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Title
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Publication Date
2018-04-01

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Decapitating the *Académie*

Of the fifteen deputies depicted in the fragment of Jacques-Louis David's incomplete canvas, *The Tennis Court Oath*, Mirabeau (the second figure from the right) was the only one who did not live to see the guillotine during Terror (Figure 1). He died due to health issues in April, 1791. Two years later, Bailly (in the center, drawn in faint white chalk) was sent to the guillotine on November 12th, 1793. Barnave (just to the right of Mirabeau) followed his lead on the 29th. Shortly after, Rabaut Saint-Étienne (directly bellow Bailly in the foreground) met similar fate on December 5th. Later, in summer, 1794, the blade eventually found the necks of Robespierre (fifth from the right) and Antoine Saint-Just (just to the right of Saint-Étienne). The instrument that decapitated each of these men was named after Guillotine (second from the left, in the back). Although Pétion de Villeneuve (two to the left of Robspierre) escaped the guillotine, his death may have been more gruesome than the others. His body was found in a field in 1794, mutilated by wolves.

All of these deaths, according to historian Warren Roberts, make up the revolution's fallout that prevented David from finishing the *Oath.*

> For his part, David abandoned work on the *Tennis Court Oath* in the wake of the political explosion of August 10 [1972] and the tremors that continued into September. It was in the month of September, when prisoners were slaughtered, that he set aside the project in which he had invested so much time, but whose message of unity and renewal through constitutional government was hopelessly incongruous in a Revolution that was torn by violence, factional strife, and popular fear and anger. Some of the heroes of the Tennis

Court Oath were no longer heroes, and others would soon become enemies of a Revolution that had traveled far from the goals and ideals of 1789.[1]

The same account of the *Oath's* failure appears frequently throughout scholarship. I will address Thomas Crow's version later, but here, Roberts reveals some of the standard assumptions about the revolution and its relationship with making art. Using the *Oath* as the high point of harmonious cooperation, scholars typically consider the revolution to steadily decline towards chaos and conspiracy. While violence intensified as the revolution wore on, it was central since the storming of the Bastille on July 14th, 1789, which was just before the Oath on July 20th. In his *Introduction to the French Revolution* (written in 1793 while he was in prison), Barnave reveals the mood of the early Estates General: "If, anticipating the violent convulsions to which succeeding events delivered the kingdom, the work of the assembly had not been continuously influenced by the inflammatory atmosphere of a people in a state of revolution…the result would have been some kind of compromise among the various elements, a new arrangement of what existed rather than complete transformation."[2]

David's sketches, *Decapitated Heads of the Marquis Delauney* and *Major de Losme Salbrai of 1789* make Barnave's point visual (Figure 2). Decapitation always figured the revolutionary imagination, even before the guillotine's emergence. My first issue, then, is that Robert's account tries to see "unity" in David's fragmented canvass. The word might be an incorrect description of the Oath itself.

I question Roberts about the moments between "when prisoners were slaughtered" and when David "set aside the project." Roberts implies that political action and making art are independent activities that respond to one another. Because it is the revolution we are

[1] Warren Roberts, *Revolutionary Artists*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 253.
[2] Antoine Pierre Joseph Marie Barnave, *Introduction to the French Revolution,* in *Power, Property, and History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), trans. Emanuel Chill, 130.

considering, T.J. Clark offers the proper rejoinder to Roberts: "art not only is obliged to make form *out* of politics, but also to leave accident and tententionsness of politics in the form it makes—not transmute it, in other words."[3] "Accident" is key, as well as the messiness of the trace. Many historians end the discussion of David's *Oath* with its incompleteness. But it is precisely the fact that production halted at an unintended moment that provides unique insight into the way politics and form make each other.

After the September massacres and the king's arrest on August 10, Robespierre was pressed to justify the preceding unrest:

> Citizens, did you want a revolution without a revolution? What is this spirit of persecution that has come to revise, so to speak, the one that broke our chains? But what sure judgment can one make of the effects that can follow these great commotions? Who can mark, after the event, the exact point at which the waves of popular insurrection should break? At that price, what people could ever have shaken off the yoke of despotism? For while it is true that a great nation cannot rise in a simultaneous movement, and that tyranny can only be hit by the portion of citizens that is closest to it, how would these ever dare to attack it if, after the victory, delegates from remote parts could hold them responsible for the duration or violence of the political torment that had saved the homeland? They ought to be regarded as justified by tacit proxy for the whole of society.[4]

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[3] T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 22.
[4] Maximilien Robspierre, *Virtue and Terror* (New York: Verso, 2007), trans. John Howe, 43. For the original, see: "Réponse de Maximilien Robespierre à l'accusation de M. Louvet, devant la Convention nationale," (Paris: De l'Imprimerie de P.J. Duplain, 1792), 19.

Robespeirre taunts his accuser with the paradox "revolution without a revolution," implying the hypocrisy of wanting political freedom while condemning incidental violence. "Revolution," then, is polysemic. The same paradox contorts the body politic; while it has "remote parts," it can be aggregated into a "whole of society." Robespierre reconciles these oppositions by protracting time: the fact that not all of society can undergo social transformation at once justifies the "duration" of social unrest. The time it takes measures the distance travelled by political representation.

Robespierre, therefore, indicates the two-dimensional lightening rod of the Revolution's reception. Twentieth century scholars like Hannah Arendt formulate the revolution as a "gap between past and future."[5] The revolution certainly ruptures the continuity of time, but somehow that movement gets figured spatially. Robespierre gives us two reasons why: firstly, when the revolution shatters tradition, it dissolves the previously established cohesion of society. After the political body is dismantled, its connectedness must be rediscovered. Secondly, that process of reconfiguration also has physical form. The vestiges of monarchy must be literally torn asunder. Louis was decapitated. We will see if this claim holds true for the techniques of painting.

In addition to dismembering the body, violence during the revolution also exceeded knowledge about the body's response to physical stimuli. An anecdote from the Abbaye prison massacres of September 3rd shows how gruesomeness defied expectations:

> From time to time we sent some of our comrades to the turret window to inform us as to the position adopted by the unhappy people who were being killed, so that from their report we could decide which one we should do best to choose for ourselves. They reported to us that the people who raised their hands suffered much longer because the

[5] Hannah Arendt, "Preface: The Gap between Past and Future," *Between Past and Future* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961.)

> force of the sabre strokes was deadened before it reached their heads; that there were some whose hands and arms fell before the body, and that those who put them behind their backs must suffer much less.[6]

For these witnesses, the violence was unprecedented, which compelled them to obtain a "report" on what was repellent to watch. The observation of small differences in the victim's bodily orientation lessened the observer's eventual suffering. If looking is a pathway for physical empathy, then revolutionary violence made it necessary to feel a new form of death before its occurrence.

It goes without saying that many similar accounts of the violence were exaggerated, but the hyperactive revolutionary imagination only further demonstrated the government's loss of control. Robespierre knew he had to fortify his authority with intellectual explanation; thus, the paradox: "A revolution without a revolution." The logic entraps the listener, and the conceit is that Robespierre can anticipate the unpredictable. Cunning wit and responsive improvisation matched the erratic conditions. However, standardization and consistency could end them. The guillotine would make death the same each time, eliminating new extremes of pain along with their fictionalization.

Before the guillotine, the state's older methods of capital punishment appeared as imprecise as killings during popular insurrection. Previous beheadings were recounted to the national assembly:

> It should be remembered…what occurred during the execution of Thomas Arthur, comte de Lally. He was kneeling and blindfolded. The executioner struck him on the back of the neck. The blow did not separate the head from the body, nor could it have done. Nothing

[6] Jourgniac de Saint-Méard, "My Thirty-Eight Hours' Agony," in G. Lenotre, *The September Massacres* (London: Hutchinson & Co), 171.

> now presented the body from falling. It toppled forward, and the head was finally separated from the body by four or five sabre blows. The hacking, if we may use the term, was witnessed with horror.[7]

The pain endured by the criminal exceeds the punishment issued by the court of law. The sight of death becomes horrific if the execution deviates from the mandated procedure. Erratic bodily movement was seen as the failure of regulation, which potentially undermined the government.

After presenting the anecdote above, Doctor Louis was right to claim that the guillotine was "easy to construct and infallibly effective; decapitation…instantly ensue[ed], in keeping with the spirit and the demands of the new law."[8] Increasing speed did more than reduce the victim's suffering; it also closed the gap between policy and action, fueling the revolution's urgency. Standardization of death calmed Robespierre's anxiety about subsumption: a single procedure for execution could be used throughout France, even in its "remotest parts." It is ironic that imagining a "whole" state required finding a systematic way to break bodies into pieces.

For these reasons, Roberpierre's speech of November had two purposes: he wanted to stabilize the preceding unrest, but also justify the use of state violence in the future. The guillotine operated for the first time in April, 1792, yet its true test was the King's neck on January 21st, 1793.[9] Barère, the farthest left figure seated in David's *Oath,* reveals the fraught symbols of that event: "The law tells me that between tyrants and peoples there are struggles only to the death...As a classical author said, the tree of liberty grows only when it is watered by

[7] Doctor Louis in Daniel Arasse, *The Guillotine and the Terror*, Trans. Christopher Miller (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1989), 186.
[8] Ibid., 187.
[9] Arasse, *The Guillotine*, 28.

the blood of all species of tyrants. The law says death, and I am only its voice."[10] While his tone is vigorous, his meaning lacks clarity. He almost personifies the law, as it "tells" and "says," but it still lacks its own "voice." Must the law issue judgments through its own windpipes in order to destroy those of others? This question reveals how I am tracking the revolution's various juxtapositions: The human body versus the body of the law; The written versus the spoken; The literal versus the figurative; Mind, body; Time, space; Ideal, action; Part, whole; Life, death… All these might be the fissures of tradition or the modernity's common conflations.

It is even stranger that the King's blood became the property of foreigners: "Two well-dressed young men were to be seen. One of them, who looked to be a foreigner, perhaps tan Englishman, gave fifteen francs to a child, requesting him to soak a very fine white handkerchief in the traces of blood that remained."[11] What a triumph for capitalism! After the guillotine had sliced the king's body in half, the substance of his former vitality could be purchased for almost nothing.

Less than five months later, in late July, 1793, Barère wanted to shed Girodin blood. "The moment has come…for you to assume the proud attitude befitting national justice and strike down all conspirators without distinction."[12] After Robespierre was elected to the Committee of Public Safety, the guillotine purged the Girodins. Charlotte Corday was the first killed becuase she assassinated Marat on the 13th. After the blade severed her head from her body,

> [t]he executioner's assistant held up Charalotte Corday's head to show it to the people. When he slapped it, it appeared to blush at the indignity. A scandal erupted. Public anger led to a similar response at the highest level. The inhumanity of the act, and the lack of respect shown to the victim contributed to the indignation, but Corday's reddening

[10] Bertrand Barère, quoted in Leo Gershoy, *A Reluctant Terrorist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 75.
[11] Quotes in Arasse, *The Guillotine*, 63.
[12] Barère, in Gershoy, *Terrorist*, 174.

> cheeks did much to diminish people's confidence in the humane efficiency of the machine.[13]

Here is where I imagine a historian breaking in: 'you have raced through the revolution at *breakneck* speed, stopping only for the goriest anecdotes. Revolutionary time is precious and the Tennis Court Oath took place almost exactly four years earlier than Corday's execution. At that earlier time, the violence, the vicious discourse and the twisted metaphors of your account had yet to begin. Surely, the revolution was volatile, violent and Janus-faced, but David's painting does not figure any of that. Instead, the Tennis Court Oath was a genuine moment of hope. The interval between "past and future" is marked by radical egalitarian values triumphing over despotism, not the fallout of tradition.'

While I argue that violence historically surrounded the Oath as much as it is built into David's painting, I am glad to momentarily oblige the historian and review the mood of July 20th. It is important to remember why many historians reach the same conclusion as Roberts about "unity and renewal." While it is true that primary accounts of the event are overwhelmingly hopeful, their tone may misguide today's viewing of David's pictures.

A month before the Oath, Barère was still young and eager. He wrote, "we remained in the hall. We decided to adhere to our preceding resolutions and declared that the deputies were immune from arrest. We meet tomorrow morning, ready for whatever comes. We will show the courage and the caution befitting a great nation."[14] Rising early to warmly welcome the unknown may sound naïve today, but it may have encouraged the readership of *Le Point du Jour* as they coped with dramatic changes in government. Feigning diligence and agility distracted from the

[13] Arasse, *The Guillotine*, 38.
[14] Barère, in Gershoy, *Terrorist*, 72.

state's uncertainty. In a similar vein, on August 8th, Barère sent the following news home from Versailles:

> It is a pleasure to address you thus as I transmit news which is as pleasant for me as for you yourselves.
>
> The inhabitants of the province of Bigorre had instructed me to request the abolition of personal feudal rights and the redemption of real feudal rights. We have just obtained it from the generosity and the patriotism of the French nobility. The inhabitants of Vieusac [sic] should be the first to benefit.
>
> Something would be lacking in the joy which this decree of the National Assembly inspires in me if I were not able to have the general desire most fully realized. Consequently, I declare to you through this letter that all entry and exit rights, law of blood, watch and guard, and other feudal inventions are abolished among you. I tell you that we shall very easily reach an agreement on the rights which are truly real and constitute legitimate property, that I shall be considerate toward the poor in the matter of redemptions .... And I pray you to accept as a gift the redemption of the banality of the mill and all others in the records of the seigniory. You are free from this moment to grind your grain where you will, and there will never be any dispute between us on this point. I am leaving to the justice of those who are now in litigation to come to terms with the steward, unless they wish me to settle all discussion when I return. But all law suits are terminated on this subject from this moment on. I shall be eager to see you again to carry out in a more solemn manner the justice that I am rendering to you and the duty I am fulfilling. As for the gift, it is so slight that you should not even think of it. The happiest

> day of my life will be the one when I shall record in your midst that your lands are free and ask only to live in your memory and that of your children.[15]

Barère wrote this letter 19 days after the Oath and 18 days before the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. My question is whether or not optimistic accounts of the revolution dominate our looking at David's *Oath*. The words "pleasant," "joy" and "happiest" may only apply to an unrealized final version of the painting, not its present fragmented state. The former seems to be a fantasy of representation, like the utopic freedom celebrated by Barère. If the *Oath* figures the people's "redemption," we might see apocalyptic havoc, not salvation.

In David's highly finished sketch, Barère sits just to the left of the central trio with a writing board on his left leg and quill poised in mid air (Figure 3). His attention towards his environment is matched by his eagerness to spread the news. While the far-left figure in the incomplete painting would have become similar to Barère in the sketch, it is worthwhile to momentarily forestall the transposition from sketch to painting, as well as, from letter to painting. The figure in the painting is precisely *not yet* the Barère in the sketch, even less, the voice in the letter. *That not yet* tells a different story about the early revolution.

Look at how the incomplete painting discloses 18th century methods for making pictures. For example, the faint outline of a buckle heralds the disappearance of Mirabeau's toes. Bare toes underlay fashion. In Barère's case, a similar observation is stranger: the waist pre-exists correspondence and news. Together, culture and politics hide the dark crevices of natural pre-history—the toes' interstices, the belly button and the perineum. Multiple naked bodies betray David's compulsion to see and command anatomy, especially before he endows the body political agency.

[15] Ibid., 78.

David's meticulous technique and sustained observation seem to warrant theoretical description of representation. The painter's vision is a vector that points into three-dimensional space towards objects. Only the objects closest to the painter in each vector's path should be visible on the picture plane, whereas more distant objects should be hidden. The illusion, then, is that viewers know some objects to be present without seeing them. However, the incomplete *Oath* shows that David did not paint the closest objects first. David drew Barère's belly-button even though he would have later covered it with clothing and a writing board (according to the sketch). He intended to paint over the intricately drawn muscles of all fifteen *académies*. Making the picture required momentarily seeing the invisible. When they are finished, David's pictures enact realism by inviting theoretical deduction about space and its representation. But those theorems do not govern the picture making process. Instead, the picture emerges out of cultural fascination with the male body, which would have become invisible if the painting had been finished.

In the case of Barère's left leg, David drew only the first object in his line of sight. Even though the sitter's phallus was present while David studied him, he did not outline it beneath the sitter's leg. This reveals the body to be the obstinate pictorial surface, seldom transparent, almost always opaque. Painting did not penetrate skin and flesh, unlike clothing and props. Painting also produced and collapsed different visibilities of the same physical object. Looking, then, is the ongoing desire to see the invisible. Realism responds by finding a decisive moment for looking to break-off —precisely then, the visible truthfully reports the invisible. Yet, this equilibrium's pitfall is its determination by culturally contingent values, which operate in the guise of spatial facts. Impenetrability and wholeness are ways of seeing the body; both, especially the latter, cannot be seen on the picture plane.

The way natural light illuminates the body exacerbates visibility. According to the sketch, Barère's torso would have been shadowed in the final painting, but the sun would have highlighted his hand, quill and writing board. But in the painting's unfinished state, light on his hand negates the dark wash of his chest, while unrealized light on the writing board has yet to disappear his dark groin. To be clear, the word "hand" is a misnomer for what is visually present. David left a hole in the wash where he could have later added Barère's hand. The cloudy wash and the absence of a distinct outline, like the one hemming in Barère's bicep and calf muscle, reveal David's hesitancy. A confluence of convergences produces the aberration: the picture plane collapses hand and body, light and shadow, living flesh and the writing instrument.

Painting is messy here because it tries to visualize a non-illusionistic symbolic register, the textual. This writing has opposite movement as David's painting because it converts the visual act to textual description. This moment is even more circuitous: when David painted Barère taking notes, he tried to visualize an act of counter-representation. For the reason that Barère's news represents political representatives performing an act of representation for their constituency. This news, produced at same moment as the event itself, transmitted the present to the future, thereby transforming the present into the past. Since David attempted to paint the same past as the one recorded by the news, he visualized his own competitor, but one that also configured his vision (as the present of his painting was part of the future prepared by Barère's news). Fourthly, painting is also vexed by the task of representing its own bodily means—the hand in motion—working for a product that is not itself. Letters, not brushwork.

The *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* and its traditional education determined David's investment in history painting and the *académie*. It was also one of many hierarchical power structures subsumed under the monarchy. In that way, the aberration is produced by

painting's own predicament: the traditions of painting relayed the news of their own demise, which is as ironic as when Barère wrote home to relinquish his feudal power. His privilege and education justified his attendance at the National Assembly. While he eagerly renounced his serfdom, he was incapable of renouncing his literacy. And he certainly did not forsake the opportunity to shape the Rights of Man.

When David stopped painting he was still in the process of forming a convincing illusion. Barère is one example. Another is the shoe buckle in front of Dubois-Crancé's right foot, in front of Robespeirre's right calf, in front of Merlin's right calf. Visual incoherence forces almost nonsensical description. Without the sketch, which tells us that Dubois-Crancé stands on a chair, it almost impossible to see three-dimensional space. It seems like he jumped into the air with straight legs. While this moment is only four layers deep in the incomplete canvass, it regresses infinitely in the sketch, where there are innumerable deputies. The completion of David's *Oath* would have required resolving many similar passages into spatial recession.

While Barère's body takes precedence over his quill and writing board, Sieyès's hat (the other man siting) denies visual access to his left forearm and upper left thigh. Here, the prop and the body were given equal priority. The difference is especially striking when one observes that Mirabeau holds a hat in the sketch, but lacks one in the canvass, even though his hand remains clenched. Mirabeau's and Sieyès's hat each stress the picture's illusion to different degrees. In the sketch, Mirabeau's hat covers part of Dubois-Crancé's right leg and Gerard's stomach, while Sieyès's hat only covers his own leg and a dark spot under the table.

In the incomplete *Oath,* it is especially strange that Sieyès has a hat, but lacks a head to wear it. On the other hand, Mirabeau's head is painted in color, but sits precariously on top of his

sketched body. On the other hand, faint white chalk barely suggests Barère and Sieyès's heads. Collectively, the three different figures demonstrate that David lacked a consistent sequence for painting the body, its appendages and its ornaments. Sieyès received a hat before a head; Barère, a quill and shading before a head; and Mirabeau, a colored head before a sketched hat. The interplay of hat, body and head indicates the instability of the head within revolutionary visuality.

The *académie* was ubiquitous in 18th century French academic painting, but prominent politicians did not go to David's studio, undress and pose naked for hours. Strictly speaking, the body of *not yet* Barère actually belonged to an anonymous model. Likewise, the *académies* are not the bodies of the politicians that they supposedly represent. Instead, David studied the bodies of models independently from the heads of his political comrades. Making the body whole throughout the picture involved transposing decapitated heads onto *académies*.

Before he abandoned painting the *Oath*, David had already made color studies of the heads of Barère, Rabaut Saint-Étienne, Prieur and Gérard, the last of which was transposed onto the canvas (Figure 4,5, 6 & 7, respectively). Of all these portraits, Prieur's head makes the point most explicit: David decapitated him directly at the neck; there is no paint below it on the canvas. Almost the same is true for Saint-Étienne and Gérard.

Unlike the sketch of the *Oath,* these portraits are not set within perspectival space. Rather, David was concerned with each politician's physiognomy during the act of oath-taking. Their various expressions account the emotional complexity of the event. Gérard, Saint-Étienne and Prieur are dumbstruck, enthralled and refreshed, respectively. While Barère is definitely attentive, he could express surprise or admiration.

But all of these expressions are a bit uncanny. Even though everyone's head is directed above the horizon, indicating the unanimous optimism of the Oath, each figure seems threatened by what they see. The open mouths of Prieur, Gérard and Saint-Étienne literalize the moment's suspense. The first two are almost stupefied, and the third, possessed. Barère's wide right eye indicates fear, and his downward turning lips suggest hesitancy or disappointment.

Of course, all of these descriptions slightly miss their mark, and they should. Their accuracy is less important than noticing the kind of looking needed to see the *Oath*'s unfulfilled future. If we, as viewers, want to re-enact David's looking and painting, it requires reading *têtes d'espression*s and then transposing their meanings onto decapitated *académies*. My argument is not that David caused or prophesied the decapitation of these politicians. Instead, decapitation is the historically appropriate description of David's process of picture making. It was the method that enabled David to use his academic skills (the *académie* and the Le Brunian head) for painting contemporary history.

To some extent, the *tête d'expression* has always been decapitated. Consider how the head *L'Admiration avec Étonnement*, from Le Brun's *Expressions des Passions de L'Ame*, 1727, has a neck, but lacks a body (figure 8). Her expression even resembles Prieur's and Saint-Étienne's. But the decapitation of the *tête d'expression* did not have torn implications for representation until David inserted it into the revolution. Le Brunian theory constricts human experience by connecting feeling and its expression to well-known and identifiable emotions. This also oversimplifies representation by supplanting the visual with definitive invisible meaning. Strict predetermination sharply contrasts the myth of The Tennis Court Oath, which affirms the possibility for political action to liberate history from entrenched authority. The Oath was both a declaration of the end of feudalism and monarchy and a commitment to a new structure of

government. In other words, it was the commitment to posing representation as a question. Barère relinquished his feudal rights, but that action lacked definitive meaning: How would he relate to the people of his former serfdom? What power(s) would representatives have in the new government? The incomplete *Oath* pushed Le Brunian logic beyond its standard set of visual terms by forcing it to visualize the emotions of a crisis in political representation.

Norman Bryson argues, "David asks for a different kind of reading, that is less like a translation and much closer to interpretation: there is a greater distance between the image and our reading, and there are no easy one-to-one equivalences."[16] If interpretation is to be figured spatially, the revolution finds its most protracted form. The distance to the text, external authority or pre-determined knowledge became so large that the political act lacked meaning. Hence, Arendt's "gap," or "clearing," has unknown, or infinitely large, size. The guillotine opened the gap by killing authorities. Once the heads were severed from their actual bodies, the knowledge contained within them stopped exerting power over the political body. This undermines the inward half of Le Brunian logic: killing the powerful mind meant destroying the connection between the visual and meaning. The revolution ruptured two parts of the *tête d'expression*: the sign itself tries to visualize meaninglessness, but also, it kills the viewer formerly responsible for connecting the sign to its signified.

While the guillotine expanded, cleared and proliferated the present (of the early 1790s), it is ironic that it also brought death into close proximity with life. In order for killing to be an effective tactic for historical change, life and death must be separated by a "great distance." But when the executioner slapped Corday's head, causing her face to blush, he almost opened a pathway between the two. Apparently, when dying becomes facile and instantaneous, what is dead may retain the capacity to mean, rather than refuse meaning. If the *tête d'expression* can

[16] Norman Bryson, *Word and Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 238.

survive decapitation, the revolution's radicalism (of liberating the present through killing the past) is debunked. This would also threaten new political representation, as the dead (or their authority, tradition and government) would continue to exert power over the living.

It was a topic of widespread debate whether or not a decapitated person could recognize his or her bodilessness (or headlessness). Thus, in year IV, René-George Gastellier, the former revolutionary deputy, claimed, "[t]he heads preserve the mask they had at the instant of death."[17] At the moment of its decapitation, physiognomy becomes merely physiology, genuine expression becomes an emotionless and physical process. Here arises the banal version of meaninglessness, neither meaninglessness as the clearing of what is predetermined nor the opportunity for interpretation. The unconscious body, mechanical and automatic, gave revolutionaries leverage on the ambivalence of meaninglessness. Scientific thought quelled conspiracy and mysticism.

At the end of *Painters and Public Life*, Crow points out David's great innovation for history painting was to invent, rather than, to search for, the "most pregnant moment."[18] But Crow does not dramatize the pregnancy of the *Tennis Court Oath* enough. The paradoxical nature of decapitation—its simultaneous legibility and illegibility, how the instant is forever—does it justice. On Feburary 5th, 1792, just two months before the guillotine's inauguration, David wrote the following to the National Assembly: "l'historie d'aucun peuple ne m'offre rien de si grand, de si sublime que ce serment du Jeu de Paume, que je dois peindre…Nation francaise! C'est ta gloire que je veux propager! Peuples de l'univers, presents et futurs, c'est une grande leçon que

[17] Gastelier in Arasse, *The Guillotine*, 153.
[18] Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1985), 254.

je veux vous donner."[19] David used "sublime" in earnest. Shattering tradition was as much a nightmare as a dream.

The moment was so pregnant that it exploded, bursting David's *Oath* into fragments. In the postscript, Crow writes, "[t]he lesson of David's experience is that when the painter identifies his work completely with the contemporary public sphere, forsaking the distance of metaphor, that sphere will perpetually escape representation."[20] Here, Crow aligns himself too snugly with David. The moment itself was rupture, and therefore, it would have been impossible for David to capture it within a single canvass. Dismemberment of the political body and dismemberment of the physical body are represented by a dismembered canvas. For that reason, my notion of representation is less refined than Crow's; I do not limit it to intentional products of fully conscious actors. Only through collecting the fragments of the *Oath*, so that we notice the gaps within the representation, and therefore, the violence oath-taking did to tradition, and not in order to *re-member* them into an imaginary whole, do we see the paradoxical nature of the revolutionary moment.

While the sketch for the *Oath* is located in a specific time and space (it is a blustery July day at the Versailles tennis court; hence, the balls and racquet on the lower left side, the flapping curtains and the thunderbolt), all the preparatory portraits lack context. This comes as marked contrast to David's "meticulous transcription of the surface textures of bodies and objects"

[19] Jacques Louis-David, "Lettre de David au Président de l'Assemblée nationale, 5 février 1792," in Phillipe Bordes, *Le Serment du Jeu de Paume de Jacques-Louis David* (Paris: Ministére de la Culture, 1983), 165.
[20] Ibid., 258.

within his portraiture just a few years later.[21] Then, he located the sitter in specific and personalized domestic settings (Figure 9).

While each portrait for the *Oath* closely attends to the sitter's face and hair, their backgrounds are indefinite and abstract; they are flat explorations of paint, not three-dimensional environments surrounding the figures. In all of them, golden brushwork of various hues punctuate swaths of dark brown and black, just like the upper right portion of David's *Death of Marat* (Figure 10). In that painting, Clark encourages us to see more than just "scumbling." The areas around the heads are not "a satisfactory representation of nothing or nothing much—of an absence in which what ever the subject is has become present—but something more like a representation of painting, of painting as pure activity. Painting as material, therefore. Aimless. In the end detached from any one representational task. Bodily."[22]

What a strange description for the background of bodiless portraits! David's body or, at least, the traces of his gestures substitute for his sitter's bodies. If, according to Clark, the emergence of the process of painting in the mark makes it bodily, David's portraits for the *Oath* achieve this at the expense of their sitter's bodies. But this exchange is not explicit on the canvas. The lower halves of Prieur's, Saint-Étienne's, and Gérard's portraits are all hauntingly empty. David started to paint Saint-Étienne's coat, but stopped before foreshortening the sitter's shoulders (where the shape of the body becomes as important as the clothing). Clark's distinction is subverted; abstraction becomes blankness, which is "a satisfactory representation of nothing." The claim must be too literal for Crow, as it entirely forsakes the distance of metaphor. But notice how literally nothing results from the failure to literalize the body into bodily paint. I see the impasse caused by the revolution's radicalism: even what is constituted by its refusal of everything—

[21] Amy Fruend, *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France* (University Park, Penn State University Press, 2014), 19.
[22] Clark, *Farewell,* 45.

what is supposedly intransigent and obstinate at the basis of the revolutionary mythos—can absorb the doubt it has for world into itself. Painting shows how nothing lacked certainty about being nothing, like how presence, action and the body defaulted on their promise to be real, literal and physical.

The process of envisioning contemporary history demands the painter to be self-reflexive. David faced the following questions: what defines the contemporary for the painter? How can representation, previously used to transmit history, accommodate the present? Does the present for the painter include the very act of painting?

David could only reflect on these questions materially, with pen and ink, paint and brush. We are lucky to receive David's unfinished work, which discloses experimentation, like the portraits' backgrounds, the aberration of Barére's hands, or the interplay of hats. But an imagined final version of the *Oath* hides these difficult picture-making problems, revealing only unrealized solutions. The revolution lacked these solutions because it was a crisis in representation; seeing the revolution requires enduring the question. Looking as an ongoing and indeterminate interpretation.

I am not so much arguing that we should see blood spewing from David's canvas, from the neck, where the bodies of anonymous models meet the heads of political radicals. Nor am I arguing that David's bloodlust was harbored (which became blatant when he later gave ordered executions of fellow artists) in his picture making. But I do confess my enjoyment of those conclusions and think that their melodrama is on par with the revolution's own.

More modestly, I'm observing that picture making paralleled criminal judgment during the revolution. Via decapitation, they both tried to convert contemporary contingency into symbols of law and equality. David submitted radical action and the prominent contemporary political

actors to the traditions of the academy. The *académie* was the way that every historical event and actor could be *seen* to rely on natural and collective laws—the body predetermines every human move, political or otherwise. Likewise, the guillotine submitted the *Peuple* to equal punishment. David equalized the whole body like the guillotine equalized the human neck. The blade sliced through the body emphatically and consistently each time. David sketched the deputies with startlingly uniform muscle builds.

Today, though, we can recognize that the guillotine and the *académie* were only coercive figures of representation. Both tried to make everyone seem equal, but neither could realize that equality. The fact is that the Guillotine did not kill everyone; rather its seemingly universal potency relied upon making death a public spectacle. Those who only ever watched beheadings could still have imagined their own decapitation. It is an even worse conceit to say the *académie* could represent the whole public body. For one, it was entrenched in classical notions of beauty that did not describe real revolutionary bodies. Needless to say, the deputies did not have such impressive muscles. Also, it was exclusively male.

Figure 1: Jacques-Louis David, *The Tennis Court Oath*, unfinished sometime 1792.

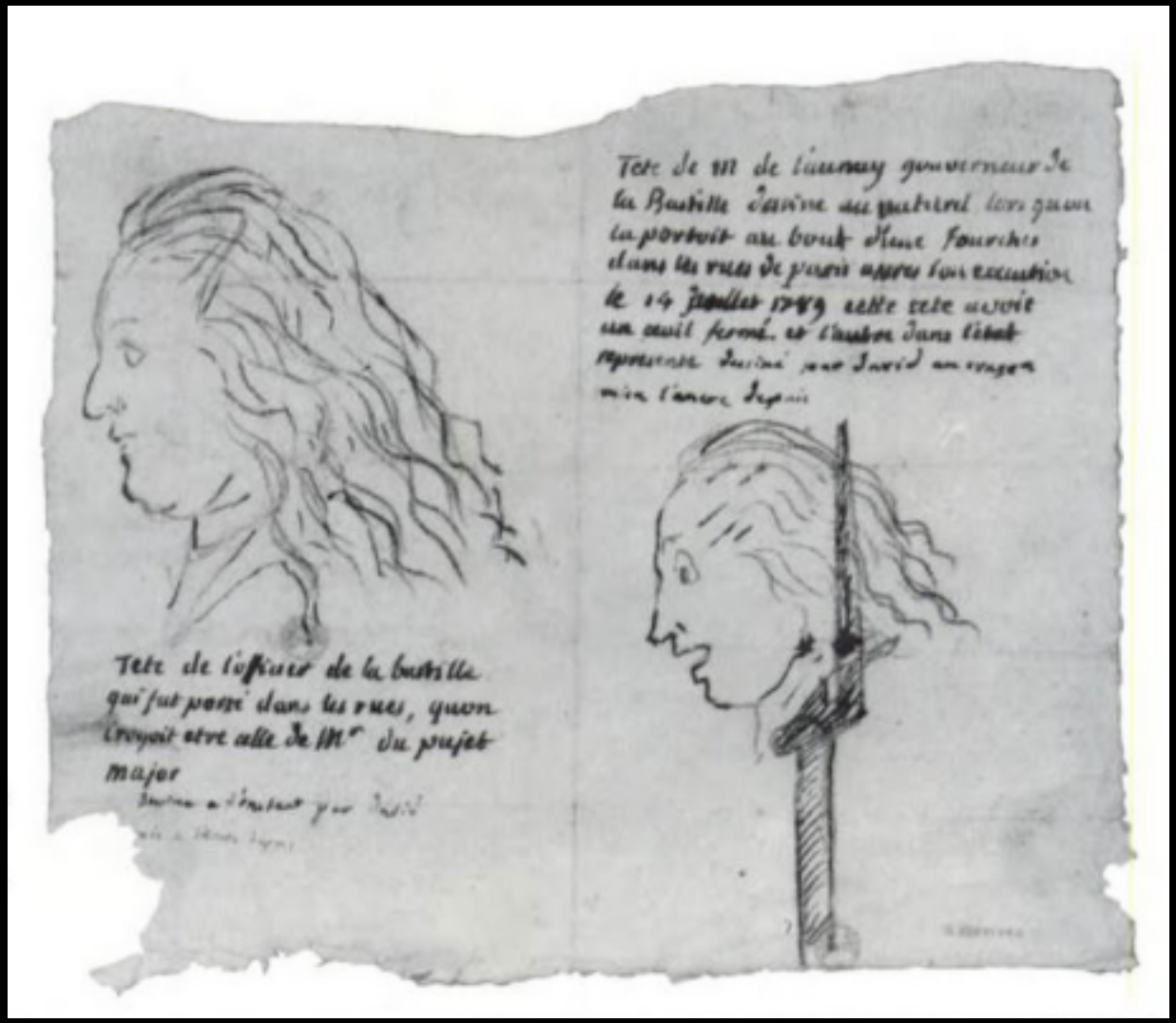

Figure 2: Attributed to Jacques-Louis David, *Decapitated Heads of the Marquis Delauney and Major de Losme Salbrai*, 1789.

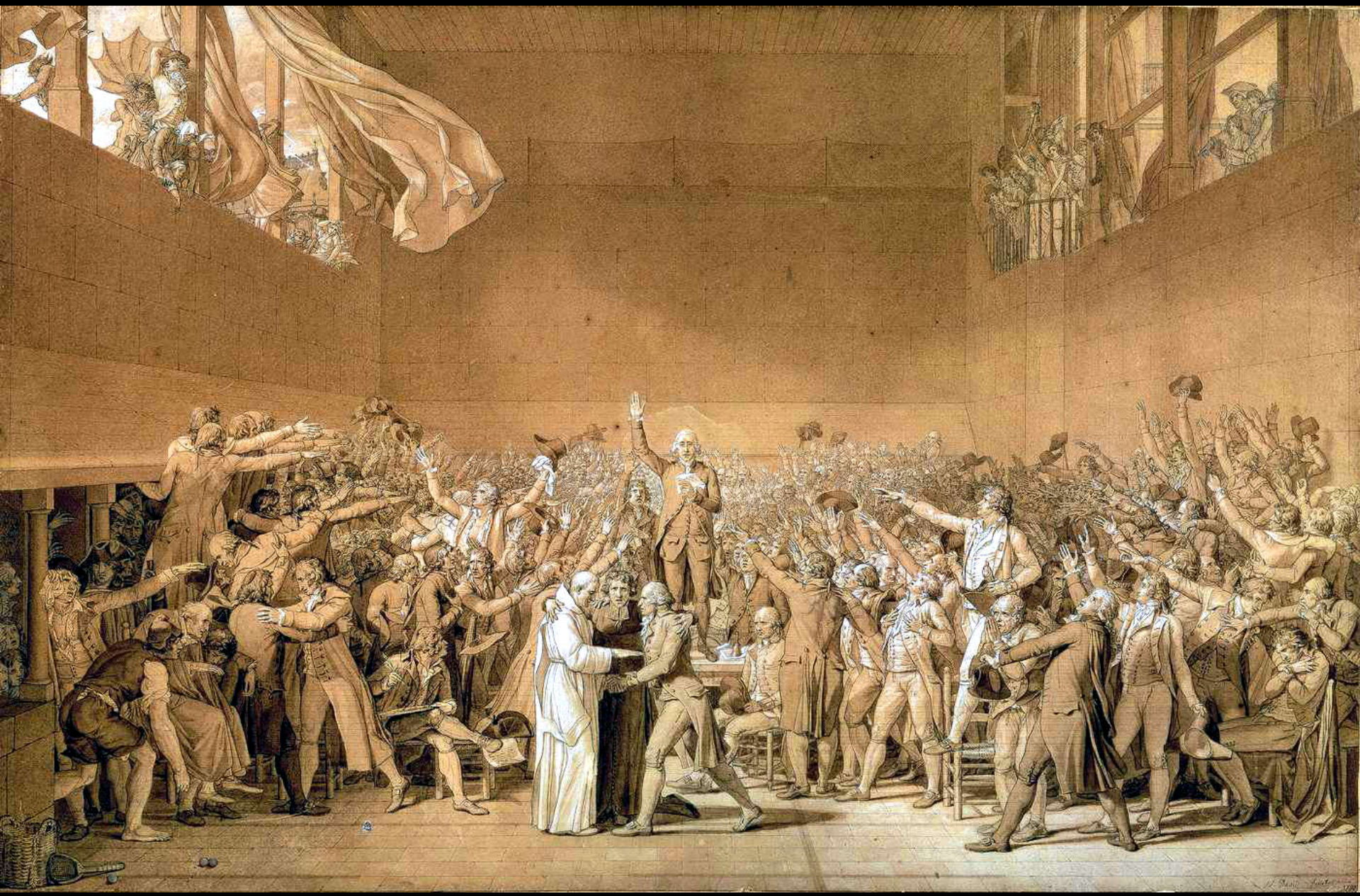

Figure 3: Jacques-Louis David, *The Tennis Court Oath*, 1791.

Figure 4: Attributed to Jacques-Louis David, *Bertrand Barère*.

Figure 5: Attributed to Jacques-Louis David, *Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Étienne.*

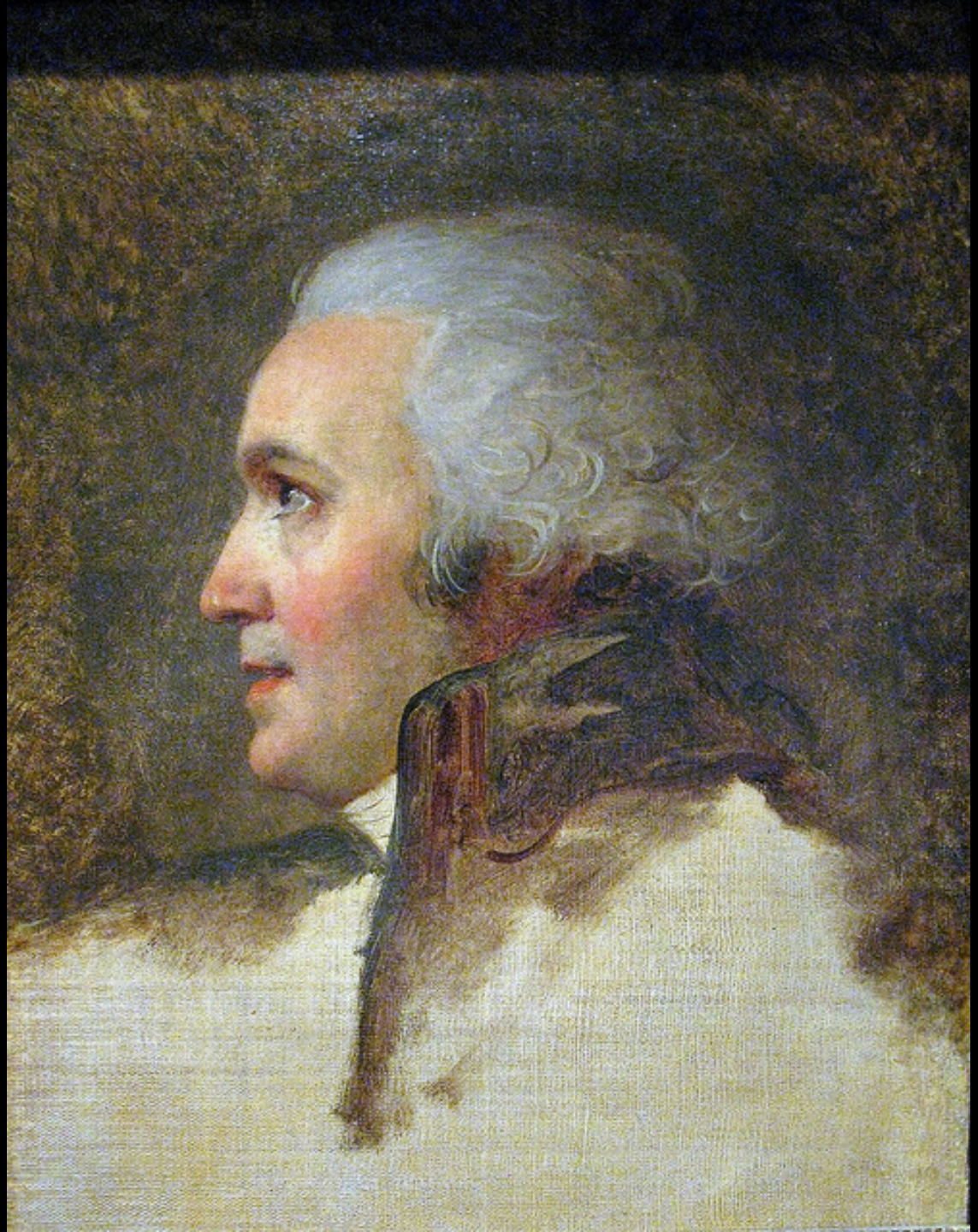

Figure 6: Attributed to Jacques-Louis David, *Pierre Louis Prieur.*

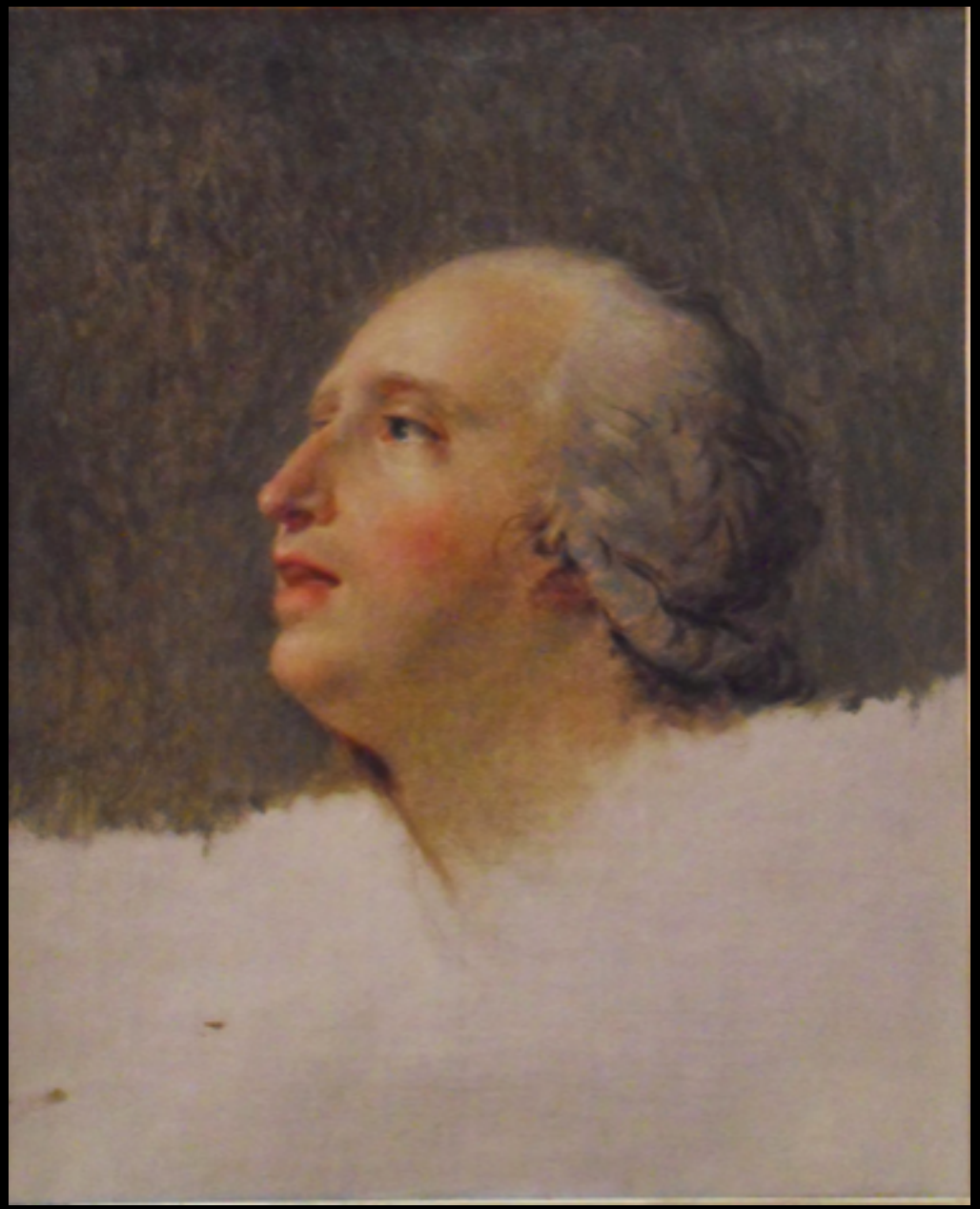

Figure 7: : Attributed to Jacques-Louis David, *Michel Gérard*.

Figure 8: Charles Le Brun, *L'Adimiration avec étonnement,* 1727.

Figure 9: Jacues-Louis David, *Jacobus Blauw*, 1795.

Figure 10: Jacques-Louis David, *Death of Marat*, 1793.