

### 3. THE DRESDEN MANUSCRIPT

The artist Charles Brun created the 35 uniform plates presented in the second part of this collection (beginning with Plate 114 on page 249), on a commission from the noted French collector Gabriel Cottreau in the early twentieth century. Brun based his work on the eyewitness drawings and paintings relating to the *Grande Armée* of 1813 presented in the *Camp de Dresde* (“Camp of Dresden”) Manuscript (hereafter *Dresden Manuscript*).

The first volume of that manuscript was entitled “Campaign Uniforms of the French Army 1812-1813” and the second volume was “Parade Uniforms of the French Army 1812-1813.” The two volumes totaled 92 pages, from which Brun made the 35 plates reproduced in this book.

The two original manuscript volumes were sketchbooks, preliminary rather than finished work, with meticulous notes. Unlike the *Freiberg Manuscript*, many illustrations in the *Dresden Manuscript* were only partly colored. The greatest value of the *Dresden* illustrations is the very thorough and organized style of the notes and sketches. Some of the artist’s original notations indicate the battles in which the identified regiments took part. Other notations include information such as the number of adjutants in the French Imperial Headquarters, details that could have been acquired only on the spot.

Although it depicts fewer figures from 1813, the *Dresden Manuscript* offers a greater array and depth of detail than Winkler’s *Freiberg* watercolors, especially regarding items such as *schabraques*, rank distinctions, lists of facing colors, and extra background information on the units. The 35 Brun plates presented in the *Dresden Manuscript* include their original notes.

At one point the renowned French military artist Edouard Detaille (1848-1912) owned the original *Dresden Manuscript*. After Detaille’s death in 1912, the manuscript came into the hands of Belgian uniform enthusiast Charles Delacre in Brussels, and, after his passing, was sold at a Paris auction in 1961. Today the original manuscript is held privately in France, with a copy in the museum of Metz (formerly belonging to noted French illustrator Jacques Onfroy de Breville, also known as “JOB”). A second copy of the manuscript from the collection of noted Polish uniform artist Bronislaw Gembarzewski was lost in Warsaw during World War II. It is not known who made these two copies of the original *Dresden Manuscript*, only that they were drawn before JOB or Brun saw them.

#### THE MYSTERY OF THE MANUSCRIPT’S ARTIST

For nearly two centuries, the artist responsible for the *Dresden Manuscript* could not be identified with certainty.

Herbert Knötel believed that the author of the *Dresden Manuscript* was an East Prussian by the name of Alexander Ivanovich Sauerweid (1783-1844). A student in the Dresden Art Academy and present in the area during the 1813 campaign, Sauerweid published sets of plates on the Westphalian Guard (1810), the Saxons (1810), and the Duchy of Warsaw (1813). He also rendered a set of battle scenes of the 1809 and 1813 campaigns. In 1814, he moved to St. Petersburg, Russia, where he lived until his death 30 years later. Among other things, Sauerweid became a tutor to Russian princes while also going on to create several large battle scenes on Russian subjects.

Another possible author was suggested in Bronislaw Gembarzewski’s history of Polish military costume *Zolnierz Polski* (1964). His monumental four-volume work listed twelve plates from the *Dresden Manuscript*, and named Peter Hess (1792-1871) as the artist. Hess is best known for twelve large battle scenes — executed between 1839 and 1856 — for the 1812 War Gallery in the Winter Palace (today the Hermitage Museum) in St. Petersburg. A student of the Munich Academy of Art, Hess served on the staff of Bavarian General Prince Karl Philipp von Wrede when Bavaria switched sides to fight the French just before the Battle of Leipzig in 1813. Hess made several large oil paintings of the battles from sketches he made in the field. Hess died in Munich in 1871, having lived to see one more Prussian victory over France.

Because no signature or actual proof of the man who created the *Dresden Manuscript* was found, both Sauerweid’s and Hess’ authorship was speculative, based on the fact that both artists seemed to have spent time in the area in 1813.

#### THE MYSTERY SOLVED

Curiously, although the artwork in the *Dresden Manuscript* provided a good survey of the French army, it lacked any images of Napoleon’s Imperial Guard. An artist who worked in the Dresden area in the summer of 1813 could not have missed seeing this elite corps. Ultimately, this apparent oversight helped determine the probable true identity of the manuscript’s creator.

In 1925, Herbert Knötel wrote an article that appeared in the short-lived uniformology publication *Das Kasckett* (literally “small helmet”) that mentioned the *Dresden Manuscript* and referred to “the Dresden artist Bommer.” Knötel’s article went on to describe:

“A set of 16 wonderful paintings depicting Napoleon’s Old Guard, being of highest interest.

Unfortunately these pictures, which were painted in a light *gouache* style on chamois-colored paper, were not finished. From an artistic point of view they are very attractive. This series is also from Bommer.”

Subsequently, in 1993, I found some watercolors of the Imperial Guard by H. Knötel in the Brunon Collection at the

*Château de l’Emperi* with this note on the back in pencil: “After Bommer, Camp of Dresden.” This corresponded exactly to a set of tracings I acquired that showed the same Guard figures on which Knötel based his watercolors. If these figures of the Guard were by this artist Bommer, the *Dresden Manuscript* might very well be Bommer’s work.

To confirm this theory, I compared the style and substance of illustrations between the younger Knötel’s illustrations and the Brun copies of the *Dresden Manuscript*. Prominent similarities were evident that included the following:

- The pioneer on N° 4 of Knötel’s Brunon set is practically identical with the one in the *Dresden Manuscript* volume II, plate 11 (1)—*Napoleon’s Last Grande Armée (NLGA)* Plate 131. The pose of the figure, the position of the belts, and the shape of the axe blade are identical to Knötel’s.
- The baldric (wide shoulder belt) of the drum major has the same rounded edge with a tassel in Knötel’s plates N° 6 and in Dresden II, 8 (4)—*NLGA* Plate 120—and II, 11 (3)—*NLGA* Plate 131. The plume and feather decorations on the bicorne are also nearly identical. No other source shows this peculiar resemblance.
- The musician of Knötel’s N° 1 has the same double stripe on the collar as those in Dresden II, 8 (3)—*NLGA* Plate 120—and II, 11 (2)—*NLGA* Plate 132—and the particular shape of the trombone is like the one in Dresden I, 16.

One day in a Dresden antique shop I noticed an interesting watercolor of a French marshal, painted in a vivid *gouache* style on chamois-colored paper. On the back side were extensive notes in black ink, familiar in their meticulousness, that included names and notes on Saxon regiments along with sketches displaying *schabraque* (saddle cover) corners with chevrons.

These rank chevrons are extensively documented in the *Dresden Manuscript*, and Herbert Knötel noted a plate with such a chevron on a *schabraque* attributed to Bommer. In addition, *this* illustration included an imperial eagle decoration on the pistol holsters, a unique feature found only in this manuscript.

The most important item on this watercolor was the signature of the artist, below the figure of the marshal: “Bommer fec:” — the “B”, “e” and “r” of the signature were very distinctive and identical with these letters in the other writing on the plate.

The sum of the similarities in illustration details noted above — as well as the signature and handwriting matches — should settle the question as to the creator of the *Dresden Manuscript*. Christoph Ernst Benjamin Bommer, born in Dresden in 1790 and a student at the Dresden Art Academy, was almost certainly the original artist of the manuscript upon which Brun diligently based his work presented here. The whole manner of work of the *Dresden Manuscript* fits Bommer so much better than Sauerweid or Hess. The sample illustrations of these three artists shown in this chapter further support this hypothesis.

Sadly, Bommer started a third portfolio that was either never completed or was possibly lost during World War II in the tragic destruction of the city for which the work is named.

There are several Napoleonic picture manuscripts that carry the name “Dresden,” and now the name of the artist of this particular *Dresden Manuscript* has finally been positively identified. Therefore, this collection presents the original *Dresden Manuscript* plates referred to as “Bommer”— followed by the volume of the manuscript as a Roman numeral (I or II), and the original plate number as an Arabic numeral. For example, *NLGA* Plate 114 is Brun’s plate Number 3 rendered from Bommer I, 6.

It is also important to note that the Bommer originals held by a French collector were consulted and compared to the Brun renderings when the text for the 35 Brun plates was written.



Shown here are sample illustrations done by the three men who have been considered the authors of the *Dresden Manuscript*: Alexander Sauerweid (left), Peter Hess (center), and Christoph Bommer (right). Note how similar Bommer’s figure on the left in his plate is to the musicians on the left in Plates 120 and 132 of this collection.