



## SAVING A HAITIAN NATIONAL ICON

Guillon-Lethière's *Oath of the Ancestors*

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*Susan Wood*

Natural disasters like the earthquake that ravaged Haiti earlier this year take a toll not only of lives, limbs, homes and basic infrastructure but also of a country's soul: its cultural life, art, and historic monuments.<sup>1</sup> On January 12, some of the buildings that collapsed were museums and galleries filled with the vibrant, colorful works of contemporary Haitian painters. The murals of Trinity Episcopal Church in Port au Prince fell from the walls and shattered. And the Palais Nationale, which was home to one of Haiti's earliest art treasures, collapsed in ruins. Although I knew that it was petty to worry about an inanimate object when so many human beings were dead or suffering, my first thought when I saw photographs of the flattened palace was "Oh no! *The Oath of the Ancestors!*" Guillaume Guillon-Lethière's monumental 1822 canvas had been his labor of love, his gift to the newly independent nation of Haiti, and his declaration of political solidarity with their revolution against slavery. I could not imagine how a perishable work on canvas might survive the disaster, and the thought of its loss was heart-breaking. Therefore, I was delighted to learn recently that the painting has been found and salvaged from the wreckage of the building. Its canvas stretcher (not the original one) had been destroyed, and the canvas itself was torn, but the damage

is reparable. A team of French specialists from the *Centre de recherché et de restauration des musées de France* will travel to Port au Prince to undertake the conservation effort on site.<sup>2</sup> These French conservators are especially well qualified for the task since they have worked on this painting once before and know it well.

Lethière was a man of color who was born on Guadeloupe in 1760, the son of a French official named Pierre Guillon and a woman of mixed race named Marie-Françoise Pepayë. Because he was born out of wedlock, he did not receive the legal right to use his father's name until the age of 39, when his father legally acknowledged him. Until then, he was known simply as "Lethière," or "The third," which identified him as his father's third natural child. Pierre Guillon appears to have been a loving and attentive father who recognized his son's artistic ability and arranged for him to receive appropriate training. Lethière left his homeland at an early age to study painting in France, where he spent several years at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, followed by five years of training at the French Academy in Rome. He returned to Rome in 1807 to serve as the President of the French Academy until 1816. Although not well known today, he was a very successful artist in Revolutionary France who was regarded at the height of his career as the equal and rival of Jacques-Louis David. If most people today respond to his name with "Guillaume who?" it is not for lack of talent on his part but the result of unlucky historical timing. Early in his career, Lethière planned a huge project that was to be the culmination of his life's work: a cycle of four great paintings that would celebrate the key revolutionary moments of ancient Roman history. These were: the establishment of the Roman Republic in 510 B.C.E., the Plebeian rebellion against Patrician abuses in 450 B.C.E., the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.E., and the death of Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian Bridge, which ushered in the era of Christianity in 312 C.E. The first of the paintings in the cycle, *Brutus Condemns His Sons to Death*, created a sensation at the 1812 Salon as well as at a special loan exhibition in London. The dramatic story, in

which the first consul of Republican Rome faces a wrenching choice between punishing collaborators with the deposed king or sparing the lives of his own sons, accounted for some of the painting's popularity. The scene must have hit home emotionally to people who remembered the Reign of Terror. But his technical skill also inspired admiring comparisons with Titian, Guido Reni, Coreggio and Rubens.<sup>3</sup>

In the following years, however, Napoleon went into exile and the Bourbon monarchy returned to power. During the "Hundred Days" when Napoleon escaped from exile on Elba to attempt a restoration of the Republic, Lethière took down the royal flag and hoisted the revolutionary Tricolore above the French Academy in Rome with what later seemed to King Louis XVIII as unseemly haste.<sup>4</sup> That demonstration of Republican sympathy later almost cost Lethière his election to the Institute of Fine Arts. After Waterloo and Napoleon's final exile to Ile Ste. Hélène, therefore, paintings with revolutionary subject matter—especially those by artists with openly anti-monarchical views—were no longer likely to find patrons. Artistic fashions, meanwhile, had moved on from neoclassical history painting to Romanticism, making Lethière's work look somewhat dated. Therefore, the next painting in his Roman cycle, *The Death of Virginia*, elicited little except yawns in 1828. The indifference of critics and connoisseurs to that painting must have been especially hurtful to the artist since it dealt with a subject close to his own heart, the injustice of slavery and the rebellion of oppressed people against it.<sup>5</sup> He never completed the final two canvasses of the cycle although a detailed oil study exists for one of them.<sup>6</sup> During the years when he was working on his *Death of Virginia*, Lethière also painted his *Oath of the Ancestors*. This is the only known work that Lethière signed not only with his name but also with a proud statement of his origins: "Guillaume Guillon-Lethière, né a Guadaloupe, An 1760, Paris, 1822, 7bre."

*The Oath of the Ancestors* is a huge canvas, 3.34 meters high and 2.28 meters wide, depicting life-size or nearly life-size figures. The event that it depicts transpired twenty years earlier,

in 1802, when Napoleon had sent his brother-in-law LeClerc to reconquer the rebellious island of Saint-Domingue (known today as Hispaniola). The *sang mêlé* officer Alexandre Pétion, faced with the decision to attack his own homeland, decided instead to defect from LeClerc's expeditionary force and pledged his allegiance to the rebellion against France.<sup>7</sup> The other party to this oath was Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a Black officer and former slave. These two men had every reason to regard one another as mortal enemies since they had earlier faced one another in a bloodthirsty civil combat. After Toussaint L'Ouverture led the 1794–95 slave rebellion of Saint-Domingue that expelled the French and Spanish colonists, a struggle ensued for control of the island. The population's loyalties were divided largely along ethnic lines with the former slaves supporting Toussaint while free people of mixed race followed his rival André Rigaud. Pétion served in Rigaud's army and in 1799 commanded the defense of Jacmel. Dessalines, along with Henri Christophe, was one of the generals loyal to Toussaint who led attacks on southern Saint-Domingue. After the fall of Jacmel, Pétion escaped to France, but Dessalines brutally crushed the forces that Pétion had commanded. It was no small act of courage and faith, therefore, for both of these men later to make common cause with one another. Their alliance proved the turning point in Haiti's struggle for independence.<sup>8</sup>

Lethière depicts the two men standing on a raised podium, facing one another but gazing upward toward the heavens while the broken shackles of slavery lie at their feet. Below them, gazing anxiously upward, are their fellow countrymen and women, one of whom holds up a small child to witness the historic moment. In the distance, we can see a battle still raging; the struggle for freedom is far from over. On the podium, a stele, engraved in gold letters with the opening words of the Haitian constitution, stands between the two men, forming the focus of their gestures, while above them, emerging from an aureole of light in the clouds, is God the Father, identified by an inscription in Hebrew above his head. The em-

phatically white, European depiction of God has drawn much harsh commentary from post-Colonial critics, most prominently Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby. Her important article about this painting examines how Lethière's own relationship with his white father shaped his attitudes toward Black self-determination.<sup>9</sup> According to Grigsby's interpretation, Lethière had internalized the racist and colorist assumptions of his society that Black men cannot win freedom for themselves without the blessing of white, European patriarchs. Grigsby and Kadish both further observe how the painting's composition seems to privilege Pétion, who stands on the right hand of God (the viewer's left) and whose face also appears more brightly illuminated than that of Dessalines.<sup>10</sup> Lethière probably felt closer kinship to a member of his own class, the free men of mixed race who formed the middle class of the Caribbean colonies, than with the former slave. He also shared Pétion's Republican political sympathies rather than Dessalines' choice of monarchy as the model for the government of the new nation.

For the 21<sup>st</sup> century viewer, the sight of the two men of color gazing worshipfully upward at a white God is both offensive and painfully embarrassing although a neoclassical artist trained in Europe could hardly be expected to visualize God in any other way. The notion of casting Morgan Freeman as God was still nearly two centuries in the future.<sup>11</sup> One could argue, of course, that Lethière did not need to represent God at all. He could simply have shown an aureole of light that suggested the presence of the divine, but instead he represented God as someone similar to his own white father. There is, however, another way to read and interpret this scene, one that gives Lethière more credit both for intentionally choosing his imagery and for manipulating it subversively. First, we must note that the inscription that identifies God is in Hebrew, not in Latin or French as one might expect from an artist trained in the academies of Europe. This, as Weston points out, is specifically the God of Moses who liberated the Jewish people from bondage in Egypt.<sup>12</sup> The presence of the Judeo-Christian God and of a stone stele that evokes the tablets of the Ten Com-

mandments not only allegorized the Haitian people as the followers of Moses but also calls European viewers to live by the principles of their own professed beliefs. Abolitionist rhetoric of the 19<sup>th</sup> century frequently attacked defenders of slavery by turning racist rhetoric against them. Defenders of colonialism and slavery stereotyped indigenous peoples as savages and cannibals; abolitionists responded by arguing that slave owners were themselves cannibals for all practical purposes since they consumed the products of involuntary human labor.<sup>13</sup> Lethière turns the tables on defenders of slavery in another way by showing that the God of their own religion blessed the freedom of the Israelites and, therefore, presumably also that of African slaves.

Furthermore, the presentation of the two men would have been both novel and startling in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The standard image of Black people, even in the literature and propaganda of abolitionists, was of a kneeling man in chains, imploring his master “Ne suis-je pas ton frère?” (Am I not your brother?).<sup>14</sup> But Pétion and Dessalines stand upright, in heroic postures, and although they look upward toward the heavens, their body language is not subservient. Does the composition, moreover, really privilege Pétion over Dessalines? God the Father extends his hands, palms down, over the heads of both men but faces directly downward toward both, not turning to one side or the other. If the gray clouds below God appear to form a diagonal line that connects him with Pétion, the more brightly lit clouds behind Dessalines form another diagonal from the aureole in the sky downward to the viewer’s right. The light falls on both their faces. While Pétion’s paler skin appears to be more brightly illuminated, Lethière took some pains to represent the highlights that glint on Dessalines’s cheekbones, chin, and forehead while also using the brighter sky behind him to set off his darker face and uniform. And, although Dessalines stands on the left hand side of God with all the symbolism that such a position evokes, he is on the viewer’s right, which is visually the more powerful place in a composition. European languages are written from left to



*Guillaume Guillon Lethière, "The Oath of the Ancestors,"  
1822, photo courtesy of Art Resource.*

right, and the instinctive tendency for Francophones, as for English speakers, is to read an image the same way. Thus, the viewer's eye comes to rest at Dessalines rather than Pétion. A figure on the viewer's left of a composition typically appears to have just entered the scene while one on the right seems more stably planted. That impression is especially appropriate in this case since Pétion had recently arrived from France whereas Dessalines had never left his homeland nor wavered in his commitment to its liberation. The profile treatment of Pétion's face further enhances his appearance of moving across the picture plane while Dessalines turns more frontally towards the viewer.

Both men are ideally handsome, with tall and classically proportioned bodies. The figure of Dessalines in particular bears a striking and no doubt disconcerting resemblance to one of the best known and most celebrated works to survive from classical antiquity: the *Apollo Belvedere*. His pose is mirror-reversed from that of the famous statue, but just as the Apollo steps forward on his right leg while turning his head toward the left and extending his left arm outward to the side, Dessalines steps forward on his left leg while extending his right arm across toward Pétion. The treatment of the lowered hand differs somewhat: Apollo held his right hand at his side, probably originally gripping the second arrow for his bow, while Dessalines extends his left hand forward to gesture towards the inscription on the stele. His head also tilts more strongly upward and backward than that of the statue. Despite these divergences, his resemblance to that celebrated statue is too close for coincidence. Lethière must have seen and probably drawn the Apollo many times during his years as a student in Rome and later during the statue's brief sojourn in Paris as part of Napoleon's spoils of war.<sup>15</sup> It was a composition that would spring naturally to his mind for an heroic figure, but in this context, it also constitutes an act of cultural appropriation.

To educated people of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the *Apollo Belvedere* was more than famous, it was iconic. Johannes Winkelmann, the great eighteenth century



art historian and curator of the Vatican collections described it as “the most sublime of the ancient works that have survived until our time . . . The combination of its forms raise themselves above human nature, and his stance displays the divine grandeur that fills him. An eternal spring, such as reigns in the blessed Elysian fields, spreads over the virile forms of a perfect age the traits of a peaceful youth, and it seems that a tender softness plays over the noble structure of his limbs.”<sup>16</sup> When the American artist Benjamin West visited Rome, his hosts, some of whom believed that West was a Native American, were curious to see how this uncivilized bumpkin would react to the highest achievement of which European culture was capable. They therefore arranged a special showing of the Apollo at the Vatican for him. West, however, astonished them by demonstrating what Lethière later also understood—that people whom Europeans considered a lower class of humanity were quite capable of finding parallels for this image in their own experience. The first words out of West’s mouth when he saw the Apollo were, “My God, how like it is to a young Mohawk warrior.”<sup>17</sup> And he then explained his reasoning to his hosts convincingly enough to make them accept his judgment: he had seen the muscular young Mohawk hunters fixing their eyes intently on their prey, just as the Apollo does, while extending the bow-arm in the identical gesture.

Quotations of classical sculpture were a standard element of neoclassical painting and are amply present in Lethière’s other works, from the earliest to the latest phases of his career.<sup>18</sup> The painting that he entered in the Prix de Rome competition of 1785 borrowed the portrait face of the infamously cruel emperor Caracalla for a figure from Roman Republican history. His painting identifies Caracalla with the warrior Horatius who killed his own sister for treason simply because she mourned for her lover whom he had just killed in battle. Forty three years later, Lethière used another portrait face from the Roman Empire to characterize a tyrant of the Roman Republican era in *The Death of Virginia*, the libertine decimvir Appius Claudius who had illegally attempted to seize a young woman

into slavery and who wore the face of the irresponsible playboy emperor Lucius Verus. Virginia's enraged father turns to menace Claudius with the knife, which he had just used to kill his daughter, rather than to permit this abuse, and as he lunges up onto the platform where the official scribes sit, his pose unmistakably quotes the famous statue known as the Borghese Gladiator, an ancient statue in the Louvre.<sup>19</sup> Here, as in his *Oath of the Ancestors*, Lethière's choice of an heroic model for a man of low social standing is thoroughly calculated. It is surely not by chance that his signature appears on the edge of the scribe's platform, directly below Virginius's foot. The visual quotation of Apollo Belvedere in *Oath of the Ancestors*, then, was consistent with the artist's lifelong practice. Lethière, in short, might not have been innocent of the unconscious prejudices of his time about class and color, but his intention in this painting was probably to present the heroes of the Haitian rebellion in the most admiring and respectful manner possible and in a way that aggressively challenged European assumptions about the inferiority of non-white people.

The recent damage to this painting in the 2010 earthquake is just one more episode in a sad litany of indignities that Lethière's works have suffered over time. His *Death of Virginia* languished until years after his death in the possession of M. Boyard who kept it rolled up in a trunk, perhaps the worst imaginable way to store an oil painting on canvas. A few days after the Revolution of 1848, Boyard presented the painting as his gift to the new French Republic with the observation that Lethière had always hoped it might one day hang in the Louvre alongside his *Judgment of Brutus on his Sons*. Unfortunately, both paintings are in a poor state of preservation, so the Louvre displays them very high on the walls of a large salon, where they are difficult to see even with the aid of binoculars. Another of his monumental canvases, *Philoctetes Abandoned on the Island of Lemnos*, remains in storage at the Louvre while many of his other works are scattered around in the smaller French regional museums and in private collections. A few of these works even appear to have dis-

appeared without documentation.<sup>20</sup> *The Oath of the Ancestors* has likewise been dogged by misfortune. Lethière's son Lucien delivered the painting to Haiti on behalf of his father, proudly identifying himself as a man of color during his stay in Port au Prince, as a French spy recorded.<sup>21</sup> Lucien, whose mother and paternal grandfather were white, could probably have passed for Caucasian if he chose, but he preferred to declare his solidarity with the people of Haiti and to make his home on the island, where he married a Haitian woman. As proof of the eternal adage that a good deed never goes unpunished, however, Lucien died not long afterward, probably in one of the epidemics of yellow fever or malaria that periodically ravaged Saint-Domingue. He is buried at Aux Cayes.<sup>22</sup> In the following years, *The Oath of the Ancestors* hung in the cathedral of Port au Prince where a combination of air pollution, incense, and candle smoke darkened the surface until the picture was barely legible. The work was largely forgotten until the research of Genevieve Madec-Capy and Florent Laballe led to its rediscovery. Thanks to their efforts, the painting was sent to Paris for cleaning and conservation, after which the Louvre displayed the canvas in the Hall of Napoléon, its vibrant colors once again gloriously visible.<sup>23</sup> That exhibition in turn helped to spark a renewed interest among scholars in Lethière's art and career. The painting then made a triumphal return to the Caribbean, forming the centerpiece of an exhibition on the artist's native Guadeloupe before finally assuming its new place of honor in the Palais Nationale of Port au Prince. The damage to the painting when the building collapsed is yet another cruel irony. The French conservators who cleaned it once before, however, may be able to repair the damage and restore the painting to its original appearance although they obviously cannot completely undo the harm done by a tear in the canvas. The fibers that will weave the pieces together and the paint that they will use to fill in the lacuna will be 21<sup>st</sup> century, not 19<sup>th</sup>, although they will undoubtedly replicate Lethière's original colors as precisely as possible. Conserva-

tors and curators, however, have to be somewhat philosophical about such things since accidents of various kinds are inevitable. When an object is damaged, like the Picasso in the Metropolitan Museum that recently suffered an unfortunate encounter with a student's elbow, conservators repair the work to the best of their ability, and the damage and conservation then become "part of the history of the object." If *Oath of the Ancestors* were a work in a private collection or museum, its financial value would be diminished, but as a monument of Haiti's history, it has a value that has nothing to do with insurance appraisals.

Lest I leave you with the impression that the study of Lethière's work is a task only for scholars who thrive on exploring the dark corners and dusty storage areas of museums (people like me, as a matter of fact), at least one of his monumental history paintings is readily accessible in one of the world's great art collections. Lethière's *The Death of Cato of Utica* hangs on public display in the Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg. Americans, furthermore, can see at least two of his surviving works without purchasing an overseas airline ticket. His 1785 painting for the Prix de Rome competition, *The Death of Camille*, belongs to the museum of the Rhode Island School of Design where it enjoys a place of honor in the grand salon of European painting. And a charming portrait of a young female art student, possibly Lethière's stepdaughter, is on display in the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts.

This latter work demonstrates a very different side of the artist from his history paintings: it is a small, intimate and unpretentious work. The pretty young woman gazes gravely at the viewer, holding the tools of her trade. A large portfolio rests in her lap, a red chalk drawing peeping out at the edge, and she holds a paintbrush in her right hand. She appears to be a great deal more interested in art than fashion since she wears a simple, practical jacket and skirt of plain, dark material, no jewelry and a very casual hairstyle. The hair is pulled back from her face and fastened at the back of her head, out of her way and

out of her eyes, although wispy bangs partly cover her forehead. The damp, slightly untidy curls around her face suggest that she has just come from a busy day in the studio without bothering to primp for her portrait sitting. We do not know the young woman's identity but can sense the affection between the mentor and his protégée. His signature, subtle but clearly legible, appears on the back of the bench on which she is sitting.

Do go to see these paintings if you get the chance, and if you visit the Louvre someday, take your binoculars. It will be worth your effort.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Clark, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Rykner 2010.

<sup>3</sup> *Descriptive Synopsis* 1817, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Madec-Capy and Florent-Laballe, 1991, 11.

<sup>5</sup> On the story of Virginia, see Livy's *History of Rome*, 3.44.1–48.5. Virginia was a young woman of the Plebeian class. The powerful Patrician decemvir Appius Claudius had repeatedly attempted to seduce her without success. He therefore persuaded a client of his to bring a fraudulent claim that Virginia was a slave born in the client's household and, therefore, his property to sell as he wished. Rather than permit his daughter to become Claudius's concubine, Virginius killed his daughter. The event touched off a rebellion by the Plebeians that eventually led to the granting of greater legal protections to the Plebeian class.

<sup>6</sup> *Château d'Aubermesnil* catalog 2006, [www.nord-image.com](http://www.nord-image.com).

<sup>7</sup> On the Haitian revolution, see Bell 1997, 41–46, with earlier literature, and Rogoziński, 1999, 164–175; 216–219.

<sup>8</sup> Rogoziński, 1999, 170–171.

<sup>9</sup> Grigsby 2001, 213–221.

<sup>10</sup> Kadish 2005, 118–120 and fig. 1. Note however that in Kadish's illustration the reproduction of the painting is mirror-reversed.

<sup>11</sup> *Bruce Almighty*, Universal Pictures 2003, directed by Tom Shadyac.

<sup>12</sup> Weston 2003, 188.

<sup>13</sup> Grigsby 2003, passim, esp. 163–5.

<sup>14</sup> Grigsby 2003, 155–7, fig. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Haskell and Penny 1981, 148.

<sup>16</sup> Winkelmann 1783, Vol. 2, 356–7.

<sup>17</sup> Haskell and Penny, 1981, 150; Galt 1820, 103–6, 115.

<sup>18</sup> See my forthcoming article, “Caracalla and the French Revolution: a Roman tyrant in 18<sup>th</sup> century French Iconography,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 2010 or 2011.

<sup>19</sup> On the Borghese Gladiator, see Haskell and Penny 1981, no. 43, 221–4, fig. 115. See also Serullaz 2005, 81, fig. 15. The source of the figure is particularly obvious in Lethière’s nude study for the figure of Virginius, Louvre RF 52618.

<sup>20</sup> For example an oil sketch entitled “*Nero causes Junia to be abducted during the night*,” which is recorded as belonging to the Musée Fabre in Montpellier, apparently is no longer in that collection. My inquiries as to its current location have received no response. Oriol 1935, 41; André Joubin, *Catalogue des peintures et sculptures exposées dans les galeries du Musée Fabre de la Ville de Montpellier* (Paris: Impressions Blondel la Rougery, 1926), 198; private correspondence from Jérôme Farigoule.

<sup>21</sup> Grigsby 2001, 212, 224.

<sup>22</sup> Naef 1977, 411.

<sup>23</sup> Bardin 2006, 2187.

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