

## Restoring Maréchal Soult's Toiletry Nécessaire

The Fondation Napoléon's collection comprises more than 1,500 objects, and the institution organises and participates in many exhibitions. Since the collection includes furniture, paintings and ceramics as well as military memorabilia, it can be used to illustrate the history of the Napoleonic periods in different thematic ways.

Indeed, the collection includes genuine masterpieces dating from the 18th to the 20th centuries, thus making the Fondation Napoléon is a cultural institution of the highest importance. Since 2003, various international events have brought the Fondation international recognition: from Australia to Kazakhstan via Brazil, not to mention France, Italy and Germany.

In order to ensure the proper conservation of the objects in the collection, it is essential to clean the objects, and to restore those objects that have been rendered fragile by the years or by being moved around. The Fondation Napoléon cares for its collection on a daily basis, and on these pages we invite you to learn about the different stages of restoring a truly exceptional object: 'Maréchal Soult's Toiletry Nécessaire' (INV 577). This section includes a description of the toiletry nécessaire, an interview with each of the two restorers, and some information about nécessaires.



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Online catalogue of the collection: [napoleon.ontia.fr](http://napoleon.ontia.fr)

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## A Description of Maréchal Soult's Toiletry Nécessaire

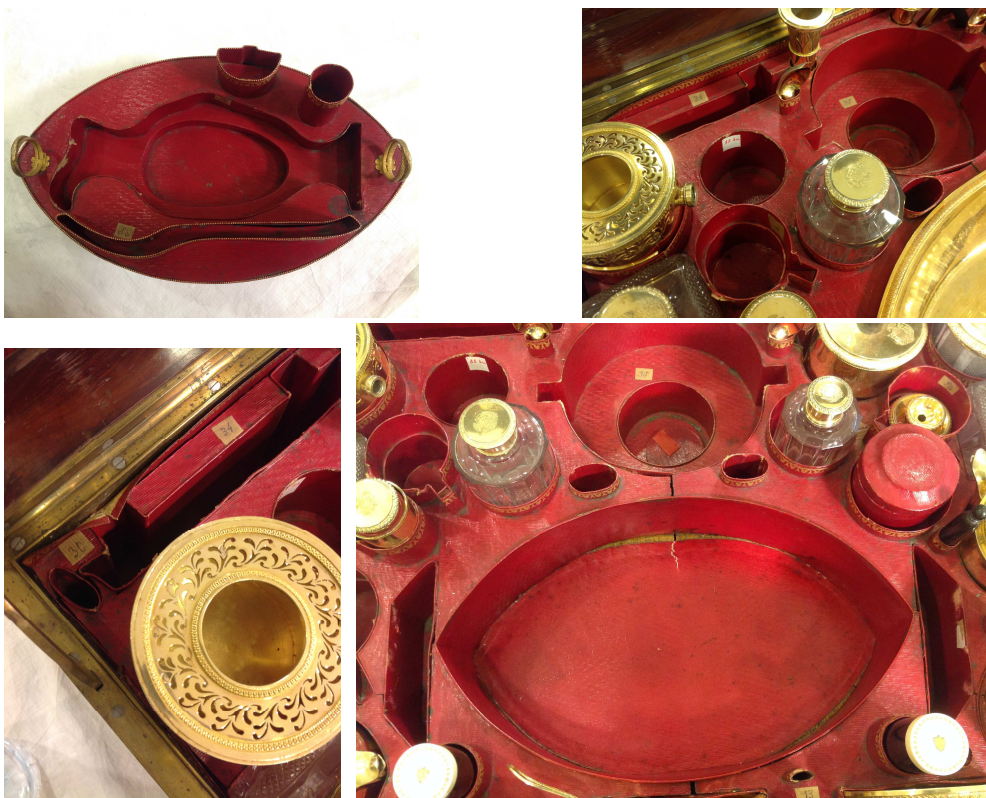


This extraordinary piece of work is made up of 45 pieces of vermeil, each of them carrying Maréchal Soult's coat-of-arms. The inside of the mahogany chest is made up of a latticework of wood covered with morocco leather. The key feature of the restoration of such an object is that it requires the services of several specialist restorers, one for each material of which the object is made.

The toiletry nécessaire in middling condition, and the individual materials require different levels of restoration work. Many of the leather parts have dried out, become unstuck, or been stained by the variations in weather during the journeys it has been on. The vermeil is in excellent condition: oxidation is only visible on some areas, and there is only generalised dirt on it. The box (made of wood and brass) requires a more heavy-duty restoration. There are several cracks to be repaired, the upper tray mechanism needs to be unblocked, and there are some very dirty metal parts which are considerably oxidised. The box has had a level of wear and tear that comes with normal usage, but it must be repaired quickly so as to preserve it for centuries to come.

Photos before restoration





You will see that the whole restoration process raises problems that we try to resolve as best we can, but often we do have to make compromises.

For example, the objects had little stickers on them so they could be placed in numerical order and be easily put back in their place. However, when we saw that the majority of these stickers had disappeared, we came to the conclusion that they were no longer useful, and seeing as their historical interest was debatable and that the glue was contributing to the deterioration of the leather, it was deemed best to remove them completely.

For this restoration, we worked with Elise Blouet-Ménard, a leather and metal conservationist-restorer, and Jean Perfenniti, a woodwork restorer. They let us ask them a few questions about their respective jobs.



## Restoring the leather and vermeil parts of the travel nécessaire: Élise Blouet-Ménard



**Fondation Napoléon:** Elise, you have worked on the Fondation Napoléon's collection before (side arms, the Duchesse d'Otrante's nécessaire and even the cloche plates belonging to Madame Mère). What is the principal difficulty in this restoration?

**Élise Blouet-Ménard:** The difficulty is all in the way leather is set alongside the precious metal - here, it is vermeil, which is silver covered with a thin film of gold. The two materials interact with one another and change depending on outside conditions. The silver oxidises when it comes into contact with the oxygen in the air and is happier in an environment which has relatively low humidity. Because of this, the first difficulty comes from the fact that, in their normal state, the two materials require opposite conditions to be well preserved. Furthermore, the pieces' complexity and fine detail, slotting together like Russian dolls, mean that the two materials are in direct contact and require in-depth knowledge of materials and the way the materials interact with one another.

**Fondation Napoléon:** So to restore them you need different cleaning products and several stages of restoration. How do you do it?

**Élise Blouet-Ménard:** I start off by cleaning the metal. Oxidisation gives the vermeil an iridescent bronzed colour, when originally it had a much whiter colour. The next step requires a lot of care: these vermeil objects can also carry residues of previously-used cleaning products such as Miror. Cleaning removes these residues which are still acting on the piece, and which untreated would end up damaging the metal. I use a cotton bud to apply special conservation-adapted cleaning products to the metal, without touching the adjoining leather. After rinsing, a mineral protection wax is applied to prevent any future alterations. The leather is cleaned with rubbers and neutral products, and the lifting tabs are put back into place and glued. We can think about doing some light, reversible retouching so as to hide the gaps. One of the issues about the leather on this piece is that previous restoration attempts have been botched: for example, some old lifting tabs have been stuck on using leather glue which is soluble in hot water. Hot water alters leather irreversibly and stains it. The only thing we can do is to mask these stains by lightly recolouring the leather.



**Fondation Napoléon:** How many hours of work does a piece like this require?

**Élise Blouet-Ménard:** More like days! It is always difficult to estimate how long something is going to take, and it is essential to see the object in order to make a quote. Everything depends on how worn the object is, how it has been altered previously, and in what conditions it can be conserved in the future. This complex toiletry nécessaire will take around a week.

**Fondation Napoléon:** So the cleaning takes time. What did the owners of these objects do for cleaning at the time?

**Élise Blouet-Ménard:** Things were different at the time. When these objects were in use, they were given regular attention and upkeep. So you would find little oxidation of the metal, the leather was fed regularly and you would only find a very light layer of dirt. The notion of conservation-restoration is quite recent; at the time when these objects were used, any damage was repaired and the broken pieces were replaced.



*More information and contact details for Élise Blouet-Ménard (in French) can be found at:*  
<http://www.eliseblouet.com/eliseblouet.com/Latelier.html>

## Restoring the travel nécessaire's wooden frame: the work of Jean Perfettini



**Fondation Napoléon:** What are the main issues here in the restoration of this object?

**Jean Perfettini:** Toiletry nécessaires cases were luxury objects, and their craftsmanship is of a very high quality. However, the box has inlaid elements made of brass set into the wooden structure, and these two materials do not evolve or react to hygrometric conditions in the same ways. The wood changes in volume and has a tendency to contract and split with the variations in climate. What I have to do is to restore the wooden part whilst being very careful not to damage the metal parts (on which there is engraving) on the top and on the front of the box.

A toiletry nécessaire case is obviously a 'travel' object': its wooden container has naturally become scratched – indeed the scratches are sometimes major, and these require particular attention.

**Fondation Napoléon:** What is the 'restoration policy' with regard to the natural risks in the life of a piece of wooden furniture?

**Jean Perfettini:** That is what I discuss with whoever is in charge of the object in question: for example, on certain objects, reconstituting the missing parts on a large scale using tortoiseshell is no longer something we do. We use substitute materials. Sometimes, the way the object has changed over time demands even more drastic measures: when an element of inlaid brass does not fit anymore in the place where it is meant to be in the original wood, we have to file it, to a minute degree, so that it will go back in again. The same is true for the wood, when we have to take out a piece with a spatula so as to glue it back on better. According to the type of wood, whether it has been treated, or tinted, whether it is veneer and stuck onto a resinous wood or onto oak, the treatment is different. Each object is unique.



**Fondation Napoléon:** What about the box here?

**Jean Perfettini:** We have to fill in the cracks and clean the wood as well as the brass parts. Current ethics lead us to use non-permanent glues for all sticking processes, unlike what restorers used to use in the past. Sometimes they are traditional glues, made of animal products, sometimes used hot, sometimes cold, but for quite a few years now they have always been reversible. Before, traditional glues mixed together bones and nerves for their properties which had the advantage of being both good at sticking and being soft. Here, we use fish glue, which can be used cold, and which can be removed later. The glue has been updated by a student at the Institut national du Patrimoine [National Heritage Institute] and it is remarkable the way it's soft and supple but also has great adhesive power. Current practice says that we do not sand furniture anymore where the wood has gone a bit faded naturally over the years, to make it shine again. We might perhaps varnish an object to refresh it. Here, the toilette nécessaire is restored with its two materials in mind: metal and wood, but also thinking about how it has lived: it's an object that's travelled, and was made as such.



*More information and contact details for Jean Perfettini (in French) can be found at: <http://www.atelierducraie.com/>*

## Toiletry nécessaires: luxury objects of the First Empire

Toiletry nécessaire start to be mentioned in the 16th century, but it was during the Empire that this object, defined both by its luxury status and by its ingenious design, had its heyday. Napoleon is well known for having spent a large part of his life on the road, and the artists and artisans of the time competed fiercely in their attempts to combine the luxury befitting an emperor and his inner circle with the facilitation of a daily life complicated by intensive traveling. These items could come in the form of a sewing nécessaire, a toiletries and personal care nécessaire, a tea or coffee nécessaire, or even a writing nécessaire. The Fondation Napoléon's collections include several of these ensembles, and some of them are of very high value, such as the toiletry nécessaire belonging to the Duchesse d'Otrante (INV 566), Napoleon's porte-manteau (INV 1160), the Emperor's dental hygiene nécessaire (INV 286) and the travel toiletry nécessaire belonging to Maréchal Soult (INV 577).

Travel toiletry nécessaires were very much in vogue during the First Empire. These small transportable chests were designed to contain as many items as possible in the smallest possible space, and they could contain several dozen utensils for one's toilette, for meals, or for writing. Napoleon himself owned several large travel toiletry nécessaires made by master craftsman Martin-Guillaume Biennais.

Whilst it is true that the chest here does not display the same quality of finish as those carved in mahogany by Biennais - it is simply draped in red morocco - , on the other hand it contains forty-five pieces of a sumptuous vermeil service, a luncheon set and a toilette set, made by four different craftsmen. The cutlery bears hallmarks by Boulanger and Castel; the splendid soup plate with swan-shaped handles and feet in the shape of rams' heads and a stand were furnished by Huguet. Minot made the sugar tongs. The case was delivered on 11 July, 1812, to the Duchesse de Dalmatie (1771-1852), née Louise de Berg, who was the wife of Jean-de-Dieu Soult (1769-1851), *maréchal de l'Empire* who was given the title of Duc de Dalmatie on 29 June, 1808. Each piece of gold ware also bears the coat of arms of the Duc de Dalmatie, 'gold ground upon which a red escutcheon with three gold leopard heads in a 2.1 formation; above this stands a red ground with silver stars, the famous "au chef des ducs de l'empire brochant".

The Empire saw the rebirth of a Court, and Napoleon wanted this to shine with a gleam that reflected the glory of France. The reestablishment of a hereditary nobility on 1 March, 1808, (which had supposedly been 'abolished forever' by the French Revolution) contributed all the more to the regime's prestige. Via his system of 'dotations' (financial preferments), the Emperor kept encouraging his highest dignitaries to move into the most beautiful palaces of the Ancien Régime, and to live there in great pomp and ostentatious grandeur. *Maréchal Soult* and his wife happily accepted the Emperor's encouragement to live splendidly, and this imposing casket and its luxurious contents show the shimmering sumptuousness of their way of life. In addition to the opulence of the service, the presence of a filter cafetière, a teapot with a strainer and a hot chocolate maker with an ebony tong for making foam shows how exotic and expensive drinks were reserved for the privileged caste. The revolutionary wars followed by the Napoleonic wars had certainly made these exotic commodities rare in France. The continental blockade, which by a decree of the 21st November 1806 forbade all trade with Britain, contributed to the collapse of the coffee, tea and cocoa trades in France. To consume such goods became the privilege of the fortunate elite, and to possess a hot chocolate service was proof of one's high social standing and rank. The master craftsman Boulanger, who was the official supplier to the Soult family, had already made them a complete silver table service in 1808-9 for the staggering sum of 82,216 francs.