

NAPOLEON, ANCIENT ROME, AND THE PAPACY

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

On in Rome until May 30th and hopefully prolonged through the summer is the exhibition “Napoleon and the Myth of Rome” in recognition of the 200th anniversary of Napoleon’s death on May 5, 1821. 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 are 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 the National Archeological Museum in Naples, and many museums in France, particularly the Louvre and the Palais Fesch-Musée des Beaux-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.

“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.



Statue of Napoleon as a young cadet

In contrast Napoleon, who’d risen to the rank of general during the Revolution, admired Julius Caesar, but his 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 young 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 Yverdon Region (Yverdon-les-Bains); a bronze statue of Alexander the Great astride his horse, on loan from Naples, for Napoleon’s ambition was to conquer a similar vast territory; and Lorenzo Bartolini’s large bronze depicting *Napoleon/Emperor*, from the Louvre, with a laurel crown and the features of an unidentified Roman emperor. There is also 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 large section is dedicated to Napoleon’s relationship with Italy and Rome. Already crowned the Emperor of France on December 2, 1804,



Canova's Bust of Pope Pius VII

Print of Pius VII's triumphal return to Rome in 1814

Bottom, Pacetti's sculpture entitled *Napoleon Inspires Italy and Makes Her Rise to a Greater Destiny*



All photos:
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about six months later on May 26, 1805, in Milan's Cathedral Napoleon crowned himself the King of Italy with the iron crown of Lombardy. This was a misnomer because his kingdom did not include the whole peninsula, but only Lombardy, the Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trentino, the South Tyrol, and the Marches. Instead, most of the rest of the peninsula: Aosta, Piedmont, Liguria, Umbria and Latium (so including Rome) was incorporated into the French Empire in 1809 and not ruled as a separate kingdom.

Napoleon had ambitious plans for Rome. It was to become the second imperial city after Paris. His administration immediately selected the Quirinal Palace, then the popes' summer residence, as Napoleon's residence.

It also promoted extensive excavations in Trajan's Forum, hence the appropriateness of this exhibition's location, south of Trajan's column which 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 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 the 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 (who reigned 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.

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 the Pope refused to renounce his temporal power, they took him to France as a prisoner, where he died three years later.

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

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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 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. Pius VII was taken prisoner and transported to France. In January 1813 Napoleon personally forced him to sign the humiliating Concordat of Fontainebleau, but luckily for Pius, after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and his exile to St. Helena the next year, 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. The 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, adding on to those he'd established in 1808 before his imprisonment in France: Boston, New York City, Philadelphia and Bardstown (now Louisville, KY).

The most interesting pieces in the third large 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, which circumstances left unfinished. For not only did Napoleon never live in the Quirinal Palace, he never even came to Rome despite his announcement in 1809 that he intended to hold a second coronation as King of Italy in St. Peter's Basilica. Thus, ironically, for Napoleon himself, Rome remained a myth. ○