

## Discussion Questions

<http://orias.berkeley.edu/2009/NapoleonDiscussion.pdf>

Of portrait photography, the famous fashion photographer Richard Avedon once said:

*A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth.*

His claim for the photographic portrait is just as true, if not more so, than for painted or sculpted portraits. Painted or sculpted portraits do not require the suspension of disbelief that photographs do — their surface is apparent as man-made: we do not “see” truth value in them the way we do in photographs and yet, we are led to believe that the person who is represented actually looked like this or did these things. There are innumerable portraits of Napoleon Bonaparte, many of which are quite different one from the next. The variety of these representations forces us to ask:

- Who was Napoleon, really — the man on the horse or the man in his study?
- What did his rapidly ascendant career mean to the French at each step of the way — and what steps were worthy of commemoration?

It is vital to remember that in this period, most portraits were highly visible (publicly displayed or commonly reproduced), state-commissioned works and were conceived of and completed after the date of the event they depict. Portraiture, then, can be seen as a sort of selective history—a “greatest hits” of a man’s life. Napoleonic portraits are all the more interesting for this because they inherit the problem of representation endemic to the French Revolution:

- How does one depict a man when he is more than a man but not a king: a general, peacemaker, consul, and finally emperor?
- Can Napoleon the Peacemaker exist side-by-side with Napoleon the Warrior? What images are mobilized at different times in his career and what visual vocabulary can they employ successfully without making the wrong political statements?

How can one break down the “constructedness” of a portrait to get at the meaning conveyed? Here are some good questions to begin with:

- How much of the available space does the figure occupy? Is the subject shown standing? In three-quarter view or in profile? What effect does that have on the way you perceive him? How young or old does he look? How strong or weak?
- What do the clothing, furnishings, accessories, and background contribute to your sense of Napoleon’s character? What sort of message is the composition trying to convey about the subject? What kind of man is Napoleon based on how he is represented?

### Napoleon: Portrait of a Man

<http://orias.berkeley.edu/2009/MathieuSlides.pdf>

Keep these questions in mind as we examine Napoleonic portraiture — as compared to other portraits of the past that these images contend with, and in comparison to one another.

1. SLIDE TWO

Who was Napoleon? More importantly, who did he want to be seen as? Two works of David's reveal utterly different facets of his character. Define them, looking especially at the incredible and telling background details, and ask, what did Napoleon gain by embracing such a range of representations?

2. SLIDE THREE

Compare either one of these paintings to an earlier one made by David to commemorate the death of Jean-Paul Marat, a Revolutionary hero. How does the painter choose to reveal each man's heroism differently?

3. SLIDE FOUR

His whole life, Napoleon invited comparisons to the emperors of Rome, especially Caesar and Augustus. He had an Italian artist of great skill, Antonio Canova, come up from Rome to sculpt him as a Roman leader. The sculpture was roundly ridiculed by Napoleon's contemporaries. What is so "wrong" with this portrait? What message was it trying to convey and how or why do you think it succeeded or failed at that message?

4. SLIDE FIVE

Girodet's portrait of Napoleon was an official portrait commission: Napoleon commissioned 36 of them to be sent out to the various provinces. Ingres's portrait, though more famous today, was unsolicited by the emperor; it was widely panned when it was displayed at the Salon of 1806. What is the difference between these imperial Napoleons?

5. SLIDE SIX

How would a comparison with Hyacinth Rigaud's *Louis XIV*, a painting well-known to both artists and people at that time, help sort out this issue? How much of a "king" can a post-Revolutionary monarch be?