

Sculptor Anne Seymour Damer Meets Napoleon

On May, 1, 1815, English sculptor Anne Seymour Damer stood in a room at the Palais Elysée in Paris. His Imperial Majesty Napoleon I had commanded her presence.

Her appointment was at 10 a.m. She had been waiting two hours.

Finally, a servant approached her. “Madam, please follow me.” The servant led Damer through a dark passage which opened into another room. There, Napoleon stood at a table.

On the table sat a marble sculpture of a bust, or sculpture of a person’s head, of Mr. Charles James Fox. Damer sculpted it for Napoleon three years prior to this meeting. It was sent to France when created, but was never formally presented to the Emperor.

Damer curtsied. “Your Majesty, it is an honor to see you. Please forgive the delay in presenting the bust of Mr. Fox to you.”

Napoleon placed his hands behind his back. “Mr. Fox was a famous British supporter of mine. You did an excellent job. The bust shows not just the face of Mr. Fox, but also the mind of the man. His death saddened me. Thank you for coming now.”

Receiving diplomatic gifts in a formal audience, or meeting, demonstrated power and influence. They were important for Napoleon and other rulers of the time.

“Did you receive the present I sent as a thank you?” asked Napoleon.

Damer tilted her head and smiled. “Oh, yes, Your Majesty. The gold box with diamonds is beautiful. It is greatly appreciated. Thank you.”

Napoleon’s face brightened. “Please sit. Did you see the engraved gold oval plaque inside the box? It explains how the box came to be given to you.”

Damer sat on a small sofa. “I did, Your Majesty. It is elegant. Thank you.”

With his hands still behind his back, Napoleon paced the floor. “To what family do you belong?”

“My father was Field-Marshal Henry Seymour Conway, and my father-in-law was the 1st Earl of Dorchester.”

The Emperor and Damer continued to talk for several more minutes. They discussed art and her journey to Paris.

Then Napoleon moved closer to Damer. "Are you afraid of me?"

Damer lowered her eyes. "No, Sire. Great men are not frightening."

A slight smile crossed Napoleon's face. "Good day, Mrs. Damer."

Damer curtsied. "Your Majesty." She continued to curtsy as she backed out of the room."

Questions

1. In this story, what is a bust?
2. As a gift to Napoleon, Damer made a bust of what person? Why was that important to Napoleon?
3. In Napoleon's time, what did diplomatic gifts received in a formal audience mean?
4. Why did Damer say she was not frightened of Napoleon?