

JACQUES-LOUIS
DAVID'S
MARAT

Edited by

William Vaughan Helen Weston



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INTRODUCTION

THE DIVINE MARAT (BAUDELAIRE)

The *divine* Marat, one arm hanging out of the bath, its hand still loosely holding on to its last quill, and his chest pierced by the *sacrilegious* wound, has just breathed his last. On the green desk in front of him, his other hand still holds the treacherous letter: 'Citizen, it is enough that I am really miserable to have a right to your benevolence.' The bath water is red with blood, the paper is blood-stained; on the ground lies a large kitchen knife soaked in blood; on a wretched packing case, which constituted the working furniture for the tireless journalist we read: 'À Marat, David'. All the details are historical and real, as in a novel by Balzac; the drama is there, alive in all its pitiful horror, and by a strange stroke of brilliance, which makes this David's masterpiece and one of the great treasures of modern art, there is nothing trivial or ignoble about it. What is most astonishing in this exceptional poem is the fact that it is painted extremely quickly, and when one considers the beauty of its design, it is all the more bewildering. It is the bread of the strong and the triumph of the spiritual; as cruel as nature, this picture has the heady scent of idealism. What has become of that ugliness that Death has so swiftly erased with the tip of its wing? Marat can henceforth challenge Apollo; Death has kissed him with loving lips and he rests in the peace of his transformation. There is in this work something both tender and poignant, a soul hovers in the chilled air of this room, on these cold walls, around the cold and fune-

real bath. May we have your permission, politicians of all parties, even you, ferocious liberals of 1845, to give way to emotion before David's masterpiece? This painting was a gift to a tearful nation, and our own tears are not dangerous.¹

We may no longer weep in front of this picture. We may need more help in understanding it than those people in the 1840s who first read Baudelaire's appraisal. But for us, too, David's *Marat* is an unforgettable work (Fig. 1). It depicts a murdered man at the last moment of his life with such graphic starkness that it communicates both the fascination and the horror of a detailed, eyewitness account. At the same time the picture is so carefully designed and painted that it strikes us, as well, with its beauty.

Such effects are intentional. The picture was painted by the artist to commemorate a personal hero who was assassinated during the period of mounting political crisis following 1789. As the artist himself said, he wished it to move the French people and to spur them to patriotic action. It is in every sense a political painting.

THE HISTORY OF THE PICTURE and the event it commemorates are extensively documented. We are in little doubt about why and for whom the picture was painted. It is a fascinating and highly important historical document. Yet this does not altogether explain the hold that it has exerted on later generations. Indeed, the historical circumstances of its origins were for a time a threat to its very existence. Because of political changes *Marat* was displayed in public for only a couple of years. After that it went into hiding – like many of the radicals who had been colleagues of its subject. It did not reemerge until after the artist's death. Since that time – and particularly since it was put on permanent public display in Brussels in 1893 – it has become a kind of icon of the French Revolution. It is a sign of the painting's importance that it is frequently used on the jacket of books covering the period, both from a political and from a cultural and artistic point of view. Furthermore, it has become a work that fascinates those who have no particular interest in the period it comes from. The shock of the picture has worked – like some of those shocking moments in twentieth-century film (for example, the nurse in the *Battleship Potemkin*, or the razor and the eye in *Un Chien Andalou*) – both on other artists and on spectators

in general. It is one of those images that fascinates simultaneously by its horror and its beauty. It can be approached from many angles. In this book we have brought together studies by contemporary scholars that look at the painting from a range of perspectives using current practices.

THE EVENT

On 13 July 1793 Jean-Paul Marat, a deputy of the Montagnard faction and an extreme populist journalist, was attacked and murdered by Charlotte Corday, a Girondin sympathiser from Caen, who hated everything for which Marat stood.² It was a suffocatingly hot July; indeed, the heat was one of the factors that aggravated Marat's illness: he suffered from a severe skin complaint that caused him to seek relief through immersion in the bath with a vinegar-soaked cloth wound around his head like a turban. He was, not surprisingly, forced to abandon plans to be present at the 14 July Festival of Liberty on the Champ de Mars, and likewise to take his seat at the National Convention. Corday's carefully laid plans to assassinate Marat in one of these public spaces on that day were therefore thwarted. She had spent weeks working toward this goal, ever since she had heard the emotional speeches in Caen of Charles-Jean-Marie Barbaroux de Marseille, former Girondin deputy for the department of the Bouches-du-Rhône to the National Convention. He singled out Marat as the real enemy of the French nation and incited the people of Normandy to march on Paris and deliver it from such monstrous creatures. Armed with letters from Barbaroux, in connection with their common friend, Mlle de Forbin, to deliver in Paris to one of Barbaroux's former colleagues and fellow deputy, Lauze Deperret, Charlotte Corday arrived in Paris on 11 July with this as her ostensible mission. She booked herself into a cheap hotel, learned of Marat's indisposition, and realised that she would have to kill him at his home. She spent the next day with Deperret and then turned to her real objective on the following day – 13 July.

Meanwhile, on 12 July Jacques-Louis David, a prominent Jacobin, indeed president of its club for a month in the summer of 1793, deputy to the Convention and powerful member of the Committee of Public Instruction, was visiting his friend, Marat,

where he found him working in his bath. He was clearly affected by Marat's diseased appearance and by the austerity in which the journalist worked.

The day before Marat's death, the Jacobins sent Maure and me to get news of him; I found him in a state which stunned me. Beside him was a wooden box on which there was an inkwell and paper, and with his hand out of the bath, he was writing his final thoughts for the deliverance of his people.³

In her hotel room that evening Corday wrote a speech to the French people, *L'Adresse aux Français*, explaining her motives, her intention in destroying 'the savage beast fattened on the blood of Frenchmen', and her hopes for France's peace after Marat's death. She meant her speech to be found and read, so she attached it, together with her baptism certificate, to the dress she would wear to visit Marat. She rose early on 13 July and bought a newspaper. She read with fury of the guillotining to take place that day of nine men from Orléans who were accused of plotting against a Jacobin official. As the shops began to open in the Palais Egalité, Corday made her way to a cutler's and bought a kitchen knife with a six-inch blade and ebony black handle and two rings for hanging it from a shelf or cook's waist (David paints it white-handled, with no rings). She then hailed a carriage and asked to be taken to Marat's apartment.

Marat lived at 30 rue des Cordeliers, where he had installed a printing press for distributing his newspaper, *L'Ami du Peuple*. He shared the apartment with Simonne Evrard, his common-law wife who appears to have paid most of the bills, and her sister, Catherine, and a cook. It was a modest apartment; the walls were covered with paper with an illusionistic design of columns, which David clearly chose to ignore for his painting. Arriving at the building, Corday rang a bell and asked to see Marat but was refused entry by the concierge. An hour later she returned and managed to reach Marat's apartment but was refused entry this time by Catherine and Simonne Evrard. Returning to her hotel Corday wrote Marat a letter promising to give information about the Girondins in Caen and appealing to Marat's sense of patriotism. She sent it by the *petite poste*. Later that afternoon she wrote a second letter which she carried with her – the one that David adapted for his painting and

placed in Marat's hand.⁴ She changed her dress and transferred the *Adresse aux Français* and baptism certificate to it, tied green ribbons on her black hat, called another carriage, and returned to Marat's residence at about 7.30 P.M. On her arrival two men, employed in connection with Marat's newspaper, were being admitted into the apartment and Corday seized her chance to get a foot in the door and plead with Simonne to be admitted to Marat's room. On overhearing this exchange Marat agreed to see the citizeness from Caen. He was seated in a sabot-shaped hipbath (these could be hired quite cheaply) in a small room adjoining his bedroom. According to some accounts, he wore an old dressing gown over his shoulders, which David again chose not to represent. Around his head was some white cloth soaked in vinegar. Across the bath was a wooden board that Marat used as a writing surface. On the wall behind was a shelf with a pair of pistols and a map of France beneath it. Many of these details would emerge in contemporary prints recording the incident and in later nineteenth-century paintings, but David eliminated all evidence of decoration and personal possessions except the objects needed by Marat for his work as a journalist.

Marat himself was weak, immersed to the waist in water, naked beneath the dressing gown, but he was nevertheless busy with paperwork. His skin was badly marked with what was referred to at the time as a 'leprous' condition, presumably some sort of psoriasis. Corday gave him news of the uprisings in Caen and the names of the Girondists responsible – at which point he assured her, according to her own testimony, that they would be guillotined in a few days. Enraged but emboldened by this, Corday drew the knife from her clothing and plunged it hard into Marat's chest, withdrew it, and flung it away from her. Marat called out to Simonne – 'à moi, à moi, ma chère amie, je me meurs!' – these supposedly being his final dying words.

Chaos ensued as Simonne and the other women tried to lift Marat onto his bed and stop the bleeding, and the men forced Corday to the ground, tied her hands, and shouted at her. A doctor pronounced that it had been a clean blow and death instantaneous, the knife reaching between the first and second ribs, through the lung and into the heart, producing torrents of blood. A policeman questioned Corday at length in one room while the unpleasant

business of embalming Marat's corpse began in the bedroom. Four deputies were sent for to interrogate the prisoner, the main spokesman being the former Capucine monk, François Chabot, and they brought pressure to bear to make Corday compromise other Girondins who they presumed had plotted with her against the friend of the people. She named no one and was taken to the Abbaye prison for further questioning.

The following day, by which time news of Marat's death had reached the Convention, Guirault, member of the deputation to the Convention from Marat's Section, turned to David; 'there is yet one more painting for you to do'. Another deputy, Audouin, begged David, 'Return Marat to us whole again' – which reveals an interesting faith in the power of the image to create a likeness so believable that the subject's actual presence might be felt.

In the following days attempts were made to convince people that it was possible for art forms to keep their friend alive. A death mask of Marat appeared at the window of his apartment, later to be replaced by a bust. Marat's body meanwhile was fast disintegrating, his head and shoulders turning green, and David was compelled to relinquish his initial plans for the funeral procession, in which he had wanted to exhibit Marat's body seated upright, as he had seen him the day before his death, working away for the sake of the people. Instead, he adopted the same form as the one he had used for displaying the body of another martyr, Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau; a recumbent figure with the chest wound visible on the unwrapped upper torso (Fig. 4).

In all respects, however, the orchestration of Le Peletier's funeral had been much simpler than Marat's would prove to be. Le Peletier had died in the cold winter month of January, and the smell of rotting, diseased flesh was not a problem then. In the intense heat of July, Marat's corpse had to be accompanied by a sprinkling of heavy perfumes in order to overcome the stench. Le Peletier's allegiances had been straightforward. Marat, however, was claimed by disparate groups and there were therefore competing contenders for control over the arrangements. Robespierre wanted nothing to do with the cult of Marat or of any individual, which, for David, as one of Robespierre's allies, was potentially embarrassing. In the end it was the Sections of Paris that took responsibility for the funeral.

An oil sketch in the Musée Carnavalet, attributed to an artist by the name of Fougea and dating from the following year, gives an



Figure 2. Fougéa (attrib.), *The Funeral of Marat in the former Cordeliers Church*, 1794, oil on canvas, 59 × 73 cm. Musée Carnavalet, Paris. (Photothèque des Musées de la Ville de Paris.)

idea of the sort of scenes in the Church of the Cordeliers where Marat lay in state (Fig. 2). Significantly, the body was within reach of the mourning people, not just of their representatives, as was the case with *Le Peletier*. Also evident is the presence of wailing, keening women hugging their children and feeding their babies in the foreground. Marat's arm hangs down by his side as in David's painting, and the effects or attributes of the martyr – bath and blood-stained sheet, upended box, inkwell, papers and quill – are all there in reference and deference to David's painting. But Fougéa's work could hardly be further removed from David's. Fougéa's painting presents a compression of a diachronic sequence; it includes on the left-hand side the capture of Corday and her supposed conspirators, as well as the funeral ceremony of several days later. By contrast, David's painting represents a single moment of suspense. It makes no attempt to tell the story or describe the scene of Marat's assassination or to include any of the other characters who had been present. The first is a cluttered genre scene, a confused narrative; David's is a laconic transparent work, a history painting and an

icon whose power to fascinate has hardly diminished since the day of its first exhibition.

THE DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The creation of David's *Marat* involved three people most directly: the victim represented in the picture, the assassin who precipitated the event it commemorated, and the painter.

JEAN-PAUL MARAT – THE VICTIM

Marat never produced the autobiography that he had wanted to write, but there is a diary that enables us to follow his early years. He was born in Switzerland in 1743 and was a sickly child but later proved to be a brilliant student. He spent the years 1762–5 in Paris studying medicine, followed by a ten-year period in England and Scotland practising as a doctor. It was here that he started his career as a writer, with a number of essays that were expanded into a book, on the nature of the human soul, followed by successful publications on electricity and optics, and the more famous *The Chains of Slavery* of 1774.⁵ The influence of Descartes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau is tangible in these writings.

Back in Paris in 1776 he was, ironically, appointed the following year as doctor to the troops in the household of the king's brother, the Comte d'Artois. This position lasted only until 1782, when the first of his serious bouts of illness, together with financial difficulties resulting from constant persecution from the Science Academy, caused him to leave this employ. On recovery he vowed to devote himself thereafter to serving the cause of liberty. In *L'Offrande à la patrie* (Feb. 1789), he addressed the French people on the imminent elections for the Estates General and on the tone and language adopted by the king's letter of convocation, of which he disapproved, but most of all on the duties of the people's representatives and the misery of the people.

From then on Marat styled himself as the champion of the freedom of the press and of the cause of the people. He cultivated a lifestyle of austerity, truth, and virtue, and he gloried in rudeness as a sign of his integrity and refusal to please. Polite manners he viewed as a form of corruption. He constantly offered to die, to sacrifice himself rather than compromise his principles.

In September 1789 Marat started publishing *L'Ami du Peuple*, first called *Le Publiciste*, in which he noted from the start his intention to expose conspiracies, traitors, and plots and to warn the people of danger from whatever source. He called himself 'the eye of the people' and 'd'annonciateur patriote', but 'l'ami du peuple' is the name that for many, including David, was synonymous with Marat. His life was one of self-imposed austerity and untiring devotion to the people's welfare. Much of the time he was persecuted by the authorities for his forthright attacks on government policies and, not surprisingly, had to work clandestinely, even literally underground, in a basement from which he emerged only after the overthrow of the monarchy on 10 August 1792. This picture of Marat working underground by the light of a lantern would appear frequently in subsequent imagery.

Marat was elected as a Paris deputy to the National Convention on 9 September 1792, sitting with Danton, Robespierre, and David, among others, and from this date he and his newspaper became the target of attack from the Brissotins, more generally known as Girondins. They believed Marat to have been responsible for inciting the sans-culottes to massacre Girondins held in Paris prisons in September. They also accused him of wanting to become a dictator. On 12 April 1793 they eventually obtained a decree from the National Convention to have Marat brought to trial before the revolutionary tribunal. This was a fatal mistake on their part. Marat was able to defend himself against all charges and was acquitted and carried in triumph from the courthouse on 23 April 1793. This victory would constitute one of the subjects of the famous painting competition of the Year II (1794). In the next weeks Marat's health deteriorated and alarming reports were given in the newspapers. It was understood that he did not have long to live. That his life and death would not, however, be allowed to follow their natural course, and that 'the friend of the people' would be assassinated by a young woman, supporter of the Girondin faction, could never have been foreseen.

MARIE-ANNE CHARLOTTE CORDAY – THE ASSASSIN

Like David, Charlotte Corday (Marie to her friends) had been well educated, especially in the literature of the ancient world, and she

had a particular interest in Plutarch's *Lives*. Her education had been formed by nuns of the royal abbey at Caen until the convents were closed down in 1791. She also made reference during her trial and elsewhere to the writings of Abbé Raynal and to the political writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. She was born in Normandy in 1768 and lived in Caen at the time of the outbreak of the Revolution. Caen was a stronghold of Girondin supporters who had chosen to leave Paris as their moderate views became less and less acceptable from spring 1793 onwards. Since April, Corday had been planning to assassinate Marat, whom she regarded as the real enemy of the French, because he had been responsible for denouncing in the late May and early June issues of his newspaper the many Girondins whom he had branded as traitors – 'unmitigated royalists' who had wanted to 'annihilate liberty by treason and re-establish despotism by civil war'.⁶ If she could eliminate Marat, Corday believed she could bring peace back to France.

Like David, she too had a strong sense of the theatrical, in her case stemming perhaps from the fact that her ancestor was Pierre Corneille, whose plays explored the value of patriotism over and above the passions of the human heart. In his play *Cinna*, for example, she found an expression of ambition and zeal similar to her own and an image of a bloodthirsty tiger in Rome, which, for many Girondins at this time, characterised Marat in Paris.⁷

Corday never married, and her unmarried status at the age of nearly twenty-five was held against her at her trial. Jacobin attitudes toward women – and these were endorsed by Marat – insisted that certainly by this age a woman should have married and should be producing little patriots to fight for their country. Corday was a virgin at this time, as ascertained shortly after her death.⁸ Her attractive appearance was also manipulated to count against her at her trial, especially since the moderate press, certain poets (including André Chénier), and some sympathetic engravers had begun to show her in a positive light, as the obedient daughter writing to her father from prison, for example, or as a supremely calm and poised woman who displayed utter conviction in the rightness of her act.

Corday never swayed from her belief in herself and indeed spent some of her time in prison constructing the kind of image she wished posterity to have of her. She posed for a portrait of herself

by the painter Jean-Jacques Hauer. Her trial took place on 17 July. She was condemned to the guillotine and executed that same day. The myth of her angelic beauty and power to enlist supporters to her cause through her innocence and serenity continued at the scaffold. When her head was held up to the crowd it was slapped on one cheek, which apparently caused the other cheek to blush. The legend of Charlotte Corday persisted intermittently throughout the nineteenth century, but it was considerably promoted by Jules Michelet in the mid-nineteenth century, and she became the subject of countless paintings (especially popular at the 1880 Paris Salon), sculptures, plays, poems, and prints, the study of which is beyond the brief of this book.⁹

JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID – THE PAINTER

David held a number of public positions during the early 1790s. He was one of the major orchestrators of the numerous Paris festivals, from the pantheonization of Voltaire in July 1791 to the Festival of the Republic One and Indivisible in July 1793 and the Festival of the Supreme Being in summer 1794. He also led a petition to restructure the Académie Royale de Peinture along more democratic lines, with the eventual outcome being its abolition in August 1793. And he was officially appointed to paint the posthumous portraits of three martyrs of the Revolution: the regicide, Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau; the defender of the sans-culottes, Jean-Paul Marat; and the young republican boy fighting in the Vendée, Joseph Bara.

In 1791, for the *Société des Amis de la Constitution*, later to become the Jacobin Club, he had agreed to paint a huge canvas (26 feet long) of *The Oath of the Tennis Court*. In the Versailles tennis court members of the Third Estate, with a few defectors from the nobility and the clergy, had come together in an emergency meeting in June 1789 to ensure fairer representation of the people of France. David produced a finely detailed finished pen-and-wash drawing for this commission and started work on the canvas. By 1801, however, political events had overtaken it and the work was left unfinished. It is possible that he was still working on it in the summer of 1793, however. In the first half of 1792 David had experimented in a series of drawings for a portrait of King Louis XVI as a father,

pointing out to his son, the dauphin, the articles of the new Constitution. But by 10 August 1792 the king was suspended, the monarchy overthrown, and a National Convention had replaced the Assembly. David would later deny any attempt to produce a portrait of the king.

David was elected deputy for Paris to the National Convention in September and sat with Marat, Danton, Robespierre, and other Jacobins. By the time he finished the painting of Marat the new revolutionary calendar had been brought into action to replace the Gregorian calendar. The Republic dated from September 1792, shortly after the collapse of the monarchy and the imprisonment of the royal family. In October 1793 France was therefore in year II of the Republic. Careful use of this calendar change is made in David's portrait of Marat.

In January 1793 David voted for the death of the king. He also produced his first martyr portrait in honour of Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau, a former member of the nobility, who had been killed by one of the king's guards for casting his vote for the king's death. It was as a pendant to this portrait that David painted *Marat* the following July through October, intending both paintings to hang behind the speaker's rostrum in the hall of the National Convention, as inspiration to the representatives of the people assembled there and, by extension, to the entire French people. David's antipathy toward the queen, Marie-Antoinette, would also be made transparent in his drawing of her, believed to have been done as she passed under the window of his apartment in the Louvre, on her way to the guillotine on 16 October 1793 (25 vendémiaire, An II). In a wholly unflattering pen-and-ink drawing he represented the former queen without her wig, teeth, or any of the usual regal attire. Later this same day *Marat at his last breath* made its first public appearance. It was exhibited, along with *Le Peletier on his Deathbed*, in the courtyard of the Louvre, for the benefit of the Section du Museum, in order that David's fellow citizens of this Section might pay civic honour to the two martyrs.¹⁰

In September 1793 David became a member of the powerful Committee of General Security, and in the following month he was on the Committee of Public Instruction. These committees had the responsibility for promoting social reform and for ordering trials, imprisonment, or death for antirevolutionaries. Maximilian

Robespierre was the guiding force behind the committees, and David admired him and willingly went along with his propagandistic policies. At this date Robespierre appreciated what Marat represented for the people, yet his instinct was not to honour individuals during their lifetime but to use their deaths for rooting out anti-republican forces and for exalting the abstract notions of Virtue, Liberty, People.

For some time David had been campaigning for the reform of the 'despotic' Académie Royale de Peinture along more democratic lines. He had also been instrumental in bringing about structural and organisational reforms for the Salon since 1789 and in transforming the Louvre into the Central Museum of the Arts with its revolutionary programme of reforms. On 8 August 1793 David called for the total abolition of the Academy, 'last refuge of all aristocracies', as he labelled it, in a speech that is impressive for its passionate appeal: 'in the name of humanity, in the name of justice, for the love of art, and especially for your love of youth, let us destroy these sinister Academies, which can no longer survive under the reign of liberty'.¹¹ All academies were closed down on 14 August 1793.

On 14 October David announced the completion of his painting to the National Convention and asked for permission to display it first to his colleagues in the courtyard of the Louvre for two weeks before giving it to the Convention. David's colleagues' reactions, in which they pay respect to David's patriotism, are recorded:

The expressed horror . . . permeates the whole canvas, which proves that the forceful and skillful touch of the artist would not have been sufficient in itself; it needed that ardent love of country that impassions the artist. . . it is difficult to look on it [the *Marat*] for any length of time, its effect is so powerful.¹²

David eventually presented *Marat* to the Convention on 14 November, praising Marat's virtues and calling for the friend of the people to be given the honours of the Pantheon. In May 1794 the National Convention decreed that copies of the painting be reproduced by the Gobelins factory under David's supervision. By this time David had been at work for several months on his portrait of Joseph Bara. He was in charge of choreographing the public funerary ceremonies of Bara and another young martyr, Viala. He was also working on a curtain design representing *The Triumph of the*

French People, in which the procession of martyrs following the people's chariot is suddenly interrupted by the figure of Marat, who leaps out toward the spectator to reveal his wound and appeals for vengeance. The Bara portrait would be left in a state of uncertain finish by the time of Robespierre's fall in July 1794, and the drop curtain was never produced in finished form. They represent David's last activities under the Terror. With the fall of Robespierre David underwent a spell in prison, and after his release at the end of 1794, he went to stay with his wife's sister, Madame Sériziat, in Saint-Ouen in order to recover from an illness. He stayed there until October, with another period in prison from late May to early August. On 26 October 1795 the Convention agreed to a general amnesty for crimes under the Terror and David recovered his freedom and returned to Paris.

THE LOOK OF THE PICTURE

Although simple, the picture has been arranged with the utmost care. It is possible to read it as a set of two-dimensional rhythms. Despite the high relief suggested by the raking light, the picture has very little depth. It is almost like a frieze. Both the box and the bath are severely rectilinear and are parallel with the edges of the picture. They provide a rigorous structure against which the curves and diagonals of the dying Marat are set. All these curves and diagonals suggest collapse; they are sloping and sagging downwards, as are the pen that Marat is holding and the scattered pieces of paper. The head has rolled over the farthest. Although it is the focus of the picture, the face is also the hardest object to read. The tilt it is given cleverly performs two functions. It both indicates that Marat's death is near and prevents us from observing his features properly. For Marat's face was disfigured with the skin disease that caused him to spend so much time in the bath in which he has been assassinated. David has managed to prevent us from reading the distorted nature of his hero's features while avoiding an obvious idealisation that would have destroyed the picture's sense of actuality.

IT IS POSSIBLE to find a precedent for David's treatment of his theme in the depiction of martyred saints. In this sense the picture fits within a 'genre' of religious painting and that of other heroes

who died for a noble cause. Within that genre, however, the picture stands out for its great originality. It has an unusual simplicity and starkness. This can be related to contemporary aesthetic interests. David was painting at a time when many artists were inspired by a return to classicism to explore new and radically simplified ways of designing pictures, sculptures, buildings, and other artifacts. This artistic climate probably helped David to formulate the extreme directness of the work. Yet the formula remains his own, and was in fact worked out by him on the canvas, as evidenced by a number of 'pentimenti' in the design. He was making changes to its details as he painted. The rhythm of shapes does not conform to any traditional compositional pattern – such as that of the 'Golden Section', which was much used by classical artists to communicate a sense of harmony. He seems instead to have chosen intervals that emphasise emptiness. The whole of the top half of the canvas is a dark, impenetrable space. The first object in the picture is Marat's head, which is placed exactly halfway down. This is the principle focus of the picture. It would be usual to have this focal point in or near the centre of the picture. Yet while David has made it halfway up the picture, he has also moved it across very far to the left. It is interesting to see from the one surviving supposedly preparatory compositional study (Fig. 17) that David has increased the extremeness of this position in the finished picture.

Although the picture appears to be very clear and 'real', it contains a subtle spatial ambiguity. Looking at Marat's head, we might imagine that we are on a level with it. It is exactly halfway up the picture, which is where one normally expects 'eye level' to be when looking at a picture unless some clear indication to the contrary is given within the picture itself. The head is turned toward us 'flat on', which would fit in with a central viewing point. Yet if we follow the diagonals of the edges of the box and the plank across the bath we see that they lead to a vanishing point high on the right side of the picture. They have been drawn as though we were looking down on the scene rather than directly at it, something that we might expect to do if we were standing in a room and looking down on someone in a bath. The lean of the shoulders toward us disguises the discrepancy between the two spatial systems. This discrepancy is not in any way due to ineptness. It is deliberately planned to make us simultaneously look down on

Marat and straight at him – to pity him yet respect him. It also enhances the strange sense of separateness that the head has from the rest of the picture, making it all the more hypnotic and doubtless reminding contemporaries of the many guillotined heads that were falling with increasing alacrity by autumn 1793.

In keeping with his training as a historical painter, David has made colour strictly subordinate to form. Colour is used in this painting to articulate shapes, and it echoes them in its simplicity. There is in fact a very restricted use of colour. Whites and browns predominate, the white sheets echoing the paleness of the body, the dark brown of the background providing a murky obscurity beyond the event. The green of the cloth (an unusual colour for David) gives a restful tone, as well as providing a background to throw the foreground wooden box into starker relief. This low-key series of tones makes the small touches of blood red all the more telling.

We can see how carefully David has staged his picture to make it seem compelling and ‘authentic’. It has often been described as though it were a faithful record of what happened. Baudelaire, for example, said that it was as ‘real as a Balzac novel’.¹³ In recent times the historian Edgar Wind has praised it as a ‘remarkable piece of reportage’.¹⁴ Yet as has already been indicated, the artist has in fact been extremely cavalier with the evidence. Beyond the fact that the picture shows Marat having been stabbed in his bath, it contains hardly a detail that corresponds either to the sequence of events or to the appearance of the place in which they occurred. Marat was certainly stabbed in his bath, but he didn’t expire quietly in isolation. The bath he had been sitting in didn’t look like the one David created. It was a conventional sabot-shaped one, as can be seen in other representations of the event. Marat was not reading the letter he is shown as holding when Corday came in to stab him. Nor was he writing at the moment when he was stabbed. The makeshift desk he used did not look like the crude box in the picture. Even the knife that Charlotte Corday used to murder Marat did not look like the one portrayed.

There is more than ‘artistic license’ in all these changes. For the truth of the matter is that David was not intending simply to show one specific moment in the story of Marat’s death. He was presenting a picture that would simultaneously record the horror of mar-

tyrdom and present an image of his hero as 'l'ami du peuple'. David had seen Marat at work in his bath a day before the assassination, and the memory of that visit is the base on which this picture is built. What he has done, in effect, is to imagine the assassination as though it had taken place immediately after the moment that he himself had last seen Marat alive. From a psychological point of view, this was perhaps how David himself experienced the event. For the next time that he saw Marat after his visit, the politician was a corpse. He has united the personal with the public to give this commemoration a particular charge.

The picture was originally intended as a commemorative image. This practice was part of a deliberate campaign to use pictures of revolutionary martyrs to replace religious imagery. It was done quite literally at times; new images actually took the place in some churches of the old religious ones. From September 1793 to March 1794 there was a strong 'culte de Marat'. By the end of November more than fifty commemorative ceremonies for Marat had been held in Paris, usually including a bust of him as a central focus. Increasing unease was felt by Jacobin leaders about the scale of these ceremonies. On 14 November, after the Pantheonization of Marat, Robespierre made a plea for these activities to cease.¹⁵

Robespierre attempted to replace the cult of martyrs with that of the Supreme Being in 1794. Although his effort did not succeed – and Robespierre himself was soon to fall from power and be executed – this shift does mark the beginning of the process that caused David's *Marat* to be removed from public view early in 1795.

THE PICTURE'S HISTORY AND RECEPTION

From the time of its first exhibition, the *Marat* has been perceived as a striking and disturbing work. The first published account appeared as a result of the exhibition of it together with the *Le Peletier* at the Louvre in October 1793: 'Although these two pictures are conceived each in their own way in the best possible terms, artists especially admire the picture of Marat. Indeed it is difficult to look at it for very long, so terrible is its effect'.¹⁶

Since the *Le Peletier* was destroyed in 1826 it is impossible to say whether it, too, might have enjoyed a subsequent history similar to that of *Marat*. However, important though it clearly was as a work

(and included by David together with the *Marat* as his two most significant works), it did not contain the elements of shock and *verismo* that the *Marat* does, so it may not have occupied quite such a central position. It may have been those very elements that caused the artists, when they first saw the two, to prefer the *Marat*. Certainly the commentator's remark about the terribleness of the effect of this work has persisted and has been a key feature of the picture's fascination ever since.

The challenging nature of the picture has also been maintained by the continued controvertiality of its subject. Marat was long reviled after his death by both conservatives and liberals as a monster and an inciter of the rabble to barbaric deeds.¹⁷ It was Marat, remarked Mme de Stael, 'whom posterity will perhaps remember in order to attach to one man the crimes of an epoch'.¹⁸

Even after the first Republic began to be rehabilitated in the 1840s, Marat remained condemned as a monster. Jules Michelet, in his classic study, used Marat's physical repulsiveness to enhance repugnance: 'from what swamp has come this shocking creature?' he asked.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, Michelet exalts Corday's character and beauty in his work.

However, in the 1860s, when republican sympathies were beginning to revive, Marat began to be seen by some in a more sympathetic light. Alfred Bougeart, in *Marat, l'ami du peuple*, considered that Marat had been a check on unlicensed authority and felt that he would have saved the Revolution had he lived.²⁰ Such views were echoed by Engels in 1884, and from this time onwards Marat became a communist hero, eventually becoming widely celebrated as such in Soviet Russia.²¹

In recent years the divided view of Marat has continued. Following the staging of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*, he became a cause celebre in the 1960s, and has continued to act as a bone of contention between left and right since that time. As Ian Germani observed in 1992, 'As long as the issues which divided France during the Revolution continue to divide us today, Marat must necessarily retain his symbolic identity, a figure of revulsion to some, of heroism to others'.²²

It is difficult to gauge quite how the divided fortunes of Marat have affected responses to David's picture. It certainly doesn't seem to have diminished respect for the painting, though it has affected

interpretations. On one hand, right-wing and liberal admirers of the work have tended to emphasise how the human dimensions of the drama 'transcend' the precise political circumstances of its origins. Left-wing supporters, on the other hand, have tended to see the work as the ultimate authentic revolutionary painting, in which personal and public commitment merge into one.

Since the picture remained concealed from 1795 until after David's death, there was no comment about it at the time that Marat was being most thoroughly vilified. However, when it did emerge at the sale of the contents of David's studio it was still regarded as too inflammatory an image to be sold. Nevertheless, the picture attracted attention because of its stark realism and modernity. Stendhal saw the work and wrote in its praise. His experience of the *Marat* seems to have informed his attack on the classicists in his *Salon* review of 1827.²³ In this he accused the classicists of imitating an imitation in modelling themselves on Greek art. David, he said, by contrast, modelled his art on nature. It was a similar sentiment that caused Delacroix to call David the 'father of the modern school'.²⁴ Delacroix was in fact recognising a tradition of which he was a part. For the two modern artists who were Delacroix's immediate forebears – Gros and Gericault – had developed a form of tragic modernity that some believed to be based on David. It was Gros – the artist who had preserved the *Marat* after David had fled to Brussels – who had taken up the challenge of David's *Marat* during the Napoleonic period with a work like the *Plague at Jaffa*, and Gericault who had taken this dimension further with his own modern disaster picture, the *Raft of the Medusa*.

Marat's next public appearance in Paris took place, interestingly, a couple of years before the 1848 Revolution. It was shown in 1846 at the Bazar Bonne-Nouvelle as part of a small exhibition of the works of David and Ingres. It would seem that the show had been designed as a vindication of the classical tradition. Yet the response that it caused had the opposite effect. Once again critics dwelt on the modernity of David's realism and the failure of academicians to follow his bold lead. This exhibition is memorable for precipitating the most famous description of the picture, that by Baudelaire already quoted at the beginning of this introduction.

This quote became the 'classic formulation' of the picture, both because of Baudelaire's status as a poet and critic, and because of

the sheer beauty of his phrases. His obsession with the conflict of the real and the ideal relates perhaps most closely to his own meta-physical self-questioning. Moreover, Baudelaire's description sealed the reputation of the picture as one of quite unusual interest and complexity, and few commentators since that time have been able to avoid seeing a spiritual as well as a realistic dimension in it. Only a year later Alphonse Esquiros described it as a 'pietà jacobine' in his history of the Montagnards of 1847.²⁵

The canonical status of the *Marat* received a further boost in 1855 when it was described in E. J. Delécluze's *Louis David, son école et son temps*. A former pupil of David, Delécluze had assiduously followed the works of his master during his career as an art critic and journalist. Now near the end of his life, he published what was to become the standard biography of David. In it Delécluze made clear that he regarded the *Marat* as David's principal work even if not technically his 'masterpiece':

Likewise the *Marat*, if it is not exactly the artist's masterpiece, must be seen as the first of his works to reveal the power and originality of his talent. He had seen and felt what he painted and it was a moment of enlightenment that made him envisage his art from a completely new point of view.²⁶

Delécluze's treatment is important because it places David squarely within the realist camp. Interestingly his book appeared in the same year that Courbet challenged the artistic authorities responsible for the selection of works for the French section of the Exposition Universelle with his 'Pavillon du réalisme'.

The rising reputation of realist art – together with the softening of attitudes to Marat himself – meant that the status of David's painting was no longer in doubt. However, the work was soon to become embroiled in a controversy of another kind. In 1860 Jacques-Louis Jules David, the artist's grandson, acquired *Marat* from his aunt. At the same time he made a gift of one of the copies of *Marat* also in his possession to Prince Napoleon, who placed it in his gallery at the Palais-Royale. Despite the fact that J. L. Jules David made clear the status of the two works in a publication in 1867,²⁷ claims were made that the Palais-Royale version was in fact the original. This was maintained in particular by the dealer Durand-Ruel, who acquired the version and sold it as an original

David in 1885. A dispute arose and in 1889 Louis David's widow was obliged to take the matter to court, where – despite some disagreements among the experts – the authenticity of her *Marat* was upheld. This unpleasantness may have cost France the work, for in 1893 Mme David bequeathed it to the Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, in recognition of the reception that city had afforded David when he had gone into exile in 1815.

In the nineteenth century David's 'progressive' realism was seen to be in conflict with his classical idealism. However, in the twentieth century opinions changed as the classical revival in the late eighteenth century came to be seen as a radical movement in itself. The starkness of *Marat* now began to be read as a sign of stylistic modernity. This interpretation also led to a reintroduction of the political debate around the image. For political radicals, the stark neoclassical manner was to be read as the visual analogue of republicanism. This position was summarized by Arnold Hauser in his magisterial *Social History of Art*. Writing about David's *Horatii* he said:

If it is admissible to interpret pure artistic form sociologically, then here is a case in point. This clarity, this uncompromising rigour, this sharpness of expression, has its origins in the republican civic virtues; form is here really only the vehicle, the means to an end.²⁸

Hauser's views were countered by those who wished to see neoclassicism in apolitical terms as a pure artistic movement that had the seeds of modernism in it. For some the extreme formal simplicity of the *Marat* was seen as a kind of protominimalism. In the most extensive and detailed exploration of the neoclassical minimalist style, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art*, Robert Rosenblum wrote of David's pictures as 'sequences of reformatory manifestoes that attempt consecutive purifications of his earlier styles'.²⁹ In this teleology the *Marat* is still one step away from the final statement of Davidian flatness, the *Sabines* of 1799.

Like much art historical formal analysis, Rosenblum's reading was supported by the concept of modernism as 'pure' pictorialism, the idea promoted by Clement Greenberg so powerfully in the art world in the 1950s and 1960s.

However, there was another dimension to Rosenblum's study. While subscribing to the Greenbergian view of the pictorial rigour