

# VERSAILLES

## Philip Thicknesse (1719–1792)

Saint Germain, 30 August 1766

The palace of Versailles has been so often described that I find it as unnecessary as it is difficult to speak of such an amazing pile of building; which, however, seems to me to have been built with more expence than real judgment; and the greatest part of its real magnificence, perhaps, lies in the noble roads and stately trees by which it is every way approached. I have not yet found out where the very great number of capital pictures I have heard so much said of are placed; I have seen only a very few for such a palace, but they are certainly very fine; those which most delighted me are a full length of Louis XIV, in which the very foul and genius of that monarch, according to my idea of him, shines forth in his face; he seems to be painted in a full bottom brown wig put over a smaller quite black; but the under one, in reality, is to represent his own hair; and the upper is a wig which was worn in his days, upon all occasions, in full dress. The other is a picture by Guido, which I am apt to believe is his own portrait, and that of his wife, or mistress, who has a palette, brushes, and colours in her hands, and is receiving his instructions how to use them; there is so much affection, beauty, attention, and modesty in this female face, and so much dignity and harmony in the whole performance that though it is a little square picture, patched out, originally, from an oval form, I would prefer it, for my own pleasure, to any picture in the palace of Versailles. What disgraces this palace exceedingly is the unclean manner in which these noble apartments, the fine pictures, the glasses, furniture, statues, vases, etc. are permitted to remain in; but that neatness which characterizes the houses of princes and people of fashion in England is not observed with the attention in this kingdom that it ought; nor do you scarce ever see a palace or fine house in France that is, with its gardens, buildings, etc., perfectly complete and finished; there is either a litter of stones, trees, rubbish, or workmen, or all together, at most houses and palaces I have yet seen. In the gardens of Versailles are an infinite number of statues; some, however, are very bad; but in a wood near the palace may be seen what is called the Baths of Apollo, where Louis XIV is represented, under the character of that God, just come out of the bath and six of his favourite ladies assisting him with linen, etc. and performing the offices due to so clean a divinity; the seven figures, which are of white marble, are admirably disposed and, I believe, finely executed. What adds to the beauty of this piece of sculpture, in my eye, is that the figures are about the size of real life. A Venus de Medicis eight feet high is to me a shocking sight, however well it may be executed.

The last time I was at Versailles, I saw the Queen dine alone in her bedchamber and her daughters, the princesses, in another apartment. I also was present when the Dauphin signed a marriage covenant in the presence of a cardinal and the officers of state. The Queen is a little cheerful-looking woman, and though she was but just recovered from a dangerous fit of illness, she condescended to walk through the apartments (her sedan chair following her) that those who had not seen her might have an opportunity; and that those who knew her might rejoice and congratulate her upon her recovery; for she is a good woman and much beloved; indeed, the whole royal family are remarkable for their good nature. The Dauphin is of a fair complexion, and looks rather sickly; and his brother, Le Comte de Provence, often rallies him and says he will be king; he is, indeed, a most sprightly and captivating child.

At the court of France there is no kissing of hands as with us. When a stranger is presented (which must be by the ambassador of his country) the ambassador mentions his name to the King, who returns the bow, but never speaks; not from pride, for he seems to have none, but to avoid the commonplace questions that must be put upon such occasions. What is very singular is that you are admitted into the King's bedchamber to see him dress, even to the putting on his shirt, during part of which time four or five bishops are upon their knees praying for him at his bedside.

I do not think any prince in Europe enjoys life more than Louis XV; his principal diversions are hunting and shooting, and he is continually moving from one palace to another to partake of these his favourite amusements; not but that I am told he has a little garden, a *Trianon*, where he often picks his own salad, makes his own soup, and enjoys the conversation of a few select friends, without the plague, impertinence, and, above all, the parade that generally attends royalty.

Philip Thicknesse *Observations on the Customs and Manners of the French Nation* (1766):54–58.