

The Theater of Revolution: A New Interpretation of Jacques-Louis David's *Tennis Court Oath*

AS artistes manquées, as would-be artists, we art historians feel a strong inclination toward the great unfinished projects. Here we are not only entitled but asked to complete what was left fragmentary. But especially in the case of works that never stood the test of realization, we are tempted to do what we do more often than not to normal works of art: We transfer them to a kind of ideal space, severing their bonds to function, place, and viewer.

In this chapter, I present a new interpretation for a famous fragment, using it to demonstrate the decisiveness of a work's function and place of destination, especially in this case of a bold and failed design.

In the case of David's *Tennis Court Oath*, we find authorization in an argument that David himself put forward some years after he began the painting. He said:

To be sure, France does not really love the Fine Arts. An affected taste rules. Even if Italy's masterpieces are met in France with great enthusiasm, one regards them in reality as curiosities or treasures. The place a work of art occupies, the distance which you have to overcome in order to see it, these factors contribute in a special way to the work's aesthetic value. In particular the paintings which previously served as church ornament lose much of their attraction and power when they do not remain at the place for which they were made.¹

I shall give you only a very short summary of the well-known facts about the *Tennis Court Oath*.² On 20 July 1789, the six hundred deputies of the Third Estate met in a tennis court at Versailles, after the king had kept them away from their normal meeting place. There they took an oath to remain in permanent assembly until they had drawn up a constitution for their country: They would "die rather than disperse before France was free." Even the revolutionary events that followed in

rapid succession could not interfere with the primordial importance of this day.

After celebrating the first anniversary on 20 June 1790, deputy Dubois-Crancé entered a threefold motion at the Jacobin club: that the tennis court of Versailles should be preserved as a landmark of national interest, that parliament should assemble there every year and renew the oath, and that "the most energetic brush and the most skillful graving-tool" should "immortalize" the event.³ The last part of the motion essentially spelled out the fact that Jacques-Louis David was Dubois-Crancé's man.

The first suggested step was to paint a picture of the Tennis Court Oath for the assembly hall of the parliament, a work measuring twenty to thirty feet. This huge painting was then to be reproduced in engravings. The Jacobin club approved this motion, introduced it in parliament, and parliament approved it on 6 November 1790. David went to work. The Salon of 1791, which opened in September, witnessed the first result of his intensive studies: a large, very detailed drawing (fig. 1), which attracted much attention and induced parliament to pass a resolution: "That the painting, which represents the oath at the Tennis Court and was begun by the painter J. L. David, should be executed at public expense, and is to be hung at the location which serves as Parliament's meeting place, in order to remind the lawmakers of the courage, that is necessary for their task."⁴ David had received a commission, which was unique in many respects. To begin with, the patron was without precedence. The parliament, the representatives of the people, had taken the initiative, in former times a prerogative of the king or the municipality. The work was to be executed at public expense. It was destined for a building, for a public space, that France never had seen and that was still being planned when David got the commission: the floor of a parliament. Uncommon, even according to feudal standards, was the bold scale of the work, which Dubois-Crancé had estimated at twenty to thirty feet and which was even enlarged by David to twenty-seven to thirty-five feet. To execute a one hundred-square-meter picture not as a wall painting, not as a mosaic, as Dubois had first proposed, but as an easel painting confronted a painter with many technical and artistic problems. Also without precedent was the subject: a revolutionary crowd, six hundred actors figuring in such a large composition. And, finally, a radically new understanding of history painting was at work in choosing an event of the very recent past and enlarging it to monumental scale.



1. David, *Tennis Court Oath*, 1791. Paris, Louvre, Cabinet des Dessins, courtesy Service de Documentation Photographique.

Each of these challenges would have been too great for a painter of lesser ability. David, however, might have coped with this accumulation of artistic problems if external difficulties had not interfered. He succeeded in transferring the outlines of his design to the canvas and realizing some of the heads. He then went into politics himself, was elected deputy, and became the pageant master of the Republic, a sought-after man. In the same space of time, more and more protagonists of 20 June 1789 had left the political arena, in fact, had left head and life under the guillotine. Bailly, Mirabeau, Barnave-St. Etienne, Robbespierre—some of the key figures in the event—either died, were decapitated, or became unpopular in the very years when David was due to complete his work.⁵ Although the bold design remained a fragment, its very successful engravings shaped the sensibilities of both David's contemporaries and of the following generations. Ultimately, historical event and history painting became almost identical.

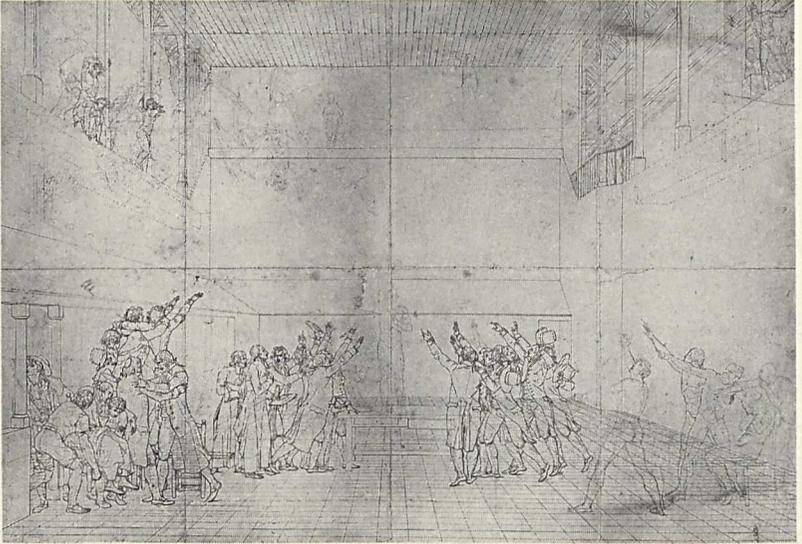
David was neither the first nor the only one to picture this event, however, and his version perhaps lays the least claim to historical correctness. A comparison can help clarify its idiosyncrasies. In his engrav-



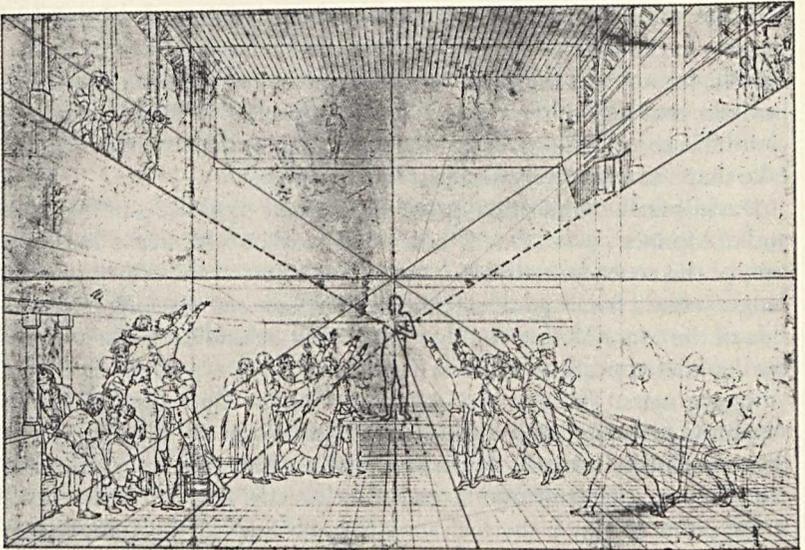
2. Helman after Monnet, *Tennis Court Oath*, 1792–1793, courtesy Bibliothèque Nationale.

ing, Charles Monnet (fig. 2) shows the court from an oblique view; he arranges the deputies in a half circle and locates the central point of interest in the back of the court. There, Bailly, the president of the assembly, pronounces the oath. According to the rules of perspective, the horizon, and with it the viewer's ideal position, is in the center of the cloud.⁶ In short, Monnet keeps the event at a distance and allows it to take shape in a relatively unconstrained manner.

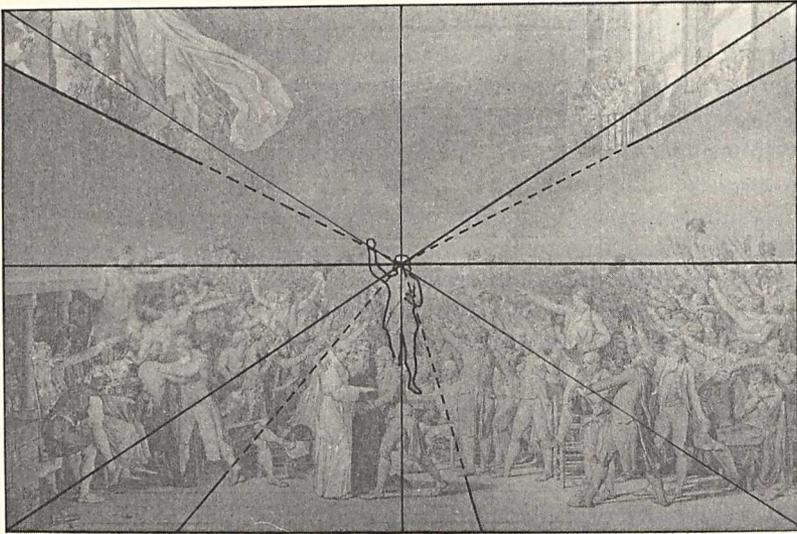
David's final composition is just the opposite of projects of this kind and of Monnet's print. David faces the somewhat cold, sterile construction of the court frontally; he takes a small part of the crowd and arranges it like a frieze, parallel to the picture plane and reaching from one side of the court/of the painting to the other. Behind it, the majority of the deputies appears as a kind of etcetera-formula, as a relatively vague, vibrating mass. The first row is placed close to the viewer, although separated from him by a distinct, small strip of space. Equally near is the only central figure, President Bailly, who stands on a table and stares out of the picture, confronting the viewer directly. Between Bailly's eyes is the point at which the relevant structural lines of the composition meet; it is the crossing-point of the picture's diagonals and the center of both the vertical and horizontal axes. Moreover, this spot marks the vanishing point at which the orthogonals of the image converge. The



3. David, *Tennis Court Oath*, 1791. Cambridge, courtesy Fogg Art Museum.



4. David, *Tennis Court Oath* (vide fig. 3), diagonals and vanishing point.



5. David, *Tennis Court Oath* (vide fig. 1), diagonals and vanishing point.

viewer is thus there, face to face with Bailly, a little bit above the crowd. More stress couldn't be laid upon this single point; we will have to bear that in mind.

It should be noted here that David, who was not very strong in perspective, is said to have left the geometrical construction of his painting to a specialist, a "perspecteur," in this case probably the architect Charles Moreau. The result of his efforts would then have been the large drawing in the Fogg (fig. 3), which is exactly the same size as the drawing for the Salon.⁷ In one respect, the two drawings differ: they have different vanishing points. In the Fogg drawing, the vanishing lines come together where Bailly's hand should be and, in his hand, the paper containing the formula of the oath (fig. 4). In the finished version it is—as we have seen—the point between Bailly's eyes (fig. 5). The difference is a subtle one, but it marks two different conceptions about the central point. The first drawing, the Fogg drawing, is the result of considerations based on the logic of the event. This work concentrates on the symbolic essence of the event, on the document that is holding out the promise of a greater document, the constitution of the bourgeois state. To make the vanishing point coincide with Bailly's eyes would make no sense on this level. Bailly is engaged in taking the oath in many ways:

by having the document, by raising his right arm, by pronouncing the formula—but the look of his eyes matters little in this respect. The transition from the first to the second vanishing point indicates a shift from a conception based on the logic of the event to one that stresses the painting's physical context. The final placement of the vanishing point focuses the composition on the point at which two systems of communication merge: one within the painting and one between the painting and the viewer. This creates a center of exceptionally active radiation, as well as acknowledges the viewer.

Upon consideration, this shift in the central point might only be the logical outcome of prior compositional ideas. One could say that the final placement of the vanishing point is the keystone of a construction that fulfills the needs of an aesthetical reception rather than historical accuracy. The accent on the document would have been only a symbolical compensation for the deficit in the logic of the narrative. After all, the way David pictures the event in both drawings does not meet the claims of historical reality. Never would the deputies of the Third Estate have arranged themselves in this way. They did not stand behind Bailly, and Bailly, when pronouncing the oath, did not turn his back on them. They did not press closely together in one half of the court, in order to leave the other half void. Lacking an authentic depiction of the event, we can assume that all the other versions of the *Tennis Court Oath*—versions that show Bailly in the middle of the crowd, as the center of a, so to speak, natural circle and not as the protagonist of a frieze-like group—get closer to the truth. "He [Bailly] is too far at the front, where only a few stand, while a multitude are behind him; it is not natural that he turns his back on them," as a critic said of the picture in 1791.⁸

To understand David's forced composition we have to deal with problems of its reception. We must ask about its spatial context, the kind of addressees the work was intended for, and how its composition re-sounded to its external conditions and requirements. The *Tennis Court Oath* is a picture of a provisional parliament, destined for a permanent parliament. The style for a parliament building was not yet realized on the continent before the French Revolution. Even the "Constituante," the parliament that commissioned David, met in a makeshift place; but by the time David started working on his large painting, certain formal and ideological notions concerning the appearance and function of a parliament had arisen. Without knowing the final shape of the new building, David could at least presuppose a basic structure, and, equally

important, he could form an idea of the ideological quality of the space he was to decorate.

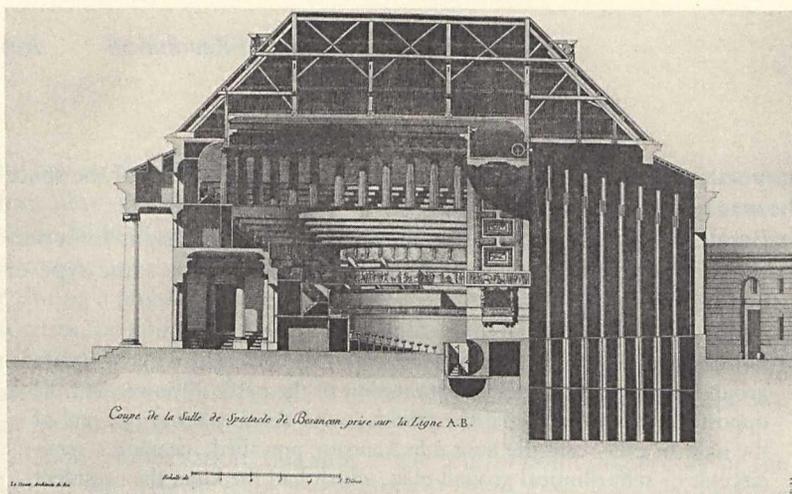
Between 1789 and 1793, a broad range of different designs for a parliament was produced, but all of them adhered to the same type of projected floor:

Nobody came upon the idea to follow the English model with its square ground-plan and its spatial confrontation of the party in power and the opposition, with its placing the president and the speaker at one end of the hall. In every case the floor à la française prevailed, meaning a semi-circular or semielliptical ground-plan, which had the king, the president and the speaker in the centre, face to face with the plenum and the public. The model was found, probably stimulated by the latest developments in theater-architecture; the triumph of French parliamentarism resulted in many realizations throughout the world.⁹

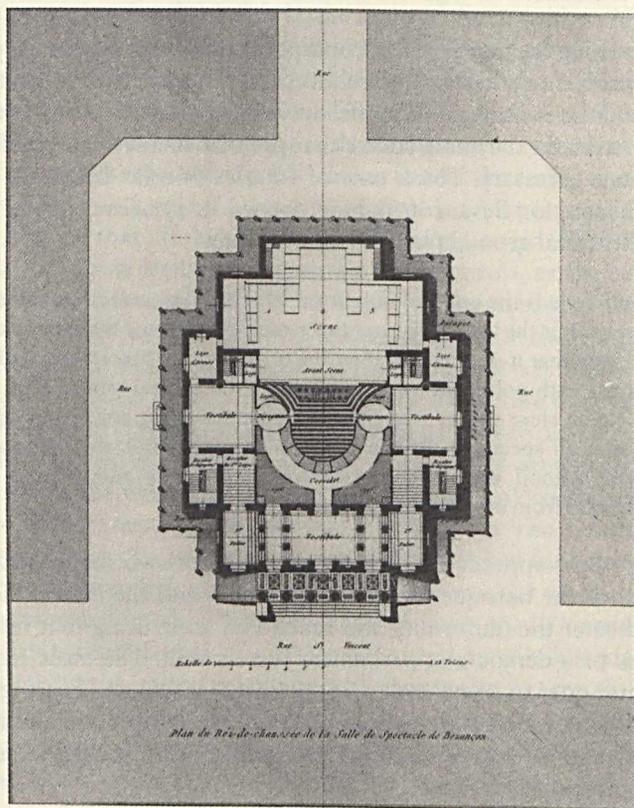
Concerning the practical and conceptual affinity of theater and parliament, we have to add that the architectural school of the French theater had found the exchangeable model only right before the Revolution and as a reaction to the same social changes that finally made building a parliament necessary. Think only of Charles Nicolas Ledoux's democratic theater for Besançon, which opened in 1784 and about whose amphitheatrical ground plan its author wrote:

The halfcircle is the one and only form which allows everything on stage to be seen. It is the task of the artist to establish the frame for his picture in such a way that it obstructs neither the object nor its perception. Morals, combined with political power, will restore the natural ranks. Who pays most, sits at close range; who pays least, sits far away, but by paying the admission all spectators have a claim to sitting comfortably and safely, to having a good, unobstructed view from every angle and to being seen equally well from everywhere (figs. 6, 7).¹⁰

Ledoux's new approach meant the abolition of two major structural elements of the baroque theater: the parquet and the boxes. He gave to the theater the uniformity and functional structuring that fitted the purposes of a democratic parliament just as well. The basic rights of the theater-goer to a seat and to unobstructed vision and hearing entail the abolition of the boxes: to see well, and to be easily seen, are the two quintessential aspects of Ledoux's program. For overview you have to pay the price of surveillance.



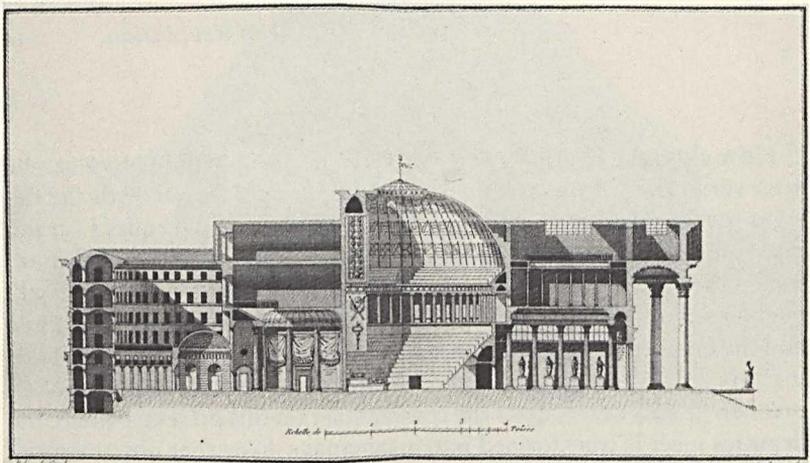
6. Ledoux, *Theatre at Besançon* (section), 1784. Photo courtesy Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.



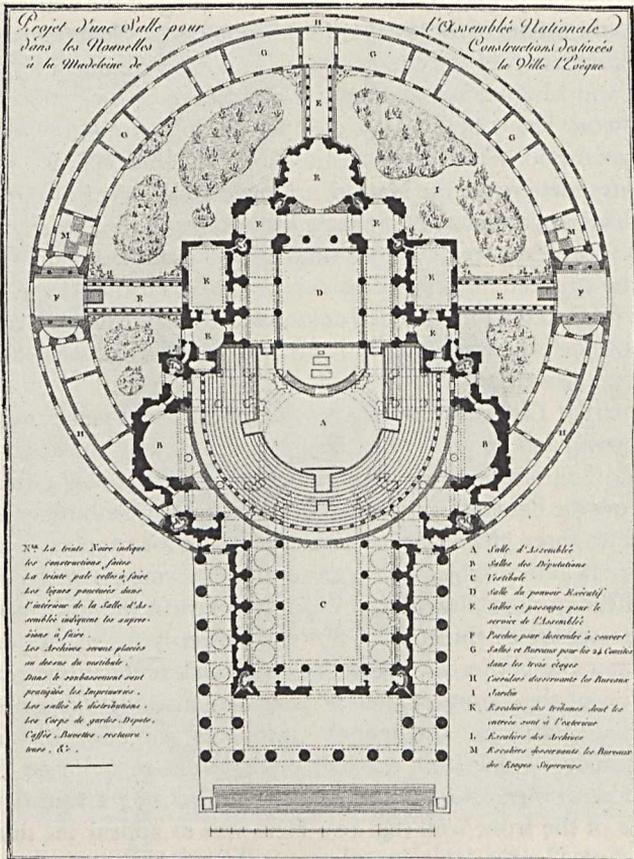
7. Ledoux, *Theatre at Besançon* (groundplan), 1784. Photo courtesy Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.

How close the relations were between the two building types can be seen very clearly from a comparison of Ledoux's theater with the designs for the new parliament, which were published by Jacques Legrand and Jacques Molinos in 1791 (figs. 8, 9). These architects planned to remodel the partly finished church La Madeleine into a "Palais National" in such a manner that the nave could be used as an extended vestibule and the choir (plus transepts) as the amphitheatrical floor. A new building type would never again succeed an old one in such an outspoken manner. "Every place," says the commentary on this project, "where the deputies meet is transformed into a sanctuary. Even that obscure gymnasium, that tennis court, where the National Assembly took upon its oath to live in freedom or to die, . . . instantly became a sacred place and will remain such forever."¹¹ A "temple" was to be built. But the massive changes that the plans provide for the remodeling of the church are indebted to the model of the theater. The theater designs lent themselves to the transformation of the extant church into the parliament. No doubt Legrand and Molinos worked from a knowledge of Ledoux's building for Besançon. They opted for the pure semicircular ground plan, which was not yet the norm in theater-architecture. Their rationale is Ledoux's: "The representatives of the Nation, arranged on the steps of the amphitheatre, have approximately the same distance from the president of the assembly; their eyes are fixed on him in a very natural way, and from his lectern the speaker can see all his colleagues."¹² Further, Legrand and Molinos refer to the monumental colonnade of the theater of Besançon, with whose help Ledoux made an optical distinction between the gods and the expensive tiers.

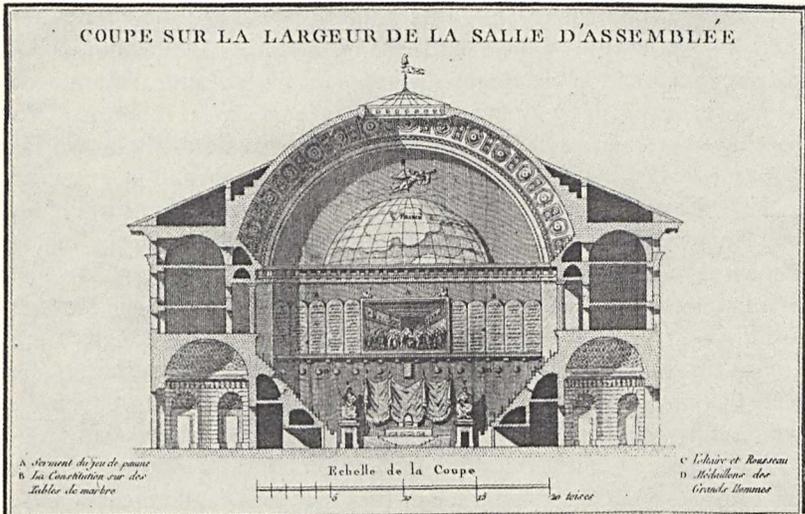
But whereas Ledoux uses the space behind the colonnade for more seats, Legrand and Molinos provide seats for the public above the colonnade. And Legrand and Molinos elaborate upon Ledoux's design by substituting the flat ceiling for a half dome, with the result that the floor incorporates three geometrical or stereometrical forms, pure forms according to the philosophy of revolutionary architecture: namely, the half circles of the ground plan and of the upper part of the front wall and the quartersphere of the cupola. But it is not only formalistic purism that dictates the choice of forms; it becomes clear when we read the description of the "voute immense" that they also serve the needs of "architecture parlante," for here the architects wanted to display the flags of France's twenty-four departments to evoke the unity of France, France as a whole. Another symbolic statement was assigned to the half circle of the front wall (fig. 10): Here was to appear the northern



8. Legrand-Molinos, *Plan for a Parliament* (section), 1791. Courtesy Soc. Amis Bibl. Art. Arch.)



9. Legrand-Molinos, *Plan for a Parliament* (groundplan), 1791. Courtesy Soc. Amis Bibl. Art. Arch.



10. Legrand-Molinos, *Plan for a Parliament* (section), 1791. Photo by author.

hemisphere, with France at the center and the genius of liberty above it. What Dubois-Crancé said in his speech in 1790 when he argued for commissioning David with the *Tennis Court Oath* helps us understand this composition. He said: “No sooner had the structure of the French constitution extricated itself from the ruins of old superstitions, than it presented itself to the neighbour-nations in a sublime way. Imitating our example, the whole world [as a matter of fact, he said ‘the circle of the world’] will be free.”¹³ The extension of the visual program to cosmic dimensions has its political sense, but we should not overlook that highest utilization of circular and spheric forms, the analogy with the cosmos itself. Again we are reminded of Ledoux, who placed at the front of his treatise on architecture the image of the planetary system, or of his great rival, Etienne-Louis Boullée, who claimed for himself the introduction of the sphere into architecture and who wrote on behalf of the circular form: “In nature everything is circle: the stone, which falls into a lake, makes numberless circles; centrifugal force expresses itself in circles; the air, the sea circle around endlessly; the satellites revolve around Jupiter and Saturn, and the planets are on their immense orbit.”¹⁴

The circle was provided by nature and is therefore right, good, and beautiful. The circle is the symbol of unity, equality, and infinity; it is practical and proper. For the revolutionary architects all these at-

tributes were interchangeable. On his (never realized) project for a theater, Boullée writes: "I have made the inside of my auditorium in the shape of a semicircle—undoubtedly one of the most beautiful shapes. . . . Moreover this is the only shape suitable for a theater. It is necessary to be able to see and hear perfectly and what shape fulfils these two requirements better than the one whose exactly equal radii give the ear and eye the greatest and most equitably distributed freedom; where no point hides another and where, for this reason, all spectators on the same level can see and hear equally well."¹⁵

It has escaped the notice of the David scholars that his *Tennis Court Oath* was part of the Legrand and Molinos project. The design of the front wall speaks to where it was to be placed and how its surroundings were planned. The large canvas struggles to stand its ground on the wall, which is forty meters long. It was to be hung in a rather high position—its lower edge on a level with the highest tiers of the deputies. Beneath the canvas were to appear the stands for the president and the speakers, to its sides, marble slabs with the engraved text of the constitution, and above it, the said picture of the northern hemisphere. This design must have been completed after May or September 1791, because it shows in the final version of David's composition. It was submitted at the end of 1791 and published in 1792.

It is hard to tell how much it was the result of a direct cooperation between the painter and the architects. But two facts at least are certain: When David thought about the future location of his painting, he could work on the premise of an amphitheatrical structure of the floor, as it was planned in its purest form by Legrand and Molinos. As a member of the parliamentary committee responsible for the new building, he knew of Legrand's and Molinos' projects. Of all the submitted designs, theirs were the most successful and received the most prominent publication. It may be that David was instrumental in placing his work in, and adjusting to, the parliament to be built. In any case, this design of the floor's front wall represents the one and only interpretation of the *Tennis Court Oath* in its surroundings, so to speak. Neither the painting nor the parliament building according to Molinos' and Legrand's plans were realized. Money and the pressure of time stopped the latter.

The Parliament's decision of September 1792 to remodel for its own purposes not the Madeleine but rather the theater of the Tuileries was a decision supported by David. Behind the change in plans may have stood David's own insight into the impracticability of his painting: for the new structure allowed no place for his huge canvas (fig. 11). He



11. Helman after Monnet, I. *Prairial de l'an III*, 1794. Photo courtesy Bibliothèque National, Paris.

was to adorn this place, the wall behind the speaker, with two smaller works: the dead Marat and the dead Lepelletier.¹⁶

So far we have analyzed the structure of communication within the painting, and we have reconstructed (the structure of) the space it was intended for. We can now relate these two aspects. The model of the theater is appropriate not only for the parliamentary floor but also for the first major commission for picturing a parliament in action. Many writers have mentioned the theatrical effect of David's *Tennis Court Oath*. Here I am interested not in the depicted but in the architecturally defined theatricality.

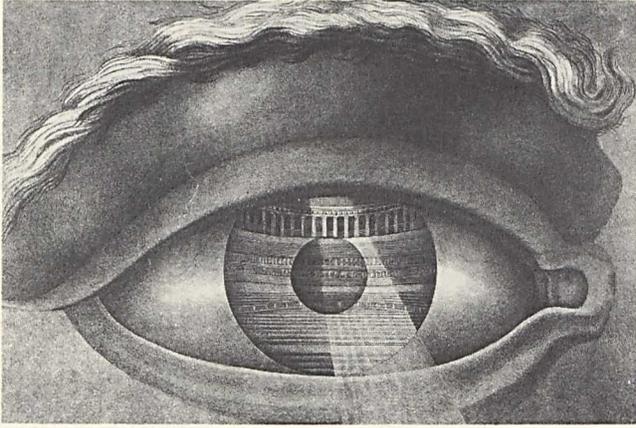
The plenum of deputies as the auditorium, the general public as the gods, the platform, including the speakers' lectern and the president's seat, as the proscenium, and the *Tennis Court Oath* as decor and stage—these were the elements of the planned parliamentary theater. Putting them together we get a more than functional form; we get an ideologically motivated one that we know well: the circle. When we imagine looking from above on David's arrangement of the crowd, we get a perfect half circle, with Bailly in the center and with the front line as its straight line. This half circle is forced and, according to the logic of the event, unmotivated and asks for completion through the amphitheater

of the floor and the plenum of the deputies. The painted half circle of the provisional parliament and the real half circle of the true parliament complement each other to form the appeal-structure (*appellstruktur*) of David's composition.

In this case, though, viewers and actors, public and stage, are not brought together by architectural means alone. This interaction of painting and architecture would have been a solution that fits very well into the concept of neoclassical art: close connection between the two sides but protection of their respective autonomy. In this respect, the exposed strip in the foreground speaks a clear language. But David goes one step further to secure the contact between the two halves of the circle. The figure of Bailly, which faces the viewer, which indeed faces all viewers, collects the energy of the crowd, focuses it, and redirects it to the viewer.

This kind of perforation into the closed mechanism of neoclassical painting is not unprecedented in David's work, but what is unprecedented is that a painting of this size comes to one point or head. Through a subtle manipulation of the relationship of the composition and the actant, what is normally the remotest and deepest point in this painting—the vanishing point—has been reversed to form the opposite: Bailly's look, which marks this center, transmits, without intermission, the focused message of the painting into the infinity of his audience like a beacon. The look as the active and activating center, the all-seeing eye, and the "figura cuncta videntis," all point to issues that affect theater and parliament, art and politics, in a similar manner.

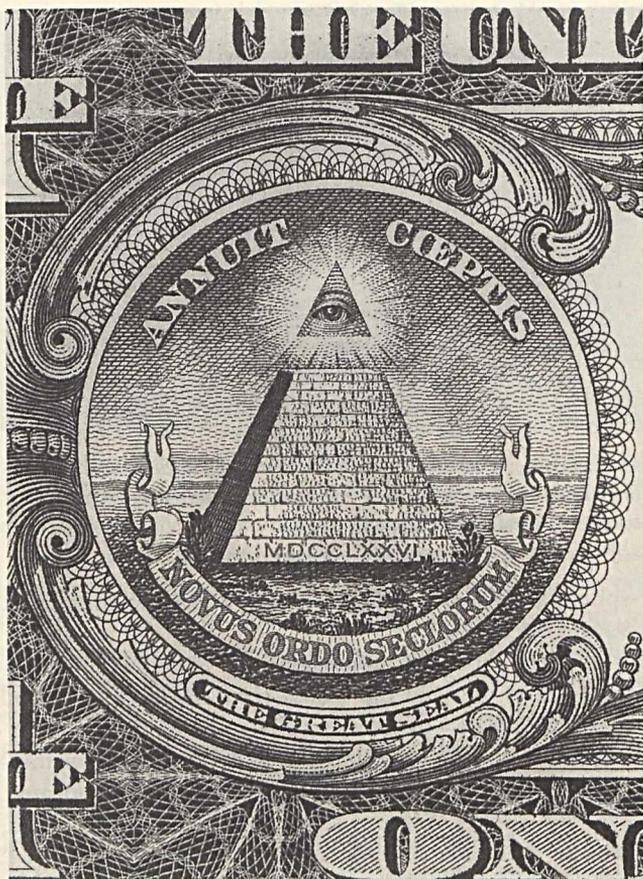
First of all, let's look into the most famous eye of the period, provided by an illustration to Ledoux's treatise on architecture (fig. 12). The title, "Symbolic representation of the auditorium through the pupil of an eye," refers to the auditorium of the theater of Besançon, which was opened in 1784 (whereas the book was published only in 1804). Seen "through the pupil of an eye" can be understood, on the one hand, as: We look through the pupil into the eye, into its inner half-circular or, better, concave background, in this case into the amphitheater. The natural disposition of our sight organ is in accordance with the structure of the auditorium: the theater is all eyes. Ledoux devotes a long passage to this thought, parts of which we have already quoted: "Equal sight for all" is his maxim. If we transfer this model to the situation for which David's painting was destined, we get the floor of a parliament that allows equal sight (*rayon égal*) for all the viewers/deputies, as well as equal sight on the stage, that is, on the platform and on the stage set. Such is the case in David's *Tennis Court Oath*. Like the radius of a



12. Ledoux, *Symbolic representation of the auditorium [of the theatre in Besançon] through the pupil of an eye*, 1804. Photo courtesy Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.

quarter-sphere all the lines of sight were to run up to the center, to the all-captivating eye of Bailly.

If, on the other hand, we understand the symbolic eye as an active organ—and this is the way the words seen “through the pupil of an eye” are normally read—as meaning not into but with the aid of this eye, then we see how the mighty eye receives the image of the auditorium and mirrors it back to us. This eye would have been located where Bailly’s eyes are, on the stage, in a rather elevated position and facing the auditorium frontally. A remarkable coincidence between David’s and Ledoux’s works is that the exact visual center is, in both cases, a rather neutral zone and not a place of specific interest: through the center of Ledoux’s pupil runs a relief-frieze; Bailly’s line of sight meets the ambulatory and not the deputies or the general public, if we imagine the hanging of the painting according to the plans of Legrand and Molinos. We can fairly safely say that these looks are directed toward nothing special, but see all and everything; and this is the way they are shaped, these staring and totally open eyes. Ledoux’s basic law said not only that all should see equally well but also that all should be seen equally well. Our short treatment of theater-architecture has already suggested that this call for a two-way communication had to meet more than just a technical or—so to speak—hygienic demand. How far we stand in



13. *The Great Seal of the United States* (from the one-dollar bill). Photo courtesy Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.

the arena of politics becomes clear when we consult the eye-symbolism of the French Revolution.

The basic scheme of David's composition was already prefigured in the Great Seal of the United States, which everybody can study on the one-dollar bill (fig. 13) and which dates back to the penultimate decade of the eighteenth century: a pyramid with an eye at its peak.¹⁷ I have already mentioned that Bailly's eyes mark not only the intersection of the vanishing lines but also the point where the diagonals intersect.

When we cut up these lines, then, four triangles with eyes at the top result—the formation of a pyramid, as in the seal. Regardless of the many symbolic meanings of the eye and the triangle, we are entitled to state that, in these cases, the social body or basis is finished, or better yet, crowned through an eye. Combined with any form of symbolic light (for example, sunrise, lightning, dissipation of darkness), the eye and the triangle are the most successful emblems of the two great bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century and of the Enlightenment in general.¹⁸ It is remarkable that the symbolic triad is completely present in the seal as well as in the *Tennis Court Oath*. David ingeniously exploits the historic circumstances: the lightning and the fierce wind of a thunderstorm about to break provide the proper atmospheric-cosmic accent. We admire the stage manager's skill, for David deflects the lightning and brings its effect down to the scene by using the expressive gestures of people and things.

"Annuit Coeptis," the second inscription on the seal, meaning "He has favored the beginnings," speaks of *Him*, who finds in this combination of triangle, eye, and light his conventional symbolic expression. But in spite of the strong Christian connotations of the symbol, one should not overlook that it competes with strong profane implications: freemasons, atheists, philosophers, people of the Enlightenment used it frequently to designate providence, the light of reason, or, generally, the "Supreme Being" to which most enlightened minds still felt bound. We must suppose, then, that the political symbolism of the French Revolution had to consider carefully Christian, political, and ideological implications when it engaged the "natural sign" of the eye for its own purposes.

The *Constituante*, the parliament that commissioned David's *Tennis Court Oath*, had as the vignette of its resolutions the Bourbonic lilies (fig. 14).¹⁹ We should keep in mind that a vignette is as official as a state seal. The convention, the next parliament, for whose floor the painting was destined and for whom David was a deputy, changed the vignette and replaced the lilies with the eye (fig. 15). The deputies, who did not have to work eye to eye with Bailly, reproduced in every legal publication the all-seeing eye. But even without David's painting and Bailly's eyes, the floor of the new parliament did not remain "blind." The front wall of the remodeled theater of the Tuileries (see fig. 11) displayed two big panels with the text of the human rights statement inscribed on them. The one on the left (fig. 16) had at its top the eye and the triangle, surrounded by an aureole of light. This image goes back to an earlier

engraved publication of the human rights statement, which probably followed the political iconography of the American Revolution. The old interpretation has been preserved. According to the preamble of the declaration, which says, "resolved and declared in face of and under the auspices of the Supreme Being," the divine eye shines upon the foundation, the block of human rights, which is flanked by allegories of France and Justice.

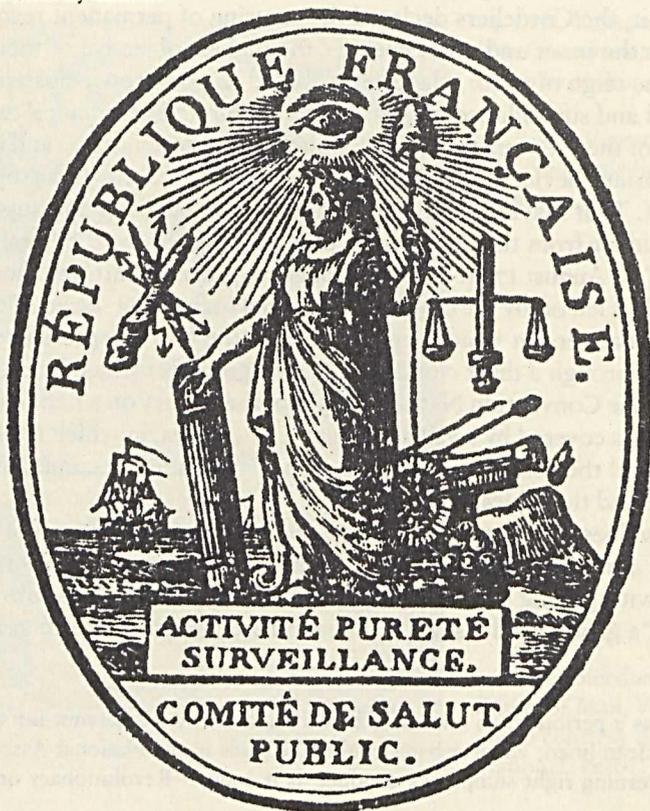
Whether the vignette or emblem of the Convention, the single eye, still retains this meaning may be reasonably doubted. After 1789 the symbol was thoroughly reevaluated and indeed intensified; it resurfaced, for example, as the logo of the most radical party in parliament, the Cordeliers (since February 1791; fig. 17), and as the vignette of the Convention's most powerful group, the "Comité de salut public" (fig. 18). Both these cases and many others established the meaning of the eye as a symbol of surveillance. The "public welfare committee" under Robespierre and, before it, the Cordeliers declared the securing of permanent revolution against the inner and outer enemies the highest objective of their politics. The reign of terror, "la terreur," based its power on a close-meshed control and surveillance system: "Activité-Pureté-Surveillance" was the motto of the eye vignette of the "public welfare committee," and a more appropriate device could not be found for the "Great Incorruptible" himself. That David was aware of this shift in meaning and supported it is evident from the decorations that he designed for the "Festival of Unity," 10 August 1793: "Now the pageant proceeds through the boulevards. It is led off by the crowd of the united societies of the people. They carry a banner, on which the stern eye of the law is represented, as it pierces through a thick cloud. The second group is formed by the members of the Convention National; eight of them carry on a handbarrow a chest: it is covered by a veil and contains the tables, in which the human rights and the constitution are inscribed."²⁰ Again, the combination of the eye and the tables of law.

How does the *Tennis Court Oath* relate to this development of a symbol, of a natural sign? This is not an academic question; it has nothing to do with getting the iconography straight. We are dealing with a time when "a generalized visual paranoia in Paris" reigned. Norman Bryson states:

It was a period when one could be denounced by one's servant for wearing clean linen; when debates could take place in the National Assembly concerning right sumptuary conduct: is it counter-Revolutionary or is it



17. Membership card of the Cordeliers (after February 1791).
Photo by author.



18. Vignette of the Comité de Salut Public 1793–1794. Photo
by author.

patriotic for women to wear oak-leaves in their hair? is it an insult to the General Will for a Quaker not to remove his hat before the Bar? is the red cap a true sign of Liberty, or the mask of intrigue? During the Jacobin supremacy, life and death turned on the interpretation of signs: to uproot a tree of Liberty, to sing "O Richard o mon roi," to deface the image of Marat, these were crimes of the utmost seriousness."²¹

Bryson is talking about the *terreur*, but I would contend that this sort of public visual awareness and sensitivity to symbols dates back at least to 1790/1791, when the *Tennis Court Oath* was in the making.

Again, how does this work of art fit into the symbolic discourse? Bailly's gaze works, works very well, as I wanted to show, on the level of reception—but not only on this level. In this point, geometry and politics, past and present, merge as the gaze reaches all, as all gazes become absorbed in it. But as I said, the gaze does not only function as a device for focusing visual energies, it is also a sender. It is a stern gaze, but is it also a gaze that has ultimate authority? Bailly is more elevated than the other deputies around him, elevated by the height of a quickly supplied table. His makeshift position and his gaze really cannot claim what the eye of God and of the king could claim: that they not only see all and everything but give rise to all and everything. The gazes of God and the king have no counterparts that look back: These gazes are directed one-way. In this painting, however, it is crucial that gaze answers gaze and that the half circles unite. More than the combined action of painting and space is at stake here. In my opinion, there are two open questions concerning the status of the bourgeois revolution that are made visible by this active and open composition and that remain open: the question of the permanent revolution, "révolution en permanence," and the question of the legitimation of the *novus ordo*, the new order of society.

The objective of the oath of 1789 was to constitute the bourgeois state. This task was never regarded as finished. The idea was that Parliament would form the general will into new laws and amendments, as the will was laid down in the declaration of human rights in 1789. Substituting the will of the "one" for the "one will" was of paramount importance for the French Revolution. It adhered to a principle that would not allow the Revolution to end in stable institutions but to be carried on as a permanent revolution. "A revolutionary law," says Condorcet, "is a law whose object is to maintain the revolution and to accelerate or regulate its course."²² And Rousseau, who was responsible for this idea, had already insisted that it would "be absurd for the will to bind itself for

the future."²³ So the unity confirmed over and over again, "la volonté UNE," "la Nation Une et Indivisible," the "multitude . . . united in one body," the closed circle, all these fantasies of unification, were not only the ultimate principle but also the goal permanently to be achieved.

Dubois-Crancé's proposal to renew the Tennis Court Oath every year illustrates this point, and we must put David's painting, which is the permanent *Tennis Court Oath*, in this context. The painting is thus not a fixed document or memorial tablet, like Trumbull's "Declaration of Independence,"²⁴ for instance (the counterpart for the American Revolution), but a composition that asks for active completion and new reactions. David took it upon himself to make the "*volonté générale*," the electrified action of the crowd, the topic of great painting, but he did not confine himself to the depiction of external aspects like quantity and emotional action. What his accumulation of frozen attitudes does not really achieve is attained through composition as a whole: the indication of the new quality of political dynamics, of dynamics "en permanence," which must transcend the borders of a painting.

"The great problem in politics, which I compare to the problem of squaring the circle in geometry . . . [is]: How to find a form of government which puts the law above man."²⁵ Commenting on this crucial statement of eighteenth-century political theory, Hannah Arendt writes:

Theoretically, Rousseau's problem closely resembles Sieyès' vicious circle: those who get together to constitute a new government are themselves unconstitutional, that is, they have no authority to what they have set out to achieve. The vicious circle in legislating is present not in ordinary law-making, but in laying down the fundamental law, the law of the land or the constitution which, from then on, is supposed to incarnate the "higher law" from which all laws ultimately derive their authority. . . . The trouble was—to quote Rousseau once more—that to put the law above man and thus to establish the validity of man-made laws, "il faudrait des dieux," "one actually would need gods."²⁶

In the *Tennis Court Oath*, however, Bailly is not constituted as the highest source of authority, which does away with all needs of sanction. And no cloud of highest beings descends favorably. In this respect, David does not fool himself and his contemporaries: Bailly, the whole painting, whose energy he collects, transmits the problems, the anxieties, and the hopes of the beginning. Any attempt to close the circle again and again equals squaring the circle. Like the geometrical form of the circle

in nature, architecture and art do not fulfill automatically what the ideology of the time promised—namely, establishing social unity. Unlikely as it is, that unity, however defined and realized, can do away with the deficit of the first and highest sanction. Then establishing unity and permanent revolution can become a goal in itself and seeing and being seen can become the foremost task of the political machinery. Rousseau's theory confronted the Revolution with a terrible alternative: The unity of the nation, he said, only functions when an external enemy threatens; if there is no such enemy, he is to be tracked down in every single citizen as every person's "individual will and self-interest." Can there be no production of unity through appeals, through symbolic alliances in feasts, and in great compositions of painting and architecture, as in our study case? As a matter of fact, the *Tennis Court Oath* was stopped because unity was established by elimination: more and more parliaments relieved one another, more and more deputies dropped out of sight. On 12 November 1793, the head of Jean Silvain Bailly fell under the guillotine; the one head, without which the composition of the *Tennis Court Oath* comes to nothing, is blinded. What was developed after 1791, after the conception of our painting and with the help of David, was the surveillance state, on the one hand, and a helpless attempt, on the other hand, to supply the need for legitimation by the cult of the "Supreme Being." The Bailly of the *Tennis Court Oath* does not entirely belong to either development. But he teaches the viewers, who meet his gaze after 1984, that certain things can start by developing clever techniques of mass communication.

NOTES

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1. J. L. David, quoted in J.L.D. David, *Le peintre Louis David 1784–1825* (Paris, 1880), 339f.
2. A Schnapper, *David. Témoin de son temps* (Paris, 1983), 102ff.; P. Bordes, *Le Serment du Jeu de Paume de Jacques-Louis David* (Paris, 1983).
3. Dubois-Crancé quoted in Bordes, *ibid.*, 148f.
4. Quoted in *ibid.*, 54.

5. Schnapper, *David*, 118ff.; Bordes, *Le Serment*, 85ff.
6. F. -L. Bruel, *Un siècle d'histoire de France par l'estampe 1770-1871. La Collection Vinck* (Paris, 1909), Nr. 1460.
7. For David's preliminary drawings, see D. Holma, *Son evolution et son style* (Paris, 1940), 58ff., fig. 18ff.; V. Lee, J.-L. David, "The Versailles Sketchbook," *The Burlington Magazine* III (1969): 197ff.; W. Kemp, "Das Bild der Menge (1789-1830)," *Städte-Jahrbuch* 4 (1973): 253ff.; M. -D. de La Patellière, "Rysunki Jana Piotra Norblina przedstawiające 'Przysięge w Jeu de Paume' w zbiorach amerykańskich," *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* (1979): 413ff.; P. Bordes, David, and Norblin, "'The Oath of the Tennis Court' and two Problems of Attribution," *The Burlington Magazine* 122 (1980): 569ff.; Schnapper, *David*, 105ff.; Bordes *Le Serment*, 39ff.
8. Quoted in Bordes, *Le Serment*, 72.
9. F. Boyer, "Projets de salles pour les assemblées révolutionnaires à Paris (1789-92)," *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire de l'art français* (1933): 183. For the building and planning history of the revolutionary parliaments, see A. Brette, *Histoire des edifices où ont siégé les assemblées parlementaires sous la révolution*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1902); F. Boyer, "Les Tuileries sous la convention," *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire de l'art français* (1934): 197ff.; J. -M. Pérouse de Montclos, E. -L. Boullée 1728-1799 (Paris, 1969), 181f. The notion of "parliament as theater" has been treated splendidly by M. -H. Huet, *Rehearsing the Revolution. The Staging of Marat's Death 1793-1797* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1982).
10. C. -N. Ledoux, *L'architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des moeurs et de la législation* (Paris, 1804), 223. See also J. Rittaud-Hutinet, *La vision d'un futur: Ledoux et ses theatres* (Lyon, 1983).
11. A. -G. Kersaint, *Discours sur les monuments publics* (Paris, 1792), 56.
12. *Ibid.*, 63f.
13. Dubois-Crancé, quoted in David, *Le peintre Louis David*, 89.
14. H. Rosenau, *Boullée and Visionary Architecture* (London, New York, 1976), 147.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860* (Paris, 1862ff.), 49: 652.
17. F. H. Sommer, "Emblem and Device. The Origin of the Great Seal of the United States," *Art Quarterly* 24 (1961): 57ff.
18. Werner Hoffmann, ed., *Luther und die Folgen für die Kunst* (München, 1983), 43of.
19. A. Boppe, *Les vignettes emblématiques sous la Revolution* (Paris, 1911), *passim*.
20. Quoted in K. Scheinfuss, ed., *Von Brutus zu Marat. Kunst im Nationalkonvent 1789-1795* (Dresden, 1973), 98.
21. N. Bryson, *Tradition and Desire, From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge 1984), 96.

22. Quoted in H. Arendt, *Über die Revolution* (München, 1974), 237.
23. *Ibid.*, 97.
24. I. B. Jaffé, *Trumbull, The Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1976).
25. Rousseau quoted in Arendt, *Über die Revolution*, 238.
26. *Ibid.*