Introduction, Imaging the French Revolution: Depictions of the Revolutionary Crowd
Jack Censer and Lynn Hunt

Our presentation on the web site is divided into two main parts: a bank of images that focused our collaborative discussion and six individual essays about the meaning of the images. The results of a collective discussion that took place on-line in late spring and summer 2003 have been incorporated into the essays and also excerpted for review. It is our hope that readers will be able to consult the images, use the interpretations offered by the authors as a preliminary guide, and decide for themselves which approaches work most convincingly and perhaps even develop their own questions and hypotheses about the images of the crowd.

French revolutionary prints and cartoons present several problems as sources. Many are anonymous and undated. The Bibliothèque Nationale de France has filed the images in their collection by the date of the event in question when the date of the print is unknown; this is misleading because it effaces the difference between images produced in the heat of the moment and those printed after the fact for the purposes of celebration or denigration. The videodisk prepared by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, like Michel Vovelle's five volume publication of revolutionary images, is deliberately focused on political events, so the number of non-political prints and cartoons is underrepresented.[1] Finally, the on-line digitized version of these images leaves much to be desired; the text below or around the image is often obscured and the electronic format does not reproduce the actual size of the image. Art historians have been reluctant to embrace electronic media because the reproduction quality is inferior to that of conventional slides or photographs and because information about size and even technique is lost

---

[1] The videodisk accompanies The French Revolution Resource Collection; Colin Lucas, ed., Images of the French Revolution (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1990). Michel Vovelle, ed., La Révolution française: Images et récit, 1789-1799, 5 vols. (Paris: Editions Messidor, 1986).

in digitization.[2]

The electronic format nonetheless offers many advantages. Readers can consult a wider range of images than are usually available in a print format, and they can instantly access those images. Even readers far away from the major collections of French revolutionary imagery can in this fashion see, compare, and interpret the visual sources. In addition, advances in technology make enlargement easy so that viewers can partially replicate the experience of closely scrutinizing the eighteenth-century artifact. Those who have downloaded Macromedia's free Flash player can make careful comparisons by manipulating multiple images on the screen; in our presentation the reader can even overlay the images by making one relatively transparent. Finally, the use of electronic linkages eases the usual financial or spatial constraints that limit presentation of the images. Color is always available, and essays can be copiously illustrated.

While the technological advantages are significant, even for those who may still travel to collections, they loom even larger for the reader who cannot examine in person the evidence presented. All these readers may now be emboldened to challenge the authors. Reading can include mulling over the primary sources just as much as the arguments. With some of the most important original evidence in view, namely the images themselves, readers reflect, respond, criticize, and, in general, enter into the debate, rather than watching specialists from the sidelines. In a separate venue (another web site), the editors plan to open a public conversation on these matters, in which readers may comment directly in the discussion section as described elsewhere. A valuable technological advance will allow these essays to be linked directly to the image database (also see below) and thus illustrate the comments. This will further enhance the

---

[2] In just the area of printmaking, there were differences in method and differences in the size and function of the prints. For a discussion of methods of printmaking, see the on-line Grove Dictionary of Art (www.groveart.com). For an introductory discussion, see Jules Renouvier, Histoire de l'art pendant la Révolution, 1789-1804 (Geneva:

interactive quality of this history on the web.

The authors of the essays that follow undertook their work with very few limitations. Asked to focus in particular on the selected group of 42 images, they were free to move in any direction that suited them. The goal was to produce as broad an array of perspectives on the subject as possible. And broad that array is indeed! The authors develop different categories of analysis, emphasize different visual elements, situate those elements in different contexts, and yet in many ways come to conclusions that are at least overlapping and are rarely contradictory. Each essay demonstrates the richness of the visual sources B and the need to develop the techniques of interpreting them. An image does not stand alone. The artist draws on elements in his or her contemporary visual culture B from iconography to gender and class stereotypes B and also responds to specific political purposes. Written sources are used by all the authors to help unravel the meaning of the visual imagery. Differences in approach can be easily spotted by comparing the use of the same images in different essays. Special links have been constructed for this purpose.

Can any conclusions be drawn? None of these authors would have written a piece arguing that visual images were useless or impossibly defective as historical sources. For all their problems, and the essays often linger on those difficulties, revolutionary prints offer access to areas otherwise obscured: pictures emerge of people, actions, and even physical spaces that cannot be rendered in the same fashion by printed words. Engravers did not necessarily aim to reproduce events, people, or places in accurate detail; the constraints of the medium, political imperatives, and even their own fears and fantasies shaped the content and the rhetoric of every representation. Still, even inaccuracies and inadvertencies turn out to be significant.

Slatkine Reprints, 1996, original 1863).

It would be unfair for us (Censer and Hunt) to pronounce too decisively on the historical conclusions to be drawn since we have written one of the essays that follows. We drew our conclusions which are not identical to those of our co-authors. But we can venture one observation. The visual evidence seems to support all sides in the debate as it has evolved over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not one side or the other. Contemporaries knew that crowd violence helped fuel the French Revolution, and print-makers did not overlook it. Counter-revolutionary artists seized upon the grotesque and anarchic elements B and the often central role of women B even as Burke retailed them in his classic jeremiad. Pro-revolutionary engravers occasionally celebrated that violence but more often contained it by minimizing the lurid details of death and destruction or by emphasizing some other element such as popular justice. But violence always threatened to seep out around the edges of any esthetic choice. Violence could be "rationalized"—that is, presented as making some kind of sense in a broader framework—but it never entirely lost its essentially menacing quality, at least not for those charged with giving it visual specificity. Violence could only be ambivalently represented therefore; counter-revolutionary artists who gloried in their ridicule of harpies and their henchmen ended up terrifying those they wanted to soothe, and pro-revolutionary printmakers who wanted to mobilize their comrades ended up making them worried about where events were headed. The engravers kept reminding the public of what always lurked beneath the surface.

Finally, the on-line format affords a possible solution to one of the greatest problems in using visual imagery produced at the time of the French Revolution. Better analysis and interpretation depends on more information, and only a limited amount of information is likely to emerge from the efforts of any one individual. These essays show the influence of a more interactive exchange, and the construction of links between them will enable readers to join in

the debates themselves. The authors certainly learned from each other. We each came across tidbits that illuminate the history of printmaking at the time of the French Revolution; advancement of our knowledge will come in part by building a mountain out of all the scraps we have each collected from comparing prints and reading the police reports, newspaper advertisements, and salon catalogues with their few lines about one or another print. The result will never be definitive, but it will be ever richer.

Now it is time for the reader to decide.