

Empire Style

“Empire style” was originally the elaborate Neoclassical style of the Napoleon's French First Empire (1804-1815). Roman-inspired symbols, furniture, and even hairdos were part of an ambitious scheme to relate Napoleon to Emperor Augustus as the French government was transformed from a republic into an empire. The style was largely inspired by Napoleon's architects Percier and Fontaine, combining the grandeur and martial symbols of Rome with Ancient Egyptian motifs and the elements of Greek architecture.



Traditional classical motifs, already seen in the reign of Louis XVI, were supplemented by symbols of imperial grandeur, including the emperor's monogram and his emblem, the bee, and representations of military trophies.



In 1798, Napoleon returned triumphant from his Egyptian campaign. The victory launched a program of intense scientific research, prompted by the large numbers of archaeological discoveries collected in Egypt by the throng of scholars accompanying the expedition. The worlds of fashion and the applied arts also took up the Egyptian theme, with motifs such as sphinxes, winged lions, lotus blossoms, caryatids and scarabs appearing everywhere. All over Europe, Egyptian motifs, as well as those drawn from Ancient Greece and Rome, were to become prominent features of the sumptuous Empire style of decoration.

Other Empire motifs include the acanthus leaf (leaf of a Mediterranean shrub), the anthemion (stylized honeysuckle), animal-paw feet, the cornucopia (horn of plenty), and dolphins, eagles, lyres and rosettes.