

18th- and 19th-Century France (Neoclassicism)

The French Revolution began in 1789, when citizens stormed the Bastille prison in Paris. Within a few years, France had adopted and overthrown several constitutions and executed its former king. It found itself at war with most of the Continent and endured horrible violence at home during the Reign of Terror. Finally, in 1799, the successful young general Napoleon Bonaparte seized control and, in 1804, proclaimed himself emperor. Though he made important administrative reforms, he was preoccupied by constant warfare and his heroic but failed attempt to unite all of Europe by conquest. After being defeated at Waterloo in 1815, Napoleon was exiled and the Bourbon monarchy was restored in the person of Louis XVIII.

With the revolution, French painting resumed its moral and political purpose and embraced the style known as neoclassicism. Even before 1789, popular taste had begun to turn away from the disarming, lighthearted subjects of rococo; as revolution neared, artists increasingly sought noble themes of public virtue and personal sacrifice from the history of ancient Greece or Rome. They painted with restraint and discipline, using the austere clarity of the neoclassical style to stamp their subjects with certitude and moral truth.

Neoclassicism triumphed—and became inseparably linked to the revolution—in the work of Jacques-Louis David, a painter who also played an active role in politics. As virtual artistic dictator, he served the propaganda programs first of radical revolutionary factions and later of Napoleon. As a young man David had worked in the delicate style of his teacher François Boucher, but in Italy he was influenced by ancient sculpture and by the seventeenth-century artists Caravaggio and Poussin, adopting their strong contrasts of color, clear tones, and firm contours. David gave his heroic figures sculptural mass and arranged them friezelike in emphatic compositions that were meant to inspire his fellow citizens to noble action.

Among the many artists who studied in David's large studio was Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. Unlike his teacher, Ingres did not involve himself in politics and spent most of his youth in Italy, returning to France only after the restoration of the monarchy. During his long life, he came to be regarded as the high priest of neoclassicism, pursuing its perfection after younger artists had become enthralled with romanticism. A superb draftsman, Ingres insisted on the importance of line though he nevertheless was a brilliant master of color. A mathematical precision pushes his work toward formal abstraction despite the meticulous realism of its surfaces.



Jean-Antoine Houdon
French, 1741–1828

Giuseppe Balsamo, Comte di Cagliostro, 1786

One of his contemporaries noted that Houdon, the most successful portrait sculptor of his day, “pushed truth to the bitter end.” This bust captures the fleshy and disheveled scoundrel Cagliostro, who bilked the courts of Europe as an alchemist and mesmerizer. He was implicated in the notorious Affair of the Diamond Necklace, which galvanized public opinion against the French royal family when it appeared that Marie-Antoinette had purchased an extravagant necklace at a time of strained public finances. In fact, an ambitious dupe had made the purchase in hopes of currying the queen's favor. Cagliostro was suspected of acting as a go-between, and though no charges were proven, he was expelled from France in 1786, the same year this bust is dated. He died in a prison in Rome about fifteen years later, condemned by the pope as a heretic.

Cagliostro's spirited portrait contrasts with Houdon's cool and impersonal *Diana*, also in this room. Cagliostro's eyes, for example, are drilled to indicate the pupil, whereas *Diana's* blank, undifferentiated gaze reveals neither spirit nor human emotion. Houdon copied *Diana* from his 1776 plaster model for a full-length statue, a practice he followed frequently.

Marble, without base: .629 x .589 x .343 m
(24 3/4 x 23 x 13 1/2 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.103



Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun
French, 1755–1842

The Marquise de Pezé and the Marquise de Rouget with Her Two Children, 1787

Madame Vigée-Lebrun was part of the world she painted and, like her aristocratic patrons, was under threat of the guillotine after the revolution. She was forced to flee Paris in disguise in 1789. She had been first painter to Queen Marie-Antoinette and her personal confidant. The queen had intervened to ensure her election to the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, an honor accorded few women.

More than two-thirds of Vigée-Lebrun's surviving paintings are portraits. Most, like this one, are of women and children who are idealized—flattered—into a kind of family resemblance. These unrelated young women, for example, could easily be mistaken for sisters. Their garments, airy silks and iridescent taffetas, are almost more individual than their faces, although both women were friends of the artist. The picture was hailed as a tribute to friendship and maternal love when it was shown at the Salon of 1787.

Oil on canvas, 1.234 x 1.559 m (48 5/8 x 61 3/8 in.) Gift of the Bay Foundation in memory of Josephine Bay Paul and Ambassador Charles Ulrick Bay 1964.11.1



Jacques-Louis David
French, 1748–1825

The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries, 1812

David described Napoleon's tireless diligence: “He is in his study. . . . The candles flickering and the clock striking four remind him that the day is about to break. . . . He rises. . . . to pass his troops in review.”

It is unlikely that Napoleon actually posed for this portrait despite its convincing detail. The painting is an artful contrivance to convey three aspects of his public image: soldier, emperor, and administrator. A volume of Plutarch's *Lives* positions him with the great generals of ancient history and reinforces the meaning of the uniform, sword, and campaign maps. Embroidered on the ceremonial chair are the golden bees and *N* of his imperial emblem. And on the desk, rolled papers—the *Code Napoléon*, whose reforms are the basis of French legal theory—recall his civic role.

Oil on canvas, 2.039 x 1.251 m (80 1/4 x 49 1/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.15

- 1789 French Revolution begins
- 1793 Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette executed. Reign of Terror
- 1796 Jenner introduces smallpox vaccine
- 1798 Napoleon campaigns in Egypt. Wordsworth and Coleridge publish *Lyrical Ballads*
- 1799 Napoleon elected consul
- 1801 Chateaubriand publishes *Atala*. Lamarck studies role of acquired characteristics in evolution
- 1803 U.S. buys territory from France in Louisiana Purchase
- 1804 Napoleon crowns himself emperor. Beethoven completes *Eroica* Symphony
- 1808 Goethe publishes *Faust, Part I*
- 1812 Byron publishes *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*
- 1815 Napoleon defeated at Waterloo. Louis XVIII assumes crown
- 1818 Mary Shelley publishes *Frankenstein*
- 1823 death of Prud'hon**
- 1825 death of David**
- 1828 death of Houdon**
- 1830 Louis Philippe proclaimed French "Citizen King"
- 1832 Berlioz completes *Symphonie Fantastique*
- 1842 death of Vigée-Lebrun**
- 1848 Louis Philippe abdicates. Louis Napoleon elected French president
- 1852 Second Empire begins, Louis Napoleon proclaimed Napoleon III
- 1857 Pasteur studies fermentation, leading to pasteurization process
- 1862 Hugo publishes *Les Misérables*
- 1867 death of Ingres**



Jacques-Louis David

Madame David, 1813

When David married Marguerite-Charlotte Pécoul, the young daughter of a prosperous builder with connections at Louis XVI's court, he was literally twice her age. Their marriage was at times stormy; they separated, divorced, and remarried. David spoke of her as a "woman whose virtues and character had assured the happiness of his life." Political disagreements, particularly his attachment to the ruthless Robespierre, may have exacerbated their personal differences. However, after Robespierre was executed and David himself imprisoned—and threatened with the guillotine—his wife rallied to him with great courage. Her tireless appeals secured his release, and they remained together until her death.

David's frank but sympathetic portrait catches not only the homeliness of his wife's features, but her intelligence and directness as well. Unlike many of David's works, this portrait was painted entirely by his own hand. Its technique is freer than the austere style he applied to less intimate subjects. The satiny texture of her dress, unadorned by jewelry as Madame David surrendered hers in support of the revolution, is created with heavy brushes of thick pigment, the plume with lighter strokes of thinner color. These exuberant surfaces contrast with the restrained precision of the accessories in Napoleon's portrait.

Oil on canvas, .729 x .594 m (28 ¾ x 23 ⅜ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.14



Pierre Paul Prud'hon

French, 1758–1823

David Johnston, 1808

David Johnston, who was painted at the age of nineteen, became a progressive industrialist in the ceramics business and served as mayor of Bordeaux. This portrait was produced while Prud'hon was at the height of his fame, in the same year that Napoleon awarded him the Legion of Honor. Unlike most other painters in France, Prud'hon did not fall under the influence of David's austere style. His work, by contrast, has the shadowy softness of Italian Renaissance painters Leonardo da Vinci and Correggio, whose works he studied. The firm lines and hard contours of color preferred by his contemporaries throw their subjects into vivid relief, while Prud'hon's more gentle gradations of tone lend romantic, sometimes erotic ambiguity instead. Compare, for example, this portrait with the sharp intensity of Ingres' *Marcotte d'Argenteuil*.

Prud'hon, his life marred by personal tragedy, was passionately admired by romantic artists of the following generation who saw in his work an alternative to the *tyrannie davidienne*, the dictates of a neoclassical style that eventually lapsed into rigid dogma.

Oil on canvas, .546 x .464 m (21 ½ x 18 ¼ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.84



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres

French, 1780–1867

Pope Pius VII in the Sistine Chapel, 1814

Ingres painted this scene while he was living in Italy. The painting's extreme visual accuracy, which reproduces Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* at the right, is so precise that the painting would appear to be an eyewitness account; however, at that time the pope was being held virtual prisoner in France after having been brutally removed from Rome by French forces following Napoleon's annexation of the Papal States.

The circumstances of the work's commission are somewhat surprising, since Ingres painted it for a prominent French official in Rome who might have been expected to avoid such a potentially controversial subject. He was Charles Marcotte, a good friend of Ingres' and one of his most important patrons, whose portrait hangs nearby. (Ingres included his self-portrait here as one of the brown-clad train-bearers, the fourth from the left). By the time the painting was exhibited in Paris, events changed dramatically. Napoleon's defeat and exile, the return of Louis XVIII, and the pope's own restoration to Rome removed the controversy from Marcotte's commission.

Ingres, unlike David in whose studio he studied, remained blind to politics, devoting himself instead to the perfection of his art.

Oil on canvas, .745 x .927 m (29 ⅜ x 36 ½ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.23



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres

Madame Moitessier, 1851

When his friend Marcotte first suggested that Ingres paint Inès Moitessier, the wife of a financier and jurist, he demurred. Ingres changed his mind after being struck by her "terrible et belle tête" (terrible and beautiful head). The author Théophile Gautier described her as "Junolike," and Ingres presents her with the imposing remoteness of a Roman goddess. Her stance is severe and strongly silhouetted, her monumental shoulders stark ivory against the somber, restricted colors around her.

Ingres insisted on painting every detail from life, so he could achieve, in his words, "the faithful rendering of nature that leads to art." With minute accuracy he has recorded the light-absorbing darkness of her lace and velvet costume, the gleam of gold jewelry, the gloss of her elaborate coiffure. The emphatic reality of these details contrasts with her unfocused gaze, contributing to the sense that she is somehow removed from life.

Ingres began to pose Madame Moitessier in the 1840s, but the work languished. This second attempt was begun after the aging artist—he was seventy-one—had been roused from depression by the prospect of his remarriage in 1852.

Oil on canvas, 1.47 x 1.00 m (57 ¾ x 39 ⅜ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.18