

NAPOLEON'S HISTORY REPEATING

*Learn museum-quality techniques
that one upholsterer used to
refurbish Napoleon's chair.*

by Kevin Kennedy



Napoleon's chair was covered with a historical bee-pattern fabric and an imported Italian trim. A low impact treatment was used because of the lack of historical fabric remaining, and the fact that the chair is a family heirloom. The horse hair fill and hand-sewn edge roll were both preserved, and restoration notes were left inside the chair.

I was called to restore Napoleon's chair. I couldn't contain my excitement. Being a history buff, I jumped at the chance to restore the emperor's chair. This particular chair is depicted in Napoleon's deathbed scene. In the illustration, Napoleon lies dying with a group of mourners, including an unnamed officer sitting sideways in the chair with his left hand grasping the arm and his right hand dangling off the back with a downcast look.

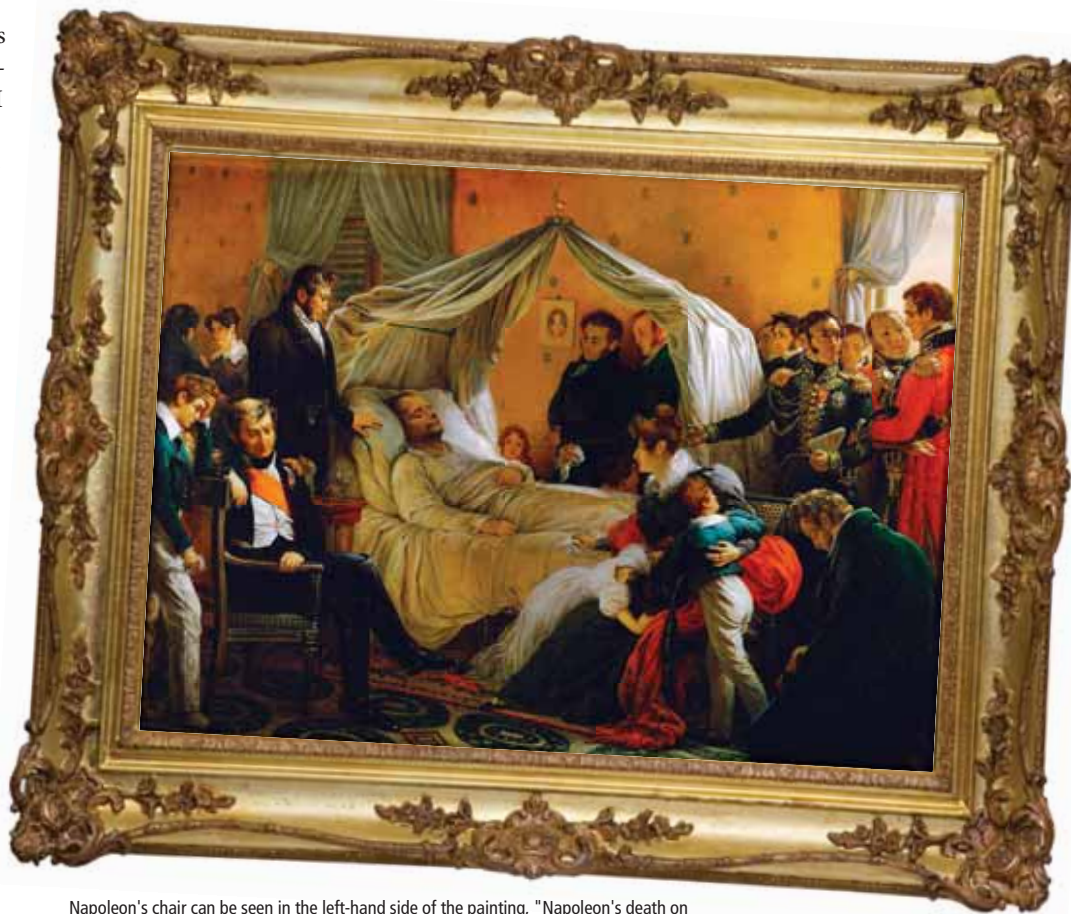
The chair has been drawn with amazing accuracy, except for one detail that perhaps only an upholsterer would see and an illustrator may add for more detail. The artist added a loose cushion with piping. The chair has always had an upholstered seat stuffed with horse hair, cotton, jute webbing and no springs. The wood frame under the layers of traditional materials exposed the artist for taking some liberties.

Everything else is very close to the chair. The swoop of the back and the scale align perfectly with the already trumped-up provenance supplied by the client. This indeed was the great emperor's last throne and was present when he passed.

When consulting with the family about how to proceed with the restoration, it was important to know their family history, as it relates to the chair. The chair has been in continuous use in the family for nearly 200 years and will remain in private use after the restoration.

At the initial consultation, the client was interested in a museum-quality restoration, complete with full documentation of the process. My client was willing to pay for this expensive treatment and I was able to provide it. Our upholstery ancestors over the estimated seven reupholsteries in America saw to it that the only original piece, beside the horse hair, was a single thread.

The upholsterer in 1982 had used a high level of workmanship in the restoration, and he and the others elected to reuse the horse hair, edge roll and seating. (I overlooked the substitute muslin, double welt and Dacron.)



Napoleon's chair can be seen in the left-hand side of the painting, "Napoleon's death on the island of St. Helen," by Carl von Steuben in 1821. Researchers have disputed for ages whether Napoleon was poisoned by adversaries, but it was proven in 2007 that he died from stomach cancer.

Negotiating how to work this historic piece took months. We started with a museum restoration estimate, but, for the sake of preserving the frame from damage, chose a low-impact restoration working with the 1982 restoration.

My advice to the client was to keep the fine 1982 restoration up to the substitute muslin, which I replaced with real muslin, 100-percent cotton, the customer's own Napoleon bee fabric and an imported Italian trim. We decided on the low-impact treatment because of the lack of historical fabric remaining, and the fact that the chair will be used as a family piece. We felt taking the 1982 restoration apart and replacing it with the exact treatment would have created more problems and stress on the frame. The cost was significantly less, but it was best for the piece.

The restoration that was performed will last 40 years. The client can expect at least another 20 years of use, at which point new fabric and a complete restoration would ensue.

Priorities included preserving the horse hair fill and hand-sewn edge roll, and leaving the 1982 fabric in the bottom of the chair along with my 2009 restoration notes. From 1982 to 2009, the recovering would be documented for future researchers. I think my approach has both satisfied my client's needs, as well as preserved history.



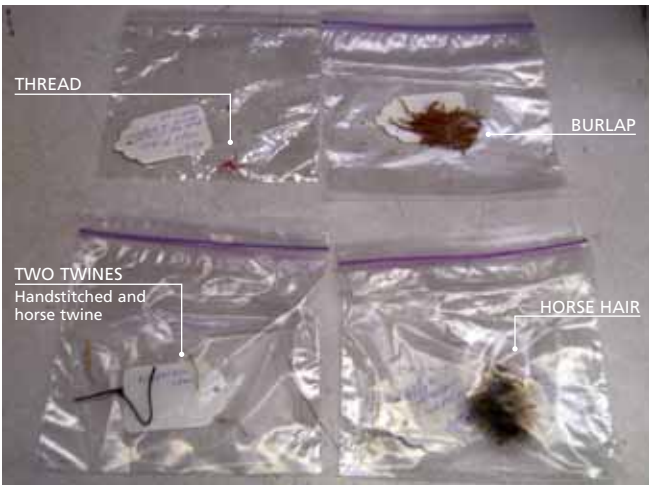
1 This is the condition of the chair when picked up at the client. The 1982 reupholstery job used double welt and buttons. The client liked the buttons, but I advised a French gimp for the finish.



2 I removed the 1982 upholstery, batting and muslin to expose the original horse hair and hand-made edging. This was good news from a restorative perspective.



3 I cataloged all evidence of the original interior by taking samples. I bugged and tugged for any future researching.



4 Upper left: The only thread of what I believe to be the original fabric found stuck to the horse hair. It looks very much like the color illustration in the deathbed scene image.



5 I left some evidence of past upholstery work (1982 replacement muslin) for future researchers, as well as keeping all 1982 materials.



6 I repaired edges and chose to repair the hand-sewn original edging.



7 I used traditional muslin to cover my horse hair, allowing for the long-lost art of "working" the horse hair with a regulator through the loose muslin and leaving behind the tell-tale holes.



8 I used the customer's Napoleon bee fabric, which needed to be cut and fitted to work with the sling style of the seat.



9 I used 100-percent traditional cotton for my under cover.



10 I pin-tacked the cover, and, as agreed with the client, used staples to cause less damage to the frame.



11 The finished product with a French gimp to match the gold bees gives the piece a finished look. The customer supplied the fabric, while I supplied the gimp. ^{uj}



Kevin Kennedy has been upholstering for 34 years in the Boston area, where he is the master upholsterer for Trefler and Sons in Newton, Mass. He teaches in the Concord, Mass., public schools and supervises a non-profit program that specializes in transitional employment for adults with head injuries. Kennedy authored a book on the basics of upholstery and developed a beginner's upholstery kit. He can be reached at kkenedy12@verizon.net.

Research on Napoleon's chair provided by www.bksresearch.moonfruit.com.

» For more, search **restoration** at www.upholsteryjournalmag.com