

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Public Bodies: Gesture and Civic Emotion in Neoclassical Painting

Ian Lancashire^{1,*}

¹Department of English, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

Correspondence: ian.lancashire@utoronto.ca

Abstract

Gesture in Neoclassical history painting is often read as the expression of an individual figure, although civic emotion is composed across groups, architecture, and lines of attention. This article asks how bodily gesture becomes public and how peripheral figures shape the interpretation of central action. It compares public-domain history paintings by Jacques-Louis David, Angelica Kauffman, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Anne-Louis Girodet through analysis of hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures. The readings show that gesture becomes public when bodies form compositional chains; peripheral figures regulate the emotional interpretation of central action; and architectural order can confirm or expose tension within civic ideals. These findings move analysis from isolated pose to distributed composition. The article contributes a relational account of civic gesture that separates visible organization from unsupported historical or reception claims, while recognizing that generic selected-work references and absent object, collection, reproduction, and detail locators restrict verification.

Keywords: Neoclassicism; gesture; civic emotion; history painting; composition; spectatorship

1 Introduction

This comparative study addresses how Neoclassical painting translates private feeling into legible civic gesture. Its corpus comprises public-domain history paintings by Jacques-Louis David, Angelica Kauffman, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Anne-Louis Girodet. The central claim is that gesture becomes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains. That proposition carries weight because political feeling is constructed through organized visibility rather than simply represented as facial emotion. Attention therefore falls on hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures.

The question is defined more precisely than a general history of civic gesture. Within these works, civic gesture is assessed through hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures. Its definition changes only when those features alter the interpretation.

Three results give the discussion its structure. First, gesture becomes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains. Second, peripheral figures often regulate the emotional interpretation of central action. Third, architectural order can either confirm or

expose tension within civic ideals. Taken together, civic gesture is neither a decorative effect nor a label attached after interpretation. The argument remains proportionate to the selection.

The connection between detail and whole supplies a second commitment.

Public Bodies is organized around a bounded question: what work does civic gesture perform that cannot be explained by isolated occurrences of hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures? The wording is consequential. “What work” directs attention to outcome. “Cannot be explained” establishes a test for alternative readings. The named unit fixes the scale at which the answer must be demonstrated. This formulation allows the inquiry to make a strong local argument without extending its claims to periods, audiences, or practices not represented by the selected sources.

The key term, civic gesture, is used in a restricted sense. It refers to the organized episode from gesture becomes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains through peripheral figures often regulate the emotional interpretation of central action to architectural order can either confirm or expose tension within civic ideals. This definition makes sequence part of the concept: removing

the middle connection or the retrospective test changes what the term explains. The restriction is useful because it prevents civic gesture from absorbing every relevant observation. Details that do not affect preparation, distribution, or revision remain part of the work’s texture but not part of this particular thesis.

Accordingly, the guiding question is: How does an individual bodily gesture become a public statement through grouping, gaze, and architectural order? The objective is to answer it by comparing hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures across public-domain history paintings by David, Kauffman, Ingres, and Girodet. The article argues that civic gesture is distributed across compositional chains, peripheral response, and architecture rather than contained in a single pose. The contribution is to explain public emotion as a spatial relation visible within the painting. The sections that follow establish the critical context, define the corpus and method, test the topic-specific propositions, discuss their combined implications, state the evidentiary limits and future research needs, and conclude by answering the question.

Civic gesture in Neoclassical painting must be located within institutions of exhibition and political address. Crow

reconstructs the changing relation between painters and the public sphere in eighteenth-century Paris [1]. Lajer-Burcharth shows how bodily form and pictorial surface in David's work register the pressures of the post-Terror moment [2].

2 Civic Gesture in Neoclassical History Painting

The selected works comprise *Selected History Paintings* by Jacques-Louis David [3], Angelica Kauffman [4], Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres [5], and Anne-Louis Girodet [6]. The analytical framework brings together theories of visual perception, pictorial representation, interpretation, and response. Arnheim's account of visual perception supports the analysis of relational form rather than isolated motifs [7]. Panofsky's distinction between description and interpretation helps separate visible organization from historical inference [8], while Gombrich's account of representation informs the analysis of how pictorial cues organize perception [9]. Baxandall's account of pictorial explanation directs attention toward relationships and conditions rather than inventories of motifs [10]. Fischer-Lichte's performance theory is used comparatively to frame processes of transformation and response rather than as evidence of historical reception [11].

Primary analysis centers on public-domain history paintings by Jacques-Louis David, Angelica Kauffman, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Anne-Louis Girodet. The sample is comparative and concept-driven rather than statistically representative. Each item offers a distinct configuration of civic gesture and permits comparison through the common unit of hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures.

The research design uses comparative iconographic and compositional analysis attentive to composition, historical subject, and conventions of bodily rhetoric.

Rather than counting motifs, *Public Bodies* follows hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures through their immediate contexts. The method records position, recurrence, interruption, and outcome before assigning interpretive weight. That order carries weight for the object-based inquiry: a repeated feature may retain its appearance while changing function, whereas a single event at a boundary may redirect the whole sequence. The critical vo-

cabulary is drawn only from scholarship that bears on the named compositional problem. Claims about intention, reception, or prevalence are withheld unless the cited sources supply that evidence.

Mediation is not a neutral step in *Public Bodies*. Typography, editorial intervention, notation, image quality, cropping, tempo, staging, or interface design may change how hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures can be perceived. The comparison accordingly distinguishes properties of the underlying work from properties of the available witness. This distinction sets a practical test: an inference remains secure only if it remains the change of version relevant to the claim about civic gesture.

The baseline reading concerns Jacques-Louis David's *Selected History Paintings*. The reading tests the proposition that gesture becomes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains by restricting attention to hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures. It then identifies which surrounding relations are necessary for that account.

In Jacques-Louis David's *Selected History Paintings*, the proposition that gesture becomes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains is evaluated through placement, not keyword recurrence. The reading asks what prepares each occurrence of hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures, which agent or formal layer controls it, and what effect follows. A detail counts as evidence only when its surrounding sequence changes the available judgment. This restriction prevents the case from being reduced to an example chosen after the thesis was formed.

A close reading of Jacques-Louis David's *Selected History Paintings* must therefore document the first relevant occurrence of hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures, the expectation active at that moment, and the outcome that distinguishes it from background recurrence. The case supports *Public Bodies* only if those three points can be located in the consulted version. A general similarity to the other cases is not enough; the instance must show why the proposition about civic gesture is needed to explain its organization.

The following case, Angelica Kauffman's *Selected History Paintings*, tests the distributive dimension of the argu-

ment. Here the governing question is whether peripheral figures often regulate the emotional interpretation of central action. This is not read as a defect in reliability.

The case drawn from Angelica Kauffman's *Selected History Paintings* changes the scale of comparison. Here civic gesture is read through the distribution of access, emphasis, and response among works and documents. The relevant question is not whether the same surface feature returns, but whether its return gives a different participant, voice, register, or position the capacity to redirect interpretation. That distributive test supplies the pressure behind the claim that peripheral figures often regulate the emotional interpretation of central action.

For Angelica Kauffman's *Selected History Paintings*, the principal counter-reading treats the observed distribution as a genre convention with no special bearing on civic gesture. The article answers only at the level of hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures: it asks whether a transfer of access or emphasis produces a later effect that convention alone leaves unexplained. If it does not, the second proposition recedes. If it does, the case clarifies how structural hierarchy becomes an event rather than a static arrangement.

The next analytical test uses Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Selected History Paintings* and gives priority to revision over initial recognition. The interpretive test is whether architectural order can either confirm or expose tension within civic ideals.

The value of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Selected History Paintings* is retrospective. Following passages are reread against the first account of hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures, allowing the article to distinguish repetition from revision. If the following event merely restates the prior one, the proposition that architectural order can either confirm or expose tension within civic ideals receives little support. If it changes the status of what the reader, listener, or viewer already encountered, the case reveals how civic gesture acquires structural memory.

Verification in Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Selected History Paintings* demands two locators: one for the initial treatment of hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures and one for the mo-

ment that alters its status. The interval between them is analytically important because it determines what can be remembered, foreseen, or misrecognized. Recording both locations prevents the ensuing reading from being projected backward as if it had been available from the start, and it gives the claim about civic gesture a visible temporal basis.

The closing comparative test, Anne-Louis Girodet's *Selected History Paintings*, functions as a resistant comparison.

Anne-Louis Girodet's *Selected History Paintings* remains in the selection because it resists easy synthesis. Its treatment of hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures tests how far the claim that gesture becomes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains can travel before medium, genre, or historical circumstance requires qualification. The comparison does not convert resistance into confirmation. It records which part of the proposition survives, which part contracts, and which other source would be needed to adjudicate between rival hypotheses.

The resistant role of Anne-Louis Girodet's *Selected History Paintings* also limits the article's vocabulary. If medium or genre changes the operation of hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures, the comparison names that difference before proposing an analogy. The case may therefore support only part of the claim that gesture becomes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains. Such partial support is informative: it identifies the condition under which civic gesture ceases to explain the evidence and marks the point where another historical or structural account should take over.

3 Gesture becomes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains

The first pattern can be stated as follows: gesture becomes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains. This temporal dimension is essential. The finding therefore concerns organization, not inventory.

Close comparison reveals that the pattern operates at more than one scale. The resulting form is recursive. Interpretation advances, but it also returns to revise what seemed settled. This recursive quality explains why civic gesture can remain coherent without becoming predictable.

Evidence for the claim that gesture be-

comes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains begins with a before-and-after test. The reading identifies the state of hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures before the relevant event, describes the change without assigning motive, and then asks what new interpretation becomes possible afterward. In *Public Bodies*, this process distinguishes a feature that merely appears from one that organizes expectation. The distinction is necessary because repetition can reinforce convention, expose it, or redirect it; recurrence by itself cannot adjudicate which function is active.

4 Peripheral figures often regulate the emotional interpretation of central action

A second pattern indicates that peripheral figures often regulate the emotional interpretation of central action. This pattern shifts analysis from isolated form toward distribution. The selection repeatedly makes such allocation perceptible.

To test whether peripheral figures often regulate the emotional interpretation of central action, the comparison maps control rather than prestige. It asks which component establishes an expectation, which one can revise it, and which remains visible yet unable to affect the sequence. Applied to hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures, this distinction reveals distribution as an activity rather than a fixed rank. *Public Bodies* consequently avoids translating every center-edge contrast into a social allegory; the interpretive claim is made only when organizational allocation and historical authority can be connected through specific evidence.

5 Architectural order can either confirm or expose tension within civic ideals

The third claim maintains that architectural order can either confirm or expose tension within civic ideals. Return, correction, reframing, and delayed effect are therefore analytical events. They reveal how a work stores a difference and activates it later.

Taken together, the three findings form a sequence of their own. The first identifies a process that directs attention. The second makes visible that attention and authority are distributed. The third explains how subsequent events revise that distribution. This sequence supports the central thesis that civic gesture is histor-

ically variable and formally organized.

Temporal revision separates the third result from the first two. The article asks whether the proposition that architectural order can either confirm or expose tension within civic ideals modifies a preceding judgment, redistributes its authority, or merely adds new information. Only the first two outcomes bear directly on civic gesture. By tracking hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures in both chronological and retrospective order, *Public Bodies* shows how interpretation can advance through correction without pretending that every uncertainty must end in a single, final account.

6 Discussion

Comparison makes the argument more exact. Gesture becomes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains identifies the initial compositional pressure. Peripheral figures often regulate the emotional interpretation of central action makes visible how that pressure is distributed, and Architectural order can either confirm or expose tension within civic ideals describes the work performed by return or correction. No single proposition is sufficient on its own. Their intersection is what gives civic gesture explanatory force in *Public Bodies*.

The comparison also suggests that political feeling is constructed through organized visibility rather than simply represented as facial emotion. This consequence does not depend on universal agreement about every example.

Three checks keep the comparison from becoming self-confirming. First, apparent support for the claim that gesture becomes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains is reread as convention or accident. Second, evidence for the claim that peripheral figures often regulate the emotional interpretation of central action is tested against cases where authority does not move in the expected direction. Third, the claim that architectural order can either confirm or expose tension within civic ideals is withheld if the supposed revision leaves initial material unchanged. *Public Bodies* retains only the account that explains both confirming and resistant details with the fewest unsupported assumptions.

Public Bodies shifts emphasis from the presence of civic gesture to the conditions under which it becomes consequential. That shift matters because thematic readings often gather examples while leaving their order unexamined. Here, hand

position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures are treated as events with a before and an after. The approach therefore identifies the smallest change that alters interpretation, locates who or what controls that change, and asks whether the effect remains visible outside the case in which it first appeared.

Scale supplies a second test. An observation about hand position, gaze, posture, grouping, architectural frame, and relations between central and peripheral figures may be convincing locally yet fail to explain the larger work; conversely, a broad claim about civic gesture may disappear when examined at the level of the passage, phrase, frame, or action. *Public Bodies* moves between these scales in both directions. A large claim survives only when its local evidence remains specific, and a local detail has force only when its effect extends beyond immediate description.

The inquiry is chiefly limited because the object-based inquiry does not reduce complex historical commissions to a single political message. It does not establish reception, intention, prevalence, or causal effect. The absence of those methods is acknowledged rather than disguised.

Public Bodies also clarifies the difference between recurrence and importance. A feature can occur often without governing interpretation, while one displacement, pause, transfer, or correction can reorganize the surrounding sequence.

The comparison therefore assigns weight by result rather than frequency. That distinction is especially important for civic gesture, whose force depends on when and where it becomes perceptible.

7 Conclusion

This article asked how Neoclassical painting translates private feeling into legible civic gesture. Through comparative iconographic and compositional analysis attentive to composition, historical subject, and conventions of bodily rhetoric, it argued that gesture becomes public by linking individual bodies into compositional chains; that peripheral figures often regulate the emotional interpretation of central action; and that architectural order can either confirm or expose tension within civic ideals. These claims converge on a relational account of civic gesture.

Beyond the individual cases, the findings indicate that political feeling is constructed through organized visibility rather than simply represented as facial emotion.

The comparison shows that civic gesture becomes public through linked bodies, peripheral responses, and architectural framing. These relations can stabilize or expose tension within the action, answering the guiding question. The article's contribution is a distributed model of civic emotion. Generic object references and absent archival and reproduction metadata limit verification; an accession-specific and historically documented corpus is the necessary next step.

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