

Analysis: Jean Clouet's *Portrait de François 1^{er}*

[image]

Jean Clouet, Portrait de François 1^{er}, roi de France (c. 1530), Paris, Musée du Louvre, INV 3256, 96 cm x 74 cm, oil on wood (oak).

This portrait of François 1^{er}, painted by court artist Jean Clouet, depicts the monarch at the height of his reign and serves as a display of copious wealth and opulence. Completed against a backdrop of economic prosperity and territorial supremacy, this painting ties together several visual markers of power and affluence to create an imposing portrait.

A subdued background of dark red damask allows François' clothing to dominate the painting. His loose cloak – which Clouet illuminates to give the impression of silk – fills the frame and continues beyond its boundaries, accentuating his figure and giving him a powerful presence. Underneath his cloak is a tight doublet, featuring slits through which copious amounts of fabric are pulled. The abundance of fabric in François' clothing not only increases his physical presence but is also indicative of his power and wealth.

The Renaissance period saw a “desire for novelty and greater ornamentation” (Ashelford, 1983, p. 12); a development which is demonstrated in this portrait through the many embroidered patterns adorning François' doublet, which also features lacing at the neckline and wrists. These details serve to complete the garment, while also acting as additional indicators of wealth and taste. François' hat, adorned with gemstones and feathers, adds further visual interest to his elaborate outfit.

Colour also plays an important role in this display of opulence and prosperity. As stated by Jones (2000, p. 43), gold was not only expensive to produce in the form of a garment but was also expensive to paint. Therefore, the use of gold as the dominant colour in this painting not only serves as an additional signifier of François' wealth, acting as an example of “hierarchy through colour” (Jones, 2000, p. 44), but also marks out the portrait itself as a status symbol. Given François' position as a patron of the arts, the expense involved in producing this painting would have underlined his enthusiasm for, and commitment to, the art that he commissioned and the artists that he supported.

Other prominent colours in this painting include the dark red of the damask background, emblazoned with courtly motifs, and the dark green of the piece of silk which covers the table or desk at which François is seated. Although these expensive materials serve as secondary indicators of wealth and status, they are dimly illuminated so as not to draw attention away from François and his opulent attire.

It is on this silk-covered surface that we see François' left hand resting on the handle of his sword, indicating his readiness to go to battle at any given moment, while the chain of office which hangs around his neck also hints towards his military credentials. These details are particularly relevant when considering the prosperity and influence which France enjoyed in the early 16th century, due in part to the large amounts of territory which it had acquired in the preceding decades. When viewed in this context, this portrait serves not only to signify the wealth and power of François 1^{er}, but also of early 16th-century France.

Bibliography

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