

Napoleon III style

Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (1808-1873) was Emperor of the French from 1852 to 1870. In a certain way, the artistic code of the Napoleon style - also called second Empire - was laid out in the Fair of 1844.

The décor is the strong point of this period. It was abundant, always using exquisite quality of materials, with plenty of furnishings and fabrics. Second Empire designers loved grand interior architecture elements. The focal points of rooms were fireplace mantels, mirrors, candelabras, sconces and chandeliers. Atlantes and caryatids were symbols of used and were synonymous of luxury.

□The Napoleon III style also called Second Empire style can be summed up in one word: abundance – abundance of inspiration, profusion of materials and a wealth of décor – a generous mix of 17th and 18th century styles. The period was famous for its tortoiseshell and metal parquet furniture in the André-Charles Boulle manner, Louis XV and XVI style living room sets, and Renaissance style – Henri II dining room sets.

The Louis XVI style or more exactly Marie-Antoinette style set the tone for the interiors of the day. The Empress adored Marie-Antoinette and inspired the resurgence of the flower basket and the bow decorative elements. The Louis XVI-Empress style copied Carlin, Weisweiler and Riesener and was presented to the public at the 1867 World's Fair.

The important names of the time are Bellangé, Beurdeley (Imperial warrant), Cremer, Dasson, Grohé, Diehl, Fourdinois (Empress Warrant), Linke and Sormani. The cabinet maker Antoine Krieger added mechanisms inspired from 18th century furniture. Small side tables on rollers were created and well ad black lacquered furniture covered with bouquets of flowers.

□This was the era of Progress and industry. The technique for large tufted cushions was invented in 1838, as well as cast iron furniture that could be reproduced mechanically. It was a period of vast innovations: new machines allowed for very fine and precisely cut veneer, the process of gold electro deposition was used on certain bronzes and marble carving became easier. Paper Mache was inventing allowing for fake sculpture. Electrotyping and the use of silver plate, which Christofle excelled in, gave much creative freedom and gave access to products that had up till then been reserved to the very wealthy.

In general, the Napoleon III style was characterized by exuberant shapes, a profusion of decorative motifs, and a naturalism in the representation of human figures – such as those created by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, the sculptor famous for the Dance figure on the Paris Opera house.

Princess Mathilde supported the artistic activity of the Second Empire by collecting paintings. She herself painted aquarelles and exhibited in the salons from 1859 to 1897. She held a famous salon rue de Courcelles, where she welcomed Carpeaux, Marcello, Gavarni, Lami, Doré, Flameng, Roybet, Détaille and Jacquet. The three last painters were very famous in the 3rd Republic.

The State bought and commissioned artists from the salon whose work did not shock the eye. The former salon de l'Académie (Salon of the Academy) became the Salon des Artistes français (Salon of French artists) and at the end of the Empire the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts (Fine Arts Society) was created. In 1863 Napoleon III accepted the creation of the Salon des Refusés (Salon of Rejects).

This period saw the transformation of Paris under the impulse of the Baron Haussmann. The amount of investment property apartment buildings changed urban architecture and allowed architects and decorators to freely express their imagination to the delight of the bourgeois society that was taking power.

□photo 1: Napoleon III style interior, Louvre museum.

photo 2: Opera Garnier, lithography, 1875. In 1851, Charles Garnier discovering the Pantheon in Rome exclaimed "There is no choice in the arts; you've got to be God or an Architect!" Charles Garnier finished the Opera in December 1874.

photo 3: Inauguration of the Opera Garnier in 1875, view of the Grand Stairway.

photo 4: Imperial casket by Diehl, World's Fair of 1867. This bluish marble casket adorned with gilded bronzes was considered the greatest master piece of the Fair, perfect in conception, composition and execution. The portraits of the Emperor, Empress and imperial prince are gilded bronze on antique red marble. □

photo 5: Louis XVI style centre-piece, by Christofle & Cie, 1867 World's Fair.

photo 6: Clock and pair of candelabras from a design by Carrier Belleuse, presented by the Compagnie des Onyx, directed by M. Viot, 1868 World's Fair. In part in gilded bronze, draped with onyx, enamelled bouquets and antique green marble stands. This mantel piece ornament greatly impressed the Fair's visitors. □



