

Pascal Convert

*On Memento Marengo*

Following an invitation from the Army Museum at the Invalides in Paris to participate in the bicentenary of the death of Napoleon, I have been working for nearly two years on a project that places Napoleon's favourite horse, Marengo, under the Dome of the Invalides. The horse was captured by Wellington's army at the Battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815 and taken off to England as a war trophy. After Marengo's death, his skeleton was preserved like a sacred relic and exhibited, and it is still on display today at the National Army Museum in London.

Carrying out this project has involved overcoming a number of obstacles. A simple loan by the museum was out of the question because of the fragility of the original skeleton and owing to British sensitivities concerning the relic, which is a symbol of their victory at Waterloo. Brexit and the pandemic have not helped, of course, but thanks to some resourceful cooperation on both sides of the Channel, I was granted permission to make a high-definition 3D copy, as long as I guaranteed that this would be the only one ever made and that it would only be exhibited during the bicentenary commemoration.

I was assisted by my friends at Iconem (<https://iconem.com/fr/>), with whom I have worked on projects in Afghanistan and Armenia, and who carried out the virtual reconstruction of the destroyed archaeological sites at Palmyra and Aleppo. They produced the 3D digital scan of Marengo's skeleton in London, in collaboration with Factum Arte (<https://www.factum-arte.com/>). This stage of the project involved an intense series of negotiations between the National Army Museum and the Army Museum at the Invalides. Once the 3D data was transferred to us in France, we then had to separate the 206 bones making up a horse skeleton and treat them individually in order to obtain the greatest possible degree of accuracy. The 3D printing of each bone was carried out in a highly specialised laboratory that normally makes parts for the aeronautical industry (<https://www.sculpteo.com/fr/applications-fr/industries-aeronautique-et-aerospatiale/>). Rearticulating the 206 elements enabled us to produce a perfect facsimile of Marengo's skeleton. There remained the task of recreating the patina of two-centuries-old bones. CHD Art Maker (<https://www.chdartmaker.com/fr/>), who have been involved in this project since the beginning, put me in touch with the artists who produced the replica of the Gargas Cave.

The term 'plastic' recurs like a leitmotif in the criticisms levelled at my work by the historian Thierry Lentz and his followers. 'Plastic' denotes a material that is not considered noble in art, but the term is really being used to indicate a kind of anathema and a form of artistic prohibition, without any reference to the fact that this horse is not just any horse.

Would the reaction have been any different had my sculpture been in gold? Might the work have then been more acceptable? Definitely not. In the current debate we are looking at a wholly different issue.

France has a troubled relationship with its history. This was my experience in 2003 with my *Monument to the Memory of Resistance Fighters and Hostages Shot by the Nazis at Mont Valérien between 1941 and 1944*. Consisting of a huge bell resting on the ground and inscribed with the names of all the victims, this monument became the

occasion for a stand-off between Gaullists and Communists about how to remember the period. Which version of memory would prevail? The debate reached the very top of our State because the then President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, refused to get involved and asked his Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, to attend the inauguration. I can well recall the anger felt by Robert Badinter, the man behind this homage to those who had been executed: in France, a Prime Minister's endorsement is that of his government and not that of the Republic. Honoré d'Estienne d'Orves, Gabriel Péri, Joseph Epstein, Jacques Decour and so many others, whether famous or not, had not earned the right to be recognised by the Republic. Twenty years on, things have calmed down and the Mont Valérien logo now brings together, in a single act of homage, the famous Cross of Lorraine and the profile of the bell honouring those killed at Mont Valérien.

The bicentenary of Napoleon's death is seeing the return of the old demons of a nation divided between his acolytes and his detractors, with the key issue this time probably being the re-establishment of slavery by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802, which remains a stain on his triumphant rise to power. And on his fall from it.

As an amateur historian I have learnt over the years to place history in its proper context, but this does not in any way excuse the wrong that he did on that occasion.

When I asked Raymond Aubrac about the absence of any reference to decolonisation in the plans drawn up by the National Council of Resistance in June 1943, he explained to me that the overriding concern at the time was to attract as many people as possible to the Resistance, whereas there was no consensus regarding the question of decolonisation. Members of the Resistance on the Right, as well as some on the Left (including Communists), were convinced that the Empire meant the grandeur of France and that it was a necessary condition of the country's recovery after the war.

We all know what happened as a result: three colonial wars, in Madagascar, Indochina and Algeria. Is General de Gaulle today seen as a defender of the colonial possessions of France or as a liberator? Going by the commemorations that took place in 2020 for the triple anniversary of his birth, his death and the Appeal of 18 June 1940, the image of the visionary liberator is clearly the dominant one in our minds.

To return to my project for the Dome of the Invalides, any controversy is not caused by the material used for the sculpture but by the fact that my work penetrates the sacred circle of the Emperor's tomb. For some people this is such a heretical move that they feel compelled to declare their outrage. I have no doubt that other people will accuse me of being complicit in an attempt to rehabilitate a tyrant who was in favour of slavery.

However, it is my belief that the aim of my project is sufficiently clear for anyone who is willing to contemplate it with an open mind. It neither seeks to cause offense nor to praise unconditionally, but rather it attempts to propose a simple form to mark a complex history and ask important questions.

To bring Napoleon's horse back to the tomb of his rider is to perform an ancient funerary ritual where warriors were buried with their horses, as seen at the Gondole burial site for Celtic horsemen, near Clermont-Ferrand, at the Piovego Necropolis at Padua, and at certain archaeological sites in China. In some cases, the horse was not buried with its rider but suspended over his tomb, as if to carry the spirit of the deceased warrior into the next world. In the present case, no sacrilege is being committed at a national necropolis, since we are simply witnessing the fulfilment of a destiny.

A series of questions are also being asked. The presence of a skeleton above the tomb recalls the sculpted cadavers on Medieval or Renaissance tombs, for example in

the Basilica of Saint-Denis. Beyond the pomp and the glory, death is present.

The position of the horse brings Pegasus to mind, the legendary winged horse that played a role in the downfall of the demigod Bellerophon, who suffered the wrath of Zeus for having tried to ride to Mount Olympus. By a curious twist of fate, Bellerophon was the name of the ship on which Napoleon was taken from France at Rochefort, after his surrender on 15 July 1815, prior to his departure into exile on Saint-Helena, where he would die.

The sculpture *Memento Marengo* is like a drawing of the Napoleon Bonaparte constellation, taking us from his rise to his fall and reminding us all of our destinies even when we are blinded by our achievements and think of ourselves as demigods. It is a contemporary 'Memento mori'... 'Remember you are mortal' was the expression repeated by the slave who accompanied a victorious Roman general during the celebration of his 'triumph'.

Napoleon ought to have remembered this before he re-established slavery. People are fated to be brought together in death.

The passions currently aroused in France during public debates leave little room for nuance. It is for this reason that the work of historians is so important and must always serve the cause of history alone. Our shared history.

*Translated by Nigel Saint*