

# The Saint-Bartholomew's Fragmentation



François Dubois, *Le Massacre de la Saint-Barthélemy* (1575-84)

King Charles IX firing on the people of Paris

Catherine de Medici mother of Charles IX

The Seine river

Pont aux Meuniers where 600 Protestants were killed

Roof of the new Renaissance aisle behind, built by Pierre Lescault

The Louvre of Philippe August built in the Gothic style

Henri de Navarre + Marguerite de Valois

House of Admiral Coligny in the new Renaissance style

Porte St Honoré

Gallows of Montfaucon

Walls of Charles V surrounding Paris

Duke of Guise

Admiral Coligny being mutilated

Henri d'Anjou, brother of Charles IX and future Henri III

## 1. Architectural Fragmentation

In contrast to a classical painting, which would represent an event occurring in one place and at one specific moment, the painting of Dubois *Le Massacre de la Saint-Barthélemy* (1575-84) presents many landmarks of sixteenth century Paris as in a collage. The fragmented representation is also emphasized by the disparity of styles, such as:

The hotel of Coligny stands out as being of the Renaissance style: one can see its differentiated stories, its windows ornate with mullions and Ionic pilasters, its stepped attic with dormers.

The houses behind Coligny's are of the Romanesque period, with their gables on the street and brown color. The old church across the Seine is also of that period.

The Louvre shows this disparity of styles all by itself: its crenellated towers are of the Gothic style, but one can also distinguish behind these towers a large gray roof with dormers of the Renaissance style: it is the new aisle built by Pierre Lescault on the west side of the palace during the reign of Henri II.

## 2. Fragmentation of the Political Body

The political body is fragmented in its multiple representatives:

**King Charles IX** is shown bordering madness as he fires with a hunting rifle on the Protestants from a window of the Louvre. Divided between his love for Coligny, leader of the Protestants and a father figure, and his duty represented by his mother and brother, he cannot reunite within his person the integrity of the political body.

**Catherine of Medici**, who had a strong influence on her son King Charles IX, is shown on the painting inspecting piles of dead bodies with the cold and reasonable eyes of the political body.

**Henri d'Anjou** is the brother of Charles IX and the favorite son of Catherine of Medici. He was at the time popular for his victories against the Protestants. His prominent position on the front of the painting presents him as the victorious body of the monarch. As the future Henri III, he will be the last king of the Valois Dynasty.

**Henri de Navarre** is watching the event from a window of the Louvre. As the future Henri IV, he will be the first king of the Bourbon Dynasty.

## 3. Anatomical Fragmentation

The most recognizable event of the massacre is the murder of the admiral Coligny, one of the main leaders of the Protestant party. Catherine of Medici had him eliminated that night by the duke de Guise, chief of the Catholic league. The painting shows simultaneously two scenes from Coligny's murder: first when he was thrown from the window, and then when he was beheaded. Henri de Guise is probably the figure on the right, pointing to the body of Coligny, as if ordering further mutilation. Killing Coligny is not enough. His body must also be fragmented, even after death, to deprive it of its integrity. The kneeling man armed with a knife is about to emasculate him in a sadistic gesture: the perverse pleasure of the murderers accentuates the sexual dimension of the massacre, with the convergence of eroticism and death.

## 4. Literary Fragmentation

Guerre sans ennemi, où l'on ne trouve rien à fendre  
Cuirasse que la peau ou la chemise tendre.  
L'un se defend de voix, l'autre assaut de la main,  
L'un y porte le fer, l'autre y preste le sein,  
Difficile à juger qui est le plus astorge,  
L'un à bien engorger, l'autre à tendre la gorge  
(Agrippa d'Aubigné, *Les Tragiques* Livre V, ligne 841-46)

The strong mark of the caesura in the middle of the alexandrines (lines 843, 844 and 846) clearly separates the actions of Protestants and Catholics, while at the same time the parallel construction of the hemistich ties them together. The three lines repeat the same syntax and words ("l'un" and "l'autre", "the one" and "the other"), yet in a subtle chiasmatic manner: "the one" in line 843 is the victim, while in lines 844 and 846 he is the executioner. The exchange of place between "the one" and "the other" makes it difficult to distinguish Protestants from Catholics. They are fragmented in body parts (voice, hand, breast and throat), and put back together as an agglomerate. This composite body reflects the profound disparity of France during the sixteenth century, while divided by the religious wars.