
Appreciating the Pyramids Depicted by Antoine Jean Gros

Visual Analysis: Forty Centuries Look Down Upon You!

Many people with a reputable status are popularized by great legends and first-hand accounts of their own deeds. Before the age of the internet and the rapid spread of information, political leaders would often rely on the commission of official paintings or photographs to display to the public the nature of their character and their accomplishments. These images were not always truthful in their depictions of events, however, and could even be considered advertisement or propaganda in a modern sense. Regardless of the faithfulness of these pictures to the events they depicted, leaders still took pride in the quality of the works, and necessitated that they were composed to be of the greatest quality that time would permit. One such leader was Napoleon Bonaparte, the first Emperor of France. Napoleon commissioned Antoine-Jean Gros to be his personal portraitist, tasked with depicting his great victories in Europe and the Middle East with dashing and extravagant paintings, to garner more support for his rule in France. In his painting, *The Battle of the Pyramids*, Gros uses emphasis, symbolism, and hyperbolic contrast to foster Napoleon's legend as a noble figure and great conqueror.

The painting immediately captures the viewer's eye through its use of movement and composition, drawing the viewer to Napoleon in the center frame of the piece, calmly mounted on an alabaster-white horse with golden adornments, contrasting with the other brown and caramel colored horses of the other figures. To Napoleon's left and right are his officers, clad in the navy blue and scarlet French uniforms and sporting dark blue bicorne hats and golden epaulettes, gazing at him in admiration and respect. Several of them are gesturing to salute Napoleon by waving their sabers in the air. In the bottom-right of the painting is a group of orientaux, Turks and Egyptians. They are depicted (with unabashed inaccuracy) as wearing nothing but cloth robes, or no clothes at all, with the occasional turban. A Turkish and an Egyptian soldier hold their hands out towards Napoleon and his officers in exaltation, under the burden of a fallen Sudanese soldier. To their right is a bearded man wearing a blue tunic, shouldering a naked man and a woman wearing a lavender dress and white veil. Scattered about the easterners is an assemblage of discarded weapons, shields, and accessories. Far in the background of the piece are the titular pyramids, visible against the clear blue sky meeting the horizon, but slightly obscured by their distance from the figures in the foreground and the clouds of dust whipped up during the battle. Napoleon gestures flatly with his left hand to command the attention of his men, as his right hand, gripping the reins of his horse, points towards the pyramids.

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The elements of this painting are clearly designed to draw attention to the center-figure of the piece, Napoleon Bonaparte, and portray him as an almost messianic figure. To Napoleon's sides, his officers wave their sabers about. Jean Lannes, the man to the left of Napoleon atop the dark brown horse, is brandishing his sword downwards and to the right. All their weapons curve inward towards the center of the painting, in a sense creating a circle of swords "trapping" the viewer's eye in the middle third of the composition. Everyone in the painting is looking towards Napoleon as well, which further contributes to this effect. The outstretched hands of the fallen Ottoman soldiers also add to the "circle" enveloping Napoleon. Napoleon himself is emphasized by his brightly lit figure and white horse, which stands out amongst the darker, muted tones of his officers' uniforms.

Through this painting, Antoine-Jean Gros uses symbolism to fulfill his purpose: expand the legend of Napoleon and his efforts. Allegedly, Napoleon said to his troops before the battle, "From the heights of these pyramids, forty centuries look down upon you!" In *The Battle of the Pyramids*, Napoleon directs his men towards the pyramids, as if intent on conquering the monuments themselves, and asserting his supremacy over those four thousand years of history. This gesture reflects the idea that Napoleon believes himself to be greater than that of the greatest structures in the world, and that he is capable of surmounting challenges on the scale of constructing the pyramids themselves. The Ottoman soldiers holding their hands out to Napoleon suggest something of a Godly or Christ-like reverence, insinuating that the general is on a pedestal as high as that of God. Similarly, Louis Desaix's and Jean Lannes' horses turn their heads away from Napoleon's, almost as if feeling shame or unworthiness in the presence of it and the man astride it. The colors associated with Napoleon, specifically red and gold, evoke a sense of royalty, power, and extravagance, while the white and blue of his horse and coat, respectively, carry connotations of purity, justice, and nobility. Conversely, the Ottoman soldiers are shown wearing little to no clothing, suggesting a certain primitiveness or savagism about them, as opposed to the French, who are ornately garbed and confidently postured.

The Battle of the Pyramids, like many other works of Gros, was created to enrapture those whom Napoleon hosted and impress them with the nature of his deeds; essentially it served as a propaganda piece. As such, it was hung on display at the Palace of Versailles for all of Napoleon's guests to see. Because the intended audience of the painting was wealthy European socialites, historical and cultural accuracy took a back seat to the glorification of Bonaparte and the French Army. Many details of the battle were embellished or fabricated for the sake of creating a more visually stunning work. Despite this, the painting still successfully relies on its lavish and exaggerated imagery to present its message. The contrast between the "civilized" French and the "barbarian" Turks helps to further demonstrate Napoleon's nobility and dignity, while demeaning the qualities of his enemies. The movement and emphasis of the piece establish Napoleon as the primary subject of the painting and the center of attention, while the various symbolic and implicit connotations create an air of divinity, royalty, grace and

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about him. Antoine-Jean Gros uses these artistic elements to display Napoleon as a great conqueror of his enemies, and beneficent leader of his people.

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