

REVIEWS

The extraordinary life and image of Marie Antoinette continue to fascinate us

Royal rule breaker

**Marie Antoinette:
Metamorphoses of an Image**

La Conciergerie, Paris
16 October 2019 – 26 January 2020

Reviewed by Cynthia Rose

Marie Antoinette may now be a global figure but perceptions of her are defined by questions. Was the queen a martyr or just an epic spendthrift? A devoted mother or a licentious libertine? This exhibition – held in the prison where she spent her final days – doesn't solve these riddles. What it offers is a study of image itself.

In Marie Antoinette's day, the French royals embodied power. Every aspect of their lives was ultra-codified and dress was critical in maintaining their authority. The idea she attempted to impose – that of a private life – was more than just a deviation. For the monarchy, it was inherently dangerous. Yet, even as she insisted on her privilege, Marie Antoinette shed tradition after tradition. She stopped wearing rouge and the stiff *grand corps* corset, took up simple muslin gowns and rode in breeches. She scorned the court hierarchy for an elite group of friends and lost herself in a world of mock farms and theatre. These decisions helped destabilise the throne.

From the moment it ended in 1793, her story fuelled debate. But, since 2001, a series of books and films have radically refashioned it. Not all of them disregard



‘Both William Morris and Walter Gropius shared a mission, to break down the arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist’

ISABELLA SMITH, P.72

‘We still have much to learn from Lenore Tawney: to remember to slow down and take in what is around us with wonder-filled eyes’

BEVERLY GORDON, P.78

archival fact, but most approach the queen through modern sympathies. The results have given us Marie Antoinette as teenage heroine, fashion avant-gardist and proto-queen of bling. In addition, many academics now see the queen as a woman doomed by the search for agency.

The show at La Conciergerie encompasses all these ideas. But they are less about the queen, it suggests, than about differing cultures and moments in time. As critic Walter Benjamin once noted, aligning images from the past with life in the present generates an ‘upheaval’ in what they convey. The posthumous life of Marie Antoinette’s image has exemplified this turmoil for over two centuries.

Very few of the queen’s intimate items survive. Three of these – a cap, chemise and a shoe she (may have) lost on the scaffold – are positioned at the exhibition’s start. Like her final letter, the eeriness they exude requires no special effects. After these slight yet spookily corporeal objects, the show descends into a war of depictions.

Here, historic portraits face fictitious ‘history paintings’, drawings, sculpture, fashion and clips from Hollywood’s whole history. There are vicious 18th-century caricatures and porn that features a queen who was then still on her throne. Further down the decades come deferential sculptures, memorial art, fashion tributes and books of every ilk. One global hit, from the 1970s, is a manga comic series called *La Rose de Versailles*. Yet, as ‘Marie Antoinette’ traverses these eras and media, her personae break free of actual history. What began with two opposed views of a ruler – one ‘royal’, the other ‘evil’ – turns into an unruly, global gallery of visions.

That over-the-top queen in *panier* skirts and huge *pouf* hair becomes an American Southern Belle and a Japanese cosplay character. The airily clad romantic posing with her rose morphs into a misunderstood teen and a would-be feminist. The suffering and degraded Marie Antoinette of those final days yields more gothic progeny. But over them all looms one image: the severed head.

Left: Baroque paper wig by Asya Kozina and Dmitriy Kozin, 2013, and right: Marie Antoinette’s shoe, c.1790



She has been seen as teenage heroine, fashion avant-gardist and proto-queen of bling

Most of those portraits for which the queen sat are here, but it’s intriguing how time has effaced their impact. Marie Antoinette in the form of a film still or piece of a couture is so much brighter, more immediate and seductive. But, if theirs are simplistic visions, that was a problem that challenged the queen herself. Every time she contradicted expectations, either courtly or common, she ceded reading of her image to the media – a media that, as Antoine Lilti writes in the catalogue, ‘was in the throes of its own revolution. The public space was exploding with pamphlets, prints and papers... almost right away, the queen’s image escaped her.’

Some of the props on show are the queen’s own commissions and many still dazzle. Perhaps the most audacious were those that shocked not the public but the court itself. One is the *jatte-téton* (literally ‘nipple bowl’). It was the star of a 65-piece porcelain service made at Sèvres for one of Marie Antoinette’s toy dairies. Meant for sipping milk, its bowl is an upside-down breast balancing on a tripod. Because this vessel ‘replicated’ royal flesh, it was made out of *pâte tendre*. (Like the rest of the set, its tripod is hard-paste porcelain.) It went on to inspire the French *bol sein* champagne glass, an artist’s version of which appears in the show. Designed in 2014 by Jane McAdam Freud, it was sculpted around the breast of Kate Moss.

If the replica royal breast startles the modern visitor, what shocked about the *jatte-téton* was not its form – that was inspired by the *mastos* cups of ancient Greece and it constituted a tribute to the ‘nation’s mother’. But the queen’s contemporaries saw something else: a homage to the theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), whose insistence that all French mothers breast-feed had both horrified and outraged aristocrats.

Cleverly sourced and carefully explained, the exhibition sells Marie Antoinette’s story better than she did. Several of its strongest pieces come from modern makers – artisans who have based work on the queen. In 2013, for instance, paper artists Asya Kozina and Dmitriy Kozin turned her high *pouf* hairdo into a fabulous sculpture. Three years later the artist-couple Pierre et Gilles, themselves monarchs of kitsch, updated Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun’s 1783 ‘rose portrait’. This time the queen was Zahia Dehar, the footballers’ call-girl notorious for her fees.

This show could have stuck with the pretty, sentimental and terrible. Such Romantic shorthand was part of the queen’s own era and she certainly used it. Yet *Marie Antoinette* foregrounds something bigger. It highlights the lawless and dissident side of image, powers we would do well to note today. *Cynthia Rose is an arts journalist and broadcaster based in Paris*