PAINTING AND PROPAGANDA:
NAPOLEON AND HIS ARTISTS

By

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This paper examines the use of painting as propaganda under Napoleon Bonaparte throughout his reign as First Consul (1799-1804) and Emperor of France (1804-1815). The works painted by Napoleon’s artists Jacques-Louis David (1748 – 1825), Antoine-Jean Gros (1771 – 1835) and Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780 – 1867) are used to discuss the issues of official portraiture that arise as a result of the French Revolution, as well as ways in which depictions of Napoleon change as his role as the leader of the French people evolves. The reemergence of history painting and its role in Napoleon’s program of propaganda is also considered.

The use of fine art to influence public opinion concerning the national government did not begin with the French Revolution. The Bourbon Monarchs, most nobly Louis XIV, consciously used the arts to produce favorable impressions of the regime. The Revolution is however generally accepted today as the first time that propaganda was used on a mass scale. This dynamic period in French History saw the development of many practices that would become a mainstay in molding favorable responses to policy and to attain specific public opinion. In the wake of the Revolution, the importance of art as propaganda was realized by French leaders, none more so the Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon created a widespread program of propaganda as he rose from obscurity to his reign as First Consul (1799-1804) and then Emperor (1804-1815). By examining portraits and other depictions throughout the reign of Napoleon, it is possible to see that these paintings were utilized in a calculated attempt to represent Napoleon and his triumphs in a way that legitimized his rule of the French people.

Early on, when Napoleon was still just a young military general, he ostensibly understood the way in which the cultivation of his public image could help him achieve the
greatness and reach the high level of prominence that he was so impatient to attain.iii He developed the myth that still defines his public persona today, associating himself with triumph and heroism, frequently exaggerating his successes and promoting his victorious image throughout France. The absolute belief in Napoleonic rule was largely due to his careful control during his reign; censorship of the press became much stricter, and anything that attacked or criticized the Napoleonic regime was prohibited.iv During his rise to power, from successful military leader and throughout his reign as Emperor, Napoleon also used a wide range of publications and media that included, but were not limited to, art, theater, newspapers and other bulletins. The use of the popular press and art as tools of propaganda were not new ideas, but Napoleon used them to an extent that had not been seen before.v While in power, there was no alternative to the myth Napoleon had created because he wielded the power of what was shown.

When thinking about the fine arts and propaganda, the tendency is to think of them as very distinct entities, art being refined, aesthetic and inspired, and propaganda as a crude, institutional, and fanatical. It can be argued that as a reflection of society, any type of cultural representation can and is likely to serve the interests of individuals or groups who are involved in its creation.vi In the case of the images created during the reign of Napoleon, those that were commissioned by the Napoleonic administrations directly or those that Napoleon expressed approval over, are the most interesting and informative in a discussion of his attempts to wield absolute control. Although hundreds of paintings were created throughout his fifteen-year domination, extolling his bravery, genius, compassion, and wisdom, for the purposes of this investigation the portraits of Napoleon that have remained, even today, as the most iconic images of Napoleon will be examined. Specifically, the portraits painted by three of the most prominent artist whom Napoleon employed to create his program of visual propaganda: Jacques-Louis David (1748 – 1825), Antoine-Jean Gros (1771 – 1835) and Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres
(1780 – 1867). Despite their diverse formal programs and personalities, each artist responded to Napoleon’s request in decide way, and by focusing on their most significant representations of Napoleon, the commonalities between their representations of the leader become visible. These artists were at the forefront of negotiating the path through the problems of representation in the wake of the Revolution and especially the difficulties of traditional government portraiture subsequent to the destruction of the monarchy. It is also possible when examining the works of David, Gros and Ingres to see the ways in which Napoleon’s program of propaganda continues to evolve throughout his reign; as a general he is a fearless warrior, as First Consul a dominant yet compassionate military leader, as Emperor a powerful Imperial presence, and eventually, as his public opinion of his rule began to deteriorate, intellectual bureaucrat working for the good of the people.

During the Revolution, there was a widely held idea that the contemporaneous events of Revolutionary France far surpassed the events from ancient history or allegories from classical mythology, which had become the standard of history painting. History painting was the most prestigious, respected and celebrated genre of painting in French society and the great events of the Revolution were thought to be deserving of this elevated status. While this may be true, French painters during the Revolution, in general, produced very few large-scale depictions of contemporary events. The failure of the Revolution to regenerate history painting in France was realized when the Revolution was ended by the establishment of the Consulate in 1799. By the time Napoleon declared himself Emperor in 1804 the number and quality of large-scale contemporary history paintings had increased dramatically. As one might have guessed this is largely due to the Napoleon’s propagandistic agenda and the renewed state patronage of the arts.
The question remains, why was the genre of history painting so sought after in representing the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte? This can be answered largely by two elements. First, one of the benefits of a history painting utilized as propaganda is that it’s somewhat subtle in its approach. A history painting can often stand as a work of art in its own right, as an image of a historical event that appears to be objective. Secondly, these images were devised with the intent to be shown to a wide audience at the Académie des Beaux-Arts’ Salon exhibitions in Paris. This was an audience made up of all levels of society. Large-scale history paintings were the focus of attention and excitement of the Salon audiences and therefore a popular means to depict the events that would glorify Napoleon and help to legitimize his rule. The artists working for Napoleon created the new standard of the time, and through this, elevated their status as individual artists and the prestige of their schools, tirelessly executed these contemporary history paintings, as well as official portraits. Jacques-Louis David is the artist with which this is most notable.

Jacques-Louis David (1748 – 1825), with his career spanning a period of extraordinary change, from the Enlightenment and French Revolution, to the abolition of the monarchy, Napoleonic era and the eventual return of the Bourbon Kings, was the most important French painter between 1785 and 1815. As an artist he was easily the strongest influence in the nineteenth-century French Art. David’s influence in terms of style and the representation of Napoleon artistically was far-reaching due to the School of David, a group of artists who had either trained with David in his studio or were imitators of his style. These artists, who include both Antoine-Jean Gros and Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, followed David’s stylistic tenants, and, after David decided tried out various modes of representation, they utilized his models in their own works.
As a young artist beginning his studies at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris, David is thought of as a history painter. During the revolutions, as an active involvement in the Revolution, as a Jacobin and friend of Robespierre, he became a glorifier of republican martyrs and painter of contemporary history. Just three years after the fall of Robespierre, David, like the rest of France, became entirely captivated by Napoleon Bonaparte and would devote much of his next fifteen years to painting for the Emperor. He was appointed Premier Peintre de l’Empereur in 1804 and from this exulted post he created a language of images that combine both themes from ancient history and contemporary events, influencing the new generation of Napoleonic painters.

In order to see the ways in which paintings were used for propaganda to glorify the image of Napoleon we will examine David’s *Bonaparte Crossing the St. Bernard Pass* (1800) and Gros’ *Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole* (1796). Both paintings depict Napoleon as a warrior.

In his earliest images for Napoleon, it is clear that David was attempting to glorify Napoleon’s popular military successes and glorified status as victorious general, which had resonated very well with the French people. In *Bonaparte Crossing the St. Bernard Pass* (Image 1) David was, for the first time in his career, painting a living hero in; previously he painted heroes from antiquity, or martyrs of the Revolution. David was able to draw on the virtues of a hero of antiquity, who, for him, represented integrity and should be depicted as handsome, triumphant and young. In order to connect Napoleon to those heroes who represented the Rome of his imagination, David drew upon the long-established tradition of equestrian portraiture.

As the traditional convention directs, Napoleon has total control of his horse, who, with its rider, occupies an astonishing amount of pictorial space. As the beast rears back, in a rather unstable looking slab of rock, Napoleon maintains effortless composure, recalling the earlier
equestrian portraits of those who shared his great leadership qualities. Compositionally, the animal’s forelegs are used to point the viewer’s attention to another reference that is meant to recall the heroes and leaders of antiquity; this time the connection is more overt. In the foreground of the painting, David has inscribed in the rock the names of two other transalpine conquerors, Hannibal and Karolus Magnus, or Charlemagne, placing the recent exploits of Napoleon on par with those of these leaders, elevating his successes and prestige to the same level. David has also placed Napoleon’s name above, in all capital, precise letters, the more crudely rendered names of his predecessors. This implies that the victories, and successes that Napoleon has had and will have as the First Consul and eventual Emperor of France, will surpass those of Hannibal and Charlemagne. As the recently appointed First Consul, after overthrowing the Directory on November 9, 1799, the legitimacy of Napoleon’s claim to rule is in question. With the depiction as a great leader of the past, and as a superior military commander, he is validating his position as the leader of the French people.

In addition to the references from antiquity, David also borrows classical conventions in his portrayal of Napoleon. Rather than provided an exact and realistic portrait of Napoleon, David chose to idealize his features and provided a stylized portrayal, supplying, rather than the real physiognomy of the leader, an impression of Napoleon’s grandeur to coming through. His facial expression is distant, and lacks both a presence and immediacy. His eyes are looking up, rather than out at the audience; he is not acknowledging there presence, which we will see, is very different from other portraits at the time. This detachment from the viewer historicizes the portrait, “suggesting the engagement of the hero with his destiny”; he is looking up, perhaps to the future and even greater glory he will achieve.

David has effortlessly combined the elements of antique portraiture with the dramatic moment of contemporary history to provide a glorified view of the First Consul and a very
successful piece of propaganda. It is however a portrayal that uses fact rather sparingly and provides a distorted history that aggrandizes Napoleon. Although Napoleon did cross the Alps in June of 1800 and successfully drove the Austrians out of Italy in the Battle of Marengo, the campaign was not in fact as glorious as David depicted it. Napoleon in reality, did not lead his troops across the St. Bernard pass on his noble steed; he arrived a few days after the main advance, on a mule that was led by a peasant. Although David has depicted Napoleon to be in complete control of his noble beast and therefore in control over all elements of the campaign, the battle was nearly a total annihilation of the French troops. This was largely due to blunders on the part of Napoleon, who at one point declared that the battle “seemed hopeless”. David’s ability to slant the events in a way that provided Napoleon with a portrait that made his role as military leader seem all the more important and his skill as commander rivaling those of great figures of history. We will see both the exaggeration of events and the comparison to Charlemagne appear again in other works by David and in those of his pupils.

In terms of its qualification as a history painting, *Napoleon Crossing the St. Bernard* shares certain elements, but it also includes those that are not typical in history paintings. It is considered a history painting due to its focus on a single action, its hero’s feats being compared to those of historical figures, and the depiction of the hero having a calm expression, harkening back to the heroes of antiquity. The details of everyday life, which are most notably in this case, the figures lugging military equipments in the background, are not typical of many history paintings. These details bring to mind the realities of how Bonaparte’s glorification was made possible, but the focus remains on the heroic military general. Napoleon is removed from the world of ordinary men and appears as more of a figure from antiquity with his idealized appearance and ability to control his steed.
One of the most talented of David’s students Antoine-Jean Gros (1771 – 1835) was another key figure in French painting, working throughout the Empire as a major practitioner of battle paintings and portraits. He was the recipient of more large-scale contemporary history paintings than any other Napoleonic painter due to his ability to create paintings that were fine art and propaganda simultaneously. Gros was the artist who the Napoleonic regime chose for their propaganda efforts and therefore is integral to the discussion of art as propaganda under Napoleon.

Gros painted the portrait *Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole* (Image 2) to commemorate the November 15, 1796 charge to battle. This event that soon became a cornerstone of Napoleonic legend, but as we have seen from David’s *Napoleon Crossing the St. Bernard*, Napoleonic propaganda can often be liberal with the accuracy of events depicted. Although Napoleon claimed to have successfully directed his troops across the bridge on that day, first hand accounts of the attempted crossing of the bridge at Arcole present a very different picture. According to these reports, Napoleon’s attempt to lead the charge was stopped before it even made it to the bridge. In fact, retreating French troops knocked Napoleon of his horse and into a nearby ditch; he promptly left to change out of his muddy clothes. It took another two days of fighting for the troops to actually make it across the bridge. Although this may be the reality of the battle, the ways in which Gros depicted Napoleon give the impression of a decisive military action and a strong military presence.

Most noticeable when first looking at *Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole* is the sense of movement that differs from other portraits. Conventional military portraiture frequently has the subject engaged in relatively little to no action, but Gros has depicted Napoleon in the right on the brink of a battle, grabbing hold of the flag with the emblem of the French nation, and spurring his men into courageous action. He is not looking at the enemy, but back towards his
own men; he is confident in his strategy and eventual victory.\textsuperscript{xxiii} The sense of movement is largely due the painterly brushstrokes that Gros utilized, especially in the drapery of the flag and the general’s hair. This movement seems to foreshadow the Romantic painting to come and is in direct opposition to the preferred style and practices of Gros’ mentor David, who was adamant that brushstrokes should not be seen.\textsuperscript{xxiv} Gros’ composition is however redolent of those which David painted; it is concise, reasoned image, with all the “resonance of allegory”.\textsuperscript{xxv} Overall, the painting is not a conventional portrait but more a history painting because of single, decisive moment and heroism exhibited by Napoleon that is the sole focus of the viewer’s attention. By experimenting with the standards of portraiture, drawing influence from military portraiture while creating subtle innovations, Gros has presented Napoleon as a heroic general, in the midst of battle, giving the impression that what was, in reality, a military disaster, was one of the greatest military triumphs.

As we have seen in the works of David and Gros, artist under Napoleonic rule devoted a great deal to time to providing Napoleon with images that eulogized his military achievements, even if their representations were a majority of the time less than factual. They were also charged with boldly presenting even disastrous campaigns and events as victorious. Two additional history paintings by Gros, \textit{Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa} (1804) and \textit{The Battle of Eylau} (1808), utilized these same approaches. Both depict military campaigns that had somewhat disastrous outcomes and were commissioned by Napoleon to counter rumors that were circulating in France.

Gros’ \textit{Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa} (Image 3) was commissioned by Napoleon to commemorate an event from the Egyptian campaign (1798-1801). In an effort to cut England off from India, its main colonial holding, and to protect French trade interests, French military forces invaded Egypt. On March 7, 1799, French troops launched an attack on
the Jaffa, just south of modern day Tel Aviv. After the siege of Jaffa, that left 2,000 Ottoman soldiers and countless civilians dead, a large number of French soldiers were struck down with an outbreak of Bubonic plague.\textsuperscript{xxvi} Due to this epidemic, combined with many military failures and low troop moral, it is not surprising that Napoleon soon was forced retreat. With a number of his men sick with plague, Napoleon is said to have given orders for those men who were sick but still alive to be poisoned in an effort to avoid evacuating them. A few survivors of the poisoning lived long enough to tell of Napoleon’s actions to the British when they arrived in Jaffa days later. The story was widely circulated throughout the British press, and eventually made its way to France.\textsuperscript{xxvii}

The expedition was largely a disaster due to the large number or lives lost, but also because the events became the crux of the anti-Napoleonic sentiments. It is therefore surprising that “to this day the Egyptian campaign remains one of the most celebrated and captivating episodes in the Napoleonic legend”.\textsuperscript{xxviii} Clearly, the propaganda surrounding the events at Jaffa, combined with efforts to focus on the cultural enrichment during the Egyptian campaign, were incredibly successful, so much so, that the most disastrous event of the entire campaign was turned into a positive portrayal and successful piece of propaganda for Napoleon.

In his painting Gros has transformed what was a makeshift hospital into an exotic local with an orientalized setting. He depicts Napoleon paying a visit to some of the plague-stricken soldiers. As panic spread among the troops, Napoleon thought it was imperative to raise the morale of the men. He decided show that the disease was not contagious by fearlessly exposing himself to the illness. Despite the other who are with Napoleon, looking slyly to towards the exit, and motioning that they should leave, Napoleon reaches out to touch the lacerated bubo on a victim.\textsuperscript{xxix} This is largely done to demonstrate that there is no fear of contagion, but through Gros’ depiction there are much more important implications. Gros has depicted Napoleon as a
calm, composed and heroic amid the terror of the plague. His hand is extended towards one of the victims, bestowing a divine touch akin to the Kings and saints who healed by touch. This exemplifies his benevolence, and portrays him as someone who has the miraculous power to heal such that was attributed to the monarchs since the Middle Ages, who were legitimized by divine right. Painted in 1804, as founder of the empire, this painting was part of a program to justify his rule and rationalize his authority; he is associated with the legend of the kings, granting him the status of a savior.

Depicting what is probably the most inglorious episode of the Egyptian campaign, Gros was clearly attempting to counter the negative rumors about Napoleon’s conduct. *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa* was not only a successful piece of propaganda, but it also firmly established large-scale contemporary history paintings as viable means of propaganda, while also launching Gros as a leading figure in large-scale paintings into propaganda. Gros transformed Napoleon into a compassionate leader who was invested in the well being of his soldier and the French people, and repeats this program of idealization in *The Battle of Eylau*.

*The Battle of Eylau* (Image 4) was Gros last great large-scale canvas and the most gruesome representations of war painted under the Napoleonic regime. Dominating the foreground of the painting enormous frozen corpses, nearly twice life size, which seem to spill out into the viewer’s space. Napoleon is clearly the subject of the image, on horseback in the center of the image, performing the humanitarian duty of comforting the wounded and dying. All eyes are on him. Napoleon’s arm is extended in a gesture of benediction and also the salute of a military leader. It is therefore an indication of both power, as well a mercy and compassion. His eyes are raised in a gesture that suggests compassion and prompts the viewer to respond with sympathy to the fallen. In the background are smoldering buildings and destroyed land, those things that are less important than the lives lost, but are the affects of war.
The Battle of Eylau was the closest thing to defeat that Napoleon had experienced since his rise to power in 1799. The French troops had been relentlessly fighting the Russians in rural Poland for months, but the battle fought on February 7 and 8, 1807 stands apart as “one of the bloodiest and most futile episodes of the Napoleonic Wars.” After a surprise attack by the Russian forces and fourteen brutal hours of battle in a snowstorm, Napoleon began to consider retreating. By chance however the Russians withdrew and Napoleon claimed victory. Although it is unsure, it is estimated that between 15,000 and 30,000 French soldiers were killed.

Gros’ image is not portraying the action of the battle itself, but the morning after the battle. This indicates that Napoleon, having possession of the field, was the victor, but also shifts attention away from the battle itself to the moment in which the Emperor arrives to bring help and solace to those who fought. This subject was chosen because the French people had begun to feel as though peace would never be achieved under Napoleonic rule, largely because there had been almost continuous military action since Napoleon became First Consul. To reassure those at home, Gros was commissioned to create an image of Napoleon acting as the Prince of Peace. Gros’ Battle of Eylau seems to speak directly to the negative public opinion, demonstrating the destructive aspects and outcomes of war. It deplores the horror of war in order to appeal to the popular opinion and shift Napoleon’s role from that of heroic warrior to compassionate leader, who is equally affected by and concerned about the costs of war.

Those who had lived through the hell of the French Revolution were in need of a leader, and Napoleon intended to fulfill that void, establishing himself as Emperor of the French in 1804. To accompany his new regime, a new set of symbols was needed; symbols that erased the images of the public executions and reestablished peace in France. Napoleon looked to imagery
and symbols from the past as the basis of legitimacy and to establish his authority on the different ancestor link than the Bourbon Kings before him: Imperial Rome.

Although antique virtues had been the model for some Revolutionary ideals, most notably the image of liberty, the Napoleonic regime needed to choose symbols that could be read in a different way and express other antique virtues. In the wake of the Revolution, material objects from past governments became the basis for the new regime’s authority. These items were collected and displayed to aid in legitimizing Napoleon’s claims to the imperial throne. Connected to historically significant figures and taking on the status of relics, the burgeoning ruler used these material objects to promote parallels to Roman Empire and the Carolingian dynasty. Rather than claiming his legitimacy through divine right, Napoleon operated on a more self-legitimating logic, associating himself with those people and deities who he felt were his equals. Not only was Charlemagne one of the greatest French kings, but a military leader of unprecedented accomplishments. Napoleon desperately wanted to be associated with Charlemagne and seen also as the descendants of the gods, specifically Mars, the Roman god of war, and Jupiter, the kings of the gods. It is no surprise then that the icon that became the most famous throughout that Napoleonic regime was the eagle, simultaneously referring to the Roman legions, Jupiter, and Charlemagne. The eagle figures prominently in the portraits of Napoleon after he had become Emperor in 1804. This period is largely characterized by grand portraits and paintings of imperial ceremonies used to counter the insecurities of the new government.

Three years after David painted Bonaparte Crossing the St. Bernard Pass (1800), Napoleon Bonaparte became the Emperor of the French. David was asked to commemorate the coronation of Napoleon and his wife Josephine on December 2, 1804. Napoleon’s court, having become increasingly more monarchical in nature, had concerns about the new court’s resemblance to the old regime and the public’s reaction to the return of, what appeared to be,
dictatorship. Napoleon decided to hold his coronation in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris instead of being crowned at Rheims Cathedral were the Bourbon kings traditionally held their coronations. The coronation ceremony itself was of extreme importance to the legitimization of the Napoleonic Empire and the government commissioning such a work from David was an extraordinary amount of pressure. A great deal of consideration was needed on the part of David in order to select the proper way in which to depict the ceremony that would flatter Napoleon and provide the legitimacy to his rule. Prior to Napoleon’s rule, grand-scale depictions of coronation ceremonies were rare, meaning that David was without models.

David’s The Coronation of Napoleon (Image 5) is a monumental painting – it is roughly 20 feet by 32 feet. He has filled this event of contemporary history with all the appropriate symbols and signs of imperial inauguration. As we saw earlier in David’s program of propaganda, Napoleon was very keen on the idea of being linked to the Carolingian Empire. It was very important to Napoleon that he was seen, not as an extension of the Bourbon dynasty, for obvious reasons, but rather the modern equivalent of emperor Charlemagne. In order to do this, Napoleon chose symbols that recalled both ancient imperial Rome and Charlemagne. He ordered for this coronation the laurel leaf crown, recalling those worn by the Caesars of Rome, and sword, scepter and orbs all to have been recreations or the actual ones used by Charlemagne. These were paired with Napoleon’s own emblem on the crimson coronation robes worn by both Napoleon and Josephine. This emblem is made up of bees and eagles, interlaces branches of laurel, olive and oaks encircling the letter “N”. The wealth of insignia and emblems borrowed from history and mythology create an inventory of symbolism the makes the power and prestige of Napoleon visible to the masses.

In another effort to recall and draw on the example of Charlemagne, was the presence of the Pope. In 800 C.E. the Pope anointed Charlemagne, founding his Empire. In an effort to
follow in the historical precedent set by Charlemagne and to force international recognition of his own imperial ambition, Napoleon was insistent that Pope Pius VII preside over the ceremony. This intention was overshadowed however by the actions that occurred during the coronation ceremony. Not wanting to “appear subservient or reliant on the authority of the Church”, Napoleon took the laurel crown out of the hands of the Pope, and placed it on top of his own head. He then turned and crowned Josephine as the Empress of the French. For David, the actions of the coronation presented a problem.

It would seem rather obvious that the most important moment would be the moment Napoleon is crowned Emperor and therefore the one that should be commemorated in David’s painting. It is the case however, especially with the events of the Revolution fresh in everyone’s minds, the act of self-crowning on the part of Napoleon had the unwanted implication of usurpation. Originally, David’s intention was to paint the moment in which Napoleon boldly placed the crown upon his head, but after completing preliminary sketches he transformed the scene to show Napoleon crowning Josephine. By doing so, David was attempting to elicit complacency and passivity on the part of the viewer and render “lass apprehensible the brazen act of self-coronation.” The depiction of Josephine gives the impression of the return of patriarchal authority through the submissive response of Josephine; this idea of submission and acceptance of Napoleon’s rule is central to the painting’s mission. Josephine is seen kneeling in front of Napoleon with her hands clasped and head bowed in obedience. His weight is shifted forwards, eyes cast downward towards her. David has presented a less dramatic version of Napoleon than in his previous paintings, soliciting a softer sentiment. Napoleon and Josephine still remain idealized, while those surrounding them are easily recognizable. David is clearly playing on the emotions of the viewer by showing Josephine playing the role of the French
citizens, obedient, subservient and reliant on the Emperor. This is a decisive shift from the earlier images of Napoleon as the courageous military leader and warrior.

Visible through the immense number of copies of commissions painted by artists, the state portrait, the traditional image of legitimacy for a ruler, was omnipresent throughout the Napoleonic era. Although Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780 – 1867) entirely reworked the conventions, his *Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne* (1806) is by and large a state portrait.

Ingres was another pupil of Jacques-Louis David who was active during the Napoleonic era. Through his training in the French neoclassical school, Ingres was a devoted classicist, combining modern events and figures and classical motifs.

Painted at the beginning of his career, *Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne* (Image 6) is an aggrandized portrait of Napoleon enthroned. Ingres has shown Napoleon, much like David in his *Coronation of Napoleon* in his coronation robes, with all the elements of dynastic rule: the sword and crown of Charlemagne.

In addition to referencing classical sources, Ingres has also incorporated some astrological elements to support Emperor Napoleon’s rise to power. Leading up the steps to Napoleon’s throne, are carpeted steps. The carpet reaches the base of the throne, presenting the image of the Imperial eagle, and with a perimeter of zodiac medallions. The eagle, as we have seen, harkens back to Imperial Rome, Jupiter and Charlemagne. At the right of the painting are
the astrological signs Pisces and Taurus, with Scorpio, Libra and Virgo on the reverse side. Scorpio, at the bottom of the throne, refers to the Coup of November 9, 1799 the event that brought Napoleon to power. Taurus refers to the date of his proclamation as Emperor on May 14, 1804. As firm believer in the destiny of the stars, Napoleon was no doubt happy with this depiction of himself as a Roman god, as well as the reference to the astrological signs that affirm his rule was “written in the stars”.

Ingres had utilized these sources to convey omniscience and supremacy.

It is clear from this collection of images that Napoleon’s image has shifted mirroring the evolution of his governmental role. The artists are addressing the problems faced by the legitimacy of his rule and largely look to classical sources as a way to supply Napoleon with the necessary claims to the throne. It is clear that the priorities of the artists have shifted from military painting, which began to diminish as public support of military action declined, to images of grandeur and imperial splendor. Art as propaganda under Napoleon would make one more shift before he was removed from power: the bureaucrat.

David’s Napoleon in his Study (Image 7) marks a decidedly more humanistic approach to the portrayal of Napoleon. Largely due to the weakening military position of France, and the looming war with Russia, David shifts the portrayal of Napoleon from decisive military leader and dominate sovereign, to the concerned statesman. It should be noted that Napoleon’s actions on the battlefields were the remained the foundation of propaganda efforts, but this separate ideology had begun to appear, gaining favor with government officials.

Napoleon in His Study is a full-length portrait of Napoleon in the act of leaving his study. He has worked through the night, as indicated by the clock reading 4:13 am and the candles that have burnt low and are now flickering. At the right of the image, on to of the table, is a scattered
roll of papers with the word “Code” written along the top sheet; these papers are a copy of the Napoleonic Code. The audience is meant to understand the their Emperor has been tirelessly working for the good of his citizens. On the chair next to his papers in Napoleon’s sword, representing the work he will be carrying out during the day. Napoleon’s military dress and medals, and the presence of the quill on the edge on the desk further emphasize this contradiction; Napoleon is both military leader and public official.\textsuperscript{lxii}

What is most interesting about this portrait is the way that David has portrayed Napoleon in a rather unflattering light. The physical idealization of earlier portraits of Napoleon is absent. Instead his is stooped with a thickened waist, thinning hair, pasty skin and puffy cheeks.\textsuperscript{lxii} His stockings are rumpled, and the snuffbox with the tobacco he used to stay awake is in his left hand. Napoleon is however, dominating the pictorial space. He appears to be confined by his furnishings: the chair forms a powerful diagonal that seems to corner him against his desk, locking him into his work.\textsuperscript{lxiii} This legislative side of Napoleon’s rule was utilized to establish a sense of permanence that the previous images of Napoleon as dominating military leader could not sustain. As the head of state Napoleon’s duties became more than just military ones.\textsuperscript{lxiv} David has, in a sense, revived the traditional image of the ruler to provide a broader view of Napoleon and his rule.

As we have seen Napoleon, in order to confirm his legacy, created a strict program of representation and censorship that promulgated the myth of his successes. Similar to his Bourbon predecessors, Napoleon sought to display himself as the destined and rightful leader of the French people. For the artists working under Napoleon, the challenges they faced in painting these works were enormous. This was largely due to the issues that the French Revolution’s attack on the monarchy brought to the portrayal of rulers. Artists during this time
came up with solutions that were happily accepted by Napoleon. The most common way in which they did this was by connecting Napoleon’s rule to that of great historical figures of the past, namely Charlemagne and the Emperors of Imperial Rome. By utilizing historical objects of that person, or symbols that were commonly associated with them, Napoleon’s artists were visually connecting Napoleon to the heroes from antiquity, implying the greatness of Napoleon as military and national leader. Additionally, for a majority of his rule, Napoleon’s artists painted him in a similar manner as those heroes of the past; he was almost always idealized and frequently shown on horseback.

The works of David, Gros and Ingres remain some of the most iconic of Napoleon’s program and are the most significant examples of the ways in which artists dealt with post-Revolutionary perceptions of ruling powers as well as the ways in which the images of Napoleon changed thorough his short reign, from heroic military general and powerful sovereign, to compassionate leader and intellectual. They effectively shaped public opinion, turning what were frequently near losses into sweeping military triumphs. It was under Napoleon’s rule that high art and state propaganda where fused together to in the form of contemporary history paintings. The history painting garnered support for his actions and glorified his successes. It is through these means that Napoleon’s artists created that myth of Napoleonic rule that still pervades today.
Image 1: JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID, *Bonaparte Crossing the St. Bernard Pass*, 1800-1801. Oil on Canvas, 8ft. 6 ½ in. x 7 ft. 3 in.


Image 2: ANTOINE-JEAN GROS, *Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole*, 1796. Oil on Canvas, 2 ft. 4 ¾ in. × 1 ft. 11 ¼ in.

Image 3: ANTOINE-JEAN GROS, *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims at Jaffa*, 1804. Oil on Canvas, 17 ft. 2 in. x 23 ft. 5½ in.


Image 4: ANTOINE-JEAN GROS, *The Battle of Eylau*, 1808. Oil on Canvas, 17 ft. 1 ¼ in. x 25 ft. 8 ½ in.

Image 5: JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID, The Coronation of Napoleon, 1805-1808. Oil on Canvas, 20 ft. 8 in. x 32 ft. 1 in.

(Philippe Bordes, Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 94.)
Image 6: **JEAN AUGUSTE DOMINIQUE INGRES**, *Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne*, 1806. Oil on Canvas, 8 ft. 6 in. x 5 ft. 3 3/4 in.

(Todd Porterfield and Susan L. Siegfried, *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres and David*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006) 36.)

Image 7: **JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID**, *Napoleon in His Study*, 1811-12. Oil on Canvas, 6 ft. 8 1/4 in. x 4 ft. 1 1/4 in.


xxxvi Ibid.,155.
xxxvii Ibid.,161.
xlii Ibid., 134.
xliii Todd Porterfield and Susan L. Siegfried, Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres and David. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 173.
xlv Todd Porterfield and Susan L. Siegfried, Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres and David. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 5-6.
xlvii Ibid., 240.
xlviii Ibid., 241.
xlix Todd Porterfield and Susan L. Siegfried, Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres and David. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 7.
lii Todd Porterfield and Susan L. Siegfried, Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres and David. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 129.
liii Ibid., 160.
liv Ibid., 131.
lv Ibid., 6.
lvi Ibid., 177.
lviii Ibid., 52.
l.ix Ibid., 54.
lxiii Ibid., 54.
lxiv Todd Porterfield and Susan L. Siegfried, Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres and David. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 17.
Works Cited


