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Ephemeral Emblem: Jacques-Louis David and the Making of a Revolutionary Martyr

Abstract

In December 1793, Maximilien Robespierre raised a virtually unknown child martyr, Joseph Bara, to cult status through Jacobin rhetoric. The painter Jacques-Louis David was tasked with both producing a commemorative portrait and organizing a Pantheonization ceremony. The resulting enigmatic canvas–more emblem than portrait–offers new modes of understanding David's Revolutionary-era project and the contingent nature of artistic production during a turbulent era. Often considered unfinished, this painting's materiality is reflective of the ceremony to which it is fundamentally linked. This article argues that both the Revolutionary *fête* and David's newfound visual language should be understood as modes of ephemeral performance that cast the spectator as a co-maker of meaning, and that the painting does not represent the death of an individual figure but allegorically commemorates the unrealized ceremony. This article thus demonstrates the ways that the Revolution's contingency manifested itself materially and conceptually in the arts.

1. *Introduction*

July 28, 1794, or 10 *thermidor an II* was the appointed day for the ceremony to induct the mortal remains of two child martyrs, Joseph Bara and Joseph-Agricol Viala, both raised from obscurity by the Jacobin propaganda machine. The elaborate ritual was pre-empted, and made untenable, after the head of the National Convention, Maximilien Robespierre, was overthrown and the provisional government was upended the previous day. As Colin Jones (2021) has traced, the outcomes of 9 *thermidor* were far from a foregone conclusion. The events came as a surprise to all as Parisians mobilized in a fundamentally new way. With the seismic political shift, the pantheonization ceremony was immediately irrelevant, if never officially cancelled.

Recuperating the choreography of this unrealized *fête* reveals the ceremony's unrealized ideological power, of the contingency of the Revolutionary moment, particularly for artists and one of the most enigmatic paintings of the period, *The Death of Joseph Bara* by Jacques-Louis David (Fig. 1). Across David's canvas, a nude, youthful body stretches out uncomfortably against an almost monochromatic background. The dissolving ground line and the suggestion of trees-qua-clouds in the top of the canvas connotes an ambiguous outdoor setting. Between life and death, the boy's torso is heavy and corpse-like. His legs appear to be disjointed and fragmented; their weight contrasts with the musculature of the chest and neck, which are still imbued with energy that keeps the head from flopping downwards. The arm and hands, too, remain activated as the boy clutches a Revolutionary cockade and a letter. The artist deliberately renders the boy as bringing his attributes up to his chest, rather than falling upon them. Revolutionary fervor, not gravity, is the dominant force.

Figure 1. Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Joseph Bara*, 1794, oil on canvas, 118x155 cm. Avignon, Musée Calvet, Don Horace Vernet à l'Institut Calvet, Inv. 846.3.1

The rhythmic, gestural, and intentional brushstrokes of the background emphasize the youthful body's placelessness. There is a crescendo in the brushwork as the calligraphy of the background reaches a frenzied culmination above the strained head. The composition is painted thinly and seemingly in haste. With its open scumbles and porous quality, the painting's seeming irresolution has often led to its discussion as an unfinished canvas. This paper argues for the picture's aesthetics to be considered in the context of the moment of its creation, however fleeting and precarious, leading to a reinterpretation of the subject matter rendering the aesthetic choices an integral component of its intended significance.

Just as the Revolutionary *fêtes* were a form of political performance,[1] so too was David's deliberate style. Repositioning the *Bara* from a lamentable victim of history's vicissitudes, abandoned following the downfall of Robespierre, this essay understands aesthetic choices as socio-political markers of the tensions between change and continuity, and David's painting as a political statement in both its form and subject.

The Revolution brought about the reconceptualization of both History and time, in numerous iterations as attested to by multiple displacements of a new 'Year I' and the efforts to reorganize time itself. This project was fundamentally linked to the vital need for collective memory (Perovic 2012; Shaw 2011). The Revolution appeared to be 'accomplished' at several junctures, only for the collective realization that further change was needed. For example, on 29 September 1791, Robespierre declared at the National Assembly: "La Revolution est fini" (*Archives parlementaires* de 1787 à 1860, vol. 31, 620). In 1792, the deputy and author Jean-Paul Rabaut de Saint-Etienne suggested the Revolution's completion: "L'histoire de ces trois années mémorables nous présente une scène dramatique qui a eu son commencement, son milieu et sa fin" (1792, 62). Rabaut de Saint-Etienne was guillotined in December 1793 and Robespierre on 28 July 1794. Within ten years, there were three Declarations of Rights and four constitutions. Abandoned projects characterized the period: municipal initiatives, short-lived political clubs and journals, private ambitions, and numerous artistic and architectural monuments.

1 On Revolutionary festivals, see Mona Ozouf (1991). Cfr. Daniel Wildenstein and Guy Wildenstein (1973) on David's role in some festivals.

As the Revolution progressed, how an event was represented became equally important to the selection of the subject itself. Dispassionate representation was seen as dishonest. For example, Jacques Bertaux encountered widespread criticism for his 1793 painting *The Storming of the Tuileries Palace, August 10, 1792*.[2] In the wake of the Girondin reaction, one critic found it challenging to reconcile the coolness of Bertaux's depiction with the pervasive impression of the day: "Tous ceux qui ont été témoins de cet événement conviendront avec nous, qu'il ne s'est jamais livré aucune action où il y ait eu plus de confusion et de tumulte. Cependant l'auteur fait avancer avec la froideur d'un mouvement mesuré... l'auteur avait de la netteté, du soigné dans le pinceau, nous lui conseillons de l'employer dans des sujets où ces qualités ne sont pas des défauts." (Explication [1793], vol. 18, no. 458, 22). In alignment with revolutionary rhetoric that condemned duplicity and championed forthrightness, the erasure of the presence and individuality of the artist became a liability.

It is in this context that one should reconsider artworks from the period that display a looser sketch-like handling in works such as David's *Marat at His Last Breath,* in which the scumbled background creates a sense of ethereality and ephemerality underscoring Marat's transition between life and death, between hero and martyr (Fig. 2). This sketch-like aesthetic was used as a deliberate response to the pervasive uncertainties of the moment (Berman 2023). From the earliest days of the Revolution, David and others had explored a distinct form of paint handling characterized by its open scumbles, dry-brush application, thinned paint, and use of colored grounds left visible. David was experimenting with an aesthetic of contingency that connoted the urgency, immediacy, earnestness, and changeability of this moment. A large corpus of extant paintings attests to the resonance of this style, despite their subsequent disparagement as 'abandoned' or 'unfinished'.

2 Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon (MV 5182).

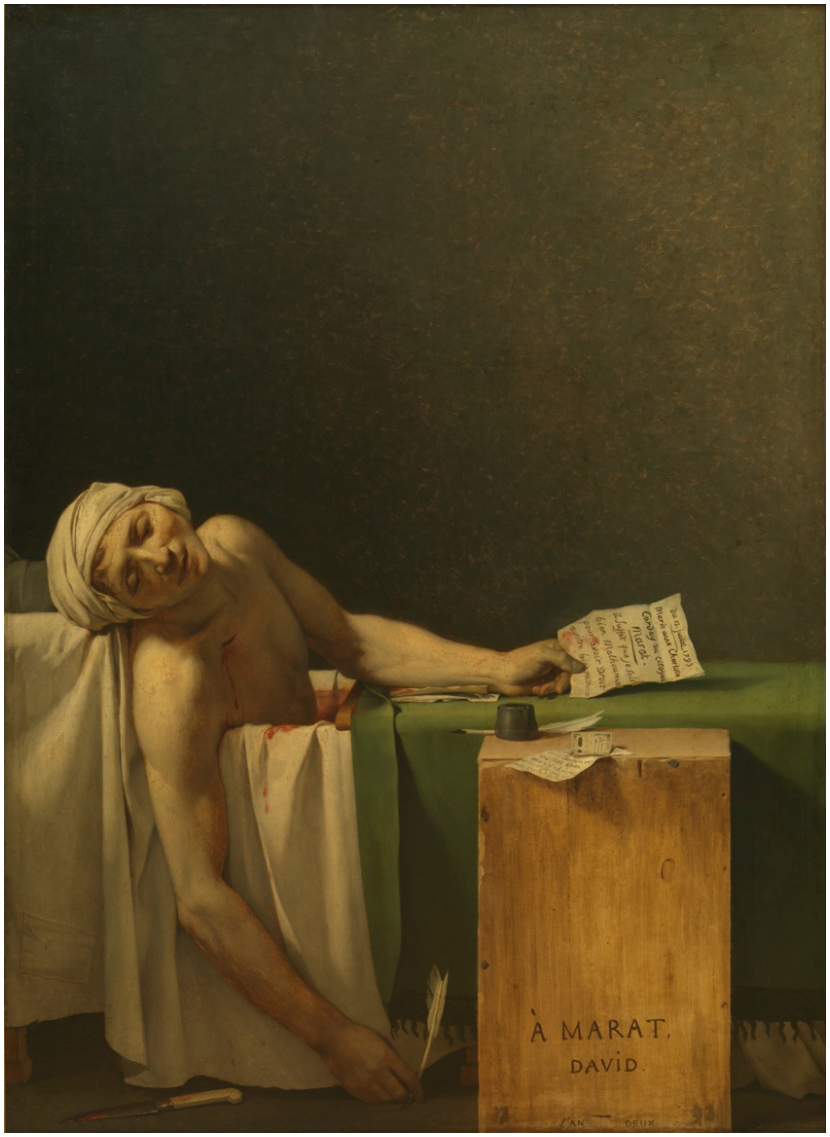

Figure 2. Jacques-Louis David, *Marat at his Last Breath*, 1793, oil on canvas, 165x182 cm. Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, inv. 3260, photo: J. Geleyns

The aesthetic was akin to an orator's rhetorical device. The classical treatise *On the Sublime* addresses the devices at the disposal of orators. For example, "Words severed from one another without the intervention of stops give a lively impression of one who through distress of mind at once halts and hurries in his speech" (Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 19:55). Longinus asserts, "It is the very

brilliancy of the orator's figure which blinds us to the fact that it is a figure... A similar illusion is produced by the painter's art" (Ibid., 17:52). The sketch-like style creates the effect of immediacy and contributes to an energy within the painting, activating the still scene even as Marat and Bara each expire. Particularly with *The Death of Joseph Bara*, David utilized this aesthetic to create an emblem of the child martyr, one that eschewed narrative details, thereby activating viewers as co-makers of meaning and allowing French citizens to see their own heroic potential.

This story in three acts is ultimately a study in different types of ephemerality: the fleetingness of political power for the Jacobins, and of political relevance for the child martyr pulled from obscurity; the provisional nature of celebrity, particularly amid Revolution; and, the even more unstable nature of how to depict it. Furthermore, this is a story about the impossible task of planning an ideologically-laden procession and anticipating the socio-political context in which it will be received, the use of a studied aesthetic to connote spontaneity and authenticity, and the irreconcilable timelines of an established, time-consuming process of image-making and the need to capture rapidly unfolding events. By resituating the aesthetically irresolute painting in its intended, but aborted, function, audience, and context, this paper explicates the multiple modes of contingencies in play and the dynamic intervention of the artist in the project of History making. Through this exploration, the so-called *The Death of Joseph Bara* can be understood not as a depiction of martyrdom, but rather as a representation of the child martyr's apotheosis, thereby memorializing the ephemeral performance and giving it enduring form.

2. *Martyrdom*

On 30 December 1793 (10 *nivôse an II*), *Le Moniteur Universel* reported on the unprecedented demand made by Robespierre at the National Convention two days before. In seizing on an account of an obscure, if tragic death in the Vendée, Robespierre elevated an unknown youth to the status of Revolutionary legend. Two weeks prior, Bertrand Barère de Vieuzac[3] reported on the civil

3 Barère from now on.

war raging in the Vendée to the Convention. He read a letter from Desmarres, a commanding military officer, recounting the bravery of a 13-year-old boy who gave up his life protecting his general's horses from Royalists. Desmarres asked the Republic to compensate the family, particularly the mother, of the young patriot Joseph Bara, who had been his family's sole provider.[4] The boy's role in a single heroic act made him "ideal material" (Weston 1996, 234) for use within the context of Jacobin propaganda and mythologizing. As Régis Michel noted (1989, 59), it is the ways in which Bara's death has been exploited, manipulated, and deployed that fascinates us, rather than the episode itself (Weston 1996; Perna 2021).

On 28 December 1793 (8 *nivôse an II*), Robespierre (1793) revived the discussion; with embellishment, he insisted that "Parmi les belles actions qui se sont passées dans la Vendée et qui ont honoré la guerre de la liberté contre la tyrannie, la Nation entière doit distinguer celle d'un jeune homme". Such rhetoric was substantiated by a fabricated story of Bara murdered by a Royalist brigade for purportedly crying out "Vive la République!" rather than "Vive le Roi!". Bara was praised for his courage, and for his unequivocal love for his country, which was matched only by his sense of filial duty. During a dark and turbulent time, Bara emerged as a symbol of national unity and hope. Robespierre proclaimed "Il n'est pas possible de choisir un plus bel exemple, un plus parfait modèle pour exciter dans les jeunes cœurs l'amour de la gloire, de la Patrie et de la vertu" (Ibid.).

Further, Robespierre requested that Bara be granted the honors of the Pantheon, typically reserved for great men. In so doing, the National Convention also fulfilled one of the fundamental remits of the Pantheon as conceived by the theorist Quatremère de Quincy, who intended that the temple be a site for commemorating and producing national heroes.[5] Robespierre (1793) specified three requests: that the ceremony be celebrated without delay, that "le génie des arts caractérise dignement cette cérémonie", and that David in particular would be "spécialement chargé de prêter ses talens à l'embellissement de cette fête". This choice was made

4 "Séance du dimanche 15 décembre 1793 (25 frimaire an II)," in *Archives Parlementaires*, vol. 81, 490 (last accessed 31/01/2025)

5 See the *Rapport sur l'édifice dit de Sainte-Geneviève, fait au Directoire du Département de Paris* by Quatremère de Quincy (1791) and a discussion by Ozouf (1984, 150). For more on Quatremère's project in creating the Pantheon, see Naginski 2009.

as much for David's artistic skill as for his well-known Jacobin politics. As Helen Weston (1996, 234) noted, "responsibility for the form that the painting took lay as much with the speeches of Robespierre and Barère de Vieuzac at the National Convention as it did with David himself". This was certainly true for the painting's conceptual construction, if not for its form. Furthermore, the choice of the painter served to reiterate Bara's place among national heroes such as Louis-Michel Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau and Marat, whose virtuous deaths had been glorified by David in portraits and funerary ceremonies.

Present at the National Convention, David (1793) buoyantly undertook the project, declaring: "Ce sont de telles actions que j'aime à retracer. Je remercie la Nature de m'avoir donné quelques talens pour célébrer la gloire des héros de la République". Following more applause, Barère (1793), a devout Jacobin, specified that the image should be used to teach to the youth of France that "…leurs vertus ne sont ni inutiles ni obscures, et que les représentans du Peuple savent les honorer dans tous les âges, et les récompenser au milieu même des mouvemens terribles et variables des révolutions."

Barère's emphasis on "la vertu toute entière, simple et modeste, comme elle est sortie des mains de la Nature" (1793) of Bara served as a compelling rhetorical device for uniting the Nation. However, it also posed a problem for the artist. Despite Robespierre's embellishments, Bara's story lacked a compelling narrative. A myriad of engravings following the National Convention's decree represented Bara's portrait alone or alongside vignettes of other martyrs (Figs. 3 and 4). Other depictions gave form to Robespierre's concocted narrative through the inclusions of the Royalist murderers, the horses Bara was holding, or both (Fig. 5). These representations of the youthful boy being murdered mid-cry, at times by snooty aristocrats or else by burly hooligans, are uniformly unbelievable, if not downright ridiculous. They certainly could not translate to the type of ennobling image David was trained, and expected, to create.

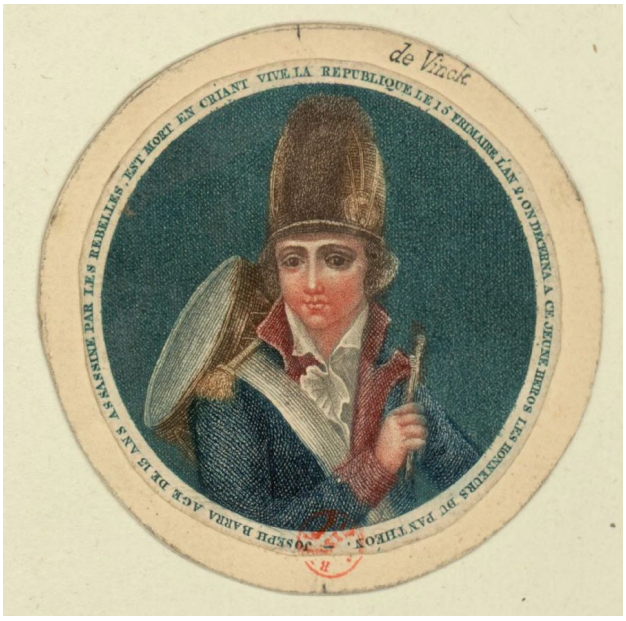

Figure 3. Anonymous, *Joseph Barra aged 13 assassinated by rebels died crying out Vive la République, 15 frimaire l'an 2, the honors of the Pantheon have been granted to this young hero,* 1794, hand-colored engraving, 6 cm (diameter).
Paris, BnF, Cabinet des estampes et de la photographie, (RESERVE QB-370 (47)-FT 4) [De Vinck, tome 47: 6367]

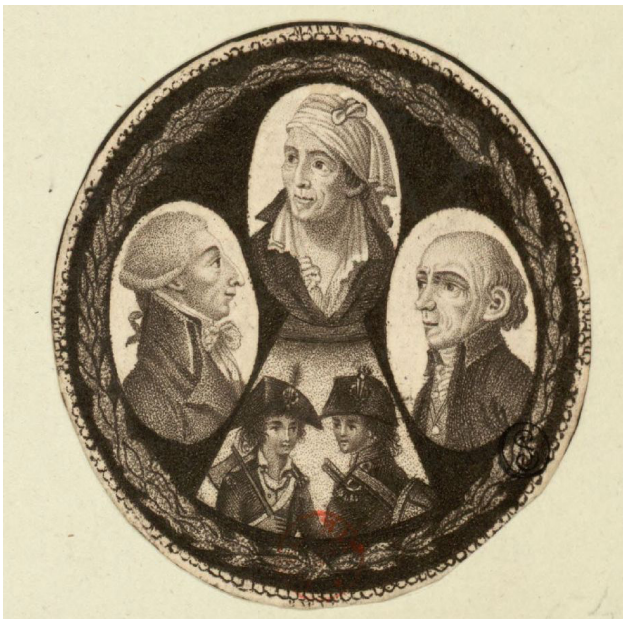

Figure 4. Anonymous, *Peletier, Marat, Chalier, Viala, Bara*, 1793/1794, aquatint, 5.5 cm (diam.). Paris, BnF, Cabinet des estampes et de la photographie (RESERVE QB-370 (33)-FT 4) [De Vinck, tome 33: 5422]

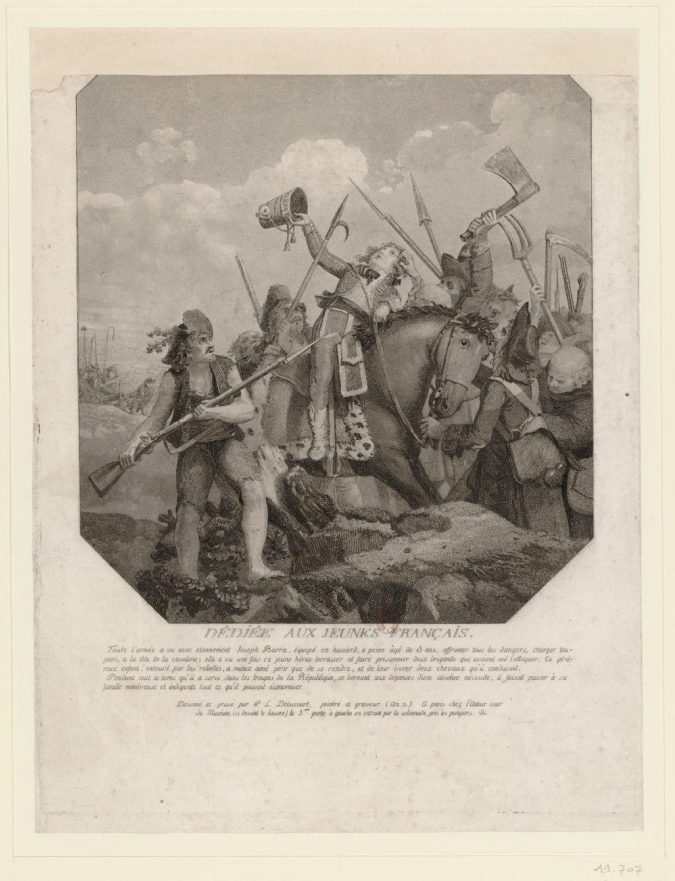

Figure 5. Philibert Louis Debucourt, *The heroic death of young Barra: dedicated to the youth of France...*, 1794, engraving; 25x23 cm. Paris, BnF, Cabinet des estampes et de la photographie, Paris (RESERVE FOL-EF-98 (1)) [Hennin, tome 133: 11707]

A portrait of an unknown, nondescript boy presented an obvious, albeit uncompelling, alternative. General Desmarres wrote again to the Convention to assist David by including a drawing and offering further thoughts on "l'attitude où il devrait être", suggesting a narrative scene rather than a portrait. These new details align with the Jacobin vision of Bara in some respects, but diverge dramatically in others. While no trace remains of the sketch, the details in the letter lent specificity to Robespierre's constructed myth, which would be deployed in some of the representations of Bara.

Fundamental to the Jacobin conception of Bara was his erstwhile nobodiness. Anonymous and unexceptional, Bara lacked any particular characteristics; each French citizen had within themselves the potential of

his heroism. Amid a period of violent turmoil, there were undoubtedly many unsung individuals whose actions had assisted the Revolution's cause. They could have been championed and elevated to the status of national hero, but they would not have the unmitigated symbolic potential of the child martyr.

The elevation of the idea of the child martyr was particularly related to the radical thinking of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his pre-revolutionary vision of a republic of virtue (Blum 1986; Higonnet 1998). Paramount to Rousseau's idea was a search for primitive purity and a concern for the natural and innate–the infamous idea that men are born good. For this reason, the child was a salient locus for Jacobin politicians seeking to generate a communal sense of goodness and virtue. Robespierre's choice of Bara, at an especially complicated moment of unrest and amid domestic and international military threats to undermine the 'way the world still needed to change' and to undo the 'way the world has changed,'[6] was fundamentally linked to Bara's youth and adjacent notions of purity and authenticity.

This rhetorical potential is underscored by the seamless association of Bara with another child martyr, Agricol Viala. In July 1793, prior to Bara's deeds, Viala tried to help a group of National Guardsmen by cutting the ropes of the Bompas bridge to prevent advancing Royalist forces from crossing the Durance River. By attracting fatal Royalist fire to himself, Viala saved the National Guardsmen.[7] Viala, too, had a mother who was consoled by the thought that her son died for his country. The Convention neither adopted her, nor supported her financially, unlike Bara's mother, but exalted her, proclaiming: "*Quelle femme! Quelle mère! Quelle citoyenne*!" (Tallien 1794, 5). Viala's story served primarily to bolster the Bara myth; its first mention in official contexts was tacked on to a decree concerning Bara, almost unnoticed.

6 "Le monde a changé, il doit changer encore." (Robespierre 1794, 931).

7 See the *Précis historique sur Agricole Viala* by Tallien (1794, 4). Commissioned by the Committee of Public Instruction, this pamphlet was printed on 13 messidor l'an II (July 1, 1794) and reprinted in *Le Moniteur Universel*, 12 July 1794, 1202. See also Michel 1989; Perna 2021.

3. *Fête*

On 7 May 1794 (18 *floréal an II*), Robespierre offered his most impassioned speech.[8] The Festival to the Supreme Being, Robespierre's central project and ultimately his undoing, was presented at length, charging David to present a plan to the Convention for that festival (Smyth 2016). At the end of Robespierre's speech, Barère casually added a proposition, stating simply: "Je demande que le 30 prairéal, elles y soient portées avec l'urne d'Agricole Vialat [sic]" (1794). Met with applause, Barère's addendum incorporated Viala into the canon of Revolutionary heroes and integrated him into Jacobin rhetoric, albeit always as secondary to Bara.

Barère's comments shed light on the mundane but essential question of the festival's date. At the moment that Viala entered the discourse on 7 May 1794 (18 *floréal*), the pantheonization ceremony was scheduled for 18 June 1794 (30 *prairial*). At some unknown point(s) for unspecified reasons, the ceremony was subsequently rescheduled first for 11 July (23 *messidor*), then to 18 July (30 *messidor*),[9] and finally for 28 July (10 *thermidor an II*). This sequence of displacements and dates becomes fundamental for understanding the state of David's painting and his program for the pantheonization ceremony.

In an account delivered to the National Convention on 11 July 1794 (23 *messidor*), David (1794) sought to prove the need for an "all-encompassing moral regeneration" best embodied by "spontaneous cries to live free or die". Participant in Jacobin rhetoric, David mused on how, having disposed of royal tyranny, the government could now focus on returning citizens to truth and virtue. Bara and Viala were held as prime examples of these that would make enemies tremble. David contended, "*Les Français sont tous des Barras & des Vialas*" (1794, 6), thereby reaffirming the potential heroic capacity of every French citizen.

David's program followed the growing tradition of Revolutionary festivals characterized by ideologically-charged performances, such as the *Fête de la Fédération*, and spectacles that included funerary processions and public mourning (Ozouf 1991). Commemorated in formal texts, private written ex-

8 The proceedings of the National Convention on 7 May 1794 were reported by *Le Moniteur Universel*, 8 May 1794.

9 In some locations, for example in Avignon, the festival celebrating Bara and Viala was still held on this previously scheduled date (Michel 1989, 37).

changes, and images, these precedents offer counterpoints to how David chose to plan Bara's pantheonization ceremony. For example, there was no mourning of the martyr's body laid to rest in state, as in the case of Marat, commemorated in images such as *Funeral of Marat at the Cordeliers Church, July 15 and 16, 1793* (Fig. 6). Nor was ephemeral architecture that punctuated the cityscape a feature of this festival, as it was in many others (Gin 2023, 61–80).[10]

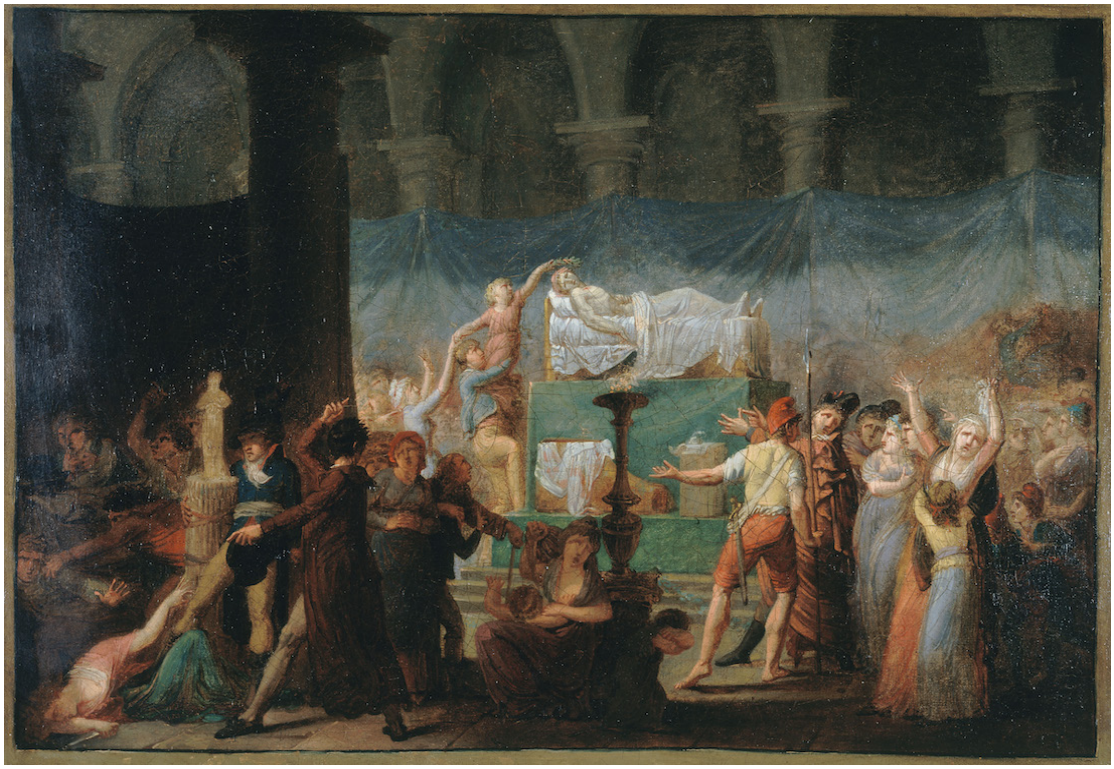

Figure 6. Attributed to Fougeat, *Funeral of Marat at the Cordeliers Church, July 15 and 16, 1793*, c. 1793, oil on canvas, 80×93.5 cm. Paris, Musée Carnavalet-Histoire de Paris, P.70

David's plan for the ceremony reinforced the youth of the child martyrs by honoring their mothers (Monnier 1980; Michel 1989). His choreography included features of military processions and extended speeches by the President of the Convention who was to be costumed by David as Representative of the

10 My thanks to Matthew Gin for our ongoing exchange around Revolutionary-era festivals and ephemeral architecture.

People (Fig. 7). Following an initial discourse at the Jardin national, David envisioned a procession in two columns of people: the one at right composed of young children of the same age as the martyred boys who would carry Viala's ashes in an urn; the left, of mothers whose children had died glorious deaths "defending our liberty" carrying the mortal remains of Bara.[11]

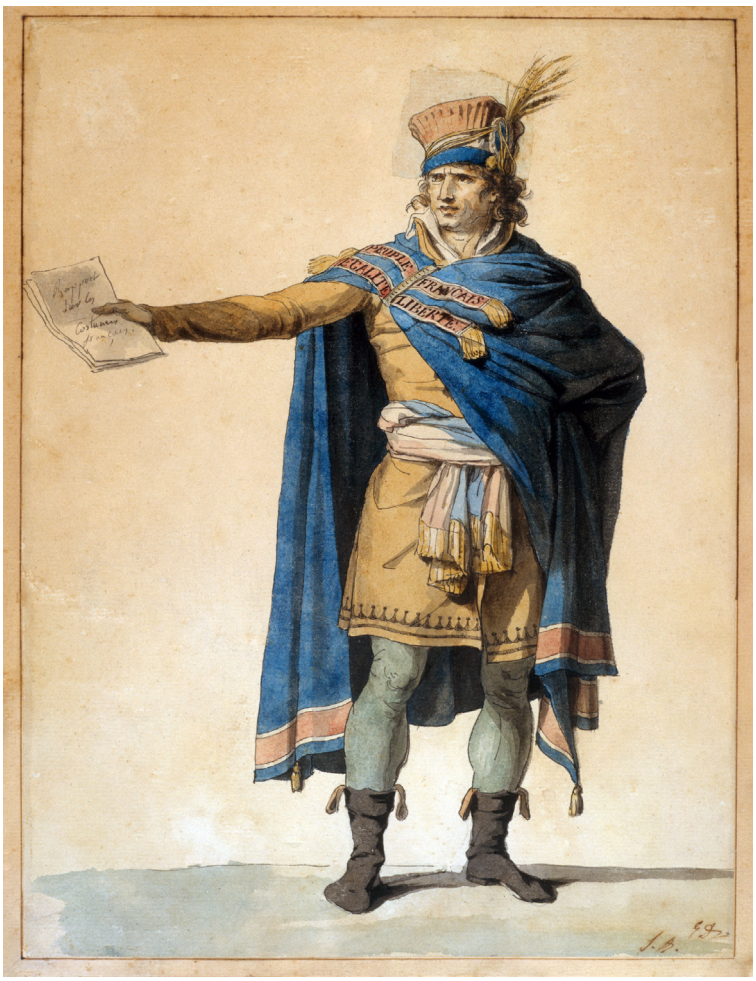

Figure 7. Jacques-Louis David, *Costume Project for the Representative of the People,* c. 1794, pen and brown ink, watercolor, 31.6x21.9 cm. Paris, Musée Carnavalet-Histoire de Paris, D. 7059

11 David's "Plan d'Ordonnance de la Fête" was delivered as part of his *Rapport*, read at the Proceedings of the National Convention of 23 *messidor an II* [11 July 1794] and published by the Imprimerie de la Convention Nationale, 11–14. A close reading of the parallels between the choreography of David's program for the festivities and Jacobin propaganda and rhetoric is offered by Raymonde Monnier (1980) in his exploration of the cults surrounding Bara.

David's choreography included male and female musicians, singers, dancers, and poets distributed between both columns.[12] Then, representatives of the Convention would escort wounded soldiers and the mother and sisters of Bara, followed by lay individuals adhering to a more standard format of a funerary procession. In front of the Panthéon, the procession would chant *"Ils sont morts pour la patrie!"* three times and then the two columns would encircle an altar on which the members of the convention–surrounded by military youth–would place the urns accompanied by a hymn by Charles-Joseph Loeuillard Davrigny set to a military march by Étienne-Nicolas Méhu.[13] Davrigny's text concludes with a beseeching of the Temple of Heroes to open its triumphant entrance to two new martyrs.

Following another discourse by the President of the Convention, the urns would be moved into the building itself, at which point the funerary tone would be abandoned. David's stage directions indicate a fundamental change in mood: "*Tout change; la douleur disparoît, l'alégresse publique remplace*" (1794, 12). And the people would cry three times *"Ils sont immortels!*" Despite the detailed descriptions given to other elements of the choreography, only a brief mention is given to the painting. David writes "*Chaque colonne aura en* tête les images de Barra & de Viala *dont les actions seront représentées sur la toile*" (Ibid.).[14] This single sentence of David's *Rapport* serves to both illuminate and complicate David's extant representation. Do David's words suggest one painting each of Bara and Viala in the entire procession (i.e., two canvases)? Or one of each per column (i.e., four canvases)? The word *toile,* however, is in the singular, suggesting just one painting, or perhaps just one composition that might be repeated and multiplied.

Régis Michel (1989) has argued that *The Death of Bara* was intended for use in the Pantheonization ceremony, a life-size *ex-voto* presiding over the public festivities. Unlike the examples of Le Peletier and Marat, whose funerary cer-

12 This signals changes in the professionalization of such political pageant performers that now allowed for the participation of women as well as men.

13 Étienne-Nicolas Méhul, *Hymne chanté par le peuple à la fête de Barra et Viala le 10 thermidor, par Davrigny...*, adopté par la Commission de l'Instruction publique [n° 18]. 1794.

14 As Thomas Crow (2006, 338) has noted, the language of the French original might be interpreted to indicate paintings of each Bara and Viala at the head of each column for a total of four paintings, but it seems more likely that this is a case of "imprecision of grammar" and that two paintings were intended.

emonies were staged around the murdered hero's corpse, there was no physical body to give corporeal reality to the construction of the child martyr.[15] It follows logically that David would depart from previous processes and create such an effigy to coincide with the celebration.

Aware of the mercurial nature of the Revolution, David would be unlikely to miss the opportunity to present his homage to the child martyr at the height of the cult's power and prominence. The ceremony embedded a deadline for the painting. Scheduled for 10 *thermidor*, and indeed originally for a month earlier, it eliminates the possibility that the artist abandoned the painting upon the fall of Robespierre the preceding day.[16] Fundamental to the medium of oil paint is the need for a canvas, even one as thinly painted as the *Bara*, to dry for several days before being moved. However, the actions of 9 *thermidor* eliminated the audience for, and undermined any salience of, the celebration of Bara and Viala.

4. *Portrayal*

David's representation eschews narrative content, aside from the ambiguous suggestion of a flag-bearing figure at left. Could this be an indicator of the murderous Royalists escaping, or Bara's own brigade coming to find him? Or could one imagine a more symbolic, even poetic interpretation that understands this figure as an indication that the child martyr is not alone, neither abandoned or forgotten, but honored and exalted? This faint detail in the background can be juxtaposed with the foregrounded elements: the Revolutionary cockade and a clutched piece of paper. The paper, often presumed to be a letter to his mother, reiterates Robespierre's emphasis on Bara's filial piety as a complement to his love for his country.

15 Bara was originally buried, as Desmarres offers to disinter the body in his second letter to the National Convention. As there is no further mention of this aspect, it seems likely that the Convention did not take Desmarres up on his proposition. The "mortal remains" of Bara mentioned in David's *Rapport* were likely symbolic or stand-ins, then. Viala's remains are mentioned as being in an urn in the letter from his uncle to Robespierre that first introduces the boy's heroic story.

16 Many authors insist that David's own imprisonment after the fall of Robespierre precluded his ability to complete *The Death of Joseph Bara*. This necessarily presumes that the painting was not finished on 9 Thermidor, which I contend could not have been the case.

The cockade is the only locus of full color saturation in the painting, rendered in medium-rich opaque (though still thin) paint. It is the fallen figure's primary attribute, yet Bara had no particular claim to the tricolor cockade, which was a ubiquitous–even compulsory–accoutrement by 1793 (Riberio 1988; Wrigley 2002). As Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell notes (2015, 271), "What began as a fashion…quickly became a necessity, and voluntary patriotism became enforced conformity to the principles of the Revolution. By 1792, the cockade was mandatory for both sexes".

This inclusion ensured that the painting's iconography was legible to all French citizens and emphasized the child martyr's status as a commoner. The inverse implication, however, was just as salient: that every French citizen could become a Revolutionary hero.[17] In giving his child martyr the omnipresent tricolor cockade, David positioned his painting as fully participant in the discourses igniting the genuine fervor and virtuous self-sacrifice, and allowing–or forcing–citizens to imbue their daily lives with the ideal of the child martyr.

As a processional banner, the aesthetic demands and expectations of David's painting would differ considerably from that of a Salon painting. Canvases for processional banners were often prepared with a thinner ground layer, to make them less rigid, and anticipated a different, fleeting, mode of looking from their observers. Certainly, *The Death of Joseph Bara* looks very different from the large-scale artworks that David had previously displayed in the Salons, for government or private patronage.[18] With the present painting in motion, the central figure of the nude youth would gain prominence,

17 Debates around citizenship continued throughout the Revolutionary decade. The tricolor cockade was standard for any man of a 'sword-bearing' age; while women did not hold full rights as citizens, they frequently wore the cockade, as did children. Despite abolitionist debates in 1793, there do not seem to be representations of black French 'citizens' wearing the cockade, although the colors of the French flag do appear regularly in their garments or trappings.

18 David severely limited his participation in Revolutionary-era Salons, opting primarily to re-exhibit paintings that had previously been shown in earlier Salons. In the Salon of 1791, David exhibited four new works: the drawing of *The Oath of the Tennis Court* (Versailles) and three female portraits, including the *Comtesse de Sorcy* (Munich) and the *Marquise d'Orvilliers* (Louvre) both of which date to 1790 and show evidence of David's initial experimentation with a more open, scumbled style that would come to characterize his pre-1794 Revolutionary-era production.

and the background would serve only as a distraction. This might account for the shadows around the child's feet; in the context of a ceremonial procession and coupled with the other bodily dislocations in the painting, these shadows might suggest *rigor mortis* setting in, emphasizing the moment of the boy's expiration.

In November 1794, the Committee of Public Safety received a petition from François Gérard and Gioacchino Giuseppe Serangeli, students of David. The petition claimed that they had been asked "par le Représentant du Peuple David de faire deux tableaux destinés à server de banniéres dans la fête du 10 Thermidor. Ces tableaux représentent les actions de Barra et Viala."[19] The text goes on to indicate that the paintings were in David's studio in the former Feuillants abbey, presumably in anticipation of the festival.

This evidence of suggests that these correspond to the two canvases intended to lead the respective ceremonial columns,[20] although precisely how they represented "actions of Bara and Viala" remains a mystery. If a close copy after David's painting in Lille (Fig. 8) might be productively connected with Gérard or Serangeli, one could conceive of David's composition replicated in the procession, reinforcing the image of the expiring child martyr as an emblem rather than a specific individual. This would be aligned with precedent, as David had requested that Gérard and Serangeli make copies of *Marat at his Last Breath* after he completed his version.[21] While there are subtle differences in the three versions, the devoted students ultimately executed copies after David's composition. It can therefore be surmised that the canvases mentioned in the petition are not of other 'actions' of Bara and Viala, but of the same composition as David's canvas–repetitions of the child hero's only action of importance: his martyrdom for the Republic.

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19 F17/1242/ cart. 31, dos. 356, Archives nationales de France, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine; published in Foissy-Aufrère et al. 1989, 163.

20 *Gattey, au sujet d'un projet d'écoles spéciales de peinture, sculpture, architecture et dessin*, F/17/1242, cart. 31, dos. 356, Archives nationales de France, Pierrefitte-sue-Seine; published in Foissy-Aufrère et al. 1989, 164.

21 The two copies of *Marat at His Last Breath* are in the Louvre and Versailles collections. There is some scholarly debate on which version should be attributed to Gérard and which to Serangeli, see Defeyt and Vandepitte 2022. This author attributes the Versailles version to Gérard and the Louvre version to Serangeli. Additional later copies are in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Reims and in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon.

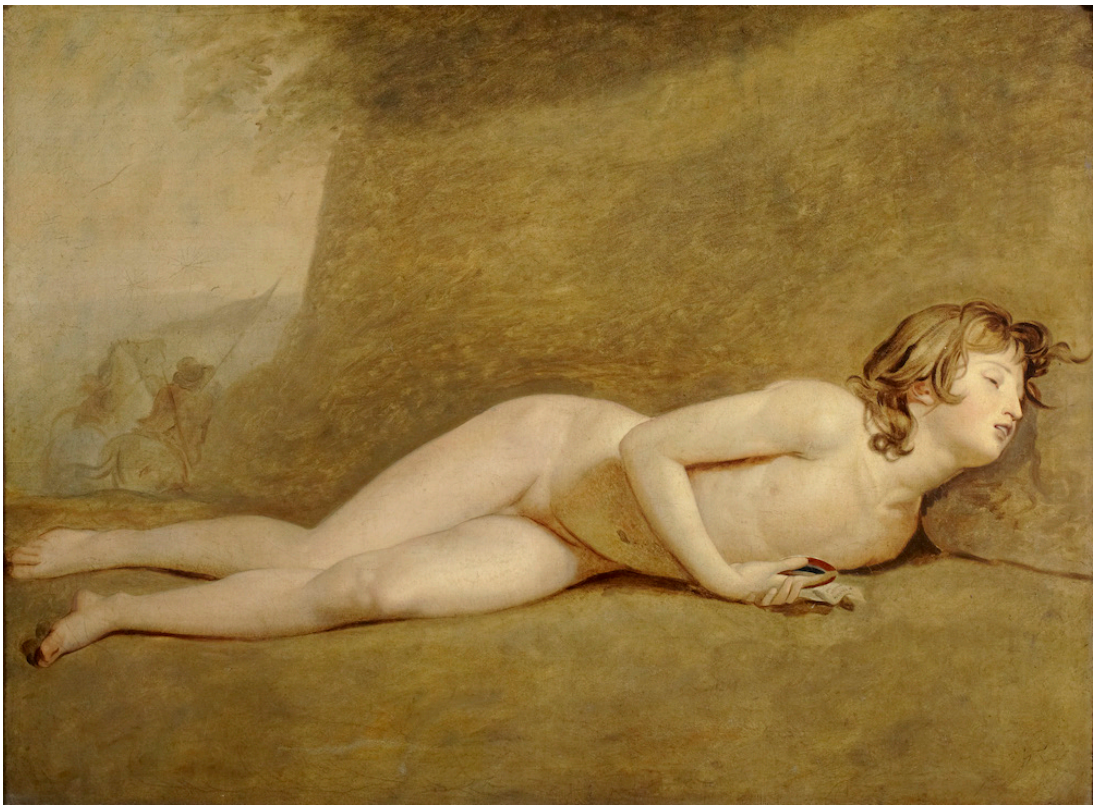

Figure 8. After Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Bara*, after 1794?, oil on canvas, 96.2x129 cm. Lille, Palais Beaux-Arts, inv. P925; inv. MRF D 2004-9. © Coll. Musée de la Révolution française – Département de l'Isère – Dépôt du Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lille

In a follow-up request to the Minister of the Interior dated 10 December 1795 (19 *frimaire an IV*), Gérard and Serangeli offered telling details about their contributions to the intended festival, noting that they were "en détrempé" and that they were now "inutiles... il ne paraît pas qu'on puisse en faire aucun usage". They claim to want the canvases back for the materials, requesting "que les toiles nous en soient remises pour nous faciliter de nouveaux moyens d'étude."[22] The tone of this request is in stark contrast to the first petition, which attests to the distinctly new condition of arts and politics in December 1795, under the auspices of the newly instated Directory government. At-

22 *Gattey, au sujet d'un projet d'écoles spéciales de peinture, sculpture, architecture et dessin*, F/17/1242, cart. 31, dos. 356, Archives nationales de France, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine; in Foissy-Aufrère et al. (1989, 164).

tached to the request is a note in another hand that reads: "Les artistes Gérard (et Serangeli) demandent de plus qu'on leur accorde les morceaux d'étoffes de serge rouge qui étaient destines à décorer le tableau, et qui y tiennent. Cet objet ne peut être d'aucune utilité pour la République et peuvent l'être beaucoup à ces artistes. Ils s'en serviraient pour draper leurs mannequins." (Ibid.)

Gérard and Serangeli's request that their banners, and accompanying decorative drapery,[23] be returned to them offer often-overlooked insight into the aesthetics of the festival that ought to fundamentally impact interpretation of David's painted contribution. The artists note that their processional banners were painted "en détrempé" usually taken to mean in distemper, or a "quick tempera medium" (Crow 2006, 178). Eighteenth-century artistic dictionaries associate "*en détrempre*" as the appropriate medium for painting interior walls, as opposed to established nineteenth or twentieth-century notions of distemper paint as a thinned-oil medium. It is possible that Gérard and Serangeli meant a casein-based paint medium.[24] A milk-protein binder would have much the same effect as traditional tempera: the paint would be fast-drying (a positive attribute for a processional banner) and water-soluble,[25] but, most importantly, it would have a flat and thin aesthetic effect.

David's sparse quasi-monochromatic canvas can best be understood, then, in the context of its adjacent artistic productions. This puts to rest the assertion that it would have been inconceivable for the preeminent painter of Neoclassicism to leave the *Bara* with so much of the facture of the canvas and of individual brushstrokes visible. Rather, David likely conceived

23 The commentary that the drapery was to decorate the painting, in the singular, could be interpreted that the red fabric was to be draped over David's unique painting. If the red cloth had decorated both Gérard and Serangeli's canvases, one would expect the note to read in the plural. However, this might be imprecision or oversight on the part of the scribe.

24 I am grateful to paintings conservators Jim Coddington and Matthew Hayes for their suggestions of this interpretation of '*en détrempe*', based on little known eighteenth-century practices. For example, Thomas Gainsborough's use of milk as a paper-sizing agent has recently been studied by conservators at The Thaw Conservation Center of The Morgan Library & Museum.

25 The medium's water solubility likely accounts for the complete disappearance of any trace of these paintings, which were likely reused by the artists for other compositions. While it is theoretically possible that traces of the original composition could be discovered under an extant painting depending on the pigments used by the artists, this is highly unlikely if a thinned- or water-soluble binder was utilized.

of his oil-on-canvas painting to be complemented aesthetically by the two thinly-painted processional paintings '*en détrempe*' executed by his trusted pupils, Gérard and Serangeli.

The introduction of Viala represented a fundamental change of circumstance for David's project. It had an impact that has heretofore been overlooked: that the painting should be understood not as a representation of the heroic action of Bara. Rather, David embarked on the more ambitious – and precarious – project of creating an emblem of the child martyr, and ephemerally depicting that figure at the moment of his apotheosis.

As an academically trained history painter, David ignored the anecdotal aspects of the story and focused on the moment of greatest didactic and moral potential. In the constructed narrative about Bara, this should probably have been the boy's fatal cry of "Vive la République!", but that moment was fundamentally aural rather than visual. Such a scene would also have required David to depict the Royal rebels, an inclusion that would have detracted from the viewer's focus on Bara's purity and love for his country. The youth's parted lips do not suggest anything audible, but rather a sense of his strained breath. Paired with the barely open eyes, the lips create a meditative aura to the boy's presence, drawing even more attention to the incongruous tension in the neck and arms that clutch the cockade to his breast. The moment of greatest didactic and moral potential that David has chosen, then, is that of transition between life and death, between childhood and adulthood, but also between individual and icon.

The inclusion of fine finishing details in the boy's face, especially touches of red in a fine brush at the inner corner of his eye and as shadowing for the inside of his nostrils, speak to the painting's completed status and, along with the greyish-rosy cheeks, add a sense of vitality. The face is framed by cascading locks rendered in both brown paint and a dry black or grey drawing medium strokes of which appear both below and on top of the painted brushstrokes. The area of the chest, shoulders, and neck is additionally emphasized by the lighting effects that render the boy's right shoulder almost white; the shadows of the collar bone are articulated with just a single brushstroke on top of the thinnest scumbles that barely tone the light ground layer. David exhibits a great economy of means, both in the amount of paint medium used, but also in the relatively few strokes with which he uses to model forms. David's use of a *frottis* technique creates a porous quality to the painting, contributing to a sense ethereality. The boy's flowing hair, which adds to the figure's androgyny, becomes subsumed by an

area of shadow on the far side of his face that serves to emphasize the carefully delineated profile with its generic, unidealized features and proportions.

A rarely-discussed preparatory drawing offers insight into David's thinking about the youth's positioning (Fig. 9). The drawing reveals that David had identified the figure's attributes; the aforementioned cockade and a piece of paper in his right and left hands respectively. Bara's body is positioned awkwardly on a mound where the earth seems to have swelled inexplicably. The drawing reveals some uncertainty, if not anxiety, around the positioning of the boy's genitals, with the artist's hand clearly hovering over this area as indicated by the numerous chalk marks.

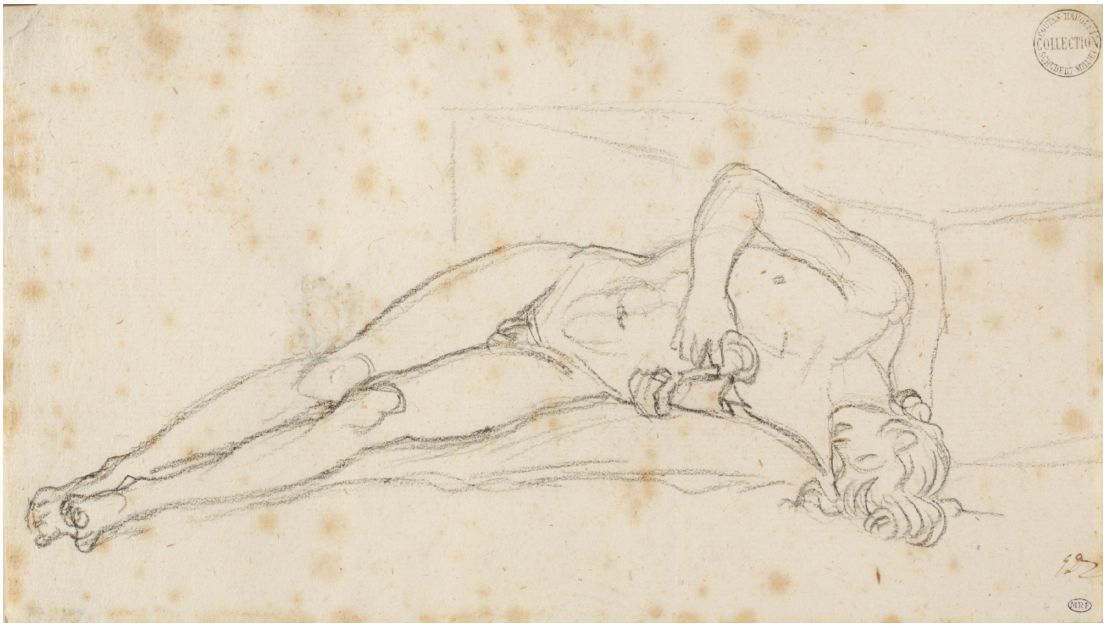

Figure 9. Jacques-Louis David, *Study for the Death of Bara*, 1793/1794, black chalk on paper, 13.8x24.7 cm. Vizille, Musée de la Révolution française: inv. MRF 1994.55 © Coll. Musée de la Révolution française – Département de l'Isère.

In David's painting, the youth is uncomfortably splayed. The position of the body eliminates the genitals that were troubling the artist in the preparatory sketch. Regardless of its cause, the effect of this deficiency emphasizes the figure's youthful androgyny.[26] The androgyny allows for further ambiguity, and

26 Bara's absent genitalia has preoccupied many scholars and resulted in a myriad of far-reaching, psychological, and implausible readings of the painting. The most compelling

for David's 'everyman' to become 'any body'. The artist's exchange of toned musculature of the stomach in the drawing for the soft suppleness of the figure's belly cast in shadow further underscores this ambiguity. A consummate student of anatomy, David was certainly capable of rendering the delineated musculature of a traditional male nude; such *académies* were the foundation of the erstwhile *Académie Royale*'s pedagogy, and paramount to the Neoclassical style. The decision to depict the body as it appears, then, should not be considered an accident or a mistake, but rather an artistic choice. The figure's androgyny amplifies its political connotations.

The ambiguity around the figure's identity is underscored by David's student and early biographer, Étienne-Jean Delécluze, who describes seeing the painting in David's Louvre studio in 1796, describing it as "une charmante ébauche d'un enfant nu, mourant en pressant la cocarde tricolore sur son Coeur; c'était le jeune Viala" (1855, 19–20). Notable, here, is that the painting of the boy martyr was kept on display alongside the *Brutus* and the *Oath of the Horatii*. Delécluze's 'mistake' attests to the interchangeability of the two figures, one that was likely intentional on the part of the artist. David was not interested in representing Bara or Viala, but rather an emblem of the child martyr. This hinges on the elimination of narrative specificity already discussed and on the aesthetic forms deployed–both in the figure and in the use of an aesthetic of contingency to engage the imagination and to convey a sense of urgency and immediacy. In this, the painting is responsive to the ephemeral performance that it was intended to both commemorate and embody.

Occupying a liminal space between allegory and realism, David's emblem speaks to the unbridled potential of French citizens, even children. In so doing, it prioritizes a Jacobin vision of heroism in which the artist so fervently believed. With an aesthetic responsive to the political circumstances of the Revolution, David's *The Death of Joseph Bara* or, perhaps more accurately *The Apotheosis of the Child Martyr* was rendered ephemeral by the ongoing evolution and acceleration that inspired its materiality.

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interpretation is offered by Crow (2006, 182), who suggests that the reddish paint in the crease of flesh that unconvincingly covers the missing penis has a titillating quality to it that could be understood as "inflected by sexual desire" in a modern sense, but that it is an unconscious and ambiguous gesture.

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