Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, oil on canvas, 3.3 x 4.25m, commissioned by Louis XVI, painted in Rome, exhibited at the salon of 1785 (Musée du Louvre)

Speakers: [Dr. Steven Zucker](https://www.khanacademy.org) and [Dr. Beth Harris](https://www.khanacademy.org)

**Jacques-Louis David, Painter to the King, Revolution, and the Emperor**

David was trained in the classicism favored by the Academy but here creates the far more severe style, Neo-Classicism. He ultimately became the painter of the Revolution and even served on the committee that voted for the beheading of the King (he would later spend time in jail for this). David was friends with Robespierre and Marat, leaders of the Reign of Terror, the revolution's most violent aspect. After the revolution, when Napoleon became Emperor of France, David served as his official painter.

**David wins the Prix de Rome; A New Style Emerges**
David was raised in the wealthy and powerful family of his uncle, a minister to the King of France. The young David was at first trained in the studio of the great Rococo master François Boucher, a distant relative who also counted Fragonard amongst his students. After several failed attempts, David would win the coveted Prix de Rome, a prize given annually to one advanced art student (somewhat equivalent to a Master of Fine Arts degree student today) in each of the three beaux-arts (pronounced "bow-zart," fine arts in English), painting, sculpture and architecture.

The competition was open to the alumni of the École des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts), the preeminent art school in France. The prize financed the study of art in Rome for a period of five years. Traditionally, winners took note of the works of Antiquity (ancient Greek and Roman art) and of the High Renaissance (the legacy of Raphael & Michelangelo for example) but devoted their attention primarily to selected masters of the Baroque. In contrast, David reversed this hierarchy focusing on the art of antiquity, the renaissance and the classicizing baroque artist, Nicolas Poussin (see especially Poussin's *Burial of Phocion* of 1648).

What emerged in David's painting was a sharp rejection of the Rococo style. Gone is the fluid brushwork, soft color, and the amorphous organic compositions of Boucher and Fragonard. Of equal import was the shift in subject. A telling document of the ancien regime, *Fragonard’s The Swing*, celebrates the pleasures of love and of the experience of the ruling class. This is a painting intended to indulge the viewer's senses with rich, almost aromatic sights and textures.

**A Story of Sacrifice**

In contrast, David tells the story of three brothers that make an oath to their father that they will die in the defense of their city (this is a legend about the founding of Rome). Most Neo-Classical paintings take their subjects from Ancient Greek and Roman history and the *Oath of the Horatii* is no exception. In this painting the three Horatii brothers have been chosen to represent the city of Rome in a battle against three brothers from the neighboring city of Alba.

Here, the three Horatii brothers are swearing an oath on their swords which their father presents to them to fight until they die for their country. Here's the catch: one of the Horatii sisters (pictured on the right) is married to one of the men on the other side (the Curiatii). When one of the Horatii brothers returns home from the battle—the only one surviving—this sister greets him with condemnation for killing her husband and the father of her children. Because she puts herself and her family before the good of her country, her brother kills her. The idea here is that one must be willing to sacrifice—even sacrifice one's life and family members—for the state.

**A Rational Style**

Eschewing the Rococo style, David organizes the canvas with a geometric precision that recalls the innovation of the ancient Greeks and of the Italian Renaissance that harked back to the rationalism of antiquity. David divides the linear perspectival interior into a balanced nine-part square. This rigorous structure frames the three sets of figures as does the triple screen of doric columns and arches at the far end of the room. The angle of the light heightens the muscularity of the male figures as it rakes across the surface of their bodies. This light, which enters the room from the upper left, sharply delineates mass and volume, a kind of modified tenebrism and creates, as in the work of Caravaggio, a strong sense of physicality.

As was traditional, David's *Oath of the Horatii* was commissioned by the King as the summation of David's five years of study in Rome. Such a work was to be exhibited in an annual exhibition of new art held in a large room or salon in the monarch's palace in Paris, the Louvre (now the museum). In part because of some crafty self-promotion but primarily because of the radical style and especially because of the political implications of the painting, David's early masterpiece quickly became a sensation.
This work is one of the most interesting paintings from the Enlightenment, and I thought your video was very informative and interesting; however I think it is important to mention that this painting is set up in a way that can be read using iconology and semiotic theory which adds to the drama and strength of this work. Like the video mentioned, there is a strong sense of physicality to this work, especially in the way that David has posed his male figures. The swords which they are holding represent both justice and power but also signify the coming battle between the two families. The red cloak worn by the rather stands for anger, blood and vitality, which are all connected with the themes in this piece. Even the set up of the figures helps to embody the ideas behind this work. The male figures are standing tall and strong, and if you look at the shape their bodies make you can see two triangles in the legs and bodies of both the sons and the father. The triangle is the strongest shape, which again speaks to the strength of the men, but it also references other powers such as the holy trinity. Whether these symbols were placed intentionally or not, I think that they enhance they work and give this painting more depth which adds to its appeal.
Check this out as well

This painting at the Louvre

Livy's Ab Urbe Condita in English Translation

Neo-Classicism in the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Metropolitan Museum of Art

This Painting on An Introduction to 19th Century Art

Your Flickr Images »

This work is an open educational resource and This work is licensed under a Creative Common Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 license.