

## PODCAST

### THE *TENNIS COURT OATH*, by Luc-Olivier Merson

#### Characters

- **WOMAN:** introduction and conclusion voice
- **MAN:** Luc-Olivier Merson, painter (37 years old)
- **MAN:** Thomas Grimm, journalist (46 years old)
- **MAN:** Jules Ferry, President of the Council (51 years old)
- **MAN:** undetermined

The Palace of Versailles podcast

Discover the incredible story of the *Tennis Court Oath*, told by its creator, Luc-Olivier Merson.

#### NARRATOR

1789.

On 5 May, the Estates General were assembled at Versailles. The elected deputies of the kingdom's provinces gathered at the Hôtel des Menus-Plaisirs, only a few metres from the Palace of Versailles. Reunited in three separate orders, nobility, clergy and the Third Estate, the representatives of the people had to rule on the Kingdom of France's critical financial, social and political situation.

On 17 June, a little over a month after their first meeting, deputies from the Third Estate, followed by certain members of the nobility and clergy, formed a "National Assembly". They wished to unite amongst themselves. Louis XVI decided to prevent a possible revolution, and closed the Hôtel des Menus-Plaisirs, where the deputies were meeting until that point.

Faced with this closed door, on 20 June 1789, they sought refuge in a sports facility, located near the palace: the Royal Tennis Court.

There, the deputies took an oath to never separate and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the realm was drawn up and fixed upon solid foundations.

*INTERIOR – Noisy crowd gathered, loud voices, brouhaha.*

*"We swear to never separate ourselves and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the realm is drawn up and fixed upon solid foundations".*

*"The nation assembled will receive no orders from anybody".*

*"We are here by the will of the people, and we will leave only by force of bayonets".*

#### NARRATOR

In 1790, less than a year after that day on 20 June, deputy Dubois-Crancé, who also gave his oath, suggested that his friend, painter Jacques-Louis David, immortalise this historic event.

This was how David, known for his mythological and historic paintings like *Oath of the Horatii* or *The Death of Socrates*, prepared to paint this act founding an entirely new society, free from royal authority. At the 1791 Salon de Peinture, he presented a preliminary drawing in pen and ink, a miniature of the huge painting that he was preparing to paint. The artist planned to fund his work by selling the engraving made from the preliminary drawing, via national subscription, which was meant to bring in 72,000 pounds. The final painting was planned to measure nearly 7 metres wide by 10 metres long. Hurried by events, David started work on the monumental painting.

But in 1791, the political unity of 1789 was already no longer. Certain heroes of the Revolution had disappeared, dismissed by the National Convention. Others were no longer living, like Mirabeau, who David planned to have a central position in the composition. He died in April 1791 and was discovered to have made clandestine contact with the king and his court.

The political disruptions of the time, paired with the lack of support for the subscription, prevented David from finishing his work. The artist kept the unfinished *Oath* in his workshop for the rest of his life. Jacques-Louis David died in 1825. One year later, his heirs cut the canvas of the unfinished *Oath* into three pieces, and sold the biggest piece to the French State, for the Musée du Louvre.

For nearly fifty years, public opinion lost interest in the very idea of painting the Oath of the Royal Tennis Court. 1789 drifted away, and so did its symbols.

Under the French Third Republic, as the 100-year anniversary of the French Revolution approached, Jules Ferry's government wished to bring the nation together around a common history and symbols. In 1880, 14 July was chosen as the country's national day. From then on, a site to home the museum of the Revolution was sought. This would be the Royal Tennis Court.

From 1882, architect of the Palace of Versailles, Edmond Guillaume, was charged with the building's interior restoration, left abandoned for several decades. The question of how to decorate the historic room led the government to once again envisage a great painting commemorating the Oath. On 12 August 1882, the Minister for Public Instruction and Fine Arts officially commissioned a painting representing the Oath of the Royal Tennis Court from young artist Luc-Olivier Merson, based on Jacques-Louis David's drawing and unfinished canvas. No small challenge awaited Merson, who only had a few months to complete the work.

On 20 June 1883, 94 years to the day after the Oath, the French Republic prepared to celebrate the brand-new Museum of the Revolution, in the historic room of the Royal Tennis Court.

The fully restored room and work painted by Luc-Olivier Merson were ready: it was time for the inauguration...

*INTERIOR – Royal Tennis Court, a few hours before the inauguration*

*Several distant voices: tradesmen working.*

*Hurried steps approach us.*

## **JOURNALIST**

Mr Merson! We had an appointment, sorry I'm late... Thomas Grimm, journalist for Le Petit Journal...  
Delighted to meet you!

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Not to worry! The Oath has been waiting nearly a century, it can wait a little longer... Hello Mr Grimm, and welcome to the Royal Tennis Court!

**JOURNALIST**

Many thanks for agreeing to meet me today, on the day of the inauguration...! If it suits, let's get started straight away! I came through Vieux-Versailles on foot, the streets are full of people!

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Yes, the opening of the first Museum of the French Revolution is an event that certainly draws a crowd... And I won't be complaining...! *[Laughs]*

**JOURNALIST**

I see the tradesmen are still working to hang the painting on the wall... A bit later and it would have been too late!

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

You can say that again! My assistants and I only finished painting the canvas last week. Then, it had to be transported to Versailles from my atelier at the Louvre, and mounted on the wall... As you say, it was close!

**JOURNALIST**

Indeed! Well... Can you explain the origins of this project to our readers? We didn't have much information about this historic painting, but I believe I heard that you were inspired by the work of painter Jacques-Louis David, is that right?

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Yes, indeed, the government did not wish to reveal the details, and I was glad of it, because it meant that there was no external pressure disturbing my work!

But I can't exactly say that I was "inspired" by David... Well, if you want me to explain how the project began, I will have to talk a little about the history of this painting, so... please forgive me in advance for the lecture...!

**JOURNALIST**

*[Humble]* Please, go on.

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

After the Oath took place, right here, on 20 June 1789, David started a large painting representing the scene. It was going to be a magnificent work, similar to what we are used to from David... You probably know his paintings, such as *Oath of the Horatii* or *The Coronation of Napoleon*... Well, the *Tennis Court Oath* was going to be just as symbolic as the first, and just as big as the second: an impressive size, a large number of figures, moved by a sacred desire to come together...

Unfortunately, David was never able to complete his great project, and the *Unfinished Oath*, as I like to call it, was quickly rolled up and stored in the Louvre, where it can still be found today... Last year, Inspector of the Fine Arts, Mr Philippe Burty, informed me that he wanted an artist to “finish” the *Oath* or rather, resume it.

#### **JOURNALIST**

Mhmm... so that is where it all began for you.

#### **LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

I would happily start my story by saying that it all started last year, in 1882... but in reality, it all started on 20 June 1789!

#### **JOURNALIST**

[Laughs] Indeed! You said that Mr David’s painting is still at the Louvre... So you did not “finish” his painting, so to speak?

#### **LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

No, no! I did not “finish” David’s painting; I based my piece on his drawing, and on the initial version he had started. The drawing that he presented at the 1791 Salon is very detailed: the faces of the figures are extremely expressive, so I was able to base myself on solid iconography.

#### **JOURNALIST**

So, did you paint “identically”, as you would say in the artistic world? I imagine that imposed certain limitations...?

#### **LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

To be specific, David’s small-format drawing, the *modello*, was done in pen and wash and measured 1 metre long, and the painting he started was oil on canvas, bistre wash and black pencil. The commission I received, the “specifications” - so to speak - mentioned several things. I had to respect the dimensions of the painting imagined by David, that is, approximately 7 by 10 metres. Beyond the dimensions, I also had to respect the very light colours chosen by David for his drawing, so keep to shades of grey and brown, and paint using what we call “greyscale”.

#### **JOURNALIST**

Yes, I was just thinking to myself about the colours. The painting we see here has a very light range of colours, especially at the bottom of the piece. I was surprised by David’s choice of colours - when we talk about the great Jacques-Louis David, we think straight away about enormous works with bright, often warm colours, like *Oath of the Horatii* that you mentioned before, or *Leonidas at Thermopylae*...

#### **LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Absolutely, that’s right. It is important to understand that here, David was preparing to paint a modern, historic and symbolic event. He therefore had to paint the exceptional nature of the very

spirit of these men who *performed* this *exceptional* act. But we are talking about a meeting of the deputies of the Assembly: the Third Estate, clergy and nobility. It would be inaccurate to imagine the deputies dressed in overcoats that were red, green, yellow, or any other colour: most deputies present were dressed in black, the common colour for official dress for members of the Third Estate. David would have probably preferred to paint red or blue togas, like in *Horatii* or *Leonidas*, and translucent skin and red hair like in *Sabine Women*... but the fact remains that he found himself forced to paint this modern event based on the rather... robust information that he had at his disposal! Hence the exceedingly grey colours. And on this point, we should note that the piece's symbolic value does not lie in the colours used, but rather in its composition!

#### **JOURNALIST**

What do you mean?

#### **LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

To go down in history and make an impression, David's painting had to be monumental. Firstly through the decor, as mentioned - we can see the storm, the tension. Then through the figures - we can see the fear, but above all the audacity, the audacity of these men who came and provoked the royalty. And moreover, in the painting, we see only representatives of the nation... or rather, of the Third Estate, even if David has included some members of the clergy united to the cause. But as for the King, he is not there, and the deputies only take up a portion of the Royal Tennis Court. We, as the spectators, find ourselves facing them, as if David was inviting us to take part in the oath, to join the cause alongside them. And lastly, and maybe most importantly, we have all the outstretched hands, reaching towards the centre, in a great display of sacred union.

#### **JOURNALIST**

Speaking of which, my next question is about the figures' movements. They are extremely detailed - we almost have the impression that each one has a very specific pose and expression. At the same time, the work as a whole clearly demonstrates an impetus for unity, union... How can this choice be explained?

#### **LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Indeed, that's an excellent observation. 18th-century historical painting was based on the "theory of passions", which involved presenting a very wide range of expressions. Here, they range from ecstasy to panic, fear and dejection. David was no exception to this great academic principle. When he started to paint *Oath*, he was already known, but this work was actually his first work depicting a major topic from contemporary history, as he typically painted antiquity. This meant that the commission was a true challenge for him -- as it was for me, but that is another story [Laughs] I think that David very quickly grasped the importance... I would say the *necessity* of painting the unity of the time. His work as an artist and painter appeared to him as an educational duty: painting the *Oath* meant painting the serious aspirations for freedom that were then shaking up his own century. And in the end, this painting is a way to leave a trace of this magnificent union, this founding legend, for posterity. I truly believe that *Tennis Court Oath* brings together all these ideas.

## **JOURNALIST**

That's very interesting... And continuing on the topic of figures, how did David proceed in painting these historic figures? And how did *you* proceed, in turn?

## **LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Though the canvas he left behind was unfinished, David had nevertheless started to draw the bodies of his figures, and even started to paint, for some, the hands, feet or face... When he was in the preparatory phase, he asked the members of the Constituent Assembly who took the oath to give him portraits of themselves, or to come to his workshop to be painted. But I don't think he intended to give a likeness for *all* the members of the Assembly. Nevertheless, in his preliminary drawing and some of the painted faces in the unfinished painting, you can recognise some of the major figures of the Revolution; because these revolutionary figures, heroes of their time, should be recognisable by all. Under David's brush, this is embodied by an almost excessive expressiveness. Let's take Robespierre, for example: David placed him in the foreground, not far from Mirabeau, at the bottom right. I painted him in the exact same position as the Master desired: his face upturned, hands clasped to his chest, in a position of suffering, or... deliverance. We know that Robespierre was a central figure in the Revolution, but on 20 June, he was only one signatory among many others. So it is surprising to see that as early as 1790, when David started the painting, he painted Robespierre with this pain-filled expression, when we know that a few years later, in 1794, the same Robespierre would suffer bodily for the decisions he made... and he would lose his life in the same way that he caused so many others to lose theirs.

## **JOURNALIST**

If David could have finished the painting, do you think he would have removed Robespierre from the final composition?

## **LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Well, you know what they say, anything is possible, but we'll never know...

## **JOURNALIST**

[Smiles] You're right...

And beyond the figure of Robespierre, David also wanted to paint other heroes. You mentioned Mirabeau... Is it Mirabeau there in the black overcoat?

## **LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Yes, absolutely, Mirabeau at the bottom right, who actually also has his face upturned... On the topic of Mirabeau, I read somewhere that in David's composition, there is a "fabulous lie" about the events of 20 June.. And I must confess that I came to agree with it after studying the figure of Mirabeau a little more closely! I learnt that the Count had a face pocked by disease, almost disfigured. However, on David's work preserved at the Louvre, Mirabeau's body has been drawn and his face painted, and you can see that his face is smooth, paradoxically... almost handsome! I don't think I'm wrong in saying that David was seeking more to represent the history of the

Revolution than recreate the event absolutely faithfully. Which is why he sometimes took liberties with the truth...

**JOURNALIST**

To Mirabeau's advantage!

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

[Laughs] Indeed, to Mirabeau's advantage... in particular!

**JOURNALIST**

But if David used portraits that the deputies sent him, how were you, on your side of things, able to find information about the faces of the figures who had not yet been painted, and who are no longer living?

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Indeed, in some cases I was short on material... Though I could not meet these key figures of the Revolution, I was able to find the information I needed for my composition in the collection of engraved portraits at the National Library, in Paris. Once I had enough details about their face and body type, I could start to paint: first the face and expression, then the details of the clothes. Jacques-Louis David is very well-known among artists for how well he painted the hang of fabric, and how perfectly he executed all his paintings. In *Tennis Court Oath*, there is a lot of draped fabric, such as the gentlemen's overcoats - accentuated by the fact that all the figures are in "movement". So I had to paint the hang of the clothes according to the movement of each figure... as well as the movement of the curtains fluttering in the wind.

**JOURNALIST**

Yes, and what's more, the composition's general atmosphere conveys a certain tension... almost dramatic! I mean, all the hands reaching towards the centre, the general exaltation, the curtains caught in the wind, the lightning splitting the sky.... As if the natural elements were accompanying this revolution of men, in a way?

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Absolutely... And it's the wind and tumult of history that we have before us...

**JOURNALIST**

Would you say that as well as being a historic painting, *Tennis Court Oath* is a poetic work?

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Oh.... exactly! I would even say that it is a poetic work *first*, and a historic one second. The event in itself is historic, of course, but the painting... It is more symbolic in other ways, in how it *tells* this story. And like any artistic creation, it is poetic by nature... David's painting recounts and educates, passionately. And I tried to pay tribute to it, by bringing this unfinished poetic project to life.

**JOURNALIST**

Weren't you intimidated by the task?

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

[Laughs] Of course I was! I went through various emotions, from happiness, above all, to fear... I imagine I needed a bit of both to see this artistic exercise through!

**JOURNALIST**

And... may I ask about the more practical, perhaps logistical, part of your work? You said earlier that the canvas measures 7 by 10 metres, correct?

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Approximately, yes.

**JOURNALIST**

As the painting David started was cut into several pieces, you mainly had the small, preliminary drawing... How were you able to transpose it to the dimensions that David wanted for the work?

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

I am glad you asked me this question. Indeed, I had to adapt David's drawing to scale, in order to paint the "life-sized" piece as David imagined. I could never have done it with the naked eye, that was clear. I was fortunate enough to cross paths with a certain Mr Manuel-Perier, who has created a marvellous invention called the "optical projection enlargement process" [Pause] In simple terms, it's an entirely new system that allows one to transfer an image, overlaid with a grid, of small dimensions to a larger surface using light projection. So we transferred David's grid and general drawing onto the large canvas... and all I had to do was paint!

**JOURNALIST**

And as you said before, you painted the piece in your workshop, at the Louvre.

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Yes... although it is not "my" workshop, rather a workshop made available to me by the Louvre, as mine is too small for such a huge canvas. And working at the Louvre is not so unpleasant, one even acquires a taste for it! [Laughs] In fact, it was very practical, as I was able to go directly to the storerooms and see the David's unfinished piece whenever I needed.

**JOURNALIST**

And it's a truly magnificent painting you are presenting here, for the inauguration of the Museum of the Revolution.

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Thank you very much. Yes... Today, I am savouring the pleasure of paying tribute to those who forged our nation. It was an honour for me to follow in David's footsteps. I hope I have not let him down. In any case, this experience has left me happier both as an artist and as a person.

**JOURNALIST**

Well, Mr Merson, I think I have what I need! My article will appear in tomorrow morning's edition of the *Petit Journal*, I will ensure a copy is sent directly to your workshop, if that suits you?

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Directly to my home would be better, Boulevard Saint-Michel. I have vacated the workshop that the Louvre graciously lent me... despite my best wishes! [*Laughs*]!

**JOURNALIST**

[*Laughs*] Boulevard Saint-Michel, noted! Thank you so much, Mr Merson, for your time.

**LUC-OLIVIER MERSON**

Thank you, Mr Grimm. I truly hope that your article will ensure this historic site receives the interest it deserves!

*INTERIOR - Royal Tennis Court. Noisy crowd gathered.  
Time for the speech from Jules Ferry, President of the Council*

**MAN'S VOICE**

Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the Council, Mr Jules Ferry.

**JULES FERRY**

*Ladies and gentlemen,  
I can see that we are all slowly being overcome by emotion in the presence of this history, these great figures, these major events of the past, that yet are still alive, immortal. I can see that we all feel that today's celebration is not a celebration like any other. No, it is not the celebration of a political party, but rather one of the timeless dates of humanity. It belongs to this major period, during which, as Michelet said so well, France was undertaking, at its risk and peril, the affairs of the human race (...).*

*It took place next to the palace of the monarchy, almost in its moat, in the presence of a court determined to resist, pursued by mercenary regiments swarming the city. It took place on a tennis court reserved for the pleasure of princes, at the very heart of the Ancien Régime, with the new, now triumphant regime, rising up. This was the scene. Who were the characters? Unknown men from the province, a "crowd of petit bourgeois", as they were called mockingly. They found themselves chased from their meeting place, like naughty schoolboys, their feet in the mud and heads in the rain.*

*Chance drove them here, where they took an oath. And what was the oath? They swore to France not to separate without giving it a Constitution that would replace arbitrary power with the law, privilege with equality, and despotism with freedom. They swore to free the earth, thought, humanity, citizen and country. They kept this oath, as proven by the fact that we are here.*

*Ladies and gentlemen, what is the best way of honouring these famed words? It is to hear their teachings. Two main lessons emerge from their story. The first is that it is not strength that triumphs, but rather what is right. Their work consecrated the triumph of moral strength over all material forces mustered to fight them. The second is that the reason the movement of 1789 was unstoppable is that all these revolutionaries were united.*

*When division arose later between the Republicans, such efforts were compromised. Let us apply these lessons. Let us be united in the Republican faith. Let us push back agents of dissension, whatever mask they bear. And we will pay the greatest honour to the memory to these great men.*

*INTERIOR - Royal Tennis Court. Noisy crowd gathered. Applause.*

## **NARRATOR**

On 20 June 1883, 94 years after the Oath brought the Royal Tennis Court into the history books, this site experienced its resurrection, inaugurated as the first Museum of the French Revolution.

Despite being added to the List of Historic Monuments in 1848, the Royal Tennis Court underwent long years of abandonment and deterioration. In 1883, it was restored and transformed into a true site of history. Edmond Guillaume, architect of the Palace of Versailles and Trianon, set up a statue of deputy Jean-Sylvain Bailly in the centre of the room. Several weeks after the Oath, Bailly became the first mayor of Paris, before perishing under the guillotine. Commissioned from sculptor René de Saint-Marceaux, the statue represents Bailly standing, his face firm, taking the oath, with his arm reaching towards the assembly. The statue is placed beneath a Doric aedicule, supported by two columns. Beneath the monument's frontispiece, it reads:

*"They swore, they fulfilled their oath"*

Overlooking the stone aedicule rises a gilded bronze Gallic rooster, the work of artist Auguste Cain. Next to Bailly, along the Pompeian red wall, Edmond Guillaume placed the busts of some of the most important signatories, including Barnave, Buzot, Merlin de Douai, Mirabeau, Guillotin, Siéyès and others. Around the entire periphery of the room's walls are painted the names of the deputies who signed the Royal Tennis Court Oath.

The opening of the Museum of the French Revolution has led to increased attention on the site, and the symbol it represents. In 1883, the French Republic, still seeking unifying symbols, inscribed the Oath of 20 June in the collective memory as an act that founded the new society.

By completing David's unfinished project, Luc-Olivier Merson in turn entered the tumultuous, spectacular history of the Tennis Court Oath. The version of the work that he delivered in 1883 crystallised the feeling of union that the hundred-year anniversary of the Revolution in 1889 would

celebrate officially and with great ceremony, especially at Versailles. In 1989, the bicentenary of the French Revolution would also be the occasion to restore the Royal Tennis Court once again.

As for David's painting, and the famous unfinished *Oath*, the most complete piece of this monumental work is now visible in the Palace of Versailles collections. In storage at the Musée du Louvre since 1921, the painting can now be found in the Chimay attic, at the heart of the South Wing, in the room known for the "Tennis Court Oath", alongside portraits of revolutionary deputies passed into posterity.

The history of the Tennis Court Oath continues to be written, even today.

Between 2020 and 2021, all the painted decor and framework, as well as Merson's painting, were restored, the sculptures cleaned and the roof renovated.

It's the perfect occasion for all to come and discover or rediscover the room where the Republic was born, a stone's throw from the Palace of Versailles.

This podcast is brought to you by the Palace of Versailles. *The Story of the Tennis Court Oath* is a podcast written by Nejma Zegaoula in collaboration with Frédéric Lacaille, General Curator at the Palace of Versailles, head of 19th century paintings.

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