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book review of

*After the Revolution: Antoine-Jean Gros, Painting and Propaganda*  
by David O'Brien

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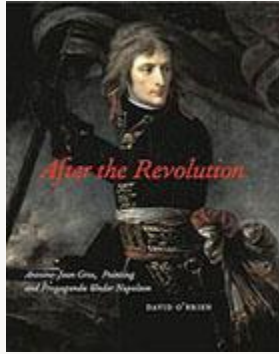
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David O'Brien

*After the Revolution: Antoine-Jean Gros, Painting and Propaganda*. 1 vol.

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An individual's position within any organization is a delicate balancing act between personal commitments and institutional demands. Put another way, this relationship involves a careful negotiation between the private self and the public sphere. For historians of art, authoritarian political regimes compound exponentially the ordinary difficulty of evaluating the presence of an artist's own convictions in art produced for the government. Given the repressive nature of such regimes, the public message required of official art could entirely eclipse privately held views or agendas. As a result, the project of excavating individual response or participation from beneath many layers of propaganda may seem impossible. In his important new book, David O'Brien challenges this assumption. Examining the work of Antoine-Jean Gros, chief painter for the Napoleonic Empire, O'Brien seeks to integrate the histories of individual and institution, private and public.

A systematic consideration of Gros's work is long overdue, and O'Brien's study significantly rectifies this lacuna in art historical scholarship. Generously illustrated, O'Brien's book brings little-known paintings of the Napoleonic regime back into the public eye along with more familiar works like *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken in Jaffa* (1804) and *Napoleon Visiting the Battlefield of Eylau the Morning After the Battle* (1808). Although several of the paintings discussed here have already received individual attention in the context of other studies (notably *The Battle of Nazareth* (1801), *Jaffa* and *Eylau*), they have not been considered together as related elements within Gros's oeuvre.<sup>[1]</sup> O'Brien reunites these works along with a host of others produced by Gros during the Napoleonic era as well as before and (briefly) after. Throughout his study, the author places Gros's work in the context of that of his colleagues and rivals, paying particular attention to paintings by Jacques-Louis David, Anne-Louis Girodet, and Philippe-Auguste Hennequin. This timely reconsideration of Gros's oeuvre coincides with renewed interest in art of the Napoleonic era, as evidenced by recent books by Philippe Bordes, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, Todd Porterfield, and Susan Siegfried, as well as two major exhibitions, one providing a long-desired retrospective of Girodet's work and another focusing on David's later years.<sup>[2]</sup>

O'Brien begins with a discussion of Gros's artistic education and early years in Italy, a period that encompasses the artist's fateful and definitive encounter with Napoleon Bonaparte. The next four chapters, the heart of the book, examine Gros's major Napoleonic commissions as both products of and evidence for the shifting relationships between the government, the public, and the artists who acted as intermediaries while simultaneously attempting to pursue their own aesthetic agendas. O'Brien first addresses Gros's return to France and his triumph in the competition to paint *The Battle of Nazareth*. As the author persuasively demonstrates, this painting's technical audacity and visual interest, sustained by a group of violent but lively anecdotal passages, demonstrated Gros's skill at reinventing the staid genre of battle painting, and gave great promise of his ability to uphold the beleaguered tradition of history painting while invigorating it through aesthetic innovation. Gros's early achievements crystallized in *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken in Jaffa*, which O'Brien examines in the following chapter. A tremendous popular and political success, *Jaffa* acted as a major turning point for the use of art as propaganda with its canny manipulation of French suffering to project Bonaparte as a compassionate leader.

Despite the sophistication of *Jaffa*, painting as propaganda still faced great challenges. In chapter four, O'Brien explores this theme in his analysis of a broad range of paintings produced for the Napoleonic administration, including works by David, Girodet, and Hennequin. One of the most persistent problems facing propagandistic painting was the need to maintain the viewer's interest while carefully controlling public response to the never-ending warfare under the Empire. If *Jaffa* was a successful example, other paintings, both by Gros and by his contemporaries, had greater difficulty in achieving this fine balance. Chapter five treats Gros's last great success in this arena, *Napoleon Visiting the Battlefield of Eylau*. After this final hurrah, his official paintings grew increasingly wooden. The sixth and final chapter covers the artist's return to a rigorous, purified classicism in the twenty-year period after Napoleon's abdication. Here, the author examines Gros's remorse for his earlier aesthetic bravado and his unwished-for influence on the three main avant-garde painters of the Restoration, Théodore Géricault, Horace Vernet and Eugène Delacroix. Throughout his narrative of the artist's career, O'Brien considers the transformations of history painting, government art institutions, and art criticism from the Ancien Régime to the Restoration.

One of the great strengths of O'Brien's study is the way he constantly links key moments in Gros's career to developments within the institutional and cultural spheres in which he traveled. When discussing Gros's fusion of aesthetic brilliance and brazen propaganda in *Jaffa*, for example, O'Brien interweaves an account of the influence of arts minister Dominique Vivant Denon both on that particular commission and on the administration of the arts circa 1804. Among his other achievements, Vivant Denon suavely transformed democratic practices of the Revolution, such as the *concours* (state-sponsored painting contests) into additional outlets of governmental control over artistic subject matter. Later, while crafting the terms of the competition to paint *Eylau*, Vivant Denon looked back to *Jaffa* for inspiration (as Gros himself did). Confronted with a shocking number of casualties for an uncertain outcome, Vivant Denon hoped to contain public outrage over the battle at Eylau by repeating the success of *Jaffa*. Just as he had done in that earlier painting with a similarly controversial theme, Gros skillfully used a partial acknowledgment of French suffering, offered as a sop to public opinion, to glorify Bonaparte's courageous and compassionate leadership. O'Brien's strategy of bringing the individual and the institutional

together is particularly useful because the most important, and best known, paintings of Gros's career are precisely those which he produced for the government, which in turn aimed to use these images to shape public response to Napoleon and his wars.

O'Brien's commendable attempt to balance private biographical concerns with public political and historical developments is largely successful. The author makes particularly effective use of letters from Gros and, later David, in the first and last chapters of the book. This correspondence adds a lively, engaging quality to chapters that are more personal in tone than the central chapters that they frame. Here, O'Brien gives us a glimpse of the stakes that art-making held for Gros, of his naiveté in regard to David, and of his crushing disappointment when his later works were critical failures. Because O'Brien deftly weaves this more intimate perspective on the artist into the institutional and cultural histories, his use of biography is both persuasive and enlightening in these bookend chapters. The presence of Gros's own voice here—and the liveliness of O'Brien's handling of this material—calls attention to its absence in the four interior chapters of the study. Because of the mysterious disappearance of most of Gros's correspondence, this lacuna is unavoidable to a certain extent, but it creates problems that reveal the difficulties of reconciling that which is hidden and private with that which is public.

One repercussion is that the reader has little sense of Gros's personal engagement with the paintings in question. O'Brien relies on letters written while Gros was in Italy to suggest that the artist ardently supported Napoleon later on, but an expanded discussion of this issue would have been desirable. To get a broader sense of Gros's views, O'Brien quite naturally looks at the paintings themselves as evidence, but this presents its own problems. For example, the presence of multiple vignettes of graphic violence in *Nazareth*, repeated in *The Battle of Aboukir* (1806), leads O'Brien to speak of Gros's compulsive attraction to such subject matter (pp. 68, 138). This interesting and provocative claim merits further exploration of corroborating material. In the case of an artist like Géricault, whose obsession with morbid themes has left ample evidence in his drawings and cadaver studies, as well as records of visits to the morgue, it has been persuasive to speak of such an attraction and fruitful to examine it. If similar evidence exists in Gros's case, O'Brien does not bring it forth. In a similar vein, O'Brien interprets the vibrant *facture* of *Nazareth* as evidence of the artist's pent-up, almost erotic desire to make history painting (p. 68). The notion that brushstroke provides an index of feeling is a canard. Even the wildest of paint marks reveals little about the degree of control used to apply them. As Baudelaire famously said of one of Gros's aesthetic heirs, "Delacroix was passionately in love with passion, and coldly determined to seek the means of expressing it in the most visible way."<sup>[3]</sup> Rather than hinting at his mental state, Gros's style of painting reveals more about his move away from traditional Davidian high finish, and suggests the usefulness of exploring his position on the relationship between form and content.

O'Brien's treatment of the fate of history painting, that most public of genres, is another high point of his study. During the Revolution, this high-minded, intellectually complex painting suffered severe setbacks, chiefly due to lack of funding and a rapidly shifting political landscape. At the same time, O'Brien points out, the role of public opinion became an important symbol of the new transparency and democratic process desired by the Revolutionary "Republic of the Arts." While the Imperial arts administration had little use

for either democratic procedures or history painting, the manipulation of public opinion was absolutely crucial to its propaganda program. If the government ignored traditional history painting, it embraced the genre's newer interest in contemporary events. Because it best served the Empire's political aims, Vivant Denon and Napoleon resurrected the battle painting, a fairly obscure and almost defunct form of history painting. With no other avenues of large-scale painting open to him, the ambitious young Gros seized on this rickety old genre, eschewing its outdated formats and injecting it with new life. In so doing, O'Brien implies, he temporarily halted history painting's demise.

The author's examination of the Empire's patronage of history painting contributes greatly to our understanding of art during the Napoleonic era. In considering the role of public opinion in this development, however, O'Brien overlooks the influence of the *genre historique*, the popular new hybrid of genre and history painting. In discussing a certain lifeless quality in some of the Imperial paintings, for example, O'Brien proposes that artists compensated for the dullness of the subject matter by including a proliferation of lavish details of costume and setting. This claim surfaces most notably in chapter four, particularly in his analyses of government commissions from Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, François Gérard, and David (pp. 134, 148). But even the most visually exciting and thematically engaging paintings, like Gros's *Battle of Aboukir* or Girodet's *Revolt of Cairo* (1810), share this very same fascination with the small stuff of costume and setting. Because this passion for the anecdotal is found in official paintings with a wide range of themes, it is clearly not just a compensatory device for boring subject matter, as O'Brien suggests. Instead, this enthusiasm for descriptive detail reveals the rising influence of the *genre historique*. O'Brien implicitly acknowledges this influence towards the end of his study (pp. 169, 238), but he would have been better served had he addressed it earlier. To take one example, Gros frequently attended to the plight of the ordinary soldier in paintings otherwise devoted to Napoleon, the exalted leader. Understood in the light of the *genre historique*, this device reveals itself not just as an acknowledgment of the tolls of warfare, as O'Brien rightly argues, but also as an emotional point of entry for the public—an encouragement of empathetic identification like that favored by the *genre historique*. Because it sought to trigger viewers' emotional responses to historical events, the *genre historique* occupies an important position in the development of the shifting relationship between private and public that interests O'Brien in this study.

With its clever blend of a biography-inspired monograph and an issues-driven analysis of paintings and art institutions, O'Brien's ambitious book makes a significant contribution to the understanding of nineteenth-century painting. The author makes a persuasive case for the importance of Gros's role both within the Napoleonic regime and beyond, particularly in his capacity as reluctant role model. In addition to bringing welcome scrutiny to one of the nineteenth century's most influential artists, O'Brien creates a vivid picture of government patronage under the Empire and a compelling case study of the use of art as propaganda. With its broad-ranging areas of interest, his book also opens up new avenues of exploration for scholars of this period. Perhaps most satisfyingly, O'Brien's study fruitfully revisits the persistent problem of the boundaries between private and public spheres.

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## Notes

[1] include Christopher Prendergast on *Eylau* in *Napoleon and History Painting: Antoine-Jean Gros's La Bataille d'Eylau*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Todd Porterfield on *Nazareth and Jaffa* in *The Allure of Empire: Art in the Service of French Imperialism, 1798-1836* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby on *Jaffa* in *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

[2] See Philippe Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities*; and Todd Porterfield and Susan L. Siegfried, *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres, and David* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2006). The exhibitions in question were *Girodet, 1767-1824* (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2005) and *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile* (Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2005). The former included a catalogue with many essays: *Girodet, 1767-1824*, ed. by Sylvain Bellenger (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

[3] Charles Baudelaire, "The Life and Work of Eugène Delacroix," 1863, trans. by Jonathan Mayne, in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (New York: Phaidon, 1964), 45.