

Louis XVIII, King of Porcelain

By Philip Mansel

Louis XVIII, who died two hundred years ago this year on 16 September 1824, had a passion for porcelain. As a younger brother of Louis XVI, he had supported the commercial 'manufacture du comte de Provence' in Clignancourt in 1775–91, making porcelain in the fashionable styles of the time. As king, following his return to France in April 1814 after twenty-three years' exile, he made frequent and generous gifts of Sèvres porcelain to his family, his officials, his favourites and not least himself.

He not only twice visited the Sèvres factory, on 10 August 1814 and 25 June 1816,^[1] but also resumed the Bourbon tradition of visiting an annual display of Sèvres every New Year's Day, to buy presents and encourage courtiers to do the same. Under Louis XV and Louis XVI, the display took place in the 'cabinet des porcelaines' in the petits appartements in Versailles. Under Louis XVIII, since the court had moved to Paris, it was held in a room in the Louvre.



Alexandre Brongniart presenting artists at Sèvres to Louis XVIII, June 1816, Jean Charles Develly, oil on paper, Musée national de Céramique, Sèvres. (Note: Madame Jaquotot is showing the porcelain tray painted with her copy of Raphael's painting of the Madonna and Child. The King said that, if Raphael were alive, he would be jealous. Note the Sèvres on display to the right)

Some of Louis XVIII's presents reflect his gratitude to his British allies for their contribution to his restorations in 1814 and in 1815. The fifty-four-inch (137.2cm) high 'Londonderry Vase', now in the Art Institute of Chicago, originally commissioned by Napoleon in 1805, was given in 1814 to Lord Castlereagh, the British Foreign Secretary, who also supported France against Prussia and Russia at the Congress of Vienna.^[2]

The famous 'Table des Grands Capitaines de l'antiquité', also commissioned by Napoleon, was given in 1817 by Louis XVIII to the Prince Regent, his greatest supporter, and frequent host, in England in 1807–14, 'comme un marque de souvenir et d'amitié'. Now in Buckingham Palace, it was thereafter included, as a symbol of victory, in the Regent's state portraits. Its despatch as a present from Louis XVIII was an affair of state, organised by the Président du Conseil himself, the Duc de Richelieu.[3]

The Duke of Wellington, who had supported royalists in south-west France in 1814, as well as Louis XVIII's return to Paris after Waterloo, received almost as many presents of Sèvres as a royal favourite: In 1814 two large vases and a déjeuner; in 1823 forty-eight blue and gold dessert plates, decorated with views of France. In 1818, to convince the Duke that modern Sèvres surpassed in quality the pre-1789 Sèvres then beginning to be fashionable, the King sent Wellington the massive 'Service égyptien', now on display in the Wellington Museum in Apsley House, London.

'Je vous prie d'accepter quelques assiettes, my dear lord...Les petits présents entretiennent l'amitié', he wrote. No wonder the Duke proved 'parfait sur tous les points', in Louis XVIII's opinion, in the negotiations ending the allied occupation of north-eastern France in 1818.[4]

The King also gave presents of Sèvres busts, statues and services to members of the royal family every year, probably more than Louis XV or Louis XVI had done. To take only two examples, a dessert 'service des peines et des plaisirs de l'amour', with each plate painted by Etienne Leguay with different scenes - 'la lutte', 'l'abandon', 'la consolation de l'amitié', and more — was given in 1819 by the King to his nephew the Duc de Berri, who had been married two years earlier.[5] In 1824 the King presented a massive Sèvres vase depicting 'Augustus closing the gates of Janus' to his younger brother the Comte d'Artois, perhaps as a symbol of their political reconciliation. The former is now in the Musée Dobrée, Nantes, the latter in the Louvre.[6]

The King also gave Sèvres services to, among others, two French ambassadors in London the Vicomte de Chateaubriand (Figures 2 & 3) and Comte Jules de Polignac; his favourite minister Elie Decazes; his last attachment, madame du Cayla; his Premier peintre Baron Gerard; and others whose names have not been recorded.[7] One of his last presents, on 16 August 1824, was a 129-piece dessert service, of which each plate was painted with a different flower by Gilbert Drouet from flower paintings by Redouté, given to the Duc de Laval-Montmorency, his ambassador in Rome.[8]

Two magnificent Sèvres vases, decorated with portraits of Louis XVIII in coronation costume and the Comte d'Artois in the robes of the order of the Holy Spirit, now in the state apartments of the Royal Palace of Naples, are expressions of Bourbon confidence and solidarity. They were presents from the King to his cousin King Ferdinand IV, whose restoration in 1815, replacing Murat the Napoleonic king of Naples, he had helped to initiate.



FIGURE 2: Two Louis XVII period Sèvres porcelain plates, from the service of the vicomte de Chateaubriand, c.1820, Artcurial.



FIGURE 3: Plate from the service of the vicomte de Chateaubriand, Sèvres Porcelain Factory, c.1820.

A further sign of Louis XVIII's love of porcelain was his appointment in 1818 of his own 'Peintre du roi sur porcelaine', Marie Victoire Jaquotot. She had worked at Sèvres since 1800 and under Louis XVIII received a pension, her own atelier in the Louvre, and many commissions. Her masterpiece was considered to be the 'Coffret de Louis XVIII', made of porcelain at Sèvres in 1819–20. It contains trays of oval porcelain plaques painted with portraits of famous men and women, French and foreign, such as madame de Sévigné, Charles XII, and Louis XIV: there are forty-eight in all, which the King would take out and study. Now in the Département des objets d'art in the Louvre, the coffret is rarely exhibited to the public. Twenty-four more porcelain portraits are in the Département des arts graphiques.

The director of Sèvres, Alexandre Brongniart, praised the 'incomparable perfection' of her talent

in a letter to the Vicomte de La Rochefoucauld in 1829: 'Mais si l'art de peindre sur porcelaine a fait d'immenses progres... c'est à l'essor que Mme Jaquotot a donné à la peinture sur porcelaine, aux modèles presque inimitables qu'elle a mis sous les yeux du public et des artistes.'^[9]

Louis XVIII's interest in Sèvres is proof that the nineteenth century, like the eighteenth, was a golden age of court patronage. Improvements in manufacturing techniques and royal finances, and monarchs' need for self-assertion, made the porcelain produced by royal factories grander, and more explicitly monarchical in decoration, than previously.^[10] A book on the patronage of Sèvres by Louis XVIII, Charles X, and Louis-Philippe, and its political and dynastic messages, would be extremely useful.

Louis XVIII by Philip Mansel (Blond and Briggs 1981, repr. John Murray 2004,) has been republished in French with a new introduction, by Perrin in 2024. His most recent book is *King of the World: the Life of Louis XIV* (Allen Lane, 2019). He is a committee member of the [Society for Court Studies](#).

^[1] Derek E Ostergard ed., *The Sevres Porcelain Manufactory: Alexandre Brongniart and the Triumph of Art and Industry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), passim, esp. Tamara Préaud, 'Brongniart as Administrator: the nature and goals of production at the Sèvres Manufactory,' pp. 75–96.

^[2] <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/68769/londonderry-vase>.

^[3] Philip Mansel, *Louis XVIII* (London: John Murray, 2004), p 303; *Duc de Richelieu, Lettres... au Marquis d'Osmond* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), pp. 95, 99, Richelieu to Marquis d'Osmond, 10 February, 6 March 1817.

^[4] Mansel 2004, p 307; Joan Wilson 'Little Gifts keep Friendship alive: an Historical Sèvres Dessert Service', *Apollo*, cii,161 (July 1975): 50–60.

^[5] *Entre Cour et Jardin, Marie-Caroline, Duchesse de Berry*, (ex. cat.) Musée de l'Ile de France Sceaux, 2017, pp 103–4, see illustrations on pp. 117–18, 148, 162–23 for other presents from Louis XVIII to members of the Royal Family, including the vase commemorating the birth of the duc de Bordeaux (Musée des Arts décoratifs, Paris), the guéridon d'Henri IV (Musée national de céramique, Sèvres) and the déjeuner des Chasses du Duc de Berry (Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris).

^[6] Mansel 2004, p 302, citing Archives de la Manufacture de Sèvres, V665–666, Objets livrés à credit, 1815–24.

^[7] Ibid.

^[8] Vente Pescheteau Badin, Paris, 8 October 2012.

^[9] https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Victoire_Jaquotot; Anne Lajoix, *Marie Victoire Jaquotot, 1772–1855 : peintre sur porcelaine* (Paris: Le Trait d'Union - Florence: Hatier, 2006).

^[10] Derek E Ostergard ed., *Along the Royal Road: Berlin and Potsdam in KPM Porcelain and Painting 1815-1848* (New York: The Bard Graduate Centre for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 1993).