

### Exercise: Annotate an interior view

In this essay I will examine a nineteenth-century genre painting with a view to considering the relationship between the figures and the setting, whether the picture contains a story or narrative, what the interior tells us about the status of its owner and what evidence it gives us about art works that the owner has collected.

Also, I will identify if there are any possible symbolic meanings. The painting I have selected for further study is *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa*, 1804, by Antoine-Jean Gros; as I wish to explore ideas of status, narrative and symbolism.



Figure 1 *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa*, 1804, by Antoine-Jean Gros.

**Describing and relating *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa, 1804*, by Antoine-Jean Gros (in the form of four separate spider diagrams)**

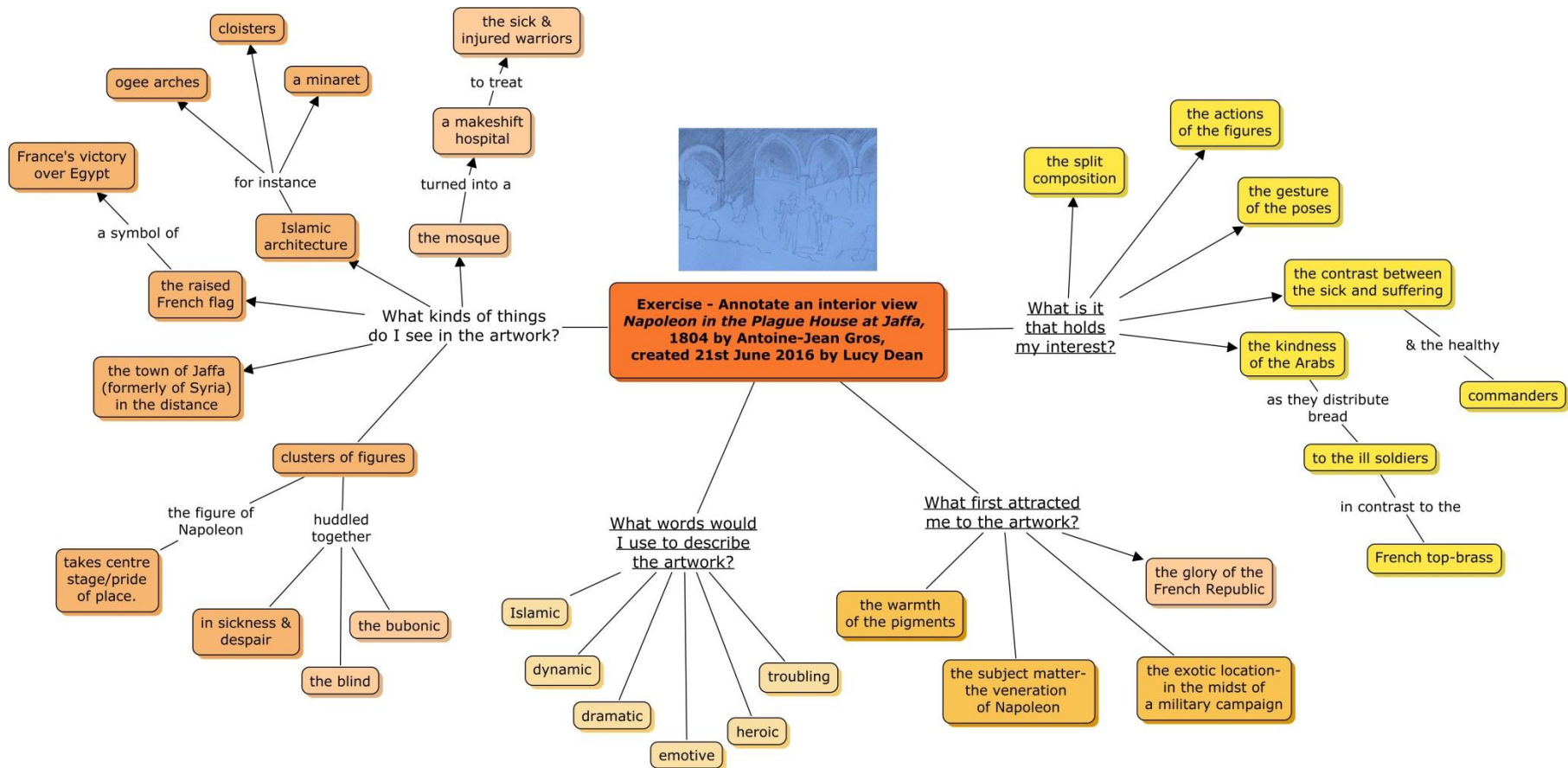


Figure 2 Spider diagram 1 of 4.

**Describing and relating *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa* by Antoine-Jean Gros**

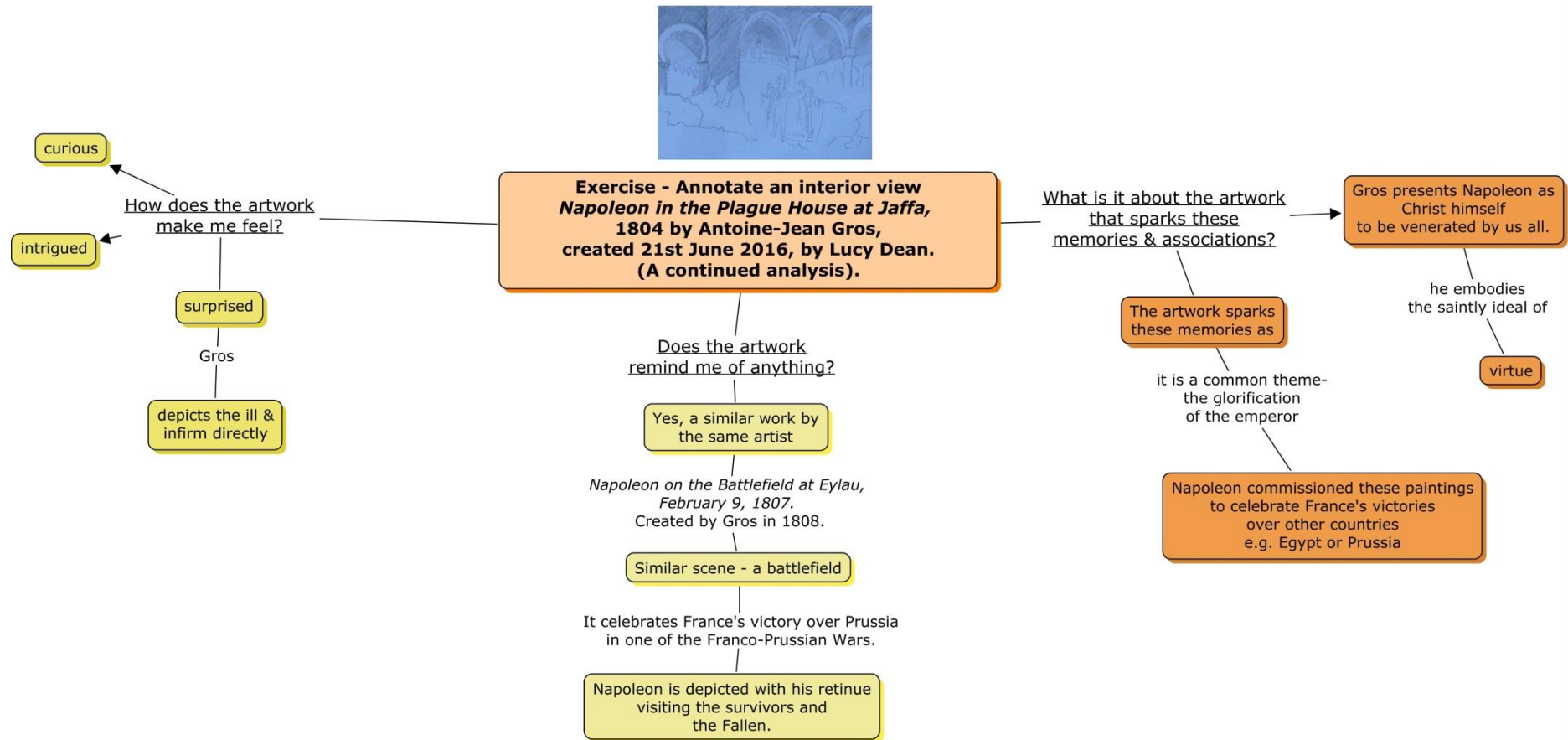


Figure 3 Spider diagram 2 of 4.

### Describing and relating *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa* by Antoine-Jean Gros

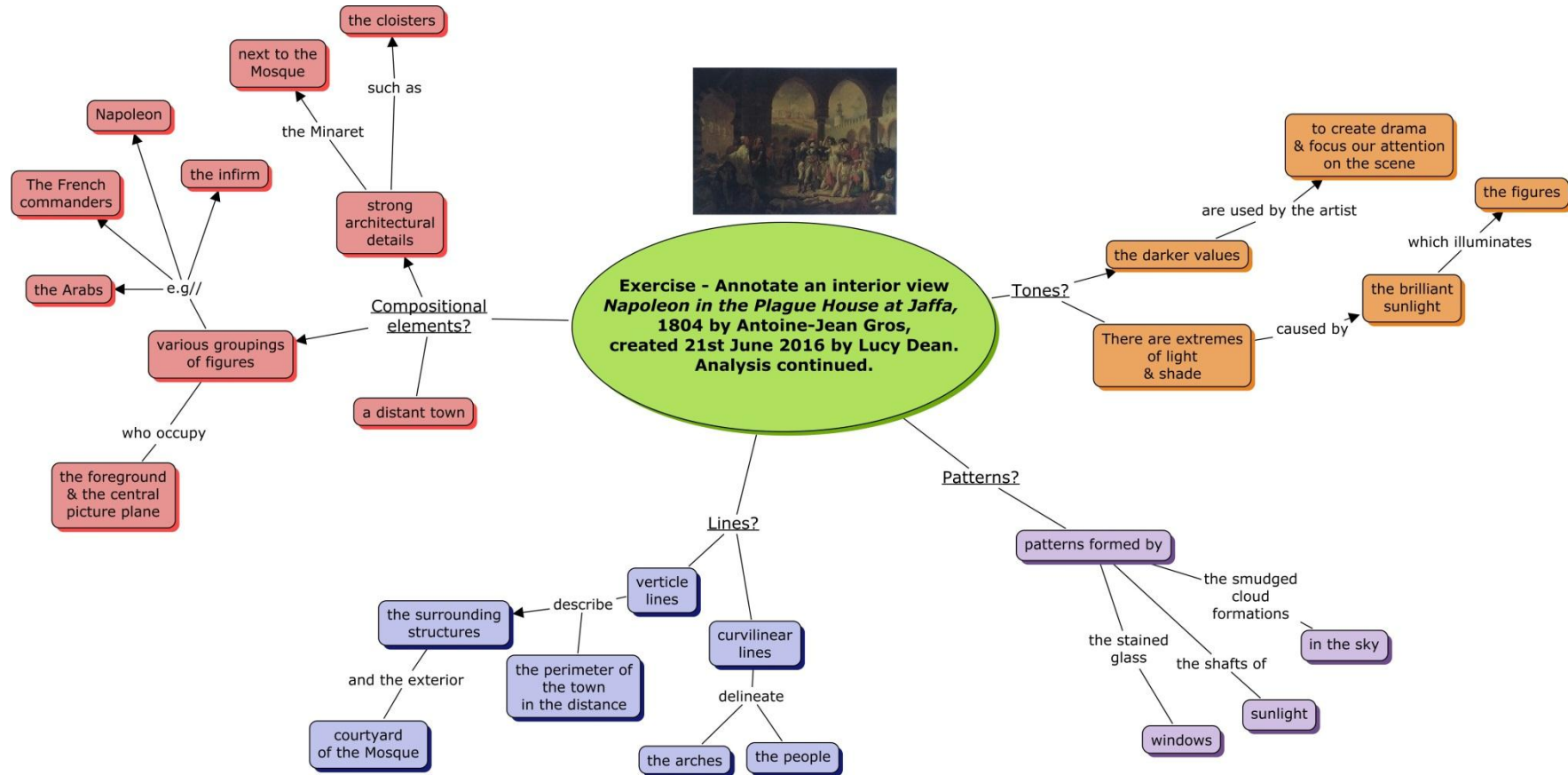


Figure 4 Spider diagram 3 of 4.

**Describing and relating *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa* by Antoine-Jean Gros (final spider diagram)**

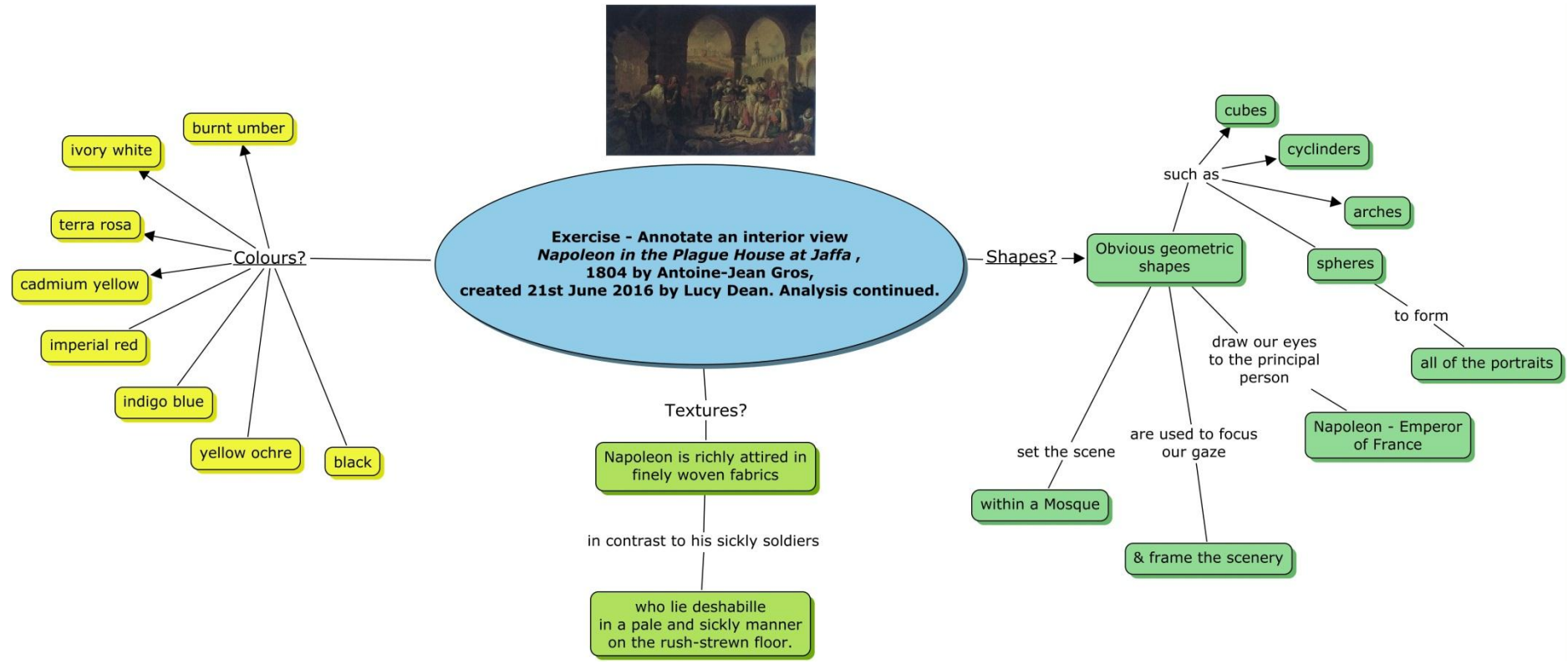


Figure 5 Spider diagram 4 of 4.

## Describing the processes and techniques of *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa* by Antoine-Jean Gros

### What type of artwork is it?

*Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa* is a fascinating large-scale history painting representing a scene from the Napoleonic Wars in the Middle East. The artist skillfully depicts General Bonaparte and his senior commanders visiting a Mosque during the Syrian Campaign of March 1799. The courtyard was transformed into a hospital to care for the sick and injured warriors. Bonaparte is pictured tending to the sick with his outstretched arm. He selflessly touches the plague-ridden soldiers with his bare hands in the manner of Christ. His colleague meanwhile, holds a handkerchief to his face to diffuse the stench of abject squalor.

Clearly, this canvas could be interpreted as an early form of propaganda as Napoleon wished to appear in the best possible light. In fact it was his aim to commission Gros, as he knew that the artist excelled at masterful illustrations of excursions on the battlefield. Also, Gros was unafraid to show the less attractive elements of warfare such as that of trauma, stress, injury and disease (Lerouge & Le Mage, 2004).

It is important to remember however that Gros' works can be viewed as glamorous lies as they were commissioned by Napoleon himself and as such were required to meet strict guidelines. In general, the works of this period are typified by their glorification of the regime, the courage of self-sacrifice and the suppression of the people whose countries they were invading. This is typical of the colonial mentality of dividing and conquering which was prevalent at the time. In contrast, contemporary accounts from other artists such as Goya reveal a much darker and far more troubling side of this regime and the damaging effects of warfare in general (Honour & Fleming, 2009).



Figure 6 *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa*, 1804, oil on canvas, by Antoine-Jean Gros. The scene depicted is from March 1799 during the Syrian campaign.

**How do I think it was made?**

I am certain that the painting would have been built up in stages in order for the artist to figure out the most arresting composition. Also, Gros would have massed in the larger architectural features before pursuing the finer details such as Napoleon's portrait. It is highly likely that he used the cloisters as a frame on which to suspend the peripheral information.

It seems to me that this is a very masterful interpretation loosely based on real events which captures the artist's skill at portraiture, the heroic nude, Islamic architecture and the landscape.

In my opinion the image is elevated by the intriguing townscape in the background which is revealed by the openings in the cloisters. The inclusion of these details serves to open up the image and prevents it from becoming too oppressive. The landscape beyond also serves to reinforce the might of the French forces (as revealed by the Tricolore suspended from a distance roof). The arid environs also help to set the scene and provide a sense of scale and majesty.

**Can I see any evidence of how the artist's hand moved? Was it produced quickly and energetically or slowly?**

The artist's hand moved slowly in order to accurately render Napoleon's portrait and those of his generals, whilst the features of the sick and injured infantrymen are less detailed. Nonetheless, the contrast between the central figures and that of the wounded is sufficiently stark that the viewer's gaze is drawn to them more so that of Napoleon.

Thus I believe the artist's chief interest was the figures rather than the scenery. Warm golden values have been applied to the sky quickly in order to generate a desert-like atmosphere. The warm ground enhances the other values which beautifully compliment one another.

I am unsure how this canvas is framed as I was unable to locate any information about it, but it must be a substantial frame due to the size of the painting. It was intended for public display and was commissioned by Napoleon himself so I am certain that the artist would have insisted on the image having a suitably impressive and ornamental frame to support the painting. It now belongs to the Louvre so I am sure that it must be adequately framed, if only for conservation and historical purposes.

**How long do I think it took to make?**

According to my research, the painting is likely to have been commissioned soon after the event in Syria took place, in order to circumvent the negative accounts of the British Press at the time. Bonaparte's aim with this campaign was to try to conquer the Ottoman Empire and to destabilise the influential British East India Company and the Royal Navy, all of whom were powerful forces to be reckoned with during this era. He also sought to counter claims that he wanted to murder his plague-ridden soldiers on his return to Egypt. So he utilised this painting to silence all of his critics and to elevate his position within French society and the wider world in general. Gros eventually exhibited the piece at the Salon of 1804 so it must have taken around four years to complete (Lerouge & Le Mage, 2004).

I think the painting is likely to have been created with the help of several assistants due to its ambitious scale (5.23 m x 7.15 m), and also due to the timeframe of its conception. In fact, this canvas was exhibited just before Napoleon's coronation so this painting alone was enough to guarantee him excellent publicity, fame and to secure his ascension (The Open University, 2016).



## Interpretation

### What do I think is happening in this art work?

**Napoleon is given pole position and is bathed in saintly light**

Napoleon and his commanders are seen visiting the sick and wounded in the Mosque in Jaffa. Napoleon stands pride of place and is richly attired. This contrasts dramatically with his dishevelled and half-naked infantrymen, who due to the lack of facilities, poor hygiene and their sickness, are scattered about in various states of undress (Lerouge & Le Mage, 2004).

**Bonaparte's presence serves as a reminder of the glory of self-sacrifice and of fighting for one's country**

In short, the implication is that Bonaparte is virtuous, immortal and descended from God.

**The Arabs are portrayed in a kind and generous manner**

Two Arabs distribute bread to the sick who are convulsing in pain. Whether that is from physical or mental strain is unclear. The figure in white catches our eyes as he bisects a golden third. His companion looks behind him as though surprised that the Generals are doing so little to help.

The huddled male figure looking towards us seems to have been driven mad by the sight of his sick comrades. He stares unblinkingly at us and avoids the gaze of Bonaparte and his other commanders' altogether. His eyes are wide with fear perhaps due to the fighting, the threat of the plague or some other unexplained illness.

**The image is harmonised by the colours of the Tricolore**

The colour palette is dominated by the colours of the French national flag: scarlet red, indigo blue and brilliant white. Gros has utilised it to harmonise the painting and to suggest the importance of various figures.

**Bonaparte is dressed in full French military regalia**

General Bonaparte is elegantly attired in an indigo blue jacket, white breeches, ivory white blouse and a bicorn hat with vermillion coloured feathers. The effect is dazzling and ostentatious considering the location. The embroidery on his outfit glistens in the afternoon light, which cascades in from the windows seen on the far left of the image. The clothing also seems incongruous for the period and the setting, as it must have been sweltering to wear the full dress uniform on such a warm afternoon.

**Bonaparte's clothing provides pomp and drama, while his soldiers are seen writhing in agony**

Bonaparte's clothing contrasts dramatically with the half-naked bodies scattered around him. The poor souls writhe in agony, some blind, some mad and some are just too sick to notice the importance of the occasion.

The kneeling man next to Bonaparte raises his arms to him as if to say "deliver us from evil" (King James Bible Online, 2016). The figure is kneeling as though Bonaparte is God. The sick figures seem to gravitate towards him as though he were Christ and they the lepers. They lean towards him in the hope that he can cure them (Lerouge & Le Mage, 2004).



Figure 7 *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa, 1804, oil on canvas, by Antoine-Jean Gros. The scene depicted is from March 1799 during the Syrian campaign.*

## Interpretation (continued)

**Where and when was the art work created? What do I know about the place and that period in history? What was life like? What was happening socially, politically and culturally?**

- The artwork was created in Paris in 1804 as a commission for General Bonaparte. Gros met Bonaparte in Italy where he was undertaking portrait commissions. Impressed by the quality of his work, Napoleon commissioned him to produce a series of stirring nationalist works inspired by his military campaigns. Gros' best known and most decorated works are: *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa* and *Napoleon on the Battlefield of Eylau, February 9, 1807*, created in 1808.
- The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars took place from 1792-1815. This was a very tumultuous time both in France and Europe. In 1789 the French assassinated their royal family and began to establish a republic rather than a monarchist government. For a brief time the French had control over most of Europe as they tried to spread their revolutionary ideals and acquire new territories (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2016).
- I think the artwork is influenced by the revolutionary ideas as it is General Bonaparte who is being feted rather than a monarch. Also the sick and wounded are portrayed as valiant and brave in their self-sacrifice for their leader and country (Lerouge & Le Mage, 2004).
- Gros was trained by Jacques Louis David and this work in particular shares some similarities with his renowned painting *The Oath of The Horatii*, 1784-85. (Due to the neoclassical style and the vaulting architecture seen behind the figures). After the exile of Napoleon, Gros never exceeded the quality of his Napoleonic works and instead turned to teaching (Chilvers, 2009).
- The sumptuous colour palette for *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa, 1804* was influenced by the art of the Renaissance Masters such as Titian or Veronese, whose work Gros would have encountered during his residence in Italy.
- The work is obviously a ceremonial piece designed to inspire awe and devotion. In some ways Bonaparte was a monarchist as he too had absolute power and control as the First Consul of France.
- I believe the work was always intended to be displayed prominently in state buildings or in the Louvre as it represents a huge source of national pride. The painting symbolises a period when France was the dominant country in Europe. Only England's powerful Royal Navy could prevent them from having a complete monopoly on global trade and commerce (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2016).



**Figure 8 *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa, 1804*, pencil on paper, by Lucy Dean.**

- It is similar to his later work *The Battlefield of Eylau, February 9, 1807* as it celebrates Bonaparte's generosity of spirit in visiting the battlefield the day after the battle. However, it differs hugely in its style and execution as the faces of the wounded dominate the picture plane (as they are twice life size) and attract the gaze of the viewer. The setting is completely different as the battle took place on a bitterly cold day in Germany. A blanket of snow shrouds the figures and the surrounding landscape while Bonaparte and his commanders survey the battleground (Lessing & de Vergnette, 2009).
- *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa* belongs in *The Department of Paintings: French painting* in the Louvre as it depicts a momentous period in French History and it serves as a record of Bonaparte's rule (Lerouge & Le Mage, 2004).

## Evaluation

To conclude, I can certainly classify this art work as a history painting created in the grand tradition. It successfully combines both neoclassical and Islamic elements which are reflected in the linear style of decoration. The background details which are comprised of high vaulted ceilings and arches are enormously successful and give the painting an air of majesty and theatricality. The scale of the painting is also of note as Napoleon is likely to have wanted this canvas to adorn the walls of his Musée Napoléon, so it had to be visually impressive and awe-inspiring. The interior certainly shows that Napoleon had high standards and collected works of a similar stature (Lessing & de Vergnette, 2009).

The image itself is both factual and artificial, for the artist painted it according to prescribed guidelines. He seems to have painted it from his studio in Paris rather than working from sketches painted on location. Thus, he would have relied on General Bonaparte's team to provide personal accounts in order to lend it an air of authenticity.

The figures of Bonaparte and his retinue are recognisable due to the fine modelling used. But Gros also paid careful attention to the styling of the Arabs with their lovely draped fabrics and turbans. This helps to provide a sense of balance and makes the picture more authentic. In fact the minaret included in the background seems very close to the original. So, I think the artist took great pains to replicate the scene even though it was ultimately utilised for the purposes of propaganda.

The image is certainly a symbol for the beauty of self-sacrifice and the glory of fighting for one's country. It is interesting though that the artist was permitted to reveal the ugliness of war also. Perhaps this was to increase the virtuousness of General Bonaparte in the eyes of the audience? The Egyptian Campaign was in fact a complete failure for Bonaparte, but this highly edited and controlled canvas would only have increased his appeal in the eyes of the French people.

The story is as previously described, although Bonaparte's aim with his forays into the Middle East was certainly to greatly enhance the French dominions and territories.

The subject is familiar to me and in fact Goya is a fine example of a contemporary artist who produced works in response to the French conquest of Spain. One of his best-known works is entitled: *Los Desastres de la Guerra (The Disasters of War, 1812-1815)*, which captures the atrocities committed by the French troops in response to the civil unrest caused by foreign rule (Honour & Fleming, 2009).

The artwork is about Napoleon's desire to conquer large parts of the world in order to expand the French dominions. He also wished to take on the Ottoman Empire and to conquer Russia. Fortunately for us he was unsuccessful as he over-extended his lines and failed to adequately arm his troops. He did however manage to manoeuvre large armies across and around the continent which was unheard of in the years prior to his leadership (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2016).

Finally, I think part of the reason for the success of the image is due in part to its setting. The oriental environment would have appealed to audiences at the time due to its inherent exoticism. The canvas would have unlocked a universe that people had only been able to read about let alone experience. In fact, Gros was to influence artists for years to come as audiences yearned for flavours of the Orient and romantic gestures. Thus, I believe if the setting had been altered to a location in Europe it would have dramatically altered the significance of the painting (Chilvers, 2009).

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