

Video 2, band 2: Women and Portraiture in Napoleonic Europe

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Objectives

This programme looks at examples of female portraiture dating from c.1800–14 with reference to contemporary fashion and individual biographies, in order to shed light on the social and political status of women in Napoleonic Europe. After watching it and working through these notes, you should:

- 1 be able to apply the skills of visual analysis introduced in Unit 9 to a range of female portraits;
- 2 be able to discuss some of the ways in which the practice of portraiture and female fashion changed in the era of the French Revolution;
- 3 have an understanding of attitudes to and expectations of women in France in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries;
- 4 have some knowledge about women who achieved public prominence in France during the Napoleonic period.

Before viewing

This programme is intended to complement the emphasis in Block 2 on the historical and cultural significance of one man, Napoleon Bonaparte, by exploring contemporary conceptions and representations of femininity, together with the lives and achievements of a number of notable women of the period. Before watching the video, you should have read Units 7–8 and started to read Unit 9. In particular, you should have worked through section 2 of Unit 9 ('The portrait of Napoleon'), which will introduce you to conventions of masculine portraiture.

The programme

The programme falls roughly into three sections. The first explores the status of women, the practice of portraiture and changes in fashion in the aftermath of the French Revolution; the second is concerned with the women of Napoleon's own family, principally his first wife Josephine and his sisters Pauline and Caroline; the final section deals with the writer Germaine de Staël, one of Napoleon's foremost political opponents, whom you will have encountered in Units 7–8.

Among the paintings shown in this video are works by Jacques-Louis David and his former pupils, François Gérard and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres; you have already encountered all three of these artists in Unit 9. Also shown in the video is a sculpture by Antonio Canova, an example of whose work is discussed towards the end of Unit 9. The artists featured in the video also include a number of women, including Marie-Guillemine Benoist (1768–1826), who was herself one of David's former students, and Elisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun (1755–1842), who enjoyed an international reputation during this period.

The video also features a number of buildings with connections to some of the women discussed in it: the Château de Malmaison near Paris, which was the country house of the Empress Josephine; the Hôtel de Charost, Paris (now the British Embassy), which belonged to Pauline Bonaparte; the Villa Borghese, Rome, the family home of Pauline's husband, Prince Borghese; and the Château de Coppet near Geneva, the family home of Mme de Staël.

While viewing the video for the first time, don't try to make notes. You will probably need to watch it a second time, stopping and starting in order to make notes in answer to the questions below. Please bear in mind that you will not be able to answer the questions entirely on the basis of the spoken commentary but will also need to take account of the images you see.

After viewing

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- EXERCISE** How are women typically represented in the portraiture of the period, and in what ways might these conventions be seen to reflect contemporary notions of femininity? Consider the portrait type (full-length, etc.), pose, costume, props, etc. You will find it helpful to compare the female portraits shown in the video with the portraits of Napoleon discussed in Unit 9 and consider the differences (and also any similarities) between them.
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DISCUSSION So far as portrait type is concerned, it is apparent that women, like men, could be variously depicted full length, three-quarter length, etc. However, you might have noted that almost all the female full-length portraits show members of the Bonaparte family, the main exception being David's and Gérard's portraits of Mme Récamier, whose celebrated beauty gave her a comparable public status. A more modest three-quarter or half-length portrait might seem more appropriate to women's typically more private way of life; as we see in relation to Mme Rivière, this can be reinforced by a close-up focus.

With regard to pose, it is highly significant that women are frequently shown sitting down, even (as in the case of David's and Gérard's portraits of Mme Récamier and Prud'hon's of Josephine) when they are depicted in a grand full-length format. This can similarly be interpreted in terms of the prevailing expectation that women should be subordinate and passive. A major exception is Ingres's portrait of Caroline Murat but, as is noted in the video, this can be related to the political authority that Caroline was exercising at the time in her capacity as regent; you might have observed that there are certain points of resemblance between this portrait and Ingres's one of Napoleon as First Consul (in other words, in a similar official role).

As is pointed out, the portrait of Caroline differs from most of the others in the video not only in showing her standing but also in showing her dressed in black rather than white. On one level, as we see, the use of white as the main colour for women's dresses at the time reflects the classicizing ideals of the period, but it also, of course, has connotations of modesty and purity (as with wedding dresses today) which can be related to contemporary expectations of feminine behaviour.

The various props shown typically function as indicators of fashion, taste and luxury (most notably with the shawls worn by the majority of female sitters), but can also have a greater significance, as in Robert Lefèvre's portrait of Pauline Borghese and the anonymous portrait of Mme de Staël, in both of which the presence of a bust of the sitter's brother and father respectively testifies to her dutiful affection for the male head of the family. Other portraits of Mme de Staël are, however, exceptional in their emphasis on her own achievements. Moreover, the frank and lively portrayal of Staël by Vigée-Lebrun and the discomfiture this caused the sitter make clear that women were more usually portrayed as demure and pretty, as they were conventionally supposed to be.

EXERCISE In what ways did the women discussed in this video variously conform to or defy conventional notions of femininity? Consider too whether these notions applied to all women equally or to some women more than others.

DISCUSSION As a famous beauty, Mme Récamier certainly conformed to conventional expectations of ‘the fair sex’, but her close friendship with Mme de Staël and the fact that she visited the latter in exile at Coppet suggest that there was more to her than meets the eye. Mme Benoist clearly defied conventional expectations in having a public career as an artist, though the fact that she ultimately put her husband’s career before her own reveals that she did not entirely disregard convention. Her beauty certainly accorded with received notions of femininity, while the black servant whom she depicted was, it seems, barely perceived as a woman at all by contemporary commentators. By contrast, Mme Rivière can be assumed to have been not merely graceful and elegant (as she appears in her portrait) but also to have conformed completely to the conventional model of proper feminine conduct, leading an obscure life in the privacy of the home, given that the only information given about her is her husband’s profession.

Of the female members of the Bonaparte family, Josephine may have failed to meet Napoleon’s requirements by failing to give him an heir, but otherwise seems to have been fairly conventional. Both she and her sister-in-law Pauline can be seen to have internalized a particular feminine ideal by identifying with Venus, the classical goddess of love and beauty (Josephine in adopting the swan as her personal emblem, Pauline by having herself portrayed by Canova as Venus). Pauline, however, failed to conform to contemporary notions of wifely subordination and womanly modesty, though her scandalous behaviour (taking lovers and having herself portrayed nude by Canova) went unpunished, indicating that high status could enable a woman to defy convention with impunity. Her sister Caroline defied convention in a very different way, remaining a loyal wife but shocking contemporaries by assuming an influential political role.

Finally, Mme de Staël was undoubtedly the woman who, more than all the others, most consistently defied convention in the independence of her way of life and by playing a major political role through her opposition to Napoleonic rule. However, she remained to some extent constrained by convention, unable to shake off completely the conventional expectation that women should be beautiful and dutiful and achieve fulfilment through love (if not necessarily marriage, in her view) and motherhood.

Further reading

Fraisse, Geneviève and Perrot, Michelle (eds) (1995) *Emerging Feminism from Revolution to World War* (vol.4 of *A History of Women in the West* series), Cambridge, Mass. and London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Halliday, Tony (1999) *Facing the Public: Portraiture in the aftermath of the French Revolution*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

Hibbert, Christopher (2002) *Napoleon: His Wives and Women*, London, Harper Collins (a lightweight, gossipy biography).

Ockman, Carol (1995) *Ingres's Eroticized Bodies: Retracing the Serpentine Line*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press (chapter 2).

Ribeiro, Aileen (1995) *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France 1750–1820*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

Staël, Madame de (1998) *Corinne, or Italy*, trans. Sylvia Raphael, Oxford, Oxford University Press (Oxford World's Classics) (an extract from Book II, chapter 1, 'Corinne at the Capitol', is read on the video).

Illustrations shown on the video

Jacques-Louis David, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, oil on canvas, 1799, Louvre, Paris (Plate 9.25).

Anonymous, posthumous portrait of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, coloured etching, c.1790, AKG, London.

After Auguste-Marie Raffet, French revolutionary scene, engraving, c.1837, Mary Evans Picture Library, London.

After Philibert-Louis Debucourt, idealized depiction of a Parisian newstand during the French Revolution, from *La Nature*, 1791, engraving, Mary Evans Picture Library, London.

Jacques-Louis David, *Mme de Verninac*, oil on canvas, 1799, Louvre, Paris.

Elisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie-Antoinette*, oil on canvas, 1783, Schloss Museum, Darmstadt.

Jacques-Louis David, *Mme Récamier*, oil on canvas, 1800, Louvre, Paris.

François Gérard, *Mme Récamier*, oil on canvas, 1805, Louvre, Paris.

Antoine Monsaldy and Georges Devisme, *View of the Salon*, engraving, 1799, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Figure 9.1).

François Gérard, *The Painter Isabey and his Daughter*, oil on canvas, 1795, Louvre, Paris.

Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait of a Negress*, oil on canvas, 1800, Louvre, Paris.

François Gérard, *Mme Benoist*, drawing, 1799–1800, location unknown.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Mme Rivière*, oil on canvas, 1806, Louvre, Paris.

Jacques-Louis David, *The Coronation of Napoleon*, oil on canvas, 1805–7, Louvre, Paris (Plate 9.28).

Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, *The Empress Josephine*, oil on canvas, 1805, Louvre, Paris.

Robert Lefèvre, *Pauline Bonaparte*, oil on canvas, 1808, British Embassy, Paris, on loan from the Rayne Foundation.

Antonio Canova, *Pauline Borghese as Venus Victrix*, marble, 1805–8, Villa Borghese, Rome.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Queen Caroline Murat*, oil on canvas, 1814, private collection.

François Gérard, *Mme de Staël*, oil on canvas, 1817, Château de Coppet.
Nineteenth-century view of the Château de Coppet, engraving, Château de Coppet.

Eulalie Morin, *Mme Récamier*, oil on canvas, 1799, Château de Coppet.

Joseph-Siffred Duplessis, *Mme Necker*, oil on canvas, 1781, Château de Coppet.

Jean de Carmontelle, *Germaine Necker aged 14*, drawing in red chalk, c.1780, Château de Coppet.

Joseph-Siffred Duplessis, *Jacques Necker*, oil on canvas, 1781, Château de Coppet.

Anonymous, *Germaine de Staël next to a Bust of her Father*, oil on canvas, Château de Coppet (Figure 7.17).

Domenichino (Domenico Zampieri), *Sibyl*, oil on canvas, 1616–17, Villa Borghese, Rome.

François Gérard, *Corinne Improvising at Miseno*, oil on canvas, 1822, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon.

Elisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun, *Mme de Staël as Corinne*, oil on canvas, 1809, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva.

Firmin Massot (after Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun), *Mme de Staël as Corinne*, oil on canvas, Château de Coppet.

Anonymous, *Mme de Staël and her Daughter*, oil on canvas, c.1805, Château de Coppet.

Connections

The issues raised in this video are also relevant to other women who feature in the course. In thinking about how far these women conformed to or defied contemporary expectations of the female sex, you should bear in mind both their different national, social and political contexts and whether the women in question are historical individuals or visual/literary representations (though, of course, the representations feed into the reality of women's lives and vice versa). Other women who feature in the course include the female characters in *Don Giovanni* (Units 2–3); Mary Prince (Units 14–15); Jane Marcet (Units 20–21); Gretchen in *Faust* (Units 26–27); female visitors to Brighton (Unit 31) and the *Women of Algiers* by Delacroix (Video 4, band 3). You might also keep a look out for any other references to women, including writers such as Jane Austen as well as the patrons, wives and other women in the lives of the 'great men' who feature in the course, together with any allusions to the attitudes towards women held by these men.

Further connections can be made with different aspects of the course. The neoclassical style of the period, as evidenced by David's *Intervention of the Sabine Women* and the antique style in women's dress, exemplifies the classical idealism informing the French Revolution – see Block 1, Unit 6. The attitudes towards black people revealed by contemporary responses to Mme Benoist's *Portrait of a Negress* relate to the discussion of slavery in Block 3. The fashion for Indian shawls and the Egyptian style in interior decoration can be linked to the 'orientalist' vogue, which is further discussed in Block 7. The concern with private feeling and subjective experience apparent in Prud'hon's portrait of Josephine can be linked to the rise of Romanticism more generally.