

## **PORTRAIT MINIATURES FROM THE BONAPARTE COLLECTION**

### **THE PRIVATE TREASURES OF EUROPE'S PUBLIC FAMILY**

**Sotheby's London, 4 July 2018**



Sotheby's prestigious annual Treasures sale of decorative artists unveils a rare collection of intimate portrait miniatures relating to Napoléon Bonaparte and his family. Drawing together myriad lines of Bonaparte provenance, the forty-four lots together paint a picture akin to a photograph album, revealing the contrasting state and private concerns of a Royal and Imperial dynasty.

Napoléon was acutely aware of the efficacy of the image as a tool for propaganda. When the Emperor set about trying to establish the Bonapartes as a hereditary dynasty, he carefully orchestrated the past and present to glorify his family – adopting much of the protocol and etiquette that had been observed previously under the Bourbons. This collection is exceptional in the number of intimate portraits it contains of members of a family that is more usually defined by elaborately orchestrated images of state.

## THE EMPRESS JOSÉPHINE

Napoléon and Joséphine's life together was notoriously tempestuous yet they were forever bound together by love, even after the marriage was dissolved in 1809. The auction presents a number of exquisite portrait miniatures that once belonged to the Empress.

***The 'Austerlitz' Joséphine: A gold-mounted tortoiseshell portrait snuff box, Pierre André Montauban, Paris, 1806-1809 (est. £80,000-100,000)***

*'I have beaten the Russian and Austrian armies commanded by the two Emperors'*

An exceptional miniature by court painter and draughtsman Jean Baptiste Isabey evokes the moment that Joséphine received the letter from Napoléon announcing his victory at Austerlitz on 2 December 1806 – created as a private family record celebrating perhaps the greatest achievement of the Grande Armée. Fittingly, the only jewellery worn by the Empress is a gold chain hung with a miniature of Napoléon.

As painter and draughtsman of His Majesty's cabinet, Isabey fully understood his role as a eulogist of the Imperial family. This extended to the clothes that they wore, and for the coronation in 1804 he was required to design costumes that bore no relationship with the immediate Bourbon past. Here, the lace collar and puffed sleeves of the velvet dress derive from Joséphine's coronation robes, which looked back to the Renaissance as a source of inspiration.



***Hortense & Eugène de Beauharnais: A gold-mounted tortoiseshell double portrait snuff box, Pierre André Montauban, Paris, 1798-1809 (est. £15,000-20,000)***

It is with the miniatures of the children of the Imperial family that the genre of the intimate portrait is most evident.

Following the birth of her son Eugène in 1781, Joséphine gave birth to Hortense in April 1783. During the Reign of Terror in 1794, Joséphine wrote from the imprisonment of herself and her first husband, Vicomte Alexandre de Beauharnais, a general during the French Revolution, to her young children: *'My darling little Hortense, it breaks my heart to be separated from you and my dear Eugène; I think ceaselessly of my two darling children whom I love and embrace with all my heart'*. Alexandre was guillotined the same year, and Joséphine married Napoléon Bonaparte two years later. Napoléon considered Eugène the most capable member of his family and



throughout this marriage, brother and sister mediated numerous times between Joséphine and Napoléon.

The relationship between Hortense, Eugene and Josephine remained particularly close, and this snuff box set with miniature portraits of her beloved children is testament to this enduring bond – despite the physical separation brought on by their respective marriages and subsequent relocations to other European countries.

## THE EMPEROR'S MOTHER & FATHER

Napoléon's will describes the cabinet of snuff boxes which he had taken with him to St Helena, including 33 mainly of tortoiseshell, his favourites set with coins or portraits of family members – revealing just how important pictures of his kin were to him. These family heirlooms also uncover Napoléon's private taste for simplicity.

The auction offers two miniatures representing the Emperor's parents, both depicted in this understated elegant style by the same goldsmith and at the same date. The mounting of these miniatures in a simple tortoiseshell snuff box is in keeping with the private taste of their son Napoléon. The plan was for these to be part of an intimate portrait gallery, one to be enjoyed in privacy away from the pomp of the court.



***Carlo Maria Buonaparte: A gold-mounted tortoiseshell portrait snuff box, Pierre André Montauban, Paris, 1798-1809 (est. £15,000-25,000)***

Napoléon's father Carlo Maria Buonaparte, depicted here with powdered hair *en queue* in a dashing plum-coloured coat, was the descendant of minor Tuscan nobility who had moved to Corsica to fulfil numerous official roles. The commission was given to Isabey *circa* 1805, years after Carlo Maria's death, and so the artist kept the fashion of the early 1780s – an important consideration for members of the family who remembered the sitter. The box contains a lock of straight, fine, dark hair, accompanied by a handwritten note stating that the hair belongs to 'my son Napoléon in the box with a portrait of my father'.

***Maria Letizia Bonaparte, Madame Mère: A tortoiseshell portrait snuffbox with gold mounts, Pierre André Montauban, Paris, 1798-1809 (est. £30,000-50,000)***

Portrait miniatures set into snuff boxes, intended as tokens of family affection and as a private memory, were often passed down through generations, such as this example with the portrait of Madame Mère de l'Empereur, which was owned by her great-great-great granddaughter Eugénie Bonaparte, later Princesse de la Moskowa.

This miniature by Isabey is based on the first of three full-length portraits painted by Baron Gérard of Napoléon's mother, commissioned when he was First Consul. It faithfully replicates the portrait, which was sold at a Sotheby's auction in 2006, save for the pearl earrings and necklace – a modification fitting for a miniature intended for private contemplation rather than public display. Although showered with luxury by Napoléon, she, unlike most of her children, remained unchanged by it, preferring to live quietly and modestly. Having endured severe financial difficulties after the early death of her husband Carlo Buonaparte, she was well aware of the fickleness of fortune.

## PERSONAL GIFTS



***Napoléon I, Emperor of the French: A gold and enamel Imperial presentation portrait snuff box, Gabriel-Raoul Morel, Paris, 1812-15 (est. £80,000-100,000)***

One of the traditions that Napoléon revived from the Bourbons was the practice of giving a portrait snuff box as a mark of favour.

This grand portrait of Napoléon I, depicting a more world-weary figure of authority compared with imagery in the early years of the Empire, was a gift to General Henri Bertrand. One of the Emperor's most trusted aides, Bertrand first came to Napoléon's attention for his bravery during the Egyptian campaign. This piece was likely given on the occasion of Bertrand's appointment as

Grand Marshal in 1813. His loyalty did not waver, and Bertrand, his wife and young family endured voluntary exile on St Helena and were at the Emperor's deathbed.

***Princess Pauline Borghese: An Imperial French silver, silver-gilt, and Paris porcelain chocolatière de voyage, retailed by Martin-Guillaume Biennais, Paris, circa 1800 (est. £40,000-60,000)***

The second, and most beautiful, of Napoléon's sisters, Pauline's first marriage was to one of his staff officers, General C-V-E Leclerc – much to Napoléon's chagrin. This lot – engraved with Napoléon's coat-of arms and the monogram PB – was a personal gift commissioned by Napoléon upon her second marriage to Prince Camillo Borghese of the eminent Roman family, with whom the Emperor sought to create a dynastic alliance.



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