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French School (?)

**Portrait of Maria Letizia Bonaparte  
(Madame Mère)**

















French School (?)

*Portrait of Maria  
Letizia Bonaparte  
(Madame Mère),  
ca. 1810*

Oil on copper, mounted  
on a black painted pear wood  
and gilt bronze portable writing desk.

DIMENSIONS: painting 23 x 17.5 cm;  
writing desk 43.5 x 32 x 25 cm.

PROVENANCE: Count Paolo Campello  
della Spina; Pompeo di Campello  
and hence by descent.

The provenance of this elegant portable writing desk confirms the identity of the sitter, as Count Paolo Campello della Spina was the husband of Maria Desirée Bonaparte (1), a direct descendant of Maria Letizia Ramolino, the daughter of Zénaïde Bonaparte (wearing the black dress, 2), who was herself the daughter of Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's elder brother, and the cousin Carlo Luciano Bonaparte (3), the first son of Lucien Bonaparte, another brother of Napoleon.

Napoleon's mother, Maria Letizia Ramolino (Ajaccio 1750 - Rome 1836), also known as Letizia Bonaparte or Madame Mère, is depicted



(1)



(2)

seated in a lush garden with a circular Ionic temple. She is shown holding a scroll with a female silhouette, while two other closed scrolls are placed to her left. Although this is an intimate and familial portrait, the sitter is dressed in the

colors of the French flag: a shimmering blue silk dress, a red shawl, and a delicate white cap covering her head, along with the rich lace of her jabot. In the iconography of Letizia Ramolino, her official portraits are better known, partic-







pean Ceramics, Portrait Miniatures and Gold Boxes, November 27-28, 2012, London, lot 332, 9). The note accompanying the miniature specifies that a variant of the miniature in the auction, mounted within an *escritoire* made by Odier, which once belonged to Jérôme Bonaparte, is now housed in the Museum of the Legion d'Honneur in Paris (inv. no. 03038), illustrated in N. Lemoine-Bouchard, *Les Peintres en miniature actifs en France 1650-1850*, Paris, 2008, p. 469, fig. a. (10).

(4)

(3) ularly the splendid portrait by François Gérard (1802, 4) and the one painted eleven years later by Robert Lefèvre (5), as well as the majestic sculptural portrait by Canova (6). A watercolor on paper depicting her in old age, where she appears frail, absent, and almost indifferent to her surroundings (7), was executed by her granddaughter Charlotte Bonaparte, Zénaïde's sister (in red, 2).

The dating of this work is suggested to be in the first decade of the 19th century, based on comparisons with other portraits of Letizia Ramolino from that era. One such comparison is with a portrait by François Joseph Kinson, circa 1811 (The Bowes Museum, 8), and a miniature, signed and dated Sieurac 1813, where Madame Mère appears with the same curls framing her forehead (Christie's, *Centuries of Style: Silver, Euro-*







(5)









(6)



(7)



(8)



(9)





(10)

The portrait and the desk form an inseparable whole. As seen in the painting, there are three sheets of paper: the sheet with the silhouette and two others rolled up beside the sitter. The number three also appears in the map of the key, as well as in the lock; furthermore, on the flap, there is a gilt bronze ouroboros, a symbol of immortality. This is undoubtedly a portrait that still holds an unsolved enigma, related to Napoleon's mother and three individuals within her circle.





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