

# Louis XIV's Use of Fashion to Control the Nobility and Express Power

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Descendants of the king, called princes of the blood, and military generals seeking power and influence began the second phase of the French civil war, known as the *Fronde des nobles*, in 1650, early in Louis XIV's lifetime. Longer and bloodier than the initial rebellion begun by the Parlement of Paris, it had a greater impact on the young Louis. In the revolt, the princes of the blood attempted to take away the monarch's power through legislative acts, and then seize it for themselves. Ultimately, the Fronde lost much of its momentum after Louis XIV's coming-of-age and coronation. The French Wars of Religion, another destabilizing civil war, had only recently ended in 1598. The religious wars lasted for thirty years and shook the nobility's and Europe's belief in the king's strength. The instability of the throne when Louis XIV ascended to it led him to turn to fashion and its established significance to control the nobility and express his power to them and the rest of Europe.

Louis chose fashion to express his power both to his nobles and the rest of the world. The proper dress alone was supposed "to encourage loyalty, satisfy vanity, [and] impress the outside world."<sup>1</sup> With this notion already in place, Louis made certain both himself and his courtiers wore expensive clothes. He enshrined fashion's importance among the elite by making it an integral part of their etiquette as well as an indicator of their wealth due to its high cost. It is debated whether Louis stressed fashion to the extent he did to send his nobles into debt, to distract them from scheming or for an entirely different motive. It has been argued that Louis had to pay for any debt his nobles acquired and therefore would not encourage debt.<sup>2</sup> However, the general consensus places his motivations on an attempt to send as many nobles as possible into debt in order to have greater control over their actions.

The art style of the time was baroque, a gaudy and elaborate style that contained precisely the elements Louis needed to enchant and suppress his nobles. Baroque was also a style he could easily draw on, as his court was already familiar with it. Louis also chose to dress in bright colors instead of somber blacks, because although black cloth was extremely expensive, it represented sobriety and piety, and Louis was not particularly restrained nor conservative in terms of religion until later in his reign: he held large parties, stayed up late gambling, and ate extravagant amounts of food.<sup>3</sup> In this vein, he introduced red heels to draw attention to the feet. They also served as a symbol for "the elevation of his court above the rest of humanity."<sup>4</sup> Red heels eventually became one of the most popular and widespread trends in Europe. Even William III of Orange, one of Louis's most hostile enemies after Louis attacked the Dutch Republic, wore red heels.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike many courts in Europe at the time, Louis required a different code of dress for each formal event. Most monarchs set a single code for all occasions, in order to keep clothing inexpensive, whereas Louis's system sent many into bankruptcy.<sup>6</sup> One of the most expensive festivities was the carrousel, to which nobles came clad in the most splendid costumes they could design.<sup>7</sup> If bankruptcy was Louis's intent, he used fashion in events like these to impose it. Debt severely limited the nobles' financial power and allowed Louis to further manipulate his nobility and empower himself.

The highest elites flocked to the court of Versailles because they "believed that mere physical proximity to the monarch... would elevate [them] to a higher social level" and the king spent almost all of his time at court.<sup>8</sup> It was therefore necessary for nobles who wanted to remain important to attend the balls and festivities Louis staged and to spend outrageous amounts of money on new clothing. Eventually, most courtiers fell into debt. If they wanted to remain within the court, they were required to ask for a loan from the king. The king would only grant them a loan, or even hear their request for the loan, if they had spent a sufficient amount of time at court.<sup>9</sup> This endless cycle kept the nobles trapped at Versailles and focused on wearing the proper and most fashionable clothing, which led them to be both too poor and too preoccupied to revolt.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Philip Mansel, *Dressed to Rule: Royal and Court Costume from Louis XIV to Elizabeth II* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Mansel, *Dressed to Rule*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Alicia M. Annas and Anne Ratzki-Kraatz, comp., *An Elegant Art*, ed. Edward Maeder (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1983), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Olivier Bernier, *Louis XIV: A Royal Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 102.

<sup>8</sup> Annas and Ratzki-Kraatz, *An Elegant Art*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Bernier, *Louis XIV*, 103.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

Louis XIV chose fashion as his means of influence because it both demonstrated the wearer's wealth and took it away, as fashion was inherently expensive, difficult to maintain, and impractical. Not all clothing was uncomfortable – some aspects were designed specifically to be comfortable – yet much of it was painful or difficult to wear. Shoes were narrow, gowns with wide hips fit only uncomfortably into chairs, hats swept the frames of modestly sized doors, and the lace, ribbons, feathers, and mountains of cloth that accompanied all fashionable attire necessitated close attention to dining etiquette and how one walked in public spaces.<sup>11</sup> For certain occasions French noblewomen were required to wear the *grand habit de cour*, a dress with a long train.<sup>12</sup> The longer the train, the more elite the wearer and the more difficult the train was to manage.<sup>13</sup> Despite the impracticality of the dress's train and sleeves, which required the wearer to bare her shoulders in both mid-winter's cold and summer's sun – something which could easily damage her delicate complexion – the dress held a high place in fashion.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, higher ranking ladies wore the tightest and most restrictive corsets.<sup>15</sup> Because of the extremes of these outfits, in order to appear elegant, nobles devoted many hours to practicing such simple acts as walking and sitting. Should a lady drop her fan or handkerchief, though it would have been inappropriate for her to retrieve it regardless, it would be physically impossible for her to bend over. She would have “relied on a servant or gentleman to pick it up.”<sup>16</sup> Her reliance on others emphasized both her delicacy and the fact that she had enough money to hire someone to do everything for her.

A fashionable image, however, did not require inconvenience or discomfort, as nobles could demonstrate their wealth through the acquisition of expensive but comfortable clothing. The lacing of a corset was placed in front of the busk to keep it from rubbing against the skin.<sup>17</sup> Clothing could also be made for the ease of dressing. Aiguillettes, thin strips of iron, were placed inside the ends of ribbons to keep them from fraying and to make it easier to thread them through loops.<sup>18</sup> Well-designed and properly laced corsets improved a lady's posture and showcased her figure, without the lady putting in much effort.<sup>19</sup> Every added comfort increased the cost, but the expense of these costumes came mainly from the difficulty in making the material and then assembling the outfits. Lace took long periods of time to weave and only nobles could afford to buy it in large quantities.<sup>20</sup> In addition, it was difficult to first create a repeating pattern by hand and then align the pattern to make the final outfit appear seamless.<sup>21</sup> The best dresses were custom fitted, especially at the waist and shoulders and with consideration for the wearer's height.<sup>22</sup> The more care put into the outfit, the more it cost. Therefore the elite nobles strived to own expensive gowns, jackets and vests, even if they did not always have the money.

Nobles' clothes were also so expensive because of the amount of material needed to make them. Such elaborate garb required many yards of cloth. Despite the occasional skintight garment, such as bodices and breeches, most clothing overflowed with fabric. Skirts, which exaggerated the frame until the nineteenth century, always required copious amounts of fabric. To retain the skirts' huge size, women wore several petticoats and layers of underwear underneath them. Sleeves were also puffed and often, “paned out and tied with ribbons into a series of puffs as virago sleeves.”<sup>23</sup> Even breeches, which were known for being skintight, could become masses of cloth. As the amount of cloth used in an outfit increased, the price increased with it.

When possible, nobles dressed their servants in reasonably fashionable clothing to show they possessed the money to buy additional costumes, especially during times of court mourning. Originally, only the elite were allowed to take part in mourning, but it was eventually extended to “all ‘persons of quality’ ... [and later] to the general public.”<sup>24</sup> Nobles were certain to supply their servants with quality garments during this time. The extension of fashion to the lower class brought even the peasants directly under Louis's influence, as well as bankrupting the nobles.

The nobles' careful crafting of their image relied not only on wearing expensive clothes, but also on keeping them immaculate. When ladies applied makeup to their face or powder to their hair, they wore a dressing jacket to

<sup>11</sup> Erin Anapol, Vania Osterland, and Kaitlyn Zydel, “Fashion, Authority and Portrait Engraving as a Courtly Art,” University of Miami College of Arts & Sciences, accessed December 16, 2010, <http://www.as.miami.edu/art/art/arh-printmaking-history.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Mansel, *Dressed to Rule*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Annas and Ratzki-Kraatz, *An Elegant Art*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>17</sup> Avril Hart and Susan North, *Historical Fashion in Detail: The 17th and 18th Century* (London: V&A Publications, 2007), 12.

<sup>18</sup> Hart and North, *Historical Fashion in Detail*, 138.

<sup>19</sup> Annas and Ratzki-Kraatz, *An Elegant Art*, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Hart and North, *Historical Fashion in Detail*, 107.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>22</sup> Hart and North, *Historical Fashion in Detail*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Nicole Kipar, “Female Baroque Clothing,” Nicole Kipar's Late 17th Century Clothing History, accessed December 17, 2010, [http://www.kipar.org/baroque-costumes/costumes\\_female.html](http://www.kipar.org/baroque-costumes/costumes_female.html).

<sup>24</sup> Mansel, *Dressed to Rule*, 16.

protect their gowns from any stray cosmetics.<sup>25</sup> Under their luxurious outer garments, courtiers wore “an unending array of chemises, petticoats, fichus and laves” in order to keep the outer garments clean from any sweats or oils on their body.<sup>26</sup> Ideally, nobles never partook in activities that would require them to clean their clothing, as they were not farmers or laborers. The most exerting task for a woman was walking in the gardens and for a man, taking part in a hunt. Though reality did not always reflect this, it was important for it appear that it did. The red heels introduced by Louis XIV especially demonstrated the need to avoid appearing unclean. If one wore something as eye catching as red heels, the heels could certainly never be dirty, and if they became so, there had to be someone to clean them.<sup>27</sup> Such clothing bespoke the idea that the wearer had a host of servants to dress them, button buttons, tie ribbons, lace corsets and keep everything in pristine order. It also implied that the wearer had a long list of people to create the clothing and synthesize the full outfit, including a “wigmaker, barber, tailor, jeweler, and perfumer.”<sup>28</sup> Even if a noble did not have such a sartorial retinue, the grander his clothes, the more the noble appeared to be able to afford all these services and have the time devote to the upkeep of his appearance. Louis understood it was already established that owning expensive clothing and appearing idle made one appear powerful. He strengthened these beliefs so that courtiers would be more focused on fashion than they had ever been in the past, constantly buying new clothing, spending money, and keeping their attire in order.

Louis designated the nobles whom he favored in court by allowing them to attend his morning dressing and evening undressing ceremonies, generating competition among them as they fought to be among the chosen few. These lengthy occasions also allowed the nobles a substantial amount of time to make requests of the king. The privilege of attending his dressing and undressing became extremely desirable, as it was otherwise difficult to find the time to speak with the king. One of the few other opportunities of gaining an audience was as Louis walked down the hall to a political meeting, at which point they would have very little time to address him. Louis also only granted an audience if he thought the noble was worthy enough.<sup>29</sup> The select few present at his dressing and undressing were already deemed worthy of his attention, an advantage for which nobles always competed.

Louis also designed a blue silk jacket, the *justaucorps à brevet*, embroidered in silver and gold, which only his most favored courtiers were permitted to wear.<sup>30</sup> Only fifty nobles at a time were approved to wear this highly fashionable piece of clothing, which meant that even those who should have by birth been placed among the king’s favorites had to fight for it. As an additional benefit, those with permission to wear the jacket could “follow the King on his hunt whenever the wearer wanted.”<sup>31</sup> In order to have the chance to rise in society, aristocrats had to spend much of their time at court in fashionable dress.

Louis continued to accentuate fashion’s importance through more official means. He created the *grand maitre de la garderobe du roi*, “the only new office which he created in his own household.”<sup>32</sup> The office oversaw the care of the king’s clothing, which was stored across many rooms.<sup>33</sup> In 1668, Louis passed an edict that required his courtiers to remain fashionable.<sup>34</sup> Although it cannot be certain the law was enforced or attached to any punishment, it served as a reminder to nobles of what was important. Many sumptuary laws dictated who could wear what, reserving velvet for barons, dukes, viscounts, and knights.<sup>35</sup> Those who could afford velvet easily expressed their status.

Louis XIV similarly used propaganda to encourage the nobility’s dependence on and obsession with fashion. Nobles believed that outside appearance reflected not only personality but also social status. The more expensive and fashionable someone’s clothing was, the greater his or her importance.<sup>36</sup> Fairy tales of the time, such as Cinderella and Puss in Boots, reflected the belief that wearing a gorgeous gown or fashionable boots made a character important and heroic.<sup>37</sup> Two French Cinderella stories were published in 1697, one written by Charles Perrault and the other by Marie-Catherine de Barneville, Comtesse d’Aulnoy.<sup>38</sup> D’Aulnoy’s story had an especially strong emphasis on the importance of fashion: effectively, the dress and shoes were the main characters and Cinderella was only there to

<sup>25</sup> Hart and North, *Historical Fashion in Detail*, 52.

<sup>26</sup> Annas and Ratzki-Kraatz, *An Elegant Art*, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Mansel, *Dressed to Rule*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Anapol, Osterland, and Zydel, “Fashion, Authority and Portrait Engraving as a Courtly Art.”

<sup>29</sup> Mounir A. Farah and Andrea Berens Karls, *World History: The Human Experience* (New York: Glencoe/McGraw Hill, 1996), 121-122.

<sup>30</sup> Bernier, *Louis XIV*, 101.

<sup>31</sup> Mansel, *Dressed to Rule*, 56.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>34</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, “Louis XIV and the Court at Versailles,” *Collections Online*, accessed October 23, 2010, <http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=epage;id=500842;type=803>.

<sup>35</sup> Anapol, Osterland, and Zydel, “Fashion, Authority and Portrait Engraving as a Courtly Art.”

<sup>36</sup> Mansel, *Dressed to Rule*, xv, quoted from Queen Victoria of England.

<sup>37</sup> Mansel, *Dressed to Rule*, xiii.

<sup>38</sup> Joan DeJean, *The Essence of Style* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 100-101.

carry them. When Cinderella comes to the ball, she never even meets the prince, but simply shows off her glamorous gown and “red velvet mules completely encrusted with pearls,” a pair of glamorous shoes she would never have intended to lose.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, in Perrault’s story, Cinderella slips out of her shoe in an attempt to lure the prince after her, as she knows its beauty will attract him.<sup>40</sup> D’Aulnoy extends the obsession with fashion to men as well, as Prince Charming finds Cinderella’s lost slipper and becomes entranced by its petit size and exquisite craft.<sup>41</sup> He becomes enamored of the shoe, not eating or leaving his room for weeks. The doctors his desperate parents send for declare that the Prince is in love, and Prince Charming himself states that it is the shoe with which he is in love.<sup>42</sup> D’Aulnoy’s story centers on Parisian fashion, which she makes magical and desirable with her fairytale setting.

About the same time, Charles Perrault wrote the story of *Puss in Boots*. In the story, the youngest son of a miller is presented with his inheritance: a cat. Puss is not particularly extraordinary until the son presents him with a pair of boots and a pouch.<sup>43</sup> Once Puss has these, he is able to perform heroic deeds and impress the king with gifts. When the king is riding in the woods, the cat tricks him into believing the miller’s son is a Marquis, whereupon the king gives the miller’s son a set of expensive clothes (Puss explains that the Marquis’s have been stolen). Eventually the miller’s son marries the king’s daughter and the cat becomes a *grand seigneur*.<sup>44</sup> Just as Cinderella transforms into a high-born lady when she wears a gorgeous gown, Puss becomes witty and courageous and able to procure many great privileges for his master when given a pair of boots. The miller’s son’s relationship with the king is also established when the king presents the son with the clothes of a courtier. These clothes transform the peasant into a noble, despite the numerous social mores of which no peasant would have knowledge. Perrault’s story emphasizes “the virtues of dress, countenance, and youth to win the heart of a princess.”<sup>45</sup> Perrault also mentions, briefly, that the truly noble need not work for a living. When Puss jumps up onto an ogre’s roof in fear, he finds it difficult because his boots are not suited for walking on tiles. The detail emphasizes that Puss’s boots would never be designed for labor because the nobility have no need to work.

Perrault wrote many other stories, including *Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Tom Thumb*, and *Ricky of the Tuft*. All of his stories include similar messages; Perrault calls on women to be beautiful, fashionable, and to properly maintain their attire. Any woman of importance or good qualities in Perrault’s stories possesses beauty or, as in the case of Cinderella, is able to swathe herself in beauty.<sup>46</sup> Men in his stories are ambitious and clever, always climbing the social ladder.<sup>47</sup> Puss especially embodies the perfect bourgeois, “who serves his master with complete devotion and diligence” and is therefore ultimately rewarded.<sup>48</sup> Perrault encourages men to be loyal to the king and serve the king well in order to gain his favor, just as Louis encouraged nobles to do through competition. In his stories Perrault hoped to convey, either by positive or negative examples, the correct mannerisms and personalities of courtiers as well as what material items they would require to achieve power.<sup>49</sup> D’Aulnoy’s *Finette Cendron* and Perrault’s *Le Maître Chat, ou Le Chat Botté* loudly proclaim fashion as influential, important, and all one needs to become rich and powerful.

Louis also extended his rules of fashion down to the middle class in France, thereby including them in his circle of power. Any person who was reasonably well-dressed could enter the Versailles gardens.<sup>50</sup> Instead of excluding those outside of the nobility, Louis extended to them not only the exciting prospect of being in the king’s gardens, but even the possibility of seeing the king. This stressed Louis’s power further as it made it clear that the middle class was willing to save their money just to be in his gardens to see the lavish displays.<sup>51</sup> While in the gardens, they might also see such events like the carousel, which would dazzle and impress them.

The fashions of France soon began to appear all across Europe. Although fashion was not responsible for France’s power, it did make the country appear powerful, through the French court’s magnificence.<sup>52</sup> The court in

<sup>39</sup> DeJean, *The Essence of Style*, 101, quoted from the original Cinderella text by Comtesse d’Aulnoy.

<sup>40</sup> DeJean, *The Essence of Style*, 101.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Jack Zipes, “Setting Standards for Civilization through Fairy Tales: Charles Perrault and his Associates,” in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 25.

<sup>44</sup> Zipes, “Setting Standards for Civilization through Fairy Tales,” 26.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>50</sup> Bernier, *Louis XIV*, 102.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Madeleine Delpierre, *Dress in France in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. Caroline Beamish (London: Yale University Press, 1997), 1.

France was the grandest in Europe: “Paris tailors were considered the best [and]...dolls wearing the latest style extended French fashions” even to hostile and distant capitals such as London and St. Petersburg.<sup>53</sup> Fashion also provided a sense of national identity and patriotism to the wearer.<sup>54</sup> Accepting another country’s fashion was, to an extent, accepting that national identity. Wearing French clothes while in England or Germany or elsewhere showed respect for France. Fashionable and expensive clothing was already a sign of power, and the spread of French fashion across Europe and the pride nobles all over Europe took in wearing it was Louis’s way of proving that France and its monarch were strong.

Fashion was also important for a more practical reason: the employment of the lower class. Louis XIV banned foreign cloth, lace, and trimmings, which meant fabric had to be made in France by the French.<sup>55</sup> This led to an increase in the amount of velvet and silk made in France and in the workforce in cloth manufacturing.<sup>56</sup> Of all high-fashion materials, lace took the most time and effort to make: a narrow strip of lace alone could take months.<sup>57</sup> Yet, a merchant or a noble’s servant who scrimped and saved could buy a small strip eventually.<sup>58</sup> Thus, once again, Louis included the middle class in the fashion of the day. The assembly of clothing also took time and money. A court gown alone required three people – the tailor, *couturier* and *marchand de modes* – and its completion took several days.<sup>59</sup> The French fashion industry employed roughly “a third of wage-earners in Paris...It employed 969,863 individuals compared to only 38,000 in the iron and steel industry.”<sup>60</sup> Periods of court morning were said to be so drawn out and to involve so many participants that those who made clothing, which included a substantial amount of the population, struggled to survive because the nobility did not buy new, expensive clothing during those times.<sup>61</sup> Thus clothing, to an extent, aided in the circulation of wealth.<sup>62</sup> Although it was certainly not Louis’s main motivation or even necessarily something he often kept in mind, the extravagant fashion kept many people employed, which helped to empower France.

Across France and Europe, expensive, impractical, flawless, and often uncomfortable clothing was the absolute symbol of status. It had been believed for centuries and would continue to be so after Louis XIV died. Louis, who took an unstable throne in a divided country, used many techniques to unite France and make it stronger. He chose fashion to control nobles; it gave them something to flaunt and be proud of, and it consumed their time and money. He himself admired fashion and how it could make a person appear elegant and powerful, both physically and symbolically. For Louis, fashion was not just something for the body; it was his way to impressively clothe and present his country to the rest of Europe.

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<sup>53</sup> Mansel, *Dressed to Rule*, 8.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>56</sup> Kipar, Nicole. “Male Accessories,” Nicole Kipar’s Late 17th Century Clothing History, accessed December 17, 2010, [http://www.kipar.org/baroque-costumes/costumes\\_male\\_accessories.html](http://www.kipar.org/baroque-costumes/costumes_male_accessories.html).

<sup>57</sup> Annas and Ratzki-Kraatz, *An Elegant Art*, 107.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Mansel, *Dressed to Rule*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

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