

## **Sample Essay from Art 188: History of Western Art (Renaissance to Modern)**

### **Prompt:**

Compare Hyacinthe Rigaud's painting *Louis XIV* (1701) to Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* (1793). Both of these artworks were made for explicitly political purposes, though they clearly depict very different types of figures and employ very different styles. Compare these two artworks in terms of how they convey their particular political message to the viewer. What strategies does each artist employ and why? What are they trying to communicate to the viewer about the state?



### **A Martyr of Royal Proportions**

For the majority of the eighteenth-century, French farmers stayed starving and cold while an elite class of nobility consumed them. For years, the upper echelon of French society relied on the blood and sweat of the layman to provide them with ample nourishment. But after the spring of 1791, the fields would be nourished by the blood of laymen and aristocrat alike, and the old ways would be no more. A revolution had begun, and revolutionary figures like Jean Paul Marat would be painted in stark contrast to the grandiose portraiture of King Louis the Fourteenth nearly a century prior. Indeed, the transition in composition from the early eighteenth century spoke to more than simple brushstrokes. It represented the political enlightenment of the French

people attempting to secure for themselves unalienable liberties they had been denied so long. Marat, therefore, was not simply a brutalized revolutionary lying lifeless in his bathtub; *The Death of Marat* depicts the efforts of the enlightenment revolution ferociously contesting with the old paradigm of French government.

When comparing two pieces it is important to recognize their respective contexts first. The Louis XIV portrait is painted by Hyacinthe Rigaud during the early Enlightenment period of France in 1701. This painting has King Louis XIV surrounded by opulence in a very stately posture. Louis states, "I am the state," reinforcing his role as monarch of France for anyone viewing his kingly grandeur. *The Death of Marat*, however, imparts a very different sentiment. Painted by French revolutionary artist Jacques-Louis David in 1793, *The Death of Marat* displays the infamous revolutionary writer is lifeless in a tub. At the height of the French revolution, he is soaking in a mixture of medicinal sulfur used to treat a rare skin condition he contracted in the sewers of France. Indeed, this disease that Marat contracted in the sewers placed him in the tub he would be murdered in. In this way, the poverty that drove him into the sewers also drove him to his demise; the French aristocracy could expunge the poor from the streets, but they could never extricate the ideas Marat imbued. The piece evoked compassion and provided justification to the many rebellious Parisians for whom he spoke. Furthermore, the painting immortalized Marat as a martyr and freedom fighter in the eyes of his fellow revolutionaries. The Louis XIV portrait flaunts power and status while *The Death of Marat* condemns monarchical rule in France.

After examining context, it is crucial to integrate the content of the works to get at their underlying meaning. Examining the content of the Louis XIV portrait gives the viewer an idea of

the intentions and priorities of the French king. It is especially apparent that the king has a lot of money. His encrusted sword and outrageously fanciful robe serve to bolster his status and wealth. It would almost seem that in a secondary effort to avoid being directly arrogant, these items are also imbued with a national relevance. The ludicrous robe displays the three-pronged lily representing the French monarchy, and his encrusted sword represents French military might. It is his shoes that cannot be accounted for. The king, old and sickly as he actually was, adorns some stylish footwear to juxtapose his position as self-proclaimed “Sun King” with some suave contemporary sneakers and a cheeky flash of the thigh. As powerful and sophisticated as he may have been, this portraiture shows a clear separation from reality; the wealth and power of “France” depicted in Louis’ portrait was not representative of the people who actually lived there. It was only relatable to the fancifully rich. Comparatively, the Marat portrait makes king Louis look like a bad attempt at humor. *The Death of Marat* was something extremely real and very relatable. It illustrated a man who suffered dearly at the hand of the monarchy and was ultimately killed by those who supported its rule. The rich and famous could never relate to *The Death of Marat* in the same way Parisians did; Marat would have been more honorable in the eyes of the public than any would-be king. Marat is shown in his tub, papers under arm and his quill in hand. It would appear that he was working on some enlightenment literature when he received a letter which tricked him into granting his killer access to him. Similar to the Louis XIV portrait, Marat’s body is sculpted with the precision and attention expected of the neoclassical age. The sickly and bleeding body of Marat elicits a specific emotional reaction of resentment and remorse. That the Marat painting gained the popularity that it did supports the idea that people began to relate more with enlightenment concepts and less of the idea of a king.

The skillful hand of each artist has a unique place in the message of each painting. The separate pieces are painted with unique and very different forms. Looking at the Louis XIV painting one notices that it is very full. This is assumed to be an intentional detail, as a king would surely have many possessions. Small shadows hide in the creases of cloth behind him. The only true shadow that rivals that of the king is in the very back of the painting almost out of sight. It would not be a stretch to say that the painting is full of cloth, and every cloth is radiant with color. Light comes from the right-side illuminating Louis the XIV making him look larger with his robe on. The piece is extremely skilled but has some element of blurring when looked at closely. The overall atmosphere is one of style, color, and power regarding the king. The Marat piece does not share much with the Louis portrait; it is of a bath tub, a man, and a desk. The details of Marat are more vivid and retain their integrity upon close inspection. Marat himself is so realistic, he truly looks lifeless. His posture is very reminiscent of pieta, reinforcing his martyr status in a Christ-like fashion. Despite the detail and realism of Marat, the stark ambiguity of the upper half of the painting is both unconventional and genius. With a black top half, there is nothing but Marat himself to focus on, the only thing one can really see and feel is Marat. As a result, the piece evokes keeps the viewers attention and feeling on the death of the man. One might ask who would do such a thing. Then answer inevitably reached is the monarchy.

The differences in context, content, and form of *The Death of Marat* and *Louis XIV* vary widely. These aspects are essential to the message and reception of the works. Their comparison brings out everything that is right, or wrong, with the messages they impart. In the case of David's painting, it simply elicits the exact emotions people needed to feel; the emotions they needed reassurance of if they were to carry out their cause. The power of *The Death of Marat*



inspired people to carry on fighting for the French Revolution. The influence of art certainly stretches beyond the construct of the mind, art is part and parcel of society, and should be regarded so dearly.