

Art as the "Visual Manifesto" of the Revolution: The Iconographic Representation of Ancient Greek and Roman "Civic Virtue" and "Republican Spirit" by Neoclassicism and the Construction of the Ideology of the French Revolution

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Abstract. Both Neoclassicism and the French Revolution emerged from the ideological foundation of the Enlightenment, with the core being the absolute advocacy of "reason" and opposition to feudal autocracy and religious ignorance. This thesis mainly examines how Neoclassicism, with classical models as its carrier, visualized civic virtue to mobilize revolutionary spirit, visualized republican spirit to justify the legitimacy of the French Revolutionary regime, and explores the communication practices and social impacts of these visual symbols. The purpose is to investigate the specific political role played by Neoclassical art during the French Revolution—how it served as a powerful "visual manifesto" to proactively participate in and shape the ideology of the revolution. This thesis adopts a review approach, with research objects including Neoclassical artworks and the ideology they represent; the core method is iconological research, and the data includes visual works, academic monographs, and documents. During its development in France, Neoclassicism successfully transcended being a mere artistic style. It played a crucial role as a visual manifesto, transforming the abstract concepts of civic virtue and republican spirit into a visual language system, thereby effectively serving the construction and dissemination of revolutionary ideology.

Keywords: French Revolution, Neoclassicism, Jacques-Louis David

1. Introduction

The French Revolution of the late 18th century was a profound ideological revolution. To shape a new civic identity and justify the legitimacy of the republican regime, revolutionaries needed a "visual language" that could transcend social classes—and Neoclassical art rose to prominence in this context, becoming the "visual manifesto" of the revolution. To the best of my knowledge, most existing studies on this topic are limited to traditional analyses of Neoclassical works, such as techniques and composition, while research on revolutionary ideology remains insufficient. Therefore, this thesis will elaborate on the complete functions of Neoclassicism as a "visual manifesto." Its significance lies in breaking through traditional research frameworks, deepening the

understanding of this perspective, and providing a historical reference for comprehending the ideological role of contemporary art in the public sphere by analyzing historical cases of how art participates in social change.

2. The "revival" logic of neoclassicism: the selection of classical models as carriers of ideology

2.1. The alignment between the spiritual core of classical models and revolutionary aspirations

The rise of Neoclassicism was far more than a mere aesthetic cycle; it was a carefully planned cultural movement filled with political intentions. In the second half of the 18th century, the nature of French political culture underwent a fundamental transformation. Influenced by Enlightenment ideas, revolutionaries were eager to find a solid, noble, and persuasive visual carrier for the new revolutionary ideology.

The myth of antiquity, advocated by philosophes of enlightened thought and adopted by David at that time, best encapsulated the spirit of revolutionary ideas and its vision for desired behaviours such as a drive for perfection, generosity, patriotism, honour, bravery, nobility of human soul, self-sacrifice and enlightenment. His other painting *The Lictors Bring Back to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789), depicting a Roman republican defender sacrificing his sons for the fatherland, was likewise inspired by classical myth and glorified simple moral virtues [1].

2.2. Selective reference and transformation of classical forms

Neoclassical forms were not wholesale copies of classical art. Similar to findings in traditional studies, Neoclassicism discarded the frivolity, curvilinear forms, and privacy of Rococo art, instead adopting the solemnity, symmetry, and clear outlines of classical art. This formal shift was akin to a political statement, symbolizing the victory of reason over emotion, the prioritization of public interests over personal desires, and the replacement of chaos with order.

For instance, consider Jacques-Louis David's *The Oath of the Horatii*. The painting's precise horizontal and vertical lines, steady triangle arrangement, and the statuesque, determined outlines of the figures all work together to create an unwavering sense of determination. Thematically, the painting is inspired by old Roman mythology. David, however, "modified" historical data; his portrayal of the scene is more in line with the 18th-century notion of "Spartan" courage and simplicity than it is with factual historical study. The revolutionary theme of "sacrificing without hesitation for the motherland" was intended to be more immediately communicated through this selection and transformation, which also served modern political propaganda [1].

2.3. Artists' ideological awareness and identity transformation

In the process of ideological consciousness and identity transformation of artists, artists' identities also underwent subtle transformations. From craftsmen serving nobles and the church under feudal autocracy, they evolved into "civic educators" and "disseminators of the revolution." David was the most outstanding representative—he was not only a painter but also a revolutionary and a trade union member.

Through an analysis of the works of Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), we can observe how the artistic concept, which served as a means of social control before 1789, became a public propaganda tool in the hands of political leaders between 1789 and 1794, and later a social propaganda tool during the Napoleonic era. It is important to note that David was deeply involved in the leadership of the revolutionary government and thus was also a policy-maker himself. He was an associate

member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, later courageously opposing it to advocate for its abolition. In 1790, he joined the Jacobin Club and was elected its president in 1793. He also served as an elected representative of Paris in the National Convention (1792-1794), holding the presidency for one month in 1794. Additionally, he was a member of the Committee of Public Instruction (1792-1794), Deputy Commissioner of the Navy (1793), and a member of the Committee of Public Safety (1793-1794)—an organization essentially equivalent to a police agency. However, his main contribution to the revolution lay in his unremitting efforts in revolutionary propaganda. His early painting *The Oath of the Horatii*, exhibited for the second time during the 1791 Salon, was praised by many as a vivid model of civic virtue and heroism. It depicts three young Roman warriors swearing on swords held by their father to either triumph or die in battle against the enemy—a symbolic expression of revolutionary messages. For early participants in the revolution, the painting served as a symbol, reminding them of their oath to the nation [2].

This ideological transformation led Neoclassical artists to infuse their theme selection, forms, and works with clear political intentions. Their creations were no longer intended to please a small group of nobles but to educate and mobilize the broad masses of citizens. Artists transformed from followers of aesthetics into proactive constructors and disseminators of revolutionary ideology.

3. The iconographic translation of "civic virtue": the visual mobilization of revolutionary spirit by neoclassicism

The construction of revolutionary ideology required the concretization of abstract concepts such as "civic virtue," and Neoclassical art undertook this mission. Through artworks, it transformed these concepts into a series of highly appealing symbols, completing the social mobilization for the revolution.

In 1814, Jacques-Louis David finished his masterpiece *Leonidas at Thermopylae*. Much like his prior creations, this piece examines modern ideals through a classical lens. It portrays the brave stand of the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae and is intimately connected to the downfall of Napoleon's formerly expansive empire. Decades before, David had painted *The Oath of the Horatii*, showing figures pledged under an oath—motivated by self-sacrifice, national devotion, and patriotic loyalty, not by adherence to a hierarchical order. While David is often viewed by historians as a political painter, his artworks in fact reveal how classical motifs supplanted the diverse emblems of the Old Regime, turning into allegorical expressions of civic virtue for the national community. These works aimed to frame modern occurrences within a classical framework, while also expressing an increasing conviction that antiquity could act as a guiding light for France's future [3].

3.1. The construction of visual symbols for core civic virtues

While formulating laws to define the rights of French citizens, abolish feudal structures, and prepare a constitution, the National Assembly also adopted new symbols like the goddess Liberty, representing the liberal ethos of the Revolution's initial period. Conflicting interpretations of these national allegories led to a fragile balance between the monarchical heritage of hierarchy and the Assembly's commitment to equality [4]. The Neoclassical artist David established a series of revolutionary visual symbols: In *The Oath of the Horatii*, the swords pointed to by the father and his sons are solemn symbols of sacrifice; in *Brutus*, after ordering the execution of his traitorous sons, the father's resolve in the shadows contrasts with the weeping female relatives behind him, demonstrating the cruel sacrifice of "republic over family affection." In *The Death of Marat*, David depicts the revolutionary "martyr" wrapped in a simple bath towel and sitting in a plain bathtub. The

quill in his hand and the wooden box beside him replace the scepters and jewels commonly seen in portraits of monarchs, creating an image of a "public servant" characterized by simplicity and diligence.

3.2. Visual narration from individual virtue to collective identity

Visual symbols explained in the previous section do not exist in isolation; instead, they are woven into a grand narrative that guides the audience from admiring individual heroes to identifying with and emulating the revolutionary collective. As the "chief visual officer" of the French Revolution, David's works accurately reflected the core tasks of the revolution at different stages. From the sacred portrayal of the individual martyr in *The Death of Marat* to the grand celebration of collective will in *The Tennis Court Oath*, David accomplished a strategic shift in visual narration—moving from mobilizing the people through the inspiration of exemplary individuals to constructing national identity by depicting the legitimacy of collective action.

In *The Death of Marat*, David adopted a "focused" visual narrative, condensing all dramatic and emotional power into a single, static, and intimate moment. The painting captures the silence after death, rather than the violence of the murder process. This interruption of the narrative elevates a single moment to eternity. It invites the audience not to trace the course of events but to mourn and admire Marat himself. This emotional resonance aims to arouse the audience's sympathy and loyalty to the revolutionary cause, following the logic: "A cause for which such a noble person sacrificed himself must be just."

In sharp contrast to the static and restrained nature of *The Death of Marat*, *The Tennis Court Oath* presents a "divergent" visual narrative, aiming to capture a historic moment of collective action. David chose the moment when the oath-receiving action reached its climax, filled with dynamism and the power of the oath being pronounced. This painting does not commemorate an individual but a moment of "covenant" birth—the representatives of the Third Estate swore together not to disband until a constitution was formulated. This action is regarded as the founding moment of modern French national sovereignty. Therefore, the core narrative of the painting is the collective political action of "We the People" and their sacred commitment, thereby guiding the audience from admiring individual heroes to identifying with and emulating the revolutionary collective.

4. The visual construction of "republican spirit": the justification of revolutionary regime legitimacy by neoclassicism

4.1. The contemporary interpretation of Roman republican history

Revolutionaries saw themselves as inheritors of the ancient Roman Republic, leading to the emergence of many works directly depicting ancient Roman history. On the surface, these works narrate the past; in essence, they allude to the present. David's *Brutus* portrays Brutus, the founder of the Roman Republic, who ordered the execution of his sons for their involvement in a restoration conspiracy. Undoubtedly, this conveyed a clear message to the contemporary audience: "For the survival of the republic, any act of betrayal—even by close relatives—must be ruthlessly eliminated." When the painting was exhibited in 1799, the public directly associated it with the event of Louis XVI's attempted escape and his subsequent execution.

Thus, the revolutionaries' dedication to allegory, theatricality, and stylization was not merely an eccentric diversion but constituted a core element of their endeavor to cultivate free citizens. Moreover, in the long term, symbolic forms endowed the revolutionary experience with a sense of

psychopolitical continuity. They bestowed upon the revolution an aura of permanence and stand as tangible manifestations of both republicanism and the revolution's secular tradition.

4.2. The "classicalized" representation of revolutionary scenes

For ongoing revolutionary events, artists did not hesitate to use classicism for "purification" and "sublimation."

Citation: Marat was a divisive figure of the Revolution, yet David depicted him in the manner of a classical hero, akin to a Christian martyr. Through this classical representation, Marat's individual death was imbued with the timeless significance of sacrifice for the Republic, thus reinforcing the legitimacy of the revolutionary endeavor. Jacques-Louis David created a drawing of Hercules that conveyed this symbolic form to the National Convention and its educated elites. A notable feature of this work is its pronounced literary quality, particularly in contrast to later depictions of Hercules where the links to contemporary politics are far more muted. In those later images, Hercules merely alludes ambiguously to current affairs and preserves numerous classical motifs. Here, however, David explicitly seeks to associate the monarchy's overthrow and the new Republic's genesis with one of Hercules' most renowned labors: the slaying of the Hydra. In the ensuing image, a nude Hercules straddles the Hydra, symbolizing the French people, while the Hydra itself bears a resemblance to Louis XVI [3].

4.3. The penetration of republican symbols in public art

The penetration of symbols in public art was the most ambitious and effective aspect of Neoclassical visual strategy. Its goal extended beyond influencing the city; it aimed to systematically reshape public space and thereby transform the collective consciousness of citizens. He wrote some of the news items himself or commissioned others to write articles which he wanted to appear, specifying the desired content and argument [5].

5. Conclusion

In summary, during the French Revolution, Neoclassicism excellently fulfilled its historical mission as a "visual manifesto." It did not passively reflect the era but proactively participated in and shaped the revolutionary process.

By drawing on ancient Greek and Roman elements, Neoclassicism successfully turned art into a propaganda tool for the revolution. It transformed the abstract concept of "civic virtue" into images understandable to ordinary people, inspiring the revolutionary enthusiasm of the masses; it packaged real revolutionary events into classical heroic stories, making the new regime appear more orthodox and legitimate. More importantly, these revolutionary images spread through exhibitions, engravings, festivals, and daily necessities, penetrating every corner of society and embedding themselves in people's minds.

This history tells us that art is not merely for appreciation—at critical moments, it can become a powerful force for promoting social change. The example of Neoclassicism still offers insights for us to understand how art influences society today. In the future, this paper can be deepened from the perspectives of differences in audience acceptance, the economic basis of art production, and cross-cultural comparisons, so as to go beyond the existing creator-centered analytical framework and reveal the complexity and historical particularity of revolutionary art communication. Future papers

can focus on comparative perspectives: the study of "art and revolution" models across countries/periods.

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