The Compositional Evolution of David's Leonidas at Thermopylae

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ONCE DISMISSED AS an ambitious failure, overly labored and indicative of an incipient decline in David's artistic powers, the Leonidas at Thermopylae (Figure 1) has more recently been recognized by art historians as a key, evocative statement of certain principles highly important to David's later development.[1] The last of his large-scale, multifigured history paintings, it was conceived as a pendant to his earlier Sabine Women and reasserted the "reformed and purified" classical mode first announced in that work, with implications for both the treatment of form and the overall expressive approach of the painting.[2] Emphasis is placed on heightened idealization of anatomy, on purposefully additive or "archaic" composition, and on a restrained or rarified expression in the gestures and faces of the figures.

1. Klaus Holma (*David, son évolution et son style* [Paris, 1940] p. 88) called the composition "morne," claiming that "la main du maître a perdu de cette sûreté qui lui a fait honneur pendant des dizaines d'années," and even David's sympathetic biographer Hautecoeur felt compelled to write about this painting defensively: "Il est facile, certes, de critiquer aujourd'hui ce tableau . . . " (*Louis David* [Paris, 1954] p. 232). Representative of a more recent and more positive critical attitude is Martin Kemp ("J. L. David and the Prelude to a Moral Victory for Sparta," *Art Bulletin* 51, no. 2 [June 1969] pp. 178–183), who writes, "It is this latter work [the Leonidas] which provides the key to David's later ideals" (p. 178). See also J. Bean and D. von Bothmer, "A propos du 'Léonidas aux Thermopiles' de David," *Revue du Louvre* 14 (1964) pp. 327 f.; James Rubin, "J.-L. David's Patriotism," *Art Bulletin* 58, no. 4 (Dec. 1976) esp. pp. 563–567.

2. David referred to the Leonidas in a letter of 31 May 1814 as "un pendant à mes Sabines" (Daniel and Guy Wildenstein, *Documents complémentaires au catalogue de l'oeuvre de Louis David* [Paris, 1973] no. 1689). Numerous authors have discussed the stylistic reform represented in the Sabine Women, most notably Robert Rosenblum in "A New Source for David's *Sabines*," *Burlington Magazine* 104 (April 1962) pp. 158–162, and in his *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (Princeton, 1967) pp. 182–183. The change in David's attitude toward expression manifested in these works, however, has never been adequately explored. Briefly, it involved a rejection of what David saw in his early work as a "Roman" and too theatrical dramatic language, with gestures and facial expression tending toward exaggeration and grimace, and the substitution of more inward, less emotive expression in an attempt to approach more closely the true antique, Greek pictorial canons. As he stated in his pamphlet on the Sabine Women (1799), "nous cherchons à imiter les anciens dans . . . l'expression de leur figures et les graces de leurs formes"; to resort to exaggerated gesture and distorted facial expression in order to portray passion was considered a violation of antique principles and a debasement of a figure's physical and moral decorum. David is known to have criticized certain contemporary painters, such as Girodet, on these grounds (Jules David, *Le Peintre Louis David* [Paris, 1880] pp. 502–504), and was also critical of his own Horatii, which he found "théâtrale" (M. E. J. Delécluze, *Louis David, son école et son temps* [Paris, 1855] p. 120). The Sabine Women and Leonidas represent on his part a concerted effort to institute a more idealized, more purely Greek mode of expression, in which figures display calm exteriors and graceful gestures even through the most intense of emotions. As the artist told Delécluze: "Je veux essayer de mettre de côté ces mouvements, ces expressions de théâtre auxquels les modernes ont donné le titre de peinture d'expression," and also, "Je ne veux ni mouvement ni expression passioné . . . " (Delécluze, pp. 225–226). This attitude concerning the necessary composure of figures and the dangers of the grimace was one shared with, and possibly derived from, such eighteenth-century theorists as Lessing, Winckelmann, Diderot, and Quatremère de Quincy.

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True to his belief in history painting as a vehicle for contemporary political message, David dramatizes an ideal of extreme loyalty to country, particularly meaningful in light of the unstable international situation of post-Revolutionary France and the fact that David's own patriotism had recently been questioned. Leonidas, leader of the forces of Sparta, is depicted with his troops in the final moments before the battle of the Thermopylae pass in which they would heroically sacrifice their lives in order to halt Xerxes' invading Persian army. This subject was one of the incidents from ancient history most frequently invoked during the Revolution and its aftermath as an *exemplum virtutis* and would take on heightened significance with the fall of Napoleon.[3] Furthermore, it has recently been shown that David may have in-

3. Literary sources for the subject include Herodotus, *History*, book 7; Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus*; Xenophon's *Constitution of Sparta* (which Kemp, p. 179, attempts to show that David knew and used); and J. J. Barthélemy's popular *Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grèce*. The latter has been overlooked as a source for the Leonidas, but is specifically referred to in an inscription on a drawing of Leonidas by David now in the Musée Fabre, Montpellier. Concerning the popularity of this theme in Revolutionary rhetoric see R. Herbert, *David, Voltaire, "Brutus" and the French Revolution* (London, 1972) note 122; Rubin, "David's Patriotism," pp. 565–566; and H. T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries* (Chicago, 1937) p. 118.

FIGURE 1
Jacques-Louis David, Leonidas at Thermopylae (1800–14). Canvas, 3.92 × 5.33 m. Musée du Louvre (photo: Bulloz)

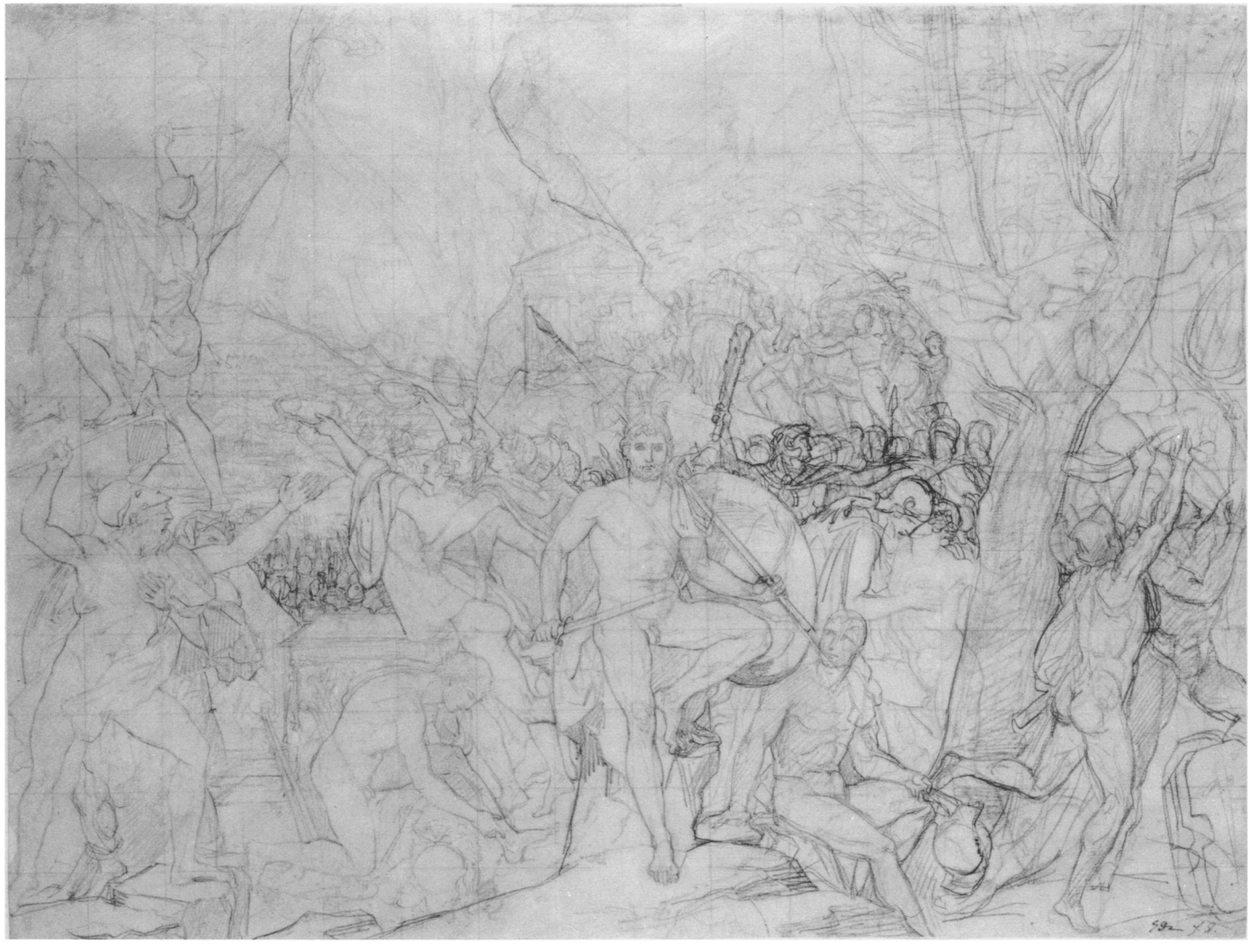

FIGURE 2
David, study for Leonidas. Pencil, 40.5 × 55 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 63.1

FIGURE 3
Tracing of underdrawing in Figure 2

tended in this work a couched and very personal statement of Republican sentiment.[4]

The primary concern of this article, however, is interpretation not of the composition's iconography but rather of its formal evolution through various generative stages. From David's long preliminary study for the Leonidas, many drawings resulted that, considered as a whole, greatly illuminate the artist's

4. Rubin, "David's Patriotism," pp. 563–567.

working method, the sources he drew upon, and the inventive decisions that inform the final image. The history spelled out by these studies is particularly extensive and complex, as work on the project continued fitfully over many years and was marked by constant revision and modification. Especially important to an understanding of this long evolution is a drawing in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 2) that actually is comprised of two distinct stages: it evidences a faint underdrawing (Figure 3) that was worked over in a firmer hand and with important changes in the arrangement of figures. Although the drawing has often been exhibited and published, this curious two-stage progression remains unexplained.[5] Viewed in the context of other compositional studies, a number of which have never before been published, as well as documentation relevant to the chronology of the Leonidas, it emerges that the Museum's drawing was executed late in the project and records a decisive transformation of the composition. Its first stage appears to be based on an oil version that existed some years earlier when David temporarily abandoned work on the Leonidas. The second stage shows the drastic compositional changes he made preparatory to repainting the abandoned canvas. The drawing, therefore, documents a crucial turning point in the painting's evolution and the inception of its final form.

The story of the interrupted development of the Leonidas is well known but bears retelling so as to establish in detail the chronology involved. David had completed his large Sabine Women by October 1798, and although his history painting proceeded simultaneously during these years with several portrait commissions, he presumably started work on the Leonidas soon thereafter. The project is recorded in documents as early as November 1799[6] and considerable effort must have gone into preliminary drawings by September of the following year when Lullin, one of David's students, wrote from Paris to his fellow student Delécluze, who was vacationing in the country: "David est de retour avec une nouvelle composition de son tableau (le Léonidas), qui, dit-on, vaut mieux que celle que nous connaissons."[7] Already, however, David was being swept up in the events surrounding Napoleon's rise to power and politicization of the arts, events that would eventually cause him to suspend altogether his work on the Leonidas. In February 1800 he received his first offer to become the government painter,[8] and from July 1800 to June 1801 he worked on his first major Napoleonic commission, Bonaparte Crossing the St. Bernard Pass. In December 1803 he wrote to Vivant Denon, then director of the Musée Napoléon, asking for antique casts to be used as models in the production of his Leonidas.[9] A year later, he was present at Napoleon's coronation. Soon after, he was made Premier Peintre de l'Empereur and given a studio in the Cluny church for use in preparation of the Coronation of Napoleon.[10]

In August 1805, he could speak only longingly of his desire to finish the Leonidas.[11] It is safe to assume that once David began the two monumental canvases, the Coronation and the Distribution of Eagles, projects that would continue until November 1810, he was forced to postpone indefinitely the Leonidas, although it is also clear that by then he had developed a painted version of the composition to quite an advanced stage, a fact not previously noted in the literature. The critic Chaussard, in his book on the Salon of 1806, gives the following observations in a short biography of David:

> On admire plusieurs détails du Passage des Thermopyles, tableau que l'artiste n'a pas achevé. C'est dans l'exécution qu'on retrouve tout son talent; mais la composition en paraît vicieuse. On y voit parmi les principaux personnages, un soldat aveugle, remarquable par l'enthousiasme et presque par l'exagération de ses mouvements. Il a l'air de crier, et prêt à frapper comme un sourd.[12]

5. The drawing is inscribed with the paraphs of David's two sons, added at the time of the David atelier sale of 1826, in which it was probably lot no. 92, not 96 as stated in *The Age of Neo-Classicism*, Arts Council of Great Britain (London, 1972) no. 556, wherein Arlette Sérullaz suggests that the underdrawing was "a first study for the picture" but gives no further explanation. See also Bean-von Bothmer.

6. Wildenstein, *Documents* no. 1319.

7. Letter of 23 Sept. 1800; Delécluze, p. 103.

8. Wildenstein, *Documents* no. 1339.

9. Wildenstein, *Documents* no. 1413.

10. The coronation, which David attended and sketched, took place 2 Dec. 1804. He was appointed Premier Peintre 18 Dec. (Wildenstein, *Documents* no. 1425) and given his studio 6 Feb. 1805 (Wildenstein, *Documents* no. 1429).

11. Wildenstein, *Documents* no. 1452.

12. Chaussard, *Le Pausanias Français, ou Description du Salon de 1806* (Paris, 1808) p. 164. Arlette Sérullaz (*Age of Neo-Classicism*

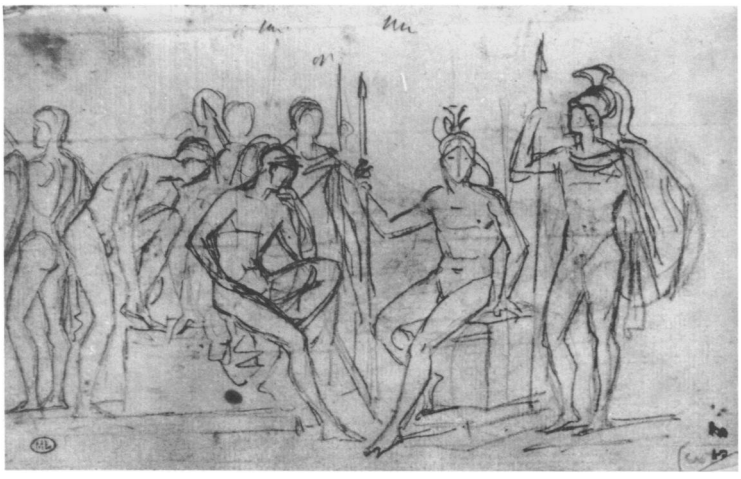

FIGURE 4
David, study for Leonidas. Pencil, 11 × 17 cm. Cabinet des Dessins, RF6071, p. 3, Musée du Louvre (photo: Musées Nationaux)

Chaussard must have seen the unfinished painting in David's studio. The very fact that he was able to comment on both technique and composition testifies to its relatively advanced development.

The Distribution of Eagles was finally completed in November 1810, leaving David free at last to return to his favored genre, that of ancient history painting. On April 23, 1811, the young artist Pierre Suau, a student in David's atelier, mentioned in a letter to his father, "M. David va continuer son tableau des Thermopyles qu'il avait abandonné et dont il disait qu'il n'était pas content."[13] David's involvement with various other projects in 1811–12 seems to have again diverted his efforts from the Leonidas,[14] but in 1813 he was able to concentrate on it more fully, as we know from comments in Suau's letters. On June 13, July 28, and August 22, 1813, he notes that David was working steadily on the canvas, that he had models coming to the studio almost daily and had made a number of important changes, and that, by August, he was approaching the final stages of execution.[15] David and his assistants required another year, however, to finish the huge composition, finally exhibited in his studio in September 1814.

It can therefore be said that the Leonidas was in production off and on for at least six years, and we know from the testimony of both witnesses and drawings that it taxed David's inventive powers perhaps more than any other of his works, as it proceeded through innumerable modifications and compositional transformations. In the front of a sketchbook in the Louvre that contains many preparatory studies for the Leonidas, a small study documents what appears to have been one of the earliest, still quite experimental stages of development (Figure 4).[16] It was characteristic of David that he started not with an overall sketch of a preconceived composition but rather with studies of individual figures that were then combined and inductively organized into increasingly definitive designs. Here, in what seems an almost random assemblage of certain conventional academic and antique poses, David has struck upon several motifs that continue through later studies. The figure second from the right, for example, anticipates to a high degree the seated posture of Leonidas in the final composition, and the figure to his right was eventually transposed to a seated position at Leonidas' feet. In this stage, however, the figures are simply spaced more or less evenly across the foreground, with no psychological interaction and little of the balanced hierarchical placement they later display.

From experimentation on a limited scale, David soon progressed to a full and complex composition.

no. 556) expresses the opinion that David never ceased working on the Leonidas, but the evidence she cites (similarity of poses in drawings with figures in the Distribution of Eagles) is unconvincing since David often borrowed poses from earlier works, and given the extent of his other obligations during 1805–10, it is highly unlikely that he would have had any time for work on the Leonidas other than perhaps a few figure sketches.

13. Paul Mesplé, "David et ses élèves Toulousains," *Archives de l'art français* 14 (1969) p. 101.

14. The Portrait of Napoleon in his Study dates from 1811–12, and in 1812 David executed an oil sketch of Alexander and Campaspe. Two drawings in the Louvre, both dated 1812, apparently derive from a short-lived project of apartment decoration in which David was involved (Guiffrey and Marcel, *Inventaire général des dessins du Musée du Louvre et du Musée de Versailles* 4, nos. 3189, 3190).

15. Mesplé, pp. 101–102.

16. The drawings for the Leonidas in this album seem to derive in general from the earlier stages of work on the project. The second half of the album contains studies for the Distribution of Eagles and Cupid and Psyche.

Three closely related drawings record the sequence of development: one, the most cursory, is known only through a lithograph published by Jules David (Figure 5);[17] a second, somewhat more firmly drawn, is in the Musée Fabre at Montpellier (Figure 6);[18] and what would appear to be the latest of the three (Figure 7) is executed on a page in one of the albums of studies for the Leonidas now in the Louvre[19] and shows a considerable increase in clarity and confidence of handling. It was almost certainly some point in the process of change represented by these drawings that Lullin was referring to when he wrote in September 1800 that David had achieved "une nouvelle composition de son tableau." All three drawings were developed in conjunction with sketchbook studies in which David researched individual figures and poses. Literally hundreds of these freely executed studies survive, allowing one to trace the evolution of each figure in the composition and David's search, often starting with antique motifs, for attitudes at once noble and expressive.[20] Exemplifying this technique are three studies for the figure of Eurytus, an old and blind Spartan warrior who, according to Herodotus, refused to accept Leonidas' order that he be escorted from the field of battle and instead had himself positioned by a slave directly in the path of the approaching enemy (Figures 8–10).[21] He appears in the final painting at the extreme left. The last of these studies is particularly interesting, as it shows David's draughtsmanship at its most fluid and best.

The compositional drawings discussed above (Figures 2, 5–7) reveal that David had determined quite early the basic narrative program of his painting. He chose to depict not the actual combat but rather the prelude to combat when the Spartan troops anticipate and prepare for the impending crisis. This was an important theoretical point for David, summarized in a statement to Delécluze: "A l'imitation des artistes de l'antiquité, qui ne manquaient jamais de choisir l'instant avant ou après la grande crise d'un sujet, je ferai Léonidas et ses soldats calmes et se promettant l'immortalité avant le combat."[22] Thus, he depicts Leonidas seated pensively in the midst of

FIGURE 5
Study for Leonidas. Lithograph by Jules David after pencil drawing by David

17. Jules David, *Le Peintre Louis David*, p. 662. It is noted there that the drawing was in Jules David's private collection, that it measured 12 × 18 cm., and that it was lot no. 159 of the David atelier sale of 1826. To the best of my knowledge, neither the drawing nor the lithograph has been mentioned in the modern literature on David.

18. This drawing may have been part of lot no. 92 in the David atelier sale, although it lacks the sons' identifying paraphs. It is listed by Jules David, p. 662, and has been published by Bean-von Bothmer, pp. 327–329 and Kemp, p. 178.

19. Published in the exhibition catalogue *Dessins français de 1750 à 1825: Le néo-classicisme* (Louvre, 1972) no. 57. The statement in the catalogue that Louvre album no. 9136 corresponds to lot no. 30 in the Destailleur sale of 1893 is incorrect, since the Destailleur notebook is known to have been broken up.

20. Albums containing figure studies for the Leonidas are in the Louvre (nos. RF6071, RF9136, RF9137), in the Musée Wicar at Lille, and in the Versailles museum (album devoted largely to the Serment du Jeu de Paume). A group of studies obviously from a single dispersed album is in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Lyon (published by Pierre Rosenberg, *La Revue du Louvre* 24, no. 6 [1974] pp. 421–28). In addition, numerous single sheets are known in private and public collections. The compositional studies and the figural drawings progressed simultaneously, mutually dependent and supportive. Having first defined a particular figure in his notebook sketches, David would then test it in the composition. The figure might be discarded entirely, or several more studies might ensue before it appeared in another full compositional drawing. The notebook sketches are often based on antique models or figures in earlier paintings or (as an indication of how David would preserve and recycle certain motifs) directly on his own earlier sketches.

21. On the story of Eurytus, see Kemp, p. 179.

22. Delécluze, p. 226. David possibly derived this notion about the choice of moment in antique art from Lessing, who, in his influential study *Laokoon* (1766), made a similar observation and advised artists to avoid the culmination of action in a narrative. The idea that the choice of a moment preceding or following the climax of action allowed greater play of the imagination became a standard element of academic theory.

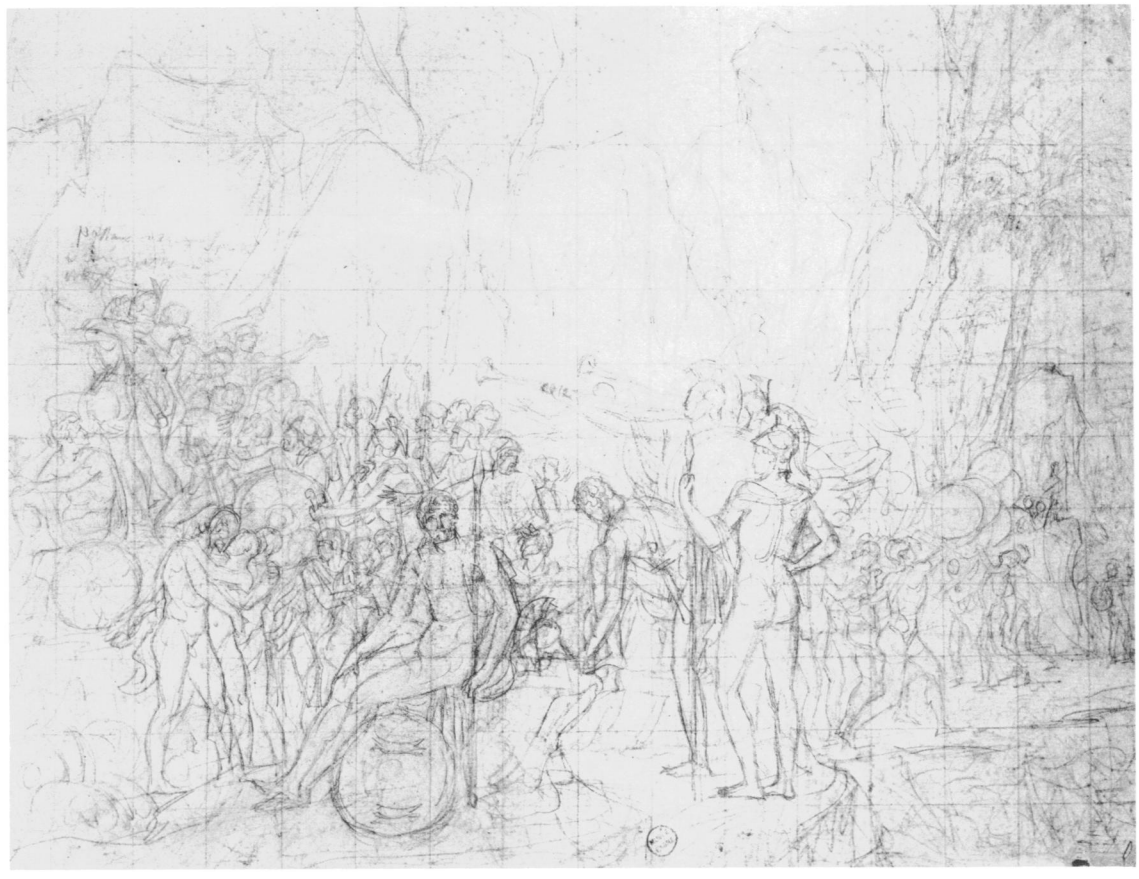

FIGURE 6
David, study for Leonidas. Pencil, 32 × 42 cm. Musée Fabre, Montpellier, 837-1-N198 (Bulloz)

FIGURE 7
David, study for Leonidas. Pencil, 20.3 × 25.5 cm. Cabinet des Dessins, RF9136, p. 19, Musée du Louvre (Musées Nationaux)

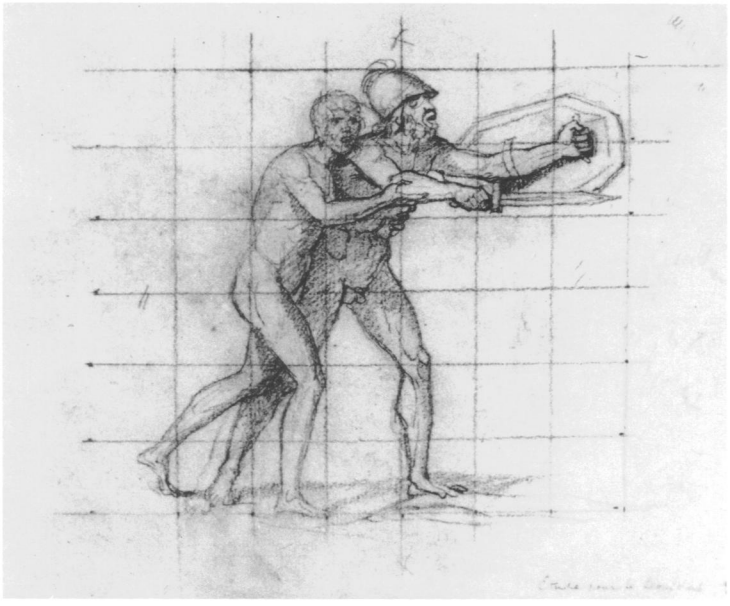

FIGURE 9
David, figure study. Pencil, 17 × 11 cm. Cabinet des Dessins, RF6071, p. 25, Musée du Louvre (Musées Nationaux)

general activity, contemplating "avec une joie douce à la mort glorieuse qui l'attend ainsi que ses compagnons d'armes."[23] Behind him, trumpeters sound the call to arms and the troops hurriedly respond, some preparing their armaments, others embracing their comrades in emotional farewells, and one soldier carving in rock with the hilt of his sword the fateful epitaph: "Go stranger and to Lacedaemon tell/That here, obeying her behests, we fell."[24] One can glimpse

23. Delécluze, p. 226.
24. The origins of this anachronistic epitaph are examined by Kemp, p. 179, who quotes the translation by G. Rawlinson, New York, 1928.

FIGURE 8 (left)
David, figure study. Pencil, 20.3 × 25.5 cm. (full sheet). Cabinet des Dessins, RF9136, p. 20, Musée du Louvre (Musées Nationaux)

FIGURE 10
David, figure study. Pencil, 25.5 × 20.3 cm. Cabinet des Dessins, RF9136, Musée du Louvre (Musées Nationaux)

in the background the departure up a mountain trail of the last of the Greek allies, sent away by Leonidas because (in Herodotus' words) "he cared for them, that they might not be destroyed."[25] This is an important thematic note since it emphasizes the magnanimity of Leonidas, the depleted number of Greek troops, and the desperateness of their position. The abstract ideal developed through all of these details is that of stoic self-sacrifice as a reflection of moral beauty and a means to eternal glory. As Kemp has put it, "Though Leonidas was to be defeated militarily, David wished to make it clear that the moral and spiritual victory after death was to belong to him, the virtuous martyr."[26]

There are a number of important compositional features that these drawings have in common. The point of view is more or less perpendicular to the direction of the mountain pass occupied by Leonidas and his men, that is, toward the rocky elevation of one side of the pass, which opens downward into the distance at the right toward the advancing Persian troops. To emphasize this, the lower right corner of the composition is left relatively open and the figures are massed toward the other side. A large profile of rock juts out to the upper right, serving as a repoussoir for the distant perspective to the side and as a balance for the upraised figures at the left. The basic compositional structure within which the figures are arranged is an uneven triangle tipped back into depth. Along the foreground base of the triangle, Leonidas is given an increasingly centralized, isolated, and commanding position with a decisive change in his pose coming in the early stages of development. Slack and rather casual in the first studies (Figures 5, 6), it becomes far more alert and resolute in the notebook drawing (Figure 7), already closely resembling the pose Leonidas strikes in the final painting.[27] It has the quality of a tensed spring: static (and therefore in keeping with Leonidas' mood of tranquil spirituality), yet predictive of imminent action.[28]

The poses not only of Leonidas but of several other figures in the foreground, as well as the relative placement of several of the motifs, are carried over to the Museum's drawing (Figure 2), which can be placed next in the chronological sequence of surviving compositional studies. As noted above, the drawing is actually a palimpsest. Having lightly laid in the underdrawing, David then reworked the entire composition, reinforcing in a firmer hand certain motifs from the first stage (for example, the figures of Leonidas, the soldier carving the epitaph, and the one kneeling to tie his sandal, the group of three soldiers reaching forward with wreaths, the blind soldier and companion at the left, the trumpeters, and below them, the two figures embracing). Probably at the same time, and with the same pressure of touch, he added over the underdrawing the vignette of the packtrain making its escape up a trail on the right, and also restructured the wall of rock in the background so that the pass opened directly away from the viewer. Other sections of the final composition, including the group of men behind Leonidas with a leader in Herculean garb[29] and the

25. *History*, book 7. David's idea of showing these men escaping up a mountain path is pure artistic license. According to Herodotus, there was indeed a mountain path but it was the route through which the Persians attacked Leonidas from the rear. The retreating Greeks would simply have crossed over the pass occupied by their countrymen.

26. Kemp, p. 183.

27. The pose in the first studies—legs stretched out to the side, one arm extended to the knee, the other at the side—seems to have been based on an antique statue of Mercury (Reinach, *Répertoire de la statuaire grecque et romaine* I [1906] pp. 365, 367, 368). Studies in David's albums reproduce the pose of this sculpture exactly (e.g., Louvre album RF6071, p. 13). It has often been observed that the definitive Leonidas pose is based on an engraved antique gem representing Ajax, published by Winckelmann (*Monumenti antichi inediti* [Rome, 1767] pl. 142; reproduced by Kemp, fig. 4).

28. Sources of other figures in this drawing: the pose of Eurytus derives from a study for the Serment du Jeu de Paume in David's Versailles notebook, which goes back ultimately to a figure in Raphael's Sacrifice at Lystra. The soldier engraving the inscription is thought by Holma and Hautecoeur to be based on a figure in the Farnese Bull, but if one traces this pose back through various drawings it can be seen to derive from a figure that David first developed for the Jeu de Paume. The youth binding his sandal appears to be based on a figure in Giulio Romano's Stoning of St. Stephen, and the motif of the emotional embrace is common in David's earlier studies. The standing figure with a spear, prominent in the Montpellier drawing but eliminated thereafter, was copied directly from a drawing in David's Berlin notebook after an antique representation of Meleager.

29. This figure is a disciple of the cult of Hercules, from whom Leonidas was said to be descended. Herodotus mentions an altar to Hercules in the Thermopylae pass, and in the final painting David added the inscription "Herakleos" to the cubical altar in the foreground.

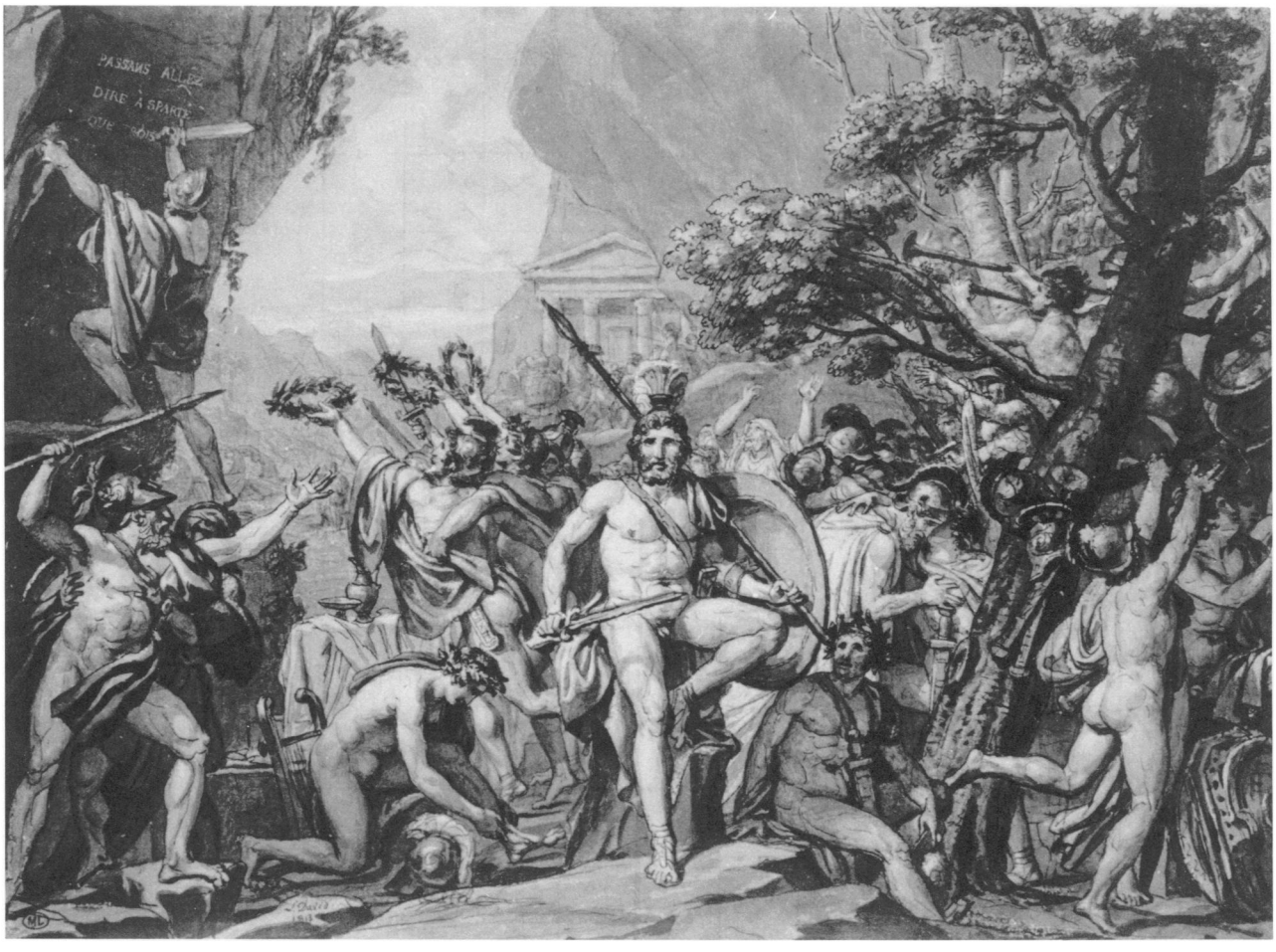

FIGURE 11
David, study for Leonidas. Pen, ink, and wash, 21 × 28.2 cm. Signed lower left: L. David, 1813. Cabinet des Dessins, Musée du Louvre, 26.080 (Musées Nationaux)

tree and two soldiers reaching for armor at the far right, are more darkly and somewhat more roughly drawn and seem to have been the latest additions.

If the tracing of the underdrawing (Figure 3) is examined, it will be seen that in composition it resembles rather closely the Louvre notebook drawing (Figure 7). The trumpeters have been shifted to the upper right, and a tree with hanging armor blocks the cleft in the rocks behind, but the direction of the pass downward to the right is apparently the same, as are several of the figures. It is my contention that the underdrawing recreates a composition that was developed soon after the Louvre study and is identical or very similar to the painted composition as it existed when David stopped work on the project in 1805; further, that the Museum's drawing as a whole represents a crucial rethinking and restructuring of the overall design at some point after work commenced anew in 1811. A light sketch of the existing composition would have provided a reference field and point of departure, over which the necessary changes could be made.

It will be recalled that Suau's letters furnish evidence that David effected extensive changes on his painted canvas in its late stages of development. He wrote on June 13, 1813, that David was going to "terminer son tableau des Thermopyles ou pour mieux dire le recommencer sur une autre toile," and

then added on July 28, "Le tableau des Thermopyles se continue sur la même toile et non sur une nouvelle . . . mais il y a fait beaucoup de changements, il y a très peu d'anciennes figures qui resteront." On August 22 he noted that "tous les changements qu'il y a fait sont ébauchés." Delécluze's discussion of the painting also stresses that several complete figures were added as late as 1813–14.[30] Since the second stage of the Museum's drawing relates closely to a finished wash drawing of 1813, the latest extant study for the composition (Figure 11), it must date from approximately the same time and therefore must manifest the changes alluded to by Suau in his letters.[31]

What evidence is there to support the theory that the first stage of the Museum's drawing records the composition as it existed in the oil of around 1805? It can be assumed, first of all, that the 1805 canvas embodied certain features common to the early drawings and would have shown, for example, the pass running parallel to the picture plane and the soldiers massed in a triangular configuration, elements shared by the underdrawing. It was, perhaps, this elevated crowding of figures that caused Chaussard to find the composition "vicieuse" when he saw it in David's studio, and it is interesting to speculate on the possibility that Chaussard's published criticism fed David's own eventual dissatisfaction with the composition.

Secondly, there is evidence that the figure of the blind Eurytus was the same in the painting Chaussard saw as in the underdrawing and all subsequent versions of the composition. Chaussard wrote, "On y voit parmi les principaux personnages, un soldat aveugle, remarquable par l'enthousiasme et presque par l'exagération de ses mouvements." The stumbling figure found in the preceding drawing (Figure 7) can hardly be described as remarkable for its enthusiasm and exaggerated movement.

And thirdly, a hint of repainting on the final canvas, the only one detectable on the glossy surface as the painting now hangs in the Louvre, further supports this theory. This pentimento comprises a slight ridge that cuts across the tree trunk on the right as a ghost contour for the back of the outermost trumpeter. It corresponds to the contour found in the underdrawing and indicates that, rather than being painted simultaneously, the tree was painted over the trumpeter. He must have been fully visible in the early version of the painting without the impediment of the tree, as is precisely the case in the underdrawing.

Although only an X-ray of the painting would make this a certainty, the available visual and documentary evidence does justify the conclusion that the composition in the underdrawing is the same or very similar to the 1805 oil version.[32] David, seriously dissatisfied with the composition as it existed, must have lightly sketched the disfavored design on what was intended as a type of worksheet and then executed the desired revisions in darker outline, preserving certain figures, eliminating and adding others, and altering the basic compositional structure. Thus, the two stages of the Museum's drawing can be seen as one continuous creative act rather than as two distinct operations separate in time. The second stage embodies all the essential features of the final composition, and progress from there to the finished wash drawing (Figure 11), in which David clarified certain ideas and briefly experimented with other

30. Delécluze, p. 337.

31. Published most recently by Kemp, fig. 2. Bean (Bean-von Bothmer) cites stylistic evidence for dating the Metropolitan's drawing to late in the project, finding the style of this work "plus avancé" than that of earlier pencil studies. The treatment, however, is not more advanced in terms of stylistic development, but simply manifests the more precise and sharply linear style that David reserved for relatively definitive studies and has parallels in his work as early as the Serment du Jeu de Paume.

32. The only problem with this theory is one raised by Delécluze's account of the order in which the figures on the final canvas were painted. He claims that the figure binding his sandal, the soldiers offering wreaths, the man carving the inscription, and the pair embracing were conceived and almost entirely painted in the early stages (that is, in 1804 or before), and that the blind Eurytus, the figure seated to the right of Leonidas, the soldiers retrieving their arms, and Leonidas himself all took form only in the late stages (Delécluze, p. 337; this account repeated by Holma and Hautecoeur). This order of progression, however, is at odds with other evidence. We know that David had determined the attitude of Leonidas as early as the Louvre notebook study, and it was probably the finalized Eurytus motif that Chaussard saw on the canvas prior to 1808. Delécluze's further contention that there is a striking disparity in the stylistic treatment of figures dating from the two different periods of execution ("au point d'en devenir parfois choquant") is unfounded, tending to throw further into doubt his reliability on this general issue.

new ones, and then to the painted canvas, involved no major changes.[33]

David's preparatory drawings for the Leonidas comprise a unique case history: they far outnumber those surviving from any other of his projects and provide a classic illustration of his methodical, highly inductive approach to composing. Furthermore, they make explicit the formalistic concerns and decisions that guided David in his development of the image. The process of gradual evolution evidenced by the drawings had as its constant objectives increased clarity and tectonic strength of composition as well as heightened narrative impact. From the tangled profusion of figures in the early studies and the many inexpressive poses—evidence of the difficulties of casting into plastic form such a grandiose theme—David slowly refined and tightened his design, although the final solution was to come only through a radical revision of form. This revision, as documented by the Museum's drawing, involved substituting for an unstable diagonal pattern a far more rigid rectilinear and symmetrical structure. Where there had been a triangle of figures David created a dense friezelike arrangement with Leonidas as a resolute formal and psychological fulcrum. The figures to either side are matched across the composition in placement and rhyming gestures. Upraised, balanced motifs at each end complete the lateral symmetry. And by redirecting the pass straight into the distance David substituted another right angle for a former diagonal and heightened the narrative drama by bringing into full view the menacing army and emphasizing the narrowness of the Spartan stronghold. In other words, all elements of design have been subjected to rigorous calculation to create an image which, in its synthesis of passion and contemplation, baroque excitement and highly disciplined order, realism and abstraction, forms a visual equivalent of the stirring moral ideals being celebrated. The final solution may strike modern eyes as labored, but considered in the light of David's own formal and theoretical expectations it can more justifiably be seen as a major achievement.

33. A poorly preserved oil *esquisse*, created after the wash drawing and before the final painting, is in the reserves of the Louvre (Sterling and Adhémar, *La Peinture au Musée du Louvre: école française XIX^e siècle* 2 [1959] no. 560, pl. 185). Bean (Bean-von Bothmer) believes that this esquisse is the work of a copyist, but stylistically it is quite consistent with other oil esquisses by David and is, I believe, by the master himself. A pencil drawing of the full composition is in the Musée Magnin, Dijon. This is inscribed with David's initials in the lower left corner but is almost certainly a copy after the painting and not by David.