# Jacques-Louis David’s Neoclassic Masterpieces

## Slide 1

Today we’re going to study the works of Jacques-Louis David, a French painter who created Neoclassic masterpieces. David was born in Paris in 1748 and died in 1825. He was primarily a large format history painter but also excelled at portraiture. We’ll look at portraits first, beginning with “Madame de Pastoret and her Son” from 1791/92. Note the sparse background and relatively simple clothing; Neoclassicism advocated morals, virtue, modesty, and love of family, duty, and country. It was also a turbulent time politically with the French Revolution and the aristocracy was no longer showing off their status. Thus, the portraits often feature plain settings and informal clothing or poses. Adelaide’s unbuttoned blouse for ease of breastfeeding, the sewing in her hand, and the crib at her side suggest an active role in childrearing; in fact, she was the founder of the first daycare system in Paris. David masterfully captures a youthful, hardworking mother in a casual moment.

## Slide 2

The next portrait is “Madame Recamier” from 1800. It has many similarities to the previous portrait; once again the subject is a young woman in a simple dress, a sparse setting, and caught in a casual moment with bare feet no less. Neoclassicism was the new classic and harkened back to Roman times in part due to the discovery and excavation in the late 1740s of the Italian cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum which had been buried after the volcano Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 79CE. Thus, Juliette’s dress is an antique style and the couch she lounges on is reminiscent of Pompeian furniture. Unusual elements include the reclined pose, horizontal orientation, and the set- back distance of the subject.

## Slide 3

Now we’ll look at David’s history paintings, for which he was better known. This image shows the quintessential Neoclassic work, “The Oath of the Horatii” from 1784. The painting is simple, balanced, and contains many Roman elements like arches in the background and togas and sandals for clothing. Its subject also advocates patriotism and honor; the three Horatii brothers are accepting their weapons from their father in order to fight their enemies of the city of Alba. They are strong and upright while their sisters weep and cling to each other. One of the women is married to a man from Alba so she is not only upset at the prospect of possibly losing a brother, but also a husband. In fact, the brothers are victorious and actually kill the sister whose husband died because she is mourning the enemy and not readily accepting her sacrifice to country. The French admired this painting and its subject as the French Revolution was approaching and the monarchy was viewed as self-serving and seeking personal pleasures instead of honorable duty.

## Slide 4

Our last image shows “The Coronation of the Emperor Napoleon I and the Crowning of the Empress Josephine in Notre-Dame Cathedral on December 2, 1804” painted in 1806/07. The title is as long as the painting! This work hangs in the Louvre in Paris and I’ve left some museum visitors in the photo so viewers can get a better indication of the size of this painting! It is huge; with a number of figures and an elaborate setting as befits a proper history painting. It’s also a bit of propaganda as Napoleon is shown crowning the kneeling Josephine in front of the Pope. The cathedral decoration has been neoclassicized and includes arches, engaged columns, and faux wood paneling. The emperor’s mother is shown seated in a throne to right of the emperor but in fact she wasn’t even present at the ceremony. This work is more elaborate than a typical Neoclassic work and in fact is showing characteristics of the next art style – Romanticism.

Thanks for joining me on this look at some of David’s masterpieces.

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