

**OVERFLOWING WITH THE JOY OF VICTORY
A RECORD OF MY LIFE
BY DAISAKU IKEDA**

Writing on the art of the French Revolution, SGI President Ikeda describes how ‘it overflows with the joy of ordinary people who have been released from the shackles of oppression and have won their dignity as human beings.’

At first glance, it was just an ordinary-looking printed document faded with age. It measured about two meters in height and a meter across—the size of what would today probably be called a poster. And on it were printed two vertical columns of text. But this single document greatly impacted the course of history.

Looking more closely, I found it to portray a dignity that had survived the centuries. Its words seemed to somehow dance off the page.

Posters just like this one bearing the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which boldly proclaimed the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, were put up in the streets of Paris at the time of the French Revolution (1789). People huddled together reading the document, voicing their sympathy with its affirmations. It expressed the excitement and energy of a people standing at the threshold of a new age. The wheels of history had begun to turn.

The copy that I saw was prominently displayed in the “French Revolution and Romanticism” exhibition, which opened in October 1987 at the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum.

How brilliant the spiritual light of this declaration must have been to the people! The French thinker Simone Weil comments in *The Need for Roots*: “Many of those who were not French wanted to become so. For to be French, thenceforward, meant belonging to the sovereign nation.” To the people of other countries who were tyrannized by similarly repressive regimes, France at that time was a dream. In his *History of the French Revolution*, historian Jules Michelet concludes, “From the first page to the last, it [France] has had but one hero: the people.”

Without a doubt, the French Revolution, which brought down the *ancien régime*, heralded the start of the modern age and established the framework for the spirit of human rights that lives to this day. On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the revolution, whose beacon shines with increasing radiance, the French government sponsored various official commemorative events both in and outside of France. The “French Revolution and Romanticism” exhibition was held as the first of these events.

Prior to the opening, in May and June, I visited France to meet with people from all sectors of French society, people who had graciously loaned valuable research materials and works of art for the exhibition. In addition to finalizing the arrangements, I wanted to express my gratitude to them.

Through the many encounters that I had with people at that time, I could see that the entire country was consumed with preparations for the various events that would take place to mark the revolution’s bicentennial. And I sensed a real earnestness and passion in their efforts.

Prime Minister Jacques René Chirac (currently president), who was then also serving as Paris mayor, was particularly enthusiastic. Mr. Chirac had visited Japan a number of times, making a name for himself as a close friend of the country.

Knowing him to be a fan of sumo wrestling—he worked hard to support a sumo exhibition in Paris—I told him in jest, “I’m sorry to say that I haven’t brought any wrestlers with me.” He was immediately all smiles. In the course of our friendly, candid dialogue, he gave his ready consent to the holding of the “French Revolution and Romanticism” exhibition and expressed his support for further cultural exchange.

Thanks to the full cooperation of a number of key people, 19 museums across France contributed artwork to the exhibition. The number of pieces on display came to 165, far more than originally planned.

There may have been prior showings of romanticist art in Japan, but never had there been an exhibition on this scale. This was also the first event to bring together in one place so many masterpieces relating to the French Revolution.

It featured a broad selection of paintings, ranging from neoclassicist artists such as David and Prud’hon to romanticists like Delacroix and Géricault. The paintings included depictions of such revolutionaries as Marat, Danton and Robespierre, and portraits of such colorful military and political figures of the period as Napoleon and Talleyrand-Périgord. There were also many works like David’s *Oath of the Jeu de Paume* that vividly capture the seething emotions of the era. Most of the works were being shown for the first time in Japan.

The *Oath of the Jeu de Paume* portrays the historic moment of the revolution when, in June 1789, the National Assembly vowed not to adjourn until a constitution had been adopted. The piece communicates with a timeless quality the passion of such key revolutionary figures as Mirabeau and Robespierre. Because the king had ordered the assembly hall at Versailles closed, the deputies hastily proceeded to a neighboring indoor tennis court, where they convened their session.

Great art has expressed the struggle for human rights.

At a special viewing of the exhibition, one guest commented that all the power of the state couldn’t have put together a display of such substance. Another called it an examination of the entire history of the French Revolution. Still another expressed his excitement in being given the opportunity to view an actual copy of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

When we examine the theme of art and the French Revolution, we must keep in mind that art has been one means by which the struggle for human rights has been expressed. Great art is at its essence a treasure encompassing the spirit of all humanity. It is a force that elevates the heart to a nobler plane.

In the course of human history, however, art has often been the exclusive property of the privileged few. It has been treated as a symbol of power, contributed to the glory of kings and nobles, and been used to embellish the religious authority of churches or monasteries.

At times, it has also been the object of plunder by conquerors. It is a well-known fact that the oppressors of Nazi Germany vied with one another to take art from the territories that they occupied for their private collections. The point is that historically, art for the most part was not made accessible to the masses, let alone considered something that exists for the people.

But the art of the French Revolution is different. It overflows with the joy of ordinary people who have been released from the shackles of oppression and have won their dignity as human beings.

It was not created to serve the powerful. Rather, it was born from a deep desire to

celebrate the lives of the people, to sing the praises of humanity. In the world of art, the French Revolution indeed constituted a major revolution.

Art has the power of fusion. It brings people together, awakening them to their common foundation as human beings through its universal qualities. It creates a world of humanism that enables people everywhere to respect one another's lifestyles and traditional cultures, and to share with and learn from one another. That's because it is a world that respects and guarantees human rights.

But those who suppress human rights dislike culture and the arts. They detest them. Attempting to distinguish and separate themselves from others, such people restrict art, which is meant to be enjoyed by all, to the narrow realm of their own country or ethnic group, rejecting anything that is different.

That Nazis burned books by Jewish authors is well known, but they also denied the works of Jewish artists, labeling them "degenerate." The Soviet dictator Stalin of the same period likewise persecuted artists whose works he deemed were out of keeping with socialist values.

By liberating the human spirit, art has the power to enlighten people to the fact that human rights belong to everyone. To the tyrants, the sight of the people soaring on wings of freedom was unbearable.

That which unites people is good. That which divides them is base and evil. The original purpose of religion is to bring people together and produce positive values. That is why, throughout history, a vibrant spirit of faith has always been at the foundation of all outstanding art and culture. Religion that is genuinely sublime will without fail cause a flowering of art and culture.

In our dialogue *Dawn after Dark*, the distinguished art critic René Huyghe, to whom I am greatly indebted, commented that, "Art and religion travel the same path leading human beings outside themselves toward a [transcendent] reality" (p. 316). Both art and religion speak to and move the human spirit, seeking to liberate people internally. They enable people to appreciate the sanctity of life and develop a universal understanding of human rights. In that sense, they spring from the same profound dimension.

Five in a series