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Experience Court Life at VMFA's *Napoleon: Power and Splendor*

Exhibition offers a new perspective on the historical figure



Portrait of Napoleon in Coronation Robes, ca. 1805-1814, Workshop of François-Pascal-Simon Gérard (French, 1770-1837), oil on canvas. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, collection Ben Weider. Photo Christine Guest.

Richmond, Virginia — This summer, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts invites visitors to enter the private world of Napoleon Bonaparte through a stunning exhibition that explores the sumptuous ambience of his Imperial Household. *Napoleon: Power and Splendor*, on display from June 9 to Sept. 3, 2018, showcases more than 200 works of art — most of which have never before been shown in the United States — in an innovative display that recreates the spaces inhabited by Napoleon and his family. Through the decorative objects and artworks on display, the exhibition reveals how members of the Imperial Household—a network of 3,500 employees—helped to create the identity of the new self-titled Emperor, fueling the propaganda machine that modernized and legitimized his reign in the wake of the French Revolution.

This international loan exhibition includes major masterpieces of painting and sculpture, along with an array of decorative arts, furnishings, engravings and more, commissioned by and for Napoleon to legitimize and bolster support for his reign. “*Napoleon: Power and Splendor* provides a fascinating look into the myriad ways in which Napoleon and his Imperial Household carefully orchestrated the image of the Emperor as a legendary hero,” said VMFA Director Alex Nyerges. “This exhibition closely examines the ways in which works of art were used as effective propaganda tools to legitimize Napoleon’s reign.”

Conceived, produced and circulated by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, with the participation of the Musée National du Château de Fontainebleau and the exceptional support of Mobilier national de France, *Napoleon: Power and Splendor* includes works from the Château de Fontainebleau, the Louvre, the Musée de l’Armée in Paris and other world-class collections. The exhibition is curated by Dr. Sylvain Cordier, curator of early decorative arts at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts under the direction of Nathalie Bondil, director general and chief curator at the MMFA.

“Ten years after we received the bequest of the Ben Weider Napoleon Collection, we welcome you to the Imperial Household,” Bondil said. “This ‘state within a state’ provided all the necessary services for Napoleon and his family, to assert his dynastic power and to adopt his policies, even the most secret among them. Our friends from Virginia are invited to discover the pomp of court life thanks to those who organized the most private spaces of the Emperor’s life even in his exile on Saint Helena. This exhibition is an opportunity to reflect on the staging of monarchical power and the persistence of certain codes even up to today. After Tiffany, Wesselmann, Fabergé and Rodin [exhibitions], Napoleon is our fifth collaboration with the VMFA. What a continuous fruitful friendship! I want to thank warmly Alex Nyerges and his great team for this new partnership.”

“Beyond the pleasure of discovering the splendor of palace life between 1804 and 1815, the exhibition presents a fascinating topic for our own age,” said MMFA Curator Cordier. “The influence of teams of advisers and political commentators, and the staging of media events may seem to us part and parcel of the contemporary culture of the power of images. Yet, the functioning of the Imperial Household shows to what extent these practices were commonplace 200 years ago.”

Napoleon: Power and Splendor features an innovative layout that recreates the sumptuous decorations and furnishings of the French Emperor's court. The exhibition design is conceived by the Montreal Museum of Fines Arts with the collaboration of Architem. Projection mapping technology from e-Motion, Montreal is used throughout to bring Napoleon's palace to life, providing a dynamic and immersive experience. "This groundbreaking exhibition not only shows us new ways of understanding Napoleon, his court, and its furnishings," explained Dr. Mitchell Merling, who is the coordinating curator for VMFA, "but also demonstrates how exhibitions can illuminate these stories in a vivid manner that is accessible as well as scholarly."

Entering the Imperial Household

Napoleon: Power and Splendor is organized in eight sections that examine the art of portraiture, explore the roles of the six Grand Offices of the Imperial Household, and reveal how Napoleon lived during his final days in exile. Each gallery corresponds to the roles of the leading figures employed to attend to the needs of Napoleon and his family. The Imperial Household was tasked with not only overseeing nearly every detail of Napoleon's daily life, but also with organizing sacred and secular ceremonies.

- **The Emperor's Image**

The exhibition opens with a series of portraits and historical scenes highlighting the ways in which various artists created portraits of Napoleon to legitimize particular notions of power. In addition to the three-quarter, life-size official portrait of Napoleon by François-Pascal-Simon Gérard, this section offers paintings by Antoine-Jean Gros, Andrea Appiani and others who depicted the French Emperor at various stages of his career.

- **The Grand Equerry and Grand Master of the Hunt**

The Grand Equerry managed imperial horses and stables, transportation, and the outward pomp and ceremony of the court, which included military parades. He also supervised the pages — young boys from prestigious families who would often go on to serve in Napoleon's army. This section includes another portrait by Gros, on loan from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, depicting one of these pages brought to court before entering the ranks of the Grand Armée. Though the Emperor himself was not a skilled hunter, continuing the tradition of prestigious royal hunts placed Napoleon within a long lineage of French rulers. In addition to a display of weapons with imperial provenance and other hunting accoutrements, this section includes projections of a forest scene to evoke the French countryside.

- **The Grand Chaplain**

To create the outward appearance of a Christian sovereign, Napoleon endowed his court with a Grand Chaplain to preside over religious services and appointed his uncle, Cardinal Joseph Fesch, to the position. Fesch presided over religious services within the imperial palace and administered the sacraments of the Church to members of the imperial family. In this role, he officiated marriages, notably the spectacular wedding of Napoleon and Archduchess Marie-Louise in 1810. Six monumental silver-gilt candlesticks and a crucifix created for the ceremony — just recently rediscovered — highlight this section.

- **The Grand Marshal of the Palace**

Of the six Grand Officers of the Imperial Palace, the Grand Marshal had the most influential position. He was responsible for the upkeep of Napoleon's many palaces, overseeing the court and social life, and arranging security for the Emperor. A spectacular display featuring Napoleon's chief dinner service, including exquisite pieces of Sèvres porcelain, is a highlight of this section.

- **The Grand Master of Ceremonies**

The palace's public and solemn ceremonies, including rituals of power such as Napoleon's coronation, were the domain of the Grand Master of Ceremonies. This section evokes the imperial pageantry of Napoleon's throne room and includes the Emperor's throne from the palace of Monte Cavallo in Rome and the cartoons for *The Four Tapestries of the World* by François Dubois — historically important, yet fragile works that are displayed for the first time.

- **The Grand Chamberlain**

This section takes a look behind the scenes into private spaces that were devoted to work and the day-to-day life of the immediate and extended imperial family. Highlights of this section include Napoleon's iconic bicorne hat, worn during the Russian Campaign, and the monumental painting *The Dream of Ossian* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres that was designed for the ceiling over the Emperor's bed in his Roman palace, along with additional pieces of *Sèvres* porcelain, which were given as diplomatic gifts by Napoleon and his wife.

- **The Imperial Household in Exile**

The exhibition's final section explores Napoleon's last years in exile on the remote island of Saint Helena. In addition to a portrait of Napoleon's nieces in exile in Brussels by Jacques-Louis David, the room includes a remarkable birdcage that the Emperor commissioned during his exile and a poignant death portrait by a British officer, who was part of the military detail charged with guarding Napoleon in his final years.

Sponsorship information

Napoleon: Power and Splendor is organized, produced and circulated by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts with the participation of the Château de Fontainebleau and the exceptional support of Mobilier national de France. Sponsors include The Lettie Pate Whitehead Evans Exhibition Endowment, The Julia Louise Reynolds Fund, Mrs. Frances Massey Dulaney, Mr. and Mrs. Fred T. Tattersall, Mr. and Mrs. Achille Murat Guest, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph T. Knox, Peachtree House Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. James H. Price III. The exhibition program at VMFA is supported by the Julia Louise Reynolds Fund.

Tickets

The exhibition is free for VMFA members, children ages 6 and under, active-duty military personnel and their immediate families, K-12 teachers and Commonwealth of Virginia employees with ID; \$16 for adults, \$12 for seniors 65 and older, and \$10 for youth ages 7-17 and college students with ID. Visitors can reserve tickets online (<https://www.vmfa.museum/exhibitions/napoleon-power-splendor/>) or by phone at 804.340.1405.

Catalogue Information

Napoleon: Power and Splendor is accompanied by *Napoleon: The Imperial Household*, a 352-page catalogue published by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Publishing Department with the collaboration of Hazan, and edited by Sylvain Cordier, curator of early decorative arts, MMFA. It can be ordered online (<https://www.vmfa.museum/shop/>) or by calling the VMFA shop at 804.340.1525.

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The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 40,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris, and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting, and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan, and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history. **The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804-340-1400 or visit www.vmfa.museum.**