

The Styles of Empire

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Expanding the Empire: Joséphine Bonaparte, Art Patronage, and Female Identities

The subject of Empress Joséphine Bonaparte's place in early nineteenth-century French culture is experiencing a renaissance in current scholarship. However, while her interests in fashion, interior design, and botany are well known, Joséphine's role in the visual arts has been largely overlooked. This is a surprising oversight, given the impressive art collection she formed during her tenure as Empress. Her patronage of artists working in *le style troubadour*, for example participated in a nascent (and then exotic) romanticism that ran counter to the official neoclassicism embraced by the state. She was also an active collector of works produced by women artists.

My paper argues that Joséphine fashioned an alternative artistic culture in which women played a formative role as subjects, creators, and patrons. Her position as an aggressive patron of the arts suggests the necessity of revisiting the so-called homosocial nature of the Napoleonic art world. It also undermines the prescriptive discussions regarding women's "empire," i.e. the private sphere, as delineated in much of the literature of the period. Joséphine's many significant contributions to the art world of Napoleonic France proposed new ways in which women could participate actively and meaningfully in the fields of art and culture. As a highly visible figure and influential arbiter of taste, she was well positioned to promote women's place in these arenas, and thus to posit new means for women to construct identities as important agents in the public sphere.

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Balzac's Musical Exotic: Birotteau and Beethoven

Beethoven first conquered Paris in 1828 as the composer of the *Eroica*, revolutionary music associated with the young Bonaparte. Balzac's Beethoven was rather the composer of the Fifth, which he heard in 1834 and 1837 at the conception and completion of *César Birotteau*. But Napoleon also shadowed the Fifth, whose reception in France centered on its Finale, heard as triumphal march and apotheosis. Balzac uses those associations at the turning point of his novel where his César, having triumphed in commerce as a perfume merchant—and posed as Napoleon's antagonist in a burlesque leitmotiv explaining his cross of the Legion of honor—gives a ball marking his own apotheosis (as he thinks) but in fact ushering in his downfall, his fortune about to dissipate like a whiff of his own perfume. Brought in to underline the comic glory of bourgeois grandiloquence and ambition, the Beethoven finale evoked in Balzac's poetic digression can be said on the one hand to drag the great composer down to the level of the bandmaster's "symphonie commerciale." On the other hand, like Napoleon in Hugo's poem—"Qu'il est grand la surtout quand, puissance brisée..."—Birotteau stands on the verge of the moral ascent that will bring his genuine apotheosis through misfortune. Thus Beethoven and the description of his finale serve complex functions. Strange as it has seemed to many, the passage

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describing the martial, virile, finale via ethereal, exotic, explicitly feminine fantasies serves the larger purpose of the narrative, while drawing on subtexts from Swedenborg and Hoffmann.

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Why Was Classicism Resurrected After the Revolution?

What took Romanticism so long to fulfil the promise of Rousseau? What kept Classicism above ground in the early nineteenth century? Among other things, Romanticism lacked representatives of genius. A crowd of mediocre writers exploited popular novels, maudlin plays, and passionate melodrama. Napoleon despised Madame de Staël and was not enthusiastic about Chateaubriand. Likewise for Benjamin Constant, who despite the self-analysis and lyrical melancholy of *Adolphe* and his *Journaux intimes*, joined others in valuing his philosophical and political writings instead. Romanticism lacked champions.

Important, widely published critics like Laharpe controlled the education hegemony at the Normal school, not to mention the pages of newspapers, and insisted on the importance of classical literature. Despite the lacklustre nature of tragedies being produced in large numbers before a listless and uninterested audience at the Théâtre Français, such plays reminded Frenchmen of France's glory, and people bought tickets and attended, perhaps because it was also a sign of culture. Politicians, in addition, believed that Classicism enhanced France's newborn institutions. Especially the middle class felt a widespread, patriotic desire to lay hold of France's glorious past.

After *18 Brumaire an VIII* (9 November 1799), when Napoleon took power, the Corsican was determined to revitalise the classical movement and, thus, to encourage a literature that would add brilliance to his reign. He did his best with prizes, grants, and honors, not to mention censure and outright suppression of differing political and literary modes.

Middleclass people associated Romanticism with the Revolution, while they wished nothing so much as stability, honour and honesty, financial integrity, patriotism, and feminine virtue. They most certainly were not interested in the vague religiosity, sentiment, and imagination that Romantics so prized. Finally, despite the efforts of Napoleon and the Bourbons, not to mention established critics and the very conservative middle class, other events opened society for something different. Charles X, for example, closed the Normal school and ignored the wishes of academics, who like Nodier were beginning to don new colors. People recognized that the Bourbons wished to bring back an authoritarian regime. They cast about for art forms that would reflect their true attitudes. Change was in the air, and *Hernani* was on the horizon.