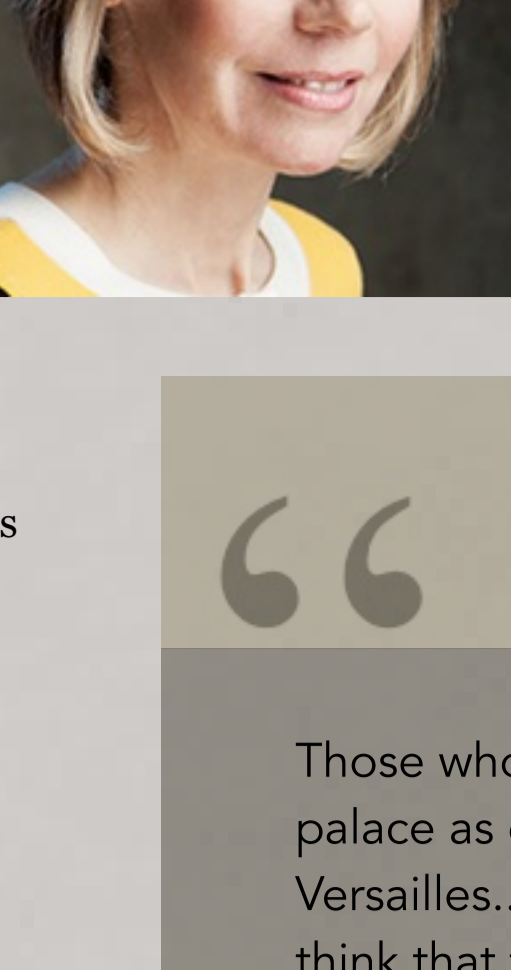
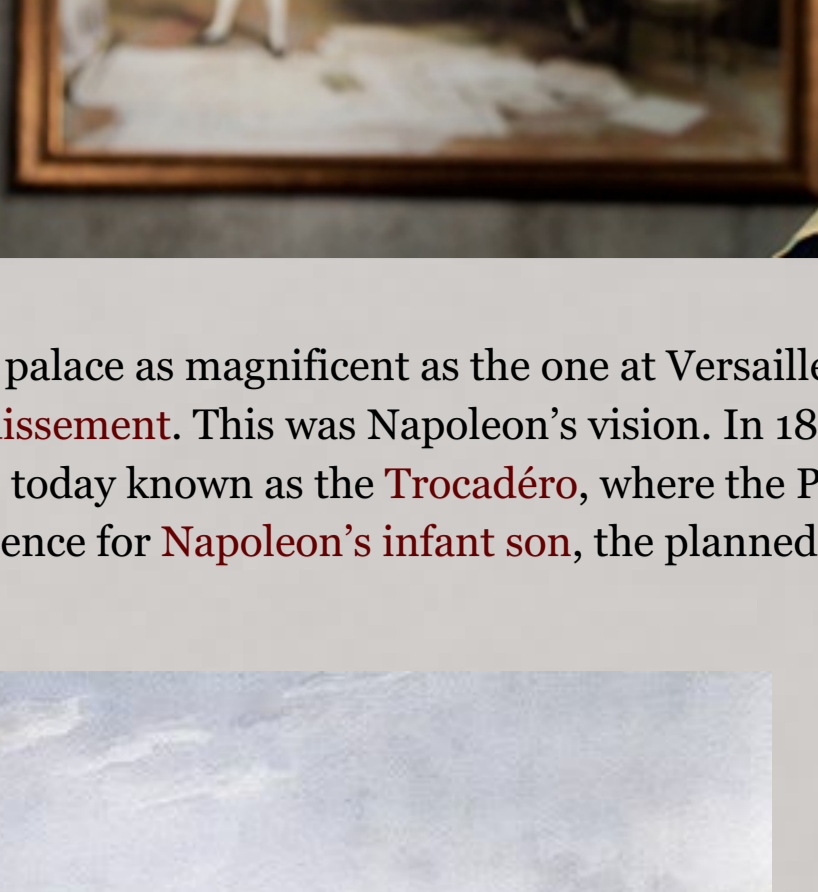
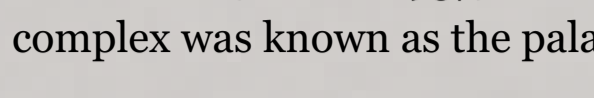
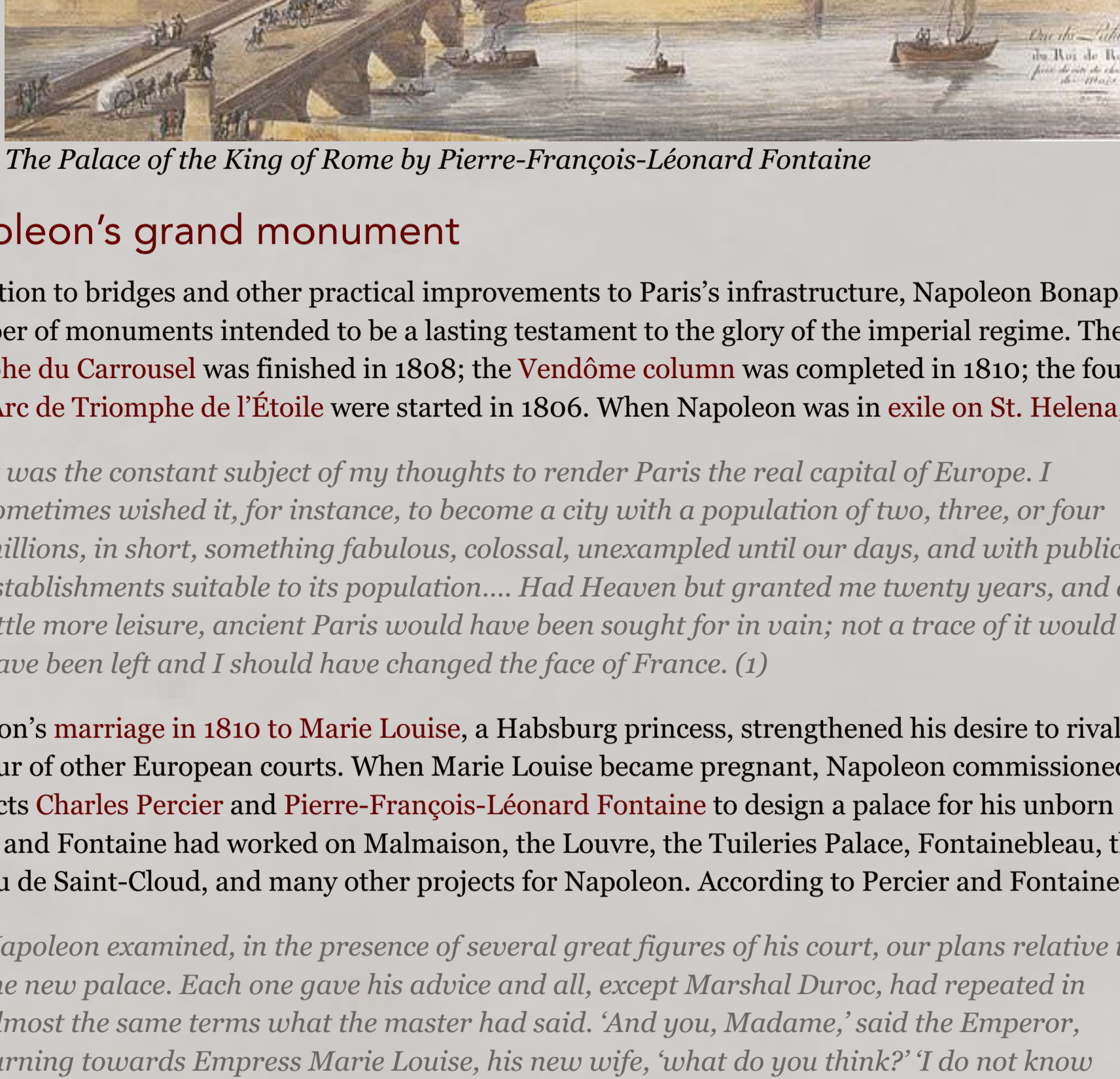


The Palace of the King of Rome



Imagine in Paris, across the river from the Eiffel Tower, a palace as magnificent as the one at Versailles, with a park covering about half of the present 16th arrondissement. This was Napoleon's vision. In 1811, work began on a great imperial dwelling on the hill that is today known as the Trocadéro, where the Palais de Chaillot (built in 1937) now stands. Intended as a residence for Napoleon's infant son, the planned complex was known as the palace of the King of Rome.



The Palace of the King of Rome by Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine

Napoleon's grand monument

In addition to bridges and other practical improvements to Paris's infrastructure, Napoleon Bonaparte built a number of monuments intended to be a lasting testament to the glory of the imperial regime. The Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel was finished in 1808; the Vendôme column was completed in 1810; the foundations of the Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile were started in 1806. When Napoleon was in exile on St. Helena, he said:

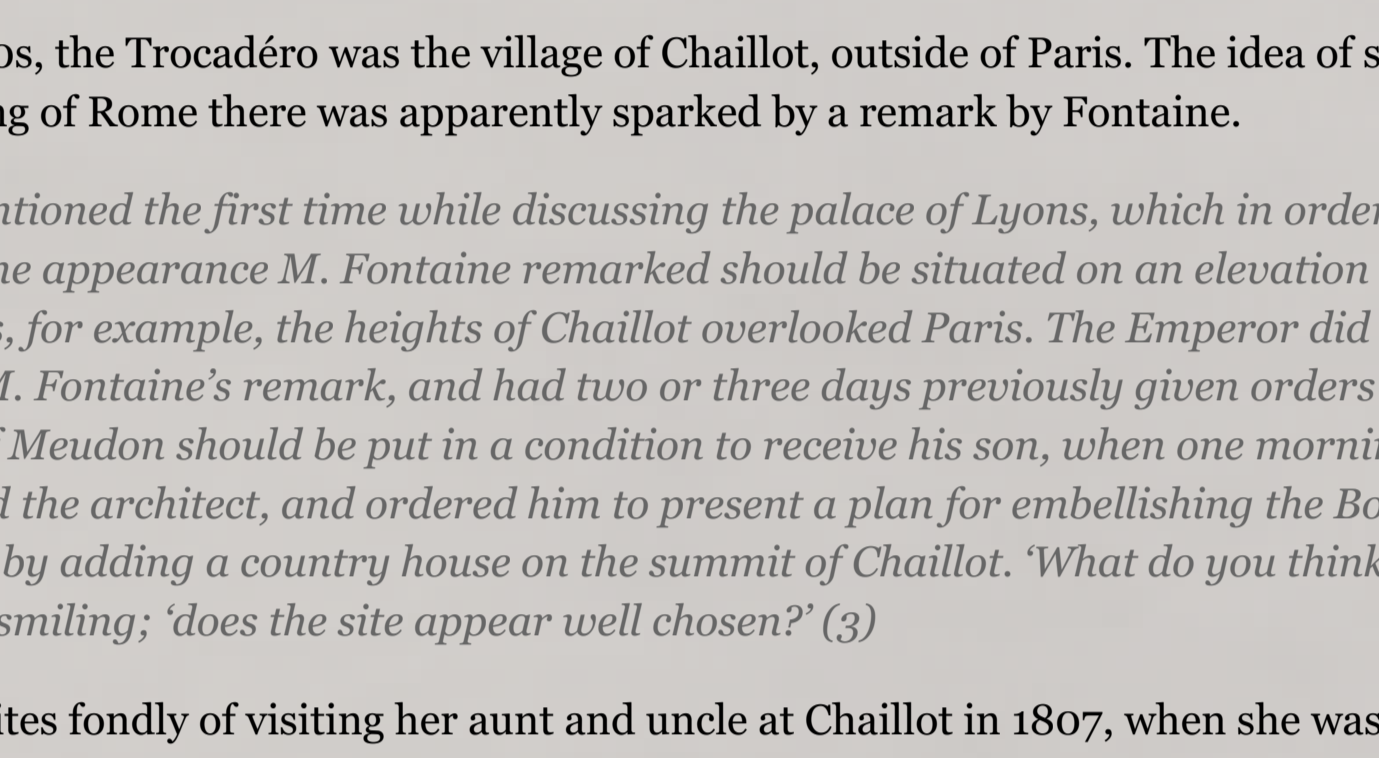
It was the constant subject of my thoughts to render Paris the real capital of Europe. I sometimes wished it, for instance, to become a city with a population of two, three, or four millions, in short, something fabulous, colossal, unexampled until our days, and with public establishments suitable to its population.... Had Heaven but granted me twenty years, and a little more leisure, ancient Paris would have been sought for in vain; not a trace of it would have been left and I should have changed the face of France. (1)

Napoleon's marriage in 1810 to Marie Louise, a Habsburg princess, strengthened his desire to rival the grandeur of other European courts. When Marie Louise became pregnant, Napoleon commissioned the architects Charles Percier and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine to design a palace for his unborn child. Percier and Fontaine had worked on Malmaison, the Louvre, the Tuileries Palace, Fontainebleau, the Château de Saint-Cloud, and many other projects for Napoleon. According to Percier and Fontaine:

Napoleon examined, in the presence of several great figures of his court, our plans relative to the new palace. Each one gave his advice and all, except Marshal Duroc, had repeated in almost the same terms what the master had said. 'And you, Madame,' said the Emperor, turning towards Empress Marie Louise, his new wife, 'what do you think?' 'I do not know anything,' the Empress responded modestly, excusing herself. 'Do not be afraid,' replied the Emperor. 'Speak, they know even less than you and I have not committed to do or to believe anything they say. Your opinion is necessary to me; it concerns the palace where our son will live.' The Empress examined the plans and made some judicious observations, which everyone hastened to applaud. The Empress was pregnant, and four months later she gave birth to the King of Rome. (2)

In January 1811, 20 million francs were allocated for the palace's construction. When Napoleon François Charles Joseph Bonaparte, also known as the King of Rome, Napoleon II or the Duke of Reichstadt, was born on March 20, 1811, work had already begun.

The site of Chaillot



Map showing the planned location of the Palace of the King of Rome at Chaillot, opposite the Champs de Mars

In the early 1800s, the Trocadéro was the village of Chaillot, outside of Paris. The idea of situating the palace of the King of Rome there was apparently sparked by a remark by Fontaine.

It was mentioned the first time while discussing the palace of Lyons, which in order to present a handsome appearance M. Fontaine remarked should be situated on an elevation overlooking the city, as, for example, the heights of Chaillot overlooked Paris. The Emperor did not appear to notice M. Fontaine's remark, and had two or three days previously given orders that the château of Meudon should be put in a condition to receive his son, when one morning he summoned the architect, and ordered him to present a plan for embellishing the Bois de Boulogne, by adding a country house on the summit of Chaillot. 'What do you think of it?' added he, smiling; 'does the site appear well chosen?' (3)

George Sand writes fondly of visiting her aunt and uncle at Chaillot in 1807, when she was a child.

[My uncle's house] was then a real country house, Chaillot not having been built up as it is today. It was the most modest dwelling in the world... But at the age I was then, it was paradise. I could draw the plan of the building and the garden, they have remained so fresh in my mind. The garden was the foremost place of delight for me, because it was the only garden I knew.... There... I saw for the first time butterflies and big sunflowers, which appeared to me to be a hundred feet tall. (4)

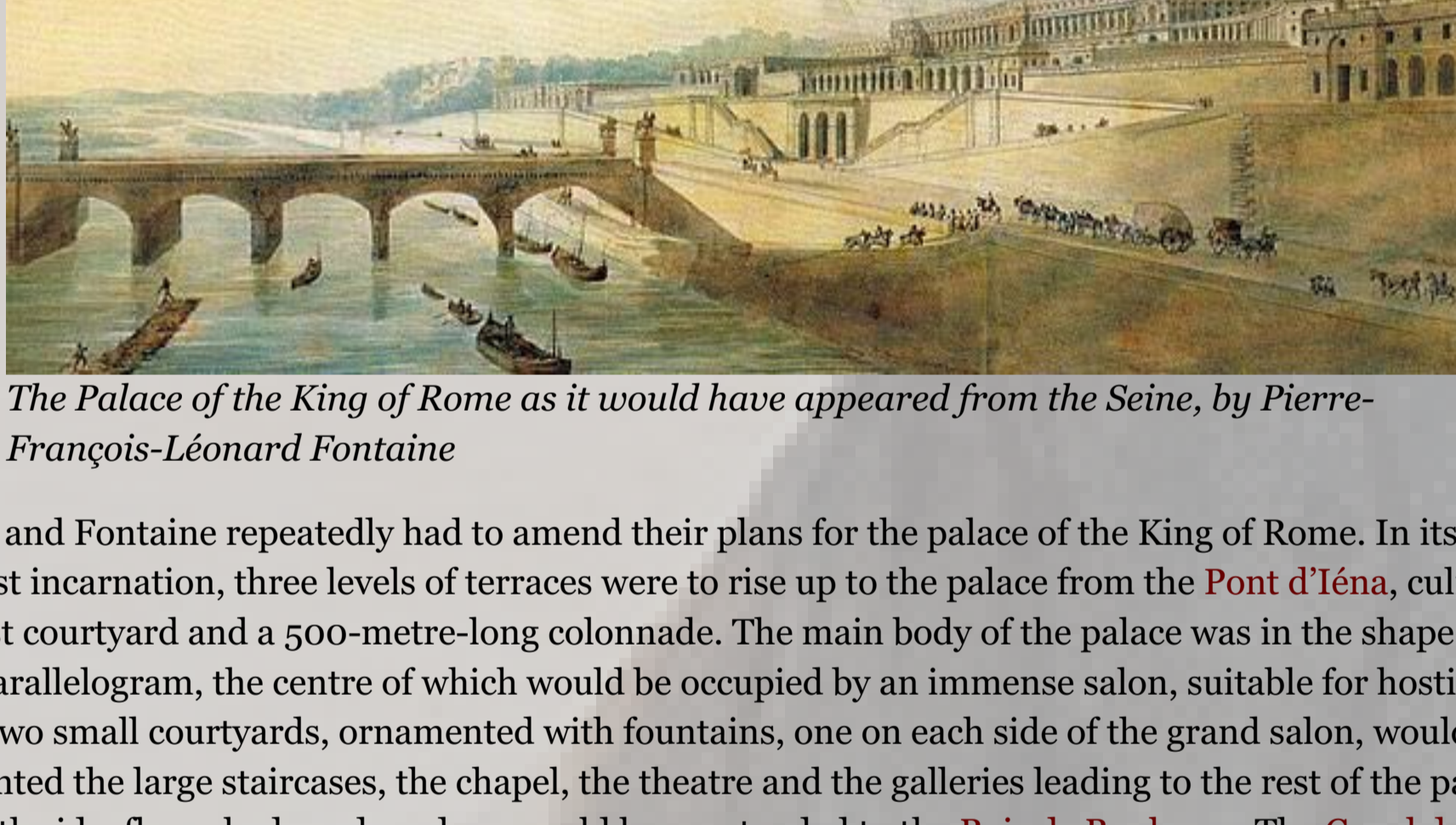
George Sand's uncle sold his small property to the French government, as it was on the site destined for the palace. Others had to sell as well. The hill had a convent on it, which was levelled to make way for the excavations.

Golden visions or bitter resentments seized on the inhabitants on and near Mount Chaillot as the preparations went forward, according as they did or did not desire a change of residence. One proprietor of a large house let in tenements, addressed, in more than one sense, a moving letter to M. le Comte Daru, the intendant of the Emperor's household....: 'I am proprietor of a vast house on the quay de Billy, No. 62; the commissioners of the palace for the King of Rome have pronounced its sentence, they have marked it with black chalk. The lodgers are aware of the fact, and are preparing to quit, as much through prudence as respect. The consequence is that if the emigration continues all the inhabitants left will be a few labourers and the swallows. You must be well aware, M. le Comte, that with such lodgers it will be difficult for a citizen to meet his demands.... My petition is therefore that the Emperor purchase my house, and recompense me like a just and liberal monarch, ordering payment to be made as promptly as possible, seeing that I am dogged by my creditors, and have engagements to fulfil.' (5)

One enterprising resident held out a little too long.

The government...endeavoured to purchase all the houses situated upon the ground where [the palace of the King of Rome] was intended to be built. Upon the spot of ground, which, according to the plan that had been traced out, was to form the extreme right of the front of the palace, there was a small house belonging to a poor cooper named Boniviant, which, including the ground upon which it stood was not, at the highest estimation, worth more than a thousand francs. The owner demanded ten thousand francs. It was referred to the emperor, who ordered that it should be purchased at that price. When the proper persons waited on the cooper to conclude the agreement, he said, that upon reflection, he should not sell it for less than thirty thousand francs. It was referred again to Napoleon, who directed that it should be given to him. When they came to conclude the business, the cooper increased his demand to forty thousand. The architect was greatly embarrassed, and did not know how to act, or in what manner he could again venture to annoy the emperor on the subject; at the same time he knew that it was impossible to conceal any thing from him. He therefore addressed him again on the subject. 'Ce drôle là abuse,' said he, 'pourtant il n'y a pas d'autre moyen; allons il faut payer.' [There is no other way; we will have to pay.] The architect returned to the cooper, who increased his price to fifty thousand francs. Napoleon indignant, when informed of it, said, 'Cet homme là est un misérable, et bien je n'achèterai point la maison, et elle restera comme un monument de mon respect pour les lois.' [I will not buy the house and it will remain as a monument to my respect for the laws.] (6)

Diminishing plans



The Palace of the King of Rome as it would have appeared from the Seine, by Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine

Percier and Fontaine repeatedly had to amend their plans for the palace of the King of Rome. In its grandest incarnation, three levels of terraces were to rise up to the palace from the Pont d'Iéna, culminating in a vast courtyard and a 500-metre-long colonnade. The main body of the palace was in the shape of a large parallelogram, the centre of which would be occupied by an immense salon, suitable for hosting large fêtes. Two small courtyards, ornamented with fountains, one on each side of the grand salon, would have highlighted the large staircases, the chapel, the theatre and the galleries leading to the rest of the palace. On the north side, flowerbeds and gardens would have extended to the Bois de Boulogne. The Canal de l'Ourcq was to be diverted to bring in water. Grand boulevards would flank the palace and gardens. A pheasantry and a menagerie were part of the plans. Besides the imperial court and a large staff, the palace would have accommodated 400 horses and 80 carriages.

In March 1812, Napoleon added the idea of constructing a palace of the arts, an imperial university, state archives and barracks on the left bank of the Seine, opposite the palace of the King of Rome.

Napoleon's disastrous campaign in Russia put an end to these dreams. In light of the dwindling resources of the government, work on the palace at Chaillot slowed. A smaller palace being built at Rambouillet was given the title of "palace of the King of Rome." After the Battle of Leipzig in 1813, Percier and Fontaine were required to drastically cut back their plans.

Those who can imagine a palace as extensive as Versailles, occupying with its secondary buildings the slope and the summit of the mountain which dominates the most beautiful part of the capital, with the easiest means of access, will not hesitate to think that this edifice could have been the most vast and most extraordinary work of our century. They will excuse us for having been able to think, for several years, of the reality of such a beautiful dream, and as soon as they will have cast their eyes on our plans, and recognized the modifications to which, therefore, it was necessary to reduce them, they cannot help but complain we were condemned to change the nature of our work; they will see that we were constrained to do a job that, in destroying our illusions, came just before the entire abandonment of the project that had so flattered us. (7)

Napoleon's plans for Chaillot were reduced to one small square pavilion, "not a palace for the King of Rome, not a grand residence for a powerful sovereign, but a little Sans-Souci, a retreat for a convalescent" (8).

By 1814, as the Allies approached Paris, only the foundations had been built. After his escape from Elba, Napoleon ordered Fontaine and Percier to resume work on the palace of the King of Rome. That ended after Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

On St. Helena, Napoleon claimed he regretted the project.

[N]othing is so expensive or so truly useless as this multitude of palaces; and if, notwithstanding, I undertook that of the King of Rome, it was because I had views peculiar to myself; and besides, in reality, I never thought of doing more than preparing the ground. There I should have stopped. (9)

Napoleon's successor, King Louis XVIII, had the foundations filled in and planted over, with walkways. An 1822 visitor's guide to Paris noted:

Facing the Champ de Mars, the spot may be seen on which the foundations of the palace of the child some time known by the name of King of Rome were laid in 1810. These foundations were on the spot formerly occupied by an alms house, belonging to Chaillot. A great deal of adjacent land was purchased to enlarge it. The gardens and grounds were intended to extend to, and join the Bois de Boulogne, which would have become an appendage to this palace. To accomplish this it was intended to remove the barrier of Passy, and the intermediate barriers between that and the barrier de Neuilly, and to place them nearer to the Champs-Élysées. The plan was stupendous and well combined – but sic transit Gloria mundi! (10)

In the sequel to *Napoleon in America*, Napoleon revives his plans for a palace for his son, this time on another continent.

You might also enjoy:

Napoleon II: Napoleon's son, the King of Rome

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10 Interesting Facts about Napoleon Bonaparte

- Emmanuel de Las Cases, *Memoirs of the Life, Exile, and Conversations of the Emperor Napoleon*, Vol. III (New York, 1855), p. 96.
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- "Napoléon Architecte," p. 36.
- Ibid.*, p. 36.
- Emmanuel de Las Cases, *Mémoires de Sainte Hélène: Journal of the Private Life and Conversations of the Emperor Napoleon at Saint Helena*, Vol. 3, Part 5 (London, 1823), p. 157.
- A. & W. Galignani, *Galignani's Paris Guide, or Stranger's Companion through the French Metropolis* (Paris, 1822), pp. 202-203.

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2 comments on "The Palace of the King of Rome"

Geoffrey says:

April 25, 2016 at 2:41 pm

Thanks, very interesting, as usual.

Reply

Shannon Selin says:

April 25, 2016 at 4:03 pm

Thanks, Geoffrey. I'm glad you enjoyed it.

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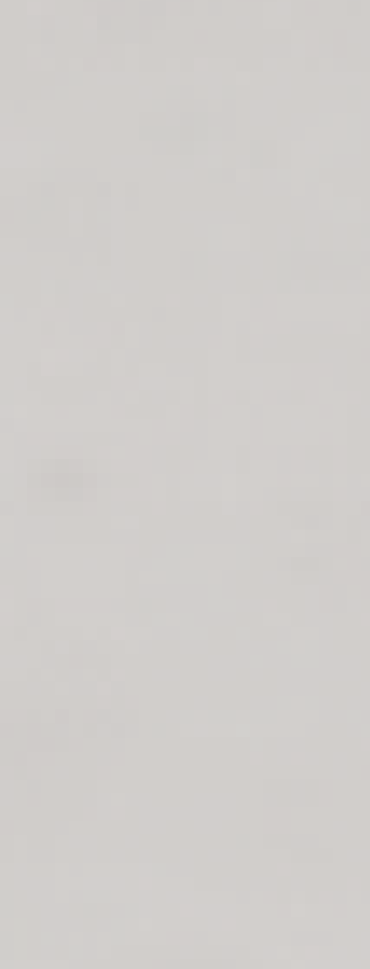
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Shannon Selin writes historical fiction and blogs about Napoleonic and 19th century history. She lives in Vancouver, Canada, where she is working on the next novel in her Napoleon series.

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