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# **EXTENDED PROJECT QUALIFICATION**

**EPQ 2019**

**EPQ Title: ‘Should Jacques-Louis David be considered a  
Classical painter or a Propagandist?’**

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## Abstract

This dissertation will explore whether Jacques-Louis David should be considered a propagandist or a classical painter. To rationally come to a conclusion three strands of argument will be discussed, whether David should be considered a classical painter, a painter who adapted the classical style or a propagandist. In order to strengthen these arguments a variety of sources will be used. This essay argues that Jacques-Louis David was a classical painter however his paintings only achieved their masterpiece status because David was inspired by his political beliefs. These great neoclassical works of art include *Oath of the Horatii*<sup>1</sup> and the *Death of Marat*<sup>2</sup> and *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, without the political implications that are prevalent in David's paintings they would not be as successful as they are seen to be today. Overall, David is both a classical painter and a propagandist but I believe that politics is what inspired David to create brilliant classical artworks.

## Introduction

I chose the debate over whether David should be considered a classical painter or a propagandist because I am fascinated by the relationship that art has played in shaping history, whether that be for the Roman Catholic church against the Protestants or the Soviet propaganda against the Proletariat. However, I specifically chose Jacques-Louis David because of how he seamlessly combines politics into his paintings without taking away from what he is painting. Instead his images become larger than what is portrayed as they represent something bigger when applied to the context of the revolution.

This project will research different arguments about how David as a painter should be seen, whether it is as purely classical or as a propagandist, to do this other people's opinions and arguments on David will be discussed. This question is controversial because the link between propaganda and politics is still relevant today, the only change is in what form propaganda takes, for the French revolution it was oil paintings and journalists however today it is predominantly seen in social media. The question also requires me to look at how propaganda has changed through time to separate my current bias of propaganda in the modern day to what propaganda meant in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Also, propaganda plays such a large role in shaping

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<sup>1</sup> A link to the painting: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/oath-of-the-horatii/KwHkqyZxc2>

Google Arts and Culture is a well respected organisation which provide high quality images of artworks throughout history.

<sup>2</sup> <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/marat-assassinated/7QGjl9R141MCBw>

<sup>3</sup><https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/bonaparte-crossing-the-grand-saint-bernard-pass-20-may-1800/QwEFHqZhgW6ulw>

history that I shall look at the ethics behind propaganda and whether it should be considered art. This is a fundamental question and one which I shall explore in my discussion.

## Defining the Question

### Propaganda and art throughout history

In order to argue whether Jacques-Louis David should be considered a propagandist it is important to understand what propaganda is and understand how it has changed (specifically propaganda through art) over time. Propaganda is defined as ‘information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view’ (Oxford Dictionary)<sup>4</sup>. Propaganda has been used for centuries as a tactic to gain power therefore it comes in a variety of forms. However, propaganda is united by its intentions to convert people to a cause yet how this is achieved and for what causes are constantly changing. Therefore this section of the essay will briefly discuss how propaganda has changed through history.

In the Roman empire, Augustus used statues and monuments as propaganda in order to influence the widest number of people as literacy rates were poor. This is a recurring theme as to why art was used as propaganda, as art is universally understood. Augustus used two forms of himself in these sculptures, as the leader which can be seen in the sculpture *Augustus of Prima Porta*<sup>5</sup> and the second as the emperor Pontifex Maximus, as seen in the *Via Labicana Augustus*<sup>6</sup>. These statues were to give Augustus a strong image and validate his power, as Augustus appears calm and in control in all these sculptures. Another important aspect to Roman culture was their religion, they had strong connections to their Gods, which Augustus used to his advantage, we can see this as on the famous *Prima Porta* statue, there are images of the Gods on his breastplate, to show that Augustus's victory was the will of the Gods. This belief that Augustus was supported by the Gods meant that no one dared oppose him for fear of the Gods' retaliation. His use of advertising himself as supported by the Gods was an early form of propaganda as Augustus was misleading the population in order to gain political support. This relates to what David was doing with his paintings as in his later paintings he was trying to build a strong and almost divine image for Napoleon. This is most apparent in the painting *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, painted in 1801 and which depicted Napoleon as a great conqueror and as infallible.

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<sup>4</sup> Oxford Dictionary is an acclaimed website and has over 250 specialists who are constantly researching languages, therefore can be deemed reliable.

<sup>5</sup><https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/statue-of-augustus-wearing-a-cuirass-lorica-known-as-the-augustus-of-prima-porta/rQHpyShXcc7DLw>

<sup>6</sup> <https://artsandculture.google.com/search?q=Via%20Labicana%20Augustus>

The word 'propaganda' is first seen in a way that we would recognize by modern standards as a result of the Catholic church against the Protestants. As 'in 1622 Pope Gregory XV created in Rome the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith'<sup>7</sup> (American History Association) The purpose of the Congregation was for cardinals to spread the Catholic faith and regulate church affairs in non-Catholic lands. Prior to this congregations of the Catholic church were also responsible for commissioning great works of art, such as Caravaggio's *Entombment of Christ*<sup>8</sup>. Caravaggio was a great Renaissance painter, famous for his realism and grand religious paintings. The use of these paintings was to communicate to a larger number of people the power of God and to convert many to the Catholic faith just as Jacques-Louis David was trying to gain support for his causes.

Propaganda began to evolve by the 19th century with the development of the printing press and with higher literacy rates articles and journalists took a more prevalent role. However art and images were still one of the most effective way of spreading ideas and with the development of the printing press posters became a new way of spreading propaganda. This new art form is still used in our society today as it is so effective. One of the most famous examples of using posters in history was for WW1, these posters would be used to encourage recruitment and support for the war. They would often be accompanied with slogans such as '*I WANT YOU*'<sup>9</sup> to make the population feel directly involved with the war. This is a more obvious and apparent form of propaganda than what David was creating as the posters were designed purely to influence people's opinions whereas David's images were designed as pieces of artwork. This shows how propaganda has evolved to become more obvious throughout time.

## Classical Art

It is necessary to understand what the question means when it refers to a 'classical painter'. A 'classical' painter refers to someone who imitates ancient Greek or Roman art. The phrases 'classical' and 'neoclassical' can be interchangeable as they both refer to the same painting style. Yet 'neoclassicism' can also be used to relate to a particular movement within classical art which occurs between 1750 and 1860 in Europe and America. This 'neoclassical' style started with Jacques-Louis David as he moved away from the light-hearted Rococo style. However, 'classical' or 'neoclassical' are general terms as there were many styles of sculpture within Greek and

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<sup>7</sup> American Historical Association is a non profit membership organisation which was founded in 1884 and was incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies. It is the 'largest organisation of professional historians in the world' and has more than 12,000 members who represent a wide variety of historical periods. The American Historical Association is a trusted historical website.

<sup>8</sup> [https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-entombment-of-christ/VQH\\_gkXPoelJcg](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-entombment-of-christ/VQH_gkXPoelJcg)

<sup>9</sup> <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/i-want-you-for-u-s-army-wwi-poster/qQGTxl9ipZb6ew>

Roman art ranging ‘from the stark geometric abstraction of the eighth century B.C... to the tired eclecticism of the second century A.D.’<sup>10</sup>( Agard). This shows us that ‘classical’ art is a broad style which encompasses a large range of art. When looking at Jacques-Louis David's art it is a complete change to the Rococo movement of his time. David was a pioneer in the neoclassical movement as he reintroduced the classical style into the arts. We can clearly see that his work is classical because of the deep themes of devotion, self-sacrifice and duty that run through his paintings which were completely at odds with the ornate Rococo style.

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<sup>10</sup> Walter R. Agard wrote this piece for the Classical Journal, he was professor at Wisconsin university. He specialised in Greek, publishing on Greek tradition, sculpture and tragedy. He was a well-established academic from a respected university.

# Literature Review

In order to understand whether Jacques-Louis David's paintings should be considered propaganda it is important to understand the context of the time, therefore this literature review will explore the french revolution, looking at its causes, events and how art and artists responded to the revolution. By looking at the causes of the French Revolution we can understand the stability and position of the country at the time and thus why the artworks were so influential. Then we will see how art responded to the turmoil of the revolution and how it was used as propaganda to keep the people active in the revolution.

## Causes of the French revolution

### Changing philosophical attitudes

France was undergoing drastic changes in opinion as people were questioning the authority of the king. Schwartz<sup>11</sup> ( 2011) argues that “The Enlightenment” was one of the main causes of the French Revolution as it led to an “impulse for reform” which “ intensifies political conflicts”. One example used by Schwartz was “Montesquieu's spirit of the Laws”<sup>12</sup> which “introduces new notions of good government, the most radical being popular sovereignty, as in Rousseau’s Social Contract <sup>13</sup> [1762]” (Schwartz 2011) Schwartz is arguing that Enlightenment at the time was orchestrated through philosophers such as Montesquieu who by publishing ‘Spirit of the Laws’ (1748) created discontent as it “pleaded for a constitutional system of government with separation of powers, the preservation of legality and civil liberties, and the end of slavery” (Schwartz 2011). This was radical because it spoke out against the oppressive government and called for a further equalization and liberty of the people. These ideas were developed further by Rousseau who introduced his ideas to the public through ‘The Social Contract’ published in 1762 which “theorized about the best way to establish a political community” and most radically “argued against the idea that monarchs were divinely empowered to

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<sup>11</sup> Schwartz is a professor of Art History and Film at the university of Southern California. She is a reliable source with regards to the causes of the French revolution as she was trained in Modern European History with a concentration on France at Princeton university.

<sup>12</sup> Montesquieu was a french judge and philosopher most famous of the ‘spirit of the laws’, which was popular with Britain and America. Many of his ideas are still used when discussing philosophy today therefore he can be deemed reliable.

<sup>13</sup>Rousseau was a genevan philosopher who influenced the enlightenment. His ideas were important to the development of philosophy and his ideas are still referred to.

legislate. Rousseau asserts that only the people, who are sovereign, have that all-powerful right.” Due to this radical idea this book “helped inspire political reforms or revolutions in Europe, especially in France”(Augustyn 1998)<sup>14</sup>. This shows how the Enlightenment philosophy was partly responsible for causing the revolution as philosophers were spreading the belief that the monarchy did not have a divine right to rule therefore inspiring the people to revolt and intensifying political conflicts. These new ideas are what inspired Jacques-Louis David and others to rebel against the monarch initially. We can also see how the enlightenment was reflected in David's work as in paintings such as *The Oath of Horatii*, there is a morality and seriousness in his paintings, determined to convey a message which opposes the divinity of the monarch. This is at complete odds with the previous frivolous Rococo style which was common before Jacques-Louis David, therefore showing how drastically these ideas influenced David. Oxford art online supports this argument and says that ‘These works [David's paintings] embodied the enlightenment thought of Diderot, Voltaire, and Rousseau, namely the ideas of basic man rights, modern scientific investigation, rationalism, and moral rectitude’(Oxford Art Online)<sup>15</sup>. This quote is saying that the artworks also reflected the attitudes of the time which called for equality and morality, yet this was achieved through either the start realism such as *The Death of Marat* or through the Neoclassical work such as *The Oath of Horatii*, yet all artwork seemed to glorify the cause and inspire others to fight.

## Living Standards

The ‘new light on the Economic Causes of the French Revolution’ remarks that the famine in 1709 was a cause of the French Revolution. It was so bad that ‘the population, which had probably been 19 million in 1700, had dropped to 16 or 17 million by 1714.’(Knowles 1919)<sup>16</sup> This was a cause because it meant that people were unhappy and desperate which would lead them to take drastic measures. Knowles then says that ‘risings took place on account of food scarcity almost every year during the eighteenth century’. In James C. Scott's ‘Revolution in the revolution; peasants and commissars’ (Scott 1979)<sup>17</sup> he remarks that ‘in many societies, the class of a person may be directly inferred from what he or she eats. When we add to this the fact that the problem of famine and dearth is perhaps the overwhelming existential fear in an agrarian society, it should not be surprising that food and the imagery of food is the center of peasant notions of equality’. Here Scott is arguing that famine shows inequality because the distribution is corrupted so that only the rich survive, this

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<sup>14</sup> Adam Augustyn is the Encyclopedia Britannica Managing Director, a respected website.

<sup>15</sup> Oxford Art online includes over 200,000 articles spanning the history of art. It claims to offer access to the most authoritative, inclusive, and easily searchable online art resources available, therefore validating its reliability.

<sup>16</sup> Lilian Knowles was a British historian and professor of Economic History at the London School of Economics in the 1920s. She was well respected and was the first full-time teacher of her subject in economic history. Therefore she is reliable to discuss the causes of the French revolution.

<sup>17</sup> James C. Scott is a Sterling Professor of Political Science and Anthropology at Yale university. With regards to his reliability on living conditions and causes of the French revolution, he is the director of the Program of Agrarian Studies and is a noted anarchist scholar. Thereby he is qualified and reliable.

strengthened peasants' ideas about the injustice in their society in a form that the peasants can understand. This is because the peasants are in an agrarian society so only through agrarian terms can they fully realize the extent of the inequality being acted upon them. This realization mixed with desperation caused many to uprising, so was a major contributing factor for the cause of the French revolution. The fact that conditions were so dire meant that the population had nothing left to lose. This meant that they were especially susceptible to the propaganda and ideas of the time meaning that Jacques-Louis David's paintings were well received and his ideas spread.

## Opposition to Government

The government's reluctance to carry out agrarian reform resulted in opposition from the people, 'the France of 1789 was essentially an agricultural country. Twenty out of the twenty-six million inhabitants gained their living in connection with agriculture, and therefore to the bulk of the people agricultural questions outweighed all others in their pressing importance'(Knowles 1919). Knowles is highlighting that by the government ignoring the country's agricultural issues, they were creating opposition for themselves from the majority of the population, this meant that they were not only preparing themselves for a famine but the resistance of the country and potential supporters. H. Lewis in 'Causes in the French Revolution' says that ' the suffering produced by unnecessary restrictions and excessive burdens upon labor, inevitably generates a most dangerous element of revolution'<sup>18</sup> (Lewis 1868) . It is being argued here that the taxes caused the revolution because they were too harsh as 'after satisfying the many demands of the nobility and government, the tithes were still due to the clergy, leaving little to the laborer, for his own support and that of his family'(Lewis 1868). This is arguing that by a lack of communication between the church and government and by greed from both the peasant is not left with enough to support himself, making him more open to rebellion and revolution. This all meant that 'reflection and favoring circumstances would kindle into a bitter sense of injustice and a terrible thirst for revenge.'(Lewis 1868) This all meant that due to the greed and harsh taxes from the government the people have more of a reason to rebel as they see any difference in their position as an improvement. It was clear that opposition to the monarchy was growing, the fact that it was gaining momentum meant that painters and authors had the bravery to publish and paint to fuel the flames of unrest. This meant that Jacques-Louis David had the opportunity to continue painting and develop his skill of painting for the revolution.

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<sup>18</sup> H. Lewis wrote an article in "The College Courant: A Weekly Journal, Devoted to College Interests" by Yale university. Yale university is well respected therefore applying credibility to H. Lewis.

## Background on the French Revolution

### French Revolution

France during David's life was unstable and tumultuous, the reign of King Louis XVI was coming to an end from 'two decades of poor harvests, drought, cattle disease and skyrocketing bread prices' which had 'kindled unrest among peasants and the urban poor'(History.com Editors 2009)<sup>19</sup>. These conditions were perfect for an uprising and the monarchy was bankrupt from extravagant spending and for France's involvement in the American Revolution meaning that King Louis XVI could only watch as France descended into chaos and revolution. The King attempted to appease the people by assembling the Estates-General, which consisted of the three estates (the nobility, the clergy, and the middle class) which hadn't been summoned since 1614. However, the 'non-aristocratic members of the Third Estate now represented 98 percent of the people but could still be outvoted by the other two bodies'(HistoryEditors.com 2009). This led to the third estate (non-aristocratic) to gather power as they were fed up with the injustice and form the National Assembly and swear the Tennis Court Oath, which aimed for constitutional reform. This made an impact as within one week the clerical deputies, liberal nobles and soon Louis XVI absorbed all three orders into the new assembly. However this was too little too late and the people were still uprising, this all accumulated to the Storming of the Bastille on July 14th which was a catalyst for the start of the revolution.

Revolutionary beliefs and ideas spread across France due to the success of the revolution and the writing and paintings to encourage this further. It led to the National Constituent Assembly abolishing feudalism on August 4th, 1789. The next major event in the wake of unrest was on September 3rd, 1791 when the National Constituent Assembly released a constitution and established a constitutional monarchy. Yet this constitution was seen as too moderate as the 'king enjoyed royal veto power and the ability to appoint ministers' (HistoryEditors.com 2009). The next few months that followed involved the Legislative Assembly declaring war on Austria and Prussia, in hope of spreading their revolutionary views. However, the Legislative Assembly was replaced by the National Convention who abolished the Monarchy and established the French Republic. This then caused chaos in France as the National Convention was seized by the Jacobins in June 1793 and 'a series of radical measures, including the establishment of a new calendar and the eradication of Christianity'(HistoryEditors.com 2009) and the Reign of Terror was started that spread over 'a 10-month period ... suspected enemies of the revolution were guillotined by the thousands'(HistoryEditors.com 2009). This was

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<sup>19</sup> History.com is a website with the intention of educating on and summarising important historical events in history. History.com does this through articles and documentaries. The website has multiple authors all of which are anonymous. The website can be trusted as it strives for accuracy and has a vast database of knowledge.

all overseen and enforced by Robespierre, who had an iron rule until his death in July 1794. Overall throughout this period 17,000 people were officially tried and executed. This vast number shows how unstable the country was and so susceptible to propaganda. This regime also proves how effective the propaganda was as David was directly involved with making sure the public kept supporting the constituent assembly by organising events or parades and painting for the constituent assembly in order to keep the craze for liberty that sparked during the overthrow of the monarchy kept alive.

## Napoleon Summary

In 1799 the Directory of France was losing power and Napoleon decided to take advantage of this by returning to Paris and becoming the 'first of three consuls in the new government proclaimed in 1799(Sparknotes)<sup>20</sup>. Napoleon gained power through his military success and negotiations until in 1804 Napoleon crowned himself Emperor. Jacques-Louis David came to the attention of Napoleon, even though David swore that he would die with Robespierre yet was conveniently ill when he was beheaded. David was responsible for a series of paintings which glorified Napoleon and was responsible for creating Napoleons image.

## Art response

### Peoples' involvement

The French revolution was shaped by prevalent artwork as when the "Revolution returned in 1830, 1848 and 1870, all these dates can be associated with moments of invention in French art."<sup>21</sup> (Jones 2005) Jones is saying that with all the major events in the revolution art had its own response, which thus caused further 'ammunition' for the revolution examples of this as said by Jones are "Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People and Courbet's The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory explicitly identify the cause of avant-garde artistic bohemia with that of the people." Here Jones is saying that the art was important because it depicted ordinary people joining the fight and standing up for their beliefs. This bridged the gap between the ordinary peasant and the revolution, making their goals seem attainable and encouraging the people to act and continue the revolution.

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<sup>20</sup> Sparknotes are an online learning resource which overview topics and genres. They have over 500 guides and span a series of subjects, they strive for reliability and to overview their topics.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Jones is a reliable source because he is an art writer for the guardian, a well respected newspaper. We can also see that he is acclaimed as he was on the jury for the 2009 Turner Prize.

## Neoclassicism

The revolution needed to be romanticized within art so to make it seem more heroic and a worthy cause for sacrifice, this meant that .“Scenes of the revolution vied with neo-classic embody and to inculcate the ‘patriotic’ spirit”<sup>22</sup> (Dowd 1951) Dowd is saying that patriotism was purposely used as a tool to get people involved with the revolution and so this was utilized in artwork at the time. Neoclassicism depicts key moments of legends in the Roman empire, portraying morals of justice, revenge and strength which was to give people courage for the revolution. Oxford art online says that ‘The heroic phase of Neoclassical painting resulted in Jacques-Louis David’s most pivotal works, *Death of Marat* and *Oath of the Horatii*’ (Oxford Art Online )<sup>23</sup>. These artworks are some of the most famous and influential during the revolution. *The death of Marat* showed the revolutionary writer Marat dead in his bath water after just being assassinated. The painting also hung in the government where the constitutional assembly held their meetings, serving as a reminder of the threat of the opposition, some could argue that it was one of the causes to the harsh and oppressive rule that the Assembly held. Another example of neoclassicism is the *The Oath of Horatii* which glorified the soldier, showing him as in Roman dress and portraying him as an eternal hero. This style of painting mirrors the attitudes of the time and shows how quickly the revolution started as the Rococo style is drastically different the Neoclassicism.

## Art as propaganda in the French Revolution

As stated previously, the definition of propaganda is ‘information, used to promote a political cause or point of view’<sup>24</sup>(Oxford Dictionary). So by definition, much of the art painted around or in the French Revolution is propaganda, as they were painted with the idea of swaying peoples opinions and getting messages and experiences out in the open. This is similar to modern day social media, as not only were the art gallery’s for entertainment but they were also full of political propaganda as they reflect the attitudes in France at the time, similar to social media platforms today. Sullivan states that “art and written text were the two most common forms of propaganda” (Sullivan) <sup>25</sup>as they were the easiest way to spread awareness to the people. This was

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<sup>22</sup> David L. Dowd is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Florida and has published other works on the French Revolution. His book where I took the extract from is also named ‘Art as National Propaganda in the French Revolution’, which is very relevant to my project as it directly uses my themes in my project of art at propaganda, of which there are little published works.

<sup>23</sup> Oxford Art online includes over 200,000 articles spanning the history if art. It claims to offer access to the most authoritative, inclusive, and easily searchable online art resources available, therefore validating its reliability.

<sup>24</sup> Oxford Dictionary is an acclaimed website and has over 250 specialists who are constantly researching languages, therefore can be deemed reliable.

<sup>25</sup> Nate Sullivan is an adjunct history professor and a freelance writer with an M.A. in History and M.ED, his writing is used by study.com a subscription website, therefore he is credible. His essay is also titled ‘French Revolution Propaganda: Art and Posters’. This is very relevant for my project as it looks in depth at the propaganda of the French revolution.

known by the leaders of the revolution and is why many artworks were commissioned as propaganda, below are a few examples which will discuss this.

### The Tennis Court Oath

This was painted early in Jacques-Louis David career, *The Tennis court oath*<sup>26</sup> is described by Nate Sullivan as “one of the best known pieces in the French Revolution propaganda” as it “depicts the Tennis Court Oath, a critical moment in the French Revolution in which elected representatives called deputies defied King Louis XVI and met on a sort of tennis court to form a new representative assembly” (Sullivan). This artwork responds clearly on the events of the time but art is propagandized because the piece was commissioned by the assembly to glorify the event, yet the piece was never finished because of a lack of funding and that by “1794 some of the ‘heroes’ portrayed in the painting had actually been branded ‘enemies of the republic’”(Sullivan). This as well as being a very clear attempt at propaganda also showed how turmoiled France was at the time as anyone could be prosecuted under the harsh oppressive rule.

### The Death Of Marat

Another important work by Jacques-Louis David was the *Death of Marat*, which shows the death of revolutionary writer Jean-Paul Marat. He was a radical intellectual who the people loved but was hated by the conservatives and non-revolutionary’s. Marat himself was a propagandist and Nate Sullivan argues that “Marat became a martyr for the revolution, and this image served to inspire other revolutionaries” (Sullivan). By painting a picture solely of this propagandist Jacques-Louis David is making a point and is attempting to add to the martyrdom and make it visible for all to see, thus making this painting propaganda.

### Liberty Leading the People

Eugène Delacroix, another revolutionary painter, is most famous for ‘Liberty Leading the People’. This painting took place on July 28th, 1830 and depicts the uprising of the people against Charles X and ‘the Guardian, Jonathan Jones’ says the painting depicted the “anarchic freedom, when anything seemed possible” and that “it is the most enduring image of what revolution feels like from within: ecstatic, violent and murderous”<sup>27</sup> (Jones

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<sup>26</sup>[https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/his-france-revolution-oath-of-tennis-court-20th-june-1789/\\_gGb1s8jwBNHeA](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/his-france-revolution-oath-of-tennis-court-20th-june-1789/_gGb1s8jwBNHeA)

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Jones is a reliable source because he is an art writer for the guardian, a well respected newspaper. We can also see that he is acclaimed as he was on the jury for the 2009 Turner Prize.

2005). This painting embodied the core values of the revolution to come 'equality, fraternity, liberty', this encouraged the people to stand up for what they believed in as 'brothers' of all ages were rising up for their freedom led by a glorified woman clutching the red, white and blue flag, a symbol of their defiance. By glorifying the revolution Delacroix "legitimized popular action and contemplated the total destruction of tradition" (Jones 2005) meaning that this picture encouraged political and revolutionary action in the future, and by doing this it is a form of propaganda.

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## Discussion

My discussion will be divided into three arguments, was David a classical painter, a painter who used classical styles but adapted them to a modern era for his own gain, or was he a propagandist? In order to answer these questions I will be looking at different critics and opinions on Davids style and use of propaganda.

Overall, I will be arguing that David started and ended his painting career as a classical painter however during Robespierre's and Napoleon's rule he used his paintings politically as propaganda to legitimize their rule, specifically using neoclassical and religious styles to form martyrs (for Robespierre's National Assembly) and heroic scenes, (of Napoleon), to gain a god-like status for the rulers. However, these pieces of 'propaganda' in their own right are great works of neoclassical art and without Jacques-Louis David's inspiration from the politics during his life his paintings would not have achieved their masterpiece status.

### David as a classical painter.

David was a pioneer in art as with the *Oath of the Horatii* created a turning point for art where he moved the style of the period from Rococo to the neoclassical. In David's own autobiographical sketch in 1793 it 'gives the impression that Davids real interest was to try his hand at a genre he had not previously attempted. But instead of following what was traditionally *agreable*, he adopted *la maniere grecque* and made the picture *tout a fait antique*...[he then turned]...to a style of tragedy and history'<sup>28</sup>(Dowley 1988). Showing that at this point David was unconcerned with the connection between his art and politics only with attempting a new genre but in his own style, which includes his extraordinary architecture within his paintings and composition. To see the lengths that David would go to recreate these neoclassical scenes he 'even had the *ebeniste* [French for woodcarver] Jacob provide furniture after antique designs to enhance the credibility of the Homeric chamber'(Dowley 1988). This relates to David's *Paris and Helen* 1786, yet shows how dedicated David was to his paintings and that he was attempting to recreate these heroic scenes in a way that had not been attempted before. These lengths that David resorts to are long and 'One doubts he would have studied so thoroughly to make the picture *tout a fait antique*, if it were only to be a vehicle for a protest that was contemporary and political'(Dowley 1988) here as this argument states, there was an

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<sup>28</sup> Francis H. Dowley was a professor Emeritus of Art History at the University of Chicago, 1915-2003. He was a renowned expert on the art of early modern France and his work and ideas were highly original. His status therefore makes his work credible.

irony between the classical style and perhaps alluded to politics of the time. However, these lengths that David goes to for his work shows that he is a true classical painter as these minute details and planning would not have been achieved if David was a propagandist. We see further evidence of David's painting ability in his *The Oath of the Horatii (1784)* where 'artists, critics, and the general public at once recognized something entirely distinctive and new in this work that placed in a separate category from other major paintings of the time'<sup>29</sup> (Johnson 1989). This new neoclassical genre was shaped by David's work, who with *The Oath of the Horatii* creates something new and novel for future painters to follow. This is a work of artistic genius and shows that David starts his painting career as a pioneer and brilliant painter.

David at the time of the paintings understood the political turmoil that was underway in France and 'Perhaps David was indeed aware of possible political connotations in his paintings but regarded them as much less important than their artistic and dramatic qualities'(Dowley 1899). This argument is that the early David, pre-revolution was only concerned with his artwork and that 'He may have changed later in the revolution when he became more directly involved in politics' (Dowley 1899). The reason that David may have 'politicized references to liberty and patriotism that in 1794 he claims were expressed in those paintings, or whether he was reading into them meanings not originally intended but asserted retrospectively in support of his defence when facing charges'(Dowley 1899) were for him to gain support and power by insisting that he had been supporting the revolution through his artwork. This argument implies that David never was a propagandist in his early art, only that post-revolution his paintings adopted the political meanings as people were inferring the revolution into anything they could find.

We can also see through his work that David paints what he believes in and what inspires him. David describes Napoleon as 'finally here is a man whom would have been erected *altars* in ancient times. Yes, my dear friend, Napoleon is my hero'<sup>30</sup> (Bering 2016) This provides us with a new argument that David only ever painted what he believed in and what inspired him, from this quote we know that David sees Napoleon as a 'hero' and in Godlike terms, meaning that this is how David will paint him such as in 1801 with *Napoleon Crossing The Alps*. In this painting David had only one instruction from Napoleon which was that he be portrayed as "Calme sur un

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<sup>29</sup> Dorothy Johnson, Professor of art history at the University of Iowa, Ph.D. from the university of California, Berkeley. Specializes in 18th and 19th century French and European art. Her position at a well respected university and her further publishings on French art qualify her to be cited.

<sup>30</sup> Henrik Bering, a graduate of Oxford University has a direct and original way of writing which makes him an interesting addition to my project. His reliability stems from his professional Journalism Fellow at Stanford which is a well respected and accredited university.

cheval fougueux”<sup>31</sup>(Pollitt 2013)(calm, mounted on a fiery steed), this gave David virtually free reign on the painting and it was through his own image of Napoleon that he used a sublime background which gave Napoleon a ‘god’ like appearance which could defy even the elements. This painting could be considered as propaganda however if David paints Napoleon as if he were a God or ‘hero’ because that is what he truly believes does it make it propaganda? This argument would imply that David was only ever a classical painter as he painted what he believed as that is what inspired him, not with the purpose of making it propaganda.

Furthermore it is difficult to categorize Davids artwork as propaganda because ‘to prove that a single painting has a secondary meaning as in Koshaks interpretation, the evidence must either be inherent in the picture or external to it be with verifiable connections and not just parallels’(Dowley 1988) This argument states that you cannot prove anything is propaganda as there are no facts nor faces directly linking the painting to an political meaning as everything is completely allegorical.

## David using classical styles but adapted it for his own gain

David throughout his life had been using Classical styles and adapting them to his advantage ‘a political chameleon, David adapted his neoclassical style to remain successful throughout the tumultuous climate of the late 18th and 19th century. He secured important commissions from the monarchy, the Revolutionary government, and Napoleon Bonaparte, all of whom used David’s classicism to legitimize their claim to authority’<sup>32</sup>(DiPalma, 2018). This argument states that Davids only real aim was to gain and remain in power and to do this he played on the respective powers need to validate their power. He did this through utilizing classical myth to recreate these scenes for the powerful, thus implying their power and authority. David himself said that “to achieve their goal masterpieces must charm but also penetrate the soul and make a deep impression on the mind that is similar to reality...Therefore the artist must have studied all motives of mankind and he must know nature thoroughly. In short, he must be a philosopher’ (DiPalma, 2018). This proves how David managed to remain in power, he knew the true motives of these men and managed to take advantage of their insecurity by creating images to validate their power. This quote also relates to the enlightenment were philosophers such as Rousseau and Voltaire were vital in the development of science and knowledge. With this ability to know mankind's nature so thoroughly as he remarks himself he can ‘make the politically reprehensible appear attractive’(Bering 2016) to the people. This skill was vital for his success, as it ensured he remained in power,

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<sup>31</sup> Ben Pollitt, studied art history and English Literature at Edinburgh university, teaches Art History at Fine Arts College in Kensington. He is respected and an A level examiner on Art history.

<sup>32</sup> Jessica M. DiPalma, Bachelor of Arts degree in Speech Communications and a Juris Doctorate, Masters of the Arts degree in Art History. She is knowledgeable in her field.

everything that he did in some aspect was all to keep such power which explains why he formed the neoclassical as it was what the rulers wanted and in the case of Napoleon that was ‘set about immortalizing the dictatorship of one man’(Bering 2016), as it gave them the legitimization they craved.

In the late 18th century, due to the revolution, and so the context of the time it is almost impossible not to apply the context to any piece of artwork and see how it is influenced. As the revolution will have influenced everything in its own way as ‘dearth of anti-monarchical, republican or revolutionary interpretation of David’s art does not prove that the works did not have such political content for the artist or his public’<sup>33</sup> (Herbert 1972) here it is being said that his art can be interpreted in a multitude of different ways when applied to different people or contexts however its David's ability to create an artwork which is admired by so many. Some argue that David couldn’t outright say his political views so ‘traditional Homeric iconography would have to disguise his adverse political criticism so well that d’Artois [commissioner] would not have detected it; but on the other hand, it would have to be patent enough to be understood by the liberal opposition he really sought to address’<sup>34</sup> (Korshak 1987) this is one argument to why Davids early work was so questionable to whether it was propaganda, as he had to disguise it to all but the most liberal.

We should also be discussing that if something is perceived as propaganda, should it still be considered art? To do this it ‘includes judging whether political content is integrated with other components to form an artistic whole’ (Korshak 1987) Here Korshak is saying whether the art and propaganda play an equal role as to create ‘a political subject like David’s *Oath of the Tennis Court* necessary as research in depth may be for the understanding of such a political painting, it does not take precedence for the art historian over its artistic conception, design, and execution’(Korsaks 1987), Korshak’s argument is that no matter the political implications of an artwork, the effort into creating it will always outway its political meaning, therefore it should be justified as art. To clarify this argument Korshaks then states ‘The understanding of the artists political or other non-artistic material constitutes a fundamental but still preliminary stage towards understanding how it serves as a measure of his ability to transform it into a work of art’(Korshaks 1987). Korshaks argument is valid as David's work is no pamphlet or caricature, his work is based primarily on the painting and its skill, the political implications of it are a secondary and daring move.

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Herbert, author of books on french art. He specialises in Impressionist art however also wrote books on the French Revolution such as ‘David, Voltaire, “Brutus”, And The French Revolution: An Essay In Art And Politics’. His ideas on art and politics have been very useful in the development of my project and he is credible as he is a well respected author of art history.

<sup>34</sup> Yvonne Korshak was an American Art Historian. She was a Bachelor cum laude at Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958 and a Master of Arts, University of California Berkeley, 1966 and a Doctor of Philosophy, University of California 1973. She published on Greek art, which relates to the neoclassical style in which Jacques- Louis David painted. She studied in three very well respected universities and her educational achievements and publishings prove her credibility.

## David the propagandist

During the constituent assembly's rule David was deeply involved in politics, he was close friends with Robespierre and as he was closely related to the Assembly's success means that he used his artwork as propaganda, during this period he was best known for his *Death of Marat* which martyred a fanatic and attempted to glorify the revolution that he encouraged. David was closely related with the politics and propaganda and as the 'Robespierre of the brush'<sup>35</sup>(McMullen 2008) by the people and in 1793 was a member of the art commission. David was deeply influential and he became 'the propaganda minister of the French Revolution - a man who could turn an unruly mob, ready to kill for a loaf of bread, into tearful patriots willing to die for the cause'<sup>36</sup>(Wilson 1998). This view may be seen as extreme but during the 18th-century propaganda was most effective in the form of art, whether that be in pamphlets, caricatures, speeches as due to a poor literacy rate journalists ideas couldn't be understood by everyone, whereas pictures are universally understood. This meant that art played a much larger part in Frances society and politics when compared to politics in modern day so that when the Death of Marat was released, it was seen as drastic and of being quite a scandal yet it also simultaneously rallied people to support liberty and the ideas of the revolution. Proof of Davids power can be seen from the effects of his painting *Brutus* in which J Brutus, First Consul, returns to his house bringing his sons bodys after condemning them for conspiring against the Roman empire. This painting reinforced the ideas of liberty and loyalty to the revolution which swept through France with 'speeches and pamphlets' calling "The people of France demands its Brutus!" (Wilson 1998). Yet these ideas did not just stay in Paris as 'A revival of Voltaire's play *Brutus* became a regular fare around the country with costumes, settings and stage directions based on his painting' (Wilson 1998). These performances were greatly received with cheers of '*Vive la Liberte!*'. David choose dramatic and politically relevant classical scenes to paint in which 'his images showed the power of art to electrify even the commonest citizen' (Wilson 1998). Davids innate painting ability, his apt choices of classical scenes and political turmoil created the perfect recipe for propaganda and ensured that it was received with enthusiasm.

Another major work of propaganda was David's *Oath of the Horatii*, this earlier work depicts three brothers pledging their life to fight for their home and clearly shows the morals of the new Assembly as ' There is no room for private feelings: loyalty to the state invariably trumps the private concerns of the individual'(Bering

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<sup>35</sup> Roy Donald McMullen was an art historian, his publishings include 'Art, Affluence, and Alienation; the world of Marc Chagall; and others. The others in this case include Jacques-Louis David and other French artists. Therefore proving McMullens credibility.

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Barkley Wilson is an author and journalist for The Guardian. She has written a series of articles that specialise on Jacques-Louis David and has a wealth of knowledge on the subject.

2016). This was a much earlier painting and its meaning can be unclear but when related to his later propagandistic work, involves the same morals that the state is trying to invoke so, therefore, can be seen as propaganda.

One of David's most recognized works for his propaganda is *The Death of Marat* where he 'through the medium of oil and canvas David transformed Marat, the postulated militant and embodiment of the terror, into the beatific martyr canonized by the blade of a vituperous educated aristocratic female'<sup>37</sup>(Beaumont 2018). This martyrdom is enhanced by David's subtle allusion religious work such as 'Caravaggio's the entombment of Christ due to the lighting, length of arm, smooth skin unlike Marat's real skin problem'(Beaumont 2018) Marat, in reality, had 'postulated' skin and the bath that Marat was killed in was medicinal in order to soothe his skin condition. However, David glorifies this scene with the reference to Caravaggio's work and in doing so implies that the Assembly is a powerful and Godlike organization which is worthy of sacrifice. This is why Burleigh called the *Death of Marat* 'one of the finest examples of political art of all time'<sup>38</sup>.(Burleigh 2005).

David was a brilliant propagandist due to his use of the neoclassical, where through famous mythological classical stories he could relate them to the modern politics of France, this had never been done previously as the neoclassical was only reemerged with David's work. He managed to give a 'classical and pragmatic myth the topicality of gossip and elevated current images of scandal to the level of critical and political ideas'(Korshak 1987). This ability of using classical material but making it his own shows David skill in propaganda as he managed to relate classical myths to modern people and values, whether that be in David's *Paris and Helen* relating to the unfaithfulness of d'Artois or the *Oath of the Horatii* relating to the morals that the state wanted to expand; that of loyalty to the state.

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<sup>37</sup> H. Spencer Beaumont, specialises in military history and teaches in the U.S Air Force Academy's Department of History. He holds degrees in European History, Law and European Security Studies and is continuing his studies at Texas A&M University by writing a PhD. He is an experienced historian therefore is credible.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Burleigh, worked at New College Oxford, London School of Economics, Cardiff University, Stanford and Rutgers. He won the 2001 Samuel Johnson Prize for Non Fiction proving his credibility.

## Conclusion

David's painting career lasted throughout the reign of King Louis XVI, the Constituent Assembly and Napoleon, through his classical painting style Jacques-Louis David managed to gain support for the later two regimes. I believe that all the arguments determining whether David should be considered as a propagandist or a neoclassical painter should be combined as it is not as simple as first appears. David is a mixture of both and I believe that David paints his best classical masterpieces when inspired by the politics and events of the time. Without this 'propaganda' David's *The death of Marat* would never have been created and although it is considered to be propaganda it is also considered to be one of the best pieces of neoclassical art. I propose that David paints what he is most inspired by, even if it is his political beliefs, to create works of neoclassical genius. To reinforce this point, later in David's life he was banished to Brussels, he continued to paint yet his works were not even close to the league of when he was working under Robespierre or Napoleon as he had no greater cause or belief to work for.

## Evaluation

My project has required me to use a variety of different sources as I have been discussing multiple arguments. To do this I have had to read through a multitude of sources, I have predominantly used websites such as Jstor, EBSCO and google scholar which have been invaluable. They have enabled me to find a variety of works however, it has been very timely as I would often be required to read large documents for only a few lines of material which I could use. Yet, through doing this I have learnt how to use my time for efficiently in order to get as much material as possible. One pattern that I have noticed in my research is that people tend to argue that he was an extreme propagandist, and I have even come across arguments which say 'he is the forerunner of Albert Speer and his great Nazi rallies in Nuremberg or the filmmakers Lenu Riefenstahl's celebration of Aryan Supermen in the 1930 Olympics'(Bering 2016) or that David is a gifted Neoclassical painter. However it is rare for David to be judged as both a propagandist and a great classical painter, as I believe these two aspects of him; David the painter and David the politician are inexorably linked. I believe this to be because Davids inspiration stemmed from his beliefs however the two are rarely discussed in relation to each other. However, If I was

continuing my project I would want to find yet more varied material on David and try to find some further information on his painting career after Napoleon to gain a better perspective of Davids whole painting career.

My title changed multiple times through my project, I started with my interest in the propaganda and attempted to compare propaganda in the Roman Catholic Church, the French revolution and World War One. However, it soon became apparent that this was too great a task and so I narrowed it down to The French Revolution as that was the area was most interested in. Once I had started my research into the French Revolution I began to realize that one artist Jacques-Louis David was in a completely different league, artistically and propagandistically to another artist at that time, resulting into me narrowing my topic to just David. From here I decided to broaden my topic not just in propaganda but to David's painting itself, which was centralized around the neoclassical style, which quickly led me to my final title, Should David be considered a classical painter or a Propagandist?.

Overall, writing this project has given me a deeper insight into the importance of art and the radical effect that it can have, the best part has been being able to understand and study in depth the masterpieces that David had produced and to see his style developed through his career. If I was to extend my project I would like to expand on Davids work to in relation to how propaganda has evolved over time. This would give a more rounded view of what defines propaganda and how it has changed throughout history.

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