The Court of Louis XIV:
Images, Ceremonies, Symbols

b.1638 - d.1715

Historical Background on the Palace of Versailles

Le Roy 1624-1632
Le Vau 1661-1670
Mansart 1678-1708
Gabriel 1772-1778
19th Century
The Old Chateau (1623-1668)
Back in 1623, Louis XIII - father of Louis XIV – built a 'hunting lodge, a little gentleman's chateau' of brick, stone, and slate at Versailles. The king liked it so much that he soon had it enlarged by his 'royal engineer and architect', Philibert Le Roy (this early chateau survives in the buildings that flank the Marble Courtyard). Then from 1661 to 1668 the young Louis XIV, known as the Sun King, had his own architect, Louis Le Vau, embellish the residence. Yet this little house of cards', as the Duc de Saint-Simon called it, remained too small. Extensions were deemed necessary.

Marble Court, showing how Louis XIV preserved his father's hunting lodge encrusting it with sculpture, gilded metalwork and paving its courtyard with marble.

Andre Le Notre's design for the first garden, the petit parc, begun in 1662

Furetière’s seventeenth-century dictionary of the French language defined ménagerie as follows: ‘Place designed to feed animals and to administer the countryside. It is used for the castles of Princes and Great Lords, who maintain them more for curiosity and magnificence than for profit, as the menageries of Versailles, of Vincennes, of Meudon.’ The menagerie at Versailles was built by Le Vau for Louis XIV between 1662 and 1669 on the southwestern part of the grounds. The completion of the canal in 1674 added interest to the menagerie because visitors could reach it from the chateau (or from the Trianon) in a gondola.
The New Chateau (1668-1670)
Le Vau was once again charged with carrying out the work. From 1668 to 1670 he built the 'envelope', which Saint-Simon severely criticized for contrasting with the old chateau: 'the beautiful and the ugly, the vast and the restricted, were stitched together'. Indeed, Le Vau's 'envelope' entailed wrapping the old chateau in a second building whose uniformly white stone facades served as a fine garden setting. Work on this building, whose central terrace was inspired by Italian baroque villas, was taken up by François d'Orbay on Le Vau's death in 1670. It houses the State Apartments.

View from the park showing the "Envelope" built by Louis Le Vau around the earlier building to house apartments on either side for the King and Queen in 1669. Note how the center is left empty for a viewing terrace - this was later to be filled in to create the Hall of Mirrors.

Palace of Versailles, Patel
Official Residence (1678-1715)
In May 6, 1682, Versailles became the official residence of the Court of France, supplanting the palaces at the Louvre and Saint-Germain-en-Laye. From 1678 to 1684, meanwhile, the terrace of the new chateau was transformed into the Hall of Mirrors, symbolizing the power of the absolute monarch. Feverish building activity then gave birth to the North and South Wings, the Orangery, Stables, and Grand Lodgings; the vast construction site was headed by royal architect Jules Hardouin-Mansart. The last major feature built during the reign of Louis XIV, the Chapel Royal, was completed in 1710 by Robert de Cotte.

View of the Palace of Versailles around 1675 before the construction of the Hall of Mirrors

Stables (1679-86), again by Mansart; note their highly appropriate horseshoe-shaped layout.

Royal Chapel
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1638</td>
<td>born</td>
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<tr>
<td>1643</td>
<td>officially became king</td>
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<td>1648</td>
<td>Dutch Republic officially separated from Spanish Netherlands</td>
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<td>1648-53</td>
<td>Fronde</td>
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<td>1651</td>
<td>ceremony to mark the end of his minority (age 13)</td>
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<td>1660</td>
<td>married Maria Teresa, daughter of Spanish king Philip IV</td>
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<td>1667-68</td>
<td>War of Devolution - fought between France and Spain over the Spanish Netherlands</td>
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<td>1670</td>
<td>secret Treaty of Dover with English King Charles II to fight the Dutch and restore Roman Catholicism to England</td>
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<tr>
<td>1672-78</td>
<td>Dutch War - France allied with England and invaded the Dutch Republic</td>
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<td>1678</td>
<td>Peace of Nijmigen: Hainaut and Cambrai area became French.</td>
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<td>1682</td>
<td>official opening of Versailles palace</td>
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<td>1683</td>
<td>wife, Marie Thérèse of Austria, died</td>
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<td>1684</td>
<td>secretly married Mme de Maintenon</td>
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<td>1685</td>
<td>revoked Edict of Nantes, forced 200,000 Huguenots into exile</td>
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<td>1689-97</td>
<td>War of the Grand Alliance - The Austrian Habsburgs, the English, and the Dutch allied against France in defense of Holland</td>
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<td>1700</td>
<td>death of Spanish king</td>
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<td>1701-14</td>
<td>War of Spanish Succession - Spanish ruler Charles II died without an heir. England, Dutch Republic, and France made claims of having the rightful successor. Louis believed his grandson Philip V to be the rightful heir &amp; crowned him king of Spain. Allied armies from England, Holland, Prussia and Austria defeated France at Blenheim [1704] and several other battles.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1713</td>
<td>Treaty of Utrecht: border between France and Netherlands settled</td>
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<td>1715</td>
<td>died</td>
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Source 1: High altar, Notre Dame, Paris, 1638

![Image of the High altar, Notre Dame, Paris, 1638](image1)

*Louis-Dieudonné ("God-given")*

Source 2: *Louis XIV*, Testelin, 1648

![Image of Louis XIV](image2)

Source 3: Louis XIV, 1661, the day after Cardinal Mazarin's death

"Up to this moment I have been pleased to entrust the government of my affairs to the late Cardinal. It is now time that I govern them myself. You [secretaries and ministers of state] will assist me with your counsels when I ask for them. I request and order you to seal no orders except by my command, . . . I order you not to sign anything, not even a passport . . . without my command; to render account to me personally each day and to favor no one."
Source 4: *Louis XIV*, LeBrun, 1661

Source 5: *Louis XIV*, Bernini, 1665

Source 6: *Louis XIV*, visiting the Gobelin manufactory with Colbert and his brother Philippe, tapestry, 1667
Source 7: Jean-Baptiste Colbert Presenting the Members of the Royal Academy of Science to Louis XIV, Testelin, 1667

Source 8: Louis XIV, Testelin, 1668

Source 9: Madame de Sevigne, letter to a friend, 1671

(Before the construction of Versailles, Louis kept an eye on the aristocracy by requiring that they accompany him wherever he went. When he traveled, he did so at the head of a great lumbering retinue of hundreds of lesser nobility who had to be fed and entertained. When Louis decided to make war on Holland, he went to Chantilly to meet with his commander. A great feast, supervised by Vatel, "Prince of Cooks," was planned for the forest.)
"It is Sunday, the 26th of April; this letter will not go till Wednesday. It is not really a letter, but an account, which Moreuil has just given me for your benefit, of what happened at Chantilly concerning Vatel. I wrote you on Friday that he had stabbed himself; here is the story in detail.

The promenade, the collation in a spot carpeted with jonquils – all was perfection. Supper came; the roast failed at one or two tables on account of a number of unexpected guests.

This upset Vatel. He said several times: 'My honor is lost; this is a humiliation that I cannot endure.' To Gourville he said, 'My head is swimming; I have not slept for twelve nights; help me to give my orders.' Gourville consoled him as best he could, but the roast which had failed (not at the king's, but at the twenty-fifth table), haunted his mind.

Gourville told Monsieur le Prince about it, and Monsieur le Prince went up to Vatel in his own room and said to him, 'Vatel, all goes well; there never was anything so beautiful as the king's supper.' He answered, 'Monseigneur, your goodness overwhelms me. I know that the roast failed at two tables.' 'Nothing of the sort,' said Monsieur le Prince. 'Do not disturb yourself, all is well.'

Midnight comes. The fireworks do not succeed on account of a cloud that overspreads them (they cost sixteen thousand francs). At four o'clock in the morning Vatel is wandering about all over the place. Everything is asleep. He meets a small purveyor with two loads of fish and asks him, 'Is this all?', 'Yes, sir.' The man did not know that Vatel had sent to all the seaport towns in France. Vatel waits some time, but the other purveyors do not arrive; he gets excited; he thinks that there will be no more fish.

He finds Gourville and says to him, 'Sir, I shall not be able to survive this disgrace.' Gourville only laughs at him. Then Vatel goes up to his own room, puts his sword against the door, and runs it through his heart, but only at the third thrust, for he gave himself two wounds which were not mortal. He falls dead.

Meanwhile the fish is coming in from every side, and people are seeking for Vatel to distribute it. They go to his room, they knock, they burst open the door, they find him lying bathed in his blood. They send for Monsieur le Prince, who is in utter despair. Monsieur le Duc bursts into tears; it was upon Vatel that his whole journey to Burgundy depended. Monsieurie Prince informed the king, very sadly; they agreed that it all came from Vatel's having his own code of honor, and they praised his courage highly even while they blamed him...

Gourville, however, tried to repair the loss of Vatel, and did repair it. The dinner was excellent; so was the luncheon. They supped, they walked, they played, they hunted. The scent of jonquils was everywhere; it was all enchanting."

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Source 10: Louis XIV, Warin, Palace of Versailles, 1672
Source 11: *Louis XIV in Front of Maastricht*, Mignard, Palace of Versailles, 1673

Source 12: *Louis as Alexander the Great*, LeBrun, Palace of Versailles, 1682

Source 13: *Louis XIV at the Siege of Namur*, Mignard, 1695
The Court

His natural talents were below mediocrity; but he had a mind capable of improvement, of receiving polish, of assimilating what was best in the minds of others without slavish imitation; and he profited greatly throughout his life from having associated with the ablest and wittiest persons, of both sexes, and of various stations. He entered the world (if I may use such an expression in speaking of a King who had already completed his twenty-third year), at a fortunate moment, for men of distinction abounded. His Ministers and Generals at this time, with their successors trained in their schools, are universally acknowledged to have been the ablest in Europe; for the domestic troubles and foreign wars under which France had suffered ever since the death of Louis XIII had brought to the front a number of brilliant names, and the Court was made up of capable and illustrious personages.... Glory was his passion, but he also liked order and regularity in all things; he was naturally prudent, moderate, and reserved; always master of his tongue and his emotions. Will it be believed? he was also naturally kind-hearted and just. God had given him all that was necessary for him to be a good King, perhaps also to be a fairly great one. All his faults were produced by his surroundings. In his childhood he was so much neglected that no one dared go near his rooms. He was often heard to speak of those times with great bitterness; he used to relate how, through the carelessness of his attendants, he was found one evening in the basin of a fountain in the Palais-Royal gardens....

His Ministers, generals, mistresses, and courtiers soon found out his weak point, namely, his love of hearing his own praises. There was nothing he liked so much as flattery, or, to put it more plainly, adulation; the coarser and clumsier it was, the more he relished it. That was the only way to approach him; if he ever took a liking to a man it was invariably due to some lucky stroke of flattery in the first instance, and to indefatigable perseverance in the same line afterwards. His Ministers owed much of their influence to their frequent opportunities for burning incense before him....

It was this love of praise which made it easy for Louvois to engage him in serious wars, for he persuaded him that he had greater talents for war than any of his Generals, greater both in design and in execution, and the Generals themselves encouraged him in this notion, to keep in favour with him. I mean such Generals as Condé and Turenne; much more, of course, those who came after them. He took to himself the credit of their successes with admirable complacency, and honestly believed that he was all his flatterers told him. Hence arose his fondness for reviews, which he carried so far that his enemies called him, in derision, "the King of reviews"; hence also his liking for sieges, where he could make a cheap parade of bravery, and exhibit his vigilance, forethought, and endurance of fatigue; for his robust constitution enabled him to bear fatigue marvellously; he cared nothing for hunger, heat, cold, or bad weather. He liked also, as he rode through the lines, to hear people praising his dignified bearing and fine appearance on horseback. His campaigns were his favourite topic when talking to his mistresses. He talked well, expressed himself clearly in well-chosen language; and no man could tell a story better. His conversation, even on the most ordinary subjects, was always marked by a certain natural dignity.

His mind was occupied with small things rather than with great, and he delighted in all sorts of petty details, such as the dress and drill of his soldiers; and it was just the same with regard to his building operations, his household, and even his cookery. He always thought he could teach something of their own craft even to the most skilful professional men; and they, for their part, used to listen gratefully to lessons which they had long ago learnt by heart. He imagined that all this showed his indefatigable industry; in reality, it was a great waste of time, and his Ministers turned it to good account for their own purposes, as soon as they had learnt the art of managing him; they kept his attention engaged with a mass of details, while they contrived to get their own way in more important matters.

His vanity, which was perpetually nourished - for even preachers used to praise him to his face from the pulpit - was the cause of the aggrandisement of his Ministers. He imagined that they were great only
through him, mere mouthpieces through which he expressed his will; consequently he made no objection when they gradually encroached on the privileges of the greatest noblemen. He felt that he could at any moment reduce them to their original obscurity; whereas, in the case of a nobleman, though he could make him feel the weight of his displeasure, he could not deprive him or his family of the advantages due to his birth. For this reason he made it a rule never to admit a seigneur to his Councils, to which the Duke de Beaufort was the only exception.

But for the fear of the devil, which, by God's grace, never forsaken him even in his wildest excesses, he would have caused himself to be worshipped as a deity. He would not have lacked worshippers.

**Life at Versailles**

Very early in the reign of Louis XIV the Court was removed from Paris, never to return. The troubles of the minority had given him a dislike to that city; his enforced and surreptitious flight from it still rankled in his memory; he did not consider himself safe there, and thought cabals would be more easily detected if the Court was in the country, where the movements and temporary absences of any of its members would be more easily noticed. No doubt that he was also influenced by the feeling that he would be regarded with greater awe and veneration when no longer exposed every day to the gaze of the multitude.

His love-affair with Mademoiselle de la Vallière, which at first was covered as far as possible with a veil of mystery, was the cause of frequent excursions to Versailles. This was at that time at small country house, built by Louis XIII to avoid the unpleasant necessity, which had sometimes befallen him, of sleeping at a wretched wayside tavern or in a windmill, when benighted out hunting in the forest of St. Leger. The visits of Louis XIV becoming more frequent, he enlarged the château by degrees till its immense buildings afforded better accommodation for the Court than was to be found at St. Germain, where most of the courtiers had to put up with uncomfortable lodgings in the town. The Court was therefore removed to Versailles in 1682, not long before the Queen's death. The new building contained an infinite number of rooms for courtiers, and the King liked the grant of these rooms to be regarded as a coveted privilege.

He availed himself of the frequent festivities at Versailles, and his excursions to other places, as a means of making the courtiers assiduous in their attendance and anxious to please him; for he nominated beforehand those who were to take part in them, and could thus gratify some and inflict a snub on others. He was conscious that the substantial favors he had to bestow were not nearly sufficient to produce a continual effect; he had therefore to invent imaginary ones, and no one was so clever in devising petty distinctions and preferences which aroused jealousy and emulation. The visits to Marly later on were very useful to him in this way; also those to Trianon, where certain ladies, chosen beforehand, were admitted to his table. It was another distinction to hold his candlestick at his couche (public ritual of retiring); as soon as he had finished his prayers he used to name the courtier to whom it was to be handed, always choosing one of the highest rank among those present.

Not only did he expect all persons of distinction to be in continual attendance at Court, but he was quick to notice the absence of those of inferior degree; at his lever, his couche, his meals, in the gardens of Versailles (the only place where the courtiers in general were allowed to follow him), he used to cast his eyes to right and left; nothing escaped him, he saw everybody. If any one habitually living at Court absented himself he insisted on knowing the reason; those who came there only for flying visits had also to give a satisfactory explanation; any one who seldom or never appeared there was certain to incur his displeasure. If asked to bestow a favor on such persons he would reply haughtily: "I do not know him"; of such as rarely presented themselves he would say, "He is a man I never see"; and from these judgments there was no appeal.

He always took great pains to find out what was going on in public places, in society, in private houses, even family secrets, and maintained an immense number of spies and tale-bearers. These were of all sorts; some did not know that their reports were carried to him; others did know it; there were others, again,
who used to write to him directly, through channels which he prescribed; others who were admitted by the
backstairs and saw him in his private room. Many a man in all ranks of life was ruined by these methods,
often very unjustly, without ever being able to discover the reason; and when the King had once taken a
prejudice against a man, he hardly ever got over it....

No one understood better than Louis XIV the art of enhancing the value of a favor by his manner of
bestowing it; he knew how to make the most of a word, a smile, even of a glance. If he addressed any one,
were it but to ask a trifling question or make some commonplace remark, all eyes were turned on the
person so honored; it was a mark of favor which always gave rise to comment....

He loved splendor, magnificence, and profusion in all things, and encouraged similar tastes in his Court;
to spend money freely on equipages and buildings, on feasting and at cards, was a sure way to gain his
favor, perhaps to obtain the honor of a word from him. Motives of policy had something to do with this;
by making expensive habits the fashion, and, for people in a certain position, a necessity, he compelled
his courtiers to live beyond their income, and gradually reduced them to depend on his bounty for the
means of subsistence. This was a plague which, once introduced, became a scourge to the whole country,
for it did not take long to spread to Paris, and thence to the armies and the provinces; so that a man of any
position is now estimated entirely according to his expenditure on his table and other luxuries. This folly,
sustained by pride and ostentation, has already produced widespread confusion; it threatens to end in
nothing short of ruin and a general overthrow.

**A Day with the Sun King**

The Duke de Saint-Simon wrote, 'with an almanac and a watch, even at a distance of three hundred leagues, you
could say precisely what he was doing'. A king's day had to be perfectly timed so that the officers serving the
monarch knew exactly what they should do, when, and how. The court was regulated like clockwork.

**Levee**
8.30 am: 'It is time, Sire', declares the First Valet de Chambre, waking the king. The levee, or ceremonial rising,
thus begins. Doctors, family and a few favored friends successively enter the King's Bedchamber where he is
washed, combed, and every other day shaven. The Officers of the Chamber and the Wardrobe then enter in turn
for full levee, during which the king is dressed and has a breakfast of broth. The most important officials of the
kingdom are admitted; it is estimated that the usual number of people attending numbered one hundred, all male.

**Mass**
10 am: On leaving the king's apartment, a procession forms in the Hall of Mirrors. The king leads the procession
of courtiers through the Grand Apartment. The public can now see the king and even petition him with a written
request. In the Chapel Royal, the king occupies the tribune. Mass lasts roughly thirty minutes. The choir known as
the Chapel Music, famous throughout Europe, always sings new music composed by Lully, Lalande, and others.

**Council**
11 am: Returning to his apartments, the king holds council in his cabinet. Sundays and Wednesdays are devoted
to Councils of State; on Tuesdays and Saturdays, finances are dealt with; Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays,
another Council of State might replace a Dispatch Council (domestic affairs) or Religious Council, or
perhaps the king will decide to focus on his building program. Five or six ministers usually advise the monarch
who speaks little, listens a great deal, and always decides.
Dinner
1 pm: The king dines alone in his bedchamber, at a table facing the windows. This meal is theoretically private, but Louis XIV admits the men at court, making attendance similar to the levee.

Promenade or Hunting
2 pm: The king always announces the afternoon program in the morning. If he has decided on a promenade, it might be taken on foot in the gardens or in a carriage with ladies. On the other hand, hunting activities the Bourbons' favorite pastime will take place on the grounds (if the king goes shooting) or in the surrounding forests (riding to hounds).

Social Gathering or Work
6 pm: Louis XIV often leaves his son to preside over the private social gatherings known as soirées d'appartement. The king himself might sign the many letters prepared by his secretary, then go to Madame de Maintenon's quarters where he might study an important file with one of his four secretaries of state.

Supper
10 pm: A crowd fills the antechamber of the King's Suite to witness this public supper. The king is joined at table by the princes and princesses of the royal family. Once the meal is over, the king returns to his bedchamber to say 'goodnight ladies' then retires to his cabinet where he can indulge in conversation with his close acquaintances.

Couchee
11.30 pm: The couchee is a reverse, shortened version of the levee. The Sun King's daily timetable was incumbent on Louis XV and Louis XVI, but neither of them could bear court ceremonial. They tended to flee to their private apartments or smaller chateaus nearby. Levees and couchees became increasingly rare, as did public suppers. Courtiers complained that the king was nowhere to be seen.

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Source 15: Louis XIV, Rigaud, 1701
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<th>Before Versailles</th>
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<td>Ceremonies</td>
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<td>Symbols of power</td>
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References:
Madame de Sevigne's account appears in Robinson, James Harvey (ed.) Readings in European History (1906); Carr, John Laurence, Life in France under Louis XIV (1970).
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