

On the Cover



Cover image: Death of Marat , 1793. Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). Oil on canvas.

Musee d'Art Acien, Musees Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium.

Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY

Jean Paul Marat, a possessed leader of the French revolution, was killed in his bathtub by a royalist woman who primed herself for it by fasting and praying. His friend and co-revolutionary, the painter J-L David, at that time president of the Jacobin Club, was asked by the Convention to paint his death scene exalting Marat's citizen's virtue and dedication. David depicted Marat dead or dying, his hand resting on the false introductory note handed by Christine Corday to gain entrance into his apartment. On the box that serves as a table there is a gift of state bonds to the recent widow and children of a soldier of the revolution. The background is dark

but a soft light beckons from the right illuminating a limp, dead body, in a pose similar to what has been used to represent the descent from the cross or the disentanglement of Christ. The entire scene stages, without credits, the usual Christian props for depicting martyrs and saints.

Marat's skin is pale and smooth but this is not at all like his skin truly was. The miserable condition of his skin was probably bound to his personality and humor. Marat had a scaly, red, itchy and painful condition that dermatologists have pinned down to have been eczema, dermatitis herpetiformis or seborrheic dermatitis. Some psychological insiders have wondered whether his skin condition was a cutaneous manifestation of his irascible and paranoid personality or, if the latter was the consequence of his painful and intractable skin condition. I do not see what difference either proposition would make in considering his historic persona. He did most of the writing for the newspaper he funded and single-handedly produced ("The Friend of the People") inside his bath tub soaking for hours in mineral salts to relieve the painful itching of his skin. The turban on his head is the cloth soaked in vinegar he wore to relieve the pain in his scalp.

Immediately after his assassination a saintly cult arose surrounding his persona. The leadership of the revolution liked David's painting and saw its suitability for propaganda. They commissioned additional copies of this painting to David and later to some of his disciples. But this fast-lane secular canonization would not last long. The political winds of the revolution changed, Marat's body was removed from the stately Pantheon and his likeness was burned in effigy. To this day, historians either admire or curse him.

There is a parallel between the figures of Marat and Che Guevara. Both had been practicing physicians. Both were good at math and physics: Marat translated Newton's *Optiks* and published scientific papers before he got immersed in the vortex of the Revolution. Che Guevara had books on mathematics in his knapsack when he was captured in the Bolivian jungle before being executed. Both were intransigent in matters of ideology and both dealt harsh punishment to political dissenters. At the end, both became pop icons after their deaths with the aura of martyrs of some pure enterprise.

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