



A Collection of Napoleonic Objects on Display in Australia

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A collection of antique objects connected with Louis Bonaparte, the brother of Napoléon, was exhibited in Melbourne in May 2016 as part of the Australian Antiques and Art Dealers' Association Fair. The owner of these pieces is an American who now lives near Canberra with her Australian husband. She is a direct descendant of Comte (François) Louis Gaspard de Castelvechchio, who was the illegitimate son of Louis Bonaparte. This small but interesting collection of objects tells a fascinating story.

Louis Bonaparte was placed on the throne of Holland in 1806 by his brother. He was married to Hortense de Beauharnais, daughter of the Empress Joséphine. Their third son, Charles Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte was born in 1808 and was to become Emperor Napoléon III in 1852. In 1826, Louis Bonaparte, in exile from France, was living in Italy with an Italian woman, possibly the Countess Carolina Negroni. It was here that his illegitimate son Louis was born. Louis Bonaparte was in many ways closer to this son than his other surviving son, the future Napoléon III, whom he suspected of being the offspring of an extra-marital liaison between his wife, Hortense de Beauharnais, and a senior military officer. Louis de Castelvechchio lived with his father during the 1840s and was with him at his death in 1846. He received a generous inheritance, much to the annoyance of other members of the family.

Hortense de Beauharnais did, however, leave a small legacy through some of the items that are in the collection. She and her mother Joséphine had been close to King Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette prior to their final imprisonment and execution. Hortense is known to have sold many items that had belonged to Marie-Antoinette over subsequent years. It seems





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that Louis Bonaparte kept certain of these items after Hortense left him and some appear to have been passed on to his illegitimate son Comte Louis de Castelveccchio during the final years of Louis Bonaparte's life.

Specifically the collection contains a diamond necklace bearing the portraits of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, and a ring bearing the portraits of two women, very possibly Marie-Antoinette's sisters. Other items in the collection relate to the Napoleonic and Second Empire eras. These include a breakfast set in green and gold painted Sèvres porcelain with portraits of the Napoléon family, various small cameo portraits and a carving set with mother of pearl handles with the Castelveccchio crest. There are also some 'relics'—a piece of Napoléon's coffin, swatches from his deathbed clothing, together with the certification of their authenticity at the time of the return of the ashes to Paris in 1840.

There are a number of paintings in the collection, one by Franz Xavier Winterhalter, court painter to Louis-Philippe and then to Napoléon III. This depicts Elise de Castelveccchio, the wife of Comte Louis. A watercolour by Jean-Baptiste Fortuné de Fournier, whose paintings of interiors are fine records for the study of decorative arts of the Second Empire period, depicts the interior of Elise's bedroom in their apartment on the rue de Rivoli, with one of her young daughters visible in the doorway of the bedroom. There is also a miniature of Elise by Fournier and a miniature of Louis's half-brother Napoléon III after a lost portrait of him by Winterhalter. This miniature was presented in a decorated gold case by Napoléon III to his half-brother.

Comte Louis de Castelveccchio died in 1869 and his wife, Elise, died in 1894. The collection passed to their youngest daughter Joséphine and then to her daughter Elisina Palamidessi de Castelveccchio, the great grandmother of the current owner. In 1923, Elisina and her second husband, Royall Tyler, an American diplomat, bought Antigny-le-Château, near Arnay-le-Duc in Burgundy. It was here that the objects Elisina inherited from her mother, together with a considerable collection of books about the Bonapartes were housed. Elisina's son from her second marriage, William Tyler, lived on at Antigny until 1987, when, following the death of his wife, he moved back to the United States, only spending summers thereafter at Antigny, with his daughter and her family, until his death in 2003.

In the portrait by Winterhalter, Elise is seen wearing a black silk shawl. This shawl had also been part of the collection but disappeared when the collection was being packed up to come to Australia. The fact that it surfaced





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recently in an auction in Paris, certified as having belonged to Elise de Castelvechio, was drawn to the current owner's attention. She suspects that other objects that were in the castle in France were similarly spirited away over the years when there was no family member living permanently at the castle, although she and her parents jointly maintained the château. By 2012, the castle was in need of costly structural renovation and they were able to transfer the ownership to a family friend who is now working in association with the French Historical Monuments society to preserve it as part of France's heritage. It was at this time that the collection came to Australia.

Since coming to Australia, the collection has only been displayed twice, last year in Sydney and just recently in Melbourne. Future plans for the collection are uncertain, but it certainly holds both historic and artistic interest and represents strong family connections for the current owner, who spent many holidays with her grandparents in the castle in France.

Melbourne



The interior of Elise de Castelvechio's bedroom on the rue de Rivoli, watercolour by Jean-Baptiste Fortuné de Fournier.

