Napoleon's legacy in culture, art and heritage (online, 3 Aug 21)

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IMPERIAL MATERIAL NAPOLEON'S LEGACY IN CULTURE, ART, AND HERITAGE, 1821–2021

Napoleon Bonaparte died exactly two hundred years ago on a small island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. He had spent the last six years of his life in exile on St Helena, removed from political and military power, in the unusual situation of being able to try to shape and preserve his own posthumous legacy. He was, in a way, phenomenally successful. Napoleon is an instantly recognisable name to this day, and despite growing efforts in recent years to critically revise his reputation and highlight his role in issues such as the reinstatement of slavery, he has largely managed to escape the same level of historical censure as other infamous military dictators. This is perhaps partly because his name has become such an adaptable brand, standing for an entire era of people, places, and events, as well as a full two centuries' worth of art, craft, and consumer commodities. While other events marking the bicentenary of Napoleon's death have weighed his contributions to legislative, political, and military reform, less work has been done to confront his vast material, visual, and cultural legacy.
Napoleon's death in 1821 prompted a frenzy of creation and circulation of materials relating to him, a whirling international trade in objects, images, texts and memorabilia which has essentially never since ceased. Death masks were made, shipped to Europe, waylaid, stolen, copied, and taken around Latin America by one of his doctors. Portraits were exchanged and exhibited, caricatures continued to abound, and actors took on the mantle of the Emperor from the stage to the film set. Personal items belonging to Napoleon were gifted to friends and family, collected by his admirers, and displayed at public exhibitions around the world: his horse, the key to his room, his toothbrush. These items make national headline news to this day when they are rediscovered, are sold for monumental sums to contemporary collectors and serve as key advertising strategies for museums. Napoleonic items can be official or personal, serious or comical, luxury or disposable: the former emperor can be equally thought of as a monumental Neoclassical marvel in white marble, as Joaquin Phoenix, or as a tiny cartoon figure astride a fat pony – yet little work has so far been done to bring together these diverse cultural histories in conversation.

We therefore invite researchers of all disciplines, and museum and heritage professionals, to reflect on the enduring material and visual legacy of Napoleon, what our interpretation and use of it means for the future as well as how it affects our understanding of the past.

Possible themes for papers include:
• Napoleon in theatre, TV and film; in music; in poetry; in art, sculpture and drawing; in books, ephe-

mera, printing, paratext
• Napoleon in exhibitions and museums: museum histories, interpretations of collections, and how objects are presented to the public, including in past, present and future events; how Napoleon is used in marketing strategies or public engagement
• Private collecting and the choices and agency of collectors, including by historians; the memorabilia trade both in the 19th century and up to today; Napoleonic tourism and the creation, looting or buying of souvenirs from significant places
• Gender, sexuality, and Napoleonic memory; involvement of women as collectors, curators, consumers
• Race and empire: critical histories and commentaries on Napoleonic representations
• Medical histories of Napoleonic objects
• Dress, fashion, appearance
• Home décor
• Religion and the macabre
• Animals and Napoleonic symbolism
• The ‘golden’ or ‘rosy’ vs. ‘black’ legend of Napoleon and ongoing critical interpretations
• Comedy and ridicule
• Romanticisation, neoclassical heroism, masculinity
• Circulation and object histories
• Re-enactment
• Public commemoration; plaques, monuments, iconoclasm
• Napoleon and antiquity

Please submit abstracts for short 15-minute papers, along with a short bio, to ImpMatWorkshop@gmail.com by 12 July 2021. (Abstracts should be no longer than 300 words.) Following the workshop, we plan to pursue the publication of selected papers as a collected edition.
Convenors:
Dr Matilda Greig (Cardiff University) and Dr Nicole Cochrane (University of Exeter)

Reference:
CFP: Napoleon's legacy in culture, art and heritage (online, 3 Aug 21). In: ArtHist.net, Jun 13, 2021 (accessed Nov 25, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/34358>.