

1 Generation Bonaparte

The first section of the exhibition is devoted to the ‘Generation Bonaparte’. Napoleon was a typical representative of the *‘novi homines’* (new men) whose meteoric rise was facilitated by the new social, geographical and psychological mobility that galvanised France after the Revolution.

The collapse of the absolute monarchy and the triumph of the ideas of ‘Equality and Liberty’ electrified the intellectual elite not only in France, but all over Europe, where the vertical structures of pre-Revolutionary estate-based societies by and large persisted. Both Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were part of the collective reading experience of the ‘Generation Bonaparte’. Other shared interests were the aesthetic and academic exploration of the ancient world and the experimentation with natural phenomena.

Those who turned twenty in 1789 – for example Alexander von Humboldt, Ludwig van Beethoven, Georg Hegel and Friedrich Hölderlin, to name but a few of Napoleon’s coevals – stood on the brink of great events. While the established artists and thinkers of the time (Goethe, Goya, Jacques-Louis David) belonged to an older generation, many of the leading political figures of the Napoleonic decade (Tsar Alexander I, Queen Louise of Prussia) had not reached thirty when Napoleon crowned himself Emperor on 2 December 1804.

2 Fascination and Revulsion

‘I saw the Emperor – that world-soul – riding out of the city to reconnoitre. It is indeed a wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out across the world and dominates it.’

G. W. F. Hegel, 1806

Ever since the Italian campaign of 1796 Europe perceived Napoleon as invincible. Even the victims of his battles could not quite shake off the fascination he exerted. After the peace treaties of Lunéville in 1801 and Amiens in 1802, which brought a temporary end to the war that had ravaged Europe for the past then years, Napoleon was hailed as a modern Prometheus, the bringer of light who had overcome the opposition of hidebound absolutism, as Jupiter, as Mars the Peacemaker, as Christian saviour and he became the subject of countless apotheoses.

Although news of the coronation of the First Consul as emperor in 1804 shook many of his erstwhile admirers to the core, fervent adulation continued to drown out critical voices until 1807. At the same time, the mobilisation of ever larger armies and the drastic rise in the numbers of dead and wounded soldiers set a chilling example of an increasingly callous and inhuman military apparatus. Poets and artists began to depict Napoleon as an ogre, an unfeeling colossus, ‘Satan’s eldest son’ and, by 1814/15, as chained Prometheus, torn limb from limb.

3 Physical and Symbolic Birth

‘I was born when my country was dying. ... My cradle was surrounded, from the very day of my birth, by the cries of the dying, the groans of the oppressed and the tears of despair.’

Napoleon Bonaparte

Weaving together his own birth and the death of his brave fellow-Corsicans, self-aggrandisement and fervent patriotism, Napoleon eloquently sums up the two elements that were at the very heart of his political career: his Corsican roots and his matchless feel for the pathos of powerful images.

The political culture into which Napoleon was born was a product of the European Enlightenment. As early as 1755 Corsica became the first and only democracy in Europe. Seen as a testing ground for democracy, the island attracted the keen interest of Enlightenment Europe until France brought the experiment to a bloody end on 15 May 1769, exactly three months before Napoleon's physical birth in Ajaccio.

The symbolic birth of Napoleon, the beginnings of his national and international visibility, did not take place until years later – under the French flag and no less bloody. The successful siege of the (cradle-shaped) harbour of Toulon in December of 1793 marked the start of his rise through the ranks. The violent and – so legend has it – single-handed suppression of the royalist rebellion in the church of Saint Roch in Paris on 5 October 1795 set him on the track of his vertiginous political career.

4 The Dream of a Great Empire

Since the Middle Ages, no empire between the Atlantic and the Rhine, the mouth of the River Elbe and the Pyrenees, the English Channel and the Tiber had been larger than France under Napoleon. The imperial dream is by definition a European dream, rooted in classical, Byzantine, medieval and colonial ideas and aspirations.

On the threshold of the 19th century it also reflected highly topical political debates. Although Napoleon's European politics evolved along primarily pragmatic lines, he later described them as a carefully calculated, premeditated project.

That his politics did nothing to promote peace is borne out by the vast number of fallen soldiers. His wars cost the lives of two if not three million Europeans; hundreds of thousands were wounded. In view of these numbers it is astonishing how little historians have looked into the suffering of an entire generation of young men around 1800. The exhibition addresses the subject of injured and disabled soldiers. Their battlefield injuries led to a wide range of medical innovations, and amputees and disfigured veterans remained a common sight on Europe's streets for decades after the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

5 Blood and Sex: Europe, a Family Business

It can be argued that Napoleon managed the conquest of Europe like a family business. Right from the outset of his career, he provided his siblings with key posts in the European enterprise, later with financial gratifications, imposing titles and the trappings of royalty. Almost his entire family was recruited into the Napoleonic system of exercising power over Europe.

Safeguarding the dynastic succession and the validation and legitimation of power from one generation to the next became Napoleon's central concern. Thus it is hardly surprising that the only child born of his highly strategic marriage to Marie-Louise of Austria, the eighteen-year-old daughter of the Habsburg Emperor Francis II, was hailed as the incarnation of the

European imperial idea and known from birth as the King of Rome. Not only did the little boy fulfil his father's dynastic aspirations, in his veins flowed the old blood of the Holy Roman Emperors and the new blood of the Bonapartes. On his slender shoulders rested the old European order and the new – a fateful fusion of France, Italy and Austria.

6 Space, Law and Religion: New Forms of Controlling Space and the Mind

'One of my greatest ideas was the geographical fusion and concentration of the individual peoples that had been torn apart and dispersed by upheavals or politics.'

Napoleon Bonaparte

Under Napoleon, the drive for standardisation in all areas of life, which had first manifested itself in the early years of the French Revolution, became a key political instrument. The model was Roman: one set of civil laws, one network of roads, one army and one language.

Thus Napoleon pushed the integration of the conquered territories on the European continent. New forms of controlling space (road construction), time (post and semaphore telecommunications systems), bodies (conscription) and the mind (laws, religion and censorship) laid the foundation for faster communication and created a grassroots sense of connectedness and community.

Napoleon envisioned the capital of his empire as a new Rome. The great European roads and telegraph lines led to Paris; all statistical, fiscal and police intelligence gathered under Napoleon filled the files of the central administration in the French capital. All across Europe, a great many of Napoleon's reforms and structural revisions remained in force long after his deposition – some to this day.

7 Objects of Desire: Napoleon and the Appropriation of European Art and Heritage

Paris was at the heart of Napoleon's imperial dream. The transformation of the city into a European Mecca of the arts and sciences was to a very large degree a function of the far-reaching and ruthless politics of appropriation practiced since 1794 that saw fit to uproot entire art collections and libraries, later entire archives, all over Europe and to transplant them to Paris.

The Napoleonic confiscations of art became the most visible and spectacular expression of a post-Revolutionary ideology of appropriation that sanctioned such seizures, first in the name of Freedom and later in the name of the common good. At the same time, the systematic transfer of European archives to Paris represented the ultimate subjugation of the continent. While it allowed for the creation of a centrally administered historical long-term memory for Europe in Paris, it disenfranchised the states that were deprived of their national heritage and memory.

While Paris transformed itself around 1800 into the capital of a new form of public, circulating and visible knowledge, the bereft nations experienced a groundswell of patriotic identification with the stolen objects. 'Taken from the princes, re-conquered by the people' was a motto that led, in 1814/15, to greatest act of restitution of European history.

8 The Empire of Symbols

‘Why should France fear my ambition? [...] I merely act upon the imagination of the nation. When that fails me I shall be nothing, and another will succeed me.’

Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon was a master of propaganda who appropriated and reused the emblems, insignia and symbols of Christendom, Rome and the monarchy to legitimise his position. There is more than a soupçon of Caesar, Charlemagne, Louis XIV and Frederick the Great, even of Christ and the Pantocrator, in Napoleon’s carefully crafted public image. Multiplied by the principalities under Napoleon’s control, it enjoyed unprecedented dissemination across Europe.

The standardisation of the appearance of royal households, government agencies, letterheads, furniture etc. in the interest of imperial ‘corporate design’ did much to fix the Napoleonic era in the collective visual memory of Europe – to this day.

9 Duels

With the naval defeat at Trafalgar in 1805, Napoleon’s dreams of a maritime empire were sunk in the cold waters of the Atlantic. His plans of invading England null and void, Napoleon attempted to enforce a Europe-wide commercial boycott of Britain called the Continental System, which took the Franco-British confrontation to the European mainland.

The lost duel with Britain led to the lost duel with Russia. Chafing under the embargo and angered by the exclusively pro-French politics of the emperor, Tsar Alexander I decided to end the Continental System and to reopen trade with Britain. This was one of the reasons that brought about the rift with Russia and the spectacularly disastrous Russian campaign. Britain and Russia were the great powers that put an end to Napoleon’s grand plans of expansion.

10 Nations – Emotions

Napoleon’s imperial project and the efficient integration of Europe – albeit often at gunpoint – gave many European countries access to modern administrations, economies, legal systems and infrastructures. But all over Europe, the brutally imposed modernity fostered strong opposition and great patriotic fervour that were harnessed in the service of fighting and vilifying the opponent.

Napoleon, whom the art critic William Feaver once labelled *‘the first universal figure in caricature’*, was derided all across Europe in countless illustrated pamphlets as a criminal on the throne, a mass murderer, an oppressor of the people, the spawn of hell, a bloodsucker, the crusher of the world, an ogre, the plague, the devil in disguise etc. What the caricatures did in Britain, Holland or Germany was done elsewhere by hate tunes, doggerels baying for blood, tirades, manifestoes, broadsheets and a flood of patriotic handbills that swept over Europe.

All across Europe, Napoleonic rule incited a groundswell of nationalism. His opponents were stylised as martyrs or national heroes, important dates and won battles became the stuff of independence myths that affected historiography well into the 20th century.

11 Symbolic and Physical Death

At the age of thirty, Napoleon Bonaparte was First Consul. At thirty-five he became emperor. At forty-six he was dead – symbolically dead. Although he lived for another six years in exile on the island of Saint Helena, the defeat at Waterloo in 1815 marked the end of his meteoric career and has since been described as a zero hour of European history.

Forced to abdicate on 22 June 1815, Napoleon declared to Parliament that his political life was finished. What followed on the miserable windswept Atlantic island of Saint Helena has been described by the historian Luigi Mascilli Migliorini as a complex battle for his commemoration and legacy.

Here the exiled emperor worked on his legend. And here the increasingly frail and ailing body of the fallen monarch gradually became the central focus of his small household. Napoleon died on 5 May 1821. His body gave rise to a long string of persistent suspicions, rumours and speculations as to the cause of his death – a lasting testament to the political, historical and symbolic significance of his remains.

12 Projections: A ‘Divided’ Icon

‘Bonaparte is no longer the real Bonaparte; he is a figure of legend fashioned from the mad whims of poets, soldiers’ stories, and folk tales. What we see today is a Charlemagne or Alexander of medieval epics. This hero of fantasy will become the real individual, the other portraits will vanish.’

François-René de Chateaubriand, 1840s

To this day, Chateaubriand’s prediction has lost none of its validity. The legend, to which the deposed emperor contributed in no small way, took on unprecedented political and emotional dimensions. From today’s vantage point, Napoleon is a complex mix of hero worship, mystical transfiguration and a wide range of political and national projections. Moreover, every country of modern Europe has spawned its own different and often violently conflicting images of Napoleon.