

The Courtiers

Historically a courtier was someone who was frequently in attendance at the court of a reigning monarch. The court was typically located at the monarch's residence and was the central location of governmental affairs. Life at court often blurred the distinction between the political and social spheres of government. The most famous court in European history was King Louis XIV's court at the Palace of Versailles. During his reign Louis worked to become an absolute monarch who had complete control over the political, economic, religious, and social facets of French life. Louis was more successful than his predecessors in centralizing the state and phasing out the remnants of feudalism, a system that endowed the noble class with significant power and influence.

One way that Louis was able to diminish the strength of the nobility was by requiring their presence at his court in Versailles. In part, Louis built the Palace of Versailles outside of Paris to compel the members of his court to spend part of the year living there in relative isolation from other parts of society. The enormity of the Palace of Versailles provided enough space for most courtiers to live in residence at court. The size of Louis's court ranged from 3,000 to 10,000 people, all of whom were expected to abide by a complex set of rules and customs that he personally established. In return for their service and loyalty, the king's courtiers were awarded royal pensions and received access to some of the state's most privileged ceremonies and celebrations.

The Profile of a Courtier

Because of the humungous size of the Palace of Versailles, there were thousands of courtiers living and working at Versailles at any given time. Among the courtiers there was a rigid social hierarchy that dictated their daily routine and schedule. Some courtiers were not even members of the aristocracy. Louis had approximately 5,000 personal servants and 9,000 soldiers at Versailles. The court required the regular services of a wide array of middlemen and agents for the king, including soldiers, clerks, secretaries, and clergymen. Courtiers at every level sought to obtain valuable information as a way to impress the monarch and gain his admiration. Access to privileged and valuable information was one of the most valuable commodities a courtier could obtain at Versailles.

It was considered a great honor and privilege to serve as a member of the court at any level, and many tried to use their service in court as a means of social mobility. If an ambitious soldier or member of the administration was able to attract the king's attention and gain his favor it could lead to an elevation in social status. During the Middle Ages promotions at court had been frequent, but the divisions between classes at court became more pronounced during the early modern period. By the reign of Louis XIV it had become very difficult for someone who was considered a menial servant to rise through the ranks at court. An unusual exception to this was Alexandre Bontemps, the head valet to Louis XIV. Through his court appointment Bontemps was able to establish his family in the ranks of the nobility.

Noble courtiers were given access to some of the most privileged positions at court. High-ranking members of the aristocracy who enjoyed a specific role or position at court were considered to be “established” at Versailles. The services that established courtiers were expected to perform were traditionally linked to a specific function or office, and were usually inherited or purchased. Unlike members of court who worked in more menial services, such as barbers and valets, noble courtiers, like the secretaries of state, desperately sought Louis’s direct approval.

For courtiers, securing living quarters at the Palace of Versailles was an important aspect of life at court. This ensured a secure place for them to reside during their time at court. At any given time, there were approximately 1,000 nobles and their 4,000 servants living at Versailles. Members of the royal family received apartments in the most desirable areas of the palace, such as the apartments with views of the gardens. The established courtiers typically resided in some of the palace’s outbuildings, such as the Grand Lodgings or the Stables. Not only did private accommodations signify social status and rank, they also prevented courtiers from the need to travel back and forth between Versailles and their primary residences.

Etiquette at the Court of Louis XIV

Relocating the court to Versailles and demanding a lengthy attendance at court were merely two of the ways that Louis wielded control over the nobility. In addition to these requirements Louis established an elaborate and strict set of rules and procedures that courtiers were forced to follow. Following the proper conduct, or *etiquette*, at court was an extremely important part of life as a courtier under Louis XIV. Many courtiers spent the majority of their time at Versailles seeking the approbation of the king. They were obligated to regularly visit the royal residences and were expected to always be available for the king. A courtier’s absence from court was considered a punishable offense.

The rules of etiquette at Versailles guided and shaped the social interactions and structure of the court. They also determined and reflected a courtier’s prestige. For example, the rules dictated who was able to approach a high-ranking member of court, and where and when it was appropriate. These rules applied to nearly all areas of a courtier’s behavior, including when and how to sit down and how to address different members of court. Etiquette also applied to a courtier’s style of dress, and courtiers were always trying to acquire the latest styles of clothing. There was also a complex and ever-changing set of rules for dancing, and courtiers would spend countless hours preoccupied with learning the latest dance steps.

The following list provides a few examples of the intricate rules of etiquette that courtiers were required to follow:

1. People who wanted to speak to the king could not knock on his door. Instead, using the left pinkie finger, they had to gently scratch on the door, until they were granted permission to enter.

2. A lady never held hands or linked arms with a gentleman. Instead, she was to place her hand on top of the gentleman's bent arm as they strolled through the gardens and chambers of Versailles.
3. When a gentleman sat down, he slid his left foot in front of the other, placed his hands on the sides of the chair and gently lowered himself into the chair.
4. Women and men were not allowed to cross their legs in public.
5. When a gentleman passed an acquaintance on the street, he was to raise his hat high off his head until the other person passed.
6. A gentleman was to do no work except writing letters, giving speeches, practicing fencing, or dancing. For pleasure he engaged in hawking, archery, indoor tennis, or hunting.¹

In addition to the complex and fluctuating rules of etiquette that noble courtiers in particular were expected to follow, Louis controlled the behavior of the aristocracy by continually changing or adding accessories to the royal wardrobe. Courtiers were required to observe the latest trends in fashion in order to maintain their rank at court.

¹ The Splendors of Versailles—Teachers' Guide Supplement, ["Customs"](#)