Growing up in St. Louis even in the mid-20th Century, it was hard for anyone with an interest in history not to detect the reminders of its French roots, even though its native citizens insist on pronouncing the final ‘s’ despite Hollywood’s musical and cinematic insistence to the contrary. Pierre Laclede is remembered both in landmarks and in corporate names. There is Creve Coeur Lake in the city’s suburbs (one of which also bore the name of Creve Coeur). The city’s parks and public buildings host other reminders including its pride and joy, the statue of St. Louis, King Louis IX of France (1212-1270, reigned 1226-1270), which still stands in front of the city’s Museum of Art. Both the statue and the museum building are survivors of the city’s proudest moment – the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition and World’s Fair. However, you will find no representations or monuments in St. Louis to the man who made the city part of the United
States – Napoleon Bonaparte – except for that short period in 1904 when his figure graced the exposition grounds.

Napoleon by Daniel Chester French, exhibited at the Cascade Gardens at the 1904 World’s Fair (Image from the 1904 Official Guidebook). A different view from the Smithsonian’s collection of images can be seen in the illustration from “Journey into Fame: Daniel Chester French” written by the sculptor’s daughter, Margaret French Cresson.

In 1904, the city of St. Louis, Missouri, on the banks of the Mississippi River, played host to the World. The occasion was the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, or 1904 World’s Fair, that ran from April 30 to December 1 to commemorate the centennial anniversary of the purchase of the Louisiana Territory by the young United States from the France of First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte.

The exhibition area was four times that of the 1900 Paris exhibition or the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The grounds were completely electrified allowing visitors to tour the fairgrounds until 11:30 pm. Fifty-three governments participated, 40 of them occupying individual pavilions, in addition to all 45 states and territories of the United States. There were 14 major exhibition palaces for the fair’s main departments of Art; Liberal Arts; Manufactures and Varied Industries; Machinery; Electricity; Transportation; Agriculture and Horticulture; Forestry, Fish, and Game; Mines and Metallurgy;
Anthropology and Ethnology; Education and Social Economy; Physical Culture; Live Stock [sic]; and Music.

While the enclosed exhibit spaces covered 128 acres, another 100 acres were devoted to outdoor exhibits including specially commissioned artworks and monuments. There were also military encampments with daily drills, an air ship contest, and the 1904 Olympic Games. The encampments featured 200 U.S. Marines, just returned from the Philippines, and gun drills (without actually firing) by the U.S. Coast Artillery on pieces installed on the exposition grounds. Visitors could witness the naval battle at Santiago re-fought by 12 foot-long electric-powered model warships on one of the basins that made up part of the fair’s many water features, or for as little as .25 cents, it was possible to witness British troops and Boers reenacting one of their battles from the recent war in Southern Africa. Martial music and band concerts were regularly provided by musicians from around the United States and the world, including the Band of the Garde Republicaine of France.

One hundred American sculptors were commissioned to create more than 1,000 works of art to adorn the buildings and decorate the grounds. While much of this statuary was allegorical in nature, the fair’s theme also prompted more literal works portraying such men as the Spanish explorer De Soto, the American explorers Lewis and Clark, and Presidents Andrew Jackson, James Madison, James Monroe, and Thomas Jefferson, among other figures (the female form appeared solely as allegory). The Exposition Committee specially commissioned a portrait sculpture of Napoleon Bonaparte from Daniel Chester French (1850-1931). Born in New Hampshire, French was the best known and most prolific American-born sculptor of the day and others of his works would be displayed in the Liberal Arts pavilion. French rose to prominence with his 1875 statue “The Minute Man,” erected in Concord, Massachusetts, to mark the centennial anniversary and original scene of “the shot heard round the world” when American militia exchanged fire with British regulars and thus sparked a revolution. French quickly became the preferred choice for sculpted portrayals of prominent Americans including such individuals as George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. His greatest work would be his statue of a seated Abraham Lincoln as part of the memorial in Washington, DC, that would be dedicated in 1922.

For this World’s Fair commission, French chose to portray then-First Consul Bonaparte not in a classically heroic posture, but in a more thoughtful almost casual posture that is still redolent of the young man of action. Napoleon is seated with his left leg stretched out and his right leg bent at the knee. He is resting a large document on that right leg as he apparently contemplates the proposed sale of Louisiana. But while evidently burdened by the decisions confronting him as ruler of France, his boots, the sword resting along his left leg, and even the greatcoat tossed casually over the arm of his chair all remind us that he has reached this position by means of his sword.
The Exposition Committee received from French both his preliminary one-quarter scale model and the finished twice-life-sized statue. Like most of the structures and much of the sculpture for the fair, these were both made of staff, a mixture of plaster of Paris and hemp fibers used in casts much like regular plaster of Paris. The finished material can be handled, sawn, nailed, and even repaired, while statuary made of it can be safely exposed to the elements as long as the surface presents no cracks that might allow water to penetrate into the interior of the material. The Committee’s intention by specifying this material was to ensure that once closed, almost all traces of the exposition’s buildings and other structures could be easily and quickly removed so that the site, much of which was part of the already established Forest Park, could be restored to its previous condition — and possibly to keep down costs as much as possible. The finished statue of Napoleon was erected to the right of Festival Hall along the Grand Cascades water feature, the most formal of the gardens, and was located south of the central Grand Basin.

After the Exposition closed, the Committee pushed for the quick de-construction of the buildings and the removal and disposal of any sculptures or structures not already spoken-for and still deemed salvageable. The building housing the largest portion of the fine art exhibits had been purposely built of permanent materials and would become the new art museum for the city of St. Louis, saving also a number of the works that had been exhibited at the fair. An additional number of art works were dispatched by rail to Washington, DC, to become part of that city’s growing national collection of public art. On December 21, 1904, St Louis Parks Commissioner Robert Aull wrote to the Committee and expressed his acceptance of the statue of Napoleon along with many others for display in the city's parks.

In 2007, I visited the Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center near the original grounds of the 1904 Fair where the exposition records are now housed. The archives showed no record that the Napoleon statue was ever again publicly displayed after it was removed from the exposition grounds. There were published reports that
some of the sculptures from the fair had been placed in St. Louis parks but that those statues placed outdoors were reportedly destroyed by weather during the succeeding two decades and were finally removed and disposed of, apparently along with those never put on display during that period. I was also unable to find in that collection any image of the finished statue either at the Fair or on subsequent display.

Author George McCue wrote in "Sculpture City: St. Louis" that the one-quarter-scale model was placed on exhibit at the Old Courthouse in St Louis. When that building was transferred to the U.S. National Park Service, the model was transferred as well. An exchange of emails with the NPS at the Old Courthouse subsequently resulted in confirmation by Assistant Curator Kathleen Moenster that the Napoleon model is still there. Curator Moenster reported that the model is 86.3 cm high; 52.2 cm wide; and 76.3 cm in depth. She also stated that the statue model is in storage at the Courthouse, not on public display, and that there are no plans to put it on display.

A review of the literature on Daniel Chester French reveals little additional information about “Napoleon.” It is rarely mentioned in the standard biographies or in reference works that discuss his body of work. An examination of his papers at the Library of Congress revealed no further information about this commission, the finished statue, or even a mention of the commission, although there were extensive holdings on many of his other works. His daughter, Margaret French Cresson, included the statue in a list of his works in her biography of her father, but did not discuss this commission or even mention it or the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair.

I can only speculate that when no follow-on order was received for a bronze version of the staff original to become part of the new St. Louis art museum’s collection or to be exhibited at some other location, Daniel Chester French lost interest in the project and gave his attention to other commissions. Thus, a major work by probably the best-known American sculptor of his day, portraying one of the most important figures of the 19th century appears to have been lost and is now virtually forgotten. All we have for certain relating to this work is the approximately two and one-half foot tall model of “Napoleon” held in storage by the National Park Service at the Old Courthouse in St. Louis. (http://www.nps.gov/jeff/planyourvisit/och.htm)
Art historian, lecturer, photographer, and author Lee Sandstead has traveled from coast to coast for the past eight years locating, documenting, and photographing the works of Daniel Chester French. In his lectures and writings, Lee Sandstead calls French “the consummate Idealist”. He has found these works in city centers, forgotten cemeteries, and university chapels – but it would appear that French’s “Napoleon” – in its twice-life size original from – has escaped us.

In 2015, I was able to contact the National Park Service at St Louis and arrange a visit to actually see the surviving ¼ scale model of French’s work. The Assistant Curator, Kathleen Moenster, responded to my query and we arranged a visit in 2015. She enclosed six images in her message which area included in the album accompanying this article. Also included are the images we captured during our visit and a few others since found online, but more about those later. The figure of is in reasonably good condition though missing the blade of the sword that originally placed along Napoleon’s left leg, but it is easy to see where it would have rested.
During our visit, we also talked about NPS discussions of a possible 3D scan of the model made working with university students. We encouraged them to explore the possibility of using that 3D scan to produce desk top sized models of the statue for possible sale. Certainly, I find this portrayal of the young and vigorous Bonaparte at this point of his career an appealing image.
As I was updating this article, I did some further explorations on line to see what else may have turned up regarding our lost Bonaparte. One discovery was a new website dedicated to the 1904 World’s Fair (http://atthefair.homestead.com/1904Fair.html), launched in 2012 by Lee Gaskins III and still actively being updated as recently 2018. However, his gallery of images of sculptures from the World’s Fair offered only a picture of a statue of Napoleon seated, sword across his lap, sitting stiffly erect in the same chair used by ‘our’ Napoleon. Although identified as the work of Daniel Chester French exhibited at the Fair near the Cascades, there is no further information on sourcing for any of this. (BTW, the rest of the website looks like a fascinating peek at the Fair and is recommended.) A Google Image search also failed to turn up any information.
Elsewhere, I did turn up two images of the actual Napoleon statue in place at the World’s Fair. One is clearly from a stereo viewer card but the other shows a grander view of the original statue on public display at the Fair (at beginning of article).

Bibliography

*Official Guide to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, at the City of St. Louis, State of Missouri, April 30 to December 1, 1904*. Compiled by J. M. Lowenstein, Issued by authority of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition and published by The Official Guide Company of St. Louis, © 1904 The Louisiana Purchase Exposition Company.


Note: For more information about the sculptor, Daniel Chester French, you can visit [http://www.yeodoug.com/resources/dc_french/daniel_chester_french.html](http://www.yeodoug.com/resources/dc_french/daniel_chester_french.html), which presents information about his career and photographs of many of his other works.

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