

Neoclassicism and the Pupils of David

...

Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) held a privileged place in painting at the end of the eighteenth century. The leader of the Neoclassical movement to the detriment of Regnault (1754-1829) or Vincent (1746-1816), he attracted an entourage of young artists seeking to revive the classical tradition through painting governed by the new aesthetic and moral canons bound up with the social upheaval that would ensue from the French Revolution. His workshop provided a place for painters to train and was to become the hub of this movement, which he led as the true mentor of the new school. In this place of both learning and pooled experience, his pupils with their keen competitive spirit contributed to the painter's great compositions as their talents allowed. Among the generation of budding artists who followed this teaching were Jean-Germain Drouais (1763-1788), Fabre (1766-1837), Girodet (1767-1824) Gros (1771-1835) and Gérard (1770-1837) ; they would each seek in turn to embody this artistic revival on a par with David.

Brought together by Fabre, the collection of painted sketches on display here allows us to gain a better understanding of the complex process involved in creating great Neoclassical painting, with the figures of François Xavier Fabre and Anne-Louis de Girodet-Trioson affording a glimpse of the sometimes stormy relations uniting the pupils of David.

Room
Girodet

...

Neoclassicism

The Grand Prix for Painting

The Grand Prix for Painting was a crowning achievement of a young artist's debut, opening the doors of the French Academy in Rome. The fame brought by being awarded this prize was the guarantee of a first-rate career. After a series of various heats, candidates had to produce a painting on a given subject ; the contenders, confined to individual examination rooms and denied contact with the outside world, had seventy-two days to produce their offering.

Girodet applied in 1785 with Horatius *Slaying his Sister Camilla* (fig.1). His canvas reveals the radical nature of the style to be found in the pupils of David when it is compared with the sketch for the painting by Desmarais* (1756-1813), the winner of the award that year : it still retains an eighteenth-century manner in the sweeping Baroque gesture of the Roman hero.

In 1787 it was Fabre's turn to win, again beating Girodet, who was accused by his rival of having infringed upon the examination's rules. The rigour of the antique-style frieze composition and the expression of the soul's passions drawn from the seventeenth-century repertoire are already perceptible in his modello for *Nebuchadnezzar Ordering the Execution of Zedekiah's Children**. The careful depiction of the figures of Zedekiah and his son denote a refined sense of colouring which is typical of Fabre's work.

The fact that Girodet would always hold this denunciation against his fellow student also illustrates the extreme rivalry that could arise among artists within David's studio itself. The *Sketch** for *Pietà* dates to the year in which he won the Grand Prix (1789). While this piece does not yet convey the strong luminous contrast of the final painting (fig.2), the composition recaptures the main group of the bodies of Christ and the Virgin merged as if fused into one ; moreover the classical rigour of the whole, devoid of any particular religious connotation, gives an almost secular interpretation of the subject.



fig.1- Anne-Louis Girodet
Death of Camilla
Montargis, Musée Girodet
All rights reserved



fig.2- Anne-Louis Girodet
Pietà
Montesquieu-Volvestre, Church of Saint Victor
All rights reserved

26

...

The Stay in Rome

In order to perfect their training, the winners of the Grand Prix would be accommodated in Rome : they were to copy models from antiquity, the Renaissance and Roman classicism, but would also draw inspiration from the Latium countryside. To monitor the pupils' progress, Natoire (director from 1751 to 1775) had reintroduced the obligation for them to send one or more works to the Academy each year.

Fabre carried out this task with great panache (Room 22) – as well as honouring private orders such as *Saint John the Baptist Preaching** commissioned by his patron Laurent Joubert for a church in Montpellier. Ménageot (1744-1816), the director of the Roman institution at the time delighted in “his politeness and honest ways”.

A pupil of Vincent, Meynier (1763-1832), joint winner in 1789 with Girodet – an exceptional occurrence – decided on an episode in line with the events of the Revolution for his 1791 submission*: Timoleon sacrificing his own brother for the sake of democracy. On a single plane, in a stark architectural settings, the influence of David is apparent in interplay of matching poses, recalling Drouais's painting *Marius at Minturnae* (fig.3) executed five years earlier.



fig.3- Jean Germain Drouais
Marius at Minturnae
Paris, Musée du Louvre
© RMN

Echoing Abel by his rival Fabre, Girodet created a sensation from Rome with his *Endymion Sleeping*, a large nude academy figure harbouring a disturbing sensuality. The violent source of light flooding the scene with a supernatural atmosphere was to become one of the artist's hallmarks and is also to be found in his painting *Old Man in a Cave**. *The Study** for his 1792 submission *Hippocrates Refusing the Gifts of Artaxerxes* (fig.4) was more in keeping with David's aesthetic : light fashions the great corporal masses and prefigures the subtle harmony of the white drapes of the emissaries of Artaxerxes.



fig.4- Girodet
Hippocrates Refusing the Gifts of Artaxerxes
Paris, Museum of the History of Medicine
All rights reserved

Fabre and the Portrait

Alongside their output of great history paintings within the scope of their official career, these artists also worked for private clients. Portrait art thus formed a genre that took up a large part of their oeuvre. For Fabre, at odds with his homeland because of his legitimist opinions, this art form would represent his main source of income until the 1800s.

In his youthful *Self-portrait**, he made no concessions in depicting his angular face revealing an ambitious young artist sure of his talent. This scornful expression earned him the nickname of “long nose” from Girodet. The *allegorical portrait of Lady Charlemont** testifies to Fabre's taste for finery – silky tresses, the fine fabric of the tunic, a precious bracelet – and provides a charming image of a young woman with childlike grace reminiscent of Greuze.

The winner of the 1784 Grand Prix for painting, Gauffier (1762-1802) turned his career towards landscapes (see Room 24) and portraiture ever since his stay in Florence in 1793. These works attracted commissions from a select society established in the peninsular through the fashion for the “Grand Tour”. He struck up a friendship with Fabre who shared his political opinions and, compelled to exile, he died an untimely death in Italy. Far removed from the canons of David's effigies, his elegantly posed portraits are set in parks or against the Florentine countryside radiating a charming natural impression with pre-Romantic notes. His precise, refined workmanship is also reminiscent of the precious art of the miniature.