A GIFT TO CAMBACÉRÈS

By JOHN GOLDSMITH PHILLIPS

Associate Curator of Renaissance and Modern Art

The Museum has recently placed in one of its costume galleries a full-length portrait of Napoleon as emperor of the French. No publicity attended its debut; yet the public soon discovered it, and their ever-increasing interest in it shows that it possesses that magical quality (magical even in a work of art) of charming many people. It appears to be in a class with the Museum’s ever-popular Calmady Children by Lawrence, Manship’s portrait of his infant daughter Pauline, and Cellini’s Rospiglosi cup.

The portrait of Napoleon is likely to give the visitor who happens upon it something of a shock, for at first glance it appears to have been painted in oil—an illusion heightened by its gilded frame. One discovers at once, however, that although its model was indeed a painting, it is really a tapestry. Just as a literary translation may in itself be a work of art, the Napoleon tapestry is a masterpiece. Fortunately, its model was an eminently translatable portrait, possessing a wealth of decorative detail and a full orchestration of color. François Gérard (1770-1837) painted a “portrait en pied” of the emperor in the year 1805. This original canvas, presumably the one in the Museum of Versailles, may not reveal an overwhelming talent; yet in its suavity and opulence it goes far towards explaining Gérard’s unequaled success as official court painter. The sycophants were half right in calling him “le roi des peintres, et le peintre des rois.”

The painting seems to have delighted Napoleon, for almost immediately Gérard produced several copies; and in February of 1808 Napoleon inserted into the national budget an item to cover the cost—6,000 francs—of still another copy, which was to serve as a model for the Gobelins tapestry weavers. In this manner the plans for the Museum’s new hanging took shape.

The weaving actually started on May 12, 1808; it was completed nearly three years later, on March 7, 1811, at a cost of 12,500 francs. Although the panel measures less than sixty by ninety inches, before its completion no less than eight weavers had worked on it under the direction of Cozette, master weaver. Never before in the long history of tapestry had such extraordinary efforts gone into the weaving of a single piece. It is sheer virtuoso work.

Meanwhile, in honor of his marriage to Marie Louise in the spring of 1810, Napoleon had decided to present the tapestry to the archchancellor of the empire, Jean Jacques Régis de Cambacérès, and it was delivered to him on March 11, 1811. A second copy was woven later and a third begun, but these were destroyed after the fall of the empire. The archchancellor’s tapestry is unique.

Cambacérès was one of the most stately figures of the Napoleonic age. He had been Second Consul when Napoleon was First Consul; when Napoleon became emperor, he was his archchancellor and trusted adviser. In Napoleon’s absence on foreign campaigns the government usually rested in his hands. Perhaps his abiding achievement lay in the guiding role which, as a jurist, he played in formulating the famous Code Civil.

Prudent though he was, he yet was seduced by the pomp and circumstance of the ancien régime he had helped to overthrow. Seemingly Napoleon played upon this least noble side of his character in giving him titles galore. Only in a rare, informal moment would l’Altesse sérenissime, as he insisted on being addressed, forego them; his intimates could then address him simply as Monseigneur. This same Cambacérès, it may be added, gave such Lucullan banquets that envious Parisians considered him more the archgourmet than the archchancellor. Surely Napoleon chose well in presenting him, of all Frenchmen, with this grandiose gesture in tapestry!
Tapestry portrait of Napoleon after a painting by François Gérard. Woven at the Gobelins Manufactory, 1808-1811. Joseph Pulitzer Fund, 1943