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Author(s): Constance C. McPhee

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How Napoleon Became an Emblem

By Constance C. McPhee

Between 1797 and 1815 Napoleon Bonaparte's image spread across Europe spurred by inventive British satires. Prints issued in London not only captivated native buyers but proved popular on the continent. Ironically, the general-emperor's fame, or infamy depending on your point of view, was encouraged by a potent visual stereotype, honed and promulgated by an enemy nation (Fig. 1). That this emblematic rendering made its way freely across national borders during an extended period of war, and before

modern mass marketing, attests to its power.

In 1797, three anti-Napoleonic satires, the earliest known, appeared in London in response to reports of Bonaparte's successful Italian campaign and subjugation of the Papal States (Figs. 2, 4).¹ By the time the general crowned himself emperor in December 1804 hundreds more images had been published in London and were stimulating continental imitators.² Close on the heels of the first British prints came others mocking the general's ill-fated incursion into Egypt and his hurried return to Paris to seize power as First Consul in 1799. It was the invasion force he assembled at Boulogne in 1803, however, that sparked by far the great-

est number of early satires.³ Although Napoleon's plans to cross the Channel were ultimately abandoned, the massing of his army on the French coast inspired a wave of British prints and cemented the general's transformation into an instantly recognizable stereotype.

The essential Napoleonic image, still iconic today, was established by 1801 and became ubiquitous by 1803: a short body trimly clad in a military tailcoat, sporting a huge bicorne hat and oversized Hessian boots, and carrying a long saber. The final touch, counterintuitive to graphic satirists at the outset, was to leave Napoleon's distinctive aquiline profile un-caricatured. This combination of elements did not



Fig. 1. James Gillray, *The Magnanimous Minister, Chastising Prussian Perfidy* (1817), hand-colored etching. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 17.3.888-71.



Fig. 2. Isaac Cruikshank, *Buonaparte at Rome Giving Audience in State* (1797), hand-colored etching. The British Museum, 1868,0808.6606.

spring fully formed from a single brow. Although James Gillray is rightly heralded for refining the image and making it famous through his unforgettable compositions published from 1803 to 1811 (Figs. 1, 7),⁴ the form Gillray used so brilliantly was initially manipulated by several London printmakers who all kept a close eye on one another's work.

When we consider how artists construct comic form we tread in the footsteps of Ernst Gombrich, who often wrote about caricaturists' visual strategies. Discussions of Napoleonic satire, conversely, have tended to focus on subject matter and related historical context. (Since the number of relevant works is vast, early scholars such as A. W. Broadley and M. D. George devoted themselves for the most part to essential foundational cataloguing.⁵ Out of necessity, the latter's discussions of prints belonging to the British Museum were sparsely illustrated, but the publication of that collection's on-line database now makes it possible to thoroughly explore this material from a visual perspective.) Here we will examine how the standard satirical image

of Napoleon was actually put together. Once constructed, it conveyed an easily readable core meaning and proved useful in an astounding range of contexts.

The years 1797 to 1800 saw a range of wildly experimental Napoleonic satires

loaded with embryonic hints of what was to come. Two of the earliest were designed by the Scottish born Isaac Cruikshank and titled *Buonaparte at Rome Giving an Audience in State* (1797) (Fig. 2) and *The Ghost of Buonaparte Appearing to the Directory* (1799) (Fig. 3). In the first, a war-tattered general dressed in spurred boots and sashed military tailcoat, has presciently taken possession of a throne. In the second print Cruikshank cast hat and uniform aside but retained the military boots and added a saber to refer to the coup d'état by which Napoleon assumed the position of First Consul. *Buonaparte at Rome* responds to the Treaty of Tolentino signed in February 1797, which formalized the pope's lost authority (although the image misleadingly suggests that Napoleon and the pontiff actually faced off in Rome, when in reality papal legates were summoned to Tolentino, east of the capital). The pose Cruikshank gave the conqueror, however, does effectively convey Republican disdain for established religious authority. Richard Newton reprised the latter theme in *Buonaparte Establishing French Quarters in Italy* (1797)



Fig. 4. Richard Newton, *Buonaparte Establishing French Quarters in Italy* (1797), hand-colored etching. The British Museum, 2001,0520.31.



Fig. 3. Isaac Cruikshank, *The Ghost of Buonaparte Appearing to the Directory* (1799), hand-colored etching. The British Museum, 1868,0808.6810.

(Fig. 4), crudely casting Napoleon as a literal *sans-culotte* and giving him a grotesque mask-like face under a *bonnet rouge*. Gillray entered the satirical fray in 1798 with the Egyptian subject, *Buonaparte Hearing of Nelson's Victory, Swears by his Sword to Extirpate the English from the Earth* (Fig. 5). Armed like a bandit, the general here assumes an aggressive wide-legged stance that would find many later imitators, although his wildly flowing tailcoat and plumes would soon be restrained. After Napoleon seized power in 1799, Gillray's *The French Consular-Triumvirate, Settling the New Constitution* (1800) (Fig. 6) suggests that the new constitution instituted by the First Consul was a sham. The boots and sword clearly visible beneath Bonaparte's quaintly antiquar-

ian Directorial costume indicate the true source of his authority. Napoleon's face is caricatured to some degree in all these early caricatures, and he is represented as of average height. Both of these elements would be adjusted within a year.

The fully formed Napoleonic stereotype first appeared in London in 1801, and a truncated example hovers in the background of Gillray's *Political Dreamings! Visions of Peace! Perspective Horrors!* (Fig. 7) pulling a captive Britannia towards the guillotine. This mock-heroic image may have been inspired by engraved copies of official French portraits circulating in London.⁶ For Gillray, the form underscored the message that British hopes for peace were illusory and any cessation of hostili-

ties would only work to Bonaparte's advantage. When the Treaty of Amiens did indeed reopen the borders between March 1802 and May 1803, Napoleon's un-caricatured face became a commonplace in British satires. Peace relaxed the pressure to demonize an enemy. Charles Williams' *The Balance of Power* (1801) (Fig. 8) exemplifies how the freshly minted emblem was put to use, while Percy Roberts's *Hop, Step and Jump* (1803) (Fig. 9) applied as war resumed and invasion again became likely. Components previously used selectively by printmakers were now integrated so that from this point forward Bonaparte generally wears a well-cut uniform and his short stature is accentuated by an oversized bicorn and long sword. Gillray dubbed this figure "Little



Fig. 8. Charles Williams, *The Balance of Power* (1801), hand-colored etching. The British Museum, 1868,0808.6973.

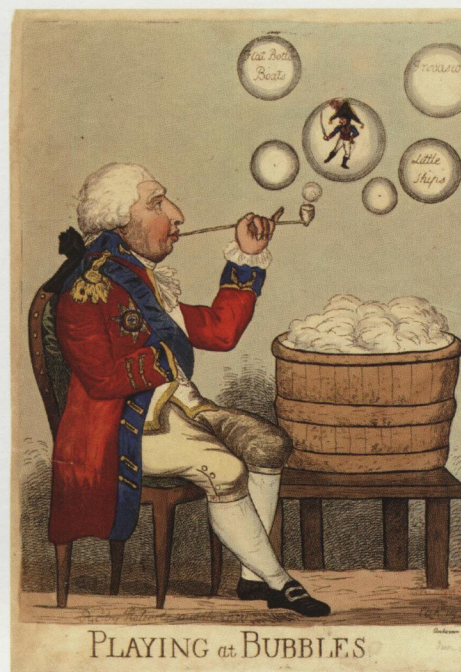


Fig. 10. Anonymous, *Playing at Bubbles* (1803), hand-colored etching. The British Museum, 1868,0808.7142.



Fig. 9. Anonymous, *Hop, Step and Jump* (1803), hand-colored etching. The British Museum, 1872,1012.5073.

Boney" and both nickname its attendant image stuck.⁷

Just as soon as printmakers honed Napoleon into a recognizable emblem, they began to invent variations. One popular strategy miniaturized the First Consul and contrasted him with a giant representative of the British state. In Piercy Roberts's *Playing at Bubbles* (1803) (Fig. 10), the tiny general is trapped in a soap bubble blown by George III, while William Holland's *John Bull teased by An Ear-Wig!!* (1803) (Fig. 11) places an insect-sized Bonaparte on the shoulder of a grumpy John Bull-merchant. A second variation attached Napoleon's now familiar profile and bicorne to a symbolic non-human body. *The Corsican Locust* (1803) (Fig. 12), for example, cast Bonaparte as a hungry insect hovering over a British picnic, while *The Oak and the Mushroom* (1803) (Fig. 13) imagined him as a fungus longing to infect an emblematic British tree guarded by a sailor. Other transmutations issued in 1803 alone, cast the First Consul as an earthworm, a bloodhound, a bantam, a gamecock, a rooster, a monkey, a scarecrow, a moth, a flock of birds, and a dragon skewered by St. George.⁸ British satirists were here reviving, probably unconsciously, a mode popular in France during the early days of the French Revolution when censorship was briefly lifted and political caricature allowed to flower.⁹

The Napoleonic stereotype, whose establishment we have traced, became so closely associated with its subject that many people today still assume the emperor was very short—in fact, he was of average height at five foot seven inches. British satirists became so attached to their emblematic creation that they often represented Napoleon as small, virile and slender until after his defeat at Waterloo in 1815—even as he aged and grew stout in French portraits. The visual strategies pursued to form this powerful emblem found an echo in the 1830s when Honoré Daumier famously transformed another French monarch, King Louis-Philippe, into a pear. That

unforgettable mocking verbal-visual pun was circulated in lithographs published by Charles Philipon in *La Caricature*.¹⁰ Unlike Daumier and Philipon, British artists who took aim at Napoleon were in no danger of being prosecuted, because they targeted a foreign enemy, but their methods were similar. Daumier took a fruit that was a common male sexual symbol, as well as a

colloquial term for a fool, and used it to indelibly brand a public figure and indicate the emasculation of a political movement.¹¹ When Gillray and his contemporaries set to work on Napoleon they manipulated size and dress to symbolically deflate a threatening military opponent, and produced an image that communicates so effortlessly, we often forget it was invented.



Fig. 5. James Gillray, *Buonaparte Hearing of Nelson's Victory, Swears by His Sword, to Extirpate the English from Off the Earth* (1798), hand-colored etching. The British Museum, 1851,0901.952.



Fig. 6. James Gillray, *The French Consular-Triumvirate, Settling the New Constitution* (1800), hand-colored etching. The British Museum, 1868,0808.12580.



Fig. 6a. Detail of Figure 6.



Fig. 7. James Gillray, *Political-dreamings! Visions of Peace! Perspective Horrors!* (1801), hand-colored etching. The British Museum, J,3.34.



Fig. 7a. Detail of Figure 7.



Fig. 11. Anonymous, *John Bull teased by An Earwig!!* (1803), hand-colored etching. The British Museum, 1868,0808.7094.



Fig. 13. Anonymous, *The Oak and the Mushroom* (1803), hand-colored etching. The British Museum, 1868,0808.7126.



Fig. 12. Anonymous, *The Corsican Locust* (1803), hand-colored etching. The British Museum, 1868,0808.7197.