

# MADAME DU BARRY

By Caroline Von Krockow



Mistresses were prevalent in all European courts, but only in France did they become official *maîtresse-en-titre*, which meant that they were generally well enough born and became part of the court. Louis XIV had several mistresses among them Catherine Bellier, Louise de la Vallière, Anne-Lucie de la Mothe-Houdancourt, the famous Françoise Athénaïs de Rochechouart de Mortemart known as “Madame de Montespan” (she had seven children by Louis XIV), Olympe Mancini, Mademoiselle de Marivault, Marie Mancini and the famous Madame de Maintenon. After the queen Marie Thérèse’s death Madame de Maintenon even married the king in 1684.

Louis XV also had many mistresses like Catherine Éléonore, Françoise de Chalus, Marie Anne de Mailly, Irène du Buisson de Longpré, Marie Anne de Coislin and Madame de Pompadour, who “reigned” for more than twenty years, to name but a few. Madame du Barry only stayed at the court for 5 years, she was Louis XV’s last mistress and her story interests us today.

When Marie Antoinette arrived at the French court she was horrified to discover about the acknowledgement of Jeanne du Barry. Marie Antoinette’s mother, Maria Theresa, prevailed upon her young daughter to be kind to Madame du Barry and to keep in mind



that things in France were done differently than in Austria. Nevertheless Marie Antoinette refused to speak to her, until one day she gave in and remarked to du Barry, “There are a lot of people today in Versailles.” This eased some of the tension, but Marie Antoinette’s antipathy towards the courtesan remained. When Louis XV got sick with small pox and died shortly after Marie Antoinette succeeded in persuading Louis XVI to ban Madame du Barry from court and she was exiled to the Abbey du Pont-aux-Dames near Meaux-en-Brie.

Years later Madame du Barry retired to her country estate near Sceaux. She tried to hide her jewellery in England and made frequent trips to London. The revolutionaries observed her and her extravagances caught up with her. Madame du Barry was also one of the victims of the reign of terror. It is said that she became hysterical on her way to the execution begging the executioner not to hurt her. Her last words were, “One moment more, executioner, one little moment” but were not granted. She was beheaded on the Place de la Revolution, now Place de la Concorde on 8 December 1793. Her beautiful jewellery was later sold at Christie’s auctions.



The diamond necklace, which was commissioned by Louis XV in 1772 for Madame du Barry is perhaps her most famous piece due to the diamond necklace affair. It was a special gift with an estimated value of around 15 million dollars in today’s money. Louis XV requested that Parisian jewellers Boehmer and Bassenge create a diamond necklace that would surpass all others in grandeur. The *chef-d’oeuvre* was not finished and unpaid for by his death.

The jewellers tried to sell it to Marie Antoinette several times, but she refused it. Nevertheless the costs of it would later be unjustly attributed to her, increasing the accusations against her, which had cost her her head years before Madame du Barry on 16 October 1793 on the Place de la Revolution.

BUT HOW DID IT ALL START?

Madame du Barry (1743 – 1793) was born the illegitimate daughter of a dressmaker. She was a beauty and her face her capital. As reflected in art of the time, Jeanne was a remarkably attractive blonde woman with thick golden ringlets and almond-shaped blue eyes.



She started her “courtesan career” at 15 when she slept with her employer and as Jeanne Vauberier entertained in Madame Quisnoy’s brothel. Her beauty came to the attention of Jean-Baptiste du Barry, a high-class pimp who owned a casino. Du Barry made her his mistress and named her Mademoiselle Lange. Du Barry helped establish Jeanne’s career as a courtesan and this enabled her to have a good part of the French aristocracy as her clients. As Mademoiselle Lange, Jeanne became a sensation and was showered with lavish gifts, jewellery and furs much to the envy of the wives. She had many lovers from the king’s ministers to his courtiers. Maréchal de Richelieu, for instance became a frequent lover. Jean du Barry therefore saw her as a means of influence over Louis XV. She could however not become a *maitresse-en-titre* if she did not have a title. Until then the mistresses came from a “better” background than Jeanne. This should not be an obstacle though and was solved by her marriage on 1 September 1768 to du Barry’s brother, Comte Guillaume du Barry. The marriage ceremony included a false birth certificate



created by Jean du Barry himself, making Jeanne younger by three years and of fictional noble descent. The ageing king Louis XV signalled immediate interest in her by sending her bouquets of roses tied with strings of diamonds. Madame du Barry was soon afterwards installed above the

King’s quarters. She quickly got accustomed to luxury, having also been given a young Bengali boy by Louis XV, Zamor, whom she dressed in elegant clothing to show him off.

Jeanne was a tremendous triumph and now wore extravagant gowns and jewellery covering her bosom, neck, ears, wrists and fingers. While Jeanne managed to rid herself of her rivals, the faction around duc de Choiseul, she was unlike her predecessor, Madame de Pompadour not interested

in politics. While Jeanne was known for her good nature and support of artists, she grew increasingly unpopular because of the king’s financial extravagance towards her.

Since Madame du Barry’s “reign” at court only lasted five years it was not long enough to leave a strong impression in the artistic landscape. However, her collection shows her great taste including a portrait of Charles I by Van Dyck, paintings by Fragonard, de Vernet, de Vien and de Greuze. She also had an interesting library and befriended Voltaire. But her greatest influence was perhaps in fashion and surpassed even Madame de Pompadour’s extravagance. She made stripes à la mode, combined lace, silk and a multitude of fine materials. Madame du Barry hired the best designers like Carlier, the hat maker Chardon and Rose Bertin, who would also become the minister of fashion for Marie Antoinette. Her style was ephemeral and splendid.