DAVID D’ANGERS
MAKING THE MODERN MONUMENT

EMERSON BOWYER
with JACQUES DE CASO

THE FRICK COLLECTION, NEW YORK
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Emerson Bowyer, former Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow at The Frick Collection, curated the exhibition and wrote the major essay for the catalogue. His insightful contribution is joined by that of the long-acknowledged authority on David, Jacques de Caso, Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley.

David d’Angers: Making the Modern Monument extends the Frick’s series of monographic exhibitions on major sculptors who worked in bronze—Tetrode, Riccio, and, most recently, Antico. It also continues the institution’s important tradition of organizing annual exhibitions curated by emerging scholars, a program made possible by the ongoing assistance of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

We are deeply grateful to the exceptional group of private collectors who have so generously and enthusiastically shared their precious works and their knowledge: Allen Adler and Frances Beatty, Pierre Bergé, W. Mark Brady, Herbert and Carol Diamond, Louise Grunwald, Alexander B. V. Johnson and Roberta J. M. Olson, Stephen K. and Janie Woo Scher, Michael and Lana Schlossberg, Wheelock Whitney III, and a number of anonymous lenders. We also extend our hearty thanks to the American Numismatic Society, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of the City of New York, and the New York Public Library for their loans.

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FOreWOrD

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Emerson Bowyer
Pierre-Jean David (d’Angers)

1788 Born March 12 in Angers.

1808 Enrolls in the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris as a student of Philippe-Laurent Roland (1746–1816).


1811 Awarded first prize in the École’s tête d’expression competition with La Douleur. Receives scholarship of 500 francs from the city of Angers. Takes the Prix de Rome for his bas-relief The Death of Epaminondas.

1826 Elected a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts and named professor at the École des Beaux-Arts.

1828 Begins writing his Carnets and visits London.

1829 Visits Germany (and again in 1834).

1830 Marries Émilie Maillocheau. Secures the commission for the pediment of the Pantheon.

1839 Inauguration of Galerie David d’Angers in Angers.

1848 Rejects the position of director of the Musées nationaux. Elected mayor of the 11th arrondissement in Paris and becomes a member of the Constituent Assembly in Maine-et-Loire (Angers) but is not reelected the following year.

1851 Arrested and exiled following his opposition to Louis-Napoleon’s coup d’état. Travels throughout Greece, the Ottoman Empire, and Italy.

1853 Returns to France.

1856 Dies January 5 in Paris and is interred in Père Lachaise Cemetery.
CHRONOLOGY

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DAVID D’ANGERS: MAKING THE MODERN MONUMENT

EMERSON BOWYER

A sculptor is the recorder of posterity. He is the future.
—David d’Angers, Les Carnets de David d’Angers

In 1883, Victor Hugo refused to sit for a portrait bust by Auguste Rodin. No artist, the writer asserted, could hope to equal the likenesses made of him decades earlier by another French sculptor, David d’Angers. Though lauded by Hugo as the Michelangelo of Paris, today David is little known and understudied. Yet he produced many of the most iconic portraits and ambitious public monuments of the Romantic era. Celebrated and controversial in his lifetime, he was an ardent Republican, experimental writer, confidant to innumerable artists and intellectuals, and teacher to some of the greatest sculptors of the period. Taken in its entirety, David’s career presents a profound investigation of the function and significance of memory and the representation of the past. In an epoch marked by both intense historicism and the ever-accelerating rhythms of modernity, David sought to redefine and reinvigorate the notion of a monument.

CLASSICISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Like most sculptors of the early nineteenth century, Pierre-Jean David d’Angers’s origins were working class. From an early age, he assisted in his father’s ornamental woodcarving workshop and joined other apprentices for
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Of his three major student works, the tête d’expression bust offers the clearest indication of David’s developing aesthetic philosophy and practice.\(^9\) La Douleur is a Laocoön with side whiskers; a thrillingly tense conjunction of timeless classicism and the material immediacy of the real.\(^9\) Here, David makes an important intervention in contemporary controversies concerning the relationship between the art of antiquity and the observation of nature.\(^9\) Writing to Roland in 1812, David reiterates his teacher’s position on this debate: “I know you have always told me that the antique serves to make visible the beauty that exists in nature.”\(^9\) This vague proposition, expressing all the internal contradictions of early nineteenth-century aesthetic theory, seems directly addressed by La Douleur. The work demonstrates David’s deep familiarity with classical precedents—the Laocoön, the Dying Alexander—while retaining a strong sense of the live model from which he worked. Rather than relying on superficial and schematic facial movement for its effect, La Douleur evokes a unified bodily organism, one that seems to extend beyond the limits imposed by the bust format. Head, neck, and shoulders act in concert, each contributing meaningfully to the representation of pain.

David’s anatomical precision reflects his investigation of dissected corpses with the young medical professor Pierre-Augustin Béclard (1785–1825). Around this time, and probably in consultation with Béclard, the sculptor executed a series of large and highly finished anatomical drawings.\(^9\) One sheet vividly pictures what could almost be the meaty, subcutaneous machinery of La Douleur: a straining web of veins and muscles that, in the plaster, seems veiled only by the finest of membranes (fig. 2).\(^9\) Here, David provides an innovative interpretation of Toussaint-Bernard Émeric-David’s Recherches sur l’art statuaire, which offers the following advice:

“Each time you study a dissected part of the human body, model or draw the corresponding part of a live model. During this work, keep the antique
basic drawing classes at the local École Centrale. In 1828, he traveled to Paris and enrolled in the École des Beaux-Arts as a pupil of the sculptor Philippe-Laurent Roland (1746–1816). By all accounts, David spent his first Parisian years in near abject poverty, assisting on large-scale public decorative projects in order to survive. Yet he rose rapidly through the ranks, in 1810 receiving second prize in the Prix de Rome competition for his Othryades Mortally Wounded. This work caught the attention of First Painter to Napoleon, Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), who invited him to take classes in his studio without paying the usual fees. Louis David provided a charismatic, if problematic, model for the production of politically engaged art, fostering in his students both a preference for the observation of nature and a critical approach to classicism. Throughout his career, David would acknowledge the formative influence of that teacher. The year 1811 brought David greater success. In early February, he won the École’s annual tête d’expression prize with La Douleur (p. 12 and fig. 1), an extraordinary bust representing pain. Consequently, his professors requested financial aid from the city of Angers for the impoverished student. A fellowship of five hundred francs was offered, providing David with the financial security necessary to devote all his effort to study. The following September, he took the Prix de Rome with his bas-relief The Death of Epaminondas, a work that demonstrates his complete assimilation of neoclassical style. As an expression of gratitude to his native city, David sent his three prize-winning works to the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Angers. He would also adopt the city’s name as his own. Angers continued to receive a regular flow of objects made by the sculptor—mostly bronze and plaster casts. In 1830, the Galerie David d’Angers officially opened as an appendage of the city’s museum. It was the first institutional and museological space devoted to a living artist and, by the late 1850s, would house an almost complete collection of his sculpture.

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colossal sculpture of Louis de Bourbon, the seventeenth-century French
general known as the Grand Condé. After the restoration of the monarchy
in 1815, Louis XVIII had launched a monumental program celebrating the
illustrious men of the Bourbon reign, and David’s marble was one of twelve
commissioned for the Pont Louis XVI (now the Pont de la Concorde). This
was an exceptional show of faith in a little known and untested artist who was
also by far the youngest contributor to the project. His half-size plaster model
for the statue made its debut at the Salon of 1817 although the four-meter-
high marble (now destroyed) would not be completed for another decade.9

The Grand Condé (fig. 5) breaks with the neoclassical style that had
dominated sculptural production for almost half a century and whose major
constantly before you so it might serve to mediate between dissected and
living nature.” Unlike other contemporary attempts to harmonize antiquity
and modern physiology—Jean-Galbert Salvage’s overly literal illustrations
of the Apollo Belvedere (fig. 3), for example”—La Douleur is a hybrid
figure that exploits the ambiguous space between classical idealism and the
fleshy, pulsing reality of the living body. As such, it teeters on the brink of
Romanticism.

In 1816, following his four-year sojourn in Italy as a pensionnaire at
the Académie de France in Rome, David returned to Paris and almost
immediately gained his first major state commission. With the death of
Roland, the young artist received his teacher’s unexecuted contract for a
colossal sculpture of Louis de Bourbon, the seventeenth-century French general known as the Grand Condé. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1815, Louis XVIII had launched a monumental program celebrating the illustrious men of the Bourbon reign, and David’s marble was one of twelve commissioned for the Pont Louis XVI (now the Pont de la Concorde). This was an exceptional show of faith in a little known and untested artist who was also by far the youngest contributor to the project. His half-size plaster model for the statue made its debut at the Salon of 1817 although the four-meter-high marble (now destroyed) would not be completed for another decade.¹⁹

The Grand Condé (fig. 5) breaks with the neoclassical style that had dominated sculptural production for almost half a century and whose major
proponents were Antonio Canova (1757–1822) and Bertel Thorwaldsen (1770–1844). David rejects the cool repose of such sculpture in favor of dramatic action. In its conception and effect, the work owes more to innovations in painting—such as Antoine-Jean Gros’s *Bonaparte on the Bridge of Arcole* (fig. 4)—than in sculpture. A confluence of oppositional forces, the extravagantly costumed Condé rears back while preserving a forward momentum, and all the while he whirls like a turbine. According to the Salon’s explanatory booklet, the statue depicts a crucial episode from the life of the Condé when the young officer hurled his general’s baton at the enemy before leading his troops forward to reclaim it. David presents the instant immediately preceding the baton’s release, when the Condé coils like a spring. And yet, precisely with that bodily stance, he allows us to imagine an almost cinematic unfolding of the action on a wider temporal continuum—both before and after the moment pictured. This is animated history. Like the young general, David treads a fine line between boldness and recklessness. It marks the brash entry of Romanticism in the history of sculpture.
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