



Canova Special Issue

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A close-up of the head from Canova’s Napoleon as Mars the Peacekeeper.

A Canova Special Issue?

We already had some minor pieces relating to Canova. I was waiting for member Susan Jaques’ new book, *The Caesar of Paris*, to come out, as it covers Napoleon’s role in the art world. When Susan kindly offered this article, I thought that if we bundled it all together, we could have a special issue devoted to the great artist of the Napoleonic period.

**“CAESAR’S FRIEND”
ANTONIO CANOVA AND NAPOLEON
by Susan Jaques**

This past summer, a new auction record was set for Antonio Canova when his *Bust of Peace* sold for over £UK 5.3 million. The rediscovered marble was among five Ideal Heads created by the sculptor as thank you gifts for British support in the art restitution that followed Napoleon’s defeat.

Retrieving looted Italian art trea-

sures from Paris was arguably Canova’s greatest challenge. Yet, over a decade of experience as unofficial papal envoy had prepared him for the important assignment. At the same time Canova was modeling portraits of Napoleon and his second wife Marie Louise, he was advocating on behalf of Napoleon’s nemesis, Pope Pius VII.

Their complex relationship began in 1797, when then General Napoleon Bonaparte learned that the neoclassical sculptor was in financial straits. After France's occupation of Venice, the new municipality suspended Canova's pension for his tribute to the naval hero Angelo Emo. Eager to be portrayed by Europe's most sought after artist, Napoleon personally wrote to Canova that August, promising to reinstate his life annuity.

Napoleon never made good on that promise. Later that year, when he offered Canova a commission to carve a relief portrait of himself for Padua, the sculptor declined, citing health issues and bad roads. In fact, France's pillaging of Italy's masterpieces and its ceding of Venice to Austria were deeply upsetting to the patriotic artist. "I have St. Mark in my heart and nothing in the world will change me," Canova pronounced after the millennium-old Venetian Republic fell to Napoleon.

It was at Caroline and Joachim Murat's Château de Villiers-la-Garenne near Neuilly that Napoleon saw Canova's *Cupid and Psyche* and *Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss*. Napoleon's brother-in-law acquired the famous pendants after visiting Canova's studio during the French occupation of Rome in 1798. At that time, Canova expressed his anti-Bonapartist sentiment in a letter to a friend: "I would happily lose anything, even my life, if by it I could help my beloved country, for I shall call it thus till my dying breath."

Though the new governors of French-controlled Rome awarded Canova various honors, he returned for a time to his hometown of Possagno, north of Venice in the

foothills of the Dolomites. Born in November 1757, Canova was raised by his paternal grandfather Pisano, a stone-cutter. At eleven, Canova was apprenticed to a local sculptor who arranged for him to study drawing, painting, and sculpture in nearby Venice.

Lured by Rome's ancient ruins and monuments, the 22-year-old traveled south in 1779. Three years later, Canova's dramatic *Theseus and the Minotaur* became the talk of Rome. He was soon hired to create a tomb for Pope Clement XIV at Rome's Church of the Holy Apostles. For the high profile commission, Canova turned to the pyramid, the ancient Egyptian symbol of grief and transcendence. Five years later, Canova produced a second neoclassical funerary monument for Pope Clement XIII at St. Peter's Basilica.

In 1801, the Vatican acquired Canova's monumental *Perseus* for the empty space previously occupied by *Apollo Belvedere*, purloined for the Louvre. The acquisition launched an important bond between Canova and Pius VII. In 1802, Pius named Canova Inspector General of Antiquities and Fine Arts for the Papal States, with responsibility for the Vatican and Capitoline Museums. That same year, Napoleon summonsed Canova to Paris to model his portrait bust. Pius urged the reluctant sculptor to go, hoping he could ease tensions with France's bold new leader.

In October 1802, Canova's friend Quatremère de Quincy presented him to Napoleon and Joséphine at Saint-Cloud. Canova barely recognized Napoleon who bore little resemblance to his earlier portraits. Throughout the Italian campaign,

Napoleon wore his fine chestnut hair long, cut square and covering his ears in a style called "dogs ears." In Cairo, Napoleon ordered his soldiers to follow his example and cut their hair short, Roman style "à la Titus."

Canova returned a few days later with clay and modelling tools. He was granted a handful of meetings and five sittings with Napoleon – generous for a man who disliked posing and refused to sit for painter Jacques-Louis David. During their informal sessions, Napoleon read papers and wrote dispatches from an hourglass-shaped desk topped with busts of Caesar and Hannibal. Napoleon also chatted with Joséphine and Canova, reportedly calling Canova "Caesar's friend."

Keenly aware of his role as papal envoy, Canova used the meetings to convey Rome's economic plight and the dire financial situation of the Papal States. According to Canova, he did not hold back, expressing his concern about France's treatment of Venice, the "deportation" of the famous horses of St. Mark's, and the removal of Rome's masterworks. The First Consul tolerated Canova's complaints, a small sacrifice for a superb clay portrait bust.

On one occasion, Canova returned to the château to find Napoleon preparing to go hunting. While waiting for him to return, Canova made preliminary sketches for a full-length marble portrait. Napoleon expressed a strong preference to be portrayed in his military uniform, but Canova insisted that he be sculpted nude, like the heroes and rulers of ancient Greece. Because of Canova's celebrity, Napoleon deferred to him, reportedly saying "We do not impose a law on Genius." Napoleon would



*Pauline Borghese as Venus Victrix, 1805-1808, Antonio Canova
Borghese Gallery, Rome © Leochen66, Dreamstime.com*

come to regret that decision.

Back in Rome, while working on *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker*, Canova produced *Pauline Borghese as Venus Victrix*. Canova sculpted Napoleon's favorite sister reclining on her side on an embroidered marble mattress, draped in a sheet from the waist down. Resting her right arm on two pillows, Pauline seductively touches the nape of her neck with the fingers of her right hand. In her left hand, she holds the famous golden apple of discord.

In the fateful beauty contest, Paris gave Venus the apple after judging her more beautiful than her rival goddesses. Venus introduced Paris to the beautiful Helen, wife of Sparta's Menelaus. Paris's abduc-

tion of Helen caused the Trojan War and the flight of Aeneas, son of Venus, to Italy. The choice of Venus Victrix suited both Pauline and her husband Camillo Borghese, whose family members considered themselves descendants of Aeneas, Rome's legendary founder.

Using his signature technique, known as "the last hand," Canova polished the surface of the finished marble, giving it a deep luster and the lifelike texture of skin. Canova also heightened the work's sensuality by covering Pauline's skin with a light layer of molten pink wax. Pauline's marble mattress rested on a plaster and wooden Empire-style bed that hid a revolving mechanism allowing viewers to experi-

ence the work in the round. Pauline Borghese's love life added to the fame of the statue, as did its nudity and sensuality. When asked if she minded posing nude in the grand saloon at the Palazzo Borghese and Canova's nearby studio, Pauline replied: "Why should I? The studio was heated."

In 1808, Pauline wrote husband Camillo in Turin, requesting he allow *Venus Victrix* to travel to Paris. Four of Canova's works, including his statue of her mother, *Madame Mère Seated*, were to be displayed for the prestigious Salon at the Louvre, renamed the Musée de Napoleon. Canova began the full-length seated portrait of Maria-Letizia Ramolino shortly before

accepting the commission for Pauline Borghese's sculpture.

Canova based the portrait of the formidable Bonaparte matriarch on the Capitoline's famous antique statue of Agrippina (2nd or 4th century AD). Canova portrayed Letizia like the ancient female figure, sitting on a curved leg chair, her sandaled feet on a footstool, wearing the fashionable classically inspired garb. But which Agrippina was Canova comparing Letizia Bonaparte to? The loyal,

principled Agrippina the Elder or her conniving, murderous daughter Agrippina the Younger? As direct descendants of Augustus through his first wife Scribonia, both Agrippinas were key to Rome's dynastic succession.

In either case, argues Mary Beard, Canova's *Madame Mère Seated* was an insult to Napoleon. "If there was an honorable option for Madame Mère herself here in the model of Agrippina the Elder, there certainly wasn't one for Napoleon. One thing

that both these Agrippinas good and bad had in common were their truly terrible sons. Agrippina the Elder gave birth to the mad Caligula and Agrippina the Younger gave birth to the equally mad Nero. There were not a few critics and commentators who felt that had been Canova's point and that through the imperial mother, Canova's target was actually Napoleon."¹

Letizia Ramolina Bonaparte had a complicated relationship with her son, the second of her eight



Letitia Ramolino Bonaparte, c.1804-07, by Antonio Canova.

*Collection of the Duke of Devonshire, Chatsworth House, UK / © Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth.
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surviving children. Napoleon was reportedly embarrassed by his pious, barely literate mother who spoke Corsican-Italian, not French. Despite Napoleon's increasing power, Letizia did not hesitate to express her opinions, including her displeasure with his treatment of his younger brother Lucien and his marriage to Joséphine. About his position as emperor, Letizia prophetically declared "Let us hope it will last!" Though she boycotted his coronation, Napoleon gave Letizia the title of Her Imperial Highness, Mother of the Emperor, or Madame Mère, along with an annual pension of 300,000 francs and her own household.

Canova's portrait of Pauline never joined that of her mother in Paris. The scandalous, semi-nude marble resembled his wife so strongly, Camillo Borghese kept it hidden from public view inside Turin's Palazzo Chiabrese. Canova's *Madame Mère Seated* proved a hit at the Salon, but not with her son who may have understood that the underlying subject was himself. Rather than install the marble opposite his throne at the Tuileries Palace as his mother requested, Napoleon packed it away to the palace's storeroom.

Despite his resentment toward Napoleon's policies in Italy, Canova accepted a number of commissions to sculpt other family members after classical and mythological figures, a Roman tradition. In October 1810, eight years after his first meeting with Napoleon, Canova returned to France to model a clay bust of Napoleon's new wife, which he would use for *Marie Louise as Concordia*. This trip assumed a heightened sense of importance. Rome was under

French control; Pius VII remained under house arrest in Savona after being abducted by French troops from Rome's Quirinale in July 1809.

Canova entered the elegantly furnished room at Fontainebleau to find the maître d'hôtel serving the imperial couple a morning meal of fricassee of chicken. At the next sitting, Canova was surprised to find Napoleon again by Marie Louise's side. In fact, the emperor would never leave the sculptor alone with his young wife. Canova was struck by the contrast between the doting husband and the First Consul of eight years before who was too impatient to sit for his own portrait. With Napoleon completely unoccupied, Canova raised the touchy subject of reconciliation with the Pope. But when this angered the emperor, Canova changed his strategy. He appealed instead for resources to preserve the monuments and churches of Florence and Rome. A week after Canova's departure, Marie Louise's pregnancy was announced.

The following April, Canova's colossal *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker* finally arrived at the Louvre's Salles des Hommes Illustres. Though the head was recognizable, the buff, eleven-foot figure bore no resemblance to the short, portly emperor. Canova sculpted Napoleon striding forward, looking at a small cast copper Victory on an orb in his right hand, holding a long scepter topped by an eagle in his left. With the exception of a chlamys flung over the left shoulder and a vine-leaf covering the genitals, the figure was stark naked.

An embarrassed Napoleon rejected the work on the spot and ordered the statue removed to a

niche in the museum. It was hidden from view by a screen of planks and a curtain; access was restricted to a handful of artists. After Napoleon's defeat, the statue was acquired by the British and gifted to the Duke of Wellington. The towering marble still stands at the foot of the staircase at Apsley House, Wellington's London residence.

After his triumphant return to Rome in May 1814, Pius VII entrusted Canova with restituting treasured art works from the Louvre. Though only about half of the works taken from Italy were returned, Canova received a hero's welcome in Rome. A grateful Pius awarded Canova the title marquis of Ischia di Castro, inscribed his name in the Libro d'oro or Golden Book on the Campidoglio, and gave him the highest pontifical honor, the Order of Christ.

In 1816, Canova finished the statue of Elisa Baciocchi ordered seven years earlier. With Napoleon's sister off the Tuscan throne, Canova replaced her head with Polyhymnia, muse of history, and sold the work to Count Cesare Bianchetti of Bologna. In spring 1817, Canova sent *Marie Louise as Concordia* to Parma where France's former empress had been installed as ruler by the Congress of Vienna. Canova depicted her seated, holding the sacrificial patera, with cornucopia decorating the reliefs of her throne.

In October 1822, Canova took ill while staying in Venice at Casa Francesconi near Piazza San Marco, where he was a guest of his friend Florian (owner of the famous Café Florian). Canova died on October 13, two weeks shy of his sixty-fifth birthday. Since the 1780s, Canova had suffered from severe stomach pains, the likely result of pres-



*Napoleon as Mars the Peacekeeper, 1806, Antonio Canova.
© Wellington Collection, Apsley House, London.*

sure of a drill on his ribs during the sculpting of Clement XIV's tomb. According to the doctor who performed the autopsy, Canova died from bowel disease, thought to be related to this injury. After a hero's funeral in Venice, Canova was buried in Possagno. A decade later, his remains were moved to a neoclassical temple of his own design in his hometown.

Though he depicted many of the Bonapartes, Canova never joined Napoleon's propaganda team. Among his works are a tomb for the patriotic Italian poet Alfieri for Santa Croce in Florence and a funerary monument for Napoleon's arch-nemesis, British admiral Horatio Nelson. And yet... Canova kept a bust of Napoleon in his bedroom until his death.

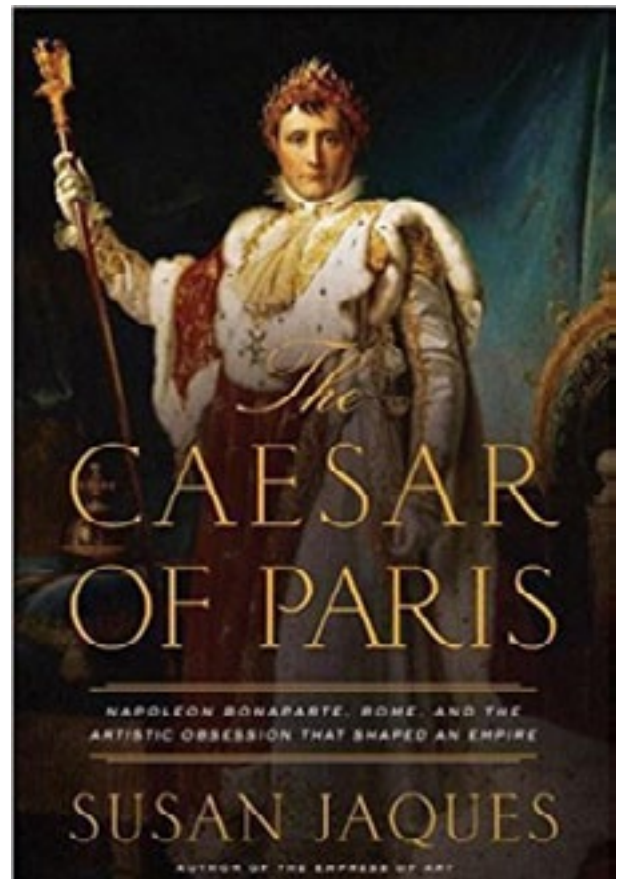
About the complex relationship, Quatremère de Quincy would write: "Time, however has revealed to us that in him [Napoleon] there was still something other than the desire to entrust the portrait of himself to the most renowned talent of that time. This kind of ambition, since Alexander, has not been lacking in any celebrated man. But with Bonaparte, there was already the expectation of that universal conquest that was the object of his whole life. Hence his covetousness of everything there was in each country, whether masterpieces or precious objects, or men of talent and famous subjects. What follows will make better known, in regard to Canova, the extraordinary desire that he had to appropriate him, his works even less than his person." ²

Footnotes

¹ Mary Beard, "The Twelve Caesars: Images of Power from Ancient Rome to Salvador Dali, Part 4: Caesar's Wife: Above Suspicion?" The Sixtieth A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., April 17, 2011.

² Christopher Johns, Antonio Canova and the Politics of Patronage in Revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 93.

I mentioned earlier that Susan's book, The Caesar of Paris, was published in December. If her name is familiar, it may be because you noticed a previous book of hers, The Empress of Art, about Catherine the Great, published in 2016.



PEACE

As Susan Jaques mentioned in her article, Canova's bust of *Peace* sold last summer for over \$7.5 million at Sotheby's. The white marble bust is almost 21 inches tall if you include the base. The bust of *Peace* had not been displayed in public for over two hundred years. The previous time had been when it was exhibited in the Royal Academy summer exhibition of 1817. For a long time, it had been thought lost.

The bust was symbolic of the peace established by the Great Powers after Waterloo. It was the first of Canova's Ideal Heads (in Italian, *Teste ideali*) to arrive in Britain, and it caused a sensation. London had never seen anything like it. You must remember Britain had been isolated for over 20 years from the greater art world by the wars. Byron even wrote a poem to Countess Albrizzi's Ideal Head.

The Ideal Heads enshrine the sculptor's idea of facial perfection. Canova intended them as gifts to friends and others who had helped him. None were commissioned. That gave him the freedom to create them as he wished.

The first head, *Helen*, went to Countess Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi in 1812. It's now in the Palazzo Albrizzi in Venice.

Clio, he gave to Luise Stolberg, Countess of Albany. That's now in the Musée Fabre in Montpellier.

Peace was given to his friend and British patron, Lord Cawdor.

The Duke of Wellington received the head of a *Dancer*, which copied a statue commissioned by Empress Josephine. The bust remains in Apsley House in London, and Josephine's statue is in the Hermitage in





St. Petersburg.

Castlereagh, Britain's great diplomat, was given another bust of *Helen*. It is in the Londonderry collection in Northern Ireland.

William Hamilton, another British diplomat, got *Clio*, which is now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

Yet another British diplomat, Sir Charles Long, was sent an Ideal Head, probably meant to be the muse Polymnia, but just possibly a portrait of Caroline Murat. That one is now in the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth.

Why did the five British men, four of them diplomats, get five out of the seven heads? They were in all in Paris in 1815. Canova was having an awful time trying to recover Italian treasures from the Louvre. At times he was in peril of being mobbed. Talleyrand and Vivant Denon, the director of the Louvre, were putting up considerable resistance. Lord Cawdor introduced him to these British officials who protected him and helped him to complete his mission. So in 1818 he repaid them with these princely gifts.

Cawdor was a friend, and Long was big in the London art world. All of them were influential, but Canova was in no need of more commissions. He may have been acting on behalf of Pope Pius VII, and the busts might have been official or semi-official gifts from the Vatican.

We have yet to see if the British government will allow *Peace* to be exported. It considers *the bust* to be a significant cultural object symbolizing the end of the Napoleonic era and the return of peace to Europe after decades of conflict. It is hoping a British institution will raise the money to buy it back.

LORD CAWDOR

Canova gave *Peace* to John Campbell, Lord Cawdor, a Scottish aristocrat and one of the largest British landowners. Cawdor was also an Italophile and an extravagant art collector. In 1783, the 30 year old Cawdor visited Italy. He was there for five years. In 1787 he commissioned from Canova the *Amorino* and *Cupid and Psyche*, now in the Louvre. But he seems to have been more than a patron, a friendship forming between the two.

Eventually Cawdor had to return to his humdrum life as a British aristocrat and member for parliament. He made a good marriage in 1790, but it was not enough. He had to sell the bulk of his collection in 1800.

With the arrival of peace in 1814, Cawdor was soon back in Rome. He dined with Canova daily, including Christmas Day. In 1815 he recorded seeing Canova working in his studio on the Statue of Peace, a full size statue for the Russian Count Nikolai Petrovich Rumyantsev. Rumyantsev had been Tsar Alexander's foreign minister until 1812, when Napoleon's invasion derailed his attempts at detente. He wanted the statue to celebrate all the peace treaties he had negotiated. Perhaps Cawdor admired it so much that Canova decided to give him a bust based on the statue.

Cawdor was a booster of the sculptor's reputation in Britain. In 1814 he bought the Duke of Bedford to the studio. The Duke admired the Three Graces so much he tried to buy it. But the statue was a commission from Josephine and he couldn't have it. So Canova made another version, which is now



Sir Joshua Reynolds' portrait of John Campbell, Lord Cawdor.

in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Josephine's version is in now in the Hermitage, sold by her children to the Tsar. It was Cawdor

who introduced Canova to the British leaders who helped him in Paris. So he was more than patron when Canova gave him *Peace*.



WHAT DO YOU GIVE TO THE MAN WHO RULES EVERYTHING?

by Mark Hartman

Wandering the corridors of that South Kensington institution, the Victoria & Albert Museum, I saw an exhibit I had missed before. In the micro-mosaics gallery is a case that relates to your interest in Canova. The caption in the case says Canova, acting on behalf of Pius VII, chose these vases and clock as gifts for Napoleon.

The vases were made sometime between 1795 and 1800 by Nicola

de Vecchis from marble, pietre dure, and glass micro-mosaic. It took extraordinary skill, inspired by archaeological finds near Rome, to shape the micro-mosaic around the curve of the vase.

The clock, shaped like a triumphal arch, was the work of Giacomo Raffaelli about 1804. Napoleon was so impressed he encouraged Raffaelli to move closer to his own court and set up his workshop outside

Milan. While Raffaelli made the case, the clock itself was made by Breguet in Paris.

By 1814 the vases were at Malmaison. In the inventory of Josephine's estate they are described as 'Two vases of antique form having towards their centers mosaic pictures representing fantastic subjects imitated from the antique.'



THE PAINTING THAT DID NOT GO HOME

Above is *The Wedding at Cana*, painted in 1563 by Paolo Veronese. It was commissioned by the monks of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, to celebrate Jesus turning water into wine. The work weighs a ton and a half, and measures almost 22 feet by 32½, truly monumental. It hung from a wall in the monastery designed by Veronese himself.

In 1797 Napoleon needed the monastery as his headquarters. Liking the painting, he had it transported to Paris. His men cut the

painting in two and rolled it up like a carpet for transport. It was stitched back together to adorn the refurbished great hall in his museum in the Louvre

But Napoleon did not like it that much. In 1810 he decided to use the hall for his wedding to Marie-Louise of Austria. The Veronese painting interfered with the plans. Napoleon ordered it to be destroyed, saying "Since it cannot be moved, burn it."

The curators of the Louvre knew

Napoleon too well to take this as an order. They found a way to move it elsewhere.

In 1815 it should have been returned to Venice. Canova himself was Venetian. The Austrians ruled Venetia now and they deemed it too large to move. The Louvre insisted it was too fragile to move again.

Canova was defeated. As compensation he sent the monastery the Feast at the House of Simon, by Charles Le Brun. So Cana remains in the Louvre today.

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