

The Customs of Louis XIV

King Louis XIV (1638–1715) of France was the longest-reigning king in European history. His rule lasted for nearly 73 years. Louis was a member of the European royal House of Bourbon, which ruled France from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century. Monarchs from the Bourbon dynasty ruled in some of the Italian states, including Naples and the Duchy of Parma, from the eighteenth through the nineteenth century, while the royal family of Spain continues to descend from the Bourbon line today.

Louis XIV worked to establish an absolute monarchy during his reign. Unlike other systems of monarchical government, an absolute monarchy endows the king with total and complete power over all matters of the state. The king is not bound by any governmental body, constitution, or set of laws. Louis spent the majority of his reign sculpting the role of the absolute monarch in French society.

Louis chose the sun as his royal emblem, which led to his nickname—the Sun King. He believed that like the sun, his power regulated all living things. He also chose the sun as his symbol because traditionally the sun was connected to Apollo, the mythological god of peace and the arts. Louis encouraged the development of art, music, and literature during his reign. He became the patron and what was called the “Protector” of the Academie Francaise, and directly supported the growth of French literature, including that by writers such as Moliere and La Fontaine. Louis also promoted the visual arts and music and employed several composers to write and play at Versailles.

The symbol of the sun as a source of power, strength, and the arts was embodied in Louis’s Palace of Versailles, a renovated royal hunting lodge just over twelve miles from Paris. When Louis decided to relocate his court to Versailles he transformed it into one of the largest palaces in the world. The palace’s ostentatious design, with its opulent artwork, architecture, and decorative gardens, was meant to symbolize the strength of Louis’s absolute monarchy. In 1682 the seat of government and the royal court was officially established at the Palace of Versailles.

Louis’s decision to move to Versailles reflected his belief in the political system of absolutism. By moving the seat of government and the members of his court away from the centers of power in Paris, Louis was able to weaken the nobility and increase his control over state and government affairs. Nobles of a certain rank were required to live at Versailles for a portion of every year. Louis hoped this would deter the noble class from creating their own regional power and thereby taking power away from the king. In addition to relocating the seat of power to his new palace outside of Paris, Louis established a complex set of rules, social customs, and a strict form of etiquette to be observed by members of his court. For example, there was a series of rules and ceremonies that accompanied the king’s rising in the morning and retiring in the evening.

The Daily Routine of Louis XIV

Louis's daily routine comprised a detailed schedule that he and the court strictly adhered to. Every day began at 7:30 in the morning with a half hour of official ceremonies performed for the king's rising, or *levee*. The first (or *petit*) levee was observed by physicians and a few privileged and well-liked members of the court. During this first levee Louis was washed, his hair was combed, and every other day he was shaved. The next phase was the grand levee, which was observed by approximately 100 of the kingdom's most important men. During this time the king was clothed and received his breakfast. At 10:00 the king and those who had attended the levees left Louis's apartment and entered the Hall of Mirrors for a formal procession. Crowds would gather to try to see the king and potentially present him with a formally written request. Afterwards Louis would attend mass in the Royal Chapel for approximately thirty minutes.

Around 11:00 in the morning Louis met with ministers from different councils, including the Council of State, the Royal Council of Finances, and the Dispatch (or Religious) Council. At 1:00 p.m. Louis was scheduled to dine by himself in his bedchamber, although oftentimes he invited members of his court to accompany him. Starting at 2:00 the king would engage in some type of physical activity. This was traditionally either a promenade through the gardens or a hunt on the grounds of Versailles or in the neighboring woodlands.

In the evening, starting at 6:00, Louis would enjoy some nighttime entertainment, which might include a symphony or an opera. Afterwards Louis often signed official letters or documents and visited his wife Madame de Maintenon in her apartments. At 10:00 the royal family enjoyed the Grand Public Supper, which was attended and observed by members of the court. After supper Louis paid tribute to the ladies of the court and then withdrew to his chambers, where he was free to spend some intimate time with his family and close friends. At night, the same rituals that took place in the morning occurred in reverse, and were referred to as the *couchees*.

The intricate routine and etiquette established under King Louis XIV was expected to continue after his death. However, both Louis XV and Louis XVI disliked the tedious and demanding ceremonies and tried to find respite from them as often as possible.