

## ABSTRACT

“L’Artiste Créateur, L’Homme Aimable”:  
A Survey of the Artistic and Commercial Success of Jean-Baptiste Isabey

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Director: Madame Marie Level

Jean-Baptiste Isabey was one of the most successful French artists of the nineteenth century, yet his name is unfamiliar today. His popularity survived eight different regimes, from Louis XVI to Napoléon III. Known as the “portraitiste de l’Europe”, Isabey painted every major historical personality from Marie-Antoinette to Hortense de Beauharnais. In the past few years, scholars have been intrigued by this man who has disappeared from the pages of history. This thesis examines the painter’s life and major works under each regime to discover why he achieved success in such variegated environments. This thesis argues that Isabey’s popularity was due to both his personal and artistic merit. His ability to win patronage, artistic versatility, and family support allowed him to maintain a successful career throughout his lifetime.

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“L’ARTISTE CRÉATEUR, L’HOMME AIMABLE”:  
A SURVEY OF THE ARTISTIC AND COMMERCIAL SUCCESS OF  
JEAN-BAPTISTE ISABEY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Baylor University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Honors Program

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May 2014

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Marie Level for her time and encouragement during this process. This thesis would not have been possible without her constant support and attention to detail.

I would also like to thank my thesis panel, Dr. Eric Rust and Dr. Christian Bratu, for their time and invaluable advice.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my family and friends for their encouragement and support.

## PREFACE

The small provincial town of Nancy experienced much change through the eighteenth century. Once the capital of a grand duchy in the Austrian Empire, Nancy now belonged to a would-be Polish king, Stanislas Leszczynski. Stanislas' influence could be seen throughout the town. Since his arrival, majestic pavilions, fountains with fantastic figures like Neptune and Amphitrite reminiscent of Bernini, and a gold-leaf triumphal arch filled the new city. A lover of art, Stanislas wished to make Nancy a grand artistic capital.

Nancy's brightest jewel lay in its very center: a magnificent sculpture of Louis XV, the French king, and patron to the city's beauty. It was Louis, the monument reminded the town, who had given Lorraine to Stanislas after the War of the Polish Succession.<sup>1</sup>

Jacques Isabey, a young bourgeois from the Franche-Comté, also loved the arts. The son of a school teacher, he had moved to this new artistic center with high hopes of fame. He opened up a small grocery shop that also sold miscellaneous gloves, ribbons, and other accessories. He married a young woman named Françoise, and of six children two survived: Louis and Jean-Baptiste.

Thirty years later, Jean-Baptiste would be adopted into the exclusive circle of European royalty as their favorite painter of miniature portraits. How did this man,

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<sup>1</sup> François Pupil, "Eloge du modèle réduit: Les miniatures de Nancy. (French)," *France*, no. 501 (December 1993): 73.

from a simple family living in a provincial town, achieve this fame? He was a skilled artist, certainly, but there was something more. What was it?

There are several clues left behind by those who knew him best. He was a man of immense personal charm, with great wit. He could make anyone laugh. He loved people and he loved the process of understanding another's character. And if this was his true first talent, his second talent was just as integral to his career.

Marion Osmond explains: "Beauty was the breath of life to him. This did not preclude sympathy; he was almost Italianate in that quality."<sup>2</sup> Jean-Baptiste was something of a Renaissance man. He could paint, without a doubt; but he was also inventive, creative, and easily adaptive to whatever artistic endeavor a patron required. His motivation was exceptional. The beauty he so loved was more than just an aesthetic; it was the beauty of human nature.

A person of such charm and understanding was bound to have a remarkable life. And Jean-Baptiste Isabey's was certainly that. From Marie-Antoinette's *petit peintre de cour*<sup>3</sup> to Napoléon's *dessinateur de cabinet*<sup>4</sup>, from official painter of the Congress of Vienna to chief artistic director of the Paris Opéra, he had quite an interesting and variegated career.

There was a legend in Nancy at the time. The seventh-born child would belong to the king's service. He would have a small birthmark in the shape of a *fleur de lys* that would designate him as dedicated to the royal crown. Isabey did in fact

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<sup>2</sup> Marion Osmond, *Jean-Baptiste Isabey: The Fortunate Painter* (London: 1947), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Edmond Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres* (Paris: E. Panckoucke et cie, 1859), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Mme de Basily-Callimaki, *J.-B. Isabey* (Paris: 1909), p. 69.

have a small birthmark, to his town's delight. His father was very proud. It had been his dream to be an artist for the royal court. When life led him on a different path, he determined that his two sons would succeed in his place. Indeed, they did. Perhaps the life that was granted to Jean-Baptiste Isabey was in some way destined.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Early Influences

Many of the reasons why Jean-Baptiste Isabey was so successful in his artistic career can be traced to his early years in Nancy. This formative period largely shaped his personal and artistic style. Isabey's family provided a strong network of support for him during his personal and artistic development. These connections would provide a source of stability for him in later, more turbulent years.

Jacques Isabey, the patriarch of the family, was born in the grassy farmlands of the Franche-Comté province. Jacques had an artistic nature, and left his home at the young age of fourteen for Strasbourg, a city with more opportunities, or so he hoped. Unable to find success, he moved yet again to Nancy, a new artistic center, where he set up his small grocery shop and at last settled down with a family of his own.<sup>5</sup> His youngest son, Jean-Baptiste, was born in 1767.

More philosophical in his later years, Jacques happily resigned himself to his practical employment while providing his two sons, Louis and Jean-Baptiste, with a liberal education in music and painting.<sup>6</sup> Louis, the eldest, studied the art of drawing and painting; Jean-Baptiste, his younger brother, took lessons in the violin.

However, "il faut dire que le premier ne se plaisait qu'à barbouiller de noir les murs blancs du logis, tandis que Jean-Baptiste Isabey cassait les oreilles de sa

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<sup>5</sup> E. Basily-Callimaki, *J.-B. Isabey. Sa vie. Son temps. 1767-1855*. (Paris: Frazier-Soye, 1909), 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

famille, en tapant sur les casseroles et en chantant à tue-tête.”<sup>7</sup> The two did not improve over time. There is an often repeated story first told by Edmond Taigny, Isabey’s nephew, which he claims was told to him by his uncle. One afternoon, the boys exchanged brushes and bows to amuse each other. But instead of the laughter they anticipated to ensue, they were surprised to discover a freeing power of expression in the other’s medium. Louis could play the phrase his brother simply could not learn with a little prompting and hear in it a beautiful melody. Jean-Baptiste made a very life-like rendering of a horse with Louis’ crayons. The two brothers made a pact to teach each other everything they learned. Not a month went by before Jacques Isabey uncovered their secret. Delighted, he put each brother in appropriate lessons and watched their success as they grew.<sup>8</sup>

Louis progressed quickly. At the age of fourteen, he was performing concertos for all of Nancy, receiving thunderous applause. Their father would often say to his youngest son, “Courage, Jean-Baptiste! Qui sait? Vous serez peut-être un jour peintre du roi!”<sup>9</sup>

But Jean-Baptiste’s development as an artist was no less rapid than his brother’s. He studied under J. B. Claudot, a local artist who painted landscapes and miniatures, most notably for the King of Poland.<sup>10</sup> He quickly outgrew his teacher’s capabilities. He found himself at an artistic standstill. He passed the time making

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<sup>7</sup> F. de Mély, “Jean-Baptiste Isabey,” in *Gazette des beaux-arts : courrier européen de l’art et de la curiosité* (Gazette des beaux-arts (Paris), 1859), 406, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb343486585/date>.

<sup>8</sup> Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 8–9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> E. Basily-Callimaki, *J.-B. Isabey. Sa vie. Son temps. 1767-1855.*, 3.

small black and white portraits of family and friends, and assisting – eventually overseeing – the painting inside the newly restored *Théâtre de Nancy*.<sup>11</sup> Only one of his portraits from this early period of his life remains.<sup>12</sup> His uncle Isabey, a doctor, is its subject, and although done at the age of twelve, it shows a remarkable ability to perceive and express individual character.

When Louis left for Paris in search of bigger opportunities, Jean-Baptiste felt the loss acutely. The two brothers were the closest of companions all their lives, providing a source of laughter and sympathy for each other in the uncertain world of the artist. Both handsome, charming, and good-humored, they would be much in demand at the fashionable salons of Paris. The journey would prove fortuitous for Louis, for he would be engaged as principal violinist to no less than the tsar of Russia, where he would remain, though he visited Paris often.<sup>13</sup>

Another important influence on the young artist was his mother, Marie-Françoise, a simple, good woman with a generous heart. Her warmth and support could not but help to encourage Jean-Baptiste's good nature. There are two portraits of her that can be seen today: one shows an elderly woman in a respectable bonnet with a sweet expression;<sup>14</sup> the second, seated in a chair, while her son stands nearby

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<sup>11</sup> Christian Pfister, "Histoire de Nancy. Tome 3," *Gallica*, 623, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k58499035>.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Baptiste Isabey, *Oncle d'Isabey*, 1779.

<sup>13</sup> E. Basily-Callimaki, *J.-B. Isabey. Sa vie. Son temps. 1767-1855.*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Baptiste Isabey, *Portrait de Marie-Françoise Isabey, née Poirel, mère de l'artiste*, miniature on ivory, n.d., Nancy, Musée lorrain.

with a mischievous look. In the second portrait the tone is humble, seeking to portray honestly a mother and her beloved son.<sup>15</sup>

The broad artistic heritage of Nancy also contributed to Isabey's unique set of skills. Newly French, Lorraine's capital was bursting with creative opportunities due to King Stanislas' generous patronage.<sup>16</sup> Isabey not only developed skills in portraiture, studying the wide variety of human personalities that animate a city, but in miniatures, landscapes, and in the pageantry of the theatre.

As soon as Isabey surpassed the ability of Claudot, he found a new opportunity in the renovation of the *Théâtre de Nancy*.<sup>17</sup> Although Claudot participated in the project, most of the detailing can be recognized as Isabey's work.<sup>18</sup> His reputation in town spread, and could rival even the grand reputation of his brother. People started to recognize the short, dark-haired young man as more than the grocer's son – he was an artist whose work was proudly on display in Nancy's new theatre.

Isabey was well-liked not only for his talent, but because he was charming, inventive, and loved to laugh. This is a significant theme in the success of Isabey's career. He was popular with everyone he met – a quality that would be extremely useful during the rocky years to come in France. His social adeptness sprang from an ability to observe and perceive acutely certain details in a person's character,

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<sup>15</sup> Jean-Baptiste Isabey, *Portraits de Madame Isabey et l'artiste*, black chalk, n.d., département des Arts graphiques, Paris, musée du Louvre.

<sup>16</sup> E. Basily-Callimaki, *J.-B. Isabey. Sa vie. Son temps. 1767-1855.*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Pfister, "Histoire de Nancy. Tome 3," 623.

<sup>18</sup> E. Basily-Callimaki, *J.-B. Isabey. Sa vie. Son temps. 1767-1855.*, 4.

both outward and inward. This gift of perception aided him doubly in his artwork and in his survival as an artist. He had an immense sense of tact. Few artists have such talent and the ability to support their career in the midst of so many social and political upheavals. This is why Isabey is such an outstanding figure in nineteenth-century art.

The turbulence of the French Revolution was looming, but for Isabey the monarchy was still the center of French power and wealth. Paris loomed as the cultural capital of the Western world.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Paris

At the age of eighteen, Isabey set off for Paris. The young artist was ready to face the big city, with all its glamor, politics, intrigue, and beauty. Paris would be the setting for the beginning of Isabey's success. Here he would experience both poverty and life at the court of Marie-Antoinette: two key influences on his artistic career.

Parting from his beloved family was a trying experience. "Je me sentis le cœur bien gros," he wrote, "lorsqu'il fallut quitter cette ville où tous les visages étaient amis."<sup>1</sup> When news of his departure spread throughout the town, people would stop him in the streets to wish him luck.

He slept little the night before his big voyage. At five o'clock in the morning, Père Isabey woke his son to prepare for the journey. His voice trembled as he gave him his benediction. His mother sat beside him and offered her whole life savings: five *louis*. The coach at last arrived. From the street, he took one last look at his childhood home. A hand lifted the curtain and sent him one last kiss: it was his mother. All of his friends were gathered in front of the coach to say their goodbyes. And then, the coach set off, and when the last of the houses from his hometown disappeared into the morning mist, he could no longer hold in the feelings that he

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<sup>1</sup> Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 10.

had held so tightly. He burst into tears and did not cease to weep for the long eight-hour journey. But when Isabey reached Paris, his tears stopped.<sup>2</sup>

His spirits rose as he beheld Paris for the first time, perhaps covered in a January frost. A hansom cab took him to the Hôtel du Comte d'Helmstadt on the rue Cassette. He passed the doorman a letter of recommendation for Monsieur Bouquet, the maître d'hôtel. After a warm welcome, Isabey found himself in a small room about eight steps long and wide, with white-washed walls. There was a cot, a straw chair, an old pine table, and a broken mirror that hung on a window which looked out onto the stables. He could not help but laugh as he saw his reflection in the cracked mirror.<sup>3</sup>

How to begin? At first, Isabey decided to become a marine painter of noble ships and grand seascapes. He was a great admirer of Joseph Vernet, but unfortunately he did not have a studio in Paris. What about the famous Jacques-Louis David? Another disappointment. He had just left for Rome with a promising young student named Drouais. Isabey had brought a letter of recommendation for François Dumont, a fellow *lorrain* and first miniaturist to the Queen. Perhaps Dumont would look kindly on a fellow countryman?<sup>4</sup>

Isabey paid him a visit. François Dumont lived in a handsome apartment where everything breathed luxury. Dumont appeared, enveloped in a robe of blue and gold, his hair “coiffé et poudré à l’oiseau royal.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 12.

The young artist was taken aback by his coldness. “I can do nothing for you,” he told him. “I do not take students for miniature painting. However, there is a studio I sometimes visit during the morning that I could recommend you to.”<sup>6</sup>

This was not the reception Isabey had hoped for. A studio with a master artist - someone with a reputation - was considered the best environment to learn the trade. Connections were vital. However, there were models, whether live or statues from classical antiquity, that were available for Isabey to study in the studio recommended by Dumont.<sup>7</sup> Models played a big part in the style known as classical realism popular at the time. They were essential for the development of the artist.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, his five *louis* were reduced to two. “Mais, tout en travaillant pour l’art, il fallait vivre et payer les frais d’installation,” he wrote.<sup>9</sup> He found various odd jobs to support himself while a student. He painted snuffboxes, buttons, and small pastels that were sold underneath the colonnade of the Louvre. At the same time, he managed to create a loyal clientele among the bourgeois of St-Denis for his miniatures. This is the first instance of Isabey’s ingenuity blossoming during hard times.<sup>10</sup> His time as a student living above the stables reveals that he was a hard worker who was dedicated to his craft. Moreover, his personal charm allowed him to create a clientele with little reputation. He was *mondain*, “an ardent lover of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuelle Brugerolles, Georges Brunel, and Camille Debrabant, *The Male Nude: eighteenth-Century Drawings from the Paris Academy* (London: Wallace Collection, 2013), 80–7.

<sup>8</sup> Alistair Rider, “David and the Revolution” (lecture, University of St. Andrews, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Taigny, J.-B. *Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

life.”<sup>11</sup> A good storyteller, he loved to make people laugh. Moreover, once he formed a connection – he kept it. His nephew wrote that he was “recherché dans le monde pour son esprit fin et anecdotique, et estimé pour son tact et sa rare discrétion.”<sup>12</sup> Both qualities were united in his character, making him a valuable friend and a trustworthy worker.

Soon he was able to move out of the *hôtel*, joining a friend in an apartment close to the Louvre. His new roommate took him often to Versailles, where his father served the Marquis de Sérent. By a lucky chance, his friend’s father overheard that the Marquis had been instructed by the Queen to have a portrait made of her two young nephews. This friend’s kind father recommended Isabey to the Marquis, and thus Isabey began painting the royal family.

At the first sitting, he was extremely nervous. By the third, his confidence grew. One day, absorbed in his work, someone announced the Queen had arrived. “Il faut se reporter,” Isabey wrote:

à ces temps monarchiques, tenir compte de mon jeune âge, du point de départ de mon existence, pour bien comprendre l’émotion profonde dont je fus saisi à la vue de cette belle et imposante personne chez laquelle la double souveraineté de femme et de reine se confondait si merveilleusement.<sup>13</sup>

His hands trembled so much that he could not focus on his work. The Queen smiled and said to the Comte d’Artois, who was with her, “voilà donc, cher frère, ce jeune lorrain dont vous m’avez parlé?” She sat beside him and he blushed as she enthusiastically praised his work. The Comte laughed, seeing his trouble, slapped

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<sup>11</sup> Marion Osmond, *Jean Baptiste Isabey: The Fortunate Painter. 1767-1855*. (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1947), 22.

<sup>12</sup> Taigny, J.-B. *Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

him casually on the shoulder, then offered his hand to the Queen. She got up to embrace the young princes but upon leaving she told Isabey, “Continuez, mon enfant; cela va bien.”<sup>14</sup>

Three days later he was invited to Trianon, where the Queen asked him to copy a portrait of her made by Louis Sicardi. He became established at Versailles, where he was nicknamed “le petit peintre de cour,” due to his short stature.<sup>15</sup> Life was gay, he was a success, and he felt that he had begun to fulfill some of his destiny so often discussed by his friends from Nancy.

What was life like for a young painter in Marie-Antoinette’s court? Isabey went often to the theatre, where he had free admission as an artist, with the pages, who were young like him and loved to enjoy life. More than anything he loved the masked costume balls so popular at the time. His personality was theatrical. He was always in demand at the *salons* for his anecdotes or as an actor in a play put on by members of the court for each other’s amusement. Costumes, spectacles, sets, and scenery – he had a great vision for these.

One ball in particular Isabey would never forget. Put on by the Queen herself, it took place in a grand theatre. That night, the Comtesse de Calignac and Madame de Simiane dressed him as a lady-in-waiting. Thanks to his youth and shortness of height, the illusion was possible up to a certain point. Hidden in a pink hood, Isabey arrived, escorted by a knight. Upon entering the room, he joined the Comtesse as arranged. Offering her arm, she led him to the Queen. He followed, but the Queen’s

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

welcome hinted that she had been warned about Isabey's disguise; nevertheless, she said nothing, enjoying the joke. Isabey played along. Invited to take off his mask, he did so but with an air so modest that the Queen could barely stand the hilarity.

“Tous les rangs se trouvaient confondus dans cette foule parée, et nul ne se révoltait contre l'égalité passagère que le plaisir fait naître,” he wrote.<sup>16</sup> It was a sentiment he would repeat often. No matter what court, Isabey would long for the days when one could enjoy the company of friends without the formality of etiquette according to rank.

Though Isabey adored these diversions at Versailles, he was at the same time working hard. “Il comprit,” his nephew wrote, “qu'il ne pouvait pas toujours patiner avec Saint-Georges, ou frayer avec les gardes du corps; c'eût été manquer à cette sagesse et à cette modération qui formaient un des traits distinctifs de son caractère.”<sup>17</sup> He was making connections that would serve him for a lifetime. Edmond Taigny proposed that the court was the food of art and commerce.<sup>18</sup> Despite a royalist tint, Taigny's words ring true. Wealth and power were concentrated within the *noblesse*, many of whom held positions at court. Therefore, the best place to find a patron would be at court. Isabey was fully aware of this. He attended lectures often in Paris to improve his education and to make him more like courtly men. He stayed informed, connected, and always very busy.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 9.

When two years of Isabey's new life in Paris had passed, he received tragic news: his father was sick and unlikely to recover. Isabey rushed home to Nancy, but did not make it in time. The loss of his father was a turning point. Personally, he was distraught; but his father had also been the first to help him to discover his talent as an artist. Now there was added incentive to succeed. From this day forward, he would work to honor the memory of his father through his passion for his profession. As one of his biographers has put it: "Artist to the soul, he would have to strive for the sake of Art only."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Osmond, *Jean Baptiste Isabey: The Fortunate Painter. 1767-1855.*, 18.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Revolution

The advent of the French Revolution marked a major change in the course of Isabey's career. As a popular painter in Marie-Antoinette's court, Isabey found himself in a dangerous place. Fortunately, he had the perfect ally – the revolutionary neo-classicist Jacques-Louis David. Not only would he essentially save Isabey's career, he would have a profound impact upon his artistic style.

When David returned from Rome in 1787, Isabey joined his atelier, along with other students such as François Gérard and Anne-Louis Girodet. Stern and philosophical, David nonetheless had a “place dans cette classe des grands artistes d'autrefois qui considérait leurs élèves comme les membres d'une famille.”<sup>1</sup> He held dinners for his students at his home and loaned them rent money, on several occasions. Isabey's name was frequently associated with both of these generousities. David also made sure that his students were managing well the balance between work and socializing.

At that time, Isabey painted mostly miniatures to pay off the high debts that had accumulated as the result of his time in Marie-Antoinette's court. Miniature painting was largely associated with the elite, which displeased David, who believed in the principles of the Revolution. Originally conceived as a decoration or illustration for medieval books (the Latin “minare,” from which it comes, means “to

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<sup>1</sup> Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 16.

color with red lead,” red being the color used for capital letters that often contained illustrations inside), these small portraits were soon in demand separate from the books.<sup>2</sup> Both books and the miniatures could only be bought by the elite, because the materials used to make them were very costly. By the late sixteenth century, miniatures were used by the members of the French court to display the wealth and power of the patron. Royal miniatures also became more common, considered tokens of a monarch’s favor. Miniatures remained associated with the royal court until their disappearance in the late nineteenth century with the advent of the photograph.<sup>3</sup>

David urged Isabey to focus on the larger scale, historical paintings that he had popularized and that would find success with the Académie Française.<sup>4</sup> Besides rejecting the miniature as tied to the monarchy, David believed that there was no way to communicate an idea within the medium. François Pupil explains, “Proche de l’objet d’art, la miniature souffre d’une ambiguïté fondamentale parce que sa fonction de sujet pictural est concurrencée par sa qualité sentimentale de souvenir et de parure.”<sup>5</sup> Isabey temporarily obeyed, making significant contributions to David’s *grands tableaux*. The majority of the background and architectural details of *Les Amours de Pâris et Hélène*, for instance, was done by his hand.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Victoria & Albert Museum, “Portrait Miniatures” (n.d.), <http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/p/portrait-miniatures/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> E. Basily-Callimaki, *J.-B. Isabey. Sa vie. Son temps. 1767-1855.*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Pupil, “Eloge du modèle réduit,” 72.

<sup>6</sup> Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 21.

David further protected Isabey by allowing the young artist to accompany him to an important Jacobin meeting during the Terror to affirm his “patriotism.” Isabey’s sympathies were with the families he saw broken apart by the incessant turmoil raging in the country, Royalist or otherwise, but Isabey agreed to go out of loyalty to his master. It was a terrifying experience. He wore the costume “*de rigueur*” of the Jacobins: a long, full body garment with a red collar, the short jacket worn by the French working class, known as a *carmagnole*, and a cap with a tricolor ribbon. Upon entering, David repeated the password “le frère est avec moi.” They were handed a paper with something printed on it in return. Holding his head up high so as not to lose sight of his master, he took a seat designated by an usher. Nervous, Isabey watched as a member of the assembly approached the tribune and thundered, “My brothers, we have a traitor among us!” Trembling, Isabey felt as if all eyes were turned towards him. He did not breathe as he heard the name Drouet, a postmaster from Varennes, pronounced. In that moment, he later admitted, the love of tomorrow was elevated into a vice; he was overjoyed not to be in the place of his citizen-brother Drouet. Isabey made use of the confusion that followed to escape. The next day, he confided to David the fear that he had felt. “Ah! ah!” cried David, laughing, “you thought you were done for!”<sup>7</sup>

Isabey made another important connection at this time. An old washerwoman who lived nearby had come to look after Isabey, a little like a surrogate mother. One day, she learned from one of her clients, an editor, that he was planning a biography of all the members of the *Assemblée nationale*, and that he

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

hoped to find an artist to do a portrait of each to begin the biographies. The necessary introduction was made. Through this fortuitous encounter, Isabey made the acquaintance of all the important men of the Revolution. In particular, he created a lasting friendship with Monsieur de Talleyrand. This connection would prove vital in years to come.

During the early years of the Revolution, Isabey had little work, and when he did receive a commission, he was paid very little or sometimes not at all.<sup>8</sup> There was a new genre that arose out of the confusion of the times which Isabey called *portraits de consolation*. Mothers forced to leave the capital, or even the country, asked for a portrait of their children; husbands of their wives; many families were broken apart. Often Isabey saw the names of those he had just painted on the list of those recently executed. “Le dévouement délicat, le courage d’amour, m’avaient laissé un effaçable souvenir,” he wrote.<sup>9</sup>

But not all was desolate during the Revolution. Isabey met Jeanne-Laurice de Saliénne, whom he would marry in 1791. Their meeting was a little like something out of a novel. One day, Isabey saw a young woman leading an elderly, blind man. The gentle grace of the young woman impressed him. He followed the pair to the notary’s office, where a friend of his, Monsieur Baillot, happened to work. From Monsieur Baillot, Isabey learned that the blind man was her father, and that they lived at Meudon. He formed a friendship with Monsieur de Saliénne before being admitted to the house, where he was able to court de Saliénne’s daughter. During

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<sup>8</sup> de Mély, “Jean-Baptiste Isabey,” 406.

<sup>9</sup> Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 18.

this period, he painted a miniature of his fiancée.<sup>10</sup> In the portrait, she has just read a letter signed “Isabey.” Her charm as well as her beauty are evident in her playful smile, golden curls, and large, blue eyes. Not much is known about her, except that she was young, about eighteen years old at the time of their engagement, and that she possessed a certain manner full of grace that was remarkable, almost noble, perhaps from her ties to the aristocracy in the past.<sup>11</sup> Monsieur de Saliene objected to the marriage at first, Isabey being but a young artist with no money, and himself having very little to offer as a dowry for his daughter. But the poor, worried father was finally convinced by Isabey’s eloquent declaration of his love and future potential as an artist. The two were married the next year. They had two sons and two daughters together: Louis, Eugène, Alexandrine, and Louise. Their domestic life was apparently very happy. A certain Prussian musician, Johann Friedrich Reichardt, visited the atelier of Isabey and reported that they were a very complimentary couple. Jeanne-Laurice, whom he remarked had attractive, fair features, worked beside her dark-haired husband, painting a pretty landscape, while he adjusted some of the details of a miniature. Her gentle, sweet disposition and sincerity were a pleasant contrast to her husband’s appealing liveliness and witticisms.<sup>12</sup>

His marriage provided him with a source of stability during the Revolution. Jeanne-Laurice was gracious and supportive. She was also a talented artist herself.

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Baptiste Isabey, *Portrait de Mademoiselle de Saliene portant une robe décolletée*, miniature on ivory, 1790, Paris, musée du Louvre.

<sup>11</sup> Osmond, *Jean Baptiste Isabey: The Fortunate Painter. 1767-1855.*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

She received little training, as was typical in women's education at that time, but she could relate to and offer a valuable opinion concerning her husband's work. She remained, throughout her life, "la plus charmante des compagnes."<sup>13</sup>

While society was turned upside down, the artistic world also underwent a revolution. New ideas were promoted such as liberty, fraternity, and equality. These values impacted who could create art, what subjects could be explored, and who viewed it. One major change was that artists outside the Académie could exhibit in Paris *salons*.<sup>14</sup> In addition to an increase in the number of artists exhibiting their work, there was an increase in middle class viewers. No longer was art to be reserved for the Académie or for the elite alone. Art was displayed for all French citizens to see in the Louvre. This shift in the artist's audience changed the subjects he painted. A less formal, or less classical, approach was taken. For example, just before the Revolution, David made his political allegiances clear by painting classical subjects but with references to contemporary events. This is the case with works such as *The Oath of the Horatii*.<sup>15</sup> The subject and composition are classical, yet the story David chooses to depict embodies the Revolutionary values of fraternity and loyalty to the state. After 1789, an increasing number of his paintings depict modern events. For instance, *Death of Marat*<sup>16</sup> visualizes the death of the Revolutionary

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<sup>13</sup> de Mély, "Jean-Baptiste Isabey," 408.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Halliday, "Academic Outsiders at the Paris Salons of the Revolution: The Case of Drawings À La Manière Noire," *Oxford Art Journal* 21, no. 1 (June 1998): 74.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, oil on canvas, 1784, Paris, musée du Louvre.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*, oil on canvas, 1793, Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium.

politician.<sup>17</sup> Here are the beginnings of modernism in nineteenth century art. The less academic artwork appealed to a wider audience as well. Commercialism in art accompanied modernism. This was the basic framework for the artistic world of the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

These themes can be traced within Isabey's own artistic development. In 1794, Isabey opened his first exhibit in Madame Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's salon. Mme Vigée-Lebrun was herself a well-respected and successful artist. His exhibit featured *Le départ pour l'armée* and *Le retour du soldat*, two parts of a story celebrating family and loyalty to France.<sup>19</sup> Like David, the ideals reflect the French Revolution in a modern setting. The style was *à la manière noire*, a new trend developed first in England but made popular in France by Isabey. These works looked like informal sketches, but were in fact created so purposefully. Their simplicity appealed to a wider audience and were therefore more marketable.<sup>20</sup> They were also easier to reproduce. Isabey's first exhibit found immediate success.<sup>21</sup> Building upon his first achievement, Isabey continued working *à la manière noire* to create his most popular work, *La barque*.<sup>22</sup> This charming scene, which recalls the

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<sup>17</sup> Rider, "David and the Revolution."

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Baptiste Isabey, *Le départ pour l'armée et le retour du soldat*, 1798, Nancy, Musée lorrain.

<sup>20</sup> Halliday, "Academic Outsiders at the Paris Salons of the Revolution," 73.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Halliday, *Facing the Public: Portraiture in the Aftermath of the French Revolution* (Manchester University Press, 2000), 30-1.

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Baptiste Isabey, *La barque*, aquatint, 1804, Private Collection of Thiebault-Sisson.

*tableaux* of Reynolds and Gainsborough, shows himself and his family enjoying an afternoon on the lake.<sup>23</sup> Edmond Taigny wrote,

le tableau réussit-il par le contraste habile qu'il offrait avec les mœurs du jour. Peindre le calme de la vie de famille au sortir de la terreur, c'était aller au devant des secrètes aspirations de chacun, et faire luire au milieu de l'orage comme un rayon consolateur des affections légitimes et bénies.<sup>24</sup>

The success of *La barque* secured his position as an artist under the Directory. In addition to his exhibits, Isabey continued to paint miniatures. Some of his clients included Madame de Staël, Madame Récamier, and Madame Tallien.<sup>25</sup>

In Louis-Léopold Boilly's *Réunion d'artistes dans l'atelier d'Isabey*, painters, sculptors, architects, musicians, and actors gather in Isabey's "*atelier-salon*"<sup>26</sup> revealing the immense success and popularity Isabey would reach within a few years.<sup>27</sup> The significance of Boilly's work, however, lies in the fact that it depicts an artist who is successful in the marketplace.<sup>28</sup> Isabey's example is meant to reassure French society that the art world is still stable despite the political upheavals.<sup>29</sup> Artists are portrayed as men of culture, who belong to a comparatively high social

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<sup>23</sup> Taigny, J.-B. *Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> E. Basily-Callimaki, J.-B. *Isabey. Sa vie. Son temps. 1767-1855.*, 34.

<sup>26</sup> Blandine Chavanne et al., eds., *Jean-Baptiste Isabey, Portraitiste de l'Europe (1767-1855)* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2005), 39.

<sup>27</sup> Louis-Léopold Boilly, *Réunion d'artistes dans l'atelier d'Isabey*, 1798, Paris, musée du Louvre.

<sup>28</sup> E. Basily-Callimaki, J.-B. *Isabey. Sa vie. Son temps. 1767-1855.*, 34.

<sup>29</sup> François de Vergnette, "Réunion d'artistes dans l'atelier d'Isabey" (n.d.), <http://www.louvre.fr/oeuvre-notices/reunion-dartistes-dans-latelier-disabey>.

class.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, it establishes Isabey as an “artiste définitivement incontournable,” for the popularity and influence of his atelier. <sup>31</sup>

Isabey had managed to survive the French Revolution with his career intact, although not without a few major setbacks. Nevertheless, he found enough stability to provide for his family and to enjoy life. His increasing popularity made him much in demand in the fashionable salons of Paris; “son humeur égale, facile, accessible à la plaisanterie en faisait le favori...l n’y avait pas de fête complète sans lui.”<sup>32</sup> But could he survive the storm that would overtake France in the upcoming years under Napoléon? It would in fact become the zenith of his career, with the help of a very important friend: Joséphine de Beauharnais.

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<sup>30</sup> Halliday, *Facing the Public*, 140.

<sup>31</sup> de Mély, “Jean-Baptiste Isabey,” 414.

<sup>32</sup> E. Basily-Callimaki, *J.-B. Isabey. Sa vie. Son temps. 1767-1855.*, 38.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Napoléon

Isabey did not allow the Revolution to trouble his spirits for long. For the sake of his family, and because of the strength of his spirit, he endured throughout, continuing to work and to make connections. At a salon one evening, he became acquainted with Madame Jeanne Louise Henriette Campan. Once first lady of the bedchamber to Marie-Antoinette, and one of her most trusted friends, the now elderly woman was beginning a boarding school for girls. As it happened, she was also in desperate need of a drawing master. Isabey agreed to take the job, delighted to help his new friend. A new vitality resurfaced as a result of his new friendship. The added income was also an additional blessing during the hard times of the Revolution.

Isabey enjoyed his work as an instructor, especially as some of his students showed real progress. One young girl, Hortense de Beauharnais, possessed a great deal of talent. Youthful, charming, and feminine, Hortense completed many pretty country landscapes with Isabey's help. Her older brother, Eugène, who attended Monsieur Mac-Dermott's neighboring school, was well known for his wit and love of a good joke. He developed a friendship with Isabey, who at nearly thirty years old, was in a sense an older brother to him. Eugène and Hortense's father, a wealthy aristocrat, had been executed during the Terror. They now gathered their income from their mother's small fortune derived from Caribbean plantations.

Their mother was none other than Joséphine de Beauharnais. Born on the Caribbean island of Martinique, she was betrothed to the Vicomte de Beauharnais, Alexandre François Marie de Beauharnais. Removed from her home to Paris, she suffered fifteen years of an unhappy marriage before revolution broke out and took away all that she held dear, except her two beloved children. Now thirty-two, she was an insecure, coquettish woman, but with a generous heart, real empathy, and a charming, playful disposition. Her coquetry was perhaps a mask for her insecurity and desire to be loved after the failure of her first marriage. Isabey described her thus:

En dépit de quelques défauts qui tenaient à son éducation créole, à une mobilité d'impressions qui donnait prise à la malveillance, on l'aimait. Toujours, en elle, l'action d'un cœur aimant se faisait sentir; sa bienveillance était extrême, et donnait du charme à tous ses rapports. Certaine de l'admiration que provoquait sa grâce pleine d'abandon, elle paraissait ambitionner davantage l'estime des qualités de l'esprit.<sup>1</sup>

They soon developed a friendship, though their place in society was always acknowledged and preserved. Joséphine moved in a different circle. While they knew the same people, their relationships with them were not the same. Isabey was in demand at the salons for his wit, his talent, and his ability to stage various divertissements. However, though successful, he did not come from a titled family. Even after the Revolution, the upper class was predominantly made up of families whose history could be traced back centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> Taigny, J.-B. *Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 25.

Isabey's success had enabled him to buy a pretty white house on the Rue des Trois Frères, with a large English garden in front.<sup>2</sup> His family was prosperous. His children received a good education; he and Jeanne-Laurice were even able to follow the latest vogues in fashion. They hosted a "salon élégant qu'il avait su former dans son coquet hôtel" frequently.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Isabey enjoyed following the styles and trends of his day. A portrait of the artist hangs in the Musée du Louvre, painted by his close friend from their student days, François Gérard. About this time, Gérard completed the famous *Bélisarius*, a neo-classical masterpiece with a theme traditional to the Revolution, loyalty. Unfortunately, due to the difficult economic state, the piece did not sell. Isabey bought the work for a good price, and subsequently sold it when the right buyer eventually came along, giving the entire profit to Gérard. As a token of his appreciation, Gérard painted the famous portrait of his friend.<sup>4</sup> Isabey could easily be a fashion plate for 1795, wearing a tailored black jacket, simple cravat, double-breasted black waist coat, grey trousers, Hessian boots, and a conical black hat, a precursor to the top hat. His hair is cut short and styled like Beau Brummell. Isabey was frequently found with the most fashionable members of society; he had been particularly associated with the fashionable set, the *incroyables*, known for their outrageous styles under the Directory. What sets this piece apart is the domestic

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<sup>2</sup> E. Basily-Callimaki, *J.-B. Isabey. Sa vie. Son temps. 1767-1855.*, 41.

<sup>3</sup> de Mély, "Jean-Baptiste Isabey," 414.

<sup>4</sup> François Gérard, *Jean-Baptiste Isabey et sa fille Alexandrine*, oil on canvas, 1795, Paris, musée du Louvre.

setting. Isabey is at home, holding the hand of his four-year-old daughter, Alexandrine.

Increasingly, citizenship was defined in terms of paternal status.<sup>5</sup> Here Isabey is portrayed as a husband and father, about to participate in a family excursion. The theme of family, so often present in Isabey's works, reflects not only domestic happiness, but an attempt by the Republicans to rebuild French families as a central part of society. The family was a key element in the Republican definition of citizenship, an ideal that Napoléon continued to promote. In many ways, this portrait better reflects the ideal than the individual. One critic remarked that the portrait was taller than the individual, referring to Isabey's short stature.<sup>6</sup> The role in which Isabey is placed is significant, however, because he is exemplary as the ideal citizen. It refers to his status as an artist, as does Boilly's painting.

Within a very short period, a romance blossomed between Joséphine and a young, very successful Corsican soldier: Napoléon Buonaparte. The two were quickly married, much to the dissatisfaction of Hortense, who likely confided her worries to Isabey. Her new stepfather was rash, coarse, and violent. Eugène, who shared his sister's fears at first, was glad to have a paternal figure, though he was a little afraid of him. Isabey was a supportive friend throughout. He quickly became acquainted with Napoléon, and though fascinated by his dynamic and charismatic personality, always remained Joséphine's intimate, and never her husband's. Napoléon was a man who invoked more fear than friendship.

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<sup>5</sup> Halliday, *Facing the Public*, 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

Napoléon's rise to power was rapid. Before long, as Premier Consul, he was effectively ruling France. Though Isabey retained a rather fearful respect for the Premier Consul, Napoléon genuinely liked Isabey. He appreciated his humor, his taste, and his loyalty. Isabey was soon given many important commissions, raising his status as an artist and sealing his connection to the family.

By coincidence, Madame Lecoulteux, a friend of Isabey's, decided with her husband to sell their country estate, La Malmaison. An old building dating to the thirteenth century, it was in desperate need of repair. "Les pièces étaient à peine meublées, et les murs dans un état de délabrement déplorable," wrote Isabey in his journal.<sup>7</sup> However, he mentioned the news to Joséphine, who was looking for just such an escape from the increasing formality of her life in Paris. According to Isabey, Napoléon liked the idea as well, considering it a strategic move to relocate outside of Paris.<sup>8</sup> A team of architects and designers renovated the old chateau into a fashionable estate. Here the Bonaparte family lived for a few years before the dawn of the Empire.

Isabey's dearest memories date to this happy period. Napoléon apparently developed a taste for theatre and charades during his campaigns in Italy, and so joined the games at parties with pleasure. He especially liked to play tragic figures, "qui, selon lui, convenaient mieux à sa voix sonore, et à sa figure maigre et

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<sup>7</sup> Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

expressive.”<sup>9</sup> Their directors were Eugène and Hortense de Beauharnais, and they were frequently joined by actors such as Talma and Mademoiselle Mars.<sup>10</sup>

Isabey’s intimacy with the family allowed him a rare opportunity. Napoléon often took solitary walks in the park, hands behind his back, absorbed in thought. One day, Isabey happened to be there on the same path as the Premier Consul. “Il me fut aisé de saisir son expression pensive et la physionomie de sa tournure,” he wrote.<sup>11</sup> Unperceived, Isabey made the portrait and then showed it to the General.<sup>12</sup> The resemblance pleased him, and from that moment forth Napoléon chose to have his portrait done without posing.<sup>13</sup>

But this brief interlude did not last. Napoléon had greater ambitions. It was not long before the Senate declared him Napoléon I, *Emperor* of the French. To demonstrate his new role, Napoléon planned a grand ceremony for his coronation. Monsieur de Ségur, *grand maître des cérémonies*, consulted with Isabey on all matters concerning the costumes and pageantry.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Napoléon ordered that Isabey draw all the costume designs for the imperial family and monitor their execution.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Baptiste Isabey, *Bonaparte, 1er consul à Malmaison*, Black pencil enhanced with white, 1801, Paris, musée du Louvre.

<sup>13</sup> Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Unfortunately, Napoléon sometimes demanded the impossible. About a week before the coronation was to take place, Isabey met with Napoléon at his new symbolic home of St-Cloud, former home to the French monarchy. Napoléon requested that Isabey make seven large-scale drawings of each important moment in the ceremony within a period of two days. It was an unreasonable request. A commission of that kind would take at least a week, not to mention that Isabey still had much to do preparing the ceremonial costumes. This is where his remarkable creativity and adaptability comes into play. Instead, Isabey built a miniature replica of the ceremony with small dolls clothed in the magnificent designs intended for the imperial family. Each doll could be moved into a specific marked place to demonstrate the proceedings of the ceremony. It was a genial move, and Napoléon was delighted. Now he was no longer just Joséphine's portraitist; he had proved his worth as an artist in the Imperial court.

On December 2, 1804, the coronation at last took place. It was a glittering, golden affair wrought with heavy symbolism. Everything went according to plan, except for one small incident. Just before Joséphine was to descend from her throne to accompany her husband to the altar, she realized that she had lost her wedding ring. She signaled Eugène, who ran to her side. With the help of Isabey, they managed to find her ring under the cushion of the throne. The Emperor never knew of this small crisis, but the always superstitious Joséphine was profoundly impacted.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 30–31.

During the Empire, Isabey was at the zenith of his career. He was appointed “suprême ordonnateur des réjouissances publiques, et des fêtes particulières qui avaient lieu aux Tuileries.”<sup>17</sup> Two years later, at Strasbourg with the Empress Joséphine, the victory at Austerlitz was announced. At this time, Joséphine made Isabey *dessinateur du cabinet* and “peintre des cérémonies et des relations extérieures.”<sup>18</sup>

Napoléon established a new court with a new set of nobility for his Empire. It was modeled after the old regime, but contained a certain gaucheness that annoyed those who remembered the court of Louis XVI.<sup>19</sup> Hierarchy of dress was revived, along with the fashion of wearing wigs.<sup>20</sup> Court proceedings were conducted with excessive formality. “Le règne de l’étiquette allait arriver,” wrote Isabey. “Adieu les quadrilles animés, les charades divertissantes... le cérémonial était né!”<sup>21</sup> Joséphine did not care for the formality either, declaring that it “bored her.”<sup>22</sup>

The stifling atmosphere at court did not weaken Isabey’s ties to the imperial family. In fact, Isabey was made *dessinateur du sceau des titres*.<sup>23</sup> In this way his name was spread throughout Europe, as the nobility of the surrounding countries under French rule were encompassed into Napoléon’s Empire. He also painted

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Hicks, “Napoleon and His Court,” *Fondation Napoleon*, n.d., [http://www.napoleon.org/en/reading\\_room/articles/files/hicks\\_court.asp](http://www.napoleon.org/en/reading_room/articles/files/hicks_court.asp).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Taigny, J.-B. *Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Hicks, “Napoleon and His Court.”

<sup>23</sup> Taigny, J.-B. *Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 31.

many miniatures of the Emperor, the Empress, Joachim Murat, King of Naples; the Prince de Talleyrand, and Louis Bonaparte, Crown Prince of Holland. Most significant of all was a collaboration with David on an important portrait of Pope Pius VII.<sup>24</sup>

At this time, Isabey painted several historical paintings recording the events of the Empire. One example is the *Visite de Bonaparte à la manufacture des frères Sevène à Rouen*.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, the painting was damaged by overexposure to sunlight; however, what is still visible is evidence that it was a masterpiece. It represents Napoléon's benevolence to the workers of Normandy. It was a huge success.<sup>26</sup> A second example is *L'escalier du Louvre*. It displays the reasons why some considered him a "romantique mineur."<sup>27</sup> Though a history painting, it displays an interest in the Oriental. Furthermore, "il tenait à la fois du genre par le format ainsi que par l'esprit anecdotique et de l'histoire par le sujet."<sup>28</sup> Finally, there is *Napoléon remettant le roi de Rome à l'impératrice Marie-Louise*, in which can be viewed the repeated theme of family.<sup>29</sup> Many of Isabey's works choose to portray the Emperor simply, in the context of family, or in the case of *Bonaparte, 1er consul à*

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Baptiste Isabey, *Visite de Bonaparte à la manufacture des frères Sevène à Rouen*, drawing, 1802, Musée national de Versailles et des Trianons.

<sup>26</sup> Xavier Salmon, *Pomp and Power: French Drawings from Versailles* (London: Trustees of the Wallace Collection, 2006), 32.

<sup>27</sup> *La Peinture au Musée du Louvre. Ecole française. XIXe siècle (deuxième partie) / par Paul Jamot,...*; *Publiée sous la dir. de Jean Guiffrey,...* (l'illustration (Paris), n.d.), 61, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6432361b>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Baptiste Isabey, *Napoléon remettant le roi de Rome à l'impératrice Marie-Louise*, watercolor, 1811, Private Collection.

*Malmaison*, as a bourgeois gentleman.<sup>30</sup> The principles of empire and democracy that Napoléon projected to combine did not always complement each other, and as a result, a complex iconography developed around him. While many sought to portray him as a powerful or Romantic figure, Isabey was unique in depicting him as a father or as an ordinary man. Napoléon is portrayed as the ideal citizen. He is a patriarchal figure who supports Republican ideals for society. This image of the Emperor was immediately popular and contributed further to Isabey's success.

Three years passed peacefully, until, in 1809, tragedy struck. Hortense had been removed to Holland seven years earlier, against her will, to marry her step-uncle, Louis Bonaparte. It was a loveless marriage from the start. However, Hortense faced it bravely. Isabey wrote in his memoirs, "elle justifia pleinement le mot de Madame de Krudner: 'elle ressemble à la mer qui doit ses plus beaux effets aux orages.'"<sup>31</sup> The loss of his friend and patroness had been a blow. But more trouble was to come. Joséphine, nearly forty, was unable to produce a son and heir to Napoléon's Empire. It was not long before Napoléon decided to issue a divorce. His decision was announced quietly, at dinner; Joséphine's screams were heard from the next room by the Secretary. The following day, she was removed to Malmaison. Joséphine remained devoted to her husband until the end, agreeing to the divorce in "the interests of France" and "to offer him the greatest proof of

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<sup>30</sup> Gérard Gengembre, *Napoléon, l'empereur immortel* (Paris: Ed. du Chêne, 2002), 49.

<sup>31</sup> Taigny, J.-B. *Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 25.

attachment and devotion ever offered on this earth.”<sup>32</sup> Another friend, and his most important supporter and patroness, was no longer in favor.

Finally, Isabey suffered a personal loss, more keenly than any of these tragedies. His brother Louis, who came to visit him in Paris, died suddenly and unexpectedly from a heart disease. Isabey was distraught. He wrote on his tombstone, *à mon meilleur ami, mon frère*. Shortly afterwards, his eldest son Louis, named for his brother now past, was killed while fighting under Napoléon. He and Jeanne-Laurice grieved deeply. Everything seemed to be falling apart. Isabey, usually so good-humored in the face of adversity, was instead gloomy and introspective.

Fortunately, Isabey had a certain depth to his personality and driving determination that propelled him to face his troubles. An order quickly came from the Emperor to paint his engagement portrait for his new bride, the Austrian princess Marie-Louise von Hapsburg-Lothringen. Always committed to his family, Isabey decided to continue working for the Emperor, despite the divorce. Napoléon still admired his talent, and he held nothing against Isabey as Joséphine’s particular friend. Isabey visited Malmaison, scene of past happy times, to console his friend. His work and his family helped him to regain his old humor and happiness.

Marie-Louise arrived at the French court in 1810. Demanding and anxious in her new role as Empress, she took an instant liking to Isabey. Ever charming, the new Empress demanded frequent lessons from him, absorbing most of his time. The

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<sup>32</sup> “Napoleon and Josephine: Crisis and Divorce” (Public Broadcasting Service, 2013), [http://www.pbs.org/empires/napoleon/n\\_josephine/crisis/page\\_1.html](http://www.pbs.org/empires/napoleon/n_josephine/crisis/page_1.html).

following year he was invited to Vienna, where he was asked to paint the Empress and her family.

He met first with the Emperor Francis II, who gave him a sincere welcome free from the formulaic etiquette so common among the royal courts. The Emperor was a simple man, who did not care for the superficial splendors of court life. After having completed his portrait and his children's, Isabey met with Prince Charles. The Prince was a famous war hero, only recently defeated by Napoléon. Isabey was prepared to meet a serious man, full of martial grandeur. The Prince, however, was nothing like this. He was gentle and modest, chatting about his tulip garden like a bourgeois gentleman. He could not reconcile the two opposing aspects of this man. Then, from just outside the windows the music of a military march could be heard. The Prince stood up, his height seeming to increase, and his eyes became brilliant, as if he could see the enemy and the cannons before him. "Je compris l'homme et toute la difficulté d'atteindre à la hauteur de mon sujet," he wrote. "Cependant, je pris un si vif intérêt à mon modèle que le résultat fit honneur à mon pinceau."<sup>33</sup> Besides these excellent portraits, Isabey met with the Prince de Ligne, the Prince d'Esterhazy, and the Prince de Metternich.<sup>34</sup> He painted their portraits as well, making an important connection with these men who would soon play an important role in European politics.

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<sup>33</sup> Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 33.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

In 1813, Isabey was appointed *décorateur de l'Opéra*.<sup>35</sup> Because of his training in set decoration in Nancy, and because of his talent for staging, Isabey was the perfect choice. Unfortunately, he was only able to enjoy this work for a year, before Napoléon's final defeat at the Battle of Nations. Politically, things had begun to go wrong for Napoléon, and after his failed campaign in Russia, other European armies sensed their chance. On April 4, Napoléon agreed to abdicate in the Treaty of Fontainebleau. The next month Isabey was summoned to appear before the Empress Marie-Louise. Everything spoke of an eminent departure: carriages cluttered the streets, packages and luggage were everywhere. Isabey describes his last meeting with the Empress thus:

Introduit à Sa Majesté, je m'écriai plein d'émotion: « Vous nous quittez, madame! au moment même où nous venons de prêter serment à la régente, au roi de Rome! Ecoutez la voix du peuple; elle vous supplie de rester. – Je ne le puis, répondit-elle avec tristesse; l'Empereur commande que je parte. » Sa résolution était prise. Je compris tout. Me tendant la main, elle me remit son portefeuille sur lequel elle avait écrit: *De la part d'une écolière qui conservera toujours le souvenir de son bon maître.* »<sup>36</sup>

Having said goodbye to the Empress, it was now time to say goodbye to the Emperor. He took the long voyage to Fontainebleau, despite the difficulties that arose travelling there. It was a painful meeting. In Isabey's words:

Sa Majesté se promenait de long en large. M'apercevant, l'Empereur fit quelque quelques pas à ma rencontre. L'émotion m'oppressait; ne pouvant prononcer un seul mot, tant mon cœur était plein, je m'agenouillai en m'emparant de sa main: « Allons, dit Napoléon avec bonté en me relevant, c'est fini pour moi; mais vous, continua-t-il avec une nuance d'amertume, vous devez à votre famille la continuation de vos travaux. Prenez courage, Isabey; mes successeurs vous rechercheront... »<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 35.

Again, an allusion is made to Isabey's family, suggesting that this was an integral part of his life. For Isabey, family was his main system of support. He believed in the importance of the family structure in French society that the Republic and the Empire had promoted. Noteworthy is Napoléon's kindness to the artist in these last moments. It is further evidence of the respect that he felt towards Isabey regarding his work and his character. With the Emperor's blessing, Isabey began to try to find a new place to fit in within the artistic society – one that existed in the fragmented states of the fallen Empire, with no stable governments or royal courts to provide patronage.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Congress of Vienna

Just as Joséphine de Beauharnais had been a friend to Isabey during the Napoleonic period, the Prince de Talleyrand would be a powerful friend in the years to come. The artist had made the acquaintance of this formidable politician many years ago, during the turbulent and trying times of the Revolution. Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, Prince de Bénévent, had been a part of each of France's governments since that period. Perhaps Isabey recognized in this man the same clever tactfulness and ability to enjoy life that had ensured his own success. If anyone could help Isabey during the chaos that followed Napoléon's defeat, it was Talleyrand.

In fact, Talleyrand was strategizing for one of the most significant events in nineteenth-century Europe: the Congress of Vienna. Isabey wisely decided to pay him a visit. Talleyrand not only revealed his plans to Isabey, but invited him to join a collection of Europe's most important families and politicians as the official painter of the Congress.<sup>1</sup> The politician was pleased to do him this favor, but ultimately it was done because he recognized there could be no better choice. Not only was Isabey already familiar with the court at Vienna, having visited the previous year with the former Empress Marie-Louise, but he was capable both of charming the

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Garrigoux, "Talleyrand : [exposition], Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, 1965...", *Gallica*, 76, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5844467t>.

diverse personages who ruled Europe, and of painting them truthfully, yet appealingly.<sup>2</sup> Once again his excellent connections, personal charm, and signature style had saved him from suffering the same fall from grace as his previous patron. It was a pattern that would repeat itself again during his lifetime.

Isabey's signature style is unique. He is best known for his miniatures of fashionable women adorned by garlands of roses and *voiles aériennes*. He used soft colors to create a poetic, romantic look. Most women loved his style: they felt pretty and feminine when painted by him. Though posed and romantically adorned, Isabey nevertheless captures a few distinct features to make the subject of the painting unmistakable.

Not everyone admired his style, however. The Baronne du Montet was critical of the 1814 exhibit she visited in Paris. She wrote, "Isabey a pris une méthode sûre pour avoir la vogue: il flatte excessivement. Il n'y a pas de femme même laide, qui peinte par lui, ne paraisse jolie et aérienne comme une sylphide... il travaille pour son époque, et non pour la postérité."<sup>3</sup> The Baronne's criticisms are very valuable, as they contribute greatly to efforts to analyze Isabey's art and artistic reputation in the context of his own society. In light of the Baronne's personal review, Isabey appears to have produced more commercial art than anything of a profound truth or observation. If this is the case, his success is largely due to a superb ability to read public demand for art, implying a talent for observation. His

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>3</sup> Chavanne et al., *Jean-Baptiste Isabey, Portraitiste de l'Europe (1767-1855)*, 111.

miniatures, it can be said, are ruled more by marketability than by profound truths, which is only logical given the purpose of the medium.

However, his personal sketches reveal an artist with a profound sense of character colored by a clever sense of humor. Sketches of friends and family show such incredible individual detail that they appear alive on the page. His caricatures are a second example of this facet of his art. They usually mock a social custom: the wigs worn under the monarchy, or the outrageous fashions of his friends, the *incroyables*. Occasionally they are political, though these he kept hidden for fear of discovery, and were drawn mostly later in life. All of these personal sketches reveal an artist with exceptional observational skills and artistic capability. So while his miniatures may be criticized as being merely pretty or charming, the more profound side of the artist thrived, even if not well known outside his immediate circle, for the sake of his family and for his own well-being.

Isabey arrived in Vienna in the cold fall months of 1814. He chose a decent apartment on the banks of the Danube River in the fashionable quarter of Prater. The following day after his arrival, the police sent a squad to clear the roads around his apartment, so greatly did they fear the traffic would be from all the monarchs and politicians that would want their picture painted by Isabey. He was immediately plunged into a massive amount of work brought on by practically the entire Viennese court demanding a miniature from him. He gave orders to his valet, an old soldier, not to be disturbed.

One morning, a stranger presented himself. Following orders, his valet tried to persuade the gentleman that the artist would see no one. However, upon hearing

the sound of the gentleman's voice, Isabey rushed to the door. It was the Prince Eugène de Beauharnais. They embraced, greeting one another enthusiastically. "How happy I am to see you, my dear friend!" laughed the Prince. "How shaking the hand of my friend from the days of my youth makes me feel I am back in beautiful France! We are much older now," he added, grinning. "Do you remember those happy gatherings at the hôtel de Salm? How we danced! And the ball you gave at the Louvre, when my dear sister Hortense was married! And Malmaison! And the coronation!" Here the young man paused. "How much these memories remind me of the Emperor," he said sadly. "I always think of him, even now. I still live in the shadow of his grandeur. It is my protection, even now." Isabey saw the tears in his eyes. "But now," he said, his face brightening, "what are your plans? How shall we introduce you to Viennese society? This time, *I* will be your master of ceremonies. Tomorrow, we visit the emperor of Russia."<sup>4</sup>

This memoir is a strong example of how close those linked directly to the Empire remained. Isabey's own feelings no doubt reflected those of the young Prince Eugène. Napoléon and, especially, the court at Malmaison, remained fixed in their memories.

Though incredibly grateful to the Prince for his desire to be his patron in Vienna, he in fact needed no help succeeding in Viennese society. A contest soon developed between the monarchs of Europe to see who could claim his attendance at each social event. He was very popular, and as official painter of the Congress, everyone wanted the distinction of being his patron. He became very well

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<sup>4</sup> Taigny, J.-B. *Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 38.

acquainted with Francis II of Austria, Alexander I of Russia, and Frederick William III of Prussia.<sup>5</sup> Isabey certainly earned the nickname, “portraitiste de l’Europe.”<sup>6</sup>

Isabey also prepared to submit his first draft of the Congress at this time. Every detail had to be pre-approved. There were many laws of etiquette and ceremony involved. For example, during a sitting, how to properly acknowledge the rank of the sitter, especially when two or more monarchs were together, which was very frequent, as Isabey’s studio became a spot for secret alliances and meetings. The composition of the painting proved to be the most challenging. Several men had to be grouped in a very small space, with similar attitudes, yet preserving the character and rank of the diplomats, and above all avoiding sheer monotony. At last he decided to place them in the act of friendly conversation, after a meeting had finished. This can likely be interpreted as Isabey’s dislike for all things strictly ceremonial. His initial sketches were approved, and he continued to work with few alterations.

The exception came in the fact that, well into the convention, Robert Stewart, Lord Castlereagh, was replaced by Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington. Incidentally, Isabey and the Duke of Wellington had been on unfriendly terms in the past. This is perhaps the only well-known instance where Isabey experienced trouble with a client. Apparently, Wellington had visited Isabey’s studio in Paris immediately after Napoléon’s defeat to have his portrait done. According to Isabey, he behaved “avec un sans-*façon* tout britannique,” which one can only guess

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>6</sup> Chavanne et al., *Jean-Baptiste Isabey, Portraitiste de l’Europe (1767-1855)*, 76.

involved some sly remark about the recent turn of events.<sup>7</sup> Isabey refused to paint the Duke of Wellington's portrait. Later, at an event hosted by the Spanish Marquesa de Santa-Cruz, who was so famously painted by Francisco de Goya, they met again. The Duke sensed that his conduct had been tactless and apologized. Isabey finally agreed to paint the famous General. When they met next in Vienna, Wellington was full of thoughtfulness for the painter. Isabey thanked him by giving the following compliment: when asked by Wellington why he was painted in profile, he answered, because it bore a remarkable resemblance to Henri IV. Wellington, delighted, repeated this story to the Prince de Metternich, who replied that Isabey was a good enough diplomat to be a member of the Congress.<sup>8</sup>

An additional difficulty Isabey experienced with a client at the Congress resulted in a further opportunity for Isabey to display his inventiveness. The Baron d'Humboldt declared that his features were so unattractive that he should never be painted. Moreover, he refused to sit for the painter. Isabey tried to persuade the Baron, but to no avail. Finally he asked, would the Baron accept an invitation to visit him, merely for the sake of conversation? The Baron agreed. The next day, Isabey showed him the preliminaries of his portrait. "How can this be?" asked the shocked Baron. It happened that during their conversation, Isabey had studied his features and his character.<sup>9</sup> His skill had enabled him to create an attractive yet honest portrait of the Baron d'Humboldt. For Isabey, it seemed, nothing was impossible.

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<sup>7</sup> Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> de Mély, "Jean-Baptiste Isabey," 407.

Besides his role as an artist, Isabey almost immediately resumed his place as organizer of grand balls and spectacles. All of Europe's most beautiful princesses were actresses in his plays, and all of the emperors and kings his audiences. Isabey and the Prince Eugène would even, at times, dare to dream of those happy times at Malmaison.

An interesting anecdote from Isabey's journal describes the famous dinners given by the congressmen. They were well-known for their extravagance. These dinners offered the perfect distraction for the politicians after a long, arduous day discussing the re-management of Europe. All were self-professed gourmets, the Prince de Talleyrand actually employing the culinary star Marie-Antoine Carême, whose exquisite yet refined architectural style remains legendary in the French tradition of *la grande cuisine*. Often, these dinners became a battlefield for discussing the superior qualities of one's national cuisine. On this particular occasion, Talleyrand was giving the dinner, and the subject was cheese. Isabey recalls:

L'Angleterre réclama la priorité pour le stilton, le chester, etc. Une voix suppliante, qui devait être italienne, prononça tout bas le nom de *strachino*; mais l'arrogante Albion ne cédait pas: elle allait triompher, quand on annonça un courier de France. – Qu'apporte-t-il? des dépêches importantes? Bien mieux: un fromage de Brie. – Le déboîter, le chapeler fut l'affaire d'un instant. Et le congrès décida, à la majorité des voix, que la France était la terre promise des fromages.<sup>10</sup>

His theatrical and comical account of this story sheds some interesting light on what these men were like when they were not discussing politics. Proud and nationalistic,

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<sup>10</sup> Taigny, J.-B. *Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 39–40.

brilliant, eloquent, and full of wit; one can begin to picture what the Congress was really like.

The months passed, until Isabey began to wish he was home again. The Congress was coming to an end. He made preparations to leave with the Russian Empress Elizabeth Louise, who would take him as far as Baden, her home state. Before he left, however, he attended the ballet *Nina*, starring Émilie Bigottini, who had once modeled for him.<sup>11</sup> During the show, some shocking news suddenly spread throughout the theatre: Napoléon had landed in Cannes! Isabey ran to the palace to verify the news, and heard from the ex-Empress Marie-Louise that it was indeed true. He bid goodbye to his many friends and patrons, who were very sorry to see him go. Talleyrand encouraged him to leave as soon as possible, and did not seem at all surprised. The Prince de Ligne wrote a few verses on his behalf. The Prince de Metternich, in his farewell letter, wrote these kind lines: “Je regrette en vous l’artiste créateur, l’homme aimable: comme tel, vous êtes citoyen de tous les pays; mes vœux vous accompagnent.”<sup>12</sup> With this, Isabey left the next morning for Paris.

Just as Joséphine had protected Isabey under the Empire, Talleyrand had rescued him from suffering the disgrace that would normally have befallen a servant of the Emperor. Only the future could tell how long Napoléon’s second rise to power would last.

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<sup>11</sup> Chavanne et al., *Jean-Baptiste Isabey, Portraitiste de l’Europe (1767-1855)*, 81.

<sup>12</sup> Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 41.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Restoration

In the past, Isabey relied on a strong patron to help him during the transition from one government to the next. However, after Napoléon's final fall from power, Isabey found himself friendless. Talleyrand had administered the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, but with limits placed on the monarch's power. Nevertheless, the proud and unpopular Louis XVIII struggled with the concept of a constitutional monarchy. Problems with class that originated before the Revolution were brought back to the forefront as a result. Posters expressing discontent with Louis' monarchy covered the walls of Paris. Shop windows displayed often crude drawings ridiculing the royal family. The French police, eager to stop the circulation of such material, searched homes for anti-Restoration propaganda. Isabey, who was rumored to be a great caricaturist and who had such strong ties to the Imperial family, was a prime suspect.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, at the Salon of 1817, Isabey presented a controversial tableau in which could be read political criticisms, as well as some miniatures of the Imperial family. The Salon of 1814, the first held since the coronation of Louis XVI, marked a thematic shift that continued into the Salon of 1817. Monarchs from the past, especially the popular Henri IV, were a common theme further exaggerated by art critic Charles Landon to make it appear as though the artistic community

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 42.

overwhelmingly supported the monarchy.<sup>2</sup> It was in this context that Isabey presented *The Congress of Vienna* and Imperial portraits.

In response, the police raided his home, destroying an unfinished portrait of Napoléon's son and confiscating several miniatures that dated to the Empire.<sup>3</sup> From this point, he appeared once before Louis XVIII for a miniature due to his excellent reputation as an artist, but was otherwise banned from the Tuileries and from royal patronage.<sup>4</sup> For the first time since Isabey had begun his professional career in Paris, he could find no allies. He would have to sustain himself through his established reputation and reach out to circles outside of France.

Isabey decided to make a trip to London. Most importantly, he wanted to escape the censure of the French government. He observed the irony in the situation when he remarked, "si les régimes avaient souvent changé, aux Tuileries, j'avais toujours rencontré les représentants de mêmes familles."<sup>5</sup> But several French artists besides Isabey were working in London for these and other reasons. Some, like his former master David, were sent into exile. Others went freely to participate in the new "anglophile" trend which lasted throughout the nineteenth century. Isabey may have gone for a variety of these reasons.

Isabey arrived in London in the spring of 1820, where he stayed with the Marquis d'Osmond, who was also visiting from Paris. The Marquis, as an important

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<sup>2</sup> Debra Schrishuhn, "Deja Vu: Charles Landon's Critique of the 1814 Paris Salon," *Selected Papers/the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1850* (January 1, 2000): 178.

<sup>3</sup> Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Chavanne et al., *Jean-Baptiste Isabey, Portraitiste de l'Europe (1767-1855)*, 82.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

military officer, had attended the Congress of Vienna with Isabey, and the Marquise d'Osmond was frequently a part of Isabey's social circle. Besides work commissioned by the Osmond family, Isabey painted for the Duke of Wellington, who ironically had become a great friend of his. Wellington recommended him to the Seymour family, who commissioned many miniatures.

Unfortunately, the tense atmosphere of the English court limited his commissions to these three families. George IV, who had separated from his wife Caroline in 1796, was attempting to pass an unpopular bill which would ensure their divorce. The humiliated Caroline, who had won popular sympathy, refused to cooperate.<sup>6</sup> During this uneasy time, the English aristocracy wisely remained at home in their country estates. With such limited access to patronage, Isabey reverted to selling pieces from the time of Napoléon and sketches from the Congress of Vienna, a few of which he sold to George IV, before returning home to Paris with little profit.

Upon his return, Isabey decided to apply for an audience with Louis XVIII. Despite a personal dislike of the king, Isabey relied on royal patronage to sustain his career. He was well-received. The wealth of the restored aristocracy created a supportive environment for patronage of the arts. Rich families who had fled France during the Revolution filled the court. With Louis XVIII's favor, Isabey was able to return to a steady pace of work.

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<sup>6</sup> H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), accessed April 27, 2014, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/templates/article.jsp?articleid=10541#King1820andtheproblemofQueenCaroline>.

In the following years, Isabey took advantage of his security to travel. As a student he had never been able to join David in Rome; now, as a successful artist, he was able to develop a genre which had always fascinated him. Isabey had experimented with landscapes as a student but never had the opportunity to pursue the subject. In 1822, he visited Rome, where he studied classical sculptures and sketched the Italian landscape. The variety of the points of view in his landscapes, the attention to architectural detail, and above all his skillful treatment of light reveal the talent of the artist, even to the same extent as do his portraits.<sup>7</sup>

Isabey's fascination with landscape and new ways of rendering light can be dated back to the age of the Empire.<sup>8</sup> A sketch of Isabey's garden dates to this period, as well as two sketches of Nancy. Undated are several landscapes which study light at different times of day or night, and during different seasons. They can be linked to the Romantic trend to explore landscape as an expression of nationalism, although in Isabey's case, his interest appears to be more focused on aesthetics than the larger symbolism. In 1822 Isabey published a collection of thirty drawings in *Voyage d'Italie*.<sup>9</sup> All his landscapes are worthy of merit, but none are as charming as those featuring French scenes in Normandy and Lorraine. This facet of his work reflects his sensibility, versatility, and no doubt from his frequent attendance at the Paris salons a knowledge of contemporary artistic trends.

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<sup>7</sup> Chavanne et al., *Jean-Baptiste Isabey, Portraitiste de l'Europe (1767-1855)*, 96.

<sup>8</sup> Marie-Claude Chaudonneret and Pierre Miquel, "Isabey," *Grove Art Online* (n.d.).

<sup>9</sup> Chavanne et al., *Jean-Baptiste Isabey, Portraitiste de l'Europe (1767-1855)*, 96.

In years to come, Isabey would travel again to Normandy to study landscape, but accompanied by his son, Eugène. Eugène Isabey was born in 1803, and after the death of his older brother, a soldier in Napoléon's army, became his father's only son. He studied art, like his father, but proved to have a greater talent for landscapes, especially marine landscapes, than for portraiture. Eugène became a respected artist in his own right. His work explicitly identifies with Romantic and Impressionist trends, unlike his father. Monsieur Isabey remained a portraitist with a distinct and original style, set apart from prevailing trends.<sup>10</sup>

Father and son were very different. They were from different generations, with opposing visions of the world. As an adolescent, Eugène wanted to become a soldier or a sailor.<sup>11</sup> His father, however, hoped he would become a painter, and gave him lessons, much like his own father had done for him. Furthermore, the young Eugène developed a reputation as a squanderer. The Isabey family lived on the fashionable Rue de Choiseul, along with the famous romanticists Charles Nodier, the Baron Isidore Justin Séverin Taylor, and Alphonse de Cailleux.<sup>12</sup> In 1820 Eugène, who had become a part of their circle, joined them in Normandy, without informing his father. As they wrote *Voyages pittoresques dans l'ancienne France*, he sketched the Normandy coast.<sup>13</sup> His drawings so impressed his friends that they urged him

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<sup>10</sup> Halliday, *Facing the Public*, 65–6.

<sup>11</sup> Christophe Leribault, *Eugène Isabey* (Paris: Le Passage Editions, 2012), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Salomon, *Charles Nodier et le groupe romantique : d'après des documents inédits* (Perrin (Paris), 1908), 105, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k61933w>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 105–6.

relentlessly to pursue an artistic career.<sup>14</sup> His first works found immediate success, with the help of his father, who was overjoyed to learn that his son had not only committed to a profession but to the same one as himself, and due to Eugène's innate giftedness.

An examination of their portraits depicting each other illustrates their relationship well. There is a sketch of Eugène by his father, made in 1821, which fondly depicts a young man with kind eyes and an artistic sensibility.<sup>15</sup> In the corner of the paper is the title: *Louis-Gabriel Eugène Isabey, Mon fils, mon élève, mon ami*.<sup>16</sup> From the same period, there is a portrait of Isabey by Eugène.<sup>17</sup> It is a watercolor painting of an old man, paper and brush in hand, who meets the eyes of the viewer with a commanding gaze. Their relationship was affectionate, despite their frequent opposition, and they could relate to each other and support each other as artists.

Little is known of Isabey's daughters, except that they married well. Alexandrine married the famous set designer Pierre-Luc-Charles Cicéri, and Louise married a respected artist. There is a portrait of Alexandrine by Louis-André Gabriel Bouchet, which reveals little about her except that she had the same dark hair and

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<sup>14</sup> Leribault, *Eugène Isabey*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Baptiste Isabey, *Portrait de Louis-Gabriel Eugène Isabey (1803-1886)*, drawing, 1820, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

<sup>16</sup> Chavanne et al., *Jean-Baptiste Isabey, Portraitiste de l'Europe (1767-1855)*, 155.

<sup>17</sup> Eugène Isabey, *Portrait de Jean-Baptiste Isabey dessinant debout*, watercolor drawing, n.d., Paris, musée du Louvre.

eyes as her father.<sup>18</sup> It is likely that Isabey was an affectionate, but absent father, and that his relationship with his daughters was unlike that with his son.

Louis XVIII was very soon succeeded by his brother Charles, previously the Comte d'Artois, who remembered "le petit peintre du court" from the days of Marie-Antoinette. Charles X, who took his absolutist beliefs even further than his brother, made every effort to establish the monarchy as it was before the Revolution. As part of this effort, Isabey was re-appointed "dessinateur de chambre." He was also made an officer of the Legion of Honor.<sup>19</sup>

There is a portrait of Isabey by the artist Émile Armand, in which he is sixty years old. He is still well-dressed, wearing a fur coat and the medallion of the Legion of Honor. It proves that he was still wealthy and successful even at this point.<sup>20</sup>

However, Charles remained in power for only six years. Just before revolution began to break out, Madame Isabey suddenly became ill, and died in 1829. Isabey was deeply grieved. He sold his house on the Rue des Trois Frères, the scene of so many triumphs, despite his children's protests, and moved into a small apartment near the Louvre. Within half a year, he remarried a young woman, Rose de Maistre.<sup>21</sup> Her portrait reveals a pretty woman, but with none of the charm of Madame Jeanne-Laurice Isabey. Isabey may have been unable to cope with the loneliness of living without his first wife. His second wife was kind and a good

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<sup>18</sup> Louis Andre Gabriel Bouchet, *Alexandrine Isabey (1791-1871), Madame Charles Ciceri*, oil on canvas, n.d.

<sup>19</sup> Taigny, J.-B. *Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> A. Crépin-Leblond, ed., "Musée de Nancy. Catalogue Descriptif et Annoté : Tableaux Dessins,..." , n.d., 220, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64242383>.

<sup>21</sup> Osmond, *Jean Baptiste Isabey: The Fortunate Painter. 1767-1855.*, 178-9.

companion for his remaining years, even if he was never able to forget Jeanne-Laurice. *La barque*, that charming picture of his family in days past that is perhaps his greatest work, had belonged to her. She kept it all her life.

Isabey continued to work for Louis Philippe after the Revolution of 1830. He still received commissions until 1840, when he decided to retire from painting. He continued to live in his apartment near the Louvre until he died, in 1855. Napoléon III, son of his former student and friend, Hortense de Beauharnais, promised to protect his family. A year before Isabey died, he made him a commander of the Legion of Honor and became an official patron to his son. Eighty-eight at the time of his death, he was “vital, interested, and interesting to the end.”<sup>22</sup>

Though life after the fall of Napoléon had been difficult, Isabey relied on his reputation as an artist to remain successful. He had been ever charming, and versatile in his ability to please both a patron and the public. With the strong support of his family, he himself chose when to put down the brush, and no one else.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 207.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Conclusion

Despite six different governments in France, Jean-Baptiste Isabey remained a successful artist. His reputation as an artist only grew with time, providing a solid base for his career. An ability to win patronage, his artistic versatility, and family support made this possible.

It is evident that Isabey possessed excellent personal skills. He was charming and popular at the French court, yet tactful. His talents allowed him to form many important connections, which good fortune allowed to be the most prosperous patrons of the era. For even Isabey, clever as he was, could not have predicted Joséphine de Beauharnais' rapid rise to power, or the role that the Prince de Talleyrand would play on the international stage. In spite of the growing role of the public audience after the Revolution, wealthy patrons remained the key factor to an artist's success.

Patronage was a universal strategy employed by artists for centuries; Isabey was unique in that he could meet the demands of any patron, for his creativity and versatility were endless. This is most perfectly illustrated by Isabey's miniature model of the Imperial coronation ceremony, created in response to Napoléon's impossible demand. It was both creative and efficient. Furthermore, he was successful in several different genres: miniatures, historical paintings, set and

costume design, and landscapes. This increased his opportunities when available artistic work was limited.

Finally, strong family support ensured his success. His father had been the first one to encourage him to pursue painting, and after his death, inspiration to persevere. His close relationship with his mother and brother were reflected within his own family. Though by nature possessing the ability to focus and dedicate himself to his work, traits reinforced by his brief state of poverty as a student during the Revolution, there were times when only the encouragement of his wife and children kept him positive and artistically active. Significantly, his most popular and arguably most successful work, *La barque*, depicts his family enjoying the beautiful French landscape. Even Napoléon had urged Isabey to continue in his work after his defeat, for the sake of his family. He recognized the importance of the family structure.

These are the factors that, when combined, allowed Isabey to become the “portraitiste de l’Europe.” Colin Lemoine posed the question, “Qui est vraiment Jean-Baptiste Isabey?”<sup>1</sup> I believe that these same motifs may answer his question. Jean-Baptiste Isabey was a charming member of the fashionable Paris salons, creative, inventive, theatrical, and witty. He was a husband and a father, a brother and a son. And he was an artist who recorded everything he saw, and “l’historien le plus éloquent de ces modèles.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Lemoine, “Qui est vraiment Jean-Baptiste Isabey? (French),” *L’Oeil*, no. 574 (November 2005): 66.

<sup>2</sup> Taigny, *J.-B. Isabey: Sa vie et ses œuvres*, 17.

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