

NAPOLEON

POWER AND SPLENDOR

VMFA

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

NAPOLEON: POWER AND SPLENDOR

[INTRODUCTION]

In 1804, First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), the victorious general who had risen to power through a coup d'état, became “His Majesty Napoleon, Emperor of the French.” The creation and maintenance of Napoleon’s new imperial image led to the establishment of the Imperial Household. With a staff of over thirty-five hundred individuals, the Household was directed by six Grand Officers: the Grand Equerry, the Grand Master of the Hunt, the Grand Chaplain, the Grand Marshal of the Palace, the Grand Master of Ceremonies, and the Grand Chamberlain. As their titles suggest, each Grand Officer was allotted specific roles and responsibilities. Together they were charged with upholding the standards described in the **Étiquette du Palais Imperial**. The text defined all aspects involved in the staging of Napoleon’s daily life as an Emperor and as a man, from court protocols of behavior, dress, and ceremony, to the arrangement, decoration, and furnishing of public and private spaces within the imperial palaces.

Napoleon’s reign and dynastic aspirations came to an end after only ten years. Having lost the support of a public weary of his endless wars, the Emperor was deposed and sent into exile. The image of Napoleon as a legendary hero and his lasting mark on the collective memory of the world spring from the Household’s skillful orchestration and effective projection of his power and splendor. This legacy may be the most enduring of all his victories.

SECTION 1: The Emperor's Image

Splendid works of art enhanced Napoleon's public image throughout his military career and imperial reign. Even during early military campaigns, his advisers and his first wife Josephine convinced him that carefully constructed images could sway public opinion in his favor.

When Napoleon became First Consul in 1799, artists were appointed to create portraits of the powerful new leader, depicting him in a new style that omitted visual references to French kings. Painters and sculptors turned instead to political portraits of the newly formed United States of America.

In 1804, with the establishment of the empire, a Grand Officer of the Imperial Household and the Intendant General managed the regime's visual propaganda, which included images of Napoleon. Consequently, Napoleon's staff assisted in the selection of strong imperial symbols and emblems. The ancient Roman eagle served as a military symbol of the empire, while the bee became the civic symbol of society's dedication to its undisputed ruler.

For official portraits of Napoleon, artists borrowed from imperial imagery of the past. Imperial models included Emperor Augustus Caesar (63 BC–AD 14) of ancient Rome and Emperor Charlemagne (742–814) of the Holy Roman Empire. By combining motifs from antiquity with visual traditions drawn from the former Bourbon monarchy, artists presented the Napoleonic Empire as the culmination of over a thousand years of European history.

SECTION 2: The Grand Equerry and the Imperial Stables

The Grand Equerry Armand de Caulaincourt was responsible for all of Napoleon's coaches and horses. He organized transportation from daily excursions to the elaborate ceremonial processions of the Emperor and his entourage. Excellent maintenance of equipment and efficient management of the stables were required when the court moved from one residence to another and absolutely vital in times of war. Caulaincourt supervised over 750 employees, including imperial pages.

He also managed two stables—one for carriage horses and one for riding horses. Napoleon acquired only the best horses, and preferred Arabians, which he encountered during his Egyptian campaign. Pictured nearby are portraits of four of his horses. The names Napoleon chose for them reflect his preferences and aspirations. Sahara and Sheik received Arabian-inspired names, while Distinguished and Triumphant emphasize the imperial status of their master.

SECTION 2: The Grand Master of the Hunt

The Grand Master of the Hunt managed the Emperor's hounds, maintained his hunting weapons and supplies, and oversaw the forest estates surrounding imperial residences outside of Paris. As Emperor, Napoleon quickly reinstated the popular time-honored tradition of the royal hunt, thereby associating himself with earlier French kings. The appointment of Louis-Alexandre Berthier as Grand Master of the Hunt reinforced this association by forming a direct link back to the old monarchy, which Berthier served when he assisted his father, a royal engineer, in drawing up a map for royal hunts. In service to Napoleon years later, Berthier supervised numerous lieutenants, forestry captains, captains of the hunt, and firearm bearers, often recruited from the former huntsmen who served Louis XVI. Even the packs of hounds contributed to this connection, as most of them were descended from the hounds of the former monarch.

SECTION 3: The Grand Chaplain

The Grand Chaplain of the Household, assisted by his staff, supervised religious ceremonies and personally administered the sacraments in the chapels of the Emperor and the imperial family. Holding the rank of bishop of the court, he also served as the French ambassador to the papacy. Napoleon entrusted this religious office to his half-uncle, Cardinal Fesch.

Throughout Napoleon's rise to power, Grand Chaplain Fesch struggled to fulfill his civil duties while remaining true to his religious vows. In the turbulent decade of the Revolution, republican ideals clashed with Catholicism, causing violent uprisings across France. During the Consulate, Fesch assisted Napoleon in negotiating the Concordat of 1801, which recognized Catholicism as the religion of the French majority. This pact also reestablished cordial relations with Pope Pius VII (r. 1800–1823).

To acknowledge the importance of Catholicism in France, ornate liturgical objects were commissioned to create settings for Napoleon's imperial ceremonies. For example, monumental candlesticks and a gilded crucifix provided a suitable backdrop for the marriage of Napoleon and the Archduchess Marie-Louise in April 1810.

Although the Pope agreed to travel to Paris to bless Napoleon's coronation, which took place in Notre-Dame Cathedral on December 2, 1804, Napoleon consistently treated him as a subservient political ally rather than the sovereign of the Catholic people, causing their relationship to deteriorate and complicating Grand Chaplain Fesch's

SECTION 3: The Grand Chaplain

situation. Fesch officiated at the marriage of Napoleon and the Archduchess Marie-Louise, despite the Pope's refusal to sanction Napoleon's divorce from Josephine. Following the conquest of the Papal States in 1809, Napoleon had Pope Pius VII arrested and held hostage until the empire fell in 1814. Fesch also baptized Napoleon's son, the King of Rome, in 1811, but ultimately took the Pope's side, which led to his imperial disgrace.

SECTION 4: The Grand Marshal of the Palace

The Grand Marshal of the Palace was undoubtedly the most important of the Grand Officers of the Imperial Household. He oversaw the upkeep, furnishing, and decoration of the palaces. Nothing was commissioned, moved, restored, or taken away without his approval.

This officer also maintained palace security and organized all court meals — from intimate lunches to grand banquets, known as Grand Couvert dinners. His duties required him, his prefects, and other staff to accompany Napoleon at all times, guaranteeing the Emperor's daily comfort and protection in every residence, campaign, or journey.

The responsibilities of the Grand Marshal reveal the military nature of court life under Napoleon, who appointed two army generals to the position. General Géraud-Christophe-Michel Duroc, formerly Bonaparte's aide-de-camp under the Revolution and later his governor of the Tuileries palace under the Consulate, served as the Emperor's first Grand Marshal. Duroc died in combat in 1813.

This Grand Marshalship was ultimately granted to General Henri-Gatien Bertrand. He proved to be the most loyal of the Grand Officers of the Household, serving from 1813 until the Emperor's death in 1821. He alone chose to follow Napoleon into exile — first to the island of Elba in 1814 and then to Saint Helena in 1815 — maintaining imperial standards of the deposed sovereign's household until the Emperor drew his last breath.

The Grand Couvert

Although Napoleon understood the usefulness of official dinners as a way to showcase the brilliance of his reign, he detested them. Only eight Grand Couvert dinners (public feasts) took place during the empire.

The term Grand Couvert was used to designate the court service provided on those occasions. Although everyday meals served at the palace were the business of the officers and servants of the Imperial Household, the Grand Couvert required the participation of the Grand Officers themselves: the Grand Chaplain blessed the table; the Grand Chamberlain gave Napoleon a moist cloth for washing his hands and served him coffee at the end of the meal; the Grand Equerry offered Napoleon his armchair; and the Grand Marshal of the Palace brought Napoleon his napkin and poured water and wine.

During the empire, Grand Couverts combined aspects of service à la française, in which platters were presented in the center of the table and food served at the table, with Russian-style service, in which individual plates were prepared behind the scenes and then brought to the guests.

These banquets required several kinds of serving dishes. First courses, including soups, melons, salads, and eggs, were served on porcelain. Cooked courses, including highly seasoned dishes and roasted meats, required silver-gilt. Porcelain dishes reappeared with dessert and coffee.

SECTION 5: The Grand Master of Ceremonies

The Throne Room and the Grand Cabinet were the most prestigious and magnificent spaces in the palace complex. The Throne Room was the site of the most significant official receptions, while the Grand Cabinet was a suite of rooms reserved for ministerial audiences and the staging of power.

The Grand Master of Ceremonies defined imperial court protocol in these spaces. He enforced standards of court dress and oversaw the design and staging of all the ceremonies, from Napoleon's coronation to marriages, baptisms, and mourning observances of members of the imperial family.

Louis-Philippe de Ségur held this position at the empire's outset. Born into the old nobility, he was the ideal man for the job, combining a perfect knowledge of the old monarchy's former customs with enlightened, liberal opinions. In 1805, shortly after the coronation, he penned the **Étiquette du Palais Imperial**, the seminal text defining imperial court regulations for dignitaries and courtiers.

SECTION 6: The Grand Chamberlain

The Grand Chamberlain, as head of the Department of the Chamber, was responsible for managing the private details of the imperial family's personal apartments and overseeing hospitality. In 1804, Napoleon appointed Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, his minister of foreign affairs, to serve as his Grand Chamberlain. Talleyrand managed a large staff of chamberlains, who were often chosen from families of the old nobility. The Emperor's wardrobe, library, office, theatrical and musical entertainments, as well as official gift-giving, fell within his responsibilities.

The Grand Chamberlain supervised the presentation of gifts as diplomatic gestures, selecting paintings, furniture, lace, medals, gold boxes, and jewels as rewards for courtiers, ambassadors, rulers, and other worthy recipients. Each gift symbolized the political and diplomatic exploits of the regime. Perhaps the most impressive of these objects came from the imperial porcelain manufactory at Sèvres and the Gobelins tapestry manufactory.

After discovering Talleyrand had made overtures of peace to Austria and Russia, Napoleon dismissed him in 1809. Pierre de Montesquiou-Fezensac was subsequently appointed to the position of Grand Chamberlain, an office he filled until the fall of the empire in 1814.

SECTION 7: Napoleon's Two Empresses

The Household of the Empress, created in 1804 with the establishment of the empire, served Napoleon's wife, although the Empress lacked any real decision-making powers. Napoleon established the annual budget and chose the staff, often selecting the wives of the old nobility as well as the wives of his marshals and generals. The Lady of Honor, the highest position in the Empress's household, was the equivalent of the Emperor's Grand Chamberlain.

Napoleon viewed the primary role of women, from the Empress to the humblest peasant, as delivering offspring in every French home. In his memoirs, he wrote, "Woman was given to man that she may bear children. . . . She is his property, just as a fruit tree is the property of the gardener." This same attitude toward women was embedded in the Civil Code of the French, established in 1804 under Napoleon. In this otherwise groundbreaking modern legal code, French women were denied access to education, required spousal consent for employment, and were refused the right to vote.

Napoleon married his first wife, Josephine de Beauharnais, in 1796, when he was still a young general. An intelligent woman of the world and seven years his senior, Josephine courted public opinion to help Napoleon with his career. Although she had children from a previous marriage, she was unable to give the Emperor an heir. In 1809, he insisted on a divorce, proving their sincere love for each other was no match for Napoleon's dynastic ambitions. In 1809, he

SECTION 7: Napoleon's Two Empresses

insisted on a divorce, proving their sincere love for each other was no match for Napoleon's dynastic ambitions. The following year, he married Archduchess Marie-Louise of Austria, a great-niece of France's queen Marie-Antoinette, who was guillotined during the Revolution. Less than a year later, the long awaited heir, Napoleon-François-Charles-Joseph, was born and given the title of King of Rome.

SECTION 8: The Emperor's Private Apartments

Breaking from the customs of the old monarchy, Napoleon's Imperial Household did not treat the state bedchamber as a public space. This differed greatly from the protocol during the Bourbon dynasty, which treated the king's bedchamber as the ceremonial center of court. Napoleon's chambers were private rooms, intended solely for the sovereign and his servants.

Because the everyday business of government was transacted there, the Emperor's Cabinet (Napoleon's study) was placed under the supervision of the Grand Chamberlain, who managed the imperial family's private apartments. Napoleon spent the greater part of his days in this space, reading and writing reports and dispatches and dictating the day's correspondence, orders, notes, and decrees. In his Cabinet, Napoleon held audiences with ministers and advisers and scheduled meetings with various councils.

SECTION 9: Napoleon's Architectural Vision

Napoleon's architectural ambitions for his empire equaled his appetite for conquest. In Paris, he envisioned a modern metropolis adorned with monuments dedicated to his military victories. Two of the most famous included the original Vendôme Column (visible in the portrait of Duroc on view in the Banquet Room) and the Arch de Triomphe. Due to the regime's early collapse, most of Napoleon's projects for Paris were never completed.

In addition to monuments, Napoleon adapted the approximately fifty former royal palaces, châteaux, and private residences to ensure appropriate lodging for his court and staff across his empire. Principal palaces were located in and around Paris: the Tuileries palace in the capital, Fontainebleau to the south, and the Trianon to the west.

Among all the architects associated with the Imperial Household, the reputable team of Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine and Charles Percier was tasked with adapting many of the existing former royal residences to meet the organizational requirements of the Imperial Household. Albums in this gallery document the changes the Napoleonic government made to these existing buildings.

Coupled with the panorama, these albums make it possible to understand the scope of Napoleon's architectural vision for the city of Paris and his official residences.

SECTION 10: Exile

Following several military defeats beginning in 1812, Napoleon's empire collapsed in April 1814. The victorious forces of Austria, Russia, and Prussia required Napoleon to sign the Treaty of Fontainebleau on April 11, 1814.

In exchange for renouncing his position and residency in France, the treaty granted Napoleon the right to reign as Emperor over the small Mediterranean island of Elba, off the coast of Italy. With his Imperial Household and military staff officially released from their oaths of loyalty, Napoleon established a small court on Elba, employing faithful followers and local gentry.

Meanwhile in Paris, the French Senate invited Louis XVI's brother to return, after twenty-three years in exile, to restore the Bourbon dynasty. When the newly crowned Louis XVIII reestablished his Royal Household, several former officers from Napoleon's Imperial Household quickly applied.

At first, Napoleon occupied his time on Elba modernizing his mini-state, but he soon grew bored and developed a plan for reconquering France. On March 1, 1815, he sailed from Elba, landed in Provence, and headed for Paris. Louis XVIII, finding little support from the French people, fled from the capital. Napoleon, emboldened by popular acclaim and supported by his former soldiers, reached Paris on March 20. The famous three-month reign, known as the "Hundred Days," had begun.

SECTION 10: Exile

The European monarchs, shocked and alarmed, rallied their armies once again to confront the man they now considered “a threat to world peace.” Napoleon’s dreams came to an end at Waterloo on June 18, 1815. He surrendered to England and abdicated for a second time. The victors condemned him to a harsher exile on Saint Helena, a distant island in the middle of the southern Atlantic Ocean. Having never diplomatically acknowledged the legitimacy of the French Empire, the British denied Napoleon his imperial title in this final exile.