

Marie Antoinette

The teenage queen was embraced by France in 1770. Twenty-three years later, she lost her head to the guillotine (but she never said, 'Let them eat cake').

Adapted from the article by Richard Covington published in the *Smithsonian Magazine*, November, 2006

With the possible exception of the Corsican-born Napoleon, another outsider who overstayed his welcome, no one haunts French history like the Austrian (Hapsburg) princess. The frivolous, high-spirited tomboy who arrived at Versailles at age 14 was quickly embraced by her subjects. Yet by the time of her execution 23 years later, she was reviled.

Marie Antoinette is engaged to marry the grandson of Louis XV

Dispatched to Vienna in 1768 by Louis XV to tutor his grandson's future wife, the Abbé de Vermond encountered an easily distracted 13-year-old who could barely read or write her native German, much less French. But 'her character, her heart, are excellent,' he reported. He found her 'more intelligent than has been generally supposed,' but since 'she is rather lazy and extremely frivolous, she is hard to teach.' Blessed with thick, ash-blond hair, large, greyish blue eyes and a radiant complexion, Marie Antoinette possessed a delicate beauty, marred only slightly by a pouty Hapsburg lower lip. For her May 1770 wedding, she was escorted to France amid an entourage that included 57 carriages, 117 footmen and 376 horses.

She met Louis XV waiting with his grandson outside their carriage, and curtsied, instantly winning over the king, who kissed her. Perhaps intimidated by her forwardness, the 15-year-old bridegroom gave her a perfunctory kiss, then hardly glanced at her as she chatted away with the king on the ride to the château. The awkward, myopic heir apparent suffered from feelings of unworthiness, despite a facility for languages and a passion for history, geography and science.

Louis Auguste de Bourbon and Marie Antoinette were married on May 16, 1770, in the royal chapel at the Palace of Versailles. The next day, news that the union had not been consummated spread through the court. It was only the beginning; by all accounts, the marriage went unconsummated for seven years. By this time, Louis XV had died (of smallpox, in 1774) and his teenage grandson had acceded to the most powerful throne in Europe.



After encouraging her daughter to 'lavish more caresses' on her husband, Maria Theresa dispatched her son, Joseph II, as she put it, to 'stir up this indolent spouse.' Whatever he said apparently did the trick; in any case, the couple wrote to thank him. Many historians conclude that Louis suffered from phimosis, a physiological handicap that made sex painful, and that he eventually had surgery to correct the problem. Biographer Antonia Fraser, however, contends that the pair were simply, as Joseph reported to his brother Leopold, 'two complete blunderers.'

Life at the Palace of Versailles

Added to any sexual frustration Marie Antoinette may have felt was her homesickness ('Madame, My very dear mother,' she wrote, 'I have not received one of your dear letters without having the tears come to my eyes.') and her rebellion against court etiquette ('I put on my rouge and wash my hands in front of the whole world,' she complained in 1770 of a daily ritual at which dozens of courtiers hovered). She sought escape in masked balls, opera, theatre and gambling. 'I am terrified of being bored,' the 21-year-old queen confessed in October 1777 to her trusted adviser, the Austrian ambassador. Where Louis was indecisive, thrifty and over-serious, Marie Antoinette was quick to make up her mind, extravagant and light-hearted. He loved being alone, tinkering with locks; she craved the social whirl. When Louis went to bed, around 11 p.m., Marie Antoinette was just revving up for a night of festivities. By the time she awoke, around 11 a.m., Louis had been up for hours. 'My tastes are not the same as the King's, who is only interested in hunting and his metal-working,' the queen wrote to a friend in April 1775. And what exorbitant tastes she had! She bought a pair of diamond bracelets that cost as much as a Paris mansion. She sported towering bouffant hairdos, including the 'inoculation pouf,' a forbidding confection that featured a club striking a snake in an olive tree (representing the triumph of science over evil) to celebrate her success in persuading the king to be vaccinated against smallpox. Informed of her daughter's behaviour, Maria Theresa fired off letter after letter warning Marie Antoinette to mend her ways. 'You lead a dissipated life,' the mother railed in 1775. 'I hope I shall not live to see the disaster that is likely to ensue.'

Storm clouds

Cloistered in the luxury of Versailles, the royal couple was oblivious to their subjects' plight. A failed harvest had made the price of grain skyrocket, and mobs were rioting in the streets of Paris, demanding cheap bread. Crushing taxes were also taking their toll on the populace. Meanwhile, the queen gambled recklessly, ordered expensive jewellery and clothes and spent a fortune on creating her own private domain at Versailles—the Petit Trianon. The three-story neo classical château was originally built on the grounds of Versailles in 1762-68 by Louis XV for his mistress Madame de Pompadour. Louis XVI had given it to Marie Antoinette in June 1774, a few days after he became king, when she asked for a hideaway. ('This pleasure house is yours,' he told her). Palace gossip spun outrageous tales about 'scandalous' and 'perverse' goings-on at the Trianon, giving anti-monarchist pamphleteers material for salacious underground cartoons. How could the queen spend the nation's money, at a time of financial crisis, on her private hideaway, critics asked. But Marie Antoinette seemed blind to the criticism. She directed architect Richard Mique and artist Hubert Robert to conjure up a sylvan fantasy of artificial streams, grottoes and winding paths. In 1784, the two designers created what, from the outside, appeared to be a hamlet (the Hameau) of cracked and tumbledown cottages, which, in fact, were appointed with comfortable couches, stoves and billiard tables. A working farm completed what a critic satirized as 'this expensive pastoral comedy'. The

overall effect of the Petit Trianon was—and remains—quaintly charming, but the total bill, including the Hameau, came to more than two million francs (the equivalent of more than \$6 million today). To this day, the Petit Trianon—silk hangings, wall coverings, porcelain dinner services, furniture—bears Marie Antoinette’s stamp, with flower-mad motifs in cornflower blue, lilac and green.



1789 - The Revolution begins

Historians trace the French Revolution to that summer of 1789. On July 14, some 900 Parisian workers, shopkeepers and peasants—fearing that the king, who at the queen’s urging had moved a large number of troops to Versailles and Paris, would dissolve the representative National Assembly—stormed the Bastille prison to seize arms and ammunition. Marie Antoinette tried to convince her husband to put down the insurrection, but not wanting to provoke an all-out conflict, he refused, effectively ceding Paris to the revolutionaries. The Comte de Mirabeau, leader of the increasingly anti-monarchist National Assembly, observed that the queen had become ‘the only man at court.’ In the weeks that followed, the Assembly did away with age-old privileges for the aristocracy and clergy, declared a free press, got rid of serfdom and proclaimed the Rights of Man. A little before noon on October 5, a mob of several thousand market women, armed with pikes and sickles, set out from Paris’ Hôtel de Ville (City Hall) on a 12-mile trek to Versailles to protest a lack of jobs and the high cost of bread. By evening, thousands more, some carrying guns, had joined them in front of the palace. After dithering over what to do, Louis finally decided to seek refuge in the distant Rambouillet château. But when his coachmen rolled out the royal carriages, the crowd cut the horses’ harnesses, stranding him and his family. Around five o’clock on the morning of the sixth, rebels surged toward the queen’s bedroom, killing two guards. A terrified Marie Antoinette leapt out of bed and raced to the king’s apartments. Louis, meanwhile, had dashed to her bedroom to rescue her, but finding her gone, doubled back with their son to join her and their daughter in the dining hall of his quarters. By this time, the Marquis de Lafayette, commander of the National Guard, had arrived with Guard troops and temporarily restored order. But the throng, swollen to some 10,000 people, began clamouring to take Louis to Paris. When someone cried out for the queen to show herself on the balcony, she stepped forward, curtsying with such aplomb that the mob grew silent, then burst into cries of ‘Long live the queen!’ But Marie Antoinette sensed that the reprieve would be short-lived. Retreating inside, she broke down; ‘They are going to force us to go to Paris, the King and me, preceded by the heads of our bodyguards on pikes,’ she said. Her words proved prophetic. Within hours, the triumphant procession—indeed with the guards’ heads on pikes—was escorting the captive royal family to the old Tuileries palace in the capital.

1792 - France is declared a Republic – what becomes of the former Royal Family?

For the former Royal Family, now prisoners in the Temple tower, the next two months passed improbably in something like domestic tranquility. While the King schooled his seven year-old son, Louis Charles, the Queen gave their 13-year-old daughter, Marie Thérèse, history lessons, played chess with her husband, did needlework and even sang at the harpsichord. Then, on November 20th 1792, Louis' letters to foreign powers plotting counter-revolution against the new French Republic, were discovered in a strongbox hidden in the Tuileries. Louis was taken from his family, locked up on the floor below them and, on December 26, put on trial. Robespierre, a chief architect of the Revolution, and the fiery journalist, Marat were among the many radical leaders who testified against him during a three-week trial. 'It is with regret that I pronounce the fatal truth,' proclaimed Robespierre, 'Louis must die, so that the country may live.' After a majority vote by members of the Convention (Republican Assembly) that Louis had conspired against the state, the former King was condemned to death on January 16th, 1793. He was allowed to spend a few hours with his wife, son, daughter and sister before being led to the guillotine on January 21st and executed before a crowd estimated at 20,000.

Six months later, on August 2nd, the 'Widow Capet', as Marie Antoinette was now known, was transferred to the Conciergerie, a dank prison dubbed 'death's antechamber.' Louis' sister, Elisabeth, Marie Thérèse and Louis Charles remained in the Temple tower. Later that month, the Queen recognized among her visitors a former officer, the Chevalier Alexandre de Rougeville, who dropped at her feet one or two carnations (accounts differ) containing a note that said he would try to rescue her. A guard spotted the note, and when public prosecutor Antoine Fouquier-Tinville learned that Royalists were scheming to free the former Queen, he moved to put her immediately on trial.

Emaciated and pale, Marie Antoinette maintained her composure at the trial, a gruelling 32-hour ordeal carried out over two days. She responded with eloquence to the prosecutor's litany of accusations—she was guilty, he said, of making secret agreements with Austria and Prussia (which had joined with Austria in the war against France), of shipping money abroad to Louis' two younger brothers in exile and of conspiring with these enemies against France. Accused of manipulating the king's foreign policy, she coolly replied: 'To advise a course of action and to have it carried out are very different things.' On the first day of the trial, the prosecution delivered a bombshell, presenting testimony by young Louis that he had sex with his mother and his aunt. (Caught masturbating by his jailer, the boy had invented the story to shift blame onto the two women.) The former queen summoned up a stirring denunciation. 'Nature refuses to answer such a charge brought against a mother,' she replied. 'I appeal in this matter to all the mothers present in court.' The prosecutor's ploy backfired as the audience reacted with abashed silence.

But the trial's conclusion was foregone. Found guilty of treason, the former Queen was sentenced to die. On the eve of her execution, Marie Antoinette wrote a last letter, to her sister-in-law, entreating Elisabeth to forgive young Louis for his accusations and to persuade him not to try to avenge his parents' deaths. 'I am calm,' she reflected, 'as people are whose conscience is clear.' Before the former queen left prison the next morning, October 16th, 1793, the executioner cut off her hair and bound her hands behind her. A priest counselled courage. 'Courage?' Marie Antoinette shot back. 'The moment when my ills are going to end is not the moment when courage is going to fail me.' As an open tumbrel cart carrying the condemned woman rolled through the streets to what is now the Place de la Concorde, Marie Antoinette, two weeks shy of her 38th birthday, but appearing far older, maintained a stoic pose. When the guillotine sliced off her head at 12:15 p.m., thousands of spectators erupted in cheers. Her body was placed in a coffin and tossed into a common grave in a cemetery behind the Church of the Madeleine.

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