

**LIFE AT VERSAILLES IN 100 QUESTIONS**

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Sample translation by Gretchen Schmid

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### **31. How were people required to dress at Versailles?**

At the beginning of the 1660s, when Louis XIV became passionate about Versailles, he invited several people there in addition to his own family. In those first years, those privileged enough to follow him would have had to obtain a *justaucorps à brevet*, an item of clothing that had first appeared on December 23, 1661, in the early stages of the king's affair with Mademoiselle de La Vallière. Owners of this item of clothing did not have to ask permission to join the monarch. According to Saint-Simon, it was "a blue coat lined with red and with a red waistcoat, both of which were embroidered with a particular design," and the king "gave a dozen of them to those whom he allowed to follow him on [his] special little walks at Versailles." It was a true honor. The tradition of this outfit continued even after the court moved to Versailles in 1682; notably, it became the object of a clever joke, characteristic of the wit that reigned supreme at court. When the Marquis de Vardes returned after nineteen years in exile, he was sporting a justaucorps à brevet from 1664 that was very out of fashion. The king remarked upon it, and spectators jeered and laughed, to which—according to a letter by Madame de Sévigné dated May 26, 1683—the Marquis de Vardes responded: "Your Majesty, when one is so unfortunate as to be far away from you, one becomes not only unhappy but also ridiculous."

All the same, courtly dress remained extremely codified despite changes in fashion, as attested by the correspondence of Madame Palatine, the duchess of Orléans and sister-in-law of Louis XIV. In a letter from March 5, 1695, she reports: "I do not see why people must have so many different outfits. The only clothes I own are my formal gown and a riding habit for when I ride horses; I have no others. I've never in my life owned a dressing gown or an overcoat, and in my

wardrobe I have only one nightgown for when I get up and go to bed.” But although she claims to have never gotten used to this “insipid etiquette,” she nonetheless followed it to the letter, for all the important women at the court were required to wear a formal gown, the “*grand habit*,” in public. This item of clothing, made up of a bodice, a skirt, and a train, was extremely restrictive and mandated impeccable posture due to its rigidity. Aside from some loosening for specific circumstances beginning in the 1740s, it remained de rigueur for women at the court until the end of the Ancien Régime. It was Marie Antoinette who, with her milliner Rose Bertin, made shockwaves in the world of women beginning in 1774 by favoring comfort in addition to extravagance.

Despite several evolutions between the 17th and 18th centuries, men’s dress always required two indispensable accessories: a hat and a sword. Anyone without them would be turned away from the royal apartments by a Swiss guard who paid scrupulous attention to the “dress code.” The courtiers were also required to follow extremely precise rules based on their location. In his memoirs, the count of Hézecques noted the following about the reign of Louis XVI:

Every country home to which the king paid his little visits required its own style of dress. Trianon required a red habit embroidered with gold; Compiègne a green one; Choisy a blue. Hunting dress was a heavy blue, trimmed with gold; the type of trim indicated the type of animal that was being hunted. An all-green habit for hunting with shotguns, with everyone who accompanied the king outfitted just like him.



### **37. Why was there a King's Apartment and a Queen's Apartment?**

Court etiquette dictated that the king and the queen were required to have separate apartments. During the construction of the first château of Versailles in 1623–1624, only one apartment for the king was envisioned, as well as several others assigned to his various companions. The residence's status was clear: it was a hunting lodge, and women were not allowed. When it was rebuilt and enlarged, an apartment for the queen was added, just like at the other royal residences. Until then, the King's Apartment had occupied the entire western part of the main building overlooking the gardens, but for the second château, it was decided that the monarch's apartments would be in the northern part of the central staircase (where his son Louis XIV's chamber was then located) and that those of his wife would be in the southern part of the same staircase.

Anne of Austria, the wife of Louis XIII, may very well have possessed an apartment in this new château, but it seems that she never actually slept there while her august husband was present. Each time she travelled there, the monarch made sure to send her back on her way to Paris, Saint-Germain, or another royal residence. We can find evidence of this in this letter that he wrote to the Cardinal of Richelieu on October 1, 1641: "The Queen has just informed me that smallpox is spreading quickly in Saint-Germain, and asks where I want to send the children; I've asked her to send them to Versailles and for herself to go stay at Noisy. I'll admit that she, too, could stay at Versailles, with my children; but I'm afraid of the large number of women who would come and spoil everything for me if she were to come."

The layout that Louis XIII established did not change afterward. With the construction in 1669–1670 of Le Vau’s “Envelope,” which led, later, to the Grand Apartments, the rulers could enjoy a ceremonial garden-view apartment and a private apartment in the Marble court, in what would from then on be referred to as the old château. The symmetry was perfect: from the central common room shared by the king and queen, the former staircase in Louis XIII’s château, the King’s Apartment stretched to the north and the Queen’s Apartment to the south. It remained thus from the marriage of Louis XIV and Marie-Thérèse of Austria in 1660 until the latter’s death in July of 1683. Taking advantage of her absence, the king then annexed the queen’s private apartment (which he had already begun to do even before her death, in the eastern part of the main building), reserving for himself the suite of rooms that began with the end of the Queen’s Staircase and ended with the northeastern-most extremity of the main building. The queen’s former apartment became the king’s new living areas, and his own former interior apartment was dedicated to his collections.

Due to this new layout, the dauphine Maria Anna Victoria of Bavaria, the duchess of Burgundy (who became dauphine in 1711), Queen Marie Leszczyńska, and Marie-Antoinette, who was first dauphine and then queen, had to live in their grand apartment, and sleep in the ceremonial bedroom. This explains the evolution of the décor of that room, while the King’s Apartment remained in the same state it had been in during Louis XIV for the entire Ancien Régime. However, beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and even more so in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, more private places were reserved for the dauphines and queens, especially with the construction of a wing that separated the queen’s interior court in two: in the west, the Dauphin’s court, and in the east, the new Queen’s court.

#### **49. Did the courtesans do their business in the corridors?**

According to an enduring legend, there were no toilets at Versailles, and as a result, visitors as well as courtesans had to do their business in the corridors of the château. This legend stems from the fact that, ever since the alterations of Louis-Philippe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there are almost no facilities at the château. Furthermore, people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—both a reaction to the Ancien Régime and a time of great advances in hygiene—had an unfortunate tendency to sully the image of the French monarchy following the Revolution. This description of the château de Saint-Cloud by Viollet-le-Duc in his *Dictionary of French Architecture*, associating royal residences in which stink and trash reigned, therefore sticks in our minds:

We remember the odor that was everywhere, from the time of King Louis XVIII, in the corridors of Saint-Cloud, for the traditions of Versailles were scrupulously upheld there. This fact, relative to Versailles, is not exaggerated. One day when we were visiting the palace with a respectable lady from Louis XV's court, as we passed by a reeking corridor, she couldn't hold back this exclamation of regret: "This smell reminds me of the good old days!"

There is every reason to believe that Viollet-le-Duc is exaggerating his story a little in order to fit with the time. The reality, however, wasn't all that far off, if we are to believe the description by the Duke of Saint-Simon in regards to the bishop of Noyon, who was literally caught "pissing off the balustrade" of the chapel. Alerted to this impropriety, Alexandre Bontemps, the palace intendant, rushed over to shoo the prelate away from such a holy place. "The good man

[Bontemps] reprimanded him and Monsieur de Noyon, every Noyon bit of him, found himself banned. The King laughed a lot about it, but he had the consideration to never speak to him of it.” This superb anecdote in itself proves that this was an exception. Without a doubt, there must have been other similar cases, but they must have been quite rare due to the fact every effort was made to ensure that events of this ilk did not occur.

#### **74. Did the king and queen appear naked in front of the courtesans?**

The sovereigns may have exposed themselves to the courtesans daily in highly ritualized ceremonies, but they never appeared nude—not even when the kings took baths, as they would enter the bath wearing a long shirt. During sunrises and sunsets, they were exposed, too, as they got dressed and undressed under the eyes of several members of the court. However, they never showed their naked bodies. They slept in a nighttime “camisole,” and this is how the first visitors to their bedroom in the morning saw them. As soon as the king left his bed, he would be given a dressing-gown. The dressing process took several stages and began at the bottom, with the king still wearing his dressing-gown. Once they reached his top half, a skilled process began.

According to *The State of France* (1708), “While His Majesty removed his nightshirt and replaced it with his day shirt, next to his armchair stood two bedroom Valets who held up his dressing-gown to hide him.”

The ritual for the queen was well practiced, too. As Marie Antoinette’s lady-in-waiting, Madame Campan, reported, the dressing routine was a “masterpiece of etiquette; everything was perfectly regulated. The lady of honor and the lady-in-waiting—both of them, if they were there, aided by the first maid and ordinary maids—carried out the main service; but there were distinctions among the women.” These distinctions, which gave etiquette its flavor and which marked the rungs of status between each person, sometimes led to very disagreeable situations for those who had to adhere to them. It fell to the lady of honor, the one in charge of the queen’s household, to pass the dauphine’s shirt to her—unless a princess from the royal family was there, in which case the lady of honor relinquished her right. Things became even more complicated with the arrival

of a *princesse du sang*, or princess of the blood—meaning a princess from a collateral branch of the royal family. In order not to diminish her privileges, the lady of honor would hand over the shirt not directly to the *princesse du sang*, but to the first maid, who would then pass it to the *princesse du sang*, who would finally pass it to the dauphine.

According to Madame Campan, one winter there was an unseemly scene. Marie-Antoinette had already undressed and was ready to receive her shirt from her lady of honor, when the duchess of Orléans—a *princesse du sang*—showed up. The lady of honor, naturally, handed the shirt to the first maid so that she could hand it to the duchess. But then appeared the countess of Provence, the sister-in-law of Marie-Antoinette and thus Her Royal Highness, to whom the duchess of Orléans was obliged to give the shirt so that she could pass it to the queen herself... “The queen crossed her arms over her chest, appearing to be cold. Seeing her disagreeable mood, Madame merely tossed away her handkerchief, kept on her gloves, and, passing over the shirt, tousled the hair of the queen, who began to laugh to hide her impatience—but only after saying several times under her breath: *How rude! Such harassment!*” The queen may have been “nude” for a few moments, but doubtless she was protected from prying eyes...

## **Did Versailles invent the first elevator?**

A courtesan might find himself living in the palace attics, which provided very good living conditions but nonetheless would require him to climb and descend the stairs constantly. Because of the topography of the Versailles apartments, Louis XV decided he would house his mistresses in the northern attic of the central section of the palace. And so the duchess of Châteauroux, after having told her lover that she needed to live in a very beautiful place, took ownership in 1743 of an apartment that looked out onto the North Parterre and the Neptune Fountain, sending several important people packing along the way. To allow her to avoid the fatigue of climbing the steps that led to her apartment, Louis XV was good enough to install a “flying chair” for his mistress, a creation that enabled her to travel directly from the ground floor to the third floor. Drawing attention to her ambition and demands, Mouffle d’Angerville—who recounted details of the royal love affairs in his vehemently critical *The Private Life of Louis XV*—reports that “it was for her that machines were invented that were capable of transporting her from one place to another, at the time and circumstances that her lover thought to merit the greatest of attention.” The work of the machinist Blaise-Henri Aroult (who, several years later, would design the machinery for the Royal Opera), the creation cost nearly 4,900 pounds and was stored in a specially equipped turret.

The mistress didn’t get to use it for very long because she died on December 8, 1744. The flying chair was not taken down, and the marchioness of Pompadour, who succeeded the duchess at the king’s court, began to use it once she moved into the apartment in September 1745, after some construction work. Even when Madame de Pompadour moved to an apartment on the ground

floor (the former Bath Chambers, which had become the apartment of the countess of Toulouse), the flying chair still remained in place. In 1754, it was transported to the Fontainebleau château so that Madame de Pompadour could reach her room in the Belle Chéminée wing.

The invention wasn't totally new. Developed in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the fanciful academician Jean-Jacques Renouard, the count of Villayer, it allowed one to "be carried from the bottom to the top of a dwelling, and from the top to the bottom, with a counterweight," according to Tallemant des Réaux in his short biography dedicated to Amelot-Beaulieu. The academician served as the model for Hermippe in La Bruyère's *Characters*, of whom the author writes: "He has found the secret to ascending and descending without using the stairs, and he is looking for the way to enter and exit more comfortably than using the door." Finally, Saint-Simon also reported on this miraculous invention when the count of Villayer died on March 5, 1691, giving it the following precise description:

He also invented flying chairs, which ascend and descend between two walls by counterweights alone. One goes to the floor one wants by sitting inside of it and stopping where one wants. Monsieur le Prince [of Condé] used them often in Paris and in Chantilly. Madame la Duchesse, his sister-in-law and the daughter of the King, wanted to have one for her mezzanine in Versailles. One night, as she tried to ascend, the machine failed and stopped halfway, and she was stuck in there for three whole hours before someone heard her and was able to help her out by breaking the wall.