Opposite
Self-Portrait (detail of 93), 1791.
Oil on canvas; 64 × 53cm, 25¼ × 20⅞in.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

David left Rome on 17 July 1780, and arrived in Paris towards the end of September. In Paris his first priority was to become a member of the Academy, since Academicians were given the most prestigious projects when royal commissions were distributed. They also had the monopoly on exhibiting at the only large-scale public art show, the Salon, which took place every two years in the Louvre. To become an Academician, an artist had to present his or, very rarely, her works to the assembled members, and if they were thought to be good enough, the candidate would be accepted as an Associate (*agrée*). A reception piece on a subject chosen by the Academy then had to be painted in order for them to become a full Academician (*reçu*). David wanted to show the Academy the *St Roch* and some of his other Roman work in order to gain admittance, but this was not acceptable to the king's First Painter, Jean-Baptiste Pierre (44). On 1 December Pierre wrote: 'The picture [*St Roch*] by the sieur David can be accepted for his *agrément*, as can his nudes; but he cannot present his candidature until he has done a work in Paris. This is a custom that has assumed the force of law.' This insistence on precedent obviously rankled with David, and when, in August 1793, he spoke out against the Academy and its privileges, outdated customs and inertia, he must have had this incident in mind:

43
Andromache Mourning Hector, 1783.
Oil on canvas; 275 × 203cm, 108¼ × 79⅞in.
École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, on loan to Musée du Louvre, Paris

A young man who, on his return from Italy was preceded by a disquieting reputation, wanted to apply to the Academy; a member of this Academy [probably Doyen because Vien was in Rome] who had not been won over by the prevailing spirit of the institution, examined the artist's work and enthusiastically praised the work of the young candidate. An old Academician [Pierre] who had been through all of the honours offered by the Academy and whose lethargic perseverance had occupied all of its positions ... said

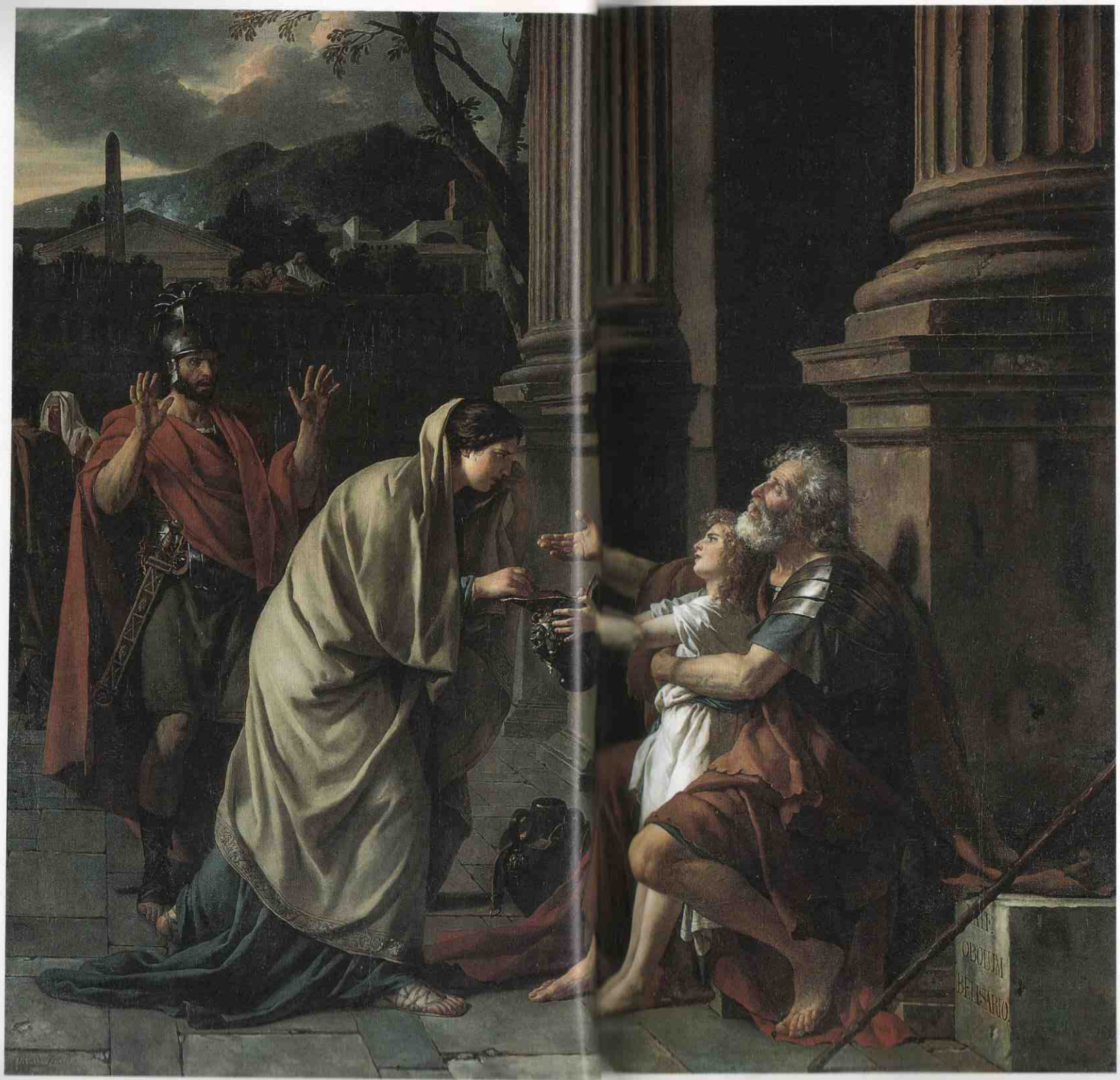
44
Guillaume Voiriot,
Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Pierre,
1759.
Oil on canvas;
130·5 × 97·5cm,
51⅜ × 38⅜in.
Musée National du Château de Versailles

gravely, 'Gentlemen, if as it is said, this young man has so much talent, I myself see no need to admit him into our midst. Gentlemen, remember the equilibrium of talents, the equilibrium.' Seized by a holy respect for such a clearly reasonable argument … they inclined their heads and crossed their hands over their chests, commending their colleague's good idea. They all cry out together 'The equilibrium of talents! The equilibrium!' and all this simply to hold back for two years a young man's rise to fame, for at that time the Salon was only held every two years. They even claimed that he should not be admitted until after the public exhibition, that all the places were filled, that too many candidates had applied at the same time …

As the king's First Painter and director of the Academy, Pierre worked closely with d'Angiviller in pushing through the reforms in history painting and reinforcing the authority of the Academy. A rich snob who had virtually given up painting

to concentrate on administrative matters, Pierre enjoyed wielding power and humiliating artists, whom he habitually addressed in the 'tu' form, normally used for children and servants. He was highly unpopular among his colleagues and, although sometimes supportive of David, the two were soon to form an intense dislike for one another.

To create his new work, David chose a subject from ancient history which also had contemporary appeal – Belisarius (45). The story of Belisarius, as related by Procopius of Caesarea (Belisarius' secretary) and the twelfth-century Byzantine writer Johannes Tzetzes, was that of a loyal and successful general in the service of the Byzantine emperor Justinian. He had won major victories against the Vandals, Goths and Bulgarians, but he then became implicated in political intrigues, was accused of treason and disgraced. He became an outcast and was even reduced to begging; one version of the story also said that his eyes were put out. Belisarius had also been the subject of a novel by Jean François Marmontel in 1767, which recast the ancient general as a greatly wronged philosopher, and criticized weak and corrupt kingship and the lack of civic virtue. Marmontel's Belisarius remained loyal to the emperor when falsely accused and sentenced, and was eventually vindicated when Justinian and his heir Justin II secretly sought out the aged general for advice. Parallels were soon drawn between Justinian's treatment of Belisarius and the unheroic reign of the then king, Louis XV, which the *philosophes* saw as characterized by corruption, vain luxury and laxity of morals. Belisarius' call for religious tolerance of pagans, which could be related to the contemporary persecution of Protestants, also meant that Marmontel's book was condemned by the Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne in Paris. Modern life had also thrown up a kind of present day Belisarius when the Comte Thomas Arthur de Lally, Baron de Tollendal, formerly a military hero, became the scapegoat when the French were forced to surrender to the English at Pondicherry in 1761, a loss which meant the end of their



45
Belisarius Receiving Alms, 1781.
Oil on canvas; 288 × 312 cm, 113⅜ × 122⅞ in.
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille

colonial aspirations in India. Accused of treason and cowardice, he was imprisoned for two years before being tried and condemned to death in 1766. This outrageous and unjust treatment prompted a sustained campaign, led by his son and Voltaire, which succeeded in clearing his name in 1778. In selecting the story of Belisarius, David demonstrated a shrewd grasp of current trends at court and in liberal intellectual circles. Under the administration of the former soldier d'Angiviller, history paintings with military subjects were being encouraged, and so David very astutely chose to paint

46
Belisarius Recognized by a Soldier, 1779.
Pen, ink, wash and white highlights; 45 × 36cm, 17¾ × 14⅛in.
École Polytechnique, Palaiseau

47
Belisarius Receiving Alms, c.1620s.
Engraving by Bosse after Luciano Borzone

a picture that had both a classical appeal and a contemporary resonance. In doing so he courted both the attention of officialdom and the recognition of a public sensitized to the pathos and topicality of the subject.

David had actually first worked on the theme of Belisarius when he was in Rome in 1779, after Peyron had lent him his copy of Marmontel's novel. He then produced a detailed drawing of the subject (46). The general disposition of the scene was probably inspired by an engraving of a painting then thought

to be by Van Dyck, now attributed to the seventeenth-century Genoese artist Luciano Borzone (1590–1645; 47). This shows the blind Belisarius begging with an outstretched hand while surrounded by a group of women, a child and one of his former soldiers. All are dressed in seventeenth-century costume, and there is no attempt to recreate sixth-century Byzantium. David also looked to Hubert Gravelot's illustrations to Marmontel's book for the details of the architectural setting. He probably began the painting around November 1780 in a studio that he had acquired on the top floor of one of the

pavilions of the Paris town hall. With a typical economy of effort he adapted the vertical format of the drawing into a horizontal presentation. Both the drawing and the painting showed the same scene – *Belisarius is recognized by one of the soldiers who served under him just as he receives alms from a woman* – which was David's own invention, not having occurred in any of the written sources. For the painting David took note of the work of the expressive characterizations of his contemporary Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805), who created simple and direct scenes of rustic morality such as *The Village Betrothal*

of 1761 (48). There is also much evidence of figures being drawn from life; one of David's first pupils, Philippe-Auguste Hennequin (1762–1833), posed for the figure of the boy helper.

The theme of Belisarius was much in vogue from the 1770s, and rival artists of David's own generation, such as Peyron and François-André Vincent (1746–1816), had painted their own versions of the subject. In Peyron's work (49), Belisarius is recognized by a peasant who had served under him, and praised as their protector and saviour by the rural family that now give him hospitality. Vincent's Belisarius (50) is reduced to begging, and receives the charity from a soldier in Justinian's army. Here there is no sense of recognition, the blind former general is oblivious to the identity of his benefactor. Vincent also took the unorthodox step of creating a group of half-length figures, an unusual device in France at this time. David,

sensing competition, was determined to outdo both Peyron and Vincent, and the choice of such a dramatic moment combined with a powerfully direct presentation was calculated to provide a striking and appealing reading of the story. He also painted his *Belisarius* on a scale he had never yet tackled: it measures 2·9×3·1m (9ft 5in×10ft 3in), more than seven times larger than the works by Peyron and Vincent.

48
Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Village Betrothal*, 1761. Oil on canvas; 92×117cm, 36¼×46in. Musée du Louvre, Paris

The *Belisarius* was the first fully resolved example of the new heroic and austere style that is now known as Neoclassicism. It is a picture with a serious subject that is painted in a sober and rational style. Few characters, set as if on a stage, exchange meaningful and easily understood gestures. *Belisarius* is a painting about charity, sympathy, dutiful patriotism and the reversal of fortune. At the very moment that the woman drops a coin into the upturned helmet held by Belisarius' boy helper, something perhaps borrowed from Vincent's work, one of the general's former soldiers recognizes him and raises his hands in shock and surprise. Announcing the old man's desperate situation, and appealing to the spectator's charitable sensibilities, the Latin inscription *Date Obolum Belisario* (Give an obolus – an ancient Greek silver coin – to Belisarius) is displayed on the marker stone in the bottom right-hand corner. This was a scene from Christian antiquity that clearly had lessons for the present. Belisarius' wanderings, exile and blindness also gave him something of the character of a Homer figure, and the facial features employed by David reflect these similarities. As if to underline his change in circumstances, the old general sits begging by a structure that is either a triumphal arch or a city gate. Whichever is the case, a sense of victimization and isolation brought on by the vagaries of fortune is suggested. The irony of the inclusion of a triumphal arch – erected to honour a successful commander following a military victory – is immediate. If banished to beg outside the city walls, Belisarius is patently an outcast from society.

49
Pierre Peyron.
Belisarius Receiving Hospitality from a Peasant who had Served under him,
1779.
Oil on canvas;
93 × 132 cm,
36⅝ × 52 in.
Musée des Augustins, Toulouse

The overall organization of the picture, and the major role assigned to the architectural setting of the fluted half columns, the distant obelisk and pedimented building, owe much to the influence of Poussin. His work was continually cited by critics such as Diderot as the prime example of the noble, severe and intellectual qualities of painting, and was seen as a model for the regeneration of French art. Peyron was the first of the new generation of history painters to consciously follow Poussin, but David soon began to adopt compositions and the disposition of figures from him. This is first seen in the *St Roch* (see 39) and the *Belisarius*, but in the *Belisarius* David attributed greater characterization and emotional response to his figures than the mask-like and understated figures employed by Poussin. However, lessons drawn from past artists did not help David with his perennial problems of recession and perspective. On the left, the spatial relationship between the woman's back foot and the feet of the soldier is faulty, and the orthogonal lines of the pavement recede incorrectly. This was, as

50
François-André Vincent, *Belisarius*, 1776.
Oil on canvas; 98 × 129cm, 38½ × 50¾ in.
Musée Fabre, Montpellier

Thomas Crow has observed, probably the result of David's enlargement of Gravelot's small book illustrations, combined with the unfamiliarity and inexperience of working on such a large scale. At the bottom left of the canvas, David signed the work with the Latin inscription L DAVID FACIEBAT ANNO 1781 LUTETIAE ('L David was making this in the year 1781 in Lutetia' – the ancient name for Paris). Such a Latin signature not only underlined David's classical learning, but was perhaps a sideswipe at the Academic ruling requiring an artist to paint a picture in the capital to qualify as an *agrée*. By using the imperfect form *faciebat* (making) instead of the perfect form *fecit* (made), he drew attention to the fact that he was living in Paris while he was painting it.

David presented this work, along with some others, to the Academy on 24 August 1781, contrary to a decision of the Academy of 4 August which expressly forbade candidature for the Academy at the time of the Salon. This was introduced

because in that year a number of potential *agrées* were late in submitting their entries, and a halt to submissions was called to save the Academician charged with the hanging of the Salon (called the *Tapissier* or decorator) the troublesome task of re-hanging the exhibition to accommodate the works of any newly admitted artists. David claimed to be unaware of this rule and said that he was only seeking 'advice and instruction' by submitting his work. This is hard to believe, since David knew that, as a new member, he would have the right to show these works at the Salon, which opened the next day. Whatever the case, he was unanimously elected an Associate Academician and his works were hung on the walls of the Salon after the official opening, their sudden appearance naturally creating great interest. Other artists had used this stratagem before, although not everybody approved of such a practice; David was to adopt this attention-grabbing device for almost all of his subsequent public exhibits. The Salon, which was open for a month from 25 August (the feast day of St Louis), was the capital's main entertainment during that time, and attracted large crowds drawn from all classes of society. In fact it was one of the few places where a labourer might rub shoulders with a nobleman, and a fishwife with a lady of quality. Such social integration was a shock to the middle and upper classes who could neither bear the sight nor the smell of the lower orders.

The Salon received much attention from both the official and the unofficial press, and dozens of pamphlets, ranging from considered and balanced opinions to scathing and mocking attacks, were written and sold. David's *Belisarius* was very favourably received, and the elderly Diderot, writing his last account of a Salon, said of it: 'I see it every day, and each time I think I am seeing it for the first time (in a paraphrase of Racine's *Bérénice*, Act 2, Scene 2). This young man works in the grand manner, he has a soul, his faces are expressive without being contrived, the attitudes are noble and natural, he can draw, he can dispose a drapery and make handsome folds; his colouring is fine without being garish.' The proud artist wrote

excitedly to his mother in Normandy: 'I did not receive one blackball from the Academy, which is most unusual. Monsieur the Comte d'Angiviller was at the meeting of the Academy and he gave me the greatest encouragements ... If you come to Paris to see my pictures you will know them at once by the crowds around them. The important people, the Cordon Bleus [members of the Order of the Holy Spirit, the highest order of knighthood] want to see the author, and at last I am rewarded for my troubles ... At present I am only rich in glory, certainly less so in hard cash, but I trust that this too will not be long in coming.' David's modest circumstances at this time meant that he was forced to lodge in the upper storey of a house belonging to an iron merchant, Hecquet, who was probably a friend or business acquaintance of his late father, and so he received visitors in the more comfortable surroundings of his uncle Sedaine's rooms in the Louvre instead.

Although his main Salon piece was a grand work on an elevated subject, David was also anxious to demonstrate the variety of his productions to the Parisian audience. In addition to the *Belisarius* he exhibited the *St Roch* (see 39), *The Funeral of Patroclus* (see 33), three Roman *académies* – *St Jerome*, *Hector* (see 35) and *Patroclus* (see 36), a *Head of an Old Man* (possibly the *Philosopher* now in the Musée Baron Gérard in Bayeux), a lost *Woman Nursing her Child* and a number of other studies. He had also taken the precaution of exhibiting the portrait of Potocki (see 41) in his studio before and during the early part of the Salon. Whatever happened, the public would be aware of his work. History painting, portraiture, expressive heads and sentimental genre were chosen to herald his arrival and announce his versatility.

But even though the *Belisarius* was well received, it was not the most successful painting at the Salon. That accolade was awarded to *The Death of Leonardo da Vinci in the Arms of Francis I* (51) by François-Guillaume Ménageot (1744–1816), a former colleague of David's in Vien's studio. This was a

completely different sort of picture from the *Belisarius*, and it owed its success more to the subject matter – a French king's compassion and reverence for a famous artist – than to any startling stylistic development. Nevertheless, by calculation and audacity, David had engineered a brilliant Parisian debut. He had attracted the attention of the people that mattered, and he could soon expect to receive important and prestigious commissions. One critic writing about David's *Belisarius* obviously suspected a favourable disposition towards the young artist from the Directeur des Bâtiments du Roi, and wrote, with a mixture of jealousy and spite: 'Happy is he with talent when one has d'Angiviller.' As David's letter to his mother says, he was as yet only rich in glory, and hoped that the Crown would purchase the *Belisarius* – he had, after all, lavished a lot of time and trouble on it. But Pierre went back on a promise to buy the work – more proof of the strained relations between the two. Fortunately, Pierre's superior, d'Angiviller, liked the *Belisarius* so much that he ordered a reduced scale replica for himself from David. In this work, painted in 1784 with the assistance of his pupil François-Xavier Fabre (1766–1837), David rectified the spatial problems of the original. But although this was a variant replica of an existing work, David treated his task conscientiously; it was, after all, for an important client, and he therefore gave it a reasonably high (though not total) degree of personal attention.

51
François-Guillaume Ménageot, *The Death of Leonardo da Vinci in the Arms of Francis I*, 1781.
Oil on canvas; 278 × 357cm, 109½ × 140½in.
Musée de l'Hotel de Ville, Amboise

As soon as he moved into his studio in the town hall in 1780, David began to take on pupils. They were of twofold importance to him: firstly, their tuition fees provided a regular source of income, and secondly, they could be used as assistants on his major commissions. The best of them could even be entrusted with working independently on reduced replicas. As well as the *Belisarius* replica, there is also one of *The Oath of the Horatii* (see 62), painted in collaboration with Anne-Louis Girodet (1767–1824) in 1786, and an unfinished full-size copy of *The Death of Socrates* (see 66), probably also painted with Girodet's assistance. Although the idea of a replica of an

original work runs counter to twentieth-century sensibilities about the uniqueness of the art object as the expression of the individual creativity of the artist, such matters of discrimination did not feature so greatly in the eighteenth century. Critics and writers had yet to fix the notion of the artist as the creative genius whose works were predominantly an extension of the self. To the eighteenth-century collector, buying a replica of a successful work was a practical way of owning a key example of an artist's output, and the fact that there was one or more of them did not drastically diminish its status. In David's case he exercised an extremely high degree of quality control over what left his studio, and there are only isolated examples of patrons being unhappy with the result. In painting another version of a successful Salon piece, David was also following established practice. There are numerous other contemporary examples of artists repeating royal or public commissions on a smaller scale for private collectors. In its size and organization, David's studio was both a place of instruction and a setting where suitable pupils were gradually introduced into the process of production. A marked division of labour was established to enable several projects to be executed at once, and although a small scale operation in the 1780s, under Napoleon's patronage the system enabled vast canvases to be undertaken with little loss of quality.

If any fault had been found in the *Belisarius*, it was that its colours were too dull, and so in the autumn and winter of 1781–2, David spent three or four months travelling around northern France and Belgium making a detailed study of Flemish artists, particularly Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), who were renowned for their vibrant treatment of colour. On his return to Paris he had to resolve a disciplinary matter with one of his pupils. He had left the studio key with a trusted student, Philippe-Auguste Hennequin, but it then emerged that Hennequin had used some expensive blue ultramarine pigment that David had been reserving for himself; he was also suspected of having stolen an engraving from the master's

portfolio. Hennequin's accuser in this matter was a jealous fellow student, Jean-Baptiste Wicar (1762–1834), and although Hennequin pleaded ignorance to the first charge and innocence to the second, David was inflexible and dismissed him from the studio. Disputes and rivalries were never very far from the surface in the hothouse atmosphere of David's studio, and his pupils were not necessarily friendly comrades with mutual goals.

The success of the 1781 Salon led to David being allocated a studio and lodgings in the Louvre, a substantial perk and proof of official favour. Places in the Louvre were eagerly sought after by artists, and David's family connections probably helped him once again. He was given the former rooms of the painter Pierre-Antoine Baudouin (1723–69), whose widow was the daughter of David's cousin, Boucher. She, in turn, had remarried Charles-Etienne-Gabriel Cuvillier, d'Angiviller's Premier Commis at the Direction des Bâtiments du Roi. The new location meant that David could now take on more pupils, and also expand his operations. The most talented young artists joined him and began to paint under his influence: these included Jean-Germain Drouais (1763–88), an enormously gifted artist who died tragically young, Anne-Louis Girodet (a male artist – Anne is the French equivalent of the Hebrew name Annas) and François-Xavier Fabre.

When he moved into the Louvre in 1782, David asked one of the building contractors, Charles-Pierre Pécoul, whose son he had known in Rome, to build him a small bed alcove. 'Why then a small one?', Pécoul replied, 'I'll make it big, suitable to receive your wife.' He then promptly suggested his daughter Marguerite-Charlotte as a bride, although at only seventeen she was half the age of David. As a further enticement, Pécoul added: 'You wish to live for art, well then work for glory, I will work for your fortune.' David consulted with his godfather Sedaine, who had hoped that the up-and-coming artist might marry his own daughter Suzanne, but it was agreed that the

match would be advantageous, especially as Mademoiselle Pécoul brought with her a substantial dowry. The couple married on 16 May 1782 in the church of St Germain-l'Auxerrois, close to the Louvre. The witnesses to the wedding contract of 2 May included Pierre (the unpleasantness over the *Belisarius* forgotten, or put to one side), Vien and the king's chief architect Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728–99). According to the marriage contract, David's financial resources were modest, but his new wife brought with her a fortune that gave him the financial independence that he had not previously had. Nine months later the couple's first child, Charles-Louis-Jules, was born.

Early in 1782 David was given a royal commission for a painting to be completed in time for the 1783 Salon. It was to be *Old Horatius Defending his Son for the Murder of his Sister Camilla*, and was to be a medium-sized work for which a fee of 4,000 livres was payable. Apart from one drawing (see 55), little progress was made, and eventually David postponed the project in order to concentrate on becoming a full Academician (*reçu)* by painting his reception piece (*morceau de réception*). This decision displeased Pierre, but d'Angiviller received the news well, approving of the decision and hoping that the painting would be ready for the coming Salon. While David's relations with Pierre seem to have slowly deteriorated, his contacts with d'Angiviller continued to be cordial. Around 1782–4 David even wrote a fable in the form of a two-verse poem dedicated to the Countess d'Angiviller, entitled 'The Field Bouquet and the Pineapple'. This was a moralizing critique of aristocratic pretensions, in which a pineapple, assuming the characteristic of an arrogant Spanish lord, resents being placed next to a common bouquet of wild flowers and field grasses on a dinner table. A humble daisy declares to the proud and haughty pineapple: 'Each condition has its own merit', and at the end of the meal, after all its posturing, the pineapple is eaten as dessert. David's message was that magnificence and display are transitory, while simpler

qualities endure. Such sentiments would have found favour in the liberal and witty salons that the countess held at Versailles.

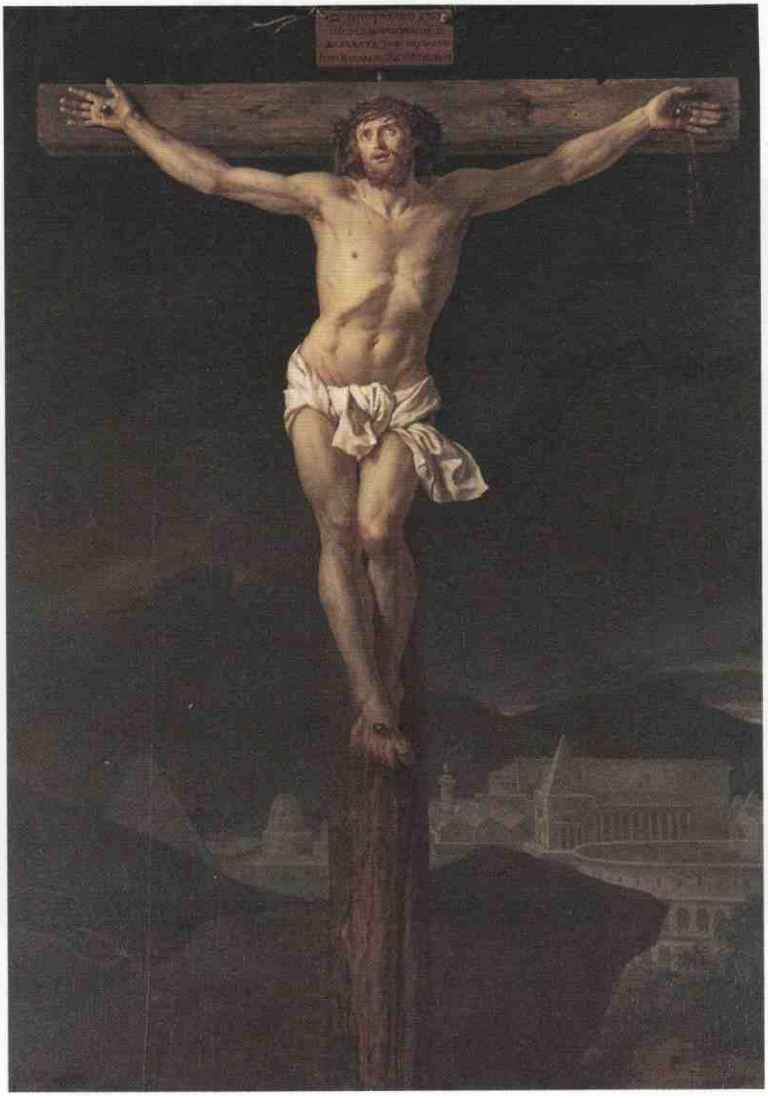
David became a full Academician with *Andromache Mourning Hector* (see 43), which he presented on 23 August 1783, again just in time for it to be shown at the Salon. The painting represents a scene from Homer's *Iliad* where Andromache grieves over the body of her husband Hector, who has been killed by Achilles in the Trojan War. The subject of a widow and a young child might have evoked personal memories for David; the fatherless Astyanax is shown trying to console his mother in the midst of her grief, and he appears to be about the same age as David was when his own father was killed. In the *Iliad* Astyanax is a baby, but, before jumping to the conclusion that this is an example of David's direct personal identification with the subject, one should remember that when Winckelmann illustrated the same scene in his *Monumenti Antichi Inediti* of 1767, the boy is shown not as a babe in arms, but at the age of eight or nine.

An appropriately dark and sombre style was used for this subject, and it is probably David's least colourful picture. To some eyes it may appear overly austere, and people at the time noted its gloomy aspect, but David was striving to match the painting's appearance with its content. The deep sorrow and tragedy of the scene is amplified by the strict geometry and the bareness of the setting. The wall behind Hector has a black curtain stretched across it, and above there is a row of fluted columns. Once again there are obvious debts to Poussin, especially his deathbed scenes such as *The Death of Germanicus* (1628) and *The Testament of Eudamidas* (1643–4). Poussin had always been dutifully respected in France, but at this time there was a genuine renewal of interest in his art; two appreciations of his work had been published in 1783. David also made extensive use of his Roman studies for the painting: the figure of Hector is derived from a funerary scene in one of his Roman sketchbooks, which is his own variation on one of the numerous antique bas-reliefs that depicted the death of

Meleager. The bier on which the body lies is taken from David's drawing of an antique bed; the immediate past is alluded to by the decorations on its side. On the left we have Hector's farewell to Andromache, and on the right the slaying of Hector. The latter scene is taken directly from David's own drawing of *The Funeral of a Hero* (see 37, 38), but both warriors now wear armour. As with the *Belisarius*, David included an inscription that would help to explain the picture. Written on the candelabra, in Greek, is the beginning of Andromache's lament from the *Iliad*: 'Husband, you died too young to leave me widowed in our home. Our son, whom you and I most unhappy brought into the world, is still so young.' While most critics appreciated and approved of David's suppression of painterly expression to achieve a sense of pathos, others failed to grasp the significance of this deliberate austerity, and complained that he had not heightened his colour since *Belisarius*.

In 1783, *Andromache Mourning Hector* was shown with about six other works at the Salon. One of these was the *Christ on the Cross* (52), painted for the Marshal de Noailles and his wife, Catherine Françoise Charlotte de Cossé-Brissac. Formerly a highly placed courtier with King Louis XV, and a military commander in the War of the Austrian Succession, Noailles was created a marshal of France in 1775, but had little influence at the court of the new king Louis XVI. Both he and his wife were devoutly religious, so much so that the marshal was accused of the fanatical persecution of Protestants by a fellow noble, the Marquis de Bombelles. Noailles commissioned a series of religious works for the family chapel in the Capucines church in the Place Vendôme from David, Jean Charles-Nicaise Perrin (1754–1831) and Joseph-Benoît Suvée. David found such religious subjects uncongenial, and this was the last he ever painted. Early biographers said that he had difficulty with Christ's features and so used a soldier as a model, much to the displeasure of Madame de Noailles who recognized the soldier and thought that such a borrowing detracted from the picture's holiness, and took David to court. There is, however, no proof

52
Christ on the Cross, 1782.
Oil on canvas; 276 × 188cm, 108⅝ × 74in.
Church of St Vincent, Mâcon



of this, and the work was such a success that the Noailles family removed it from the chapel for which it was painted and hung it in their own house. Madame de Noailles formed a particular attachment to the painting, and managed to keep it with her when most of the family's pictures were seized by the revolutionary Commission Temporaire des Arts.

David also showed two portraits at the Salon of 1783, one of his uncle Desmaisons (see 8), and the other of Doctor Alphonse

Leroy (53). Leroy was an obstetrician, and probably attended Madame David at the birth of her first child. David shows him as an intelligent and refined man, dressed in fine clothes, writing at his desk leaning on a volume of Hippocrates' *Morbi mulierum* ('The Diseases of Women'), lit by a *quinquet* lamp – a recent invention that gave illumination equal in strength to a dozen candles. The only less than successful part of the picture is the angle of the sitter's left arm that denies him a

hand, and this might be partly explained by the fact that certain details were delegated by David to his pupil Jean-François Garneray (1755–1837). The sophisticated public image that David gave Leroy does not actually equate with the man himself. He was apparently irascible, held controversial medical views, was considered by some to be incompetent and negligent, and was later killed by his own servants. Yet, thanks to David, he becomes a dignified professional man of the Enlightenment.

Without a doubt David was a highly talented portrait painter, and he could have made a lucrative living from this alone. But for him, money, although very important, was not enough. He also craved fame, glory and recognition, and it was only as a history painter that his ambitions could be fulfilled. In practically the shortest time possible he had become a full Academician, joined the ranks of royally favoured artists, attracted great public attention and taken on a large number of pupils. In a world where artists were usually passive, David went out of his way to shape events and carve out his own destiny. Yet this success was not achieved without cost. Some fellow artists were jealous of his meteoric rise, and when advising David to marry Marguerite-Charlotte Pécoul, Sedaine had said, 'in an ... honourable family you must find a powerful support against your enemies; for my young friend, talent makes people envious'. His rivals were not impressed by the blatant scheming and independence of the newcomer, and his next tactical career move was to enrage them even more.

53
Portrait of Doctor Alphonse Leroy, 1783.
Oil on canvas; 72 × 91cm, 28⅜ × 35⅞in.
Musée Fabre, Montpellier

Early in 1784 David resumed work on the official commission for the Direction des Bâtiments du Roi that he had been given in 1782. He had decided to paint an episode from the story of the Horatii triplet brothers who, in the seventh century BC, had represented Rome in single combat against the Curiatii brothers of Alba. Rome and Alba were drifting into a state of war over trivial border incidents, and so, rather than embark on a destructive full-blown conflict, each kingdom elected

champions to do battle on their behalf. Matters were made more complicated because of the emotional ties between the Horatii and Curiatii. One of the Horatii brothers was married to Sabina, sister of the Curiatii, and Camilla, sister of the Horatii, was betrothed to one of the Curiatii. Whatever the outcome of the battle the family would suffer, and the story illustrated how duty to the homeland must come before all personal concerns. After the combat, the only survivor of the six warriors was the eldest Horatius. On his return to Rome he was cursed by Camilla for the death of her beloved, whereupon he stabbed her with his sword. Arrested for murder, young Horatius was defended by his father, who successfully pleaded for his son's life.

54
Horatius Returning Victorious to Rome (The Death of Camilla), 1781. Black chalk, pen and ink, with grey wash; 27·5 × 38·7cm, $10^{7}/_{8} \times 15^{1}/_{4}$ in. Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna

55
Old Horatius Defending his Son, 1782/3. Black chalk, pen and ink; 21·6 × 28·9cm, $8^{1}/_{2} \times 11^{3}/_{8}$ in. Musée du Louvre, Paris

The subject of the Horatii and the Curiatii was rare in art, although David, after his first Roman visit, was probably aware of the fresco by the Cavaliere d'Arpino (1568–1640) in the Palazzo dei Conservatori, showing the battle between the two factions (1612). He had been thinking about painting a scene from some part of this story for about three years, and a drawing dated 1781 shows *Horatius Returning Victorious to Rome (The Death of Camilla)* (54). As recorded in an official list of February 1782, David initially proposed to paint *Old Horatius Defending his Son* (55), but he soon abandoned the subject, possibly because it illustrated a speech, and therefore had too little action and visual appeal. Instead he painted an imaginary episode: *The Oath of the Horatii* (see 62). None of the ancient or modern sources of the story – Livy, Plutarch, Dionysius of Halicarnassus or the Abbé Rollin – mentioned an oath; it was David's own inspired invention. David had taken note of the revival of interest in the plays of Pierre Corneille, the centenary of whose death had been celebrated in 1784; he is known to have attended a performance of Corneille's play at the Comédie Française late in 1782. Corneille's plays, especially *Horace* (1640; based on the subject of the Horatii), were praised for their forthright and robust language, and the celebration of masculine virtue and patriotic duty. Patriotism

and duty were matters of public interest and debate, and David's work may also relate to the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's short treatise of 1762, *The Social Contract*, which contained notions of the common interest of all, civic virtue and self-sacrifice. Visually David was perhaps influenced by other paintings and engravings showing unswerving allegiance to one's country or ideals, such as *The Oath of Brutus* by Gavin Hamilton (1723–98; 56), which was available as a engraving, and the picture on the same subject by Jacques-Antoine Beaufort (1721–84) that David had seen at the 1771 Salon (57).

56
Gavin Hamilton,
The Oath of Brutus,
c.1763–4.
Oil on canvas;
213·3 × 264cm,
84 × 104in.
Yale Center for British Art,
New Haven

57
Jacques-Antoine Beaufort,
The Oath of Brutus,
1771.
Oil on canvas;
129 × 167cm,
50¾ × 65¾in.
Musée Municipal,
Nevers

In the Brutus story, the oath was sworn as a promise of individual revenge against a corrupt monarchy, and it was somewhat inconsistent and redundant to have noble and virtuous Romans swear an oath to affirm a virtue that was beyond question – patriotism. But the motif of the oath allowed David to present a unified and memorable distillation of a highly involved story.

Like his fellow artists Greuze, Doyen, Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828), Ménageot and his brother-in-law Pierre Sériziat (see 128), David was a Freemason, and so it is also possible

that *The Oath of the Horatii* was in some way inspired by the rituals of the masonic lodge, where swords and the swearing of oaths played a prominent role in the proceedings (58). Though this may be the case, it is not to say that the painting is a masonic allegory of any form, as is Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (1791). David's introduction into Freemasonry is not known, perhaps it was through Sedaine or Desmaisons who, as architects, were conceivably Masons. The only record of his membership was found through the patient researches of Albert Boime in the late 1980s, who established that David

became affiliated to the Lodge of Moderation on 24 November 1787. To become an affiliate the candidate must already have been an established Mason. David had a network of masonic connections which included his pupils Jean-Baptiste Wicar and Philippe-Auguste Hennequin, Count Stanislas Potocki, the chemist Lavoisier and two of his earliest biographers, Pierre Jean Baptiste Publicola Chaussard and Alexandre Lenoir.

Although much of the preliminary work was done in Paris, David decided that to paint the *Horatii*, he should return to

58
Assembly of Freemasons for the Reception of a Master Mason, from Johann Martin Bernigeroth's *Les Coutumes des Francs-Maçons dans leurs assemblées, principalement pour la réception des apprentifs et des maîtres, tout nouvellement et sincerement découvertes*, 1745

Rome. This was a very expensive undertaking, and was only made possible when David's highly supportive father-in-law offered to pay the expenses of the artist and his wife. The promise of fame and glory seems to have been the main motivation for his second trip to Rome, because the financial rewards from the sale of the picture to the king would have been far outweighed by the money spent. Such a visit, just to paint a single picture, was way beyond the means of practically any other artist of the time, and to some of his rivals David was a privileged publicity seeker for this very ostentatious expenditure.

Leaving their two children with their grandparents Pécoul (a second son, Eugène, had been born on 27 April 1784), the Davids left Paris at the start of September 1784. Accompanying them part of the way was David's favourite pupil, Jean-Germain Drouais, who had won the Prix de Rome in that year with the accomplished and sensationally successful painting *The Woman of Canaan at the Feet of Christ* (59). This was the first time that a pupil of David's had won this important prize,

and it signalled the start of further successes and the blossoming of a true Davidian school. Not surprisingly, established Academicians were alarmed and envious of the calibre of students that David produced. At this time he had perhaps as many as forty students, and a great number of these had come to him from the studios of established masters. Leaving a teaching practice for any length of time risked losing enrolments, so David entrusted his studio to the care of the established Academician Nicolas-Guy Brenet (1728–92), who had been Drouais's first master, and was an artist in whom David must have had considerable confidence.

David is reported to have said: 'I decided to accompany him [Drouais] to Italy, for the sake of my art as well as for him. I could no longer do without him; I myself profited from giving him lessons, and the questions he addressed to me will be lifelong lessons.' Although the relationship between David and Drouais was extremely close, it is unlikely that David's well laid career plans would have revolved around the availability of a young pupil. It is more likely that the Prix de Rome success provided Drouais with the opportunity to accompany David, rather than it being the catalyst for David to leave Paris. The evidence points to Drouais being the person making hasty travel arrangements, and he left even before being issued with his passport and *brevet* (travel warrant) from the Direction des Bâtiments du Roi. Such lack of respect for the correct procedure disturbed and irritated d'Angiviller, and he pointed out that the winning of the Prix did not automatically qualify the artist concerned for the Rome pension. It was 'a grace from the King which is entirely independent'.

David arrived in Rome on 8 October and arranged to rent a studio in the Via del Babuino, between the Piazza del Popolo and the Piazza di Spagna. He worked in a very methodical manner, drawing from life models and draped mannequins, and some very detailed studies survive for many of the main figures (60). David's generous allowance also enabled him to

have accessories such as the swords and helmets made by local craftsmen so that they could serve as accurate props. Some passages of the final work proved very difficult – he repainted the left foot of Old Horatius at least twenty times before he was satisfied. Drouais is supposed to have assisted David, painting the arm of the rear Horatii brother and the yellow garment of Sabina. He also urged his master to paint the heroes nude, but David rejected this idea. Drouais was also given responsibility for painting the whole of the figure of Camilla, but the result was what David called 'a figure of plaster', and he was forced to repaint it himself.

The painting was finished at the end of July 1785, and was then exhibited in David's studio. As with the *Belisarius*, David very conspicuously added the painting's place of origin to the signature and date – L David/ faciebat/ Romanae/ Anno MDCCLXXXIV – a tactic that was presumably to inform the

spectator of his scrupulous and dedicated search for authenticity. Newspapers and journals carried glowing reports about the work, crowds clamoured to see it, and even the Pope wanted to view the painting that had created such a sensation. In the event, this was not possible as papal protocol forbade the pontiff visiting a commoner, and it could not be brought to the Vatican. The aged Pompeo Batoni once again urged David to stay in Rome where his talent would be fully appreciated, and said: 'You and I alone are painters. The rest can be thrown into the river.' Batoni was so taken by David's talent that at his death in 1787 he bequeathed his brushes and palette to him as a mark of his esteem.

Although pleased with the success of the *Horatii* in Rome, David had always meant for it to be his grand statement at the 1785 Salon in Paris. While in Rome he wrote twice to the Marquis de Bièvre, a courtier, amateur playwright and fellow

59
Jean-Germain Drouais,
The Woman of Canaan at the Feet of Christ,
1784.
Oil on canvas;
114 × 146cm,
44⅞ × 57½in.
Musée du Louvre, Paris

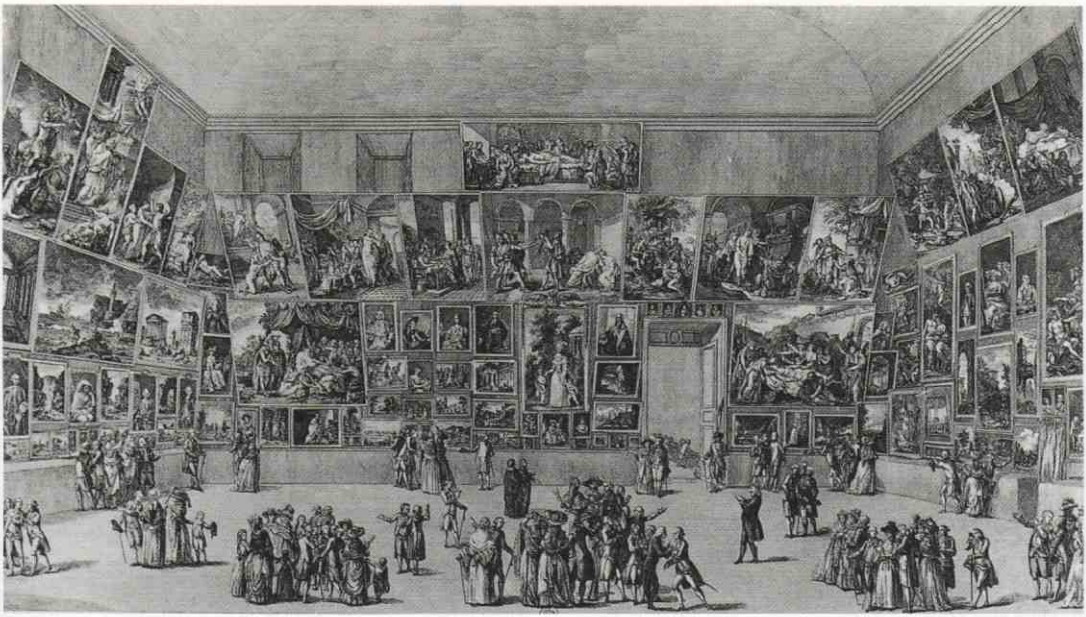
60
Drawing of the three Horatii brothers,
1785.
Black chalk, wash and white highlights;
58 × 45cm,
22⅞ × 17¾in.
Musée Bonnat, Bayonne

Mason, who saw himself as a protector of David, asking him to use his influence to ensure that the picture was hung favourably at the Salon. David was worried that the hostile Pierre might malevolently arrange for the picture to be hung in a poor position, and said, 'It is always our Pierre that I am afraid of.' He appealed to the marquis's own theatrical talents by adding, 'Would you be content if one of your comedies were badly performed?' However, nothing could be done because the painting arrived after the Salon had opened and so it was placed high up (61), only being rehung lower when the closing date of the Salon was extended. News of the painting's great success and ecstatic reception in Rome had spread, and huge numbers of people came to view it – some of them doubtless attracted by the false rumour that the painting's author had been murdered on the way back to Paris.

61
Pietro Antonio Martini.
View of the 1785 Salon, 1785.
Engraving;
34 × 50·5cm,
13⅜ × 19⅞in

Because of its austerity and depiction of dutiful patriotism, *The Oath of the Horatii* is often considered by some writers to be the clearest expression of Neoclassicism in painting. Neoclassicism does not mean the re-creation of the style of Greek and Roman antiquity, or of paintings peopled with characters that look like coloured classical sculptures. In David's case this new style was based on scrupulous life drawing and a close study of artists such as Caravaggio and Poussin. Its association with classical antiquity came in its moral and ethical subject matter and the severe style that was stripped of all unnecessary embellishments. Of course Neoclassicism is only a shorthand term for a cultural phenomenon that was very complex, and by using it we are in danger of losing the intricacies and subtleties of individual works. Yet it is clear that to the people of the eighteenth century, the ancient authors were not remote and irrelevant – Pliny and Plutarch were used as school textbooks – and the heroic and selfless behaviour of past heroes could provide an ideal model for an imperfect present.

David gave his scene a high degree of actuality, and in doing so was highly innovative – his *Horatii* looked like no other picture



of the time (62). Its uncompromising directness, economy and tension made it instantly memorable and full of visual impact. Each of the three elements of the picture – the sons, the father and the women – is framed by a section of a Doric arcade, and the figures are located in a narrow stage-like space. David split the picture between the masculine resolve of the father and brothers and the slumped resignation of the women. Camilla in the white dress, Sabina in blue and yellow, and the nurse with the children all avert their eyes from the oath-taking, and only the young boy, whose future duty will also be to bear arms and defend the homeland, is allowed to watch (63). The focal point of the work is occupied by the swords that old Horatius is about to distribute to his sons, thus capturing a moment just prior to the passing of power and authority from one generation to the next. While the rear two brothers take the oath with their left hands, the foremost one swears with his right. Perhaps David did this simply as a way of grouping the figures together, but people at the time noticed this detail, and some supposed that this meant that the brother in the front would be the one to survive the combat.

62
The Oath of the Horatii, 1784.
Oil on canvas: 330 × 425 cm, 129⅞ × 162⅜ in.
Musée du Louvre, Paris

In creating such a picture of contrary emotions and varied figures, David broke many of the accepted rules of harmonious composition that his contemporaries took great pains to observe. By making a virtue of a display of disjunction and lack of pictorial unity, David ran counter to accepted academic methods as laid down in such manuals as Dandré Bardon's *Traité de Peinture* (1765). The *Horatii* lacked focus since the diagonal line was not used to lead the eye to the main protagonists, who were themselves split into separate groups. In his student days David had been criticized for his lack of adherence to compositional rules, so with the *Horatii* he made a bold and calculated alternative statement. Further, David's application of paint had none of the bravura effects or impasto highlights that were recommended in texts and practised by established Academicians. The surface of the *Horatii* is flat and even, and hard-edged outlines are created by the overlapping of figures and their draperies.

63
The Oath of the Horatii (detail of 62)

Although David changed the subject of his painting from *Old Horatius Defending his Son* to *The Oath of the Horatii*, such changes were admissible by the administration and were not infrequent. However, without consulting his superiors, David increased the picture's size from 10×10 ft (3×3 m) to 10×13 ft (3×4 m), the very largest format of painting that the *Direction des Bâtiments du Roi* would sanction. David gave a lengthy explanation of his actions, saying: 'For the picture's size I have increased the dimensions given me by the King. I was told to do it 10×10, but having turned my composition in all ways, seeing that it would lose its energy, I ceased to make a picture for the King, and did it for myself. No one will ever make me do anything detrimental to my reputation and it now measures 13×10. You need not doubt my desire to please the King, as I do not know whether I shall paint another picture like it; moreover, when I offered it to M. Pierre I told him that I was not guided by self-interest and would charge as much for the 13 feet as for the 10. He said I could not do that, that it would provoke my colleagues; I did not see the matter in this light,

and only considered my own development.' So the *Horatii* was not simply the fulfilment of a Crown commission, but a bold assertion of David's artistic freedom and independence.

By the 1790s, *The Oath of the Horatii* had been taken up as a symbol of the French Revolution. However, it is unlikely that it was meant to be a political painting. David held no political views or allegiances at this time, and it is far-fetched to think of the painting as a call to revolt and rebellion. The Revolution was still four years away; in 1785 republicanism was not yet a force in France, and the overthrow and removal of the monarchy was unthinkable. Undoubtedly the *Horatii* was controversial and revolutionary, and had resonances with contemporary debates on virtue and patriotism, but its greatest impact was as a striking and innovative image.

With this single picture David eclipsed all of his rivals, particularly Peyron, whose sombre painting *The Death of Alcestis* (64) was in direct competition with the *Horatii* at the Salon. This was Peyron's first attempt at a large-scale work, and the increase in size and the square format – rejected by David for the *Horatii* – created problems of figure scale and focus. Peyron's dark and mournful painting, subtitled *The Heroism of Conjugal Love*, showed Alcestis, who had volunteered to commit suicide to save the life of her husband, King Admetus of Pherae, lying dead with outstretched arms between her son and daughter. Her husband turns his head in sorrow and the other members of the household display their anguish with highly stylized and overemphatic gestures. The Salon *Livret* (short catalogue) explained: 'The women, plunged in grief, fill the palace with their mourning, and the statue of Hymen [the Greek god of Marriage] is veiled for ever as it must never again witness fresh embraces.' Compared to the direct rhetoric of the *Horatii*, the painting appeared artificial and excessively gloomy.

The vast majority of critics declared David to be the unanimous victor of the Salon; he was hailed as the head of a new and vigorous French school of painting, reaching a position of

supremacy that he would not relinquish for thirty years. Almost all critics wrote of the painting in terms of the action depicted, and made no reference to young Horatius' ignoble murder of his sister. It might even be argued that the Horatii story, if taken as a whole, is less of an example of Enlightenment secular virtue than it first appears, since it advances a form of patriotism where violence is seen as the ultimate solution, and the price of personal attachment and sensitivity, as paid by Camilla, is death.

The Oath of the Horatii was a personal manifesto designed to be shown on the most public of stages. It is evidence of David's refusal to be treated like a glorified craftsman – he considered his own judgement to be above that of bureaucrats and committees. Such a posture naturally antagonized the Academy, officialdom and many fellow painters, but it was very attractive to radicals and impressionable young artists. The stylistic radicalism of the painting has led Thomas Crow, in his book *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (1985), to locate David within the milieu of pamphleteers and subversive critics who conducted a campaign against the favouritism and elitism of government institutions. Crow has maintained that the *Horatii*'s direct language of truth, that some critics found disquieting, appealed to 'a subculture of opposition'. But these interpretations have not met with universal acceptance, and other writers have noted that whereas the language employed by underground writers was colloquial and often bordered on the scandalous and obscene, for all its directness, David's production remained in the realm of 'high' art. David was effectively agitating against the Academy from within, and the financial security provided by his wife enabled him to be independent and take calculated risks.

In the arts and sciences there were also other examples of individuals pitting themselves against privilege and conservative institutions, although not always with the same success as David. In April 1784 the first performance of *The Marriage of*

Figaro by Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais took place, a play which challenged the accepted order of absolute power and inherited privilege. For his impertinence the author was locked up with petty thieves and prostitutes in the prison of St Lazare. Later, in 1778, the Academies of Science and Medicine in Paris fiercely attacked and hounded out the Austrian physician Friedrich Anton Mesmer (founder of mesmerism), who claimed to cure disease in patients by correcting the flow of 'animal magnetism' in seance-like sessions which sometimes raised female subjects to a state of orgasm. In Paris during the Enlightenment, academies and institutions were fair game for both satirical and more openly expressed attacks from a small but energetic underground press.

David's career continued to flourish, and his pupils were also extremely successful in the Academy's competitions. It was said that: 'By a miracle that none of us fully understands, David's school has reached a degree of perfection such that his nineteen-year-old students are already fully-formed men.' But petty jealousies from established Academicians were never far away, and in 1786 the Prix de Rome competition was cancelled because all the best entrants were pupils of David's and therefore bore the clear imprint of his style. His pupils had a reputation for being clannish and aloof and disdainful of other students, but even so an atmosphere of cut-throat competition existed between them. This came to a head in the 1787 Prix de Rome, when Fabre denounced his fellow pupil Girodet for cheating, with the result that Girodet was disqualified and Fabre was awarded first prize. Meanwhile in Rome, Drouais was making rapid progress, and was proving to be an even more difficult student than David had been. He did not like the petty regulations of the Academy, and then he got into a street brawl with a local tough, after which he had to carry a pair of pistols for protection. His masterpiece, *Marius at Minturnae* (65), was shown in Rome in the summer of 1786 and in Paris the following January, and represents the first flowering of the mature Davidian school. This dramatic

64
Pierre Peyron, *The Death of Alcestis* or *The Heroism of Conjugal Love*, 1785.
Oil on canvas; 327 × 325cm, 128¾ × 128in.
Musée du Louvre, Paris

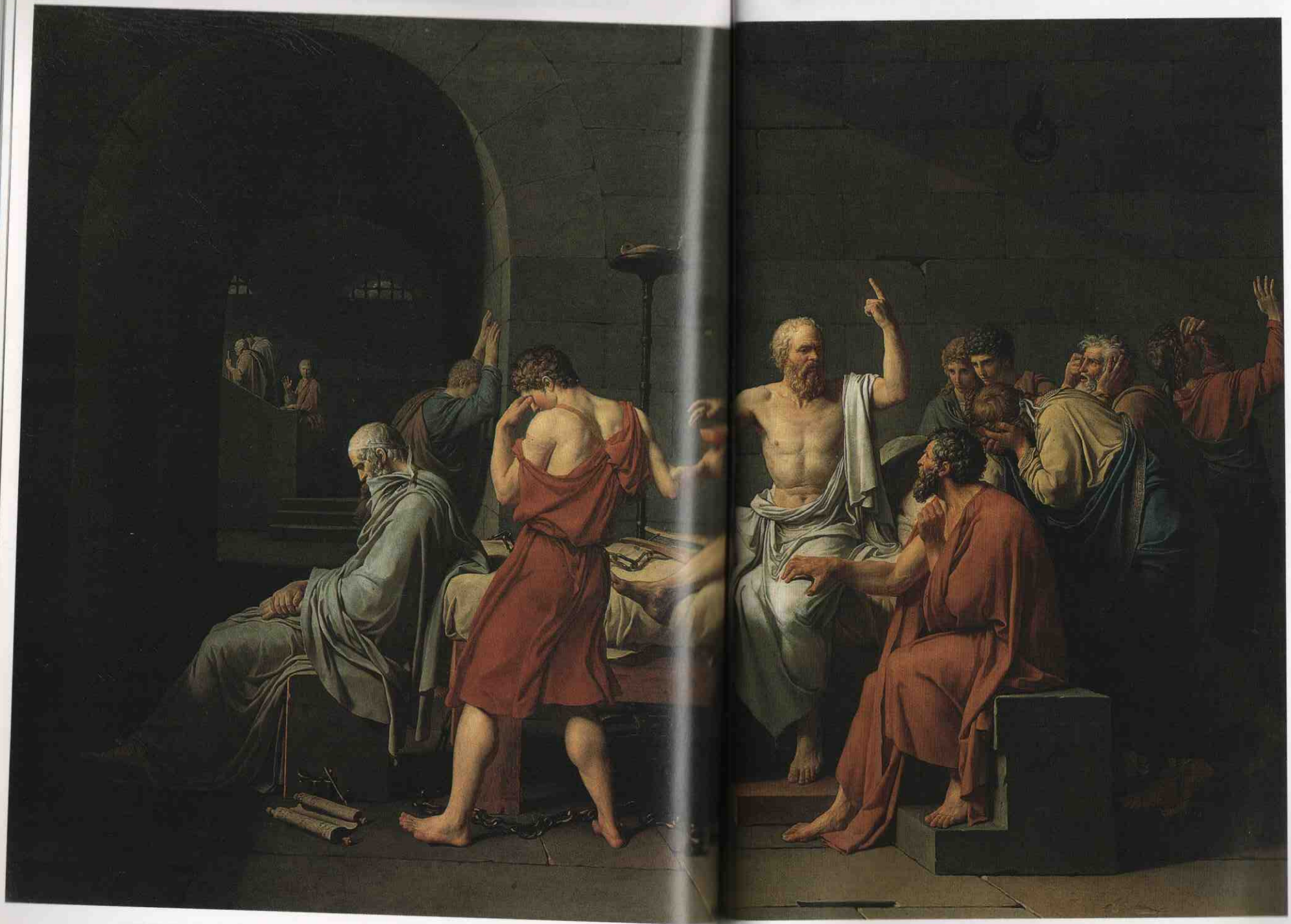
and powerful work, which shows Marius turning back the Cimbrian soldier sent to kill him by the sheer force of his will, was in some ways Drouais's response to the *Horatii*. Although Drouais's painting was clearly based on David's examples, the similarities in appearance masked a fundamental difference in subject matter. While the Horatii brothers were examples of patriotism, Marius was a greedy and ambitious general who caused large numbers of innocent people to be slaughtered in his quest for power. In Paris the painting was extremely well received, and many people thought that Drouais would eventually challenge and perhaps even surpass David. Tragically this did not materialize because Drouais died in Rome in February 1788 from a combination of smallpox and overwork. David was plunged into grief, and wrote that, 'In losing him, I lost my emulation. He alone could trouble my sleep.' He even erected a small memorial to him in the garden of the Louvre, which has since disappeared.

65
Jean-Germain Drouais, *Marius at Minturnae*, 1786.
Oil on canvas; 271 × 365cm. 106⅝ × 143¾ in.
Musée du Louvre, Paris

David now thought that his artistic triumphs qualified him for some high position in the administration of Crown art. The directorship of the French Academy in Rome was to become vacant in October 1787, and David expressed a strong wish to be chosen for the post. However, this did not happen and, much to David's disappointment, Ménageot was appointed instead. David had the support of some aristocratic patrons, and the Marquis de Bièvre wrote to d'Angiviller asking why his protégé had been overlooked for the job. He was informed that David was too young (at nearly thirty-nine) and too inexperienced for the post, but that he would be a strong candidate when the position next became vacant in six years' time. David's independent spirit was probably beginning to count against him, since his ability to teach and produce gifted students was unquestionable. Perhaps his strong-minded attitude was also a factor, because the director's duties also required considerable diplomatic skills. David's rejection from the post was yet another event in his continuing struggle with the Academy that put them on a collision course.

Because of his great impact at the 1785 Salon, David would normally have been commissioned to execute a large history painting for the following Salon. But although he received the order for a *Coriolanus Turned Back from Rome*, it was never completed. A gossipy society journal of the day, the *Mémoires Secrets*, related that David's pride prevented him from painting a subject that the autocratic Pierre wanted to impose, and that he considered unsuitable. With characteristic shrewdness,

David more than compensated for the absence of an official work by securing an important private commission. This was for *The Death of Socrates* (66), paid for by the wealthy Charles-Michel Trudaine who, with his brother Charles-Louis, held a regular artistic and literary salon in their sumptuous Parisian town house in the Place Royale (now the Place de la Concorde). David's social connections had enabled him to come into



66
The Death of Socrates, 1787.
Oil on canvas; 129·5 × 196·2cm, 51 × 77¼in.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

contact with the brothers, and attend the meetings of this so-called 'Trudaine Society'. There he mixed with the liberal nobility and Enlightenment writers and intellectuals, among them André Chénier, who was soon to become a distinguished poet and radical journalist.

The Athenian philosopher Socrates had made himself unpopular with the ruling factions by his implacable respect for the law and his desire to expose false pretensions. He was condemned to death in 399 BC on the charge of not recognizing the state's gods and of corrupting the city's youth. Socrates accepted his fate with noble resignation and died by drinking hemlock, a painless but slow-acting poison that enabled him to continue his debates and discussions with his followers until the very end. To the men of the Enlightenment, Socrates was a figure of great stature, being the embodiment of truth, moral rectitude and self-control; his evident erotic attachment to handsome young men was conveniently disregarded.

David possibly advanced the subject of Socrates himself, but it was also appealing to the Trudaine circle and provoked a great deal of discussion on how it might be depicted. Chénier gave some advice on the pose of Socrates, and David also consulted the Oratorian scholar Father Adry for details. The fullest account of Socrates' death was in Plato's *Phaedo*, but Diderot had also recommended the subject to artists in his 1758 *Treatise of Dramatic Poetry*. However, David showed Socrates reaching for the poison instead of, as Diderot suggested, 'Holding the cup in one hand and turning his eyes to Heaven.'

67
The Death of Socrates (detail of 66)

Unlike the *Belisarius*, *Andromache* and *Horatii*, *Socrates* was a modestly sized easel painting suitable for a domestic interior. David chose to show Socrates as he is about to pick up the lethal cup of hemlock, without ceasing the flow of his wise words. Confident in the immortality of the soul, with his left hand Socrates points heavenwards, and at this sight some of his followers lose their composure and give way to grief and anguish, particularly Apollodorus at the extreme right. The

faithful Crito sits listening intently and lays his hand on his master's knee, and Plato sits impassive like a human bookend at the foot of the bed. David also used extensive artistic licence in assigning ages to his characters. Although Socrates was about seventy when he was forced to commit suicide, he is shown as a much younger man with a muscular and athletic torso. Conversely, Plato, who was considerably younger than Socrates (and not even actually present at the death), appears as an old man. According to Plato's description, about fifteen people were present, but David included twelve, to make the scene less crowded and perhaps also to suggest parallels with Christ and his Apostles. The chill setting of the cell, which seems anachronistically modern, and close to Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's (1736–1806) contemporary prison architecture, combined with the hard-edged quality of the paint, exactly match the sad dignity of the scene. On the stairway in the background, Socrates' wife, Xanthippe, who had been dismissed from the final act by her husband, casts a last wistful glance back (67).

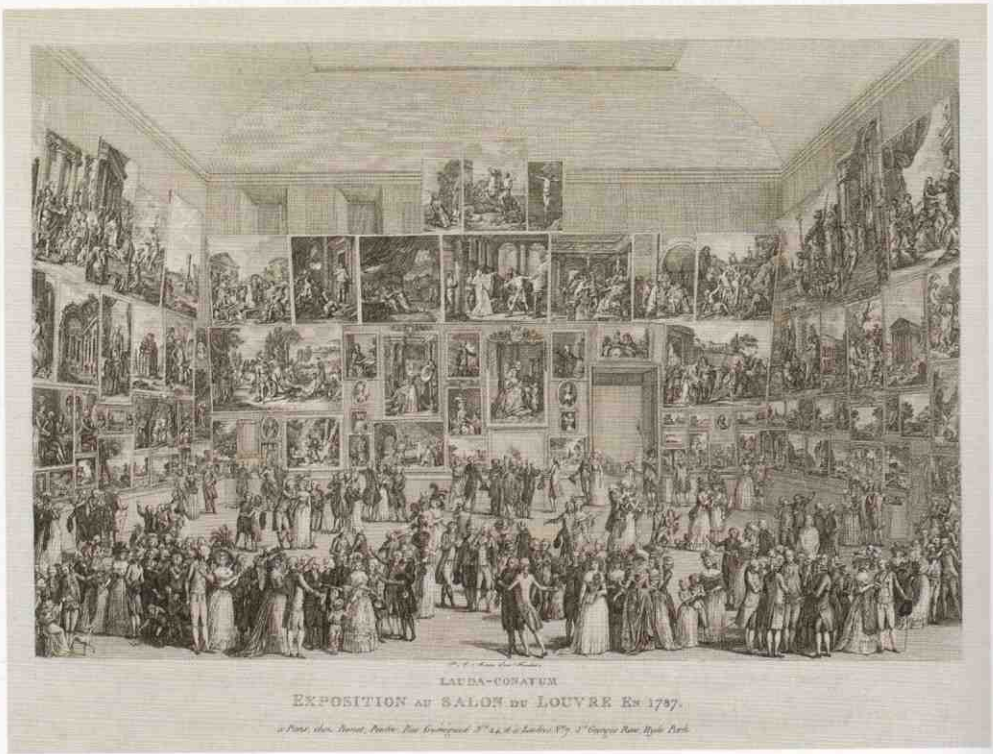
Shown at the Salon of 1787 (68), David's work was again in competition with Peyron, who also exhibited a *Death of Socrates* (69) commissioned by d'Angiviller for the Crown. David's confidence in surpassing his rival, coupled with his aggressive and ambitious nature, make it very possible that he chose to paint his own *Socrates* when he learned of Peyron's plans. The force and clarity of David's version was thrown into even sharper relief by the lack of drama and focus in Peyron's work, and both the public and critics declared David's work to be far superior. David eclipsed his long-time rival once and for all, and from then on Peyron had to be content with a subordinate role in the art world. An English visitor to the Salon, the print publisher and art entrepreneur John Boydell, wrote that David's *Socrates* was, '(in my opinion) the most exquisite and admirable effort of art which has appeared since the Sistine Chapel and Raphael's Stanze. A picture which would have done honour to Athens in the age of Pericles; which after ten days'

successive observation seems to me absolutely perfect in all its parts.' Thomas Jefferson, then in Paris as American minister to France, wrote of the Salon, 'The best thing is the *Death of Socrates* by David, and a superb one it is.' Trudaine was so satisfied with the painting that he increased David's already handsome fee of 6,000 livres to 10,000 livres.

Not only was David the most successful and talked about artist of the day, he was also a character of imposing presence. He was tall (about 1·8 m or 6 ft), dark, well-built and vigorous. He had keen and piercing eyes, slightly wavy hair, and his movements and bearing were mostly calm and distinguished. He was also something of a dandy, taking great trouble over his dress. Usually good natured, he could charm and flatter the ladies, although the increasing size of his mouth tumour must have caused some speech problems. But David was a complex character, and at times he would display a certain crudity and coarseness of manners, and could also be suspicious and vindictive. Music and the theatre were his favourite pastimes, and he fancied himself as a violinist, but his own assessment of his talent was not shared by the people who had the dubious pleasure of hearing him play. He also moved in high society and was not content with the company of other artists, whom he had little time for. As well as the Trudaine circle, he was invited to entertainments held by Queen Marie Antoinette's favourite painter Elisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun (1755–1842), who was also a courtier, and by Félicité de Genlis, former mistress of the king's cousin, the Duke d'Orleans. Madame de Genlis was also the governess of the duke's three children at the country house of Saint-Leu, and David not only gave them drawing lessons but also joined in the favourite game of grouping them into *tableaux vivants* (living pictures) representing scenes from history and mythology.

Exposure to liberal intellectual thought served to increase David's dissatisfaction with the Academy and its methods. He saw it as despotic, oppressive and an obstacle to the

development of natural talent. David strove to demonstrate the superiority of his own style as opposed to that of established Academicians, and sought public support for himself. He actively discouraged his pupils from attending the Academy's school, though he was of course delighted when they carried off its prizes. He eloquently summed up his attitude to the Academy in a most forthright way: 'The Academy is like a wigmaker's shop; you cannot get out of the door without getting its powder on your clothes. How much time will you waste in



forgetting those poses, those conventional positions into which the professors force the model's torso, as if it were a plucked chicken? ... They will doubtless teach you to do your torso, teach you your trade in the end, because they make a trade out of painting. As for me I hold that trade in filthy contempt.'

68 **Pietro Antonio Martini**, *View of the 1787 Salon*, 1787. Engraving

David's ideas on individual liberty, both artistic and social, were clarified and developed at this time, and his friend André

69
Pierre Peyron,
The Death of Socrates,
1787.
Oil on canvas;
98 × 133 cm,
38½ × 52⅜ in.
Statens Museum für Kunst, Copenhagen

Chénier was highly influential in their formation. Contact with Americans such as the painter John Trumbull (1756–1843), who visited him in 1786, and possibly with Thomas Jefferson, with the Italian patriot Filippo Mazzei and with English people such as John Boydell and the husband and wife painters Richard (1742–1821) and Maria (1759–1838) Cosway, taught David something of democratic political systems that existed elsewhere. A significant contrast was revealed between them and the authoritarian monarchy and privileged aristocracy in France, and he began to see the necessity for change and reform. The English art world also seemed very appealing to him as he thought it to be even-handed and lacking in the prejudice and intrigue of Paris, and so a visit to London was planned, not only to renew his acquaintance with the charming Mrs Cosway, with whom he was particularly taken, but also to show either *The Oath of the Horatii* (see 62) or *The Death of Socrates* (see 66) at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1788 or 1789. However, David's plans did not materialize because of the turmoil and upheaval that surrounded the momentous events of the French Revolution.