



An earthly paradise

*Château de Malmaison and La Petite Malmaison,
Rueil-Malmaison, France*

The country retreat created by the Empress Joséphine enjoyed European celebrity in the early 19th century. Monique Riccardi-Cubitt tells the story of the house and its exceptional owner

Photographs by Paul Highnam

A WEEK after his defeat at Waterloo, Napoleon Bonaparte took refuge at the *château* of Malmaison. This was the country house outside Paris that, from 1800 to 1802, as First Consul, he had shared with his first wife, Joséphine. Following his declaration as Emperor on May 18, 1804, the couple had moved to the nearby *château* of Saint-Cloud, a residence on a grander scale. But he always came back to Malmaison, and he acknowledged its importance to Joséphine, who lavished much time, thought, energy and money on the property.

The day after the politic divorce of the Emperor and his Empress on December 16, 1809, he granted her full ownership of the *château*,

its lands, park, furnishings and collections. And it was here that she died of pneumonia on May 29, 1814.

In June 1815, Joséphine's daughter, Hortense, welcomed the defeated Emperor to 'the place where he had in the past dreamt of much glory'. Here, Napoleon recalled happier times spent with the woman who had remained the love of his life. He spent a long time in the bedchamber they had shared and told the Queen of Holland: 'It is true isn't it, Hortense, that the Malmaison is a really beautiful place?'

No doubt he would be further assured to discover that it still is, for, despite sale and pillage, the modern visitor can see in re-created form a brilliant evocation of the apartments created here by Joséphine.

Fig 1 left: The tented design and rose paintings by Redouté in Joséphine's bedroom of 1812 echo her earlier Parisian chamber. Here, she received the Tsar of Russia on the eve of her death, lying in the carved gilt bed, displaying her swan motif and topped with the imperial eagle. In 1865, the bedchamber was restored to Napoléon III's instructions after a watercolour view. Fig 2 above: The tented porch to the 17th-century house

Born in Martinique to a family of settlers originating from the Loir-et-Cher region, Marie Joséphe Rose de Tascher de la Pagerie, called Rose by her friends and Joséphine by Bonaparte, received her first education from nuns. Married, aged 16, to Alexandre de Beauharnais and then estranged from her husband, she was caught up with two children in the turmoil of revolutionary Paris. While imprisoned at Les Carmes (where her husband was

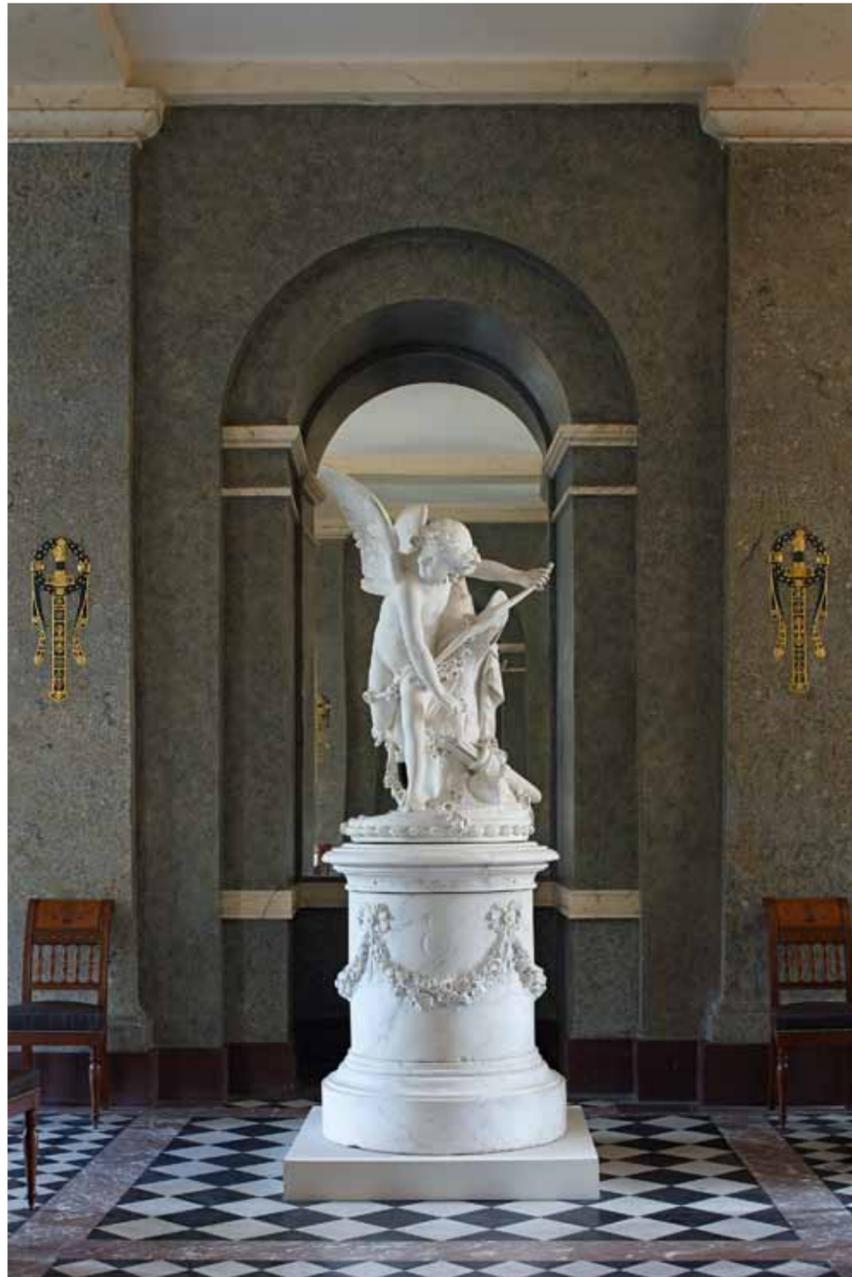


Fig 3: The entrance hall, restored in 1991–2, used to be filled with cages of exotic birds. Its black-and-white marble floor carries on into the dining room and the Billiard Room. The marble statue of Eros preparing his arrow by Tassaert was originally in the Temple de l'Amour

guillotined in 1794), she met the Spanish-born Thérésia Cabarrus Tallien, wife of a Revolutionary politician and one of the Merveilleuses of the Directory period, influencing Parisian fashion, society and politics.

Mme Tallien introduced Joséphine to Barras, one of the five Directors, who became her lover and protector. In 1795, she moved to an elegant Louis XVI folly, nestling among trees, on the rue Chantierine, in the centre of Paris. Here, Joséphine held a salon, supported by the fiery and flamboyant Mme Tallien, whom Bonaparte had fallen in love with. When rebuffed, he married her friend Rose de Beauharnais in a civil ceremony on March 1796. 'Sweet and

incomparable Joséphine,' wrote Bonaparte after their meeting in 1795. 'What strange power you do have on my heart! Your portrait and last night's intoxicating memory have not ceased to torment me.'

Joséphine embellished her Parisian house to create for Napoleon a fitting stage that reflected and supported both his military and political ambitions. She wrote to the decorator Vautier in 1797: 'I want my house to be furnished with the latest elegance.' Probably under the influence of the neo-Classical painter David, she used for the first time the motif of the military tent in an entrance extension. This conceit of the tented room, which clearly

celebrated Napoleon's military prowess and experience, became the *leitmotif* of Malmaison (Fig 2), to which her attention turned next.

Joséphine must have discovered the estate of Malmaison in 1793, when she rented a house at Croissy, near Saint Germain-en-Laye, to escape from the Terror in Paris. The manor house, dating from 1610 to 1620, built on a classical French plan with a central structure flanked by two pavilions topped by high slated roofs, was set in a garden naturalised in the English manner.

Joséphine bought the property on April 21, 1799, while Napoleon was away on the Egyptian campaign. The timing was not coincidental,



Fig 4: Napoleon's Library was the last ground-floor room realised by Percier and Fontaine. It was described and illustrated with the Council Chamber in *Recueil de décorations intérieures*, published in 1801–12, which codified and disseminated the Empire style

as Napoleon had claimed that the property was too expensive. In his absence, she had her way.

In 1800, the architect Fontaine and his associate Percier proposed rebuilding Malmaison as a villa, but high costs obliged them to refurbish instead, creating new apartments within the house's 17th-century shell. To the front was added an outer entrance in the shape of a military tent, with fasces of lances, shield and helmets, in 1801. The theme carried on in the Council Chamber, where 169 cabinet meetings were held.

After the coup d'état of the 18th Brumaire (November 9), 1799, Bonaparte became France's ruler and Malmaison was, with the Tuileries Palace, the seat of government from January

1801 to September 1802. There, the Légion d'Honneur was created, the Code Civil drafted and the Concordat with the Vatican discussed. The military motif is echoed in the bed-chambers—suitably austere in Napoleon's (Fig 5) and on a grand imperial scale for Joséphine's (Fig 1)—realised by the architect Louis Berthault in 1812.

This Roman note appears also in the entrance hall (Fig 3), with a black-and-white marble floor and grey scagliola walls and columns. Pompeian grace reigns in the apsed dining room, with dancing nymphs panels painted by Louis Lafitte. The Library—containing 4,500 red leatherbound volumes stamped with

a gold B-P—displays an elegant, airy ceiling decorated with the 'Loves of the Gods' and portraits of philosophers. Mahogany panelling and carved gilt furniture by the firm of Jacob Frères add a more imposing Empire note (Fig 4).

The Jacob firm had worked for Joséphine in Paris and now created new forms designed by Percier, such as the *fauteuil en gondole*, with a curved back, and Joséphine's swan motif. The cabinetmaker Biennais produced small elegant pieces for her comfort, such as the *lavabo* on a tripod stand with porcelain basin and ewer, a bedside table or *somno* and the imposing standing mirror to which Thomire added gilt-bronze mounts. ➤



Fig 5 above: Napoleon's bedroom was reconstructed in 1969, the bicentenary of his birth. *Fig 6 left:* The Temple de l'Amour was built by Berthault in 1807 using columns looted from Parisian churches at the revolution. It emulates Marie Antoinette's eponymous folly at Le Petit Trianon



Fig 7: The 1803–5 gallery of La Petite Malmaison, formerly a temperate greenhouse. Note the Parthenon frieze casts over the windows

From 1802, Malmaison became Joséphine's stage and the setting where she could fully express her personality, her creativity and her passion for botany. She took over the direction of the works, engaging Vignault and Vignon in 1805 to replace her first garden designer, Morel, then, in late 1805, Berthault.

Within the grounds close to the house, a small theatre was built in 1802, its interior decorated with a fabric awning after the manner of a Roman amphitheatre. She collected on a grand scale in the encyclopaedic tradition of the earlier cabinets of curiosities: ethnic artefacts, works of art, antiquities, modern sculptures by Canova, minerals, insects, an aviary of exotic birds and a zoo.

The house was also extended in 1807–8 with the addition of a Gallery—now lost—to the Music Room. In this space were displayed her paintings, some of them in the new Gothic Revival Troubadour style. There was also a chapel of white marble in the Greek style. Its altar was adorned with a gilt-bronze relief of the Deposition from the Parisian nunnery of the Val-de-Grâce by Anguier, now in the

Rueil-Malmaison church, and the altarpiece was a version of Raphael's *Holy Family*.

For the garden itself, she had high ambitions. 'I want Malmaison,' she wrote 'to become the source of wealth for the whole of France... I want to make it the most beautiful and the most curious garden in Europe.' In the park and garden, planted with rare trees and embellished with follies and grottoes by Berthault as well as the Scottish gardeners Blaikie and Howatson, exotic animals roamed freely, among them kangaroos and emus from Tasmania. Joséphine went by boat amid the black swans on the river to the Temple de l'Amour (**Fig 6**) or to the 165ft-long Hot Greenhouse, where rare imported plants and flowers flourished. When the latter was built in 1803–5, it was the largest glazed structure in the world.

Some adjoining reception rooms, La Petite Malmaison (1804–7), were decorated by Berthault, in 1807, with a precious satinwood and rosewood inlaid floor by Jacob-Desmalter in the entrance hall known as the Salon des Stucs. The Gallery (**Fig 7**) in the house—originally the temperate greenhouse—displayed some of her

250 Greek vases and is hung with plaster casts of the Parthenon frieze of about 1795 (before Lord Elgin acquired the originals from Athens).

Overall, 184 new plant species were introduced at Malmaison between 1804 and 1814. Her rose collection of some 500 species, immortalised by Redouté, was unrivalled; Napoleon allowed her, despite the blockade, to receive specimens from Kew Gardens and the British horticulturists Lee and Kennedy. When presented by Joséphine, they captivated visitors, such as the comte de la Garde Chambonas: 'She led us through these magnificent greenhouses naming all those rare plants that man's art and patience make grow under our climates. It is here, she said that I have felt happier studying

the purple of the cactus, than contemplating all the pomp around me. It is here that I would like to reign over this vegetable kingdom. Here is the hydrangea, just renamed hortensia from my daughter's name, there is the alpine snowbell, the violet from Parma, the lily of the Nile. These conquests from Egypt and Italy will never bring enemies to Bonaparte. But here is my own conquest, she added, showing us a jasmine from the Martinique. The seed I have sown and cultivated, brings me back my own country, my childhood, and my maidenly adornments. While saying this, her soft créole voice sounded like an expressive and tender music.'

After Joséphine's death, Malmaison suffered

several extreme changes of fortune. It was sold by her son and then restored with great care in 1865–7 by Napoléon III, Joséphine's affectionate grandson. It was then emptied during the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 and the estate divided up. At this point, La Petite Malmaison, shorn of its glass conservatory, became a private residence with its own independent grounds.

In 1896, a philanthropist, Daniel Iffla—known as Osiris—bought the *château* and its park was drastically reduced. Then, from 1897 to 1900, the *château* was restored by the architects Humbert and Daumet, faithfully reproducing the original interiors from published designs and watercolours, under

the direction of Marcel Jambon, decorator at the Paris Opéra and the Opéra Comique.

Osiris gave it to the state in 1903 and Malmaison opened to the public as a Napoleonic museum in 1905. In 1906, Joséphine's bedroom was refurbished according to Napoleon III's plan. In recent years, further restorations, including a particular campaign from 1985 to 1999, have brought the house to its present compelling form.

For further information, visit <http://musees-nationaux-malmaison.fr/chateau-malmaison>. *Château de la Petite Malmaison* is not publicly accessible, but can be hired for events (www.petitemalmaison.fr)