

Antoine-Jean Gros

Antoine-Jean Gros was born in Paris on March 16, 1771. His father, who was a miniature painter, began to teach him to draw at the age of six, and showed himself from the first an exacting master. Towards the close of 1785 Gros, by his own choice, entered the studio of Jacques-Louis David, which he frequented assiduously, continuing at the same time to follow the classes of the Collège Mazarin.

The death of his father, whose circumstances had been embarrassed by the French Revolution, threw Gros, in 1791, upon his own resources. He now devoted himself wholly to his profession, and competed (unsuccessfully) in 1792 for the grand prix. About this time, however, on the recommendation of the École des Beaux Arts, he was employed on the execution of portraits of the members of the National Convention, and when disturbed by the development of the Revolution, Gros in 1793 left France for Italy, he supported himself at Genoa by the same means, producing a great quantity of miniatures and fixes. He visited Florence, but returning to Genoa made the acquaintance of Joséphine de Beauharnais, and followed her to Milan, where he was well received by her husband, Napoleon Bonaparte.

On November 15, 1796, Gros was present with the army near Arcola when Bonaparte planted the French tricolor on the bridge. Gros seized on this incident, and showed by his treatment of it that he had found his vocation. Bonaparte at once gave him the post of inspecteur aux revues, which enabled him to follow the army, and in 1797 nominated him on the commission charged to select the spoils which should enrich the Louvre.

In 1799, having escaped from the besieged city of Genoa, Gros made his way to Paris, and in the beginning of 1801 took up his quarters in the Capucins. His esquisse of the Battle of Nazareth (now in the Musée de Nantes) gained the prize offered in 1802 by the consuls, but was not carried out, owing it is said to the jealousy of Jean-Andoche Junot felt by Napoleon; but he indemnified Gros by commissioning him to paint his own visit to the pest-house of Jaffa. "Les Pestiférés de Jaffa" (Louvre) was followed by the "Battle of Aboukir 1806" (Versailles), and the "Battle of Eylau, 1808" (Louvre). According to the article about Gros in the Encyclopædia Britannica, Eleventh Edition, 1911, these three subjects the popular leader facing the pestilence unmoved, challenging the splendid instant of victory, heart-sick with the bitter cost of a hard-won field gave to Gros his chief title to fame.

Britannica further remarks that as long as the military element remained bound up with French national life, Gros received from it a fresh and energetic inspiration which carried him to the very heart of the events which he depicted; but as the army, and its general separated from the people, Gros, called on to illustrate episodes representative only of the fulfilment of personal ambition, ceased to find the nourishment necessary to his genius, and the defect of his artistic position became evident. Trained in the sect of the Classicists, he was shackled by their rules, even when by his naturalistic treatment of types, and appeal to picturesque effect in color and tone he seemed to run counter to them.

In 1810 his "Madrid" and "Napoleon at the Pyramids" (Versailles) show that his star had deserted him. His Francis I and Charles V, 1812 (Louvre), had considerable success; but the decoration of the dome of St. Genevieve (begun in 1811 and completed in 1824) is the only work of Gros's later years which shows his early force and vigour, as well as his skill. The "Departure of Louis XVIII." (Versailles), the "Embarkation of Madame d'Angoulême" (Bordeaux), the plafond of the Egyptian room in the Louvre, and finally his "Hercules and Diomedes", exhibited in 1835, testify only that Gros's efforts in accordance with the frequent counsels of his old master David to stem the rising tide of Romanticism served but to damage his once brilliant reputation.

Again citing Britannica, "Exasperated by criticism and the consciousness of failure, Gros sought refuge in the grosser pleasures of life." On 25 June 1835 Antoine-Jean Gros was found drowned on the shores of the Seine near Sèvres.

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