

**Jacques-Olivier Boudon, Elisabeth Claude (dir.),
Eugène de Beauharnais. Guerre, art et politique
dans l'Europe napoléonienne, Paris (L'Harmattan),
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Eugène de Beauharnais' rise was remarkable, fuelled as much by chance as by talent. He was born in 1781, the son of the future empress Josephine by her first marriage to Alexandre de Beauharnais, a revolutionary general who, after losing the siege of Mainz in 1793, was sentenced to death and guillotined. At the time Eugène was a young officer in the French army; but a year later his fortunes changed dramatically when his mother remarried, making him Napoleon Bonaparte's adoptive son. Napoleon took a personal interest in his development, helping him to advance his career and gain the diplomatic skills he would need in later life. Eugène accompanied Napoleon as his *aide de camp* during the Italian campaign, before going on to serve the Empire in a number of powerful and prestigious posts: commander of the Army of Italy, Arch-Chancellor of France and Viceroy of Italy, for which he was rewarded with the titles of Duke of Leuchtenberg and Prince of Eichstätt. Young, brave in battle, but also known to be a diligent and efficient administrator, he seemed to many of his contemporaries to be the ideal hero for the Napoleonic age, and it is as such that many remember him today.

This collection of essays, based on papers given at the tenth conference in a series held in Rueil-Malmaison where Josephine maintained her imperial palace, is rich and wide-ranging as well as satisfyingly interdisciplinary. Political and military historians are joined by art historians, museum and gallery curators, and specialists in architectural and garden history, with the consequence that the work offers an insight into every aspect of Eugène's life and provides the reader with a rounded appreciation of a man who would play such an important role in imperial Europe, especially in the Kingdom of Italy. These essays will be of interest not just to historians of the Empire but also to those studying the taste and artistic fashion of the time, both of Eugène himself – for he was a considerable collector and art lover in his own right – and of Napoleonic court society more generally. The Rueil conference (and with it the present volume) was intended to complement a major exhibition on Eugène organised by the Musée national des châteaux de Malmaison et de Bois-Préau at Malmaison in late 2022. The two share a common focus: indeed, the sumptuous exhibition catalogue, published as *Eugène de Beauharnais: un prince européen*, is edited by Elisabeth Claude, who has co-edited and written a chapter for this book.



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The volume starts with some useful family history that helps to place Eugène in his wider circle. There are revealing accounts of his relations with his mother and of the life of his younger sister, Hortense, who only came to know Eugène when she was already a girl of seven, as he had been a boarder from a very young age while studying in Paris, at a time when she was still living at home in Martinique. Family was clearly important to Eugène, who made no attempt to hide his affection for his sisters and other relatives he cherished and patronised. And though his subsequent marriage to a Bavarian princess, Auguste-Amélie, was one of diplomatic convenience, he and his wife were a faithful and loving couple who stood by each other during Eugène's long absences in war and on official occasions in Milan. These early chapters indicate the power and influence that might be accrued through family alliances, and they are illustrated by some fine artworks and family portraits drawn from museums and galleries across Europe.

Much of the volume is devoted to the three themes picked out in the sub-title, »war, art and politics« – each of which is the subject of several discrete chapters. Eugène comes across as a dedicated army officer who played an important part in several of Napoleon's major campaigns, including the campaign of 1809, in which Napoleon somewhat unexpectedly handed him command of the Army of Italy, and the Russian campaign of 1812 in which, though his own guard was decimated by the enemy, he succeeded in bringing the rump of his army back to France. The chapters on his political role also paint a positive picture of his achievements, especially in Italy where he had a delicate balancing act to perform as viceroy, acting in Napoleon's stead while the Emperor was elsewhere without daring to trespass on his power as King of Italy. His vision for Italy, as Vincent Haegele explains in the final chapter of the book, was very different from that of the more headstrong Murat in Naples. For Laetitia de Witt Eugène could even be seen as a rival to Napoleon's own brothers, Joseph, Louis and Jérôme, for the Emperor's favour, Lucien having already been cast aside for his earlier indiscretions.

A third theme of the volume, and one to which different authors repeatedly return, is Eugène's taste in paintings and his talent as a collector of art. It is clear that he was a considerable collector, choosing artworks to decorate his various palaces, which included – and the list is not comprehensive – the viceroy's official palace in Milan; the Villa Bonaparte, also in Milan, where he went to relax and reputedly felt most at home; his Paris residence on the rue de Lille; and the huge Leuchtenberg palace, the largest palace of its era, which he had built in Munich between 1817 and 1821 when he moved there after the fall of the Empire. Some of the paintings he inherited from his mother's collection at Malmaison; others were purchases he himself made in Milan and Munich. His taste was quite catholic, a mixture of the traditional and the modern, and he was rightly adjudged in his time to have been a generous patron of the arts. He also helped to spread French influence by importing art from Paris wherever he went. Nor was his cultural patronage limited to painting. In Milan he surrounded himself with music and



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founded a *conservatoire* on the Paris model. He took an interest in architecture, too, sponsoring the work of some of the leading architects of the day. At Monza he extended the palace gardens, redesigning them to reflect current European taste. And in all his residences he commissioned fine furniture and bought elegant fittings. These purchases should not be dismissed as idle instances of self-indulgence, for, as this volume demonstrates, Eugène both appreciated the value of art and understood the soft power to which it could be turned.



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