

Charles Hwang

Professor Jaffee

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Descriptive Essay

The painting “Oath of the Horatii” (1785) by Jacques-Louis David is a vibrant work that depicts three men, the Horatii brothers, lifting their arms in a sort of salute towards a man wearing one gray and one white overlaying garment holding three swords in his left hand and facing upwards. This man is cast to be older and wiser than the other three because of his gray hair and beard. These three men are standing in a row in the process of swearing an oath of patriotism and are wearing colorful clothing and different colored armored helmets seemingly made of steel, gold, and silver. The brother in the middle has his right arm around the brother in the foreground, reaffirming their strong relationship. The brother in the foreground is holding a wooden spear in his left hand anchored on the tiled ground. A scar on his left elbow indicates previous conflicts or battles he was in. Behind the man administering the oath are three women each wearing several layers of colorful clothing, presumably the wives or relatives of each of the three men. These three women are portrayed to be grieving from their facial expressions and downwards-facing physical posture, one of which is behind the other two in the background and cast with darker colors, consoling two infants as a caretaker or babysitter. Behind the scene are two stone pillars between three archways and on the side are weathered stone walls.

The painting matches the historical components of the play well by portraying the characters in the play and their respective personalities. However, the scene itself being projected by the painting was not in the original play. This leaves some room for interpretation by the audience about David’s intentions. Although the scene was not in the play, the Horatii brothers could be assumed to have sworn a patriotic oath before entering battle with the three brothers from the other city.