

Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France

Amy Freund

Introduction

In November 1790, a Parisian mob sacked the house of an unpopular nobleman. In an anonymous print executed soon after the event, titled *Moyen expéditif du peuple français pour démeubler un aristocrate* (The French people's expeditious means of removing the furniture of an aristocrat), a group of men and women appears in the windows of the house, breaking glass and throwing furnishings out into the courtyard, where debris is already accumulating (fig. 1). Conspicuous among these items are three portraits. The first, seen through a window on the second floor, appears to be a full-length portrait of Louis XVI, judging from the pose and the crown and scepter just visible in the right foreground of the image. One of the looters points to the canvas and doffs his hat. On the floor below, another man holds an oval portrait of a woman. He seems shocked by the appearance of the sitter, who is depicted bare-breasted or with a very low décolleté, her breasts separated and emphasized by a dark sash. Finally, a portrait of a prelate with a very noticeable decoration around his neck lies in the courtyard, already damaged by its flight. Next to this portrait lies an open book inscribed with the moral of the print, "Ah ça va bien Puni / son Les aristocrates" (Ah, everything's going well, Punished / are [or "let's punish"—the engraver's spelling is approximate] the aristocrats).

This depiction of violence and class resentment points to the extraordinary symbolic power of portraiture in revolutionary France. The portraits in this print are part of the furniture of the despised aristocracy, three more candidates for defenestration. But they also symbolize, even more than marquetry furniture or expensive textiles, the political regime with which they are associated. In 1790, when a constitutional monarchy still seemed possible, the portrait of Louis XVI commands respect, albeit possibly tinged with irony; the looter shows the portrait the deference he would show the sitter, demonstrating the persistent belief that an image is invested with the power and status of the individual it depicts. The portrait of the scantily clad woman, held in the arms of another member of the crowd, seems to attract as well as repel—in this world turned upside down, the print suggests, a member of the *peuple français* might aspire to the affections of a noblewoman. No one, however, respects or desires the portrait of the clergyman languishing in the courtyard. It has already been half-destroyed, much like the clerical authority for which it stands. For the producers and viewers of this print, portraits represent all that is despicable about the ancien régime. The very vehemence of the reaction to the portraits demonstrates their power to embody not only particular people but also abstractions: aristocratic immorality, clerical corruption, good government.

The destruction of portraiture during the Revolution was far outpaced by the production of new portraits by artists and sitters eager to record their participation in the Revolution's expanded narrative of political sovereignty. Martin Drolling's 1791 portrait of his father-in-law, Michel Belot, a painter and color merchant, demonstrates portraiture's ability to concretize political abstractions (fig. 2). The clarity of Drolling's depiction of Belot's physiognomy firmly anchors the portrait in the contingencies of personal likeness. The artist's attention to material specificity

extends to his rendering of the pamphlet in Belot's hand, the concrete trace of the abstractions of civic identity and the individual's sublimation in the collective. Its fragmentary title—*Projet . . . au fran . . . mir*—alludes to an address published by Honoré-Gabriel Riqueti, comte de Mirabeau, a leading orator of the early years of the Revolution whose death in 1791 inspired an outpouring of public grief. Belot, his face brightly lit and isolated against a brushy dark brown background, furrows his brow and gazes upward, as if contemplating the ramifications of the political tract he holds. Drolling's use of bright highlights along the edges of the pages and on his father-in-law's forehead makes a formal connection between the pamphlet, emblem of the public sphere, and the intellection of the private citizen who holds it. The agitated strokes of paint radiating from Belot's head make visible his engagement with the world of politics.

Drolling's portrait of Michel Belot is a modest painting. Its power lies not so much in its radical departure from the conventions of portraiture—there is nothing particularly innovative about the half-length format or the sitter's costume and pose—as in the way it manipulates those conventions in order to make a painter and small businessman into a participant in the body politic. This transformation would have been impossible during the *ancien régime*, when men like Belot had no claim to political agency. Drolling's portrait, and countless others like it, created a new kind of political identity by harnessing one of the genre's key strengths. Portraiture is both a private and a public art form, speaking specifically about a sitter or sitters but in a language that any viewer can understand. Unlike history painting, which was traditionally considered the appropriate visual form for exalted ideas (appropriately allegorized, or packaged in dignified mythological, biblical, or historical narratives), portraiture invites bodily identification and personal empathy with a contemporary, someone whose clothes, accessories, and occupation are within the viewer's immediate frame of reference. The portrait of Belot encourages its viewers to follow the sitter's thought process, proposing a model for our own intellectual engagement with political change. This oscillation between individual identity and communal ideals meant that, even in the most radical moments of the Revolution, when conditions for art production and consumption seemed least propitious, portraiture's popularity and power were never in doubt. Indeed, the special concerns of portrait making—the memorialization of contemporary life, the conferral of dignity on the individual, and the evocation of bodily and psychological presence—came to dominate the visual culture of the era.

Portraiture was central to French culture between 1789 and 1804 because it grappled with the fundamental problem of revolutionary political ideology—how to make new people for the new France. The Revolution swept away the social and political structures of the *ancien régime* in the name of individual liberty and social equality. The absolute monarchy, and the society of fixed orders and privileged corporate bodies over which it theoretically presided, was replaced with popular sovereignty, in which political authority rests with the people. In order for this regenerated nation to function, the individuals who composed the newly anointed body politic had somehow to be transformed from subjects into citizens, and rendered both free and contributors to the common good. Portraiture was the mode of representation most sensitive to these issues because it required artist and sitter alike to think through the markers of personal identity and render them legible to viewers. Drolling and Belot responded to this challenge by working within existing portrait conventions. Other portraitists and their clients looked for more dramatic and innovative ways to reconstruct the self in revolutionary terms, developing new modes of portraiture for new social and political circumstances.

The extraordinary resilience and creativity of portraiture over the course of the Revolution is also due to its character as a collaborative art. With the exception of images produced entirely on the artist's initiative and executed without the knowledge of the person depicted (as in the case of the many unauthorized portraits of Napoleon Bonaparte, or the cottage industry in posthumous images of Jean-Paul Marat), a portrait is the product of a negotiation between an artist, a commissioner, and the sitter or sitters. In order to produce a coherent image, all of these parties must reconcile their ideas about how best to represent physical likeness, character, and social status. This negotiation became particularly fraught after 1789, as traditional social and political hierarchies were dismantled and the structures of personal identity came into question. French citizens were faced with the task of reformulating the basic elements of selfhood—the structure of the family, the dictates of religion, the relationship between wealth and social status, and the roles of men and women in the new polity. Revolutionary lawmakers attacked these problems from the top down, legislating sweeping changes in the nation's political, social, and cultural structures. But portraits show us this process from the bottom up, providing evidence of how a wide range of newly anointed citizens reacted to revolutionary change, and how they adapted their self-images in response to national events.

The chapters that follow explore the visual language of revolutionary portraits and demonstrate how portraiture came to play such an important role in the era's cultural imagination. My analysis of portraiture's contribution to the reimagining of selfhood after 1789 depends, much like the portraits themselves, on striking a balance between the individual and the collective. This book about portraiture as a genre is based on the close analysis of a handful of portraits. Concentrating on a few case studies allows us to think carefully about the relationship between a portrait's visual language and the commissioner's and artist's ambitions. But the look and meaning of each particular portrait also depends on the more general material and cultural circumstances of its production. A portrait is shaped by the aesthetic theories and practices of its era; it is usually (but not always) the product of a transaction between an artist and a paying customer; and it participates in discourses about the self and its relationship to larger sociopolitical categories. These three domains—the aesthetic, the economic, and the subjective—were closely intertwined during the revolutionary era, and the institutions that shaped each were undergoing dramatic change.

The first category, aesthetic theory and artistic practice, has been the center of art-historical research since the publication of Thomas Crow's groundbreaking *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* in 1985. Crow's focus on the evolution of public art exhibitions and art criticism provides a compelling narrative about the intersections of aesthetics and prerevolutionary political thought. In Crow's account, artists of the second half of the eighteenth century devoted their creative energies to playing to, and against, the expectations of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, the new cadre of professional art critics, and the actual audiences at the biannual Salon exhibitions. Those expectations were shaped by a very particular set of aesthetic theories promoted by the Academy. According to the hierarchy of genres codified by André Félibien in the mid-seventeenth century, portraiture was the second-most important category of painting, after history painting. Portraiture could claim this relatively elevated rank because it represented the human body. However, its putative lack of narrative complexity and moral import, and above all its status as an imitative rather than an inventive art, undermined its prestige. Portraiture was, moreover, associated with the vanity and ambitions of its sitters, and

portraitists were often stigmatized as base flatterers. Even worse, critics viewed the genre as in competition with history painting, and they commonly bemoaned the tendency of talented young artists to succumb to the temptation of portraiture's easy money.

The rise of professional art criticism in the middle of the eighteenth century gave new impetus to the condemnation of portraiture. For instance, Étienne La Font de Saint-Yenne, the best-known and most vehement midcentury advocate of the revival of history painting, spoke out in the strongest possible terms against the proliferation of portraiture, which he described as “the genre of painting that is today the most abundant, the most practiced, and the most advantageous to even the most mediocre brushes.” In a now famous diatribe, he accused portraitists of “flattering a simpering face, often misshapen or decrepit, almost always without physiognomy, multiplying obscure beings, without character, without name, without place and without merit.” For La Font de Saint-Yenne, portraiture was the opposite of public art, appealing only to the relatives of the sitter, exposing worthless individuals to the public eye and offering no example of virtue to the viewer. However, he was willing to make an exception for portraits of kings, ministers, generals, famous authors, and other people whose visages could recall for their viewers some shared notion of talent or merit. Indeed, likenesses of the royal family and of great men of France were promoted by the Academy and critics alike as the one form of portraiture capable of inspiring noble sentiments in their viewers, even as portraits of less exalted figures were condemned as socially or aesthetically offensive.

When the Revolution opened the Salon to all artists (rather than just academicians), the number of portraits in the public exhibition rose precipitously, and the critics protested in much the same terms as La Font de Saint-Yenne had nearly fifty years earlier. Now, however, portraiture had new advocates. The poet André Chénier argued in a 1792 newspaper article that the genre had progressed so much since earlier in the century that distinctions between portraiture and history painting were no longer meaningful: “truth, simplicity, naiveté, are no different for a painter of portraits than for a history painter.” To cast aside the distinctions between portraiture and history painting was to overturn years of academic dogma and to dignify the entire genre. The qualities of truth, simplicity, and naiveté that Chénier claimed for modern portraiture (which he contrasted with the false, tasteless, and unnatural portraiture of yesteryear) were also, not coincidentally, the qualities of a good revolutionary citizen.

Other critics defended portraiture in more explicitly political terms. For instance, in his review of the Salon of 1798, the republican art critic Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Chaussard wrote, “Portraiture, a fairly insignificant genre under a monarchy—because one man counts for everything, and the others for nothing—should acquire under a Republic a new degree of interest: it can consecrate virtues, talents, service, and memory. It is in a Republic that the images of the hero, the useful man, the estimable woman are greeted with respect: from a moral and political point of view, the genre of the portrait should be elevated.” Chaussard argued that the Revolution had changed the value of portraiture, endowing images of the merely useful or estimable individual with new worth. No longer could the critic sneer about the obscurity of the sitters whose portraits hung in the Salon. In a republic, Chaussard implied, every individual was potentially significant by virtue of his or her citizenship. Each portrait, therefore, was the bearer of political and moral meaning.

Chaussard went on to claim that portraiture could aspire to the status of history painting on formal as well as ideological grounds, thus countering the traditional allegations that portraiture was merely an imitative art. He argued that portraitists in fact had more opportunities for invention than history painters: “The artist even has an advantage: his subject is his alone, he determines it; while historical subjects are susceptible to be treated differently by several brushes. In putting his characters *en scène*, in giving them *an action*, the artist enters into the class of history painters.” Chaussard’s conviction that portraiture could become history painting, if the artist exercised his or her powers of invention, flew in the face of the traditional arguments against portraiture. Indeed, other critics who were just as enthusiastic about dignifying the genre argued that portraitists, in order to excel, ought to avoid crossing the line between history painting and portraiture. Artists and sitters themselves were eager to experiment with composition and pose, and some practitioners overtly aimed at creating portraits that looked like history paintings. But whether or not revolutionary portraits took on the formal qualities of the noblest genre, they were increasingly called upon to shoulder the burdens of moral exemplarity and ideological import that had once belonged to history painting.

The story of how portraiture became so central to the revolutionary art world, and to the rethinking of self and society, moves beyond familiar narratives about history painting and its struggles to adapt its traditional vocabulary to new subjects and political exigencies. Tony Halliday, in *Facing the Public: Portraiture in the Aftermath of the French Revolution* (1999), integrates portraiture into Crow’s narrative of the Salon and its viewers, and extends that narrative into the revolutionary era. Halliday approaches the problem of portrait production and use primarily from the artist’s point of view, tracing the ways in which portraitists constructed their own identities as practitioners of a liberal art, and how they and critics valorized the genre as a whole. His work convincingly places portraiture at the center of revolutionary aesthetic discourses, stressing the elevation of the portrait to the status of public art.

However, Halliday’s analysis of Salon criticism and of changing attitudes toward portraiture as a genre gives us only a partial view of the culture of portraiture during the Revolution. Many of the most interesting portraits of the revolutionary era were not displayed at the Salon, instead moving directly from the artist’s studio to the home of the commissioner. Moreover, any assessment of the strategies and impact of revolutionary portraits must account for the collaborative nature of the portrait process. Many of portraiture’s contemporary advocates preferred to draw a veil over the commissioner’s role, an approach duplicated by many of the genre’s subsequent historians. Chaussard’s defense of portraiture claimed that the artist was solely responsible for the composition of the image—that “the subject is his alone.” In his eagerness to assimilate portraiture to history painting, and to counter claims that the portraitist was debased by his or her servility to the sitter, the critic suppressed altogether the hand of the commissioner in the creation of the portrait. In fact, as the *Moyen expéditif* print reminds us, portraits were objects of luxury consumption, produced to order for demanding clients. A portrait, after all, was a direct representation of the sitter’s identity, and he or she was likely to have an opinion about how that identity was recorded for posterity. Revolutionary portraits were products of negotiation between established visual conventions of representing the individual and new ideas of selfhood, between an artist’s ambitions and a sitter’s desire for self-presentation, and between the resulting image and its viewing (or looting) public.

My analysis of these portraits takes into account the aesthetic framework provided by the academic tradition, but it also places revolutionary portraiture in the context of a thriving and thoroughly commercial art market. Portraiture—indeed, all art production in France—had been shaped by market forces since at least the seventeenth century. The Revolution did not mark a sharp break with the basic dynamics of earlier portrait production. But the political and social upheaval that accompanied it served to amplify the portrait market—probably in terms of the quantity of portraits produced, and certainly in terms of the ideological weight those portraits were meant to carry. Moreover, the collapse of the Academy and the breakdown in the official hierarchy of genres after 1789 made the role of money, and the patrons who spread it around, more visible. The look and meaning of revolutionary portraits were determined by market conditions as much as by aesthetic and critical discourses, if not more so. By mapping the portrait market and examining how its mechanics affected the images it generated, we can better grasp the importance of portraiture to the history of revolutionary art, and to the articulation of the revolutionary self.

From the initial conception of the image to its display and reception, the portrait process was marked by the preconceptions and demands of at least three, if not four, distinct parties: the artist, the commissioner, the sitter(s), and the viewer. The best-documented actors in the portrait market are the artists themselves; we can reconstruct the material conditions of their practice and their strategies of self-promotion. The identity and behavior of the clients are more difficult to pin down. However, through evidence provided by correspondence and memoirs, we can begin to understand what kinds of people commissioned portraits, and how they made the decisions that shaped the final image. By tracing the display and reception of the object produced by the artist-client interaction, we can reconstruct viewers' reactions to revolutionary portraits. Display and reception can of course be studied in the context of the Salon and other public exhibition spaces. However, the majority of revolutionary portraits were viewed in other contexts—in the artist's studio, in the home, or, in the case of miniatures, on the body. Moreover, the display of portraits was rarely static; they were given as gifts, recirculated as copies, and reproduced as prints. Even portraits destined for domestic settings had a public life. The permeable boundaries between private and public space in early modern Europe were further eroded by revolutionary insistence on transparency between the lives of citizens and the larger community, and many portraits that were never intended to hang on the Salon walls nonetheless invoked contemporary aesthetic and political discourses.

The third factor that, in concert with aesthetic and economic concerns, shaped portraiture between 1789 and 1804 was the changing definition of the self. In revolutionary France, as in other cultures and eras in which portraiture was valued, a portrait defined and represented the self in a variety of ways: it recorded physical likeness, asserted social status, reinforced gender hierarchies, affirmed kinship ties, and preserved the memory of the sitter for posterity. In the extraordinary circumstances of the Revolution, portraits also made the abstract principles of a fragile new social and political order concrete and visible. The Revolution began by vesting sovereignty in the people and eroding the authority of the king. Within a few years, the monarchy had been abolished and political legitimacy transferred entirely to the people and their legislators. This radical transformation of the nature of sovereignty was accompanied by a revolution in the structures of personal identity. The nobility was dismantled, the Catholic Church was forced to give up its property and prerogatives, and new laws legalized divorce and

undermined paternal authority. The historian Jan Goldstein argues that the collapse of the political and social structures of the *ancien régime*, and the kinds of selfhood that were associated with them, was a “powerful incitement to psychological discourse,” setting off a wave of anxiety about the stability of personal identity.

Given the Revolution’s dramatic efforts to refashion both self and society, and the “self-talk” that Goldstein sees proliferating in the postrevolutionary period, I have found that the most productive way to think about the revolutionary self is to engage with revolutionary voices. I take as a model T. J. Clark’s study of Jacques-Louis David’s 1794 self-portrait, which analyzes how the painting works with, or against, late eighteenth-century discourses about the self. The revolutionary quest for new and stable forms of identity involved many different ways of thinking about the self: as male or female, as part of a familial or national collective or as a triumphantly autonomous individual, as a sensitive interlocutor of its fellow citizens or as a representative of the state’s authority. That quest shaped the thousands of portraits produced by artists and sitters who were also trying to reformulate the self for the Revolution. Each portrait makes its own claims about the revolutionary self, drawing on particular forms of “self-talk”; my discussions of individual portraits bring to light different revolutionary definitions of the self according to the nature of the artist’s and sitter’s choices.

This study attempts to keep in play all three of these ways of understanding a revolutionary portrait—as an expression of an aesthetic system inherited from the *ancien régime* but shaken to its core by the Revolution, as a product of a new consumer culture, and as an intervention in heated debates about the nature of the self in a new society. The choices made by particular artists and clients in the course of the commission can be difficult to recover. However, my recreation of the general circumstances of portrait production allows us to read particular images against revolutionary ideas of personal, social, and political identity. The result, I hope, is a rich and historically responsible analysis of the visual language of revolutionary portraiture that allows us to see the portraits for what they were and are: sometimes confused, sometimes belligerent, sometimes touching arguments about the revolutionary self, in which the voices of the artist and the sitter merge with those of their fellow citizens in an eloquent cacophony.

Of the many thousands of revolutionary portraits produced between 1789 and 1804, I have chosen a handful as case studies. The choice inevitably involved more or less defensible exclusions. My argument takes as its main focus Paris, the largest and best-documented portrait market in France, and the city where the nation’s political and artistic institutions were centered. My case studies include oil paintings and prints but give short shrift to sculptures and miniatures. Sculpted portraits were expensive, time-consuming, and relatively rare during the years of the Revolution; they appear only in passing in this book. Miniatures, by contrast, were relatively cheap and very common. They feature as supporting actors in many of my case studies, but I do not provide a sustained argument about the medium and its particularities. My study of painting and printmaking is itself necessarily partial. Most of the portraits I discuss, with the notable exception of Jean-Louis Laneuville’s portrait of Thérésia Cabarrus, are of men. This exclusion follows that of revolutionary political theory; women were barred from active citizenship, and portraiture’s engagement with politics generally reflected this interdiction. This gendering of politics in portraiture extends, at least in part, to female artists. Although the Revolution saw a dramatic leap in the number of female portraitists, they are underrepresented among the portraits

I analyze here—possibly because sitters felt that male artists were better suited to making arguments about new political definitions of the self. Finally, the work of David, the most thoroughly studied of all revolutionary artists, figures here largely as a foil to portraits by other artists. This is not because David did not produce important portraits between 1789 and 1804—he certainly did—but because his paintings and drawings occupied only a small (if exalted) corner of the larger portraiture market. Those portraits have been discussed, often brilliantly, by many scholars. The work of David’s colleagues and competitors, however, remains much less well known, and it was these artists who, in large part, shaped the culture of revolutionary portraiture.

Instead of aspiring to exhaustiveness, I have emphasized important modes of portraiture and made my argument about their place in revolutionary political culture through specific works, situating these case studies against a larger analysis of the portrait market. My discussion of portraiture begins with the portrait process and its role in the development of revolutionary selfhood. Chapter 1 places the practice of portraiture at the crossroads between two new concepts of identity: the regenerated citizen and the self as consumer. Revolutionary ideas about selfhood and political agency intersected with, and were amplified by, a thriving portrait market. I analyze the physical, economic, and social geographies of that market through primary evidence provided by artists’ account books, artist and sitter correspondence, exhibition catalogues, and contemporary almanacs and travel accounts.

The subsequent chapters explore five different modes of revolutionary portraiture. These case studies reveal the parallel developments in portraiture and concepts of selfhood from the opening of the Estates-General in 1789 to Napoleon’s declaration of empire in 1804. The chronological narrative begins with chapter 2, which introduces the problem of political portraiture by analyzing a 1789–91 series of print portraits of the deputies to the National Assembly. The chapter traces the deputy portraits’ roots in the eighteenth-century cult of the great man and their formal antecedents in ancien régime print portraits, arguing that their creative reuse of these conventions and their deliberate departures from tradition contributed to a new theory of political representation. Chapter 3 considers the phenomenon of the National Guard portrait, an image type that proliferated between 1789 and 1792. National Guard portraits allowed bourgeois men, previously excluded from the officer corps, to craft images of themselves as active citizens and to articulate their positions in the heated revolutionary debates about class, authority, and military intervention in national affairs. The sheer number and exuberance of these images, and their engagement with political events during the first years of the Revolution, demonstrate the widespread enthusiasm for new modes of portraiture and self-definition, and the equally widespread confusion about what a new social hierarchy might look like.

The political and aesthetic experimentation of the early 1790s culminated in the Terror, a period of radicalism and violence that lasted from the spring of 1793 to the summer of 1794. In a short essay between chapters 3 and 4, I argue that the Terror made political self-representation very difficult, and at the same time provided the occasion for radical (and radically ill-judged) forms of portraiture. Chapter 4 considers portraiture in the immediate aftermath of the Terror through an analysis of Jean-Louis Laneuville’s 1796 prison portrait of Thérésia Cabarrus, also known as Madame Tallien. Cabarrus was an enthusiastic participant in revolutionary politics, and Laneuville’s portrait reveals both the possibilities for self-representation that the Revolution

offered to women and the limits of women's political agency under the post-Terror regime. Chapter 5 analyzes revolutionary images of sitters in the landscape, taking as its primary example a monumental 1798 portrait by François Gérard of Louis-Marie Revellière-Lépeaux, one of the five directors of the post-Terror government. By depicting his sitter as a man of sensibility contemplating the wonders of nature, Gérard transforms landscape portraiture into a vehicle for revolutionary ideas about the moral virtues of the "natural" life as well as for Revellière-Lépeaux's own political program.

The sixth and final chapter, on the image of the family during the Revolution, examines a series of portraits and allegorical compositions by François-André Vincent commissioned by the Boyer-Fonfrède family. These elaborate multifigure paintings and drawings, produced between 1795 and 1801, propose a model of citizenship based on the family and private virtues that engages directly with the more conservative politics of the late 1790s. The Boyer-Fonfrède images also attest to the ways in which Vincent, a successful history painter before the Revolution, took advantage of the vitality of the portrait market to fuse the ideological complexity of history painting with the immediacy of portraiture. Finally, the conclusion sketches out the fate of revolutionary portraiture after the rise of Napoleon, and the ways in which portraiture's priorities shaped art into the nineteenth century.

The portraits under consideration here, both those that explicitly evoke the political turmoil of the era and those that implicitly suggest new ways of being in the world, respond to and shape revolutionary discourses about art and personal identity. Often, they do this more eloquently than the critics and politicians who were addressing the same issues in print. Portraits can express nostalgia for the past, make arguments for change, and tell boldfaced lies. It is this multivocality that allows the portraits produced between 1789 and 1804 to speak to, and of, the contradictory achievements of the Revolution.