



Save *the* Imperial Prince's frigate!

Above - The frigate in the Carp Pond, albumen photographic print, 1856. Next page - The current conditions of the Imperial Prince's frigate. © Sophie Lloyd

Water reigns supreme at Fontainebleau. Excavated beginning in the Middle Ages, the Carp Pond is the most beautiful body of water at the King of France's castle. Created after a dam was built to allow access to the castle from the south, the Carp Pond was built to drain and store water from the Changis creek and from the numerous other natural springs that feed the swamps. Before long the Carp Pond became a swimming hole, a place for fishing and rowing and soon it became one of the most popular attractions on the castle grounds. The area was frequently chosen for lavish parties like the one held in 1544 for the baptism of the future king Francis II or the one held for Carnival in 1564. Small boats have been used on the pond since the XVI century. On March 20, 1538 it was decreed to reinforce the eastern banks up to the docking area. Louis XIII and Louis XIV had a gilded gondola that they used for relaxing on the water and for sailing to the pavilion built almost in the centre of the pond. Napoleon and Louis Philippe also kept small boats on the pond. In 1808 the city of Nantes even offered a small yacht to the Emperor.



***In Napoleon III's day
the "English garden flotilla"
was made up of numerous boats
of all different types.***



73. PALAIS DE FONTAINEBLEAU —
La frégate du Prince impérial



Above - Postcard of the frigate in the Gallery of Stags, appr.1930, Palace of Fontainebleau. On the left - The court at Fontainebleau: the garden lake; manuscript, 1862 © RMN-Grand Palais (Château de Fontainebleau) / Gérard Blot. Below - Palace of Fontainebleau: the sojourn of Napoleon III's court, H.M. the Empress' gondola and the Imperial Prince's frigate on the pond; sketch, after M.Moulin, 1863 © RMN-Grand Palais (Château de Fontainebleau) / Gérard Blot.

Lefebvre Decarville was responsible for this fleet, the Emperor's pleasure boats, but these fragile boats did not spend the whole year at Fontainebleau. The Court would reside at the Castle for just a few weeks in the early summer. When they were away the boats would be dry docked at Villeneuve-l'Étang where they also did maintenance work. Cleaning, painting, transportation, docking and other preparations for the Imperial couple's arrival was all taken care of by a group of sailors who did their service of the Fountain's Court, nearby the Pond. Traditional boats were joined over the years by others from more exotic locales: merchant ships from the Thames, canoes, yawls. In 1863 the Empress Eugenia received a Venetian gondola complete with a gondolier who could recite verses from Dante and Tasso. Later she got a Turkish gulet almost 11 m long, with painted arabesques on its sides and decks covered in silk: an elegant and precious boat that was rowed by Kosté, a kaïkdji Turk who had personal rooms at the castle as did the gondolier. In 1867 a boat offered by Rama IV Mongkut, King of Siam, also joined this rich and varied fleet.

During the nicest hours of the day the royal couple loved to sail around the calm and sunny waters of the pond. Sometimes it was risky. On June 13th 1864 Prosper Mérimée told a friend that Napoleon III had taken an unexpected swim a couple of days earlier: thrown into the water when his boat capsized, he hadn't hesitated to swim to shore.

A year earlier in 1863 Napoleon III almost certainly commissioned the small frigate that was given to his son, Napoleon Eugene Louis Giuseppe Bonaparte, the Imperial Prince (1856-1879.) Built at the arsenal at Brest, the boat was a present to the boy for his seventh birthday. 3.90 M long, with a beam of 1.10 M and 6 M high, the boat was a miniature reproduction of a XIX century ship. Its two bridges had 100 toy cannon along its sides, a helms wheel, an anchor, a bowsprit that was almost two metres long and complex rigging. The boat could be rowed by two or three people seated on benches below. Napoleon II and the Capatin Duperré used the boat to give the Imperial Prince his first lessons on navigation.

Up to 1870 the fleet was just for the pleasure of the Royal Court. After the Prussians invaded, the fleet was transported to Saint-Cloud where it was unfortunately completely destroyed. The only boats left at Fontainebleau were Eugenia's gondola and the Prince's frigate. The gondola was sold in 1907 and the frigate was abandoned on the Pond for years until it was brought into the castle for restoration in 1926 under the direction of the architect Jean-Paul Alaux.



PALAIS DE FONTAINEBLEAU — Les Sjours de la Cour de Napoléon III
La gondole de S. M. l'Impératrice et la frégate du prince impérial sur la pièce d'eau (1863), - d'après le croquis de M. Moulin

There was not much left to save and some changes were made: some original elements were substituted, some beams were hurriedly replaced, the sails and exterior paint were completely changed. From 1926 to the sixties the boat was displayed as it was in the Deer Gallery. When the Gallery was undergoing restoration the boat was moved to a stairwell, inaccessible to the public. Today the small boat is badly deteriorated. The masts have suffered the most, the linen sails are ripped and rotten, ropes and halyards are knotted and broken. The helm, some pieces of the masts and the sails have been dismantled. The frigate is a shadow of its former self. But because of its historical importance, its rarity and its quality the boat cannot be left in this state. Further deterioration would be an incredible loss. Therefore, some steps have been taken to preserve her.



413 FONTAINEBLEAU — Vue générale du château et de l'étang
avec le bateau du Prince Impérial. — LL.

Above - The Imperial Prince's frigate and the Palace of Fontainebleau © RMN-Grand Palais (Château de Fontainebleau) / Gérard Blot.

After having been transported to a laboratory the frigate has been treated against insects and has been meticulously cleaned. All elements that have been dismantled have been photographed. The negatives have been used to create a file where all information on the boat is organised.

This file has allowed for a detailed inventory of all elements preserved and of their function so that one can evaluate the state of the materials, their authenticity through the layers of paint present, the extent of retouching the number of original elements that have been substituted or modified, changes made from the original structure.

This inventory will allow us to set up a programme for restoration which will consist in five phases: consolidation of antique materials, replacement and repositioning of original elements in their correct positions, the removal of newer and low quality elements such as nails, screws, wire and other elements that are discordant with the original, bringing back the original, Second Empire colour.

All of this to reconstruct the frigate for its unveiling to the public. It will be necessary to make the masts and sails removable. It will also be necessary to finish some elements of the rigging without which the masts cannot stand. To limit these reconstructions the frigate will be displayed with her sails furled.

The cost of the entire restoration project is estimated to be 200,000 Euro. The next step is to find a sponsor that will step in for this sum and save the Imperial Prince's frigate and allow the general public to see her again in all of her splendour.