

Patronage, Power & Propaganda: Jacques Louis David and the Napoleonic Adventure.

April 2014 marked the bicentenary of Napoleon Bonaparte's exile to Elba, prompting renewed reflection on the excitement and strain of the decline of an empire. Art historically, it is eminently possible to chart the rise and fall of the Napoleonic dream; artists were ever-eager to capture the various guises of Napoleon and his changing status: conqueror, peacemaker, politician, humanitarian and hero.

"Plenty of paint and ink was spilled in the effort to mythologise the *'little corporal'* and even adorn him with divine attributes." (Boime)

Napoleon allegedly summoned David in 1798 to marshal visual practice - the first of many demands made by the Corsican upstart. According to his brother Lucien, he wanted to be seen in a good light:

"You must understand that my brother Napoleon takes an interest only in pictures in which he counts for something. It is his weakness and he has no objection at all to being in the limelight." (Lucien Bonaparte).

Whilst, in the main, Napoleon and the French painter Jacques-Louis David enjoyed a mutually beneficial artistic and political alliance, there was tension too: David never felt he received the laurels and plaudits as Napoleon's painter. He was acutely aware too, that Napoleon was more attracted to the chromatic Romanticism of David's pupil and subsequent nemesis, A.J Baron Gros. Furthermore, David didn't approve of Napoleon looting Italian art treasures and felt that he lacked artistic taste in general.

A chief exponent of Neo-Classicism, David's works adhere to that Winckelmann paradigm of 'calm nobility and grandeur' yet paradoxically, as Kenneth Clark argues, "In every Classicist there is a Romantic struggling to get out." Napoleon provided the catalyst for David's sojourn into Romantic emotion, yet it was ever-marshalled by archetypal Classical austerity.

David's works embodied the stoic virtues of Republican Rome which chimed with the Napoleonic Imperial programme; a duality of desire to ape antiquity. Thus, David became painter-advocate to Napoleon and propagandist image-maker of the soldier of destiny, encapsulating the early ambition, energy & optimism and "that insatiable urge to conquer and explore." (K. Clark).

Study of Unfinished Head

David first painted Napoleon in 1798; Napoleon is still General at the time. Here he is young (in his late 20s) and he turns to the future in a manner reminiscent of former Roman emperors set in stone. Equally, posing here as

a dashing Byronic Romantic hero, he is a swashbuckling soldier of emotion, with the unknown military malaise mapped-out in front of him. David summarises his features in a painterly dash of patriotic colour and ephemerality of pose. The artist had to make do with a bust for a model, as 'fidgety Napoleon' (J-L David) only posed for 3 hours, hence the portrait remained unfinished, metaphorically paralleling Napoleon's militaristic career at the time.

Successful as David's Napoleonic works are, it is felt they lacked the empiricism of the battlefield, however. Unlike the arguably more avant-garde Napoleonic image-maker A.J Gros, David avoided the battlefield, both in accompanying Napoleon (he was too old) and in depicting it. The former subsequently exerted a more profound impact on the next generation of French painters, Gericault and Delacroix among them, who were drawn to Gros' Rubensian bravura and fecund emotion, like moths to a flame. Together they were to subsequently launch the 'Romantic Rebellion'.

Napoleon Crossing the Alps of 1800 is a masterpiece of Classical technique and Romantic emotion. The theme is 'man against nature' and the impossible journey that lies ahead - the battle of the elements and ungovernable natural forces. David endeavours to immortalise the erroneous event when the General takes control of his charger Marengo, and optimistically points towards the glacial backdrop, while his footmen are relegated to subordinate position beneath him. In a carefully conceived propagandist programme, David elevates his patron to the realm of deific dimensions; "calm, and mounted on a fiery steed" (Napoleon) and allegorically emulating Peter the Great of Russia and Marcus Aurelius of antiquity.

This is, in idealised form, the nigh-on impossible journey of the Carthaginian General Hannibal of 218 BC and Charlemagne – the names inscribed in the rock fossilise the endeavours of former transalpine conquerors.

Commissioned by the King of Spain, the work captures the conquest of Italy by the French for the 2nd time, crossing the St Bernard Pass to retake territory seized by the Austrians and take them by surprise via the transalpine route. The reality was that Napoleon actually crossed the St Bernard Pass on a mule borrowed from a local and led by a Swiss peasant in fine weather and a few days after his troops. The dramatic chiasmic composition pertains geometrically to the symbol for a battle; the configuration of two crossed swords.

David's son posed at the top of a ladder in the uniform of the battle acquired from Napoleon's Valet de Chambre; David also had Napoleon's favourite grey Marengo horse delivered to his atelier for equestrian authenticity-sake. Napoleon is portrayed replete with gold trimmed bicorne and holding a Mamluk-style sabre, while the horse's breastplate, or cuirasse, holds the signature of the artist. Idealised and aggrandised as the image is, Napoleon in fact wore a greatcoat and not a cape - a piece of Davidian poetic licence and an excuse to portray flying drapery reminiscent of Nike of Samothrace, thus connoting victory.

Realism has been abandoned for political iconography; Napoleon's face is youthful and in the aesthetic of the beautiful ideal (Apollo Belvedere). We note a bare not a gloved hand, thus Napoleon is portrayed as peacemaker rather than conqueror.

In 1800, there was a bout of assassination attempts made on Napoleon's life, hence David's timely elevational equestrian effigy, immortalising the diminutive general as egalitarian leader and a soldier of emotion.

"Triumph over every imaginable obstacle, to ward off the very elements and, in a word, to transcend nature itself." (Chasseud).