

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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Diadems Are Forever

But for a certain Napoleon Bonaparte there might be no Paris *haut joaillier* called Chaumet. Indeed, the debt the *maison* owes him – and he it – becomes crystal clear in a new gallery featuring models of the sublime headpieces, arranged for posing and posterity’s sake, that it created to burnish his imperial court’s image. Tiara boom de-ay, exclaims Carol Woolton. Photography: Ambroise Tézenas

Napoleon was passionate about the theatre. He had playhouses built in many of his 52 palaces, including Malmaison, to enjoy the visual drama of show and spectacle that a play provided. Theatrical productions must have inspired his extravagant use of props, décor, scenery and jewels to create the backdrop of imperial grandeur intended to dazzle the whole of Europe.

Pomp and splendour were created by craftsmen, goldsmiths, silk weavers, marquetry makers, sculptors, painters and jewellers, who worked exclusively for the emperor in a Neoclassical style that was inspired by ancient Rome. Paris was illuminated by this renaissance of luxury, and the nation became his stage set. Arguably, of all the arts that served to promote his regime, it was the jewels and opulent tiaras that generated the greatest impact. With Empress Joséphine as his muse, Marie-Etienne Nitot, the founder of Chaumet, was appointed official jeweller to the imperial court. Now, following a year-long renovation of its 18th-century *hôtel particulier* in Place Vendôme, maquette models of the *haut joaillier*’s historic tiaras have been given new life in its redesigned Salon des Diadèmes.

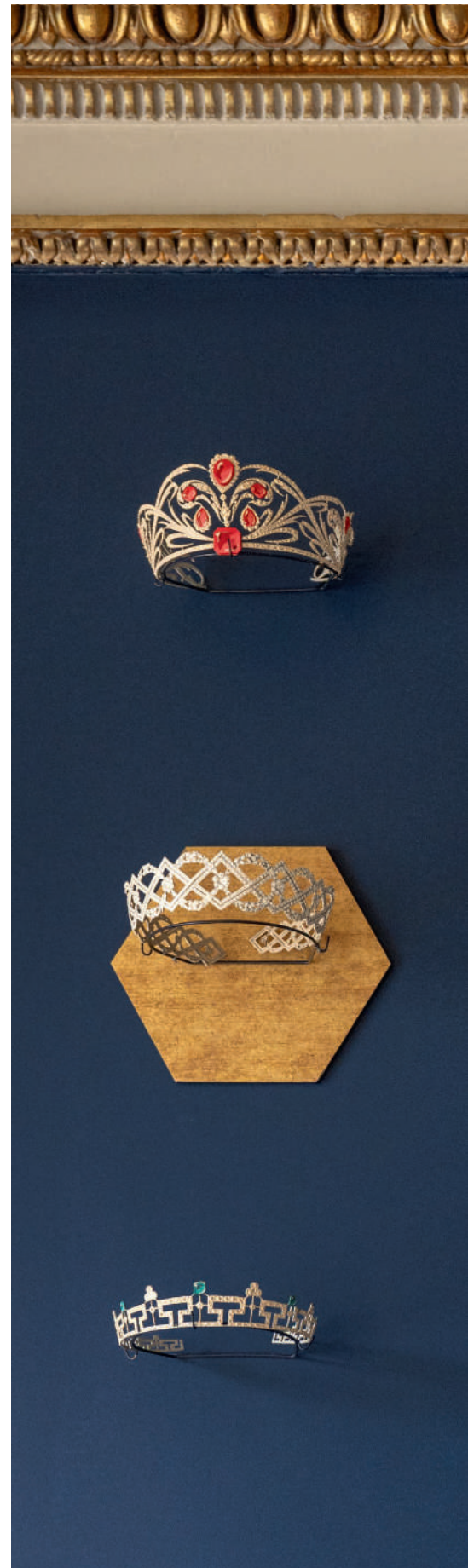
Napoleon astutely recognised that glittering head ornaments would transform the bourgeois Bonaparte and Beauharnais families into princesses, much like the other crowned heads of Europe, who occupied their thrones by virtue of royal blood. The tiara, having languished in relative obscurity since antiquity, reached

glittering new heights of fashion during this era. France defined standards of elegance, so courts across the continent quickly adopted Joséphine’s style and visitors came from far and wide to buy the bejewelled *articles de Paris*.

Staging was fundamental to the idea of Napoleonic glamour and, as such, Chaumet’s model tiaras are now presented in a grand new setting within the salon. Restored *boiserie* panelling has been stained a lapis-lazuli blue, while golden glints are reflected in mirrors from mouldings, cornices and the magnificent chandeliers above. The pieces themselves, fashioned from dynamic curves and spirals with painted rose- and brilliant-cut diamonds, highlight the engraved alabaster walls like stars. All together, there are 600 preparatory tiaras on display, mostly made of metallic alloy, forming a timeline of changing tastes and styles, from floral inspirations made for sovereigns and aristocrats who wanted to convey their wealth and status, through avant-garde designs for the likes of Countess Mountbatten of Burma and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, to contemporary pieces created for tech magnates and modern weddings.

The idea of presenting jewellery models on the salon walls dates back to Joseph Chaumet, who gave the *maison* its name and was director from 1885 to 1928. He decided that a full-scale preparatory tiara was essential to use for size adjustments as well as selecting the gemstones to be included. These full-scale maquettes would

Chaumet calculates that it has made more than 2,000 tiaras since 1780. Hundreds of ‘maillechort’ models, which are largely made from nickel silver, line the walls of the Salon des Diadèmes, some mounted on gold honeycomb hexagons alluding to the bee, emblem of the house’s great patron. The archive itself contains 400,000 drawings







then be hand-painted with gouache to reflect the colours of the chosen gems.

Archive photographs of the salon c1910 show the tiaras arranged around the walls for clients to admire. The new design pays homage to this tradition, updated for modern shoppers and selfies *en diadème*. Conservation is in progress to stabilise the gouache, which flakes over time; other maquettes are made of fragile materials such as cardboard; others still, made of lead, show signs of oxidisation. In a sense

the salon also plays a part in preserving history. A model of Empress Eugénie's Russian diamond-and-sapphire diadem, made before the 1887 auction of the French crown jewels, hangs on the wall, for example. In Jacques-Louis David's monumental painting of the 1804 coronation, the red ermine-lined robe worn by Napoleon, as well as Joséphine's high-waisted white gown, are embroidered with golden bees. The emperor chose the motif to replace the Bourbon fleur-de-lys,

as golden bees had been found in the grave of King Childeric, father of Clovis I, the first ruler to unite the Frankish tribes under one sovereign. This emblem therefore linked the new imperial dynasty to the origins of France. Today, the salon walls are decorated with golden hexagons, echoing this ancient motif, while the jewellery tells the stories of 19th-century monarchies, societal changes and shifting artistic movements. One tiara, commissioned in 1919 by Armand, Duke of

Throughout her reign, Empress Joséphine was particularly fond of wheat sheaf tiaras. This c1811 design by François-Régnauld Nitot, who succeeded his father – Chaumet's founder – as Napoleon's official jeweller, features more than 66 carats of antique-cut diamonds mounted in gold and silver. It rests on a leather-bound book from the company archive and sits alongside a model for another diadem



Doudeauville, as a wedding gift for his daughter Hedwige, features stylised diamond, open-petalled fuchsias set in a trompe-l'oeil effect. Another piece, made seven years later for Charlotte, Grand Duchess of Luxembourg, is clearly influenced by the emergence of the Art Deco movement, with strong geometric lines housing a spectacular emerald originating from Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria. More recently, in 2018, a 'Joséphine Aigrette Impériale' tiara was created as a tribute to the namesake empress. Every

order, once it has been finished and delivered, becomes part of this living heritage.

For her very first appearance as sovereign, at the Légion d'Honneur ceremony, Joséphine wore a nine-diamond wheat-sheaf tiara, the golden grains heralding a new generation intent on making France more open, where luxury was no longer the preserve of the Versailles court. Paradoxically, then, the very object Napoleon used to symbolise the monarchy in fact expressed the birth of a new society based on merit rather than birthright.

Panels engraved with excerpts from the passionate letters that Napoleon and Joséphine exchanged now line the sweeping staircase leading up to the salon. Outside, in Place Vendôme, a bronze figure of the former assuming a grand theatrical pose stands at the pinnacle of a 42-metre-high *colonne*. I like to think he's standing guard over his legacy of craft, which remains the basis of French luxury today © Carol Woolton is the author of 'If Jewels Could Talk: Seven Secret Histories' (Gallery, rrp £18.99 – see review on page 72)

The Salon des Perles, where pearl-stringers once prepared necklaces, is now a dining room, its midnight-blue 'boiserie' cartouches containing gilded 'carton-pierre' panels. The ceiling is by the 19th-century decorative painter Pierre-Victor Galland and features cherubs harvesting fruit, flowers and fish for a banquet, while the table was made by Les Compagnons du Devoir, a crafts apprenticeship scheme