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"This Deep, Great, and Religious Feeling": Delécluze on History Painting and David

by Marijke Jonker

Fig. 1 Eugène Delacroix. *Massacres at Chios*, 1824. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Etienne-Jean Delécluze (1781-1863), a former painter who had studied in David's workshop, was the art critic of the liberal newspaper *Le Journal des débats* from 1824 until his death. Nowadays, even more than in his own time, Delécluze stands as a learned, highly respected but also highly conservative critic, chiefly remembered for his unwavering defense of David as the greatest contemporary French artist and as the example which young artists should emulate. His *Louis David, son école et son temps: Souvenirs* (1855) counts as one of the most important sources of information about this painter.[1] He is also remembered for his outspoken dislike of the work of any artist who did not follow the precepts of David and for his paternalistic, rigid attitude towards young painters, which made many of them hate him from the bottom of their hearts. The most scathing comment on Delécluze can be read in a letter from the landscapist Paul Huet to the critic Sainte-Beuve, written in 1862: "...this larva, sitting on the leaves of the *Débats*, whose slobber has defiled, withered, besmirched everything that bloomed, everything that could bear fruit."[2]

We, modern readers, are used to a strictly teleological view of the history of nineteenth-century art. Each great nineteenth-century artist is admired for the aspects of his work that seem to announce Modernism. An art critic like Delécluze, holding on to the principles learned in youth and not changing his point of view when new artistic directions came to the fore, does not fit this paradigm. His inability to accept young artists as leading artistic personalities in their own right, and his reviews that always focused on the degree to which their works deviated from David's principles, discredit him as a critic in our eyes. Delécluze wrote, with reference to Delacroix's *Massacres at Chios* (fig. 1), for instance, that he saw "the theory of ugliness, systematically opposed to that of beauty,"[3] and about Delacroix's later works that the painter never seemed to feel the obligation to change his ideas and manner.[4] His judgment of most French painters preceding David was equally negative.

The most important publications to date about Delécluze's life and career, by Robert Baschet, David Wakefield, and James Rubin, although acknowledging his importance as a critic, do little to alter this view of Delécluze, nor do they attempt to clarify the reasons for this persistent trait of judging French artists by David's standards in his writings.[5] In this article I will focus on Delécluze's criticism of history painting in *Louis David* and his depiction of David as one of the few modern French painters who broke completely with history painting and who overcame the degeneration of French culture. My argument is that Delécluze's criticism of French history painting and his defense of David sprang from a lifelong and growing mistrust of French art and culture, which he saw as individualistic, self-indulgent, and marked by political strife. This mistrust was especially focused on the Academy and its glorifying of history painting as the genre in which France showed its artistic and cultural superiority over all other nations. Precisely because Delécluze is seen as a conservative critic by historians of

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nineteenth-century art, we tend to overlook his outspoken criticism of the Academy and history painting, which is usually associated with Modernism.

Delécluze's chief objection to Academic history painting was that it served only the perfection of art itself and the artists' need to stand out from the crowd. To him, truly great paintings sprang from the artists' need to express an ideal to be shared with the public. He mistrusted the preoccupation with artistic progress and the superiority of French art, which dominated theoretical writing about history painting, and he criticized French artists for what he believed to be their systematic, insincere, and self-indulgent need to draw attention to themselves.

Although *Louis David* is valued for its insider's view of David's career, it is also the book in which Delécluze summarized his negative ideas on French culture and history painting, which had colored his *Salon* reviews and other writings on art during the previous thirty years. *Louis David* is the only one of Delécluze's writings readily available to most researchers in the field of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art and art criticism. Citations to it crop up in many studies of David and other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French artists. These studies, however, betray little understanding of the fact that Delécluze, without making it explicit, tries in this book to come to grips with his own failed artistic career. For this reason he depicts David as a highly talented artist who had met with almost insurmountable barriers to his career in contemporary France, where the Academy, the government, and the artists alike were preoccupied with their own superiority, and who could only realize his full potential by making choices which the principled Delécluze had refused to make.

In order to understand Delécluze's negative feelings about his own country we must first find out where they came from. Their origins appear to go back to Delécluze's formative years during the Revolution and the Napoleonic age. Since *Louis David* informs us in detail about those years, we can find our most important clues there. Delécluze tells us about his Parisian family, liberal and pro-Revolutionary at first, but feeling threatened in their own city once the Revolution began to radicalize. He lets the reader share in the anxiety of the family in the evenings, sitting around the supper table, white and immobile with fear while the Revolutionary patrols roamed the streets, as well as in their relief when the patrols had passed by.[6] He recounts his experience as a child, returning home with his mother, when they were suddenly confronted with a tumbril carrying people to the guillotine. Delécluze vividly remembered that his mother had been warned by another unwilling onlooker because her face betrayed her emotions too much. In the tumbril Delécluze saw M. de Laborde, a court financier. Years later, when he was a pupil in David's studio, he encountered M. de Laborde's daughter, the beautiful Mme de Noailles. Delécluze describes his embarrassment at the memory of Mme de Noailles' father which was triggered by this encounter, and at his momentary vision of the young lady's beautiful head falling under the guillotine.[7] Obviously, these memories of the Revolution were traumatizing, at once for their horror and for the unwanted, sadistically tainted, erotic images which they evoked.

Delécluze showed himself deeply disturbed by the political behavior of David, his admired teacher. He describes him as a man who, instead of showing political integrity, followed several regimes, all equally repulsive in Delécluze's eyes. After siding with Robespierre and hysterically shouting out his wish to die with him, David had backed out at the last moment. Delécluze witnessed

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this last scene and recounts it in full, humiliating detail, evoking Peter's denial of Christ.[8] Shortly after, he saw David "shed the Republican of 1793, protecting *émigrés* and paying court to people bearing a noble name."[9] Only a few years later David turned to Napoleon when the latter came to power. Delécluze saw with great clarity that this turncoat behavior was not limited to David. A whole generation of artists and intellectuals turned to Bonaparte when the battles he won made them forget the sad recent history of their country. David himself suddenly stopped working on *Leonidas at Thermopylae*, a work inspired by Republican sentiments, when Napoleon asked him to paint his portrait. Napoleon had totally subjected David.[10]

Delécluze noticed that once Napoleon became emperor in 1804, the *politesse* of the Pre-Revolutionary court returned and David exchanged the behavior of the revolutionary for the refined manners of the *Ancien Régime*. "David's conversion to the Monarchy was, at least at that moment, so complete, and one can even say so sincere, that he did not perceive his change of ideas and costume."[11] Under Napoleon, David's career developed as that of a great painter would have done under the *Ancien Régime*. The painter accepted from Napoleon the title of *Premier Peintre*, against which he had protested in the past.[12] France's intellectual elite compared itself to Charlemagne's paladins, believing it to be destined to form a new nobility of merit.[13] According to Delécluze Napoleon's need for artists to serve his propaganda machine did more harm than good to French art. The bloody battles of the Napoleonic regime now became the most important subject for painters, and these subjects were honored as a new subcategory of history paintings, *sujets honorables pour le caractère national*, when Napoleon invented the *Prix décennaux* in 1810 to crown the best works by French artists created during the previous ten years. Battle paintings brought a vogue for anecdote into French painting; many were works of low quality, mainly to be admired for their painstaking rendition of details. Delécluze's judgment of most of the artists working for the Napoleonic propaganda machine was damning. In their paintings "they could wield their brush without greatly taxing their imagination and even without great perfection being demanded from them."[14]

Although Delécluze does not dwell on this in *Louis David*, he had to face the fact that, having refused to serve the Napoleonic propaganda machine, he was unable to survive as an independent artist. At the beginning of his career, he had earnestly wished to become a painter of religious subjects, but he never succeeded in this. His paintings with Classical subjects, which he exhibited at the *Salon* between 1808 and 1814, won him the admiration of critics, but during the last, difficult years of the Empire there was little interest in art that did not serve political propaganda.[15] This meant the end of Delécluze's career as a painter. Holding on to his principles had brought him nowhere.

An artistic career cut short, traumatic memories, mistrust of feelings and acts of a man he admired as an artist and a teacher; with these problems Delécluze wrestled in *Louis David*. The fact that the Napoleonic regime under which he set out as an artist had no need for his idealist paintings but only for documentary history paintings serving its own, dubious ends, probably inspired his view that history painting itself formed the root of evil in French art.

In Delécluze's view of the history of art, Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) and Eustache Le Sueur (1616-1655) were the great French painters of the seventeenth century. Although these two are

generally considered to be leading figures in the development of history painting, Delécluze depicts them as artists who played no part in its emergence at all, and who had not been able to determine the course of French art. Instead, he puts forward Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), *Premier Peintre du Roi*, Director of the Academy, and an important theorist during the second half of the seventeenth century, as the leading personality in French seventeenth-century art. According to Delécluze, Le Brun encouraged French artists to imitate the styles of Italian painters like the Caracci, Carlo Maratta, and Pietro da Cortona; a choice doubtlessly inspired by the large, propagandistic works entrusted to him.[16] Delécluze places the invention of history painting itself even later, around 1700, long after Poussin and Le Sueur had died. The critic considered history painting as the product of an age without any need for religious art, and a new genre which catered to the amateur's taste. The only time he tries to describe the characteristics of history painting he calls it a genre which came into existence because its greater range of subjects (as compared to those of traditional religious art) would allow "artists' talents, free from obstruction, to take a bolder, more vigorous direction, and soar to immense, and until that moment unknown heights."[17]

Delécluze's interpretation of the emergence of seventeenth-century French history painting in *Louis David* must be compared to that of a modern researcher in this field, Charles Duro, to enable us to see the far-reaching implications of Delécluze's views on this matter. According to Duro, from its foundation in 1648 the Academy put forward history painting as the genre most suitable to serve as a showcase for the full range of French Academic painters' abilities. He points to the fact that Le Brun in particular always publicly admired Poussin as the first great French history painter; Delécluze did not believe Poussin to have been a history painter at all. However, the Academy needed royal commissions, so as to be able to develop history painting and prove the superiority of Academic painters. This need, Duro tells us, prompted Le Brun to choose Italian painters like the Carracci as the real examples for his grand decorative projects, as their works, and not Poussin's small-scale paintings, were the only ones which provided models for the large-scale propaganda paintings which Louis XIV needed.[18] Duro points out that he and other early theorists of history painting during the formative years of the Academy, such as André Félibien and Martin de Charmois, used exalted terms to describe the history painter. They stressed his ability to depict all aspects of nature, including man himself, and, like a historian or a poet, to depict great or agreeable subjects, and this led them to understand the history painter's work as that of a Creator, a Godlike being.[19]

Delécluze wished to see Poussin and Le Sueur as strangers to the pompous court art of seventeenth-century France and to the deification of artists described by Duro as typical of the propagandists of history painting. So, ignoring Le Brun's admiration of Poussin as the first great history painter, he placed the beginning of history painting much later than Duro does. He ties this beginning to the new ideas about history painting which emerged when amateurs began to put their stamp on art theory, towards the end of the seventeenth century. Again, comparison with modern research helps us to understand Delécluze's ideas about the importance of amateurs for the development of history painting. Thomas Crow has drawn our attention to these amateurs; the Crozat family in particular, which collected colorist, technically brilliant Dutch and Flemish paintings and the equally

brilliant works of Watteau. They protected theorists like Jean-Baptiste du Bos (1670-1742) and Roger de Piles (1635-1709), whose interests had shifted from the intellectual to the technical side of painting.[20] Once these theorists had gained a foothold in the Academy, around 1700, they and their eighteenth-century followers advised history painters to use painterly means like *clair-obscur*, "pyramidal" compositions, fading of background figures, grouping of figures, and *peinture d'expression*, for the creation of highly dramatic works, partly inspired by the Italian masters which Le Brun had already admired, and partly by the colorist schools of the North.[21] Eighteenth-century history painting's reliance on drama would quickly become such that critics often compared its painted gestures and facial expressions to those of bad actors, and they called history painting "theatrical" instead of "dramatic."[22]

Although Delécluze's views on history painting as an ill-defined genre, developed to enable artists to show their ability, are based on his knowledge of sources from the early years of the Academy, his views on what Academic history painting actually looked like stem from his knowledge of eighteenth-century painting, art theory, and art criticism. He describes the situation of French art at the beginning of David's career as follows: on the one hand, highly dramatic, even theatrical, history painting, influenced by the techniques of masters belonging to foreign, colorist schools; and bearing no relationship at all to the works of Poussin and Le Sueur; on the other, smaller works by artists such as Boucher, painted with no other purpose in mind than to display a personal manner and technical brilliance, equally influenced by the colorists of Italy and the North.

Delécluze believed that the French government's earnest attempts at protecting the arts during the eighteenth century had had a devastating effect. The first of these attempts was the *Salon*. Created in 1737 to serve the interests of artists, it contributed to the diminishing importance of art. Delécluze compared the *Salon* to a bazaar, where the merchants displayed the most varied and bizarre objects to arouse the customers' interest.[23] The second was Marigny's (*Directeur général des bâtiments* [Director-general of buildings] from 1751 to 1773) attempt at regeneration of French art during the 1750's through giving commissions for history paintings with a fixed subject, size and price, without indicating their destination or even expecting to find a destination for them. According to Delécluze he simply had the vague intention to help painters, and tended them "as they tend bears and parrots in the *Jardin des Plantes*."[24]

The main trouble with history painting was, and always would be, that it had no real purpose except that of allowing painters to develop their abilities to the full. Delécluze simply ignored the belief held by Marigny and d'Angiviller, his successor, who held office until 1791, that history paintings and sculptures, depicting the great deeds of Classical and French heroes, could be used as a form of public instruction, to instill virtue and national pride in the French people. Instead, his opinion of the value of history painting seems to foreshadow Thomas Crow's: that history painting had become "a free-floating symbol of all that was elevated and morally commanding," appropriated by anyone who thought it could serve his interest.[25] Delécluze pointed out that Marigny's measures caused a multiplication of works of art and of artists who were dependent on the government. Both the *Salon* and the protection of history painting greatly harmed the interest of the arts and the glory of the state.[26]

The last culprit on Delécluze's list was the museum, the place were the history paintings commissioned by the government inevitably ended up. Delécluze called them "the poor-houses of art."[27] Museums destroyed the moral effect that painting could have had on the masses. The viewer regarded every object in this marketplace with indifference, until he found something which he fancied.[28] Delécluze's negativity seems to be justified by Andrew McClellan's words: "Late eighteenth-century museums initiated the now commonplace practice of isolating works of art, both from each other, through hanging and frames, and from the social roles and physical contexts that they originally enjoyed, in the service of direct or transparent viewing."[29]

Fig. 2 Jacques-Louis David. *The Oath of the Horatii*, 1785. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Delécluze points out that David's first greatly successful history painting, *The Oath of the Horatii* (Salon of 1785) (fig. 2) was also a commission from d'Angiviller. Since the painting's size was larger than prescribed, d'Angiviller saw need to criticize David. Delécluze regarded this criticism as completely absurd. What was the use of prescribing a certain size for a work of art without a destination? [30] Neither *The Oath of the Horatii* nor *Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of his Sons* (1789) (fig. 3) were subjects fit to be placed in a church or a palace, and they remained in David's workshop until they were acquired for the *Louvre*, in 1802. A proper destination was the most important condition for the creation of a significant work of art. Lacking this, an artistic career became a kind of lottery, in which artists were continually obliged to find new subjects to raise the public's curiosity. David himself could only partly surmount this obstacle, and then only through "the freedom and vigor of his talent."[31]

Fig. 3 Jacques-Louis David. *Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of his Sons*, 1789. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Delécluze believed that he lived in a historical period and country without a real purpose for art, because a higher principle, that could have created a natural tie between artists, the nation, and the people, was missing. This becomes clear when we read his praise of Italian art and of Raphael in particular. Delécluze assumed that art could reach perfection only in a simple, unified society. Artists of the Italian Renaissance had drawn from a rather small range of subjects of a predominantly religious character and were guided by a deep and simple faith, which inspired love for their subjects.[32] Delécluze wondered what would have become of Raphael and other great Renaissance artists, had they been the contemporaries of Louis XV, Voltaire, Mirabeau and Robespierre, and how great David would have become if he, "accustomed since childhood to respect the institutions and persons governing society" would, like Raphael, have been pampered by Leo X.[33] Raphael's works were masterpieces because they did not show "a dramatic scene which linked all the figures, but only because the figures were almost isolated from each other, connected more through thoughts than through attitudes and expression."[34] This almost complete separation of the figures in Raphael's work enabled the viewer to admire every one of them for their individual perfection. In this way Raphael's paintings slowly conquered the viewer's eyes and his soul, enabling him to experience the profound faith which Raphael wished to express. Modern *peinture d'expression* could only arouse the viewer's passions.[35]

As we have seen, our critic regarded Poussin and Le Sueur as the only two artists in seventeenth-century France to have reached true greatness. Poussin spent most of his life in Italy, where he managed to stay clear of the Carracci, Maratta, and Piero da Cortona, who were so influential in France. During most of his career he underwent the influence of Raphael and other Renaissance painters; towards the end of his life Classical

Antiquity became his only source of inspiration.[36] Delécluze detected a change from religious to worldly subject matter in Poussin's work when around the middle of his career the painter shed the allegories and symbols visible in his paintings until then, and chose reality as his subject. Le Sueur was admired by Delécluze as a painter who, isolated and too poor to pay for a proper artistic education, had learned to paint from a few prints after paintings by Raphael and other Renaissance masters.[37] Because they both found their inspiration in Renaissance and Classical art, Delécluze placed them both outside the tradition of French history painting.

Delécluze leaves us to conclude that it was the lack of unity in his country and in French culture, as well as the lack of a shared faith, that made David, who was not born a rebel, follow one regime after another, once the *Ancien Régime* was over. He expected not just commissions from these regimes, but a place in the heart of the nation for paintings which would once again have a destination. Had David lived at the beginning of the sixteenth century, he would have been spared the predicament of having to search a destination for his art. He would have been a far greater artist and would not have had to suffer the consequences of his political choices. Although he does not say so, Delécluze probably believed that he himself would have become the painter of religious subjects he wished to be, had he lived in Raphael's time. His fantasies about the integrity, faith, and love of beauty of those times, were doubtlessly an antidote against painful childhood memories.

Fig. 4 Jacques-Louis David. *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, 1799. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

David's early successful works were created under the same circumstances as most eighteenth century history paintings. Delécluze believed that they still showed the flaws of this genre, and that David was aware of this when he looked back on these works in later years. David had studied with Joseph-Marie Vien and at the same time at the School of the Academy. As a result, he found it hard to overcome Academic principles even when Vien, and his sojourn in Rome after winning the *Prix de Rome* (1775-1780), invited him to do so. He would later, when working on *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799) fig. 4), admit that at this early stage of his career he had still been convinced of the superiority of French art, that his taste was not refined enough at the time to admire Raphael, and that he had liked bold modern painters like Caravaggio, Ribera, and Valentin more. "In short, Raphael was a too delicate food for my coarse mind."[38] Making use of critics' favorite argument for condemning Academic history painting in general, David would condemn the composition of *The Oath of the Horatii*, with its opposition of two groups, as theatrical. He thought that it showed a recherché interest in anatomy, condemned his own use of color, and admitted that the painting was influenced by Roman taste and monuments. When David would be able to recommence his studies, now that Antiquity was known better, he would go right for the goal**the emulation of Greek art.[39] In this description of David's changing interests Delécluze presupposes an insurmountable barrier between true understanding of Raphael and Classical art, and the principles learned by French history painters. In reality, copying after Raphael was the main occupation of the students of the *Académie de France à Rome*.[40]

Fig. 5 Jacques-Louis David. *The Death of Marat*, 1793. Brussels, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts.

Delécluze felt that not merely *The Oath of the Horatii* and *Brutus*, but David's whole oeuvre, displayed a variety of ideas and subjects which had a bewildering effect on the viewer. Here also lack of faith was to blame. His paintings "were truly remarkable, judged as works of art, but they distracted the mind, instead of captivating and instructing it; they let ideas diverge, instead of leading them to one center."[41] Delécluze believed that only two or three works showed the originality of David's talent to the full, but they were all inspired by the various regimes with which David sided once the *Ancien Régime* was overturned. The first of these, although by no means David's best, was *The Death of Marat*, from 1793 (fig. 5).[42] In a detailed account of the creation of what Delécluze considered David's most important works coupled to his political development, Delécluze makes clear the stages of David's break with history painting.

David, in his speeches as a member of the Convention during Robespierre's Republic, began to express his newly formed ideas on the role of art in society. Delécluze discerned a depth of thought there which tied David to the dogmatic doctrines of philosophers like Plato, but also to the churches and priesthood of modern times.[43] "In this case, art would no longer be an aim, but a means … In David's speeches, art is represented as a branch of public instruction, fit ... to propagandize ethical and political ideas..."[44] Here, Delécluze credits David with having discovered the principles that had already guided the *Ancien Régime*'s protection of history painting. He also implies that David was led to these principles by his newly found faith in the ideas of Robespierre and Marat. The Revolution had truly become his religion. For a short while, society was built on the principles of Medieval society, when religious institutions and governments protected the "unity of action of sciences, literature, arts and ethics."[45] As we have seen, when this ideal was destroyed, at Robespierre's downfall, David betrayed his "Messiah."

Delécluze claimed that David's new involvement with his subjects and his newly found belief in art as a form of public instruction inspired his growing interest in the nude. David now realized that the philosophers of Antiquity had searched the human soul, so as to know truth and justice, just as Phidias and his contemporaries studied the human body, using all their wisdom and delicate taste to discover and fix the most harmonious proportions. Delécluze quotes David lecturing to his pupils on this principle: "…If there is no real civilization when the laws of justice remain unknown, it is equally true that art does not exist where there is no study of the proportions that constitute visible beauty."[46]

Delécluze lauded this visual perfection of each individual figure, directly influenced by Raphael, as the main achievement of *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*. Most of the criticism heaped on *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* when it was first exhibited concerned its composition and David's use of the nude. This criticism came from people who resented the part he had played in the Academy's closure in 1793, and who noticed the opposition between their principles and those demonstrated by David in this painting.[47] As we have seen, when working on *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* David learned to see the deficiencies of his works of the 1780's. He renounced both the methods he had used in the past and the goal of imitating the methods of other great masters and now concentrated on the noble and truthful imitation of nature. He learned to appreciate the nobility and simplicity of expression in Raphael's figures and realized that the great Renaissance painter had come much nearer to an understanding

of the principles of Greek art than he had. Delécluze believed that, although the painting lacked the dramatic unity demanded imperiously by the moderns, viewers would instinctively be drawn to the group of soldiers on the verge of combat, separated by the women casting their children between the two armies.[48] Charm and simplicity of form served the expression of a simple ideal which could appeal to the public's deepest feelings now that peace had returned to France.

Fig. 6 Jacques-Louis David. *Leonidas at Thermopylae*, 1799-1815. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Delécluze describes *Leonidas at Thermopylae* (1799-1815) (fig. 6) as a work originally intended as a continuation of the principles so brilliantly demonstrated in *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*. Again David refused to indulge the modern wish for expression, lighting effects, and dramatic grouping, and again he chose to depict human beings in such a way that they could be admired individually. When working on *Leonidas at Thermopylae*, David introduced a monthly composition contest in his workshop in order to stimulate his students and himself to find new principles of composition based on those of Renaissance and Greek art, instead of on those of history painting. These were to enable painters to create convincing renditions of the history of the Spartans at Thermopylae and other subjects from Greek history.[49] David wished to evoke the thoughtful atmosphere preceding the battle of Thermopylae, when the Spartans meditated on their duty towards their country and on their own inevitable death in the battle to come. Again Delécluze stresses that David's still existing Republican sympathies constituted a pseudo-religion. David wished to give this scene a serious, religious aspect and wished to express "this deep, great and religious feeling, which is inspired by love of one's country."[50] The holiness of the subject did not allow a dramatic composition and the use of *peinture d'expression*, which would give the painting a theatrical aspect. Instead David wished to work like Classical Greek artists, who were always trying to perfect a restricted set of types and ideas and who realized that "the true value of an idea lies in the perfection with which it is rendered and used."[51] The reader is left to conclude that the methods of Greek artists resembled those of Mediaeval and Renaissance religious artists.

According to Delécluze, David's bold break with the principles of modern history painting did not lead to a satisfactory expression of the great idea of patriotism. Precisely this subject, of people in great danger, needed a more dramatic rendition. Delécluze recorded in great detail the difficulties experienced by David when working on this painting and noted that David found it nearly impossible to find the right attitude and facial expression for Leonidas, the embodiment of patriotism, even though he had modeled him on a Classical cameo representing a mythological hero.[52]

The painting was left unfinished in David's workshop when the painter suddenly exchanged his Republicanism for Monarchism and his admiration of Greek art for near envy of his pupil Antoine-Jean Gros, who was the most successful of the painters glorifying the Napoleonic regime and who had developed a naturalistic, colorful manner suited to the depiction of contemporary events.[53]

This naturalism and a new interest in realistic portraiture also formed the hallmarks of David's propaganda works for Napoleon. Napoleon commissioned four paintings of his *Sacre* (Coronation) from David, which were to depict the *Sacre* itself, the *Enthronement*, the *Distribution of the Eagle Standards*, and the *Reception of the Emperor and Empress at the Hôtel de Ville*. Of these, only the *Distribution of the Eagle Standards* and the *Sacre* were

Fig. 7 Jacques-Louis David. *Sacre*, 1805-1807. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

finished. Delécluze believed that only the *Sacre* (1805-07), which actually shows the coronation of the Empress Joséphine, and not that of Napoleon, was a truly good painting (fig. 7). Ignoring David's preliminary sketches for the *Sacre*, showing Napoleon crowning himself, Delécluze stated that the moment depicted by David, that of Napoleon crowning his spouse, was chosen by Napoleon, whose instructions David had followed scrupulously throughout the project.[54] Napoleon's choice of moment enabled David to create a scene which aroused the same immediate interest as *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*. Napoleon was not depicted as an autocrat, but as a knight worshipping his lady, an example of French courteousness. The painting expressed a simple idea which the emperor, the artist, and the French people could share, and which had not sprung from the artist's fancy. Delécluze noted that not the coronation group, but the religious group on the right was really the most important one in the painting. After falling for Napoleon, David had already discovered a new hero, the Pope, a symbol of traditional authority if ever there was one. Now that he had the chance of portraying both an emperor and a pope, he no longer envied "the great painters who have come before me, for the opportunities that I never expected to come my way."[55]

So David was forever torn between his heroes and his convictions, and could only find temporary inspiration in any of them. By the time he finished the work on the *Sacre* paintings his opinion of Napoleon had already changed. Although David still admired him, he began to distrust his warlike and dictatorial traits, especially after the debacle of the war in Spain.[56] David's old Republican sentiments returned for a while and he took up the work on *Leonidas at Thermopylae* again. However, he was no longer able to recapture them in this painting, now that the political situation had changed and Classical Antiquity was no longer in fashion.

Fig. 8. Jean-Dominique des Ingres, *Vow of Louis XIII*, 1824. Oil on canvas. Montauban, Cathedral.

Delécluze did not believe that David's example had had a lasting salutary effect on French art. Many of David's less talented students followed a road which David had hoped they would avoid. They adopted David's manner and imitated it in lifeless paintings with subjects taken from Homer, Classical tragedy, or simply a mythological dictionary. This meant a return to the faults of eighteenth-century art. Subjects were usually far-fetched and compositions unoriginal, and even if they were not, it was simply impossible to match the Classical writers' grandeur. For this last reason David had avoided fictional subjects, and had chosen instead historical events which he could master, such as Napoleon's *Sacre*, to poeticize in his own way.[57] Ingres proved to be the only one of his pupils able to match David, when he painted his *Vow of Louis XIII* (1824) (fig. 8), with its simple and severe subject (Louis XIII dedicating France to the Virgin Mary), and the figures of the Virgin and the angels "who recall the majesty and grandeur of the sacred or heroic figures introduced in the works of the Renaissance or Antiquity."[58] Delécluze believed it to have been by far the most important work of art created after David, bearing the consequences of his political choices, had left his country for good after Napoleon's downfall.

In *Louis David*, Delécluze has tried to come to grips with his own short-lived artistic career and David's continual change of masters and principles, both political and artistic. He believed history painting to be the root of evil in French art, because it did not have a destination. David was a man of the *Ancien Régime*, unable to show his true greatness as a painter in an art world dominated by both the Academy's and the government's sterile protection of

history painting. During the Revolution, when he became an artist-politician, David found a pseudo-religious destination for his art, broke completely with the rules of history painting, and created works belonging in a category of their own. His desire for greatness and fame as an artist drove him to follow Napoleon, who gave him the commissions which would have by right been his, had he lived in Raphael's time, or even in that of Le Brun. Although he does not say so, we must assume that Delécluze's interest in the art of the Renaissance sprang from his need of an antidote to his traumatic childhood experiences, and his frustrated desire to become a painter of religious subjects. Great ideas shared by painters and their public were for him the only true source of great art; the teleological interpretation of the history of art, to which modern readers are used, was completely alien to his thinking. On the contrary, he believed that artistic perfection and progress should never be an aim in itself.

All translations are by the author.

1. Etienne-Jean Delécluze, *Louis David, son école et son temps: Souvenirs* (1855; reprint, preface and notes by Jean-Pierre Mouilleseaux, Paris: Macula, 1983).

2. "…cette larve, posée sur les feuilles des Débats (qui) a de sa bave taché, flétri, sali tout ce qui était en fleur, tout ce qui pouvait être un fruit." Cited in Pontus Grate, *Deux critiques d'art de l'époque romantique: Gustave Planche et Théophile Thoré* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1959), 20.

3. "…la théorie du *laid*, opposée systématiquement à celle du *beau*…" Delécluze, *Louis David*, 389.

4. Ibid.

5. Robert Baschet, *E.J. Delécluze, témoin de son temps: 1781-1863* (Ph.D thesis, Université de Paris; Paris: Boivin, 1942); David Wakefield, "Stendhal and Delécluze at the Salon of 1824," in Francis Haskell, Anthony Levi, and Robert Shackleton, eds., *The Artist and the Writer in France: Essays in Honour of Jean Seznec* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 76-85. I mention only James H. Rubin's most important publication discussing Delécluze," *Pygmaleon and Galathea*: Girodet and Rousseau," in *Burlington Magazine* 127 (1985) 514, 517-20.

6. Delécluze, *Louis David*, 165-66.

7. Ibid., 41-44.

8. Ibid., 172.

9. "…dépouillant le républicain de 1793, protégeant les émigrés et faisant presque la cour aux gens qui portaient un nom." Ibid., 44.

10. Ibid., 233-34.

11. "La conversion de David à la Monarchie fut, à ce moment du moins, si complète et l'on peut même dire si sincère, qu'il n'aperçut pas de son changement d'idées et de costume." Ibid., 234.

12. Ibid., 242.

13. Ibid., 241.

14. "…ils purent exercer leur pinceau sans grands frais d'imagination et sans que l'on exigeât même d'eux une grande perfection." Ibid., 327.

15. Baschet, *E.J. Delécluze*, 39-43.

16. Delécluze, *Louis David*, 411.

17. "…le génie des artistes, dégagé de toute entrave, prendrait un essor plus hardi, plus vigoureux, et s'élancerait dans les sphères immenses et inconnues jusque-là." Ibid., 403.

18. Paul Duro, *The Academy and the Limits of Painting in Seventeenth-*

Century France (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 190-91.

19. Ibid., 8-9, 21, 32.

20. Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 40-44.

21. Thomas Puttfarken, "David's Brutus and Theories of Pictorial Unity in France," *Art History* 4 (1981), 290-304.

22. Richard Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism: From the Ancien Régime to the Restoration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 254-57.

23. Delécluze, *Louis David* , 325.

24. "comme on soigne des ours et des perroquets au Jardin des Plantes." Ibid., 125.

25. Crow, *Painters and Public Life*, 110.

26. Delécluze, *Louis David*, 117.

27. "…ces hôpitaux de la peinture auxquels on donne le nom fastueux de *musées*." Ibid., 403.

28. Ibid., 325.

29. Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 6.

30. Delécluze, *Louis David*, 118-19.

31. "…la franchise et la vigueur de son talent." Ibid., 404.

32. Ibid., 408.

33. " …accoutumé dès l'enfance à respecter les institutions et les hommes qui gouvernaient la société…" Ibid., 410.

34. "…non pas parce qu'ils présentent une scène bien dramatiquement enchaînée, mais seulement parce que chaque personnage, placé presque isolément et se rattachant aux autres plutôt par une pensée que par une attitude et une expression, soumet peu à peu les yeux et l'âme, au lieu de s'attaquer aux passions." Ibid., 221.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 411.

37. Ibid.

38. "En somme, Raphael était une nourriture beaucoup trop délicate pour mon esprit grossier…" Ibid., 114.

39. Ibid., 120.

40. Jean Locquin, *La peinture d'histoire en France de 1747 à 1748* (Paris: Laurens, 1912), 98.

41. "…fort remarquables sous le rapport de l'art, mais qui distraient les esprits au lieu de les captiver et de les instruire; qui font diverger les idées au lieu de les ramener à un centre unique…" Delécluze, *Louis David*, 324.

42. Ibid., 406.

43. Ibid., 176-77.

44. "L'art, dans ce cas, n'est plus un but, mais un moyen… Dans les discours de David, l'art n'est donc présenté que comme une des branches de l'instruction publique propre…à propager les idées morales et politiques…" Ibid., 176.

45. "...unité d'action par les sciences, les lettres, les arts et la morale..." Ibid., 177-78.

46. "…s'il n'y a pas de véritable civilisation tant que les lois de la justice restent inconnues, il est également vrai qu'il n'y a point d'art tant qu'on ne s'est pas appliqué à la recherche des proportions qui constituent le beau visible." Ibid., 217-18.

47. Ibid., 215.

48. "Si le sujet des *Sabines* ne réalise pas cet ensemble et cette unité dramatique que les modernes exigent si impérieusement, cependant la vue de ces guerriers près de combattre, mais séparés par des femmes jetant entre eux leurs enfants, présente une scène si simple, que le spectateur, sans s'inquiéter de ce qui a précédé ou de ce qui suivra, peut y prendre intérêt instinctivement." Ibid., 338-39.

49. Ibid., 221-22.

50. "…ce sentiment profond, grand et religieux qu'inspire l'amour de la patrie." Ibid., 225.

51. "…qu'une idée ne vaut réellement que par la perfection avec laquelle on la rend et on l'emploie." Ibid., 228.

52. Ibid., 337.

53. Ibid., 246.

54. Ibid., 313.

55. "J'avoue que j'ai longtemps envié aux grands peintres qui m'ont précédé des occasions que je croyais jamais rencontrer." Ibid., 249.

56. Ibid., 336, 340.

57. Ibid., 331, 338.

58. "…rappellent la majesté et le grandiose des personnages sacrés ou héroïques introduits dans les ouvrages de la renaissance ou de l'antiquité…" Ibid., 394-95.