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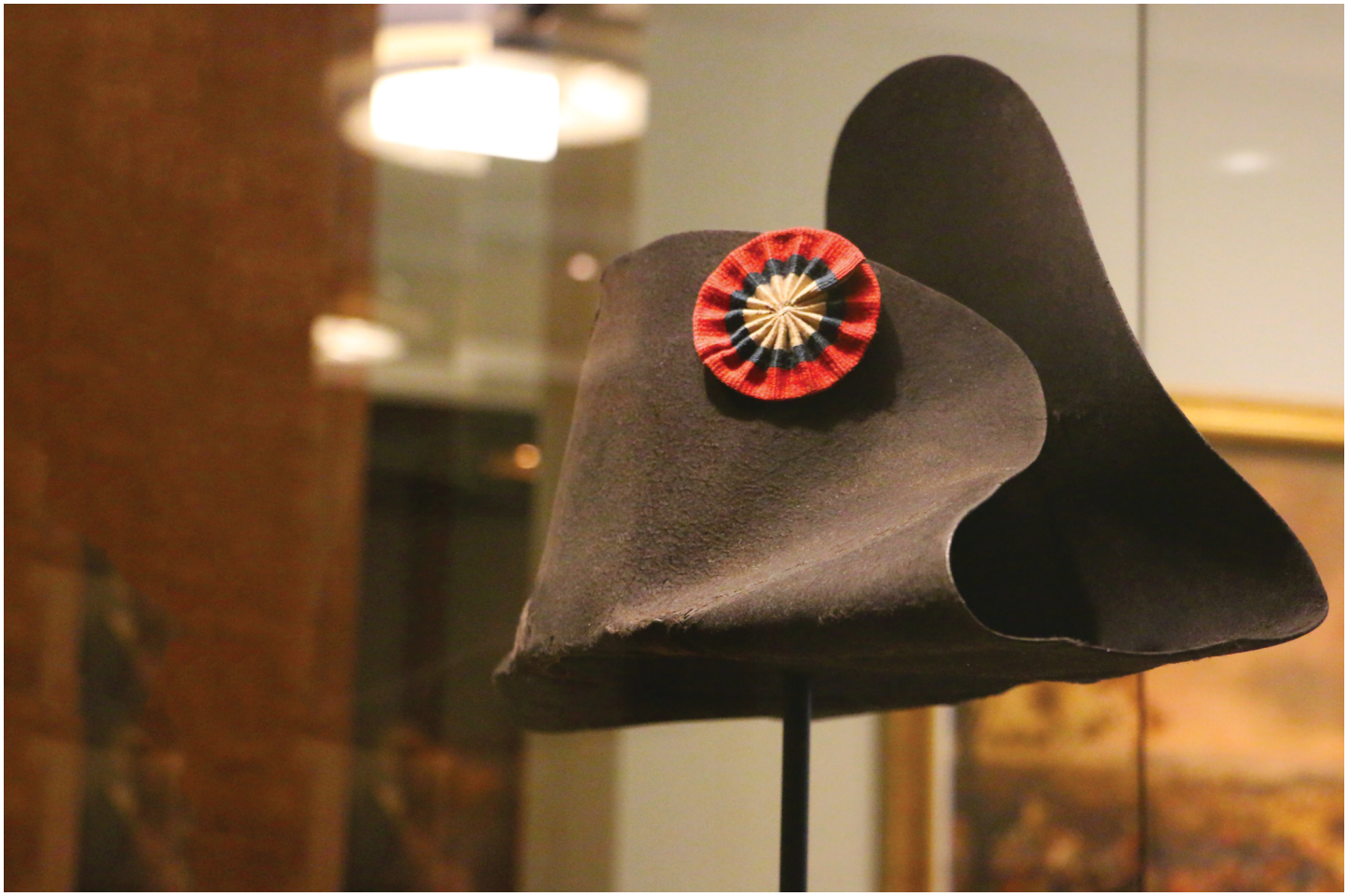
Napoleonic paintings



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Introduction

If you visit the Louvre museum in Paris and choose the route leading to the Denon wing, you will find on the first floor two vast galleries, the Daru room and the Mollien room, devoted to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French painting. Although they also contain many comparatively small works, notably portraits, these galleries are dominated by colossal pictures depicting historical and mythological subjects. Many of the images that we will be discussing in this course belong to this genre. At the time, '**history painting**' (as it is generally known) constituted by far the most prestigious **genre of painting** for two principal reasons. First, it was considered to be far more demanding than the so-called lower genres (portraiture, landscape, still life, etc.): not only did the history painter have to work out a large-scale composition involving the human figure, but he was also expected to represent nature in its ideal forms rather than merely copying the familiar appearance of things, like artists who practised the lower genres. (The masculine pronoun is deliberate. It was extremely difficult for women to become history painters. Female students were not admitted to the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. The core of its tuition was the life class, which involved drawing from the naked (male) model, so women were excluded on grounds of modesty.)

Second, the subject matter of history paintings was considered to be much more significant than that of the lower genres, on account both of the exalted status of the gods and heroes who were depicted in them and of the elevating moral messages that they offered to the viewer. At least, this was the theory; the practice was often rather different, as we will see from considering examples produced during the Napoleonic era. This was increasingly to be the case as the nineteenth century progressed.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- analyse paintings centred on the human figure in terms of how a work's form and content together produce its meaning
- explain how and why French painting came to be used and controlled by the Napoleonic regime
- discuss the problems of interpretation raised by Gros's Napoleonic paintings
- locate Napoleonic painting within the broad shift from Neoclassicism to Romanticism in French art.

1 Paintings at the Louvre

1.1 The state as patron

Most of the history paintings in the Daru and Mollien rooms have been in the Louvre, a royal palace that was turned into a museum in 1793, since the nineteenth century. Many of them were commissioned by the French state, which has a long tradition of promoting the arts for the sake of the personal glory of the ruler and the prestige of the nation as a whole. Many of the others were acquired by the state after being shown at the **Salon**, the public exhibition held at the Louvre every year or two during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (named after the room in which it was held the *salon carre*). Works of art that had been commissioned by the state would also be exhibited in the Salon, so that the public could see the results of official patronage. Free entry attracted huge crowds and meant that the Salon audience was socially pretty diverse (see Figure 1). These institutional factors played a decisive role in shaping the very nature of French art during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The huge history paintings on display today in the Daru and Mollien rooms would not have come into existence without the state as actual patron or potential buyer: they are mostly too large to go anywhere but a museum or other public building. Moreover, the knowledge that his painting was going to be exhibited at the Salon meant that an artist would be conscious of the need for eyecatching effects in order to compete with all the other paintings hanging on the walls for the attention of the public. It is important to keep these points in mind when analysing French paintings of this period.

Figure 1 Monsaldy and Devisme, *View of the Salon, 1799*, engraving, Bibliotheque nationale de France, Paris

Click to view a larger version of Figure 1, View of the Salon, 1799.

Between them, these galleries allow visitors to trace the chronological development of French painting from **Neoclassicism** (the term applied to late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century painting in the classical style) in the Daru room to Romanticism in the Mollien room. We can gain some sense of the changes between NeoClassicism and Romanticism by means of a comparison between a history painting by Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), the principal exponent of Neoclassicism, and one by Eugene Delacroix (1798–1863), the leading French Romantic painter. David's *Oath of the Horatii*, exhibited in the Salon of 1785 (see Plate 1), depicts an example of patriotic virtue from ancient Roman history with great clarity and simplicity. The statue-like figures stand out against a dark background, the setting is a plain box-like space, the colour range is limited and the paint surface smooth, almost photographic (though it should be noted that this effect is heightened by the fact that what you are looking at is, in fact, a photograph). By contrast, Delacroix's *Massacres of Chios*, exhibited in the Salon of 1824 (see Plate 2), depicts an episode from the Greek War of Independence, which was going on at the time. It has a vertical rather than a horizontal format, which means that the figures are crowded into a narrow foreground in a somewhat confusing way. Rather than being strong and heroic, like the main figures in David's painting, they are the helpless victims of Turkish oppression. Behind them, the open landscape appears very much as a flat backdrop. Despite its grim subject, the painting has a certain picturesque appeal, thanks to the exotic costumes, light tonality, vivid colours and loose handling of paint. Overall, it can be said that this work retains the ambitions of a history painting but breaks with the aesthetic and moral idealism traditionally expected of the genre.

Click to see plate 1 Jacques-Louis David, The Oath of the Horatii, oil on canvas, 329.9 x 428.8 cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Click to see plate 2 Eugène Delacroix, Massacres of Chios, 1824, oil on canvas, 417.2 x 354 cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

A key figure in French painting between David and Delacroix is Antoine-Jean Gros (1771–1835), whose two most famous works, *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken of Jaffa* (1804) and *Napoleon Visiting the Field of the Battle of Eylau* (1808), now hang in the Mollien room (Plates 3 and 4). A former pupil of David, Gros turned to the depiction of current political and military events in a lively, colouristic fashion in response to the propaganda demands of the Napoleonic regime. For Delacroix, Gros's work represented a dazzling achievement that he aspired to emulate, and, as a young man who came of age after the fall of the empire, he envied the older artist for having lived in an era of spectacular military exploits. In 1824 he wrote: 'the life of Napoleon is the epic of our century for all the arts' (Delacroix, 1938, p.78). *Jaffa* and *Eylau* continue to be admired today as pioneering examples of the Romantic style and, as such, are distinguished from most other Napoleonic propaganda painting, which seems conventional and uninspired by comparison. It has been argued that they 'enshrine not only Napoleon's heroism but also Gros's misgivings' and thus introduce 'an element of fundamental personal doubt' into French history painting (Brookner, 1980, p.161), despite the fact that there exists no written evidence to suggest that the artist was at all disillusioned with Napoleon. Underlying this statement is the assumption that a great work of art must be the independent creation of an autonomous genius and cannot simply have been painted according to official dictates. This conception of artistic creation as self-expression in fact crystallized during the period that we are considering, and is one of the defining features of Romanticism as a broad cultural movement.

Click to see plate 3 Antoine-Jean Gros, Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken of Jaffa, 1804, oil on canvas, 532.1 x 720cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Click to see plate 4 Antoine-Jean Gros, Napoleon Visiting the Field of the Battle of Eylau, 1808, oil on canvas, 521 x 784 cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

In this course we examine a range of Napoleonic imagery by David, Gros and a number of other artists. We begin with relatively simple single-figure portraits and moving on to elaborate narrative compositions such as *Jaffa* and *Eylau* As you saw in the introduction to the course, we have three key aims.

1. The first is to develop your skills of visual analysis and to show how a painting's form and content together produce its meaning. In doing so, we illuminate the broad cultural shift from the Enlightenment to Romanticism as it played out in Napoleonic painting.
2. The second aim is to examine the relationship between art and politics. We will examine how painting came to be used and controlled by the Napoleonic regime for propaganda purposes. As you will see, the fundamental problem driving Napoleonic propaganda was one of political legitimation: how to provide ideological justification for a leader who had seized power and whose rule rested ultimately on force.
3. The third aim is to introduce you to some of the complex issues that are involved in interpreting works of art, with particular reference to Gros's best-known Napoleonic paintings. What makes it difficult to view *Jaffa* and *Eylau* as straightforwardly propagandist works is their depiction of suffering and death, which seems to evoke the costs rather than the benefits of Napoleon's rule. Rather than trying to account for the horrific elements in the paintings in terms of a hypothesis about the artist's intentions (that is, Gros's supposed doubts), we will relate them to the fundamental stresses and contradictions of the regime.

2 The portrait of Napoleon

2.1 The general

Even early on, when he was a brilliant young general winning battles in Italy, Napoleon was already well aware of the value of images in promoting his career. It was not only owing to his own initiative that he had his portrait painted at this stage, but also because it was advantageous for an artist to be associated with a national hero. Gros, who had gone to Italy to pursue his studies as a history painter but found himself practising portraiture out of financial necessity, got himself introduced to Bonaparte's wife, Josephine, in 1796 ‘in the sole hope of getting to do the portrait of the general’ (quoted in O'Brien, 1995, p.653). In the resulting painting, *General Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole* (1797), he is shown leading a charge across a bridge (see Plate 5). More famous than the actual painting, however, is the sketch for it, in which the loose brushwork enhances the overall dynamism of the image (see Plate 6). But even in the finished work there is a strong sense of movement that distinguishes it from the long-established tradition of military portraiture, which Gros took as his starting point, a tradition exemplified by Hyacinthe Rigaud's portraits of commanders (see Plate 5).

Click to see plate 5 Antoine-Jean Gros, General Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole, 1797, oil on canvas, 130 x 94 cm, Musée National du Château, Versailles. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Click to see plate 6 Antoine-Jean Gros Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole, 1796, oil sketch, 72 x 59 cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Click to see plate 7 Hyacinthe Rigaud, Marshal Charles-Auguste de Matignon

Exercise

Compare Gros's portrait of Bonaparte (Plate 5) to Rigaud's of a French marshal (Plate 7). In what ways does Gros follow the model provided by Rigaud, and how does he alter it in order to convey a greater sense of movement? Consider, in particular, the type of portrait (full-length, half-length, etc.), the setting of the scene and the sitter's pose.

Like Rigaud, Gros employs a three-quarter-length format, showing his sitter from just below the knees upwards, and with a battle going on in the background (though the battle is more implied than evident in the later work). However, the poses of each figure are very different. The marshal painted by Rigaud is not engaged in action but faces calmly frontwards, one hand resting on his sword hilt and the other gesturing towards the battle with his marshal's baton as a demonstration of his leadership. By contrast, Gros shows Bonaparte in the thick of battle, striding ahead while simultaneously looking back to rally his troops on. The twist in his body (torso facing to the right, head to the left) serves to animate the whole image. In addition, the waving flag that he holds aloft and his outstretched sword are both cut off at the edge of the picture, producing a sense that what we are seeing is a fleeting snapshot of an actual moment.

The overall result is a painting that is not a conventional portrait but has something of the character of a history painting, in so far as it depicts a decisive moment of military action. In fact, the event depicted by Gros was nothing of the kind since, although Bonaparte claimed to have successfully led a charge at Arcole, it actually took two more days' fighting before the French could cross the bridge. The story is typical of the way that Napoleon embroidered the truth for propaganda purposes throughout his career. His awareness of the value of good publicity is also evident from the fact that he paid to have Gros's portrait engraved (see Plate 8), thereby ensuring that it would reach a wide audience. The image that it conveys is of a brave commander who, by his example, inspires his men to follow him. Since he does not bother to look at the enemy, it is as if he knows his strategy in advance and is completely confident of victory. As such, he can be identified as a hero, a term which should be understood to mean a very particular kind of person who is certainly exceptional but perhaps not entirely admirable. This becomes apparent from the definition of 'hero' in the *Encyclopédie*, the great work of reference which embodies the rational, public-spirited and humanitarian ideals of the Enlightenment.

Click to see plate 8 Thomas Piroli, after Gros, General Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole, 1797, etching with aquatint, 72 x 59 cm, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

2.2 Hero or great man?

Exercise

Read the following passage from the *Encydopédie* article 'Hero', considering what qualities identify the hero as opposed to the great man. Which type of man seems to owe more to innate talent and genius? Which type of man can be identified with enlightened ideals?

> A hero is defined as a man steadfast in difficulties, intrepid in peril and very valiant in combat; these qualities are linked more to temperament and to a certain configuration of the organs than to nobility of spirit. The great man is something very different -he joins the majority of moral virtues to talent and genius; he has only lofty and noble motives for his behaviour … The title of *hero* depends upon success, that of the great man does not always depend upon it. His principle is virtue which is as unshakeable in prosperity as in misfortune.
>
> In short, humanity, gentleness and patriotism conjoined to talent constitute the virtues of the great man; bravura, courage, often temerity, knowledge of the art of war and military genius characterize to a greater extent the hero.
>
> (Quoted in Johnson, 1993, p. 76)

The hero is above all a military figure; his principal quality is bravery in action, whereas the qualities of the great man are internal, moral ones. Whereas the qualities of the hero are part of his physical make-up and are simply what comes naturally to him, those of the great man seem to come from reflection and to provide him with a sense of direction. The hero is said to have military genius, which presumably means an innate instinct for what will work on the battlefield, while the great man is said to have moral virtues in addition to talent and genius. The implication seems to be that he has everything that the hero has and more – and also perhaps that he can claim more credit for his actions because they do not simply come naturally but require self-discipline, a striving after what is right.

The statement that the title of hero depends on success also suggests an element of chance and luck in the matter. By contrast, the great man is admirable because he sticks to his principles no matter what he goes through. Furthermore, since his virtues include 'humanity, gentleness and patriotism', it is clear that his superiority rests above all in his concern for other people. In this respect, as well as in his thoughtfulness, he can be seen to embody the ideals of the Enlightenment; as such, it is not surprising that the *Encyclopédie* should have presented him as more admirable. By comparison, the hero seems a rather problematic character, acting merely out of instinct and not obviously benefiting other people.

This text sheds light on the enlightened values that underlie Neoclassical art and helps reveal the ways in which Napoleonic portraiture departs from them. In the later eighteenth century, the commemoration of great men came to be considered one of art's principal functions; the aim was to inspire the viewer to emulate their virtuous, patriotic spirit. From 1775 onwards, the arts administration of the monarchy commissioned a series of statues of the great men of France, which only came to a halt with the Revolution. The cult of the great man culminated in the Revolution with the creation of the Pantheon in 1791. Among those subsequently buried there was the revolutionary journalist Marat, assassinated in 1793, whom David commemorated shortly afterwards in a famous painting; it can be seen to embody the enlightened ideal of the great man, whose virtuous life found its culmination in a noble death (see Plate 9). David shows Marat at the moment of his death, slumped back in the bath in which he sat to soothe a skin disease, his pen still in his hand. The closed eyes, the light falling from above, the simple composition made up largely of horizontal and vertical lines, and the empty space above the figure together create a mood of great serenity, which implies that, just as he served his country in life with his pen, so he is glad to die for it. That Marat was a truly enlightened great man, humane as well as patriotic, is indicated by the note on the box that he has frugally been using as a table; it is a request for charity to a widow and her children, suggesting that he is a father to the poor. (In fact, Marat was a deeply controversial political figure, as widely reviled as revered.)

Click to see plate 9 Jacques-Louis David, The Death of Marat, 1793, oil on canvas, 160.7 x 124.8cm, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Bel

As a posthumous portrait of a civilian, David's *The Death of Marat* is a very different type of image from Gros's *Bonaparte at Arcole*, which serves to promote the military career of a man who was not only very much alive but even (so the image suggests) invincible. Nevertheless, the contrast between the two paintings can help to elucidate the distinctive features of the Napoleonic image. First, whereas David universalizes his scene by depicting Marat naked and idealizing his notorious ugly face and diseased body – thereby turning him into a timeless, almost classical figure – the uniform and flag in Gros's painting locate the scene in a particular time and place. Bonaparte is thus identified as a modern

figure, a specifically French hero. Moreover, whereas David's painting is above all a rational image, providing the viewer with evidence of the qualities which made Marat admirable, Gros's is an irrational one, seeking not to persuade or instruct but rather to overwhelm the viewer with the glamour of Bonaparte's appearance and the force of his personality. Some art historians have argued that David evokes traditional Christian imagery, notably depictions of the dead Christ; against this type of interpretation, it should be noted that the painting contains no hint of any supernatural element, no suggestion (for example) that Marat is going to be wafted up to heaven.

In it, traditional military heroism can be seen to dissolve into ‘an essentially modern notion of personal charisma’ (Prendergast, 1997, pp.122, 148). In describing the painting in these terms, there is a danger of projecting back on to this early portrait the fully fledged Napoleonic legend of later years. However, it also helps to distinguish this portrayal from those produced once Napoleon had embarked on a political career. As we will see, the image that he cultivated as ruler shifted away from the personal qualities of the hero towards the moral virtues of the great man. In general terms, it represents a compromise between the values of the Enlightenment (rationalism, humanity, etc.) and Romantic concerns (notably, in its emphasis on the quasi-magical ‘genius’ of the unique individual).

2.3 The military leader

Let us now consider another relatively early portrait, David's *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps*, in which the then First Consul is shown at the Great Saint Bernard at the start of the campaign which led to the defeat of the Austrians at Marengo in June 1800 (see Plate 10). In fact, Bonaparte had actually crossed the Alps on a humble mule rather than on the splendid mount depicted in this painting. What interests me, however, is not so much the falsity of this propaganda image but exactly how it served Napoleon's ambitions. In fact, the painting originated as a commission from the King of Spain for a gallery of famous military leaders, but a copy was immediately ordered by Bonaparte himself (this is the version illustrated here). He had previously sat for his portrait to David, apparently at the artist's own request, on his return from his first Italian campaign in 1797, but that painting was never completed. David is supposed to have been greatly inspired by the encounter, exclaiming (according to one of his pupils, writing years later): ‘O my friends, what a fine head he has! It's pure, it's great, it's as beautiful as the Antique! Here is a man to whom altars would have been erected in ancient times …. Bonaparte is my hero!’ (Delécluze, 1983, p.200; quoted in Brooker, 1980, p.142). In 1800, however, he was granted no sittings by Napoleon, who is reported to have declared:

> Likeness is not produced by an exact reproduction of features, by a pimple on the nose. What the painter must show is the character of the face, the thing that makes it alive … Nobody wants to know if the portraits of great men look like them. It is enough that their genius lives in them.
>
> (Delécluze, 1983, p.232)

Clickto see plate 10 Jacques-Louis David, Bonaparte Crossing the Alps, 1800–1, 1800-01, oil on canvas, 260 x 221 cm, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

This statement at once draws on the classical tradition of idealized representation (such as we have seen in David's *Marat*) and expresses a typically Napoleonic faith in the charisma of the heroic leader. Whether or not he actually uttered these words, Napoleon

undoubtedly did have an aversion to sitting for his portrait. Nor did this present too great a problem in the case of official portraits, the purpose of which was not simply to record an individual likeness but also to embody the authority of the office (as king, general, minister, etc.). Certainly, when David put the two versions of the portrait on show in the Louvre in 1801, none of the critics seemed bothered by the acknowledged lack of resemblance. This can be attributed to the fact that it was, in effect, an official portrait (even if it had not initially been commissioned by the regime), and also to its significance as a work of art in its own right, as an ambitious painting by the most famous French artist of the day. The fact that David put them on display (though not in fact in the Salon) is also significant; it suggests that he saw himself as painting as much for the Parisian public as for the person who commissioned the painting.

Click to see plate 5 Antoine-Jean Gros, General Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole, 1797, oil on canvas, 130 x 94 cm, Musée National du Château, Versailles. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Exercise

Compare *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* (Plate 10) to *Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole* (Plate 5). In each case, consider the size of the painting (check the measurements in the caption), the type of portrait (is the figure shown full-length, for example?), the relative importance of the background, how the figure relates (or doesn't relate) to the viewer outside the painting, whether or not a sense of movement is conveyed, the brushwork (highly finished or loose and sketchy?). For the moment, we will concentrate on these **formal** properties and leave aside broader questions of meaning.

David's painting is quite a bit larger than Gros's, a more modest three-quarter-length portrait. Also, whereas *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* includes craggy mountains and a windswept sky, *Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole* has only a hazy background, which can just be glimpsed behind the figure. Whereas, in the latter painting, Bonaparte's gaze is directed towards his soldiers, somewhere within the imaginary space that extends beyond the picture frame, David shows him looking outwards towards the viewer. Moreover, although the figure's upward-gesturing arm can be read as an instruction to his soldiers, its exaggerated drama suggests that it is really directed towards the viewer outside the picture. It is as if he is inviting the viewer to follow him. Also, his equestrian pose means that he looks down on everyone (soldiers and viewers alike) from a great height, whereas Gros's figure is roughly on a level with his men. Rather than sharing the dynamism of the earlier painting, David's has a strangely frozen quality, despite depicting energetic action. The rearing horse has a sculptural stillness and Napoleon's idealized features are impassive. This effect is reinforced by the smoothness of the highly finished manner used for the equestrian group, which contrasts with Gros's looser, livelier handling.

The question then arises: how do we account for these differences? Clearly, we are dealing with two painters each with his own style, but this provides only part of the answer. The larger size of *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* and the grand equestrian format (often used for monarchs) can be related to the fact that, by 1800, Napoleon was no longer a mere general but had become the nation's leader. A crucial clue towards the painting's meaning is provided by the names inscribed on the rocks in the bottom-left foreground: Napoleon, Hannibal, Karolus Magnus (Charlemagne), thereby identifying Bonaparte with

great military leaders who had crossed the Alps before him. Together with the way that he seems to be inviting the viewer to follow him onwards and upwards, they give a mythic dimension to the image. He is presented not simply as a hero but as a man of destiny, who will lead his army to military victory and, by implication, the French people to a glorious future. In this respect, it is important to note the tricolour flag being carried by the artillery men struggling up the mountainside; it identifies them with the nation, just as Napoleon appears here less as an individual than as the embodiment of military glory. It could also be argued that, by showing him calmly riding a fiery horse and defying the wild nature behind him, the painting implies he is capable of controlling a chaotic political situation and establishing a new order that will safeguard the gains of the Revolution. As such, it can be seen to justify the authority he had seized and thus to function as propaganda for the regime. While any official portrait is, in some sense, a form of propaganda, the Napoleonic crisis of legitimation meant that images of the new ruler had to (as it were) 'work' that much harder.

2.4 The First Consul

Clickto see plate 11 Antoine-Jean Gros, Bonaparte as First Consul, 1802, oil on canvas, 205 x 127 cm, Musée Nationale de la Légion d'Honneur, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Exercise

Look at Gros's *Bonaparte as First Consul* of 1802 (see Plate 11). How does it differ from the previous portraits of Napoleon we have looked at? What kind of claims does it make on his behalf? Consider the portrait type, setting, pose (including gesture and direction of gaze), costume and accessories.

Note: the uppermost paper on the table is headed by the word *traités* (treaties) followed by a list of names, concluding with 'Amiens'; below this are three further entries, which read '18 Brumaire', 'Concordat', 'Comices de Lyon'. The Treaty of Amiens established a (temporary) peace with England in 1802; the Comices de Lyon was the election of Bonaparte as president of the Cisalpine Republic (northern Italy, effectively) in the same year.

This is the first full-length standing portrait we have looked at, and, for the first time, we see Bonaparte in an interior setting, which gives the image a more civilian character than the previous portraits where he is shown first and foremost as a military leader. He is still wearing a uniform and a sword, but the uniform is richly embroidered and seems more ceremonial than functional. At the same time, the plain backdrop counteracts the opulence of his attire and that of the fringed tablecloth, and means that the overall effect is still quite austere. In this respect, it is also significant that his hair is severely short rather than long and flowing as in Gros's previous portrait of Bonaparte. Rather than gesturing commandingly, he points towards the pile of papers on the table; the writing on the top document serves to emphasize not his military victories but rather his achievements as a statesman and a peacemaker. He is not staring out at the viewer but instead looks towards the right and seems to be listening or thinking. The image insists not so much on Napoleon's glorious destiny as on his executive role as head of government and the benefits of his rule.

This portrait established the standard image of Bonaparte as First Consul; it served as the model for several further portraits commissioned from Gros and other artists, usually to hang in public buildings in provincial cities to serve as a focus of loyalty. Prior to 1802, he had continued to be portrayed above all as a military leader (as in David's portrait) rather than in his official capacity. The reason for the delay in establishing the official image for the First Consul was presumably that nobody had any clear idea of what such an image should look like, given that the office had just been invented and was inherently ambiguous. On the one hand, the title of consul was derived from republican Rome while, on the other, the constitution gave the First Consul quasi-monarchical powers. It was during the consulate that Napoleon adopted the antique-style cropped haircut, which was said at the time to make him resemble the Roman consul Brutus, whose appearance was recorded in a famous bust (see Figure 2). The flattering (and also hopeful) implication of the comparison was that he, like his ancient predecessor, was a man of integrity, devoted to the good of the republic, and not one to bring about a return to monarchical rule. Gros's painting not only records Bonaparte's new haircut, but also embodies the tensions of the position of First Consul in the way that it tempers official splendour with a certain austerity and in its emphasis on function rather than ceremony, in keeping with the spirit of the Revolution.

Figure 2 Anonymous, *Head of Lucius Junius Brutus*, bronze, Musei Capitolini, Rome. Photo: Scala

2.5 The emperor

With Napoleon's coronation as emperor in 1804, a new type of official image was once again required. Portraits of the emperor in his ceremonial robes were commissioned from several established artists; these all revived a traditional type of royal portraiture from the eighteenth century. The example shown in Plate 10 is by a former David student, Francois Gérard (1770–1837), by now a fashionable portrait painter (see Plate 12). A portrait of Napoleon as emperor was also painted by a former David student of a younger generation, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), apparently on his own initiative. When *Napoleon on the Imperial Throne* (see Plate 13) was exhibited at the Salon of 1806, the catalogue stated that it belonged to the Legislative Body, but documentary evidence indicates that it had been purchased from the artist rather than having originated as a commission. Ingres had previously received a commission for a portrait of the First Consul for the city of Liege, and must have been disappointed that he had not been given the opportunity to exhibit the painting, which commemorates Napoleon signing a decree ordering the reconstruction of an area of the city that had been bombarded by Austrian troops (see Plate 14).

Click to see plate 12 François Gérard, Napoleon in his Imperial Robes, 1805, oil on canvas, 227 x 145 cm, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Click to see plate 13 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Napoleon on the Imperial Throne, 1806, oil on canvas, 260 x 163 cm, Musée de l'Armée, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Click to see plate 14 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Bonaparte as First Consul, 1804, oil on canvas, 227.5 x 147 cm cm, Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Arte Contemporain de la Ville de Liège. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Ingres may, therefore, have come up with the idea of painting a portrait of the emperor 'on spec' in order to attract attention and win acclaim. If so, the gamble did not entirely pay off; although Ingres did succeed in selling the picture, the critical reception was almost unrelievedly hostile. The question that concerns us is: why?

Exercise

Compare Ingres's *Napoleon on the Imperial Throne* (Plate 13) to Gérard's portrait of the emperor (Plate 12), thinking about the difference in the effect conveyed. Consider the pose and, in particular, the way the figure relates to the viewer of the painting. How much sense of three-dimensional space do you get from each work? How much emphasis is given in each case to the ceremonial robes and imperial regalia?

The most basic difference is indicated by the title of Ingres's painting, which depicts Napoleon seated on a throne, whereas Gérard's is a full-length standing portrait. Also, whereas the latter work shows the emperor's body at a slight angle to the front of the picture space and his head turned slightly to face the viewer, Ingres shows Napoleon in a strictly frontal pose facing the viewer head-on. The image is not strictly symmetrical but almost so, with the two sceptres balancing each other on either side of the figure. The effect is strangely stiff and formal by comparison with Gérard's imposing but more natural-seeming image. The head-on pose used by Ingres also produces an impression of flatness: Napoleon is set slightly back from the front of the picture, distancing him from the viewer, but the figure seems rather two-dimensional, partly because of the way it is so swathed in robes that there is little sense of a body underneath them. Also, because the enthroned figure takes up most of the picture surface, allowing for only a hint of dark backdrop without much detail, there is very little sense of any depth to the scene. The effect is rather claustrophobic by comparison with Gérard's painting, in which the figure is set in a larger space, with the throne behind it and a stool to one side. The stool also provides a resting place for an orb and sceptre, so that the figure does not seem overloaded with regalia as he does in Ingres's painting, where he not only holds both sceptres but also has a ceremonial sword under his arm. Similarly, whereas in Gérard's painting Napoleon's chain gets lost in the ermine, it is completely visible in Ingres's painting where it forms a flat semi-circle that echoes other circular shapes around his face, such as the laurel leaf crown.

2.6 The portrayal of traditional symbols of power

Napoleon on his Imperial Throne is crammed with traditional symbols of power. The sceptre surmounted by a statuette, the other sceptre (the ‘hand of justice’) and the sword all had associations with Charlemagne. In the run-up to the coronation, the regime had adopted as official propaganda the flattering notion of Napoleon as a modern Charlemagne (which was already current, as we have seen from David's portrait). Much effort was expended on legitimating his imperial authority by linking him to the last emperor to unite western Europe under his rule. The hand of justice, which had supposedly belonged to Charlemagne, was in fact fabricated for Napoleon's coronation. The great advantage of the early medieval monarchs as a source of legitimation was their remoteness from the Bourbon dynasty deposed by the Revolution. Another Carolingian (the Frankish dynasty founded by Charlemagne (d.814)) (and ancient Roman) symbol of power appropriated by Napoleon was the imperial eagle, which appears carved on to the throne and woven into the carpet in Ingres's painting. The eagle was originally an attribute of Jupiter, the king of the gods in classical mythology, and Ingres may have based Napoleon's pose on an image of the god which itself derived ultimately from a famous lost statue, known as the Olympian Jupiter, by the ancient Greek sculptor Phidias (see Figure 3). However, the pose could have come from any number of ancient or medieval depictions of enthroned figures. The crucial point is that it symbolized divine power and, when used for an earthly ruler, signified a divine right to rule.

Figure 3 Comte de Caylus, Jupiter, 1752–67, engraving, 8.3 × 5.6 cm, Bibliotheque nationale de France, Paris

When the painting was exhibited at the Salon, the main complaint was that it looked ‘gothic': that is, medieval (Siegfried, 1980, pp.70–1). More than one critic compared it to the work of the Flemish painter Jan van Eyck (d.1441), whose famous Ghent altarpiece was one of the looted trophies of war then on display in the Louvre; the central panel of God enthroned could in fact have been a source for the emperor's pose (see Figure 4). What elicited the comparison was the stiffness of the pose, meticulous attention to detail, and bright but restricted colour scheme (red, gold and white, essentially). Commentators also objected to the way that the figure is so loaded with drapery and ornament that it lacks any sense of physical presence: ‘the head seems to have been set on cushions’, complained one (quoted in Shelton, 1999, p.500). Several were reminded of images of medieval kings and cult statues of the madonna. These comments suggest that it was not simply the ‘barbarous’ style that aroused concern but also, for some at least, the religious character of the image and the vision of kingship it embodied. The claim that Napoleon was a ruler by divine right alienated all those who had rallied to him as the saviour of the Revolution and who considered that his legitimacy derived not from God but from the people. By 1806 the regime had realized its mistake and had moved away from the medieval symbolism used at the time of the coronation; a plan of 1803 for a statue of Charlemagne to be erected in a prominent site in Paris had been abandoned. Ingres was thus out-of-step with official propaganda imagery.

2.7 Legitimating the regime

The failure of Ingres's painting is revealing of the problems of political legitimation faced by the regime. If it was difficult to justify the authority of a ruler who had seized power, it was even harder to justify a monarchy based on usurpation (the authority Napoleon had usurped being either that of the Bourbon dynasty from a royalist point of view or that of the people from a republican one). Ingres's image of timeless, otherworldly majesty can thus be seen as compensating, or rather trying to compensate, for the all too recent and highly dubious origins of Napoleon's imperial rule. Its failure was not simply a matter of bad timing but, on a deeper level, bound up with the opportunistic, improvisatory response to the problem on the part of the regime, which seized at any and every identity (Charlemagne, Brutus, etc.) that could serve a propaganda purpose and cast them aside as soon as they lost their relevance and usefulness. Furthermore, while it was not bothered about the overall consistency and coherence of its propaganda, the need to appeal to different shades of political opinion meant that the image of the emperor would ideally balance contradictory elements, reconciling sacred and secular, monarchical and revolutionary, traditional and modern, irrational and rational. The problem with Ingres's painting was that it focused exclusively on one side of the equation; the same can be said of David's *Napoleon in his Study* of 1812 (see Plate 15), which otherwise could hardly offer a more different image of Napoleon.

Click to see plate 15 Jacques-Louis David, The Emperor Napoleon in his Study at the Tuileries, 1812, oil on canvas, Private Collection. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Figure 4 Jan van Eyck, *Christ of the Mystic Lamb*, detail of the Ghent alterpiece, 1426, oil and tempera on wood, 208 × 79 cm, St Bavo Cathedral, Ghent. Photo: © Paul M.R. Maeyaert

Exercise

Which of the previous portraits we have looked at does *Napoleon in his Study* most closely resemble, and in what ways does it depart from this model? What kinds of claims does David make here on Napoleon's behalf, and how do they differ from those made by Ingres's portrait of Napoleon enthroned?

Note: the word ‘Code’ that appears on the document on the desk indicates that it is a copy of the Civil Code or Code Napoleon of 1804.

This painting returns to the **iconography** (the study of the meanings of images;) of Napoleon as First Consul, showing him standing in an interior in close proximity to official papers. More precisely, the portrait refers back to the period of the consulate, during which the Civil Code was drawn up, though it shows him stout and balding as he would have appeared in 1812. If anything, the image is more sober and businesslike than Gros's 1802 portrait, since Napoleon is wearing a relatively plain military uniform rather than an opulent ceremonial one. Also, since the papers are lying not on a table but on a desk at which he has evidently been working, there is an even stronger emphasis on his executive role. The clock giving the time as 4.15 and the guttering candles indicate that he has been working through the night. Another contrast with the consular portrait is that Napoleon is looking out at the viewer; this, combined with the fact that he is standing in close proximity to us rather than staring down from a great height, makes him seem more human and accessible to the viewer who, as we saw earlier, can be identified with the French people (see above). Thus, instead of an all-powerful and unapproachable monarch ruling by divine right, such as Ingres depicted, here we have the ruler as enlightened bureaucrat who labours on behalf of 'us', his people.

Like Ingres's painting, David's portrait of Napoleon in his study does not simply offer a certain image of the emperor but is bound up with a broader crisis of political legitimation. It acknowledges that, without a sacred basis for its authority, power has to keep working to justify itself. A ruler who lacks divine right is judged on his performance. In this respect, the problems faced by Napoleon were only an extreme version of those that the Enlightenment critique of established authority posed for more venerable monarchies. They, too, now needed to justify themselves in rational, utilitarian terms, on the basis of the benefits they brought their subjects. It is also important to note that *Napoleon in his Study* was another unofficial portrait, having been commissioned by a Scottish admirer, Alexander Douglas, the future Duke of Hamilton. Just as Ingres overcompensated for the instability of the regime, so David's modern, rational and functional image went too far in the opposite direction to be effective as imperial propaganda. Despite presenting an entirely positive vision of Napoleon (not least in showing him conscientiously labouring on the Civil Code by himself, when in fact his contribution largely took the form of chairing a legislative committee), it lacked the mystique and glamour needed to capture the popular imagination. Its sobriety stands in marked contrast to the propaganda images of the emperor commissioned by the imperial administration.

Exercise

You should now watch *Women and Portraiture in Napoleonic Europe*, referring first to the AV Notes.

Click to see the AV notes for the video clip

Click below to view part 1 of Women and Portraiture in Napoleonic Europe.

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Part 3

3 Gros and the Napoleonic propaganda machine

3.1 The limits of propaganda

Although portraits of Napoleon were manufactured on a large scale and distributed widely, they could only act as propaganda for the regime up to a certain point. Given the institutional circumstances sketched out in the introduction to this course, the most effective way to use art as propaganda was with large-scale history paintings that would attract the attention and excite the interest of a large audience when they were exhibited in the Salon. State patronage for such painting was revived on a lavish scale under Napoleon, a development that was very welcome to artists after the lean years of the Revolution, during which very few works were commissioned by the government. However, Napoleonic patronage was also characterized by a much tighter control over the form and content of history painting than had previously been the case, in order to ensure that the resulting works fulfilled the propaganda objectives of the regime. The works in question were, above all, paintings of military subjects. Just as French men were conscripted en masse into the army, so French painters were enlisted in the service of the empire to celebrate the battles the soldiers fought: in 1811 a critic described David, Gros and other leading artists as ‘the generals of painting’ (quoted in Wrigley, 1993, p.337). French art was thus subjected to the control of a propaganda machine, paralleling the strict censorship and surveillance imposed on every other form of expression.

These shifts in French painting were heralded quite soon after Bonaparte seized power; in a letter of 1800 he wrote to his brother Lucien, the minister of the interior, listing six battles that he wanted to have depicted and asking him to select appropriate painters for the task. One of them was the battle of Marengo, while the others were all drawn from his Egyptian (in fact, Middle Eastern) campaign of 1798–9, despite the fact it had ended in failure. From the first, therefore, not only did the regime turn to military painting for purposes of propaganda, but it is also evident that a certain sleight of hand was involved; that is to say, the Napoleonic strategy was not to pretend that a setback had never occurred, but boldly to present even a disaster as a triumph. This holds especially true of the two paintings that we will be focusing on here: Gros's *Jaffa*, which deals with the most inglorious episode of the entire Egyptian campaign, and *Eylau*, which depicts a problematic episode from a later campaign. Two points need to be made in advance. First, both paintings rely on a notion of France's ‘civilizing mission’, in which enlightened ideals are harnessed to a new nationalistic and also colonialist agenda. Second, both also testify to the limitations of Napoleon's strict censorship laws, since it was precisely because news of what had really happened was circulating in France that the regime found it necessary to promote its own version of events. (We will come back to both points.)

3.1.1 Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken of Jaffa

First and foremost, *Jaffa* (like *Eylau*) contributed to the personality cult of Napoleon, which formed the core of the regime's propaganda. In this respect, however, it is important to note that this painting, exhibited in the Salon of 1804, was actually one of the first military

scenes commissioned by the regime to exalt Napoleon in this way. This was largely because it took some time before the propaganda machine needed to organize a large-scale system of official patronage was in place. After Bonaparte seized power, David hoped to be given responsibility for running government art policy himself; in 1800 he was offered the title of 'painter to the government' but turned it down, apparently because it lacked the powers that he wanted. It was not until the end of 1802 that the administrator who was to be in charge of running the system was appointed; he was Dominique-Vivant Denon (1747–1825) and the new post that he filled was director general of the Musee Napoleon (as the museum in the Louvre was known at that time; the wing of the Louvre in which French paintings of this period now hang is named after Denon). Although a number of military paintings were commissioned in an ad hoc fashion during the consulate (including *Jaffa*), it was only during the empire that propaganda art was produced on a large scale.

To start with, moreover, military painting did not necessarily glorify Napoleon himself. When this genre was revived around 1800 after a long period in which paintings of battles were relatively uncommon, it was primarily in order to celebrate the bravery of all ranks of the French army, common soldiers as well as officers. Just days after the battle of Nazareth was fought in 1799, Bonaparte announced a competition for a painting to commemorate the event, one of the few successes of his Egyptian campaign, which he claimed as a great victory; it was not a personal triumph, however, since the French troops had been led on this occasion by another general. When the competition eventually took place in 1801, the government provided the artists with a summary account of the battle, singling out a number of individual acts of courage. The oil sketches submitted as competition entries were exhibited in the Louvre; the winner was Gros, who had made careful use of the documentation provided (see Plate 16). What is striking about his sketch is, on the one hand, its immediacy and dynamism and, on the other, its lack of a single focus of interest. The composition consists, as you might expect from the brief, of numerous distinct groups of figures; the French commander, General Junot (on a white horse), does not dominate the scene but is set well back. A number of critics at the time objected to this lack of dramatic unity, which transgressed the hierarchical conventions of traditional history painting, in which the centre of attention is the most important person in the scene.

Click to see plate 16 Antoine-Jean Gros, The Battle of Nazareth, 1801, oil sketch, 135 x 195 cm, Musée des Beaux Arts, Nantes. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Significantly, the commission was subsequently cancelled; Gros never worked up his sketch of *The Battle of Nazareth* into the vast painting, some 7.6 metres (25 feet) wide, decreed by the terms of the competition. Although there may well have been other reasons, the decision must have been largely determined by the increasingly exclusive propaganda cult of Napoleon. The painting Gros produced instead, *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken of Jaffa* (see Plate 3), testifies to the authoritarian nature of the new regime on a number of levels. For one thing, it was not commissioned by means of the democratic system of the competition, which had become the standard method of distributing official patronage during the Revolution. Instead, it was commissioned on Bonaparte's own initiative, apparently without even consulting Denon. Arguably, moreover, whereas Gros's composition for *The Battle of Nazareth* has a democratic structure that accords with the republican ideals of the Revolution, *Jaffa* adopts the hierarchic structure of traditional history painting (as noted in the previous paragraph).

Exercise

Click to see plate 3 Antoine-Jean Gros, Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken of Jaffa, 1804, oil on canvas, 532.1 x 720cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Compare *Jaffa* (Plate 3) to *The Battle of Nazareth* (Plate 16), thinking about the ways in which the composition of the former conforms to the traditional model of history painting. How might you see it as less democratic, more authoritarian? Bear in mind not only relationships between the figures within the painting but also your relationship, as viewer, to the picture.

Instead of giving equal attention to soldiers of different ranks and making it hard to work out who exactly is the commanding officer, as he did in *The Battle of Nazareth*, Gros places the most important figure, Bonaparte, in the centre of the scene in accordance with the traditions of history painting. Also, since the figure scale is much larger in *Jaffa*, Bonaparte takes up proportionally more of the picture than any of the figures in *The Battle of Nazareth*. He wears a splendid uniform which makes him stand out from the other figures, most of whom are either dressed in flowing robes or naked. He is the focus of attention, both for the figures in the painting, several of whom turn to look at him, and for us, the viewers, whose gaze is directed towards him; he is a commanding figure in every sense of the phrase. By comparison, *The Battle of Nazareth* is more democratic not simply in terms of equalizing soldiers of different ranks but also in allowing the viewer's eye to wander over it freely.

3.2 The propaganda function of *Jaffa*

When *Jaffa* was exhibited in 1804, it was greeted with great acclaim and would thus seem to have fulfilled the propaganda purpose for which it was intended. Like *The Battle of Nazareth*, it deals with the later stages of the Egyptian campaign after the French had invaded Syria, which, like Egypt, formed part of the Ottoman (Turkish) empire. The French assault on Jaffa in March 1799 culminated in the massacre on Bonaparte's orders of some 2,500–3,000 Turks, who had surrendered the garrison in return for a promise that their lives would be spared. It also involved the rape and slaughter of many civilians. Such actions flatly contradicted the avowed purpose of the campaign, which was justified on the grounds that it was not so much a conquest as a liberation that would bring enlightenment to the benighted lands of the East. In order to back up this conception of a ‘civilizing mission’, Bonaparte brought large numbers of scholars, scientists and artists with him to Egypt. French soldiers not only carried out atrocities at Jaffa, however, but were also themselves struck down in large numbers by the plague there. On his retreat to Cairo, two months later, Bonaparte gave orders for those still alive to be poisoned so as to avoid having to evacuate them. It was this incident that was the most shocking from a contemporary European point of view, and the story rapidly gained currency in the British press (see Figure 5), some of the victims having survived to tell it to the British, who entered Jaffa after the French left. It also reached France, and it was clearly in order to counter these rumours that Gros was commissioned to paint his picture. *Jaffa* thus had a very specific propagandist function.

The painting depicts a visit made by Bonaparte in March 1799 to some of the plague-stricken French soldiers in a hospital in Jaffa. The catalogue of the 1804 Salon describes it as follows:

> Bonaparte, general in chief of the army of the Orient, at the moment when he touched a pestilential tumour while visiting the hospital at Jaffa … To further distance the frightening idea of a sudden and incurable contagion, he had opened before him some pestilential tumours and touched several. He gave, by this magnanimous devotion, the first example of a genre of courage unknown until then and which has since had imitators.
>
> (Quoted in Grigsby, 1995, p.9)

Bonaparte apparently did insist on the non-contagiousness of the disease, and according to his chief medical officer Desgenettes (who stands in the painting between Bonaparte and the sick man he is touching), he did have some physical contact with the plague-stricken during his visit. The precise subject seems to have been devised by Gros in consultation with Denon.

Figure 5 George Cruikshank, *Napoleon Poisoning the Sick at Jaffa*, illustration from William Combe, *The Life of Napoleon*, 1817, from the copy in the William Henry Hoyt Collection, Rare Book Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Click to see plate 3 Antoine-Jean Gros, Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken of Jaffa, 1804, oil on canvas, 532.1 x 720cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Exercise

Now look at the painting again (Plate 3) and consider the following questions:

1. How does the image of Bonaparte that it offers serve to counter the accusations made against him? How might his action be seen (in the light of the catalogue entry) to embody enlightened ideals?
2. How does Gros evoke the horrors of the plague? How might this contribute to the propagandist function of the painting?
3. How does Gros evoke the Middle Eastern setting? How might this contribute to the propagandist function of the painting?

1. Completely ignoring the crimes that could be attributed to Bonaparte, both massacres and poisonings, the painting depicts him as calm and fearless in face of a terrible disease. His composure is heightened by contrast with the men on either side of him, one of whom covers his face with a handkerchief while the one kneeling on the right seems to want to protect him from infection. He is shown not as a ruthless tyrant capable of having his own men murdered, but rather as a compassionate leader willing to risk his own life for their well-being. He also embodies enlightened values since he touches one of the plague boils with the aim of dispelling a supposedly unfounded and thus irrational fear of contagion.
2. The plague-stricken are mostly naked and slumped on the ground in poses expressive of mental and physical anguish (cowering in a corner, tearing their hair, desperately reaching out, etc.). They are also enveloped in shadow, as if to suggest that what they are going through is too horrific to be shown in the clear light of day; their blood-shot eyes stare out crazily through the darkness, and the blankets in which they are wrapped look rather like shrouds. The painting thus acknowledges that horrific suffering did take place and that French soldiers were among the victims, but attributes this suffering to a horrific natural cause, the plague, rather than French brutality or any other wrongdoing. This contributes to the propagandist function of the painting, as does the macabre fascination of the scene, which similarly distracts attention from the question of pinning down the blame.
3. The architectural setting, with its pointed arches, elaborate crenellations and tall minaret, is indicative of a Middle Eastern setting, as too are the turbans and flowing robes of the Arab figures. The warm, golden light and extensive use of red also serve to evoke a sultry, intense atmosphere that might be regarded as typically eastern. The overall sense of a mysterious, exotic place adds to the fascination of the composition and thus, like the plague horrors, enhances its propaganda function by side-stepping more mundane issues of accountability. In so far as the plague itself might be seen as a specifically eastern phenomenon, it is further implied that no Frenchman can have played any part in causing this suffering. Since the tricolour can be seen flying from the top of the city, the painting also appeals to patriotic pride in French victories and thus endorses a colonialist agenda, while also conveniently skirting round the fact that the French did not hold Jaffa.

3.3 The use of religious imagery

What is paradoxical about this painting is that, while Bonaparte is ostensibly presented here as the exponent of rational values, the impression that it conveys is not so much of a modern secular leader as of a saviour in the Christian tradition. His hand extended towards one of the plague-stricken suggests that he has miraculous powers of healing. As one of Gros's fellow artists put it, in an ode to the painting: ‘the hero can cure at a glance’ (quoted in Porterfield, 1998, p.56). It thus effectively attributes to Napoleon something very like ‘the king's touch’, the miraculous power to heal scrofulous abscesses attributed to French monarchs since the Middle Ages. The only problem with such an interpretation is that it is a bit too neat and fails to account for the sheer abundance of religious allusions. Napoleon might also be compared to St Roch, the patron saint of plague sufferers, or

even to Christ. (Given that this work dates from after Napoleon had made the Concordat with the Church, it is safe to assume that these religious references are intended to convey a specifically Christian meaning. In this respect, Gros's use of traditional religious imagery differs fundamentally from that in David's painting of Marat. In the latter case, the artist cannot have intended to identify Marat with Christ, in view of the Jacobins' replacement of Christianity with deism as the official religion.)

The composition, with its colonnades, recalls paintings of Christ healing the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda (see Figure 6); there is even a blind man groping his way forward at the right as if hoping for a miraculous cure. Nor do the religious resonances stop here; the naked figures of the plague-stricken resemble the damned in hell, cut off as they are from the radiant light around the Christ-like leader. In fact, the figure seated at the left is based on one of the damned in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel (see Figure 7).

Figure 6 Bartolome Esteban Murillo, *Christ Healing the Paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda*, 1668, oil on canvas, 237x 261 cm, National Gallery, London. Photo: © The National Gallery, London

Figure 7 Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement*, detail (one of the damned), 1536–41, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Vatican City, Rome. Photo: Scala

Gros's painting is thus positively overloaded with allusions to religious images, in much the way that Ingres's portrait of Napoleon enthroned is crammed with symbols of divine power. Despite the differences of style and genre between these works, both testify in this respect to the problem of embodying authority in an iconography drawn from the art of the past (that is, a standard repertoire of stock poses, motifs, symbols, etc.) in a post-revolutionary culture in which the equivalence of monarchical and Christian power had collapsed. In consequence, the meanings of iconography had become unfixed. Thus, Napoleon could be depicted as a sacred monarch, but there was no guarantee that viewers would take the image in the spirit in which it was intended; it would be likely, for example, to strike a royalist as blasphemous. However, it is also important to note a fundamental difference in approach between Gros and Ingres. The latter uses iconography in an entirely literal-minded fashion, as if its former meanings still automatically applied and as if Napoleon's claim to the throne was undisputed. Gros, by contrast, enters whole-heartedly into the pragmatic, instrumentalist spirit of Napoleonic propaganda, combining as he does sacred and secular, religious and rational justifications for Bonaparte's rule in a single painting without regard for ideological coherence. These contradictions were inherent in the regime, which owed its existence to the Revolution but, by the time that *Jaffa* was painted, was moving steadily towards monarchy.

These contradictions were also inherent in the Egyptian campaign, which supposedly served to extend the enlightened (that is, secular, rational and modern) values of the Revolution into new regions but, in practice, substituted imperial expansion for revolutionary goals (it was, in fact, the prelude to France's colonization of North Africa in the nineteenth century). Just as Gros's *Jaffa* introduces a religious dimension into an

image that ostensibly promotes the virtues of rationality, so his sketch for *The Battle of Nazareth* compromises its apparently 'scientific' documentary approach by altering the topography to give prominence to Christian holy sites such as Mount Tabor (which appears on the left when it should really be on the right); in fact, Bonaparte named the battle to highlight the notion of a Christian victory against the infidel, even though it did not take place that close to Nazareth. Gros's sketch also presents a moral contrast between European civilization and Oriental barbarism, which owes at least as much to Christian tradition as to the Enlightenment; in the centre, a French soldier spares the life of a surrendering foe, while a Turk in the lower left prepares to cut off the head of a defenceless enemy, only to be stopped by a bullet. The Arab figures caring for the sick in *Jaffa* also conform to European stereotypes but in a different, less overtly denigratory, fashion; their calmness in the face of the horrors of the plague was attributed by one Salon critic to their typically Oriental fatalism and passivity. As such, they can be seen as willing collaborators in the French colonial campaign. The point is that while Gros's painting acknowledges something of the horrors that took place in Jaffa, it works to conceal not only Bonaparte's crimes there but also the coercive and violent nature of the entire enterprise.

3.4 Editing out warfare

It is important to note that the requirements of propaganda usually required the editing out of any too explicit reference to the violence of warfare. Thus, for example, though the commission for *The Battle of Nazareth* was cancelled mainly because Napoleon did not figure in the composition, it probably also had something to do with the gory nature of the scene. Critics of the time expressed disquiet about military paintings that (like Gros's sketch) dwelled on the actual killing involved, and thereby made it difficult for them to sustain a comforting belief in the noble ambitions that supposedly underlay French campaigns. They were too committed to this belief to be able to be explicit about the nature of their anxiety in their criticism, but it is not at all difficult to read between the lines.

Consider, for example, Pierre Chaussard's response to another painting by Gros, *The Battle of Aboukir* (see Plate 17), which was exhibited at the Salon of 1806 and depicts a further episode from the Egyptian campaign. Chaussard praised the contrast that it offered between French 'calm' and 'superiority' and 'the brutal rage and stupid ferocity' of the Orientals. As such, it presented, in Chaussard's words, 'the triumph of enlightenment and civilization over shadows and barbarism' (quoted in Prendergast, 1997, p.97). However, he also criticized the way that, as he saw it, the overall order of the composition is disrupted by the chaos and carnage of the scene. Chaussard would clearly prefer to ignore the violence that underlay France's 'civilizing mission'. Other critics of the time were even more disturbed by the painting. It was specifically the collapsing bodies of the Turks and the bright colours (the red perhaps too reminiscent of blood) that troubled them. What makes this example especially significant is that *The Battle of Aboukir* was *not* an official propaganda painting, but had been commissioned by one of the most famous of Napoleon's generals, Murat, who had led the charge which secured victory for the French at Aboukir in July 1799. He occupies the centre of Gros's composition.

Click to see plate 17 Antoine-Jean Gros, The Battle of Aboukir, 1806, oil on canvas, 578 x 968 cm, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

By contrast, the first group of works commissioned by Denon (in 1806) virtually excluded scenes of French soldiers actually engaged in combat, even though all but one had a military subject. *The Battle of Austerlitz* (see Plate 18) by Gérard, for example, which was

exhibited to great acclaim in 1810, does not show the heat of battle, but rather the moment when news of the victory was brought to Napoleon. The other works commissioned by Denon typically showed either the prelude to battle or its aftermath, and glorified Napoleon not as a military commander but rather as an inspiring, compassionate and magnanimous leader. A case in point is *Bonaparte Pardoning the Rebels of Cairo* (see Plate 19) by Pierre-Narcisse Guerin (1774–1833), another painting of the Egyptian campaign, which was exhibited in 1808; as you will probably not be surprised to learn, this image of a forgiving conqueror glosses over the brutality with which the French repressed the uprising that took place in Cairo in 1798. In general, Napoleonic propaganda painting depicts the emperor as a 'great man', in accordance with the humanitarian and pacific values of the Enlightenment; it insists that, far from his being an aggressor, his endless wars are all motivated by a desire to establish peace.

Click to see plate 18 François Gérard, The Battle of Austerlitz, 1810, oil on canvas, 510 x 958 cm, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Click to see plate 19 Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, Bonaparte Pardoning the Rebels of Cairo, 1808, oil on canvas, 365 x 500 cm, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

3.5 Napoleon Visiting the Field of the Battle of Eylau

Napoleonic propaganda painting was very tightly controlled. In 1806, for example, the list of subjects was devised by Denon in consultation with Napoleon. The exact moment to be depicted was specified in several cases; as the above examples indicate, this could be crucial in ensuring that any too overt representation of violence was avoided. Artists were simply allocated the subject that they were to paint, and were also required to submit sketches of their proposed compositions to Denon for approval. All of the paintings were to be ready for the Salon of 1808, and any artist who did not finish in time was to be ineligible for further commissions. In fact, Gérard and Gros (who was also supposed to depict an episode relating to the battle of Austerlitz) both failed to meet the deadline, but only because they were required to produce other paintings for the regime in the intervening period. In Gros's case, the work in question was *Napoleon Visiting the Field of the Battle of Eylau* (see Plate 20), the commission for which he was awarded in 1807 on winning a competition to commemorate the event.

Click to see plate 4 Antoine-Jean Gros, Napoleon Visiting the Field of the Battle of Eylau, 1808, oil on canvas, 521 x 784 cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

The battle itself took place in Poland, near the village of Eylau, on 7–8 February 1807; the enemy force consisted largely of Russians. It was fought in a howling snowstorm, and the outcome remained uncertain on the morning of the 9th. Napoleon contemplated retreat but, when the Russians did so first, he declared victory even though the French had suffered immense losses. Their casualties may have numbered as many as 30,000, while the Russians' have been put at up to 25,000. In the 58th *Bulletin de la Grande Armee*, which was devoted to an account of the battle, however, Napoleon put the figures at 1,900 French killed and 5,700 wounded. The *Bulletin* was one of the principal propaganda vehicles of the regime, serving to bring reports from the front into French homes. Its role was celebrated in a painting of 1807 by Louis-Leopold Boilly (1761–1845), *Reading the 'Bulletin of the Grande Armee'* (see Plate 20), which shows an entire family caught up in a patriotic fervour; even the breast-feeding mother is fulfilling what Napoleon considered to be women's primary function, that of producing new soldiers for the empire. Note, too, the bust of Napoleon on the mantelpiece, a copy after one made by the Italian sculptor

Antonio Canova (1757–1822) (see Plate 21); such copies made Napoleon's image widely known. Of course, Boilly's painting does not correspond to the scepticism that we know actually characterised popular attitudes to reports in the *Bulletin*.

Click to see plate 20 Louis-Léopold Boilly, Reading the 'Bulletin of the Grande Armée', 1807, oil on canvas, 47 x 60 cm, Private Collection/ Agnew's, London. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Click to see plate 21 Antonio Canova, Napoleon, 1802, marble. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Florence. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

It was in the face of this kind of scepticism and, more specifically, in the face of widespread rumours that French losses were far higher than was admitted in the *Bulletin* that the imperial propaganda machine launched a campaign to persuade the French people that Eylau had been a great victory. The 58th *Bulletin*, which was printed in the official newspaper, *Le Moniteur*, on 24 February 1807, was followed by further bulletins countering reports of catastrophic losses. Since knowledge of what had happened could not be entirely suppressed, the regime needed to manipulate public opinion, and for this purpose official propaganda was less effective than reports that seemed to emanate from objective sources. This is why Napoleon himself dictated an 'eyewitness' report of the battle by a German, which appeared in the French press. It was as part of this exercise in damage control that the painting competition was announced by Denon in a letter to the press on 2 April. The logic behind it was that, if Eylau was indeed the victory that the regime claimed it was, then it must be capable of pictorial representation like the battle of Austerlitz. However, the terms of the competition were extremely tight; not only did the announcement include an account of the subject, but the letter also informed artists that a sketch of the site was available for consultation in Denon's offices.

3.5.1 Denon's account of Eylau

Exercise

Now read Denon's account of the subject and consider the following questions. In each case, take as your point of reference other Napoleonic propaganda paintings and, in particular, Gros's *Jaffa*.

> *From the Grande Armée 7 March 1807*The battle of Eylau is one of those events with which history is sparing, even in our time; for this reason it becomes the patrimony of the arts, especially of painting which alone can convey the harshness of the site and the climate and the rigour of the season during which this memorable battle took place. In the absence of any attempt to depict the subject, the Director General of the Musée Napoléon has considered it his duty to propose it publicly to history painters.
>
> Since all battles resemble each other, he has thought it preferable to choose the moment on the day after that of Eylau and when the Emperor visited the battlefield in order to bring assistance and consolation without discrimination to all the honourable victims of the fighting.
>
> The painter of the hospital of Jaffa could quite naturally have been entrusted with the task of executing this painting, given that he has already so well depicted a subject of this kind; but the Director General believed it would be an injustice to the entire body of painters if he had not given all of them the opportunity to try their hand at so great a theme. He therefore asked His

Majesty for permission to invite them all to produce a sketch of the subject which will be judged by the fourth class of the Institute.1 The sketches must be deposited at the secretariat of this class within the space of a month from the publication of the present announcement. The picture will be the same size as that of the hospital of Jaffa and the prize will be 16 000 francs. It will also be executed as a fine tapestry by the Gobelins factory. The two sketches that the class of the Institute judges to merit the position of first and second runner-up will each be honoured with a gold medal and 600 francs.

The Director General includes here a description made on the field of the battle of Eylau at the moment on the day after the battle when the Emperor reviewed the troops which had fought in it.

The EMPEROR visits the field of the battle of Preuss-Eylau, 9 February 1807 The French army, victorious on the 8 February at Preuss-Eylau, had bivouacked during the night on the field of that memorable battle which had been precipitately abandoned during the same night by the routed Russian army. On the 9th, at daybreak, the vanguard of the French army pursued the enemy in all directions, and found the roads of Koenisberg covered with abandoned Russian dead, dying and wounded, together with cannon, cases and baggage.

Towards midday, the EMPEROR mounted his horse. He was accompanied by Princes Murat and Berthier, by Marshals Soult, Davoust and Bessières; by the grand-equerry de Caulincourt; by the general aides-de-camp Mouton, Gardanne and Lebrun and by several other officers of his household, together with a squad of chasseurs of the guard and by princes and officers of the Polish guard of honour. He reviewed several divisions of the troops led by Marshals Soult, Augereau and Davoust, which remained on the battlefield, and visited one by one all of the positions that had been occupied, the previous day, by the various French and Russian units. The countryside was entirely covered with thick snow over which were scattered dead bodies, wounded men and the remnants of arms of all kind; traces of blood contrasted with the whiteness of the snow; the places in which cavalry charges had taken place stood out on account of the numbers of dead, dying and abandoned horses; French detachments and Russian prisoners traversed this vast field of carnage in all directions, and removed the wounded in order to take them to the hospitals set up in the town. Long lines of Russian corpses, wounded soldiers, remnants of arms and abandoned haversacks outlined in a bloody fashion the place of each battalion and squadron. The dead were heaped on top of the dying in the midst of broken or burnt cases and dismantled cannon.

The EMPEROR stopped at every pace in front of the wounded, asking them questions in their own language, ensuring that they were comforted and tended before his eyes. The unfortunate victims of the combats had their wounds dressed in front of him; the chasseurs of the guard transported them on their horses; the officers of his household carried out his benevolent orders. Rather than the death that they had been led to expect by the absurd prejudice they had absorbed, the wretched Russians found a generous conqueror. Astonished, they prostrated themselves in front of him or held out their weak arms in gestures of gratitude. The consoling look of the great man seemed to alleviate the horrors of death, and to spread a

gentler light over this scene of carnage. A young Lithuanian hussar, whose knee had been blown off by a bullet, had maintained his courage undiminished in the midst of his expiring comrades. He raised himself up at the sight of the EMPEROR: 'Caesar,' he said to him, 'you desire that I live; well, then! Only let me be healed, and I will serve you faithfully as I have served Alexander.'

Pascal Griener, 'L'Art de persuader par l'image sous le Premier Empire. A Propos d'un concours officiel pour la représentation de Napoléon sur le champ de bataille d'Eylau', L'Ecrit-Voir, 1984, 4, pp. 9, 20. Translated for this volume by Emma Barker.

1. When and where exactly does the scene take place, and how does this contribute to the propaganda function of the proposed picture?
2. To what extent are the horrific consequences of the battle acknowledged, and how is this done in such a way as to contribute to the propaganda function of the proposed picture?
3. How is Napoleon himself presented, and how does the scene invoke France's 'civilizing mission'?

1. The scene is set on the morning after the battle, following other Napoleonic propaganda painting in deflecting attention from the actual violence. Also, by insisting that the scene is set on the battlefield, the text emphasizes that the French remained in possession of the field after the battle and thus are technically without doubt the victors; the reference to the French army having bivouacked there overnight stresses this point. This emphasis on the battlefield thus serves, like the tricolour flag in *Jaffa*, as a reminder of France's military prowess while avoiding depicting it directly.
2. The text acknowledges the horrific consequences to a remarkable extent, even referring to 'this vast field of carnage'. It also notes such grisly details as the way that dead bodies are heaped on top of the dying. Although this is exceptional by the standards of Napoleonic propaganda painting, it nevertheless distracts attention from the French losses by referring only to 'dead, dying and wounded' Russians and to 'long lines of Russian corpses'. The reference to the emperor speaking to the wounded 'in their own language' also identifies them as Russian (as well as contributing to the propaganda function of the work by flatteringly suggesting that Napoleon could speak Russian). In this respect, the scene might have been less disturbing to a French viewer than *Jaffa*, which it resembles in dealing with a military setback, since there the sufferers were actually French.
3. Napoleon is presented as a noble and compassionate figure, offering consolation to the wounded and making sure that they receive proper care. The text refers to his 'benevolent orders' and calls him a 'great man'. France's 'civilizing mission' is invoked by reference to the Russians' expectation that they will be killed – in accordance with their own 'barbarous' values – and their surprise and gratitude at receiving such care. The emphasis on medical care – the text even refers to hospitals – is reminiscent of *Jaffa*. Also, as in the earlier work, Napoleon appears as a quasi-spiritual figure in the way that he seems 'to alleviate the horrors of death, and to spread a gentler light over this scene of carnage'. The injured Lithuanian's speech also seems to credit him with almost supernatural powers of healing.

3.6 Supporting Napoleon's bulletins

The scene broadly accords with Napoleon's bulletins, which similarly focus on the Russian casualties and, in expressing sorrow at the horrors of the battlefield, imply that the blame lies with other leaders: the sight, he wrote, ‘is made to inspire in princes the love of peace and the abhorrence ofwar’ (quoted in Prendergast, 1997, p.163). The incident with the Lithuanian was apparently Denon's invention. In his letter announcing the competition, Denon justifies the choice of moment by claiming it was made on the grounds that all battles resemble each other. He also says that the commission could simply have been entrusted to the ‘painter of the hospital of Jaffa’, who has ‘already so well depicted a subject of this kind’, but that it was only fair to give all artists a chance to secure it (Anthology I, p.123). This comment not only acknowledges the resemblance in subject to Gros's earlier painting, but also serves to justify the staging of a competition (Denon would have preferred to give the commission directly to Gros). The regime had ceased to allocate commissions by this means, largely because it did not allow it to have sufficient control over the result. There was also the risk that the public might dispute the jury's choice of winner. On this occasion, it reverted to this democratic practice in order to involve as many people as possible in the commemoration of the ‘victory’ but maintained strict control, with the result that the 26 competition entries were all quite similar. The example shown here is by Charles Meynier (1768–1832) (see Plate 22), who was placed second in the competition after Gros.

Click to see plate 22 Charles Meynier, Napoleon Visiting the Field of the Battle of Eylau, 1807, oil sketch, 93 x 146 cm, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Exercise

What are the principal ways in which Gros's painting differs from Meynier's sketch, and what effect do they make?

Note: the wounded Lithuanian is the figure with upraised arm on the far left; the figure in the green coat is Murat.

Both compositions show Napoleon on horseback in the centre, but while Meynier depicts him looking straight towards the wounded Lithuanian, in Gros's painting his eyes are turned upwards and his hand is raised much higher as if in a gesture of benediction so that the spiritual aspect is emphasized. Gros also adds a Russian soldier kneeling by Napoleon's horse and leaning forward to kiss his imperial eagle, suggesting (as in *Jaffa*) that contact with the emperor's body has a miraculous power. Another difference is the much greater prominence that Gros gives to Murat, on a rearing horse and sumptuously dressed; the contrast with this bold and assertive figure highlights Napoleon's saintly compassion and further distances him from responsibility for the horrors on view. In Meynier's composition, the dead and dying in the foreground are (somewhat grotesquely) naked, but they do not dominate the space as much as those depicted by Gros, which lie in a confused heap, snow-sprinkled and blood-spattered, right across the front of the picture; there is even a corpse lying virtually beneath Napoleon's horse. Gros's foreground figures are also more vigorous, especially the wounded soldier on the right who pulls away from the doctor trying to tend him with a horrified expression on his face. In sum, Gros goes to greater extremes than Meynier, both in his exaltation of Napoleon and in his depiction of the horrors of the battlefield.

Although the prominence of the foreground figures disconcerted the critics when *Eylau* was exhibited in 1808, this can hardly be the result of any personal disaffection with Napoleon. In fact, Gros was so thrilled when the emperor gave him the Legion of Honour at the Salon that he proposed to celebrate the moment in a painting (see Figure 8). For one thing, in his treatment of the foreground, he was only taking advantage of a freedom that he was explicitly granted by the terms of the competition. Denon's letter states: 'Everything that is movable in the foreground is left absolutely up to the painter' (Anthology I, p. 124). In any case, all the entries included similar (if not so brutal) details. A police report on the exhibition of the sketches stated uncomprehendingly that 'the artists have accumulated every kind of mutilation, the various results of a vast butchery, as if they had to paint precisely a scene of horror and carnage, and make war abhorrent' (quoted in Prendergast, 1997, p. 17). The reason that the regime positively encouraged artists to engage with such subject matter is related not simply to what happened at Eylau but, more generally, to the profound war-weariness of the French people by this date. A major indicator of this was a growing resistance to conscription; significantly, one critic described the cheerful mood of Boilly's *The Conscripts of 1807 (see*Plate 23) as 'unnatural' (quoted in Boime, 1990, p. 48).

Figure 8 Antoine-Jean Gros, *Napoleon Distributing the Cross of the Legion of Honour to Artists at the Time of his Visit to the Salon of 1808*, unfinished, oil on canvas, 350 x 640 cm, Chateaux de Versailles et de Trianon. Photo: © RMN

Click to see plate 23 Louis-Léopold Boilly, The Conscripts of 1807 Parading Past the Saint-Denis Gate, 1807, oil on canvas, 84.5 x 138 cm, Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

If Gros's painting was to succeed as propaganda, it had on some level to address these concerns rather than glorifying Napoleon as an invincible leader (which would not convince anyone). The regime's concern to *appear* to be responding to public opinion, which no doubt also contributed to the decision to stage a competition, can again be attributed to Napoleon's problems of political legitimation and his need to justify his authority as deriving from the people. In *Eylau*, therefore, the suffering caused by war is acknowledged (though displaced on to the enemy's soldiers), but the admission is counterbalanced by the portrayal of Napoleon as a humane leader. In other paintings of the later empire, the exploration of the experience of ordinary soldiers is given free rein. A

notable example is *The Wounded Cuirassier* (see Plate 24) by Theodore Géricault (1791–1824), which depicts a cavalryman retreating from battle and owes a considerable debt to the work of Gros. The latter undoubtedly did play an important role in the move towards a new and typically 'Romantic' concern with suffering and with subjective experience. The crucial point, however, is that the initiative for doing so came not from Gros himself but from the Napoleonic regime.

Click to see plate 24 Théodore Géricault, The Wounded Cuirassier, 1814, oil on canvas, 358 x 294 cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

4 The Decennial Competition of 1810

4.1 Inspiring loyalty to the leader

Official support for painting was motivated not simply by propaganda concerns but also by the belief that artistic achievements were crucial indicators of a regime's greatness. Part of the logic behind the emphasis on military painting, therefore, was the assumption that feats of arms and works of art *both* testified to the glory of Napoleonic rule. Traditionally, however, the most prestigious art form was the classical history painting, exemplified by David's *Oath of the Horatii* (Plate 1). As noted in the introduction to this course, the superior status of this type of painting rested both on its idealized forms and on its elevated subject matter. From the later eighteenth century, however, depictions of modern history were defended and promoted on the grounds that they were more accessible and more relevant to a contemporary audience. More specifically, the claim was that subjects from national history encouraged patriotism. During the Revolution, these tensions between the ancient and the modern intensified. On the one hand, classical idealism, which seemed to transcend the specificities of time and place, was felt to accord with its universalist ideals; on the other hand, the need to uphold loyalty to the revolutionary cause encouraged the depiction of its principal actors and events. These tendencies are combined in David's *Marat* (Plate *9*), which is as much a history painting as a portrait. The painting of national history triumphed under Napoleon, as revolutionary idealism (and republicanism) gave way to a pragmatic concern with promoting loyalty to himself as France's leader.

Click to see plate 1 Jacques-Louis David, The Oath of the Horatii, oil on canvas, 329.9 x 428.8 cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Click to see plate 9 Jacques-Louis David, The Death of Marat, 1793, oil on canvas, 160.7 x 124.8cm, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Bel

4.2 Purpose of the Decennial Competition

These tensions came to a head in the Decennial Competition of 1810, which was intended to reward the major artistic achievements of the decade since Napoleon came to power. Prizes were offered for the best history painting and for the best painting 'representing a subject honourable to the national character' (Wrigley, 1993, p.338). There were also prizes for sculpture and architecture. The jury consisted of members of the National Institute, the official body that regulated scholarship and the arts. In the first category, the front-runners were David's *Intervention of the Sabine Women* (see Plate 25) and *Scene from a Deluge* (see Plate 26), by Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson (1767–1824), another former David pupil. The fact that the decision went in favour of Girodet indicates how far taste had moved away from the formal perfection of the classical ideal. By contrast to David's *Sabines*, with its poised antique nudes and overall sense of harmony, Girodet's *Deluge* represented a new extreme of violence and suffering; the moment depicted is one of high tension, since the splitting branch warns us that the family are about to be hurled into the abyss. Although the nudity and generalized drapery are conventional enough, the scene is not based on a literary text, as history paintings were supposed to be. It is

tempting to speculate that Girodet's vision of humanity at the mercy of vast forces beyond their control had a particular resonance at the time, given that the French people were themselves helplessly caught up in the workings of the Napoleonic war machine.

Click to see plate 25 Jacques-Louis David, The Intervention of the Sabine Women, 1799, oil on canvas, 386 x 520 cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Click to see plate 26 Jacques-Louis David Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson, Scene from a Deluge, 1806, oil on canvas, 431 x 341 cm, Musée Magnin, Dijon. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

In the second category, it was widely expected that the prize would go to Gros's *Jaffa*, which can be seen to represent a fundamental challenge to the classical traditions of history painting. The heroic male nude who dominated Davidian painting is here transformed into a helpless plague victim; the central figure in Girodet's *Deluge* is similarly helpless, but the difference in this case is that Gros also offers a new kind of hero, the modern military officer, in his tight, bright uniform. A further point of contrast between these two types of figure is that, whereas the male nude is a supposedly universal figure, the military officer's uniform identifies him with the particular nation that he serves or, of course, leads. This opposition can be brought into focus by reference to Canova's huge sculpture, *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker* (see Plate 27), which had been begun in 1803 but only arrived in Paris in 1811. It flatteringly portrays Napoleon in the guise of the god of war turned peacemaker and, on the sculptor's insistence, heroically nude; Canova had rejected Napoleon's proposal that he be depicted in his uniform. The rationale was precisely that nudity best befitted the hero by making his glory timeless. Napoleon's refusal to let the statue go on display was no doubt because he feared that its 'too athletic' forms would present an unflattering contrast to his own short and increasingly stout figure (quoted in Johns, 1998, p.101). More fundamentally, in view of his original proposal, his response can be seen to reflect his resolutely modern, pragmatic outlook, which meant that he had little time for classical idealism as such.

Click to see plate 27 Antonio Canova, Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker, 1803, marble, Apsley House, London. Photo: Victoria and Albert Picture Library, London/ Daniel McGrath/ Sara Hodges

In the event, the jury decided that the prize in the second category should go to David for his *Coronation* (see Plate 28), which had been exhibited, like *Eylau*, at the Salon of 1808. There it had excited considerable interest, as Boilly recorded in one of his scenes of contemporary Parisian life (see Plate 29). In general, attendance figures for the Salon were high during the Napoleonic era, indicating that the regime's propaganda painting owed its success to the way it combined the traditional ambitions of high art with the spectacular appeal of popular entertainment. David had been commissioned to commemorate the coronation in his capacity as First Painter to the Emperor, a title he had been awarded in 1804. The title was a reversion to traditional royal practice (the Bourbon kings had also had their 'first painters'), just as the coronation ceremony itself was based on Bourbon ceremonial. The resulting painting demonstrates just how far the classical tradition had been undermined by the demands of Napoleonic propaganda. In it, David wholly abandons the visual austerity and sculptural simplicity of his earlier work in order to capture the magnificence of the ceremony in a riot of colour and a mass of detail. The actual moment that it depicts is crucial with respect to the new emperor's problems of political legitimation. Napoleon had had the Pope brought from Rome to crown him, but in the event, presumably partly to placate republican opinion by avoiding too overt connotations of divine right, placed the crown on his own head, thereby demonstrating that his ultimate source of legitimation was himself and his deeds. David originally

intended to paint this provocative, give-away gesture, but was discouraged from doing so and instead showed Napoleon crowning Josephine.

Click to see plate 28 Jacques-Louis David, The Coronation of Napoleon, 1802-07, oil on canvas, 621 x 979 cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

Click to see plate 29 Louis-Léopold Boilly, The Grand Salon of 1808, Viewing the David 'Crowning of Napoleon', 1808, oil on canvas, 60 x 81cm, Private Collection

In the end, the whole Decennial Competition collapsed and no prizes were awarded. First, the minister of the interior and then Napoleon himself challenged the jury's decisions, declaring that the winners ought to be David's *Sabines* and Gros's *Jaffa*. This turn of events confirms that competitions were inherently problematic for the regime because they did not allow for the degree of control that it required. It also suggests that the authorities felt obliged to pay lip-service (if no more) to the traditions of history painting and the superiority of the classical ideal, as exemplified by the *Sabines*. Napoleon also wanted the top prize to go to David as the greatest painter of the day, just as he wanted the main sculpture prize to go to Canova as the greatest sculptor (he had not then seen *Napoleon as Mars);* the acknowledgement of their genius would, he thought, do honour to the greatness of his rule. It also seems likely that the *Coronation* was considered an insufficiently patriotic picture to merit the other prize, given that all the other short-listed entries in the category focused on Napoleon's military exploits. *Jaffa* could be seen to be a truly national subject, dealing as it did with the achievements and suffering of the French people as represented by their army. By contrast, David's painting was primarily a dynastic picture, focusing as it did on the monarch, his wife and family. Part of the reason, in fact, that crowds gathered around it at the Salon was no doubt that the ceremony itself had been closed to the public. In the competition, as in Napoleonic propaganda painting generally, the regime's problems of legitimation made it politically necessary to balance ruler against people and, in however token a way, to represent them and their concerns as well as to glorify him.

5 Conclusion

The great advantage of history painting as a form of propaganda was that it could appear to be nothing of the kind. Whereas an official portrait of Napoleon fairly obviously served to focus loyalty towards the nation's leader, a depiction of a battle could be seen, on the one hand, as a work of art in its own right and, on the other, as an objective record of a historical event. This meant that the viewers whose attention was attracted by such a picture would be likely to absorb the version of reality that it presented without being aware of being manipulated. As we have seen, Napoleonic 'reality' involved extensive editing, both in terms of the selection of a particular moment and of the personages and actions to be included. A further example of this process is David's *Distribution of the Eagle Standards* (see Plate 30), exhibited at the Salon of 1810, which shows Napoleon accepting the army's oath of allegiance after his coronation; it was to have included Josephine seated on a throne behind Napoleon, but she had to be edited out after their divorce. In fact, this is widely considered to be one of David's weakest works. Part of the problem is that he had planned to depict a winged Victory flying over the heads of the soldiers and showering them with laurel leaves, but Napoleon compelled him to remove this figure too, with the result that the upper right of the composition appears strangely empty. The painting was poorly received by the critics, who found the balletic postures of the officers holding the eagle standards awkward and absurd. It succeeded neither as propaganda nor as a work of art.

Click to see plate 30 Jacques-Louis David, Distribution of the Eagle Standards, 1810, 610 x 931 cm, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon. Photo: © RMN/ P.Willi

Such interest and appeal as Napoleonic propaganda painting continues to have today depend on the extent to which it can be seen to transcend its original propaganda purpose – though, as we saw with Gros, this need not mean that it betrayed that purpose. The same might be said of another Napoleonic painting, Girodet's *Revolt at Cairo* (see Plate 31), also exhibited in 1810, the idea for which came from Napoleon himself and caused Denon some anxiety; he wrote that he wished the emperor had specified which moment of the revolt should be depicted. The subject – of insurgents resisting Napoleonic rule during the ill-fated Egyptian campaign – was disturbing and potentially subversive. Girodet's painting shows hand-to-hand combat in front of Cairo's main mosque; the composition sets a charging French hussar against a naked Arab warrior, who supports with one arm the collapsing body of a Mameluke. (Originating as Circassian slaves, the Mamelukes were a military order who dominated Egypt between the early thirteenth and nineteenth centuries. Renowned for being brave, fierce, proud and beautiful, for their lavish costume and their taste for sodomy, as such, they epitomized both the degradation and the fascination of the East for Europeans.)

Click to see plate 31 Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson, The Revolt at Cairo, 1810, oil on canvas, 365 x 500 cm, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library

The painting could be read as an endorsement of colonialism, glossing over the brutal repression of the revolt and opposing French bravery and dignity to 'Oriental' cruelty and vice. Alternatively, it could be argued that the Arab and the Mameluke together constitute the main positive element of the composition, providing visual appeal and emotional interest. It is hard to pin down the significance of this violent and exotic spectacle either way, as promoting or subverting Napoleonic rule, as presenting Orientals as objects of

disdain or desire. What does seem clear is that Girodet (who was probably homosexual and had royalist sympathies) brought his own personal agenda to the commission.

As we saw in the introduction with reference to Delacroix's *Massacres at Chios*, a concern with humble and anonymous figures, an interest in the exotic and the present-day and a fascination with violence and suffering are all characteristic of Romantic painting. In this respect, Girodet's painting represents a significant shift, despite retaining the hard-edged clarity and idealized nude bodies of Neoclassicism. More plausibly than with Gros, *The Revolt at Cairo* might be seen as embodying the artist's disaffection from the regime, his private concerns. Nevertheless, it remains the case that we are dealing here with official art, which allowed only to a limited extent for the expression of the concern with subjective experience that is fundamental to Romanticism. Equally, it is important to register that it would have been risky for an artist to give a critical edge to an officially commissioned work, given the highly repressive nature of the regime. This would have been especially true of paintings depicting Napoleon himself, such as *Jaffa* and *Eylau* or David's *Eagle Standards*, which has also been claimed to reveal the artist's disillusionment with Napoleon. According to the art historian who made this rather unlikely claim, David ‘used the deletions he was forced to make as an opportunity to render the composition even more politically and aesthetically subversive’ (Johnson, 1993, p.214). It is really only in English caricatures that we find a negative image of Napoleon (see Figure 5). Even after the fall of the empire, French representations are invariably positive, though now they showed him as a tragic hero, suffering in exile on St Helena, as well as continuing to promote the legend of the great leader who combined military genius with fellow-feeling for the common man.

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