

Picturing Violence: Limitations of the Medium and the Makers
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Whether found in paintings, prints, letterhead vignettes, medals, money or on the face of crockery, images of the French Revolution, like all such visual depictions, were meant by their very nature to have some kind of aesthetic value. They could not be sold or widely circulated otherwise. The aesthetics of the image therefore creates inevitable problems for the depiction of crowd violence. Can violence itself be directly represented? Its essential horror seems incompatible with most of the conventions of visual representation, though it could be argued that the images of the September massacres of 1792 [Image 12], published in the newspaper Révolutions de Paris, come close to capturing that horror.

Violence can be suggested by various visual means, and even the obliqueness of its portrayal can be instructive. The medal, Vivre libre ou mourir [Live free or die, Image 17], for instance, evokes the desperate fervor of the revolutionaries with the symbols of popular force, the Roman fasces and the Roman liberty cap, but these are abstract symbols and not depictions of real people, much less of death. Like many revolutionary images, this medal aims to incorporate and obliterate simultaneously the reference to violence; by incorporating that threat it both reproduces the emotion it evokes and softens it by framing it in aesthetic terms.

Prints of the fall of the Bastille, though more direct in their representation of violence, still expressed considerable ambiguity about that violence. Engravers and painters apparently did not want to sully this foundational moment with too much blood and gore. The images often emphasize the hugeness of the prison-fortress [see, for

example, Image 28]. Images produced in the immediate aftermath of the attack typically rendered violence in stylized fashion; men are shown carrying pikes, muskets, shovels, and scythes and dead bodies litter the ground but the actual killing takes place either elsewhere or earlier [Image 13]. The attack occurs largely out of sight. Gun smoke emerges in the foreground but mainly on the other side of a building on a distant rooftop. The figures are stick-like, seeming only to walk toward the action. The only activity in this rather still panorama comes from a soldier leaning on a cannon and another individual, likely a noncombatant, ready to embrace other happy spectators. These are the only emotions apparent. The Bastille seems to be falling to a largely immobile and disengaged mass. Clearly artists envisioned the event as momentous, but they did not dwell on the violence of the event.

Popular violence and death appear in more explicit form in the images of the killings of Foulon de Doué and Bertier de Sauvigny. A little more than a week after the fall of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, an angry Parisian crowd massacred both Joseph-François Foulon de Doué and his son-in-law, Louis-Jean Bertier de Sauvigny. As prominent officials in the king's government, they were rumored to be plotting the starvation of Paris. In his essay in this collection, Warren Roberts discusses two of these prints [Images 25 and 31], both of them drawn by Jean-Louis Prieur. We focus instead on Image 2, an anonymous print that has none of the architectural framing so noticeable in Prieur's work. It may well be that the second of the Prieur prints [Image 31] did not make it into the Tableaux historiques series, as Roberts notes, because it was too forthright in its depiction of violence. It captures the terrible moment when Bertier is presented with the decapitated head of his father-in-law, its mouth stuffed with straw. After hanging

Foulon from a lamp-post, the crowd cut off his head and stuffed straw in his mouth because in a previous famine, Foulon had reportedly said that the people could always eat grass.

“Le Supplice du Sieur Foulon” [Punishment of Foulon, Image 2] depicts the mob dragging the dead body of Foulon through the streets while exhibiting his head on a pike. The moment of death itself is not depicted, but the violence is still far from over. The men at the front visibly strain to pull the body along the cobblestone street. Blood appears to be still flowing from the severed neck and also from the head on the pike. A woman and a man raise stones in the air, no doubt with the aim of further mutilating the body. A dog leans toward the corpse, perhaps indirectly suggesting a kind of cannibalism. But individual faces are difficult to discern, and the crowd melds into a seemingly immobile mass. Strangely, onlookers from a nearby building appear disproportionately large and totally passive. Is their presence meant to render the scene a curiosity rather than an act of revolutionary retribution? Or is their disproportionate size merely an indication of the haste with which the image was likely produced?

From the very beginning, then, the crowd had to figure in some fashion in representations of revolutionary events, especially since “the people” or “the Nation” was now posited as the fount of sovereignty. Printmakers faced a tremendous challenge trying to capture cascading events while working to meet publishing deadlines. Little in the traditional practice of French printmaking prepared them for the task. Unlike English engravers, who, following William Hogarth, frequently depicted working people, eighteenth-century French printmakers preferred fine art engraving. French working people appeared in the paintings of eighteenth-century artists such as Jean-Baptiste-

Siméon Chardin and Jean-Baptiste Greuze [see, for example, *The Laundress*, 1761 at <http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/objects/o843.html>] and therefore in prints made of their works, but French art had no eighteenth-century equivalent to Hogarth who worked as both painter and engraver and provided narratives of ordinary people in series of interconnected prints [see, for example, *Beer Street and Gin Lane*, 1751, at <http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibits/hogarth/hogarth5.html>]. Most of the French revolutionary printmakers had begun their careers reproducing paintings or engraving portraits of famous people.¹

The most widely produced genre of popular prints before the Revolution was known as the “cries of Paris” [<http://gallica.bnf.fr/anthologie/notices/00071.htm>].² Dating back to the fourteenth century and updated repeatedly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the “cries” portrayed the dizzying variety of tradesmen and women who hawked their services in the streets of the capital. From knife sharpener to singer and flowerseller, the portrayals were often vivid but changed little over time and consisted mainly of archetypes, omitting customers or other people in the street. Emphasizing the traditional, identifying costumes of each trade, the “cries” almost never depicted action or motion of any kind. No particular emotion, except acceptance of one’s lot in life, and of the powers that be, was implied, perhaps because impassivity made the figures less

¹ For instance, Jean-François Janinet, one of the best-known engravers in color, had previously engraved paintings of Hubert Robert and also produced series of prints of famous actors and actresses playing noted roles in the theater. He also engraved a portrait of Benjamin Franklin. Charles Monnet and Isidore-Stanislas Helman, whose prints are discussed below, both began in the fine arts. Monnet drew erotic mythology, allegories and vignettes before 1789, and Helman worked as an engraver for the duc de Chartres. Some of Helman’s pre-1789 work can be seen in *Graveurs français de la seconde moitié du XVIIIème siècle* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1985), e.g., pp. 62, 66 67, 68 and 77.

² On the cries, see (no first name) Massin, *Les Cris de la ville. Commerces ambulants et petit métiers de la rue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978). For comparison with England, see Sean Shesgreen, *Images of the Outcast: The Urban Poor in the Cries of London* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002).

threatening and thus more acceptable to middle class, noble, and clerical purchasers. As idealized and stylized portraits, the cries could not serve as models for the representation of crowd violence after 1789.³ Although such stereotypes had some influence on the depiction of individual members of the lower classes in some prints of the revolutionary epoch, perhaps especially satirical, counterrevolutionary ones, the cries themselves disappeared as a genre during the Revolution, to reappear once again in the early years of the nineteenth century as a version of increasingly nostalgic Parisian folklore.⁴

In general, the French working classes aroused little interest among writers before the Revolution of 1789. While the English press spilled considerable ink vilifying the “dangerous” classes, French periodicals generally ignored the lower orders. Despite the efforts of Louis-Sébastien Mercier, Nicolas-Edme Restif de la Bretonne, and others who penned important memoirs and books about their own experiences of poverty, the eighteenth-century French novel generally focused either on the middling sorts or the aristocracy. Enlightenment writers had looked askance at the lower orders, hoping that their own words about equality would not encourage them. On occasion the people did nudge their way into the mental world of the written works that comprised the “public sphere.” Want ads offered work to domestics and others, but these advertisements sought limited skills, emphasizing deference and good references. Workers also sought job placement through the press. Their tendency to emphasize their laboring skills provided a fleeting profile of their self-image, underlining their irrelevance in the intellectual world

³ For the English version of Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s Panorama of Paris of 1933, the translator had to turn to a series of engravings produced by a German in order to match the rich verbal descriptions of those toiling in Old Regime Paris. In Helen De Guerry Simpson, The Waiting City (1933), most of the images come from engravings by Balthasar Anton Dunker, originally published as Costumes des mœurs de l’esprit françois (1787).

created by published works.⁵

Printmakers could not ignore the laboring classes after 1789. Artisans, shopkeepers, and wage-laborers and their wives, sisters, and daughters powered all the grandes journées: by arming themselves and attacking the Bastille, they forced the king to accommodate the demands of the new National Assembly in July 1789; by marching to Versailles, disrupting the National Assembly, and breaking into the king's private apartments, they forced the king and the National Assembly to return to Paris in October 1789; by organizing an armed assault on the Tuileries palace in Paris, they insisted that the Legislative Assembly suspend the king in August 1792 and so on. Like journalists, engravers and etchers had to come to terms with the sans-culottes, that is, those who wore the clothing of working people rather than the attire of the upper classes [see, for example, Image 18, "Madame Sans-Culotte," an image that does show the influence of the traditional cries genre—that influence may be part of what Barbara Day-Hickman identifies as its satirical intent].

Although artists might have lacked for variety and nuance in the tradition of depicting lower class life in motion, they did have clear antecedents for depicting the worst version of mass violence, massacres. Precedents for newspaper illustrations of the September massacres [Image 12] can be found in similar images from the French Wars of Religion of the sixteenth century [extra Image]. More than two centuries apart, the images are remarkably similar and tell us something about the representation of extreme violence. In both cases, there is nothing at all symbolic, abstract, or oblique about the

⁴ Vincent Milliot, Les Cris de Paris ou le peuple travesti: Les représentations des petits métiers parisiens (XVIe -XVIIIe siècles) (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1995), especially pp. 315-327.

⁵ Jack R. Censer, The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins UP,

delineation of violence. The moment chosen is one of almost complete mayhem, in which bodies, daggers, and swords seem as one in a flailing maelstrom of directly physical attack in which people are hacked and stabbed to death. The handcoloring of swaths of blood in the earlier image only heightens the disturbing physical effect. Both images imply, moreover, that the violence is ongoing, as new victims await their fate as they enter, are pulled, or are chased into the killing courtyard. Neither of these images is meant to be positive about this kind of crowd behavior. This is mob rule at its worst, revealing the potential behind crowd action for the breakdown of all social bonds.

Most of the time, however, artists did not choose such moments. While we cannot offer a complete classification of all the images made during the French Revolution, we do see three different and overlapping axes of choices available: “realistic” representation vs. caricature; pro-revolutionary vs. anti-revolutionary depiction; and images engraved at or near the moment of the event and those rendered later as historical commemoration. Where Vivian Cameron in her essay emphasizes the differences in the types of violence portrayed, we were more struck, perhaps because writing as historians rather than art historians, by differences in overall effects of images in depicting crowd violence and their links to competing political positions. The set of images provided for analysis to us and our co-authors is skewed toward realistic representation (which tend to be pro-revolutionary) but is more evenly divided between pro and anti-revolutionary images and immediate and “historical” ones. This set of images, interpreted through these categories, may suggest new understandings of the

place of crowd violence and the response to it by the literate.⁶

We use the term “realistic” representation in order to emphasize the difference in aim from caricature, which deliberately exaggerates its effects in order to satirize its subjects. We call “realistic” an image such as the one titled “Day of the First of Prairial, Year III” [Image 16] because it aims to narrate a particular historical moment by rendering the action in specific detail. Presumably a viewer would recognize the event from the depiction of the action as well as the setting (but also from the information in the caption). Such images, like the Monnet-Helman “Execution of the King” [Image 14], often appeared in chronological series of prints that were intended to provide a visual narrative and commemoration of the unfolding of the Revolution. Printers began to publish them as early as 1790 under such titles as Principal Days of the French Revolution.⁷

In producing such prints, the engravers had in mind much more than just faithfulness to the facts. True, they aimed to show real people engaged in real events, now passed, but each print also communicates a political agenda.⁸ The Monnet-Helman

⁶ A more complete study of imagery from the French Revolution would attempt to gauge the relative weight of each type, but so far, such a study has proved to be very difficult because of problems of dating (most prints were published anonymously and often with no indication of date).

⁷ The prints of this sort we describe here are from Charles Monnet and Isidore-Stanislas Helman’s series, Principales journées de la Révolution, which consisted of 15 engravings published between 1790 and 1800. The best-known series are the Tableaux des principaux événements qui ont eu lieu dans la Révolution de France published in five different editions between 1791 and 1817. See the catalogue, La Révolution par la gravure: Les Tableaux historiques de la Révolution française, une entreprise éditoriale d’information et sa diffusion en Europe (1791-1817) (Vizille: Musée de la Révolution française, 2002). A useful and more detailed discussion of the Monnet-Helman print of the execution of the king can be found in Hould, p. 175. Helman presented it to the National Convention on April 19, 1794. He suggested displaying it in every primary school.

⁸ For an analysis of a more radical print artist and his aims, see Warren Roberts, “The Visual Rhetoric of Jean-Louis Prieur,” Canadian Journal of History/Annales canadiennes d’histoire, 32 (December 1997): 415-436. Prieur drew the illustrations that were engraved by Pierre-Gabriel Berthault for the first version of the Tableaux historiques.

image of the execution of Louis XVI [Image 14] emphasizes the order of the crowd present and the acclaim the act received from the populace. In contrast, their engraving of the crowd's attack on the National Convention in 1795 [Image 16] and of the right-wing uprising against the Convention in 1796 [Image 27] both showed the dangers of crowd violence, whether from the sans-culottes who demanded "Bread the Constitution of 1793" or from royalists and right-wingers who opposed the decree guaranteeing two-thirds of the seats in the new legislature to the outgoing deputies of the Convention. The engraving of the 13 Vendémiaire uprising [Image 27] is almost cinematic in its attempt to capture the action: clouds of smoke indicate the exchange of gunfire, dead bodies litter the ground in a way that suggests that they have just been cut down in action. A contorted horse lying dead in the foreground reinforces the impression of horrific carnage. The dog barking in the left foreground shows that the violence has not yet ended. Although most faces are too small to reveal expressions, several show an evident fear.

When prints such as "Day of 13 Vendémiaire Year IV" [Image 27] are compared to those of 1789, it is evident that printmakers had become more technically proficient at representing crowd violence. Yet the artists had hardly embraced that violence. Their task was to bring order to representations of the Revolution, and the disorder of popular violence clearly troubled many of them. Although they developed skills in creating a kind of reality effect in rendering important scenes of crowd mobilization, they did not dwell on the most horrific and disturbing aspects of popular violence. The soul-searing, ritualistic, and even cannibalistic faces of popular violence on view in some engravings from the early years of the Revolution, 1789-1792, such as the prints featuring the killing of Foulon and Bertier de Sauvigny or the September massacres, proved to be exceptions

to the rule. These more broad-brushed and sometimes vulgar prints, usually turned out very close to the moment of the event, might be considered more “realistic” in the sense that their very simplicity of composition and clear focus on severed heads and dead bodies captured a truth about popular violence that fine art printmakers avoided.⁹ Most printmakers, clearly linked to and dependent on the press produced by the educated, could recognize neither the humanity nor the inhumanity of the crowd, and they never celebrated crowd violence.

Those opposed to the French Revolution felt more comfortable depicting crowd violence because its very portrayal served as a form of condemnation. English, German, and Dutch engravers produced anti-revolutionary imagery of great variety, and the English, in particular, excelled at caricatures, or political cartoons.¹⁰ In “French Democrats Surprizing the Royal Runaways” [Image 9], English satirist James Gillray clearly aimed to castigate the revolutionaries. In the scene depicted, revolutionaries barge into the room in the village of Varennes in northeastern France where the royal couple is being held in custody. Louis XVI had fled in disguise on June 21, 1791, seeking to reach the border and a friendly army. Apprehended only a few miles away from safety, the print shows the king awaiting his fate. In actuality, the local authorities treated the

⁹ Similarly, the very crude drawings of Célestin Guittard de Floriban, found in his daily journal, evoke the horror of the guillotine in a particularly telling, if unartistic, fashion. His little stick figures and insistence on recording the exact numbers of those killed each day capture the psychological effects of the killing much more effectively than do fine-line engravings of single executions. Raymond Aubert, ed., Journal de Célestin Guittard de Floriban, 1791-1796 (Paris: Editions France-Empire, 1974), p. 415, for example.

¹⁰ On the question of why caricature did not develop in France before the Revolution as it had in England in the mid-eighteenth century, see Michel Melot, “Caricature and the Revolution: The Situation in France in 1789,” in French Caricature and the French Revolution, 1789-1799 (Los Angeles, CA: University of California, 1988), pp. 25-32. For an explicit comparison between English and French caricatures, see James A. Leith and Andrea Joyce, Face à face: French and English Caricatures of the French Revolution and Its Aftermath (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989). But the number and interest of pro-revolutionary caricatures should not be underestimated. See, for example, Antoine de Baecque, La Caricature révolutionnaire (Paris: Presses du C.N.R.S., 1988).

royal family with respect, but outside the room threatening crowds gathered. The print brings this tense situation into sharp relief with the revolutionaries pointing muskets, a sword, a dagger, a hammer and even a broom at them. Most expressive of royal vulnerability is the dauphin, who lying with his rear in the air, resembles a pig about to be stuck by a bayonet thrust toward him. The members of the crowd, in typical cartoon fashion, appear as stereotypes, but they are still individualized. And the whole scene depicts motion. The king and queen seem startled, uncertain of what to do, as they tentatively raise their hands. In short, this caricature gives individuality, power, and initiative to the crowd, even while portraying them as enraged.

Far less biting is the French print of “The President of a Revolutionary Committee after the Seals are Removed” [Image 21]. The printmaker focuses on the moment after the act has occurred. The revolutionary official is shown leaving a sequestered residence with his booty, resembling a common thief. The menace of violence depicted by Gillray is only implied here. The official appears to be taking very measured steps away from the victim’s house. In fact, the print image, in its simple lines and focus on just one person, reminds one of the “cries” genre. The “president” looks very much like a tradesman. Instead of the tools of a trade, his pockets are stuffed with stolen silverware, while one hand holds more of the same and the other grasps a bowl or plate. The scene contains no background and no other person. Contemporaries must have seen it as a stinging commentary on current (or just past) politics using a very old tradition of representation.

Caricature could only have a paradoxical role in the French Revolution. Although at heart a “popular” genre in its gestures toward vulgarity, it was employed with most success by anti-revolutionary printmakers who wanted to call attention to the dangers

inherent in crowds and popular participation in politics. Caricature was best suited to oppositional politics and was virtually incompatible with any kind of commemorative intent. During the first three years of the French Revolution, pro-revolutionary printmakers produced startling caricatures of nobles, monks and nuns, courtiers and the royal family. After the fall of Robespierre, caricature revived as a genre in France, now deployed to criticize the nouveaux riches and others who had seized the occasion offered by constant warfare and political turbulence to rise to the top of society. But in 1793-1794, at the zenith of the Terror as a form of government, caricature disappeared in France, the victim along with novels and many newspapers, of the fear, if not the reality, of political censorship.¹¹ Only the rather ponderous “realistic” and commemorative images of printmakers such as Helman [Image 14] gained official favor. Until the 1830s, consequently, French caricaturists never really challenged their English rivals for mastery in the field.

Even this brief analysis of images of crowd violence shows that the conflicts over political meaning took place in the arena of visual culture as much as in the printed word. It is impossible to read printed images as simply “illustrations” of events known primarily through verbal description. Prints had their own political grammar, syntax, and rhetoric that require as much study as verbal political discourse. As we have seen in the essays here, historians now treat images seriously as sources in their own right. They have learned many of the methods necessary to analyzing them and now include them more systematically in interpretations and explanations of the French Revolution. Things could be “said” in the visual media that could not be expressed verbally. Foremost among

¹¹ This observation is based on a review of the many microfilms at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France,

these things was the deep ambivalence of the educated classes about the revolutionary crowd. The crowd's participation was critical to both the success and the failure of the Revolution; without the crowd, there would not have been a revolution, but containing the crowd's violence also provided a major justification for the Terror. The crowd had to appear therefore in prints of important revolutionary events, but the crowd also had to be tamed in the very process of its representation.