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Maurice Quentin de La Tour (1704–1788) painted this portrait of King Louis XV of France. It depicts how the King appeared in 1748. The painting is at the Louvre Museum, in Paris, where it is part of the Louis XV Collection.

Curators at the Palace of Versailles tell us how Louis XV died (of the dreaded disease smallpox). “The king, whose face was blackened and distorted by the scabs, was given a final remedy, but with little hope of success. On the morning of 10 May [1774] he lay motionless, though still conscious. At 11 am he went into his death throes, and died at 3.15 pm.” His grandson, 19-year-old Louis Auguste, would succeed him as Louis XVI.

Smallpox, in the 18th century, was a particularly dreaded disease. It was the reason Louis XV developed a fever and headache while having dinner with his favorite companion, Madame du Berry (Marie-Jeanne Bécu), on the 27th of April, 1774.

Within two weeks, the once-handsome ruler looked like he was covered with a single black scab. Louis-Auguste and Antoinette were not allowed to see him since the disease was so contagious. According to Madame Campan’s memoir:

The air of the palace was infected; more than fifty persons took the smallpox, in consequence of having merely loitered in the galleries of Versailles, and ten died of it. (Campan, Book 2, Chapter 4 - see end of first paragraph.)

As it seemed clear Louis was dying, courtiers placed a candle near the window of his Versailles bedroom. When he died, the flame would be extinguished.

The king’s grandson, and his young wife, were apprehensive. The dauphin was not yet twenty. He was concerned about his ability to govern. Madame Campan describes (scroll down 40%) what happened at the moment Louis XV died:

A dreadful noise, absolutely like thunder, was heard in the outer apartment; it was the crowd of courtiers who were deserting the dead sovereign’s antechamber, to come and do homage to the new power of Louis XVI. This extraordinary tumult informed Marie Antoinette and her husband that they were called to the throne; and, by a spontaneous movement, which deeply affected those around them, they threw themselves on their knees; both, pouring forth a flood of tears, exclaimed: “O God! guide us, protect us; we are too young to reign.”

Because everyone was afraid of the body, which Madame Campan describes as “pestiferous remains,” it was not embalmed.

The King’s daughters, who had lovingly tended their father during his last illness, also contracted smallpox. Louis-Auguste and Marie Antoinette were thus forced to temporarily reside in Paris where the people joyfully welcomed them.

Madame Campan continues:

It became necessary instantly to send away the young royal family; and the Chateau de la Muette, in the Bois de Boulogne, was selected for their reception. Their arrival at that residence, which was very near Paris, drew so great a concourse of people into its neighborhood, that even at daybreak the crowd had begun to assemble round the gates. Shouts of "Vive le Roi!" were scarcely interrupted for a moment between six o'clock in the morning and sunset. The unpopularity the late King had drawn upon himself during his latter years, and the hopes to which a new reign gives birth, occasioned these transports of joy.

If only the people of Paris, and elsewhere, had continued with their "transports of joy" and excitement about the new reign. But the young couple's fears were well-founded.

They were, indeed, "too young to reign." And Marie Antoinette, in substituting some of the formality of the Versailles court with more simplified procedures she'd known in Vienna, began to sow the seeds of her undoing.

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Media Stream



Small Pox Victim

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Madame du Berry

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Madame Campan

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Chateau de la Muette

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Bois de Boulogne

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