

PLUNDER. Napoleon's Theft of Veronese's Feast

Cynthia Saltzman.

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Sanctimonious twaddle is what we can expect for the bicentenary of Napoleon, but the man was a thug with pretensions and his empire a system of expropriation run on the back of what French critics of conscription called the 'blood tax.' This contrast in perception was there from the outset. Napoleon proclaimed his virtues and opponents were shot down, starting with mass executions in Italy in 1796 to suppress popular opposition to French exploitation. Napoleon's nephew, Louis Napoleon, later Napoleon III, was to claim in *Des Idées Napoléoniennes* (1839): 'In Italy he formed a great kingdom which had its separate administration and its Italian army. ... The name Italy, so beautiful, defunct, for so many ages, was restored to provinces which until then had been severed. That name implies in itself a future of independence.'

The reality was very different. Aside from the brutal suppression of opposition, including by limiting food supplies in Calabria, there was the mass conscription that led to 70,000 deaths fighting for Napoleon, and heavy financial burdens. Indeed, there and elsewhere, the unpopularity of the Napoleonic system helped create and accentuate divisions between state and society that have been a feature to the present.

And, as Cynthia Saltzman shows, in this well-written, carefully constructed, artistic gem of a book, there was also a mass looting of works of art. She skilfully moves between generalities and specifics. In part, as with Hitler with whom comparisons frequently arise, this was ideological: Napoleon and his ilk delighting in attacking and despoiling the Church, and Hitler doing so, to far, far more murderous effect, against Jews. And not only with Napoleonic in Italy. Saltzman writes well about the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic seizure of art in the Low Countries and Germany respectively. So also in Spain. Thus, the destruction and despoilation of churches are readily apparent in Seville, as in the monastery of Santa María de las Cuevas in Seville and the chapel at the Hospital de la Caridad there. In 1812, the great Benedictine monastery at Montserrat in Catalonia was sacked.

His apologists might like to see Napoleon as a builder after the deadly destruction of the Revolution, but he was both a major protagonist of revolutionary violence, and against the French as well as foreigners, and also brought fresh conflict and looting in his wake. As when he invaded Egypt in 1798, he could talk the talk, or at least the clichés, of revolutionary Enlightenment, but the reality, as Saltzman shows, was a monstrous egotism to which all other values and representations had to bow.

That might seem depressing, but there is also joy and interest aplenty in the book. The account of Veronese's skill, eye and work, and of the placing of his paintings, is one of a skilled art historian who is both perceptive and gifted with an appreciation of the multi-faceted character of paintings and their subsequent history. Moreover, she can convey her knowledge with clarity as well as wisdom. In the particular case of *The Wedding Feast at Cana*, the details of its placing in the Venetian island monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore help underline the vandalism of its removal of Napoleon in 1797. We then follow the painting on its long journey to the Louvre where Napoleon subsequently decided in 1810 that it should be taken off the wall in order to construct a chapel in the Salon Carré for his marriage to Marie Louise of Austria. When the Director explained that moving the Veronese and other old master pictures was likely to damage them, Napoleon instructed him to burn them, which, instead, led to them being moved.

Saltzman understandably focuses on those who applauded Veronese, although not all critics agreed. Thus, in 1755, George, Viscount Villiers thought the *Wedding Feast at Cana* 'a prodigious work, but greatly confused,' and preferred Leonardo Bassano's *The Raising of Lazarus* in Santa Maria della Carità, a building which was repurposed under Napoleon: 'The expression in the countenances of all the figures is excellent.' In the case of *The Wedding Feast*, Dr John Hinchliffe in 1762 observed the degree to which commentators on art history repeated each other:

'It is true what Montesquieu says in his little essay on Taste, that Paul Veronese makes good what he promises at first sight, though he does not like Raphael do more. The great picture at the Convent of the miracle of changing the water into wine is certainly a first-rate work. The general objection to it that the figures are not at all concerned at the miracle has been repeated over and over like many others, without any other reason than that it has been said before.'

Hinchliffe preferred Veronese's *The Family of Darius* before Alexander:

'There is in the Pisani Palace a very capital picture of Paul's which excepting some few errors in the drawing unites all the excellencies of the art... The character of Alexander is very expression, of a manly beauty touched with a generous compassion. The mother, wife and two daughters are on their knees before him, a family likeness is preserved through the whole, with such a just proportion of difference that age occasions. ... The colouring is excellent.

In 1798, Randle Wilbraham found Venice sadly diminished as a result of the harsh plundering by the French, a plundering that extended to that of British residents, for example Frederick, Earl-Bishop of Derry arrested near Ferrara in 1798.

Saltzman also includes a fascinating account of the struggles over restitution. Louis XVIII was unenthusiastic when he returned to power in 1814, but had to be more accommodating after Napoleon's renewed failure in 1815. There were still complaints in France about restitution, complaints supported by foreign politicians who did not wish to offend the French. Nevertheless, Wellington, who was in command of the occupation authorities was robust, asking why should 'the

powers of Europe ... do injustice to their own subjects' solely 'to conciliate' the French. The 'great moral lesson,' he called for, did not extend, however, to *The Wedding Feast* for reasons Saltzman explains. The earlier loss of Venetian independence was a key point in lessening the pressure for restitution.

A large jewel in the crown in the Louvre, *The Wedding Feast* was taken to Brittany in 1870-1 during the Franco-Prussian war and to the Vichy Zone in 1940, only returning to view at the Louvre in 1949. Saltzman also follows the very sad history of San Giorgio Maggiore, which the French turned into a barracks in 1806, and which subsequently suffered much destruction, notably when later used by the Austrian army.

An excellent book. Saltzman of course is hopelessly wrong when she claims that 'the French government launched the policy of seizing art from its defeated enemies.' Nevertheless, this is an impressive contribution to the field and one that deftly interleaves the history of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic history with that of Veronese's lifetime, and, in doing so, skilfully counterpoints Veronese with the artists of the era, notably David and Gros, and their creation of an artistic legend for Napoleon. Beautifully produced and handsomely illustrated, the book is an attractive and salutary account of art and war.

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