

# THE HEYDAYS OF MARIE ANTOINETTE



By Caroline Von Krockow

**M**arie Antoinette was the tender age of fifteen when she married the equally young Louis XVI in 1770. The teenager had to leave her beloved Vienna behind and create a new home in Versailles. In contrast to the Austrian court, which allowed for informal leisure time after the formal receptions in the Hofburg Palace and Schönbrunn, the French daily routine was stricter and more regulated, filled with appointments, prayers and work under the constantly watchful eyes of the king and her three austere aunts (the sisters of Louis XV). This was much to the dismay of our rebellious Dauphine, who craved amusements. But neither her husband, a quiet man who enjoyed hunting and physical activity more than the fair sex, nor her educators like the Comtesse de Noailles who she called "Madame Etiquette" entertained Marie Antoinette. Bored and prisoned in the golden cage of Versailles she wanted to go to Paris, but getting the permission of Louis XV was easier said than done. Finally on Tuesday, 8th June 1773, on this cloudless day the sun shone on her and the Dauphine made her formal entry into the city of light. Her first encounter with the French people made a profound impression on her and she shared her joy with her mother writing that, "we were received with all imaginable honour."



Soon after this first visit, Marie Antoinette at nineteen became Queen. "God help us," nineteen year old Louis XVI exclaimed, "for we are too young to reign." Marie Antoinette by contrast was thrilled and the crown became her brand new toy. A year later the queen had a portrait of herself painted wearing an embroidered gown encrusted with sapphires and a towering ziggurat of powdered hair. When the Empress Marie Theresa received it, she was aghast. "No, this is not the portrait of a Queen of France. This is the portrait of an actress!"

As the youngest daughter of Empress Maria Theresa she did not experience the perhaps necessary pressure and despite the private tutoring could not write properly at the age of ten. Her mother was well aware of Marie Antoinette's unwillingness to dedicate herself to serious matters, that she rarely opened a book and preferred the fleeting pursuit of pleasure and happiness. Dancing, laughing, shopping, her hair, make up, masked balls and playing were her favourite pass times. At the beginning there was still a bit of pressure from "Madame Etiquette" and King Louis XV, but now that she was Queen, what and who should stop her?

After her first visit to the capital Marie Antoinette had conquered Paris, but Paris had also conquered her! She would often drive to this alluring city, officially and 'incognito' to amuse herself at day and night. At the beginning she would still visit the museums, great houses and noteworthy sights, but this soon tired her.

Instead her daytime visits would become more rare and the dress maker Mademoiselle Bertin would go to Versailles to equip the Queen for night time. Her mother, tried to warn her daughter repeatedly. "You know I have always held that it is well to be in the fashion to a reasonable extent, but that one should never be outré in one's dress. A good-looking Queen, endowed with charm, has no need of such follies. I, who love my little Queen and watch her every footstep, cannot hesitate to warn her of her frivolousness in this matter." However, Marie Antoinette shrugged off these warnings and thanks to her shopping addiction the seamstress Mademoiselle Rose Bertin would become quite famous. The Queen adored every detail



of Rose's designs and they became fast friends. But nothing stands alone as more imaginative—and perhaps more excessive—than Bertin's poufs (the material attached to the dresses at hip height at the back to create more volume). Rose designed poufs with many luxurious details. The poufs of the queen were very special and up to three feet high adding lavish amounts of embroideries, jewelry, laces, ribbons and other passementerie. On hats, the adornment was even more inventive, including feathers, fruit and flowers. The staggering expenses that Marie Antoinette incurred were paid for by levies on the Third Estate. The cheerful and coquettish Queen invested in her clothes. Her budget overran on an annual clothing allowance of about \$3.6 million in current spending power and in some years, more than double.

Marie Antoinette's hairstyle was of equal importance to her. The elaborate coiffures were the literal height of fashion and the most extreme examples of the excesses reached during this period. Monsieur Léonard was the king in this department. Again, her mother was alarmed and told her daughter so quite frankly, "I cannot refrain from touching upon the matter which many of the newspapers have brought to my notice. I refer to the way in which you are dressing your hair. They tell me that from the roots on the forehead it rises as much as three feet, and is made higher by the super addition of plumes and ribbons." Indeed Marie Antoinette's hair was sometimes even higher and there could be a boat or an English garden fashioned on top of her head. Obviously, all the fashion victims of Versailles wanted to look like her and sometimes lost everything financially trying to copy her style. Like Marie Antoinette, the aristocrats couldn't pass through the doors of Versailles because their dresses were too voluminous. When they traveled their hairstyles were so big they had to pass their head through the window of their horse coaches. This did not prevent Marie Antoinette or any of her friends from wearing the poufs, ornaments and even houses in their hair.



## SOCIETY

Then what would be a beautiful dress and hair without the matching jewelry? Boehmer and Bassenge were the Harry Winston of the day. From them Marie Antoinette purchased diamonds, rubies and pearls not only for her tiaras, fingers, neck and ears, but also for her hats, hair and dresses. Even her shoes were sparkling with the finest gems.

Another weakness was gambling, which became a serious addiction of the young Queen. Playing for money at Versailles was as innocent a way as passing your evening as billiards or dancing, but not at the stakes Marie Antoinette played. Her gaming tables were heavily laden with gold pieces and her debts grew to exorbitant amounts. Marie Antoinette had been taught to gamble by her mother as a child already and the game was as prevalent in Austria as it was in Versailles. However, as she started to lose more and more money even her mother became alarmed, "Gambling is unquestionably one of the worst pleasures, attracting evil company and giving rise to malicious talk. It allures those who are given to it by the passion for gain, and they are always duped by their desires. Let me beg you, then, my dear daughter, not to give way to this passion."

Then of course masked balls had their irresistible attraction for Marie Antoinette. Like this she could flirt,

gamble and play to her heart's content without being recognized. Quite quickly, scared of being bored Marie Antoinette turned night into day! She lived side by side with her husband and went to bed when he woke up. There were no children for the moment and as her mother reminded her there wouldn't be if she did not adjust her schedule.

Next to Versailles there is a little house, the little Trianon. Louis XVI gave the Petit Trianon and its estate as a gift to his young bride, who rapidly made it her own and set about redecorating the interiors including a Rococo theatre and the exteriors with Anglo-Oriental gardens. Petit Trianon, became her favorite surroundings, where she could pursue all her aforementioned pleasures completely undisturbed and even excel as an actress! The fact that the hamlet was also a functioning farm, a point upon which the Queen insisted, did not mean that she became rural. She did not (as has been speculated) play at being a farming lady at the farm complete with sheep trussed up in ribbons. The queen actually used the hamlet as a place for relaxing walks, hosting plays, small gatherings and parties. Her husband was not always welcome and when he did come he was often encouraged to leave early. Marie Antoinette's secret garden is worth a visit now as it re-opened and has been completely re-furbished in the empire style.

