Iconoclasm during the French Revolution*

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MY friend," wrote Diderot in 1765, "if we love truth more than the fine arts, let us pray God for some iconoclasts."[1] In this oracular statement from one of the tutelary deities of the Enlightenment there is the germ of a major dilemma for the men of the French Revolution. First, they realized that France was a treasure house of Western art, and that any French government wishing to justify itself in the eyes of contemporaries or of posterity would have to respect the French artistic inheritance. Second, the men of the Revolution knew that painting, sculpture, and architecture, in the years before 1789, had been used as instruments of social control, as textbooks in morals and politics. Both the *philosophes* and the royal art ministers had agreed that the chief function of the arts was didactic: "The governors of men have always made use of painting and sculpture in order to inspire in their subjects the religious or political sentiments they desire them to hold."[2] Most of the art criticism of the late eighteenth century confirms this view, and variations upon this refrain were constantly repeated during the Revolution itself.[3]

Here, then, is the painful dilemma of the revolutionaries: They had to demonstrate that the fine arts would not suffer under a revolutionary regime, but many of the social, political, and religious values expressed in the art of the pre-1789 era were, in revolutionary terms, "untrue," and had to be

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[1] *Magazin encyclopédique,* III (1795), 52–53. The passage is from Diderot's critique of the Salon of 1765.

[2] Diderot, *et al.,* eds., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonnée des sciences, des arts et des métiers* . . . (Paris, 1751–65), article "Peinture," XII, 267.

[3] See La Font de Saint-Yenne, *L'ombre du Grand Colbert, le Louvre, et la Ville de Paris, Dialogue. Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'Etat présent de la peinture en France* . . . (Paris, 1752), *passim;* M. L—— P——, *Observations générales sur le sallon de 1783, et sur l'état des arts en France* (Paris, 1783), p. 31; *Journal de Paris,* no. 279 (Oct. 6, 1787), pp. 1203–1204; Fernand Engerand, ed., *Inventaire des tableaux commandés et achetés par la direction des batiments du roi (1709–1792)* (Paris, 1900), p. xxix; Jean Locquin, *La peinture d'histoire en France de 1747 à 1785* (Paris, 1912), p. 51; David L. Dowd, *Pageant-Master of the Republic: Jacques-Louis David and the French Revolution* (Lincoln, 1948), chaps. 1, 2. For comment in a similar vein during the Revolution, see Jérôme Mavidal, Emile Laurent, *et al.,* eds., *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860* . . . (Paris, 1862–1913), Ser. 1 [hereafter cited as *Arch. parl.*], XVI, 541; XX, 293; XXII, 215; XXIV, 281–82; XXVI, 467–72; XXIX, 306; XLIV, 498. The philosophy of art common to the eighteenth century seems to have been derived from a vulgarization of sensationalist and associationist psychology prevalent during the era. See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1951), chap. 3.

destroyed. The revolutionaries were cultivated men; they were proud of their artistic heritage; they were confident that the visual arts were a school for both the illiterate and the literate, but they were also positive that the values of the *ancien régime* were false and had to be eradicated. If Diderot had been alive, they might well have replied to him, "We love the truth *and* the fine arts. What shall we do?"

Although both horns of the dilemma were clearly in view from the first days of the Revolution, the general tendency up to 1792 seemed to be to favor the preservation of the arts. This tendency was accurately reflected in the newspaper *L'Année littéraire* when it noticed an art exhibition in August, 1789. "France has always been *la patrie* of art and talent. One hopes that, in the astonishing revolution now under way, the Muses will not quit their customary asylum."[4] But it was not only "hoped" that the arts would continue to flourish; definite efforts were made to preserve the French art heritage—efforts made necessary by the nationalization of church property in November, 1789.

The sale of many church buildings to private individuals raised fears that the mosaics, stained-glass windows, statues, and paintings in these buildings would be either destroyed or dispersed.[5] To avoid the danger of such an artistic loss to the nation, the Constituent Assembly in 1790 created a Monuments Commission composed of members of several royal academies.[6] The chief duty of this group was to inventory and collect in various depots those works of art thought worthy of preservation by the state. The members lacked funds necessary for travel but attempted to reach departmental officials by publishing a brochure entitled, "Instructions concerning the conservation of manuscripts, charters . . . monuments of antiquity, statues, paintings, and other objects relating to the fine arts found in churches."[7] The Monuments Commission had some success in collecting, from the churches in the region around Paris, the funerary monuments of the former rulers of France and the princes and princesses of the royal blood. These monuments were then displayed in the abbey church at St. Denis, in the hope that both records of the past and the fine arts would be preserved at the same time.[8] The commission won high praise in the Constituent Assembly,[9] for such activity as this seemed to confirm the attitude expressed in a speech by Barère in May,

[4] *L'Année littéraire,* VI (September, 1789), 281.
[5] *Arch. parl.,* XIX, 434–35, 472, 603.
[6] *Ibid.,* XIX, 603; Louis Tuetey, ed., *Procès-verbaux de la Commission des monuments, 1790–4* (Paris, 1902, 1903), I, i–vii.
[7] *Arch. parl.,* XXI, 490 ff.
[8] *Procès-verbaux de la Commission des monuments,* I, 30.
[9] *Arch. parl.,* XXXI, 346.

1791. "The revolutions of a barbarous people," Barère said, "destroy all monuments, and the very trace of the arts seems to be effaced. The revolutions of an enlightened people conserve the fine arts, and embellish them, while the fruitful concern of the legislator causes the arts to be reborn as an ornament of the empire."[10]

For all this, there was an ominous undercurrent which boded ill for the arts. In the same month that the writer for *L'Année littéraire* was praying for the preservation of art and a continuation of artistic activity, the more radical *Révolutions de Paris* observed that

> the statues of kings in our cities are not the work of the people, but of courtesan ministers. . . . The recent events in the districts have doubtless impressed themselves upon everyone's memory, but Time will soon efface those memories. . . . for those who cannot read, it will be as though these names and ceremonies had never existed. We should speak to the people of their glory by means of a public monument, for we must not forget in this revolution the powerful language of symbols. . . . If it is objected that such a statue is too costly, then let us take the marble and bronze from the statue erected to the iniquitous Louis XIII which is an insult to both reason and humanity. From the debris of this monument we may raise one to the defenders of liberty and *la patrie*.[11]

To remind Frenchmen of the "powerful language of symbols" was a work of supererogation. Early in 1790 a group of artists, in a petition to the National Assembly, requested that the king "order the destruction of all monuments created during the feudal regime."[12] A short time later Quatremère de Quincy, a member of the Assembly, recalled to his fellow legislators Plato's fears for the people in the presence of corrupting art. While agreeing with Plato, De Quincy gave the philosopher's ideas a peculiar twist. "Under tyranny the arts turned the people from their true interests and caressed them to sleep," he wrote, but, "place the arts in the hands of the people, and they will become the flail of tyrants. The arts are only instruments, which will produce good or evil depending upon the hand that uses them."[13]

While these reminders of the necessity of legislative concern for the arts continued, the attitude of legislators remained ambivalent. For example, during the debate on the abolition of noble titles in June, 1790, a motion was passed which ordered the destruction of some bas-reliefs at the foot of Desjardins' statue of Louis XIV in the Place Victoire because they represented four French provinces in chains.[14] Within a week this destruction was accom-

[10] *Ibid.*, XXVI, 471–72.
[11] *Révolutions de Paris. . . .*, IX (Sept. 9, 1789), 25–26.
[12] M. Deltufo, *Discours prononcé a la barre de l'Assemblée Nationale, par M. Deltufo, directeur de la Société Polysophique* (Paris, 1790), p. 5.
[13] Antoine C. Quatremère de Quincy, *Considérations sur les arts du dessin en France, suivies d'un plan d'Académie . . .* (Paris, 1791), pp. 56–57.
[14] *Arch. parl.*, XVI, 374.

plished, yet nobody seemed to notice that the decree which abolished noble titles contained an article which specifically forbade destruction of monuments pertaining to the old order.[15]

This attitude of hesitation between the preservation and destruction of art seemed swept away after the uprising of the Paris Commune in 1792. August 10, 1792, marked the collapse of the monarchy and the beginning of a torrent of iconoclasm which was to last for three years. Mobs stirred by the tocsin on August 10 roamed the city and tore down the monuments which had immortalized the "Capetian line." Accompanied by the cheers of excited crowds, the statues of Henry IV, Louis XIII, XIV, and XV crashed to the ground.[16] During the session of the Legislative Assembly on August 11 this destruction was noted with some dismay, but the legislators agreed that "nothing could be done to stop the wrath of the people." It was decided to "uproot all royal prejudice," and to "demonstrate to the people that the Assembly was aware of their regard for liberty," by decreeing that all statues in Paris "erected in honor of despotism" be destroyed.[17]

Three days later a definitive law applicable to the whole nation was passed without opposition. The preamble to the decree made its general purpose—iconoclasm—quite clear; if the monarchy was to disappear, it was necessary that all its symbols disappear as well.

> Whereas, the sacred principles of liberty and equality will not permit the existence of monuments raised to ostentation, prejudice, and tyranny to continue to offend the eyes of the French people; whereas, the bronze in these monuments can be converted into cannon for the defense of *la patrie,* it is decreed; I. All statues, basreliefs, inscriptions, and other monuments made of bronze or other metals, which exist in public squares, gardens, parks, public buildings . . . will be removed by the communes. [The second article provided for the conversion of this metal into cannon.] III. All monuments containing traces of feudalism, of whatever nature, that still remain in churches, or other public places, and even those in private homes, shall, without the slightest delay, be destroyed by the communes.

Having directed some twenty-five million people to destroy feudal monuments without delay, the government remembered its responsibilities to the arts and turned to the thirty-three members of the Monuments Commission.

[15] Johann Georg Wille, *Mémoires et Journal* (Paris, 1857), II, 217. Wille recorded the destruction in his journal entry for July 4, 1790. For the text of the decree abolishing titles of nobility, see *Arch. parl.*, XVIII, 104–10.

[16] *Ibid.*, XLVIII, 2, 115; *Moniteur*, no. 226 (Aug. 12, 1792), p. 948; no. 229 (Aug. 15, 1792), p. 962; Bertrand Barère, *Memoirs . . .* (London, 1896), II, 16–17; Edouard Lockroy, ed., *The Great French Revolution, 1785–1793. Narrated in the Letters of Madame J[ullien] of the Jacobin Party* (London, 1881), p. 212.

[17] *Arch. parl.*, XLVIII, 2.

The last article of the decree read: "IV. The Monuments Commission is expressly charged with the conservation of those items which have a particular interest for the arts. . . ."[18]

With this legal sanction, the destruction of symbols of the Old Regime went on apace. Within a month the minister of the interior was expressing concern because he could not possibly keep records of, or control the upsurge of, iconoclastic activity set in motion by the decree of August 14.[19] Perhaps the minister did not realize that haste was of the essence. Granting a common belief in an identity between the object perceived and the idea in the mind of the percipient, those visual objects which possessed a dangerous ideological content had to be destroyed at once.[20] As one member of the Convention warned his fellows, "When a horse has the glanders he must be killed, and his harness and stall must be burned to avoid the spread of the pestilence."[21]

The "harness and stall" in this crude analogy seemed at first to refer only to the social and political symbols of the *ancien régime*. But the assassination and apotheosis of Marat and the "dechristianization" movement in 1793 brought religious symbols also under the hammer or to the pyre. Public lamentation for the death of Marat and hatred of "non-juring" clergy and an ultramontane church were often combined in a ceremony with three main features: a church would be inaugurated as a Temple of Reason, a bust of Marat would be unveiled, and a bonfire composed of statues, paintings, charters, and armorial bearings would be lit. The fete held at Fontainebleau was typical of many. "To appease the spirit of Marat," all the pictures of kings and nobles were taken from the chateau and set afire in front of a bust of the martyr. It was proudly recounted how the smoke from Champagne's portrait of Louis XIII "was wafted toward the bust. It was the most agreeable incense we could offer him."[22] Although there were many such ceremonies, often the bonfire alone provided an outlet for republican zeal. A fete celebrating the anniversary of the collapse of the monarchy, for instance, was considered a fine occasion to burn wagonloads of the "symbols of royalty, super-

[18] *Ibid.*, XLVIII, 115–16.

[19] *Ibid.*, L, 14–15; *Moniteur*, no. 261 (Sept. 16, 1792), p. 1108. The minister made a similar complaint in October, 1793; see *Arch. parl.*, LIII, 96.

[20] This is not to say that sensationalist psychology was entirely responsible for revolutionary iconoclasm (see n. 3); however, arguments leaning upon this psychology lent weight or support to the iconoclastic movement.

[21] Cited in James Guillaume, ed., *Procès-verbaux du Comité d'instruction publique de la Convention nationale* (Paris, 1891–1907), IV, 276.

[22] Description of the fete at Fontainebleau in *Arch. parl.*, LXXVII, 648–51. For other such fetes, almost liturgical in their sameness, see *ibid.*, LXXII, 318; LXXIX, 702–704; LXXXI, 277, 689, 695; LXXXII, 74, 383, 449, 664.

stition and ignorance," or of "slavery, despotism and fanaticism," which might include even books with the *fleur de lys* stamped on the bindings.[23]

While this destruction went forward, many complaints were voiced in the Convention that the destruction of symbols glorifying the past was not being accomplished with sufficient rapidity or thoroughness.[24] A decree of September 14, 1793, threatened dismissal to municipal officers who failed to perform their duty as prescribed by the first law for the destruction of monuments.[25] In October, 1793, it was required that all symbols of the *ancien régime* were to be destroyed within eight days, upon pain of confiscation of the property where such symbols still existed.[26] In the same month, the council of the Paris Commune ordained that all "religious effigies" in the city be immediately destroyed; no statue other than that of "Sommeil" would be allowed to stand in the cemeteries, and all other sculptured representations would be delivered to the hammer.[27]

In face of such legislative pressure, the Monuments Commission (which had been organized in 1790) was almost helpless. They were still responsible for the preservation of works of art, but the thirty-three members of the group were all residents of Paris; they served without pay; their official status was ambiguous, and, in any event, they could not possibly roam the face of France directing municipal officers to stop doing what the central government had instructed these municipal officers to do upon pain of loss of their civic positions. Indeed, the Committee of Public Safety actually called upon the Monuments Commission to destroy a part of what the commission had so care-

[23] For specific reports of the destruction of monuments, paintings, books, etc., because of their real or imagined connection with the Old Regime, see *ibid.*, LIII, 96; LXI, 392; LXVIII, 485; LXX, 69; LXXIII, 318; LXXVI, 479; *Procès-verbaux du Comité d'instruction publique de la Convention nationale,* II, 150; III, 40; IV, 79, 81, 302, 650, 676, 817, 838; V, 254, 514; VI, 126, 502, 525, 549, 572, 675, 712, 801; Louis Tuetey, ed., *Procès-verbaux de la Commission temporaire des arts* (Paris, 1912, 1918), I, 97, 115, 207, 210; II, 4, 9, 25, 37, 60, 154, 212, 241; *Procès-verbaux de la Commission des monuments,* I, 141, 149, 273, 311, 364; II, 2, 3, 7, 12–13, 46, 56, 61, 69–70, 71, 77, 81–82, 92, 94, 109, 111, 127, 170–71, 175, 207–208. These citations cover the period 1790–95; they do not include government-encouraged destruction of monuments and statues during 1794–95 which had been raised in honor of Marat and *la Montagne* during 1793–94. If there was so much destruction, how can we account for what has remained? (a) It is difficult to destroy in three years that which had been created in the previous eight hundred years. (b) In many cases (not cited above) the offending architectural decorations were simply plastered over. (c) Much of the destruction required expensive scaffolding and hired laborers; the communes were required to pay for this work from local revenue (see *Arch. parl.,* LXXIII, 378; LXXIV, 100), and it appears that considerations of economy interfered with the desire to destroy the symbols proscribed. (d) A reasonable portion of "medieval" cathedral sculpture which delights the eye of the modern tourist, e.g., on Notre Dame de Paris, is the work of nineteenth-century restoration under the leadership of such men as Viollet-le-Duc.

[24] *Arch. parl.,* LV, 341–42; LXI, 392; LXIII, 311; LXXIV, 100; LXXVI, 440, 455; LXXXIII, 378, 484.

[25] *Ibid.,* LXXIV, 100.

[26] *Ibid.,* LXXVII, 711–12; *Procès-verbaux du Comité d'instruction publique de la Convention nationale,* II, 652.

[27] *Moniteur,* no. 27 (Oct. 15, 1793), p. 107; no. 34 (Oct. 23, 1793), p. 135.

fully labored to preserve—the royal tombs at St. Denis.[28] "These monuments of idolatry still nourished the superstition of some Frenchmen,"[29] and within a month of the directive from the Committee of Public Safety some fifty of the tombs were destroyed under the direction of the Monuments Commission itself.[30]

By December, 1793, however, the hapless members of the Monuments Commission, accused of "not having kept pace with the revolution" and of "stationary" patriotism, were dismissed by the government. A new group, called the Temporary Arts Commission, with duties identical with those of its predecessor, was called into being.[31] It also was to preserve those works of art remaining from the *ancien régime* which possessed a purely aesthetic or historical value. The new commissioners conscientiously applied themselves to this task, but they too were not innocent of iconoclasm. The commission ordered all portraits of "the Capetian race" destroyed, and when one member timidly suggested that a few of these portraits might contain "some aspects of genius or originality," he was firmly overruled by the more "patriotic" members.[32] The new art commission also suggested that a national fete be held, centered around a holocaust of "the effigies and monuments that recall royalty and fanaticism, in order that nothing escape the republican crucible."[33]

This fete was never held, but there was a period during 1793 and 1794 when it seemed that the maw of the "republican crucible" would be crammed to overflowing if the disciples of the cult of republican virtue were to have their way. Prominent in the winds of doctrine that blew over eighteenth-century France was the notion that the arts were a result of luxury and vice, that they flourished only in decadent, over-civilized societies and provided opiates for the subjects of tyrannical rulers.[34] Disputes over the truth or falsity of such ideas before the Revolution remained largely academic, but the implications of such a philosophy of art obviously would be disastrous if French-

[28] *Arch. parl.*, LXX, 108.

[29] *Ibid.*, LXXVI, 440.

[30] *Procès-verbaux du Comité d'instruction publique de la Convention nationale*, II, 610–11; *Procès-verbaux de la Commission des monuments*, II, 40.

[31] *Arch. parl.*, LXXXI, 628–31.

[32] *Procès-verbaux de la Commission temporaire des arts*, II, 657. See also, I, 106, 207; *Procès-verbaux du Comité d'instruction publique de la Convention nationale*, IV, 657.

[33] *Ibid.*, IV, 654–55.

[34] See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, ed. George R. Havens (London, 1946), pp. 61–82. Havens shows that Rousseau's *Discours* expressed ideas that had been abroad for at least three generations, in the works of Charron, Bossuet, Fénelon, Montesquieu, *et al.* Several French editions of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* were published between 1740 and 1760, adding fuel to the dispute. See also, J.-J. Rousseau, *Lettre . . . sur les spectacles* (1758); Paul Henry Thiry Baron d'Holbach, *Système social . . .* (London, 1773), I, 64; Johann J. Winckelmann, *Histoire de l'art chez les anciens* (Paris, 1791), I, 90.

men ever decided to create a republican regime which prided itself upon a Reign of Virtue, a return to simplicity, and to nature.

Such a regime was the dream of many revolutionaries in 1793–94. Its adherents sometimes refused to distinguish between "royal" and "republican" art: they would abolish the arts altogether. In a discourse before the Convention in October, 1793, Michel-Edme Petit succinctly expressed the new vogue. He claimed that any inclusion of the fine arts in the education of children would "corrupt morals" and he pointed to the lax morals of artists as proof. Any enjoyment from the fine arts, he contended, "would enervate the spirit, render it incapable of courage, of enduring privations; it would make men insensible to the charms of moderate means and simplicity which are so indispensable in a republic."[35] Soon after Petit's speech, a deputation from Sèvres visited the Convention complaining of ornate church decorations and priestly vestments because such display was not in keeping with "the simplicity and modesty of the *sans-culotte* Jesus."[36] In November, 1793, the Committee of Public Instruction received word from the citizens of Rochefort that all "monuments of superstition" as well as all religious books in the city had been devoured in a bonfire lasting twenty-two hours. On the same day that the committee heard from Rochefort, they also received a letter from the librarian of the city of Marseilles asking for advice (or consolation); the librarian had been told by his townsmen to burn *all* his books because they were either "useless or evil."[37] And one anonymous pamphleteer pointed out that the epochs most favorable to the arts had been those of the emperor Augustus, Pope Leo X, and Louis XIV; on the other hand, the Spartans had "banished all luxury."[38] What must a good republican conclude?

Almost inevitably, the reaction against the art of the pre-revolutionary era

[35] Cited in *Procès-verbaux du Comité d'instruction publique de la Convention nationale,* II, 551.

[36] *Moniteur,* no. 51 (Nov. 11, 1793), p. 207.

[37] *Procès-verbaux du Comité d'instruction publique de la Convention nationale,* III, 40–41.

[38] Alexandre Tuetey and Jean Guiffrey, eds., *La Commission du muséum et la création du Musée du Louvre (1792–1793)* (*Documents . . .*) (Paris, 1910), p. 181. For other contemporary comments regarding the necessary connection between luxury and art, see Quatremère de Quincy, *Considérations sur les arts,* pp. 49, 86; Anatole de Montaiglon and Jules Guiffrey, eds., *Correspondance des directeurs de l'Académie de France à Rome . . .* (Paris, 1901–1907), XVI, 395; *Moniteur,* no. 95 (Nov. 25, 1789), p. 387; no. 20 (Jan. 20, 1790), p. 79. Further reports of art, philosophy, and literature condemned as useless or dangerous for republicans may be found in *Arch. parl.,* LXXVII, 489; LXXXI, 633; *Procès-verbaux du Comité d'instruction publique de la Convention nationale,* IV, 829; *Moniteur,* no. 119 (Jan. 17, 1794), p. 480; *Annales de la République française . . .,* no. 230 (Aug. 17, 1793), p. 1131; *Décade philosophique . . . ,* I (June 28, 1794), 402; Antoine Augustin Renouard, Chardin, et Charlemagne fils, *Observations de quelques patriotes sur la nécessité de conserver les monuments de la littérature et des arts* (Paris, 1793), p. 11; François Antoine de Boissy d'Anglas, *Quelques idées sur les arts, sur la nécessité de les encourager . . . adressés a la Convention nationale* (Paris, 1793), p. 127–28. These reports do not name specific persons; rather, they "heard it in the streets," or "one hears that the arts are condemned as useless," etc.

reflected upon those artists still alive during the Revolution who had formerly produced paintings or sculpture glorifying royal or religious patrons. The Conventionnel A.C. Thibaudeau reproached French artists because they had not memorialized the great events of the Revolution. Most artists, he said, had "centuries of baseness and adulation" on their record, for during a despotic regime they "had hastened to deify despotism and present it to the people in its most seductive forms."[39] Such insinuations had been in the air since the first years of the Revolution.[40] Perhaps as a consequence, we find that no group seemed more anxious to join the iconoclastic crusade than the artists themselves.

Jacques-Louis David, the greatest painter of his age, was a member of the Monuments Commission. In June, 1790, he had joined a deputation to the National Assembly, pleading for the partial preservation of Louis XIV's statue in the Place Victoire, lest this "masterpiece" be lost to posterity.[41] David later became a rabid Jacobin and was chosen to represent his *section* in the National Convention. Soon after the Convention opened, he was demanding that an "auto-da-fé" be made of the effigies of kings and cardinals in the Royal Academy's school at Rome.[42] As organizer of the fete commemorating the first anniversary of the downfall of the monarchy, David arranged that a statue of liberty be raised in the Place Victoire; before this statue the "attributes of royalty . . . would be made into an enormous bonfire . . . as an expiatory sacrifice."[43] Although David did not indicate who was "expiating" for what, he may have unconsciously intended the bonfire as an atonement for the past sins of French artists. During his term as president of the Convention in January, 1794, he announced that "The arts are going to recover their dignity. They will no longer prostitute themselves celebrating tyrants."[44]

David was not the only artist interested in forwarding iconoclasm. The Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture was abolished by government fiat in August, 1793, and was almost immediately replaced by an official group (dominated by David and his students) called the "Commune of Arts." At first it seemed that the Commune of Arts would be merely a more egalitarian version of the old Royal Academy, while it carried on the academy's teaching and judging functions. But the hostile pressure upon a group of men who had so obviously "prostituted" themselves so short a time ago was too great, particularly when injury was added to insult by suggestions that art of *any* kind

[39] *Moniteur*, no. 232 (May 11, 1794), p. 943.
[40] See *Arch. parl.*, XVIII, 91–92; XXII, 215; LXXVII, 650–51.
[41] *Ibid.*, XVI, 541; *Moniteur*, no. 181 (June 30, 1790), pp. 737–38.
[42] *Ibid.*, no. 331 (Nov. 26, 1792), p. 1403; *Arch. parl.*, LIII, 579.
[43] *Procès-verbaux du Comité d'instruction publique de la Convention nationale*, II, 73.
[44] *Moniteur*, no. 119 (Jan. 18, 1794), p. 480.

was useless or evil. By January of 1794, the members of the Commune of Arts decided that "any conflict between the God of genius and the God of patriotism must cease."[45] The hotheads in the Commune planned a ceremony in which a portrait of the dauphin was to be dragged to the foot of a liberty tree, mutilated by each member of the Commune and then burned. Those in the Commune who opposed such activity were assumed to be infected with "moderantisme" or "counterrevolutionary" tendencies.[46]

In the spring of 1794, the Commune of Arts began to take action against contemporary painters and engravers whose works contained "obscenities which revolted republican morals," and they planned to bring a list of proscribed works to the Committee of Public Safety.[47] Within a week of this action, the well-known painter, L.-L. Boilly, appeared before the Commune to "abjure his former errors" as a painter of subjects of doubtful morality. Boilly asked for mercy on the ground that he was first to denounce his own conduct. He assured his rapt listeners that in the future he would use his brush "in a more worthy manner."[48] What more could virtuous republicans ask?

Notwithstanding all these iconoclastic plans, legislation, and activity, the dilemma remained in force, even though it never seemed to be recognized explicitly by the revolutionaries. The dialectic, the tension, between iconoclasm and the need to preserve the heritage of the arts (to say nothing of the need to provide an environment in which artists would feel encouraged to create republican symbols without fear of reprisal at the next shift in the republican credo) remained a fact even during the most destructive periods during 1793–94. Attempts were made to draw a line between "luxury" and "art"; questions were raised concerning the necessary cause-and-effect relationship between the morals of society and its art, and some courageous Frenchmen began to hint that the primrose path of iconoclasm lead to the hell of barbarism.

When, in January, 1793, the minister of the interior asked for funds to support the Gobelin tapestry works, he granted that the Gobelins had formerly served "luxury and frivolity," but he insisted that once the "moeurs" of a

[45] Henry Lapauze, ed., *Procès-verbaux de la Commune générale des arts de peinture, sculpture, architecture et gravure* . . . (Paris, 1903), p. 213.

[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 202, 207. When the painter A. J. Belle was named director of the Gobelin factory in 1793, he proved his patriotism by burning at the foot of a liberty tree tapestries containing royal symbolism; see *Correspondance des directeurs de l'Académie de France à Rome*, XV, 381.

[47] *Procès-verbaux de la Commune générale des arts*, p. 287. A member of the commune also brought the problem to the Council General of the Paris Commune, asking severe police action; *Moniteur*, no. 222 (May 5, 1794), p. 915.

[48] *Procès-verbaux de la Commune générale des arts*, p. 291. Boilly had enjoyed great success as kind of a bourgeois Boucher. His depictions of middle-class courting scenes appear innocent enough, but the titles of the pictures usually contained a *double-entendre*. Part of his expiatory activity included painting "Marat Carried in Triumph on the Shoulders of the People."

society had changed, the arts would follow suit.[49] The arts did not corrupt society until society had first corrupted the arts. Reform "les moeurs" and the arts would reflect this reform and further it.[50] "Let us distinguish between luxury and the arts" warned the author of *Almanach des Républicains*. "Leave luxury for monarchs, but let us keep the arts, for they support lofty ideas." After all, "Republicans are not barbarians," and even the "Spartans made sacrifices to the Muses before going into battle."[51] A fear of further iconoclasm was shown by the writers of a liturgy for "Temples of Reason" in their elaborate defense of the fine arts in a republic. In fact, the arts were considered so important that they were included in the Ten Commandments (revised republican version). Commandment Six read, "Thou shalt cultivate the fine arts; they are the ornament of the State."[52]

Newspaper and pamphlet comment during this period often approved of iconoclasm in principle but condemned it in practice. Fears were expressed that, if the destruction continued, France would become a cultural desert and lose its leadership in the arts. Further, those engaged in government-sponsored iconoclasm were often compared to "Ostrogoths," "Visigoths," "Moslem fanatics," or to "early Christians, who had destroyed the statues of Pheidias and Praxiteles."[53]

This type of objection was sometimes echoed in the National Convention, often by the same members who were (on other occasions) insisting upon the necessity for the destruction of all royal, feudal, and religious symbols.[54] Attempts were made to cast the blame on the enemies of the Republic and to provide for a remedy. In June, 1793, notice was taken of the "irreparable losses" suffered by the fine arts through "the outrages of aristocrats," and an act was adopted providing two years in irons for anyone discovered mutilating works of art.[55] In October, 1793—the same month in which a law was passed insisting upon the destruction of all offending monuments without delay—a member of the Committee of Public Instruction presented to the Convention an

[49] *Arch. parl.*, LVI, 654.

[50] *Décade philosophique*, I (June 8, 1794), 404. The same idea is expressed in the anonymous pamphlet "Considérations sur les arts et sur le muséum nationale" reprinted in Tuetey and Guiffrey, *Commission du muséum*, p. 181.

[51] Pierre Sylvain Maréchal, *Almanach des Républicains, pour servir à l'instruction publique* (Paris, 1793), pp. 69, 83.

[52] C. Chenier, Dusasoir, *et al., Office des décades, ou discours, hymnes, et prières en usage dans les Temples de la Raison* (Paris, IIème année de l'Ere républicaine), pp. 45–47, 84.

[53] See Chrisosthome Alethes, *Félicitation publique à M. Lequino sur son projet de démolir les monuments des arts* (Paris, 1793); Renouard, Chardin, et Charlemagne fils, *Observations de quelques patriotes;* Boissy d'Anglas, *Quelques idées sur les arts; Annales de la République française*, no. 230 (Aug. 17, 1793), p. 1131; *Décade philosophique*, I (June 28, 1794), 401–11; *Moniteur*, no. 72 (Dec. 2, 1793), p. 290.

[54] *Arch. parl.*, L, 5; LXVIII, 246–47; LXX, 69; LXXVII, 431–32.

[55] *Ibid.*, LXVI, 98.

omnibus decree respecting the arts, intended to remedy the defects of earlier laws on the subject. The speaker asserted that "the enemies of liberty" had given the laws of the Convention "a disastrous interpretation." He blamed "English spies" for leading the people to the destruction of "monuments which attest the superiority of our arts and our genius." Under the terms of the new law, it was "forbidden, under the pretext of destroying symbols of royalty, feudalism, or superstition, to efface, destroy, mutilate, or alter in any manner whatsoever . . . any object of art . . . which has artistic, historical, or educational value." Those objects which bore the symbols of the *ancien régime,* and had historical, educational, or artistic value were to be "taken to the nearest museum" for conservation. The last article of the law read, "All good citizens are invited to be as zealous in destroying the symbols proscribed in the preceding decrees . . . as they are to assure the conservation of those works of art which are of interest chiefly to the arts, history, and education."[56]

The provisions of this law relate to the problem of revolutionary iconoclasm in two important respects. First, there is the attempt of the Conventionnels to grasp both horns of the dilemma: to destroy specific works of art, yet preserve the arts. Second, there is a proposed solution of the dilemma: the creation of public museums.

The Louvre museum and the Museum of French Monuments were products of the Revolution; it was there that the Monuments Commission and the Temporary Arts Commission collected many works of art containing the "proscribed symbols."[57] The Louvre was first opened to the public in August, 1793, and while many *sans-culottes* admired symbols of "royalty, feudalism, and superstition" inside the museum, they continued to engage in iconoclastic activities outside of it.[58] This paradoxical activity need not imply a contradiction in attitudes. It seems probable that when these works were seen in the museum, torn out of their cultural context, they were regarded only as "art"; their significance as tokens, symbols, or *mana* had been drained away because of their placement in an artificial situation, a strange milieu. A member of the Monuments Commission recommended that a scepter from one of the tombs at St. Denis be preserved for the museum "not as a scepter, but as an example of fourteenth-century goldsmith work."[59] (If this seems unusual or improbable, the reader might recall that, in our age, the *content* of a work of art in a museum is seldom objected to; on the other hand, murals in post-

[56] *Ibid.,* LXXVII, 486–90.

[57] See *Procès-verbaux de la Commission temporaire des arts,* and *Procès-verbaux de la Commission des monuments, passim.*

[58] The museum was opened to the public three days a week, and was usually crowded with visitors. *Décade philosophique,* IV, no. 28 (Jan. 29, 1795), p. 215.

[59] *Procès-verbaux de la Commission des monuments,* II, 211.

offices or in the Rockefeller Center have become public issues.) Regarded in this light, the public museum may be said to have originated as both an instrument of and a result of iconoclasm.

Despite the new decrees, and the founding of museums, the Conventionnels failed in their efforts to control iconoclasm before 1795. They had sowed the wind, and they reaped the usual unwelcome harvest. As reports of the destruction mounted, the Committee of Public Instruction had one of its members (on July 8, 1794, some weeks before Thermidor) collate these reports and make known his findings.[60] Henri Grégoire was the man assigned to the task, and he made not one but three lengthy reports from the tribune of the Convention in the last half of 1794.[61] In these speeches, he placed the blame for the destruction upon "English spies," "counterrevolutionaries," and "terrorists," although only a few months before Thermidor Grégoire himself had praised the "wise law" ordaining "the destruction of all that carries the imprint of royalty and feudalism."[62]

Not only did Grégoire blame the destruction upon the enemies of the Revolution; he also described this activity as "vandalism," i.e., "willful and ignorant destruction," and so added a word to our language, for the noun vandalism was of his coining.[63] By the use of this term, Grégoire evidently hoped to clear the fair name of the Revolution; in this hope he not only failed but made available a term of reprobation which has served as a polemical weapon in revolutionary studies ever since. Historians have taken Grégoire's "vandalism" at its face value, and have either denied it ever happened, or claimed that every mutilated or badly weathered statue in France is the work of "revolutionary vandalism."[64] It has been shown here that the activity described by Grégoire was not "vandalism" but iconoclasm, i.e., premeditated destruction of visual symbols because of their specific emotional or ideological content. In short, the issue of "revolutionary vandalism" is a false one.

[60] *Procès-verbaux du Comité d'instruction publique de la Convention nationale,* VI, 273.

[61] B. H. Grégoire, *Rapport sur les destructions opérées par le Vandalisme, et sur les moyens de les reprimer . . . séance du 14 Fructidor, l'an II* (Paris, l'an II); *Second Rapport sur le Vandalisme . . . séance du 3 Brumaire, l'an III* (Paris, l'an III); *Troisième rapport sur le Vandalisme . . . séance du 24 Frimaire, l'an III* (Paris, l'an III).

[62] B. H. Grégoire, *Rapport sur les inscriptions des monuments publics . . . . séance du 22 Nivose, l'an II* (Paris, l'an II), pp. 1, 5.

[63] See "Vandalism" in *Oxford English Dictionary. Mémoires de Grègoire* (Paris, 1840), I, 347.

[64] The most recent comments on the subject are by Dowd, *Pageant-Master of the Republic: Jacque-Louis David and the French Revolution,* in which the destruction wrought during the Revolution is denied as a "hoary legend," p. 90, n. 53; in "Le 'vandalisme révolutionnaire,'" *La Pensée,* no. 37 (July–Aug., 1951), Marcel Cornu blames vandalism upon the *ancien régime,* while the revolutionaries are credited with antivandalism. See also, Eugène Despois, *Le vandalisme révolutionnaire . . .* (Paris, 1868 and 1885); E. Boutaric, "Le vandalisme révolutionnaire," *Revue des questions historiques,* XII (1872), 325–96; Gustave Gautherot, *Le vandalisme jacobin* (Paris, 1914).

The real issue involves a revolutionary dilemma in terms of iconoclasm versus the preservation of an artistic heritage; while a great deal of premeditated destruction was wrought, an attempt to preserve the arts persisted. In one sense, the problem posed by Diderot, ". . . if we love truth more than the fine arts, let us pray God for some iconoclasts," was never resolved. It could be argued, however, that the revolutionaries did solve the dilemma in two ways. First, they encouraged iconoclasm and then called it the vandalism of their enemies. If this be a solution, it is neither creditable nor original. Second, they created a public institution called a "museum"; immure a political symbol in a museum and it becomes merely art—iconoclasm is thus achieved without destruction. This solution was quite original; it is one that Diderot never dreamed of, and it probably would have received his high praise.

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