Arts

On Exhibit: Napoleon's Love of Ancient Rome and his Struggles with the Papacy

"Napoleon and the Myth of Rome," the exhibition to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Napoleon's death, will be on view in Rome till May 30

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan

Trajan's Forum, site of the exhibit. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Mar 23 2021

Already in 1809 Napoleon's Roman administration had immediately selected the Quirinal Palace, at the time the popes' summer residence, as Napoleon's dwelling. If Napoleon concentrated on imitating ancient Rome and its emperors, his relationship with religion and the Holy See was complex, often hostile, and at best shaky, as is illustrated in one of the second section's rooms. In the end, not only did Napoleon never live in the Quirinal Palace, but he never came to Rome...

The exhibition, "**Napoleon and the Myth of Rome**," in recognition of the 200th anniversary

of Napoleon's death on May 5, 1821, will be on view in Rome until May 30th and hopefully prolonged through the summer.

Napoleon's birthplace in Ajaccio, Corsica. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

The exhibition is divided into three "macro-sections" and includes more than 100 works: sculpture, paintings, prints, medals, gems, and objects of the so-called minor arts. They're primarily on loan from the Capitoline and other museums in Rome: The Museum of Roman Civilization in EUR, the Napoleonic Museum, The Museum of Rome near Piazza Navona, the Accademia di San Luca, and The Vatican Museums, but also from Naples' National Archeological Museum and Milan's Museo del Risorgimento as well as many museums in France, particularly the Louvre and the **Palais Fesch-Musée des Beaux-Arts** of Ajaccio in Corsica, Napoleon's birthplace on August 15, 1769.

Chronologically the exhibition starts with a small background section about the French Revolutionaries' admiration of ancient Rome. "Brutus, we swear we will follow your example and maintain the Republic as an indivisible whole. No more kings, no more impostors, freedom forever, freedom or death" was their oath.

Statue of Napoleone as a young cadet. Photo: Zètema Progetto Cultura

"Although they made frequent references to ancient Greece, Sparta, and Athens," reports a wall panel, "revolutionary France saw itself as the direct heir of the ancient Roman Republic…Brutus became the republican archetype par excellence." However, for them the name Brutus referred to two different republican heroes: Lucius Junius Brutus, who had ousted the last king, Tarquin the Proud, and founded the Republic, and Marcus Junius Brutus who killed Julius Caesar.

This was in contrast to Napoleon, who'd risen to the rank of general during the Revolution

and admired Julius Caesar, but whose other heroes of antiquity were Alexander the Great, Hannibal, and the Roman emperors, Augustus (r. 27 BC-14 AD), Trajan (r. 98-117 AD), and Constantine (r. 306-337 AD)– not the republicans.

The first section highlights the relationship between Napoleon and the classical world. "For a young man, history could become a school of morality and virtue" was the school prospectus of the **Military School of Brienne-Le-Château**, where even at such a young age Bonaparte received a classical education from 1779 to 1784, supported by his personal passion for Antiquity. "The heroes of times past," reports another wall panel, "were presented to the cadets at Brienne as models to be imitated. Napoleon became fascinated by Cornelius Nepos' *Lives of Eminent Commanders* and Plutarch's *Lives,* so steeped in heroism, patriotism, and republican virtues". On display here is a plaster statue of *Napoleon Cadet at Brienne* by Louis Rochet from the Musée d'Yverdon et Région (Yverdon-les-Bains), a bronze statue of Alexander the Great astride his horse on loan from Naples' Archeology Museum, for Napoleon's ambition was like-minded: to conquer a similar vast territory; and Lorenzo's Bartolini's large bronze depicting *Napoleon/Emperor,* from the Louvre, with a laurel crown and the features of an unidentified Roman emperor, not to mention the marble bust of Augustus from the Capitoline Museums, on whom Napoleon modeled himself. "I am a true Roman Emperor; I am the best race of the Caesars—those who are founders," he said of himself in 1812.

The exhibition's second macro-section is dedicated to Napoleon's relationship with Italy and Rome. Already crowned the Emperor of France on December 2, 1804, about six months later on May 26, 1805, Napoleon crowned himself in Milan's Cathedral with the iron crown of Lombardy the King of Italy, meaning today's regions of Lombardy, the Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trentino, the South Tyrol, and the Marche. Instead, four years later, in 1809, he incorporated into the French Empire: Aosta, Piedmont, Liguria, Umbria and Latium (including Rome of course) so they weren't ruled as a separate kingdom.

Napoleon II of France (The King of Rome).
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Napoleon had ambitious plans for Rome. It was to become the second Imperial city after Paris. At his birth on March 20, 1811 Napoleon gave his only legitimate son François Charles Joseph the title "King of Rome".

Already in 1809 Napoleon's Roman administration had immediately selected the Quirinal Palace, at the time the popes' summer residence, as Napoleon's dwelling. It also had promoted extensive excavations in Trajan's Forum, hence the appropriateness of this exhibition's location, south of Trajan's column that Napoleon used as a model for the Vendôme Column in Paris.

On display here are architectural plans, a detailed study of the excavation of the Basilica Ulpia, paintings of the area before and after the French excavations, and a few of their archeological finds, in particular statues of Dacians on loan from the Vatican Museums (for

by 106 AD Trajan had added Dacia, modern-day Romania, to his Empire). Exhibited here for the first time are three projects drawn up in 1812 by the architects Giuseppe Valadier and Giuseppe Camporese, on loan from Rome's Accademia di San Luca, that led to the discovery of the Basilica Ulpia, Ancient Rome's largest administrative building.

If Napoleon modeled his Empire on Augustus for his political and administrative skills, it must not be forgotten that Trajan (r. 98-117 AD) was remembered as a successful soldier-emperor who presided over the second greatest military expansion in Roman history after Augustus, and that at his death the Empire had reached its maximum territorial extent ever. Again, like Augustus, Trajan was known for his philanthropic rule, extensive building programs and social welfare policies.

Pacetti's sculpture entitled Napoleon Inspires Italy and Makes Her Rise to a Greater Destiny. Photo: Zètema Progetto Cultura

Also on display here are three artworks showing Napoleon as King of Italy: Pacetti's sculpture

group entitled "Napoleon Inspires Italy and Makes it Rise to a Greater Destiny," on loan from the Castle of Fontainebleau, and two portraits from Milan.

If Napoleon concentrated on imitating ancient Rome and its emperors, his relationship with religion and the Holy See was complex, often hostile, and at best shaky, as is illustrated in one of the second section's rooms. In brief, in 1796 during the French Revolution, Napoleon's troops had invaded Rome and captured Pope Pius VI. When he refused to renounce his temporal power, they pulled off his Fisherman's Ring and extradited the Pope to France, where he died three years later. However, Napoleon, like his hero the Emperor Constantine, realized the importance of religion as a means for increasing obedience and control over his subjects, so he gave Pius VI a gaudy burial soon after Pius VII's election on March 14, 1800. He made a further reconciliation with the Concordat of 1801, which reaffirmed the Roman Catholic Church as the majority church of France.

Although the Concordat guaranteed religious freedom for French Catholics and restored some ties to the papacy, it was largely in favor of the state.

The balance of church-state relations had tilted firmly in Napoleon's favor. Not to mention that, when against most of the Curia's advice Pius VII travelled to France for Napoleon's coronation in Notre-Dame in 1804, bringing as a present to Napoleon's brother Joseph a gold snuff box with a mosaic cover of Jupiter of Otricoli (on display here), Napoleon not only did not give back Pius VI's emerald-studded tiara, which Napoleon's troops had previously looted, but he crowned himself, spurning the Pope's intent to do so.

Thus, this already tenuous relationship inevitably deteriorated and fell apart completely in 1809, when Napoleon once again invaded the Papal States, which resulted in his excommunication.

Canova's Bust of Pope Pius VII. Photo: Zètema Progetto Cultura

Napoleon retaliated: Pius VII was taken prisoner, without even being given the time to put on his spectacles, and transported to France where he was put under house arrest at Fontainebleau.

In January 1813 Napoleon personally forced him to sign the humiliating "**Concordat of Fontainebleau"**, but luckily for Pius the next year, after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and his exile to St. Helena, the Concordat was never put into effect and Pius was permitted to return to Rome. On display here is a print of his triumphant welcome home as is his bust by Canova.

Pius VII lived the last decade of his life in relative peace. In 1815 he named **Canova "Minister Plenipotentiary of the Pope"** and sent him to Paris to recover the art Napoleon had carried off to France. Canova's mission was accomplished in a year.

As for the United States, during his papacy the Catholic Church grew significantly. In 1821 he established the dioceses of Charleston, Richmond and Cincinnati and added them to those he'd established in 1808 before his imprisonment in France: Boston, New York City, Philadelphia and Bardstown.

The most interesting art work in the third macro-section are five panels showing the *Triumph of Alexander the Great in Babylon* (1822) by the Danish sculptor and long-term Roman resident Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844).

They are based on panels of a similar stucco frieze that had been commissioned by Napoleon in 1812 to decorate the *Salone D'onore* in the Quirinal Palace, but which circumstances left unfinished.

Print of Pius VII's triumphal return to Rome in 1814. Photo: Zètema Progetto Cultura

For not only did Napoleon never live in the Quirinal Palace, despite his announcement in 1809 that he intended to hold a second coronation as Emperor in St. Peter's Basilica like Charlemagne, he never even came to Rome.

Thus, ironically for Napoleon himself Rome remained a myth. As it did for François, the "King of Rome" who never took possession of his kingdom. For, after his father's abdication, he lived the rest of his short life with his mother the **Empress Marie Louise in Vienna,** where he died of tuberculosis at the age of 21. Nonetheless, for many of Napoleon's relatives, Rome was not a myth.

To learn more about Napoleon's "Roman family members", visit Rome's Napoleonic Museum, located at Piazza di Ponte Umberto I no. 1.

Lucy Gordan

Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalistic accreditation in Italy and the Vatican, I'm culture editor of the US monthly Inside the Vatican; European... *[More]*

Column

ABOUT MORE

Art Exhibits | *Concordat* | *French Revolution* | *Napoleon I* | *Pius VII* | *Quirinale* | *Rome*
