Identifying Neoclassical Art

Notable stylistic similarities found in most Neoclassical art include a sense of order, stability and calmness.

Born to a wealthy Parisian family, Jacques-Louis David was aged 7 when his father was shot dead in a pistol duel. Brought up by his uncles, his desire was to paint. Painting became an important means of communication for him since his face was slashed during a sword fight and his speech became impeded by a benign tumour that developed from the wound, leading him to stammer. He was interested in painting in a new classical style that departed from the frivolity of the Rococo period and reflected the moral and austere climate before the French Revolution.

Symbolic theme: The painting depicts a scene from a Roman legend about a 7th-century BC dispute between two warring cities, Rome and Alba Longa, and stresses the importance of patriotism and masculine self-sacrifice for one's country. Instead of the two cities sending their armies to war, they agree to choose three men from each city; the victor in that fight will be the victorious city. The painting depicts the Roman Horatius family, who, had been chosen for a ritual duel against three members of the Curiatii, a family from Alba Longa, in order to settle disputes between the Romans and the latter city.

As revolution in France loomed, paintings urging loyalty to the state rather than to clan or clergy abounded. Although it was painted nearly four years before the revolution in France, The Oath became one of the defining images of the time. The work shows the three brothers express their loyalty and solidarity with Rome before battle, wholly supported by their father. These are men willing to lay down their lives out of patriotic duty. They are symbols of the highest virtues of Rome. Their clarity of purpose, mirrored by David’s simple yet powerful use of tonal contrasts, lends the painting, and its message about the nobility of patriotic sacrifice, an electric intensity. This is all in contrast to the tender-hearted women who lie weeping and mourning, awaiting the results of the fighting.

Jacques Louis David: Oath of the Horatii, France, 1784.