

THE ROYAL FAMILY IN OLYMPUS: RESTORATION OF JEAN NOCRET'S MAJOR WORK

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Press release

In September 2022, the Palace of Versailles began a major restoration campaign for Jean Nocret's painting, *The Royal Family in Olympus*. With its imposing dimensions – around 12 m² – this work is the largest surviving French portrait from the 17th century. The painting will be on public display once the restoration of the Œil-de-Bœuf antechamber is completed in the spring of 2024.

A MYTHICAL PAINTING

The Royal Family in Olympus was painted in 1670 by Jean Nocret and presents an iconography that seems the epitome of Versailles, to us. The Sun King, crowned with laurels, appears in the centre of the composition in the guise of the god Apollo, surrounded by his wife, Queen Maria Theresa, as Juno, his son, the Grand Dauphin, as Love and his cousin, La Grande Mademoiselle, as Diana.

But it would have been impossible to find this painting at the Palace of Versailles in the 17th century. In fact, the work was commissioned for and delivered to the Château of Saint Cloud, property of the king's brother, Philippe d'Orléans, also known as Monsieur. It is represented at daybreak, as though announcing sunrise. The painting is just like the residence which houses it: an enchanting site, to the taste of Monsieur, who had no governmental function. Its decorative style was lighter, more graceful and less martial than the official royal residences. Destroyed in 1870, the Château of Saint Cloud was redecorated after 1660. In addition to this large portrait, Jean Nocret painted several ceilings there, alongside Pierre Mignard.

This painting suits the delicate atmosphere that reigned in Saint Cloud more than that of the imposing Versailles, where the picture rails were dedicated to the king's taste for great French or Italian painting. Nocret's painting replaced a work by Veronese, *Esther and Ahasuerus*, which was moved from the Œil-de-Bœuf antechamber to the Louvre.

Indeed, in 1814, before the Hundred Days, Louis XVIII envisaged the return of the Court to Versailles. He asked that restoration work be carried out at the Palace. The painting by Jean Nocret, mentioned as having been in Saint Cloud until 1792, was then embedded in the woodwork of the Œil-de-Bœuf antechamber. The return of Napoleon I cancelled Louis XVIII's project, but the painting remained in place. It would be maintained by Louis-Philippe during the creation of the museum dedicated "to all France's glories."

The attractive and spectacular iconography undoubtedly contributed to Louis-Philippe's decision. In the painting, we see Louis XIV as Apollo, seated majestically, surrounded by the closest members of his family, also represented as divinities. It is a *portrait*

historié: people are represented as mythological figures, so the patron has the dual pleasure of ordering both portraiture and history painting. This emblematic work continues to attract visitors; often photographed, it is also regularly reproduced.



*The Royal Family in Olympus, Jean Nocret, around 1670
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JEAN NOCRET, OFFICIAL PAINTER OF MONSIEUR, THE KING'S BROTHER

Jean Nocret (1615-1672) was the official painter of Philippe, Duke of Orléans, from at least 1652. He sometimes worked for Louis XIV, decorating the Tuileries or painting portraits. But his principal employer remained Monsieur, whom he represented frequently, as well as his family: many of these paintings are currently conserved at the Palace of Versailles. He mainly decorated the Château of Saint Cloud, where he painted five rooms in the apartment of Madame, the Duke's wife. In Jean Nocret's biography, read at the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture after his death, *The Royal Family in Olympus* is considered the artist's chef-d'œuvre because of its size and the number of people it represents, which therefore struck his contemporaries.

Removal of The Royal Family in Olympus by Jean Nocret
© Château de Versailles / T. Garnier



A NECESSARY RESTORATION

Over 350 years old, and last shown between 1984 and 1986, Jean Nocret's painting required a thorough restoration to improve both its state of conservation and its readability by the public.

Entrusted to a group of nine restorers, this operation should last about 14 months. A file of scientific imagery was drawn up by the National Centre for Research and Restoration in French Museums. This included infrared and ultraviolet images that revealed the presence of several pentimenti, as well as lapis lazuli, a very precious pigment, used for the sky and certain blue coloured costumes.

The restoration began with the dissolution of the old varnishes, which had become yellowed and opaque, as well as the removal of the overpaint. It will continue with the treatment of the canvas support and the frame before the reintegration of gaps and wear.

The other six paintings in the Ciel-de-Bœuf antechamber, two large equestrian and four overdoor paintings, are also undergoing restoration to improve their medium- and long-term conservation.

THE FIRST STEP IN THE RESTORATION OF THE CIEL-DE-BŒUF ANTECHAMBER

The restoration of Jean Nocret's painting is part of a larger project that concerns the entirety of the Ciel-de-Bœuf antechamber, where it is housed. This sweeping restoration debuts in December 2022 and will end in April 2024.

The Ciel-de-Bœuf antechamber is one of the most emblematic and prestigious rooms of the royal residence. In 1701, when Louis XIV had his Ceremonial Room built in line with the course of the sun, he ordered two adjoining rooms built on the south of this new bedroom. The former room called «Bassans» (named after the paintings by Jacopo Bassano, who decorated it), along with the former King's Chamber, became the Ciel-de-Bœuf antechamber. Designed by Jules Hardouin-Mansart and Robert de Cotte, this room presents precious decor that testifies to the transition between the sumptuous style of the first part of the Sun King's reign and the beginnings of Rococo. The antechamber was at the centre of Court protocol under the Ancien Régime: it was here that the most privileged courtesans waited to assist the king in his getting-up and going-to-bed ceremonies.

The room's décor has been relatively untouched since the 18th century; only one major restoration was carried out in 1983. The current state of the room will require a complete restoration of its architectural elements and decor. This work is also part of the Palace's safety and security program initiated in 2003.