

Versailles

Versailles is a world in itself: three palaces, two gardens and extensive parklands. Three kings reigned—Louis XIV from 1643 to 1715, then Louis XV (1715–74) and Louis XVI (1774–92)—and the estate has been renovated and refurbished many times. As the centre of French politics and cultural life for more than 130 years, Versailles was shaped by all who lived there.

From modest beginnings as a hunting lodge built by his father, Louis XIV transformed Versailles into a vast, luxurious palace. The construction of Versailles took place from 1662 in several phases over nearly half a century. Under architect Louis Le Vau—and with the king's First Painter Charles Le Brun in charge of the overall decoration—the famous 'envelope' was built in the 1670s. André Le Nôtre's formal gardens developed to complement the palace buildings.

A grand entrance, known as the Ambassadors' Staircase, led to the royal apartments on the first floor: this *enfilade* or series of seven rooms culminates in the spectacular Hall of Mirrors. The expensive construction program at Versailles, carried out in times of peace, paused during the many wars of this period. The structure and iconography of Versailles reflect its artistic, social and political role after 1682 as the official seat of the court and government.

The Sun King

Louis XIV's image as an absolute monarch was reinforced throughout Versailles with royal insignias, allegorical references and classical iconography. The king is shown in the guise of Apollo, the ancient Greek god of the sun—hence his title the Sun King—or represented as a Roman emperor. His achievements are documented by art in all its forms, in sculpture, in court portraits, history paintings and genre scenes.

At Versailles Charles Le Brun's designs included every detail, from great ceilings enriched with stucco and paintings, to polychrome marble panelling and gilded wooden doors, down to intricate handles and locks. The highest standards of materials were employed: porphyry, alabaster, coloured marbles, ebony and other precious woods, silver, gilding and mirrors.

Sculpture appears everywhere. Reliefs are set into the building's interiors and exterior. Portrait busts or life-size figures, often from antique models, stand in niches and adorn corridors, tabletops and mantles. A large number of bronzes and marble works are featured in the gardens. As well as Apollo, we find examples of classical mythology, such as Latona, Flora, Ceres, Bacchus and Saturn.

Manufacturing French style

A guiding principle of Versailles was that it must, above all, represent *French* taste, design and craftsmanship. The palace was inspired by Italianate traditions and, although many of the artists commissioned by Louis XIV were Italian or Flemish, the king's patronage was essential in establishing France as a centre for art and culture. Versailles became an ideal to which the rest of Europe could aspire.

In 1662 Louis XIV acquired the great Gobelins workshop and supported it with major royal commissions such as the tapestries displayed here. The magnificent Savonnerie carpet was woven for the Louvre, the king's principal residence before the move to Versailles—although the palace was used as a Parisian base. The Savonnerie factory had been granted a state monopoly by Louis XIII in 1627; its products furnished the royal residences but were also made for prestigious diplomatic gifts.

These tapestries and paintings record some of the spectacular interiors and works of art at Versailles, many of which no longer exist. When a coalition of European powers joined forces against France in December 1689, the king was obliged to melt down his famous silver collection to fund the war effort. More than 200 items, designed by Le Brun, had been produced by eminent silversmiths between 1670 and 1680. As well as the vases, urns, tables, candlesticks and candelabra stands documented here, the collection included wine coolers, vases, mirrors, a magnificent throne and a balustrade weighing a tonne.

Louis XV and Louis XVI

Unlike the Sun King, whose entire life was on display, Louis XV and his grandson Louis XVI preferred to live more privately at Versailles. On the death of his great-grandfather in 1715, Louis XV took up residence in Paris but returned with his court to Versailles in 1722. New suites of apartments were constructed, deliberately conceived as private spaces, with a skilfully devised system of concealed doors set into the wood panelling or behind hangings. Access to Louis XV's Petits Appartements was restricted to a small number of favoured courtiers.

New informality and domesticity appear in images of the royal family and aristocracy. We see people promenading, enjoying music and relaxed dinners, and partaking in fashionable indulgences such as drinking chocolate. The furniture and other objects in this gallery suggest changing styles, an enthusiasm for new technology and the exotic. Cold marble is replaced by the warmth of wood in all its forms: parquetry, wall paneling, gilded scrolls, and the combination of colours and patterns used in cabinetry.

The dauphin's desk was part of a refurbishment of the South Wing apartments for the marriage of Louis-Ferdinand to his cousin Marie-Thérèse Rafaela of Spain in February 1745. It was used for barely two years. Following his wife's sudden death in July 1746, the dauphin was obliged to remarry and the apartments were again fitted out.

Hydraulics and water



Pierre-Denis Martin *View of the Machine of Marly, the aqueduct and the chateau of Louveciennes* 1723, oil on canvas, 92 x 128 cm, Palace of Versailles
© RMN-Grand Palais (Château de Versailles) / Gérard Blot

Water is central to the garden design at Versailles—from cascades in the groves to imposing fountains and vast artificial lakes. A network of 46 kilometres of pipes feeds more than 2000 jets. Although the palace was built on swampy land the low-lying

estate, paradoxically, lacked water. Yet Louis XIV ordered increasingly elaborate waterworks, demonstrating that he could tame nature.

Campaigns of surveying, drainage and pumping were carried out at enormous expense, using tens of thousands of men. In 1682 the much-lauded Machine of Marly attempted to resolve the shortage by pumping water from the Seine River to an aqueduct 162 metres above sea level, before sending it down to a reservoir at nearby Marly and on to Versailles.

Despite these feats of engineering, a proper solution for the water shortage was never found. The fountains played only for special occasions, such as visiting royal or diplomatic parties. They relied on an army of assistants to run ahead, using keys to turn the fountains on and off to maintain pressure and water supply. Even today, using modern technology, the fountains are only turned on at specific times.

Gaspard MARSY

France 1624/25–1681

Balthazard MARSY

France 1628–1674

Latona and her children 1668–70

marble

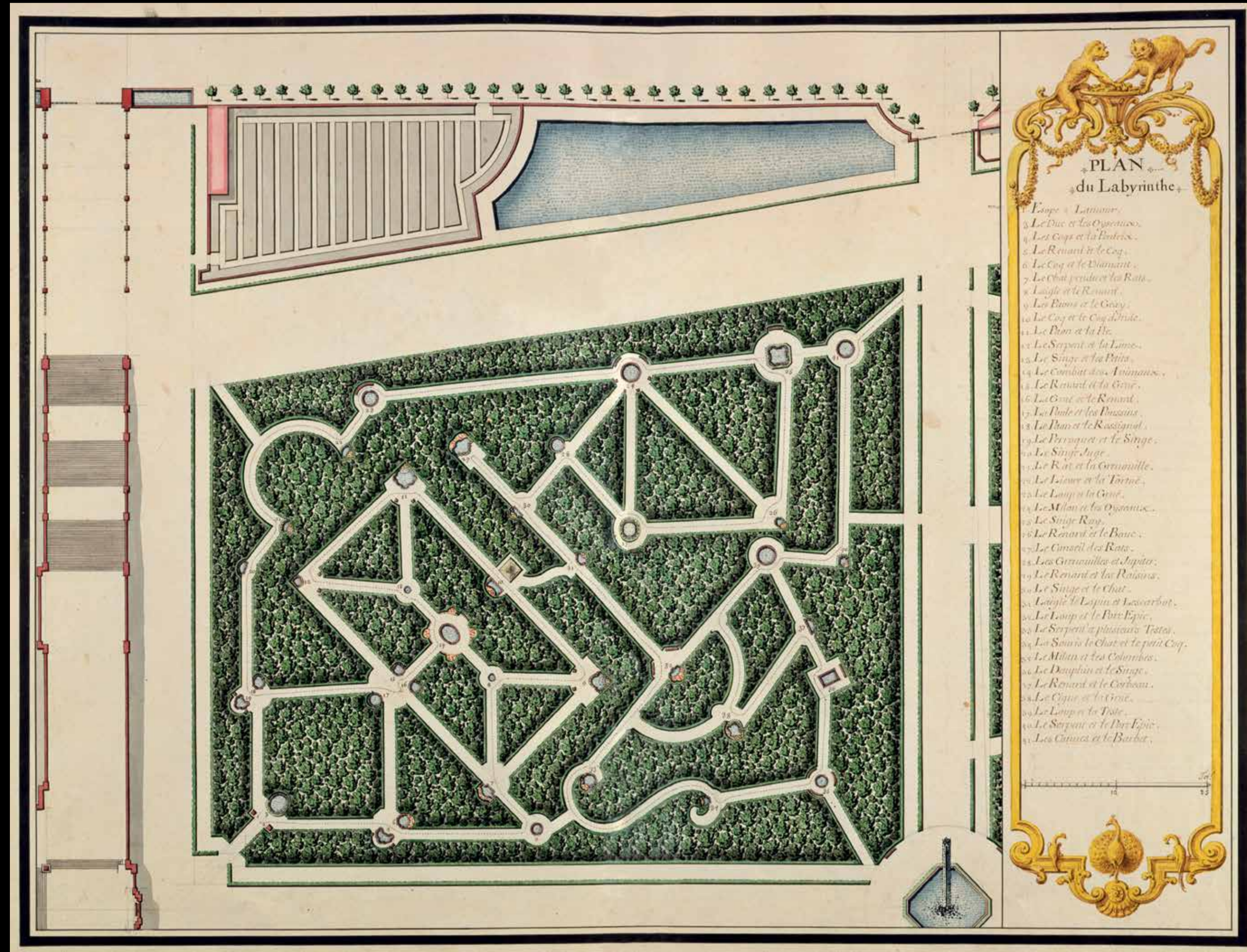
Palace of Versailles

The sculpture is the centrepiece of the Latona Fountain on the main axis of Versailles' gardens. The scene shows an episode from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Latona, accompanied by her children Diana and Apollo, flees to Lycia. She stops at a pond but the local inhabitants prevent her from drinking. Latona calls on Jupiter, the father of her children, cursing the people. They are transformed into frogs and toads.

Latona and her children symbolises the opposition between Beauty, represented by the marble group, and the peasant–frogs who have no respect for it. The sculpture is also understood to refer to the *frondeurs*, rebellious subjects during the series of civil conflicts between 1648 and 1653. It demonstrates the divine protection given to Apollo, the king's symbol, as well as the victory of civilisation over the forces opposed to established order.

Surrounded by leaden figures metamorphosing into frogs, *Latona and her children* originally faced the palace. Visitors, coming to the gardens from the palace, encountered the goddess begging for help. The water jets, from the mouths of the toads, represent the peasants' insults to Latona. Between 1687 and 1689, the sculpture was elevated onto a stepped marble base, with more frogs and lizards added, and turned to face the gardens. It was replaced by a cast in 1982.

The Labyrinth



Jean Chaufourier *Plan of the Labyrinth* 1720, watercolour, 45 x 56.5 cm, Palace of Versailles
© RMN-Grand Palais (Château de Versailles) / Hervé Lewandowski

Versailles' Labyrinth was located west of the Orangerie in the southern part of the gardens. Originally conceived by André Le Nôtre in 1665 as an undecorated maze, the crossroads of each path were furnished in the 1670s with thirty-nine fountains decorated with 330 painted

lead animals illustrating classical parables. These new additions were inspired by the publication of Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables* 1668, dedicated to Louis XIV's six-year-old heir.

About twenty artists worked on the fountain sculptures; the naturalism of the figures produced suggests they were likely inspired by the animals in the nearby Menagerie. Each group was accompanied by Isaac de Benserade's verse summarising the fables. The Labyrinth was one of the most popular parts of the garden. Visitors could find moral truths hidden within the remarkable scenes. Among these were that all people were not created equal and the evils of social ambition.

After years of neglect the maze was replaced in 1774 by the Queen's Garden. Only thirty-five animals, and the statues of Aesop and Cupid from the entrance, survive. Fortunately the maze was immortalised in *Labyrinthe de Versailles* 1679, which includes descriptions, Benserade's poems and Sébastien Leclerc's etchings of each fountain group.

The gardens

Gardens were Louis XIV's passion. In less than twenty years the unpromising site of Versailles was transformed into a showcase for France's wealth, power and prestige. The king wrote six versions of his treatise *Manière de montrer les jardins de Versailles*, which outlined how best to view his grand gardens. During the *ancien régime* the estate of Versailles occupied 15,000 hectares: the formal garden around the palace, the Petit Parc for carriage rides around the Grand Canal, and the Grand Parc reserved for the hunt. The palace grounds now cover an area of 815 hectares, the area of the old Petit Parc.

André Le Nôtre, Louis XIV's first landscape designer, included fifteen groves laid out on either side of the Royal Avenue. These secluded 'salons of greenery', garden rooms contained by densely planted trees and hedges, were settings for activities such as walking, dining, music, play and entertainment. Subject to changes in taste and fashion over the years, areas of the gardens were constantly altered and rebuilt—even demolished and replaced. In 1676 Jules Hardouin-Mansart began redesigning the garden. He created new groves with a marked architectural character, including the Colonnade Grove built in 1684. Three hundred sculptures decorated the parterres, avenues and groves, creating an open-air museum in the park of Versailles.

The hunt

The kings of France had a passion for hunting. The sport served to initiate young princes and to educate them in the art of war. As a child Louis XIV developed a fondness for his father's hunting estate and the forest of Versailles. With its long wooded avenues suitable for galloping, the Grand Parc spread far beyond the boundaries of the Petit Parc. Many types of hunting were practiced: falconry; shooting with dogs to flush out pheasants, partridges or hares; and big game such as deer, boar and wolves.

Hunting was considered an entertainment on par with theatre, ballet and opera. On average Louis XIV, XV and XVI hunted every third day. An invitation to join the king was considered a mark of favour as court customs dictated that members of the royal family hunted only with those closest to them. As a result, being permitted to share the king's intimacy and take part in the traditional *débotté* or removal of boots was much coveted, as was the meal served in his private chambers on the return from the hunt.

Divertissements

Versailles was conceived to host celebrations, showing the king in all his magnificence. Courtiers and foreign visitors were drawn to the royal residence as witness to these events. Numerous engravings assured the fame of the king's 'divertissements', recording the feasts, fireworks and other activities in their most remarkable yet ephemeral moments. The management of the king's entertainment required a special department, the office of the Menus-Plaisirs (royal entertainment).

Military or diplomatic victories, births or marriages of princes gave occasion for the most extravagant celebrations. Over the span of several days feasts alternated with dinners, masked balls and fancy dress, plays and operas, lotteries and carousels, and finished with fireworks and illuminations. The fireworks astonished with flashes of silver and gold, their frightening, thundering noise sometimes amplified by the sound of canons. These events reached their peak in 1674 when the Grand Canal was lined with magical scenes, all lit up at the same instant by a regiment of soldiers. In 1770, for the wedding of the dauphin and Marie-Antoinette, the entire gardens were illuminated by 16,000 lamps lit in less than three minutes.

Under Louis XVI, when celebrations became less frequent at Versailles, royal entertaining centred on the Petit Trianon. Marie-Antoinette hosted music and theatrical events, opening her estate to visiting guests who experienced 'divertissements' on a more intimate scale.

Grand Trianon and Petit Trianon

Louis XV and his mistresses, first Madame de Pompadour then Madame Du Barry, spent considerable time at the 'Marble Trianon' or Grand Trianon. Built by Jules Hardouin-Mansart, the Grand Trianon was a place for parties and country outings. With suites opening directly onto the parterres, boundaries between the inside and outside dissolved. The flower garden, a tribute to the goddess Flora, housed the rarest blooms. The king's interest in science led him to botany and, in 1750, his three gardens housed more than 4000 plant species.

In 1762 Louis XV had Ange-Jacques Gabriel design a new small house, the Petit Trianon, in the emerging neoclassical style. The square exterior has Corinthian columns and pilasters on the facades. Flowers dominated the interior—on the wood and upholstery of chairs, on the inlaid furniture, on bronze and porcelain—designed to please the king's new favourite, Madame Du Barry.

However, at the death of Louis XV in 1774, Marie-Antoinette took possession of the Petit Trianon. Its modernity and remoteness from the main palace and court etiquette appealed to the new queen. She spent increasing amounts of time there with only her closest friends. The last phase of the Petit Trianon was the Queen's Hamlet, a series of buildings with a rustic character: farm, cottage, mill, dairy, barn and dovecote. In this reconstructed pastoral idyll, Marie-Antoinette indulged in simple pleasures such as drinking milk, fishing and walking in the fields.

Versailles: epilogue

The Palace of Versailles epitomises the complex, absolute monarchy created by Louis XIV, elements of which continued through the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI. However, this extravagance proved unsustainable and, although the king attempted reforms, it was too late. By 1788 France was bankrupt.

Through the formation of the National Assembly in 1789, political power shifted to the people, a moment captured brilliantly by Jacques-Louis David's *The Oath of the Tennis Court at Versailles, 20 June 1789*. In October the palace was stormed, and the king and queen were forced to live in Paris under a kind of house arrest. The royal family never again occupied Versailles. The monarchy was formally abolished in September 1792. Many items from the palace were dispersed, including at auctions between 1793 and 1794. Versailles was designated a museum in 1797 and later, in the 1830s, became the Museum of the History of France.

The palace and its gardens were declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1979 and, from 2003, have been the subject of an ambitious restoration and renovation program. Many objects have been returned, either from the holdings of public museums or purchased from private collections. The interiors and grounds of Versailles continue to reflect the glamour and opulence of court life under Louis XIV, Louis XV and Louis XVI.