

Louis XIV's medal cabinet at Versailles¹

Robert Wellington

WHEN SWEDISH ARCHITECT Nicodemus Tessin the Younger (1654-1728) visited France for the third time in 1687, he wrote a memoir of the extraordinary things that he had seen there. Alongside his account of the more famous gardens, galleries and salons of the palace of Versailles is an extended account of Louis XIV's Cabinet des Médailles – one of the most opulent rooms in the château. The walls of the Cabinet were covered with mirrors, it had a coffered dome decorated in lapis lazuli blue with gilt rosettes, and gold stuccowork abounded. The room held a precious collection of cabinet paintings by some of the greatest early modern masters, small silver and bronze statuettes, extraordinary engraved gems, and armoires filled with more than 27,000 coins and medals. At the end of his account of the medal cabinet, Tessin suggested that 'the small sketch that the little time I had there permitted me to make, will provide a little more clarification'.² This sketch (presumed to be lost when Tessin's memoir was transcribed and published in 1927) is held in the collection of the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm (fig. 1).³ Remarkably, Tessin's tiny study is the only extant elevation of a room in Louis XIV's Versailles that was once described by the Mlle de Scudéry as 'infinitely superior to all that has been seen...'⁴

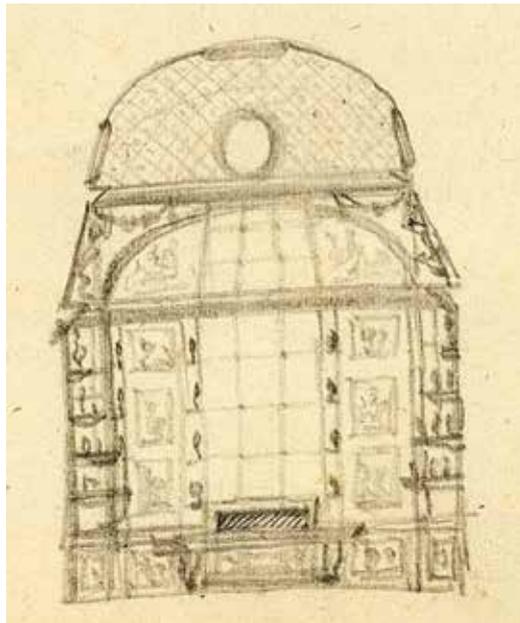
Unfortunately, very little remains of what was once the most lavish space in the château, remodelled in the mid-eighteenth century to accommodate the royal family and eventually becoming Louis XVI's Salon des Jeux in the 1780s. Named for the most numerous of items that it contained, the Cabinet des Médailles (sometimes called the Cabinet des Curiosités) contained one of the greatest numismatic collections in the world, a resource of unparalleled importance for the antiquarian study of history.⁵ Louis XIV, as well as being the most prolific subject portrayed in medals of any ruler before or since, was a great collector. The *Histoire métallique* of the king was inextricably linked to the royal collection of gems and medals.

Struck to commemorate almost all notable events from the reign, when these medals were placed alongside their ancient precursors they became an extension of the premier numismatic cabinet in France. By amassing a vast numismatic collection, Louis XIV created a distinctly French encyclopedia of history that culminated in a celebration of his own reign.

Tessin's sketch of the Cabinet des Médailles appears on a sheet of paper folded three times, into eighths, presumably to make a more stable surface to draw upon as the Swedish party was conducted around the palace. When the sheet is unfolded, the study is perpendicular to a text describing the Cabinet that includes a plan of the space in ink amongst Tessin's near impenetrable handwriting (fig. 2). On the back of the sheet is an elevation of a section of the Hall of Mirrors (fig. 3) next to a rough study of Domenico Guidi's sculptural group *The King's Renown* (fig. 4). The hurried sketches that Tessin executed on this sheet of paper bring together the two most significant new spaces created at Versailles in the 1680s with a statue that celebrates Louis XIV as a great man of history with a numismatic allegory.

Guidi's sculpture, executed after a design by Le Brun, had been delivered to Versailles in September 1686, and was one of the most recent additions to the palace gardens when Tessin saw it the following year. It was so admired by Louis XIV that it was moved to pride of place at the centre of the Orangerie, displacing Bernini's ill-fated equestrian monument.⁶ *The King's Renown* presents Louis XIV as the prime agent of history through an allegory of Clio, Time and a portrait of the king. This reading is confirmed by the description beneath the engraving of Guidi's statue, presented as the frontispiece to the revised 1693 edition of Claude-François Ménéstrier's *Histoire du règne de Louis le Grand par les médailles...*:

History ... holds the portrait of the king and the Annals of his Reign on the wings of Time while



1. Tessin: *Elevation of the lateral wall of the Cabinet des Médailles at Versailles*, c.1686, pencil on paper, Nationalmuseum Stockholm. (Photo: Cecilia Heisser / Nationalmuseum)

2. Tessin: *Plan and description of the Cabinet des Médailles at Versailles*, c.1686, pencil on paper, Nationalmuseum Stockholm. (Photo: Cecilia Heisser / Nationalmuseum)



Envy twists under the feet of History trying in vain to divert her from her Enterprise. Beneath the feet of Time are consular fasces and arms that time destroys insensibly. Medals of Alexander, Scipio, Julius Caesar, and Trajan are at History's side a little gnawed at the edges because Time always causes some loss of the memory of Great Men, which would be more considerable if History had not taken care to preserve their Great Deeds.⁷

What must have delighted Louis about this group when it arrived at Versailles was to see his own image held up as the object of history's admiration in the lineage of great men represented in portrait medals in the lower register (fig. 5). He was shown to be an agent of history, the inheritor of a glorious tradition exemplified by Alexander, Scipio, Julius Caesar and Trajan through the compositional device of repetition. It was an antiquarian allegory that harnessed the medal as a bearer of historical facts to draw comparison between the French king and the ancients – an activity available to scholars in the king's medal cabinet in the palace close by.

The numismatic allegory of Guidi's sculpture was born from a culture of antiquarianism at Louis XIV's court that inspired a new approach to the documentation of the king's history in images and objects.⁸ I contend that this influence can be felt throughout Louis XIV's commissions in the arts that document

his history for posterity, and especially in his medals. The numismatic resonances that are found throughout Charles Le Brun's decorative scheme for the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles – a space that Gérard Sabatier described as the 'grand médaillier du roi' – is another interesting case in point.⁹ As many scholars have noted (including Alan Stahl in his article above), Louis XIV had a personal interest in his collection of coins, medals and engraved gems, and passed many hours in his medal cabinet at Versailles, attesting to the popularity of numismatic study at his court. It is no coincidence that Tessin's sketch of the Cabinet appeared alongside his sketches of Guidi's sculpture and Le Brun's gallery on that sheet of paper. Through this seemingly disparate group of studies the Swedish architect exposes the numismatic theme found throughout the visual histories of Louis XIV. With medals playing a central role in the formation of the Sun King's image for posterity, the Cabinet des Médailles at Versailles was a site for the historical self-fashioning of Louis XIV.

Louis XIV's personal interest in his collection increased markedly in the 1680s, when he ordered designs for two new rooms adjacent to his apartments at Versailles to house his collection. The ascendancy of François-Michel le Tellier, marquis de Louvois (1641-91) to the position of Superintendent of Royal Buildings on Colbert's death in 1683 coincided with the final renovations to the vastly enlarged palace

3. Tessin: *Studies of the Hall of Mirrors and Domenico Guidi's The King's Renown at Versailles, c.1686*, pencil on paper, Nationalmuseum Stockholm. (Photo: Cecilia Heisser / Nationalmuseum)



at Versailles. As the new official seat of the monarchy and administrative centre of France, it was deemed prudent to move the king's most precious objects to new rooms in the palace unequalled in splendour. The first room, entered via the vestibule to the right at the top of the new ambassador's staircase, came to be known as the Salon de l'Abondance (Salon of Abundance).¹⁰ It contained magnificent displays of the carved agate and rock-crystal vases, vessels and bowls, now housed in the Galerie d'Apollon at the Louvre.¹¹ The room was exceptionally sumptuous, with all of these highly polished vessels returning the light of the silver chandeliers and candelabrum – a glittering plenitude expressing the wealth and fecundity of the reign.¹²

The theme of the ceiling in the salon, painted by René-Antoine Housse (1645–1710) after Le Brun's design, are the riches of Louis XIV and the perpetual glory that they will bring to his name. In a show of bravura illusion, fabulous carved agate vessels, oriental carpets and other treasures appear to perch upon the top of the cornices around the room, as the ceiling opens to the heavens (fig. 6). Above the door to the Cabinet des Médailles is a particularly rich display of pots, nefes (vessels carved in the form of a miniature ship's hull), bowls and ewers upon an exotic carpet, drawing the eye towards the portal that opened onto the most opulent room in the palace. Jean-François Félibien (the

son of the more famous André) identified the various personifications in this ceiling in his 1703 description of Versailles.¹³ Above and to the right of the doors to the cabinet there is a figure of Asia wearing a turban and holding a dish of perfumes. Opposite her is Europe in the guise of Minerva surrounded by the instruments of war. These figures represent the regions from where the treasures in this and the next room were sourced, while the figures of Pluto, Neptune and Thetis refer to the materials from which they are made: Pluto, the god of the underworld, where precious metals and stones were mined; Neptune and Thetis, gods of the sea, the province of pearls, shells and corals. Through the allegory formed by these personifications the Salon de l'Abondance and the Cabinet des Médailles beyond it are presented as a princely Wunderkammer, with materials gathered from many parts of the known world representing the universal order of nature and culture.

The allegory is extended to form one of eternal fame through material splendour by the three figures above Europe and Thetis. Magnificence (fig. 7) is at the centre:

a beautiful woman, whose body is half uncovered. A radial crown upon her head; in her right hand she carries a golden sceptre, she leans her same arm on a cornucopia, from which spills a quantity of medals, pearls, and jewels; and with



4. Guidi: *The King's Renown*, 1680-85, marble, Versailles. (Photo: courtesy of Château de Versailles; © the author)

5. Detail of fig. 4. (Photo © the author)

her left hand she points towards the cabinet, signalling the methods she prescribes.¹⁴

This contemporary description of the ceiling draws a connection between magnificence and numismatics by pointing to the gems and medals that pour forth from the cornucopia that Magnificence holds, and emphasising her gesture towards the medal cabinet. The 'methods she prescribes' for the formation of princely magnificence are the province of the antiquarian objects located there. To the right of Magnificence is Immortality, sitting in front of an obelisk and holding a palm leaf with which she points towards the door of the cabinet, indicating that it is through medals and gems that one is immortalised in eternal memory; by these means the king will enter the annuals of history. The figure that completes the trio 'has wings on her back, a flame above her head, & in her hands the instruments of the fine arts to mark the progress in them.'¹⁵ Genius expressed by the flame above the locus of her mind, she proffers her tray of tools before her as she flies towards the medal cabinet, symbolising advances made in the arts under the reign of Louis XIV. When read as an allegory together with the other figures and the compositional emphasis on the entrance to the medal cabinet, it is medals that are presented here as the source of fame and eternal memory for the king.

The allegorical programme of the salon continued with a bas-relief by Antoine Coysevox over the door to the Cabinet des Médailles that represented:

the science and study of [engraved gems and medals]. A woman dressed *à la Romaine*, is seated and her attention is focused on vases filled with medals and engraved gems. A winged infant before her presents her with an antique vase in the shape of a gondola, from which she seems to choose the object she desires. A smaller putto lifts another vase, & all of these figures are of gilt bronze on a ground of white marble.¹⁶

In this lost over-door relief, preserved in an extant sketch (fig. 8),¹⁷ antiquarian study was personified surrounded by the objects that are of primary interest to the discipline. Together with the ceiling of the Salon de l'Abondance, this bas-relief reads as an allegory of the study and production of medals as mode of historical representation. The personification of antiquarian study rested above the entrance to the medal cabinet, an atemporal space where universal history would be assembled and events distant from each other in time and place were brought into order in the trays of the cabinets within. The Cabinet des Médailles was not just a storehouse for precious things to demonstrate the temporal wealth of the monarch, it was also a place where Louis XIV

could insert his own image into the broader fabric of history.

The earliest description of the medal cabinet refers to it as a 'cabinet of curiosities' that looked like a fantasy treasury from the pages of fiction. Opening the doors from the Salon de l'Abondance revealed a room broadly rectangular in plan, longer than it was wide (figs 9, 10), with an oval domed vault.¹⁸ The whole space glittered with gilding, mirrors, precious and semi-precious stones:

The Cabinet of curiosities is infinitely above all that has been seen, as it is truly an assemblage of all that has been produced of a rare and precious kind by the Sun, or in the entrails of the Earth, or in the womb of the Sea from all over the world, that has been embellished still more by art, & that by industry has been arranged & placed on Shelves with an order so marvellous & a variety so great, that this place appears altogether magical.¹⁹

This quote from Madeleine de Scudéry's description of the cabinet was written soon after its installation at the palace. She presented it as a Wunderkammer filled with wondrous things produced from diverse natural materials transformed by art into items of extraordinary luxury.

From the Salon de l'Abondance the visitor ascended five marble steps to the door of the medal cabinet. The oval domed vault above had coffers set on the diagonal to form a diamond pattern, each coffer inset with a gold rosette on a blue background.²⁰ At the centre of the ceiling was an oval painting, imitating the oculus of an ancient dome, depicting three floating putti. By day the room was lit by windows opposite the door arranged in three sections: a large rectangular set of glass panels on the wall; a smaller set of panes above the cornice that was wider at the bottom than the top to accommodate the change of shape towards the dome; and an oval aperture above that on one side of dome. The windows above the cornice and on the dome were matched with mirrors of the same size and shape on the remaining three sides of the room. Beneath the dome were four pendentives that allowed for the transition from the rectangular plan of the room to the curve of the dome, each decorated with an oval panel of a personification in female form.²¹ These figures continued the theme of the ceiling of the Salon de l'Abondance into the cabinet: Abundance reflected the wealth of the prince; Magnificence, the outward image that such riches would impress upon others; Love,

the adoration that it would bring him, while signalling his own taste for such things; and Symmetry, the classical principal of design found in ancient treasures and continued in his own commissions.

On the ground, the corners of the room were rounded off by ornately decorated cabinetry. Tessin's sketch shows the wall that faced the entrance with the tall window directly facing the door. Either side of that window was a recess hung three high with cabinet paintings by the great masters including Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, Andrea del Sarto, Mantegna, Carracci and Veronese.²² There were two of these recesses for paintings on each wall of the cabinet with twenty-four paintings distributed evenly about the space.²³ The painting recesses were flanked by narrow, mirrored pilasters with gilt borders each articulated with four shelves that held ancient engraved gems and vessels of rock crystal, agate and gold.²⁴ Above the cabinetry in each of the four corners of the room was a niche half an octagon in plan, its five sides, top and bottom faced with mirrors. These corner niches each had four ornate shelves, which Tessin depicted as tiered scalloped convex forms that countered the concave façades of the cabinetry below (fig. 10). These shelves held a variety of objects, silver and bronze statuettes (both ancient and modern), agate vessels and nefs and all manner of precious objects that would be multiplied infinitely by the mirrors surrounding them.²⁵ There were yet more of these precious objects displayed on a shelf-like entablature above the niches that continued around the perimeter of the room.

The act of assembling such a collection of precious objects was of historical import, as de Scudéry emphasised in her description of an elaborate cup in Louis XIV's cabinet, thought to be the one used for the baptism ceremony of the Holy Roman emperor Charles V (1500-58):

There is a Jasper Vase of excessive size, which is shaped as a kind of irregular oval that served at the Baptism of Charles V, which is of inestimable value; I shall make you note that this vase will be esteemed more in two thousand years, for having been in the Cabinet of Louis le Grand.²⁶

The precious collectibles in the king's cabinet had accrued value through their provenance; this vase was notable for its connection with an illustrious ancestor of the king, through his mother's Habsburg heritage. Now this object was owned by another figure destined to be remembered by posterity two thousand



6. Houasse: *Ceiling of the Salon de l'Abondance*, 1682, Versailles. (Photo: © Château de Versailles, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Christophe Fouin)

7. *Detail of fig. 6.* (Photo: © Château de Versailles, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Christophe Fouin)

years hence, like Alexander or Caesar, and the objects associated with him would gain an historical lustre of their own.

When the king's collection of engraved gems and medals was transported from rue Vivienne in Paris to the cabinet at Versailles in February 1684, they became the main attractions of the new cabinet.²⁷ 'Who could estimate the number and the beauty of the cameos and engraved gems', Félibien enthused, 'these precious monuments of antiquity along with medals, from where the cabinet take its name, are together its principal riches.'²⁸ The special cabinetry that would house this collection was an intrinsic element in the design of this space from the outset.

Tessin attributed the decorative scheme of the Cabinet des Médailles and the furniture within it to Jean Berain I (c.1640-1711).²⁹ Making many prints for the crown but also designing costumes, and decorations for royal ballets, fêtes and funerals, as well as the arabesque designs that proliferated in the decorative arts under Louis XIV, Berain was a polymath. He was given the title of *Dessinateur de la Chambre et du Cabinet du Roi*. In this capacity he designed a *grand bureau* that was executed by Alexandre-Jean Oppenordt (1639-1715) for the centre of the medal cabinet and can be seen in Tessin's elevation sketch (see fig. 1). This piece does not survive, but the inlays on an extant corner cabinet provide

some clues as to the appearance of the rest of the furniture in this space.

Along with the large bureau, twelve *médailleurs* (medal cabinets) were commissioned from Oppenordt, and installed in the *Cabinet des Médailles* between January 1684 and May 1685.³⁰ One of the *médailleurs* from the corner of the room came to light in 1999 (fig. 11), providing a rare glimpse of the level of decorative detail once found in there.³¹ The cabinet was originally set beneath one of the corner niches behind richly decorated doors with putti posed as herms on either side.³² What survives today is an internal fitting, which accounts for its lack of decoration on all but the principle façade, which would have been exposed upon opening the doors of the cabinet. Here an intricate border of ebony inlaid with a scrolling arabesque design in pewter incorporates the Bourbon fleur-de-lis and the interlaced Ls of Louis XIV's monogram (fig. 12). Inside, the drawers were lined with red morocco leather trays shaped to fit the irregular angles of the cabinet, with circular apertures lined with blue velvet to hold each coin, medal or engraved gem and stamped with a gilt fleur-de-lis design, echoing the marquetry on the face of the cabinets (fig. 13).³³ The royal symbols in this inlay work and the stamped leather trays within them designated the coins and medals in the king's collection as the possession of the French crown. The inclusion of Louis XIV's



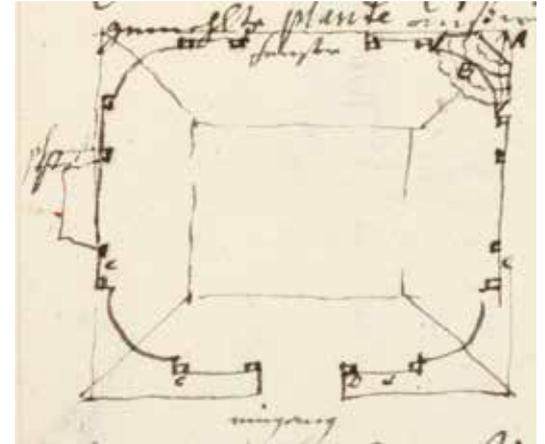
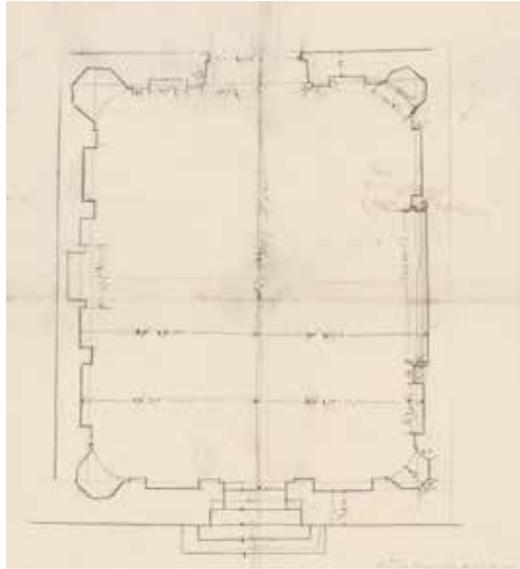
8. Coysevox: *Bas-relief over the door from the Salon de l'Abondance into the Cabinet des Médailles at Versailles, 1682*. From a sketch of c.1780. (Photo: © Archives nationales de France)

cipher makes an even more specific claim to his personal possession of the collection and the associated culture and learning that owning such objects bestows upon him. The king's monogram and the fleur-de-lis that decorated the cabinet and its internal dressings framed the collection of historic gems and medals from ancient to modern times. They were subsumed within a network of *louis-quatorzième* imagery, producing universal history as a Bourbon narrative that culminated with the current king.

In the medal cabinet individual coins, medals and engraved gems were organised and were unified through systematic filing in the cabinetry that, together, housed more than three hundred trays full of these precious items.³⁴ As soon as the *médailleurs* were installed and the collection was moved to Versailles, Louvois, at the king's behest, commissioned the new Keeper of King's Medals, Pierre Rainssant, and *Antiquaire du Roi* Jean Foy-Vaillant to make an inventory.³⁵ The collection was carefully arranged by size, material, epoch and country.³⁶ Most of the collection of ancient coins were Imperial Roman examples, with gold, silver and three sizes of bronze kept separately. Among the modern pieces, French medals dominated, with a cabinet of thirty-six drawers dedicated to gold and silver pieces. The collection was vast by seventeenth-century standards; nearly comprehensive, it formed a haptic compen-

dium for the study of history. By imposing a system of historical, or perhaps antiquarian, categorisation, history was subsumed in microcosm within the cabinet of the king. The younger Félibien praised the collection for its encyclopaedic breadth: 'There is in gold, silver and bronze all that one could see to represent the most beautiful Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Hebraic, Syrian, Punic, Gallic, Gothic, Arabic, and Runic medals, which form the series of different Consuls, Empires, Cities, kings, Deities [etc.]'.³⁷ These artefacts 'form series' (*forment des suites*), with the gems and medals arranged to create a complete representation of the history of the known world. Thus assembled, they collapsed time between the most glorious events from ancient history, so that by placing one coin next to another the deeds of the present king could be considered next to those of Alexander or Julius Caesar.

During the period in which the collection was catalogued many new acquisitions were made in an attempt to complete the chronology.³⁸ Besides the continual purchases made by Foy-Vaillant and Rainssant, the king bought more famous collections in their entirety, beginning with that of his uncle, the late Gaston-Henri, duc de Verneuil in February 1684, which cost him for 14,000 livres. The duc's widow presented a particularly rare piece as a personal gift to the king.³⁹ Such was the importance of assembling what would become the national collection that many of the best



9. *Plan of the Cabinet des Médailles at Versailles.*

(Photo: © Archives Nationales de France)

10. *Detail of fig. 2.*

antiquaries contributed, with Foy-Vaillant selling the king the set of medals of the kings of Syria that he had collected to write his history of that country.⁴⁰

Putting together a complete history of France was one of the priorities of the cabinet, and as commemorative medals were a modern invention, the narrative had to be completed with coins:

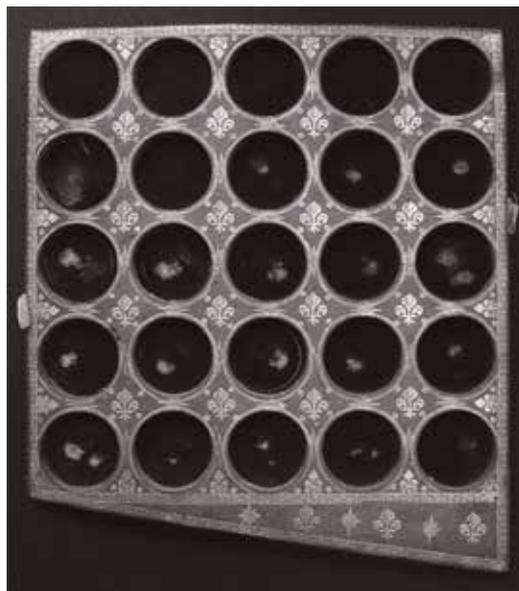
As we found the set of coins of the kings of France quite deficient, although it was one of the most necessary, we thought that we could bring together coins of all our kings since Clovis which would make one of the finest ornaments of the Crown, & an original account, to prove the succession of twelve hundred years of our monarchy that France alone of all kingdoms could produce.⁴¹

The precedence of the French crown, claimed then to be the oldest continuous sovereign title in Europe, could be proven by the evidence of coins collected to form a complete history of the monarchy. This project reveals the importance of genealogy in the king's history and shows the lengths taken to establish the origins of the crown through material documents of those who had reigned before Louis XIV. Amassing a comprehensive collection of French coins and medals would prove that the French monarch was a powerful agent of history. The continuous reign of French kings for twelve hundred

years positioned them with, if not surpassed, the imperial dynasties from the ancient world in terms of longevity. The collection of French coins and medals became one of the most celebrated elements of the cabinet in its day, with the younger Félibien proudly announcing that, 'amongst an infinity of coins fabricated by every Nation of the world, we find a complete series of our kings and of the French Monarchy since it commenced at the establishment of Gaul.⁴² It seems that by the beginning of the eighteenth century the collection of French coins now traced the nation of France back to ancient Gaul, extending the historical claims of the crown back to antiquity.

Assembling the collection of coins and medals for the king's cabinet was not an exercise in excess; it was a means to produce history by material objects. Moreover, the Cabinet des Médailles was described as a space for antiquaries to conduct the latest historical research: 'It is there that savants admire the magnificence of H.M. [who] has provided a place for new progress and discoveries to be made in the most learned research', wrote the younger Félibien.⁴³ The cabinet not only revealed the magnificence of the king in its material splendour, but also showed his place within this haptic material history of the known world. Where a Wunderkammer might reveal the universal order of humans within nature through the materials collected and embellished from throughout the known

13. Tray from a médaillier of the Cabinet des Médailles at Versailles, c.1684, gold-embossed leather and velvet, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. (Photo: © the author)



11. Oppenordt: *Médaillier of the Cabinet des Médailles at Versailles*, 1684, pine, ebony and pewter, private collection (location unknown).

12. Detail of fig. 11.



world, Louis XIV's Cabinet des Médailles claimed his place within history.

The collection of medals and gems assembled at Versailles made it a centre for study, contributing to the fashion for antiquarianism. The cabinet was a physical encyclopaedia, with a sheet produced for each drawer that illustrates and describes its contents.⁴⁴ André Morell was given the task of carefully drawing each coin and medal, while Rainssant and Marc-Antoine Oudinet (1643-1712) wrote the descriptions.⁴⁵ These sheets survive (fig. 14), shaped to fit the asymmetrical drawers from the corner cabinets, and would have been placed below the trays of medals for ease of reference.

The cabinet was furnished in a manner that facilitated numismatic study. A large day bed was placed at one side of the room and Oppenordt's bureau in the middle, so that one could stay and study the medals at leisure. Many books were bought for reference purposes, and the goldsmith Ladoireau was commissioned to make seven fine silver gilt magnifying glasses and eight gold fillets in order to view and to manipulate the diminutive treasures.⁴⁶ Claude du Molinet, one of the savants working on the inventory of the cabinet, reported that the king took a keen personal interest in this task: 'During the organisation of the Medals in their trays, the king took pleasure in coming nearly every day after mass until dinner, to this

Cabinet, to see them placed, indicating that he found much satisfaction there, and always found something to learn.⁴⁷ Louis delighted in these visits, where he could learn from history revealed by the experts cataloguing his collection. Antiquarian knowledge of this kind was an important part of courtly erudition, and Louis would delight in making Versailles a centre of excellence in this field of learning. Philippe de Courcillon, marquis de Dangeau (1638-1720), a court diarist and confidant of the king, reported that Louis spent a lot of time in his medal cabinet during 1685, when 'it amused him often to see his medals after dinner', and it became a favourite space in which to spend his time at leisure.⁴⁸ It was a place where the king could learn and demonstrate his erudition, and reflect on the lessons from history revealed in the medals that he surveyed.

The Cabinet des Médailles was also an important site of diplomacy, where visits of the most distinguished guests would culminate, as it did for a tour of the palace that Louis XIV gave to the exiled James II of England and his wife Mary of Modena in 1689.⁴⁹ The number of gifts that the king received from courtiers, family and friends throughout the last three decades of his reign further attests to his personal interest in numismatics.⁵⁰ The gifts also suggest that this collection was deemed to be of personal significance to him. On many

14. Morell: *Sheet from a médaillier of the Cabinet des Médailles at Versailles, 1684, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.* (Photo: © Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques, BnF)



occasions Louis was given cameos and intaglios bearing the portraits of his forebears. In October 1690 he was presented with a hyacinth intaglio of Henri IV during a trip to Fontainebleau, the palace favoured by his grandfather.⁵¹ Another gift, from Madeleine de Scudéry, was an intaglio engraved with an Helios steering the sun chariot, surrounded by the twelve signs of the zodiac (fig. 15).⁵² Not only was the sun the main element of the king's personal device, the composition of the gem was very similar to the design of a medal celebrating his birth (fig. 16). These particular gifts were chosen for their resonance to Louis XIV, drawing a connection to his life and ancestry through gems fashioned in past times.

With history ever in the making through the events of the present king's reign, the collection was to be continually updated, not only with gifts such as these and other items the king bought, but also through the production of new medals. The cabinet was a tactile encyclopaedia of history, mapping events from ancient civilizations to the king's day, where the reign of Louis XIV featured as the most current in a long and distinguished narrative of history.

When they were close to completing their medal book in 1701, Louis XIV rewarded the Petite Académie by granting a new charter to elevate the society to the same level as the other major academies.⁵³ With a new consti-

tution, there was a change of name to the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Médailles in recognition for their work on the *Histoire métallique*.⁵⁴ The new constitution greatly enlarged the company. It would henceforth comprise eighty members: forty academicians, ten honorary members, ten pensioners, ten associates and ten students. Among the new members listed in the constitution were noted figures from the antiquarian salons of Paris: Père La Chaize, Louis-Marie-Victor de Rochebaron, duc d'Aumont, Jean Foy-Vaillant, and Keeper of the King's Medals Marc-Antoine Oudinet. The new rules established this expanded company as a society of antiquaries, as illustrated by the nineteenth article:

The Academy will apply itself incessantly to the making of Medals on the principal events of the History of France under every reign, up to the start of the Monarchy; & to composing the historical Descriptions of the said events in accordance with the medals that will be made. It will work also without delay on the explication of the Medals, Medallions, Gems & other antique and modern rarities from the Cabinet of His Majesty; and also on the description of all the Antiquities and Monuments of France.⁵⁵

On completing the task of producing a comprehensive *Histoire métallique* of Louis XIV, the new Académie Royale des Inscriptions et



15. *Signs of the zodiac*, bloodstone, probably ancient Roman, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. (Photo: © Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques, BnF)

16. Delahaye: *The birth of Louis XIV in 1638 (reverse)*, c.1687, silver, 72mm., Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. (Photo: © Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques, BnF)

Médailles planned to make a complete history of the monarchy of France in medals, perhaps to make up for those that were only represented by coins in the king's collection. Following the practice that they adopted for the production of Louis XIV's medals in this period, they would write descriptions of every new medal that they designed simultaneously, to leave a clear record of their intended meanings. Moreover, the antiquarian project of cataloguing all of the medals, engraved gems and other rarities of the king's cabinet was part of their remit. The new medals that completed the tactile encyclopedia of history found in the royal medal cabinet would also be unified through a process of interpretation that would ultimately form a teleological narrative of an unbroken heritage from the classical world to Ludovician France. Here, the relationship between the new medals designed for the king and examples from every reign back to the dawn of antiquity was made unequivocally.

The new list of members in the 1701 constitution of the academy excludes Claude-François Ménéstrier, one of the most prominent antiquaries in Paris. This was no doubt the result of a long-standing feud between him and the Petite Académie over the right to publish the *Histoire métallique* of Louis XIV.⁵⁶ Perhaps the pamphlet published by Ménéstrier in 1701 to celebrate Louis XIV's patronage of this reconstituted antiquarian academy was

an attempt to reconcile his differences with them.⁵⁷ The pamphlet is illustrated with a medal and a madrigal in praise of the king (fig. 17). Both sides of the medal are shown. On the obverse is a portrait of the king with the inscription *LUDOVICUS MAGN. FUNDAT. ET. PROTEC. ACADEM. REG. NUMISMAT ET INSCRIPT.* (Louis le Grand, founder and protector of the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Médailles). Through its new title shown alongside the king's portrait, the academy is acknowledged as the author of his narrative in medals. The figure of a medal postulates the king's place within the universal order of history found in the Cabinet des Médailles at Versailles, illustrated on the reverse. The reverse shows a *médailleur*, described below the illustration as 'a Cabinet of Antique Medals arranged according to Era in various Drawers'. The cabinet is identified as belonging to the king by the interlaced Ls of his cipher above a fleur-de-lis on the stand below (fig. 18). In combination, the two sides of the medal explicitly link the new medals designed and struck by the academy to their display in the king's cabinet at Versailles.

The inscription on the medal's reverse is a quote from Virgil: *MAGNUS AB INTEGRO SAECULORUM NASCITUR ORDO* (And the majestic roll of circling centuries begins anew).⁵⁸ From the king's collection of ancient coins and medals, supplemented by those struck to commemorate his own reign, the antiquary could see the



17. Dedicatory page of *Ménestrier's Au roy, fondateur et protecteur de l'Académie royale des médailles et des inscriptions*, 1701, Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon. (Photo: © BmL)

18. Detail of fig. 17. (Photo: © BmL)

patterns of the 'circling centuries' of history, and how an age of greatness began afresh with the reign of Louis XIV. This sentiment was reiterated in the madrigal below the illustrated medal that referred to the marvels of the king's cabinet as an encyclopaedia of history:

This precious mass of Antique Medals,
In whose face & reverse
Under symbolic figures
Expose our eyes to the order of the Universe,
We go from century to century in authentic
proofs
Giving complete form to a thousand different
deeds.

An inventory of the Cabinet des Médailles at Versailles taken at the end of Louis XIV's life showed that medals representing his own deeds far outnumbered those of any other modern figure: there were twenty-two gold medals and 260 in silver, more than ten times as many as were held to commemorate the reigns of his father and grandfather.⁵⁹ When placed in the king's cabinet, the collection of medals struck for Louis XIV would unify the past to his present through emulation of both ancient and modern compositional modes. Where those that drew from classical models would establish historical continuity, those with a modern design would present a challenge to the absolute authority of ancient

forms. Moreover, by emulating the more ephemeral images from textiles and prints, durable medals would guarantee the continuation of their imagery carefully developed to preserve details of contemporary life for posterity.

When it is considered how all of the items in the king's cabinet were brought into aesthetic unity, through to trays embossed with the king's cipher mirroring the symbols woven into the finishes of the decorated cabinets, the whole effect was one of subsuming history under Louis XIV's control. Asserting his place within history and placing the study of history within his purview, Louis XIV's Cabinet des Médailles must be viewed as a site of historical self-representation. **M**

NOTES

- 1 Much of the material presented in this article has been excerpted from the third chapter of my book: Robert Wellington, *Antiquarianism and the visual histories of Louis XIV: artifacts for a future past* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 79-105 (see p. 60 below).
- 2 Ragnar Josephson and Pierre Francastel, eds, *Nicodème Tessin le jeune: relation de sa visite à Marly, Versailles, Clagny, Rueil et Saint-Cloud en 1687* (Versailles: Librairie Léon Bernard, 1927) (henceforth Tessin), p. 33.
- 3 Nationalmuseum Stockholm, NMH THC 1315.
- 4 Madeleine de Scudéry, *Conversations nouvelles sur divers sujets dédiée au roy* (Paris: C. Barbin, 1684), i, p. 25.
- 5 On the king's collection of gems, medals and agates, see Thierry Sarmant, *Le Cabinet des Médailles de la Bibliothèque Nationale 1661-1848* (Paris: École des Chartres, 1994), pp. 25-90; Ernest Babelon, *Traité des monnaies grecques et romaines* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1901), cols 136-46; and Ernest Babelon, *Catalogue des camées antiques et modernes de la bibliothèque nationale* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1897), pp. cxxiii-cxxxiii. Little art historical commentary has been made on the collection, except for a brief description given by Antoine Schnapper, 'The king of France as collector in the seventeenth century', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xvii, 1 (1986), pp. 185-202, and Antoine Schnapper, *Curieux du grand siècle. Collections et collectionneurs dans la France du XVII^e siècle*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), pp. 332-8.
- 6 See Robert W. Berger, 'Bernini's Louis XIV equestrian: a closer examination of Its fortunes at Versailles', *The Art Bulletin*, lxiii (1981), pp. 232-48.
- 7 Frontispiece to Claude-François Ménestrier, *Histoire du règne de Louis le Grand par les médailles...*, new ed. (Paris: R. Pepie, 1693).
- 8 Wellington, *Antiquarianism and the visual histories of Louis XIV*.
- 9 Gérard Sabatier, *Versailles ou la figure du roi* (Paris: A. Michel, 1999), p. 266; Wellington, *Antiquarianism and the visual histories of Louis XIV*, ch. 7: 'Numismatic resonances: Le Brun's cycle for the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles'.
- 10 On the Salon de l'Abondance, see Nicolas Milovanovic, *Les grands appartements de Versailles sous Louis XIV: catalogue des décors peints*, exhibition catalogue (Versailles: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2005), pp. 92-5, and Daniel Alcouffe, *Les gemmes de la Couronne*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2001), pp. 14-17.
- 11 More than seven hundred agate and rock crystal vessels were listed in contemporary inventories of king's possessions: Jules Guiffrey, *Inventaire générale de mobilier de la couronne sous Louis XIV* (Paris: J. Rouam, 1885), pp. 171-268. On these vessels, see Alcouffe, *Les gemmes de la Couronne*.
- 12 The silver furniture in this room is described in *Nouveau Mercure galant* (December 1682), pp. 40-41.
- 13 Jean-François Félibien, *Description sommaire de Versailles ancienne et nouvelle* (Paris: Antoine Chrétien, 1703), pp. 109-11.
- 14 Félibien, *Description sommaire*, pp. 109-10.
- 15 Félibien, *Description sommaire*, p. 110.
- 16 Félibien, *Description sommaire*.
- 17 Archives nationales de France, O/1/1778/3/no. 1.
- 18 Curiously, the plan of the Cabinet drawn by Tessin and the later plan held in the Archives Nationales de France (O/1/1768/no. 29) show the room on a different axis: Tessin shows the window and door to the cabinet on the wider walls and the plan from the Archives has these features on the short walls. Looking at the plan of the royal apartments at Versailles from the late eighteenth century, it is clear that Tessin was mistaken and that the entrance to the Cabinet was on the shorter wall of the room.
- 19 Scudéry, *Conversations nouvelles*, i, p. 25.
- 20 Tessin believed this design to have an ancient lineage, made in imitation of the 'temple du Solleil et de la Lune', by which he may have been referring to the temple of Venus in Rome; Tessin, p. 33.
- 21 Félibien, *Description sommaire*, p. 112. Tessin provided an alternate reading of these four figures as representing the sciences; Tessin, p. 33.
- 22 Félibien, *Description sommaire*, pp. 113-15.
- 23 The artists and subjects of these paintings, along with details of how they were distributed throughout the space, were recorded by Jean-François Félibien; Félibien, *Description sommaire*, pp. 113-15.
- 24 Tessin, p. 32.
- 25 Félibien, *Description sommaire*, p. 116.
- 26 Scudéry, *Conversations nouvelles*, i, pp. 28-9.
- 27 François Michel le Tellier, marquis de Louvois gave the order to transport the medals and engraved gems to Versailles on 17 February 1684; see Thierry Sarmant, *Les demeures du soleil: Louis XIV, Louvois et la surintendance des bâtiments du roi* (Paris: Champs Vallon, 2003), p. 60.
- 28 Félibien, *Description sommaire*, p. 117.
- 29 On Berain, see Roger-Armand Weigert, *Jean I Berain, dessinateur de la Chambre et du Cabinet du roi (1640-1711)*, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions d'art et d'histoire, 1936), and Fiske Kimball, 'Sources and evolution of the Arabesque of Berain', *Art Bulletin*, xxiii, 4 (1941), pp. 307-16.
- 30 The following accounts from the 'Comptes des Bâtiments du Roi' track Oppenordt's cabinetry: 2 January 1684, 400 livres for marquetry cabinets that he made for medals (Jules Guiffrey, *Comptes des bâtiments du roi sous le règne de Louis XIV*, 5 vols (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1881-1901 (henceforth CBR), ii, p. 329); 16 January - 12 March 1684, 3,600 livres for 12 marquetry cabinets that he made for the medals of H.M. (CBR, ii, p. 458); 14 April - 19 November 1684, 3,500 livres for the desk that he made for the Cabinet of Curiosities (CBR, ii, p. 458); 31 December 1684 - 11 March 1685, 1,632 livres for the marquetry that he made for the restoration of the 12 cabinets for the king's medals (CBR, ii, p. 774); 12 March - 6 May 1685, 6,500 livres for his work on the bureau of the Cabinet of Curiosities (CBR, ii, p. 774).
- 31 One of Oppenordt's corner cabinets was identified and auctioned by Sotheby's in 1999; Sotheby's, *Important mobilier, Importante orfèvererie* (Monaco: Sotheby's, 1999), no. 29, 22-5.
- 32 Félibien, *Description sommaire*, p. 117.
- 33 These trays were produced by Daubancour, with the accounts listed in the 'Comptes des Bâtiments du Roi' (CBR, ii, pp. 458-9).
- 34 Félibien, *Description sommaire*, p. 117.
- 35 The eight handwritten manuscripts of the inventories by Jean Foy-Vaillant and Pierre Rainssant are held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France: 'Inventaire des médailles antiques [et modernes] du Cabinet de Sa Majesté' (1684), BnF, Med., Γ18; 'Inventaire des médailles antiques de moyen bronze du Cabinet de Sa Majesté' (1684), BnF, Med., Γ33; 'Inventaire des médailles antiques de petit bronze du Cabinet de Sa Majesté' (1684), BnF, Med., Γ34; 'Inventaire des médailles antiques d'argent du Cabinet de Sa Majesté' (1685) BnF, Med., Γ24; 'Inventaire des médailles impériales d'or du Cabinet du roy' (1685) BnF, Med., Γ20; 'Inventaire des médaillons d'or et d'argent de l'empire tant latins que grecs du Cabinet du roy' (1685) BnF, Med., Γ1; 'Inventaire des médailles consulaires d'or, d'argent et de cuivre du Cabinet du roy' (1685) BnF, Med., Γ13; 'Inventaire des médailles

- des rois de France pour le Cabinet du roi' (c.1685) BnF, Med., F59. Between June and December 1864 four antiquaries are listed in the accounts of the king's works for payments for the inventory of the collection: Desferres, Thomas, Vincenot and Cadenet (*CBR*, ii, pp. 466, 469).
- 36 'Estat des médailles du cabinet du roy', 1715, BnF, Med. F91.
- 37 Félibien, *Description sommaire*, p. 118.
- 38 Many medals were purchased by the crown from 1684 to 1687, during the period when Rainsant and Foy-Vaillant were cataloguing the collection: *CBR*, ii, pp. 461, 468, 492, 494, 536-8, 542, 559-60, 776-8, 858, 861, 863, 865, 867, 870, 873, 875-6, 914-17, 1007-08, 1084, 1087, 1090, 1,092, 1095, 1097-8, 1141, 1143, 1199, 1200-3. See Sarmant, *Le Cabinet des médailles*, p. 54, n. 110.
- 39 P. Claude du Molinet, 'L'Histoire du Cabinet des Médailles du Roi', *Nouveau Mercure galant* (May 1719), p. 56.
- 40 Molinet, 'L'Histoire du Cabinet des Médailles', p. 56.
- 41 Molinet, 'L'Histoire du Cabinet des Médailles', pp. 54-5.
- 42 Félibien, *Description sommaire*, p. 118.
- 43 Félibien, *Description sommaire*, pp. 117-18.
- 44 Sarmant, *Le Cabinet des médailles*, pp. 52-3.
- 45 Marc-Antoine Oudinet (1643-1712) would take over the position of Keeper of the King's Medals when Pierre Rainssant was found drowned in a water reservoir at Versailles in June 1689; Sarmant, *Le Cabinet des médailles*, pp. 59-61.
- 46 Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet, 'D'agate et d'or camées et intailles de la collection de Louis XIV', *FMR*, lxxxv (2000), pp. 85-110, at p. 88.
- 47 Molinet, 'L'Histoire du Cabinet des Médailles', p. 55.
- 48 '[I] s'amuse souvent les après-dînées à voir ses médailles' is a phrase repeated on at least three occasions in the marquis de Dangeau's diary: Philippe de Courcillon marquis de Dangeau, *Journal du marquis de Dangeau: publié en entier pour la première fois*, 18 vols (Paris: Firmin Didot frères, 1854-60), i, pp. 305, 312, 318-19.
- 49 On 30 November 1689; Dangeau, *Journal*, ii, pp. 313-14.
- 50 These gifts are listed in an inventory in 'Journal des acquisitions du Cabinet des médailles du roy, commencé le 25 octobre 1689', BnF, Rés ms. 00001 PAR BN Fo (1689). The sections of the document about engraved gems are transcribed in Babelon, *Catalogue des camées*, pp. cxxix-cxxxii.
- 51 Babelon, *Catalogue des camées*, p. cxxix.
- 52 Babelon, *Catalogue des camées*, p. cxxx.
- 53 The 'Règlement ordonné par le Roy pour l'Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Médailles' was transcribed in the minutes of the séance of 16 July 1701. On the history of the academy in this period, see Joseph Jacquot, 'Pourquoi l'Académie s'est-elle appelée Académie des Inscriptions?', *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, cxi, 1 (1967), pp. 147-9.
- 54 The academy would change its name again in 1716 to the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, closer to its current form; Jacquot, 'Pourquoi', pp. 147-8.
- 55 'Règlement ordonné par le Roy pour l'Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Médailles', article 19.
- 56 See Wellington, *Antiquarianism and the visual histories of Louis XIV*, ch. 5.
- 57 Claude-François Ménes-trier, *Au Roy, fondateur et protecteur de l'Académie royale des médailles et des inscriptions* (Paris: Imprimerie de la Vve. A. Lambin, 1701). The example illustrated here is in the Collection Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon, 24894.
- 58 The Latin comes from Virgil, *Bucolics*, Eclogue IV. The English translation is from Virgil, *Eclogues*, trans. J.B. Greenough (Boston, MA: Ginn & Co, 1895).
- 59 'Estat des médailles du cabinet du roy'.