Jean François Pierre Peyron

a biography

Jean François Pierre Peyron, a French Neoclassical painter, was born on December 15, 1744, into a prosperous family in Aix-en-Provence, France. Following his family's wish, he studied law until his father's death in 1765. He enrolled in the Ecole de Dessin at Aix-en-Provence where he learned from history painter and etcher Michel-François Dandré-Bardon (1700–1783) before entering the Paris atelier of Rococo painter Louis Jean François Lagrenée (1725–1805) in 1767. From his early student days, Peyron's work reflected his teachers' interests in moving away from lighthearted Rococo subjects to the classical tastes of the seventeenth century.

With his work *The Death of Seneca* (1773), Peyron won the 1773 Prix de Rome, the French Academy's Grand Prize for art students wherein winners were given a scholarship to study in Rome. Two years later, he left for Italy where he remained for several years as a student on this stipend while also enjoying the patronage of Charles Claude de Flahaut Comte d'Angiviller, the director of the French king's commissions and artworks. This sojourn was long and productive for the artist, although he worked slowly and with difficulty due to his fragile health and anxiety. While abroad, he created some of his most distinguished canvases including *Belisarius receiving Hospitality from a Peasant* (1779) and *Athenian Girls and Athenian Youths Drawing Lots to be Sacrificed to the Minotaur* (1776–1777).

During his early Roman years, Peyron was widely regarded as the artist who would revive the French national school. His painting *The Funeral of Miltiades* (1780), a commission from d'Angiviller, stood out when compared to the work of his contemporaries in Rome. Its high degree of finish, compositional rigor, and melancholy cast, along with its intent to represent a scene of exemplary virtue, demonstrate Peyron's determination to produce innovative work. He sought to dismiss, or to move beyond, the gallant mythologies and sugary pastorals favored by the Rococo artists of the previous generation.

In recognition of his accomplishments, Peyron was accorded probationary membership in the French Academy in 1783 and full membership in 1787. His position as the most prominent rising French artist, however, was not without competition; throughout his time in Rome, and for several years afterward, he counted renowned painter Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) as his primary rival. In 1782, Peyron returned to Paris. Despite the success of his *Death of Alcestes* (1785) at the Salon of 1785, he was unable to counter David's rising fame. Comparisons of their own versions of *The Death of Socrates,* which both artists exhibited at the Salon of 1787, proved detrimental to Peyron's standing in the art community. His version received a more critical reception than David's painting. Thereafter, David dominated the French art scene while Peyron largely disappeared from public life, living on the margins of the art world of his time. He died in 1814 in Paris, aged 69, and is remembered both for his influence on David and his own distinguished career. Peyron's works, which included several royal commissions, are held in museums worldwide, including the Louvre in Paris and the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen.

Jean François Pierre Peyron (French, 1744–1814), *Belisarius receiving Hospitality from a Peasant,* 1779, oil on paper laid on canvas, 29 5/8 x 33 1/4 in. (55 x 84.5 cm), The National Gallery, London, Bought 1995, NG6551

Jean François Pierre Peyron
French, 1744–1814
The Death of Socrates
1788
oil on canvas, 39 x 53 1/2 in. (99.1 x 135.9 cm)
Museum purchase with additional funds from The Robert H. and Mildred T. Storz Trust; E. James and Norma Fuller; Joseph and Lenore Polack; First National Bank of Omaha; The Ethel S. Abbott Charitable Foundation; Jacqueline Vrana; and Thomas and Cynthia McGowan, 1999.55

In *The Death of Socrates* (1788), a revised version of his 1787 canvas, Jean François Pierre Peyron depicts the Greek philosopher Socrates (c.470–399 BCE) in prison after being condemned to death for impiety and corruption of the youth. The artist conveys the story's emotional core and moral message with great sensitivity and clarity. Carefully composed and rendered with an astute sense of balance and harmony, chords of saturated colors (yellow, red, and green, complemented by blue) appear throughout the composition, unifying the figure groups and picture planes. The flatter, horizontal distribution of the figures across the composition, as if in an architectural frieze, provides greater compositional clarity; the viewer is led to scan the work from left to right, making the work's narrative more legible.

Peyron demonstrates his classical knowledge with his portrayal of the central figure, Socrates. The philosopher's appearance is modeled on ancient busts that, rather than idealizing the hero's face, depict his famously homely features. This striking note of naturalism encourages viewer empathy. Comforting the grief-stricken followers surrounding him, Socrates has already emptied the poisoned-cup and death's greenish-gray cast is seen on his foot.

This work is an excellent example of Neoclassicism, a widespread movement in the visual arts that reached its height in the late eighteenth century. As the French Revolution of 1789 approached, artists abandoned the lighthearted Rococo style and turned to the art and values of classical antiquity for inspiration, creating compositions that displayed reason and order through heroic subject matter. Artists working in this style strove to create work that, like *The Death of Socrates*, embodied the Neoclassical ideals of antique beauty, high drama, and civic virtue.

The 1788 version was first shown at the inaugural exhibition of the Society of Friends of the Arts, held in 1790 in the Louvre. The Society, established to promote the works and welfare of French artists, sold the exhibited works by lottery to support its mission. Of all Peyron's "Death of Socrates" compositions, this version was received far better by his contemporaries than the others. A critic wrote in the *Journal gratuity* in August 1790, "Mr. Peyron has treated the subject several times, but he has never succeeded as well as he has in the present easel painting that is now presented to us. There is a greater harmony and better coloration than in its predecessors, and the historical narration is perfectly rendered by the expressions and the gestures of the characters."

Discussion Questions

Why do you think Jean François Pierre Peyron painted another version of the "death of Socrates" after the 1787 Salon?

❍

Why was Socrates a popular subject to depict in the visual arts and literature?

❍

Why is it important to stand up for your values?

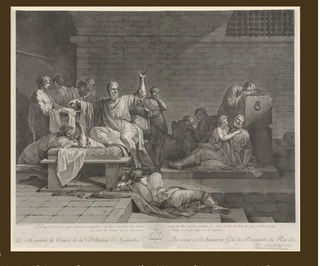
Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's related academic standards and lesson plans.

Peyron's Printmaking

Jean François Pierre Peyron was one of the few eighteenth-century painters who, rather than entrusting the reproduction of his works to professional engravers, produced plates and prints of his works himself. Relatively little is known about his printmaking. Of the few prints catalogued, most are after his own compositions, with several others after works by artists Raphael (1483–1520) and Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665). As an important neoclassical painter, Peyron's prints represent an emerging printmaking style that would become particularly relevant in the nineteenth century.

Many prints in his time were created through the technically demanding process of engraving. In this method, an image is incised directly onto a metal plate, which is then inked and pressed into paper to create a print. Since Peyron was not a printmaker by trade, he created his prints through etching, a more forgiving technique on the rise in the late eighteenth century. In this process, the artist incises a composition onto a metal plate coated with an acid-resistant ground, like wax. The plate is then soaked in acid, corroding the exposed lines of the composition, so that when the plate is inked, the paper absorbs the reverse image. Peyron's prints do, however, bear similarities to those created through the engraving process; his close-knit crosshatching and marked light and dark contrasts resemble the character of the lines created by a burin (a metal tool used in engraving.)

According to Jay McKean Fisher in *Regency to Empire: French Printmaking 1715–1814,* Peyron's greatest work in the medium is his etching after his first composition of the *The Death of Socrates,* created in 1790. For a relatively inexperienced printmaker, he used a remarkable diversity of etched lines, varying from precise ruled lines in the foreground to the volumetric drawing of the figures. He also utilized a roulette, or a tool with a spiked wheel used to incise lines of dots, to create tonal shading, seen in the back wall and over the background figures. Additionally, his control of light is masterful, and he aptly realizes textural variations and the material weight of substances like stone and fabric. Peyron's goal in making the print himself was likely to translate his masterpiece accurately into another medium, possibly to disseminate his work more easily. His etchings certainly aided in the preservation of his work for posterity; for many years, as the painted versions of *The Death of Socrates* were largely inaccessible to viewers, his composition was known only through his etchings.



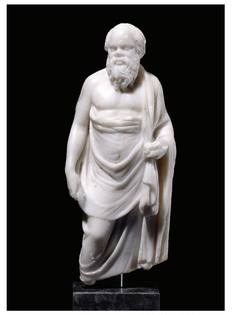
Images (left to right): Jean François Pierre Peyron (French, 1744–1814), *The Funeral of Miltiades (or the Self-sacrifice of Cimon, or Cimon and Miltiades),* 1782, etching, ink on medium-weight white wove paper, 6 7/8 x 8 5/8 in. (17.5 x 21.9 cm), Joslyn Art Museum, Museum purchase with funds given in memory of Casper Y. (Cap) Offutt, 2000.4.1; Jean François Pierre Peyron (French, 1744–1814), *Death of Socrates,* 1790, etching with roulette and stipple, 18 1/8 x 21 9/16 in. (46 x 54.7 cm), The Baltimore Museum of Art, Garrett Collection, 1984.81.66

Socrates in the Arts

Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE) was a Greek philosopher who devoted his life to the investigation of proper conduct. A native of Athens, his interest in moral philosophy gained him wide recognition and infamy as a questioner of everyone and everything. Socrates was an enigmatic figure; he wrote nothing and therefore is known primarily through the accounts of later classical writers, like his student Plato (428/427—348/347 BCE). Through his portrayal in these writings as a man of great integrity, insight, and argumentative skill, Socrates has become renowned for his contributions to the fields of ethics and epistemology (the branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge or what it means to know something) and for laying the foundation of Western philosophy more broadly. The Socratic Method, a style of teaching which involves asking clarifying questions until students arrive at their own conclusions, remains a commonly used tool today.

The manner of Socrates' death magnified the impact of his life. In 399 BCE, several powerful Athenians charged him with impiety and corrupting the youth. At his trial, Socrates defended himself eloquently; his speech, as written in Plato's *Apologia*, became one of the central documents in Western thought due to its impressive advocacy for leading an examined life and for its condemnation of Athenian democracy. Despite this passionate defense, a jury of his peers sentenced him to death by poisoning. Socrates stayed true to his principles and stoically submitted to his fate, cementing his reputation as a model of civic virtue and heroic self-sacrifice.

Socrates has been depicted by artists throughout history. Several sculptors alive during or shortly after his lifetime created busts or full statues of the philosopher. These, combined with written sources, provided future artists with clues about his appearance; he was bald, stocky, and broad-shouldered, with a wide nose, prominent eyeballs, large mouth with thick lips, sturdy neck, and protruding belly. Jean François Pierre Peyron and Jacques-Louis David may have seen these original objects while in Rome (or plaster casts of the originals, which were used routinely in art academies to ensure compositions were historically accurate). Socrates inspired artists across Europe during the Renaissance, Baroque, and Rococo periods. Italian High Renaissance artist Raphael (1483–1520) included the philosopher in his famous fresco *Escola de Atenas (School of Athens)* (1509).



Marble statuette of Socrates, ca. 200 BCE–100 CE, a Hellenistic original of the 2ndC BC, or a Roman copy, 10 3/4 in. (27.5 cm) high, The British Museum, 1925,1118.1

Socrates' death has been the focus of paintings by numerous artists since the Renaissance. Portrayals of the iconic scene became particularly fashionable in France beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, as Enlightenment circles of the time considered dying for one's principles the best example of idealistic virtue. Philosophers of the period, like Voltaire (1694–1778) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), were celebrated as "reincarnations" of his spirit. One such philosopher, Denis Diderot (1713–1784), in his *Discourse on Dramatic Poetry* (1758), asserted that depictions of Socrates, particularly his heroic death, should be the ultimate artistic goal. He declared, "If one really grasps the philosopher's firm, simple, tranquil, serene, and elevated character, one will understand how difficult he is to paint. At every moment he should bring a smile to one's lips, tears to one's eyes. I would die content, if I had accomplished this task as I conceive it."

As Diderot's work spread, Socrates' death grew in popularity to become the Neoclassical theme par excellence. In 1762, the subject was assigned to competitors for the Prix de Rome. The topic became even more popular when the Count d'Angiviller became the Director of the King's Works in 1774. As the "chief curator" of the royal collections and head of government sponsorship of the arts, he implemented policies encouraging didactic painting, or works that reformed society by inspiring their viewers. In its clear representation of a moral message, the death of Socrates was the perfect theme for a didactic painting. As a result, increasing amounts of French Neoclassical artists created works on the subject with David's treatment broadly considered the most successful. Eventually, however, scenes from Socrates' life began to decrease in popularity in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

Timeline

Background Image: Jean François Pierre Peyron (French, 1744–1814), Detail, *The Death of Alcestis,* 1785, oil on canvas, 128 3/4 x 128 in. (327 x 325 cm), Musée du Louvre, INV.7175

Rivalry with Jacques-Louis David

Images (left to right): Jean François Pierre Peyron (French, 1744–1814), *The Death of Socrates,* 1787, oil on canvas, 38 1/2 x 52 1/2 in. (98 x 133.5 cm), Statens Museum for Kunst, KMS7066; Jacques-Louis David (French, 1748–1825), *The Death of Socrates,* 1787, oil on canvas, 51 x 77 1/4 in. (129.5 x 196.2 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1931, 31.45

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), often considered the most celebrated French painter of his day, was a leading proponent of the late eighteenth-century Neoclassical reaction against the Rococo style. Although David is remembered as the preeminent painter of his generation, Peyron served as one of David's important contemporary influences and main rivals. As Peyron was only four years older, they pursued their studies together and competed for prizes at the Academy, commissions, and fame. Their rivalry began in earnest while both were studying in Rome in the late 1770s and early 1780s. During this time, Peyron was decidedly the stronger artist, receiving wide acclaim for works such as *Funeral of Miltiades* (1780). It was only with works later in the 1780s, including *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), that David began to outshine Peyron and dominate the French art scene.

In 1786, David learned that Peyron had received a commission from French king Louis XVI for a work depicting Socrates' death to be shown in the Salon of 1787. Seeking to force public judgment on who was the better artist, David obtained a similar order from his patron Charles Michel Trudaine de La Sablière. Although David's and Peyron's works depict the same historical event, they differ drastically in how that content is conveyed. Peyron illustrates the event dramatically, recreating the story as if on stage, including figures who enact emotions through poses and gestures. The bold colors and extreme chiaroscuro, or the use of strong contrasts between light and dark, increase the drama and emotional impact of the scene. In contrast, David's scene is frozen, like a timeless symbol rather than an event unfolding. The plot and moral message of the story is told through figures who, rather than actually experiencing emotions, seem to symbolize or represent those feelings. The level, calm lighting, restrained colors, and contained space make the painting clearly legible. Overall, rather than inciting the viewer to participate emotionally in the event, it promotes rational understanding of its meaning.

As the Salon approached, the impending contest was common knowledge and anticipated with suspense. Amédée van Loo (ca. 1719–1795), the artist and professor responsible for the exhibition arrangement, deliberately set the stage for the comparison by hanging the works side-by-side. The 1787 Salon proved to be the climax of Peyron's and David's rivalry. While Peyron's work was relatively well-received, David's was acclaimed as a masterpiece. Although some critics favored the emotional response and mood that Peyron's colors and use of chiaroscuro produced, several others found his composition confused and incoherent, his figures short, and their legs and piles of drapery difficult to discern.

Although David acknowledged Peyron's influence on his work (remarking at his funeral, "He opened my eyes"), the younger artist proceeded to dominate French painting for the next several decades. In contrast, Peyron largely disappeared from the artistic scene, but not before painting *The Death of Socrates* (1788). This composition, in which he made improvements to the composition, lighting, and drapery, was in response to David's work and to his critics.

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JEAN FRANÇOIS PIERRE PEYRON
French, 1744–1814

THE DEATH OF SOCRATES
1788, oil on canvas, 39 x 53 1/2 in.