

Study on Ingres Art Theory

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Received: 6 January 2026; Accepted: 21 January 2026; Published: 1 March 2026

Abstract:

This paper examines the artistic philosophy of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, the leading figure of French Neoclassicism. His artistic legacy encompasses numerous masterpieces, and his artistic principles hold significant importance, both embodying the distinctive characteristics of his painting style and exerting a profound influence on subsequent generations. The paper first explores the factors shaping Ingres's artistic philosophy. Subsequently, drawing upon Ingres's *Treatise on Art*, it distils his four core tenets: adherence to classical aesthetic principles; deriving aesthetic inspiration from objective nature; the primacy of drawing as the true art; and the necessity for colour to harmonise with drawing. By examining specific works, it analyses how these principles manifest in Ingres's artistic practice. Finally, the paper explores the profound influence of Ingres's artistic philosophy on the development of art in subsequent generations.

Keywords:

Ingres, Art Theory, Classicism

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Significance

The nineteenth century represented not merely a pivotal historical transition for Europe, but also an exceptionally significant artistic epoch. In France particularly, Ingres emerged as the most influential exponent of Neoclassicism, championing precise draughtsmanship and eschewing disorder. The austere atmosphere inherent in classical art itself remained a defining characteristic of the Neoclassical style. This was not a deliberate choice by Ingres, but rather a natural inheritance. The Neoclassical movement, epitomised by Ingres, exerted a profound influence on 19th-century French painting. This paper commences with an examination of Ingres's artistic theories, systematically reviewing and synthesising past research on his theoretical contributions. This study plays a vital role in uncovering the foundations of Ingres's artistic philosophy. By analysing Ingres as its subject, exploring his artistic concepts and their genesis, this work facilitates deeper research into Neoclassical art and Ingres himself, documenting his achievements for future reference.

1.2. Current State of Research

Numerous scholarly articles have been written on Ingres. In recent years, the number of dissertations and journal publications concerning him has also shown an upward trend. These can be broadly categorised into three main types: the first focuses on Ingres and the French academic tradition of the nineteenth century. In Jia Chenchen and Tang Chenghui's "On Beauty and 'Ugliness' in Artistic Works: A Study of Ingres's *The Spring* and Courbet's *La Source*" [2], Ingres's *The Spring* and Courbet's *La Source* are contrasted to reveal the connection between 'ugliness' and beauty. Only by correctly understanding this relationship can we better grasp the driving force behind artistic creation and thereby express profound ideological content more effectively. Wang Sujie's 'On the Painting Controversy between Ingres and Delacroix' [3] offers a detailed examination of the 19th-century French artistic debate concerning drawing versus colour. It focuses on the dispute between Ingres, as a leading figure of Neoclassicism, and Delacroix, summarising the aesthetic ideas embedded within this debate and discussing its implications. Another category focuses on analysing Ingres's works. Ju Xiumei's *Classical Beauty, Ideal Beauty, Formal Beauty: A Brief Discussion of Ingres's Nude Paintings* [4] examines how Ingres's nude paintings embody a new aesthetic concept, organically integrating classical beauty, ideal beauty, and formal beauty to establish a model of classical ideal beauty.

Li Sen's "The Metaphorical Narrative of Neoclassicism: A New Interpretation of Ingres's *The Spring*" [5] points out that *The Spring* is a work by the renowned neoclassical artist Ingres, yet its study remains insufficiently thorough. *The Spring* maintains close connections with Ingres's other works and classical traditions; the interplay between these elements forms a richly suggestive, metaphorical context. Traditional painting often employs imagery laden with metaphor, which over historical development has crystallised into fixed expressive forms, frequently bearing stylised and symbolic characteristics. Within *The Spring*, the figures, their interactions, and the backdrop each possess their own narrative threads. Yet Ingres subverts this established framework, infusing the work with an ethos entirely distinct from Neoclassicism.

The final category involves analytical studies of Ingres's artistic concepts regarding drawing, colour, and other aspects of painting. Wang Fangfang's 'An Interpretation of the Rational Colour in Ingres's Oil Painting Art' [6] argues that Ingres achieved such prominence because his works are imbued with a distinct form of "rationality". In "The Manifestation of Beauty: Interpreting Ingres's Painting Philosophy" [7] portrays Ingres as an artist adept at integrating aesthetic ideals into his work. He masterfully employed formal elements, organically merging idealised aesthetic concepts with innovative line work to forge a distinctive artistic expression that profoundly influenced subsequent generations of artists.

2. The Life of Ingres

2.1. An Introduction to Ingres

Ingres was a renowned French painter of the 19th century, classified by some scholars as a Neoclassical artist, while others contend his works exhibit Romantic characteristics. A pupil of the Neoclassical master David, Ingres held Raphael's artistic ideals in high esteem. His distinctive artistic style in draughtsmanship and colouration bore a marked personal imprint, his works imbued with rationality. Amidst the shifting artistic ideologies and painting movements of the 19th century,

Ingres steadfastly upheld his artistic principles. His art embodies ‘noble simplicity and serene grandeur’. Through his distinctive artistic approach, Ingres enriched the artistic landscape of the 19th century while exerting a profound influence on subsequent generations. Ingres’s representative works include *The Spring*, *The Grand Odalisque*, *The Bather of Valpinçon*, and *The Turkish Bath*, among others. His artistic development was closely intertwined with the evolution of French Neoclassicism. His works hold a pivotal position in art history, offering viewers an interpretation of his distinctive artistic style.

2.2. The Reasons Behind the Formation of Ingres’ Artistic Philosophy

Ingres, whose full name was Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, was a renowned French painter. Born in Montauban in 1780, his father Joseph Ingres was an accomplished engraver and architect, as well as a painter with a keen interest in music. From birth, his father placed high hopes upon him, aspiring to nurture him into an artist. Ingres understood that while his father valued artistic cultivation, he had no specific ambition for him to become a musician or painter. Ingres chose the visual arts after his teacher, Florence, brought a reproduction of Raphael’s *Madonna of the Chair*. This painting captivated the young Ingres, whose heart was instantly won over by Raphael’s elegance and beauty. From then on, Ingres held Raphael in the highest esteem, often lamenting that had he lived three hundred years earlier, he might have become the master’s pupil. It was this profound reverence for Raphael that ultimately steered him towards painting over music, setting him firmly on the path of the visual arts.

In his youth, Ingres successfully gained admission to David’s studio with the assistance of the artist’s pupil, Gros. David’s exacting demands forged the quintessential classical style evident in Ingres’s works. As David consistently prioritised drawing, Ingres’s innate talent in this discipline flourished to its fullest potential. David’s artistic philosophy became the golden rule that the young Ingres adhered to. He declared: “*David is our great master, who restored French art. His Oath of the Hipparchians and The Rape of the Sabine Women are masterpieces. David taught me to ground the human figure firmly upon two feet and to position the head correctly upon the shoulders. Like him, I have studied the paintings of Herculaneum and Pompeii with the utmost diligence.*”

Although Ingres was a pupil of David, his painting style leaned more towards Raphael. The pure colours, soft light, and serene, elegant rhythms found in Raphael’s works profoundly influenced Ingres’s artistic pursuits. Raphael expressed humanist ideals through a graceful, poetic manner, and his relentless exploration of beauty exerted a tremendous influence on subsequent generations. The young Ingres was among those profoundly affected. After departing from his master David, Ingres gradually developed his own artistic philosophy. Having admired Raphael since childhood, he believed Raphael’s principle of drawing inspiration from nature was the essential path for artistic creation. Guided by this philosophy, he produced early works such as *The Bathers of Valpinçon* and *The Grand Odalisque*. Though these paintings failed to garner official recognition in France, they increasingly revealed Ingres’s distinctive artistic vision. His 1824 work *The Oath of Louis XIII* received high praise from French authorities. However, due to their unconventional concepts, Ingres’ subsequent paintings failed to make a significant impact within French artistic circles. Disheartened, Ingres relocated to Florence after 1834, where he achieved considerable success. Upon his return to France seven years later, he received an

enthusiastic welcome from the French establishment, being hailed as the founder of French Neoclassicism. Subsequently, works such as *The Bathers of Valpinçon* and *The Turkish Bath* exerted a profound influence on the development of French classical art. At the advanced age of 82, Ingres created *The Spring*. Its masterful expressiveness and meticulous observation earned high praise from the art world, with many painters hailing it as the embodiment of beauty.

3. Ingres' Artistic Philosophy

3.1. *Painting as an Expression of Nature*

Ingres did not publish his own books, and our understanding of his creative philosophy largely stems from his notebooks. His artistic insights can be gleaned from his diaries. Ingres firmly believed that only one form of art exists in this world: eternal beauty, the creation of nature. Our purpose lies not in creation, but in emulating the great painters, faithfully reproducing these things within the vast, observable objective world before us, rendering them pure and appropriate, perfecting them to the utmost. *"I have always worshipped Raphael, worshipped his era, worshipped ancient Greece—especially the mythical Greeks."* [1] It is evident that he was a stubborn, conservative, and aesthetically focused classical painter. He held ancient Greek art and Raphael's art in the highest regard. He even lamented his own 'misfortune' at not having lived in Raphael's era. From his words and creations, one can readily sense his reverence and devotion to Raphael and Greek culture. Ingres further stated that he did not merely study and replicate ancient artworks. In learning from Raphael, he maintained his independent thinking while breaking free from the shackles of old conventions, seeking innovation within stability. He asserted that his admiration for Raphael would not cause him to lose his own identity, for this was scarcely possible. Moreover, he questioned whether any great artist in history had truly escaped imitation to innovate from nothingness. *'All who practise literature and art,' he declared, 'are, to some degree, descendants of Homer.'* This reveals Ingres' dialectical approach—far from blind imitation or replication.

3.2. *Painting captures reality*

The authenticity of painting was another point emphasised by Ingres. David's aesthetic principles gradually became the guiding principles of Ingres's painting, with his works exhibiting David's precise lines, stable compositions, delicate yet simple lighting, and elegant atmosphere. While David in his later years gravitated towards Greek art, Ingres leaned more towards Italian art. Thus, Ingres forged his own artistic path. Beyond his love for Greek art, he developed a keen interest in real models. Ingres studied the works of Italy's most outstanding artists, particularly Raphael, believing that an excellent artist must master their craft and possess the genuine ability to faithfully reproduce objective reality. Crucially, he maintained that compositions must never be constructed in isolation from the whole, and that painting should never rely on imagination in the absence of a model. In artistic creation, one must faithfully depict the subject before the brush. Consequently, Ingres's paintings sometimes featured female figures with three vertebrae, prompting jesters to remark: "Ingres's aesthetic is flawed—his maidens bear three vertebrae." Ingres maintained: "To express certain characteristics, one may employ exaggeration, particularly when necessary, especially when seeking to convey beauty."

Thus, when discussing the authenticity of creation, Ingres deemed moderate exaggeration acceptable, though acknowledging its inherent risks. Authenticity does not equate to a perfect replication of the subject; rather, it involves infusing one's own ideas into the work. Thus, moderate exaggeration in creation is permissible. What he advocated was concealing beauty within truth. In his notes, he once revealed: the artists of ancient Greece and Rome were not creating or fabricating anything; rather, they were discovering or uncovering certain truths.

3.3. The Importance of Artistic Forms

From Ingres's works, we can discern the profound importance he attached to drawing. In his view, drawing was by no means a mere preliminary sketch of external contours or the refinement of lines; its function lay in expressive power, establishing the foundational state of the entire artistic endeavour, capturing the intrinsic form and the overall composition of the picture. Colour, he held, served merely a decorative purpose. Ingres once remarked: "*Florentine painting is Roman painting. The sixteenth century was an era steeped in legend, producing numerous outstanding painters who adhered to this eternal principle: only through drawing from life can one attain true aesthetic beauty and achieve appropriate form.*" [1] From these statements, we discern the Florentine passion for sketching in the sixteenth century, centred on capturing human form and structuring compositional outlines. They guided their practice by sketching as the fundamental artistic principle. Ingres grasped the defining characteristics of sixteenth-century art with precision, integrating them into the Neoclassical era.

He maintained that when studying a subject for painting, the foremost consideration must be the holistic unity of the whole. The foremost consideration is to seek solutions within the whole; form must be broad, indeed it must be broad. Form is the foundation and source of all; even mist must be rendered through lines. This reveals Ingres' profound emphasis on the application of line within the composition. He further noted that the more concise the use of line and form, the greater the beauty achieved. Focusing solely on analysing and depicting a particular part of the form is incorrect, as this only renders the part more disjointed, yielding a worse result. In sculpting an object, the primary focus lies in its overall unity, not in the detailed rendering of any single part. Compared to David, Ingres clearly placed greater emphasis on the form of the subject. Form is not merely an outline; it conveys the spirit and character of the person being depicted. To achieve an elegant form, one must avoid sharp lines as much as possible and have a distinct conception of the body's contours. External lines should not be concave but rather convex, forming arcs. The entire form is composed of curved lines, whereas angular lines are considered less aesthetically pleasing.

Ingres's artistic philosophy synthesised the approaches of Italian painters from different periods, playing an extraordinary role in the formation and development of his style. His artistic ideals also exerted a profound influence on subsequent generations.

4. Factors Contributing to the Formation of Ingres' Artistic Philosophy

4.1. Influences from Ancient Greece and Rome

From Ancient Rome and Greece boast millennia of history. The Romans once possessed a splendid culture and art, yet during the same period, artistic techniques and forms varied across different regions of the Roman Empire. Roman and Greek art were characterised by realism and narrative, with Greek art leaning towards romanticism and fantasy, while Roman art was distinguished by its realism. During the Classical period, beauty was regarded as the supreme artistic ideal, primarily manifested in the human form. The sculptor Phidias once declared: '*Nothing is as perfect as man, so we give our gods human form.*' Phidias believed the human body to be the most perfect creation in the world. Ingres's compositions stand as the finest testament to this inheritance of ancient Greek and Roman art. In the archaic Greek paintings, emphasis lay on line rather than colour. The historian Dionysius observed: 'In the ancient paintings, colour was a very simple matter; it could not be expressed through a variety of hues, and its use was exceedingly subtle.'

4.2. Renaissance Impression Factors

France served as a sanctuary for the development of classical art, particularly during the 18th century. Its unique political and historical context provided Ingres with an exceptional creative environment. Under the reign of Louis XIV, France's dominance in Europe became more firmly established, laying the foundations for its status as the world's artistic centre. By the late 18th century, France erupted into the bourgeois revolution. This bloody conflict reverberated globally. To the Western capitalist nations of the time, the republican system represented a force liberating human thought and culture, as well as a driving force for the formation of a new social order. The emergence of this new system inevitably spurred the development of social ideology. This presented artists like David with fresh opportunities. Revolutionary Classicism, with its sublime and elegant artistic ethos infused with an unshakeable conviction of triumph, unleashed a tempest in France, colliding fiercely with the aristocratic sensibilities of Rococo art. Following this, the Romantic movement began to emerge. The French Revolution had just concluded, yet reality proved vastly different from what the Enlightenment scholars had envisioned. Many experienced disillusionment and despair regarding their ideals, venting their frustration through their works. Thus, from an artistic perspective, the rise of Romanticism should be seen as a creative reflection on Classicism. Romantic artists pursued boundless imagination and unrestrained expression in their creations, employing form and colour as primary mediums. Each work bore a distinct personal imprint. Against the backdrop of Europe's political upheaval, the Romantic movement took root. The French Revolution had scarcely concluded, yet reality diverged sharply from the visions of France's great thinkers. Many experienced disillusionment and despair regarding their ideals, channelling this frustration into their artistic output. Thus, from an artistic perspective, the Romantic movement should be seen as a critical reflection on the creative achievements of Classicism. Romantic painters favoured unbridled imagination and freedom in their creations, employing diverse forms and colours as primary means of expression, each work bearing a pronounced personal stamp. Overall, the shift from classical decline to romantic ascendancy marked merely the beginning. Throughout the 19th century, France and Europe witnessed successive artistic transformations, yielding numerous outstanding paintings, as realism, impressionism, and others. Many artists, constrained by Western traditional conventions, found themselves drawn into the tide of reform. Their works encompassed both critiques of society and reflections on social sentiments.

Nineteenth-century French painting achieved remarkable breakthroughs, exerting a profound influence on the artistic landscape of the era. During this period, Ingres produced numerous outstanding works. The Grand Odalisque introduced a visual innovation in its composition, designed to accentuate the noble bearing of the depicted woman. Ingres employed an exaggerated approach to rendering the female form, which not only heightened the painting's poetic quality but also revealed the artist's creative philosophy.

4.3. Contemporary factors

Renaissance art represented an unprecedentedly bold endeavour to view the world from a human perspective. Compared to earlier eras, this period placed humanity at the centre as the measure of all things, both intellectually and artistically. The rationalism of the Italian Renaissance guided every step of the movement. Raphael, renowned for his elegant depictions of the Virgin Mary, remarked: *"To create a perfect female figure, I had to observe many beautiful women, then select the most exquisite as my model... Given the difficulty of choosing a model, I had to rely on the image of ideal beauty already formed in my mind and which I was seeking."* The Virgin Mary depicted by Raphael was an idealised representation of a real person. He emphasised her humanity, rendering her image closer to that of a real human being. Similarly, Ingres's figures are all idealised representations, demonstrating that he drew upon Raphael's painterly characteristics and developed them to their ultimate expression.

In certain respects, Raphael transcended the works of all contemporary painters, moving beyond mere naturalistic representation. He consciously employed a standardised ideal of beauty—a principle Ingres likewise adopted from Raphael. Ingres transformed Raphael's knowledge into his own conceptual framework, thereby forging something uniquely his own. He assimilated Raphael's entire legacy, making it his own and establishing his distinctive artistic style.

5. Conclusions

Ingres's work exerted a profound influence on subsequent painters, the art world, and indeed the entire world. His artistic philosophy transcended his era, establishing him as a pivotal figure bridging classical and modern traditions. Artists following him began to abandon the faithful representation of reality and the pursuit of authentic realism in painting, instead turning towards the emotional expression of form.

Realism emerged as a prominent artistic movement in nineteenth-century Europe, forming a stark contrast to Romanticism. As most works exposed the darker aspects of society, it became known as Critical Realism. Courbet, a quintessential realist painter, championed realism in art, viewing it as a democratic form of artistic expression. In his later years, Courbet produced numerous portraits characterised by elegant figures, fluid lines, and vibrant colours, evoking an air of refinement and poetic charm. In composition, he employed diagonal arrangements, placing figures within this framework—a technique reminiscent of Ingres's The Grand Odalisque. A comparison reveals that the women in both works extend their left hands towards the cloth at the centre of the canvas, unifying the entire composition. Ingres passed away in 1867. By this time, his vision for 'historical painting' had reached a dead end. Though critics and audiences held differing views, historical painting had ceased to be the pinnacle of French art. The emergence of Courbet brought a fundamental shift to

the genre, which had flourished since the 17th century. Ingres thus stands as the final master of classical historical painting.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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