NAPOLEON AT THE BOWES MUSEUM

ART TREASURES FROM NORTHERN ENGLAND

Photo taken by the author

A photo essay

by

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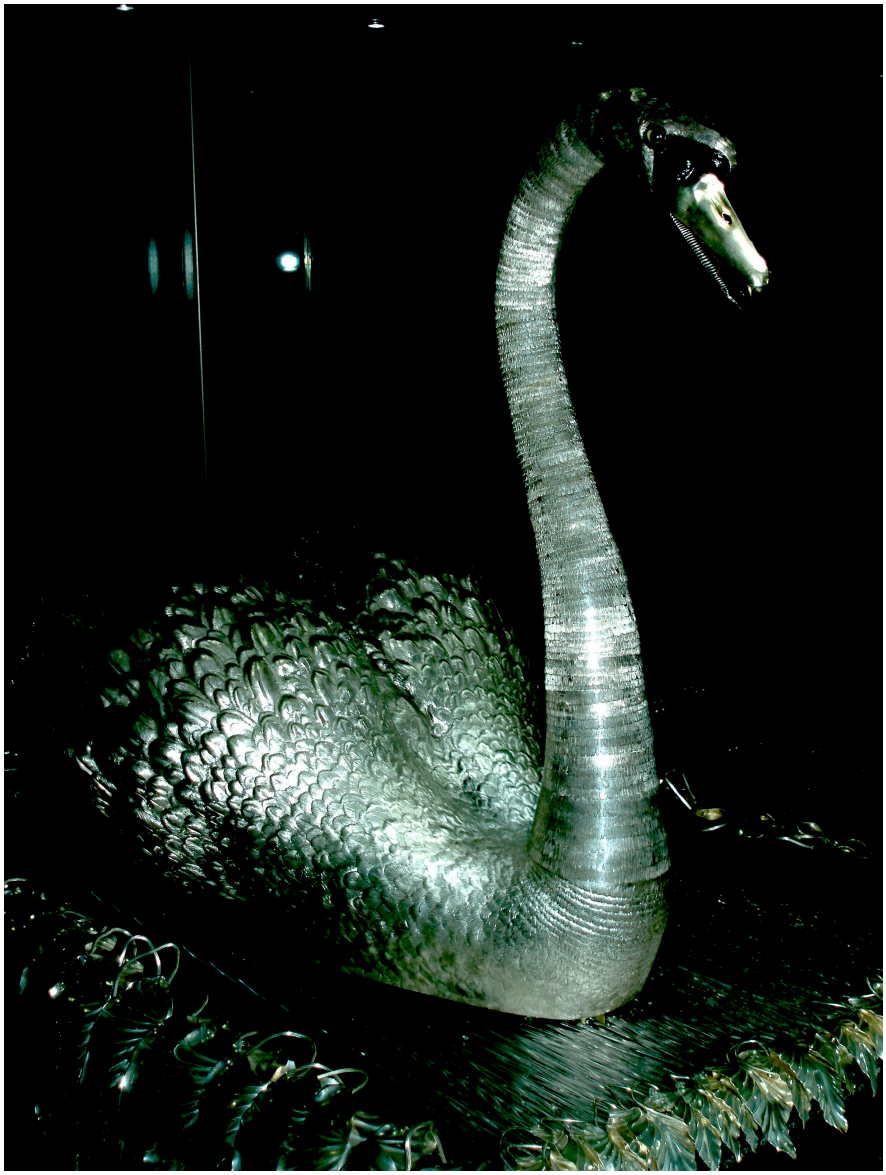
The superb Bowes Museum is situated in the delightful market town of Barnard Castle in the north of England, a place steeped in history and located in Teesdale, one of the most scenic areas of the British Isles. Long ago the area was disputed between Scottish raiders and doughty Northerners and its rugged beauty fell prey to the tramp of marching armies. The Bowes Museum reflects a more recent military struggle – that between England and Napoleonic France.

The Museum was built in the late C19th by John and Joséphine Bowes in order to display their magnificent collection of Art and furniture. In accordance with the patrician Victorian zeitgeist of the time, it was meant to display cultural riches to the common man. Sadly, neither of the couple lived to see the official opening on June 10th 1892, but what a legacy they bequeathed to the area! Some 63,000 people visited the Museum in its very first year.[1]

The most famous exhibit is the Silver Swan, a musical automaton that was made in 1773 - when Napoleon was only four years old – and displayed in the Mechanical Museum of James Cox of London.[2] Such automatons were very popular at the time. Napoleon once said that the French soldier was not an automaton, implying that he needed direction and a good reason to fight. The Emperor's famous bulletins helped serve this need.

However, what is really intriguing and of the utmost fascination to the Napoleonic scholar is an exhibition room that pits Napoleon against his most inveterate enemy of all time – the Comte d'Artois, the younger brother of Louis XVIII, whose motto could have been: 'Divine Right by might'. D'Artois loathed Napoleon with a mindless passion because in his eyes the Corsican Ogre had stolen the throne of France from its 'rightful' owner. It was d'Artois, exiled from France by the Revolution, who concocted one assassination attempt after another on Napoleon's life from Britain in comfortable boltholes first in Edinburgh and later at 72 South Audley Street London (from 1805 to 1814) – all the while supported by an large allowance from George III. He was literally 'paid to plot'.[3] His creature Montholon eventually succeeded in poisoning Napoleon on the island of Saint Helena in the far-flung wilds of the southern Atlantic Ocean. His enmity pursued Napoleon across land and sea to his lonely grave.



The famous Bowes swan – photo taken by the author

It is a strange feeling indeed to stand in a colossal exhibition hall and see Napoleon and d'Artois facing each other from opposing walls. The Bowes provides just such a dramatic experience and throws in for good measure a fine portrait of Joseph Bonaparte and an endearing painting of a young Pauline Bonaparte, whose plump round face is so instantly recognisable that for a moment it almost seems as if the painting is of mature Napoleon in drag!

Joseph served his younger brother for many years - after a fashion - only to flee Paris in a panic in 1814, leaving the city in Talleyrand's scheming hands. Talleyrand then presented the French capital to Tsar Alexander and Napoleon was forced to abdicate. It was while Napoleon kicked his heels on Elba that his most loyal sibling – Pauline - came to visit him on the island along with their mother. So

these portraits in the Bowes provoke a number of powerful and evocative associations for those interested in the First Empire.

Napoleon in Coronation robes c.1812 by Girodet (1767-1824) Photo taken by the author

In 1812, the year of the fateful Russian Campaign, Anne-Louis Girodet was given a commission for no less than thirty-six of these fine portraits (above). In Napoleon's left hand he holds a sceptre while his sumptuous robe is covered in gold bees, a decoration used by the old kings of France. The symbolism is clear – Napoleon is their worthy successor. The Emperor's right hand stretches over his famous Civil Code and around his neck is the grand collar of the Legion of Honour – an institution that recognized talent and ability in everyman. When Napoleon abdicated only twenty-six of these portraits had been completed and all were still in the artist's studio, only to be finally distributed after the painter's death.

Close-up of Napoleon. Photo taken by the author

Napoleon's nemesis d'Artois strikes a surprisingly similar stance in his own portrait by Baron François Gérard. By coincidence, the artist Girodet died the year this painting of Charles X was commissioned by the government in 1824. It was a popular exhibit at the Salon the following year.

D'Artois by Gérard - photo taken by the author

The royalist purges after Waterloo, backed by Lord Liverpool the British Prime Minister, and subsequent laws and prohibitions in France, along with Napoleon's own death on Saint Helena in 1821, meant that the greatness of his Empire was already being consigned to history. Various royalist writers also *re-wrote* history to appeal to d'Artois and his ilk and it is from this time that the lies and misinformation about Napoleon began to take root. The 'official' history stated that Napoleon had caused all the wars of the preceding two decades. This thought once planted by a very effective spin-machine has had the resilience of Japanese knotweed, hence the slurs and calumnies are still current to this day.

Meanwhile in England, perhaps the only thing that had prevented the British Government and aristocracy blaming the *American War of Independence* on Napoleon was that fact that he was only a small boy when that particular conflict broke out. As for it being the *British navy* that Napoleon had kicked out of Toulon; British gold that had paid for all those assassination attempts; and British gunpowder and ships that had been used in these acts of terrorism – all that was quietly and conveniently forgotten by the Royalists on either side of the English Channel.

D'Artois air of supercilious superiority is clearly discerned in his portrait. A believer in divine right on the Charles 1st of England scale (and look where that got him – Revolution and the axe), d'Artois became apoplectic when Napoleon crowned himself Emperor. Next to his portrait at the Bowes it states that: "As a young prince he acquired a rather notorious reputation at the French Court, which together with his strong belief in aristocratic rights and privileges made him a particularly hated figure by revolutionists, and in 1789 his brother Louis XVI, ordered him to leave France from whence he eventually settled at the Palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh."

So it was, that d'Artois spent some considerable time living nearer to Barnard Castle in the North of England, where the Bowes would eventually be built, than he was to his native France. And by a twisted irony, he was eventually, if indirectly, helped back to the throne by that defrocked priest and very crooked man Talleyrand, he of the slithering walk devised by himself so that even as a cripple he could appear suitable self-important when he launched himself upon parquet floors. Talleyrand later helped Louis XVIII and thus Charles X regain their thrones. He couldn't have done it without that other creature of the night, Fouché, and well was it said when they once

appeared together, that there goes vice arm-in-arm with crime. Whereas Talleyrand betrayed Napoleon and France in 1814 by giving Paris to the Allies, in 1815 after Waterloo, Fouché ensured that Paris was kept out of Napoleon's reach, despite the common people cheering for the Emperor in their droves.

As one reads of the exploits of d'Artois, Talleyrand and Fouché it is similar to being acquainted with three villains from Hollywood central casting. It almost seems that legions of the dead, lives taken by their machinations, are hissing in the background as if in some Victorian melodrama. Throughout the affairs of the Revolution, down through the years of Empire to those of the Restoration, Talleyrand is the ubiquitous spider securely planted in the midst of a vast web of intrigue. Scuttling in the shadows is Fouché, head of the secret police, with loyalties to no one other than himself. After at first serving Napoleon, they then did their best to bring him down and helped restore the benighted Bourbon monarchy to the French throne. Those who believe Waterloo led to Napoleon's downfall don't know the half of it.

It is eminently satisfying to know that D'Artois got his just deserts. An extreme Catholic and ultra-reactionary, it was almost as if he wanted to turn the clock back to the time of Christ, not just to before the Revolution. He was already 67 when he became King in 1824, a nasty anachronism from antediluvian times. But in trying to set the clock back he himself ran out of time. As the Bowes states: "Charles' attempts to reverse the ideals of the Revolution made him deeply unpopular and in July 1830, public revolts forced him to abdicate." He skulked off to the land of his former paymasters, the English, before going to Prague. He finally died of cholera in Italy. But he had lived a long if blighted and malevolent life, far longer than that of the man he had had murdered on a rock in the Southern Ocean.

There is also a fine bust of the Emperor at the Bowes. It is easy to see why the artist David was so taken by the shape of Napoleon's head after the young general swept into Paris in December 1797 trailing clouds of glory: "Oh my friends, what a fine head he has! It's pure, it's great, it's as beautiful as the Antique! Here is a man to whom altars would have been erected in ancient times; yes, my friends, yes my dear friends! Bonaparte is my hero!"[4]

Invited to accompany Napoleon to Egypt, David declined. What a loss to history and Art that was. Who knows what masterpieces the overawed artist might have produced of the new Alexander?

The liveliest and the most incorrigible of Napoleon's sisters was Pauline – and she was his favourite. Whether it was the stories he heard about her supposedly swimming naked in the sea off Marseilles or just his fears about her own forward, not to say provocative nature, he knew that he had to keep an eye on his errant sibling.

Pauline and her older sister Elisa were two peas from the same pod: "One thing, and only one, *l'Amour*, occupied their thoughts. Sexually precocious, naturally audacious, and extremely vivacious, these two made sure that they were seen about town."[5] If there was going to be a storm in the port of Marseilles, these two were sure to be at the centre of it. They were a social tsunami all of their own. For 'a girl without fortune' - as Jane Austen might have put it - there was always one certain, sure way to attract members of the opposite sex. But the liberties involved were not the sort that Rousseau and Voltaire had been writing about.

Pauline Bonaparte (1780-1825) by Louise Marie Jeane Mauduit (1784-1826) Photo taken by the author

As a young girl, Pauline had been a tomboy and: "*Garcon manqué,* she gave little promise of the completely feminine creature that she would become."[6] In Mauduit's portrait she has almost Rubenesque proportions with her puppy fat, rounded face and plump hands. But the ungainly creature here displayed would soon be transformed into a woman of consummate beauty, a Pre-Raphaelite stunner long before there were even Pre-Raphaelites. But no Blesséd Damozel was she. She had the Devil in her veins and before long she would have no need of rings because so many men were wrapped around her little fingers.

As her big brother was soon to discover, there was more to life than conquering countries and creating empires. Napoleon became a very human piece of clay in the hands of Josephine – she was able to mould him to her every whim. She toyed with him mercilessly, but he always loved her and died with her name upon his lips. Little Pauline

knew instinctively her own immense power and she took human hearts with incredible ease. She became a veritable goddess in her own right. In South Yorkshire patois, she could have taken ducks off water and she was definitely “a warm ’un”. No man is a match for *that woman*, his very own femme fatale.

In another portrait by Robert Lefevre from Apsley House in London, we see a much more assured, if slightly jaded Pauline, sans puppy fat.

Pauline Bonaparte, Princess Borghese (1780-1825) by Robert Lefevre (1755-1830)

Apsley House belonged to the Duke of Wellington, who bedded two of Napoleon’s former mistresses in Paris after Waterloo. Perhaps Wellington was thinking of yet another conquest when he saw this painting?

But there was another side to Pauline herself, a tender and loving one. When Napoleon faced a lonely exile in Elba, she determined to go and visit him and try to cheer him up: “Marie-Louise broke her promise to come there with their son, as she had fallen in love with Count Niepperg, her political adviser, and whose mistress she became. Josephine was dead, and the faithless Marie Walewska, after one lightning visit, faded from sight. But Pauline came to comfort

him."[7] Of course, encouraged by his political enemies, this led to stories of incest between them. Supposedly one of Pauline's letters asked for six bottles of *Rob l'Affecteur* a well-known treatment for syphilis – but this was enough to have cured the whole island![8]

Others had for a long time been spreading stories that Napoleon had been having sexual relations with his stepdaughter Hortense. As these calumnies were current during his lifetime, and many others were invented for Royalist readers after his fall from power, it should come as no surprise that many other untruths and exaggerations became manifest in the two centuries after his death.

In 1815 after the Battle of Waterloo, the young Tsar Alexander, seen as the saviour of Europe by the aristocrats in every land, lauded it over all in the salons of Paris. Yet he *was* committing incest with his sister Catherine, who seemed the only one capable of calming his delirious self-pretensions. And Alexander had also acquiesced in the murder of his own father, Tsar Paul, who had earlier become an ally of Napoleon. In reality, it seems that the Romanov pot was decidedly blacker than the Corsican kettle. As J.F Bernard puts it: "Catherine was reputedly Alexander's mistress. As well as his sister… She always had great influence over her imperial brother, by means of a talent for satisfying both his lusts and his ego."[9]

Joseph Bonaparte, King of Spain c. 1811 by François-Joseph Kinsoen (1771-1839) Photo taken by the author

Joseph Bonaparte was originally called Giuseppe and he was older than Napoleon by only a year, born in 1768. In 1808 Napoleon made

him King of Spain, a post he did not want and to which events were to prove he was certainly not suited. The Bowes states that here he is: "wearing his military uniform with a red sash and gold epaulettes. The decorations on his chest include the Order of the Golden Fleece and the Légion d'Honneur. Here François-Joseph Kinsoen's sober, heroic portrait is reminiscent of the work of Jacques-Louis David."

Totally lacking Napoleon's charisma and military skills, Joseph was unable to cope with the revolts and insurrections in his adopted country. The Spanish war, notably likened to an 'ulcer' by Napoleon himself, flared up time and again amongst the ignorant peasantry whose primitive priests and monks proclaimed a virtual crusade against the French invaders. It was reminiscent of a modern jihad only on this occasion is was 'peace-loving' priests and monks who told their flocks that the quickest way to heaven was to kill a Frenchman. The conflict descended to the depths of depravity with horrific brutality being shown by both the Spanish and the French, who retaliated in kind.

It is often forgotten that Napoleon was invited to sort out a dispute between the Bourbon Spanish King Charles IV and his wayward son. Charles who was sixty in 1808 and a great lover of food – a Bourbon trait – was dominated by his wife, Queen Maria-Luisa, who was so ugly she could have tuned Medusa into stone. Nevertheless, she had a lover, Godoy, who controlled them both as if they were mere finger puppets. As for those representatives of the Church: "the monks, insolent, libertine and ignorant, lived off the populace which remained poverty-stricken."[10] The ignoble heir to this backward den of iniquity was Crown Prince Ferdinand who was just itching to rule himself.

Ferdinand hoped to marry a French princess and increase his status thereby, so he wrote to Napoleon with this in mind. His letter was ignored. Then Charles IV penned a missive of his own complaining about his 'unnatural' son who had now been arrested by Godoy. There were more twists in this father-son-lover relationship than there are in a monkey puzzle tree, suffice it to say: "Appealed to by father and son, Napoleon became the arbitrator of this family quarrel."[11] Here was a poisoned chalice of monumental proportions.

Yet again, it was Talleyrand who filled Napoleon's cup. The Vice-Grand Elector - it was said it was the *only vice* he didn't have before - and Minister of Foreign Affairs, was overheard by Pasquier saying:

‘Since Louis XIV, the crown of Spain has belonged to France’s reigning family. It is one of the best parts of the great king’s heritage and the Emperor should inherit it whole; he must, he cannot abandon any part of it.’[12]

Talleyrand, the man with the non-Midas touch – he had a penchant for turning to lead many of the golden opportunities that lay before Napoleon – was at the bottom of the whole thing. Just as he had encouraged Napoleon to arrest the duc d’Enghien and promised to visit Turkey to make peace with the Sultan before Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign, which he then failed to do, he made a bad situation worse.

Next to Joseph’s portrait, the Bowes comments: “Napoleon’s brother is represented as a benevolent ruler in an attempt to counteract his public image as a weak king, unable to deal with the popular uprisings that eventually led to the French defeat in the Peninsular Wars and ultimately his own abdication in 1813. His failure was followed by the restoration of Ferdinand VII and by decades of despotic repression.” Ferdinand was a chip off d’Artois’ block.

The Bowes Museum is well worth a visit and not just for those interested in all things Napoleonic. The castle that gives the town of Barnard Castle its name is itself impressive and is within striking distance of Hadrian’s Wall and the stupendous Bamburgh Castle on the East coast, as well as Monkwearmouth where Saint Peter’s, the oldest church in the north of England c. 674 AD, is situated. Yet the frisson one gets standing in front of the portraits of Napoleon and d’Artois, and looking from one to the other, is a sensation all of its own.

A SOULADREAM PRODUCTION

NOTES

1. See The Bowes Museum Website for more details on this impressive museum.
2. Ibid.
3. See Wikipedia under The Bowes Museum.
4. Brookner Anita *David* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1980) 142
5. Article *Pauline Borghese* by Helen Barnes in *International History Magazine* No.13 January 1974, 60
6. Ibid., 60
7. Ibid., 68
8. Ibid., 68
9. Bernard J.F. *Talleyrand: A Biography* (London, History Book Club, 1973) See Footnote 354
10. Tranie J. and Carmigniani J.-C. *Napoleon's War in Spain* (London, Arms And Armour Press, 1982) 19
11. Ibid., 19
12. Ibid., 21 quoted from Pasquier's memoirs.

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