

Jacques-Louis David

*The Death of Marat*, 1793

The *Death of Marat* is a painting that both symbolises the French Revolution and represents one of David's crowning achievements.

Created during the period known as the Reign of Terror it shows, in a gaunt and essential way, **the moment immediately after Marat was killed** by Charlotte Corday. The National Convention deputy was in the bathtub treating a bothersome skin disease when the counter-revolutionary Girondist woman was admitted to his presence on the pretense that she had secret information to give him. Marat's assassination in 1793 inspired great emotion in Paris because Jacobins considered him almost a saintly figure; he was seen as a man who had devoted himself in an uncompromising way to the cause of the Revolution without serving his own personal interests.

In its ancient simplicity the painting is organised in a **geometrically essential layout**. The pictorial space is divided into equal parts above and below Marat's face, the focal point of the painting that defines the horizon line. The lower part is constructed via a modular network of horizontal and vertical orthogonal lines; a series of diagonals depart from the lower right hand border and determine the inclination of Marat's upper body and his head.

Within the rigorous geometrical construction David creates a **tension of lines running in different directions**. As can be seen in some of his other works, David uses the rigour of drawing to evoke a low relief crossed by transversal lines. The light coming from the upper left creates harmonies and contrasts with the warm colours used throughout the picture, placing emphasis on the bare reality of the scene.

The canvas's **dark and empty background** makes it seem as if Marat's body is abandoned in the midst of nothing. The gaunt character of the composition, seen in other portraits like *Madame Trudain* and *Madame Pastoret* for example, has a special role to play in this work. David uses it to downplay the evocation of a real event; by emptying the murder story of its concrete details, he makes the painting tell a different story. Paradoxically the painting's connection to history is communicated, in lieu of the total absence of narration, by the symbolic use of objects and by the allegorical nature of the overall composition.

With its bared body, Marat's cadaver is portrayed in a **heroic nudity**, laid on a sort of burial shroud just an instant after his death. In his hand he still holds the paper with which Corday had asked for audience while the pen, a symbol of his work as a journalist, is about to fall from his other hand. All traces of the violence have gone; his throat wound is clean and the blood is just enough to stain the sheet and the water in which he lies. His calm face seems almost on the verge of a serene smile.

In the silence of the scene **the objects are used to narrate the moral dimension of Marat's character**: the poverty of the honest politician (the rough wooden crate), his generosity (the cheque to benefit orphans), his active dedication to politics and to truth (in the inkwell) and his martyrdom (the knife). Therefore in his apparent realism, David confers a **metaphysical dimension on the historical event**, transforming Marat into a Christ-like figure. In fact it is not hard to see the iconography of the Deposed Christ in the revolutionary's pose; especially when compared to such examples as Caravaggio's *Deposition*, Baccio Bandinelli's *Pietà* in the Florentine Church of Santissima Annunziata as well as Michelangelo's work of the same title. Robert Rosenblum has observed that the knife and the other objects that surround Marat's body recall the sacred relics used in Christian iconography to express the Passion of Christ and the tortures he underwent. In other words David returns to the **Christian iconographic tradition** to narrate an event of his contemporary history or to 'make holy' a secular event.

**Fig. 1** Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*, 1793. Oil on canvas. 162x128 cm. Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique.

