

David and Neoclassicism

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Neoclassicism, which was to regenerate painting at the end of the eighteenth century, emerged in the decade leading up to the French Revolution. While David was its principal exponent, he was not the first – or the only one – to set about thoroughly reviving the pictorial aesthetic. He would himself acknowledge his indebtedness to his master Joseph Marie Vien. Other artists of the same generation including Vincent and Suvée would join him in establishing this new order of the arts.

While the Salon organised by the Academy of Painting and Sculpture was the venue for the fullest expression of this new artistic movement, this revival also extended to the provinces. In Montpellier, the site of the Promenade du Peyrou was one of the great Neoclassical sculptural commissions of the century.

Room
David

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Neoclassicism

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Joseph Marie Vien (1716-1809)

A native of Montpellier, Vien trained under Natoire (1700-1777). In 1743, he won the Grand Prix for painting and set off for Rome. The fruit of this artistic apprenticeship, the *Male Academy Figure** – an exercise for budding artists designed to represent the male body from life – is a masterful portrayal of anatomy, austere placed on the neutral ground of the canvas. On his return to France, he developed a painting style that was serious and restrained : commissioned to fit out the transept of the Saint-Roch Church created by Etienne Louis Boullée (1728-1799), Vien produced *Saint Denis Preaching the Faith* (fig.1) with its sober organisation of figures and palette of intermediate tones low in contrast. Presented at the 1767 Salon, the painting marked the beginnings of a new aesthetic order with a perceptible desire to return to the classical ideal of the previous century as illustrated by Le Sueur or Poussin. With his aura of exceptional glory, Vien counted the most influential artists of the movement among his pupils.



fig.1- Joseph-Marie Vien
Saint Denis Preaching the Faith
Paris, Saint Roch Church
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François André Vincent (1746-1816)

Trained by Vien, Vincent lived in Rome as a boarder at the French Academy from 1771 to 1775. On his return to Paris in 1777, he exhibited a pair of works that attracted much attention : *Belisarius** and its pendant *Alcibiades**. As in the *Death of Cato** dating from his time in Italy, he orchestrated two edifying accounts exalting the virtues of the Ancients. While the figure of Alcibiades was well known through the dialogues of Plato, the story of Belisarius was brought in line with current tastes only in 1767 through a novel by Jean François Marmontel. This morality tale, which allowed artists to revive the great tradition of history painting, was a recurrent theme in David's work in 1781 (fig.2). By means of tight framing and a sparkling, refined palette, Vincent focussed attention on the intensity of the looks being exchanged. In his choice of a more narrative composition for the same subject in which the psychological accents were less pronounced, David offered a more radical style of art which was eventually to supplant Vincent's more classical manner.



Fig.2- Jacques-Louis David
Belisarius
Lille, Musée des Beaux-Arts
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Joseph Benoît Suvée (1743-1807)

A native of Flanders, Suvée lived in Italy from 1771 to 1778, having obtained the Prix de Rome to the detriment of David. The *Birth of the Virgin**, a sketch for a painting, now at the

* An asterisk indicates that the work mentioned is displayed in the room

Church of the Assumption (Paris) (fig.3), reveals another facet of Neoclassicism : the drawing, much in evidence, remains visible beneath the painted composition and wash effects are applied to the delicate colours, giving the scene a great sense of mellowness inspired by the art of Raphael.



fig.3- Joseph-Benoît Suvée
Birth of the Virgin
Paris, Church of the Assumption
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Jacques Louis David (1748-1825)

Leader of the artistic revival that took shape in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, David was to reign over the arts for almost half a century, from the end of the Ancien Régime until the Restoration, with a hold similar to that of Le Brun during the reign of Louis XIV. A pupil of Vien, after winning the Grand Prix de Rome for painting in 1774 he went to Italy where he found himself face to face with past masters – Caravaggio, Raphael, Guercino, the Bolognese school – who would nourish his own work. On his return to France, he made a name for himself between 1781 and 1789 with a series of great history painting – *Belisarius* (1781), the *Oath of the Horatii*, Brutus – which were a resounding success and secured his pre-eminence. The works held by the Musée Fabre date to this period and form an important milestone for understanding his oeuvre. Earning himself a solid reputation as a portraitist at this time, he excelled in capturing the character and stature of his subjects with great economy of effects. In the *Portrait of Laurent Joubert** (c.1786-92), he used large brushstrokes to thrill the dark garment and silhouette of the sitter sketched on a neutral ground. A more social and naturalistic vision, *Alphonse Leroy** (1783) is portrayed as a scholar at work with the objects related to his position in the familiar surroundings of his study, a formula that he would also apply to the *Portrait of Lavoisier and His Wife* (1788) (fig.4). A similar taste for realism is apparent in his slightly illusionistic rendering on canvas of the richness of the fabric of the scholar's turban or jacket.



fig.4- Jacques-Louis David
Portrait of Lavoisier and his Wife
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art
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This desire for exactitude was also employed by the artist in his creation of History, applying a similar precision of human representation to his heroic compositions : the *Two Studies for a Man's Head**, actually a single canvas cut in two, illustrate the important preparatory work that went on behind his great paintings.

Neoclassicism in Languedoc

During the eighteenth century, societies of fine arts and painting academies emerged in the provinces to bring the teaching and thinking of the Royal Academy to young provincial artists. The Languedoc region was well-endowed in this respect : an academy of painting and sculpture was created in Marseille in 1735, followed by one in Toulouse in 1750 and the society of fine arts of Montpellier in 1778. In their teachings, these institutions advocated new artistic theories and enlightened amateurs such as Laurent Joubert helped to establish the region's Neoclassical aesthetic, which was to have a lasting effect on Languedoc art at the end of the eighteenth century.

The Royal Promenade du Peyrou

In 1780, Jean Arnaud Raymond decided on a major commission designed to adorn the Peyrou terrace : four groups of sculptures were to accompany the equestrian statue of Louis XIV marking the supply of water to Montpellier with the construction of this huge reservoir. While these sculptures were never made, the two sketches at the Musée Fabre nonetheless bear witness to the ambitious nature of the project and its sanctimonious aims in keeping with the Neoclassical spirit. *Bossuet and Fenelon** created by Moitte (1746-1810), who was to become a member of the Royal Academy (1783), is an exhortation to return to a life of virtue ; *Colbert and Duquesne**, a product of Pajou's chisel (1730-1809), is a celebration of France's maritime power.