

6: L'état, c'est moi

A. Heads of State

1. Class title 1 (Equestrian statue of Louis XIV)

The phrase “*L'état, c'est moi*,” or “the State—that’s me,” is apocryphally attributed to **Louis XIV** (1638–1715), addressing the *Parlement de Paris* in 1655, his twelfth year on the throne, when he himself would have been 17; apocryphal or not, the phrase has stuck as the capsule summary of absolute monarchy. Louis, of course, was born a prince. **Napoleon Bonaparte** (1769–1821), our other subject for today, though of an aristocratic family, was born a citizen of Revolutionary France, and a provincial at that; Corsica had come under French rule only a year before he was born. He rose to fame as a soldier, then traded on that fame to proclaim himself First Consul, and later to crown himself Emperor. At the height of his powers, the phrase “*L'état, c'est moi*” might have applied equally to him too.

[I have taught a lot of courses before, and both Louis and Napoleon are major figures who tend to crop up again and again. So maybe as much as 50% of this class has been shown somewhere before. But I have added new stuff wherever possible, and the point of view in this course is pretty much a new one.]

2. Section title A (Napoleon and Louis XIV)

3. Bernini: *Louis XIV*, detail (1665, Versailles)

4. Canova: *Napoleon*, studio copy of head (c.1810)

This comparison is on the website, two portrait busts produced by the leading sculptors of their day, both Italian. **Gianlorenzo Bernini** (1598–1680) visited Paris in 1665, with a commission to produce an equestrian statue and bust of the King, and provide a design for the East front of the Louvre. In the end, his Louvre plan was rejected as being insufficiently respectful of French tradition; the equestrian portrait was completed posthumously by Bernini’s pupils, shipped to Paris, and also rejected; only this bust was executed directly by the artist in France. The Napoleon bust by **Antonio Canova** (1757–1822) is a studio copy taken from a full-body sculpture that I will talk about in a moment. Right now, though, let’s just compare the heads. What does each tell you about the character of the man and/or the way in which he wanted himself represented—and are these in fact different questions?

5. Canova: *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker* (1806, Apsley House)

What do you think? As you probably saw on the website, the full-length sculpture from which the Canova head was taken is in fact a colossal piece called *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker*—an interesting iconography, given that Mars was the god of War; and you could conceivably say that nations wage war only to achieve peace. Anyway, the work was executed by Canova between 1802 and 1806, captured from the French after the Battle of Waterloo, and presented by the British government to the victor of that battle, the Duke of Wellington.

6. Napoleon and Louis as Apollo

Did you notice that the copy of the Canova head I first showed was titled not Mars, but **Apollo**? I don't know if Napoleon himself suggested this allegorical identification, but I do know that Louis XIV actively embraced the association with Apollo—the Sun King—and even appeared as Apollo in ballets in the earlier years of his reign; more on those in a moment. And the Bernini equestrian statue that had so displeased him when it arrived, became somewhat more acceptable when its title was changed to *Louis XIV as Marcus Aurelius*.

B. Louis XIV Timeline

7. Section title B (clock at Versailles)

Before looking at any more specific portrait, let me take you through a rapid timeline of the life of Louis XIV. His reign of 72 years is the longest of any monarch on record, beating out even the 70-year span of the late Queen Elizabeth II. But then, he became king at the age of 4. His reign was so long that he outlived both his son and his grandson.

8. Timeline schema

You will see that the slides I show all follow the same format, with a timeline along the left-hand side, divided into colors showing rough periods of Childhood, Ascendancy, Zenith, and Decline. It goes without saying that most of the dates I show are chosen pretty much arbitrarily; there are a lot of significant events I have left out.

9. Louis XIV timeline (step through, slide by slide)

- 1638 The future Louis XIV is born
- 1643 Louis XIV becomes king at the age of 4, under the regency of his mother, Anne of Austria
- 1647 The parlement and nobles rebel against the power of chief adviser **Cardinal Mazarin**, in an uprising known as the **Fronde**.
- 1653 Finally victorious, Mazarin begins building an extensive government apparatus with Louis as his pupil
- 1654 Having attained majority (at 14), Louis is crowned King, but continues to work with Mazarin. He serves briefly in the army.
- 1660 Although in love with Mazarin's niece, Louis marries the daughter of Philip IV of Spain, to cement an alliance between their two countries
- 1661 Mazarin dies. Louis informs his court that he will reign alone, without a principal minister.

- 1668 Louis determines that **Versailles**, whose gardens had been under construction since 1661, shall be elaborated into the principal royal residence. This is only one example of his record as a patron of the arts.
- 1665 Believing in military conquest as a key to national pride, Louis engages on a series of wars, principally against Spain in the Netherlands.
- 1678 **Treaty of Nijmegen** ends the war, and leaves France and Louis at the zenith of their power.
- 1685 To reinforce the primacy of the Catholic Church (largely controlled by him) as the national religion, Louis revokes the 1598 **Edict of Nantes**, thus ending freedom of worship for Protestants.
- 1700 In the final decades of his reign, Louis suffers a loss of popular support, exacerbated by continued wars, economic downturn, and the increasing isolationism of the Versailles court.
- 1715 Louis dies. His son and grandson having died before him, he is succeeded by his great-grandson, **Louis XV**.

C. Louis as Man, Monarch, and God

10. Section title C (Louis as Man and Monarch)

11. Portraits by LeBrun and Rigaud (detail)

12. Rigaud detail as above, with full picture

Here are a couple of portraits to compare. Full disclosure: the one in the left is complete, but the one on the right is taken from a larger picture. There is also about 40 years between them, roughly 1660 and 1700. But they differ in other respects too. What do you think each artist is trying to convey? The one by **Charles Le Brun** (1619–90) is relatively informal so far as portraits of the King go. It leapt out at me among the many I looked at, because it really seemed to show the man, a human being to whom I could relate. One thing that struck me about the **Hyacinthe Rigaud** (1659–1743) portrait on the right is that, unlike Queen Elizabeth I, Louis XIV did not require painters to airbrush his age away; this is clearly a man in his sixties. But he did require that he be shown in all his majesty and power; the armor and the setting seem as important as the face, or perhaps even more so.

13. Rigaud: *Louis XIV*, 1701 (Prado, left; Louvre, right)

Rigaud painted a very similar portrait in the same year (1701), using roughly the same pose and absolutely the same facial expression; only the trappings are different—portrait as dress-up doll! The Prado version shows the King as military leader, which he was, although his wars came close to ruining the country. The Louvre version shows him almost as a literal embodiment of his famous phrase, “L’état, c’est moi”; he is virtually enveloped in France, by that ermine-lined cloak that is surely far too large to have been worn in public.

I want to go now to a video made by **Becca Segovia**, who specializes in looking at portraits and recreating what she thinks is the real face behind the depictions. I have no idea what technique she uses, but I found her introduction good and her reconstructions convincing until— well, you'll see!

14. What did Louis XIV really look like?

15. Portraits by Egmont and Vaillant

What did you think? The two portraits on the screen right now, are of a much younger King; they are by artists I don't imagine any of us will ever encounter again. Same contrast: the one on the right by **Wallerant Vaillant** is a little like the Le Brun in showing the man without all the attendant pomp, though it does not have Le Brun's grasp of character. The one on the left by **Justus van Egmont**, however, is painted for the panoply, to show that this young teenager is in fact a King and coming into his own. Louis and Mazarin had to flee Paris during the Fronde rebellion (which may be on reason why he eventually built his palace well outside the city), but it has now been quashed and Louis can take the throne. Now look at this:

16. Charles Poerson: *Louis XIV as Jupiter, Conqueror of the Fronde* (1653)

The child king, who had done little more than flee out of harm's way while Cardinal Mazarin, his mentor, dealt with the rebellious nobles, is now portrayed as the god Jupiter! And it is not just Classical myth that is pressed into service for such tributes; look at this:

17. Charles Le Brun: *Apotheosis of Louis XIV* (1677, Budapest), doctored

18. Charles Le Brun: *Apotheosis of Louis XIV* (1677, Budapest), normal

In this section, we are juggling Louis XIV the monarch, who is ubiquitous, with Louis Bourbon the man, who is much harder to find. I picked out the **Charles Le Brun** pastel portrait as one of the more natural. Here he is painting a religious subject, the *Harrowing of Hell* or some such, in which Jesus Christ defeats the powers of evil. Only it is not Jesus Christ but Louis XIV. And even though the subject—an *Apotheosis*—is one that you normally only see to commemorate someone who is dead. But this is 1677 and Louis is very much alive. This is not just Louis the Monarch, but Louis the God!

19. — the two pictures below

20. Unknown artist: *Louis XIV, Queen Maria Theresa, and the Dauphin*

21. François de Troy (?): *Louis XIV and Mme. de la Vallière Enlightened by Love* (e. 1700s)

Perhaps we can see more of Louis the Man in his private or family portraits, but these too tend to get mythologized. Compare these. The only mystery about the top one is the identity of whatever third-rate artist painted it. But clearly it is the King, his Queen, and their young son and heir. Despite the landscape background, they are seated on clouds, and he appears to be in the role of Orpheus. But the other, much finer as a painting, is a real oddity. The King is Jupiter, the much younger woman is Juno, and the figure of Love holds a torch above them. So far so good, but the woman has been identified as **Mme. De la Vallière**, who was the king's mistress from 1661 to 1667; Louis, however, has the face of one of those Hyacinthe Rigaud portraits from 1701. The best hypothesis is that the portrait was commissioned by a member of the La Vallière family as a memoriaf after her death.

22. Jean Nocret: *Louis XIV and his Family* (1670)

23. — the above, with labels

Here is the family portrait to end all family portraits: it is a painting by **Jean Nocret** (1615–72), showing the entire extended family sitting around like Greek gods. The Sun King, of course, is in his favorite avatar, Apollo, the charioteer of the Sun himself. There is one more allegorical portrait I need to show you, and I can use it as the header for my final section of the hour.

D. Louis as Patron

24. Section title D (Louis XIV as patron of the arts)

Offsetting Louis' absolutism and his ruinous penchant for war, is his extraordinary record as one of the greatest patrons of the arts of all time. Most of the great French academies and performing institutions were founded during his reign. On the stage, he commanded the likes of **Racine**, **Moliere**, and **Corneille**; in music, **Lully** and **Charpentier**; and his masterpiece, the Chateau of Versailles, employed an extraordinary trio of geniuses: the architect **Louis Le Vau** (1612–70), the garden designer **André Le Nôtre** (1613–1700), and **Charles Le Brun**, now wearing his other hat as a sculptor. And the whole thing is laid out with divinities and fountains, like an allegorical portrait of its patron.

25. Le Vau, Le Nôtre, and Le Brun: *Château de Versailles* (1661–)

26. Le Brun: *Bassin d'Apollon* (1671)

27. Le Brun: *Louis XIV as Apollo* (1671)

The gardens and the palace itself were laid out on the axis of the sun, whose rays would shine into the King's bedroom when it rose. He could go out and see the sunrise—and his own—allegorically presented in Le Brun's *Apollo Fountain*, with the King himself as the Sun God at the reins of the horses pulling the sun out of the sea. **Bernini**, who also designed fountains, would have felt at home, although his French visit came six years before Le Brun finished his work; maybe the influence was the other way around?

Louis' first artistic field, however, was **dance**—not just a patron, but also as performer. Here is the beginning of a BBC documentary with David Bintley, artistic director of the Birmingham Royal Ballet.

28. *The King Who Invented Ballet*, documentary by David Bintley, opening

29. Boris Terral as Jean-Baptiste Lully in *Le Roi Danse* (2000)

The young king's performance as Apollo is reconstructed somewhat differently in the magnificent movie *Le Roi danse* (2000) by the French director **Gérard Corbiau**. It is about the long relationship between King Louis XIV and his court composer **Jean-Baptiste Lully** (1632–87). Lully virtually defines the musical style of the French court, yet the irony is that he began life as a child street musician from Italy, and was thus neither French nor a courtier. But he and the adolescent king hit it off, and for the rest of his life wrote music that would flatter him, entertain him, and show off his talents as a dancer. Beginning with this number from the film, in which the young king appears as the personification of the Sun, and has all

the other forces of his domain bow before him. I have played it at least twice before, but I know nothing else quite like it.

30. *Le Roi danse, the young king as Apollo*

31. Alan Rickman as Louis XIV in *A Little Chaos* (2015)

When we come back to Napoleon, I will have a number of film portrayals to compare, but for some reason I can't do this as easily with Louis XIV. However, I did find some clips from the late **Alan Rickman's** altogether more lighthearted movie, *A Little Chaos* (2015), about an imagined relationship between the King and a lady who supplies the flowers for his garden. It begins with the King being woken by his wife and children. It's fanciful and unlikely, but I show it because of the little demonstration Louis gives his children, that majesty it lies less in what one says than in how one says it—a reminder that every portrait begins with the subject portraying himself.

32. *A Little Chaos, opening*

33. Class title 2 (*All in the Attitude*)

E. Napoleon Timeline

34. Section title E (Napoleon's tomb)

Let's start with a timeline of Napoleon's career in much the same manner as the Louis XIV one.

35. Napoleon timeline (but step through)

- 1769 Napoleone Buonaparte born in Ajaccio, Corsica.
- 1779 He attends military schools in France, first in Brienne and then in Paris.
- 1793 He distinguishes himself at the siege of Toulon.
- 1796 He is promoted to general, and sent on a campaign to expel the Austrians from Italy.
- 1798 He is sent to Egypt on a combined expedition of science and conquest.
- 1798 Returning to Paris as a popular hero, he participates in a coup against the Directoire which results in his becoming **First Consul** of a new Republic.
- 1800 Leading an army into Italy again, he quickly routs the Austrians at the Battle of Marengo. Most of the next 14 years will be spent fighting on various fronts, winning many land victories (though few at sea) and greatly expanding French frontiers.
- 1804 **He crowns himself Emperor** in Nôtre Dame, in the presence of the Pope.
- 1812 He invades Russia, but suffers his first major defeat, and loses much of his army during the subsequent retreat.

1814 Further defeats force his abdication. He is exiled to the island of **Elba**.

1815 He escapes from Elba and returns for a comeback of 100 days, until he loses the **Battle of Waterloo** and is exiled to **St. Helena**, an island in the mid-Atlantic Ocean. He dies in 1821.

Or, if you prefer, we can get the whole history summed up in a 19th-century folk song:

36. Boney was a Warrior (Paul Clayton)

F. A Meteoric Military Career

37. Section title F (Napoleon at Rivoli)

38. Posthumous portraits of the young Napoleon

Many of the illustrations I used in that timeline are from much later in the century, when Napoleon was long since dead, but Frenchmen were beginning to have a hankering for what they thought he represented, or were interested in exploring his life in a less literal way.

39. Napoleon at Fontainebleau by David (1812) and Delaroche (1845)

Here is an interesting comparison: the same setting, the same uniform, the same man, but two very different circumstances. In the 1812 portrait by **Jacques-Louis David** (1748–1825), now in the National Gallery in Washington, Napoleon is at the height of his powers. The other was painted decades later by **Paul Delaroche** (1797–1856), but it imagines the Emperor in 1814. He has made his disastrous invasion and retreat from Russia, he has been forced into a corner by the Sixth Coalition (Russia, Prussia, Austria, and Britain) and has abdicated for the first time. But here's the question: why did Delaroche paint it?

40. Gros: Napoleon at Arcole (1796) and David: General Bonaparte (1799)

David was one of the first artists to paint Napoleon when he was still a general in his twenties, but the young soldier was a man of action, and he made sure that his fame was cemented by memorializing his actions at the head of his army. On his first Italian campaign in 1796, he was luck in meeting a pupil of David's **Jean-Antoine Gros** (1771–1835), who had moved to Genoa to establish himself as a portraitist and had painted Napoleon's wife Josephine. So he was with the army to witness at first hand Napoleon's capture of the bridge at Arcole. For perhaps obvious reasons, the portrait (which you see here in a slightly clearer later version) pleased the general, who made Gros his chief military painter—and also entrusted him with selecting the artworks to be seized and brought back to the Louvre.

41. David: Napoleon Crossing the Alps at the Grand Saint Bernard Pass (1801, Malmaison)

42. Delaroche: Napoleon Crossing the Alps (1850, Liverpool)

So far as I know, David did not go with Napoleon on his second Italian campaign; if he had, he would have known that Napoleon did not cross the Alps on a dashing white horse, but rode a prosaic but surer-

footed mule! But then the entire portrait is a carefully curated public-relations exercise, referring to the tradition of equestrian portraits from antiquity and the renaissance, and driving it home with the inscription carved into the rock (but partially hidden by the frame) adding the names of **Hannibal** and **Charlemagne** to that of Bonaparte. **Paul Delaroche** did another of his David-reworkings in 1850, with a less romantic but more realistic version, mule and all!

43. Gros: Napoleon Visits the Pesthouse at Jaffa (1804, Louvre)

Most of the Gros paintings of actual events were exhibited one or two years after the events they depict—roughly the time to get back to the studio and work up sketches made in the field. But this one is different. It represents Napoleon on his Egyptian campaign, visiting soldiers who had contracted the plague and were in the pesthouse of Jaffa. Gros would have observed this in 1798, yet did not work it up into the huge final picture until 1804, a gap of six years. Why then?

44. — detail of the above

What was happening in 1804? Napoleon was preparing the transition from First Consul to Emperor, and needed to proclaim himself as one. Now look at the center of this picture. Napoleon is already showing his care for his men by visiting the dying in hospital, apparently without fear. His officers hold handkerchiefs to their noses, but he doesn't. Moreover, *he touches one of the sick men*. There is an old tradition known as the King's touch, which holds that the touch of a duly anointed monarch can cure certain diseases. Conversely, the ability to effect such a cure is the sure sign of divine right. In making himself Emperor, Napoleon was not only claiming a new title for the job he already held; he was proclaiming France an hereditary empire, passed down from father to son for generations. In effect, he was making himself a king.

G. The Five-Year Empire

45. Section title G (Coronation of Napoleon)

46. — detail of the above

47. — the same, with David's sketch

So here he is, in David's huge painting, which is 33 feet from side to side. My music was the original, by **Jean-François Le Sueur** (1760–1837). Look closer, and you will see that although the Pope is present, he is not performing the ceremony; Napoleon is placing the crown on his own head. David's original sketch made this gesture a lot more aggressive (and less elegant); he also had the Pope reduced to a token, with his hands in his lap; in the final version, Napoleon's gesture with the crown is more ambiguous, and the Pope is conferring his blessing on the proceedings. The woman prominently placed in a box behind the Emperor is Napoleon's mother. She did not actually attend the ceremony, to protest the growing acrimony between Napoleon's bothers, but David put her in anyway, which greatly pleased the Emperor. In the French television miniseries from 2002 directed by **Richard Grégoire**, it is Napoleon himself who makes the suggestion; the actor is **Christian Clavier**; **Claude Préfontaine** plays the painter.

48. Grégoire: *Napoléon, coronation scene*

49. David: *Oath of Allegiance Following the Distribution of the Eagles* (1810, Versailles)

Napoleon was intent on backing up his Imperial status by calling upon every myth possible. In the Coronation, he coopts a passive Catholic Church. Four days later, he held a ceremony intended to evoke the glories of ancient Rome. **The Distribution of the Eagles** was something he devised to hand out standards to each of the regiments raised from the various regions of France; it was followed by an oath of allegiance. He was not to know it, but **Hitler** would use the same techniques at his Nuremberg rallies.

50. Girodet-Trioson: *Ossian Receiving the Ghosts of French Heroes* (1805, Malmaison)

Here is an even odder one from the same period, although its ritual exists only on canvas; it is not an actual ceremony. Napoleon was very taken by the poems of the ancient Gaelic bard Ossian—he did not know that the entire thing was a forgery by its so-called discoverer and translator, a minor Scottish poet called **James Macpherson**. So he commissioned this work by **Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson** (1767–1824) called *Ossian Receiving the Ghosts of Fallen French Heroes* (1805).

51. Gérard: *The Battle of Austerlitz, December 1805* (1810)

The battles, though, were real, and French Heroes continued to fall, even at the greatest victories such as **Austerlitz** in 1805; the painting is by **François Gérard** (1770–1837)

52. Charles Minard: *Losses in Men of the French Army in the Russian Campaign* (1869)

This gets me a long way from portraiture, but it *is* history, and it tells the story of Napoleon’s first big defeat better than any picture. Another of Napoleon’s apocryphal remarks is that he was defeated, not by the Russian people, who set fire to Moscow rather than allow it to be captured, but by “General Winter.” At any rate, I want to move quickly past his other losses, his first abdication, and even his triumphant return in the Hundred Days—though I’ll come back to it in the final section—and leave him in his last exile on Saint Helena.

53. Haydon and Orchardson paintings of Napoleon on Saint Helena

Here are two British artists, **Benjamin Robert Haydon** (1786–1846) and **Sir William Orchardson** (1832–1910), both later in the century, imagining Napoleon in his isolation; there is quite a bit of sympathy in both of them, I think. But I want to end the section with a poem written by the great Russian author **Alexander Pushkin** (1799–1837) upon hearing the news of Napoleon’s death in 1821. Here is the beginning and end of it.

54. Pushkin: *On the Death of Napoleon*, slide 1

55. Pushkin: *On the Death of Napoleon*, slide 2

H. The Emperor on Screen

56. Section title H (Albert Dieudonné as Napoleon)

Napoleon has long been a favorite role for both actors and film directors. This is Albert Dieudonné in the earliest and longest of them, the 5½-hour silent epic directed in 1927 by **Abel Gance** (1889–1981)...

57. Joaquin Phoenix as Napoleon

...and here is Joaquin Phoenix in the latest, made by **Ridley Scott** in 2023. The still is taken from the Coronation scene; since we have been studying it, we might as well see the entire clip. You will see that Scott gives a much more active—and therefore more subservient—role to the Pope.

58. Ridley Scott: *Napoleon*, coronation scene

59. Abel Gance film in cinemas

This shows the set-up for the Abel Gance movie, which was projected on three separate screens with a full orchestra in the pit. Parts of it are even projected through color filters, and that is by no means the least of the technical innovations which Gance explored. The film deals only with Napoleon's childhood and youth, before he became a general. Gance planned five more instalments, but as the first one ran for over 5 hours, he realized that this was impossible. Here is the final sequence in a restored version.

60. Abel Gance: *Napoléon*, ending

61. Rod Steiger and Christian Clavier

This is a comparison I have offered before. Two portrayals of **Napoleon**: one stars **Rod Steiger** in a 1970 film by **Sergei Bondarchuk**, the other is **Christian Clavier** again from the 2002 French miniseries we have just sampled. The situation is the same in each case: Napoleon has escaped from Elba and gathered a thousand men. His former friend **Marshal Ney** (**Dan O'Herlihy** in the first clip, **Alain Doutey** in the second), has been ordered to stop him. If there is time, we can discuss.

62. Bondarchuk: *Waterloo* (1970), Napoleon's return

63. Grégoire: *Napoléon* (2002), Napoleon's return

64. Class title 3 (Napoleon on St Helena)