

*Question:*

*To what extent do you find the influence of Rousseau's views on the relationship between the state and the individual in David's painting "The Oath of the Horatii"?*

Eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau influenced many French revolutionaries with his ideas. In the time of the Enlightenment, people believed that humankind could progress and improve through the use of reason and science. One of them was French artist Jacques-Louis David, who was official artist to the French revolution (p158, Blk 3). Just as Rousseau had used his publications to reflect on his ideas, David had used art as a media to reflect the ideas and values of the society in the eighteenth century. In this essay, we will be examining the influence of Rousseau's views on the relationship between the state and the individual in David's painting "The Oath of the Horatii".

Rousseau's publication, *The Social Contract*, states that "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains". His belief is that everyone is equal and nobody has authority over anyone else. This was the source of the revolutionaries' ideas (p96 Blk 3). In order to be free while 'living in society', Rousseau's solution is that the individual adopts the general will. This view is also reflected in David's painting "The Oath of the Horatii".

David's Neoclassical style was austere and reflected on reason and the clear moral principles of Rousseau's ideas. "The Oath of the Horatii"

depicts the presenting of arms from Horatius to his sons. This demonstrates an act of patriotism as one of the brothers and the sister was related by marriage to the enemy Curiatii. He draws on the classical story by the ancient historian Livy, to reflect patriotism and selflessness. The story would have been familiar to the educated contemporaries of David, and this kind of knowledge was important to the Enlightenment (p166, Blk 3). The particular point where the brothers choose between the country and their personal desires deliberately sets people thinking about the message of patriotism. It is a representation of a kind of patriotic heroism or duty in which the best interests of society are put before those of the individual (p177, Blk 3). The brothers in choosing to go into battle, has chosen political duty over family allegiance. This reflects Rousseau's views that the individual puts aside their particular wills and adopts the general will in the interest of the state.

The act of selflessness reflects Rousseau's views of the general will. According to Rousseau, the general will is that which is best for the state as a whole and the particular will is the particular desires of an individual. (p105, Blk 3). As the particular will is a product of appetite and the general will a product of reason, we should obey the general will which makes us noble and good. Rousseau argues that when a man acts on his particular will, he is slavish to his appetite and that makes him a stupid, limited animal. Whereas, when he adopts the general will, he is being an ennobled, intelligent being. In the painting, the brothers

offer their lives on behalf of the country. In doing so, they are sacrificing their personal desires for the sake of their country and are thus considered heroes, reflecting Rousseau's views.

This painting is divided into three equal parts by the arches in the background and the characters correspond to each of these arches (TV12). The father is in the middle portion of the painting. The lines of perspective created by the tiled floor, draws our attention to the swords that the father is holding and the vanishing point lies just behind the handles of the sword. Our angle of vision is such that we are looking directly at the main figures groups, particularly the father. A single light source from the left of the picture illuminates the characters and also focuses our attention to the father holding the sword. This creates a 'theatrical' effect. The background is simple and stark so our attention is focussed on the figure groups in the painting. The painting has a wide tonal range that makes the composition logical and balanced. The colours used in this painting are mainly dark, neutral colours. The colours used are grey, brown and blue. This reflected the thought that focus should be on drawing and composition that is more intellectual, whereas colour has a more superficial appeal to the senses (TV12). In contrast to the dark clothes worn by the women, the bright red colour of the father's cloak draws our attention to him. All these elements of the painting such as perspective, angles of vision, bright lights and colours make us focus our attention on the figures. The focus on the father seems to signify that he is the central character. The sons

on the left stretch their hands willingly to receive the swords. This reflected Rousseau's view that the individual puts aside their particular wills and thinks according to the general will. Hence, the brothers represent the people and the father represents the state. By putting the father as the centre of attention, suggests that the state should be at the core and we should all think about what the state wants instead of what the individual wants.

Furthermore, an arm of one of the brothers is rested on his brother's back. This symbolises the unity that the three brothers have in their choice of political duty over family allegiance.

In addition, the stern facial expressions on the three brothers reflect the determination and dignity of their patriotic act. Their posture is straight and their muscles in the limbs are taut. It reflects their determination and they are sacrificing willingly. The outstretched hands show that they are embracing the duty on their own accord and not out of force or power. This reflects another important view of Rousseau that might does not equal right (p103, Blk 3). He believes that power is not the source of any legitimate authority the state has over the people and in order to be legitimate, the authority that the state has over the people must come from the people themselves.

In contrast to the straight posture of the men, the women are slouched at the corner of the painting. They are in the shadows of the men in the

picture. The men are masculine and strong whereas the women are feminine. In addition, the facial expressions of the brothers are stern in contrast to the soft look on the women. This reflects Rousseau's view that women should be passive and weak, while men should be active and strong (p96, Blk 3).

David's use of clear bold lines and the austere background seems to reflect simplicity. There is a minimum of distraction in the painting. David even removed the bases on the columns for greater simplicity (TV12). This reflects frugality in an age where luxury is being frowned upon (p.174, Blk 3). Rousseau also believes that it is wrong when people are driven by their own desires.

From examining *The Oath of the Horatii*, it is clear that an art piece can be shaped by the ideas and values of the society and Rousseau's views had a significant influence in the painting. Rousseau expressed his views in his publications and David had used art as a vehicle for expressing his views in visual form.

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