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Todd Porterfield and Susan L. Siegfried, *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres, and David*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006. viii+287pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, list of illustrations, and index. $55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-271-02858-0.

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This book examines two of the most interesting paintings of Napoleon Bonaparte in his role as Emperor of the French. One, Jacques-Louis David's *Sacre*, is among the most popular paintings in the Louvre.[1] It contains a mesmerizing wealth of detail: countless portraits of imperial figures bedizened in all manner of courtly and official dress; the elaborate decor of Notre Dame amplified with imperial and papal tapestries, curtains, and draperies; rich evocations of materials such as marble, ermine, and velour; a lush color scheme that contrasts green and red amidst blonds and yellows; and, at the center, Napoleon about to crown a demure, youthful, beautiful Josephine. It is no accident, according to the book, that today crowds of viewers stand agape in front of the painting.

The second painting, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Napoleon I on his Imperial Throne* (1806), is less well-known, but anyone who has visited the Musée de l'Armée in Paris has surely pondered its eccentricities: its rigid, frontal, highly symmetric composition; its rivetingly meticulous description of objects; and its bizarre depiction of Napoleon. He is bathed in an eerie light, and his body is oddly absent, directly visible only in his head, which almost appears collaged onto the rest. On the other hand, the objects around Napoleon could hardly be more palpably present. Even more than in the *Sacre*, the shapes and textures of things grab the viewer's attention: gold, enamel, wool, ermine, silk, velour, gems, and ivory never had such distinctive appearances. Even if the viewer were unaware of the objects' elaborate symbolic significance, their sheer profusion would suggest their importance.

These two paintings provide the basis for a consideration of Napoleonic propaganda in visual art, particularly as it addressed issues of rulership and legitimacy. The book divides into two parts: Susan Siegfried wrote the introduction and three chapters on Ingres's portrait, and Todd Porterfield wrote three chapters on David's picture and the epilogue. That division—and the choice of these two paintings—might lead the reader to suspect a disjunctive and arbitrary take on the subject, but in fact the book works very well as a whole and provides a unified and strikingly original interpretation of its subject.

David and Ingres were very different artists during the period in question. The first was an established artist at the top of his profession producing an enormous, incredibly well-remunerated official commission, while the second was a young talent apparently working on his own initiative in order to gain notice from the government. Yet both felt compelled to pursue new and sometimes risky artistic solutions that addressed the unique and often problematic nature of Napoleonic imperial authority, and their efforts received extensive commentary at the Salon. The paintings therefore offer special possibilities for recovering both the critical issues and key circumstances informing Napoleonic propaganda. As Siegfried points out, most portraits of the emperor, such as those by François Gérard, Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson, and Robert Lefèvre, reworked formulas employed by the Bourbons, even as they established a necessary distance from them. In contrast, David and Ingres produced highly original paintings that spoke to Napoleon's distinctive claims to an imperial throne.

Part of Siegfried's interpretation involves an ambitious attempt to relate the distinctive features in

Ingres's portrait to larger historical changes in the nature of official power. Thus, "in the wake of the French Revolution, the signification of kingship began to be displaced from the body of the ruler to the trappings of rule. In the case of Ingres's remarkable portrait ... the sacrality of the new ruler was displaced to the secular realm of history and, more specifically, to the pose, insignia, and costume that denoted the emperor's status" (p. 25). Moreover, "the state was no longer equated with the person or the body Napoleon as the speaking subject ..., but rather with the nation, via its history" (p. 29). Unlike pre-Revolutionary royal portraits, which focused on the body of the king and referred almost casually to the attributes of power, Ingres's painting piled historical references one on top of another, creating an odd "bricolage of historical referents" (p. 29) in an effort to keep astride the shifting grounds for legitimacy. Siegfried characterizes Ingres's precious rendering of the historical artifacts in his painting as a fetishization that arose out of such historical conditions (and in an intriguing aside she finds a similar phenomenon in Vivant Denon's collecting practices). Ingres's overvaluing of objects at the expense of the body of the ruler appears, in this light, as an understandable if overwrought response to the problems of imperial portraiture after the Revolution.

A second chapter explores the reasons that Ingres undertook the painting. Contrary to what has often been assumed, Ingres appears to have taken up the subject in an entrepreneurial effort to gain attention, and he made use of connections with the mayor of his hometown of Montauban, Joseph Vialètes de Mortarieu, to secure the purchase of his canvas by the Corps legislative. This chapter provides fascinating reading for art historians specializing in this period because it demonstrates how radically the Revolution changed the strategies that artists pursued to further their careers. Siegfried relies on some very admirable archival research to fill out our understanding of the unusual tactics informing not only Ingres's early career, but also those of Jean-Baptise Debret and Lorenzo Bartolini. Combined with recent research on the careers of other artists who came of age in the years around 1800, such as Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, Jean-Baptiste Wicar, Antoine-Jean Gros, and Philippe-Auguste Hennequin, we can now appreciate the extent to which the Revolution removed older corporate forms of organization from artistic life, forcing artists to pursue original paths to success and leaving them very much at the mercy of the priorities of government administrators.[2] Their task was rendered all the more difficult by the instability of imperial iconography, both as it was formulated by the government and interpreted by the public. In the case of Ingres, a further obstacle lay in the way of official success; the artist was so intractably committed to his personal artistic vision that ultimately he could not acquiesce to the needs of official patronage.

A third chapter on Ingres examines the critical response to the portrait. Almost no one praised Ingres for his efforts. Royalists and republicans alike tended to resent his appropriation of royal iconography for the new regime, though of course for very different reasons. The artist's purposeful archaisms, referred to at the time as "Gothic," were variously viewed as regressive, effeminate, and purposefully obscure. Ingres acquired his lifelong reputation as an artist who pursued originality for its own sake, and he came to believe that superior artists like himself were condemned to misunderstanding by the vulgar horde. His response was to embrace "a willfully uncompromising personal vision" (p. 112), and he famously removed himself to Italy for thirteen years.

Todd Porterfield's chapters on the *Sacre* make extensive use of J.L. Austin's notion of the performative, particularly as it has been developed by Jacques Derrida. The concept, he argues, provides a way of understanding the narrative mode of the painting. The *Sacre* depicts not only a performative act—Napoleon transforming Josephine into an empress through words and gestures—but also performative roles available uniquely to these specific actors. In contrast to the open-ended narratives characteristic of David's pre-Revolutionary painting, which had invited viewers to assume vicariously the roles of figures in the composition and evaluate critically the narrative's content, the *Sacre* encouraged passive admiration. Viewers could never pretend to the role of Napoleon, and no figure in the canvas embodied a critical or dissenting position. The painting's illusion is so realistic and its details so captivating that it seems to provide us with a transparent window onto its subject, an intimate, unmediated view of the

high and mighty, but for Porterfield it offers only an "illusory access", "no real or meaningful access to the coronation itself was ever intended by Napoleon" (p. 124). Taken in by the captivating illusion, viewers have, according to Porterfield, largely ignored its ideological underpinnings and instead occupied themselves identifying the various personages in the painting and debating its fidelity to the event itself.

Porterfield himself explores the ideological significance of a few key aspects of the canvas. David initially thought of portraying Napoleon crowning himself, but eventually settled on the coronation of Josephine. This choice moved the subject to a sentimental register filled with femininity, beautiful appearances, and submission to patriarchal authority. Accordingly, the painting adopted many of the characteristics of troubadour painting: attention to detail, tender emotions, and courtly, ceremonial (and performative) subject matter. Picking up on Siegfried's exploration of the changing professional strategies of artists, Porterfield also notes how representations of artistic life often portrayed such courtliness extending into artists' relations with the Emperor through such ceremonial events as awards ceremonies and even in the studio.

Instead of focusing on the figure of Napoleon, as most earlier interpretations have, Porterfield pays far more attention to the figure of Josephine. He points out how much "the procreative capacity of the empress" is at issue in the painting. Signs of maternity abound: in the centrally placed Madame Mère, in Joséphine's children, in Nicolas Coustou's *Pietà*. Joséphine herself never appeared more fertile, and the documentation concerning her make-up is fascinating. (The job of applying make-up to Josephine's face went to the painter Jean-Baptiste Isabey—talk about the shifting roles of the painter!) Porterfield rightly points out how much the emphasis on *maquillage* responded to anxieties about Josephine's fitness for her role: the grandmother and widow had to appear youthfully fertile; the former *merveilleuse* properly submissive; and the Creole securely white.

Porterfield's reading strikes me as convincing, and the benefits of deploying the notion of the performative clear, but there are places where his approach gives pause. For example, he employs the notion of "reactionary modernism" in contradistinction to "progressive modernism." This has the benefit of permitting a more inclusive art historical account, much like the approach that goes under the name of 'visual culture.' Rather than focusing only on the aesthetic and political winners in the history of art, it allows us to examine the losers and tell both the bright and the dark sides of the story. In the case at hand, we can examine the painting's complicity in the intellectual bankruptcy, cynicism, and repressive politics of imperial propaganda. Yet modernism in most of its original formulations by cultural commentators was not such an inclusive concept; it did not mean all culture during modern times. Rather, it was in some sense self-reflexive and critical, and almost always took on its definition through reference to an other: for example, kitsch, academic culture, official propaganda, popular culture, folk culture, or spectacle. Of course these divisions were often illusory and never complete, but to tidy up the situation through recourse to the concept of "reactionary modernism" risks eliding the distinctions that historically have defined modernism. In its place, the new distinction between reactionary and progressive modernism divides the world according to an understanding of 'good' and 'bad' politics without really entering into the political per se. I say this even though I am sympathetic to the politics implied in the book.

A second aspect of the book invites further reflection. The success of David's painting as propaganda might reasonably be assumed from the overwhelmingly positive and obedient response it elicited from critics, but recovering the perceptions of individual viewers under the Empire is notoriously difficult because censorship and repression were so effective. When doubtful or parodic responses to the painting enter the narrative in Porterfield's account, it is primarily to establish, through contrast, the complacency or naiveté of the vast majority of viewers. He concludes, "The picture succeeded on three counts: in conveying a sense of access to the coronation event while blocking critical thinking; in dissembling the regime's source of power; and in lulling spectators into complacency and uselessness

through a two-hundred-year-long game of identifying the scores of portraits in the painted scene" (p. 121). Certainly the painting went some distance in achieving all this, but evidence for such claims remains hard to come by. We know from memoirs and from reactions after the fall of the Empire that many saw the coronation as a bogus affair, and we should be wary of assuming the public to be such easy dupes, no matter how tempting that may be in the face of centuries of intellectually stifling political propaganda aimed at the masses.

When it comes to the perceptions of art historians, Porterfield is on firmer ground when he observes that "The overwhelming majority of art historical accounts of the last two centuries presumes the same easy communication with the inaugural ceremony of the empire" (p. 124), but even here I am uneasy about the repeated invocation of that familiar simpleton, the art historian. If the painting has inspired a lot of mind-numbingly empirical art history, many recent accounts corroborate the argument here. For that matter, specialists in this area will recognize that the book is curiously reticent in citing and engaging with recent accounts, even when these support its central claims. [3] The links between this book and other recent scholarship suggest that a shift in our understanding of the period is well advanced, and there are many good young art historians in this area appearing on the horizon.

That said, neither of the two paintings at the center of this book has received its due in the broad accounts of Napoleonic art that have recently been published. And though Napoleon's coronation has been the subject of a large number of studies occasioned by its bicentenary, none of these interprets Ingres's and David's paintings along the lines proposed in this book.[4] *Staging Empire* is an important contribution both as an account of Napoleonic art and as a model of inventive, critical art history.

NOTES

[1] The painting's unwieldy full title is *Le Sacre de l'empereur Napoléon Ier et couronnement de l'impératrice Joséphine dans la cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris, le 2 décembre 1804*. Though dated on the canvas "1896. & 1807," it was completed in 1808.

[2] On Guérin, see Mehdi Korchane, "Pierre-Narcisse Guérin (1774-1833) et l'art français de la Révolution à la monarchie de Juillet," (Thèse de doctorat, Université Lumière Lyon 2, 2005). On Wicar and Gros, see my *After the Revolution: Antoine-Jean Gros, Painting, and Propaganda under Napoleon*, (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006). On Hennequin, see Jérémie Benoit, *Philippe-Auguste Hennequin, 1762-1833* (Paris: Arthéna, 1994) and my *After the Revolution*. The theme had previously been developed for a variety of artists in David's studio in Thomas Crow, *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

[3] For example, on the instability of meaning under the Napoleonic regime, more could be made of material in Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); on problems with legitimacy and the profusion of historical references in Naoleonic painting, Christopher Prendergast, *Napoleon and History Painting: Antoine-Jean Gros's* La Bataille d'Eylau (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); on censorship and art criticism in the period, Michael Marrinan, "Literal/Literary/'Lexie': history, text, and authority in Napoleonic painting," *Word and Image* 7 (July-September 1991): 177-200; on the types of performative roles assigned to Napoleon in official painting and the strategies used under the Empire to stifle critical political debate, David O'Brien, "Propaganda and the Republic of the Arts in Antoine-Jean Gros's *Napoleon Visiting the Battlefield of Eylau the Morning after the Battle*," *French Historical Studies*, 26 (Summer 2003): 281-314. Among recent work by historians that specifically addresses the role of painting and Napoleonic propaganda, reference might be made to Annie Jourdan, *Napoléon : héros, imperator, mécène* (Paris : Aubier, 1998); and Wayne Hanley, *The Genesis of Napoleonic Propaganda, 1796 to 1799* (New York : Columbia University Press, 2005).

[4] Thierry Lentz, ed., *Le Sacre de Napoléon* (Paris : Nouveau Monde Editions, 2003); Sylvain Laveissière, *Le Sacre de Napoléon peint par David*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2004); Musée Fesch, *Napoléon : Le Sacre*, exh. cat. (Ajaccio: Musée Fesch, 2004); Sylvain Laveissière, ed., *Napoléon et le Louvre* (Paris : Musée du Louvre/Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2004); and Jean Tulard, *Le Sacre de l'empereur Napoléon : histoire et légende* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux/Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2004). See also Yveline Cantarel-Besson, Claire Constans, and Bruno Foucart, *Napoléon. Images et histoire. Peintures du château de Versailles (1789-1815)* (Paris : Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 2001).

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