Lesson Title: Art and Revolution
Grades: 9–12
Time Required: 1–2 class periods
Subject Areas: Visual Art, Social Studies

Lesson Overview: Students will analyze an 18th-century painting by the French artist Jacques-Louis David. They will then discuss the concept of propaganda and the role of art in the French Revolution. In an extension activity, students assume the position of a contemporary French citizen and debate whether or not they agree with the message in David’s painting.

Common Core Academic Standards
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.9
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.2

National Core Art Standards
VA:Pr6.1.Ila
Make, explain, and justify connections between artists or artwork and social, cultural, and political history.
VA:Re7.2.Ila
Evaluate the effectiveness of an image or images to influence ideas, feelings, and behaviors of specific audiences.
VA:Cn11.1.Ila
Compare uses of art in a variety of societal, cultural, and historical contexts and make connections to uses of art in contemporary and local contexts.

Learning Objectives:
Students will be able to:
• Use close looking skills to describe and analyze a work of art
• Discuss the use of symbolism in propaganda and how images can influence the way we think
• Form an opinion on a theoretical problem and discuss and defend their choices

Artwork in Focus:
Click on the link below to access this image through the Wadsworth’s Public Portal. Once on the portal, click on the image to view the object information. Click on the image again to download a jpeg version of the work. NOTE: Works of art used in this lesson may not currently be on view at the museum.

School of Jacques-Louis David, The Lictors Bringing to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons, late 18th century

Materials:
• Image of The Lictors Bringing to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons
• Projector and screen/ SMART board, or equivalent
• Chart paper
• Index cards

Lesson Procedures:
Part One: Guided Looking
1. Project the image of The Lictors. Give students time to look quietly at the image. Do not reveal the title, date, or artist of this painting. Begin the conversation by asking close looking questions like the ones listed below:
   • Describe the figures in this picture.
   • How are the figures interacting? What do you see in the picture that gives you clues as to the type of relationship they have?
• How would you describe the emotional state of each figure? What do you see that supports this?
• Describe the light in this painting. What is highlighted? What is in shadow? How does that affect you the viewer?
• What is the setting like? What are the figures wearing? What time period or place do you think this is? What do you see that supports that?
• Describe the lines in the painting. Are they mostly horizontal? Vertical? Are there any diagonal lines? Where? Why do you think the artist used these lines?
• What is at the very center of the painting? Why do you think the artist made that choice?
• If you had to give this painting a title, what would it be?

2. End the discussion by sharing background information about the work. You may want to include more or less background information based on your students’ knowledge of the French Revolution. Make sure they understand the message of the painting: individuals should make sacrifices for the sake of the republic, and that David was painting at the beginning of what would become the French Revolution.

3. Introduce the idea of propaganda. What are some examples of propaganda that we encounter today? Record student answers on chart paper.

4. Return to the painting and ask the following questions:
   • Why would David choose to paint a moment from ancient Rome instead of what was going on at the time?
   • What were the ideas behind the French Revolution?
   • How does David’s choice of subject support those ideas?
   • Conclude: How is David’s painting an example of propaganda?

**Part Two: Debate**

Do you agree with the message in David’s painting? Is it right to ask citizens to make sacrifices for the good of the country? *Note: you can frame the discussion in terms of the French Revolution specifically, or more broadly.*

• Divide students into two groups: agree and disagree.
• Have each student write down 1-3 reasons on an index card.
• Students take turns making their point. Each student must begin by summarizing the last opposing argument made.
• The debate concludes when everyone has gone at least once.
• Discuss as a group: was anyone swayed either way?

**Extension Classroom Activity:** Have students conduct research to create a historic “persona.” Then lead a debate about whether or not they support the revolution. This extended debate should be part of a longer unit on the French Revolution, as more historical background is necessary. Consider introducing multiple primary sources, including other paintings, to deepen student understanding.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**
The Painting
The Lictors Bringing to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons (late 18th century) depicts a moment from the history of ancient Rome. Brutus had participated in an uprising that vanquished the monarchy and established the Roman Republic in 509 BC. Even though he was a nephew of the king Tarquinius, Brutus, as a consul of the new republic, had to impose a sentence on his two sons, who were convicted of plotting to restore the monarchy. Brutus sentenced his own sons to death for their conspiracy. David is showing the extraordinary sacrifices that citizens must make to establish and maintain a republic.

The Artist
Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) was part of an art movement called Neo-Classicism. Much like the Enlightenment thinkers, David used classical themes from Greek and Roman cultures to visually depict new philosophies of government and power. He was a popular artist during the French Revolution. He fell out of favor after the revolution ended and was imprisoned because of his political affiliations. After being released from prison, David became the court’s official painter under Napoleon’s rule.

Expert Perspective:
“Neoclassicism in terms of painting is most associated with the name Jacques-Louis David. In going back to the ancients, you are often looking for alternatives to the existing arrangements of society. You could get away with a lot of implicit criticism of authoritarian social relationships by celebrating and exploring the history of the Roman Republic and also the Greek city-states, which had often a kind of democracy. And because it was the ancients, everyone had to approve it was all okay. And as you did this, of course, it created a new kind of political science. And David was very attracted to this from a very early age, in part because he was a natural rebel. He chafed against the strictures of the academy, the whole system of training and subordination, prize-giving, pleasing your elders, all of that. And he really wanted to reinvent art on his own. And when he went to Rome the first time, as successful young students in the academy customarily did, he felt that this gave him a kind of cause. He was going to take what he observed and not filter it through the tradition, but bring it back in its pure and immediate state in the Brutus.

Rome at the beginning of the story is still a monarchy; it’s ruled by a corrupt dynasty called the Tarquins. And the last of the Tarquins is particularly heinous and authoritarian. And his son rapes the virtuous wife of an upstanding Roman citizen called Collatinus. His friend, Brutus, who is, in fact, himself a member of the royal family, reacts to this outrage by declaring that they will overthrow the Tarquins. But Brutus’s family, of course, is still part of this exiled monarchy. And they get drawn into a conspiracy to restore Tarquin as the king. Brutus discovers this. David shows him, shows Brutus, clutching the incriminating document in an absolutely poignant detail on the far left of the canvas. And because he has just instituted a law that such acts of treason are punishable by death, he has no choice but to order the execution of his own sons, which he witnesses in the story. But David doesn’t show that, he shows the aftermath, the grief of the household, the isolated clusters, male, female relatives, nursemaid. And the sons are being brought in, which is something that the ancient Romans never did, but it works for David’s dramatic purposes. And you barely see them, but what you see is the play of reaction across this group of afflicted relations. And the costs of patriotism are written through these figures.” - Thomas Crow, Professor of Modern Art, Institute of Fine Arts at NYU
School of Jacques-Louis David, French, (1748–1825)
The Lictors Bringing to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons, late 18th century
Oil on canvas
The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1934.34