Tearing up History

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Dr Richard Clay's new documentary, 'Tearing up History', will start on BBC Four, at 21:00 on Tuesday 6 May 2014.

The documentary has already received strong reviews in the **Radio Times (http://www.radiotimes.com/episode/cvyksb/the-french-revolution-tearing-up-history)** .

Tearing up History (http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b042ttxl), a new documentary for BBC Four's *18th Century Season*, explores for the first time the dramatic and destructive years of the French Revolution through the extraordinary story of its art. In his TV debut, art historian Dr Richard Clay controversially argues that the destruction of art can be every bit as powerful as its creation.

The French Revolution of 1789 was a war whose battlefield was the visual world, where the symbols of royal, religious and aristocratic power – statues, monuments, paintings - had long controlled people's lives. Revolutionaries took these symbols and destroyed them, taking control of their destiny from the king, nobility and church and in turn creating a new political order. So shocking to contemporaries were these acts that a new word was invented to describe the perpetrators - *vandals*.

Clay is fascinated by the symbols of power and authority, how they shape the world we live in, and how art has been used by those in power to exert control throughout history. These are always the first targets of vandals in any politically charged situation: the deliberate attempt to destroy art and culture for political or religious ends.

From this unique perspective, Clay navigates the events of the French Revolution - from the storming of the Bastille to the rise of Napoleon. He draws parallels between the mob's decapitation of a statue outside the Barrière de la Conférence – a statue holding the fleur-de-lis, France's royal symbol – and the decapitation of Paris' governor Bernard-René de Launay two days later.

He focuses on the work of stonemasons in the aftermath of the uprisings who set to work chipping away reminders of the Ancien Régime across Paris, from coats of arms to royal insignia. And Clay describes these acts not in terms of senseless vandalism, but as coordinated attacks on the symbols of oppression, seeing the breaking of images and the transformation of art through destruction as key turning points in the revolution.

Clay uses this turbulent period in French history to examine art as one of the most ancient political tools and its destruction as one of the most potent political acts. Clay argues that the power of iconoclasm in modern politics was launched with the French Revolution but has shaped our world ever since. He talks to notorious graffiti artist, So What, and draws parallels with modern day events, such as the unrest in Iraq, Libya and more recently Ukraine. Clay argues that the story of revolution is the story of the tearing up of history, both figuratively and literally.

"The inside story of great revolutions can be discovered through the smashed, altered and reshaped art of the past. This is a story about art, it's a story about symbols, it's about the power of the church, the power of the monarchy, the power of the aristocracy."

"Political leaders often have the exclusive disposal of rare, exotic or luxury goods which they use to display, reinforce or justify their power. Architecture, statues, portraits, paintings – they can all be used for the enhancement of power. When power is threatened, these symbols are the first things to be destroyed, desecrated or stolen."

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