

DAVID TO DELACROIX



Walter Friedlaender

DAVID TO DELACROIX

BY WALTER FRIEDLAENDER

Translated by Robert Goldwater

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PREFACE

THE German edition of this book was published in 1930 as a volume in a series of philological handbooks destined for use in colleges and universities. The special feature of the book is its emphasis on the historical structure of French painting from the time of David to that of Ingres and Delacroix. This most interesting and important period of French painting has been treated mostly by art critics who have specialized in the art and culture of the nineteenth century and who reduced the art of the period to two main tendencies, classicism and romanticism. Such terms, however, are unsuitable to contrasts of style or technique, whether in painting or in literature, because they refer to different levels of aesthetic experience; the one implies an ideal of form directly or indirectly dependent upon the antique, while the other describes the mood or sentiment which a creative artist expresses through the medium of his work. One can very well speak of a romantic classicism, for example in certain works of Ingres or Girodet, or of a classicistic romanticism in such a painting as Delacroix's "Medea." Such terms tend to confuse rather than to clarify the artistic situation of the period.

To my mind, a clearer idea of this situation can be gained by studying, more than has been done in the past, the historical sources of the various stylistic and intellectual currents of the time. Naturally these sources are to be found, to a large extent, in the art of the preceding period, the eighteenth century. I have therefore begun by outlining in an introduction (which because of lack of space is somewhat schematic) the main trends that lead up to David. Of equal importance, however, is the art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and significant parallels can be drawn between these periods and the early nineteenth century — parallels which are made particularly meaningful by the strongly and consciously retrospective element in the artistic intellect of the time from David to Delacroix. The art of David

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is largely based on that of Poussin, and Ingres proclaims his interest in Bronzino and his passionate concern with Raphael. Prud'hon was called the French Correggio with good reason, and Delacroix was an ardent follower of Rubens. Therefore, if I apply such terms as classic, mannerist, early baroque, and high baroque — terms which are generally applied to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries — to the art of the early nineteenth century, it is because I believe that there are specific common denominators in the phases of these two periods and in the way in which these phases succeed one another. On the other hand, in tracing the historical developments, I have tried not to lose sight of the artistic integrity of the various artists who effected these developments, and it surely does not detract from the individuality of an artist to understand his work in an art-historical context. Indeed, an artist manifests his individuality partly through the force with which he reacts to his artistic inheritance.

The present English translation is a recent revision by Dr. Robert Goldwater of a translation he made in 1939. Except for minor corrections and omissions, it follows exactly the original German text. I am especially grateful to Dr. John Coolidge, Director of the Fogg Museum of Art in Cambridge, and to Dr. Sidney Freedberg of Wellesley College, without whose loving interest in the book this edition would never have been published. I would also like to thank Dr. Jane Costello, Mr. Irvin Lavin, and Mr. William Crelly for their enthusiastic assistance in preparing the manuscript for the press. I am greatly indebted to Mr. George Wildenstein, Mr. Richard Goetz, and Mr. Henry McIlhenny for giving me photographs which I was unable to obtain elsewhere, and to the administrations of the following museums for permission to reproduce paintings from their collections: the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and especially the Fogg Museum, whose photographic collection was generously placed at my disposal.

WALTER FRIEDLAENDER

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THE ETHICAL AND FORMAL BASES OF CLASSICISM IN FRENCH PAINTING

Two main currents appear in French painting after the sixteenth century: the rational and the irrational. The first is apt to be moralizing and didactic; the second is free of such ethical tendencies. The rational trend stems from France's classical epoch, the seventeenth century, and continues, with more or less strength, throughout the eighteenth; the irrational current is less constant, but appears most splendidly in the first half of the eighteenth century. Both, though in a variety of transformations and mixtures, can be recognized in the complicated structure of French painting of the nineteenth century and continue even to our own day.

The moralizing bias is more evident in French painting than in that of any other European nation, north or south. Early in the seventeenth century there appears in France an attitude primarily concerned with the ethical and didactic content of a work of art and, of course, exerting a specific influence upon the form as well. The pioneer was Nicolas Poussin. His famous painting "Et in Arcadia ego" is a symbol of the transitory. Shepherds read on a grave monument the melancholy inscription, "I too am in Arcadia." The "Testament of Eudamidas" is a symbol of puritan rectitude; the only legacy that virtuous but poor citizen of Corinth left to his friends was the burden of caring for his mother and daughter. Such moralistic epigrams are conceivable only in the artistic and emotional milieu of France. Although the formal character of Poussin's art is based entirely on Italian, especially Roman, prototypes, no Italian artist would have chosen such didactic

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subjects. This moralizing element is even present in genre painting; Louis Le Nain's peasants are dignified and significant, unlike the drunken rustics of Brouwer and other Netherlands artists. Because of these ethical and didactic factors religious painting, too, acquired a typical sober character, very different from the fanciful brilliance of religious paintings produced in Italy and Spain in the wake of the Counter Reformation. In France, there was a new emphasis upon the individual's spiritual life and practical salvation, so that ethical and didactic concerns were more predominant than ever before. From the circle of "The Virtuous" of Port-Royal issued the serious but humanly and psychologically sensitive work of the Frenchified Fleming, Philippe de Champaigne. Eustache Le Sueur can also be placed in this category. What the French called the *grand goût* was, for the most part, permeated with this strongly didactic atmosphere. This is also true of the academic spirit so characteristic of France, a spirit that is closely related to the moralistic, or would like to appear so. The emphasis on *ratio*, a fundamental idea of the academic, is so closely related to the moralistic that the two can hardly be separated. When Boileau sets up his aesthetic rules, they are morally obligatory because they are built upon the rock of *raison* and *bon sens*. Similarly in Poussin and his great literary contemporary, Corneille, the elements of the rational are fused with those of the moral. *Raison* and didactic morality formed the *méthode classique*, represented in the seventeenth century by Poussin and Corneille, with whom the name of Descartes is associated as the rationalistic theoretician. This classical method provides an unshakable basis for the entire later development of French painting.

Sharply opposed to this moral and rational attitude is the second main current of French painting, the irrational. It does not attempt to build on the basis of human or superhuman truth or reason, but simply on taste — something that is neither rationally nor morally tangible. A real definition of taste can hardly be formulated; quite early one spoke of the imponderable fineness of *delicatesse* or, with complete subjectivity, of a certain *je ne sais quoi*. These antitheses — extreme rigidity and extreme laxity — are reflected in artistic and

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especially in literary theories. Against the strictly moralist and militantly classicist ideas of Boileau, who wanted to establish eternally valid rules of poetry confirmable in the works of antiquity, there appeared, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, a movement to make *sentiment* the criterion for artistic judgment. *Coeur* and *esprit* were catchwords of the literary salons around 1720. Thus arose an artistic mentality, unburdened by moral or academic tradition, that did not wish to live in the rarefied atmosphere of reason and morality, but at the same time had no desire to descend into the depth of emotion. It attempted rather to capture the attractive surface of reality, in both the objective and the psychological sense, and concerned itself with the facile and scintillating phenomena of life, treating them in a joyous and always technically masterful manner. *Charme* and *esprit*, the hallmarks of the style, are imponderables, pure elements of a taste whose extreme refinement and elegance could only have been developed in a metropolis such as Paris; they thoroughly defy reason. Moreover, these elements defy all morality; they are by definition amoral and this amorality was easily turned into immorality, frivolousness, and often overt eroticism. Thus, the whole movement became still more strongly opposed to the Academy, the stern guardian of morality.

The taste for the sensuously superficial and the charmingly elegant produced so many delightful works of art that there has been a tendency to forget everything in French art except these sparkling masterpieces of French eighteenth-century *esprit*. The wonderful decorations, large and small, of Watteau, Lancret, Pater, de Troy, etc., with their softly colored and yet brilliant lacquer tones and their captivating eroticism, covered the *rocaille* walls and ceilings of Parisian *hôtels* in the first half of the eighteenth century. They were the delight of connoisseurs and amateurs and enchanted the whole of Europe. But in spite of our pleasure in the finesse and quality, the spirit and charm of this art, we should not forget that this uninhibited and purely painterly attitude represents only one side of French art, as it were, the verso, the extreme, the beloved exception. From a certain point of view, this sensual and decorative art was tolerated merely

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as a passing phenomenon; for the intellectual and judicious Frenchman of the advancing eighteenth century, at least, it belonged only to the *petite manière*. Even its finest and earliest exponent, Watteau, was considered only an accident in the development of moralistic and rationalistic French art. Only the *grand goût* claimed unchallenged leadership; even such careful and penetrating critics as Diderot made no exceptions in this respect.

The great moral-classic attitude had been the dominant note in the history of French painting since the seventeenth century, but only with the inclusion of the free and optically sensitive manner could the structure be complete. Joyous and uncalculated melody is a fundamental element in the life and manner of the French people and their artistic culture, but it can never suppress the enduring rational keynote which, related to the high ideals of Italian classicism and antiquity, expresses the Latin intellect and is therefore a major component of the French spirit. Out of the conflict of these opposites, their alternation of leadership, and their partial interpenetration, French art develops. The battle between the *Poussinistes* and the *Rubénistes* which around the end of the seventeenth century produced a whole literature of bitter diatribes (more than the famous *querelle des anciens et des modernes* of the literary world) is a part of this greater struggle, really the first open conflict. For though the discussions were apparently concerned with the technical and the visual — drawing versus color, calm versus movement, sharply focused action of a few figures versus scattered crowding — the real battle was between discipline and morality on the one side and amoral slackening of rules and subjective irrationality on the other. The continuation of this deep cleavage even in the nineteenth century is seen in the bitter rivalry between Ingres and Delacroix. Even for them the real question was not one of mere formal laws. For Ingres, Delacroix, as the representative genius of colorism, was manifestly the Devil; "it smells of brimstone," he once said when he came upon Delacroix in a Salon. Ingres was the self-appointed protector not only of linearism and classical tradition, but of morality and reason as well. Strangely enough, in the most extreme academic credo, line and linear abstraction embodied

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something moral, lawful, and universal, and every descent into the coloristic and irrational was a heresy and a moral aberration that must be strenuously combatted. Similar though less sharply expressed oppositions are to be found in later French painting.

This continued battle of opinions, the constant friction in which a partial interpenetration of opposites was unavoidable, played an important part in the formation of French artists. Because of this the nineteenth century produced that extraordinary richness of individual artistic personalities and variety of schools and tendencies which distinguished French art from that of all other countries. Although the rationalistic element, characteristically and closely related to the moral, was always greatly in evidence in French art, the irrational component was of almost equal importance. The most subjective French artist was, in technique and compositional approach, partly dependent upon reason and even upon the Academy, and it is just this that in the midst of all excess still gave French art some measure of formal restraint.

Viewed historically, the freer manner appeared at the beginning of the eighteenth century primarily as a reaction. The classic epoch of the seventeenth century, in which Poussin, Descartes, and Corneille were representatives of the French mentality, was long past. Louis XIV and his ministers, especially Colbert, had gone to the utmost extremes of administrative concentration; they had bridled the classic spirit and had forced even art into the service of absolute monarchy. The result was an all-pervasive artistic sterility. The Academy, under Lebrun, with its verbose aesthetic speeches and discussions, took the lead in codifying and mummifying all vitality. The reaction that took place during the Regency toward complete freedom from any kind of academic limitation — in technique (the new colorism) as well as in subject matter (genre) — was anything but surprising. However, the dominance of the *peinture galante* lasted only a relatively short time. Watteau was active only during the first two decades of the century, and his true followers, Pater and Lancret, did not last beyond the middle of the century. Boucher, to be sure, lived on until

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1770, but he was comparatively unappreciated in his last years. Only Fragonard, unique among these great names, carried on the line and worked in the freer manner into the new century, and even he had to make concessions to the *grand goût* as early as his diploma picture of 1765. What we generally call "the spirit of the eighteenth century" should properly be limited to its first half. The style which saw its highest development during the Regency and the early years of Louis XV's reign (when, as La Mettrie writes, it was as though one were constantly immersed in a *mer de volupté*) had not been entirely extinguished by 1750, but the severe and moralizing tendencies which then reappeared were constantly limiting it and forcing its retreat. The same development occurred in decoration when the *rocaille*, that flickering and facilely capricious ornament, gave way to an ever more sober stylization.

The strong reactionary tendency which now opposed the undisciplined mentality of the salons and the multitude of the *petits maîtres* was basically only a return to the rational and moralizing keynote of French art which had culminated in the classic epoch of the seventeenth century. The governing principle involved here — as is so often the case in the evolution of art forms — is, so to speak, the "grandfather law." A generation consciously and bitterly negates the efforts of its elders and returns to the tendencies of a preceding period; these tendencies had continued in more or less hidden undercurrents and had taken on a slightly different coloration through contact with the opposing tendencies. This was indeed the situation around the middle of the eighteenth century: a neoclassic, one might say a neo-Poussinist current returned and the *grand goût* was once more dominant. However, the character of the current had been significantly changed by fifty years of subjection to the irrational rococo, and a powerful effort was needed to strengthen and purify it. The chief complaint of the opposition around 1750 was against the superficiality in the period from Watteau to Boucher. One regretted the absence of grand action, of strong composition, of impassioned expression, but above all the lack of that ethical content which had pervaded the works of Poussin. Rousseau declaimed bitterly against the pictures in the galleries and

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the statues in the gardens, because instead of showing virtuous people they portrayed *les égarements du coeur et de la raison*. It was believed that the merely visual, the melting colors, delicate values, and attractive surfaces which charmed the amateurs and pleased the salons should be secondary to more spiritual emotion. "First move me, astonish me, break my heart, let me tremble, weep, stare, be enraged — only then regale my eyes" was Diderot's appeal to the artist.

The classicism which now began to reappear, with a new manner of adoring and emulating the antique, was to a very large extent a moral affair. Antiquity was no longer simply an ultimate teacher whom one followed unquestioningly. Rather, it was felt that man had found in himself lofty and valid rules for human morality which were rediscoverable, as nowhere else, in the history, literature, and art of antiquity, and that from them one could derive maxims for one's own conduct. Thus it was not simply the formal solutions of Greek and more especially Roman art which were emulated; the important thing was the ethical value which could be extracted from antique art. The heroic was now associated with the virtuous. The Hero — preferably clothed in antique drapery — was not merely someone who performed great deeds of physical prowess and before whose muscular strength and bodily beauty one stood in wonder. He was primarily someone — and this was the moralized conception of Hercules — whose noble body sheathed a soul shining with virtue and whose exploits could serve as a model and as an ideal. He had to be a paragon of magnanimity, high-mindedness, self-control, righteousness, human dignity, and self-sacrifice — in short, he was to possess every conceivable human virtue. The stronger the contrast to the effeminate and frivolously skeptical representatives of contemporary society, the more radiantly virtuous a hero seemed. Above all, the king and his entourage were to be confronted with a luminous example of Roman Republican decency and Spartan simplicity and stoicism.

Thus, this ethical classicism took on an eminently political character and, along with literature and moralizing philosophy, paved the way for the Revolution. It was no accident or mere historicism that the Revolution utilized classicistic forms. David in his "Oath of the

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Horatii" — the classicistic painting par excellence — reached the summit of this development four years before the storming of the Bastille and became the great painter of the Revolution. Important also in heralding a new classical era was the influence of Winckelmann's ideas, especially his concept of "quiet" or "tranquillity" as the proper condition of beauty. For Winckelmann this concept had an ethical and almost religious character; it added something new to the "noble simplicity" and the *goût de grandeur* which already characterized the classicistic attitude. A real moral effect of these ideas was not felt until they met with the doctrines of Rousseau, which had begun to stimulate a new emotionalism in France about the same time that Winckelmann's ideas were becoming popular. The return to nature, from which civilization had removed mankind, the simple grandeur and beauty of "citizens of Sparta," was sought in the noble figures of the Roman Republic as they were described by Plutarch, one of the most popular antique writers of the time. The great myths which had decorated walls and ceilings, with their erotically colored Triumphs of Venus and their pale allegories, were now neglected or scarcely noticed. Cincinnatus with the plow, Manlius who condemned his own son, Arria who cried to her husband, *Paete, non dolet* ("it doesn't hurt"), as she stabbed herself — the new ideal, in brief, was the stoic dignity of man.

However, the development of the new *grand goût*, this elevated neo-Poussinist classicism, did not proceed quickly or smoothly. The path to a definitive resolution, to David's "Horatii" of 1785, was long, difficult, and not very glorious. Certainly the spirit was willing; themes of an antique, heroic, and moral nature abounded, and there was energetic competition in collecting and inventing them, even such men of letters as Diderot taking part. The formal problems of picture structure were also reworked in accordance with the new requirements of simplicity and clearly understandable staging. Poussin's "laconicism" was revived and painters began to follow his rule of *rareté*, on which Winckelmann had also insisted. This demanded that as few figures as possible be placed on the pictorial stage, whereas the decorative artists and the Rubenists were much more concerned

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with picturesque effects than with concentration on individual actions. Unlimited vistas of perspective depth were given up in favor of an effort to achieve a stage for the main action through parallel spatial planes placed one behind the other. Foreshortenings, accessories, and anything else which might distract the eye from the essence of the picture — i.e., the action — were strenuously avoided. But all of these technical classicistic regulations came into being only gradually. For the most part they remained mere beginnings or compromises and only with David were they sharply, clearly, and directly realized. Although there were real talents, hard-working and even very able men, none except David, the youngest of them, was a leading figure. Thus, though the names of the members of David's and the preceding generation are known, their works are partly lost or buried in obscure museums and, for the most part, rightly forgotten. In the ingenious and frequently enthusiastic analyses of their pictures in the *Salons* of Diderot, one often has the feeling, despite the vitality of his diction, that one is dealing with shadows. For it was more the attitude of these artists, their relation to actuality or nature (which included something of sentiment), than the qualities of the productions that Diderot and the other critics were praising. But even this attitude is often unclear and undecided. Fundamentally, it is still a matter of what one may call a pseudo or rococo classicism; the subject matter alone, heroically moralizing and taken from the antique, is in the *grand goût*. Everything is haunted by an effete and washed-out rococo which, in ridding itself of overt eroticism, had produced a more painful *volupté décente*, a kind of lascivious chastity. Chastity and the related virtues were portrayed with half-nude bosoms and draperies clinging to the body in the manner of the antique. Greuze's innocently voluptuous young maidens are typical examples of this sort of erotic prudery.

The indirect influence which the leader of the neoclassic eclectics, the Germano-Roman Anton Raphael Mengs, exercised on French art was not without importance. He was the most intimate friend and the ideal of Winckelmann, although his art was really only a watered-down version of Italy's continuing classicistic and antibaroque movements. It was, in fact, composed of reminiscences of Raphael and the

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Bolognese-Roman school, with a touch of the antique and faded rococo coloring. His art and ideas had more influence on the countless French painters who were *pensionnaires* of the Académie de France in Rome than those of the director, the still very rococo Natoire, so that the authorities had to warn the students against the influence of Mengs. His numerous English pupils — and with them the Swiss-born Angelica Kauffmann — also helped to spread his artistic ideas. They created many historical pictures in this pseudoclassic manner which were disseminated in the form of engravings and became very popular in France. In spite of their weaknesses their heroic subject matter contributed much to the strengthening of the *grand goût*.

Moral virtuousness is frequently associated with sentimentality. In this respect, English influence is unmistakable in the eighteenth century; from England a wave of sensibility spread out over all of Europe (consider, for example, Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe*). Without this almost neurotic sensitivity, a kind of hypertrophy of the emotions, the paintings of Greuze would not have received such enthusiastic and undivided applause. "Never have I seen truer color, more moving tears, more noble simplicity," said a critic of his "Maiden Mourning over a Dead Bird" (Salon of 1765). It is characteristic that Greuze was considered a painter of true nature, with reference not to the accurate delineation of details, which actually he valued greatly, but rather to just that sentimental expression which today seems somewhat dishonest and lachrymose. Moreover, it is worth while to notice that Greuze constructed his large compositions, such as "The Father's Curse" (Louvre), in a classicistic, Poussinist way, with additive planes and a curtain closing off the background; only the virile conviction is lacking.

This sensitive naïveté could also clothe itself in fashionable antique drapery, with titles to match: "Vestals Approaching the Fire," "Virtuous Athenians" (Vien), "Cupid Drilling a Squad of Little Amori" (Carle Van Loo, 1763), and the most famous of these subjects, "Merchant of Loves," taken from a mural in Herculaneum.

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This *savante simplicité* and *pureté ingénue* were specialties of Joseph-Marie Vien, the teacher of David. "The Love Merchant" was painted by him, as was the "Ladies of Corinth Decorating a Vase of Flowers," and with such subjects he earned extraordinary acclaim. Diderot says of one of his sentimental and neo-Grecian ladies: "One would not wish to be her lover but her father or mother. Her head is so noble; she is so simple and naïve." It is obvious that the heroic and moral tendency had not yet rid itself of the *petite manière*; only the antique drapery and sober restraint in drawing and color added something new. However, the sentiment is fundamentally the same. Also, it should be remembered that the coloristic current had by no means disappeared at this time. A picture technically as well as morally so loose as Fragonard's "The Swing" was produced in 1766, contemporary with the sentimental heads of Greuze and the virtuous antique maidens of Vien. And even Diderot, the staunchest moralistic critic, admired the beautiful and sensitive still-life and genre painting of Chardin (d. 1779) although he regretted that Chardin's scenes of domestic life were not in themselves interesting. The great religious masterpiece of Vien, the "Sermon of St. Denis" of 1767, had its counterpart in another "machine" at St. Roch in Paris, the "Miracle des Ardents" by the Rubenist and colorist Doyen; both of these paintings were loudly applauded. According to Diderot, Vien was "a new Domenichino and Le Sueur," and his coloristic antagonist "a Rubens." The balance, however, finally turned in favor of the more severe attitude of Vien and his sympathizers, and their new "sublime" style was praised by critics and public alike. It contained the seeds of the future, even though its moral will was stronger than its rather unsubstantial artistic performance. It was David who created the real revolutionary classicism.