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# LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE

LIBERTY'S EMBRACE

STEVEN ADAMS



# Landscape Painting in Revolutionary France

The French Revolution had a marked impact on the ways in which citizens saw the newly liberated spaces in which they now lived. Painting, gardening, cinematic displays of landscape, travel guides, public festivals, and tales of space flight and devil-abduction each shaped citizens' understanding of space. Through an exploration of landscape painting over some 40 years, Steven Adams examines the work of artists, critics and contemporary observers who have largely escaped art historical attention to show the importance of landscape as a means of crystallising national identity in a period of unprecedented political and social change.

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Cover image: Demachy, Pierre-Antoine, *The Festival of the Supreme Being at the Champ de Mars, 8th June 1794 (20 Prairial Year II)*, 1794, oil on canvas, 53.5 × 88.5 cm. Musée de la Ville de Paris/Musée Carnavalet, Paris (Courtesy of Bridgeman Images).

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## Liberty's Embrace

Steven Adams

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# Foreword

We should perhaps exercise caution in starting a book about landscape painting, spatiality and the French Revolution with the analogy that history constitutes a form of butchery. Writing in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates spoke of a philosophical method of dividing 'scattered particulars by classes where the natural joints are and not trying to break any part, after the manner of a bad carver'.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this book, it is possible to identify a corpus for analysis, but when it comes to the visual and material culture of the French Revolution and its aftermath, the integrity of the body, quite where those joints are located, or of precisely what they comprise is often harder to determine. According to the second posthumous edition of Jacques Barbeu-Dubourg's diagrammatic history of the world, the *Chronographie* of 1838, events were generally shown to unfold in neat succession from the moment of Creation in 4004 BC until the summer of 1789. However, as the account concludes, there are simply too many incidents in too short a time to contain within the confines of the page.<sup>2</sup> The size of the letterforms diminishes as one event crowds in on another. Quite how citizens' conceptions of landscape, space and visuality fit into this overcrowded historical moment is again difficult to assess: so often the most instructive cultural forms barely fit within the bounds of art history, or the more recently constituted disciplines of design history, or material and visual culture. When on the afternoon of 14 July, a young cutler from the rue de la Roquette stole from the Bastille's guardroom a sixteenth-century flag emblazoned with the arms of Henri III, hastily adapted it with the impromptu device of a flame – a Pentecostal symbol but one that would seem to have no obvious relevance to a revolutionary lexicon – and carried it to the prison's ramparts, we have to ask how this act of revolutionary fervour, or the numerous others recorded in contemporary news-sheets of the period, might best be described? The act is hard to classify. It takes visual, material, performative, spatial and textual expression but says so much more about citizens' enthusiasm and the political climate of the summer of 1789 than the few paintings of revolutionary subjects that made their way into that year's Salon. The event is doubly hard to locate because we often know of such incidents largely through accounts in the radical press. A closer look at how the siege was described might prompt us to fix on journalists' breathless prose, and the capacity of on-the-spot reporters to spirit themselves across the city – the Hôtel de Ville at one moment, the Bastille the next – at breakneck speed.<sup>3</sup> This too, of course, is a form of spatiality, and their prose a new kind of chronometry, an awareness that the Revolution brings with it a new kind of temporal immanence. In our attempt to try to understand something of these events, we might apply some kind of cross- or interdisciplinary alternative to art history and take lessons from a

combination of disciplines, but the problem of interpretation is only compounded. Writing in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the French philosopher Giles Deleuze warns against ‘decalcomania’, the imposition of a predetermined picture (or *decal*) on a retrospectively formed cultural or conceptual fabric where we see events too readily in terms of our own disciplinary frames. Interdisciplinarity – the recognition of plural disciplines and an unproblematic exploration of the connections between them – thereby risks the anachronistic application of not one decal, one set of material or discursive conventions, but several.

For all its complexity, the material and discursive fabric that makes up our period may be patchy, ill-formed and difficult to categorize but it still has a consistency about it. Many subjects and citizens lived through the 40-year period examined within this book and some way or another negotiated their way through the visual and material culture generated by a succession of sometimes wildly contrasting regimes: an absolutist and then constitutional monarchy, a Republic of varying hues, a Consulate, an Empire and a monarchy again. And some were young enough in 1789 to experience the period as a sequence of related events. Gilbert du Motier, the marquis de Lafayette, head of the National Guard in 1789, was still in line for a similar position 40 years later following the abdication of Charles X in 1830. Writing in *Rethinking Intellectual History*, Dominick LaCapra speaks about the configuration of history as a discipline, the concern that the historical record is at once too full – too full in terms of the inevitable wealth of sources available to us for scrutiny – yet incomplete because the record invariably requires the intercession of the historian to interpret it. LaCapra acknowledges history’s contingency but concedes that the ‘past had its own voices’ and the task of the historian is to enter into a work-like dialogue with those voices. Those voices ‘must be respected’, he argues, ‘especially when they resist the interpretations we would like to place on them’. Most compellingly, LaCapra also speaks of acknowledging the importance of ‘what does not fit’ and ‘an openness to what one does not want to hear from the past’.<sup>4</sup> This is helpful advice and an important point of methodological principle for the historian – or certainly *this* historian – of Revolutionary France. The galvanizing force of the Revolution was such that so much of the archive it left behind, as the act of our brave cutler shows, consistently plays fast and loose with later-day, decalized taxonomies. In short, it is to some of these resistant voices that this book sets out to attend, contextualize and to set within a chronological discursive frame that French subjects and citizens, or at least the marquis de Lafayette, might begin to recognize. In so doing, the book attempts to bring together a 40-year history of landscape painting and spatiality that strays well beyond the normative bounds of art and other forms of history.

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## Notes

- 1 Bernard Atkins, *Deleuze and Guattari’s A Thousand Plateaus* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 27. See also Plato, *Symposium and Phaedrus* (New York: Dover, 2000), p. 79.
- 2 Jacques Barbeu-Dubourg, *Chronographie, ou description des temps, contenant toute la suite des souverains des divers peuples, des principaux événements de chaque siècle* (Paris: Paulin, 1838), 2 vols.

Giles Deleuze and Félix Guatari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 13.

- 3 Jean Dusaulx, *De l'Insurrection Parisienne et de la prise de la Bastille, 1790* (Paris: Deburre, 1790), p. 26.

- 4 Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 64.



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# Introduction

## Landscape and landscape painting in Revolutionary France

This book is about landscape and landscape painting in Revolutionary France. It charts the place of landscape representation in French politics, society and culture over about 40 years from around the last decade of the *ancien régime* to a period just after the July Revolution of 1830. The need to italicize the terms *landscape*, *painting* and *space*, to stress their historical and cultural contingency, is evident from the outset. In examining some of the ways in which French subjects and citizens (and subjects again) represented the landscape over a period of such seismic political and social change, we necessarily stray from the fine arts into the less familiar terrain of visual and material culture (although they too require their own italicization), into the virtual spaces of popular literature, architectural fantasy and the immersive spaces of theatrical spectacle. So great were the demands placed on the arts, on citizens, and on political and cultural institutions during our period that once largely stable ways of representing landscape and space quickly became unstable, sometimes to collapse and be remade afresh whereafter they were swept away to be made and remade again, then forgotten only to be imperfectly recalled sometimes during a remarkably short space of time. Often in the course of this book we come across multiple incarnations of the one painter or genre, each remade according to the demands of a specific moment, political imperative or regime.

It is instructive briefly to think about some of the ways in which new conceptions of space first impacted on landscape painting and visual and material culture and the need to test art history's disciplinary frame. For example, there were plenty of landscape paintings on show in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, particularly after 1791, when the Paris Salon, once the preserve of an exclusive circle of academicians, opened its doors to all painters and sculptors irrespective of their professional affiliation. Seen from the vantage point of the Salon, landscape painting did not change that much either side of the French Revolution, only the constituency of painters who practised it. Instead, we need to leave what Anne Cauquelin describes as the 'enchanted circle of art history' for other disciplinary forms.<sup>1</sup> In the summer of 1789, overcome by the spirit of Liberty, citizens described the French Revolution as an event of millennial significance. Some were deliriously happy at the prospect of the Revolution, variously casting off skywards in aerostats to liberate the moon from 'celestial tyrants', drinking to the health of the 'people of the Universe' and dancing on the debris of the Bastille to extinguish 'feudalism's last breath'.<sup>2</sup> Others were roundly traumatized and struggled to keep pace with events. For the author of *Le Diable boiteux à Paris*, a short pamphlet of 1790, freedom took the disturbing form of a flight around the capital on the Devil's back while using his magic eye-glass to peer into the