

How Empress Josephine's roses launched an artist's journey

A footnote about her legendary garden at Malmaison opens a window into rose DNA, perfume, France's middle school system and the famous Monge Array.

By Don Fels

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Editor's note: This is part of an occasional series about the artistic process.

For the 1990 *In Public* art installation, which celebrated the opening of the downtown Seattle Art Museum, I researched the history of the city's waterfront. I learned the obvious: that Seattle grew around its trade in lumber and fish. That discovery process sent me to Asia, to see first-hand how its local resources became the trade flowing into Seattle's port. Since that time, following global trade has taken me around the world, and into and out of many historical epochs. The convergence of geography, economics, history, politics and industry (what used to be called economic geography), intertwined with science, culture and anthropology, still intrigues me, and I continue to make art about it.

I start researching my projects at the University of Washington library, though in the beginning a "project" is just an itch that needs scratching and the research for it is mostly reading sideways, following threads wherever they take me. I'm usually exploring a few potential projects at any given time.

Somehow — I now forget where or when — in just such a phase of fuzzy, happy discovery, I stumbled across a footnote about Malmaison, the rose garden at Empress Josephine's estate outside Paris. Josephine began planting her rose garden in 1805. The footnote stressed the garden's singular importance in the development of the modern rose. I was immediately attracted by this pairing of a delicate flower with a powerful imperial will.

I'm writing from Paris, where I first visited the former site of Josephine's rose garden a few years ago. As I've explained elsewhere in this series, I've been brought to Paris these past two years by the *département* of Seine Saint-Denis to continue research on my Josephine Project, and to share my artistic process with middle school kids in the banlieue, the Paris periphery. Malmaison is on that periphery too, though some distance from the school where I've been working.

The Empress Josephine was born in Martinique to petty nobility. Her given name was Marie Josephine Rose Tascher de la Pagerie, but everyone called her Rose. When she met the young Napoleon, certainly not yet an Emperor, he was nonetheless imperious, telling her that he didn't like the name and would call her Josephine.

Later, when he set out to conquer the world, Josephine stayed behind at Malmaison, a dilapidated 150-acre estate that she had lavishly rebuilt. It was here that she began the world's first rose-only garden, and perhaps reclaimed her real self. Josephine asked Napoleon to have his men send her rose seeds and cuttings from wherever they ventured. Even the British, then Europe's preeminent rose producers, with a massive naval blockade aimed at the French, bent to her will. English growers sent their rose plantings directly to Malmaison.

Napoleon complained about the cost, but he was far away and Josephine controlled a significant part of the royal budget, which she spent assembling a fine group of gardeners and scientists of the highest reputation, knowledge and promise. Josephine didn't garden, but she was the hands-on patron of the project. Her support and oversight drew heavily on the existing science of the day, and pushed it forward.



For example, the rose familiar in the West at that time bloomed once a season, and its blossoms faded quickly once a cut flower was brought indoors. By systematically hybridizing the western rose with varieties from China, where the rose first developed, Josephine literally re-structured the way roses developed their petals. The result? Roses that blossomed spectacularly several times a season, and looked splendid in a vase in the parlor for days.

The Malmaison roses were so beautiful that Josephine commissioned the famous flower artist, Pierre Joseph Redoute, to paint their portraits. His rose series was published in a fabulous (and fabulously expensive) book released after Josephine's untimely death — officially from pneumonia, more likely from a broken heart — at 51. Since then, the rose book has never been out of print. (For inquiring minds, when it became clear that his marriage to Josephine would remain childless, Napoleon divorced his love to marry a woman who could produce royal heirs. Josephine died, suddenly and not long after the divorce became final.)

Thanks to Josephine's status and passion, roses became THE French flower, rose growing became a major French industry and France emerged as the worldwide leader in rose exporting. This love affair with roses spawned, among much else, enormous interest in floral perfumes.

Cultural historians have described how Napoleon was the first leader to use visual documentation (aka propaganda) on a large scale. He brought France's finest artists out to the battlefield and into his coronation to render his deeds in larger than life paintings. The Paris museums are filled with these huge "photo opps," which initiated the modern visual era we now all inhabit. Josephine did the same with her roses. The wild rose has five petals. Josephine's roses, engineered into remarkable visual confections, have hundreds of petals.

As I delved into the history and biology of the rose, I learned that the Malmaison hybridization came at a large cost, beyond the money Josephine spent. As her roses became more visually stunning they also lost their scent. The modern rose emits only a modicum of the perfume that wild un-cultivated roses give off.

As a visual artist I found this tradeoff remarkable. Her rose garden survived just 10 years; by 1815, Josephine and her garden were both gone. But the legacy of visual primacy has not only endured but grown far stronger over the last 200 years.

As my projects gain momentum they attract partners, exceptional people who bring expertise and passion to parts of the puzzle that I am working. I love the time I spend in their company, and the way that involving others adds to the breadth, depth and complexity of what I am attempting to do.

To learn more for my Josephine project I began communicating with rose historians; in particular, Brent Dickerson. (We've never met in person, though he and I have exchanged many chronologies, ideas and hypotheses.) Through Brent and other rose scholars, I began learning about what happened to rose growing in France immediately after the demise of the Malmaison garden and in the centuries since. This line of inquiry put me in touch with L'Hay Rosarie, probably the leading rose-breeding research facility in the world — also located on the outskirts of Paris.

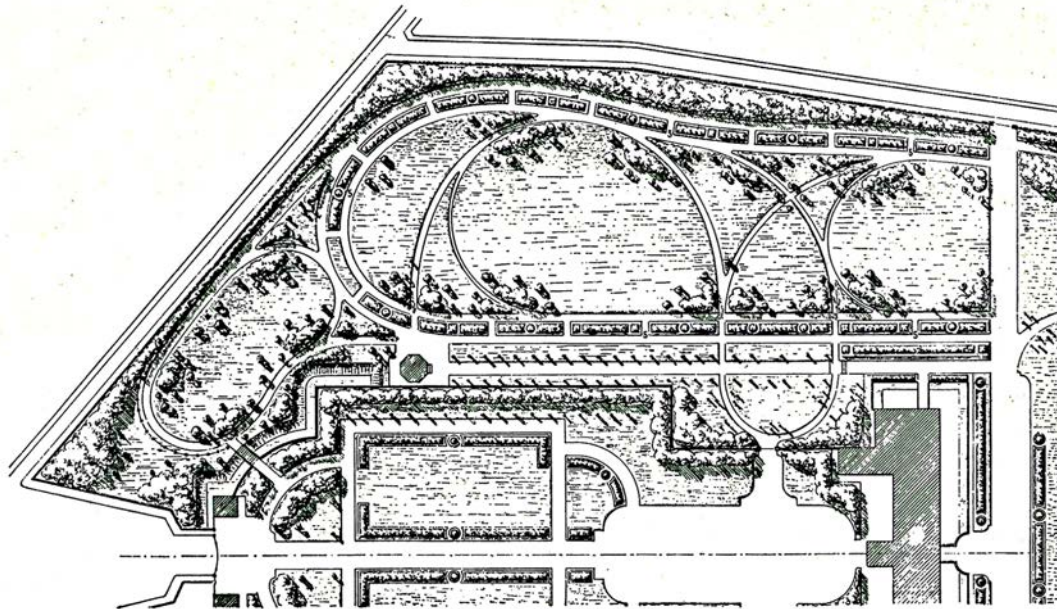
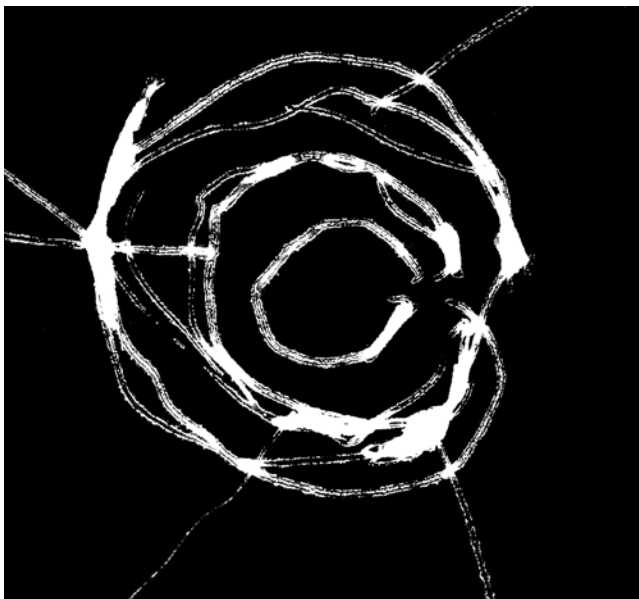


Figure 52. The Empress Joséphine's Rose Garden at Malmaison. The roses were situated on the main axis in long rectangular beds. (from a plan by E. Touret.)

Plan of Malmaison. Josephine's legendary rose gardens are the two rectangles at the bottom center of the map. Source: E. Touret

L'Hay Rosarie was begun by Jules Gravereaux, a very wealthy man, who lost a daughter named Rose. Gravereaux began breeding roses as a way to research which species Josephine had actually hybridized. Unfortunately, the records from Malmaison were casualties of Napoleon's war with the English. In 1915, 100 years after the Malmaison rose garden was destroyed, Gravereaux paid to have the garden replanted with as many descendants of Josephine's roses as he could locate.

Marc Staszewski, who is in charge of L'Hay today, has become a good friend and a welcome source of insight and information. Through Marc I learned more about Gravereaux, who made his fortune with a legendary invention: the Paris department store. I also learned about the complex politics of rose growing in France.



My fascination with roses and scent drew me into the labyrinthine world of perfume. The journey began with Denyse Beaulieu's blog: Grain de Musc, A Perfume Lover in Paris. I met Denyse in Paris. We're now friends and collaborators. She introduced me to Antoine Lie, the noted perfumer. (Yet another perfumer helped me and my Paris middle students develop a scent we named Rosephine. For its label — at left — I grafted a rose onto the city plan of Paris.) Denyse, Antoine and I are working on a perfume that will evoke the tragic history of Josephine's beautiful, scentless rose.

In our first lunch together, Antoine likened a fine perfume to a narrative that reveals its story, over time, on a woman's skin.

Since I am at heart a story-teller, and since I find the story of Josephine and her roses so compelling, creating a perfume for the Josephine Project seemed just right. So I began reading scientific papers on roses.

I came upon two reports featuring the rose *Souvenir de Malmaison*, actually hybridized decades after the garden was gone. Plant biologist Mohammed Bendahmane was listed as the lead investigator. He is head of the Plant Morphology Department at Ecole National Superior

Lyon. The city of Lyon is the center of France's rose industry. ENS is the leading French science university. As Mohammed later explained, the French government has great interest in the future, and thus the past, of the rose. His team of eight international scientists was the first to isolate the DNA of the rose.

I began a correspondence with Professor Bendahane. When I arrived in Paris last year, he invited me to come to Lyon to meet with his team. There I learned that despite the team's best efforts, its members have yet to determine how Josephine's hybridizers inadvertently switched off the rose's scent. Such a discovery would of course be key to reinstating it; to creating new roses with beautiful blooms *and* beautiful smells.

In Seattle, I've spent many illuminating hours at Café Allegro with UW mathematician Chris Swierczewski grappling with the mathematical complexities of mapping the network of gardeners and breeders who helped Josephine re-make the rose. Napoleon, too, was interested in math and much taken with the work of the poly-math Gaspard Monge. Among many other accomplishments, Monge developed what is still known and used as the Monge Array or Matrix, which describes certain attributes of far-flung networks. Chris and I have been exploring how Monge's matrix can help us understand the collaborative process that was used to great effect by Josephine, and is always central to my own projects.

Before returning to Paris this spring I met with composer Bret Battey and his wife, musicologist Deniz Ertan, about incorporating a soundtrack into the Josephine Project. Based in the UK, Bret creates music from data; the digital information becomes the raw material from which he builds his compositions. He is intrigued about using the output from rose DNA and numbers from the Monge Matrix as his starter data. Meantime, Deniz bequeathed the project examples of centuries old music written in circular notation. The actual composition looks like a rose on the music sheet. The music is then performed in the round.

Finally, while in Paris, I reconnected with Seattle writer/performer Marya Sea Kaminski, who was here to do a short film. Josephine wrote Napoleon nearly daily when he was away on his campaigns. We know this from his letters to her, which still exist. Only three of her letters are extant. Marya and I are exploring how to recreate — in live performance or on film — what Josephine might have written to Napoleon.

As my Josephine study grows and morphs into an installation, it has to be continually refined, reshaped, given enticing and elegant form. This is the biggest challenge and my ultimate responsibility as artist and initiator. For the first time I am considering an 'installation' on the web. This appeals to me, in part, because Napoleon and Josephine's relationship was virtual, if you will, carried out in correspondence more than at Malmaison. I am also pursuing a venue in Paris where a physical installation could be mounted for a couple of months. It would then travel.

As with the roses created by Josephine's team, my collaborators and I strive to create something of beauty and impact, and hopefully something that endures. Along the way, I get to immerse myself in a new world of interlocking stories and fascinating people.

Rose photo courtesy of The Loopweaver/Flickr.

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