

autograph DETECTIVE

Napoleon — An Autograph As Fascinating As His Life

by Max Rambod

Napoleon Bonaparte rising from total obscurity, was the only man in modern history to successfully conquer and hold the majority of the civilized world. He became the most powerful man of his time — although, of course, his empire was eventually broken up when he was defeated at Waterloo.

Some have compared Napoleon to Hitler. But although Hitler was initially very successful in his conquest, his fortunes began to decline after only two years. In addition, Napoleon never performed the atrocities of Hitler during his rule. Unlike Hitler — whose influence totally disappeared

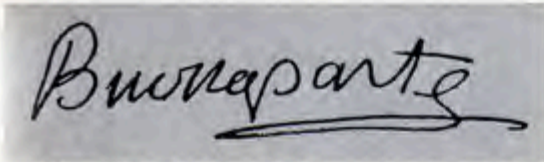


Exhibit A1 - Authentic early "Buonaparte" signature, before 1796 with a "u" after "B".

after his downfall — many of Napoleon's achievements are still in existence. Napoleon's code of law, the "Code Napoleonique," is still the system used in French Justice and even Louisiana law is based on it; Napoleon established a central bank like the Federal Reserve; the metric system owes its origin to Napoleon. Napoleon also introduced the first system of paper currency in France. His impact on America's future also considerable, as he sold the Louisiana Purchase to Jefferson. His decision to sell France's land to the United States at a bargain price gave the U.S. more land than it gained in any war. It doubled the size of the United States and created a nation of continental size with a basis for great power.

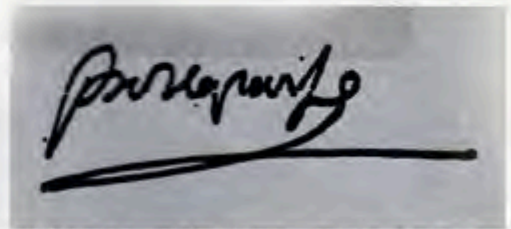


Exhibit A2 - Authentic "Bonaparte" signature, used from 1796 to 1804.

After his defeat, Napoleon attempted to move to the United States, but the British prevented him from doing so. His greatness and glory have made Napoleon of great interest to collectors for almost two centuries.

Changes in Napoleon's signatures, writing habits and dates of his letters and their effect on the value of his signature also make him an interesting subject for us. Napoleon is an excellent example of how useless it is for purposes of authentication to compare a questioned signature to only one or two samples found in a book, since he had as many variations of his signatures as one can think of, with different spellings, letters and sizes. A mistake in judgment on the authenticity of his signature is easy for anyone not familiar with it. Again, I have to say that it would be as easy to err on

both sides: to think that a peculiar small scribble does not look like the usual Napoleon signature when in fact it is; or that a perfectly spelled out Bonaparte signature on original period document with an authentic Bonaparte letterhead is authentic, when in fact it is not. Here again you will need many samples in your files before you should decide on the authenticity of the autograph. This is true not only for Napoleon's autograph but for all autographs.



Exhibit A3 - Letterhead with a vignette used by Napoleon during the "Consulat" period.

As Napoleon rose in power and influence, his signature and even his name changed with each stage of his life, not only in style but also in spelling.

Napoleon was born in Corsica and was christened "Bonaparte." Corsica belonged to Italy and became part of France only one year before Napoleon's birth.

Both Napoleon's father and mother were of Italian descent. Ironically, when Napoleon became a general, his first major achievement was invading and conquering Italy. His earliest signatures as a young cadet before 1790 were signed "di Buonaparte," as he considered himself a nobleman. But as the French Revolution took effect, Napoleon dropped forever the "di" from his signature. However, he kept the Italian version of his name "Buonaparte" (see exhibit A1), along with a full "Napoleon" signature which we will discuss later. The rarest form of his signature, is "Buonaparte."

Napoleon then dropped the "u" in his name and switched to "Bonaparte" around March 10, 1796 after his marriage to Josephine (see exhibit A2). Before 1796, Napo-



Exhibit A8 - Authentic rare foil "Napoleon" signature as Emperor.

leon often wrote his military rank after his signature. But after 1796 he dropped this custom too, as he was by then a "General en Chef" and no longer felt the need for a rank. However, even though "Buonaparte" is the rarest form of his name, it is not the most sought-after form of his signature, as most people know him by one of the more common forms — either 'Napoleon' or 'Bonaparte.' So the demand for these two versions is strongest among collectors who

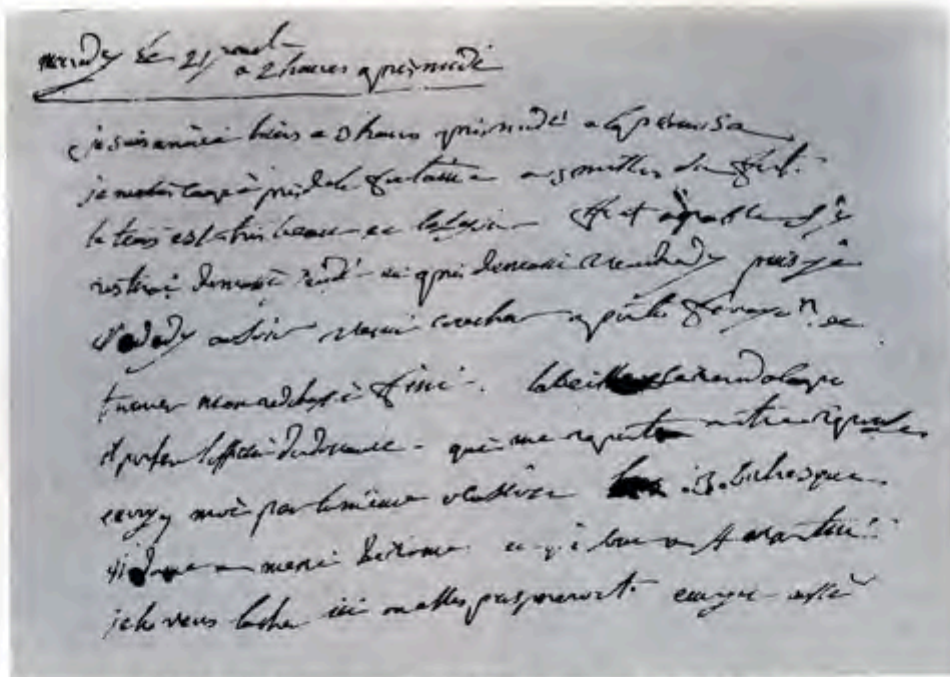


Exhibit A6 - Authentic autograph letter of Napoleon as Emperor.

needed only one sample of his autograph. Napoleon became a General at the young age of 24, at which time he also started using letterhead decorated with fancy vignettes or imprinted "Bonaparte General en Chef" (see exhibit A3 and A14). He was still fighting for revolutionary ideals; in fact, he was even imprisoned for being too close to a revolutionary party. Among his political contacts were the two infamous Robespierre brothers. However, as at other times in his life, the tide turned and General Bonaparte was put in charge of security for Paris to keep royalists planning a coup d'etat in check. Bonaparte was successful and, ironically, the man who was to become a dictator and Emperor, saved the cause of the Revolution.

Napoleon continued to sign "Bonaparte" when he

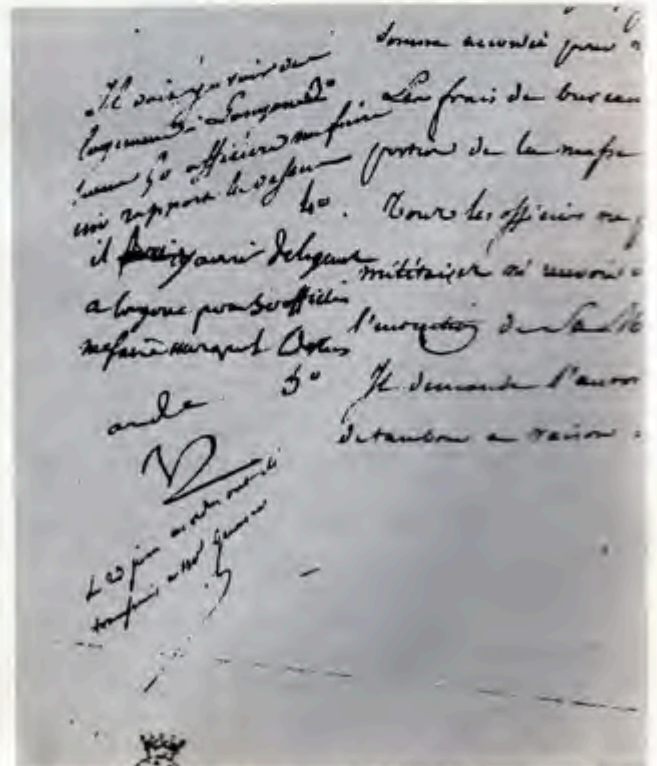


Exhibit A7 - Four lines autograph note on margin written and signed by Napoleon during his exile in Elba. As his hand was illegible the secretary rewrote it again above his note.

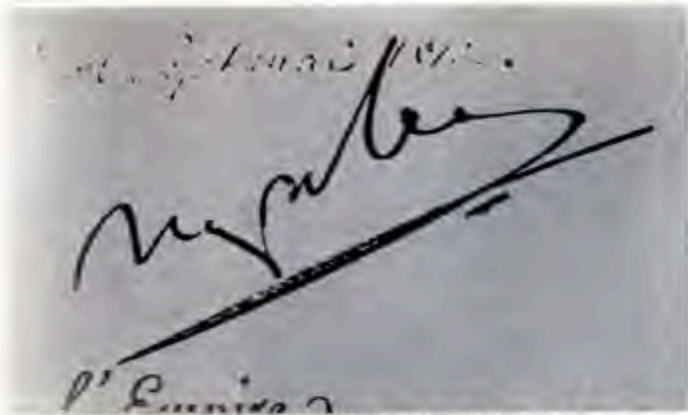


Exhibit A9 - Authentic full "Napoleon" signature as Emperor on a document.

became the Ruler of France at age 30. He was a member of the "Directoire," then a member of the "Consulate," and finally "First Consul" for life. But be careful when you examine "Bonaparte" signatures — at this time of his life he did use a secretary, and some "Bonaparte" signatures are secretarial. However, as we shall see, you will learn to differentiate between the secretarial and authentic signatures. Occasionally, at this time, Napoleon also used the initials "BB" instead of a full signature, but this was the exception rather than the rule. In this early period of his life he mostly signed with his full last name.

It is rather fascinating to note that despite the fact Napoleon was running an Empire, he would insist on signing personally the most routine documents, such as minor



Exhibit A10 - Authentic Napoleon signed "Napole"

military orders or even compensation for an old soldier. What is also fascinating is that there are not more secretarial signatures, as one would expect. But one has to understand that the way Napoleon ruled his Empire was by making all decisions himself, whether important or minor. This insistence on signing all orders and letters himself differs from most other French Kings. For example Louis XIV and Louis XVI, who are the two most collected French Kings, relied heavily on secretaries, and the vast majority of their signatures are secretarial on both letters and state documents.

The only time Napoleon used a secretary for signatures was during the year 1800 and up to the end of January 1801. He used only one secretary — Hugh Maret — to sign his name, and actually issued two decrees to allow Maret to sign for him. Maret's secretarial signatures of "Bonaparte" are distinguishable because of several differences between those and authentic signatures. Bonaparte uses a paraph to underline "Bonaparte" but Maret, even when imitating Bonaparte's

signature, does not. Also, Maret extends the line of the final 'e' in "Bonaparte" up and over the name to become the cross bar of the 'r' (see exhibit S1).

In 1804, Napoleon proclaimed himself Emperor of France and changed his name and signature again, this time to "Napoleon," never again signing "Bonaparte." At the same time, he also ceased to use letterhead illustrated with vignettes, as this had become the rage among all his generals. He decided he was above that and switched to totally plain paper with no letterhead at all, not even his printed name. A little-known fact is that he began to use mostly gold trim at the very edge of the paper, which is visible only when the paper is viewed edge-wise. This detail is often missed by the few forgeries I have seen of Napoleon.

It is important to note that while Napoleon would

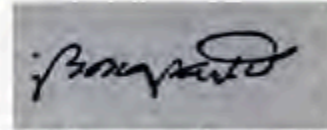


Exhibit S1 - Secretarial signature of "Bonaparte" found on many military documents dating 1800 to 1801.

never use a secretary to sign his name except for the year 1800 and 1801 mentioned above, he used secretaries very extensively to inscribe the body of the letter, with the result that it is extremely rare to find a letter with the body of the text handwritten by Napoleon himself. Because of his fast mind, Napoleon often dictated different letters to several secretaries at once. It is easy to differentiate Napoleon's own handwriting from that of his secretaries in the body of the letter, as the secretaries use a neat and attractive script (see exhibit A14: signature is authentic, text is secretarial), while Napoleon himself had a bold and impulsive scrawl, which is unattractive, highly illegible and full of misspellings (see exhibit A6).

He often tried to justify his terrible handwriting by saying that his mind was working faster than his hand could follow. His handwriting can be recognized by specific characteristics such as writing at a high speed with an accentuated inclination to the right. His handwriting is rather



Exhibit A11 - Authentic "Nap" signature of Napoleon

small. His "t" has a very long cross bar. His "p" starts like a large "v" with an ending loop. You can also see that he uses this same "p" in both his "Bonaparte" and "Napoleon" signatures. He does not keep a steady base line, as he would often start the following word above the preceding one. Napoleon, in his haste, would often connect the last letter of a word

with the beginning of the following word, as if they constituted a single word. In his speed the Emperor would also make many ink blotches. As a whole, his handwritten letters are visually very unattractive, but since they are so rare, collectors throughout the world love to see them in any catalog.

Even though his autograph letters are rarely found, it is

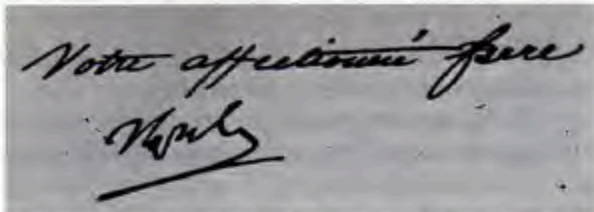


Exhibit A12 - Authentic Napoleon smaller size signature (below).

possible to find letters or reports addressed to Napoleon where he has made handwritten notations in the margin, often brief three-word responses to the content of the letter with a signature below his short response (see exhibit A7). Napoleon autograph letters (ALS's) are so rare that they come on the market only once every several years and invariably sell for \$10,000 to \$20,000, while his signed letters (LS's) sell for \$2,200 to \$7,500 depending on content, type of signature and date of the letter. Most routine letters sell at the lower end of that range, from \$2,000 to \$3,000.

In some ways, Napoleon's writing habits were similar to John F. Kennedy. Kennedy's handwriting also was illegible, and the President also used many different variations of his signature. Of course, the similarities stop there since most of Kennedy's

material was not signed by him but, rather, by secretaries and autopens. But, as we discussed earlier, the vast majority of Napoleon's signatures are genuine. As Emperor, on most letters, Napoleon shortened his signature to "Napole" or "Napol" or "Napl" and most often would shorten it even more to "Nap" or simply "NP" or even "N" with a paraph (see exhibits A8, A9,

A10, A11 and A20).

A full "Napoleon" signature is a rare find since the "Nap" and "NP" signatures are much more common on most of his letters and reports. As a result, a letter or document with a full signature of Napoleon commands a higher price, assuming content and condition are the same as one signed with the more usual "NP." Like Abraham Lincoln, who would sign official state documents with his full name "Abraham Lincoln" rather than the "A. Lincoln" he used on his letters, Napoleon also tended to have a different signing habit. He would use the full signature "Napoleon" (see exhibit A8 and A9) rather than the abbreviated "NP" for any state document of importance.

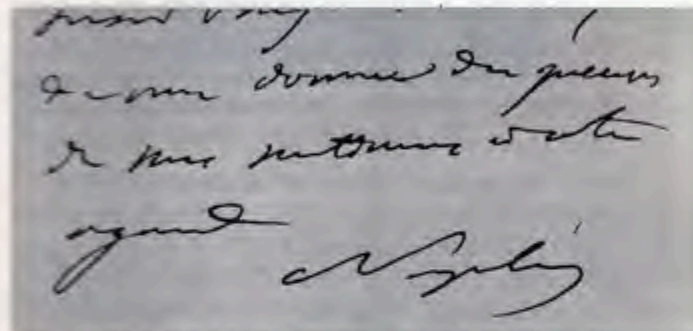


Exhibit A17 - Authentic signature of Napoleon III, nephew of Napoleon I.

The size of Napoleon's signature also varies extensively from a one inch full signature to large, impressive five inch long signatures. However, unlike the signatures of Hitler and Nixon, which grew in size with their growth of power and shrunk when their power began to decline, the size of

Napoleon's signature does not follow his fortune but varies irregularly depending on his mood (see exhibits A12 vs. Exhibit A8).

Napoleon's son, "The Eaglet" and "King of Rome," is quite rare because he died at a young age. Due to the high price of his autographs, he is only collected by those who specialize in the Napoleonic era.

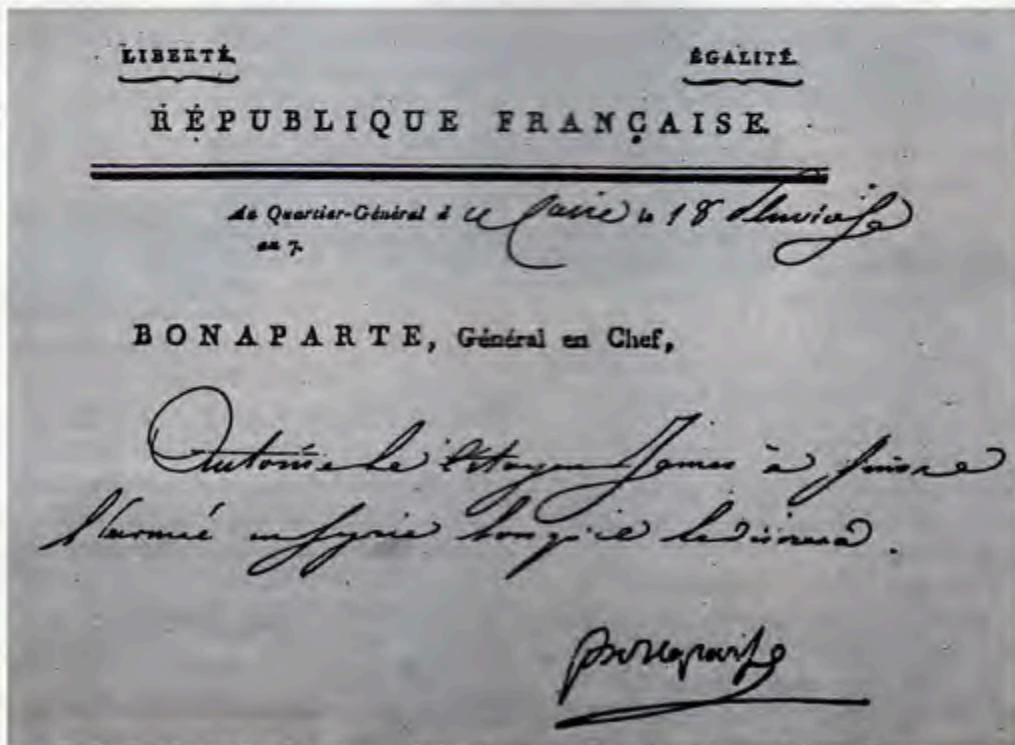


Exhibit A14 - Authentic signature of Bonaparte on letter written by secretary. Letterhead is from Egyptian campaign (1799).

Napoleon had two wives, the first being Josephine, to whom he wrote romantic love letters. Unfortunately, these are extremely rare since the majority of them are in the hands of institutions. Josephine's own ALS's (see exhibit A15) are priced a bit higher than LS's of Napoleon himself. Before her marriage to Napoleon she would sign by her maiden name "Lapagerie" or her first husband's name "Josephine de Bauharnais," but, as Empress, she would sign "Josephine." Napoleon's second wife, Marie Louise (see exhibit A16), the daughter of the Emperor of Austria, is less expensive and less sought-after than Josephine.

Exhibit A15 - Authentic signature of Josephine, first wife of Napoleon.

Napoleon's nephew (the son of Napoleon's sister), Napoleon III, became Emperor in 1852. His letters are rather common and sell for approximately \$500 to \$750. Although he tried, Napoleon III failed to achieve his famous Uncle's success. He declared war on Germany, lost, and abdicated, living in exile for the rest of his life. It was Napoleon III who sent Maximilien to Mexico, another failed enterprise. Needless to say, it is important to distinguish between signatures of Napoleon III (see exhibit A17), Eugene Louis Napoleon (see exhibit A18) and Napoleon I. Both the date and the neater handwriting of Napoleon III should solve any confusion.

Exhibit A16 - Authentic signature of Maria Louise, second wife of Napoleon

Those interested in the Napoleonic era also collect the signatures of Napoleon's Generals and officials such as Ney, Massena, Bernadotte, Talleyrand, Marmont and Murat — Napoleon's dashing brother-in-law and head of his cavalry. Napoleon gave them titles, fame, and even to some, a country to rule. Bernadette, a French General, became King of Sweden and Murat became King of Naples. In the end many of these officials turned against Napoleon seeking their own fortune and some even fought with the British against him. Bernadette was among those. As a result, today, a Bernadette descendant is still King of Sweden.

A few periods of Napoleon's career are of special interest to collectors. These include documents dating to the period before Toulon (1793) because these are rare and have the early Italian version of his signature (see Exhibit A1). Also sought after are documents from the Italian campaign (1796-97) and the campaign in Egypt (1798-99) (see Exhibit A14). In both cases, the correspondence is often on an attractive parchment, including his name "Bonaparte" imprinted (see

Exhibit A18 - Signature of Eugene Louis Napoleon

Exhibit A8). These were both important and short periods in his life resulting in comparatively fewer letters.

Documents dating from the period of major battles like Austerlitz (see Exhibit A8), Wagram, and Waterloo are desirable and if they mention anything about those battles they are very expensive. However, documents from Napoleon's Russian campaign (1812) are the rarest and command higher prices than all other periods assuming similar content. Although Napoleon made it all the way to Moscow, only one man out of ten in his "Grande Armee" came back alive from Russia. Letters from his Elba (see Exhibit A7) and St. Helena also have special appeal to collectors, since he escaped from Elba to fight again at Waterloo and he finally died in St. Helena.

Compared to other important historical figures, such as Washington, Lincoln, and Hitler, you will fortunately find fewer forgeries of Napoleon. Maybe American collectors' thirst for Napoleon's autograph is partly due to the fact that they see in him something that no European King in the last few centuries had.

Like Andrew Jackson and Lincoln who started from humble beginnings, Napoleon also came from an unknown family to become one of the most powerful leaders in the world. But this was an American concept, in Europe it was unheard of, as all French Kings were descendants of one of only two families.

In the end, Napoleon's best revenge may be that his autograph is more sought after than any other European blue

Exhibit A20 - Authentic "NP" initial signature of Napoleon.

blooded King. Napoleon is a surprisingly safe investment and although the value of his signature has been steadily increasing, it is not inflated like some others and it is safe to say that he is an icon in history whose importance will not be diminished with time. So there is no risk of people losing their fascination with Napoleon, as he was one of only a handful of leaders who tried to conquer the world and came close to accomplishing his goal.

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