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THE IDEA OF ART AS PROPAGANDA DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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"In a republic a thing is good only because it is useful."
Espercieux, President of *La Société républicaine des arts*¹.

The French Revolution challenged the social prestige which artists had won at the beginning of the modern era. Beginning with the Italian Renaissance artists had lifted themselves from the level of mere artisans into the ranks of the liberal arts by minimizing the manual labour involved in their work and by emphasizing the imaginative elements. Thereafter, throughout early modern times, artists envisaged themselves as geniuses whose masterpieces represented the finest expression of creative imagination. Artists may not always have been well paid, but they did have cultural prestige. They liked to think of themselves as members of a creative élite equal to, if not better than, the poets. The French Revolution, however, brought to a climax certain currents of thought which not only questioned the value of the artist's work but suggested that it was detrimental to the welfare of society.

Echoing the theme of Rousseau's first *Discours*, many thinkers contended that luxury sapped the moral strength of a nation. According to their judgment, societies were born stoic and died epicurean. Such a view tended to be antagonistic to the fine arts because they seemed to flourish in the rich but decadent phases of social development. Naturally this antipathy toward luxury reached its peak during the emergency republic when Spartan austerity was the order of the day. Speaking on education, Durand de Maillane told the Convention that all the higher arts were dangerous because "luxury was incompatible with a republic".² Nor was this argument overcome easily. As late as 1796 Bugny was arguing in the *Magazin encyclopédique* that the fine arts always shone in a period when societies had become corrupt, and that they were always accompanied by moral decay.³

Artists also had to defend themselves against the accusation that they had undermined morality by portraying degenerate themes. Since

¹ A. Détournelle, *Aux armes et aux arts. Peinture, sculpture, architecture, gravure. Journal de la Société républicaine des arts séant au Louvre*, Paris, n.d., p. 330.

² P. T. Durand de Maillane, *Opinion sur les écoles primaires prononcée à la Convention nationale le 12 décembre 1792*, Paris, n.d., p. 3.

³ L. P. de Bugny, «De l'influence des belles-lettres, des sciences, et des arts sur la situation politique des nations», *Magazin encyclopédique*, 1796, Vol. X, pp. 14-29.

the middle of the century a series of critics had rebuked artists for painting seductive portraits, adulterous boudoir scenes, and erotic activities among the classical gods.⁴ As the Revolution entered its radical phase, republicans added to such criticisms, charging that artists had pandered to the *ancien régime* by glamorizing gross superstitions, flattering powdered aristocrats, and by deifying despots.⁵ This argument also was not easily defeated. During 1797 Mercier, an eminent personality in the world of letters, was repeating these bitter accusations in the *Journal de Paris*: "Idolatries of every kind, the propagation of servile ideas, childish putrefaction, the distortion of the great panorama of nature, the ruination of innocence and perhaps of public decency such is the influence of the visual arts."⁶

Finally, even if they could repudiate the charge that their work was noxious, artists had to meet the indictment that they contributed nothing to human progress. Compared with the contributions of natural science and the mechanical arts *les beaux arts* seemed to have done very little for the masses of the people.⁷ To be reproached for doing nothing to better society was a serious matter in an age which had come to equate utility with goodness. And it became all the more serious when the new republic was threatened by enemies within and without.⁸ In such emergency conditions it seemed to some zealous republicans that it was a crime to create something which was merely charming. Everything useless was to be proscribed in a republic. A thing was harmful even as it served no purpose.

Thus artists, who had considered themselves members of a cultural aristocracy, found their work associated with enervating luxury, denounced as a baleful influence, or depreciated as a superfluous activity. However, at the same time as these criticisms had mounted an answer to them had developed. Beginning around the middle of the century

⁴ J. J. Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, 1750, ed. G. R. Havens, N.Y., 1946, p. 138ff and 148 ff; D. Diderot, «*Encyclopédie*», *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Assézat, XIV, p. 488; La Font de Saint-Yenne, *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'état présent de la peinture en France*, La Haye, 1747, p. 70ff; Saint-Yves, *Observations sur les arts*, Paris, 1748, *passim*.

⁵ A. C. Thibaudeau made such accusations in the Convention, *Moniteur* N. 232, May 11, 1794, p. 943; F. A. de Boissy d'Anglas, *Quelques idées sur les arts, sur la nécessité de les encourager, et sur divers établissements nécessaires à l'enseignement public*, Paris, l'an II, p. 128, mentions widespread antagonism to the arts and a tendency to question their value in a republic.

⁶ L. S. Mercier, «*Aux auteurs du Journal*», *Journal de Paris*, 10 Fructidor, l'an V (August 27, 1797), pp. 1399-1400. This was one of a long series of attacks on the fine arts.

⁷ Defenders of the fine arts tried to show that they could be as useful as the mechanical arts: "Preuves de l'utilité des beaux arts", *Décade philosophique*, June 28, 1794, Vol. I, pp. 401-410.

⁸ In the introduction to the catalogue for the Salon of 1793 artists made a long apology for engaging in artistic work in the midst of emergency conditions: *Descriptions des ouvrages de peinture exposés au Sallon (sic) du Louvre par les artistes composant la Commune générale des arts le 10 Août 1793*.

a number of *encyclopédistes*, art critics and journalists had defended art by arguing that it could be used to disseminate moral ideals, to immortalize patriotic deeds, and to dramatize national achievements.⁹ When the radical phase of the Revolution brought the crisis in the attitude toward art to a climax this idea of using art as a means of public instruction, as a method of propagating dogmas, was used to defend the visual arts against those who, like Plato, would have driven the arts from the good society. Jacques Lebrun explained this conception whereby the arts could demonstrate their utility by serving as propaganda:

How culpable are those profanatory artists who prostitute their talents by offering counterrevolutionary pictures, who forget that their essential characteristic is to be philosophic; that their primary duty is to choose subjects which tend to instruct, to reform morals, to inspire love of country and enthusiasm for liberty.¹⁰

Artists who argued that the primary rôle of art was to instruct were not moved by idealism alone. The Revolution had destroyed the patronage of those groups — the court, the aristocracy, and the church — which to a large extent had sustained the arts in the past. Under this economic duress, artists wished to demonstrate their usefulness to the republican government to which they now had to turn for assistance.¹¹ However, the idea of art as propaganda not only provided an appeal to the government, but also supplied a conception of the fine arts which enabled artists to answer the criticisms hurled against them, and to regain their social esteem. Society now gave its approval to those intellectuals who contributed to the progress of mankind by spreading enlightened ideas. In order to belong to the cultural élite it was no longer sufficient for artists to claim that they were akin to poets: they had to prove that they could be educators as well. By giving a moral and political direction to their work artists could enter the sacred company of the *philosophes*.¹²

The idea that art could be effective as propaganda rested on certain common assumptions which eighteenth century thinkers made about the human mind. One of these assumptions was that ideas were composed of sensations which the individual received from the outer world. It

⁹ Diderot had argued in his *Salons* that art should transmit moral truths; L. S. Mercier had prophesied that art would have an educative role in the future utopia: *L'An 2440*, Amsterdam, 1770 definitive edition, Paris, 1786, Vol. II, 59-84; See *l'Année littéraire*, 1779, Vol. VII, 37, 56; 1781, VII, 243; also Lacombe, ..., *Le Spectacle des beaux arts*, Paris, 1758, p. 56; La Font de Saint-Yenne, *Sentiments sur quelques ouvrages du Salon de 1753*, Paris, 1754, p. 51 ff.

¹⁰ Détournelle, *Aux armes et aux arts*, p. 192.

¹¹ M. Dreyfous, *Les arts et les artistes pendant la période révolutionnaire*, Paris, 1906, p. 155 ff.

¹² J. L. David argued that the artist would have to become a *philosophe*: *Rapport sur la nomination des cinquante membres du jury qui doit juger le concours des prix de peinture, sculpture et architecture*, November 15, 1793, p. 3.

followed that the ideas which an individual possessed depended on impressions which were made on his mind, especially when he was very young. This belief in the impressionability of the mind was very often combined with the notion that nature had used beauty in order to make those objects attractive which were beneficial to man. By conveying civic lessons in an appealing guise, art could utilize the same technique to guide mankind toward socially desirable ends.¹³ After exposure to a didactic work of art the individual would associate the message with the pleasant emotions aroused by the art. The eighteenth century may not have had modern motivational research, but it did possess a primitive associational psychology which suggested that the visual arts could be used as an invaluable instrument for disseminating ideas.

The supposition that nature had endowed mankind with a propensity toward good also encouraged confidence in the efficacy of art as a means of influencing public opinion. According to this view nature had placed within the human heart the germs of all the virtues needed for happiness among men. This implied that mankind was misguided rather than sinful with the consequence that human progress did not depend so much on changing the human heart as on stimulating the basic impulses implanted there by nature.¹⁴ Hence art which bore a moral message would be appealing to the natural instincts of man. Such a view meant that art could fulfill a rôle of which the church never could have conceived. Art, properly directed, could actually contribute to the regeneration of the human heart. In an essay on the arts which he dedicated to the Convention Boissy d'Anglas laid bare these basis assumptions:

It is therefore by educating man that you will renew him, so to speak, fundamentally and absolutely; it is by purifying his reason and his morals, it is by making him aware of the power and the danger of his emotions, by teaching him to direct them toward the good, that you will lead him back to the original simplicity with which nature endowed him, and which he has not lost except through ignorance or the evils of misguided opinions.¹⁵

Granted such presuppositions art could actually *faire naître des vertus*. In this respect we must remember that the revolutionaries wanted to use art, not only to stir up political sentiments, but also to assist in the moral transformation which they felt was essential to the success of the republic. Art, therefore, was not only to portray political themes, was not only to arouse an awareness of the achievements of the Revolution,

¹³ P. J. B. Chaussard, *Essai philosophique sur la dignité des arts*, Paris, l'an VI, p. 7 ff. Fulllest examination of the effect of art on the mind was in G.M. Raymond, *De la peinture considérée dans ses effets sur les hommes en général et de son influence sur les mœurs et le gouvernement des peuples*, Paris, 1799, p. 186 ff.

¹⁴ Anonymous, « Lettre ... sur la perfectibilité de l'esprit humain », *La Décade philosophique*, Vol. XXI, l'an VII, pp. 149-159.

¹⁵ F. A. Boissy d'Anglas, *Essai sur les fêtes nationales, suivi de quelques idées sur les arts et sur la nécessité de les encourager adressé à la Convention nationale*, Paris, l'an II, p. 7.

but was also to idealize the simple domestic virtues which were considered vital to the "Republic of Virtue". In a report to the Convention Robespierre recommended not only the glorification of liberty, patriotism, and stoicism, but also the exaltation of frugality, conjugal faithfulness, paternal love, motherly affection, filial devotion, hard work, and agricultural labour.¹⁶ Advocates of art as an educative force contended that by idealizing these humbler duties,¹⁷ as well as by portraying more heroic virtues, art would cease to be simply a pleasant diversion, the pastime of the privileged classes, and would become an instrument for the alteration of society.¹⁸

This idea that art could be used to teach and improve, to spur on to action and set an example, found its fullest expression in the proceedings of the *Société populaire et républicaine des arts* organized by pro-revolutionary artists during the most radical phase of the Revolution.¹⁹ These artists proclaimed that art had no value, no rôle to play in society, unless it contributed to the triumph of republican ideals. As advocates of utilitarian art they hoped to promote a cult of patriotism by idealizing the exploits of republican heroes.²⁰ Images of republican heroism were to be multiplied everywhere in order to arouse in others devotion to the republic. Most of the members of this society favoured an austere classical style of art, not only because it seemed to offer a suitable form in which to portray the virile deeds of the Revolution, but also because it recalled similar patriotism in the days of the Roman Republic. Bienaimé, reading a petition on behalf of the Society, appealed to the Convention to commission works of art which would stir up the people. The Society wanted heroic and virtuous actions portrayed everywhere, in all the departments, in all the sections, in all the popular assemblies, in all the public squares, in all the primary schools "that everywhere the people might find moral lessons."²¹

The government supported this idea that art should be used to impress republican ideals on the masses. The Committee of Public Safety was anxious to mobilize all the forces which could influence public opinion. During the spring of 1794 the Committee approved plans for a grandiose national park surrounding the *Palais national*. The scheme included plans for a gymnasium, triumphal arches, symbolic figures, and statues of republican heroes. All these various structures were to be decorated with low reliefs or paintings "capable of arousing republican ideals

¹⁶ *Décret de la Convention*, 18 Floréal, l'an II.

¹⁷ J. B. P. LeBrun, *Essai sur les moyens d'encourager la peinture, la sculpture, l'architecture et la gravure*, Paris, l'an II, p. 8 ff.

¹⁸ L. F. R. Portiez, *Sur l'instruction publique*, Convention nationale, 1793 *passim*.

¹⁹ Détournelle, *Aux armes et aux arts, passim*, H. Lapauze (ed.), *Procès-verbaux de la Société populaire et républicaine des arts*, Paris, 1903.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8 ff.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

in youth."²² The Committee of Public Safety also approved contests for other monuments destined for various parts of the capital dramatizing the victories of the Revolution, depicting the overthrow of the monarchy, or showing the French people trampling down Federalism. In addition the Committee called on all artists of the republic to represent themes of their choice drawn from the glorious Revolution.²³ One of the government announcements in the *Journal de Paris* explained the rôle the arts were to play:

Under the republican regime the arts will regain their dignity, they will atone for their former servility; of old they corrupted the public mind now they are going to regenerate it; and liberty will receive from them more assistance than they ever gave to despotism.²⁴

Throughout the spring of 1794, at the height of political crisis the Committee of Public Safety pressed ahead with its artistic plans with the same note of urgency which it devoted to military matters. Those in charge of supervising the project of the *Jardin national* were ordered to remove all obstacles which hindered progress and were told to report to the Committee on all the ways in which the work could be accelerated. At the same time the Commission of Public Works was ordered to furnish all the men, materials, and funds necessary for the rapid execution of the plan.²⁵ Clearly the Committee of Public Safety considered that the creation of republican symbols was a pressing necessity. Then, without any explanation, at the end of a series of urgent directives there came an abrupt order calling a halt to the work. The date, 16 Thermidor, is explanation enough.²⁶ The guillotine had intervened. David, who had inspired most of the *politique artistique* of the revolutionary government, barely escaped the same fate as Robespierre.

Meanwhile the Committee had opened a contest for monuments, statues and paintings glorifying the Revolution. The contest closed a few days before 9 Thermidor. More than four hundred plans, models, and sketches had been submitted and something had to be done with them. More than a year later an art jury²⁷ decided to award one hundred and eight prizes worth more than four hundred thousand *livres*. Gérard won first prize worth twenty thousand *livres* with a plan for a huge painting entitled the *Tenth of August*. Vincent won second prize with a sketch for a painting honouring a *Republican Heroine of the Vendée*.²⁸

²² Archives Nationales : AF. II. 80, dossier 590.

²³ *Ibid.* Arrêté dated 5 Floréal, l'an II.

²⁴ *Journal de Paris*, 3 Prairial, l'an II, (May 22, 1794), No. 507, p. 2048.

²⁵ Archives Nationales : AF. II. 80, dossier 590 : Arrêtés dated 25 Floréal, 25 Prairial and 4 Messidor, l'an II.

²⁶ *Ibid.* AF. II. 80, dossier 591.

²⁷ *Loi portant qu'il sera nommé un jury ...* 9 Frimaire, l'an III, Archives Nationales AD. VIII. 12.

²⁸ *Extrait du procès-verbal des séances du jury des arts ...* Archives Nationales F 17 1057, dossier 3.

Like most of the other prize-winning plans these works were never executed. The most ambitious scheme to revolutionize the arts had failed.

The Committee of Public Safety was unable to carry out its ambitious plans to put the arts to work but the theory of art as propaganda did not die. Under the Directory artists, art critics, and government officials continued to expound the idea that in a republic the arts must play a political rôle, although the emphasis was now on the consolidation of the republic rather than on its regeneration. The Ministers of the Interior repeatedly reminded artists that they must give *grandes leçons* to the people.²⁹ At the same time the presidents of the *Institut national*, which had replaced the old academies, warned the young artists who won the grand prizes in painting, sculpture and architecture that the republic expected them to teach patriotism, to make virtue attractive and vice odious.³⁰ The idea of art as propaganda obviously was considered important when the fine arts section of the *Institut national* announced an essay contest in 1796 on the subject of the possible influence of art on the morals and government of a free people. All the essays submitted to this contest argued that art should glorify the nation, arouse republicanism, and teach domestic virtues.³¹

Scarcely anyone during the whole period discussed the role of art in society without contending that its true purpose was to be didactic. It is, therefore, very surprising at first to find that only a small fraction of the many works produced during the Revolution might be said to have served as propaganda. There were of course a number of works with an ideological content: Chevreux drew the *Triumph of the Revolution*; David produced such well-known works as *The Tennis Court Oath*, *The Death of Marat* — which might be called the *pietà* of the French Revolution — and the *Death of Lepelletier*; Regnault painted *Liberty or Death* and the *Genius of Liberty*; Reattu portrayed *The Triumph of Liberty*; Hennequin symbolized *The Triumph of the French People on August 10*; Thévenin had rendered *Augereau on the Bridge at Arcole*; Girodet depicted *A Representative of the Colonies*; but these, and others like them, were meagre fruits of an idea which was reiterated almost endlessly. Consequently, we must try to explain why so few

²⁹ P. Bénézech, *Appel aux Artistes*, Paris, l'an V; F. de Neufchâteau, *Le Ministre de l'Intérieur aux citoyens composant le jury des arts séant au muséum*, 30 Pluviose, l'an VII, Archives Nationales F. 17 1059, dossier 28.

³⁰ A. G. Camus, *Discours prononcé par le président de l'Institut national aux élèves qui ont remporté les grands prix ...* 15 Vendémiaire, l'an VI, Bibliothèque Nationale, Collection Deloynes, Vol. L, No. 1373; A. L. de Jussieu, *Discours prononcé ...* 15 Vendémiaire, l'an VII, Deloynes, Vol. L, No. 1377.

³¹ *Rapport au nom de la Commission nommée pour examiner les discours envoyés sur cette question proposée par la section de peinture, «Quelle a été et quelle peut être encore l'influence de la peinture sur les mœurs et le gouvernement du peuple libre»*, 15 Germinal, l'an VI, in Archives of the Académie française.

examples of art as propaganda were produced in a period when so many thinkers denied in theory that art had any other value.

Some of the reasons for such lack of results are obvious. Financial problems throughout the period made it difficult for the revolutionary governments to commission works of art on a grand scale. Government instability made it impossible to turn monumental plans into real accomplishments. Also, it was simple to talk about creating works of art conveying a revolutionary message but this was more difficult in practice. To complete a large historical painting might require several years, but meanwhile the theme might have become unacceptable because the Revolution had moved on. Christian artists had had a somewhat easier time because their saints were more permanent than those of the Revolution. However, the full reason for failure to produce political themes must be sought deeper in certain unresolved tensions implicit in the attitude toward art during the Revolution.

Perhaps the most important of these tensions was that between the affirmation of artistic freedom and the concept of utilitarian art. For artists the Revolution represented an important stage in the movement toward complete artistic freedom which had been developing ever since artists had separated themselves from the guilds. During the Revolution a group of discontented artists led a successful attack on the *Académie royale de peinture et sculpture* established by Mazarin. The Academy had been organized on an hierarchical basis with control concentrated in the hands of a privileged group. The assault on the Academy was in part, therefore, aimed at overthrowing what many considered simply another aristocratic institution inherited from the old régime.³² The revolt, however, had also involved a protest against the teaching methods of the Academy on the grounds that they cramped the free development of artistic talent. In attacking the Academy artists had asserted the right of each artist to develop his individual talent free from any institutional restraints. Speaking in the final debate on the issue in August 1793, David told the Convention that talent had not been free to develop under the Academy: "It is the policy of kings to maintain a balance of crowns, it is the policy of academies to maintain a balance of talents. Woe unto the reckless artist who tries to surpass the circle of Pompilius, he will become an outcast in the eyes of the Academicians."³³

Because the modern mind associates the idea of art as propaganda with definite controls over creative work we are surprised to find artists claiming complete artistic freedom precisely at the same moment in which they elaborated the theory of art as a revolutionary weapon. The

³² J. B. Restout, *Discours prononcé dans l'Académie royale de peinture et sculpture le 19 décembre 1789*, Paris, 1790.

³³ J. L. David, *Discours sur la nécessité de supprimer les Académies*. Séance du 8 Août 1793, Paris, n.d., p. 3.

fact is, however, that most of the proponents of the concept of art as propaganda believed that art could be given a social purpose without restricting artistic freedom. Many simply assumed that once art no longer had to grovel before the old patrons it would naturally turn to the inspiring themes provided by the Revolution. Discussing the fine arts in a free society the *Décade philosophique*, for example, was confident that now that genius was liberated it would be inflamed with a passion to portray the stirring efforts of the nation and the sublime virtues of everyday life. The assumption was that a free art would be eager to serve the republican cause.³⁴

Others thought that government patronage could direct the arts toward political service. They reasoned that in a republic public luxury should nourish the arts as private wealth had sustained them previously. The government would thus be able to use works of art to convey political messages to the masses of the people. However, the advocates of the scheme of large-scale government commissions do not seem to have felt that their scheme would enslave the artist in the way they claimed private patronage had done. The *Société républicaine des arts* apparently saw no threat to artistic freedom so long as government commissions were awarded by a jury of enlightened citizens. In this way the arts could be directed *à l'utilité et à la morale publique* while leaving the artist free to choose his own style.³⁵

Of course such a plan of government patronage did mean that the government would choose the themes to be portrayed. Certainly the Committee of Public Safety intended to commission works of art only if they would serve as republican propaganda. Even under the Directory the government made it clear that it would not give any commissions to artists unless it could control the themes which they treated. In 1799 Neufchâteau, the Minister of the Interior, made this abundantly clear in a letter to a special art jury judging works which had been exhibited in the various *Salons* since 1794.³⁶ He argued that the Revolution had done a great deal for artists whereas they had done very little for the Revolution. Because artists did not seem to recognize their duty to portray useful themes the government would have to guide them. Certainly the government was not going to give commissions as prizes without imposing conditions on the artists. The arts had borne the yoke of an inept theocracy and an insolent despotism without complaint; consequently they could scarcely complain about being guided by an

³⁴ « L'influence de la Liberté », *Décade philosophique*, 10 Floréal, l'an II, Vol. I, No. 1, pp. 7-11.

³⁵ E. Eynard, *Considérations sur l'état actuel des arts, sur les concours ... et sur le mode de jugement. Publiées par la Société républicaine des arts et présentées à la Convention* (1795). Earlier J. B. P. LeBrun, *Essai sur les moyens d'encourager la peinture, la sculpture, l'architecture et la gravure*, Paris, l'an III.

³⁶ Archives Nationales F 17 1059, dossier 28, letter dated 30 Pluviôse, l'an VII (Feb. 18, 1799).

enlightened government. At any rate, Neufchâteau did not think that dictating the subject to an artist who won a government commission as a prize constituted an infringement on artistic freedom: "The arts were slaves under monarchies; in republics they are instruments or means. By this measure one does not damage their freedom. Artists can refuse to compete and devote themselves to other subjects."³⁷

As a result of this contest Girodet was required to paint *The Assassination of the French Ministers near Rastadt* and Bervick was ordered to engrave the same subject.³⁸ But because the government had very little money to spend on works of art this method of directing art toward propaganda was never a serious threat to artistic freedom. The result was that the Revolution left the artist almost completely dependent on the open market where, like any other producer, he had to try to please the customer. The catalogues to the *Salons* of the revolutionary period demonstrate that the customers wanted *genre* paintings, landscapes, and above all portraits.³⁹ Perhaps art lovers wished to escape politics for a time but, whatever the reason, there does not seem to have been a seller's market for republican paintings. Most of the advocates of art as an ideological weapon never suggested any control over artists to force them to treat political subjects. The Revolution never really faced, indeed never recognized, the tension between artistic freedom and art as propaganda.

Another unresolved tension was that between art as an aesthetic object and art as a useful instrument. Chaussard, who was one of the leading advocates of art as a propaganda medium, complained that in modern times men had made a serious error in relegating the arts to the sphere of mere aesthetic pleasure. Such thinkers, he argued, confounded the *means* which art used (which consisted of pleasing) with the *object* (which consisted in being socially useful).⁴⁰ Apparently, from this point of view, what was labelled the means, the aesthetic qualities of art, had no value by themselves without some didactic content. The revolutionaries, however, found it difficult to be consistently utilitarian in their approach, revealing by their actions or their comments that for them art still had value simply as art. The idea of art as a weapon of propaganda was apparently unable, even in the case of doctrinaire republicans, to overcome the tradition of art for the sake of art.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁸ *Rapport présenté au Ministre de l'Intérieur sur les travaux d'encouragement*, 20 Messidor, l'an VII (July 8, 1799), Arch. Nat. F 17 1056, dossier 13.

³⁹ Contemporaries were aware that artists had to paint such canvasses for the market: « Suite de l'Exposition au Salon », *Journal de Paris*, l'an VII, 23 Fructidor, No. 361, p. 1581.

⁴⁰ P. J. B. Chaussard, *Essai philosophique sur la dignité des arts*, Paris, l'an VI, p. 2.

One intriguing example of this survival of aesthetics can be seen in the ambivalent attitude of the revolutionaries toward the art of the old régime. From a republican point of view much of this art was not only useless but a political menace because it exalted tyrants, idealized aristocrats, and transmitted superstitions. Since they believed art could make a lasting impression on the public mind, the logical course of action was to remove all these pernicious images, to purge the republic of all anti-republican symbols. Actually the Revolution did destroy innumerable works of art — statues of kings, portraits of aristocrats, tapestries with feudalistic designs, even a considerable number of religious images — not simply because of uncontrolled vandalism, but as a result of conscious iconoclasm aimed at getting rid of art with a dangerous ideological content. Iconoclastic fervor reached a climax when, following the insurrection of the Paris Commune on August 10, 1792, the Legislative Assembly ordered that all monuments raised “to pride, prejudice, and tyranny”,⁴¹ whether in public places or private homes, were to be destroyed in the name of liberty. Widespread destruction of pre-revolutionary art continued throughout the period of the Terror, with artists themselves sometimes assisting in eradicating symbols of the old order.⁴²

At the same time an attempt was made, rather feeble at first, to preserve works of art from the old régime which had some special value. First the Commission of Monuments, later its successor, the Temporary Commission on the Arts, collected masterpieces with a view to preserving them in museums. While lamenting the fact that republican iconoclasm destroyed much of the art of the *ancien régime*, we must also concede the fact that the Revolution finally fulfilled the hope of many art lovers by creating an art museum in the Louvre, opened in August, 1793. One scholar has argued recently that this preservation of symbols from the former régime does not necessarily mean that republicans were inconsistent in their attitude toward art. He points out when these works were seen in a museum they ceased to be symbols and, torn out of their social context, became merely *objets d'art*.⁴³ This may be true in the case of a monument lifted from a public square and immured in a gallery, but the argument is not convincing in the case of paintings which were displayed in a museum in much the same way as in the ordinary *Salon*. In addition many of these symbols of royalty, aristocracy, and superstition were probably seen by more common citizens now that they were displayed in an art gallery than when they were in their proper setting during the *ancien régime*. But, however we interpret

⁴¹ Law passed August 14, 1792. Representatives of the communes were to oversee temporary preservation of works of art.

⁴² S. J. Idzerda, «Iconoclasm during the French Revolution», *American Historical Review*, LX (October, 1954), 13-26.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

the significance of the art museum, the preservation of some pre-revolutionary art was an admission that works of art had purely aesthetic values apart from, and in fact in spite of, their ideological content.

The survival of aesthetics in spite of a utilitarian theory of art can also be illustrated by the reviews of exhibitions written by exponents of the theory of art as propaganda. Several examples suggest themselves but perhaps the best are the reviews of the *Salons* of 1798 and 1799 by Chaussard in the *Décade philosophique*.⁴⁴ Chaussard was the author of an essay which contended that the dignity of the fine arts rested on the fact that they could serve as a means of public instruction.⁴⁵ In his reviews Chaussard emphasized this thesis repeatedly and praised those artists who treated republican themes. In his view historical painting should serve *la politique*, genre paintings should support *la morale*, and portraits ought to immortalize those who served the republic. Any work of art which was not instructive, which had no ideological message, he dismissed as wasted effort, or at least he claimed so in theory: "The arts ought to be a language for moral communication. Apart from such a point of view they are nothing more than sterile imitations. Let us never cease to repeat that the arts will become some day an active vehicle, a silent, but always eloquent, form of legislation."⁴⁶

Following our republican art critic around the *salons* we learn what he means. Whenever he found a painting with a political message he responded enthusiastically. He praised the ardent patriotism of *The Triumph of the French People on August Tenth* by Hennequin which portrayed the colossus Royalty, toppling under the feet of a giant symbolizing the People, while overhead Philosophy drives away Crime, Fanaticism, Credulity, Discord, and Envy. A classical theme such as *The Death of Caius Gracchus* by Topino Lebrun evoked his praises because it depicted wicked patricians, with daggers ready, attacking republicanism while a soothsayer, representing superstition, urges them on. He saluted the patriotic brush of Thévenin who had painted *Augereau on the Bridge at Arcole* because it showed a republican general, flag in hand and defying the crossfire of the enemy, leading his troops to victory, although our critic wondered if the general should have been distinguished so clearly from the other brave republicans. *The Fatherland in Danger* by Lethiers, the *Death of General Marceau* by Lebarbier the elder, and the *Loyalty of the French Hussards* by Vernet also met his demand for art with a political impact. On the whole he was disappointed

⁴⁴ P. J. B. Chaussard, «Exposition des ouvrages ... l'an VI», *Décade philosophique*, Vol. XVIII, l'an VI: No. 32, p. 274; No. 33, p. 335; No. 34, p. 410; No. 35, p. 465; No. 36, p. 535. «Exposition des ouvrages ... l'an VII», Vol. XXII, l'an VII, No. 36, p. 542; Vol. XXIII: No. 1, p. 36; No. 2, p. 94; No. 3, p. 212.

⁴⁵ *Supra*, note 40.

⁴⁶ *Décade*, Vol. XVIII, l'an VI, No. 34, p. 417.

at the small number of artists who had produced republican paintings. To remedy this situation he suggested that the government should use its patronage to guide art toward its proper purpose.

Since Chaussard thought that *genre* paintings should help to impress on the public those morals useful to a republic it is interesting to observe his responses to this type of painting. Like Diderot, he responded to those works which illustrated homely moral truths such as *Return to Virtue* by Drolling, which showed a young girl, respectable but humiliated, embracing the knees of her old father while the mother stands by with tear-filled eyes. However, as an offspring of the Enlightenment, our republican critic disapproved of the prayerbook, shown lying near the young girl, on the grounds that virtue inspired by sentiment was superior to that dictated by religion. A few other titles, *A Mother Explaining Emile to her Daughter* by Pajou, *A Scholar Studying his Lesson* by Bonnemaïson, or a *Lesson in Agriculture* by Vincent, suffice to show what was meant by *la morale en peinture*. As an austere republican Chaussard disapproved heartily of *A Printer's Shop* by Senave because, instead of idealizing the printing trade, the artist had made the shop look like a tavern. A *peintre philosophe* would have made the most of such a subject. In the foreground a man of genius would have been shown meditating over a proof, while in the background workmen would have been depicted intent on their respectable task. In the background there would have been a bust of Franklin, and on the floor the *Almanach Royal* with its list of censors torn and lying in the dust.

However, despite this republican enthusiasm, Chaussard could not remain consistent to his utilitarian theories. The critic who in theory dismissed as "sterile imitation" all art without a political or moral message ends up admiring classical themes with absolutely no political message, pretty *genre* paintings with no didactic intent, and even still lifes and landscapes whose only merits were those of pure art. In one case we even find Chaussard confessing, without realizing how it shattered his theories, that art can be a relief from politics:

Ah! Too often grieved by the spectacle of pious or heroic assassinations which the historical painter is condemned to depict, does not one come to muse before a beautiful view or before a sentimental scene which *genre* presents; ah yes, often I have preferred shepherds to heroes, a landscape to a battle.⁴⁷

Here then was an unwilling tribute to a wider significance for art than mere preaching. Other republican critics also usually finished up by admiring art simply for the beauty of the form or the splendour of the colour. As the need to defend their work became less urgent, is it any wonder that artists continued to paint traditional subjects? Or,

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. XXIII, l'an VIII, No. 3, p. 213.

since there was no control over what the artist produced, is it any wonder that the public continued to demand art rather than propaganda ?

In conclusion, then, the aim of the Revolution was not simply to admit the masses to the enjoyment of art which previously had been the privilege of the rich, but rather to make art an instrument for impressing ideas on the minds of the people. Under the *ancien régime* there had been those who realized the value of art as a means of inspiring certain sentiments, but none had elaborated the idea as fully as it was during the Revolution. The concept provided artists with a theoretical defense against those who denounced the social influence of the arts, and at the same time it supplied an argument in favour of state assistance in a period when customary patronage was disintegrating. However, despite a number of works which can be held up as examples of republican art, we have seen that the idea was largely sterile. One reason was that the various governments lacked the financial resources, not to mention the stability, necessary to carry out the monumental programs which they planned. Also, many artists, while supporting the idea in theory, must have been afraid to treat political subjects because of the rapidly changing revolutionary credo. But the principal reasons for this relative sterility lay in the unsolved, indeed unrecognized, tensions to which the idea of art as a social weapon gave birth, the contradiction between artistic freedom and social utility and the antithesis between art for the sake of ideology and *l'art pour l'art*. For fulfillment, therefore, the idea of art as propaganda had to await more modern times when certain governments, in the sphere of art at least, have been more ruthless, more consistent, than the men of the French Revolution.