



CHÂTEAU DE VERSAILLES
CENTRE DE RECHERCHE

SYMPOSIUM – Call for papers

The Myth of Versailles and European Courts, 18th and 19th centuries

At the end of the feudal age, the royal and princely courts represented a European phenomenon in terms of political, social and cultural content: monopolisation of power for the benefit of a single figure, gathering of a group of individuals around a sovereign and their family (princes, courtiers, domestic and military officers), development of a specific sociability and way of life, governed by ceremonial procedures, the search for ostentation and entertainment. These courts were as numerous and diverse as the dynasties that ruled them; nevertheless, some acquired a prescriptive value, such as the Court of Burgundy in the 15th century and the Italian courts of the 16th century. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it was the French Court of the Bourbons, and in particular that of Louis XIV, that became archetypal: an illusionary world, based on a reality observed and experienced by the contemporaries of the kings of France, was constructed and maintained for a long time by European monarchies, up until their demise for the most part in the early 20th century, at a time when political configurations were changing, shifting from shared power with assemblies to the establishment of republics.

The two contradictory yet complementary elements that characterise the idea of myth – the real and the reconstruction of the real – are best embodied, in France at least, at Versailles. Both a royal residence, a mode of government and a social whole, Versailles is an architectural, administrative and spectacular expression of the “absolute” power associated with the figure of Louis XIV. The objective of the programme “[Court identities and the myth of Versailles in Europe: perception, adherence and rejection \(18th-19th centuries\)](#)”, which will conclude this conference, is to analyse the modus operandi of the myth of Versailles in the monarchic Europe of the 18th and 19th centuries. Two fundamental questions must therefore be raised: how did the illusion surrounding Versailles among the contemporaries at court under the Ancien Régime and later visitors in the 19th century develop and what did it entail? And reciprocally, how did this illusion establish itself in the courts of Europe, with all possible nuances, ranging from imitation to rejection and simple adherence? The focus of this conference will therefore be twofold: understanding how the different aspects specific to the identity of Versailles have fuelled an illusion, but also discerning how this illusion gave rise to other accomplishments, whether architectural, ritual or political.

Key areas of study

1. The production of the myth, from the real to the imaginary: creation, transformations, challenges (17th-19th centuries)

The myth of Versailles spread across the courts of Europe until the decline of parish civilisation in the early 20th century. It was built up through various accounts given by foreign visitors who established a personal relationship with the Bourbon Court, whether as contemporary witnesses direct from royal Versailles until 1789, or as curious visitors to the remains of a lost time, moved by a wide range of feelings, from nostalgia to castigation. This myth was developed on the basis of illusion, fed by an observed or imagined reality. It differs from the objective historical commentary: it is the subjectivity of the “visitor” that gives rise to the myth.

In October 2019, the Centre de recherche du château de Versailles made available a database entitled “[Visitors to Versailles](#)” among its online resources. One of the aims of the conference will be to draw on this body of works in various ways:

•A chronological approach:

- Impressions of royal Versailles: contemporaries of the first Versailles of Louis XIV, changing views under Louis XV then Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, taking into account the legacy of Louis XIV as well as the changes to parish life and the spatial planning (work in the grounds, retreat to the Petit Trianon, creation of an English landscape garden, etc.).
- Versailles viewed after the Revolution: during the Empire, during the Restoration and in particular during the July Monarchy, a pivotal period that marked the shift from illusion to history with the construction of the musée de l’Histoire de France by Louis-Philippe and the accompanying literature (Alexandre de Laborde, etc...).

•A sociological approach: determine which actors participated in the development of the myth and acted as a vector. To understand their expectations and their perspectives, the discussion could cover the different criteria that forge that specific identity of visitors: their geographical origins, their social background, their language and their political, religious and national culture.

•A thematic approach :

- Ceremonial customs most often observed: the lever/coucher, public meals, mass, the movements of the king and the royal family between these various moments, as well as festivities and entertainment, etc.
- Locations that draw particular attention: the château façades, the Grande galerie, the Chambers of the king and queen, the State apartments, the chapel, the opera, the Petit and the Grand Trianon, the gardens and their ponds.
- More general elements that visitors systematically associate with Versailles: water system and the Machine de Marly, pomp and extravagant expenditure, the vanity of the kings of France and the idolatry of their subjects, Marie-Antoinette and her rural life in Trianon, and, after 1789, the consequences of the Revolution (damage, pillaging, sales, departure of the royal family for Paris).

2. The applications of the myth, from the imaginary to the real: receipt and vagaries of the Versailles paradigm (18th-20th centuries)

The second research focus aims to understand the effectiveness of this illusion of Versailles. By connecting the myth, as it was invented by visitors, to the accomplishments it gave rise to, we will seek to understand how a “model” works and can (or not) become the norm. We therefore wish to examine the impact of Versailles on the courts of Europe by comparing the conduct and structure of these courts with the perceptions of their citizens with regard to the Versailles paradigm. With this in mind, the ways in which Versailles was experienced, transcribed, glamorised, denigrated, accepted, copied or refuted must be identified: how did the myth come about? Did it stimulate practices and creations, participate in the creation of a European and cosmopolitan spirit, while being both admired and hated? And if so, what were the motivations behind this? Why use Versailles as inspiration or conversely, reject it or remain unmoved?

Nevertheless, the aim is not to spark a comparative study, point by point, between a “model” and its possible “imitation” which would seek only to compare factual data. On the contrary: rather than approaching the question from the point of view of influence, we will consider it from the point of view of interactions, in order to understand the interplay between an illusion and its concrete applications in architecture, parish organisation, social and artistic practices (protocol, dance, theatre, music). The objective is to understand the underlying rationale, the motivations and the issues that presided over these dynamics of ownership: why in some cases draw on Versailles rather than on competing models, and conversely, why in other cases favour antagonistic trends over the Versailles paradigm? We must also ensure that this question is differentiated from that of a more global “French model”: which elements strike us at the Court of Versailles specifically?

Particular interest will go to proposals that examine European courts in the 18th century and even more so the 19th century, when Versailles had lost its initial vocation. We are notably looking for studies on the following themes:

- The **means** and **challenges** of variations on the theme of Versailles, as at Lunéville, Caserte and Herrenchiemsee.
- The **legacy of Versailles in France**, in the Imperial courts and in the ceremonial functioning of the Third Republic.
- The role of the **myth** of Versailles on **the European stage throughout the 19th century**, particularly with regard to **recent monarchies**: the Kingdom of Belgium (1831), the Kingdom of Greece (1833), the unified Kingdom of Italy (1861), the Kingdom of Romania (1881), the Tsardom of Bulgaria (1908), the Kingdom of Montenegro (1910), among others. The 19th century was the true century of courts, whose multiplication went hand in hand with the rise of nationalism. It was also the century of the dominance of new “models” – Prussian and Russian, in particular – to which Versailles could be compared.

The symposium will take place on **17, 18 and 19 June 2021** in the auditorium of the Palace of Versailles.

To take part

Proposals for papers must be sent to Flavie Leroux (flavie.leroux@chateauversailles.fr), before 31 October 2020. They must include in 5,000 characters maximum, the title of the paper, the content of the paper (point of study, method used, sources used), biographical information and the applicant's contact details. These proposals for papers will be examined by the coordination committee and the steering committee. Applicants will receive a response regarding their participation in the conference by the end of December 2020.

Team

Joint coordination

- **Gérard Sabatier**, Professor Emeritus at the université de Grenoble II, project manager for the programme “Court identities and the myth of Versailles in Europe...”
- **Mathieu da Vinha**, Scientific Director of the Centre de recherche du château de Versailles
- **Flavie Leroux**, research fellow for the programme “Court identities and the myth of Versailles in Europe...”

Steering committee

- **Antonio Álvarez-Ossorio**, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid,
- **Maciej Forycki**, Uniwersytet Adam Mickiewicz, Poznań,
- **Mark Hengerer**, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich,
- **Christine Jeanneret**, Centre de recherche du château de Versailles et Danish National Museum, Frederiksborg, Denmark,
- **Jean-Marie Le Gall**, université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne,
- **Francine-Dominique Liechtenhan**, Centre national de la recherche scientifique,
- **Philip Mansel**, The Society for Court Studies, président du GIP-CRCV,
- **Andrea Merlotti**, Centro Studi La Venaria Reale,
- **Friedrich Polleroß**, Universität Wien,
- **José Luis Sancho Gaspar**, Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid,
- **Marie-Christine Skuncke**, Uppsala Universitet,
- **Jonathan Spangler**, Manchester Metropolitan University,
- **Thomas W. Gaetgens**, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.