

# *Imaging a Career in Science*



*The Iconography of  
Antoine Laurent Lavoisier*

**MARCO BERETTA**

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## Foreword

**T**HE LIFE WORK OF A CREATIVE MAN OR WOMAN, in the case at hand that of Antoine Laurent Lavoisier, often survives remarkably well-documented. Yet it seems words do not suffice; we want to see the man. Why? To judge whether he appears as clever, or less so, than his published oeuvre, or the handiwork of his notebooks? Or that he might be plain if not ugly, when his work seems that of the angels of reason? That in his countenance his fate might be foreshadowed?

We are awfully visual. Especially in chemistry—from the wonderful illustrations Marie Anne Lavoisier drew of her husband's *Traité élémentaire de chimie*, to the multitude of chemical structures that (of necessity) adorn the pages of our chemical journals today. It is natural then that we look for images—portraits, sketches, engravings, sculpture—that give us access (so we imagine) to the essence of a creative man. As if it were easier to form an emotional reaction to a picture rather than to words.

Also, being human, we swing on the long arc of a pendulum between faith in naïve realism, and the skepticism grounded in a knowledge of how images are really shaped and copied by other than their creators. And copied again. We want to believe this drawing is a faithful, insightful image, maybe even an entrance to a soul. In the next moment we doubt, sometimes to corrosive excess.

The way a person is represented, even if the artist is lacking in skill, tells us much about how others see him or her. The portrait—or the ensemble of portraits, etchings, etc.—at first sight seems entirely iconic. But such a “visual ensemble” also builds a symbolic structure—it offers to the viewer an integrated image of a man or a woman in the culture of their time.

It takes a perceptive analyst to transform a scholarly collection of images of Lavoisier, many of contested provenance, into a representation of what Lavoisier wrought. Information as to how the work of the man

who gave a language, a direction, and a *modus operandi* (not the details) to modern chemistry is to be found in the astoundingly few authentic images we have of him. Marco Beretta's book provides this information. It is a cultural biography—of M. and Mme. Lavoisier, to be sure, but also of Jacques Louis David who painted their expensive portrait, and of the cunning heirs of the Lavoisiers, who over time both held onto and let go of these images. Even of the exhibitions (including one in wartime Paris—a remarkable cultural episode), that with a kind of desperation strove to reconstruct what Lavoisier looked like. We know much more, now, through this book, and wonder what images are still to be found.

*Roald Hoffmann*