

DOMINIQUE-VIVANT DENON (1747-1825): NAPOLEON'S CHIEF ARTS ADVISER

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"The Eye of Napoleon," "Napoleon's Minister of Arts," "Censor and arbiter of taste in France under the reign of Napoleon I" –

Dominique-Vivant Denon (1747–1825) – he is often considered to be the most important and the most influential person in the domain of Napoleonic art, the coordinator of a new artistic expression, "Le Style Empire," one of the founders of the style "Retour d'Egypte," as well as the creator of the official aesthetics of the Consulate and Napoleonic Empire in France. His aspirations in the representation of Napoleon and his government via art were oriented to three dimensions of the

projection of reality - the representation through art, political propaganda and the personality cult of Napoleon Bonaparte. These were applied by Denon via different measures and, in particular cases, indeed with regards to the wishes and dependent on limitations ordered by his governor.

What was the intensity of Denon's influence on his sovereign? What did the position of general director of museums in France entail in the Napoleonic administration? Was his authority in the world of official French art of cardinal importance to the formation of the Empire Style under the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte? This

study examines the relationship between Napoleon and his chief adviser in the art.

Problems arose in their professional coexistence in certain cases, their relationship

complicated by different views of the projection of reality, aesthetic aspirations, and the aims of

Napoleonic representation. In

addition to exploring Napoleon's own hopes and views of his image, I am going to explain the role of his adviser in the arts in the structure of administration that was in charge of state propaganda through art. Moreover, I am going to point out the theory sometimes contradicted or

neglected that Denon was not only the servant of his sovereign, but he also aspired to further his own cultural policy. Thus, this study ends with a tiny comparative portrait of Denon's position in the service of Napoleon noted by his contemporaries and historians.

As noted by Judith Nowinski (1970), not the least of Denon's talents was his adaptability to changing political regimes. A successful courtier could be defined as a person who flatters the ego of those in power. In return he receives the



Baron Dominique-Vivant Denon
(by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon)

gratification of recognition.¹ In the era of the *Ancien Régime*, he was a noble devoted to libertines, a medalist, engraver and artistic critic, a diplomat, voyager and writer; during the French Revolution a draftsman, designer and painter in the service of the Nation. He entered also into the service of General Bonaparte whom he accompanied in Egypt as a member of a scientific expedition. This study does not attempt to analyze the whole personal life and vast professional career of Denon, which is precisely sketched by his biographers,² but first of all, it is important to state the fundamental aspects of Napoleon's choice to entrust Denon with the mission and power in the arts. Thus, this choice apparently demonstrated the qualities which entitled Denon to his position of Napoleon's adviser.

There are three versions of how Denon met Bonaparte before his Egyptian campaign, which he followed from the 5th of May 1798.³ General

Bonaparte had been informed about Denon's sketching and writing abilities and he was aware of Denon's extensive travels, as well as of his practical knowledge of the arts.⁴ He was charmed

by Denon's maturity, vivacity and saw him as an obviously experienced companion. All these characteristics would make Denon an invaluable chronicler of Bonaparte's conquest of Egypt, so he invited him to join the expedition. The General was astonished to learn of the adventurous spirit of the fifty-one-year-old Denon who did not shrink from so dangerous, distant, and debilitating an excursion. He continued hoping to inspire a French poet to participate in the expeditionary force so that he would compose an epic of the

campaign.⁵ Denon's own impressions of the expedition were woven into his monumental account. The artist made over 150 sketches during his travels throughout Egypt and a majority of them were included with the itinerary, topography and legends in his two-volume "*Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt, during the Campaigns of General Bonaparte*," published after his return to France and dedicated to the First Consul.⁶ Its popularity spread rapidly and the name of Denon, while at the same time being closely linked with that of Bonaparte, became widely known. Historian Pierre Lelièvre (1942) remarks:

"In the moments when the role of a Maecenas appeared to him within reckoning, Napoleon could think of entrusting to an artist, Canova or David, the care of directing the arts. When he was mindful of the



A gilded snuffbox commemorating General Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt. Inscription reads: "Soldiers, from the summit of these monuments forty centuries look down upon you."

¹ Judith Nowinski, *Baron Dominique-Vivant Denon (1747–1825): Hedonist and Scholar in a Period of Transition*. (Cranbury NJ, 1970), 66.

² In this point, it is necessary to mention these books: Jean Chatelain, *Dominique Vivant Denon et le Louvre de Napoléon* (Paris, 1973); Pierre Lelièvre, *Vivant Denon, homme des Lumières, "ministre des arts" de Napoléon* (Paris, 1993). The great summary of Denon's life and professional career is presented in the catalog of exposition: Marie-Anne Dupuy, ed., *Dominique-Vivant Denon. L'œil de Napoléon. Paris, musée du Louvre, 20 octobre 1999 – 17 janvier 2000* (Paris, 1999). The different aspects of Denon's service, functions and personality are analyzed in: Daniela Gallo, ed. *Les vies de Dominique-Vivant Denon. Actes du colloque organisé au musée du Louvre par le Service culturel du 8 au 11 décembre 1999*. (Paris, 2001).

³ They are summarized in: Nowinski 1970, 74–77. Denon gave the notice of his departure for Egypt in his letter from Paris to

Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi: Fausta Garavini, ed. *Lettres à Bettine*, n° 1798-3. Actes Sud 1999, 487.

⁴ Clément L. de Ris, *Les Amateurs d'autrefois* (Paris, 1877), 424.

⁵ Nowinski, 79.

⁶ Dominique-Vivant Denon, *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Egypte, pendant les campagnes du général Bonaparte* (Paris, 1802).

paintings that he was commissioning, he needed, in order to guide their realization, a man in whom there was a forceful combination of worldliness, competence and talent. He found it in the person of this amateur whom he made a museum director. Thus, circumstances, as much as his aptitude and merits, were so much to the advantage of Denon that they permitted him to mold this dictatorship into a veritable superintendence of the arts.”⁷

Due to his talent, skills and loyalty, on the 19th of November 1802,⁸ the First Consul Bonaparte nominated him to the post of the director of *Musée central des Arts* and the general director of museums in France. In this function, which he occupied by the 3rd of October 1815,⁹ he became practically the creator of the *Musée Napoléon* in the Louvre,¹⁰ the decorator and designer of imperial interiors, the first real organizer of modern museums in France. Several weeks after the nomination, Denon wrote in his letter dated the 1st of January 1803 to the First Consul Bonaparte:

⁷ “Dans les moments où le rôle de mécène lui parut à sa mesure, Napoléon put songer à confier le soin de conduire les arts à un artiste, Canova ou David. Quand il eut pris garde au pouvoir des images qu’il ordonnait, il lui fallut, pour en diriger la production, un homme réunissant bien des qualités mondaines à la compétence et au talent. Il le trouva dans la personne de cet amateur dont il avait fait un directeur de Muséum. Ainsi, les circonstances, autant que son habilité et ses mérites, servirent Denon jusqu’à lui permettre de faire de cette direction une véritable surintendance des arts.” Pierre Lelièvre, *Vivant Denon, Directeur des Beaux-Arts de Napoléon. Essai sur la Politique Artistique du Premier Empire* (Angers, 1942), 118.

⁸ Organization of *Musée central des Arts*, signed by the First Consul Bonaparte, Saint-Cloud, 28 Brumaire Year XI [19 November 1802], Archives nationales AF IV 76, plaq. 441.

⁹ Letter from Denon for king, 3 October 1815, Archives des musées nationaux, registre *AA9 [p. 289].

¹⁰ *Musée central des arts* in Louvre was renamed in favor of *vœu national* on the motion of Denon: “Citoyen Premier Consul, (...) Il y a une frise sur la porte qui attend une inscription; je crois que musée Napoléon est la seule qui y convienne. (...) C’est vous qui avez formé, conquis et donné celui-ci, comment votre nom ne serait-il pas attaché à un si grand bienfait, à une si grande gloire pour la nation? Je n’ai pas voulu faire placer cette inscription sans vous en prévenir, mais j’ai pris sur moi d’en faire jeter les lettres en bronze et j’espère que les consuls me donneront l’ordre de les faire placer pendant votre absence.” Letter from Denon for the First Consul, 25 Messidor Year XI [14 July 1803], Archives nationales AF IV 1049 dr 2 n° 17. The Second Consul Cambacérès gave this authorization: “Le titre qui convient le mieux à cette précieuse collection est le nom du héros à qui nous la devons. Je crois donc vous exprimer le *vœu national* en vous autorisant à donner pour inscription à la frise qui domine la porte d’entrée ces mots : Musée Napoléon.” Chatelain, 114.

“I spend my time in execution of all what you’ve entrusted me in order to engross all and demonstrate in future the opinion that your choice was given to me and every time that I perceive the amelioration in doing what I do with reverence for you and I address you my thanks for my preference to its execution. Accept, General, the homage of my profound respect.”¹¹

The areas under the immediate supervision of general director of museums were immense: *le Musée Napoléon, le Musée des Monuments français, le Musée spécial de l’Ecole française de Versailles, les galeries des palais du gouvernement, la Monnaie des Médailles, les ateliers de la Chalcographie, de gravures sur pierres fines et de mosaïque, les manufactures de Sèvres, de Beauvais, des Gobelins et de la Savonnerie*,”¹² and, furthermore, the acquisition and the transport of the objects of art.¹³ By the 1811 issue of the *Almanach*, this index had grown to include “la surveillance des travaux d’art ordonné par le gouvernement,”¹⁴ which meant the official commissions of paintings and sculptures, the last of which was assigned to Denon by the decree of the 19th of November 1810, was the direction of digs made in department of Rome.¹⁵ It is necessary to point out that the position of Denon was one component of the strict Napoleonic administrative hierarchy. In spite of this fact, that the general director of museums was in the position subordinated to the Interior ministry¹⁶ and

¹¹ “Je passe mes jours à me mettre au fait de tout ce que vous m’avez confié, afin de m’en rendre maître et de justifier peut-être à l’avenir l’opinion que votre choix a donnée de moi ; et chaque fois que j’aperçois une amélioration à faire, je vous en fais l’hommage et vous adresse des remerciements de m’avoir élu pour l’opérer. Agréés, Général, l’hommage de mon profond respect.” Letter from Denon for the First Consul, 11 Nivôse Year XI, Archives nationales AF IV 1049 dr 2 n° 5.

¹² Marie-Anne Dupuy, “Vivant Denon ou les paradoxes du directeur de Arts” in Dominique-Vivant Denon. *L’œil de Napoléon*. Paris, musée du Louvre, 20 octobre 1999 – 17 janvier 2000, 270; Letter from the general director of *Musée Napoléon* for the Interior minister, 3 Nivôse Year XIII [24 December 1804], Archives des musées nationaux, registre *AA5 p. 103.

¹³ Chatelain, 103.

¹⁴ Dupuy, 270.

¹⁵ “La direction des fouilles à faire dans le département de Rome.” Pierre-François Pinard, “Musées (Direction générale).” *Quand Napoléon inventait la France. Dictionnaire des institutions politiques, administratives et de cour du Consulat et de l’Empire*, ed. Thierry Lentz (Paris, 2008), 475.

¹⁶ Under article IV of the decree establishing Denon’s post, the Interior ministry was to have ultimate control over museum administration; but, as the control was ill-defined, Denon often wrote directly to Napoleon about related

collaborated with the general intentions of the House of the Emperor,¹⁷ the large autonomy and the multiplicity of Denon's functions enabled him to centralize the control of the fine arts in his hands in order to highlight his contributions to the glory of his Emperor, his country, and his age. Despite the fact that Denon was originally an amateur engraver, but thanks to his talent invited to *Académie royale des Beaux-Arts* in 1787, he possessed a realistic modesty based upon candid awareness that there was a limit to his knowledge and skill in the fine arts. The grace with which he could step aside in favor of specialists and their erudition was, to a considerable degree, Denon's most valuable asset as Imperial art administrator.¹⁸ Giving support to his reputation and evincible erudition, the First Consul Bonaparte named him a member of the *Institut*, the 4th class "*Beaux-Arts*", the 1st section "*Peinture*" on the 31st of January 1803.¹⁹

As Pierre Lelièvre (1942) claimed, "*The Director of museums was the counselor, the guide, and also the teacher and the art critic of the Emperor. His reports on the art exhibits, on the work in progress, shed some new light on the politics behind commissioned works as well as on Napoleon's personal views of Art.*"²⁰ The French sovereign intended that the decorative arts, partly as a result of measures of prompting and control similar to those used for music and poetry, glorify him in two ways. They were to do so directly by commemorating his outstanding achievements

and indirectly by setting a new standard of excellence which would make his epoch unique.²¹ "*My intention is to turn specially the arts towards the subjects which could tend to perpetuate the remembrance of that what was executed since 15 years,*" wrote Napoleon on the 6th of August 1805 to general intendant Daru.²² "*Paris will be the prettiest city of the world when all what is commenced will be finished, and that goes being fast enough,*" wrote Madame de Maltzau to countess d'Albany in 1807.²³ In Annie Jourdan's view (1998),

"*It's the first time, it is real that the imagination was mainly spontaneous and represented first of all the Hero of France. Under the Consulat and Empire, and under the impulse of government, this [imagination] was being more varied. Hero and heritor of the Revolution, legislator and administrator, emperor of French and 'maître' of Europe, Napoleon let himself as repairman and builder be viewed also as maecenas to mean to be the 'homme de culture.' He pursued the creation of civilization enterprise since the night of times, and enjoyed to interfuse the old and new glory of France and to excite by this stratagem 'admiration of our children and the respect of world.'*"²⁴

To Napoleon's conception of cultural policy in the limits of "*Paris the capital of the universe*" and "*the whole France the veritable Roman*,"²⁵ Denon added brilliantly, describing his project of the

matters. That's why the Interior minister Chaptal was irked by such intrusion on his domain and their relationship lacked cordiality; moreover, the minister recognized Denon's competence but he had little esteem for this character (Lelièvre 1942, 41–42). Interior ministers who were superior to the charge of Denon: Chaptal (1801–1804), Champagny (1804–1807), Crétet (1807–1809), Fouché par intérim (1809), Montalivet (1809–1814) and Carnot (1815). Thierry Lentz, "*Intérieur (Ministère)*," in Lentz 2008, 378.

¹⁷ The office of "*Intendance générale de la Maison de l'Empereur*" was established by the decree of the 17th of July 1804 as the general administration of all property of the Crown and of the expenses of the all services of the Maison. This post was managed by Fleurieu (1804–1805), Daru (1806–1811) and Champagny (1811–1814). Pierre Branda, "*Intendance générale de la Maison de l'Empereur*," Lentz 2008, 376.

¹⁸ Nowinski, 87.

¹⁹ Dupuy, 502.

²⁰ "*Le directeur des Musées a été le conseiller, le guide, et aussi le professeur et le critique d'art de l'empereur. Ses rapports sur les expositions, les travaux en cours, apportent, aussi bien sur la politique des commandes que sur les vues personnelles de Napoléon sur l'art, quelques lumières nouvelles.*" Lelièvre, 10.

²¹ Napoleon, *Correspondance*, XVI, 389, cited in Robert B. Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda* (Baton Rouge LA, 1950), 161.

²² "*Mon intention est de tourner spécialement les arts vers les sujets qui tendraient à perpétuer le souvenir de ce qui s'est fait depuis 15 ans.*" Napoleon, *Correspondance*, XI, 5, cited in Annie Jourdan, *Napoléon: héros, imperator, mécène* (Paris, 1998), 259.

²³ "*Paris sera la plus belle ville du monde, lorsque tout ce qui est commencé sera fini, et cela va assez vite.*" Marie-Louise Biver, *Le Paris de Napoléon* (Paris, 1963), 46.

²⁴ "*Dans un premier temps, il est vrai que l'imagerie fut surtout spontanée et représenta avant tout le Héros de la France. Sous le Consulat et l'Empire, et sous l'impulsion du gouvernement, elle se fait plus variée. Héros et héritier de la Révolution, législateur et administrateur, empereur des Français et maître de l'Europe, Napoléon se donne aussi pour un 'réparateur', un bâtisseur, voir un mécène. Il se veut homme de culture. Il poursuit l'œuvre de civilisation entreprise depuis la nuit des temps, et se flatte de confondre gloire ancienne et nouvelle de la France et de susciter par ce biais 'l'admiration de nos enfants et le respect du monde.'*" Jourdan, 149.

²⁵ "*Paris la capitale de l'univers, et de toute la France un véritable roman...*" Emmanuel de Las Cases, *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*. (Paris, 1999), I, 444.

Louvre as “the prettiest museum of the universe.”²⁶ He sparkled in the vision of his governor with his capacity for mobilization in the milieu of artists, by his eye of collector and his science of symbols.²⁷ His projects regarding decorative arts can be defined as the sophisticated combination of Napoleonic official symbols, documentary scenery and decorative motifs from the ancient Egyptian, Roman, Greek and Oriental art, which gave way to the representative style of Napoleon, traditionally named “Empire”, the spirit of multiculturalism, internationalism and imperialism.²⁸

The quality of the dynamic leadership that Denon assumed becomes even more apparent if we remember that Napoleon knew nothing about art or its history.²⁹ To Denon this state of affairs was not a problem. On the contrary, with his own brand of insight, the courtier at once understood the nature of Napoleon’s interest in the arts. For the ambitious hero bent upon founding a legend, they were an instrument of propaganda, a symbol of prestige and personal dominance. His art superintendent, expert at flattering those in command, wholeheartedly seconded the goal of the Emperor to create and maintain a special kind of pictorial representation. It was, of necessity, a stylized interpretation of Napoleon’s imagined spiritual and moral superiority to those who surrounded him.³⁰

²⁶ “Le plus beau musée de l’univers...” Letter from Denon for Daru, 26 March 1810, Archives des musées nationaux, registre *AA7 p.179.

²⁷ “Denon s’y impose véritablement comme l’homme du moment par sa capacité à mobiliser le milieu des artistes, par son œil de collectionneur et par sa science des symboles.” Jean-Claude Bonnet, *L’Empire des Muses : Napoléon, les Arts et les Lettres*. (Paris, 2004), 13.

²⁸ Denon designed and commanded the official production of decorative arts; for example, the Etruscan service or the Egyptian service produced in manufactory of Sèvres, the second decorated with hieroglyphs and décor inspired by his engravings published in his travelogue “*Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Egypte, pendant les campagnes du général Bonaparte*.” Letter from the general director of Musée Napoléon for M. le grand maréchal du palais, 23 October 1807, Archives des musées nationaux, registre *AA5 p. 328. See also: Tamara Préaud, “Denon et la Manufacture impériale de Sèvres,” in Dupuy, 294–295, fig. 88.

²⁹ Jean-Antoine Claude Chaptal, *Mes souvenirs sur Napoléon* (Paris, 1893), 269–273.

³⁰ Nowinski, 92.

As Napoleon’s chief adviser, both artist and administrator, Denon had a modest, realistic attitude toward his own limitations. His theories of art included “an imitation of nature, a sense of elevation and a concern for beauty in the arts, an awareness that our mores were to be influenced by the sight of engaging scenes and graceful models.”³¹ Historian of art Jules-Maurice Renouvier (1863) considered his engravings as among the best interpretations of the work of Jacques-Louis David, whose preferences included a depiction of the human body as inspired by classical imitation and patriotic zeal.³² Sensual by nature, Denon also favored the human form as iconography, which he too reproduced according to classical principles – the imitation of nature. What’s more, Denon obviously accepted the pragmatic, social aim for the arts of certain philosophers of the French Enlightenment, above all the concept of Denis Diderot, as had Napoleon; this is why Denon was able to translate so effectively the Imperial policy as a censor toward the arts when the time came to do so.³³

The commands and the distribution of the official portraits of the French governor, distinguished by strict realism in terms of the principles of portraiture of classicism, were managed by Denon as the traditional dignified presentation in sense of the official state representation of the French Governor addressed to the other authorities and for the decoration of the honorable places in the official residences, prefectures, town halls or the castles of prominent notables.³⁴

In regard to propaganda, the second dimension of the projection of reality, which was an integral part of the cultural policy of

³¹ “L’imitation de la nature, de l’élévation et du beau dans les arts, de l’influence qui devaient exercer sur les mœurs les riants images ou les modèles gracieux.” Nowinski; 63, 69.

³² Jules-Maurice Renouvier, *Histoire de l’art pendant la révolution* (Paris, 1863), 52, 85, 150.

³³ Nowinski, 70.

³⁴ It is necessary to name the official portraits of Napoleon painted by Antoine-Jean Gros, Robert Lefèvre, Charles Meynier, Marie-Guillemine Benoist, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Joseph-Marie Vien fils, Fortuné Dufau and Jean-Baptiste Greuze which were dispatched by Denon to the cities Lyon, Rouen, Lille, Dunkerque, Bruxelles, Gand, Liège, Bruges, Blois and Anvers. Letter from Denon for Napoleon, 19 February 1806, Archives nationales AF IV 1050 dr 2 n° 18.

Napoleonic regime, Denon used to serve this “instrument” as a mediator between the artists, artistic objects and their employer who was the French government. He systematically maintained the positive and glorifying image of Napoleon, desired by the monarch, and could furnish artists with such accurate pictorial and iconographic facts because he himself had often been present at the spot or at the occasion chosen for reproduction.³⁵ As Robert B. Holtman (1950) argued, this tendency of propaganda arises from the sophisticated illustration of the adventure and heroism which help maintain morale by giving an aura of romance to events. Such personalization is necessary because warfare is so vast that without some simplifying it would seem remote and incomprehensible to the average person.³⁶

On the other hand, in view of Denon’s artistic projects and proposals, which surpassed the limits of official propaganda rated by Napoleon and created the image of Emperor in terms of his personality cult, the assertive chief adviser often came into opposition with his master.³⁷ As the

³⁵ For example, as we can see in Denon’s letter for Napoleon, the general director of museums gave very exact instructions to the celebrated painter François Gérard (1770–1827) who received an order for portrayal the Battle of Austerlitz “à l’instant où le général Rapp présente à Sa Majesté le prince Repnin et les prisonniers de la garde russe...” Letter from Denon for Napoleon, 15 August 1808, Archives nationales AF IV 1050 dr 4 n° 34.

³⁶ Holtman, XIII–XIV.

³⁷ For instance, it is the case of colossal statue *Napoléon en triomphateur* in gilded lead designated by Denon and realized by François Frédéric Lemot from 1806 to 1808 for the carriage of Venetian Quadriga which was placed on the top of the Arch of Triumph in the square Carrousel in Paris. The statue presented the French Emperor in the pose of Roman Emperors in the antique style with the reminiscences of his coronation on 1804. According to some critics of Denon (Claret de Fleurieu, Fontaine), after the first presentation of the sculpture on the 15th of August 1808 in front of the eyes of the public, displeased Napoleon ordered to carry it down and remove to the Orangery of gallery in the Louvre. Isabelle – Lemaistre Jay Leroy, “Les commandes de sculptures,” in Dupuy, 363. See also: Daniela Gallo, “Pouvoirs de l’antique,” in Bonnet, 320–321; Biver 1963, 181; Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine, *Journal 1799–1853* (Paris, 1987), 215. In fact, the order of Napoleon was realized as late as August 1812 as we can gather from the correspondence of Denon: Letter from Denon for Lemot, 16 August 1812, Archives des musées nationaux, registre *AA 12, correspondance supplémentaire p. 188; Letter from Denon for Duroc, 19 August 1812, Archives des musées nationaux, registre *AA 12, correspondance supplémentaire p. 188–189.

propagandist must decide whether revelation at any given time of his identity and of the type of action he desires will strengthen or weaken his efforts,³⁸ Napoleon refused all proposals to his representation as a demi-god. The reasons were evident - this ideal image of him in face of his contemporaries could take effect of psychological impact of an original impression of the mockery replied to his flaws. He wanted to show himself simply as a human *de haute qualité* who succeeded with his own capacity and that God and history were on his side. What was then his conception of art in service to himself? According to David O’Brien (2004), since Napoleon’s own day it has been common to portray him as a philistine: he used art crassly for ostentation and instrumentally for propaganda, expressed a crude preference for verisimilitude and anecdotal scenes, and seems most concerned with acquiring whatever was famous and expensive. He was indeed attracted to famous artists, but he had a shrewd eye for politically effective images and confidently rejected those he deemed inadequate. His disdain for the nuances of aesthetics was strong, as was his impatience with the pretensions of artists, but he was at times uncharacteristically hesitant, even insecure, when addressing artistic matters, and deferred frequently to specialists and advisers.³⁹ However, his obsession with images was also part of a sophisticated effort to legitimize his regime and inscribe himself permanently in French memory. As the effective instrument, the Napoleonic propaganda aimed for a much broader public – the masses. Napoleon was attempting to combine the elevation and refinement of the medium with the mass appeal of propaganda, to reconcile the difficult and sometimes rarefied conventions of art with the everyday experiences and beliefs of the majority of French viewers.⁴⁰ That’s why, as the adherent to

³⁸ Holtman, xiv.

³⁹ Between Napoleon’s advisers except Denon has the prerogative position Jacques-Louis David as the First Painter of Emperor (since 1804), Jean-Baptiste Isabey as the First Painter of Empress (since 1805) and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine as the First Architect of Emperor (since 1813) who collaborated with Charles Percier, the next official architect of Emperor. François Benoît, *L’art français sous la Révolution et l’Empire. Les doctrines, les idées, les genres* (Genève 1975), 173–174.

⁴⁰ David O’Brien, “Antonio Canova’s Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker and the limits of imperial portraiture,” *French History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2004): 354–355, 375.

the anti-idealist thesis, he preferred the truth of imitation and the historic reality contrary to the *système idéal*, the heroic nudity and allegoric presentation. "It's unpleasant that His Majesty doesn't like allegory," wrote the director of the French Academy in Rome Guillaume Guillon Lethière to Denon on the 4th of March 1811.⁴¹ Historian of art François Benoit (1975) argued that Napoleon totally misunderstood the idealism of expression and of movement.⁴² That's why he tended to moderate the suggestions of his chief adviser in the arts, the old courtesan from *Ancien Régime* in France who used to admire his king, his honorable patron, and used to look at Napoleon through the eyes of courtier.

The flatterer of elegant manners with the convection, vital joy and *courtoisie*⁴³ never lost the respect of his governor – the mode which Denon had acquired in the Court before the revolutionary turbulences. Together with his intellectual sympathies to the *style héroïque de l'antiquité*, this could be noted as the one of the most important psychological aspects of Denon's admiration of the new outgoing power which Napoleon, as "the king of the French revolution" and the modern triumphal force, truly embodied. As the best evidence of Denon's explicit fondness of Napoleon, note his message addressed on the 6th of November 1803 to his lifelong friend Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi: "I haven't any time for me. Bonaparte disposed all my time giving me the place which I love and ordering me every moment something little what is needed to do

subsequently. He doesn't abuse me, but he would abuse me if it had been yet. It is rare to love much the grandest men but I assure you that the more I see this there, the more I love him. I feel happy that my final epoch of my life could be devoted to existence so distinguished. It is the burning star who revives my soul."⁴⁴



Dominique-Vivant Denon holding a medal
(by Jean-Baptiste Greuze)

Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that Denon was not purely the servant of Napoleon. As his chief adviser, he assertively pursued his own artistic and aesthetic aspirations sometimes without the confirmation of his governor. The typical example of the collision of different aesthetic doctrines between Napoleon and Denon was undoubtedly the project of the Column of the Glory of Napoleon's Grand Army in the Place Vendôme, in memory of

the victorious battles at Ulm and Austerlitz from 1805, inspired by Trajan's Column in Rome. *Institut* and subsequently the Interior minister Champagny recommended to modify the former project and to replace the statue of Charlemagne with the statue of the Emperor as the "prince whom France loves."⁴⁵ The iconographic choice was committed to Denon and Napoleon ordered to continue the preparation without the next specification. The statue of the Emperor was realized by sculptor Chaudet under the direction of Denon in the style *à l'antique à la tradition romaine* despite the concept of historical reality in traditional costume *à la moderne* which was

⁴¹ "Il est fâcheux que S. M. n'aime pas l'allégorie." Letter from Lethière for Denon, 4 March 1811, Archives du Louvre, Z.

⁴² "En vérité, sur tous les points, Napoléon semble adhérer à la thèse anti-idéaliste. (...) et ne comprenait rien à l'idéalisme de l'expression et du mouvement." Benoit, 170–171.

⁴³ This is the characteristic portrait of Denon sketched in the memories of his contemporaries: *Mémoires de Mlle Avrillon*, (Paris, n.p), II, 79; *Mme d'Abrantès, Mémoires* (Paris, 1912), IV, 387; Stendhal, *Œuvres intimes, Journal* (Paris, 1961) 982, 1222.

⁴⁴ "Je n'ai pas un moment à moi. Bonaparte a disposé de tous mes moments en me donnant une place que j'aime et m'ordonnant à tout moment quelque petite chose qu'il faut que je fasse de suite. Il n'abuse pas de moi, mais il en abuserait que ce serait tout de même. Il est rare de pouvoir aimer beaucoup les très grands hommes mais je t'assure que plus je vois celui-là, plus je l'aime. Je me trouve heureux que la dernière époque de ma vie soit consacrée à un être si distingué. C'est un astre brûlant qui ravive mon âme." Garavini 1999, n° 1803-6, 514.

⁴⁵ "Le prince que la France chérit." Chatelain, 118.

acceptable to Napoleon's imagination. However, when the Column was inaugurated on the 15th of August 1810, the viewers sighted on the top of the monument the statue of Napoleon naked in roman toga propping himself up with an immense glaive with the winged Victory standing on the globe in his hand. Caulaincourt later noticed the reaction of Napoleon in his memories: *"I don't want any idols, not even statues outdoors. It is to my great discontent and without consulting me that Denon made mine for the column in the Place Vendôme."*⁴⁶ As noted by the Interior minister Chaptal, *"The Emperor commanded, but he was indifferent to the mode of execution, because he lacked the taste to judge by himself (...) Denon wanted to sign the Emperor through all. Full of himself, of simple amateur, he placed himself in the rank of painters and architects."*⁴⁷ Chaptal's words demonstrate how intensive was this inevitable relation between Napoleon and his chief adviser - the connection which was evidently the result of jealousy and a grudge held by those who were overshadowed by the position of Denon in the art administration and the extraordinary competencies of the general museum director in France. On the other side, many artists respected Denon, who used to serve as an intermediate between the government and them, as the protector of their zeal. As it was presented at a banquet of artists around painter Gros, *"It is to Monsieur Denon – I dare say our 'camarade', our friend – to exploit for the glory of France this noble emulation which incites us all... when we find the master in David, the brother in Gros, we find also in Director of fine arts the father, savant protector."*⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *"Je ne veux pas d'idoles, pas même de statues en plein air. C'est à mon grand mécontentement, et sans me consulter, que Denon a fait la mienne pour la colonne Vendôme". Général de Armand Augustin de Caulaincourt, Mémoires du général de Caulaincourt, duc de Vicence, Grand Ecuyer de l'Empereur: L'ambassade de Saint-Petersbourg et la campagne de Russie (Paris, 1933), I, 305.*

⁴⁷ *"L'Empereur ordonnait, mais il était indifférent sur le mode d'exécution, parce qu'il manquait de goût pour juger par lui-même (...) Denon a voulu signer l'Empereur dans tous ses travers. Plein de lui-même, de simple amateur, il s'est placé au rang des peintres et des architectes." Chaptal, 273.*

⁴⁸ *"C'est à M. Denon - j'ose dire notre camarade, notre ami - de mettre à profit pour la gloire de la France cette noble émulation qui nous anime tous... quand nous trouvons un maître dans David, un frère dans Gros, nous trouvons aussi dans le Directeur des beaux-arts un père, un savant protecteur." Albert Soubiès, Les Membres de l'Académie des beaux-arts, depuis la fondation de l'Institut, première série, 1795-1816 (Paris, 1904), 149.*



Vivant-Denon's bust
(by François Joseph Bosio, circa 1810).

Jean Chatelain (1973) argued that *"Denon was a skeptic, it is not disenchantment. In all functions which he held, he always manifested the connatural sense of equilibrium, reality and concreteness. (...) In every case he had the real artistic erudition, concrete, acquired in terrain, very extensive; he had cognizance of antiques of Italy, Sicily, Egypt, the galleries of Naples, Rome, Parma, Venice, Florence. For a long time he is a collector passionate for all (...) If it was needed by it more to be the director competent for arts, which other him ever was?"*⁴⁹ That's the question which apparently resonated in the mind of Napoleon. As noted by Denon's contemporary Etienne-Jean Delécluze (1855), *"it is possible to say that influence exercised by this minister of arts, because he was that in fact, had always the double character: very liberal, very impartial until he practiced by himself, (his influence) became absolute and little favorable to the arts when he was obliged to follow the ideas of Emperor, what was the case the most frequent."*⁵⁰ Albert de La Fizelière (1873) added

⁴⁹ *"Denon est un sceptique, ce n'est pas un désenchanté. Dans toutes les fonctions qu'il a assumées jusque-là, il a toujours manifesté un sens inné de équilibre, du réel et du concret (...) Il a, en tout les cas, une érudition artistique réelle, concrète, acquise sur le terrain, très étendue; il connaît les antiques d'Italie, de Sicile, d'Egypte, les galeries de peinture de Naples, de Rome, de Parme, de Venise, de Florence. Il est depuis longtemps collectionneur passionné de toutes choses (...) S'il en faut plus pour être directeur compétent des arts, quel autre l'a jamais été ?" Chatelain, 110, 123.*

⁵⁰ *"On peut dire que l'influence exercée par ce ministre des arts, car il l'était en effet, eut toujours un double caractère: très-libérale, très-impartiale tant qu'il agissait de lui-même, elle devenait absolue et*

that “Perhaps never before nor after Denon had a civil servant understood and accepted as did this bighearted man, a slave of all he thought to be a duty, the obligations of his office, to such an extent, that it would not have occurred to anyone, not even to the Emperor, to demand of him.”⁵¹ Napoleon recognized Denon’s facilities together with his taste for progress, that’s why he became convinced of his usefulness he needed his help.

In fact, Denon’s ideas as administrator were not only the reflection of those of Napoleon, he was the assertive courtesan able to contradict to his sovereign. He practiced considerable action to make the Emperor accept his opinion and knew how to cleverly manipulate to keep his distrustful governor under the illusion of spontaneity. His personal aesthetic doctrine was liberal and his intelligence was always alive and opened with the sense of eclecticism.

Commissioned by the French governor, he multiplied his functions in the position of the general director of museums in France as the high official of the art administration and in the sense of familiar adviser of Emperor and Empress, as well. In addition, he fixated his activity by supervision of the grand family of arts and voluntarily practiced paternalism at it is proper to honest man and the careful family father.



Denon examining drawings at Cassel
(by Benjamin Zix, early 19th century)

Anatole France (1895) affirmed that Denon probably lacked that certain *je ne sais quoi* attribute of obstinacy, of going to the limits, of loving the impossible, of spiritual vitality, of the enthusiasm that is the stuff of which heroes and geniuses are made. He failed to perceive a “beyond.” He had doubtless never said: “In spite of all!” Finally, this fortunate man had never experienced anxiety and sorrow.⁵² His age was clearly no handicap to him. Following the Napoleonic troops for the express purpose of giving painters an eyewitness account, he was instrumental in creating a legendary, visual history of the Empire and its heroes. Small

wonder that, then, he was at sixty-five years old awarded by the Emperor the title “Baron of Empire” on the 5th of August 1812.⁵³

In conclusion, it is possible to argue that any other mention could not give as complete and suggestive an image of the relationship between Napoleon and his chief adviser in the arts as that noted by

Denon himself and addressed to Napoleon on the 3rd of June 1806 at the time of the intensive tendency of his critics appealed for his degradation: “Your Majesty will permit to me to add (...) the present level of the works which entrusted me to execute. I will work without repose to finalize all this objects. I will dearly take care of that Your Majesty would be satisfied with its execution. (...) I devoted you my existence, Sire; all what will take off my faculties will appertain you by my late sigh. It is not thus

peu favorable aux arts quand il était obligé de suivre les idées de l'empereur, ce qui était le cas le plus fréquent.” Etienne-Jean Delécluze, *David: son école et son temps* (Paris, 1983), 319.

⁵¹ “Jamais peut-être un fonctionnaire de l'ordre civil, ni avant Denon, ni après lui, n'a compris et accepté comme ce grand cœur, esclave de tout ce qu'il croyait être un devoir, les obligations de sa charge, jusqu'aux extrêmes limites, qu'il ne serait venu à personne, même l'Empereur d'exiger de lui”. Albert-André Patin de La Fizelière, *L'Oeuvre original de Vivant Denon* (Paris, 1873), 49.

⁵² “Il lui manqua sans doute ce je ne sais quoi d'obstiné, d'extrême, cet amour de l'impossible, ce zèle du cœur, cet enthousiasme qui fait les héros et les génies. Il lui manqué l'au delà. Il lui manqué d'avoir jamais dit: 'Quand même!' Enfin, il manqua à cet homme heureux l'inquiétude et la souffrance.” Anatole France, *La vie littéraire* (Paris, 1895), III, 179.

⁵³ Brevet du 5 août 1812 autorisant Denon à instituer un majorat du titre de baron, Archives des musées nationaux. Reproduced in Dupuy, 146.

idleness what I solicit, but no more hold the title of place which doesn't already exist and what progressively arrived in being that of 'premier commis'.⁵⁴ Your Majesty ordered, with the aim undoubtedly necessary to be absolutely subaltern, but (Your Majesty) will deign to permit me with a view to that being 16 years old, I exercised at the Court the charge of nobleman, being employed with the honorable missions in Russia and Italy, to say (Your Majesty) that if, for my pleasure, I cultivated the arts with some success, if, accompanying Your Majesty, I augmented my knowledge, I didn't permit to me what would be for my arrival to old age to be considered only as an artist or became a chief of office. It is simple not to have an employment at all, but it is to be that this which accepts it would be suitable for his native country. This sort of order is one of the beneficial acts recovered by the glorious reign of Your Majesty and whom I pray for his benignity to permit me to enjoy. Sire, I feel the most profound respect and loyalty to Your Imperial and Royal Majesty.

DENON."⁵⁵



Denon's tomb at the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris

⁵⁴ The superior officer of minister.

⁵⁵ "Votre Majesté me permettra de joindre aussi l'état présent des travaux dont elle m'a confié l'exécution. Je vais travailler sans relâche à terminer tous ces objets. Je mettrai les soins les plus scrupuleux à ce que Votre Majesté soit satisfaite de leur exécution. (...) Je vous ai voué mon existence, Sire; tout ce qui dépendra de mes seules facultés vous appartiendra jusqu'à mon dernier soupir. Ce n'est donc pas de l'oisiveté que je sollicite, mais de ne plus porter le titre d'une place qui n'existe déjà plus, et qui progressivement est arrivée à être celle d'un premier commis. Votre Majesté a arrêté pour un but sans doute nécessaire qu'elle serait absolument subalterne; mais elle voudra bien me permettre de lui observer qu'ayant à seize ans exercé à la cour la place de gentil-homme, qu'ayant été employé dans des missions honorables en Russie et en Italie, si pour mon plaisir j'ai cultivé les arts avec quelque succès, si en accompagnant Votre Majesté j'ai augmenté mes connaissances, je n'ai pas dû me promettre que ce serait pour arriver dans ma vieillesse à n'être considéré que comme un artiste ou devenir un chef de bureau. Il est tout simple de n'avoir point d'emploi; mais il faut que celui que l'on accepte convienne à l'état où l'on est né. Cette espèce d'ordre est un des bienfaits qu'a ramenés le glorieux règne de Votre Majesté et dont je supplie sa bienveillance de me permettre de jouir. Je suis avec le plus profond respect, Sire, de Votre Majesté Impériale et Royale le plus fidèle sujet. DENON." Letter from Denon to Napoleon, 3 June 1806, Archives nationales AF IV 1050 dr 2 n° 38.