. Jacques-Louis David, *Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of his Sons*, 1789, Musee du Louvre
informed them offer a deeper understanding of the intentions of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot. When taken together, one better appreciates the version of the archetypal society they all envisioned.
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