

SYMBOLS OF POWER NAPOLEON

AND THE ART OF THE EMPIRE STYLE, 1800–1815

Napoleon Bonaparte



Napoleon Bonaparte was born Napoleone di Buonaparte August 15, 1769, to Maria Letizia Ramolino and Carlo Buonaparte on the island of Corsica, located in the Mediterranean Sea. He later adopted the more French-sounding name, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Born to a family of Italian nobility with strong connections to the French government, Napoleon was afforded greater opportunities for study than were available to most Corsicans of the time. At age nine he was admitted to the French military school at Brienne-le-Château, a small town near Troyes. This marked the beginning of his military ambitions.

Robert Jacques François Faust Lefèvre, 1755–1830; *Portrait of Napoleon I in His Coronation Robes*, 1812; oil on canvas; 98 7/8 x 75 3/8 inches; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection (26.789)

At Brienne he excelled in mathematics and the study of ancient history, and in 1784, transferred to the École Royale Militaire, an elite military academy in Paris. After completing the two-year program in just one year, Napoleon was appointed to serve as a second lieutenant of artillery in the French army where he demonstrated a keen comprehension of tactics at the young age of 16.

In December of 1793, Napoleon gained recognition by formulating a strategy that forced the British to relinquish control over the French city of Toulon, an achievement that earned him the promotion to brigadier general at age 24. In 1799, after a progression of military victories in Italy and a coup d'état, Napoleon was made First Consul of the French Republic. In 1802, he secured the title for life, and in 1804, successfully reinstated a hereditary monarchy with himself as Emperor.

Napoleon also established what is now referred to as the Napoleonic Code in 1804. Originally called the Civil Code and based on a combination of Enlightenment principles and Roman law, the Code was intended to transform and more clearly define the French legal system following the French Revolution. The Napoleonic Code is considered to be one of the most successful codes of law ever created and greatly influenced legal systems in other countries.

Through a series of victories against Austrian, Russian and Prussian forces, Napoleon fulfilled his dream of establishing French control over much of Europe. Following a failed invasion of Russia in 1812 and a great defeat near the German city of Leipzig in 1813, however, Napoleon's empire soon began to unravel. Unable to prevent foreign armies from conquering Paris in 1814, Napoleon was forced to surrender and was exiled to the Mediterranean island of Elba.

In 1815, with the assistance of many of his former soldiers, Napoleon briefly regained control of France; but merely three months later, following a crushing defeat at Waterloo, he relinquished the throne a second and final time. Napoleon lived in exile on the remote island of St. Helena in the south Atlantic until his death on May 5, 1821.