The suspended conflict appears all the more as a suspension of history itself by virtue of David’s startling decision to depict his warriors in the nude. While this was believed to conform to an ancient Greek practice, it had no historical pertinence to a Roman subject. But he took the step, late in the compositional development of the painting, to appropriate the idealizing Hellenism being promoted by his students. The design of the principal triad of figures could be a vignette from Flaxman. The effect of its paradoxical delicacy and formalized balance is to remove the memory of actual conflict and violence to a safer realm of myth.

David’s mode of exhibiting the painting achieved a further gathering of power to himself. His response to the lack of state funds for the support of art was to ignore the Salon of 1799 altogether and arrange an independent showing of the work in his own space, charging an admission fee to every visitor. Owing to this isolation and personal control over its display, David for the first time was able to present one of his large-scale paintings at eye-level rather than at the top of a crowded Salon hanging. He further exploited these new circumstances by placing a standing mirror opposite the painting. The spectators were invited to use the reflection in order to achieve a distanced, totalizing view of the narrative; at the same time they would see themselves as participants in the action behind them. This is the first of more than one trick he would later play with mirrors in his private exhibitions in an effort to mystify and spectacularize the act of viewing. Having designed a work that maximized the potential for such effects and that reinforced rather than tested the beliefs of its audience, he made the next logical move in financially speculating on the successful appeal of his strategies. He was handsomely repaid for his effort: the painting stayed on view for five years and financed the purchase of a substantial country house and land. The entrepreneurial artist of the nineteenth century was well and truly launched.

THE SUBLIME OF AUTHORITARIANISM

A month before the opening of David’s exhibition of the 
Sabinés in the last month of 1799, the constitutional government had fallen in the coup of 18 Brumaire. Emerging as leader of a new regime was the charismatic young general Napoleon Bonaparte. Careful at this point to preserve republican forms, his faction came up with the title of First Consul; it evoked the chief executive office of the Roman Republic, one first occupied by Brutus. Napoleon was no stranger to David: he had visited the artist’s studio in 1797 and given a mighty impression as an exemplar of martial virtue. By assuming power, he made an immediate effort to bind David to the new government as its official painter. The first successful product of that alliance was the portrait (1800) of the general, calmly seated on a rearing charger, crossing the Alps over the Saint-Bernard Pass. The actual crossing was a more prosaic affair on the back of a donkey, but plainly the rhetorical requirements of leadership were to prevail over accuracy: carved in the stone are the names of Hannibal and Charlemagne, who had followed the same route to Italian conquests. The setting of natural sublimity of course does more than serve historical commemoration: as in Harriet’s Oedipus, the wild terrain and turbulent weather are meant to lend action and drama of an irrational kind to the sheer presence of the main actor.

At the same time, however, the wind-blown cloak and broken clouds remain superficial effects laid over an obdurately stable and Classical substructure. Even the perilous slopes and shafts of light arrange themselves in a rigid X-shaped armature which fixes Napoleon firmly in his seat. Soon the republican painter discovered that his deeper moral and artistic preoccupations were at odds with the Bonapartist vision of public art. By 1802, David had begun work on a major new historical canvas. The subject was Leonidas at Thermopylae, the hero being the leader of that small band of Spartans who held off the entire Persian army at a narrow pass, but at the cost of every Greek soldier. He chose the
moment of reflection and preparation before the battle, and continued the pre-Revolutionary line of ancient leaders who sacrificed everything for virtue and the welfare of the community. Napoleon, on seeing the picture in preparation, dismissed the entire idea as a painting of losers. David suspended work on the *Leonidas* for a decade and soon was diverted into the wearying and esthetically thankless task of glorifying the new Emperor’s rite of coronation in 1804. The outcome was an overbearingly enormous canvas enumerating every dignitary present at the pompous ceremony in Notre-Dame (and though he made a study of the arrogant self-crowning itself, David ended by shifting his moment away from any suggestion of usurpation to the aftermath when the freshly Imperial Bonaparte turned to crown his consort Josephine).

This was painting as duty, and it was performed as such. It returns to a conception of rhetorical elevation as copious magnificence in the accumulation of ornaments and witnesses to glory. But much Napoleonic painting was conceived without this sort of clear brief. As political legitimacy devolved into the charisma of one man, painters were presented with a qualitatively new situation. Although he was convinced that art mattered, the ruler himself could not be exactly sure of what he wanted until he saw it. His identity and self-image—general to statesman, Consul to Emperor—were continually subject to change. Artists’ initiatives were bound to take on a speculative character, and speculation could as easily turn out wrong as right.

Gérard, typically, was first to take advantage of the Consul’s known enthusiasm for the *Ossian* poems. These were claimed as the rediscovered epic cycle of an ancient Cæcubard of that name, though they had actually been produced half-century earlier by the Scottish writer James Macpherson. Because invented to eighteenth-century requirements, the believers could take the Ossianic as more pure and primitive than the poetry of archaic Greece, and the *primitifs* David’s studio put them on a level with the works of Homer and Hesiod. Even those who doubted the announ provenance of the verse appreciated it precisely for its modernity: its evocations of a dark and primal northern world inhabited by heroes and spirits corresponded to a growing subjectivity and irrationalism. In a painting destined Bonaparte’s country retreat at Malmaison, Gérard makes Ossian a blind and bereft old man, conjuring from his lyre memories of lost parents and children, who surround his ghostly spirits in a moonlit miasma. With the wild set-eerie nocturnal lighting, and subject matter of few imaginings in an elderly survivor, Gérard distilled developments of the 1790’s into a cloudy fantasy unstrained by Classical logic or structure.

Girodet had a good claim to being the most experim painter in his generation, and his rivalry with Gérard intense. He seized on the First Consul’s decorating plan Malmaison as a chance to rehabilitate his career as a hi painter, seeking at the same time to surpass his old frien studio-mate in the Ossianic stakes. Not content with rep
ing the other-worldly setting and mood of the poems, he sought to incorporate Napoleon’s contemporary concerns into the invented mythology. In his 1802 painting, French commanders, killed in recent campaigns, arrive in a Valhalla presided over by the blind Celtic bard and packed to the breaking point with ghosts and spirits. The upper zone is dominated by elements of overt allegory after Hennequin (if more suavely handled) in the floating personification of republican liberty and the victory of a Gallic cock over an Austrian eagle. These are only the beginning of a catalog of allegorical correspondences to persons and recent political events, ingeniously conceived but nearly impossible to decipher without the guidance of a detailed inventory. In a further burst of conspicuous invention, Girodet conceived the entire atmosphere and lighting of the scene according to his understanding of electric luminosity, using recent discoveries of science as a spectacularly vivid equivalent to the afterlife.

All of Girodet’s prodigious natural ability was on show in the painting, which deploys the resources of illusionism to construct a dense tissue of physical impossibilities. The packed accumulation of figures is relieved by a translucent delicacy in their rendering: “figures of crystal,” in the words of David, who praised his old pupil’s originality to his face, but dismissed it to others as outlandish and undisciplined. Contemporary evidence suggests that Gérard’s more straightforward illustration of strictly Ossianic themes found greater favor both in public and with the First Consul. Two former adherents of the Davidian primitifs, the twin brothers Franque, would later adopt the same arrangement as a formula to depict Napoleon himself being beckoned by spirits in a dream to return from Egypt in 1799 and save France by assuming power.

The setback may well have been beneficial to Girodet in that he turned away for a time from political subject matter and from appeals to the ruler’s immediate interests. For the Salon of 1806, he prepared an immense Deluge, a terrifying emotional drama in a turbulent and darkly primitive world. In contrast to his Ossian Receiving the Napoleonic Officers, he reduced the drama to a configuration of elemental simplicity and unmistakable meaning. This subject, centered on the burden of a strong young father, struggling to support a parent, a spouse and a child simultaneously, had become a popular one in the immediately preceding period. Regnault had shown a small canvas on the subject alongside his Lamentation in 1789; there the man carries his father on his back and is therefore unable to seize hold of his wife and son as the current sweeps them away. Contemporary viewers were prepared to overlook the curiously sluggish current, and it became one of his most popular works: he eventually painted several replicas to meet demand from collectors. Not for the first time, of course, Girodet took cues from the success of this artist and pushed the same material toward a more extreme and ambitious statement.

Regnault’s conception of the scene, in that it stresses the emotion of irretrievable loss, fits within the category of sentimental subjects, and its compact dimensions are those of
a cabinet picture. Girodet, by contrast, wanted to maximize both the drama and the physical impact of terror in a canvas of outsized, aggressively public scale. The size of his figures is grander than life. He stacked them vertically, which corresponds to the perilous fall along the cliff face and allows the canvas to tower over the spectator. So that the scene would conform to the requirements of high drama, he chose a moment when his central male figure has not yet lost his grip on the wife and child. The aged father has become the very embodiment of dead weight, already inert and corpse-like, clutching a futile bag of gold; he exerts monstrous strength from a withered body that seems beyond age. Thanks to this death grip of the past, the frail support of the vital younger generations is about to fail, and all the characters are poised on the brink of oblivion in the rushing torrent.

Consistent with his public ambition, Girodet took advantage of an established Classical prototype—the motif of the Trojan hero Aeneas carrying his father and leading his son from the burning ruins of the city, precisely as rendered by Gerard for a series of printed illustrations to Virgil’s *Aeneid* in the later 1790’s (in which both he and David had also collaborated). But Girodet has reversed the meaning of the motif from one of filial devotion to one of fatal conflict of obligations. If one defines expressive dissonance in any art form in terms of departure from a settled sense of harmony, then this painting is maximally dissonant within the conventions of history painting. The artist has stretched the internal contrast of age and youth virtually to the breaking point—just as the man’s arm is being pulled to its limits. The terrified expressions defy every Classical norm of composure, a quality heroic actors had been assumed always to exhibit even in extreme pain. Muscles bulge and tendons strain. An outsized, funereal cloak swirls in a freakish whirlwind.

To compare the *Deluge* to David’s conception of the Spartan leader Leonidas is to see how thoroughly Girodet had seized and transformed the conventions of heroic nudity. For
David, the hero gathers and contains his strength within himself in order to exert it at will; for Girodet, the hero, such as he remains, is a victim, his strength arrayed as a conduit across which uncontrollable, nonhuman forces exert themselves: among these is the sexual desire which binds him to his mate and to the next generation. The larger community, with its veneration of constraining authority and wealth, is a threat to his survival. But this is less a motif of youthful rebellion than a figure for the finality of human isolation. At this point Girodet had finally set his art against the rationalist, communitarian precepts of his formation in David’s circle. This was recognized by conservatives in the fine-arts division of the Institute, the umbrella cultural organization under Napoleon’s Empire, who despised the Jacobin associations that still clung to the Classical canon. In a competition to select the best works of art produced during the first decade of Bonapartist rule, the jury preferred the *Deluge* to David’s *Sabines*.

**DREAMS BEYOND HISTORY**

In the same year that Girodet exhibited the *Deluge*, an artist of the next generation made his own dramatic bid for official favor. Repeating the former’s own tactics in 1802, J.-A.-D. Ingres (1780–1867) sought to appeal directly to the self-regard of Napoleon and to distinguish himself from the competition by a conspicuous display of esthetic originality. The painting was *Napoleon on the Imperial Throne* (1806). In its conception, Ingres sought to actualize in esthetic terms the kind of pedigree which David had etched into the rock of the Saint-Bernard Pass, one extending back through the Emperor Charlemagne and the origins of Frankish kingship to Roman antiquity. As Bonaparte had clothed his usurpation of absolute power in ancient formalities, so Ingres proceeded to represent his body within pictorial conventions appropriate to ancient times. The painstaking precision of detail, which gives the symbolic accessories a weight equal to the man, was likened at the time to the manner of Flemish “primitives” like the Van Eycks. The hieratic frontal pose is arranged in the manner of Byzantine and early medieval ivory carvings of quasi-divine rulers. The Emperor’s face is mask-like and displays a waxy pallor; the figure as a whole is imprisoned within a rigid geometry that finds its ultimate point of reference in ancient renderings of the colossal statue of Zeus, sculpted by Phidias from gold and ivory as the cult image at Olympia.

Ingres had been a pupil in David’s studio during the late 1790’s. His winning Rome Prize painting of 1801, *The Ambassadors of Agamemnon Visiting Achilles*, had displayed a striking command of the rhetorical distinctions basic to the **Davidian project.** At the beginning of the epic, the greatest warrior among the Greek army at Troy withdrew from the war after a petty argument with his commander. Both Achilles and his companion Patroclus display the languidly ephebic grace appropriate to noble bodies that have withdrawn from the fray and are therefore free to manifest the homoerotic attraction that binds them in comradeship. Patroclus, the transitional figure and the first to reenter the battle, playfully sports the helmet of Achilles, an anticipation of the disguise that will lead to his death at Hector’s hands. The entreating warriors, driven by the Trojan forces to the very brink of defeat, display the hardened musculature and indented contours of bodies marked in strife. Such competition paintings had to be completed in a matter of weeks with no models or preparatory drawings permitted in the cell-like individual studios. As a consequence, few could stand up to exacting judgment; but Ingres’s entry achieved a deservedly high reputation. Not only did it contend successfully with the
authority of Flaxman's Homeric engravings, the English artist himself saw and praised the result.

By the middle of the decade, Ingres had extended the rhetorical conception of form in a new direction: over the repertoire of body types derived from antique models, he imposed a set of distinctions derived from the historical change in artistic styles over time, including nonclassical ones. According to this logic, if one were treating subject matter from a particular period or evoking ideas associated with it, one would adopt the manner of its art. The pastiche of styles in his enthroned Napoleon was a demonstration of this approach. It did not find immediate favor, earning the young Ingres a stubborn reputation as an eccentric medieval revivalist. Bonaparte's negative reaction completed the parallel with Girodet in 1802: the Emperor found the naked archaism of his claim on power embarrassing when projected with such scrupulous fidelity by the powers of art.

Conveniently this setback coincided with the renewal of Ingres's contract with the French Academy in Rome, and Ingres was able to take up the scholarship he had won five years before. He contrived to remain in Italy for the next fifteen years, painting the nude, to be sent back for inspection. He extracted the Classical prototype from beneath the artist's trappings and expanded it into an overwhelming masculine power. The subject matter of his Jupiter (1811) concerns the divine intervention that lay beyond desperate entreaties of the Greek warriors to the Achillea. The latter's divine mother is shown supplicating the chief of the gods to strengthen the Trojans and teach the Greeks a lesson for Agamemnon's high-handed mistreatment of her son. The jealous Juno looks on and plots her revenge.

The common source in the Olympian Zeus make Ingres's enthroned Napoleon and his Jupiter. They exhibit the double-sidedness of artists' subservience to authority.

24

48
authority. The dependent adoration of a dominant political figure easily transmutes itself into a personal fantasy of power and domination, and both are equally aspects of isolation and vulnerability. In this case, as so often, that domination is exercised over a woman, a diminutive figure who is turned into an impossibly sinuous and compliant emblem of submission. Ingres's imagination of untrameled strength, encouraged by the cult of the First Consul/Emperor, helped remove the rational constraints on the linear Classicism of the period. Because its approach to the human figure devalued inner substance in favor of pliable outline, it offered little resistance to the compulsions of private desires. The emphasis on silhouette in the figure of Thetis differs markedly from that achieved by Charpentier in her figure of Melancholy, in that it is not a product of the signifying structure of the painting as a whole; rather it proceeds from exaggeration and distortion, and the suppression of internal anatomy is just that, a diminishing of the body's structural resistance to the artist's command.

Certainly Ingres's personal expansion of pictorial rhetoric into self-conscious archaism was an ingenious extension of the practises within which his education had taken place. But historical circumstances were such that, in contrast with David's sharpening of Classical rhetoric in the _Horatii_, it did not trigger a new collective dialog. Nor could any painter have accomplished this. As individual artists became more detached and competitive, career patterns began to show the strains of maintaining an entire tradition by means of the frail emotional and intellectual resources of any single individual. Girodet's technical innovations in the _Endymion_ had probably had the greatest individual impact on the art of the next decade, but his own art veered erratically and unpredictably between styles and themes. The baffled responses of his audience left him feeling bitter and misunderstood. Ingres, on the other hand, dealt with the erosion of community and stable benchmarks of Classical practise by refusing the very principle of development and change. He would obsessively return to favorite motifs and compositions, seizing any
opportunity to try out small refinements in replicas and repetitions in other media. In one famous instance of this, he inserted the torso and head of his anonymous nude study of 1808, the so-called Vapinçon Bather, almost without alteration into the midst of his crowded Turkish Bath, painted more than 50 years later, by which time the context from which it took its meaning had changed enormously.

Girodet and Ingres were among the most committed Classicists of the early Empire, yet the art of both remains remarkable for its highly subjective and idiosyncratic character, its insistent revelation of the irreducible creative personality. That these are traits which have come to define Romanticism in art should be enough to underscore the point that the greater part of the Romantic legacy was in fact engendered within the project of later Classicism by artists who were determined to remain faithful to its traditions, indeed, who could not imagine a serious art outside of those traditions. Both artists cultivated an exactly polished technique in finishing the surfaces of their paintings, building up glazes so as to banish as far as possible individual gestural imprints in the paint. A “licked” finish would become one of the clichés of conformist academicism later in the century, but in the cases of its two originators, their obsessiveness with a sealed surface reads as a holding action, a determined imposition of an impersonal discipline over the involuntary exposure of the self.
CLASSICISM IN CRISIS: GROS TO DELACROIX

THOMAS CROW

FORCE OF ARMS

The Romantic style in the usual sense of the term—energetic brushwork, linear order giving way to the impact of color, elevation of contemporary and exotic subject matter to epic intensity—arrived in the first decade of the nineteenth century. But it was as much a product of the translations and distortions of the Classical inheritance as was the art of Girodet and Ingres. Its chief innovator, Antoine-Jean Gros (1771–1835), was likewise a student of David and loyal to Davidian values all of his life. The most distinctive achievements of his career were attained against that loyalty under the pressure of political contingencies.

In age Gros fits between Girodet and Ingres, and this had a decisive impact on his formation. Girodet had been among the last of the Old-Regime students to have at least the better part of the normal period of training in Rome. Ingres was able belatedly to enjoy his after the French Empire had consolidated control of Italy. Gros’s time came just at the point when Rome was closed to the French in 1793. He did manage to travel to Italy, spending time in Florence and in Genoa while those cities remained friendly territory (in the latter, he spent time with a weary Girodet recuperating on his long journey back to France). There was plenty to see and absorb, but he was denied the crucial opportunity to hone his drawing in a supportive institutional environment amid the monuments of Rome. In order to remain safely in Italian territory for as long as he did he needed protection, and the Bonaparte brothers looked after him; for a time in the late 1790’s, he held a noncombatant’s post with the army that left him ample time to practise his art (from this Gros has latterly acquired an exaggerated reputation as a soldier-artist).

That myth of Gros’s early life would, however, have followed naturally from the painting with which he established his reputation on returning to Paris in 1801. The new Consulate decided to undertake a program of large-scale painting glorifying the successes of the French army and to that end proposed a competition in 1801 for paintings to commemorate the victory of a small party of 500 French against massed Arab cavalry numbering 6000 at the Battle of Nazareth two years before. Gros’s sketch, to the consternation of many critics, took the prize. What they could not grasp was the absence of a clear center to the composition and to the depicted action. General Junot himself is well to the rear, shown in individual combat with a Mameluke horseman rather than in overall command of the operation. The entire composition is made up of such vignettes, the unifying principle of the painting coming from strong notes of color repeated at intervals and rhythmic interlacing of the episodes achieved through surface handling of the paint.

The absence of a more solid underlying structure was not simply Gros’s choice; it proceeded in part from the government’s lacking any precise account of the battle. In place of a coherent verbal overview, it provided some anecdotes of individual acts of bravery, more often by common soldiers than by officers. This sort of record conformed to a mode of celebrating French victories that had persisted from the more democratic phase of the Revolution: the success of republican arms was attributed to the commitment of the citizen soldier fighting out of patriotic devotion rather than coercion or greed. Within this propagandistic mode, Junot’s valor would be equal to that of the anonymous soldiers in the foreground, and so Gros faithfully rendered it. He augmented these with two scenes of his own invention designed to proclaim a basic humanity and idealism underlying the French adventures abroad: a vignette of Arabs about to decapitate a helpless European was contrasted to one of a French soldier protecting a surrendering captive from being shot.
The inventive artistic solution he devised for knitting all of this together had the further effect of conveying, through rapid gestural notation and the liberation of color, an exciting sense of the fury and confusion of battle. It was important too that this novel category—heroic history painting of a contemporary event—not be confused with the meticulous description deployed by traditional painters of battles, an approach which had always placed their efforts among the lower genres. Had Gros more deeply internalized the routines of Classical drawing, he might well have lacked the necessary flexibility and improvisatory flair to deal with this complicated brief. As it was, his success put him in a commanding position to respond to escalating demands for contemporary reportage in history painting.

The commission for a full-scale version of the Nazareth subject never in fact materialized. As it looked back to the Directory’s citizen army ideal, it was out of step with the Bonapartist cult, according to which French victories were guaranteed by the charismatic command of one individual. Three years later Gros made good this discrepancy with *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa* (1804). The actual conquest of the Palestinian city was again the success of another general, so this time there was no question of the painting dealing with the battle itself. Instead Gros exploited
an outbreak of plague which spread from the city's Arab defenders to the victorious French. Bonaparte is shown fearlessly touching the sore of one of his suffering soldiers while his aide anxiously holds a handkerchief to his face. The ostensible subject matter is eminently rational: fear was thought to advance the spread of the disease, and the general is here by personal example attempting to arrest the idea of inevitable contagion and death. But the effect in the painting is irrational: the sick among the French seem almost to rise by magic to make contact with their leader. Dominating the foreground, by contrast, are the shadowed figures of those dead and dying deprived of that touch. The ordinary soldier is now powerless. To the extent that heroic nudity had been a bearer of republican ideals, Gros reversed its normal meanings in transforming it into a sign of dependent helplessness, nowhere more emphatically than in the grotesquely outsized soldier on his knees in the foreground, who looks away from his attentive Arab physician toward his diminutive, tightly clothed commander.

As in the Battle of Nazareth, Gros has exploited animated surface and punctuation with vivid color to convey the exotic locale and the horrific sensory impact of the plague house. A good deal more control was required, however, in that this painting was required to return to a traditionally hierarchical arrangement with the hero at its center. The contemporaneity of the scene, its unfamiliar aspect and profusion of picturesque detail should not obscure the fact that Gros met this challenge by appropriating a touchstone of the modern Classical tradition—David's Brutus.

The crucial device by which his teacher's painting articulated the irresolvable conflict between public duty and private devotion had been the great divide in the composition, the formal interruption that split the civic from the domestic sphere. The two were pried apart in such a way that enormous tension remained between them: the engaged viewer would find no settled position for his or her sympathies; the meaning of the work consisted in his or her mental reenactment of the conflict. Gros deployed his architecture and divided his figures in order to reproduce almost exactly David's compositional scheme. The Arab doctors at the left, with their desperate charges, occupy the same position as the grouping of Brutus with the procession bearing the corpses (down to a repetition of the litter-bearer's sidelong glance). Bonaparte and his men, bathed in light, correspondingly reproduce the clustering of Brutus's wife and daughters with their ascending pattern of bare limbs. And the delirious French soldier at the far right introduces a darker note of isolation and blindness directly analogous to David's (and Gérard's) grieving nurse.

But the utter transformation in the meaning and use of this powerful scheme is the most revealing sign of the impact of absolutist priorities on history painting. There is no tension between the divided parts of Gros’s composition; the viewer is not challenged by simultaneous appeals to two sides of his or her moral character. The split rather represents a reassuring division between European Enlightenment, in the person of the conqueror, and the darkness of the Oriental vanquished, who are inured to death and impassive in its presence. On the ruin of David’s critical examination of republican virtue, Gros constructed an immutable division out of Christian eschatology, in which the radiant presence of Christ in Limbo is contrasted to an Arab Hell (the seated figure in the left-hand corner, the stand-in for Brutus, mimics representations of the cannibalistic Ugolino from Dante’s Inferno). This conflation of conquest and redemption was all the more useful in view of the disturbing reports that the French, on Napoleon’s order, had themselves visited a hellish massacre on the surviving, unarmed defenders of the city.

**AN IMPERIAL ANTIQUITY**

Ambitious painting under the empire has perhaps been misleadingly typified by such propagandistic and questionable glorifications of Napoleon. A comparative stability and freedom of movement on the Continent, which came in the wake of French conquests, allowed for more pacific develop-