

TIMELINE AND GUIDE TO SYMBOLS

for the exhibition *Symbols of Power: Napoleon and the Art of the Empire Style, 1800–1815*

GUIDE TO EMPIRE STYLE SYMBOLS

In the decorative arts of the Empire period, certain symbols were used repeatedly to promote Napoleon's regime and link it to powerful ancient cultures. You will see many of these symbols as you walk through the exhibition. Among some of the more prominent are the following:



Bee

Chosen by Napoleon as one of his imperial emblems. More than 300 bees made of gold had been found in the tomb of King Childeric I, king of the Franks in the fifth century; so by adopting this emblem, Napoleon was linking himself with the earliest French rulers.



Butterfly

Associated with the Greek mythological figure Psyche, who is often depicted with butterfly wings. When shown fluttering around bouquets or baskets of flowers, the butterfly refers to the myth of Flora, the goddess of Spring, who symbolizes the beginning of life.



Cornucopia

A symbol of abundance and wealth dating back to the fifth century B.C. Used during the Empire period as a symbol of the natural resources and cultural and economic riches of the new republic.



Crown

A symbol of power, legitimacy, righteousness, and triumph.



Eagle

Adopted by Napoleon to represent his new French Empire. Derived from the Romans, who used the eagle as a symbol of power and independence on the standards or flags of the Roman army. A bronze sculpture of the eagle was carried by Napoleon's regiment.



Five-pointed star

In heraldry, a symbol of knightly status. The five-pointed star is part of Napoleon's family crest and was often used to surround his monogram.



Fritillaria

A member of the lily family and in France referred to as the imperial flower. Chosen for its large size, symmetrical appearance, and crown-like shape, this was one of the two most common flowers depicted in the Empire period. It symbolizes power and triumph.



Laurel wreath

In Greek mythology, the sun god Apollo is represented wearing a laurel wreath on his head. In Rome it was a symbol of military victory.



Lictor's fasces

In the Empire period this symbol was used in revolutionary propaganda. A lictor was a member of a special class of Roman civil servant who guarded magistrates of the Roman Republic. A fasces, carried by the lictor, was used to hold an axe and was fashioned from a bundle of sticks and tied with a red ribbon.



Napoleon's monogram

The single uppercase *N* marks many Empire period objects. Like a brand, the monogram typically identified objects as belonging to Napoleon, his household, or his entourage.



Oak leaf

A common Greco-Roman symbol of strength and endurance, the oak leaf represented the power of the new republic established by Napoleon.



Palm branch

A symbol of Greek origin that represents peace and victory. The image of the palm branch was also a common stand-in for the Victory figure.



Phrygian cap

A symbol of Liberty adopted by the revolutionaries in France. Worn during the Roman Empire by former slaves who had been emancipated by their masters and whose descendants were therefore considered citizens of the Roman Empire.



Rose

The flower of the Roman goddess of love and fertility, Venus. The rose was one of two most common flowers depicted in the Empire period and was much loved by Empress Josephine, who had a collection of two hundred and fifty species.



Swan

A symbol of love and of the sun god Apollo. Swans are said to have flown overhead on the day of Apollo's birth and are often pictured pulling his chariot. The swan is also associated with Zeus, the god who transformed himself into a swan in order to seduce Leda, the beautiful mortal queen with whom he was in love.

TIMELINE

This timeline covers important events in both French and American history and provides a political and cultural context for the Empire style.

- 1589** The Bourbon dynasty is established in France. Henry the Great (IV) is crowned king.
- 1600** Baroque art, associated with the Catholic Counter-Reformation, becomes the dominant style of European art.
- 1610** Louis XIII, "The Just," is crowned king.
- 1618** The Thirty Years' War between Catholics and Protestants begins in Europe.
- 1625–28** The Huguenots (a Protestant minority) rebel against Louis XIII.
- 1643** Louis XIII dies.
Louis XIV, "The Sun King," accedes to the throne at the age of four.
- 1648** The Treaty of Westphalia (also known as the Treaty of Münster) ends the Thirty Years' War.
- 1682** The royal court moves to Versailles.
- 1715** Louis XIV dies.
Louis XV, "The Well-Beloved," accedes.
The Rococo style (known for its delicacy and elaborate ornamentation) begins to emerge.
- 1762** Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau publishes his *Social Contract*.
- 1769** Napoleon is born to a noble family on the island of Corsica, off the coast of Italy.
- 1774** Louis XV dies of smallpox. Louis XVI becomes king and Marie Antoinette becomes queen.
- 1775** The American Revolutionary War begins.
- 1776** The Declaration of Independence is signed.
- 1789** The French Revolution begins with the storming of the Bastille.
Revolutionaries issue the Declaration of the Rights of Man.
George Washington is elected the first president of the United States.
- 1792** Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette are tried for treason and guillotined.
The new Republic is established.
- 1795** The Directoire becomes the government of France and five directors are named: Jean François Rewbell, Paul François Jean Nicolas Barras, Louis Marie de La Révellière Lépéaux, Comte Lazare Nicolas Marguerite Carnot, and Étienne-François-Louis-Honoré Le Tourneur.

- 1797** John Quincy Adams is elected the second president of the United States.
- 1798** Napoleon and his army begin the Egyptian expedition.
French soldiers discover the Rosetta Stone in Egypt and bring it to Europe.
- 1799** The Consulate replaces the Directoire government.
Napoleon Bonaparte is named First Consul.
- 1801** Napoleon appoints Charles Percier and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine the official architects and designers of the Empire.
Thomas Jefferson is elected the third president of the United States.
- 1803** The U.S. negotiates the Louisiana Purchase with France.
- 1804** Napoleon is crowned emperor.
The First Empire begins.
The Napoleonic Code, based on both French and ancient Roman law, is established.
The Empire style begins to emerge.
- 1812** Percier and Fontaine publish *Recueils de Décorations Intérieures*, a pattern book that provides models of Empire style design. Napoleon invades Russia, an event that marks the beginning of his downfall
- 1814** Napoleon abdicates the throne and is exiled to the Italian island of Elba.
Louis XVIII is crowned king.
- 1815** The Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon's last battle, takes place on June 18.
Napoleon surrenders to the British and is exiled to Saint Helena.
- 1821** On May 5, Napoleon dies on Saint Helena.

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