

Get Off Your High Horse and Onto a Mule: An Exploration of David and  
Delaroche's Interpretation of Napoleon's Legacy



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Napoleon Bonaparte is one of the most recognizable historical figures of all time. His image is iconic, with his bicorne hat and military uniform easily recognizable by the



Figure 1. *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* by Jacques Louis David



Figure 2. *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* by Paul Delaroche

general public. What is striking is that despite the fact that Napoleon is a well known figure, he has no “true” or “accurate” depiction. His image is self-made, carefully curated as propaganda as he even refused to sit for portraits. He wanted close control of how the public perceived him, so his portraits are not precise and his appearance shifts from artist to artist.

Because of this fluid and dynamic portrayal, the legacy of Napoleon has shifted and changed with the culture, easily adaptable to suit the needs of society.

These multiple versions of the emperor can best be seen between the paintings done by Jacques Louis David and Paul Delaroche. Both artists painted Napoleon crossing St. Bernard Pass during the Second Italian Campaign of 1800. David painted his *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (Figure 1) from 1800-1801, while Delaroche painted his *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* (Figure 2) from 1848-1850. While

they show the same events, the paintings differ greatly, showcasing how the view of Napoleon

changed greatly in just 50 years and indicates an overall larger shift in society.

In David's first version of *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, he paints Napoleon on a striking white horse. Napoleon and his horse are centered on the canvas, taking up a majority of the painting. The horse is rearing upwards, while Napoleon sits on it, calm and collected. He is wearing a French general's uniform, in brilliant blue with red accents with one of his famous bicorne and a red, white, and blue cockade. His cape flows dramatically behind him, following the same upwards movement as his right hand, which is pointed up towards the heavens. His other hand is calmly grasping the reins. The general is looking at the viewer, but he is depicted as being distanced from the audience, cold and aloof. His expression is placid, in complete control. In the foreground, the name 'Bonaparte' is carved into the rock, next to the names 'Karolus Magnus' and 'Hannibal.' Further behind Napoleon, seven men in French uniform with a cannon can be seen trekking their way uphill to the left of the painting. In the background, the rocky Alps cut a diagonal across the canvas, separating the earth and the dusky orange, clouded sky.

Delaroche's *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* varies greatly from David's. While the soon to be Emperor is also centered on the canvas, he takes up less of the composition. Another key difference is that he is riding a mule instead of a horse. Next to him is a peasant guide who has a walking stick in one hand and is leaning on the mule for support. On the left of the canvas, Napoleon's convoy is behind him, being buffeted by the wind. Napoleon's expression is troubled, melancholy, and thoughtful. He is no longer the confident general of David's painting, instead he is equally subjected to the harsh weather. While he is wearing his famous bicorne, he is wearing his gray

overcoat instead of the flowing cape. The Alps dominate the background, covered in white snow that brightens the canvas.

David's and Delaroche's Napoleon differ in appearance because they reflect the change in Napoleon's legacy as public perception of him shifted from an infallible political icon to a flawed human. This change reflected the broader cultural shift in art from the Neoclassical to the Romantic periods, but it also demonstrates the fluid nature of Napoleon's use as a political symbol and as a representation of the nature of humanity itself.

## **Historical Context**

Jacques Louis David was born on August 30th, 1748 in Paris, France. His family was wealthy and he was exposed to the art world at a young age because his mother was from a family of architects and his father was a successful tradesman. Through these connections, he was able to get an education at the College de Beauvais and the College des Quatre Nations.<sup>1</sup> However, instead of becoming an architect, he wanted to become an artist. He was mentored by a Neoclassical artist, Joseph-Marie Vien, and got the opportunity to study in Rome for five years after finally winning the Prix de Rome, a major art competition. He returned to Paris in 1780 and made his name at the Salons of 1781-1789, establishing his position at the Académie des Beaux-Arts (otherwise referred to as The Academy.)<sup>2</sup> The Academy was a government institution that had huge control and influence over the art movements and communities in France, able to promote their own rigid ideas of visual art by overseeing the education of artists

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Roberts, *Jacques-Louis David, Revolutionary Artist: Art, Politics, and the French Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, 5.

at its school, the *Ecole des Beaux Arts*, and allowing members to showcase their work at the yearly exhibition, the Salon.<sup>3</sup> This organization granted David a high ranking position that allowed him to mentor other young artists.<sup>4</sup>

However, it was during this time that political tensions increased dramatically in France. Through bread riots, economic woes, and protests, the rift between the monarchy and the Third Estate (those who were not a part of the aristocracy or clergy) came to a head on June 20th 1789 with the Oath of the Tennis Court, where the Third Estate swore to write a new constitution for France. The storming of the Bastille followed a month later on July 14th and the French Revolution had begun.

During this time period, David was not a passive viewer to the Revolution. He was in fact an avid supporter of the cause, serving a term as president for both the National Convention and the Jacobin Club, and held seats on the Committee of General Security and the Committee of Public Instruction.<sup>5</sup> It was also during this volatile time, that David shifted subject matters, because although he was trained in history painting, a genre of art that usually portrayed moments from ancient Greek or Rome history or mythology, he instead depicted the contemporary. His unfinished sketch *Oath of the Tennis Court* (1794) and *Death of Marat* (1793) portrayed intense pro-revolution sentiments, and made him a powerful ally to Robespierre. This partnership did not last, as the Reign of Terror ended with Robespierre's execution on July 28th 1794 during the Thermidorian Reaction. Although David promised Robespierre he would die with him, the artist did not show up to the meeting of the Convention on 9 Thermidor and narrowly

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<sup>3</sup> "French Academy of Fine Arts Academie Royale De Peinture Et De Sculpture," French Academy of Fine Arts: History, Salon Controversy, accessed November 27, 2021, <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/french-academy.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, 5.

escaped the guillotine.<sup>6</sup> However, David was arrested and imprisoned twice, once in 1794 and again in 1795. He later was freed of all charges on October 2nd, 1795.

It was under the Directory, the new French government, where David painted *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799) which was in a newly developed art style. David turned from his highly developed Roman style of painting and was instead inspired by a more Greek look, due to the writings of J. J. Winckelmann. Winckelmann was an archaeologist whose book, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (The History of Art in Antiquity) was incredibly influential and touted the aesthetic superiority of the Greeks. He believed that ideals triumphed over nature and that perfect beauty was a concept achievable in the mind, promoting the position of man.<sup>7</sup> This Greek style of art was depicted by David through nudity and stationary poses which emphasized the purity of humanity.<sup>8</sup>

In 1796, David was introduced to a young general who was on the rise. After the successful siege of Toulon and putting down a revolt in the streets of Paris, Napoleon Bonaparte was on campaign in Italy when David first inquired about the layout of the Battle of Lodi for a possible battle painting.<sup>9</sup> The proposed painting turned into the *Unfinished Portrait of General Bonaparte* (1798). While this occurred, David “moved with the flow of history” and was swayed over to Bonaparte’s side.<sup>10</sup>

Bonaparte was a shrewd figure, eager to gather artists and philosophers around him in order to shape his image as a humble student rather than that of a ruthless conqueror. Through David, Napoleon was able to carefully craft the way the French

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<sup>6</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, 95.

<sup>7</sup> Cybele Gontar, “Neoclassicism,” Metmuseum.org, October 2003, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/neoc\\_1/hd\\_neoc\\_1.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/neoc_1/hd_neoc_1.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, 114.

<sup>9</sup> Philippe Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 25.

<sup>10</sup> Bordes, *Empire to Exile*, 25.

people saw him. After a successful campaign in Italy and a less successful campaign in Egypt, Bonaparte was ready to overthrow the Directory, and through the help of Abbé Sieyès, he established himself as First Consul in 1799. In 1802 he became First Consul for life. Finally in 1804, Napoleon crowned himself as emperor of the French. As emperor, Napoleon consolidated and standardized laws under the Napoleonic Code which promoted meritocracy over class status. He also settled the revolt in the Vendée and made peace with the Catholic Church. However, he also reinstituted slavery in the French colonies and limited women's rights. Over the course of his ten year reign as emperor, he was also almost constantly at war against the other European nations who saw his existence as a threat. Throughout this period, he used art as a tool for propaganda to win the affection of the French people.

Despite his attempts to disengage himself from political figures, David attached himself to Napoleon. However, unlike with Robespierre, David stepped back from the political world and “served Napoleon as an artist only.”<sup>11</sup> The artist, though, desired an important position, rejecting the title of Government Painter in 1800, but accepting the better role of First Painter of the Empire in 1804. He willingly painted for Napoleon and the French government, producing such works as *The Coronation of Napoleon* (1806), *The Distribution of the Eagle Standards* (1810), and *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries* (1812). When Napoleon returned from his first exile on the Isle of Elba, David rejoined him, which put him in a dangerous position after Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo. David was offered amnesty but preferred to enter self exile and he fled to Belgium where he stayed in Brussels until he died in 1825.

During Napoleon's imperial reign, David painted *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*

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<sup>11</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, 142.

(also known as *Napoleon at St. Bernard Pass*.) It was originally commissioned by King Charles IV of Spain in 1800, and Napoleon immediately ordered another copy for himself.<sup>12</sup> Both paintings were completed in the following year and were showcased together. Five copies in total were made and distributed to their respective buyers. The first copy was given to Charles IV and was hung in the Royal Palace of Madrid, before Spain was taken over by Joseph Bonaparte and the painting was transferred to Paris and currently hangs at Château de Malmaison, Josephine's rural house.<sup>13</sup>

Paul Delaroche was born on July 17th, 1797, 49 years after David's birth. Originally trained as a landscape painter at L'École des Beaux-Art, he was not interested in the genre and left to train under Antoine Gros, one of David's most successful pupils who took over David's art studio and school, to learn history painting.<sup>14</sup> His first breakout work was *Joan of Arc in Prison* (1825), which was showcased during the 1824 Salon. Delaroche was seen as a new type of artist who successfully integrated and promoted the Romantic style of painting.<sup>15</sup> He had many successful Salon exhibitions from 1824 to 1837 featuring art from English history, including: *Death of Elizabeth* (1828), *Princes in the Tower* (1831), and *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*. However, the Salon of 1837 was the last one Delaroche participated in, as he entered self exile out of protest against the "disproportionate attacks" experienced by artists from critics, which was also credited as the cause of the suicide of Delaroche's teacher, Gros.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, 143.

<sup>13</sup> Bordes, *Empire to Exile*, 88.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Bann and Paul Delaroche, *Paul Delaroche: History Painted* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 35.

<sup>15</sup> Bann, *Delaroche: History Painted*, 71.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Hackmann, "Contrived Resemblance: Delaroche and Napoleon," *Journal for Art Market Studies* 2, no. 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.23690/jams.v2i4.54>.



Delaroche turned his attention to foreign markets through the help of Goupil, an auction house and art dealership. Goupil began a new policy where “the firm began by marketing the drawings and small-scale paintings prepared for the use of engravers,” which allowed Delaroche’s work to reach a wider audience and popularized his work even further, particularly in England.<sup>17</sup> Through the patronage of wealthy English aristocrats, Delaroche was able to create a four part Napoleon series of paintings which include: *Napoleon in his Study* (1838), *Napoleon at Fontainebleau* (1845), *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1848-1850), and the incomplete *Napoleon at Saint Helena* (1855), as Delaroche passed away before completing the final painting.

During Delaroche’s lifetime, there were several revolutions taking place in France. While the Old Regime returned to power with the Bourbon Restoration in 1814, they were not in charge for long, as the July Revolution deposed the Bourbon monarchy of its power in 1830. Next, the July Monarchy was installed, led by Louis Philippe.

Louis Philippe attempted to gain popularity by celebrating and consolidating all of French history. He introduced several projects that attempted to wrestle with the Napoleonic legacy, including bringing back Napoleon’s body from Saint Helena and promoting art of Napoleon for the newly opened Versailles museum. During the 1830s, France was still heavily divided between several opposing groups including the monarchists, Bonapartists, and revolutionaries. Louis Philippe believed he could get the Bonapartists on his side by remembering the fallen emperor.<sup>18</sup> This only encouraged the spread of the Napoleonic legacy, as the cult of Napoleon gained many followers during

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Bann, “Delaroche, Napoleon and English Collectors,” *Apollo* 162, no. 524 (October 2005): pp. 24-31, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Stanley Mellon, “The July Monarchy and the Napoleonic Myth.” *Yale French Studies*, no. 26 (1960). 72.

this time period as youths attempted to emulate Napoleon's personality and appearance.<sup>19</sup>

However, like Louis Philippe's predecessor, the July Monarchy did not last long. The French Revolution of 1848 occurred, and the Second Republic formed. The elected president was Napoleon I's nephew, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte. Later on, in 1852, he consolidated power and declared himself the Emperor of France.

The Revolution of 1848 and subsequent Second Empire troubled Delaroche greatly who was concerned about the position of artists. He especially was worried about the young painters that he taught due to the unstable nature of state funded patronage during this time.<sup>20</sup> Through the combined stress of the Revolution of 1848 and the death of his wife in 1835, he was in poor health. He died in 1856.

There are two different versions of Delaroche's *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps*, and there is a slight controversy over which one was painted first. It has now been determined that the first painting was originally owned by someone in the United States and eventually wound up in the hands of John Naylor, a Liverpool banker who was collecting art for his estate. The second copy was owned by the Third Earl of Onslow, Arthur George. Onslow recorded a story that he and Delaroche were viewing David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* at the Louvre, and Onslow challenged Delaroche to make a realistic version of David's work.<sup>21</sup> However, David's work was never showcased during the time period where this supposed interaction took place.<sup>22</sup> The meeting still could have taken place, albeit at another time and location.

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<sup>19</sup> Hackmann. "Contrived Resemblance: Delaroche and Napoleon," 10.

<sup>20</sup> Bann, "Delaroche, Napoleon and English Collectors," 28.

<sup>21</sup> Bann, "Delaroche, Napoleon and English Collectors," 30.

<sup>22</sup> Bann, "Delaroche, Napoleon and English Collectors," 30.

## Historiography

There are two trends seen in the scholarship of both David and Delaroche. The first are the more generalized biographies, of which there is more for David than Delaroche. The second is the more intense analysis of a particular painting or paintings of the artists. Both artists have been compared to each other, but only in passing, usually contrasting Delaroche's Napoleon series to David's work. While there has been research done on each artist individually with a cultural lens, there has been no in depth study done that compares the two paintings and connects the differences to wider cultural movements.

There is a wide assortment of general biographies written about David.<sup>23</sup> The same cannot be said for the more in-depth analysis of the artist's paintings done for Napoleon. There is surprisingly little scholarship written about David's Napoleonic portraits, especially *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, as most attention is focused on works done during the French Revolution, such as *Oath of the Horatti* (1784) and *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons* (1789).<sup>24</sup> Overall, scholars are in agreement that David's work for Napoleon was for the purposes of propaganda. However, there has been some debate about the extent of David's personal feelings towards the Napoleonic Empire, with some authors arguing that David only supported Napoleon for the payment while others believe he fully believed in the Napoleonic cause.

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<sup>23</sup> Another more generalized biography about David includes *Jacques Louis David* by Anita Brookner who takes a more psychological look at David's paintings and examines the connection of art and society

<sup>24</sup> Some articles include: "Crafting the Neoclassical: Two New Drawings for Jacques-Louis David's 'The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons'" by Perrin Stein and "The Artistic Evolution of David's Oath" by F. Hamilton Hazlehurst

One larger book looking at David's overall life is *Jacques Louis David Revolutionary Artist: Art, Politics, and the French Revolution* by Warren Roberts. Roberts was a historian who worked as a professor of history at the University of Albany.<sup>25</sup> His goal with his book is to examine David's "entire life and work historically," paying particular attention to how politics shaped David's paintings.<sup>26</sup> He uses David to explore the connections between politics and art in order to "understand and explain an artist whose entire career was filled with controversy."<sup>27</sup> Another noteworthy point is that Roberts also believes that David served Napoleon "only in artistic capacity" by limiting his involvement with the administration, citing the many financial disputes and the interpersonal struggles David had while working with both Napoleon and his family as evidence.<sup>28</sup> By framing his biography in a political context, Roberts is able to show that David was a man deeply impacted by the movements of his time and that David's relationship with Napoleon differed heavily compared to his relationship with Robespierre.

Philippe Bordes' work *Jacques Louis David: Empire to Exile* is an alternative way to examine the life of David. Bordes is an art historian who teaches modern art history at the Université Lyon who also previously worked at the Museum of the French Revolution and has written about the French Revolution in relation to modern day museum work.<sup>29</sup> In this book, which is more like a catalogue, Bordes takes a more focused look by examining the art David painted in the second half of his career with a particular interest in David's work under Napoleon. He attempts to revise "the general

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<sup>25</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, Back of book.

<sup>26</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, x.

<sup>27</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, xi.

<sup>28</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, 142.

<sup>29</sup> "Philippe Bordes: Larhra," Accueil, accessed November 27, 2021, <http://larhra.ish-lyon.cnrs.fr/membre/90>.

balance of the biographical and artistic narrative,” since Bordes notes that more scholarship has been done on David’s art from the 1780s than the latter half of his career. The goal of the book is to “let the viewer feel he or she gains a closer understanding of David’s art and the workings of his creative imagination.”<sup>30</sup> Bordes takes a differing approach to Roberts as he believes that David was far more involved and enraptured by Napoleon. He argues that “David’s alignment could not be reduced to an appetite for honors and rewards.”<sup>31</sup> Bordes’ places a much larger focus on the art itself, discussing what other pieces influenced and impacted David and goes into greater details about the technical aspects of the paintings themselves.

On the other hand, only one recent biography has been published for Delaroche.<sup>32</sup> *Paul Delaroche: History Painted* is a book by Stephen Bann who is a professor of the history of arts at the University of Bristol who focuses on the visual culture of nineteenth century Britain and France.<sup>33</sup> He attempts to narrate and analyse Delaroche’s “major paintings in terms of their themes, structures, and strategies.”<sup>34</sup> Bann not only looks at how cultural and societal shifts played an important role in Delaroche’s art, but he also paid close attention to the artist’s inner psyche, arguing that the Napoleon series in particular shows a darker reflection of how Delaroche viewed himself.

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<sup>30</sup> Bordes, *Empire to Exile*, xii.

<sup>31</sup> Bordes, *Empire to Exile*, 40.

<sup>32</sup> Another earlier biography includes *Paul Delaroche: a study in nineteenth-century French history painting* by Norman D Ziff which was his dissertation and Stephen Bann also wrote an article entitled “Delaroche, Napoleon, and English Collectors” that provides a more in depth narrative on Delaroche’s Napoleon series

<sup>33</sup> “Stephen Bann,” Clarkart, accessed November 27, 2021, <https://www.clarkart.edu/fellow/detail/stephen-bann>.

<sup>34</sup> Bann, *History Painted*, 10.

There has been more analytical work on certain aspects of Delaroche's work, especially in regard to Delaroche's deeper purpose in his depiction of Napoleon. Scholars have proposed several reasons as to why Delaroche's Napoleon differs from previous versions but no conclusive answer has been made. One theory was posited by Francis Haskell in his article "The Manufacture of the Past in Nineteenth-Century Painting" in which he discusses the evolution of history painting. By examining French history paintings from before the French Revolution to the time of Louis Philippe, Haskell argues that political events, specifically Napoleon, started the trend of going against Neoclassical themes of antiquity which prompted the beginning of the Romantic period.<sup>35</sup> He believes that eventually, history paintings began depicting scenes with more realism and Delaroche painted Napoleon in such a way in order to present "things as they really happened."<sup>36</sup>

However, not all scholars believe that Delaroche's portrayal of Napoleon was simply out of the need for realism. Another study combining the evolution of the genre of history painting and Delaroche is "Histoire anecdotique—the people's history? Gras and Delaroche" by Derin Tanyol, who is an art historian and museum curator. Tanyol agrees with Haskell that there was a shift in history painting, but she does not think it was towards realism. Instead she argues that both Antoine Gros and Paul Delaroche are examples of *genre historique*, which focuses on capturing more personal and private moments under the guise of realism, even though it has the same amount of historical truth as David's portrayal of Napoleon.<sup>37</sup> By combining in-depth analysis on David, Gros,

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<sup>35</sup> Francis Haskell, "The Manufacture of the Past in Nineteenth-Century Painting," *Past and Present* 53, no. 1 (1971): pp. 109-120, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/53.1.109>, 119.

<sup>36</sup> Haskell, "The Manufacture of the Past in Nineteenth-Century Painting," 112.

<sup>37</sup> Derin Tanyol, "Histoire Anecdotique—the People's History? Gras and Delaroche," *Word & Image* 16, no. 1 (2000): pp. 7-30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2000.10434302>, 10.

and Delaroche's work and scholarship focused on nineteenth century art, she makes a compelling argument against Haskell's point that Delaroche was just interested in realism.

In "Napoleon Crossing the Alps by Paul Delaroche," Edward Morris, another art historian, explores the painting deeply and places emphasis on how cultural events had influence on the artist and painting. He pays particular attention to the July Monarchy and the effect the Napoleonic Revival had on the artist by arguing that Louis Philippe encouraged depictions of Napoleon in an attempt to unite France.<sup>38</sup> Morris provides an in-depth narration of the aforementioned painting's history by looking at financial documents and uses other paintings to explain the influx of interest in Napoleon. Similarly, Lisa Hackman presents the idea not only with July Monarchy but examines popular culture in her article "Contrived Resemblance – Delaroche and Napoleon."<sup>39</sup> She makes a broader cultural argument for the resemblance seen in Delaroche's Napoleon and Delaroche's self portrait. Hackman believes that it was a combination of the influence of the July Monarchy and the widespread cult of Napoleon that greatly influenced Delaroche and that it was not uncommon for people to try to embody Napoleon in looks or personality.<sup>40</sup>

Lastly, in *The emperor is dead, long live the emperor: Paul Delaroche's portraits of Napoleon and popular print culture*, Alissa Adams analyzes Delaroche's Napoleon series and how it fits in with the culture at the time. She makes the argument "that Delaroche, in portraying Napoleon sympathetically, was sympathetic to a radical and

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<sup>38</sup> Edward Morris, "Napoleon Crossing the Alps by Paul Delaroche," *Annual Reports and Bulletin, Walter Art Gallery, Liverpool*, 1974, pp. 65-74, 67.

<sup>39</sup> For a more in depth study on how the July Monarchy impacted the Napoleonic Legacy see "The July Monarchy and the Napoleonic Myth" by Stanley Mellon

<sup>40</sup> Hackmann, "Contrived Resemblance: Delaroche and Napoleon," 10.

Revolutionary political cause.”<sup>41</sup> By examining the political culture of the July Monarchy and analyzing the fact that Delaroche was heavily inspired by pro-Napoleon artists, she believes that Delaroche was not politically moderate as previously thought.

Like previous scholars, this essay focuses on the relationship between David and Delaroche and wider cultural movements. However, unlike previous works, by combining political, cultural, and art trends and movements, this paper concentrates more deeply on the shift of the broader Napoleonic legacy that can be seen in David and Delaroche’s paintings.

### **Comparing Horses to Mules**

One of the key differences between David and Delaroche was the era they were painting in: Neoclassical and Romantic respectively. While David was in the transitional period between Neoclassicism and Romanticism, his work is primarily considered in the former category and he even has a subgenre named after him: Davidian Neoclassicism, which featured intense curved lines, 3D sculpture-like shading, and smooth rendering.<sup>42</sup> His use of the Winckelmann ideals such as nudity and static poses were also commonly seen in his later art. However, he utilized Romantic techniques like chiaroscuro, a technique that used extremely contrasting colors to emphasize a particular point and to encourage drama, in some of his pieces. David also taught artists who later became extremely influential artists in the Romantic era. Overall, the Neoclassical movement occurred between 1760-1830 and it affected “European architecture, painting, sculpture,

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<sup>41</sup> Alissa Rachel Adams, “The Emperor Is Dead, Long Live the Emperor: Paul Delaroche's Portraits of Napoleon and Popular Print Culture” (dissertation, The University of Iowa, 2013), 6.

<sup>42</sup> Kathryn Calley Galitz, “The Legacy of Jacques Louis David (1748–1825),” Metmuseum.org, October 2004, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jldv/hd\\_jldv.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jldv/hd_jldv.htm).



and decorative arts”.<sup>43</sup> It was inspired by the rediscovery of Ancient Greece and Rome and the movement spread widely thanks to the Grand Tour, a period of time in which the aristocrats would visit France, Italy, and Greece in order to get a better-rounded education.<sup>44</sup> They brought the styles of antiquity back home with them and Neoclassicism flourished throughout all of Europe.

Some features seen in the genre include composition with a focus on the formal elements of art (shape, line, texture, ect.), depiction of historical events with subjects that wear contemporary outfits, and rigid and solid static figures.<sup>45</sup> The genre of history painting was revered, which had an emphasis on depicting classical scenes both from Ancient Greece and Rome and also from mythology. This is seen with David’s other works like *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* and *Oath of the Horatii* which depicts stories from ancient Rome. Neoclassicism also reflected Enlightenment ideals, when rational comprehension was applied to the arts promoting somber and serious compositions with the belief that artists could depict ideal beauty.<sup>46</sup>

David’s *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* bears the hallmarks of the Neoclassical movement. Napoleon is rendered in great detail with smooth textures and little brushstrokes, another tendency of Neoclassical artists.<sup>47</sup> Its shading also is painted sculpturally, as if David carved Napoleon’s flowing cape out of stone, which is a staple of his style. Other Neoclassical features include the dark color palette to capture the serious nature of the piece. There are also strong vertical lines, as the eye is drawn

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<sup>43</sup> Cybele Gontar, “Neoclassicism.”

<sup>44</sup> Jean Sorabella, “The Grand Tour,” Metmuseum.org, October 2003, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/grtr/hd\\_grtr.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/grtr/hd_grtr.htm).

<sup>45</sup> Cybele Gontar, “Neoclassicism.”

<sup>46</sup> Lilian R Furst, “Romanticism in Historical Perspective,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 5, no. 2 (June 1968): pp. 115-143, 116.

<sup>47</sup> Beth Gersh-Nesic, “Rococo and Neoclassicism 18th Century,” Khan Academy, accessed November 4, 2021, <https://en.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/rococo-neoclassicism/rococo/e/>.

upward as it follows the movement of the horse and Napoleon's hand pointing to the sky. The composition is flat, with the background of the Alps providing little depth. Additionally, Napoleon's pose is rather static, despite the implication of movement, another Neoclassical hallmark, as the artists were more interested in portraying ideas and themes rather than creating a dynamic composition.

Delaroche, comparatively, was firmly in the Romantic era. The Romantic era was a countermovement that reacted against the rigid and constrained Neoclassical era, taking place from around 1800-1850. Overall, Romantics promoted an emphasis on the power of nature and attempted to capture as much emotion as possible.<sup>48</sup> It featured most heavily in art, architecture, music, and literature. The art style of Romanticism encouraged looser brushstrokes, a wider range of color, and dynamic compositions in order to portray heightened emotional scenes. Chiaroscuro was also widely used in order to create more depth. The early French Romantic painters were students of David, like Gros and Delacroix, who drew inspiration from David but made their own personal mark on the movement. This idea of taking inspiration from the past while creating a more unique and personal style is incredibly important in Romanticism.<sup>49</sup> Landscape paintings became increasingly popular, and even the subject matter of the favorable genre of history painting changed, featuring scenes from medieval times and the Renaissance instead of the scenes from antiquity portrayed by the Neoclassicists.

Delaroche's *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* likewise contains stylistic hallmarks of the genre. The composition as a whole is much brighter, due to the snow. There is also a greater contrast compared to David's work, with darker shadows providing a greater

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<sup>48</sup> Kathryn Calley Galitz, "Romanticism," Metmuseum.org, October 2004, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/roma/hd\\_roma.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/roma/hd_roma.htm).

<sup>49</sup> Kathryn Calley Galitz, "Romanticism."

sense of depth, and the viewer is drawn to Bonaparte's figure as he is contrasted against the white snow of the Alps. Similarly, the placement of the rock in the bottom left foreground creates the illusion of more spatial depth, separating the fore-, mid-, and background. Bonaparte is also captured in a moment in time, unlike the highly posed general of David. Nature features more heavily in Delaroche's depiction, as the snowy landscape of the Alps is almost its own character. Unlike in David's painting, in which the general is effortlessly conquering and dominating the landscape, Delaroche's Napoleon is subject to the harshness of nature.<sup>50</sup>

The way Napoleon is portrayed also reflects differences in motives and themes in these two paintings. Napoleon specifically requested to David that he wanted to be depicted "calm on a fiery horse" in order to portray his composure.<sup>51</sup> Napoleon had a large amount of control over what David painted, even preventing David from sending a painting called *Napoleon in Imperial Dress* to a patron in Genoa because the emperor did not approve of how he was drawn.<sup>52</sup> Napoleon had large control over his portrayal, as he visited David's studio to approve of the artist's paintings. This supervision allowed Napoleon to craft his image exactly how he wanted it. The purpose of David's painting was to show that Napoleon was a strong and powerful leader, able to stay calm in the face of danger. The painting embodies Neoclassical ideas such as "self-sacrifice, devotion to duty, honesty, and stoic austerity," and so encourages the public to believe in Napoleon's abilities as a ruler.<sup>53</sup> David was also referencing previous famous

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<sup>50</sup> Ben Pollitt, "David, Napoleon Crossing the Alps (Article)," Khan Academy (Khan Academy), accessed November 10, 2021, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/rococo-neoclassicism/neo-classicism/a/david-napoleon-crossing-the-alps>.

<sup>51</sup> Ben Pollitt, "David, Napoleon Crossing the Alps."

<sup>52</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, 155.

<sup>53</sup> Gontar, "Neoclassicism."

equestrian portraits, like Titian's *Equestrian Portrait of Charles V* or Velázquez's



Figure 3. *Napoleon I at Fontainebleau, 31 March, 1814* by Paul Delaroche

*Equestrian Portrait of Philip IV* in order to create a larger connection between Napoleon and other great leaders of the past in an attempt to legitimize Napoleon's authority.<sup>54</sup>

The purpose of Delaroche's painting was to fulfill the request of a patron and he typically appealed to the British market. Depictions of Napoleon were popular with the upper class and bourgeois.<sup>55</sup> If Onslow's account is to be believed, Delaroche was tasked with depicting a

"realistic" account of Napoleon crossing the Alps. Even if the story was not true, Delaroche consistently portrayed



Figure 4. *The Execution of Lady Jane Gray* by Paul Delaroche

historical figures as more human, more vulnerable, as was common during the Romantic Era. This can be seen not only in *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* and *Napoleon at Fontainebleau* (Figure 3) but also in his *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* (Figure 4) where the composition emphasizes human suffering and emotion. Lady Jane Gray's face is full of uncertainty and fear, while the faces of her

two ladies in waiting are full of anguish and grief. Leaders were no longer untouchable and perfect and they were being used to explore the range of human emotions.

Delaroche's Napoleon is incredibly different from David's; instead of being "calm on a

<sup>54</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, 143.

<sup>55</sup> Bann, *History Painted*, 246.

white horse,” Bonaparte is miserable and cold, riding a mule instead of a glorious steed. He is solemn, his face showing “his reflective introspective solitude as he contemplates the tasks of genius.”<sup>56</sup> This more human Napoleon is further emphasized when compared to David’s work. David’s Napoleon wears an expression of seriousness as well, yet he remains detached and haughty when compared to the troubled raw emotion of Delaroche’s Napoleon.<sup>57</sup>

Romanticism also changed the genre of history painting by changing the subject matter which can further explain the difference in depiction between David and Delaroche. In the Neoclassical era, history painting was revered. The Academy put a large emphasis on history painting, disregarding art depicting contemporary events.<sup>58</sup> In the genre of history painting, scenes from Greek and Roman mythology or Classical history were preferred. However, this idea shifted during the French Revolution, as many artists began portraying current events, but they maintained Neoclassical elements and art characteristics in the compositions, such as David who found great success portraying both the current and the past. The Romantic Era shifted these ideas greatly. The subject matter of history painting changed to depict events from the medieval and Renaissance era, especially scenes from British history. In addition to the genre, history painting encouraged the depiction of contemporary events, like Théodore Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa* or Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People*. However, subject matter was not the only thing that changed.

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<sup>56</sup> National Museums Liverpool, “Napoleon Crossing the Alps, by Paul Delaroche,” National Museums Liverpool, January 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070929104805/http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/nof/aotm/displaypicture.asp?venue=&id=282>.

<sup>57</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, 145.

<sup>58</sup> Galitz, “The Legacy of Jacques Louis David.”

The way the scenes of history paintings were composed also changed, creating two distinct historical narratives. For Neoclassicism, the events being painted were set up almost like a play. In David's *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* (Figure 5) the



Figure 5. *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* by Jacques Louis David

goal of the composition was to portray “aesthetic calmness,” a reflection of the notion of depicting idealized humans.<sup>59</sup> His *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* also shares this sense of calmness, as Napoleon is staring resolutely at the viewer. This is in contrast to Delaroche's Napoleon. During

the Romantic Era, artists wanted to depict a moment in time, unlike the very posed narrative of the Neoclassical Era. *Genre historique* or anecdotal history painting was born out of this idea and it was “when the historical pretext becomes so anecdotal that it approaches genre.”<sup>60</sup> A popular example of this is Troubadour style, which aimed to showcase private moments in the lives of great figures.<sup>61</sup> Delaroche depicted Bonaparte in a nonspecific, non-dated moment, being in the middle of an action. Delaroche based his composition off of a variety of accounts including that of the mountain guide as well as Napoleon's personal accounts and recently published account by the historian Adolphe Thiers.”<sup>62</sup> He then crafted these accounts into a singular narrative moment as the viewer is placed into an intimate and personal moment as Bonaparte gazes at the audience.

<sup>59</sup> Roberts, *Revolutionary Artist*, 116.

<sup>60</sup> Derin Tanyol, “Histoire Anecdote,” 10.

<sup>61</sup> Tanyol, “Histoire Anecdote,” 15.

<sup>62</sup> National Museums Liverpool, “Napoleon Crossing the Alps, by Paul Delaroche.”

Another key difference is the use of historical markers or references to the past. While David is depicting a contemporary event in *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, he is still heavily referencing the past, with the names Karolus Magnus and Hannibal being carved into the rocks on the bottom left. This allows David to organize Napoleon into a linear space of time by placing Napoleon after these great figures in the flow of history, assigning him a natural position within the “historical genealogy.”<sup>63</sup> This again strengthens the ties between Napoleon and the rulers of the past. In Delaroche’s *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps*, there are no historical markers. There are no references to the past, no connections to other famous leaders. This makes the paintings readable by the general audience, as they do not need to know past history to understand the depth of the painting. The painting also feels more realistic and less posed. The audience is viewing a snapshot of a vulnerable Napoleon, indicating that the public became more interested in seeing their leaders as human, rather than some perfect demigod.

A second reason for the differing depictions of Napoleon is because of the broader overall shift in the cultural interpretation of the emperor’s legacy. During David’s time, Napoleon had a strong hold over public perception. Through intense propaganda campaigns and public programs, he was able to mostly capture positive public opinion. However, there were also detractors like the Royalists or the Jacobins, but through the silencing of the press and intense propaganda campaigns the emperor was able to consolidate more power. David’s work was another element of this propaganda machine, and by having an influential artist at his side, Napoleon was able to legitimize himself even further.

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<sup>63</sup> Tanyol, “Histoire Anecdotique,” 11.

After Napoleon's final exile in 1815 and his eventual death in 1821, public opinion shifted. Europe was trying to reconstruct not only the political and geographical borders, but it also had to figure out how to treat the former emperor of the French. Views were incredibly divided and no solid consensus can be drawn, showing the multifaceted nature of Napoleon and how he was used to represent many different ideas and movements. There are, however, a few trends that can be seen which explains Delaroche's differing portrayal of Napoleon.

France in particular was struggling between multiple distinct portrayals of Napoleon. On one hand, he was seen as a great man, a savior. During the mid-19th century, he was often depicted as a Jesus figure, and themes of resurrection emerged after his body was returned to France from St. Helena.<sup>64</sup> However, following the Romantic trend, he was also being increasingly humanized as the public was captivated by Napoleon the man, not only Napoleon the emperor. David's painting reflects the former idea of Napoleon as a great man and hero, projecting strength and victory. Delaroche's Napoleon reflects a more psychological study of Napoleon.<sup>65</sup> This Napoleon is accessible, relatable, and as equally human as the viewer.

Another reason for Delaroche's interest in Napoleon has to do with cultural trends, specifically that of the July Monarchy and their promotion of the former emperor. Delaroche was painting during Louis Philippe's reign, where there was a movement to bring back Napoleon into cultural consciousness.<sup>66</sup> By recognizing and embracing

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<sup>64</sup> Fiona Parr, "The Death of Napoleon Bonaparte and the Retour Des Cendres: French and British Perspectives," [napoleon.org](https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/the-death-of-napoleon-bonaparte-and-the-retour-des-cendres-french-and-british-perspectives/), 2011, <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/the-death-of-napoleon-bonaparte-and-the-retour-des-cendres-french-and-british-perspectives/>.

<sup>65</sup> Adams, "The Emperor Is Dead, Long Live the Emperor: Paul Delaroche's Portraits of Napoleon and Popular Print Culture," 26.

<sup>66</sup> Mellon, "The July Monarchy and the Napoleonic Myth," 71.



Napoleon, the former emperor turned into a symbol of French victory and pride.”<sup>67</sup> Louis Philippe hoped to gain favor of the Bonapartists and to try to unite France into a stronger nation by using the Napoleonic legacy for political purposes. Louis Philippe was able to take different elements of Napoleon to appeal to different factions, specifically Napoleon the soldier who represented the Revolution and, ironically,



Figure 6. Self Portrait  
by Paul Delaroche

democracy and Napoleon the emperor who represented French glory and centralized authority.<sup>68</sup> By memorializing Napoleon at the newly opened museum at Versailles and bringing back Napoleon’s body from St. Helena, Napoleon was brought to the forefront of French consciousness. This movement captured all levels of French society as France continued to ponder Napoleon’s divisive legacy and showed how even in death, Napoleon could serve a political purpose.

This “Napoleon mania” was not limited to only France. It spread throughout Europe as the cult of Napoleon captured the minds of people throughout the Continent and beyond.<sup>69</sup> People, from students to even famous composers like Franz Listz, would attempt to embody Napoleon, from his appearance to his mannerisms.<sup>70</sup> This can help explain the more personal aspect to Delaroche’s portrayal of Napoleon. It has been noted that there is a large resemblance between Delaroche’s self portrait (Figure 6) from 1838 and the way he draws Napoleon. From the hair to the face structure to the

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<sup>67</sup> Mellon, “The July Monarchy and the Napoleonic Myth,” 73.

<sup>68</sup> Adams, “The Emperor Is Dead, Long Live the Emperor: Paul Delaroche’s Portraits of Napoleon and Popular Print Culture,” 41.

<sup>69</sup> Hackmann, “Contrived Resemblance: Delaroche and Napoleon,” 8.

<sup>70</sup> Hackmann, “Contrived Resemblance: Delaroche and Napoleon,” 11.

melancholy look, there are clear similarities and parallels between Delaroche and Napoleon. Whether it is because Delaroche related to the melancholy emperor after experiencing his own hardships like the death of his wife or because it was simply in vogue to appear like Napoleon, it adds that striking interpersonal depth that the Romantic movement promoted.

Likewise, the interest in Napoleon also deeply affected Britain, where most of Delaroche's patrons were located. Although France and Britain were at war throughout the majority of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain still respected the former emperor. Napoleon's exile on St. Helena and his slow, isolated death transformed him "from a political tyrant into a mere human."<sup>71</sup> This humanization fascinated the British public and they began to explore Napoleon's character. He was commonly depicted by British artists such as Benjamin Robert Haydon and "hundreds of songs and plays were written" about him as well.<sup>72</sup> Throughout these depictions, Napoleon represented many different thoughts and ideals as whatever characteristic was emphasized changed depending on the author.

Napoleon represented many different things to the British as he was surprisingly popular in England. People in Britain associated Napoleon "with enlightened progress in opposition to reactionary monarchy or alternatively with military genius," showing the variety of ideas he represented.<sup>73</sup> The best example of Napoleon's changing character is seen with the British Romantic poets. Although most of them were alive during Napoleon's reign, their symbolism of the emperor continued long after the poets'

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<sup>71</sup> Parr, "The Death of Napoleon Bonaparte and the Retour Des Cendres: French and British Perspectives."

<sup>72</sup> Parr, "The Death of Napoleon Bonaparte and the Retour Des Cendres: French and British Perspectives."

<sup>73</sup> National Museums Liverpool, "Napoleon Crossing the Alps, by Paul Delaroche."

deaths. The Romantics projected ideals onto Napoleon that suited their own needs, which shifted and changed over time. They regularly configured Napoleon as “part of broader ideological controversies.”<sup>74</sup> Napoleon was able to represent the idea of a ‘Great Man’ or the battle between good and evil, or simply Freedom and Liberty. The poets often changed their views, such as Coleridge viewing him as a genius at one moment and then a man capable of “detestable Villanry” the next.<sup>75</sup> Napoleon was also credited as an inspiration for the Byronic hero as Lord Byron remained fascinated by the emperor for most of his life.

The Romantics also struggled with the idea of Napoleon’s humanity, as they were unsure how to interpret him: a Great Man, some fallen hero, or even worse. They debated if he should be treated as if he was “an ordinary man (however much a success or failure), or a kind of demigod – a unique, semi-allegorical personage worthy of adulation or denigration.”<sup>76</sup> While the answer to this question varies depending on the author, overall the Romantics were able to explore a more human Napoleon. For some poets like Byron and Shelley, the tragedy of Napoleon comes from his human nature, describing him as a “glorious failure.” In “Ode to Napoleon,” Byron called Napoleon a “ill-minded man” while also comparing him to Prometheus, showing how even in the same poem, there could be multiple views of the emperor.<sup>77</sup> However, much like in France, there was no conclusive, singular view on Napoleon. He became a symbol which changed and shifted in order to suit society’s needs.

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<sup>74</sup> Paul Stock, “Imposing on Napoleon: the Romantic Appropriation of Bonaparte,” *Journal of European Studies* 36, no. 4 (2006): pp. 363-388, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047244106071069>, 370.

<sup>75</sup> Stock, “Imposing on Napoleon: the Romantic Appropriation of Bonaparte,” 366.

<sup>76</sup> Stock, “Imposing on Napoleon: the Romantic Appropriation of Bonaparte,” 367.

<sup>77</sup> George Byron, “Ode to Napoleon,” *Bartleby*, <https://www.bartleby.com/333/543.html>.

Napoleon's flexible symbolism also reflects something deeper in society regarding the expectations of a leader. The contrast between David's infallible great man and Delaroche's somber and sullen Napoleon showcases a change in how the people viewed rulers. During the Neoclassical and Enlightenment Era, David's version of Napoleon shows a society striving towards achieving human perfection, expecting greatness from those in charge. The Romantic era is a response to this notion, as Delaroche's Napoleon shows a society that has given up on this perfection, one that accepts and even revels in the flaws that come with being human. No longer is the magnificent general on the charging white horse needed, and he instead becomes the freezing man on the mule.

## **Conclusion**

The difference between David and Delaroche shows Napoleon's divisive and differing interpretation throughout the nineteenth century. During Napoleon's reign, the emperor used himself as a symbol to unite France. Through the use of artists such as David, Napoleon was able to craft an image that was centered around Neoclassical ideologies such as patriotism and civic virtue. During the years following Napoleon's death, he was still used as a symbol, albeit he represented differing ideals that shifted depending on the needs of society. Because Napoleon was no longer able to control his image, the Romantics were able to use him to explore the highs and lows of humanity. This can be seen with Delaroche's more emotional Napoleon, as opposed to David's aloof general on his horse. Napoleon was used as a mirror to reflect the sentiments of the time.

Likewise, Napoleon's changing legacy continues to impact modern society. 2021 marks the 200th anniversary of Napoleon's death. The occasion has produced a debate among the French about how to commemorate the event, or if they even should in the first place. However, France's president, Emmanuel Macron, believed that Napoleon should be acknowledged, and he did give a speech in front of Napoleon's tomb. He stated that Napoleon was an extremely important part of French history, representing France's greatness.<sup>78</sup> In the speech, he noted the emperor's good and bad qualities and actions, and argued that the former emperor should be remembered as both a great man and a fallible human. In essence, Macron's speech demonstrates that both David and Delaroche's interpretation of Napoleon is still relevant. His fusion of these two ideas also suggests that Napoleon's legacy is still very fluid and that no general consensus has been worked out. Napoleon was also being utilized as a political symbol as Macron attempted to promote nationalistic ideals in order to create a unified France. Once again, Napoleon's name is being used to consolidate multiple groups as Macron is attempting to strengthen his newly formed political party, La République En Marche. Napoleon's legacy continues to transform, from a leader representing civic virtue, to a man showcasing the rise and fall of humanity, and now as a tool to unite a country that he once ruled over.

The continued obsession with Napoleon shows that he still resonates deeply with modern day society. His legacy is commentary on how history and important historical figures can be remembered and how they are viewed can change and shift with the

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<sup>78</sup> Emmanuel Macron,. "Napoléon is a part of us", French President Macron says." filmed May 5th, 2021. Video of lecture, 17:54.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWtAO\\_WjhAw&ab\\_channel=FRANCE24English](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWtAO_WjhAw&ab_channel=FRANCE24English).

times. It will be interesting to see how people look at Napoleon in the future and if he will morph into a symbol for something else, or if he will be disowned entirely. Whether it is his great achievements or his eventual downfall, he still captivates modern audiences and the legacy of his impact on Europe still casts a wide shadow.

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