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Patric Jean, *Napoléon, David: The Image Enthroned*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: First Run / Icarus Films, 2005. VHS, 51 minutes. Color and black and white. \$390.00 U.S.

Review by Wayne Hanley, West Chester University of Pennsylvania.

Few people in history have understood the political and propagandistic potential of visual imagery more than either Napoleon Bonaparte or the artist Jacques-Louis David. During the Revolution, David's paintings were hailed for their revolutionary import, and his public festivals, such as the Fête of the Supreme Being, helped to spread revolutionary ideology to the masses. Napoleon made careful use of artists such as Antoine-Jean Gros, Andrea Appiani and David to help create his public image and ultimately to enable his coup d'état of 18-19 Brumaire (9 November 1799) and the creation of the empire.^[1] It should not be surprising, then, that in 1804, Napoleon named David "First Painter of the Empire" and commissioned him to memorialize the coronation with a series of four paintings, the most famous of which is *The Coronation of Napoleon I*, the subject of this documentary. This monumental canvas represents the last of David's propagandistic pieces, and in many ways it is his greatest. In it, as the Belgian writer and director Patric Jean ably demonstrates in his documentary *Napoléon, David: The Image Enthroned*, one can see all the grandeur (and illusion) of the Napoleonic Empire.

Jean, whose previous documentaries include *La raison du plus fort* (which explores the social and cultural issues of immigration, race, and crime), sets the stage of this documentary with a discussion of David's artistic and political background, of Napoleon's meteoric rise to power, and of the relationship between the artist and the future emperor. He calls attention to the stark realism of David's neoclassical style, exemplified in the artist's *Oath of the Horatii*. As Jean notes, with the coming of the Revolution, David's subjects shifted from the antique to the contemporary, and his interests became more political as well: the artist voted for the death of the king, planned the Fête of the Supreme Being, became an ardent follower of Robespierre, and even served on the Committee of General Security. Ironically, while serving on that committee, David signed the arrest warrant for Josephine's first husband, General de Beauharnais. With the fall of Robespierre, the artist sought political moderation, a shift represented in his *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*. It was while working on this painting in 1797 that the premier painter of the Revolution met the triumphant General Bonaparte. As David exclaimed after the general's first (unfinished) portrait sitting: "Oh my friends what a fine face he has—it is fair, it is grand, like a face from antiquity." In Napoleon, David had found a modern hero worthy of his art.

The resulting symbiotic relationship and the events surrounding the coronation thus serves as the focus of Jean's documentary. As "first painter of the empire," David was to commit the events of the coronation to canvas, and he took great pains to ensure the artistic and historic integrity of those events (although, as Jean points out, Napoleon was willing to "rearrange historical facts as necessary"). David attended the coronation ceremonies equipped with sketch book to record events; he also invited many participants to his studio to ensure a realistic portrayal of their faces. As a result of his efforts over fifty figures are identifiable. Included among those faces was Napoleon's mother, Madame Mère, who is seated in the tribune facing the viewer. The only problem was that she was in Rome on 2 December 1804, and refused to attend the ceremonies because she disapproved of "that Beauharnais woman." Napoleon, however, wanted her to be included in the event for posterity: it would not do to show divisions within the imperial family (although two of Napoleon's brothers who were in disfavor, Lucien and Jérôme, were not included in the painting and there is no hint of disdain from the emperor's sisters as they hold the train of Josephine's dress).

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of *Napoléon, David: The Image Enthroned* is Jean's discussion of the modeling and evolution of the painting. One of David's first tasks was to find a building large enough to accommodate the huge 30 feet by 20 feet canvas. A chapel was converted into a studio for the occasion. A model of the key features of Notre Dame was constructed with clay figurines used to plan the painting's composition. In David's original drawings, he planned to portray the moment when Napoleon placed the replica of Charlemagne's crown on his head with his right hand while his left hand rested on the ceremonial sword of French kings (as Jean observed, "art and politics were thus to reinforce each other...by a host of potent symbols"). Jean not only uses David's sketches and figurines to illustrate the original plans, but also calls attention to the painting itself where David's alterations can be seen. This gesture, however, proved awkward and difficult to depict, so David changed the scene to the emperor's crowning of Josephine. As Jean notes, the final version also served to make Napoleon seem "more chivalrous." Another alteration can be seen in the pope's blessing of the event. David had originally shown the Pius VII with his hands resting in his lap, but at Napoleon's urging (Napoleon chastised David: "I did not bring the pope all the way from Rome to have him sit idly by"), the artist altered the work to show the pope lifting his right hand in benediction.

David skillfully uses lighting and color to highlight the principle figures as well. A subtle ray of light shines in from the western window to illuminate Napoleon. Reds and golds dominate the central characters while the hues soften the farther away one is from the emperor. Most figures face Napoleon "or rather the crown which he holds in his hands," but several figures have their attentions elsewhere. Talleyrand, for example, looks at the empress; an orthodox bishop appears lost in thought; two acolytes admire Eugene's sword; and the treasurer-general (in the center of the painting), the person responsible for paying David for the work, looks at the viewer. To give depth and life to the painting, several high officials, including Talleyrand, have their backs toward the viewer, drawing the viewer into the painting. Upon seeing the tableau for the first time at the Salon of 1808, Napoleon pronounced his satisfaction: "What do I see here? There are people walking in this picture. David, I salute you—you have made me a French knight." Building no doubt on José Cabanis's work, Jean also describes the events of the coronation day, its preparation, and the documenting of those events.[2]

While there is much to recommend this documentary, especially Jean's analysis of the painting, several shortcomings touching on historical accuracy are present. On several occasions Jean—who is trained in language and literature, not as a historian—is guilty of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacies, or of reading history backwards. In discussing David's *Napoleon Crossing the St. Bernard*, a work completed in 1800, the writer-director claims that the painting contains not only references to the Carolingian Empire, but also hints toward the later French Empire. Was the Empire really envisioned in 1800? On another occasion, he suggests that the Concordat was a prelude to Napoleon's coronation because he needed the blessing of the church for the event. In retrospect there may be coincidental truth to this assertion, but the Concordat was not signed so that eventually the pope would participate in the emperor's coronation. Jean also suggests that the crowds participated in coronation events simply because they were free, and that they actually had little love for the imperial regime because they were put off by the presence of the pope and the reestablishment of the church. While there was opposition to the emperor, in 1804 Napoleon was one of the most popular figures of the day, and his wars and the resulting conscription had yet to erode that popularity. That the festivities associated with the coronation were free to the public was an added bonus.

Several compositional elements of the narrative structure also detract from the effectiveness of the documentary. Interspersed through Jean's discussion of the *Coronation of Napoleon I* are explorations of the history of the Napoleonic era, such as the Egyptian campaign, which Jean calls "a watershed of Napoleonic imagery." Unfortunately the paintings discussed—most notably Gros's *Napoleon in the Pesthouse of Jaffa* (1804)—are not contemporaneous with that campaign, but date from the Empire itself. Certainly the paintings contributed to Napoleon's imperial glory, but Jean establishes no direct

connection between Egypt and the coronation.[3] Jean also includes several clips from the Lumière Brother's silent film on Napoleon. Although fascinating, the scenes selected have nothing to do with the coronation or David's paintings. The last sections of the documentary quickly summarize Napoleon's empire, his campaigns ("each battle becomes a subject for a painting"), and his fall. The treatment is superficial and has little relevance to the subject of the film. On the other hand, the music selected for this documentary was perfectly on topic and appropriate: selections from Napoleon's actual coronation music and Beethoven's Eroica Symphony. Jean appropriately concludes his film by showing how the painting influenced future coronations, with images from the crowning of the Shah of Iran and the Emperor of the Central African Empire.

Historical misreadings and a sometimes non sequitor narrative aside, the strengths of Jean's *Napoléon, David: The Image Enthroned* make it worth examining. The documentary (or certainly selected portions of it) would be well suited to complement a course on Revolutionary and Napoleonic France or an art history course on neoclassicism or romanticism. This would be particularly true for the DVD version (the VHS version was reviewed). Its discussion of the artistic composition of David's great work contributes to a better understanding not only of the painting itself, but also of the interplay between art and politics during the Napoleonic era and during the Emperor's coronation in particular. Jean presents the splendor and illusion of the First Empire, showing that Napoleon left nothing to chance where his public image was concerned.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Wayne Hanley, *The Genesis of Napoleonic Propaganda, 1796-1799* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[2] See José Cabanis, *Le Sacre de Napoléon, 2 Décembre 1804* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

[3] For the influence of the arts in the Napoleonic Empire, see, for example, Robert B. Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950); Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Bonapartism, 1800-1815* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990); or Annie Jourdan, *Napoléon: Héros, Imperator, Mécène* (Paris: Aubier, 1998).

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