



## INVESTIGACIÓN/RESEARCH

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### THE PAINTING OF HISTORY: THE PRESENT IN THE PAST OR THE PAST IN THE PRESENT?

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#### ABSTRACT

Through the review of the five individual cases of the artists Jacques-Louis David, Benjamin West, Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, Eugene Delacroix and John Trumbull, it is shown how historical painting since the late XVIIIth Century presents a reinterpretation of the meaning of history and the facts of the past in their respective present. Although history painting is not a new genre at the end of the XVIIIth Century, it did have clear guidelines highly respected in academic circles in the West. The novelty is that a new view of history is approached, in tune with present needs is configured from the paintings. In this sense, assuming each of the artworks analyzed as the solution to a problem, every art work is deciphered as a solvent contribution.

#### KEY WORDS

Painting – History – Art – Philosophy of History

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## **LA PINTURA DE HISTORIA: ¿EL PRESENTE EN EL PASADO O EL PASADO EN EL PRESENTE? RESUMEN**

A través de la revisión de cinco los casos particulares de los artistas Jacques-Louis David, Benjamin West, Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, Eugene Delacroix y John Trumbull, se demuestra como la pintura de corte histórico desde finales del siglo XVIII presenta una re-interpretación del significado de la historia y los hechos del pasado en su respectivo presente. Aunque la pintura de historia no es un género nuevo para el final del siglo XVIII, sí tenía unos claros lineamientos muy respetados por los círculos académicos en Occidente. La novedad radica en que desde la pintura se aborda una nueva visión de la historia en sintonía con las necesidades del presente. En este sentido, asumiendo cada una de las obras analizadas como la solución a un problema, se descifra a la obra misma en tanto aporte solvente.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

Pintura – Historia – Arte – Filosofía de la Historia

### **1. Introduction**

The end of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century is also a period of great efforts for the preservation of a tradition that refuses to give way, which resists the Industrial Revolution and has no place in a society increasingly secular, more open and more restless in its march in search of progress. The political and social changes that arise from the late eighteenth century will punctuate the requirements in other scenarios.

The art will also make revolution and with its doing will drag ideas of all kinds. A fundamentally political-religious sphere, the art will migrate, sometimes with calm, sometimes with unusual- radicalism towards a political and social sphere with poetic, prosaic and even religious overtones in a new sense. This migration is more of a pilgrimage in search of new answers, of different ways of building a vision of reality, and not pre-conceived from traditional institutions (the Church and the State) but configured from new elements, from factors previously had not been previously considered or did not enjoy a remarkable weight.

Not to lose the ability to communicate, to connect with the audience was a substantial challenge for artistic expression since the mid eighteenth century onwards. The current stipulated by the Catholic Counter Reformation and its development of the theatrical elements of the image (rhetoric, decorum, credibility and persuasiveness)<sup>2</sup>, mainly based on the exaltation of religious power and its symbiosis with the political power, did not seem to respond neither to public concerns nor the needs of some intellectual elites. In this sense, the artists had to

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<sup>2</sup> See Checa and Moran (1999) for more details on the use of plastic Baroque theatricality.

face the solution of some problems of artistic expression that would shake even the issues and how they were presented.

History painting was certainly not new to the late eighteenth century, but there were significant changes in the way how artists interpreted the role of history and its relationship with the arts. It is no coincidence that the last decades of this century see the presentation of new ideas about the history and meaning. Until the eighteenth century the story was just a recount the things *done* (*res gestae*) or, in any case, of the *things that happened* (*res gestarum*). In other words, the present could only be great if a parallel could be found in the giants of the past who had done extraordinary things (Mitre, 1997).

## **2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY**

Beyond the different visions about the history, its function and meaning, the essence is the vast development of historical consciousness throughout the eighteenth century, which propel the story itself as a tool for reflection, interpretation, and, of course, knowledge of man and the world throughout the nineteenth century. That self-reflective capacity that is innate to historical consciousness will lead to the configuration of new attitudes toward the historical past from all areas. The man no longer saw himself in the same way in the present, he could not see himself in the same way in the past. The historical, existential and experiential horizon was changing.

So, the arts could not remain outside the new positions around the history and the past that had nurtured both the canvases and marbles. The relationship between past and present could not be the same in times of questioning of all established order, in times of serious doubts about the political order of the *ancient régime*, of the Church and even the everyday deeply affected by the unstoppable changes of the Industrial revolution and with it, of the social aspirations of those who had the submission as their only option in life

For some artists it seem to have been obvious that, given the inevitable and unrepeatable historical fact, the only way out was the appropriation and reworking of the past. But neither this nor this appropriation reprocessing were done aseptically since the present was the scenario in which the process was carried out and, with all its cultural load, the present qualified the past. In a panoramic review of some selected cases, it is possible to notice how each generation has a particular interpretation of history, reviewing the previous vision to present its own model. Thus, since the eighteenth century, not always the past, as food for the history, was taken just as the source for the memory of great personalities and deeds but interacted more actively with the present to interpret and propel the approach to the future.

### 3. DISSCISION

#### 3. 1 Politics, art and revolution in Jacques-Louis David

The demands of public life in France will be very different after the French Revolution of 1789. A new egalitarian political order must find an identity connection with artistic practice and vice versa. In the Paris Salon of 1791 Jacques-Louis David did not take a great painting of historical subject in the traditional way as his already famous works *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784) or *The Death of Socrates* (1787) had been. By contrast and establishing a unique connection with the demands of the context, David presented a drawing, highly finished, but finally a work in progress, rather the project of a work. This was the *Ball Game Oath* (Pl. 1).

The work presented a major event for the revolutionary and civic life of just 2 years before: the time at which delegates of the Third Estate are assumed as representatives of a broader political body and swear to remain in permanent assembly until they produce a constitution for a France that should leave in the past notions of *ancient régime*. However, Thomas E. Crow (1989) notes that "to capture the moment, David conceived an oath of the Horatii multiplied, that forced the assembled representatives of the nation to a new foundation of civil authority" (p. 327 ). David thus proceeds to resume successful plastic formulas to set up a painting that will be new for other reasons. It is interesting that the work was commissioned by an unofficial political group self-named "Society of Friends of the Constitution" and not by the the State.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it was also expected that the final work, a huge canvas in which the figures in the foreground would be life-sized, "would be paid by 3,000 subscribers who would receive an engraving of it. The final destination of the work was the lobby of the National Assembly itself"(Crow, 1989, p.328).

From the above, more than the mere anecdote, we wish to emphasize to the reader's eyes the fact that the work, given the way the event is presented, the way it was intended to be funded and the final destination to display it, pointed out to what Crow (1989) has called "the execution of the public will" (p.328). and David ventured into very different properties from those of *the divine will* or *the will of the monarch* who had distinguished great works of art before. In stepping in the field of *public will*, David could generate a feeling of unity in a very large percentage of society and fall from the bonds imposed by the traditional manifestations of power emanating from the Church and the monarchical state

Addressing the President of the National Assembly, David himself said:

"Before, the artists were not used to having issues and they had no choice but to repeat, they are now the subjects those without artists. No history of any people gives me nothing as big or as sublime as the Ball Game

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<sup>3</sup> This group was not yet the group of radicals who would head later Maximilien Robespierre, but a much more open and plural group, politically speaking. He could have found it both monarchists as reformers. This Society was created in the month of April 1789 (Versailles) and became also known as the Club Breton before moving on to become the Jacobin Club.

Oath that I should paint. No, I will not have to invoke the gods of the myths asking them to inspire me. French nation! I hope to spread your glory. People of the Universe, present and future, I want to show you this great lesson. Sacred humanity, I will remind you of your rights through a unique example in the annals of history. Oh, woe to the artist whose spirit does not inflame when he is embraced by causes so powerful! "(Jacques-Louis David quoted by Johnson, 1993, p.81-82).

Clearly, with this work, David gave a convincing response to the nodal problem for the art of his time. Involving the grandiloquence of traditional historical painting and the yearnings of the new public and citizen sphere, the painter stood as the main connector between art and immediacy of the present that was building a different story to that of the iconic timeless figures of the hackneyed allegories of the great historical painting. Michael Burleigh (2005) endorses it clearly in stating that *The Ball Game Oath* meant "a contract with the future" (p.93).

His commitment was sincere. David was a political asset and a fervent citizen. As we referred Luc de Nanteuil (1990), David was carried away by the revolutionary turmoil that began in 1789, the year he meets Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794), being absolutely fascinated by his passionate republicanism. This political furor even led him to break with the Academy and to shape the "*Comune des Arts*" with a group of dissident artists also from this institution. This painter finished separated from his wife (an ardent royalist) and when Robespierre took power in France, David would be the emcee. Already in 1791, at the suggestion of Robespierre, he organized the ceremony of transfer of the remains of Voltaire to the Pantheon, which involved a military procession accompanied by children, while an effigy of the French savant was flanked by a young girl dressed in allegory of fine arts and, of course, by men of letters and scholars.

Already in 1793, David would propose the erection of a statue made of bronze from the cannons captured from the enemies of France; the pedestal would be made with fragments of stone of the sculptures torn away from the facade of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. De Nanteuil (1990) refers to a particular party held on August 10, 1793 and organized by David. For her a *Fountain of Regeneration* was erected at the site of the Bastille, which had as its main figure a woman with ample breast; of them, squeezed with her own hands, flowed abundant pure water from which each and every one of the 86 representatives of the Assembly drank; a salvo of artillery was fired each time one of the deputies drank the regenerating water. The poet Andre Chenier (1762-1794), who two years earlier praised the painter, berated him on this opportunity for being part of the madness that embodied *the incorruptible*.

David ended up being elected deputy to the National Convention in 1792, proposed by Jean-Paul Marat (1743-1793). In January of the following year, the painter would vote enthusiastically for the execution of Louis XVI. However, beyond his radical political views, David proposed an inventory of all national treasures, creating museums in each département of the country and the centralization of a collection of masterpieces in Paris. This ranks it as one of the pioneers in the preservation of

artistic heritage and conceived as national heritage (Macarrón, 2001 and González Varas, 2006).

In May 1794, from an original idea of Robespierre, David organized the Festival of the Supreme Being, held the following month. *The incorruptible* wanted to found a new religion based on the belief in a Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul, glorifying the virtues of family and patriotism. The painter devised a procession from the Tuileries to the Champ de Mars, being responsible even music and hymns were sung. However, there is no doubt that David had become not only the great master of the art of the revolution, but in the main planner and performer of the new dynamics of expression of *public will*, as already stated his project of *The Ball Game Oath* in 1791.

We cannot let Jacques-Louis David aside without referring to what would be his most revolutionary commitment expressed through painting. In mid-January 1793, the Convention should decide the fate of King Louis XVI and in a very close voting of 361 to 360 he opts for the execution of the monarch. The decisive vote, according to rumors at the time, was that of Louis-Michel Saint-Fargeau Lepeletier (1760-1793), who also had proposed Spartan educational reforms and was a firm ally of Robespierre. The fact is that the night before the execution of King, Lepeletier was killed with a sword in a restaurant of the Palais Royal.<sup>4</sup> David would paint the time of his death, rather than his agony, because he did not die instantly, but he agonized for a few hours at his brother's house. This picture, now lost,<sup>5</sup> is known by an engraving by Pierre Tardieu that he performed (1756-1844) from a drawing produced a pupil of David, Anatole Devosge (1770-1850). In this work (Lám.2) we can see the dying Lepeletier visible with the naked torso and the wound caused by the sword in his side.

Later, it will be the turn of Jean-Paul Marat. Robespierre and Lepeletier partner, was an ardent Jacobin. By mid-1793, the politician, removed from the public arena due to a worsening of his skin disease, worked at home, immersed in sulfur water and his head wrapped in a cloth soaked in vinegar. They were the hot days of July. On the 12th, David visit him and talk at length. On 13, Charlotte Corday (1768-1793), a Girondins of conviction, killed Marat with a dagger.<sup>6</sup> The painter was the last of the notable members of the Convention to see the revolutionary alive and in memory of him, as he had done with Lepeletier, made his famous work *The Death of Marat* in that year (Pl. 3). With great simplicity, David shows the Jacobin in his bathtub, his small desk, already dead and still holding the pen (his only weapon); near the right shoulder, the mortal wound caused by Corday's dagger lying on the floor.

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<sup>4</sup> Le peletier left a 11 year old daughter, Suzanne, to be portrayed by David in 1804, but at the time of the death of his father it was adopted by the French nation and received the title of "Daughter of the State".

<sup>5</sup> The last time I heard of his whereabouts was in 1826, in the collection of the Louvre. It is believed that was destroyed by the Le peletier own daughter.

<sup>6</sup> He had traveled to Paris from Caen expressly for this purpose and used the ruse of having information about an alleged conspiracy against Marat Convention to grant him an interview.

The picture on Marat was unveiled to the public on October 16, 1793, presented together with that on Lepeletier. David was responsible for organizing a solemn ceremony in tribute to these two illustrious revolutionaries. Crow (1989) describes it thus:

"In the courtyard of the old Louvre, the portraits of Marat and Lepeletier appeared hung over a couple of sarcophagi; above both of them a chapel like structure had been erected -. The courtship ritual march ended before that kind of double altar. The assembly of funeral celebrants sang hymns and patriotic oaths of loyalty to the dead"(p.331) spoke.

It is risky to say that with this David opened the way to national and civic religion, but it cannot be denied that this ceremony turned Marat and Lepeletier martyrs into appropriate of the revolution (Burleigh 2005). Moreover, David shrewdly appealed to the iconographic forms known and accepted by the people in the sphere of Christianity to present the recumbent bodies of the two pro-men. In both cases, the memory of the plastic-thematic form of Christian *Pietá* is impossible to ignore: the wound of Le peletier reminds the wound caused by the spear on the side of the body of Christ, for example. Cunningly, David took advantage of tradition to make a qualitative leap towards modernity. In other words, he solved a problem of his time with traditional tools and resources, turning the result into a real artistic revolution.

If *The Ball Game Oath* had been the manifestation of the "public will", the previous two works would be the preaching of the necessary sacrifice for the preservation of that will. With *The Oath*, David proposed a project with the works of Marat and Lepeletier, he raised a path from iron-handed principles. In addition, *The Oath* had forced David to plastically reflect on the representation of the present that builds the future and not about the traditional past. Thus, the interpretation of a present event that would build this future required different modes and David found them.

### **3.2 The story reinvents his speech: Benjamin West**

Before David, the American painter Benjamin West had subverted the tradition similarly. With his *Death of General Wolfe*<sup>7</sup> realizada in 1770 (Lám.4), West caused a sensation at the *Royal Academy*. However, not all the findings were positive. James Wolfe (1727-1759) was a tragic hero, twelve years before had beaten the French at the Battle of *Plaines d'Abraham* -during the Seven Years' War, in which he died wounded at the end. He was an important character for the recent glory of the British Empire, so that the representation of his death could not be the representation of any event.

West resolves the scene by compressing it in one crucial, epic and culminant climax: the death of the general. But while the hero's death is the center, the table addresses all the details of the event, the landing of British troops from the St. Lawrence River, the flight of the French and the death of the commander of their

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<sup>7</sup> He had traveled to Paris from Caen expressly for this purpose and used the ruse of having information about an alleged conspiracy against Marat Convention to grant him an interview..

troops, General Louis-Joseph Marquis de Montcalm. The presence of a native from the tribes of North America also reminds us that what is seen happened in the New World and not in the Old. Of course, it is absurd to think that the time of the death of General Wolfe was able to happen like this, surrounded by his officers, after all, these have had to be very busy in the heat of battle.

However, West bet on the presentation of the fundamental group from an iconographic group well known in the Christian imaginary. Yes, the enlarged group of the *Pieta*, that is, the Descent from the Cross, when Christ is not only embraced by his mother, but surrounded by Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea. The artist used models of the past but in a renewed way resemantizing even its meaning. In fact, in this work, Wolfe is no longer a simple war hero but is deified as a kind of martyr for the British cause, which would be powered by the thousands of engraved reproductions that circulated in England and outside its borders (Grossman, 2014).

But in reality, it was not this novel use of traditional forms what caused amazement to some members of the Royal Academy. Evans Grosse (1959) already pointed out what displeased then, including Joshua Reynolds (president), was the way West decided to dress the main characters of the scene as supposed would dress at the time of the event itself, with the corresponding military uniforms. The custom stipulated that the great deeds were executed by men dressed in the style of classical antiquity. The controversy was enormous, as was thought, according to West had degraded not only painting, but the tragic moment itself.

When approaching the scene painted to the reality of the present, West would have made it prosaic and vulgar. The greatness seemed then only in the timeless past, that is, classic. But the public was fascinated by this new quality of 'being there' that was provided by the paint of West. Lloyd Grossman (2014) reports that for West the same truth that guides the pen of the historian should rule the artist's brush. However, the scene that this painter ends presenting is far from the historical truth and was expected due to the already described plastic solution.

In any case, the recognition of reality with what was depicted in the pictorial surface had begun, and in a different mode different from what was seen before. If in *The Surrender of Breda* (1634), for example, Diego de Silva y Velázquez (1599-1660) presented a totally and absolutely contemporary scene, it was with all the poise and appropriate solemnity. West, however, turns into a myth a contemporary event, that is, he takes an event of his time and raises it to the level of classical or biblical story, without looking like an event of classical or biblical history. Thus, the event represented shows the British Empire as a providential mission unstoppable and predestined.

### **3.3 Dissapointment and reality in Francisco de Goya y Lucientes**

With the huge canvases *The Charge of the Mamelukes* or *May 2, 1808* and *The executions of the mountain of Prince Pío* or *The Shootings of May 3* (Pl. 5 and 6), both from 1814, Francisco de Goya makes a plastic statement that takes him off



from the traditional representation of history painting. Some are inclined to classify these works as both separate knocks of realism in art, but "his realism is not a copy of reality, is what remains when the ideology is broken into pieces," as Giulio Carlo Argan well said (1975 , volume I, p.36).

While referring to the events of May 3, 1808 has been much more reproduced than the one referred to the events of May 2, 1808, the two paintings were conceived by Goya to be displayed together. Both constitute an iconographic program. In early 1814, Goya asks the Regency Council of Spain financial support for the completion of two large-scale works that allow to perpetuate the heroic actions of the uprising of the people of Madrid against the tyrant of Europe, Napoleon Bonaparte. The money was granted to the master very quickly and quickly went to work.

In the first canvas, Goya shows a scene of the uprising that would start the Spanish War of Independence against the French occupation. This uprising took place against Muslim troops of the French army, but seeing the work, then or now, you can't prevent memory from referring to the century-long struggle against the Moors and that stirred, in times of Bonaparte, the Spanish nationalist sentiment . In the second canvas, the best known, Goya depicts the scene of the execution of those involved in the revolt that the first picture showed. The French troops seem to be a killing machine, not showing their faces and their dark uniforms turn them into the executioners of those sacrificed for freedom, those who die with his arms crossed, to remind us of the martyrdom of the victims.

Pierre Daix (2002) explains about the two works

"Goya brings us into the same space of the painted scene, together with the Spanish that attack horses and riders, amid the furious repression, where the French, from behind, with morion and faceless are already the robots murderers that Picasso will place in 1951 in his *Massacres in Korea*"(volume I, p.128).

Although the two pictures were painted six years after the events, Goya witnessed these, so his proposal is the vision of one who had before him the popular uprising and its immediate aftermath.

Goya lived then in the Puerta del Sol, the place of the happenings of May 2 and it is known that he approached with his servant to the Principe Pio hill just a few hours after the captured citizens were shot, so he must have observed the corpses stacked in positions that surely impressed him for its violence and cruelty. Thus, from his idealization unrelated to any spirit, the Spanish painter plant in denial of all that sweetens and modulates an event.

But the denial of Goya goes further. To Argan (1975), the painter negates even the ideology, because doing so "also denies the story, which for him is an ideology of the past because it represents the world as he had wanted it to be" (Volume I, p.36). So, not even nature is safe with Goya, because it is not plausible to represent it as he is desired it to be. *The Shootings of May 3* would then be a realistic picture as long as

there is no mediation of any superstition to modify what is represented. There is no superstition of the obscurantism, but neither of reason, because -well already scold Goya himself - in his dream it produces monsters. It would be the Spanish painter, as he is qualified by H. Rosenblum and Robert W. Janson (2004), "a close and sometimes sinister parallel of David" (p.50).

However, the victims of the shootings are not heroes to the classic style of David, or in a re-sanctified sense as West had stated. They are, instead, the terror of the ideologies illuminated only by the lantern located in the middle of the table that leaves in darkness the rest of the scene. At times the light looks like a photographic flash lightning which reveals the tragedy, the drama is presented without vague words. This representation of recent history has to Goya the undoubted burden that questions whether there really is a moral order in the barbarity of such immoral means. Thus, the reference to the crucified man of the white shirt, cannot be read the same way as has been read *The Death of General Wolfe* of West. Goya does not intend any allusion to the hope of redemption through sacrifice or the worth of that sacrifice to make way for a better project. This Spanish artist introduces the reference to Christian iconography, because for him religion and history are useless superstition, a dead end.

And do not forget that the two works in question were designed by Goya to be understood together. While Marat in the work of David is practically a tribute statue that places a milestone in the history of France, the shot of Goya are nothing but horror and death. If we do not plant both works one beside the other, we will not allow the iconographic discourse to unfold entirely. The insurgents of May 2 have a motive, something that pushes and stimulates them; the shot on May 3 have already lost everything and not even their death is handled as a providential beginning, as a necessary sacrifice. In the second work there is not a single reference to the idea for which they are supposed to be executed. "Meanwhile, the city sleeps. That is the story "(Argan, Volume I, p.38).

### **3.4 The Hurricane Eugene Delacroix**

Necessary in this review is the unique painting by Eugene Delacroix, *The Liberty Leading the People* (Lám.7), executed in 1830, just after the July Revolution that did away with the Bourbon Restoration in France, to make way for the bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Phillipe of Orléans. Delacroix presented the work at the official Salon the following year and, for the astonishment of many, the work resonated with the rest of the paintings that had also the Revolution July as a subject. The French state would buy the work for 3,000 francs. They tried to hang it in the Throne Room itself to serve as a reminder to King Louis Phillipe about the revolution that had brought him to power. However, it never was exhibited there but in the Luxembourg Palace and only for a few months. It was feared that the work excited the tempers too much or to serve as a stimulus for new popular revolts. Finally, the work went again to the hands of Delacroix in 1832 and, according to the report of Albert Boime (2008) – Jules Champfleury (1820-1889) would had expressed that since mid-1848, the painting was hidden in an attic for being regarded too revolutionary. Only in

1874, this work would enter the collection of the Louvre Museum and exhibited permanently.

But while the rest of the paintings of the same subject exhibited at the Salon of 1831 showed rather picturesque scenes without important players in an urban setting that includes the highest percentage of the pictorial surface, Delacroix surprises doing exactly the opposite. The book does not tell the viewer in what part of Paris happens what you see, the figures, almost life-size, seem to throw violently on the viewer given the low point of view of the work and also a woman acts as the leader of the mob that comes to the front between the barricades. What is really what the viewer sees? What the artist wants to tell us?

According to Argan (1975), this exceptional painting shows that "for Delacroix (...), the history is no example or guide of human action, it is a drama that began with humanity and endures in the present. Contemporary history is political struggle for freedom"(Volume I, p.57). Even this author points out that this work is "the first political picture in the history of modern painting" (Argan, Volume I, p.57), with the proviso that, for the author, -like all romantics in general- politics was not a matter too clear, becoming even contradictory, for it Delacroix must be understood as a revolutionary in 1830 and a counter-revolutionary in 1848. So while he declares himself anti-bourgeois, he lives like one of them and enjoy the benefits the growing fortunes of the bourgeoisie.

In any case, Delacroix produced a work that meant for him to face a substantial socio-political problem for his time: How to include the people in the political struggle? What fundamental political desire can be shared by all? There is no doubt that the answer to this last question was answered clearly in the picture: The Freedom. However, the answer to the questions is more complicated (and delicate), but given the events of July 1830 there was no other possible: claiming in the streets their right to Freedom even if this means armed struggle against the *status quo*.

*The Liberty Leading the People* is the first work that addresses the controversial issue of popular participation in the politics con the rhetorical device of allegory. Hence its fundamental value. Delacroix's solution was unique, iconic, strident and direct. But this allegory has also received an unquestionable reality check: it does not carry the traditional and classic sword but wields a rifle; it does not guide the people from the top or from a distant point but is mixed with it, commanding it with the flag of France. The ambiguity of his characterization makes it more attractive: Is Freedom or France? Is it both? Moreover, France is freedom? Is France doomed to be free and with it his people? In this work, the figure of the classical goddess is committed to street violence, something absolutely unheard of. But the bearing of the tricolor is a direct reference to the revolutionary ideals deployed in 1789. Do not

forget that this flag disappeared from the national scene after 1815, with the Bourbon Restoration, and was waved back again during the events of July 1830.<sup>8</sup>

In any case, *The Liberty Leading the People* is like a storm that rushes against the viewer. However, it does not idealize the revolution *per se*. It does not presents revolutionary acts essentially as good, but rather poses the revolution as a contradictory issue. Freedom, the artist seems to say, is not something that can be controlled when it unleashes its power. With this painting, Delacroix faces its time, proposes its context starting from it. The orientation toward the antique is just a memory that is also updated as he has updated the classic figure of Liberty. The present is the time for action and references. Delacroix had disrespected certain conventions and there were those who let him know that. Étienne-Jean Delécluze (1781-1863), the favorite pupil of Jacques-Louis David, would still refer to Delacroix with disapproval "to constitute l'extreme gauche en peinture "(Boime, 1987, p.110).

### **3.5 The New World and history in John Trumbull**

Before Delacroix astonished everyone in the Saloon of 1831, in 1817, John Trumbull received from the United States Congress a commission to perform four large paintings to decorate the interior of the Capitol in Washington. It was decided to give Trumbull the amount of \$ 32,000 (Caffin, 2005), which then constituted an exceptionally high amount and must speak of the intent of Congress to commemorate certain events in the history of the new republic. For Charles H. Caffin (2005) would have been the faithfulness to historical events and not the idea of making of his paintings mere decorations was what motivated Trumbull in the conception of the four works.

The themes chosen for these four paintings were: *The Presentation of the Declaration of Independence*, *The Surrender of General Burgoyne*, *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis* y *Washington resigning his commission*. The first of these works is the best known, reproduced and important of all. However, few know that it is based on a much smaller work previously done by Trumbull using a number of studies regarding natural portraits of a significant number of signatories to the magnum document. That previous work is now in the Art Gallery of Yale University and had the collaboration of Thomas Jefferson himself, who was very excited when Trumbull told him of his plans to paint a series of scenes about the history of the nation and he was willing to collaborate with him. Jefferson invited the painter to stay with him in Paris, since the Congress had appointed him minister Representative of the US to the kingdom of France in 1785.

The following year, Trumbull began its work of conception of what will be *The Presentation of the Declaration of Independence* (Lám.8). The first was to record the faces of the protagonists and Jefferson, of course, would be the first to be subject to the artist's brushes. His intention was to include in the paint the 56 signatories, but

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<sup>8</sup> He had traveled to Paris from Caen expressly for this purpose and used the ruse of having information about an alleged conspiracy against Marat Convention to grant him an interview.

he only managed to register the semblance of 42 of them, including others who were in the debate, but did not sign the document, such as John Dickinson (Hazleton, 1907). The work preserved in Yale would be completed in 1816, twenty years after the start. That year, December 26, Trumbull wrote to Thomas Jefferson:

" About thirty years have elapsed since, under your friendly protection under your hospitable roof in Chaillot, I painted your portrait in my work of the Declaration of Independence, the composition that had been planned two years earlier in your library. (...)

The US government is restoring its original splendor over buildings dedicated to national purposes, in Washington, which were sacrificed barbarously to the fury of war (by the British in 1814). And I have thought that this is a good opportunity to make my first attempt at public patronage and ask to be employed in decorating the walls of these buildings with paintings that have already taken many years of my life.

The Declaration of Independence is finished and is one of them. I will take them all with me to the seat of government, in a few days I will not only talk about what I intend to do, but I will show them what I have done. I hope that the Declaration of Independence that with all the portraits of many prominent patriots and statesmen, who laid the foundations of our nation ... is considered as an appropriate ornament for the Hall of the Senate and House of Representatives "(Trumbull Jefferson cited by Hazleton, 1907, p. 33).

Later, on January 10, 1817, Jefferson replied to his old friend:

"I enclose a letter to Colonel [James] Monroe, who no doubt will do everything that he can do for you and will not be the least. Your warm heart imbues fervor and enthusiasm to your good offices. Is I've already given it to him so that he is aware of the issue when necessary ... I know about his opinion and favorable disposition towards you. I rejoice that the works in which for so long you have worked and contemplated are coming to fruition. If the legislature, in the rebuilding of public buildings, would take with spirit also your decor, you must be the first object of their attention.

I hope that they do that, and honor themselves, their country and you, preserving these monuments of our revolutionary achievements "(Jefferson Trumbull quoted by Hazleton, 1907, p. 33).

With such a recommendation, Congress could not decide but for John Trumbull. So it was and among the arguments that supported the decision can be read in the resolution of the House of Representatives about the decoration of the Capitol that time then was appropriate for "a living artist of great skill and talent, a fellow of the saga and revolutionary heroes, that can transmit its accurate resemblance to posterity"(quoted in Hazleton, 1907, p. 33). For the painter it was very important to the opinion of Jefferson and kept him abreast of his progress around the works

commissioned by the Congress. On that which began in Paris in 1786, Trumbull wrote to the Founding Father on December 28, 1817:

"I have made considerable progress in the great painting of the Declaration of Independence to the Capitol. I have dedicated my time entirely to it for being of the most interest to the nation and the most important for my reputation, not to mention that time and health could fail me. (...)

The universal interest that my compatriots feel and always should feel about an important event over any other, must to some degree be related to the painting that will preserve the semblance of forty-seven of those patriots to whom we owe that memorable act and all its glorious consequences "(Trumbull to Jefferson, cited by Hazleton, 1907, p. 34).

There is no doubt that Trumbull had high expectations about his work and that Jefferson might have shared them, not only in terms of artistic quality of it but also as to the reception of the work and the meaning it could have for the interpretation of a prominent event. According to David McCullough (2008), Trumbull considered this painting as his great mission, the cause of life. However, the scene is too formal and fictitious because a meeting of all the representatives for the provision of the Act of Independence never took place. To McCullough (2008), what is really valuable in this painting is the record by more than 20 years of the faces of the protagonists of this historic event.<sup>9</sup>

As the portraits of the protagonists of the scene are the most valuable element of this work, we must recognize in it little artist's skill to manage a space that, obviously, is too small to comfortably locate many pro-men and allow all of them to make notable presence. The left section of the work is presented by Trumbull with a perspective different from the right section, making that the representatives sitting just below the standards (the center of the composition) looked too small compared to the drafters of the Declaration which which were located in a midplane. The rooflines of the room themselves do not vanish in harmony with the edges of the borders, or with the floorboards. After successfully working elaborate battle scenes, built with complex diagonals and a perfectly given center to Trumbull seems to have been an unsurpassed challenge therepresentation in a closed space.

On the other hand, if Jefferson was always enthusiastic about the pictorial project Trumbull, John Adams did not assume the same attitude, although it had nothing to do with the artistic skills of the painter. We know that Adams was able to observe the work once completed, but there is not a reliable record of his opinion. However,

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<sup>9</sup> For the purpose, Thomas Jefferson would be portrayed by Trumbull in Paris, John Adams in London, John Hancock and Samuel Adams in Boston, Edward Rutledge in Charleston, just to mention a few, which shows that the painter undertook a pilgrimage of years to collect the profiles of as many representatives of the Congress of 1776.

David McCullough is the author of John Adams in which the eponymous television series (HBO, 2008) was based

as reported by McCullough (2012), some years before 1819 -date in which Trumbull concluded the version of the work that would go to the Capitol-, Adams clearly expressed to the painter his opinion about the importance of historical accuracy. According to McCullough (2012, p.623), Adams reportedly told Trumbull: "Truth, nature, facts, should be your only guide." Insisting that "Do not let our posterity be disorientated with fictions under the presence of poetic license and graphics."

John H. Hazelton (1907) refers to the opinion of the famous son of John Adams, John Quincy Adams, regarding Trumbull painting. In his diary on September 1, 1818, John Quincy wrote:

"I was called about 11 o'clock at the home of Mr. Trumbull [in New York], and saw the painting of the Declaration of Independence, which is almost complete. I cannot say I'm disappointed with his performance, because my expectations were very low, but the paint is immeasurably beneath the dignity of the subject ... I think the smallest ancient work was far superior to this larger new. He [Trumbull] thinks otherwise "(p.35).

The grandson of Samuel Adams (one of the signatories of the founding document), Samuel A. Wells, wrote on June 2, 1819 to Jefferson; in that letter he stated: "The painting executed by Col. Trumbull, representing the Congress in the Declaration of Independence, will have, I fear, a trend to obscure the history of the event that it is supposed to commemorate" (quoted by Hazelton, 1907, p.35). Wells insists in the same letter that unfortunately, the work is not well executed "a subject worthy of the subject" (quoted in Hazelton, 1907, p.35). In response, Jefferson, then 76, only said: "I have not seen the painting lately executed by Col. Trumbull" (quoted in Hazelton, 1907, p.36).

Whatever the final outcome, the fact is that Trumbull always seemed very committed to preserving the memory of the events that had begun a historic process obviously revolutionary in the Thirteen Colonies of North America. In a letter to Jefferson in 1789, the painter expresses:

"The biggest reason that I have to commit myself in my pursuit of painting, has been the desire to commemorate the great events of the revolution in our country. I am sensitive to the fact that this profession, in its general practice, is frivolous, little useful to society and worthless for a man who has talents for more serious projects. But, to preserve and disseminate the memory of the noble series of actions ever presented in the history of mankind; to give the children of oppression and misery of the present and the future such glorious lessons of their rights and the spirit that must assert and sustain them, and even transmit to their offspring the personal semblance of those who have been major players in these famous scenes, are purposes that give dignity to the profession "(quoted by McCoubrey, 1964, p. 40).

To look at *The Presentation of the Declaration of Independence* without considering the intentions and purposes expressed by the author himself, is futile. Perhaps the work did not achieve such purposes, but it embodies an intention that is part of itself

as a cultural fact. By the time of his return to the US in 1804, after he left for Paris at the invitation of Jefferson, Trumbull fears for the environment in the country. In his opinion the lack of national unity was notable. He writes to his nephew after his arrival: "I deeply fear that my countrymen matter little the only thing I intend to understand" (quoted by Cooper, 1982, p.12).

Trumbull was, like many of his generation, openly patriotic, not only in his letters, but in his particular case, also in his painting. He thought he had the duty to develop in the US historic painting in the style of Benjamin West, his teacher. In fact, egged on by West, Trumbull had made during his stay of artistic learning in London, some scenes related to the War of Independence of his country. In that group, *The Death of General Montgomery in Quebec* (1787) stands out, in which it is clear the influence of West in the composition and presentation of the main characters, much like his famous *The Death of General Wolfe*. In a letter to his brother Johnathan, in 1784, Trumbull expresses: "The paintings of West are almost the only example in the art of that particular style that to me is so necessary, paintings of modern times and ways" (quoted by Paulson, 1982, P.350). In *The Death of General Montgomery in Quebec*, such as those made by Trumbull in his years in England, they seem to point to the vision of sacrifice after sacrifice in the effort for independence. Those deaths would be nothing but the birth of a nation.

But despite his efforts, history painting was not widely accepted in the US. John Adams sent a letter to Trumbull in 1817, which displays all the frustration he could feel before the absence of interest in the Revolution and its history among the younger generations, because of which he considered a waste of time to insist with painting of history. In the words of Adams: "I beg your pardon for my country when I say that I see no willingness to celebrate or remember, even the curiosity to inquire about actions or events of the Revolution. I am, in this sense, more inclined to disappointment than hope in the success of your painting "(quoted by Cooper, 1982, p. 15) .<sup>10</sup>

Trumbull did not cease in its efforts as we saw. He wanted more than anything to influence political opinion on a scale that could be described as dramatic -for its implementation- through the visual impact of his painting. However, he never got the recognition in this area as happened with his teacher West or with David and Delacroix. As David in France, Trumbull had been an active participant in the affairs of the American Revolution and was aware that art could affect our view of history. He did not realize instead that art could be a tool to demonstrate the various puzzles

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<sup>10</sup>If the representation made by Trumbull Presentation of the Declaration of Independence did not have the success he expected, neither had a previous representation initiated by Robert E. Pine (1730-1788) and completed by Edward Savage (1761-1817). This work, completed in 1801 and showing the time of the vote in Congress to make the decision on independence was quickly reproduced massively through the technique of mezzotint. Trumbull's work was also reproduced in 1820 in engraving by Asher Durand (1796-1886) as custom painter. It is known that the spread of this engraving was wide and also was reproduced in engravings of lower quality often later. It is also known the 2 dollar bill that was issued in 1862 for the first time and that was in circulation until 1966, which had on the back the scene of the work of Trumbull. (Lyons, 2005)



in the history and the artist could end up being the key to their understanding. He and his art are an important key to understand that moment in US history in which the generation that assumed to carry out the Independence must give the baton to the following ones.

Ronald Paulson (1982) has proposed an interesting interpretation of the set of paintings that Trumbull executed for the Capitol, including *The Presentation of the Declaration of Independence*. For this author, Trumbull would have reinterpreted the biblical covenant of the chosen people with God regarding the process of American Independence. Although we have no expression from Trumbull that so confirms, it is still interesting that, in fact, the Act of Declaration of Independence is a new alliance between members of an heterogeneous society with different religious creeds, dissimilar professions and opposing political positions. The only new standard for all would be the Freedom and that must be the primary binder. Paulson (1982) sees, even a memory of the legitimation by the Holy Spirit in the banners and flags placed by the painter to the center of the back wall in *The Presentation of the Declaration of Independence*.

In any case, if Trumbull wanted to insist on the necessary national unity through his art for the Capitol in Washington, we must suspect at least the existence of visible cracks in the alliance originally established in 1776. These cracks may have its most terrible outcome in the Civil War (1861-1865) and showed its first sparks, although for different reasons in the rivalry of visions of the Founding Fathers John Adams and Thomas Jefferson themselves from the late eighteenth century. In 1785, Richard Price (1723-1791), a Welsh preacher and moralist enthusiast of the revolution in the American colonies, published a little book entitled *Singular Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*. At the beginning of this essay reads:

"It may not go as far to say that, with the introduction of Christianity among mankind, the American Revolution would prove to be the most important step in the progressive course of human improvement . It is an event that could lead to a general diffusion of the principles of humanity and become the way to make men free from the shackles of superstition and tyranny "(p.6).

However, as on the last page of his reflection, Price (1785) expresses with concern:

"The present time, though auspicious for the United States if it advances wisely, is critical; and although they seem to have stopped the dangers threatening it, it might be time to great risks. I have been very mortified since I reached the final lines of this writing, more than I can express for issues that I have been afraid that I have taken very high my ideas about the United States, fooling myself with visionary expectations. The return of peace and pride of independence could lead them to safety and dissipation. They could lose the love of those virtues and simple ways by which only a republic can survive long. The false refinement, the luxury and excessive zeal could distract the government and the collision of interests, subject to no control could break the federal union. The

consequence will be that the fairest experiments ever attempted in human affairs be aborted and the Revolution that has revived the hopes of good men and has promised a path to better times, will become discouragement for future efforts for the freedom and prove only to have been an opening to a new stage of degeneration and human misery "(p.85).

#### **4. Final considerations**

Francis Haskell (1982) indicated that the apparent changes in history painting from the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century related to changes in attitudes towards history itself. The rummage in the Greek and Roman past for use as a sieve to talk about the present, had been the common and although Greece and Rome remain thematic sources for history painting, now artists will review the past of their own societies in search of greater identification with the present. That is why in some cases the Middle Ages and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries moments become favored by artists in their interpretation of history. This, for Haskell (1982), represent "a fully conscious search for a repertoire of scenes that should be more significant to his contemporaries than the iconography of Greece and Rome was, that had hitherto been the supreme reign " (p.117).

However, we have seen that far from being a parade of anecdotal episodes without connection to the present, history painting from the last decades of the eighteenth century gradually took on a deeper meaning and was going "to an audience very concerned about the balance of the new world of the nineteenth century with the past "(Haskell, 1982, p.118) .From David Trumbull we found that concern about the pictorial interpretation of the past, especially the immediate past, was installed in the workshops and the interests of the most talented artists. In length, the nineteenth century will see the pictorial greening of a more distant past with very clear nationalistic overtones; a past in which the genesis of the nation would have sense, but without revolutionary fuss and with a historical verisimilitude in the representations that would make them proverbial. But that is another matter and owes much of its impetus to the work of these early re-interpreters of the past through the paint.

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