
Koopman Rare Art

Koopman Rare Art is delighted to be returning to Treasure House Fair at The Royal Hospital, Chelsea from 27th June to 1st July 2025 at Stand 202.

In the weeks leading up to the fair, our Director's Choice newsletters will highlight some of the exceptional pieces we'll be bringing—such as The Incredible Madame Mere Inkstand which we have been entrusted to sell on behalf of a client.

We would love for you to join us at the fair; if you would like to attend, please e-mail info@koopman.art.

We hope to see you there,

Lewis, Timo and the Team at Koopman Rare Art

Directors Choice – Timo Koopman The Madame Mère Inkstand



The Made Mère Inkstand by Jean-Baptiste Claude Odier Paris, 1812

As the name suggests, the Madame Mère inkstand was made for Letizia Ramolino, Napoleon Bonaparte's mother, and gifted to her son, King Joseph, in 1812, as testified by the documents contained within the inkstand.

1812, the year this glorious object was commissioned was a year of significance as it marked a critical transition in Napoleonic history. The French Empire was at its greatest

extent in 1812. Having been crowned Emperor of France in 1804, the years between Napoleon's coronation and 1812 are defined by the historians as the years of the Napoleonic wars, as France was in constant conflict with the various European powers.

On the battlefield, Napoleon experienced enormous success: France defeated the Austrians and the Russians in Austerlitz (1805), Prussia in Jena (1806) and Spain (1808) in the Iberian Peninsula. Then, believing himself invincible, Napoleon launched an offensive in Russia in 1812. However, the venture turned out to be a spectacular failure. In pursuit of the Tsar's army, which continued to retreat eastward, the French were annihilated by the severe Russian cold. As so, 1812 marks the peak of Napoleonic grandeur and the last year of the Bonaparte's' fortune, which is well represented by the splendour of this empire-style vermeil inkstand.



Portrait Miniature by François-Juste-Joseph Sieurac.

The oblong inkstand rests on four feet modelled as a lion's paws. The main body is decorated on the sides with bees inside wreaths of leaves. The bee was a recurrent symbol of the Empire Style: due to the industrious habits of the insect, Napoleon chose it as the emblem of his power. As a further representation of strength, the large front drawer is embellished with the image of an imperial eagle inside a stylised foliage frieze. The flat top of the inkstand is worked with a delicate flowery flat chasing, which involves hammering with small, blunt tools to give low-relief ornamentation. This technique was highly fashionable for silver decoration in Europe in the early 18th century. Under the Empire, the ornamental repertoire followed the example of the classical world, whose rigour and perfection Napoleon sincerely appreciated and often commissioned in a presumptuous attempt to emulate the grandeur and splendour of ancient Rome. Therefore, two classical female figures are kneeling on top, each holding a cornucopia, one serving as an inkwell and the other as a pounce pot. The square plinth in the middle, applied with edges of foliage, is surmounted by a pinnacle shaped like an urn, above which sits the imperial eagle. A mechanism inserted inside this element opens a door in the pedestal to reveal a miniature portrait of Letizia Ramolino made by François-Juste-Joseph Sieurac.

The inkstand shows strong similarities to a mustard vase in gilded silver made by Odier and preserved at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The kneeling female figure beside the

jar and the lion's paw-shaped feet are nearly identical. In addition, a salt cellar by Odiot in gilded bronze, housed at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, features an identical design. A similar winged figure, like the one applied to the plinth door of the inkstand, appears in an engraving for a table lamp by Percier and Fontaine—designers from whom Odiot drew much of his inspiration, including for this inkstand. The Drawing for this inkstand sits in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

Letizia Ramolino Bonaparte

Born in 1750, Maria Letizia was a member of the Ramolino, a noble family of Italian descent who had lived in Corsica for generations.

In 1764, Letizia married Carlo Buonaparte, the son of a local family of similar origins, which ensured her financial security. The family's primary source of income was Carlo Buonaparte's work for Pasquale Paoli, a Corsican patriot, statesman and military leader, head of the resistance movements against the Genoese and French control of the island.

When, in 1768, the French armies landed in Corsica, Paoli's military forces and, therefore, Carlo Buonaparte, were called to fight. Despite being pregnant, Letizia accompanied Carlo to the front line. The event is memorable as, shortly after her return to Ajaccio, Letizia gave birth to her second son, Napoleon; his embryonic attendance on the battlefield contributed to the legend of the most famous character in European history.

On February the 24th, 1785, Carlo Bonaparte died of stomach cancer. Overnight, Letizia became the lady of the house of a destitute family. However, as Napoleon would later state, Letizia "Had a man's brain in a woman's body" and found a way to provide for her family. In 1791, the Archdeacon Lucien, Carlo's uncle, who lived upstairs in Casa Buonaparte, died, and left his inheritance to Letizia, granting her a comfortable life and allowing Napoleon to enjoy promotions and starting a career as a Corsican politician.

Napoleon's rise was expeditious, and his fame and wealth were certainly shared and appreciated by Letizia, who received 60,000 francs, which allowed her to move to one of the best residences in Marseille. Although Napoleon provided for her, Letizia remained a dominant and pragmatic woman who never succumbed to the imposing figure of the son.

Indeed, Napoleon feared and loved her mother in equal measure.

For instance, immediately after his imperial ascent, Napoleon granted his family titles, including "Prince of the Empire", to Joseph and Louis. However, Letizia was so upset about her "Madame Mère" - that she decided to boycott Napoleon's coronation by not attending.



"Madame Mère" by Gerrard Musée de Versailles ©RNM

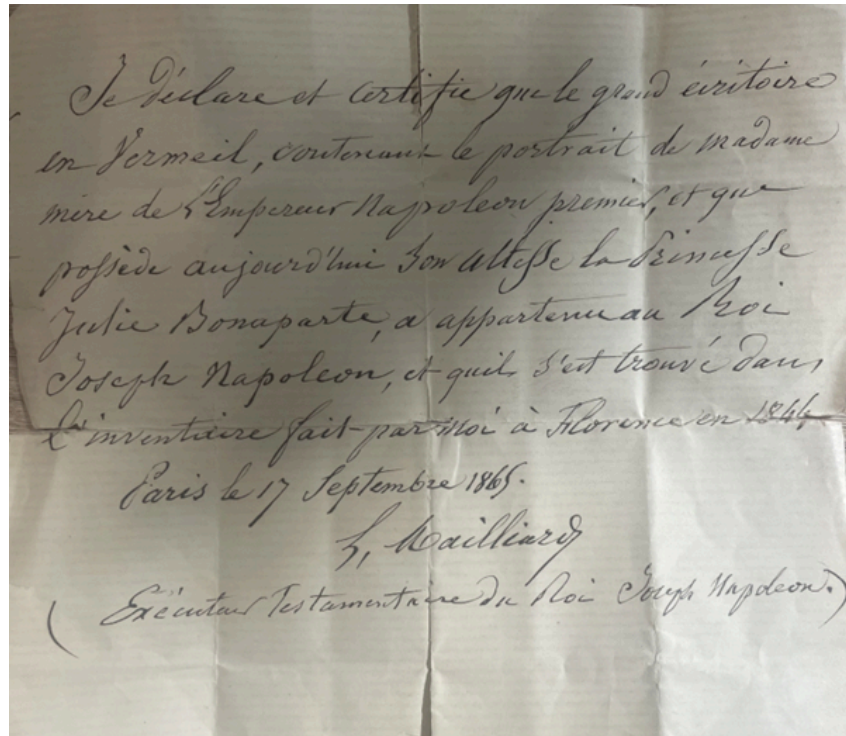
To correct the wrong suffered by Napoleon, the painter Jacques-Louis David decided to insert Letizia in the famous representation of his coronation, now housed in the Louvre, representing her smiling as she watches her son ascending to the throne of France.

Literature:

J.B.Hawkins, *The Al Tajir Collection of Silver and Gold*, London, 1983, vol.I, p.110-115
 According to documents contained in the inkstand, it was the gift of Madame Mère to her eldest son Joseph Bonaparte, King of Spain. She son Jerome, King of Westphalia and that is gave similar piece to her third a now in the Musée de la Legion d'Honneur, Paris. The model for the kneeling figure supporting the inkpots appears to have been a standard Odier model and was reused as a mustard pot in the Demidoff Service (see no.20).
 Following the death, in Florence of Joseph Bonaparte in 1844, the inkstand passed to Carlo Luciano Bonaparte, Joseph's nephew, and subsequently to his daughter Princess Julie.

Provenance:

Letizia Ramolino Bonaparte
 Joseph Bonaparte (died in 1844)
 Lucien Bonaparte (died in 1840)
 Carlo Luciano Bonaparte, Prince of Canino
 Princess Julie and Alessandro del Gallo di Roccagiovine
 Lucien de Roccagiovine (last Bonaparte owner of the inkstand, died in 1917)
 Colnaghi until 1982
 E & C.T. Koopman
 Al tajir collection until 2021



The later provenance of the inkstand is the following:

As Lucien Bonaparte (d. 1840) died before his brother Joseph (d. 1844), it was inherited by Lucien's son, Carlo Luciano Bonaparte, Prince of Canino, who had married his cousin Zenaide, Joseph's daughter. One of Carlo Luciano and Zenaide's nine children, Princess Julie, married the marchese Alessandro del Gallo di roccagiovine. Their son, Lucien de Roccagiovine, was the last recorded member of the Bonaparte family to own it.

Napoleon's mother gave a similar inkstand to one of her other sons, King Jérôme, which is in the Musée de la Légion d'Honneur, Paris (kindly pointed out to us by Monsieur Jean-Pierre Samoyault).

A mustard pot in silver gilt (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) by Odier presents marked similarities to the inkstand. There is an identical female figure kneeling beside the jar, and feet shaped like lion paws. An identical object by Odier, serving as a salt cellar, in gilt bronze is in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris. The type of kneeling figure seen on this inkstand, and the two examples of Odier's work cited above, are characteristic of the ornamental and figurative repertory of the Empire period. A similar winged figure is found in an engraving for a table lamp by Percier and Fontaine from whose projects Odier most likely derived many of his ideas.

François Juste Sieurac (1781-1832), author of the miniature, studied under Augustin. He was active in Paris as a miniaturist and lithographer from 1810 until his death. The year in which he began his career as an independent artist, 1810, is in accordance both with the statements contained in the documents quoted at the beginning of this entry (the mother of the emperor gave the inkstand to her son Joseph in 1812) and the dates of the marks (4003-19). Sieurac executed miniature portraits of Napoleon's mother on other occasions.

The emergence of the Empire style was fully embraced by the early 19th century under Napoleon Bonaparte. Influenced by classical antiquity and aimed at conveying power and grandeur. The design language became more restrained and symmetrical, focusing on clean lines and geometric shapes. Silver during this era was often utilized in items like flatware and candelabras, reflecting a neoclassical aesthetic that celebrated heroic themes and national identity, moving away from the frivolity of Rococo.

The shift in fashion from Rococo's extravagant ornamentation to the Empire's structured elegance not only mirrored changes in taste but also the socio-political landscape of France. The Empire style sought to project a unified national identity, contrasting with the individualistic spirit of the Rococo period.

The Empire style was born out of the formal Neoclassicism that dominated late eighteenth-century European buildings and decoration. These styles were stimulated in large part by the bitter rivalry of France and England and their rulers. Napoleon I (1769-1821), self-styled Emperor of the French, chose to extend France's imperial grandeur through force of arms. Upon assuming the throne in 1804, he immediately launched an ambitious art and design program that lasted until his reign ended in 1815. Across the English Channel, the Prince Regent, the future King George IV (1762-1830), sought ways to celebrate England's heritage through his active patronage of the arts.

Social conditions of the Napoleonic era created the new decorative style. New archaeological findings in Greece, Rome, Pompeii and Egypt inspired a wave of key pattern books. Furniture and art from antiquity enlivened the new styles. A taste for Egyptomania and the symbolic application of ornament simultaneously animated contemporary furnishings in France. It was a time of continuous military conflict, martial designs crept into fashionable decoration, bringing camp furniture, pennant-style draperies, and tented beds into vogue.

Napoleon Bonaparte came to power on the ashes of the fiery French Revolution and distinguished himself militarily during the brief and chaotic Directoire period (1795-98). General Bonaparte engineered his rise from First Consul to Emperor in 1804 by cleverly manipulating weak politicians and an admiring army. Napoleon's coronation, a dazzling display of pomp and pageantry, signalled the beginnings of an energetic overhaul of the French establishment in which his hand could be seen everywhere. Napoleon's personal involvement extended to the creation of an artistic style, based on the Neoclassical aesthetic, which celebrated monumental scale, masculine severity, and bold ornamentation.



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres,
Napoleon on his Imperial Throne, 1806, Musée de l'Armée, Paris.

The Empire Style is most often given the dates of Napoleon's reign, 1804-15, but its features developed in the earlier Directoire and Consulat periods (1795-1803), and Empire Style furnishings were still being produced in Europe, particularly in Sweden, into the 1830s. Napoleon's domination of the world stage until 1815 provided the means for the Empire Style to spread throughout Europe and make its way to artistically Francophile England.



Napoleon's promotion of Classical-inspired decoration was intended as a powerful counterpoint to the stylistic excesses of the Baroque and Rococo and the anciens régimes that supported such effects. Antique themes and motifs were used to promote France's civic and martial ideals. Cabinetry and metalwork by Jacob-Desmalter, Biennais, Thomire, and Odiot were rendered in the bold new Empire Style. The interrelationship of architectural setting, furniture, and decoration assumed great importance in the eyes of Percier and Fontaine and other purveyors of the style.



Napoleon I visited French textile, porcelain, and furniture workshops to encourage their increased production for the greater glory of France, and all of the arts served to promote his regime. Revolutionary conquests were echoed in the fine and decorative arts, in which figures of Fame and Victory abounded. Antique forms and ornament, already seen in the Louis XVI style, blended with Napoleon's imperial symbols, which included the bee, the letter N surrounded by a laurel wreath, stars, the eagle, and exotic hieroglyphic motifs culled from the Egyptian campaign (May 1795–October 1799). Empress Joséphine was fond of swans; they decorate the chair arms, curtains, carpets, and porcelain in the state rooms of her home at Malmaison.

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in our gallery located in 12 Dover Street, London, W1S 4LL

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