Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*, 1793. Oil on canvas, approx. 5’3” x 4’1”. Musees Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels.
Death of Marat

‘Not by pleasing the eye do works
of art accomplish their purpose. The
demand now is for examples of heroism
and civic virtues which will electrify
the soul of the people and arouse
in them devotion to the fatherland’
– Jacques-Louis David

Created in response to the murder of political theorist Jean-Paul Marat in 1793, David’s painting became an iconic image of the French Revolution. Reproduced and distributed with the artist’s permission during the aftermath of the assassination, it contributed to Marat’s status amongst the republicans as a martyr of the people.

David was an active supporter of the Revolution both as an artist and as president of the Jacobin club. His politically charged paintings such as The Oath of the Horatii 1785 and The Death of Socrates 1787 employed the visual language of classicism in order to evoke the ideals of the Roman Republic. David also designed uniforms, triumphal arches and banners for the Republican group and in his role of president of the Jacobins he signed the execution orders for over 300 victims of the guillotine.
On 13th July 1793, Marat, the political journalist and leader of the Montagnards was murdered in his bath by a young Royalist, Charlotte Corday. On gaining admittance to his apartment with a false letter of introduction she produced a knife and stabbed him fatally close to the heart. In death, Marat instantly became a martyr of the Revolution. David was invited to make arrangements for the funeral and to immortalize him in a painting. He began work immediately, drawing the corpse while it was still in the tub and details such as the green rug, sheet, wooden packing case and pen were all authentically copied from life. Marat suffered from a debilitating skin disease and had become accustomed to writing on a board placed across his bath-tub as he immersed his body in a medicinal concoction, with a bandana soaked in vinegar wrapped around his head to ease his discomfort. The evidence of Corday’s crime is also displayed in the scene: the weapon and the note which gained her access to the writer’s room (which reads in English, ‘Because I am unhappy, I have a right to your help’). However, David transformed the brutal murder of an ugly fanatic into the poetic demise of a martyr. Rather than slumping backwards into blood water, Marat’s arm and head fall forward in a pose that echoes many religious artworks, such as Roger Van der Weyden’s Descent from the Cross 1435 or Michelangelo’s Pieta 1498–9.

Following classical rules for proportion, the painting is simply composed with a strong emphasis on the vertical lines of the lower part of the image. Almost half of the canvas is empty space which encourages the eye to focus on the sculptural form of Marat’s lifeless arm draped over the side of his tomblike surroundings. Bathed in soft light, he is glorified in death.

Copies of David’s painting were made by his studio and prints were distributed as political propaganda. Following the end of the Terror, the original oil painting was hidden by Antoine Gros, one of the artist’s pupils. David himself was tried for his part in the Revolution and died in exile in Belgium after the fall of Napoleon. In 1886, his family offered the painting to the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels where it is currently displayed. The exact number of copies made is unknown, but surviving versions exist in museums at Dijon, Versailles and the painting in Tate Liverpool’s exhibition is on loan.