Napoleon’s Mirage
Politics and Propaganda in Art after Bonaparte’s Egyptian Campaign

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On July 1, 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte first set foot in Egypt. The ensuing campaign down the Nile and into the Levant failed militarily. Yet, on the cultural and scientific fronts, Napoleon won a lasting victory in terms of propaganda. As Bonaparte’s influence swelled upon his return to France, he employed artists and scholars to mobilize visual rhetorics of Orientalism and the Enlightenment to reframe his expedition as a success. By creating public works of art which served to memorialize, idealize and historicize the Egyptian and Levantine campaigns, Bonaparte’s government helped construct an Orientalized image of contemporary Ottoman culture as inferior to the West.

This project investigates Bonaparte’s imperialist expedition to Egypt and its impact on the French conception of the region’s past and present through French intellectual and art history. Specifically, this paper explores paintings and monuments created under the patronage of Napoleon’s regime to glorify Bonaparte’s campaign in Egypt. The motivations underlying the repeated commission of art topically related to the campaigns in the Middle East, as well as the visual rhetoric this artwork exploits is considered throughout the following analysis.
Acknowledgements:

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“In my undertaking I would have combined the experience of two worlds, exploiting for my own profit the theater of all history... The time I spent in Egypt was the most beautiful of my life because it was most ideal.”

–Napoleon Bonaparte

Introduction:

In the heart of Paris, just east of the Eiffel Tower and Champs de Mars, the magnificent gilt Baroque dome of the Invalides vaults toward the sky. Amongst the hustle and bustle of modern Parisian life, the Invalides stands out as a beacon of French military power, past and present. Sunken into an open crypt beneath the center of the Invalides’ dome lies the tomb of France’s most famous general and its first emperor—Napoleon Bonaparte. The megalithic porphyry sarcophagus containing his remains, enveloped in the grandeur of the Invalides’ interior decoration, gives history a very literal weight. A reflective visitor might contemplate it as an analogy for the aggrandized, mythologized life Bonaparte led. The crypt is flooded with symbols of honor and emblems of victory that were central to Bonaparte’s well-cultivated myth. Looking closely around the pedestal of Bonaparte’s tomb, one glimpses the names of eight of Bonaparte’s most famous battles are inscribed in the floor of the crypt. How one of these battles—‘Pyramids’—and Napoleon’s campaign in Egypt and the Levant (1798-1801) became ingrained in the Napoleonic mythos is the central theme of this paper.

This study aims to cut through the propaganda and pomp surrounding Bonaparte to understand how art transformed the dubious history of the Egyptian campaign into a cultural triumph which played into Napoleon’s popular myth. Through a visual rhetoric of Orientalism

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1 Quoted from an early nineteenth-century letter sent by Bonaparte to Madame de Rémusat in: David A. Bell, The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2008), 212.
and Enlightened conquest Bonaparte attempted to flip the narrative of military disaster into one of cultural and moral victory.⁵ Although it goes beyond the scope of this paper, that very idea would be propagated and exploited by some of Bonaparte’s successors, in their attempts to bolster their own imperialist agendas and their personal images via association with France’s first Emperor.³ To understand the Napoleonic artistic agenda surrounding the Egyptian Campaign, we must look first to the Ancien Régime to contextualize the changes brought about by the Revolution and Bonaparte after it.

**Art and Warfare in Revolutionary France:**

Before the French Revolution, eighteenth century art in France typically avoided battle scenes. Beside the occasional portrait of a noble in military regalia, battlefield imagery was considered in poor taste.⁴ This trend was not for a lack of conflict. The French fought a number of expensive and bloody wars in the eighteenth century, for instance the Seven Years’ War and French intervention in the American Revolution. But these topics were of little interest among the aristocratic audiences viewing and commissioning art during the Ancien Régime. The financial strain placed on Bourbon France by its wars was becoming increasingly serious, so the fact that French military action was not regarded as an appropriate topic of artistic veneration is

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³ Michael Paul Driskel, As Befits a Legend: Building a Tomb for Napoleon, 1840-1861 (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1993).

unsurprising.\(^5\) Moreover, history painting—complex paintings of historical, mythical or biblical scenes—traditionally shied away from portraying current events, which were considered inappropriate subject matter for the fine arts.\(^6\) History paintings were intended to elevate the erudite observer beyond the mundane occurrences of the world into a realm of allegory and beauty.

With the eruption of the French Revolution in 1789, political changes encouraged a new socio-cultural outlook on war. While wars under the monarchy were usually distant affairs, primarily concerned with the interests of the privileged upper classes, conflicts during and immediately following the Revolution were a matter of survival for the new French Republic. Both internal and foreign powers threatened the Republic’s very existence in the early 1790s, endangering the rights and privileges bestowed on French citizens by the Revolution. As Susan Siegfried put it, “The identification of self-interest with the interests of the state constituted a fundamentally new ideology of waging war […]”\(^7\) In the face of nearly constant war during the revolutionary period, fervent republicanism and French nationalism created a militant political culture in which warfare became an essential function of the state. Furthermore, the almost ceaseless fighting against strong European coalitions between 1792 and 1815 meant France had to mobilize its population en masse. The idea of the ‘nation in arms’ describes the concept that serving the national war effort was the duty of every able-bodied man.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) Siegfried, "Naked History," 235.

In the context of the ‘nation in arms,’ the French government, before and during Bonaparte’s rule, had an interest in promoting national service in whatever ways possible. As early as 1792, the French National Assembly called for artists to contribute to the nationalist conversation. But contemporary battle scenes remained relatively rare until 1801, when paintings of the battles of Nazareth and Marengo featured prominently at the Salon. Originally associated with the Ancien Régime’s Académie de peinture et de sculpture, the Salon was a competitive exhibition of state sanctioned paintings. The tradition survived the Revolution and played an instrumental role in solidifying Bonaparte’s visual narrative. At the Salon, paintings commissioned on behalf of Napoleon broadcast his administration’s sanctioned version of events, especially of battles. During the First Empire, there was also an interest in commissioning public monuments, which served much the same purpose, only the grand monuments of the Empire were on display for all of Paris.

The primary focus of this paper is artworks whose subjects pertain to Bonaparte’s campaigns in Egypt and the Levant during 1798 and 1799. But it is necessary to contextualize the artworks of the Egyptian Campaign in terms of two much earlier conquerors—Alexander and Caesar. Napoleon was an educated man, versed in history and aware of the power historical narratives can wield. His actions while campaigning across Italy in 1797 illustrate how keen he was to associate himself with the material culture of ancient Rome. Famous pieces of art including the Laocoön, the Dying Gaul, the bronze Quadriga from the pinnacle of St. Mark’s Basilica in Venice were hauled back to France, where they were paraded through the Champs de

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9 Siegfried, "Naked History," 235. Siegfried again cites Orlander: 274-277, as a more definitive analysis of revolutionary arts commissions; unfortunately, my attempts to locate a copy Orlander’s dissertation have been unsuccessful.
10 Siegfried, "Naked History," 235-258.
12 Bell, The First, 206-208; Saïd, Orientalism, 80-88.
Mars during the *Fête de la Liberté* on July 27 and 28, 1798.\(^{13}\) A banner carried in the triumphal procession read: ‘*La Grèce la céda: Rome les a perdus: leur sort changea deux fois—il ne changera pas.*’\(^{14}\) The only missing part of the Roman-scale triumph was the victorious general. Bonaparte had followed Alexander’s footsteps to Egypt by the time of the *Fête de la Liberté*. Upon returning to France, Napoleon put artists to work memorializing, historicizing and idealizing the Egyptian Campaign.

**History of Bonaparte’s Egyptian Campaign:**

Following successful campaigns across northern Italy and Austria, General Bonaparte found himself back in France in late 1797. In the wake of the French Revolution and the Committee of Public Safety’s infamous Reign of Terror, the French Republic had reorganized its government in 1795, consolidating executive power in a five-man oligarchy named the Directory, which oversaw French military operations at a strategic level.\(^{15}\) Initially, the Directory planned for Bonaparte to invade the United Kingdom, but British naval domination of the English Channel made such an assault unfeasible.\(^{16}\) By early March 1798, Bonaparte persuaded the Directory to allow him to muster a force to invade Egypt.

Bonaparte embarked for Egypt aboard his flagship *L’Orient* on May 19, 1798. Sailing out of Toulon, Bonaparte’s fleet was augmented by convoys from Italy and Corsica, swelling French forces to around 400 ships carrying 55,000 soldiers and sailors under Bonaparte’s command.

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\(^{15}\) Bell, *The First*, 192, 211.

Among these men were approximately 165 scholars.\textsuperscript{17} These \textit{savants}, as they are often referred to, left a were crucial in defining the mythos of Bonaparte’s Egyptian Campaign. By the end of June, the French armada had successfully crossed the Mediterranean. Along the way they managed to capture Malta and avoid British naval patrols. At length, the French fleet laid at anchor off the Egyptian coast.

Alexandria fell to French troops on July 1 after a pitched, but swift fight. From there, Bonaparte led his army inland across the desert toward Cairo. The Mameluke Beys, the ruling class in Ottoman Egypt during the time of the French invasion, organized their armies in defense of the capitol. The two armies met on July 21 not far from the Great Pyramids. Several thousand Mameluke cavalrymen rode to challenge the French before they reached Giza. In response, the French infantry gathered in square formations, cutting down the Mameluke horsemen as they approached from every direction. It was a total rout for the Egyptians. After the Battle of the Pyramids, Cairo fell to Bonaparte in short order.\textsuperscript{18}

A month into the Egyptian Campaign, it seemed everything was going well for Bonaparte’s army. That would change on the night of August 1, when a British fleet under the commander of Horatio Nelson attacked the main French fleet at anchor off Aboukir Bay. Catching the French by surprise, Nelson dealt the French a resounding blow, ensuring that Egyptian waters could be contested by the British and Ottoman navies. Moreover, with much of his fleet at the bottom of Aboukir Bay, Bonaparte faced grim prospects for reinforcements or fresh supplies from France.\textsuperscript{19} His army was on its own.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 1:4-6.
\textsuperscript{19} Russell, \textit{The Napoleonic}, 1:6-8.
Napoleon split his army, sending elements further up the Nile, while he led troops across the Sinai Peninsula and into Palestine. Skirting the Eastern Mediterranean, the French captured Jaffa, near present-day Tel Aviv, before failing to take Acre and being driven back into Egypt.\footnote{Bell, \textit{The First}, 209.} Within a year of landing in Egypt, with his army spread thin and facing increasing resistance from Ottoman troops supported by the British navy, Bonaparte began to contemplate an evacuation.\footnote{Russell, \textit{The Napoleonic}, 1:9.} Knowing the situation in Egypt was untenable, Bonaparte slipped out of Egypt in the company of his most trusted officers and a few lucky savants on August 23, 1799.\footnote{Jean Tranié, \textit{Bonaparte: La campagne d'Égypte}, illus. Juan Carlos Carmigniani and Patrice Courcelle (Paris: Pygmalion/Gérard Watelet, 1988), 235-237.}

Command of the French army in Egypt fell to the unfortunate General Kléber, who, seeing the futility of continuing operations, sought the withdrawal of French soldiers in January of 1800. The situation worsened for the French. Kléber fell victim to an assassin’s knife in June of that year. By October of 1801, what remained of the Napoleonic expedition left Egypt for good.\footnote{Russell, \textit{The Napoleonic}, 1:11.}

\textbf{Legacy of the Savants:}

Some of the most important illustrations, texts and works of art about the expedition were produced by or commissioned at the behest of the approximately 165 savants who accompanied Bonaparte’s army in Egypt.\footnote{Ibid., 1 & 2:11-591; Jean Chatelain, \textit{Dominique Vivant Denon: et le Louvre de Napoléon} (1973; repr., Paris: Librarie Académique Perrin, 1999), 77-254.} But why did Bonaparte insisted that artists, naturalists and economists join his army in Egypt then?

To some degree, the savants’ inclusion was quite practical. The logistical problems posed by the Mediterranean and the desert are obvious, so bringing engineers and chemists to find...
solutions to unforeseen problems made sense militarily. Indeed, some savants spent a great deal of time serving the army by investigating methods of baking and brewing, interpreting Arabic and, under extreme circumstances, fighting alongside Bonaparte’s soldiers. But this still does not explain the inclusion of eight artists, four architects, twenty-six cartographers and printers, not to mention a few musicians. Clearly, there was a cultural motive to bring them along.

Some of the rhetoric of the French Revolution was still ongoing when Bonaparte sailed from Toulon. Along with the rhetoric of republicanism common under the Directory government came a reverence for Enlightenment thought and the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean. As had been the case with other marauding armies throughout history, the French Republic’s armies often expanded their conquest to the cultural heritage of the places they conquered. Prior to the expedition in Egypt, Napoleon looted an enormous amount of art from Italy, much of it dating to the Roman period. These works of looted Italian art helped France establish its bid to become the cultural and political successors of Rome. The triumphal Fête de la Liberté on July 27 and 28, 1798, added Roman pageantry to Napoleon’s cultural conquests in Italy. While Paris reveled in the cultural treasures of Rome, Bonaparte was busy savoring his freshly won occupation of Cairo.

In Cairo, Bonaparte founded the Institut de l’Égypte, with the aim of promoting “progress and propagation of Enlightenment in Egypt,” through “research, study and the publication of

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natural, industrial and historical facts concerning Egypt.” Based on the structure of the **Institut de France**, at this time the intellectual powerhouse of Revolutionary thought in Europe, the **Institut de l’Égypte** (henceforth, the **Institut**) became Napoleon’s means of imposing Revolutionary ideology on Egypt, as well as extracting useful information for the French and their commander. The **Institut**’s membership was comprised of the French Savants, well-educated officers and, of course, Napoleon himself. Interestingly, two members of the **Institut**, Gaspard Monge and Claude Louis Berthollet, had been Chiefs of Commission selecting art to be shipped to Paris during the Italian Campaign of 1797.

Notes and sketches of the **Institut**’s members would later culminate in massive scholarly projects which served double time as public relations statements for the Egyptian Campaign. The best known of these projects today is the elephantine *Description de l’Égypte*. Published between 1809 and 1822 across twenty-three volumes of prints and text, the *Description* represented a truly encyclopedic attempt to capture Egypt’s past and present for a European audience. No analysis of the cultural impact of the Egyptian Campaign would be complete without acknowledging the *Description*, but there is not time to dwell on it here. An extensive body of literature exists on its construction and implications.

Dominique Vivant Denon was among the most influential chroniclers of the campaign. A member of the **Institut de l’Égypte**, Denon went on to become one of the most influential men in

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30 Saïd, *Orientalism*, 84. James Curl notes disagreement among scholars about the exact number of volumes, as a result of binding practices and folio size variations. See: James Stevens Curl, *The Egyptian Revival: Ancient Egypt as the Inspiration for Design Motifs in the West* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2005), 226, 488.
the imperial arts establishment, being named Directeur des Beaux-Arts and administrator of national museums in November, 1802. That same year, he published an illustrated volume, Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt, in which Denon describes the Egyptian Campaign through his eyes. Travels was a resounding success; one year after its original publication, a version was already being printed in English. Not bad, considering France was at war with Britain, this was quite an accomplishment. Denon sketched scenes ranging from the contemporary streets of Cairo to the ruins at Luxor with an impressive eye for detail. The prints published in Travels and later in the Description, although not the first widely published European accounts of Egypt from the period, provided viewers reasonably accurate illustrations of many significant Egyptian archaeological sites. Denon was particularly obsessed with ancient Egyptian culture. Visions of a proto-European history of the land of Exodus and Pharaohs led Denon to see Ptolemies and Caesars everywhere in Egypt. His account of the expedition in Travels is an exoticizing tale of a culture in decline, going a long way to suggest that the West, and the French in particular, were the legitimate intellectual successors of the Pharaohs.

**Said’s Orientalism and the French Colonial Narrative:**

It is helpful to ground our discussion about art focused on Napoleon’s Egyptian Campaign by touching on one of the classic texts of postcolonial theory—Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. First published in 1978, *Orientalism* remains relevant to today’s discourse. At the

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32 Chatelain, Dominique Vivant, 100.
33 Curl, *The Egyptian*, 226-230; Denon, *Travels in Upper*, 1:viii. *Travels* was such a sensation that, according to the translator’s advertisement in the first English-language edition of the book (1803), the price for the original French edition in London was as high as twenty-one guineas, equal to several hundred pounds today.
34 Reid, “Chapter 1: Rediscovering,” 31-36.
35 The explanation of Edward Said’s fundamental arguments in *Orientalism* was reworked from my own earlier synthesis of Said’s ideas, which appeared in a course paper entitle “Decolonizing the Museum: Combatting Colonial Narratives through Ethical Standards,” which was submitted on December 13, 2019.
heart of Saïd’s argument is the idea that imperialism propagated intellectual inequalities between Occidental “civilization” and the so-called Oriental other. One of the ways this effect was achieved was through the creation of narratives that denied the agency of indigenous populations using biased categorizations of knowledge.\textsuperscript{36} In simple terms, Orientalism is intellectual othering used to the advantage of a colonizing power. People can be visually Orientalized through depictions of fictitious barbarism and compositional narratives which compromise the cultural or historical agency of group of people. Orientalizing motifs and their impacts in art commissioned by Bonaparte to memorialize the Egyptian Campaign are analyzed periodically throughout the rest of this paper.

Saïd addresses Bonaparte’s Egyptian Campaign several times. As Saïd put it, “…known at second hand through the exploits of earlier travelers, scholars, and conquerors, Egypt was to become a department of French learning” during the campaign.\textsuperscript{37} Ideas about Egypt manifested, as we have already seen and will see more of, into images of domination and superiority. The association of Bonaparte with the history of Egypt—with Alexander and Caesar, Plato and Homer—was a welcome narrative during and after Napoleon’s imperial reign.\textsuperscript{38} This was just one tool in Bonaparte’s artistic arsenal which allowed his government to craft a visual narrative of cultural conquest in Egypt.

\textbf{Institutional Art and the Egyptian Campaign:}

While his soldiers were left to their fate in Egypt, Bonaparte’s career skyrocketed upon his return to France. Landing at Fréjus in October, 1799, Bonaparte became quickly entangled in

\textsuperscript{36} Saïd, \textit{Orientalism}, 12.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 83.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 85.
a plot to overthrow the Directory. Bonaparte’s service in Egypt distanced him from the turmoil inside the Directory and the French military in Europe. This fact proved politically advantageous for the plotters, who sought a strong-handed military figurehead who could command respect in their newly envisioned government.\textsuperscript{39} Within a month, the coup of 18 Brumaire overthrew the Directory and established Bonaparte as First Consul—the most powerful position in the new French government.\textsuperscript{40} Known by its date in the French Revolutionary calendar, the Coup of 18 Brumaire (November 9), 1799, laid the groundwork for Bonaparte to become France’s chief executive as First Consul and, later, its first emperor.\textsuperscript{41}

At this point, Napoleon was forced to face the political challenge of establishing a firm grasp on power, while bearing in mind the French populous that had beheaded their king and wrought havoc among themselves within the previous seven years. Napoleon shrewdly decided to commission commemorative works of art as a means of propaganda through his arts administration, headed by Denon. Many of the most prominent paintings of the Campaign, take for example Antoine-Jean Gros’s Bonaparte \textit{Visiting the Pesthouse at Jaffa} (1804) and Anne-Louis Girodet’s \textit{Revolt of Cairo} (1810), were commissioned for display at the annual Salon exhibitions.\textsuperscript{42}

Bonaparte’s first commission on the subject of his Near Eastern venture came while he was still on campaign in Palestine. In April of 1799, following the victory of around 500 French troops over an Ottoman force of about 6,000 near Mount Tabor, Bonaparte dispatched a

\textsuperscript{41} Emsley, \textit{Napoleon: Conquest}, 11-17.
\textsuperscript{42} Porterfield, \textit{The Allure}, 53-61, 68-74.
competition announcement to France for a painting commemorating what came to be known as
the Battle of Nazareth. At the time, Bonaparte had no authority to commission official works of
art. Moreover, the Directory had become suspicious of the ambitious Bonaparte. Some scholars
argue the Directory approved Bonaparte’s Egyptian Campaign in the first place to extradite the
popular Bonaparte from the increasingly tense political situation brewing in France. The weary
eye with which the Directory viewed Napoleon’s desire to commission art memorializing his
expedition speaks to the value of such a work for Bonaparte’s image.

Once Bonaparte became First Consul, the competition for the Battle of Nazareth moved
forward. Bonaparte issued detailed instructions describing the pictorial elements required to be
included in competition entries. Only nine entries were received into the competition at the Salon
of 1801. The press widely criticized the competition as an artistic failure, attracting mostly
second-rate artists willing to gamble for institutional status by producing a “moribund” battle
painting. Yet, despite its frosty reception, there is a lot to learn about Napoleonic Orientalism
from Antoine-Jean Gros’s winning entry.

There was an expectation on the part of the regime that artists would depict a relatively
“accurate” version of the battle, down to the minutiae of French and Syrian dress, representations
of specific officers and details of the landscape derived from a map drawn by the French
commanding officer at the battle, General Junot. However, none of the artists that followed
Napoleon to Egypt went with him into the Levant. So, the official demand for accuracy was met

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43 Porterfield, The Allure, 47.
44 Siegfried, “Naked History,” 242. Siegfried writes that the battle took place in 1797, while in actuality it
happened in 1799. Notwithstanding this error, Siegfried’s commentary on Bonaparte’s dispatch
announcing the competition is insightful.
45 O’Brien, After the Revolution, 61-66. “When the sketches for the contest appeared […] during the Salon
of 1801, there was general agreement in the press that the competition was a failure and that artists of
the highest caliber had indeed stayed away” (63).
through approved approximation. Denon supplied sketches of Egyptian garb, which passed for a pan-Ottoman style during the competition.\textsuperscript{46} Lacking first-hand description, the press, for all their jabs at the artistic quality of the Nazareth competition, were nevertheless quick to laud the lighting in Gros’s version as precisely the conditions of the three o’clock sun in Syria.\textsuperscript{47}

The visual rhetoric of a “clash of civilizations” presented in Gros’s \textit{Battle of Nazareth} (Fig.1), as Todd Porterfield put it in his book \textit{The Allure of Empire}, asserted French heroism through an Orientalist perspective.\textsuperscript{48} While the French exhibit staunch courage, ordered discipline and even-tempered mercy toward their captives, the Ottoman soldiers are shown fighting more like a mob than an army. They abandon formation for blind rushes into French musket volleys. In the center foreground of the painting, an Ottoman fighter pulls at a French cavalryman’s coattails with the gesture of a whining child. Near the bottom left corner of the painting, a wounded Frenchman is nearly decapitated by a dismounted Ottoman horseman who, luckily for the wounded Frenchman, has just been cut down by a shot from one of his compatriots. The barbarism Gros conveys to viewers on the part of Ottoman troops in the \textit{Battle of Nazareth} helped Bonaparte justify his invasion of Egypt and the Levant.

The implications of Gros’s Orientalist visual description of the combat at Nazareth are augmented by the biblical history associated with its battlefield. In Gros’s \textit{Battle of Nazareth}, Mount Tabor and the village of Cana, where Christ is said to have turned water into wine, both

\textsuperscript{46} O’Brien, \textit{After the Revolution}, 61.
\textsuperscript{47} Porterfield, \textit{The Allure}, 52.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 47.
lie in the background.\textsuperscript{49} For Bonaparte, the timing of Christian allusion could not have been more convenient. The Catholic Church had been abolished in France during the Revolution. This decree was ill-received by many in France and abroad, stoking the flames of resistance against the Revolution inside France, most infamously in the Vendée.\textsuperscript{50} Bonaparte decided it was time to put state anti-religious sentiment behind France when he signed a Concordat reconciling the Catholic Church with the French government on July 15, 1801.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{49} Porterfield, \textit{The Allure}, 47; For the Biblical tale of the wedding at Cana, see: John 2:1-11 (King James Version).
\textsuperscript{50} Bell, \textit{The First}, 109, 154-183
\textsuperscript{51} The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Concordat of 1801," ed. John M. Cunningham, Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed April 13, 2020, \url{https://www.britannica.com/event/Concordat-of-1801}. While the Concordat was signed in mid-1801, it “was formally promulgated on Easter day, 1802.”
Connecting the French expedition to Christian heritage would have likely also brought the crusades to mind for French viewers in Napoleon’s time. King Louis IX, canonized as Saint Louis, the patron saint of France itself, led an expedition to Egypt and into the Levant between 1248 and 1254. This connection with Saint Louis was asserted explicitly in Louis-François Lejeune’s 1804 *Battle of Mount Tabor*, where Louis’s crest can be discerned etched into a stone discovered by a French officer. This brings up the tricky balance of Napoleon’s revolutionary rhetoric and association with French monarchism. Bonaparte’s initial popularity was derived from his service to the Revolution and its extension under the Directory. Yet, as Bonaparte edged closer toward crowning himself emperor on December 2, 1804, republicanism needed to be traded for authoritarian rule. As a conquering image of ideal monarchical rule with several centuries of separation between him and Bonaparte, Saint Louis was a useful association for Napoleon. More specific to the Egyptian Campaign and its Levantine offshoot, identifying Middle Eastern lands as a site of French heritage, not just stemming from a quasi-Western Roman or Greek antiquity, but from the Middle Ages, further supported French claims to the ancient cultural heritage of the region. By showing continuous French presence over time, it was easier to claim French invading armies were liberators of long-lost heritage and lands, since occupied by Oriental Sultans and marauders.

Gros’s entry for the Nazareth competition conveyed solidarity with the Christian heritage of Western Europe, as well as asserted the Enlightenment values embodied in Bonaparte’s army facing off against Gros’s Oriental barbarism. It bears reminder that this sort of marginalization of real people whitewashes histories of brutality and imperialism. The soldiers who fought for the

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Ottoman Empire and local pashas against Napoleon’s invasion were individuals, with personalities, careers and relationships. Their lives and society were disrupted by a war they did not declared. As much as the focus of this paper is on French art functioning as propaganda, it is imperative that we do not forget the actual people whose cultures and lives were caricatured in Bonaparte’s painted propaganda pieces. Breaking down the function and rhetoric of Orientalizing art to create a better understanding of the struggles that it most often glosses over is the fundamental purpose of this paper. From its outset, the competition to paint the Battle of Nazareth was imagined as an exercise in a kind of historical documentation. The narrative put forward by Bonaparte’s government in the official commission program was calculated to amplify a heroic image of the Battle of Nazareth, thereby maximizing its propagandistic impact. Gros’s vision of the scene was judged to best suit this role as propaganda among the competition. This pretension to accuracy buries the problematic history of the actual Battle of Nazareth, where the French slaughtered captured Ottoman troops to the last.54

Gros won the competition for the Battle of Nazareth and was initially asked to create a full-scale history painting twenty-five feet in length based on his painted sketch (Fig.1). But before Gros had a chance to complete this larger version, the Nazareth project was scrapped. In its place, Bonaparte requested a painting of another incident in Palestine, this time focusing on an infamous outbreak of the plague among French troops.55 The resulting painting, Gros’s Bonaparte Visiting the Pesthouse at Jaffa (1804; Fig.2), is one of the best-known works of art from the Napoleonic era. In 1809, while Bonaparte still sat on the French imperial throne, an official jury declared Gros’ Jaffa, as it will be referred to going forward, the second greatest

54 Porterfield, The Allure, 50-53.
55 Ibid., 53.
‘history painting honorable to the national character’ produced during the ten years since Bonaparte rose to high office.\textsuperscript{56}

How did the scene of a plague-ridden pesthouse honor ‘the national character,’ no less during a failed military campaign? That has a great deal to do with the controversy surrounding what transpired at Jaffa in 1799 and the Enlightened twist Gros put on it. As was noted in the discussion about the \textit{Battle of Nazareth} competition, Bonaparte’s army frequently acted out with cruelty against prisoners during the Middle Eastern campaigns. After the coastal stronghold of Jaffa was taken by siege, the surrendered Turkish garrison of between 2,500 and 4,000 men were slaughtered, with the exception of the officers.\textsuperscript{57} In addition to committing this atrocity, when the time came to retreat back to Egypt, Bonaparte ordered his chief medical officer, René-Nicolas Desgenettes, to poison infected French soldiers rather than bring them with the army. Rather than commit the deed himself, Desgenettes left conspicuous amounts of opium around the Jaffa pesthouse so the unfortunate souls could take leave of this world as they saw fit. Some of those soldiers survived the ordeal, reporting the incident when they were later captured by British soldiers. Needless to say, this looked extremely bad for Napoleon, whose tightening authoritarian grip on France was itself coming under criticism.\textsuperscript{58}

In commissioning Gros to depict the pesthouse at Jaffa, Bonaparte confronts these incidents by offering an alternative perspective on his role at Jaffa and in the Levant. Rather than portraying Bonaparte as a detached commander, indifferent to the anguish of his soldiers, Gros’s Napoleon expresses deep concern for the wellbeing of his troops by visiting them in their hour of need. His tender reach toward one of his soldier’s sores is not only brave, it also invokes the

\textsuperscript{57} Porterfield, \textit{The Allure}, 53; Bell, \textit{The First}, 213.
\textsuperscript{58} Porterfield, \textit{The Allure}, 53-55.
‘touche des écouelles,’ a healing touch associated with French kings. 59 Again, Bonaparte adopts the rhetoric of the Ancien Régime, this time on the eve of his ascension to the imperial throne in December of 1804.

Visually, Bonaparte is shown as a beacon of light and hope amid a den of brooding despair. But he represents a different type of enlightenment as well. Desgenettes, whose portrait appears hovering behind Bonaparte in Gros’s Jaffa, told Napoleon’s army that the plague was not infectious between people in an effort to quell the fear creeping through the ranks. This turns out to be partially true, as bubonic plague is primarily transmitted through flea bites, not human

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59 Porterfield, The Allure, 56.
contact. Thus, when Napoleon touches the infected soldier’s abscess, he confronts the army’s fear of the unknown through the Enlightenment hallmarks of reason and science.\textsuperscript{60} If Bonaparte could not convincingly claim to be a revolutionary leader by 1804, he maintained a persona of Enlightenment intellectualism. Academic investigation had, after all, played a large role during the Egyptian Campaign in the form of the savants’ studies and experiments. Interpreting Bonaparte’s reach as an Enlightened gesture is supported by the inclusion of an ‘ambulance volante,’ a camel harness developed by the savants in Egypt to transport wounded men off the battlefield.\textsuperscript{61} Furthermore, Gros details an identifiable progression in the stages of the bubonic plague; starting from the prostrate man directly below Napoleon, symptoms of the three main stages of the plagues manifestation can be read from right to left, receding through the key hole archway into a portico of misery.\textsuperscript{62} Associating Napoleon’s actions at Jaffa with the Enlightenment rang more poignantly against the background of the allegedly despotic rule of the Islamic Ottoman Empire.

While a good deal could be said addressing the specific Orientalizing aspects of the “Oriental” figures or the architecture, the wider scope of the scene as a whole is of greater symbolic importance. The minaret and open courtyard of the pesthouse suggest it is actually a mosque.\textsuperscript{63} “The Christian touch and the Islamic setting denote the historical confrontation that \textit{The Battle of Nazareth} had staged on the Battlefield.”\textsuperscript{64} With none of the Arab figures falling ill, perhaps the plague infesting the “pesthouse” is a metaphor for Islamic civilization and the mysteries of the “Orient.” Taken from this perspective, Bonaparte descends from his fortress on

\textsuperscript{60} Grigsby, \textit{Extremities: Painting}, 71-73.  
\textsuperscript{61} Porterfield, \textit{The Allure}, 57-58.  
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 59.  
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 56.  
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
a hill, clearly marked by the French Tricolor. Through the power of Enlightened reason and the dominant position of his home bases, here representative of supposed French cultural superiority, Bonaparte embarks to save as many of his men as possible from their progressing sickness and recessing further into the mosque. In so doing, Napoleon tries to reclaim his countrymen, in the same way he attempted to reacquire Egypt and the Holy Lands for an Enlightened France.

As a metaphor for the Campaign, Gros’s work is ingenious propaganda. Imbuing Napoleon with paternal concern for the men under his command and spreading an Enlightened faith in reason helped sweep aside the appalling carnage Bonaparte sanctioned at Jaffa. Of course, these values strengthened the ‘national character,’ insofar as the desired character was Bonapartist. Moreover, it accepted the failure of Bonaparte’s foray into the Levant without laying blame at the feet of the soon-to-be Emperor.

Gros’s Plague House effectively symbolized that the reigns of artistic production had been handed to Bonaparte and Denon. As David O’Brien notes in his book After the Revolution, “by 1804 even the most recalcitrant elements in the art world recognized that greater government control was as much an imperative in the Salon as in any other domain of Napoleonic society.”65 From Napoleon’s immediate patronage sprung memorial after memorial to his expedition in Egypt. Gros, for example, continued to paint scenes related to the Egyptian Campaign, notably the Battle of Aboukir (1806) and His Majesty Haranguing the Army before the Battle of the Pyramids (1810). The Salon expositions, coordinated by the now-Directeur des Beaux Arts, Vivant Denon at the Musée Napoléon, as the Louvre was then known, displayed plenty of Bonaparte sponsored battle paintings, many pertaining to Egypt and the campaign.66 Politically,

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65 O’Brien, After the Revolution, 90.
66 Nowinski, Baron Dominique, 82-111.
art glorifying the successes of the expedition in Egypt and the Levant turn a militarily disastrous venture into good press for Bonaparte.

After crowning himself Emperor at the end of 1804, Napoleon had to grapple with governing as an autocrat while maintaining appearances as a son of the Revolution. Bearing in mind these political aims, the contrast of French gallantry in action and the depictions of infantile, depraved Orientalized Egyptian and Levantine fighters gained a prominent place in the Napoleonic Salon. Consider two paintings focusing on the Egyptian insurrection in Cairo on October 21, 1798. same event, Pierre-Narcisse Guérin’s Napoleon Pardoning the Rebels of Cairo (1808; Fig. 3) and Anne-Louis Girodet’s Revolt of Cairo (1810; Fig. 4).

In Guérin’s 1808 depiction of the aftermath of the rebellion, Bonaparte stands coolly in the shade of a tree, glancing down at his captives. But there is no malice in his expression; his stern glance is closer to that of a disappointed father than a vengeful overlord suppressing rebellion. Indeed, Bonaparte is shown in the act of pardoning his puerile “Oriental” subjects. Guérin elaborates on the Orient-Occident dichotomy rhetorically established through earlier works by Gros and others, portraying Bonaparte as pedagogue lecturing his pupils. The implied moral discrepancy presented in Gros’s Jaffa and Battle of Nazareth is condescendingly flaunted by Guérin.67 This was, however, a far cry from the ghastly historical aftermath of the Cairo revolt. In a dispatch sent on October 23rd, 1798, Bonaparte instructs his men to “decapitate all

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prisoners taken with arms in their hands. They are to be taken tonight to the bank of the Nile […] and their headless bodies are to be thrown in the river.”

For display in the Salon of 1810, on behalf of the Napoleonic administration, Denon commissioned Anne-Louis Girodet to represent the French assault on the rebel stronghold in Cairo’s Grand Mosque. The clash between the Egyptians and French is depicted with fervent energy and violence of action. While both the Mamelukes and the French fight ferociously, there is a distinction in the appearance and bearing between the factions. Many of the Mamelukes are completely naked. Their bodies contort and reel away from the advancing French forces. In the central foreground, a black man wearing only a sanguine turban swings a dagger at a French hussar while lifting the severed head of another Frenchman. Girodet demonstrates the alleged barbarism of “Oriental” culture and its supposed moral failings by depicting the Egyptian rebels as a bloodthirsty horde. The momentum of the action has turned in favor of the French and the Mamelukes are forced to bend to French steel.

Beyond the Salon, Bonaparte commissioned an abundance of public art and monuments, many of which served as particular reminders of his Egyptian campaign. Whereas the Salon paintings discussed above have been analyzed and debated at length, the monuments which have publicly displayed the memory of a victorious Egyptian Campaign have been largely ignored by art historians. The Fontaine de la Victoire stands in the Place du Châtelet in central Paris. Designed by François-Jean Bralle in 1807 at Napoleon’s request, the fountain served as a public tribute to his successes with particular reference to the campaign. The fountain centers on the

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Colonne du Palmier, or Palm Column, which boasts a capital of palm fronds, reminiscent of the exotic foliage along the Nile. Inscribed in the column are fifteen of Napoleon’s major victories, the Battle of the Pyramids among them. Four sphinxes surround the base of the fountain today, steeping Napoleon’s expedition in an atmosphere of antiquity mystery. These, however, are not original to Bralle’s design; they are an 1858 addition patronized by Bonaparte’s nephew, Napoleon III. He, like his uncle, understood the value of political story telling through monumental art, elevating Bonaparte’s legacy to bolster his own power.

Bonaparte ordered the construction of fifteen public fountains on May 2, 1806. Of these, six were Egyptianized in style. The Fontaine du Fellah (Fig.5), one of the Egyptianizing fountains, still sits on the Rue de Sèvres today. It was designed by Bralle design and sculpted by Pierre Nicolas Beauvallet between 1806 and 1809. The central focus of the fountain is a male figure modeled on the Antinoüs (after 129-130 C.E.), an Egyptianizing Roman statue discovered at the Villa Adriana in Trivoli and looted by Napoleon’s army from the Capitoline Museum. Beauvallet’s copied Antinoüs’s “pharaonic stance,” mid-stride with the left foot forward, in addition to the figure’s “nemes headdress” and “shendyt kilt.” Surrounding the Antinoüs figure of the Fontaine du Fellah stands a thick, slightly acute post and lintel archway, derived from Denon’s architectural plates. In fact, the archway only significantly deviates from Denon’s work in that instead of being crowned with a winged globe, the French Imperial Eagle stretches its wings above the fountain. Just as Napoleon’s army stretched across the Nile basin, the eagle

70 Curl, The Egyptian, 244-245.
72 Curl, The Egyptian, 226.
73 Ibid., 50, 225-226.
74 Ibid., 50, 226-227.
75 Ibid., 226.
too extends its dominion over symbols of the admirable ancients, claiming their history for France and Bonaparte.

Conclusion:

The irony of a Napoleonic commission copying a Roman pastiche of ancient Egyptian style should be highlighted for several reasons. First of all, the Roman connection between Egypt and the “West” forges a major link in a chain of patrimonial claims that form the basis for the Western assertion of ownership over Egypt’s past. What have come to be considered the Greek origins of Western government and philosophy form another Egyptian link through Alexander’s conquest and the Ptolemies, which in turn produce another connection to Rome. Returning to the irony of the Fontaine du Fellah, copying another culture’s stylized representation of yet another culture says quite a lot about the idea of cultural inheritance in Napoleonic France. In this view, Egypt had only sparsely been independent since Alexander. After the Greeks came the Romans and their Byzantine successors, then finally the Ottoman Turks. If France could establish a claim, self-serving as it may be, to the patrimony of ancient Greece and Rome, why not stake a claim over Egypt as well?

After Napoleon crowned himself Emperor of France in 1804, public works became powerful political tools, as well as offering a platform for propaganda. The fountains discussed above serve such a purpose, with both aiming to retain public faith in Bonaparte as emperor by reminding the common man of Napoleon’s role as conqueror and provider. Meanwhile, Battle paintings fought to solidify an official narrative of justified conquest and Enlightened authoritarianism.

Bonaparte’s decision to continually memorialize his Egyptian Campaign and its incursion into the Levant is not necessarily an obvious focus for propaganda, especially more than a decade after its occurrence. This costly expedition failed to secure a colony for France and ultimately resulted in an embarrassing defeat at the hands of the Ottomans and British. Bonaparte
mobilized the arts to shift this perspective, reframing the story of the Egyptian Campaign in a more favorable light. Orientalist rhetorical strategies developed at the Salons to demonstrate French cultural, technological and moral superiority were the means through which Napoleon achieved this goal. The Egyptian Campaign is difficult to rationalize in purely strategic terms, seeing as British naval dominance was well established and few resources of value, with the exception of cotton, were produced in Egypt. The political convenience of Napoleon’s absence in France during the time of the campaign could hardly be articulated to the public, lest it give the appearance of weakness. Instead, culture was politicized in the arts focused on the Egyptian Campaign. And so, Bonaparte’s mirage rose out of the painted sands of a fantastical Oriental desert, immortalizing a vision of Napoleon as the bringer of Enlightenment and liberator of centuries in Egypt and the Levant. A close reading of Bonaparte’s mythologized legacy shows it laden with distortions and outright fabrications. In reality, he caused profound suffering as a result of his despotic ambitions. Napoleon’s centrality in Gros’s *Bonaparte Visiting the Pesthouse at Jaffa* was used by his regime to contrast the scene’s anguish with the general’s serenity. This effort to reshape history is, in fact, a callous example of Bonaparte deflecting responsibility for his misdeeds by attempting to spin the misery of others into a political victory.

Through his admittedly successful exploitation of a manufactured Oriental-Occidental cultural struggle, Napoleon Bonaparte solidified and propagated his vision of a victorious campaign in the Middle East. To quote Saïd, Orientalism “became not merely a style of representation but a language, indeed a means of *creation*” in Napoleon’s wake. The Egyptian

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76 As I hope this paper has made clear, the literature on the development of Orientalism out of the Egyptian and Levantine Campaigns is robust. For a few examples of the academic discourse on Napoleonic Orientalism, the Egyptian Campaign and visual rhetoric in Napoleonic art, See: Saïd, Grigsby, O’Brien, Siegfried, Porterfield, Reid and Russell.

77 Saïd, *Orientalism*, 87.
Campaign continued to be venerated beyond Bonaparte’s lifetime. It was the Restoration monarch, Louis Philippe d’Orléans, who oversaw the completion of the Arc de Triomphe, in 1836. On it, six panels of sculpted friezes displaying battles of the Napoleonic and Revolutionary periods. Two of these six panels feature Bonaparte’s victories in Egypt. With the French invasion of Algeria occurring only six years before the Arc was finish, Bonaparte’s imperialist Egyptian expedition could serve as a premonition, even a justification for the then-recent French colonial venture into the Maghreb. Of course, we must remember also that it was Bonaparte’s nephew, Napoleon III, who sponsored the construction of the Emperors tomb in the Invalides, where next to France’s first emperor, the name “Pyramides” is enshrined forever.

78 Georges Huisman, Pour comprendre les monuments de Paris (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1925), 299-300.
80 Driskel, As Befits, 170-179.
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