

The Rise and Fall of the Absolute Monarchy:

(second half of the 17th -- end of the 18th centuries)

International recognition of French creativity in the arts, literature, and science formed an integral part of Louis XIV's strategy to dominate European culture. Recognizing that political power lay in cultural superiority, and assisted by his minister, Colbert (Controller General of the Finances, 1662-1683), Louis XIV (1643-1715) initiated an all-encompassing cultural program designed to glorify the monarchy in his person. Fueled by state patronage, this cultural initiative channeled the creative forces of French elite culture into academies, luxury goods, industries, technology, engineering projects, and imperial expansion.

State control of culture reached unprecedented heights under Louis XIV, the Sun King (*le Roi Soleil*). Newly created academies in the arts and sciences generated heroic representations of the king that reinforced the royal religion. Increasing censorship targeted "scandalous" texts (for example, pornography) and political writings incompatible with absolute monarchy. Systematic purchases of treasures from ancient and modern cultures the world over enhanced the regime's prestige. The need to reign supreme in cultural matters also spawned French Classicism, the crowning cultural achievement of France's golden age under Louis XIV. As the Sun King's reign passed into its twilight years, some judged the social stability and routine he had created as oppressive to the individual spirit. A "counter-cultural" revolution under his successors, Louis XV (1715-1774) and Louis XVI (1774-1793), unleashed Enlightenment ideas and values which tore away at the theatrical and courtly foundations that Richelieu and Louis XIV had given the state. The cultural vitality of the realm shifted decisively from the royal court at Versailles to Paris. The increased role of the press, of reports of scientific and commercial activities, of exploration and discoveries, as well as the weekly meetings of academies and salons energized literary, artistic, and artisan circles. The writer -- whether a novelist, a scientist, or a philosopher describing a new and better society -- became the guiding light of a culture that was enthusiastic about itself, eager for change, and increasingly beyond the control of royal censorship. In personal, cultural, and political identity, the writer evolved from a royal servant to an independent moral authority. The increasingly emancipated condition and subversive potential of authors reached their climax during the French Revolution (1789-1799) when the printed word played a mighty role in bringing down the *Ancien Régime*.