The Death of Socrates

A revealing painting by Jacques Louis David, unveiled in 1787
The artist is trying to communicate...

• Condemned to death or exile by the Athenian government for his teaching methods which aroused skepticism and impiety in his students, Socrates heroically rejected exile and accepted death from hemlock.

• How does the painting show this sentiment?
This painting is depicting Socrates’ death as it was explained in Plato’s *Phaedo*.

- There were more people in the room, but this painter limits the number of people.
- Who do you see and what do you think they are doing?
- What emotions are they showing?
• He was in chains so his foot was up on the bed and he was massaging it
• His wife Xanthippe was present and hysterical so he asked that she be taken home – you can see her in the background
• Phaedo sits to the right of Socrates, controlling himself but his hand gripping his thigh shows tension.
• On one side there are young men, scarcely aware of death.
• On the other side is an old man, surely aware and respectful of death.
• The executioner turns his head away to indicate his personal regret and distaste for his task.
• See the cup of poison? What is Socrates doing?
• He reaches for it, to show that he died voluntarily.
• He raises his left arm and points to heaven for his last discussion has been about why he believes in the immortality of the soul.
• What about the design and composition of the painting?
• White – the color of innocence.
• The Nakedness of truth
• Everything is simple geometric shapes – the painter’s garments and hair are based off of sculpture, not the softness of painting.
• Why would he do that? What is he trying to show?
• Devices of design – look for shading, lines of the painting.
• From the knee of the man seated left to the upraised hand of the man at the extreme right is implied a slanting line.
• The Shadow on the wall joins with this to imply an immense triangle pointed to the right.
• This creates the visual tension, how does the tall torch help this tension?
• What is this artist’s message about Socrates?