WILLIAM ESSEX (British, 1784–1869)

Portrait of Napoleon I, Emperor of the French
1841
Enamel on copper; oval, 13.5 x 11.5 cm (5 3/8 x 4 1/2 in.)

Signature: inscribed in enamel on verso: Napoleon Buonaparte
Painted by W. Essex. Jan 1841 Enamel painter to Her Majesty after a min.e painted expressly for the Empress Marie Louise by T. B. T. Duchesne. D 1814

Setting: later wood frame with gilt metal and velvet embellishments
Gift of Mabel Porozynski in honor and remembrance of Eugene Porozynski, 2000.106

Provenance
Before 2000
Mabel Porozynski (1918–2000, Brecksville, OH); gift to the Cleveland Museum of Art, 2000.

2000
The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Exhibitions
1853
Royal Academy of Arts (no. 647).

Bibliography

ALONG WITH HIS BROTHER ALFRED, William Essex trained as an enameller under Charles Muss (1779–1842), who was enamel painter to King William IV and through whom Essex probably received his earliest royal patronage.1 In addition to showing at the British Institution and the Society of British Artists, Essex exhibited at the Royal Academy regularly between 1818 and 1864. He was appointed official miniature painter to Queen Victoria in 1839, executing numerous enamel portraits of the royal family. A celebrated artist who enjoyed success, Essex had become impoverished enough during his later years to require an annuity from Queen Victoria in order to sustain himself.

Although he also worked in ivory, the artist is primarily recognized for his enamels, which were regarded as among the highest achievements in the medium in nineteenth-century Britain. They are characterized by a clear, carefully delineated style and rich, saturated colors. Essex often worked on a large scale and typically painted his

enamels on copper and sometimes gold. The artist is also known for his portraits of animals, particularly those painted extremely small to be placed in jewelery or used as the heads of stickpins. Essex’s work in enamel includes portraits and religious and subject pictures copied from old masters and contemporary painters, and, especially toward the end of his career, original portraits taken from life. Not just a purely mechanical art form, enameling for Essex was a valuable means of preserving the greatest works in the history of art.2

This iconic image of Napoleon I (1769–1821) was one of several that Essex copied in enamel during his career. The defeated emperor held a special fascination for British audiences, and his portrait as well as narrative scenes from his life were popular throughout the nineteenth century. Images of Napoleon appealed to British nationalism because they represented the domestication of a deadly enemy, but audiences were also drawn to his legacy of showmanship and the Romantic story of his political and personal life. Queen Victoria added several portraits of Napoleon to the Royal Collection, and Victorian audiences could visit Madame Tussaud’s and a host of other museums to see a wide variety of Napoleonic relics ranging from the emperor’s Waterloo carriage to his toothbrush.3

Essex exhibited three portraits of Napoleon at the Royal Academy: in 1829 a portrait after Jean Baptiste Jacques Augustin from the collection of H. P. Pope (no. 1829); in 1835 a portrait after Thomas Phillip’s 1802 work then in the collection of the Duke of Northumberland (no. 587); and in 1853 presumably this portrait after Jean Baptiste Joseph Duchesne (no. 647).4 That same year, the Court Journal reported that “Mr. Essex, inferior to none in his particular art, has lately copied another miniature of Napoleon, by the celebrated French artist, Duchesne. The enamel is of the most exquisite finish.” Whether this third portrait of Napoleon was commissioned or executed on speculation is currently unknown. Assuming that it is the portrait listed in the Royal Academy records, it was not exhibited until over a decade after it was painted, at which time it was not listed as lent by a particular owner.

Jean Baptiste Joseph Duchesne (1770–1856) originally painted this portrait on ivory. He was responsible for creating iconic images of Napoleon in ivory and enamel, and this iteration relates closely to portraits by fellow French miniaturists Jean-Baptiste Isabey (1767–1855) and Jean Baptiste Jacques Augustin (1759–1832). Duchesne executed several versions of this depiction of Napoleon between 1812 and 1815; one example, dated 1814, is in the collection of the Cincinnati Museum of Art (fig. 1).5 While many of these portraits

3 Madame Tussaud and her sons purchased and displayed what by the 1940s was the greatest collection of Napoleonic memorabilia in the world. Pamela Pitbeam, Madame Tussaud and the History of Waxworks (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), pp. 109–19.
6 Julie Aronson and Marjorie Wieseman, Perfect Likeness: European and American Portrait Miniatures from the Cincinnati Art Museum (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 147–48, no. 51. Other variants—not by Essex—can be found in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (39.807) and the Victoria and Albert Museum (950.1868).
by Isabey, Augustin, and Duchesne would have been disseminated as diplomatic gifts and tokens of the emperor’s favor. Essex’s inscription indicates that at least one of the Duchesne portraits was believed to have been executed for the emperor’s second wife, Marie Louise. Additional evidence to support this assertion has not been discovered at this date.

Here, Napoleon wears the green uniform of the chasseurs à cheval, including a green coat with a red collar over a white waistcoat and gold epaulets indicating his status as a general. Napoleon’s Légion d’Honneur regalia consists of the red sash worn diagonally across his chest and on his breast the commandant’s ribbon and star and the silver star of the Grand Eagle. In addition to these accoutrements, Napoleon wears the Order of the Iron Crown of Lombardy, which he founded in 1805 following his coronation as king of Italy (fig. 2). The miniature is mounted in a later oval wood frame with brown velvet and delicate gold embellishments. Contrary to ordinary practice, the enamel is covered with glass. A hinged door on the back gives a partial view of the inscription on the reverse of the miniature, which reads, “Napoleon Buonaparte Painted by W. Essex. Jan 1841 Enamel painter to Her Majesty after a min.e painted expressly for the Empress Marie Louise by T. B. T. Duchsne. D 1814” (fig. 3).

This miniature was painted in 1841, the same year that Essex was occupied with a number of commissions from Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, including enamel copies of portraits by Franz Xaver Winterhalter (1805–1873) and William Charles Ross (1794–1860), two of the queen’s favorite painters in oil and miniature, respectively. Although Essex did execute multiple versions of some portraits, no variants of this portrait after Duchesne in Essex’s own hand have been located. Cory Korkow