

*H-France Review* Vol. 7 (January 2007), No. 2

**David O'Brien**, *After the Revolution: Antoine-Jean Gros, Painting and Propaganda Under Napoleon*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006. xiv + 288 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. 149 illustrations in color. \$65 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-271-02305-8.

Review by Barbara Day-Hickman, Temple University.

In *After the Revolution: Painting and Propaganda under Napoleon*, David O'Brien considers the career of the artist Antoine-Jean Gros in relationship to the political and cultural changes that occur in post-revolutionary France (1789-1835). More specifically, O'Brien offers an excellent overview of artistic developments from the disappearance of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1793 to the government's gradual control of the arts for propaganda purposes during the Napoleonic and Bourbon regimes. In his discussion of propaganda, O'Brien poses the fundamental tension that artists faced during this period: painting could either serve the prerogatives of the state through the free agency of artists (in an open public forum) or through the government's absorption of art as a vehicle for state aggrandizement. Following the destruction of the Academy, artists no longer had to be members of an exclusive artistic association controlled by the monarchy in order to display their work at the annual Salon, and instead could, in principle, compete equally in juried competitions. But the lack of government resources for the arts during the Directory and early Consulate required artists to rely on wealthy private patrons. Thus, while some artists managed to maintain a position of greater political freedom during the republic (1793-1804), most eventually acceded to the government's directives due to the prestige and largess of Imperial/Bourbon commissions for large-scale historical work.

O'Brien demonstrates how Gros's relationships to his former teacher, Jacques Louis David, and his chief patron, Napoleon Bonaparte, created both inspiration and tensions that endured throughout his life. He addresses, for example, the artist's repeated struggles for financial solvency, professional recognition, and artistic integrity. Gros's success was due in great part to his dexterity with contemporary historical painting as well as his ability to respond rapidly to the political strategies of the Imperial government. But since such political commissions for Napoleonic portraiture and battle scenes often conflicted with Gros's deeper commitment to the principles of classical history painting espoused by his former mentor David, he experienced increasing self-recrimination and despair during the latter phase of his career. By the mid-Restoration, Gros's underlying beliefs in classicism would no longer permit him to cultivate historical studies tailored to the needs of the state.

The book is divided chronologically into six ample chapters filled with some one hundred forty-nine magnificent color illustrations. A most readable text is printed in large folio on quality archival paper. The book, however, should in no way be considered a cocktail edition for light or cursory fare; rather, the author develops a rich and multi-faceted study for a scholarly audience which integrates the impact of historical factors as well as art historical precedents on the development of Gros's repertoire. The book's extraordinary format reinforces the rhetorical quality and eloquence of the text.

O'Brien discusses the artist's initial education in David's studio and his 1793 journey to Italy

where he intended to refine his classical training at the Academy in Rome. The republican government's closing of all academies changed his plans. Subsequently, Gros supported himself with commissions for portraiture from the Italian noblesse and through patronage from a wealthy circle of French officers stationed in Italy during the Italian Wars (1797-1799). More importantly, Gros won support from Napoleon Bonaparte and his family after he painted one of the first successful live portraits of the young general, *Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole* (1796). Following this success, Gros enjoyed a train of commissions on military themes that glorified both Napoleon and the French state. He even joined French troops during the four month siege of Genoa where he witnessed events directly on the war front. O'Brien observes that, "Gros's experience as a soldier lent his work a credibility that few other artists could match [.]" (p. 51).

After Bonaparte's coup in 1799, artists remained open to the diversity of popular opinion while concurrently trying to respond to the government's preference for paintings of military conquest and glory. Gros's privileged position with Bonaparte and his family obviously gave him an advantage over other artists who aspired to gain generous government commissions. O'Brien points out that "weariness with revolutionary strife, Bonaparte's military and political successes at home and abroad, ever more successful censorship, the anarchy and pettiness of the prevailing art world and the allure of commissions from the government—all these factors eroded resistance to reincorporating painting into the machinery of government [.]" (p. 87).

O'Brien discusses how Napoleon's appointment of Dominique-Vivant Denon as Directeur Général du Musée Central des Arts in 1802 furthered this trend. Denon became responsible for the selection and implementation of government commissions for large-scale history paintings that eulogized Napoleon's triumphs as a statesman and soldier. Denon's choice of two paintings for the Salon of 1804 demonstrated the transition being made in practice, if not always in official rhetoric, from a more open political forum to state control under the empire. And because Philippe-Auguste Hennequin's *Battle of Quiberon* and Gros's *Pest-Ridden of Jaffa* were mounted side by side, they revealed the contrast between controversial and less focused representations from the republican era as compared with the prescribed vision devised by the Imperial regime. O'Brien further adds that the failure of the *Quiberon* and the success of the *Jaffa* "suggest that art patronage emanating from the new regime held far greater promise than the chaotic situation in which the Revolution had left art [.]" (p. 117). During the republic, the government's inability to provide systematic support for the production of large-scale revolutionary paintings forced artists to fall back on their own resources or resort to private commissions from bourgeois patrons. Bonaparte's subsequent investment in the arts thus offered a more inviting option.

The *Battle of Quiberon*, for example, portrays the victory of Republican troops over royalist insurgents in Brittany in 1795. Hennequin showed General Hoche's conquest of loyalists, consisting of peasant guerillas and French émigré soldiers brought back to France by the British. The Republicans easily routed the royalists and forced the British ships to retreat, leaving behind the émigrés whom they had transported to French soil. The composition clearly blames the British and royalists for their treacherous behavior, and for the death of so many Frenchmen. But Hennequin offered no perspective to the tragedy. Gros's *Pest-Ridden of Jaffa*, in contrast, conveys a decidedly more sanguine political message which foregrounds Napoleon's leadership in the face of disaster. It shows Bonaparte and his entourage "bathed a warm golden light," as he extends a gesture of healing toward the sick and deteriorating figures surrounding him in the shadows (p.101). O'Brien explains how Napoleon's gesture toward the plague-ridden soldier reflects the regal pose of the *Apollo Belvedere*, the compassion of Christ, the healing touch of the French Kings in addition to iconographic references to numerous other historic figures (pp. 102-103). Through such an elevated portrayal of Bonaparte, Gros's *Jaffa* provides an

alternative to the images of dying men in the margins of the composition.

By 1806, O'Brien contends that Napoleon and Denon had set the topic and price for most paintings and were likewise determining the selection of art for the Salon. They wanted compositions that highlighted Napoleon's stately and benign presence on the warfront while downplaying any direct association with the violence of the battle itself, as with his i.e., *Napoleon paying Homage to the Unfortunate Courageous* (1806). Gros usually met these requirements, but not always. With the *Battle of Aboukir* (1804), for example, Gros put himself at odds with the government's directives. This true-to-life depiction of the French encounter with Mameluke warriors at Aboukir, represents a horrific illustration of the engagement between French and Turks. But in view of the painting's popularity, it was apparent that critics and public were both drawn into and repelled by the brutality evoked in the painting (p. 138).

In his later Imperial paintings such as *Napoleon Haranguing the Army before the Battle of the Pyramids* (1810), Gros was more attentive to the government's injunctions against violence. Mounted in formal attire, Napoleon rallies his officers and troops forward while concurrently offering amnesty to several Turkish, Arabian, and Ethiopian families in the right foreground of the picture. According to O'Brien, the forlorn refugees "represent allegorically the peoples conquered by Bonaparte [.]" (p. 145). By 1812, with *Napoleon and Francis II after the Battle of Austerlitz* (1812), Gros agrees to adhere more rigorously to the government's demands for anecdotal and bland representations of Napoleon's diplomatic accomplishments. With fellow artists, he was required to characterize Napoleon according to peaceful virtues such as "clemency, compassion, humility, and statesmanship" instead of more dramatic representations of Bonaparte imbued with bellicose and heroic virtues. By the final years of the empire, O'Brien notes how these "later Napoleonic paintings did not offer viewers the opportunity to reflect on pressing public debates, and offered instead only the opportunity for passive admiration [.]" (p. 151).

Gros committed suicide on June 25, 1835. O'Brien speculates that the deterioration of his marriage, the passing of his mistress, plus the custody loss of his daughter partly explain Gros's depression. But O'Brien also suggests that earlier crises may have contributed to his death. The loss of his foremost patron, Napoleon Bonaparte, the death of his esteemed mentor, David in 1825, and the passing of many of his military patrons in the final years of the empire certainly set the artist adrift during the Restoration. Furthermore, O'Brien points to Gros's despair at the funeral for his beloved colleague Anne-Louis Girodet in 1824 where he expressed "feelings of inadequacy and self-recrimination about the direction of art—having strayed from classical themes and subject matter to contemporary history [.]" (p. 207). Gros may also have feared that his success with contemporary history painting during the empire had directed a rising generation of young artists, such as Eugene Delacroix, Horace Vernet, and Théodore Gericault away from the true greatness of the classical tradition. By the late Restoration, Gros refused further government commissions for contemporaneous historical events and dedicated himself to classical mythology. But after severe criticism for his painting, *Hercules and Diomedes* at the Salon of 1835, which represented his determination to pursue these convictions, Gros subsequently took his own life (p. 232).

O'Brien has produced a comprehensive study of the development of government propaganda during the Napoleonic epoch as well as a rich biographical study of Antoine-Jean Gros. O'Brien's discussion of the government's domination of the arts during the Consular and Imperial epoch adds detailed understanding to previous work on the topic done by Albert Boime, Robert Holtman, James Leith, Jean Tulard, and Martyn Lyons.[1] In his focus on the formal paintings of Gros, it is unfortunate, however, that he did not address popular forms of

propaganda derived from French art in the form of engravings or medals made available to a much wider audience than those who attended the official Salon.[2] The author, however, presents a substantive and much needed retrospective on Gros's paintings. With the exception of Thomas Crow and Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, very little scholarship has been devoted to a formal and contextual analysis of Gros's entire portfolio.[3] O'Brien's monograph does this by weaving together art history and history with synthetic skill as well as a keen attention to formal and historical detail.

But in his addressing both the emergence of political propaganda and the artist's personal life, the author perhaps loses touch with the artists' motivations throughout his career. Though O'Brien emphasizes Gros's commitment to classical principles at the beginning of the book, he loses sight of this theme during the Napoleonic era when Gros's ambition seems to correspond seamlessly with the prescriptions of the Imperial government. Highlighting signs of Gros's political and aesthetic ambivalence during the apex of his career would have deepened our understanding of his growing depression during the Restoration, and eventual suicide in 1835.

*After the Revolution* is an important study for any scholar interested in the question of visual propaganda during the post-revolutionary epoch. For those drawn to political, military, or cultural history, O'Brien provides a rich investigation into the political and aesthetic underpinnings of the Imperial regime. And most importantly, the author has crafted one of the most compelling recent studies on the life and work of Antoine-Jean Gros, a work that is thoroughly embedded in the post-revolutionary epoch.

## NOTES

[1] For other valuable sources on visual propaganda during the Napoleonic regime see, Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Propaganda 1800-1815* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Robert Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950); Martyn Lyons, *Napoleon and the Legacy of the French Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Jean Tulard, *Napoleon: ou, Le Mythe du Sauveur* (Paris: Fayard, 1977).

[2] Wayne Hanley discusses Napoleon's efforts to craft his image and legend principally in the press and with the casting of medals for distribution during the Directory in *The Genesis of Napoleonic Propaganda, 1796-99* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[3] For recent essays and commentaries on the life and work of Antoine-Jean Gros see, Thomas Crow, "Classicism in Crisis: Gros to Delacroix," in *Nineteenth Century Art: a critical history*, ed. Stephen F. Eisenman, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), pp. 51-77. Thomas Crow puts Gros in context with his mentor Jacques Louis David and peers Drouais, Gerard, Girodet, and Gericault in *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). For a provocative reading of the *Jaffa*, see Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, in *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 65-102; see also Christopher Prendergast, *Napoleon and History Painting: Antoine-Jean Gros's La Bataille d'Eylau* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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ISSN 1553-9172