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Truth, Fiction, and Image: Napoleon Bonaparte and the Changing Tides of Political Imagination

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The abdication of Napoleon Bonaparte after the disastrous Battle of Waterloo marked the end of many longstanding realities. The First French Empire came to an abrupt end, Napoleon relinquished his post as Emperor of the French, and he once again was exiled to a remote island, ending the period now known as the Hundred Days. Another end was in sight as well. For years, Napoleon used his political power to control the media and art in France, hiring an official artist of the state to create highly imaginative artistic interpretations of the emperor and his life’s events. However, after the decline of Napoleon, his portrayal in artwork and the media took a steady turn, portraying the man and the events in a more realistic and less visionary manner. The public image of Napoleon, long controlled by the Emperor himself, now fell to common artists, ending the period of state commissioned propaganda and allowing his image to shift drastically.

After his defeat at Waterloo and his subsequent abdication, exile, and death, the image of Napoleon as portrayed in popular artwork changed from a leader of godlike stature and heroic nature to a dejected, almost tragic ruler. This can be seen most clearly in the state propaganda created by artists such as Jacque-Louis David, Baron Antoine-Jean Gros, and Jean Auguste-Dominique Ingres, when contrasted with the later works of Paul Delaroche, J. M. W. Turner, and Jean-Leon Gerome.

After the violent unrest and savagery of the French Reign of Terror, in which 17,000 legal executions took place within the span of year, as well as an estimated 23,000 illegal executions, the French people were in dire need of leadership.1 Through his relatively brief but illustrious military career, Napoleon Bonaparte, at age twenty-six, rose to prominence in 1795 as France declared temporary peace with Prussia and Spain.2 However, in France, conflict still

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remained between the revolutionary government and the remaining royalists. After Napoleon successfully put down a violent royalist rebellion at the 13 Vendémiaire, he rose to the level of a national hero.³

After Napoleon’s defense of the new republic and its constitution, he was sent to Italy to lead the French Army against the Austrians. He once again proved himself especially skillful in military operations, forcing the Austrians in October of 1797 to sign the Treaty of Campo Formio. After his victory in Italy and subsequent Egyptian campaign, Napoleon returned to France in 1799 to resounding public support and approval.⁴

Despite his personal popularity, Napoleon found that the Directory was considered ineffective by the public in administering the government. Upon observing the continued unrest of the French people, Napoleon and three members of the Directory executed a coup d’état that dissolved the Council of Five Hundred, allowing Napoleon and two Directors to create the Consulate. The newly formed Consulate crafted another constitution, and Napoleon utilized his political savvy and legal writing skills to award disproportionate power to the First Consul, the position he himself held. The constitution was voted on by referendum and passed with near unanimous approval.⁵

As Napoleon consolidated power as First Consul, he began to take control over his own image. He used the immense powers given to him by the new constitution to impose state censorship of the media, as well as to commission state-sponsored artistic to portray him a flattering manner. These powers expanded even further in 1804 when he proclaimed himself Emperor of the French. The most prominent state propagandist employed by Napoleon was

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³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
Jacques-Louis David, a painter in the Neoclassical style of the late nineteenth century. David’s work emphasized Napoleon’s stature through the presentation of opulence, power, and drawing connections to legendary ancient rulers who led or established empires.

Jacques-Louis David’s most famous portrayal of Napoleon is *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, completed in 1801. This larger than life painting portrays a highly sensationalized version of events as Napoleon crossed the Swiss Alps through the St. Bernard Pass in 1800. Napoleon famously despised sitting for portraits, leaving David to rely on his imagination for the portrayal of Napoleon’s proportions, as well as many of the factual details of the event. “Once again, Napoleon was unwilling to pose, feeling it was the artist’s duty to present an idealization his subject, but he clearly stated that he was to be shown ‘calm on a spirited horse.’” Napoleon’s refusal to pose for the sketch or painting allowed David to portray him as taller, as well as more sprightly and youthful. There were other inaccuracies with the portrayal of the events of the St. Bernard Pass. While David’s work portrays Napoleon leading his men over the mountain, in reality, Napoleon trudged through the snow behind his troops. Additionally, David paints Napoleon on the back of a rearing white horse, while in his memoirs Bonaparte revealed that he rode on the back of a common mule.

Napoleon’s directions for David to portray him as “calm, on a fiery horse” demonstrate that he had a goal in mind for this painting. The clear and specific instructions that intentionally mislead from the true sequence of events indicate that Bonaparte meant for this painting to portray him as a bold and dynamic leader. After a decade of tumultuous leadership in France,

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6 See Appendix A.
9 Ibid.
Napoleon was aware of the significant need for asserting firm governance. This motivated him to methodically craft his public image as a strong, resolute leader in command of the nation.

David interpreted this intention successfully, drawing comparisons between Bonaparte and famous, ancient conquerors. In the bottom of left corner of the painting, David painted names on the rocks of the mountains. The name “Bonaparte” is inscribed next to the names “Karolus Magnus,” the Latin translation of Charlemagne, and “Hannibal.” By placing Bonaparte’s name near the names of legendary ancient leaders, David indicates that Napoleon’s legacy will be similarly impactful and long-lasting.10

Another iconic piece by David is *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries*, completed in 1812.11 The focus of this piece is portraying Napoleon as a dedicated servant of the public, not as a larger-than-life hero. In his analysis of the painting, Dr. Bryan Zygmont writes that “although he wears a military uniform, this is hardly a military portrait. He has discarded his officer’s sword—it rests on the chair on the right side of the painting—and Napoleon is shown doing the administrative work of a civic leader.”12 In order to craft this image of the devoted statesman, David includes details in the setting and Napoleon himself to show his dedication. Napoleon’s military uniform, along with his hair, is slightly disheveled. A cuff button is undone and his stockings and trousers are slightly wrinkled. In close observation of the background of the painting, one can see that the grandfather clock’s hands rest around 4:10. The low burning candles on the desk suggest that this scene more likely took place in early hours of the morning rather than the afternoon.13 David also painted a rolled scroll behind Napoleon reading the letters

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10 Pollitt.  
11 See Appendix B.  
13 Ibid.
“COD,” implying the task of his early morning vigil was the Napoleonic Code of law. All of this indicates David’s goal of representing Napoleon as a capable, just, and dedicated administrator. At its completion in 1812, Napoleon’s empire was faltering for the first time in nearly a decade. After a close defeat against the Austrians in 1811 and his disastrous attempt to invade Russia in 1812, the painting portrays his legislative strength as opposed to military prowess. This ensured that public image of Napoleon remained balanced.\textsuperscript{14}

The intentional image Napoleon was cultivating can also be seen clearly in the work of Baron Antoine-Jean Gros. A student of David’s, he was commissioned to travel with Napoleon on his early expeditions to paint scenes from his foreign tours. Gros, like David, portrayed an idealized version of events, however his artwork depicts Napoleon as a figure of Christlike divinity as opposed to a classical ancient hero. In his piece \textit{Napoleon Visiting the Plague Stricken in Jaffa}, completed in 1804, Gros crafted an image of Napoleon performing a corporal act of mercy, using Christian imagery to promote the image of the recently proclaimed Emperor.\textsuperscript{15} After the violent invasion of Jaffa by Napoleon’s troops in 1799, many French soldiers contracted the bubonic plague. In this scene, Napoleon is reflected visiting the quarantined troops in the makeshift hospital. In the background, a pillar of smoke from a cannon or a fire rises behind the flying French tricolor, suggesting the recent seizure of the city. This, along with Napoleon’s decorated military uniform, demonstrate the military force of the empire and its leader, but it is the center of the painting that emphasizes the personal merit of Napoleon himself.

Gros paints Napoleon directly between the background, showing the conquered city of Jaffa, and the foreground, showing the sick and dead bodies of infected soldiers. Napoleon is

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} See Appendix C.
standing in a beam of perfect light, as though the heavens are shining down on him. Napoleon’s attendants stand behind him, covering the mouths with cloths to avoid exposure to the plague, yet despite his aides reluctance to be near the infected, Napoleon extends his hand and touches one of the infected men. This powerful image of his willingness to touch a plague stricken man directly references the Biblical stories of Christ healing the sick, wounded, and dead by simply touching them. This Christlike representation of Napoleon was intended to emphasize his humanity and compassion, aspects of his character that, in 1804, Napoleon would publicize to further garner public support for the empire and his role as the self-proclaimed emperor.

Gros maintained his pattern of portraying Napoleon with Christian imagery in his piece Napoleon on the Battlefield of Eylau, completed in 1808.¹⁶ In this piece, painted just a year after the events during the Battle of Eylau, Gros employed similar motifs to those used in his earlier work involving Napoleon. The first is the use of the background to set the scene. The dark pillars of smoke rising from the seemingly endless snowy horizon imply the ruin brought by the conflict of the French and Russian forces. Similar to Napoleon Visiting the Plague Stricken in Jaffa, Gros places the bodies of the dead and ailing in the foreground of the work, placing Napoleon in the center level of the painting. In this piece, Gros continues to emphasize the heroic, humane, and divine nature of Napoleon, depicting him riding a white horse, a common artistic symbol of heroism. Napoleon’s gesture is that of a priest blessing a congregation, extended in benediction over the wounded troops. “With a gesture of benediction he appears not as the triumphant general but as a humanitarian.”¹⁷ The Battle of Eylau was not like the decisive wins of Napoleon’s earlier exploits. While estimates vary, historians place the loss of life at nearly

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¹⁶ See Appendix D.
¹⁷ Munhall, 8.
The battle was not a clear victory for the French, and Napoleon was eager to publicize his personal merit, leading him to commission Gros just months after the battle to portray the harsh realities of the battle contrasted with Napoleon’s divine personal qualities, offering absolution for the fallen soldiers of the empire.

Along with imagery of the war hero, the civil servant, and the Christ-like humanitarian, Napoleon was portrayed as a powerful regal emperor, on par with the crowned heads of the monarchial societies of Europe. This type of imagery is most apparent in the work of prominent Napoleonic propagandist Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, who included symbols of opulence in his portrayals of the emperor to emphasize the splendor Napoleon brought to the nation as a whole, as well as authoritative imagery to stress Napoleon’s rightful claim to the throne. In his 1806 piece *Napoleon on the Imperial Throne*, Ingres highlights the lavishness of the emperor and his nation through the imagery of the setting and costume. In this portrayal, Napoleon dons an ermine fur, red-violet velvet robes, and wields a jewel encrusted sword, all items of significant value. These vestments of wealth, paired with Ingres’ choice to have his subject directly face the viewer of the painting, create a striking visual. Edgar Munhall explains the effect of the visual details more fully as he states:

Napoleon’s head appears in strict frontal symmetry, icily focused ahead. From this fixed point stream the accoutrements of his office, a movement directed by the ermine spots arranged in a radiating perspective from the head: the muffled velvets deeply embroidered with imperial insigniae, the traditional main-de-justice; the glowing orbs of the the throne, and the Roman imperial details set into its arms.

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19 See Appendix E.
20 Munhall, 7.
Ingres also emphasizes the powerful legal and political stature of Napoleon through the details painted on the ornate rug underneath the emperor’s throne. Directly in front of where Bonaparte sits is the embroidered imperial eagle, a symbol of strength and power in the ancient Greek tradition. On the left side of the eagle, Ingres added another significant detail to the rug through the inclusion of the scales of justice, representing the emperor’s dedication to law.

However, as in all politics, propaganda can only go so far. Following Napoleon’s efforts to reclaim his empire in the period now known as the Hundred Days, the imagery of the emperor saw a dramatic shift. No longer was Napoleon infallible, and common artists reflected this consciousness of imperfection in a way the state-sponsored propagandists could not. After the French defeat at Waterloo, Napoleon’s abdication, and his subsequent death, while immense public interest in Napoleon remained, the portrayal of the emperor in European artwork of the 19th century moved towards a more abstract, contemplative, and realistic depiction. The best examples of this change are found in the works of Paul Delaroche, J. M. W. Turner, and Jean-Leon Gerome.

Paul Delaroche painted Bonaparte’s appearance as haggard and unimpressive, emphasizing the realities of the events he portrayed. In his painting *Napoleon Abdicating*, he portrays the emperor, “defeated, and already abandoned by many of erstwhile supporters, here he is alone in his private apartments in Fontainebleau, staring destiny in the face. He sees glory turn its back on him and understands that his fall is close.” In deep contrast to his usual position --

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22 Ibid.
23 See Appendix F.
standing upright, sitting on a throne or on the back of a horse -- Delaroche paints Napoleon slumping in his seat in his apartment. His boots are muddied, his papers are thrown haphazardly on the bench behind him, and his bicorne has been dropped on the floor by his feet. Through this display of Napoleon facing failure, Delaroche's work represents the shift from the glorious, near divine portrayals of Napoleon to a more realistic perspective of a failed empire and emperor.

In *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps*, Delaroche created a direct antithesis to the Jacques-Louis David work of a similar title. While David portrays Napoleon on the back of a rearing white horse, Delaroche favored the historically accurate account of Napoleon trudging up the snowy mountain on the back of a common mule. As opposed to his ornate military uniform and billowing cape, Delaroche portrays Napoleon in a more practical heavy gray overcoat, with no symbol of rank outside his bicorne. The proud gestures and expressions of David’s work are replaced by Delaroche with simple and solemn facial expressions, and a subdued position on the back of the mule. No longer god-like, Napoleon is simply a man, as subject to the harsh natural world as any other.

Decades after Napoleon’s death, British artist J. M. W. Turner favored a more abstract representation of the emperor, as seen in *War. The Exile and the Rock Limpet*, completed in 1842. The scene Turner paints takes place after Napoleon’s second abdication and exile, on the distant island of St. Helena, where the emperor would live until his death in 1821. In the painting, Bonaparte is only recognizable by his distinctive military uniform and bicorne, as his size in the painting is too small to distinguish details of his physical appearance. Turner contrasts Napoleon’s reduced size through his placement behind the large, reflective body of water, which

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25 See Appendix G.  
26 Munhall, 6.  
27 See Appendix H.
he stares across at a limpet naturally overtaking a rock. Behind Napoleon’s reflection, Turner paints the military guard assigned to watch over him, a constant reminder of his own captive exile. One of the most effective aspects of Turner’s work in this piece is his choice to stray from the Neoclassical style that many of his contemporaries employed when portraying Napoleon, opting for a more abstract romantic approach. The streaked, ombré sunset creates a blood red horizon, suggesting not just the violence of Napoleon’s reign, but the inevitable end in sight during his time on St. Helena. Turner’s negative portrayal of Napoleon is unsurprising coming from a British artist, but the somber, melancholy mood of the painting speaks to a deeper shift in the common thoughts around Napoleon.

In perhaps the most striking of Napoleon’s posthumous representations, Jean-Leon Gerome portrayed Napoleon in *Bonaparte Before the Sphinx.* In the piece, Napoleon sits alone on his horse before the Sphinx of Giza, staring contemplatively at the shattered visage of the monument to a once-great empire. Gerome guides focus directly towards the sphinx by excluding the pyramids from the scene, as well as using a simple, consistent background of desert. Upon its exhibition in the Paris Salon, the New York Times commented on Gerome’s composition of the piece. “Not even the Pyramids are shown -- only the cloudless sky, the smooth sand, from whose drifts the gigantic visage rears itself and the solitary, self-communing man.” Gerome’s use of a simple background focuses the viewer’s attention upon the two opposing subjects, Napoleon and the Sphinx. The New York Times also commented on the mood evoked by the solitary horse, the young general with his back to the viewer, and the broken countenance of the ancient monument. “The young Corsican, seated on his horse, is gazing in

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28 See Appendix I.
mediation upon the enormous enigmatic face of stone, that strange memorial of titanic ambitions, of forgotten sovereigns of a vanished race. His arms are folded and he is alone.” Gerome painting Napoleon pondering the Sphinx implies that the artist was drawing parallels to the Egyptian empire and the French empire, suggesting that Napoleon’s triumphs and travails would one day be as distant and antiquated as the ancient Egyptians and their contemporaries seemed to him.

While Delaroche, Turner, and Gerome’s honest and reflective portrayals of Napoleon are surely more realistic, it remains the Herculean and epic representations created by David and others that come to mind when most Napoleonic art is considered. The meteoric rise of Napoleon as the French sought leadership after a tumultuous decade lended itself to a romantic aspirationalism. Although the end of Napoleon’s life was complicated with many controversial decisions, the early years of his time in power were successful and represented a time of great territorial expansion and political power for the French. This history allows the modern world to retain a sentimental view of Napoleon, manifesting in nostalgic commemoration of the favorable representations of the military genius and self-proclaimed emperor. This sentimental view of the Napoleon even causes national mood swings in France, where the sales of Napoleon paraphernalia rise around the anniversaries of his birth, death, or consecration as emperor.31

Another possible explanation for the widespread recognition of David’s work and that of the other propagandists is the automatic tendency to mythologize famous leaders, and the epic nature of Napoleon’s spectacular rise, fall, return, and final decline. David’s work, as well as the work of his state-employed contemporaries, certainly evoked legendary imagery surrounding

30 Ibid.
Bonaparte’s life’s events. While their portrayals may be unrealistic, they are more idyllic, sentimental, and sensational, naturally entertaining to an audience who is eager to imagine a myth rather than a man.

Napoleon’s use of artistic propaganda and his promotion of complimentary imagery extended the role of media, imagery, and propaganda for his own political purposes. It is today not so different from the staged photo-ops employed by modern political leaders. The public’s opinion of Napoleon Bonaparte has never been simple, but the shift in artistic representation of the Emperor after his defeat at Waterloo, his exile, and death is apparent. The state employed artists during his time as First Consul and Emperor produced propaganda portraying Napoleon as an administrator, hero, saint, and god. After his decline, artists decades later began portraying the Emperor in a more realistic manner, often painting him in deep reflection upon his own legacy and deeds. The current political climate in America and abroad, where there seems to be no lack of egocentric leaders, begs the question of whether, two centuries from now, the world will remember the men and women, or the myths.
Appendix A

_Bonaparte Crossing the Alps_, David.\(^{32}\) 1801.

Appendix B

*The Emperor in His Study at the Tuileries*, David. 1812.\(^{33}\)

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Appendix C

_Napoleon Visiting the Plague Stricken at Jaffa_, Gros. 1804.\(^{34}\)

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Appendix D

*Napoleon on the Battlefield of Eyalu*, Gros. 1807.35

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Appendix E

*Napoleon on His Imperial Throne*, Ingres. 1806.

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Appendix F

*Napoleon Abdicating*, Delaroche. 1840.37

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Appendix G


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Appendix H

War. The Exile and the Rock Limpet, Turner. 1842.  \(^{39}\)

Appendix I

*Bonaparte Before the Sphinx*, Gerome. 1886. ⁴⁰

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