

# INAPPO



## **Napoleon from new angles**

LEFT TO RIGHT: The carved eaglet that watched over Napoleon's son in his cradle; an 1812 portrait of the emperor; the revolutionary cockade pinned to his bicorne hat. Objects such as these help illustrate Napoleon's meteoric rise and fall

# LEON



## A LIFE IN OBJECTS

Two hundred years after his death,  
**Nicole Cochrane** and **Emma Butcher**  
examine 10 objects that offer us a fresh  
perspective on the French emperor

# 1

## Solitary school days

Napoleon's school compass (below) is a reminder of the rudimentary beginnings of his career. Made from wood, copper and leather, it was his introduction to strategy, used in map drawing and fortification classes. Napoleon, who was born on 15 August 1769, attended *École Royale Militaire* in Brienne as a new member of the French nobility – his Corsican family were elevated in status after the country's invasion by the French, as his father had swapped sides and supported the attackers. Fiercely patriotic of his Corsican heritage, Napoleon had a deep connection to home, writing to his mother: "I hasten to testify to you the love that inspires in me the kindness that you have had for us."

Throughout his education, Napoleon was a solitary creature, reflecting later in life: "I lived like a bear in a little room, with my books for my only friends." He learnt gentlemanly pursuits such as Latin, mathematics, fencing and dancing. In his own time, he began work on historical and philosophical essays, even beginning a gothic novel: "O horror! The countess's fingers sank into his broad wounds and came out covered with blood." Despite his authorial ambitions, however, he ultimately settled on the path his family set for him. A life in the military lay before him, in a country on the edge of revolution.



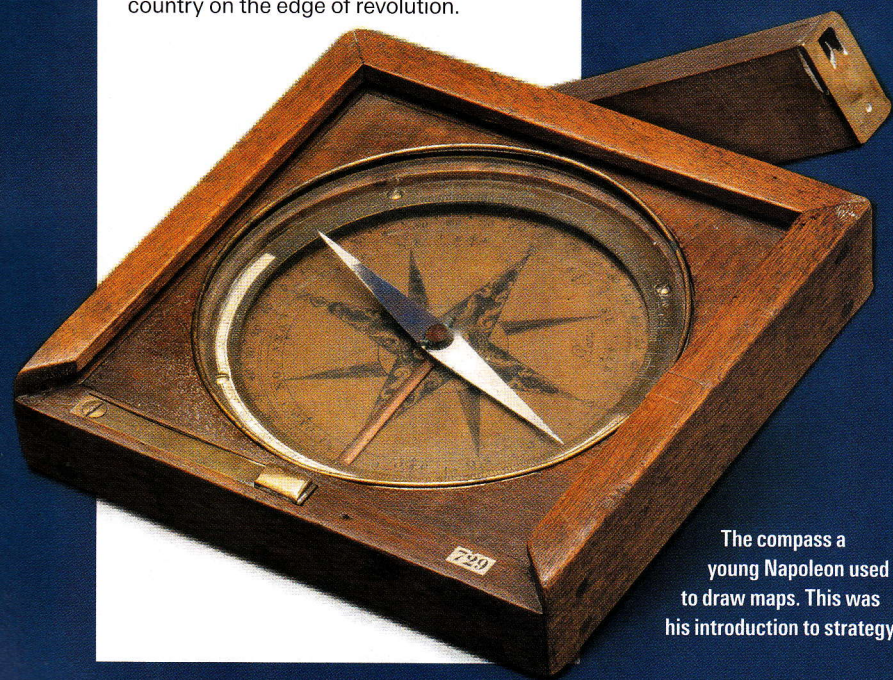
# 2

## Rising star of the revolution

"The Bat" was Napoleon's battlefield nickname, inspired by his hat's bat-like silhouette. He always carried 12 bicorne hats with him, specifically tailored to be unusually *en bataille* (with corns parallel to the shoulders) rather than *en colonne*, with the corns perpendicular, as was the fashion for most of his officers.

As well as a fashion statement, the hat was Napoleon's homage to his early revolutionary ideals. The red, white and blue cockade, the only flourish to adorn it, was the symbol of the French Revolution, of the everyman and his revolutionary yearning for democracy and liberty.

When the revolution had begun, Napoleon, four years out of military school,



The compass a young Napoleon used to draw maps. This was his introduction to strategy



One of Napoleon's bicorne hats, adorned with his customary red, white and blue cockade. This signified his revolutionary ideals

fervently embraced its ideals, eventually becoming president of the Jacobin Club, the most famous political revolutionary group. He also rose quickly through the French military ranks, even capturing the attention of Robespierre's brother, who claimed he showed "transcendent merit".

Despite the ever-changing seas of France's political allegiances, Napoleon kept its revolutionary principles with him. As he built his empire, he was determined to cultivate a "man of the people" image. Thus the cockade was a conscious fashion statement to his loyal troops, signifying that Napoleon promised to serve them, and deliver France justice.

GETTY IMAGES



The frontispiece of the first volume of *Description of Egypt*, a comprehensive survey of the country. The research for this book was conducted during Napoleon's military campaign

### 3 Enthralled by Egypt

Napoleon thought of Egypt as the "geographical key to the world". In 1798 and 1799 he led a campaign through Egypt and Syria to protect French trade interests, undermine the British and to enforce a colonial presence in the Middle East. The invasion was also Napoleon's attempt to craft his image in that of his military heroes, particularly Alexander the Great, who had forged a sprawling empire through conquest.

Alongside his military force was also a group of 167 academics, scientists, geographers, artists, engineers and musicians. As members of the Commission of Sciences and Arts, their goal was to record a comprehensive survey of Egypt,

bringing cultural and scientific flair to the campaign. The *Description of Egypt* (published 1809–29) was a series of works that were illustrated with plates of the archaeological sites, antiquities, maps and ecology of Egypt. (The frontispiece of the first volume is shown above.) These eye-catching plates sparked European interest in what would become the discipline of Egyptology.

Napoleon was also interested in excavating and looting ancient Egyptian sites. These stolen artefacts, such as the Rosetta Stone, would be seized by the British after Napoleon's defeat at the battle of the Nile – potent symbols of the way Europe exploited ancient Egypt for national pride.



## 4 Crowned in glory

Napoleon made himself emperor of the French on 2 December 1804 in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris. Spectators watched as he was anointed by Pope Pius VII and then lifted a crown, made of gold laurel leaves, above his own head – the self-made man became the self-crowned king.

His crown had proved problematic, however. Composed of 44 laurel leaves, 12 smaller leaves and 42 seeds, it was too heavy to be worn during the coronation, and six leaves were removed to make it more bearable. The goldsmith who created it, Martin Guillaume Biennais, reportedly gave his daughters the six leaves – one of which (above) went to auction in 2017 and fetched

€625,000, or around £540,000. This is the only leaf whose whereabouts we know of today: the other five are lost, and the crown itself was melted down.

The laurel crown was a symbol of military power and imperial triumph in the ancient world and, by wearing one, Napoleon hoped to emulate the Roman emperors he admired. A second crown, called the “Crown of Charlemagne”, was designed in the medieval style of the famed ruler. These two crowns were visual emblems of Napoleon’s reign: he was portraying himself as the inheritor of ancient power and medieval grandeur, heralding a new imperial era for France and the empire he had helped to shape.

A gold laurel leaf from one of Napoleon’s crowns. It sold at auction in 2017 for more than half a million euros

## 5 Desperate for an heir

One of Napoleon's chief concerns after he had established an empire was finding a way to secure it. He needed a legitimate male heir. Despite their passionate 14-year love affair, in 1809 the emperor had his marriage to Josephine de Beauharnais annulled. His dynastic hopes were placed on his second wife, the Austrian archduchess Marie Louise, eldest daughter of Francis II of Austria, whom he married in 1810. On 20 March 1811, the couple welcomed a son, named Napoleon François Joseph Charles Bonaparte, and proclaimed "King of Rome" in the tradition of the Holy Roman Empire.

This elaborate cradle was gifted to the infant prince by the city of Paris and was adorned with meaningful symbols – the baby watched over by an eaglet and the winged goddess of

victory. Napoleon doted on his son, nicknamed "the Eaglet". His private secretary, Baron De Meneval, wrote that "sometimes, dismissing the great thoughts that occupied his mind, [Napoleon] would lie down on the floor beside his cherished son, playing with him like another child".

After Napoleon's first exile, to the island of Elba, his wife and young son fled to Austria; he would never see them again. In Austria the younger Napoleon was given the nickname "Franz" and tragically died of tuberculosis aged just 21.

**The intricately carved cradle that was given to Napoleon's infant son and heir**



## 6 A worthy steed



**The skeleton of Marengo, the emperor's trusted war-horse. Napoleon rode him during the disastrous battle of Waterloo**

In 1815, the armies of Napoleon, Wellington and Blücher met at the battle of Waterloo, marking the end of the Napoleonic Wars. It was a ferocious fight, with thousands of soldiers, artillery and

horses crammed into a few square miles.

Napoleon rode into battle on his trusted horse, Marengo (whose skeleton is shown left), named after the French victory at Marengo in 1800. Fourteen hands tall, Marengo was an Arab stallion purchased in Egypt. He was trained to be calm and poised on the battlefield; French riding masters fired guns around him, waved flags and drove dogs through his legs to prepare him for the chaos of war. Over the course of his career Marengo was wounded eight times, yet he was always considered reliable and steady. After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, he was captured by the British and rebranded into a London celebrity.

When he died, after outliving his master by a decade, his skeleton was exhibited for the delight of audiences; even Queen Victoria visited the remains. Today, he's housed in London's National Army Museum. Perhaps more macabre, his hooves were made into an inkwell and snuff boxes, and one of the latter has gleamed on the sideboard in the Officers' Mess in St James's Palace for around 190 years.



## 9 The ultimate power play

In April 1811 a new portrait sculpture of Napoleon by the famed neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova was unveiled in Paris. The monumental 11ft artwork depicted Napoleon as the ancient Roman god of war, Mars. It also presented Bonaparte in the nude, in the heroic style of the Roman emperors he so admired. Napoleon hated it, calling the physique "too athletic", and hid it from public view within the *Musée Napoléon* (the Louvre).

After his defeat at Waterloo, the statue was sold to the British government, who presented it to the Duke of Wellington. The duke installed the sculpture at the base of the stairway of his London home, Apsley House. Wellington continued to collect trophies of his foe: he became the lover of two of Napoleon's mistresses; bought his sister Pauline's mansion in Paris; and amassed an extensive collection of Napoleonic memorabilia including weaponry, books, busts, paintings, and even the vast Sèvres Egyptian dinner service refused by Josephine as a divorce present.

In public, Wellington was the picture of modest Victorian masculinity and self-effacement. But at Apsley, Mars the Peacemaker was used as the ultimate display of personal triumph over the naked emperor, a self-made god forever on undignified display.

Antonio Canova's sculpture of Napoleon as the Roman god Mars, which the Duke of Wellington displayed in his home

## 10 Risen from the grave

In 1844 George Reynolds described Napoleon as that "meteor which blazed so brightly, and which so long terrified all the nations of the universe with its supernal lustre". Despite the emperor's death, his celebrity continued. In Britain, his true nature was hotly debated. Arguments ranged from Napoleon being a misunderstood leader who "neither party even understood" to being responsible for causing "slaughter, fire and human misery", as claimed by Sir Walter Scott in the first full-length biography of the emperor.

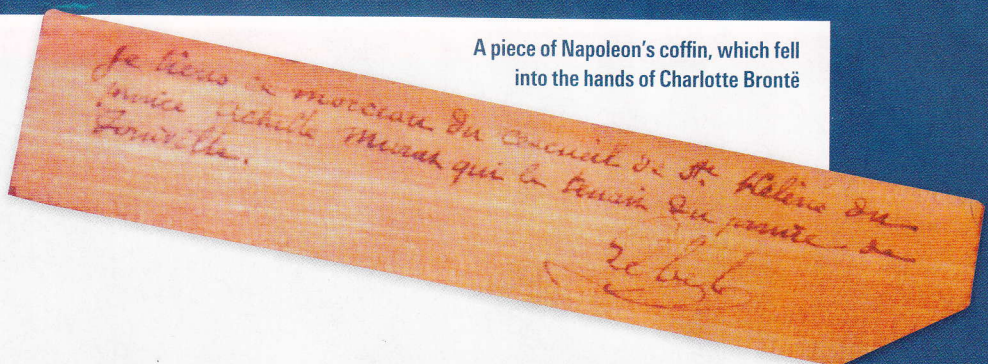
In France, Napoleon's continued popularity, paired with ongoing political unrest, led to the joint political move by statesman Adolphe Thiers and King Louis-Philippe to reinter Napoleon in Paris. In 1840, a team went to St Helena to exhume the body,

which had hardly decomposed. Some took pieces of the old coffin as souvenirs, such as the one pictured here, which ended up in the possession of the novelist Charlotte Brontë, gifted to her from her Belgian tutor, Constantin Héger.

In December Napoleon's remains were brought to Paris for *retour des cendres*, "return of the ashes". A huge crowd gathered on a day described by Victor Hugo as "beautiful as glory / Cold as the tomb". A fitting parade for a sensational life. **H**

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A piece of Napoleon's coffin, which fell into the hands of Charlotte Brontë



**LISTEN** Andrew Roberts explores the French leader's life in the five-part series **Napoleon: The Man and the Myths**: [bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05z1b4](http://bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05z1b4)

