



JACQUES-LOUIS David

STAGE MANAGER OF THE REVOLUTION

EVEN BY THE GORY STANDARDS OF REVOLUTIONARY PARIS, the funeral rites for Jean-Paul Marat were a macabre spectacle. A radical journalist and self-styled "Friend of the People," he had been stabbed to death as he sat working in his bath on the night of July 13, 1793.

It was decided that his lying in state should evoke—with a few theatrical flourishes—the scene of the crime. His body, propped up on a kind of Roman bed, was undraped to expose the gaping knife wound; placed nearby like holy relics were his bloody bathrobe and the crate that served as a tub-side desk. His right arm, hanging over the side of the bier, still held the iron pen he had been using when the fatal blow was struck.

The viewing attracted enormous crowds, and it was hoped that the sight of the slain leader would intensify an outpouring of moral outrage and patriotic fervor the assassination had caused. Marat's unattractive qualities—he was vile tempered, famously ugly and had demanded the execution of countless counterrevolutionaries—were now forgotten. In death he became a saintly martyr to the cause of liberty. Funeral orations compared him to Jesus Christ.

BY ELIZABETH BARKLEY WILSON



The man behind this extraordinary piece of revolutionary theater was Jacques-Louis David. Today David is best known as one of the great masters of French painting--the defining artist of an austere neoclassical style that dominated European art for almost a half-century--and one of the precursors of modern painting. But for a few remarkable years he was also the propaganda minister of the French Revolution--the man who could turn an unruly mob, ready to kill for a loaf of bread, into tearful patriots willing to die for the cause. On demand he produced State funerals and martyr portraits, multimedia pageants for casts of thousands--all designed to keep the revolutionary faith alive, even when the bodies were piling up ten deep beside *la guillotine*.

For more than 200 years historians of every stripe have debated how such bloody-minded revolutionary faith was born--in what was supposed to be the most civilized and decorous nation on earth--and how it was kept alive well after any semblance of liberty and the Rights of Man had given way to a tyranny more inhuman than anything Louis XVI could have imagined. The list of probable causes keeps being revised, which is why the Revolution never ceases to fascinate. But one factor--one often passed over--was the very talented and intense Jacques-Louis David.

Born in 1748, the only child of a Parisian iron merchant-turned-bureaucrat, he was a sensitive and high-strung lad, convinced from childhood that he was destined to be a great painter. When his family suggested he take up architecture, David characteristically threw a tantrum. Instead, he entered the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, whose course of training could take 15 years. The Academy, of course, was also the route to fame for any 18th-century French artist.

Time was when pleasing the king and his court meant sending them lighthearted canvases of naked nymphs and boudoir romps in the style of Boucher and Fragonard. But by the 1760s the reforming spirit of the Enlightenment (SMITHSONIAN, May 1997) had been at work. Parisians, long the scandal (and envy) of Europe for their pleasure-loving and frivolous ways, were now intent on appearing to be models of virtue. Moral self-improvement was the rage; the new job of artists, as *philosophe* Denis Diderot put it, was to "make US love virtue and hate vice."

Different styles of virtue were available. Some followed the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, among other things, not so nice, celebrated nature, simplicity and the purifying effects of a really good cry. A whole crop of Rousseauist artists emerged, chief among them Jean-Baptiste Greuze, creator of the then much-acclaimed painting *Girl Weeping Over Her Dead Canary*. For others, republican Rome seemed to offer the most inspirational model--an ideal society (created, it should be noted, by overthrowing a hated ruler) and one that cherished civic virtue, physical courage, frugality and hard work.

The Royal Academy tended to favor this manlier brand of classical virtue, and painters eager for state commissions were encouraged to cull their Livy and Plutarch for likely subjects. The day came, of course, when idealistic Frenchmen would decide to transform their admiration for republican Rome into harsh reality. But at first, this neoclassicism was merely a fashion. No one saw the convulsion coming, least of all the king, whose art collection became a virtual gallery of antique wisdom and austere, patriotic virtues. Eager to be in step with his times, young David buried himself in the classical past. After completing studies at the Academy, he spent nearly five years in Rome filling 12 fat volumes with his drawings.

Ironically, the man destined to become the great painter of stoic resolve was sometimes given to histrionics and hysterical behavior. There was a halfhearted suicide attempt when the Academy did not award a prize to one of his student works, and he had a nervous breakdown in Italy. But in 1782 he had the worldly sense to marry the rich but rather plain daughter of the contractor of the king's buildings. Financial security was soon followed by fame. At the Academy's exhibitions, held in the Louvre, David's paintings caused the biggest commotion. (On one occasion he was carried around the gallery like a football star.)

When the American Revolution broke out, to many French people it seemed as if the era of republican Rome had come to life across the Atlantic. France (to the king's later and bitter regret) supported England's rebellious colonies with men and a great deal of money. Stories about these brave citizen-soldiers, rising up against a half-mad despot, read like a page from Plutarch. And, although the French had trouble with his name (sometimes it came out "Waginston"), George Washington was idolized as a paragon of fancied Roman virtues--brave, self-sacrificing, devoted to his comrades-in-arms and very tall.



Roman virtues were writ large in David's great *Oath of the Horatii*, in which three brothers, lined up toe to toe, embrace as they swear an oath to fight to the death for their homeland. The painting caused a sensation when it appeared at the Salon in 1785 (the American minister to France, Thomas Jefferson, was particularly enthusiastic). It is easy to see why, four years later, the painting was adopted as the perfect emblem of the French Revolution. At the time, however, the end of the monarchy was the furthest thing from David's mind. In fact, the *Horatii* was commissioned for the king himself.

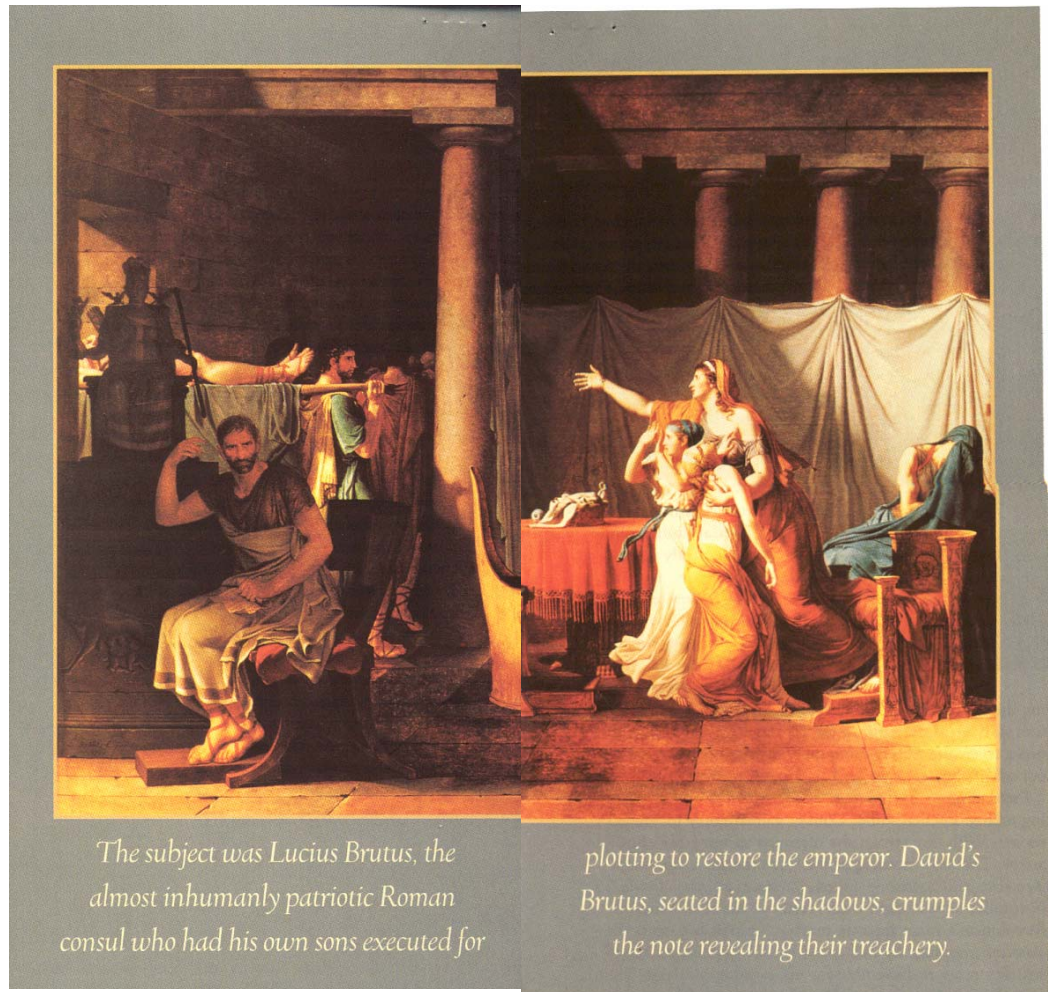
Alas, Louis XVI did not quite live up to the image of fortitude and decisive action celebrated in David's canvas. Overweight and indecisive, he was incapable of dealing with the nation's monstrous financial crisis--brought on in part by the cost of the

American Revolution.

By the summer of 1788 the French government was bankrupt. The centuries-old system of privilege put the burden of financing the government on those who could be taxed--the middle class and the peasants, collectively known as the Third Estate. Beyond them a whole system of aristocratic privilege for church and nobles stretched like a huge glass ceiling, preventing even gifted members, among them David, from reaching the highest positions.

Meanwhile, despite the huge public acclaim David enjoyed, the Royal Academy refused to make him a full officer. And in 1787--to his fury--David was passed over for the directorship of the Academy's school in Rome. At the time, he was at work on his next painting for the king, and its dark and baleful mood matched his own. The subject was Lucius Brutus, the almost inhumanly patriotic Roman consul who had his own sons executed for plotting to restore the emperor. In David's picture the lictors bearing the bodies arrive at Brutus' door. Women collapse in grief: but Brutus, seated alone in the shadows, crumples in his fist the note revealing their treachery.

The picture was still unfinished in June 1789 when members of the Third Estate, summoned to Versailles to help solve the government's financial woes, commandeered an indoor tennis court and declared themselves a "National Assembly." In a scene strangely reminiscent of David's *Horatii*, they swore to create a new constitution for France based--like America's--on liberty and equality. On July 14, a mob stormed the Bastille. In September, Paris was still bristling with alleged royal plots against the Revolution when David's *Brutus* finally--and fatefully--appeared at the Salon. The painting soon came to be



The subject was Lucius Brutus, the almost inhumanly patriotic Roman consul who had his own sons executed for

plotting to restore the emperor. David's Brutus, seated in the shadows, crumples the note revealing their treachery.

taken as a daring commentary on the current political scene--a strident call for vigilance and revenge against all traitors to liberty. This surely came as news to David, who had struggled with the picture for more than two years. Nevertheless, revolutionary Paris was swept up in a wave of Brutus mania.

Speeches and pamphlets invoked his name--"The people of France demands its Brutus!" A revival of Voltaire's play *Brutus* became regular fare around the country, with costumes, settings and stage direction based on David's painting. Performances were accompanied by cheers of "*Vive la Liberte!*" The Jacobins, destined soon to become the most radical and merciless of the revolutionary political clubs, adopted Brutus as a kind of patron saint.

Before the fall of the Bastille, David was a political innocent. Even in the provinces the painter was lionized as "the author of *The Horatii* and *Brutus* ...whose genius prophesied the Revolution." How much David sincerely believed in the Revolution is still debated. No one was more susceptible to the spirit of the moment or more eager to be a part of the great events of history--and here, assuredly, was history in the making.

In any case, he now declared it his sacred duty to promote the Revolution. By late 1790 he was at work on sketches for a huge painting of the Tennis Court Oath, the moment, by common consent, when French liberty was born. Determined that his painting would be worthy of the grandeur of the event itself, he selected a canvas measuring 22 by 32 feet--roughly the size of a motion-picture screen. (In the end, the painting was never completed, partly because it was so big, partly because so many of its principal characters kept being guillotined as traitors.)

The staggeringly expensive project was to be funded by public subscription, so it was important to stir up interest. To great fanfare, David exhibited a detailed drawing of the work. Even on this reduced scale, it conveys the impression that an event of truly cataclysmal importance is taking place. What appear to be thousands of heads and hands (in fact, 629 took the oath that day) surge together in a cresting wave of patriotic solidarity. As they do, a violent thunderstorm erupts, sending the curtains of the hall's high windows unfurling out over the crowd.

The picture was hung beside David's *Brutus* and *Horatii*. The effect was galvanic. "Frenchmen, run, fly, leave everything," one critic wrote, "hurry to be a witness to the oath of the Tennis Court, and if you are not set on fire and consumed by patriotic flames ...you are not worthy of liberty." On September 14, 1791, just as David's drawing went on view, the king was summoned to the National Assembly to formally accept the new constitution.

The Revolution, David said, not only provided new subjects "to inspire my genius," it was a chance to be revenged on the Academy. Appealing to the National Convention, which succeeded the National Assembly, he denounced "that Academic Bastille," as he called it, as "aristocratic" and "despotic." Eventually he managed to have the Academy shut down and replaced by an array of new revolutionary organizations--most of which he dominated, earning him the epithet "dictator of the arts."

It was David's search for support in his battle with the Academy that brought him into the Jacobin Club, and the chance to rub elbows with political heavyweights like Robespierre, the Comte de Mirabeau and the doctor-turned-journalist Marat. Most men recoiled from Marat's disfiguring skin condition, which produced running sores on his body, as well as from the ferocity of his revolutionary invective. But he and David became allies, possibly because both saw themselves as victims of persecution at the hands of despotic academicians. In Marat's case, a thriving practice as the purveyor of electrotherapy, using what he called "igneous fluids," had been ruined when the Royal Academy of Science rejected him as a member.

Marat helped launch David into the world of revolutionary power politics. In 1792, he helped get David elected as deputy to the National Convention, thus beginning the painter's fairly impressive record of political office-holding, including terms as secretary and president of the Convention. In a political arena where inflammatory oratory was all, David's speech was impaired by a large tumor that had begun to form on the inside of his cheek (probably the result of an old fencing wound). However, the increasingly extremist Jacobins found David useful, indeed invaluable, in other ways. They were eager to be seen as the party of the people--the voice and protector of the humblest citizen. Since the working classes and peasantry accounted for about 90 percent of the population, this was a good move. The problem was, how to control this unruly segment of the population, largely uneducated, illiterate, hungry most of the time and always volatile. Mirabeau, astute and pragmatic, knew: the best "way of acting powerfully on men in the mass," he had explained, "is by means of public festivals. ...Among the ancient peoples they worked wonders." David, with his genius for physical drama, was the logical man to take charge.

One of his first pageants was the Festival of Liberty, in April 1792. Ethically, it was a somewhat dubious occasion; the honorees were soldiers who had mutinied and been sold as galley slaves for their sins. Declaring they were not criminals at all but victims of oppression, the Jacobins bought their freedom and arranged a kind of homecoming celebration. The centerpiece of the procession was a giant Liberty chariot with the freed soldiers marching alongside, accompanied by young girls holding their chains. Progress was slowed by stops for dancing, fraternal toasts and patriotic songs. Some estimates put the crowd at 400,000. "You cannot imagine," a student wrote his parents, "how much this *fete* has raised the thermometer of the public temper."

Not long afterward a mob stormed the Tuileries, killing several hundred palace guards and sending the royal family fleeing to the Assembly for protection. Far from being a spontaneous uprising, the whole thing was designed by the Jacobins and other republicans to force the end of the monarchy--and it worked. By January 1793 France had declared itself a republic; the king had been brought to trial and found guilty of treason.

The matter of Louis XVI's punishment caused shouting matches in the Convention, mostly between the Jacobins, who called for immediate death, and the more moderate Girondists, who urged some less permanent solution. (Tom Paine suggested sending Louis to America for rehabilitation as a good republican.) The vote to execute passed--with David's "*Qui*" dutifully following the Jacobin lead--but not by much. There were last-ditch attempts to have the sentence reconsidered. The Jacobins found themselves under attack as dangerous extremists. Then a prominent Jacobin named Lepelletier de Saint-Fargeau, who had voted for the king's execution, was stabbed to death in a cafe by a former member of the royal guard. As an opportunity to divert sympathy to the regicide cause, the murder was heaven-sent. David quickly organized a state funeral.

As the headless body of Louis XVI was being quietly reduced to nothing in a lime pit, Lepelletier was given death rites rivaling those held by Achilles for Patroclus in the *Iliad*. (David had painted this very subject as a student in Rome.) The draped corpse was displayed in the Place Vendome on a high catafalque. Antique candelabras and tripods with smoking incense flanked the pedestal. The lying in state lasted four days; it was said that even those who never knew Lepelletier publicly wept for him.

David also produced a painting of Lepelletier on his bier, which was hung behind the speaker's chair at the Convention. Lest anyone forget why he was being so honored, David painted in Lepelletier's ballot paper, on which could be read, "I vote the death of the tyrant."

The memorial arrangements for Lepelletier were so successful that they helped create a kind of competitive martyr mania among the Convention's members. Rare was the speaker who did not underline his remarks by indicating his willingness to die on the spot. On one memorable occasion, Marat, responding to the latest attacks on his character by the Girondists, pressed a gun to his temple and offered to blow his brains out in front of everybody. Overcome with the spirit of the moment, David jumped to his feet and demanded to be assassinated, too.

In the end, Marat's martyrdom came, quite famously, in his bathtub, but not by his own hand. His skin affliction required frequent soakings in a medicinal bath of kaolin, and so it was that a young woman from Caen named Charlotte Corday found him on the evening of July 13, 1793. Corday's decision to kill Marat was prompted by Jacobin outrages. Tiring of their tedious war of words with the Girondists, the Jacobins began forcibly ousting them from the Convention and arresting them as traitors. Given Marat's fondness for saying things like "In order to ensure public tranquility, 200,000 heads must be cut off," it promised to be a national bloodbath.

Pretending to have names of such traitors and concealing a large kitchen knife, Corday gained entry to Marat's rooms. With one stroke she managed to sever his carotid artery. The next morning at the Convention, a representative rose and solemnly asked, "Where are you, David?" Naturally, he was right there, ready to make of Marat



He portrays Napoleon as a hero crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass on a fiery white stallion.

the Revolution's most famous martyr. Dispensing with the classical trappings he had provided for Lepelletier, David struck a more realistic note for his painting of Marat. The martyr would be presented at the moment of his death, lying in his bath, scrawling for the "good of the people." The result is one of the most unforgettable images in the history of art. The recumbent pose obviously imitates the familiar image of the dead Christ. The painting was carried in a solemn procession through the streets.

France was now swept by Marat mania. Prints of the dead Marat were distributed by the thousands; a play and songs told his Story; more than 30 towns were renamed in his honor. One patriotic parent even christened his son Brutus-Lepelletier-Marat. It was in the name of these martyrs to liberty that the concept of a holy purge--the Terror--took monstrous shape; its chief instrument a bookish and ascetic lawyer from Arras named Maximilien Robespierre. In the terrible months from the summer of 1793 to the summer of 1794 there were at least 16,000 Frenchmen put to death across the country. During the Terror, the Committee of Public Instruction--David served on it with particular distinction--had the task of inculcating patriotic (Jacobin) ideals on a mass scale. Exhibitions, concerts, theatrical performances and a whole range of public "entertainments" were systematically transformed into organs of republican edification. None were more effective than festivals, of which David was the unrivaled impresario.

His Festival of Unity and Indivisibility, held on August 10, 1793, served as a kind of inspirational kickoff for the Terror. Festivities began at dawn with fraternal libations at the Fountain of Regeneration, a giant female figure with water spewing from her breasts, and ended 16 hours later outside the Convention. Perhaps the most spectacular moment took place on the Place de la Revolution, where a statue of Liberty was surrounded by an enormous mound of crowns and other royalist paraphernalia (most of it theater props). At a signal, the pile was lit and 3,000 white doves were released into the air--each reportedly wearing a little tag that read: "We are free, imitate us."



David was also an active member of the Committee of General Security, one of the policing agencies of the Terror; his signature is on nearly 300 arrest orders. However, unlike Robespierre, who witnessed none of his victims' deaths (public executions, he said, brutalized the character), David was known to sit in the Cafe Regence sketching the tumbrel's occupants as they went to the guillotine. His most famous subject was the "Widow Capet," (left) Marie Antoinette, sketched on her way to her beheading.

The excesses of the Terror do, in fact, seem to have taken a toll on David's mental state. His speeches became even more rambling, incoherent and, at times, downright delusional. Addressing the Convention in July 1794, when the guillotine was thumping off heads at an average of about 25 victims a day, he invited his colleagues to consider the utopia that France had become--a place of fraternal love, fair weather and painless childbirth.

Unbalanced or not, on June 8, 1794, David produced his most elaborate spectacle yet, the famous Festival of the Supreme Being. It was intended as a kind of mass indoctrination for Robespierre's new state religion--a fairly imprecise form of worship ("its temple is the universe...its religion virtue") based on the philosophies of Rousseau, whose works Robespierre is said to have kept by his bedside.

On the morning of the great day, the Place de la Revolution, normally heavy with the stench of blood from the guillotine's work, was redolent with massed roses. "There were girls strewing flowers everywhere," a young girl wrote to her father. "My hair was simply full of them." A chorus of 2,400 parents and children chanted the new "Hymn of the Supreme Being." A cart full of blind children sang a "Hymn to Divinity." Presiding over it all was Robespierre. After a long speech about liberty and virtue springing from the breast of



It was hoped that the sight of the body would intensify an outpouring of moral outrage.

the divinity, he took a flaming torch--David had the honor of handing it to him--and set fire to a giant effigy representing Atheism, Egoism, Ambition and False Simplicity.

During the afternoon session, crowds assembled on the Champ de Mars to find David's piece de resistance--an 80-foot-high plaster-and-cardboard mountain topped by a statue of Hercules and a very large liberty tree. The final tableau had Robespierre standing on its summit, with the enormous choral group distributed around its slopes and crags.

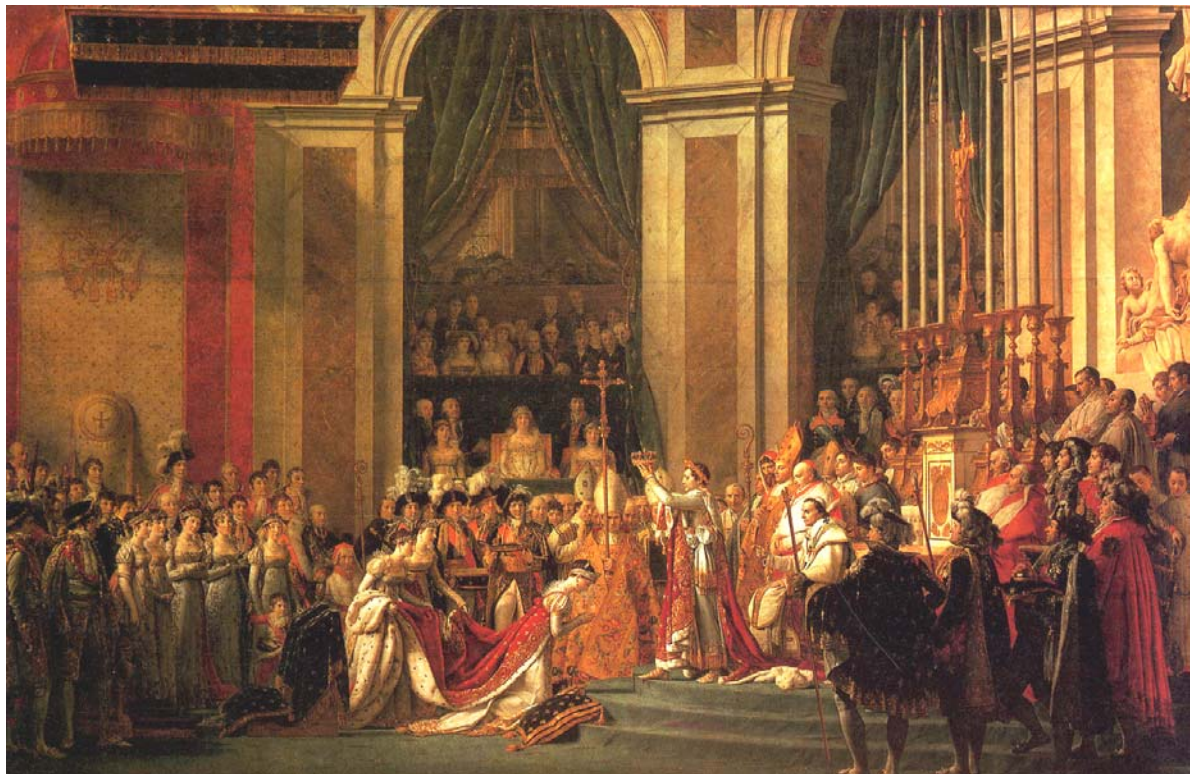
If the Festival of Unity had heralded the beginning of the Terror, the day of the Supreme Being marked the beginning of its end. Robespierre's decision to cast himself in the role of high priest of a new religion was a fatal mistake for a man already suspected of planning to set himself up as the supreme dictator of the republic. His speech at the Convention the next month, in which he spoke darkly of the need for more "purges," this time within the Convention itself, made even close colleagues fear for their heads. Typically, however, at the end he retreated into the guise of persecuted virtue. Invoking the image of Socrates' suicide, he declared, "Let them prepare the hemlock for me. I will await it on these sacred seats." When Robespierre gave the same speech at the Jacobin Club, David, creator of a famous painting on this very subject, jumped up and exclaimed, to his later and everlasting regret, "My friend, if you drink the hemlock, so will I."

On the following day, July 27, 1794, when Robespierre was denounced by the Convention as a tyrant and calls were made for his arrest, David was nowhere to be seen. "I was ill," he later explained. "I had taken an emetic and could not leave the house for several days." On July 31, three days after Robespierre and 100 of his friends were guillotined, David finally put in an appearance at the Convention. Pale, stuttering, with waves of sweat pouring off him, he tried to assure the deputies that he was no great ally of Robespierre's. His offer to "drink the hemlock" was held up to him as a most damning piece of evidence to the contrary. This was misheard, taken out of context, he contended.

The Convention arrested him on August 2. He spent several months in prison, his life no longer in any real danger since the worst bloodletting was past. During this time he referred to himself as "*in vinculis*" (in chains), but this is self-dramatics. He was not manacled; at least for a time he was allowed to receive guests, and he had his easel and paints, although he complained about the shortage of models. He did have a mirror, however, and used it to paint a remarkably revealing self-portrait.

Once out of prison he vowed he was through with politics, but for a hopeless hero-worshiper like David, the young Napoleon--dashing, charismatic and rapidly gathering up the reins of power--proved irresistible. After meeting Napoleon at a dinner in 1797, David offered to paint his portrait. In rapturous terms, he described the sitting to his students: "What a fine head he has! It's pure, it's great, it's as beautiful as the Antique! Here is a man to whom altars would have been erected in ancient times: yes, my friends, Bonaparte ...is my hero!"

And so began a second career as painter-propagandist. Early on he portrays Napoleon as the visionary military hero, crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass on a fiery white stallion (in point of fact, Napoleon had quite sensibly made the crossing on a mule). Later, there is Napoleon as the tireless statesman, posed in front of a desk piled high with papers and a copy of the *code Napoleon*. Most famously, David immortalized Bonaparte as emperor in the great coronation picture, which now takes up more than 600 square feet of wall



space at the Louvre. As a display of imperial power and pomp, it has few rivals in the history of art--and it pleased Napoleon immensely. David was made First Painter to the Emperor.

With the fall of Napoleon in 1815 and the restoration of the monarchy, David, now in his 60s, was among those exiled as a regicide. He spent his final years in Brussels, where he died in 1825. For years he was reviled as a turncoat, terrorist and political chameleon. (One of his loyal pupils was obliged to paint over the *Death of Marat* in white lead and keep it hidden to prevent its destruction.) David, however, was also a great--and revolutionary--painter. He was born into a world in which painting was an ornament to society, something for the pleasure of the privileged few; his images such as the *Marat*, the *Horatii* and the *Brutus* showed the power of an to electrify the soul of even the commonest citizen. Neither France nor art has ever been the same. I

Elizabeth Wilson is *a writer and critic who served for 12 years on the staff of the Morgan Library in New York.*