

# THE GRAND PARIS OF NAPOLEON: FROM A DREAM OF MAGNIFICENCE TO A DREAM OF UTILITY

*By Annie Jourdan, FINS  
University of Amsterdam*

*"I have made it the glory of my reign to change the face of my empire's territory. The completion of these great works is necessary both to the interest of my peoples and to my own satisfaction."<sup>1</sup>*

From 1796 to Saint Helena, Napoleon made innumerable remarks concerning architecture, urban design, and great construction projects. On board of the ship transporting him to Egypt, the general of the Republic confided to the dramatist Antoine-Vincent Arnault a dream that was difficult to accomplish: to transform Paris into "the most beautiful city possible... to combine all the admirable aspects of Athens, Rome, Babylon, and Memphis."<sup>2</sup> He communicated this same ambition to his companions in exile on St. Helena, regretting that he had insufficient time to complete what he had started. If heaven had allowed him another twenty years and a little leisure, "one would have searched in vain for the old Paris, there would only be a few vestiges remaining."<sup>3</sup> The face of France itself would have changed. Napoleon did not succeed in conquering the twenty years he needed to execute his vast projects. Yet, he did have fifteen years to achieve the dream of his youth and create the ideal city.

The new Paris would have possessed "vast open areas ornamented by monuments and statues, gushing fountains on all the avenues to purify the air and clean the streets, with canals circulating between the trees of the boulevards encircling the capital, monuments incorporating public usefulness, such as bridges, theaters, and museums, whose architecture would be enriched with all the magnificence compatible with their various functions."<sup>4</sup> Architecture and urban design would combine to bring the Parisians comfort and health, prestige and beauty. Yet, Bonaparte was conscious of the requirements of a judicious financial policy. He recognized the mistakes committed at Versailles and produced reasonable if peculiar solutions.<sup>5</sup>

In matters of architecture as well as in those of the beaux-arts, it was Italy that provided the reference point par excellence. Although Bonaparte invoked Greek culture, he never really knew the marvels of Athens which were just being discovered. Yet, he also hadn't seen Rome, whose ancient remains were accessible to him only through illustrated publications. In Italy, he certainly visited the cities conquered during the campaign of the Year IV: Modena, Parma, Verona, Bologna, Milan or Florence.<sup>6</sup> If one believes his

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<sup>1</sup> Napoleon Bonaparte, *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier* (Paris, 1858-1869), XVI, 164.

<sup>2</sup> A.V. Arnault, *Souvenirs d'un sexagénaire* (Paris, 1853), IV, 102.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel de Las Cases, *Mémoires de Sainte-Hélène*, (Paris, 1951), II, 120.

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<sup>4</sup> Arnault, 102.

<sup>5</sup> He suggested employing soldiers instead of workers in time of peace, which would undoubtedly have displeased the veterans.

<sup>6</sup> Napoleon, *Correspondance*, I, 359. He noted above all the majestic beauty of the amphitheater.

correspondence, Verona in particular impressed him greatly, even before he invaded Egypt and discovered the pyramids, obelisks, columns, and necropoli. But Paris had already conquered him, as demonstrated by his remarks to Arnault. Paris would have to “surpass the splendor of all the cities in the universe.” Under the wand of the supreme magician, Paris and indeed all of France was to become “the most beautiful empire that had ever existed.”<sup>7</sup>

There lay the dream of the Emperor of the French, which allows us to understand what he intended when he spoke of the embellishments of Paris and its great works. Yet, the path was long and tortuous from dream to reality, even if the Empire was a reign in which the marvelous and the real intertwined.<sup>8</sup>

### The dream of magnificence

On the morrow of the 18 Brumaire coup, Bonaparte’s first concern was for the embellishments of Malmaison. The architect Pierre Fontaine was in charge of the works and soon learned that the First Consul was not easy to please. Josephine was equally demanding with projects that changed constantly and which she wanted without limits or conditions. Resistance not only alienated her confidence, but also that of the

<sup>7</sup> Gaspard Gourgaud, *Journal de Sainte-Hélène* (Paris, 1947), II, 20-21. P. Fontaine, *Journal* (Paris, 1987), I, 510.

<sup>8</sup> On this subject, see my book, *Napoleon: Héros, Imperator, mécène* (Paris, 1998).

First Magistrate of France.<sup>9</sup> The administrators of the Louvre Museum knew exactly the cost of such resistance: they were dismissed for opposing the will of Citizen Bonaparte. Fontaine therefore accepted without demur orders that he considered unreasonable—contenting himself with noting, his disapproval in his journal.

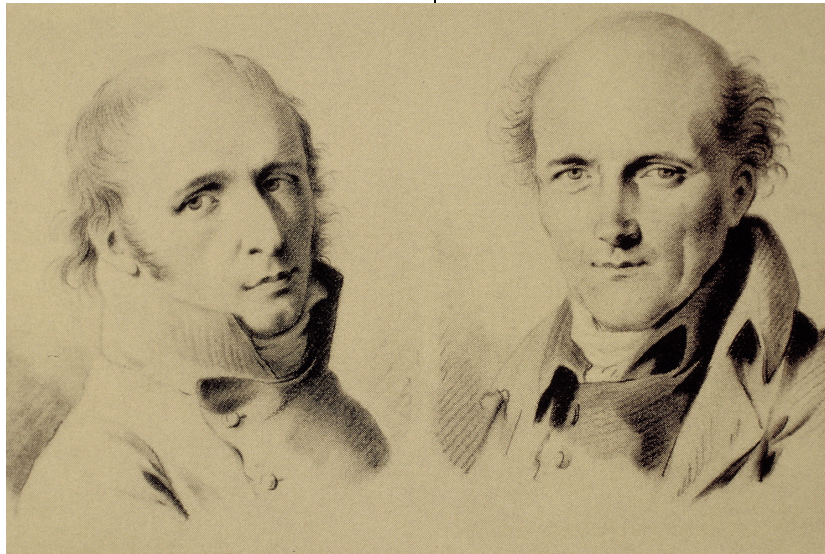
Beginning in 1801, the architect was saddled with another prestigious function: responsibility for the Tuileries. That palace was in poor condition and the decorations added during the Revolution were no longer in style. The First Consul wanted a structure that

matched his tastes and his rank, in other words charming and magnificent. Fontaine and Charles Percier did their best to satisfy him. The measures they took revealed that Bonaparte wanted to isolate, increase, and adapt the place where he was going to live. Little by little, the second and third consuls were to be excluded from the palace, while gates closed off entry to the galleries and contained the crowds of curious who came to admire the weekly parade. The least event involved changes in the distribution of apartments, which were constantly redecorated without completely satisfying the supreme head or his wife Josephine.<sup>10</sup>

Greater embellishments followed the coronation of December 1804. The Emperor and the Empress with their servants would henceforth occupy the entire palace. Meanwhile was born the idea of connecting the Tuileries with the Louvre to

<sup>9</sup> Fontaine, I, 11; 27; 31; 52 and 231.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 21-29. The project prompted him to suggest building a road and selling the lots that remained “on the river.”



*Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine*  
(19th century lithograph, The David Markham Collection)

form “a single monument dedicated to the residence of the sovereign.”<sup>11</sup> Here again major projects were necessary, including restoring the colonnade, enclosing the courtyard, restoring the galleries, reestablishing the facades, and increasing and decorating the portrait gallery. In the Tuileries itself, they added a new chapel, a hall for the Council of State, and apartments worthy of the Empress. Yet, all of this had to be accomplished with economy and speed, the most important imperial requirement. Upon returning from Austerlitz, Napoleon was finally satisfied: the hall of Marshals was finished, as well as Josephine’s apartments.<sup>12</sup> But he intended now to add a new wing to the Tuileries, parallel to that along the banks of the Seine. To be able to do so, the archives had to be transferred to the Louvre, re-designated as the Conservatory of Arts and Letters, and above all to connect the two palaces. From this plan arose the idea of an imperial avenue divided along its main axis that would be bordered by porticos and would form a promenade in a winter garden. An arch of triumph would arise at each end of the avenue, with one arch dedicated to peace and the other to war. The whole, vast and majestic, surrounded by railings and extending to the Place de la Concorde, would be worthy of the victor of Austerlitz. But a grave problem would ruin this great project.<sup>13</sup>

This problem was the lack of parallelism between the positions of the Louvre and of the Tuileries. Percier and Fontaine proposed to resolve this problem by constructing a transverse gallery, forming a portico to contain the Imperial Library and Archives. To complete this great work, an area would be opened in front of the colonnade, on the site where Sainte-Germain-l’Auxerrois was to be demolished. The emperor rejected this proposal of the two architects. He protested that an edifice

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., I, 59 and 102.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., I, 220. Despite the demands for economy, the budget was often exceeded to “respond to the views of the Emperor and the Empress who in two different manners commanded the greatest possible richness.”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., I, 46, 70, 102 and 122.

between the two palaces would break up the most beautiful view in the world. Napoleon was absolutely inflexible in this regard.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, he did not know how to decorate this immense space. At this point, the government architect discovered the fickleness, mistrust, and indecision of the master of the universe. Indecision such as, in January 1808, the ideas of magnificence and ostentation suddenly gave way to considerations of economy and utility. Napoleon asked for stables, quarters and outbuildings, only to change his mind a month later and order the construction of the transverse gallery. Yet, although he consented to the construction of the gallery, he wanted it to be on a scale that would tower over the two palaces. Fontaine invoked the need for symmetry and order, but the emperor demanded grandeur because “beauty rests solely in grandeur.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, grandeur had its drawbacks. It did not permit construction of the quarters, edifices, and monuments of which Napoleon felt the need.

After his stay in Spain, during which the Emperor saw prestigious palaces such as the Prado of Madrid, his requirements became even greater. Napoleon required that the Louvre be of a “magnificence that would be the equal of all he had seen.” Thus, on January 17, 1810, while he remained convinced deep inside that “anything placed between the Louvre and the Tuileries was not worth a beautiful court,” he decided to adopt Fontaine’s project to construct the famous transverse gallery. A budget of 26 million francs was allocated for all the construction in the Louvre. Still, on the eve of the 1813 campaign, Napoleon had not fully resolved to reduce the majestic panorama that separated the two palaces, because he remained convinced that “it mattered little if a great edifice is not completely regular . . . that

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<sup>14</sup> See also Lanzac de Laborie, *Paris sous Napoleon* (Paris, 1905), II, 162-163. M. L. Biver, *Le Paris de Napoleon* (Paris, 1963), 292-326.

<sup>15</sup> Fontaine, Vol. I, 196 and 200.

which is true is always beautiful.”<sup>16</sup> The indecision continued, which explains why the connection of the Louvre to the Tuileries was not accomplished under the First Empire.

Even in the Louvre, work continued. Decorations, paintings, sculpture, gildings, no expense was spared to transform the museum into a “parade palace.” In 1812, there remained the question of installing a great apartment for the sovereign in a portion of the colonnade, but the restorations were virtually completed. At the Tuileries, the situation was the same, but with the passage of time Napoleon was less and less pleased with the results. He felt too cramped both inside and out. What he wished for at that time was a simple bungalow with a garden where he could walk at ease. For the same reason, he arranged the park of Monceaux for the Children of France, so that they at least might “breathe the fresh air.” Thus, the thirst for grandeur and magnificence disappeared, when it was a matter of his private life and convenience, as it was termed at the time. Like the other men of that century, Napoleon loved nature, open air, and promenades, not only for the calm appropriate to good health, but also out of fear of “Mephitism” (air pollution) in the major cities. From this came his predilection for gushing fountains, juts of water and cascades, which he added little by little to the capital.<sup>17</sup>

The criticism about the inconveniences of the Tuileries and the Louvre are related a new aspiration of the new son of the Caesars. After some hesitation and after his marriage with Marie-Louise, indeed, Napoleon had decided to undertake Fontaine’s most ambitious projects. One such project, apparently suggested by Jacques-Louis David in 1810, was to construct a new palace on the mount of Chaillot. Napoleon at first considered this idea too difficult, but it worked its way insidiously into his thoughts. He invited Fontaine to present his plans for a “pleasure house,” a small summer palace or villa, but as

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 250 and 353.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., I, 271 and 310.

imagination and a favorable future encouraged it, the dream of magnificence and grandeur revived. In January 1811, twenty million francs were allocated for construction. A visit to the site only confirmed the Emperor in his desire to build from scratch. The palace of Chaillot would compensate for the inconveniences of the Tuileries. On the model of the Acropolis, it would dominate the city, the Champ de Mars, and the Ecole Militaire and rank with the largest works ever undertaken in France. In 1812 he added the idea of constructing new buildings on the grounds of Gros Caillou, close to the Champ de Mars, in view of what had meanwhile become the palace of the King of Rome. Fifteen million was set aside for the construction of four edifices: archives, palace of the arts, university, and barracks.<sup>18</sup> The Emperor began to amuse himself by repeating that restorations were too onerous and that they “added little to honor.” To enter into history as a great builder, better was to construct anew! The architect Fontaine silently aspired to this. The new district would be stunning in its magnificence, richness, and beauty, especially if one prolonged the Champs Elysées to the foot of Chaillot and if one punctuated this new imperial axis with princely residences. The establishment of this district was formally ordered on March 21, 1812.<sup>19</sup>

Delighted by the concept of raising unprecedented monuments and creating a new city within the old Paris, Napoleon became passionate about the project. During the summer of 1812, foundations and sewers were begun. All seemed for the better in this best of all worlds. Yet, at the very moment that the dream took form, the disastrous news arrived: The Russian campaign was a total defeat. Upon his return to Paris, a demoralized Napoleon had more modest ideas. His first reverse dampened his megalomania. It was no longer a question of surpassing Versailles or the Palace Real, but of imitating Frederick the Great’s Sans-Souci. The goal was no longer magnificence—“the completion of the Louvre will suffice to satisfy

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., I, 285 and 322.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., I, 322-325.

vainglory” —but to build a palace appropriate for a convalescent, for a man in his later years. Napoleon recognized the need for economies, but he had not renounced the idea of constructing a great complex. On November 26, 1813, he made a final visit to the sites. Fontaine still dreamed, but realized in his heart that the palace of the King of Rome was no more than a “castle in the air.” In fact, fighting resumed during the winter of 1813 and froze in place what might have been the most beautiful architectural formation of the First Empire.<sup>20</sup>

“The most frequent and also the most intriguing remark one can make is of the intimate relationship between Bonaparte’s projects and the political circumstances of his position and the precautions that those circumstances demanded.” This remark by Louis-Francois Bausset, prefect of the imperial palace, deserves due consideration. It encourages us to identify analogies between architecture and politics. The more the consular power increased, the more Bonaparte laid claim to prestigious spaces, such as the Chateau of Saint-Cloud, which he had at first refused.<sup>21</sup> Begun in September 1801, this major work was completed in the following spring. The work, which Berthier had estimated at 25,000 francs, actually cost more than three million. Yet, visitors all admired the richness and good taste of the interiors, carefully decorated by art works taken from public depositories and the Louvre. The embellishments continued because, even during the Empire, Saint-Cloud remained a privileged residence.

Saint-Cloud in good weather, the Elysée Palace for comfort in winter, the Tuileries and the Louvre for “vainglory,” these three residences should have satisfied the republican Emperor. He said as much at Saint Helena, when he criticized the kings of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 376.

<sup>21</sup> L. Bausset, *Mémoires anecdotiques sur l’intérieur du Palais et sur quelques événements de l’Empire depuis 1805 jusqu’au premier mai 1814 pour servir à l’histoire de Napoléon* (Paris, 1829), IV, 111-112. Lanza de Labroie, II, 184. The Tribunate had proposed Saint-Cloud after Marengo, but Bonaparte had refused it.

France for the sums wasted on innumerable “country houses” while he recognized that two or three palaces would amply suffice for him. Yet, soon after embellishing Saint Cloud, the First Consul became interested in Fontainebleau. There, wrote Bausset, he gave “the first indication of his desire to be raised to the imperial purple.” Once he was crowned Emperor, Napoleon decided, in addition to his other projects, to restore the majority of royal chateaux. After Fontainebleau came, in turn, Compiègne, Rambouillet, Richelieu, Trianon, Meudon, and obviously Versailles. There, beginning in August 1807 after the Treaty of Tilsit, he demanded “magnificence and grandeur.” To this end, he sought to conceal all the small structures erected under Louis XIII behind a peristyle and a huge arch of triumph, which formed the façade facing Paris. In reality, he wished to transform Versailles into a Greek temple, much to Fontaine’s despair. After the campaign in Russia, he gave no further instructions about this, dismissing Versailles as “a work of ostentation which could never be more than mediocre.” Rather than be mediocre, it was better to do nothing.<sup>22</sup> In 1813, conscious that such works were “a matter built over centuries,” Napoleon gave up attempting to leave his mark on the Bourbon Palace.

### The dream of eternity

Parallel to the imperial palaces that Napoleon never ceased to embellish, restore, enlarge, or (on paper at least) create, all of which reflected his desire for magnificence, the Emperor of the French also conceived various monuments intended to perpetuate the memory of French exploits and all that they had accomplished. If one were to believe his secretary, L.A. Bourrienne, Napoleon’s passion for monuments “almost equaled his passion for war.”<sup>23</sup> For him, a conquest was not “a completed

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<sup>22</sup> Fontaine, I, 298-299 and 303. A first estimate of expenses at Versailles totaled six million.

<sup>23</sup> L.A. Bourrienne, *Mémoires de M. de Bourrienne sur Napoléon, le Directoire, le Consulate, l’Empire et la Restauration*, (Paris, 1829), IV, 39 and 53. Note that at Boulogne the army of the coasts

work if it lacked a monument to transmit the memory to posterity." At first, he ostentatiously refused monuments dedicated to him personally—whether they were decreed by the General Council of the Seine, the Tribunate, the Legislative Corps or even the various cities of France and Italy. Yet, beginning in 1806, after Austerlitz, various decrees betrayed Napoleon's aspiration to immortalize his reign and his exploits in marble and bronze.<sup>24</sup>

To this end, in February of that year he ordered an arch of triumph "to the glory of our armies" located at the main entry to the Tuileries Palace. A million francs was allocated to be paid by contributions from the Grand Army in honor of which it was raised. The first stone was laid in July 1806 and the great work was completed during the fall of 1808. As usual, Percier and Fontaine were responsible for the architectural design. The task was delicate, because the arch needed to be not just in proportion to the dimensions of the palace but also in harmony with the perspective of the Tuileries.<sup>25</sup> The architects sought inspiration from the Roman arches of Constantine and of Septimius Severus. Forced to use readily-available materials, Percier and Fontaine rivaled each other in ingenuity and favored polychromy—little known or appreciated at that time, when few knew that the Greeks had made use of it. Columns of red marble, colored friezes, white stone quartered with gilded bronze - this mixture appeared to many contemporaries as a "strange cherry." On the other side, some understood that the architects were to make a virtue of necessity in which polychromy reduced the disparity between the additions at the top and the gilded quartering.

Vivant Denon, Director of the Louvre Museum, was in charge of the decorations, featuring

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dedicated a column surmounted by a colossal statue in imperial habit (by Houdon) that the Emperor accepted in Year VIII. The column was completed under the Empire, but the statue was not placed until 1814.

<sup>24</sup> Painting and engraving were also part of this effort. See my book, 253-288.

<sup>25</sup> Fontaine, I, 123-125. Napoleon feared that either "the arch will kill the chateau or the chateau will kill the arch."

anecdotal and historical scenes or classical allegories, with a clear preference for warrior motifs. Victory, Renown, War, Peace, and Force appeared, but also Prudence, Wisdom, Abundance, and Genius—especially the genius of History. Denon was also responsible for the idea of placing (in a triumphal chariot) a colossal statue by Lemot depicting Napoleon in imperial robes. The Emperor's reaction to this statue is well known. He exclaimed that it was inappropriate and demanded that it be removed immediately on the pretext that it was not for him to raise his own statues. The chariot of victory, pulled by the four horses of Corinth, remained empty throughout the following years, in the hope perhaps that posterity would erect a statue of the Hero among heroes.<sup>26</sup>

Napoleon was in fact disappointed by monument. He had hoped for a grandiose arch but was offered a simple pavilion. Beginning in May 1806, he conceived a project to erect numerous others: arches of Marengo, of Austerlitz, of peace and of religion. Four or five arches would be distributed around Paris, in addition to that of the Etoile. Could not the Emperor of the French at least follow the Roman imperators (triumphing commanders)? These monuments would have the advantage of sponsoring sculpture for ten years, and they would contribute to the prosperity of artisans, workers, and artists in the capital. Like many other Napoleonic projects, however, this one was not implemented, undoubtedly because of the immense expense involved and the construction problems they would have entailed. Yet, he continued to dream of a truly colossal arch, which gave rise to the arch in the Etoile. On several occasions he also suggested raising a second arch beside the Louvre to match that of the Carrousel.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., I, 2154-215. See the article by F. Boyer, "Napoléon et les monuments à sa gloire en France et en Italie," *Revue de l'Institut Napoléon*, 1958, No. 66. Curiously, Boyer does not mention the column of Boulogne nor the column Vendôme, which permits him to follow the Napoleonic version of this incident.

After the competition of the Year VIII for national and departmental columns, the site of the Etoile was frequently mentioned as the most prestigious and most worthy of the great nation. But there was hesitation concerning what kind of monument to build there. Some advocated a triumphal column, others an obelisk or an arch of triumph.<sup>27</sup> Champagny, the Interior Minister, and his successor Cr tet opted for an arch. Fontaine agreed, provided that the arch had truly colossal proportions. On February 10, 1808, Napoleon remained doubtful about this project and suggested an obelisk, only to follow his minister's advice several days later. There remained the question of its form, which was not a trivial matter. After various discussions, Fontaine proposed to follow the inspiration of the Janus Arch in Rome. Therefore, the arch of the Etoile was to be erected without columns and with four equal faces.<sup>28</sup> The architects intended a colossal edifice, "one of the most prominent of this type that had ever been made."<sup>29</sup> From this came a triumphal monument with ornaments that would sing of the Emperor's glory.

The design of the Etoile arch was carried over into other locations, such as that of the Bastille, where there was a plan to erect another arch of triumph.<sup>30</sup> The Etoile project would highlight the western portion of the capital, not only by its majestic perspective but also by its geographic position, because the sun set in that direction. The eastern portion therefore passed to a lower priority, although the Emperor retained the project to open a vast artery that would connect the Louvre to the Place of the Throne (today the Place of the Nation), passing by the Bastille and the Rue Saint-Antoine. Thus, the eastern perspective was not forgotten, but judged less urgent, which suggests intent to place the highest value on the

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<sup>27</sup> On this subject, see my book, 204-205.

<sup>28</sup> Fontaine, I, 190-200.

<sup>29</sup> Chalgrin's program mentioned that it would have 54.55 meters of face on 27 x 27 meters of width and 42.63 meters of height. AN F13-206, dossier 3.

<sup>30</sup> Napoleon, *Correspondance*, XII, 299 and 364.

places where the first sovereign of Europe had evolved. From the Louvre to the Tuileries, the Champs Elys es at the Etoile and at Chaillot, where the palace of the King of Rome was rising, they would elaborate upon the symbolic way conceived by Colbert and punctuated by prestigious monuments, which followed the course of the sun and in subsequent years would have prolonged the eastern perspective as far as the Place of the Throne—until it was extended still further to Vincennes.<sup>31</sup>

If the idea of erecting a column at the Etoile was abandoned, this motif continued to fascinate contemporaries. Columns had frequently been the order of the day at Paris, beginning with the competitions of the Years II and VIII. In 1803, there was another proposal to raise one in the Place Vendome. It would be dedicated to Charlemagne and to the French departments. Yet, the decree remained a dead letter until 1806, when a number of major projects were merged together, as remarked before, at the apogee of French power in Europe, culminating with the Treaty of Tilsit. The Institute and Champagny again proposed to substitute the image of the Emperor of modern times for that of the restorer of the Western Empire that is Charlemagne. The column was to be inspired by that of Trajan and would be surmounted by a statue of the "prince beloved by the nation."<sup>32</sup> Napoleon accepted the proposition and consented to approve the models, but said nothing about the statue, which suggested a tacit acceptance but permitted him to say later that the colossal effigy was erected without his order. Begun in 1806, the column named for the Grand Army or for Austerlitz was inaugurated on August 15, 1810, Napoleon's birthday. By that time, it was already ornamented with a bronze statue of the Emperor, crowned with gold and dressed as a Roman. This indicated that the statue referred to the warlike Rome of the Caesars.

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<sup>31</sup> On Colbert's projects, see M. Poete, *L'art a Paris a travers les ages* (Paris, 1924), 50, and Lanzac de Labourie, II, 140.

<sup>32</sup> Napoleon, *Correspondance*, XII, 188 (letter of Champagny of March 14, 1806, in response to Napoleon.)



An identical ambition was behind the decision to create a Temple of Glory at the Madeleine, celebrating the memory of the brilliant exploits of the French Army. On December 2, 1806, indeed, the Emperor in effect accepted a metamorphosis of the church begun under Louis XV into a temple commemorating heroism. The exterior frontispiece contained the laconic dedication: "The Emperor Napoleon to the soldiers of the Grand Army." On the inside, by contrast, there were numerous inscriptions, busts, and statues. In this monument, Napoleon ostensibly separated himself from the kings of France by consenting to share the honors of glory with those who had followed him on the battlefield, from simple soldiers to marshals. But this democratization of honors was not absolute, and the honorific hierarchy remained traditional and not democratic: it was done according to ranks and not exploits. So what? Napoleon's idea was that posterity might marvel at a monument "made by him for national heroes."<sup>33</sup>



*A snuffbox representing Napoleon as a Caesar*

In 1812, Napoleon lost interest in the project. He even regretted wasting 15 or 20 million francs on "a monument whose purpose is an ideal." By that date, as we have seen, one single great idea preoccupied him: the palace of Chaillot and its environs. Henceforth, he only dreamed of building anew or creating a new city, worthy of the founder of the fourth dynasty. There was an end to

<sup>33</sup> AN, F21-576. See also Legrand et Landon, *Description de Paris et de ses edifices* (Paris, 1818), 121.

monuments in honor of the soldiers. Enough edifices had been "raised to the immortal glory of France." What remained of his wishes were for "edifices whose grandeur and magnificence would eclipse all those that exist today." Did not the Vendome column and the Arch of the Carrousel continue to sing the praises of the Grand Army, decimated by the campaign in Russia. As for the Greek temple, was not Brongniard laboring to build it on the grounds of the sisters of Saint Thomas? The Bourse, a utilitarian edifice, would replace the Temple of Glory, henceforth judged incompatible with modern customs and religion. And thus, the concern of the Emperor in regard to the military was betrayed by the inclusion of barracks and a military hospital on the terrain known as Gros Caillou. After the Austrian marriage and the birth of his son, which ensured the continuity of his dynasty, his concern for convenience took the upper hand. This did not completely eliminate the desire for magnificence, especially at Versailles, but during the crisis years of 1811-1813, utilitarian projects took center stage, pushing into the shadows the thirst for ostentation and the desire to commemorate the victories and victims of battle.

The Pont Neuf was the designated location for a monument that would make up for abandoning the project on the site of the Madeleine. Decreed in August 1809, the granite obelisk, 180 feet tall, was to be dedicated to the French People but decorated with military motifs, as if the entire French Empire produced nothing but soldiers. It was to record "all the events that illustrated France during the campaigns of 1809." This "greatest of monuments of this genre was to have been finished in 1814. For obvious reasons, this did not happen."<sup>34</sup>

Despite the numerous projects inspired by the expedition to Egypt, that influence was rarely represented in imperial France. The gigantic pyramid that Napoleon wished to erect in Italy in memory of his two brilliant campaigns was never

<sup>34</sup> On this monument, see AN, AF IV-1290; Gourgaud, I, 205; J. A. Chaptal, *Mes souvenirs sur Napoléon* (Paris, 1893), 83.



begun, and remained at the stage of a sketch.<sup>35</sup> The obelisk of the Pont Neuf, the tallest ever built in the memory of man, was never accomplished, any more than the Egyptian temple of which Napoleon still dreamed on Saint Helena: all these were abandoned. The architectural variety of monuments erected or conceived under the Empire could not conceal an evident constant: the celebration of warrior values. The “most civilian of military men” understood monuments only in terms of celebrating his victories. Monuments told posterity of great military actions, of the heroism of soldiers and generals and the genius of the supreme chef. Forgotten were the principles and values of the Revolution. Allegories, emblems, historical scenes—all evoked campaigns, conquests and imperial ambitions. From a harangue to a meeting; from combat to submission; from peace to war. Napoleon reinserted into the national history and the French monuments the warlike values of which Louis XIV preached. Yet, in contrast to Louis the Great, he sought to meld the glory of the chief with the glory of the nation, so that they were “both reunited in monuments dedicated to national use, to men eminent for bravery and merit, who had well served the country and who died for it in combat.” The least monument would trace the greatest triumphs of the century and console the nation for such sacrifices. More than the Bourbons, Napoleon knew how to merge in his architecture themes of emulation, memorial, and deterrence. He incited men to do better, to do more, perpetuating the memory of their actions but also recalling to each one the man responsible for these miracles of heroism and sacrifice while demonstrating to Europe that under the Empire France shone in both arms and arts. He gradually abandoned the elegy for simple soldiers and vainglory, and made these monuments worthy of the fourth dynasty and his own glory. Still, a third concern inhabited him, more in accord with his own pragmatic temperament: utility.

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<sup>35</sup> A contest was opened on this subject, open to both old and new Frenchmen—from the annexed territories. *Correspondance*, XXV, 359.

## The dream of utility

Napoleon was sincerely preoccupied by works of general usefulness that in total made him prouder than the embellishments of imperial palaces and the new edifices built by Percier and Fontaine. This was visible in the annual reports on the state of the Empire and in the award of ten-year prizes – the «Prix décennaux». The first, it is true, tended to argue to public opinion the degree to which, despite his absences and preoccupations, the Emperor of the French still was concerned by works of general utility and focused on the comfort and well-being of his subjects. Thus, foremost in these reports, primacy went to roads, ports, canals, markets, slaughterhouses, exchanges, and flowing fountains.<sup>36</sup> Only after these did the reports mention the embellishments to the capital, while the numerous restorations of imperial palaces were not listed at all. Napoleon was not proud of such lavish expenditures. Yet, there was more. During the award of imperial prizes in 1810, Napoleon urged the jury to consider the Saint Quentin canal, the Simplon Pass in the Alps, and the route of Mont Cenis. This perplexed the fourth class of the Institute, because “canals and major roads have never been considered part of the Beaux-Arts,” but they did not wish to displease his majesty. At Napoleon’s insistence, the Institute decided to assign a rank among the ten-year prizes to great public works, provided that they were considered as a separate class. In architecture, the jury crowned Percier’s and Fontaine’s Carrousel. By contrast, Napoleon awarded a prize to the Saint Quentin Canal—not yet completed, and so it remained. This December 1810 intervention by Napoleon revealed the importance that he placed on routes and canals opened during his reign. It is also true that public opinion undoubtedly expected this of him. More than luxurious edifices, the great works of urban design, operating for the common good, transformed Napoleon into a republican emperor.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Napoleon was responsible for some thirty new fountains.

<sup>37</sup> *Correspondance*, XXI, 311. AN, AF IV-1050 (reports on the judging of ten year prizes.)

The same impression emerges from the memoirs of Saint Helena, where the exile enumerated the multiplicity of works completed during his reign. Embellishments, restorations, and improvements—sewers, slaughterhouses, markets, roads, canals, ports, subterranean galleries (Saint Martin Canal), which should be added to the construction of magnificent edifices: “There you have a treasure worth billions that will endure for centuries.” And he flattered himself that all this was completed without bankrupting the nation.<sup>38</sup> It is true that financing these projects was carefully managed, but the result had still cost the nation a billion francs. Millions had been absorbed in construction that remained incomplete or that was not very successful. From the Temple of Victory to the works at Versailles, from the monument to General Desaix on the Place des Victoires to that dedicated to General d’Hautpoul in the Place des Vosges; from the embellishments to the Invalides to the departmental columns and the national columns, from the colossal statue of Canova<sup>39</sup> to the elephant column on the Place de la Bastille or to the contest for the monument of Mont Cenis—many works were either abandoned or delayed in a period of crisis when utility again became the priority.

When Fontaine made this point in 1816, he deplored the fact that “almost all the buildings ordered under the Empire, often without much reflection or for motives that were not completely rational, have a character of grandeur, or profusion intermingled with stinginess, under which one can see the hesitation that accompanied their origin and execution.”<sup>40</sup> The architect was not completely

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<sup>38</sup> *Napoléon, Héros, imperator, mécène, op. cit.*, 219-221.

<sup>39</sup> The statue of Canova represented a nude Napoleon as a Greek god. It had little success in France, and was given to Wellington in 1815. The fountain of the elephant, an allusion to Hannibal and his crossing of the Alps, was never completed.

<sup>40</sup> Fontaine, I, 496-515. Opposed to this completely negative version of the facts in 1816 was the elegiac article of 1833, Percier and Fontaine, “Napoléon architecte,” *Revue de Paris* No. 52, 1833, 33-45.

wrong. No matter how sure Napoleon was in public life, he was less so in construction policy, especially as the times were so unstable with circumstances changing unceasingly.<sup>41</sup> Once he became the equal of the Caesars, for example, the emperor found it difficult to boast openly of his victories over Austria or to raise a temple to his own glory. Instead, he began to observe the proprieties. But, he also understood that the imprint he left on public spaces had to survive for centuries and perpetuate the memory of the Emperor’s genius. Thus, his projects ought to be neither mediocre nor ridiculous. However, many projects were therefore announced for their immediate effects, and not necessarily to be actually implemented—such as the colossal pyramid to be erected in Italy or the vast monument decreed for Mont Cenis in 1812. Other projects followed a jolting rhythm of starts and stops according to events, and still others were so onerous and complex that they were executed in progressive stages—this was the sequence of events for the project of a new Versailles.<sup>42</sup> Such projects required time, yet among all the obstacles that Napoleon confronted, the greatest was undoubtedly time.

In conclusion, it must be noted that the thirst for grandeur and magnificence never overcame the spirit of economy and the dream of utility. Parsimony and prudence frequently succeeded megalomania, notably in 1813, when he asserted that “the Arch of Triumph, the Jena Bridge, the Temple of Glory may all be delayed for two or three years without inconvenience, whereas it is of the greatest urgency that the storehouse be completed.” Moreover, the objects of general utility often allied beauty with usefulness: these included Brongniard’s Bourse, the fountains at the Chatelet

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<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that the Canal of the Ourcq and the route of Mont Cenis were completed; that more than 30 fountains were created, including that which is still found at the Chatelet and which recalls Egypt. The Vendome column was inaugurated in 1810; that of the Carrousel was terminated, having been only temporary.

<sup>42</sup> In 1815, Napoleon renounced that project; Versailles became “an accessory object.” *Correspondance*, XXVIII, 34-35.

and the Bastille, and a colossal bronze elephant whose water spouted from the trunk. If during years of economic crisis the triumphal and luxurious monuments were delayed, Napoleon continued to pursue other great works: grain exchanges, roads, canals, the Bourse, the Pantheon, and the basilica of Saint Denis. Construction continued not only to ensure employment for workers and artisans, but also to mix the glory of the sovereign with that of France. These great works, whatever they were, would they not endure for centuries? They would confound the calumnies and aroused the admiration of future generations, even more so because they were accomplished in the midst of continuous wars and without any borrowing. These were the true treasures of Napoleon the Great. The dream of eternity did not remain asleep, notwithstanding the subtle shift that began about 1812 and which gave priority to works of general utility. Only the dream of eternity really counted for the Emperor of the French. And he who liked to remark that "there is no point in living on this earth without leaving some traces that will recommend our memory to posterity" never ceased to multiply such traces both in France and abroad.