



WADDESDON
Rothschild Collections

Royal Spectacle: Eighteenth-Century Court Ceremony in Books, Prints and Drawings

26 March – 26 October, Drawings and Exhibition Rooms

A special exhibition of rarely seen material from the permanent collections at Waddesdon Manor, ***Royal Spectacle: Ceremonial and Festivities at the French Court (26 March – 26 October 2014)*** offers an exciting opportunity to explore the spectacular world of 17th- and 18th-century French courtly festivities through magnificently illustrated books. Following the publication of the [Catalogue of Printed Books and Bookbinding: The James A. de Rothschild Bequest at Waddesdon Manor](#) in 2013, this is the first of a series of exhibitions devoted to the visual richness of Waddesdon's collection of over 800 17th- and 18th-century books, covering many aspects of history, architecture, painting and daily life. The collection is unique in this country and is of great importance.

All of the court ceremonies and festivities, whether festive or sombre, were marked by a strong sense of theatrical spectacle produced on an extraordinarily extravagant scale. These sumptuously illustrated books were produced as permanent records of ephemeral events and as gifts to be sent to other courts to showcase the opulent lifestyle of the French court.

A special department within the Royal Household was responsible for the design, production and staging of all spectacles and it employed some of the foremost artists and designers of the time. Thus the illustrations reflect the evolution of style and taste in the remarkable artistic culture of late 17th and 18th century France. The large format engravings are full of detail, from the architecture of palaces and the layout of gardens to the fashions worn at court and even how tables were laid, while the superb bindings were commissioned from renowned bookbinders and are pieces of art in their own right.

Major royal festivities and ceremonies are highlighted, such as coronations, the victorious Royal Entrance, the building of monuments and statues, and equestrian tournaments, as well as the cycle of celebrations devoted to dynastic marriages, the birth of an heir and finally, the theatre of death. Life at court is depicted by the complex staging of operas, theatre and ballets, balls and the specific nature of dining practiced at the French court which was copied throughout Europe. Awe-inspiring



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fireworks were often the climax of the celebrations, set off from specially constructed fanciful buildings and against a backdrop of thousands of lanterns illuminating the entire palace.

The exhibition aims to not only illustrate these splendid events but to understand why they took place and why they were recorded in this way. Why were these ephemeral celebrations recorded in luxuriously printed volumes? What was their social and political importance? And what role did they play in securing the rule of Louis XIV and his successors?

Alongside these wonderful Festival books, the display also includes printed reproductions from the books themselves, allowing more pages to be on display than otherwise possible, as well as a number of drawings and prints from the collection, including three newly conserved large-format printed almanacs.

A illustrated handlist of all the exhibits and the accompanying texts can be downloaded as a PDF from the Collection/Exhibitions section of the Waddesdon website (www.waddesdon.org.uk).

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Visitor information and opening times: www.waddesdon.org.uk

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