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Napoleon and a European Narrative through the Lens of Art History : a survey of temporary exhibitions across Europe

Felicity Bodenstein, Eunamus, University Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne.

Abstract

This paper will consider the recent development of a representation of a "European" Napoleon (as opposed to traditional nationalist visions), as a quintessentially ambiguous enemy. He is indeed a figure who has provoked "Abscheu" and "Fascination" in equal proportions – as was shown in the recent 2010/2011 Bonn exhibition "Napoleon und Europa. Traum und Trauma". The art historical – and visual studies perspective in particular has proved important in the move from a rather consensual even glorifying narrative as present in many museums in the past, especially so-called Napoleonic house museums towards a conciliatory representation of the rather manichean attitudes that can be found in references to Napoleon in general historigraphy.

Whilst certain recent exhibitions relate the art historical narrative to a discourse that refers to notions of common heritage – art works can of course also be presented critically to outline the system of cultural propaganda and art theft that also characterises the history of Napoleonic rule over France and Europe. Furthermore, we will see that by widening the range of visual culture used in recent exhibitions, a new imagery of Napoleon as seen through caricatures of his time has in the last decades allowed art historians to provide a darker counterpart to the idealized portraits of his time, contributing to a more balanced or dualistic portrait of the 'great man'.

Introduction

The visual force of Napoleon's place in European museums is largely the result of the way in which he orchestrated the diffusion of his own image – and his careful efforts to style his place in history through imagery - for example by establishing himself as the successor of a prestigious genealogy of rulers that included Charlemagne (Lentz, 2005 : 11). The most famous of these images is of course Jacques-Louis David's *Bonaparte crossing the Alps* (1800), this iconic image indeed exists as five copies hanging in the museums of Versailles, Malmaison, but also in Berlin (at the castle of Charlottenburg) and in Vienna (at the Museum of the Belvédère – formerly in the Palace of the Cisalpine Republic in Milan) – the history of their creation, copy and distribution is an excellent illustration of the importance of art as a central form of diplomacy : the first version today at the Château de Malmaison, was commissioned by the king of spain Charles IV in 1800 to be hung in the royal palace of Madrid as a sign of the peaceful relationship between the two countries - one which was not to last as the painting left Spain with the flight of Joseph Bonaparte in 1812. The copy that Napoleon commissioned for the castle of Saint-Cloud was taken to Berlin by Prussian troups in 1814, von Blücher, offered it to the king of Prussia as a war trophy. Napoleon had also sent a copy to the Palace of the Cisalpine Republic in Milan in 1803 – this version was taken by Austrian troups in 1816 and is today in the Belvédère of Vienna (Schnapper, 1989: 381).

From this example we can observe that European museums have of course retained through their collections shared images that are the products of Napoleon's own cultural policy of self promotion as his artistic patronage directly contributed to the vast series of propagandistic history paintings and economically drove the development of an international artistic *Empire* style that has since been considered in direct relation with his person.

As an essential figure of European history (François, 2010: 137), Napoleon has been the subject in the last two decades of a wave of major historical exhibits organized by national museums across Europe in the context of the bi-centennial celebrations/commemorations of the major battles of the Napoleonic wars. These recent museographical reinterpretations of Napoleon's role seem to have allowed him to incarnate many ambiguous aspects of the European idea and the sometimes contradictory nature of its history as his memorial role has moved from the national to a more European paradigm.

The most interesting point about the wave of large Napoleon exhibitions is that the vast majority of them have taken place outside of France and that many of their organizers have remarked on the fact that France is the one country that has not yet allowed itself to consider a « European Napoleon ». Again many catalogues underline Napoleon's difficult reception in France and the fact that no major Napoleon exhibition has been presented in France since the 1969 *Napoléon*, exhibition at the *Grand Palais*, marking the bicentenary of his birth[i]. Based

essentially on documents and especially on artworks (paintings, drawings, sculptures etc), this object based exhibition gave rise to a remarkably controversial reception as outlined by Bénédicte Savoy (2010, 15). The hagiographic presentation of the "prodigious destiny" of Napoleon, the great statesman, prompted certain journalists in France but also in Germany to criticise what they considered to be a grossly one-sided presentation (image of the table des matières).

The most recent exhibition that we considered – "Napoleon und Europea – Traum und Trauma" held at the Bundeskunsthalle of Bonn, will in 2012 also be shown in Paris at the Musée de l'Armée – however the director of the *Musée de l'Armée* at the Invalides General Robert Bresse (article in the Guardian) stipulated that this exhibition which seeks to give a critical and differentiated vision the Napoleonic era could not have been organised in France alone. Indeed today's major temporary exhibitions by their logistics alone are based on international cooperation between national institutions and are thus at the heart of a system of cultural diplomacy and exchange between nations – inside and outside of Europe. From a material perspective this is of course expressed in the loan and exchange of important elements in the collections of both countries. But this cooperation also allows the organising institutions to go beyond the constraints of what it is permissible to express from one nation to another – and to establish new and different stories.

In the introduction to the Bonn catalogue "Napoleon und Europa – Traum und Trauma" – Angela Merkel is present as author of the "Grusswort" – as patron of the exhibition alongside Nicolas Sarkozy. Merkels words of introduction hail the possibility that the exhibition has provided to consider two different national historiographies in parallel with each other for the first time.

These exhibitions deal with military, political, economic but also largely cultural history – in this paper I will consider the part played by evolutions in art historical discourses in this international construction of a European narrative of the Napoleonic era.

It should be underlined that when considering the representation of Napoleon in the museum it is impossible to dissociate between art and history. Quite generally speaking the narratives concerning Napoleon in the museum nearly always employ objects that are first and foremost recognized as having artistic or aesthetic value, this is even true in military museums: for exmple in Paris at the *Musée de l'Armée* famous art works and collections of splendid arms and army costumes are set into a very purist and highly aesthetic type of presentation Image – Ingres' portrait of Napoleon in the *Musée de l'armée*.

The character of artistic production during the Napoleonic era was recently defined in the 2010 exhibition *Staging Power* that took place in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. As stated in the introduction to this exhibit that compared Napoleon with Sweden's Charles John and Russia's Alexander I : "Art and power are like magnetic fields. They can attract each other, to form an inseparable whole, but they can also repel one another. At certain junctures in history, they have fused together with such force that entire societies have been remoulded." (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 2010 : 5).

The discourse of art history during Napoleonic Empire as expressed today in these exhibitions constitutes an excellent subject for a transnational study of the construction of a shared narrative of European history through the ambiguous role of art in political and diplomatic contexts. Organized in cooperation with the St. Petersburg's State Ermitage museum, the preface of *Staging Power* goes on to state "Two countries that for many years regarded each other as enemies have freed themselves from their firmly rooted stereotypes by seeking their shared history"[ii] and going on to underline that: "Our starting point is the role of art in these dramatic historical events, which finds concrete expression in the objects on display", thus "the history narrated in this exhibition is fascinating, dramatic and beautiful."

According to this perspective – the art historical narrative is presented as a narrative of reconciliation and appeasement – the aesthetic representation of the past – beautifies and neutralises differences.

However the art historical narrative cannot be reduced to an aestheticisation of history and we will try and show in the following that it has contributed to a reappreciation of the Napoleonic era in a more subtle and critical way. This appears as especially significant in the context of the European narrative – which from a purely historical point of view been largely dominated by an extremely dark vision of the past. The political scientist Claus Leggewie has pointed out that the founding myths of Europe have appeared as largely negative: citing the Holocaust, soviet totalitarianism and other equally traumatic historical contexts as the principal master narratives which have contributed to a sense of a united Europe (see also Kaiser, 2011). European historiography deals predominantly with some of the darkest issues of history of the twentieth century (Mazower, 2000), and as a political entity Europe appears to have built its identity out of a common resistance to adversity (Leggewie, 2009: 2):

"For the nationally−minded, Europe is essentially a free−trade zone that acts collectively only in the case of attack from outside; worth commemorating are, if anything, wars against external enemies and internal barbarians such as the Nazis."
The development of a representation of a European Napoleon (as opposed to traditional nationalist visions), in stark constrast to most absolute of internal ennemies, Hitler, establishes Napoleon as a quintessentially ambiguous enemy. He is indeed a figure who has provoked "Abscheu" and "Fascination" in equal proportions – as was shown in the Bonn exhibition. The art historical – and visual studies perspective in particular has proved important in the move from a rather consensual even glorifying narrative as present in many museums (especially so-called Napoleonic house museums) towards a conciliatory representation of the rather manichean attitudes that can be found in references to Napoleon in general historigraphy.

Napoleon, patron of the arts – promoter of a European artistic style

Throughout the twentieth century the *arts* became one of the preponderant means that the network of national museum from Malmaison (1906) to Fontainebleau (opened in 1986) have established to consider the role of Napoleon. The chief curator of the Napoleonic museums in France, Jean Bourguignon expressed in 1949 what on might call the master narrative of these museums, taken as a group (Bourguignon, 1949, 13, translation by the author):
"We know that the First Empire was in terms of artistic production one of the most flourishing periods in our history. As Napoleon stated himself 'It is my aim to see France's artists erase the glories of Athens and Italy'. Doubtlessly, he no more created those artists than the popes of the Renaissance created theirs. But he knew how to orient them and by encouraging them to take as their subjects the *Grande Épopée*, (the Empire), he lead them to take on the full challenge of contemporary life".

The simple fact that art works are the museum's privileged media in representing Napoleon, is hardly surprising indeed as museums are where art goes. It follows that in the house museums dedicated to Napoleon and his family in France and abroad, the figure of Napoleon is very much represented through the lens of an art historical narrative that runs parallel to the historical one, dedicated to the development of the fine and especially the decorative arts during the Empire. In her guide to 'Napoleonic' collecting, Karine Huguenaud promotes the advantage of collecting in the field of the decorative arts as one of the richest areas in terms of the availability of objects, advising the amateur to train his eye by visiting the castle museums of the circuit of *Muséees napoléoniens*, whose displays "bear witness to the creativity of a style that has left a lasting mark on the history of the decorative arts, contradicting the general clichés that unjustly depreciate it" (Huguenaud, 2007: 79).
The effect that the sumptuously decorated period room presentations of the collections in these eponymous museums must have on a visitor needs to be carefully observed. The displays of France's national Napoleon museums: Malmaison, Fontainebleau etc. or those of the castle of Arenenberg in Switzerland or in Rome at the *Museo Napoleonico*, are all considered as important art collections based for a very large part on the direct heritage of the collections owned by members of Napoleon's family.
These "site" museums are principally structured as series of rooms to be visited as formerly inhabited spaces. Additionally, Arenenberg and Malmaison are more exclusively representative of Napoleon's women developing strong narratives of family life. As shown in the first part of this study, they are constructed museographically as "memorials" to the man himself or to his dynasty, thus they *de facto* represent Napoleon.
On the point of Napoleon's relationship to the arts, historiography presents a very nuanced situation through the important debates that have been waged in French art history in order to ascertain to what degree one might consider Napoleon himself a "man of taste" who veritably influenced the forms and ideals of the aesthetic vision of his time, or whether this was actually rather the work of others, such as Dominique-Vivant Denon, who was the *Directeur général du Muséum central des arts* later the *Musée Napoléon*. A certain consensus has been established positing that Napoleon though not himself directly what one would call a man of taste showing exceptional sensibility for artistic matters, did however very much "direct" cultural affairs and seek to control them an idea that can be weighted both positively and negatively according to the context. However, debates concerning the nature of his patronage in terms of the arts do not necessarily impact upon the general impression produced by the constant reference to and visual prominence of Napoleon in these house museums that are equally dedicated to his life, to that of his family and to the history of the decorative arts during the Empire. Their very nature quite logically and directly brings the artistic dimension to the forefront, whilst the history of Napoleon the politician and the general – take a step back.
In contrast to the implicit equation established between Napoleon and the arts in the permanent displays of Napoleonic museums, recent temporary exhibitions have in some cases also produced narratives of culture and art that explicitly seek to establish Napoleon in a narrative of the Emperor as a great administrator of the arts.

In 2004, the Louvre published a book on Napoleon's role in the establishment of France's most famous museum and in its preface, the museum's director, Henri Loyrette expressed the hope that it would allow the reader to consider the Napoleonic era through a different perspective from that of the military epic, which tended to overshadow the history of that time (Loyrette, 2004: 5). Whilst in his introduction to the same book, Sylvain Lavissière, curator of the Louvre's paintings department defended a historiography of the neo-classical style and the *style Empire* that established these as more than mere creations or reflections of the authoritarian and militaristic reign of Napoleon stating that the notion of a "dictatorship" of the arts needed to be carefully challenged (Lavissière, 2004: 6). The book gave its title to a major exhibition organized by the Louvre and presented in China in 2008 (in the Forbidden city) and in Moscow in 2010 – but which was not shown in France (nor in any other European country). The history of the Louvre had already been very much a part of the exhibition held in 1999 dedicated to the man who had been its general director, Dominique-Vivant Denon and 'Napoleon's eye', to paraphrase its title (*L'Oeil de Napoléon*, musée du Louvre, 1999). Of course the role of a personality such as Denon, though important for France was too marginal to be exported, whilst Napoleon could very well serve as the ambassador of the Louvre abroad. The tonality of the book published in 2004 indicated however that an explicit narrative relating Napoleon to the development of France's greatest national museum was not necessarily a welcome one in France – lending itself to a book, but not perhaps to a major exhibition as it was clearly one that needed to be defended and justified to a wider public. Indeed, Lavissière (2004: 7) remarks that Napoleon's artistic patronage:
"Is on an even greater scale, the modern counterpart of the glorious works of art commissioned by Louis XIV from Le Brun and the Academies and that if one were to be fair, it is quite simply a constant of absolute powers, though they do not always apply themselves with similar determination. But, does one want to be fair with Napoleon?"
In 2005, the privately owned Fuji museum in Tokyo brought together objects from the most important national collections in Europe and America to create a major temporary exhibition entitled: *Napoleon : Europe and Culture, the other Conquest*.
Image of the cover -
The catalogue was equally largely authored by curators from major national museums in France, Germany and Italy. Its central narrative was to consider Napoleon as the incarnation of a whole era, visually identifiable through the *style Empire* as a European phenomenon and thus Europe as a culturally unified space during this period. In a note to the visiting public, the founder of Tokyo's musée Fuji wrote : "Napoleon re-established order in the face of the chaos that reigned after the French Revolution and was already dreaming of the possibility of European unification" (Ikeda, 2005: 13). His text was followed by prefaces and opening words from Arnaud d'Hauterives, the perpetual secretary of France's *Académie des beaux-arts* and Jean Tulard, France's foremost specialist of Napoleonic history, both echoing this edifying discourse. Hans Ottomeyer, the director of the *Deutsches historisches Museum* contributed an article as did the Italian Giulia Gorgone presents the meaning and the museography of the *Museo Napoleonico* as a family art collection. What is interesting here is that this narrative of the Napoleon as a great administrator of the arts has originated in European national museums – but is essentially told outside of Europe.

Napoleon as Conqueror and Dictator of the arts

A postcard on sale at the Ashmolean museum's gift shop (2006) illustrates one of Clerihew Bentley's biographical verses: "It was not Napoleon who founded the Ashmolean. He hardly had a chance living mostly in France" with a drawing of Napoleon by g. K. Chesterton. The short humorous phrase captures the international importance of Napoleon's contribution to the development of the public museum. However, whilst Napoleon can be represented as the orchestrator of a European cultural and artistic Empire in Japan or appear as a kind of founding figure of the Louvre in Russia and China, inside of Europe itself such narratives appear as far more contentious.
The paradoxical relationship between Napoleon and history of the Louvre may in a sense be illustrated by the reflections of Pierre Rosenberg in an intentionally provocative introductory text of the catalogue accompanying the *Napoleon und Europa. Traum und Trauma* exhibition, entitled "Why I do not like Napoleon" . As a former president of the Louvre, Rosenberg (2010: 18, translation by the author) writes:
"How could I, who have givin 40 years of my life to the Louvre, forgive Napoleon for the catastrophic consequences of his return to France? For indeed would not the Louvre otherwise have been allowed to remain that *musée imaginaire* of all the masterpieces that Malraux had dreamed off" .
He was of course referring to the emptying of the Louvre after Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo. For indeed, throughout the Napoleonic era and up until the restitutions that followed Waterloo of 1815-1816, the *Musée Napoléon* had displayed as a result of confiscations during the revolutionary but also the Napoleonic wars some

of the greatest treasures from what were to become Italian, German, Austrian, Belgian and Dutch national collections. But it is not without irony of course that Rosenberg accuses Napoleon not of theft – but of having overestimated his powers, of coming back thus allowing Wellington to become the triumphant general who organized the gutting of what had for a short time been the largest and most magnificent collection of art in all of Europe.

Image caricature showing the return of the art treasures...

Only a few of the many European museums affected by this episode present this aspect of the history of their collections explicitly. Interestingly, there is one example of display related to this question, in Britain (a country that of course never lost any of its collections to France). In Apsley house, the provenance of the collections coincides so directly with the story of war and art conquest that it has entirely conditioned the display as arranged by the Duke of Wellington himself and is carefully explained and commented in all the guidebooks of the museum.

The manner in which the collections of Apsley house came to be there is indeed the main narrative of the museum itself as 'the display of his (Wellington's) collections at Apsley House could be seen as a way of consolidating his victory' (Bryant, 2009, p. 33). To illustrate this one might consider the heart of the house, the so-called Waterloo gallery, designed by the Duke as a space to be used for the annual commemorative dinner of the victorious battle. Despite what one might expect, not a single battle scene hangs on its walls. These are in fact entirely covered with the splendid collection of Spanish paintings that Wellington recovered from Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's brother after the battle of Vitoria. As the King of Spain himself had refused to take them back, declaring them to be an offering of his gratitude, these canvases of singular artistic value, including two extremely famous paintings by Velazquez, appear here most obviously as trophies of war.

Image – The Waterloo Gallery-Apsley house ;

More critically, the subject of Napoleon's great "art theft" has in the last two decades received considerable scholarly with the increasing development of collecting and museum history establishing a narrative that recognizes Napoleon as an essential figure of the history of the national museum firstly in France (Gallo, 2001; Laveissière, 2004) but also in Europe (Savoy, 2003; Bergvelt, Ellinoor and al., 2009, Potin, 2010). He has been considered as the founder of significant institutions, but, he of course also appears as the "thief". In *Napoleon's Legacy: The Rise of National Museums in Europe 1794-1830* several essays consider how museums and national collections were founded or developed as a result of the heightened awareness of heritage caused by the sense of loss provoked by multiple confiscations. The narrative of art theft was for the first time explicitly displayed in relation to Napoleon as a European experience in Bénédicte Savoy's presentation in Bonn (2010-2011) where a section was entitled "Objects of Desire: Napoleon and European Art and Memory Theft". The display highlighted the extensive nature of his project. Though not initially a Napoleonic project, but an operation began by the armies of the revolution, its aim to centralize Europe's artistic heritage but also the paper archives of the dominated territories in the city of Paris, was largely developed under Napoleon's rule, firmly establishing cultural heritage as a central strategy of conquest.

Napoleon was himself fully aware of the power of display and very much at home in the Louvre palace, consistently using its galleries as spaces to magnify his own greatness. The only sovereign to ever have lent his name to the museum: the *Musée Napoléon* indeed opened its doors in 1803. It was in the bi-annual salon held in the Louvre that the French public discovered the hundreds of paintings that he commissioned from the most important artists of his day to glorify his own image, establishing a vast *ensemble* of monumental propaganda paintings that definitively made contemporary events worthy of the attention of history painters. Accordingly commissions sought representations of contemporary history as illustrations of the nations glory, designed to elevate the new Empire to the rank of the past Empires of Alexander, Cesar, Augustus and Charlemagne (Foucart, 2001: 14). The plethoric character of the production of these images of war and government for the French artistic salons held in the Louvre during Napoleon's lifetime clearly outweighs the artistic production in Europe related to the so-called *Befreiungskreige*, or representation of the battles of the Sixth and Seventh Coalition that put an end to the Napoleonic wars. Indeed for Michael Thimann an art of *Befreiungskreige* does not exist: "In contrast to the affirmative political iconography of Napoleon and his official state art, no consistent visual world was developed on the side of his opponents" (Thiman, 2010: 119).

So it is mainly through these battle and political propaganda images, as seen through the eyes of France's artists that the Napoleonic epic has for a long time been visually perceived. Furthermore one must remember that these paintings have continued to occupy an extremely important place on the walls of two of the most visited museums in the world: the Louvre and Versailles.

Image: la grande galerie des peintures françaises – la galerie des batailles.

However, in the last two decades, art history has paid increasing attention to the caricatures of Napoleon that were produced in France and across Europe, providing a visual *anti-Napoleon*. This was indeed the title of an exhibition held in 1996 in the *Musée national de Malmaison*. Bernard Chevallier, head curator of the museum

pointed out that this subject was deliberately chosen as an original and in a sense provocative kick in the series of exhibitions that would be dedicated to Napoleon across Europe in light of the commemorations of the bi-centenaries of the Napoleonic wars. In his rhetorical interrogations on how the museum could still seek to praise the *Grand homme*, he posited that by presenting his black legend he had tried to conceive of a different, original form of celebration (Chevallier, 1996).
Two years later, the Napoleon museum of Arenenberg published in German the most extensive existing catalogue of Napoleon caricatures (Mathis (dir.) 1998). In 2003, the *Deutsches Museum für Karikatur und kritische Grafik* acquired a collection of 700 caricatures that gave rise to an important exhibition shown twice in Germany : in 2006 *Napoleon ! Kunst und Karikatur um 1800* was presented in Berlin to mark the bi-centenary of Napoleon's entry into the city and again in 2009 under the title *Napoleon: Genie und Despot*, confronting the ideal and official image of himself that Napoleon had carefully established with the caricatures that had flourished across Europe, producing perhaps for "the first time – a European discourse" (Hoppenstedt, 2007: 6) to quote the preface of the exhibition, or at the very least the visual expression of a European wide political cause – the destruction of a common enemy.
Image – Lewis Marks, *A Happy Dance for Europe*, 1814

Conclusion

Whilst certain recent exhibitions relate the art historical narrative to a discourse that refers to notions of common heritage – art works can of course also be presented critically to outline the system of cultural propaganda and art theft that also characterises the history of Napoleonic rule over France and Europe. Furthermore, we have seen that by widening the range of visual culture used in recent exhibitions, a new imagery of Napoleon as seen through caricatures of his time has in the last decades allowed art historians to provide a darker counterpart to the idealized portraits of his time, contributing to a more balanced or dualistic portrait of the 'great man'.

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Bio- note of the author

Felicity Bodenstein is a doctoral candidate in art history at the Université Paris IV-Sorbonne. Her Phd topic is the history of the *Cabinet des médailles et antiques à la Bibliothèque nationale de France de 1819 à 1924* (under the direction of professor Barthélémy Jobert). In 2009-2010 she was a research fellow at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. She is currently working as a research assistant on the EuNaMus project: *European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen* at the university of Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne with professor Dominique Poulot. In this context she has undertaken field research on the representation of Napoleon in European museums in order to gauge how the museum constructed a master narrative of the great man that has considerably changed in recent years.

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i See the exhibition catalogue : Napoleon. Grand Palais, Juin-Décembre 1969, Paris, RMN. There is an interesting analysis of the situation by Peter Hicks, "The Battle of Austerlitz, Collective Amnesia, and the Non-Commemoration of Napoleon in France", Trafalgar 1805-2005 : history, commemoration, and national preoccupation, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 119-125.
ii Director of the Ermitage, Mikhail Piotrovsky, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 2010 : 6