

*Pascal Convert was born in 1957 in Mont-de-Marsan, France. He lives and works in Biarritz.*

When I was asked to contribute to the bicentenary of Napoleon's death, I felt honoured but mainly surprised. As an artist I had worked on subjects from more recent history, for example the French Resistance in the Second World War, whereas the Napoleonic era was a grey area for me. However, I was intrigued and this led me to do some research. I read some biographies, including the famous *Memorial of St. Helena*, and I looked at the iconography of Napoleon Bonaparte. But while I might have tried to pass myself off as an expert in the field, it was when I came to the Dome of the Invalides and immersed myself in the powerful atmosphere of this special place that I started working properly on the commission.

When you enter Louis XIV's church, your gaze is immediately drawn to one spot. Rather than look up at the cupola 90 metres above with Charles de La Fosse's composition featuring Saint Louis, you proceed straight to the centre of the church, up to the marble edge of a circular opening cut into the floor of polychrome mosaics and 23 metres in diameter. Once at the balustrade, your gaze plunges down six meters, pulled towards the monumental red quartzite tomb resting on a green granite base surrounded by the rays of the sun.

Visconti's architectural design for the installation of Napoleon's tomb therefore causes you to do the opposite of what you usually do when you enter a church. Normally you would look upwards towards the vault, in search of a sign of divine light, whereas here you lower your gaze and bow down to the emperor. The sun is now no longer above but below. Thanks to the reversal of the space and with it the symbolism, the emperor has changed places with the dome's divinely ordained king. This led me to take an interest in how the sky is represented in art, especially in paintings depicting Napoleon's battles, wondering if I might find a sign foretelling victory or defeat. The sky is notably present in the panoramic paintings by Louis-François Lejeune on display at the Château of Versailles. While looking at these artworks I became aware of the significance of the cavalry in Napoleon's battles. The French cavalry consisted of between 2,500 and 3,000 horses at the Battle of Marengo, but this had increased tenfold by the time of Borodino which featured a 30,000-strong cavalry. There were about 23,000 cavalry at Waterloo. In *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo describes the cavalry falling into a ravine: 'Horses and riders plunged chaotically into the abyss, crushing each other and forming one mass of flesh'. They suffer and die together. This emotional fusion of horse and rider reflects the ancient tradition of the close ties between them. I also encountered the full mythology surrounding Napoleon's horses. The most famous of them, to be named after Marengo, had been captured at the Battle of Abukir. He was a small Arab stallion from the Maghreb, a breed favoured by Napoleon because of its stamina. Marengo became the horse Napoleon rode on the most campaigns: Marengo, Jena, Wagram, Moscow, the retreat from Russia and Waterloo. The final defeat saw Marengo's capture by Wellington's army and his transfer to England as a war trophy. A legend immediately arose around him and he was often put on show, becoming an attraction, with people paying to see him or even to ride him. At his death in 1831 he was preserved like a sacred relic, dismembered and rearticulated, and his skeleton is now kept at the National Army Museum in London.

Marengo's afterlife reminded me of certain ancient rituals where warriors were buried with

their horses, as seen at the Gondole Oppidum, a Celtic burial site near Clermont-Ferrand, and the Piovego Necropolis at Padua. There is also a photo taken about a century ago in the Altai Mountains in central Asia, showing a tomb surmounted by poles forming a pyramid from the top of which hangs the skin of a horse, as if to carry the spirit of the deceased warrior into future battles. This particular photo is undoubtedly the reason why I decided to suspend the skeleton of Marengo over the tomb of Napoleon. To bring the horse from the final defeat to the tomb of his rider is to perform a ritual. Meanwhile the position of the skeleton brings Pegasus to mind, the legendary winged horse that played a role in the downfall of the demigod Bellerophon. Incidentally, Bellerophon was the name of the ship on which Napoleon was taken from France at Rochefort, after his surrender. There was another reference in my mind as well: the white horse hanging from the raised bridge in Sergei Eisenstein's film *October*.

Ideally we would have been able to use the original relic but its fragility meant that suspending it was impossible. So I asked my friends at Iconem, a company I've worked with on projects in Afghanistan and Armenia, to carry out a 3D scan of the skeleton. Being in a lockdown meant that travelling to London was difficult and also I soon realised that a war relic is a trophy that the winning side is reluctant to give up. In the end an English team handled the scan of this symbolic memento of their victory at Waterloo and then Iconem and CHD Art Maker helped us produce an almost perfect facsimile.

This digital impression means that the object is physically present, both as the original's double and the returning ghost of Marengo. The arrival in the church of this articulated skeleton, suspended at eye level above the emperor's tomb, brings fragility to the lavish architectural space designed by Jules Hardouin-Mansart. The intricacy and *finesse* of the bones, together with their articulation, transform the space over the tomb into a drawing, reminding us that every life is still a sketch. Over the motionless sculpted mass of the glorious tomb hovers a shaking object, intruding on the pomp that accompanies the illustrious dead. Rather than a majestic statue, in *Memento Marengo* we have a drawing, in white, of a singular destiny.

The rider is made human again by contact with animality through the horse. The space is made human again by the suspension of a modestly sized object, a very small horse, that blocks our gaze. Giving back to history its human scale doesn't destroy its grandeur. It can help us understand that we are history's direct descendants, sometimes in spite of ourselves. Currently our society is looking to move to a more equitable form of democracy, while grandiose symbolic meanings are suspected of being imposed from above and little able to contribute to the community that we are seeking to form. Twenty years ago, however, when I worked on the *Monument to the Memory of Resistance Fighters and Hostages Executed at Mont-Valérien between 1941 and 1944*, I realised that engaging with the weight of the past brings buried conflicts to the surface and is in the end the only fruitful way to forge collective experience.

Artistic work should not be about imposing something visible at all costs. I hope that *Memento Marengo* will be seen as a dialectical object allowing us to reflect upon our past and the symbols we use to explain it.

*Text based on a conversation between the artist and Éric de Chasse, Dome of the Invalides, 17*

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