

CHAPTER THREE

CULTURAL IMAGINARIES AND MODERN STATES

The power of cultural imaginaries to transform social relations was made vivid in 17th-century France. The state administration initiated a cultural experiment in the arts that helped to turn France into one of the strongest states in Europe. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis XIV's minister of the Treasury and director of the king's household (1665–83), cultivated a political imaginary of France's classical heritage and imperial destiny that was at once challenging and seductive to nobles. The state in France had previously been weak because French nobles exercised considerable autonomy, but refusing an imperial destiny was hard for them. The administration had no way to win them over through patrimonial politics so it subordinated nobles to the king with a dream.

French nobles had vexed the reign of Henri IV, and they were prepared to limit the authority of the young Louis XIV, but this did not come to pass. After roughly twenty-five years on the throne, Louis XIV was ruling a system of state "absolutism". He was so powerful that many people characterized him as a tyrant. And French families of the highest ranks of the nobility established residency at Versailles, taking their place on the public stage the king had established and ruled. What happened?

In part, the modern states that developed in the 17th and 18th centuries—including France—were able to take advantage of the principles of state sovereignty laid out in the Treaty of Augsburg and Peace of Westphalia, gaining greater control of their territories and improving them with infrastructure. But this still left many nobles with important political offices over which they exercised independent powers. Political decisions required their consultation and assent, so noble officials continued to exercise personal rather than impersonal power.¹

¹Compare to Max Weber's conception of the modern state as a mode of impersonal rule. See Max Weber, Gunther Roth, and Claus Wittich, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 996–8.

The cultural program of classical revival made all the difference in France. It did not provoke confrontation between the king and nobility. Instead, it provided a dream of collective glory and modern political efficacy based on the achievements of the ancients in Gaul. (Gaul had been a major province of the Roman Empire.) Conjuring up this history for those who frequented the French court reminded nobles of how important France had been and how unimportant it had become. Under Charlemagne, France had unified and ruled the Holy Roman Empire. In the 17th century, France was just a small kingdom surrounded by enemies. Nobles had considerable autonomous powers in their regions, but what was that compared to ruling an empire? Not so much.

The ancient world could have been dismissed as a lost past, but Colbert did not allow it. He orchestrated a classical revival in the arts to claim Rome's imperial heritage for France, and make this idea seem plausible. Louis XIV became the Sun King, Apollo, who brought abundance to the earth with his warmth and light. He was a force of nature (see Figure 3.1) too strong to stop from realizing his destiny.²

The image of Louis XIV's imperial destiny was devised by scholars in Colbert's "petite académie". This group of advisors studied ancient texts and artifacts to find classical means for celebrating Louis XIV. They proposed projects to be realized by artists and artisans patronized by the state. Colbert also came to rely on Charles Le Brun, the head of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, to design the immersive environment of classical revival at Versailles. In the king's gardens and residence, nobles walked among statues of ancient gods and heroes put there to further the administration's cultural program. They also played roles in performances in the gardens based on tales of the ancient world that were organized by members of the king's household.³

While French writers argued that the moderns could never match the ancients in culture, knowledge, and power, artisans and artists silently suggested the opposite with their work. Jacob Soll⁴ has argued that Colbert gained power for the state by collecting ancient legal documents and using them to subordinate the Church to the king. But the king also had to subordinate the nobility, and Colbert made this possible with art and artifacts rather than legal papers. He cultivated noble taste for the glories of empire, and made the king seem capable of realizing imperial dreams. One could easily deny the idea

²This was not the only imaginary used in the formation of modern states. History and destiny were organized around other principles, too. See Julia Adams, *The Familial State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); George Steinmetz, *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

³Claire Goldstein, *Vaux and Versailles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Chandra Mukerji, "Space and Political Pedagogy at the Gardens of Versailles," *Public Culture* (2012), 24(3), 68: 509–34; Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions*.

⁴Jacob Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

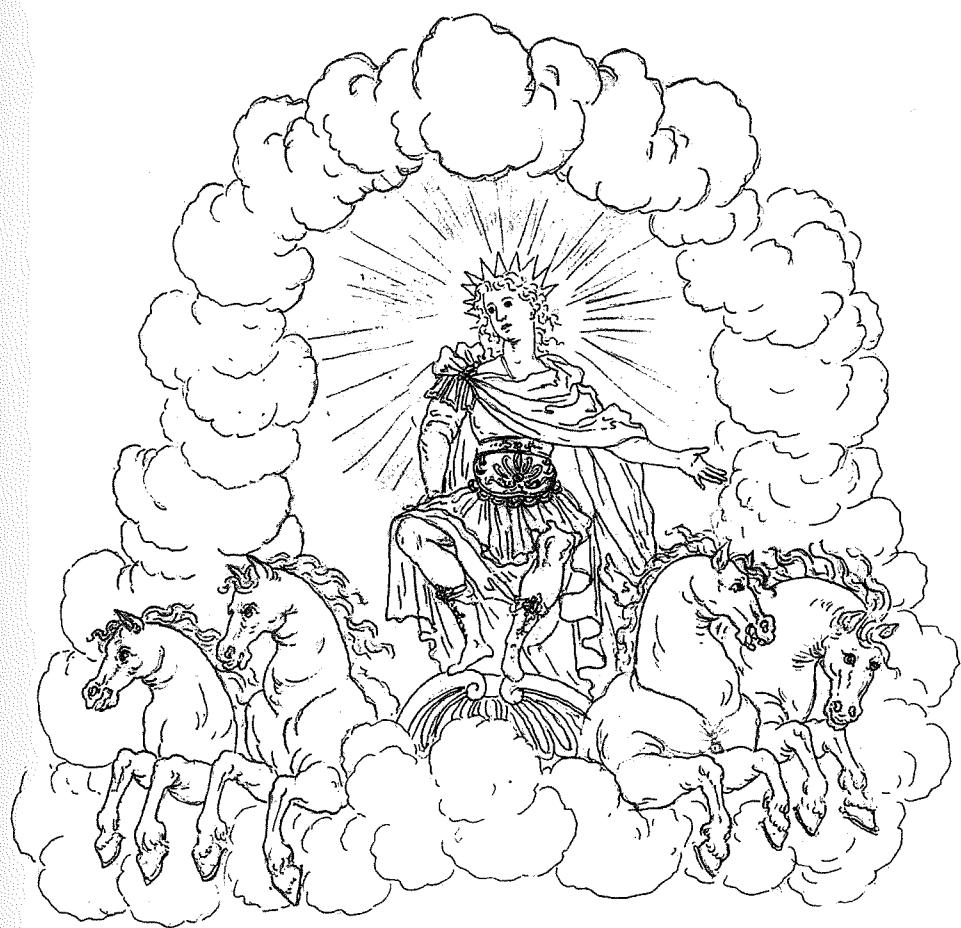


FIGURE 3.1 *Apollo, the Sun King*, Jean Bérain, Apollo on his Chariot, 1680–1710

that Louis XIV was a Sun King, but it was harder to deny his capacity to change the world around him. Machines in theatrical productions carried Apollo through the skies on his chariot, the fountains at Versailles sparkled in the sun, and the Hall of Mirrors in the chateau captured the sun's warmth and light in a dramatic display of ingenuity and wealth. Artisans made collective future glory conceivable, drawing members of the great families of France to the king's side to share his imperial ambitions.

The garden at Versailles was a masterpiece of territorial control, using techniques of military engineering and ancient garden design to make a beautifully managed landscape worthy of Rome. The chateau was filled with paintings and tapestries that represented the king as Apollo (see Figure 3.2), and was outfitted with furniture that glowed like the sun with metal and shell inlay. The statues in the garden were either imitations of Roman



FIGURE 3.2 *The Apollo Fountain, showing Apollo on his Chariot Bringing the Sun into the Sky.*
Photo by Becky Cohen

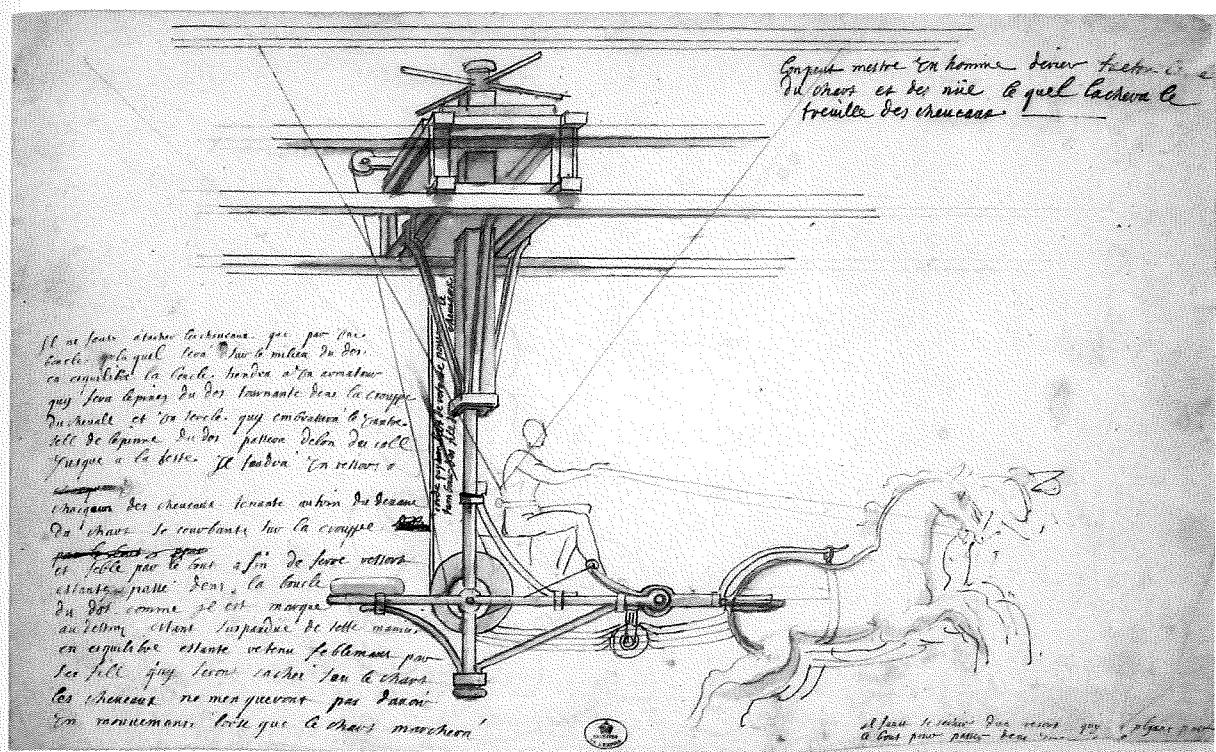
ones or done in Roman style. This display of luxury and use of classical themes made Roman revival seem already in process, and beyond dispute. Versailles was an Olympus that nobles could inhabit.⁵

The elites from high noble families that were given residence in the chateau were immersed in and seduced by this cultural imaginary. They were not captured by the king as Norbert Elias⁶ has suggested; they found themselves wanting the future he offered. Nobles at court participated in plays, acting out stories of ancient heroism in which they ascended to Mt. Olympus to join the gods. They helped to bring the ancient world to life, and experienced this way what an imperial future might bring.⁷

⁵Jean-Pierre Neraudau, *L'Olympe du Roi-Soleil: Mythologie et Ideologie Royale au Grand Siècle* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1986).

⁶Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Dublin: University of Dublin Press, 1969).

⁷Dorothy Holland, William S. Lachicotte, Jr., Debra Skinner, and Carole Cain, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1998).



IMMERSIVE THEATER AND POLITICAL SPECTACLE

Noble immersion in the classical past was active rather than passive. Courtiers took on assigned roles in plays, ballets, and mock battles, reviving the ancient world through participatory spectacles. They put on costumes, learned choreography, and entered sets that pulled them around with pulley and ropes, all to conjure up the cultural imaginary of Louis XIV's Olympus.⁸ These entertainments were meant to fill their idle hours, but they were also political games of seduction (see Figure 3.3).⁹

The festivities at Versailles were so frequent and elaborate that they gave the court a reputation for frivolousness. The spectacles seemed just games of make-believe, dressing up, and playing roles. The festivities were often announced as rewards for the nobles who were returning from wars fought for the king. Parties provided time to shed serious cares, play a fool, battle phantoms, and animate wild creatures. There were monsters to defeat

FIGURE 3.3 Chariot of the Sun (on Pulleys). Jean Bérain, *Menus Plaisirs*, 1692–1702

⁸Néraudeau, *L'Olympe du Roi-Soleil*.

⁹Sherry Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

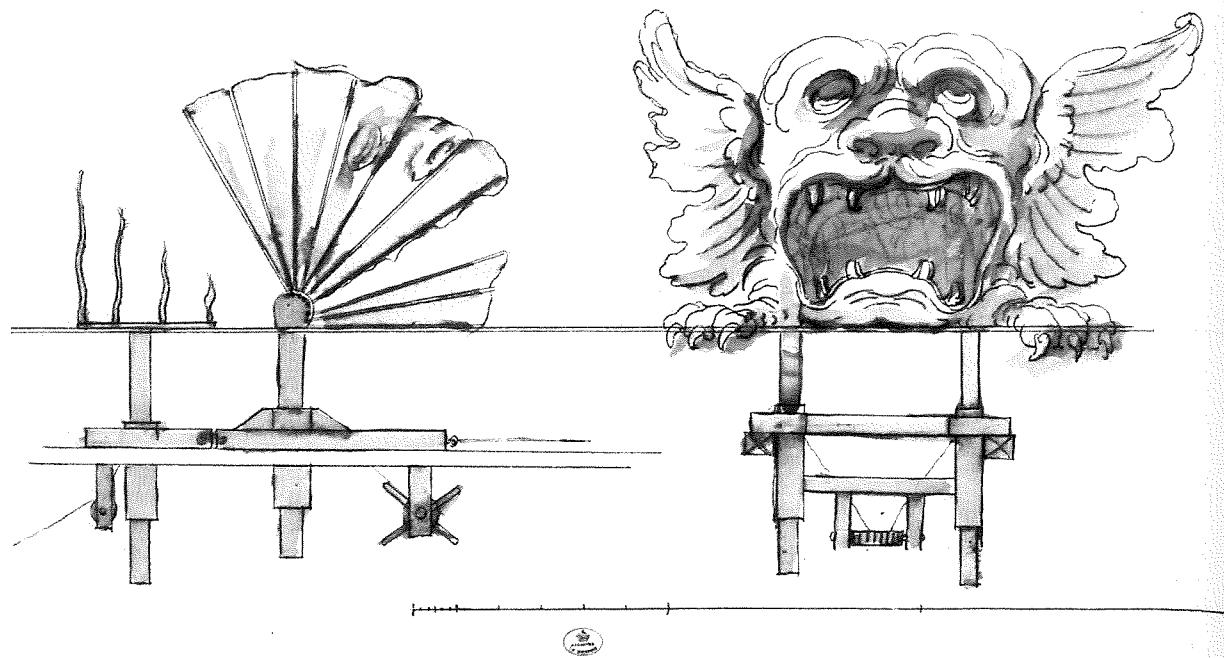


FIGURE 3.4 Design of Special Effects for Spectacles: Roaring Monster. *Menus Plaisirs*

outside of war, and virtues to uphold in mock battles. The spectacles were made magical as well as entertaining with highly engineered special effects, too, using ingenuity to animate make-believe classical worlds (see Figure 3.4).¹⁰

The events were carnivalesque, borrowing the term from Mikhail Bakhtin.¹¹ Bringing the past alive in the present seemed a cultural reversal of sorts—much like Carnival. During Carnival, people abandoned their normal character, dressed in costumes, and participated in games and parades that made fun of virtue and celebrated vice (see Figure 3.5). Peasants were crowned kings and queens, and ruled over a land of inversions. Overindulgence in sex and food was condoned, and piety set aside as people enacted roles outside normal conventions.¹² Dressing up and acting in plays and ballets at Versailles provided carnivalesque relief from the burdens of power, and seemed a time for machines and monsters to rule—only to be defeated.

Carnivalesque entertainments like masquerades were staples of court life, making light of games of power and the airs of the powerful. Costumes could be demeaning of

¹⁰ Chandra Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

¹² Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978).



FIGURE 3.5 *The World Turned Upside Down in Carnival*. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Fight between Carnival and Lent, 1559

those who wore them—like the jester and snail costumes in Figures 3.6 and 3.7. The cultural conventions of patrimonial authority had to be dropped to play these roles, and nobles had a chance to laugh at themselves and their pretenses.

It seemed innocent on the surface, but playing out stories from classical mythology was a serious game of power and politics. Those who overacted a part one day could find themselves later dreaming of glory, heroically triumphing over France's enemies. In a world of noble modernity, dressing up could become a moment self-fashioning and an embrace of a new political ambition.

Where carnivalesque play was blurred with the imperial imagery, patrimonial relations were set aside—replaced by classical glory (Figure 3.8). In the frivolity, nobles were exposed to new ways of imagining themselves, subject to serious games of political seduction.

LEARNING BY DOING

The courtiers who were given roles in plays and ballets at Versailles had to try to make stories of the ancients come alive. They did not have to believe that Louis XIV was really a Sun King; they only had to make the power of Apollo and the rule of Olympus seem

HISTORY OF MODERN SOCIAL FORMS



FIGURE 3.6 *Costume for a Jester. Workshop of Jean Bérain, n.d.*

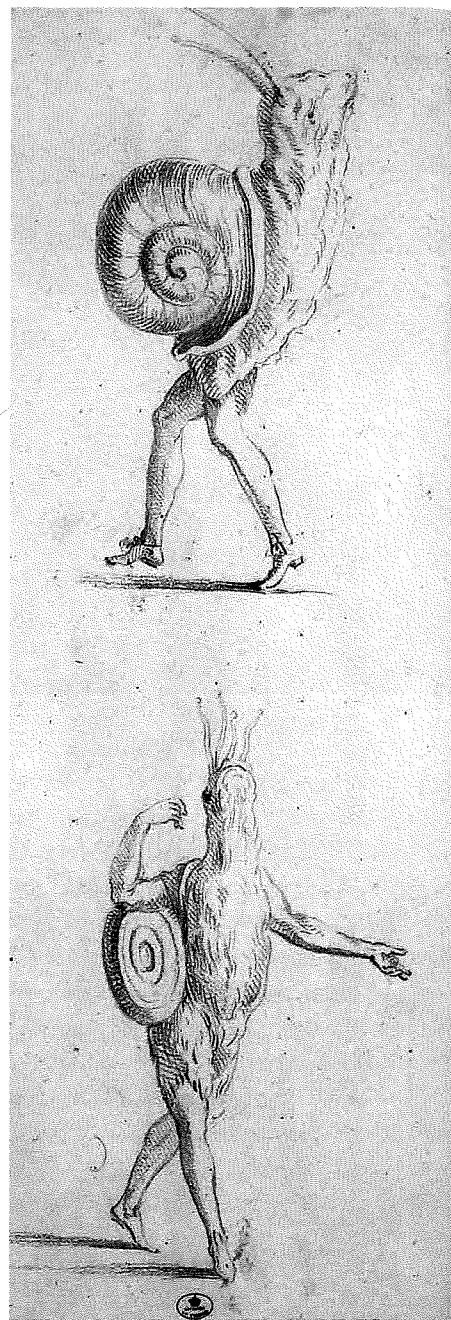


FIGURE 3.7 *Costume for a Snail. Menus Plaisirs*

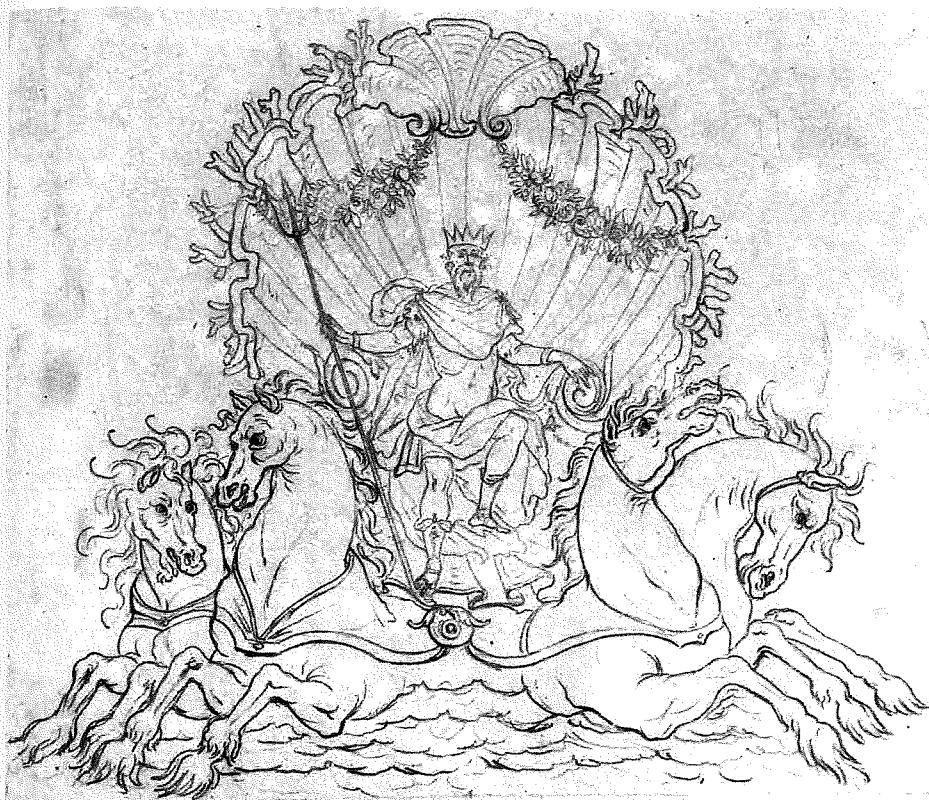


FIGURE 3.8 *Conjuring Up Gods*. Jean Bérain, Neptune, 1680–1710

convincing on stage (see Figure 3.9). Their bodies were drawn into realities that their minds might have refused, using their bodies as they were directed to do. Participants could laugh at the game and enjoy the spectacle, but they were still immersed in a political imaginary they had to try to animate. They could not struggle for autonomy in these roles, but they could feel imperial desires. The Olympus at Versailles was a giddy height to reach and an enticing reality to enter (see Figure 3.10).¹³

The playful activities at Versailles seem orthogonal to the serious business of governing. But the imperial scenarios showed what a strong state could do by coordinating powers of heaven and earth. As Huizinga argued in *Homo Ludens*,¹⁴ by teaching people rules of play, games give players skills in using those rules. So, playing with imperial power and practicing how to revive Rome taught nobles forms of play that supported new logics of political action.

¹³ Holland et al., *Identity and Agency*; Mukerji, "Space and Political Pedagogy"; Néraudeau, *L'Olympe du Roi-Soleil*.

¹⁴ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955).

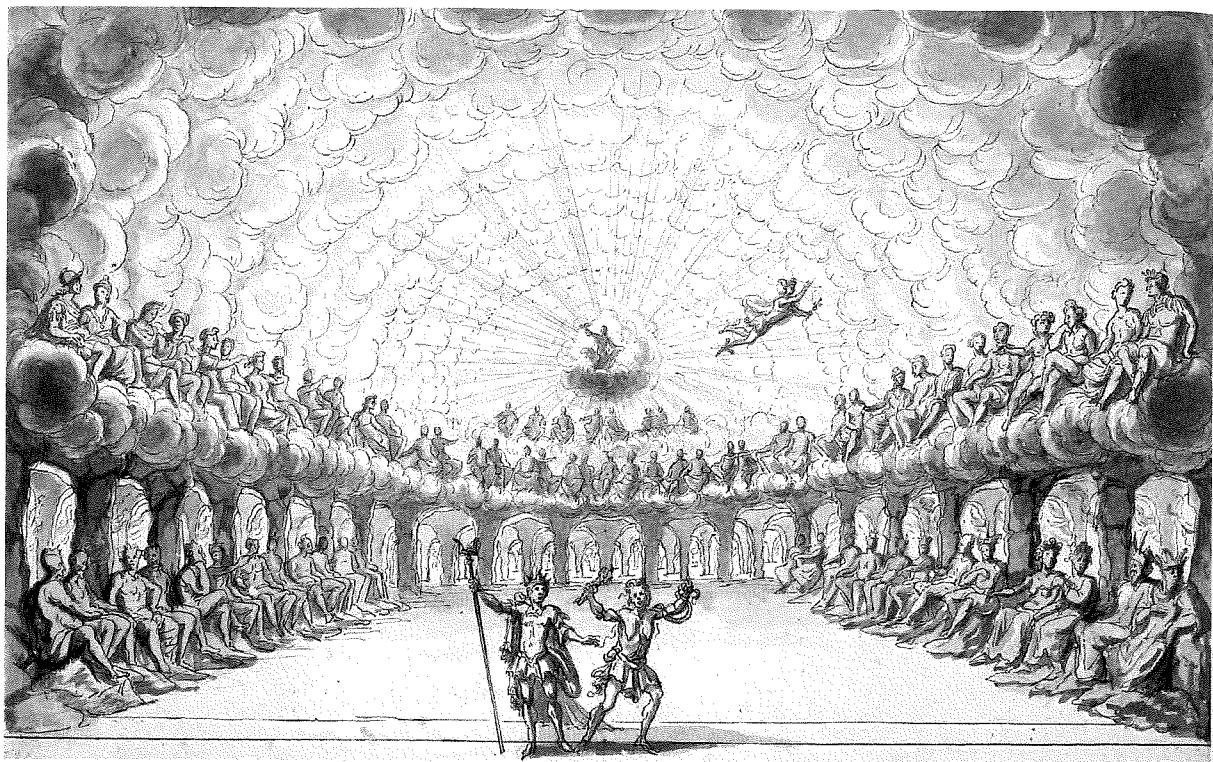


FIGURE 3.9 Set Design
for the *Domain of the
Gods*. Jean Bérain, *Le
Mariage de Pluton et de
Proserpine*, 1680

THE POWER OF THE ARTISANS

This cultural program was orchestrated at the Louvre in Paris. Louis XIV had insisted on making Versailles his residence, leaving the royal palace in Paris almost empty. In order to keep the Louvre inhabited and useful to the administration, Colbert turned the palace into an administrative center and workshop for crafting the dream world of Rome.

Originally, Colbert asked the royal architect, Louis Le Vau, to design a wing to connect the Louvre along the river to the Tuileries Palace, hoping this would make Paris more attractive to the king. Le Vau designed a well-appointed theater, and large and elegant new galleries that nobles could use for passage between the palaces or for holding parties. Beneath the galleries, the architect designed workshops and residences for artisans working on projects for the king's household. Louis XIV still refused to live in Paris, so the minister used the Louvre to house artists and artisans and provide rooms for some of the royal academies, creating a center for realizing his cultural program.¹⁵

¹⁵Jean-Claude Daufresne, *Louvre & Tuileries: Architectures de Papier* (Bruxelles: Pierre Mardaga, 1987), chapter 3.

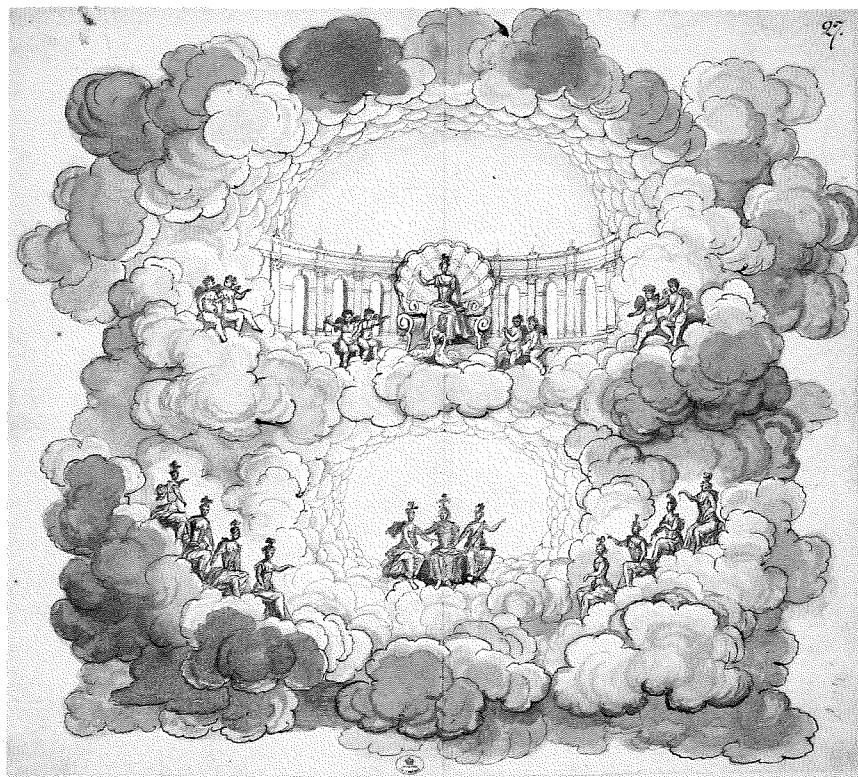


FIGURE 3.10 *Heavenly Powers and Heavenly Beings*. Jean Bérain, *Gloire de Venus*, 1680–1703

Artisans came from many parts of France to serve the king and work at the Louvre: sculptors, cabinetry makers, clock makers, instrument makers, a watch maker, painters, lens makers, a gun designer, and stage engineers. They decorated the royal households and gardens, and made luxury goods for nobles, too. They made clockworks for scientific study, and then used the same type of clockwork for decorative timepieces. They designed decorations for ships in the Royal Navy, and engineered stages and special effects for the spectacles at Versailles. They made, in other words, the cultural imaginary of the Sun King and the world of French classical revival.¹⁶

The Académie Française, the Academy of Painting and Sculpture, and Colbert's "petite académie" or Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres were the three academies allocated space in the Louvre. While the Académie Française was defining and protecting French language and culture, the Academy of Inscriptions and Belle-Lettres was designing the overall program of classical revival for Colbert. And the Academy of

¹⁶ Pierre Ramond, *André-Charles Boulle, Ébéniste, Ciseleur & Marqueteur Ordinaire du Roy* (Dourdan: Vial, 2011), pp. 42–5.

Painting and Sculpture, directed by Charles Le Brun, determined the aesthetic criteria and visual themes for the cultural program. Le Brun was also in charge of the interior decoration at Versailles, helped design garden statuary there, and directed the royal manufacture, or Gobelins factory that supplied furnishings, showing artists and artisans how to achieve the cultural goals of the program.¹⁷

The academies and workshops in tandem made the Louvre a kind of administrative center for the arts—full of scholars, artists, and artisans. They provided the principles of practice for luring nobles into imperial desire. These architects of the administration's political program were not nobles themselves, and were in service to the king. But they exercised enormous power over the high nobility at court by shaping the political imaginaries that their social superiors would learn.

The entertainments at court were mainly organized by Menus Plaisirs du Roi (the small pleasures of the king), an office of the king's household that included some of the artisans housed at the Louvre. The Menus Plaisirs was composed of a cadre of event planners, set designers, stage engineers, costume designers, furniture makers, and artisans. They did many things to entertain the royal family and court. They hired comedians, fashioned jewelry for the royal family and distinguished guests, made toys and furniture for the royal children, and created gifts for visitors to Versailles. But their most important function was to design the major events and parties at Versailles—the spectacles that defined the theater of power.¹⁸

The Menus Plaisirs was directed by Jean Bérain, a gifted designer who worked in many media. He drew most of the costumes for dances and parties, designed sets and special effects for plays and ballets, and staged the fêtes and divertissements at Versailles in the royal garden. He also was given space at the Louvre.

Members of the Menus Plaisirs dressed up nobles and designed stages where they could act out scenarios of power. They designed the chariots to carry Apollo or other gods on pulleys through the sky, designed monsters that could wiggle and roar, and burned down sets with fireworks (see Figures 3.11 and 3.12). Their staging, costumes, and special effects gave the heroes in court entertainments extraordinary powers, and conjured up forces evil enough to make their battles worthy of great men.

Nobles may have played powerful figures in the dramas, but they were not in control of the stories or their own actions on stage. They were caught in costumes and on sets that defined how they should behave.

¹⁷ Goldstein, *Vaux and Versailles*; Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions*.

¹⁸ Jérôme de La Gorce, *Dans l'Atelier des Menus Plaisirs du Roi. Spectacles, Fêtes et Cérémonies aux XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles* (Paris: Archives Nationales-Versailles, Artlys, 2010); Antoine Levesque, *Recueil de Décorations de Théâtre par Monsieur Levesque, Garde Général des Magasins des Menus Plaisirs de la Chambre* (Paris: Archives Nationales, 1752), CP/O/1/3238.

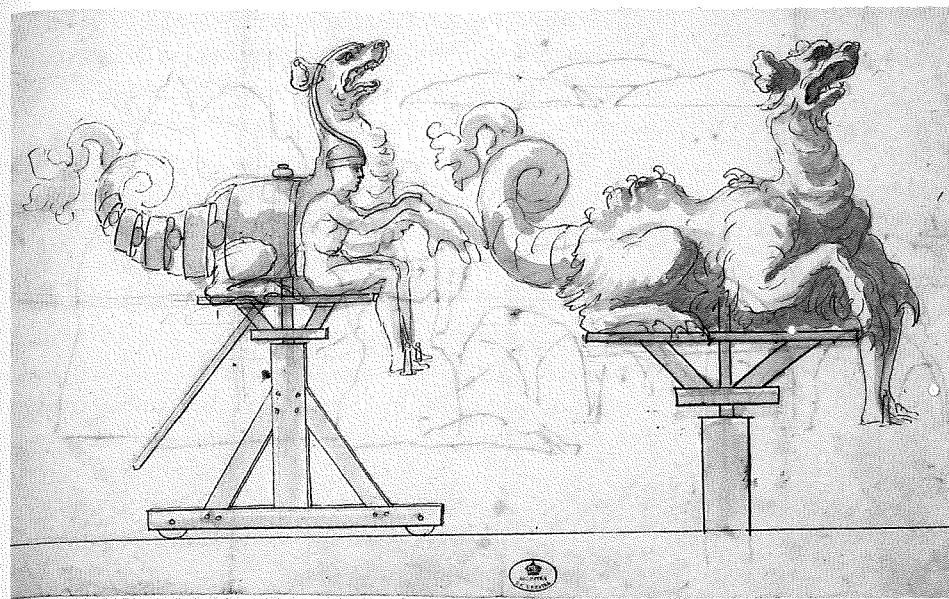
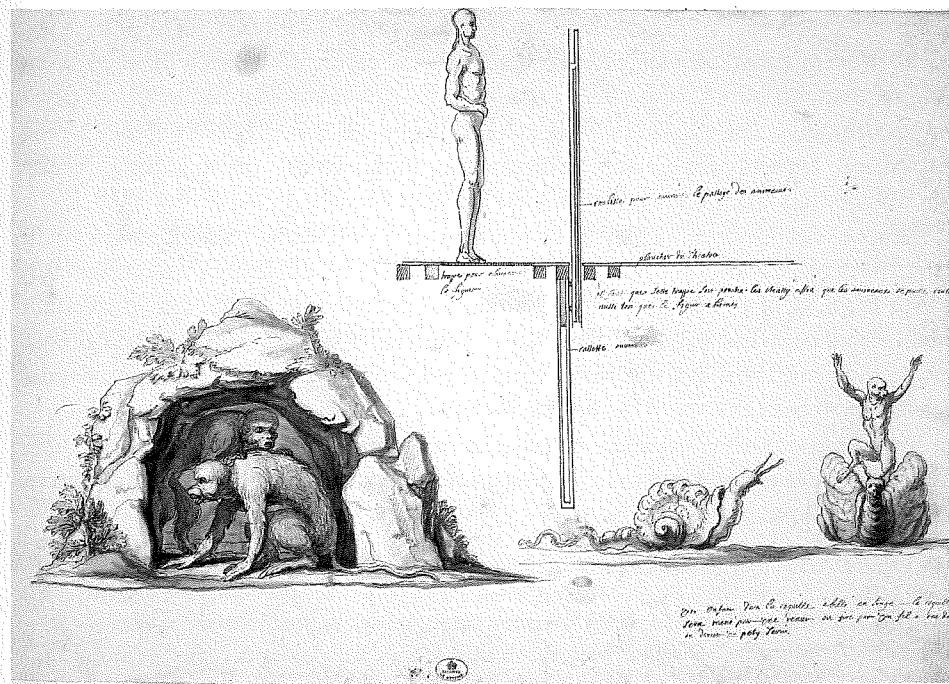


FIGURE 3.11 *Theatrical Engineering and Performance of Monsters.*
Jean Bérain, Man Animating a Monster for Bellérophon, 1679



Donz. Organe Pour le raporter, échelle en bois, le rapporter
Pour ne pas que les scènes ou que les personnes se portent mal
en dehors du plateau.

FIGURE 3.12 *Trap Doors and Elevators for the Stage.* Jean Bérain, A Trap for Staging the Metamorphosis, n.d.

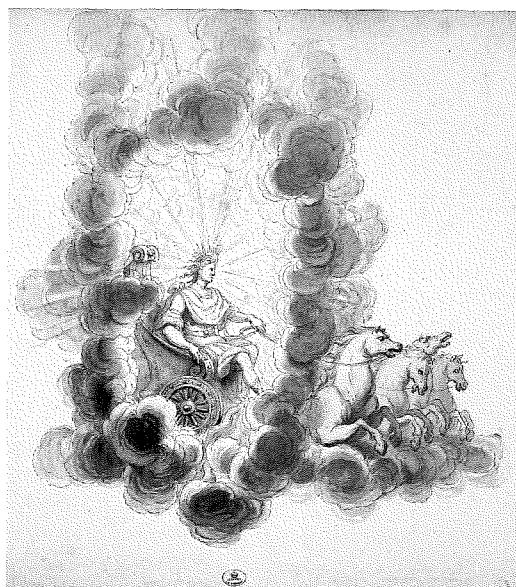


FIGURE 3.13 *The Triumph of the Sun King*. Jean Bérain,
Apollo on his Celestial Chariot, 1700–5

As we have seen,¹⁹ clothing in the Renaissance was a tool of personal moral formation. Dress was used to demonstrate patterns of mutual obligation, and fashion emotional as well as functional ties. So, when nobles put on costumes to play roles in dramas, it was both a game and a moment of moral fashioning that required them to think about their ability to act as gods and heroes in stories of classical grandeur. Taking on such a role was to shoulder moral responsibilities, and to become adequate to the demands of the role assigned them.

Enough nobles were seduced by the dream world of the Sun King that they placed hope in the king's imperial ambitions (see Figure 3.13). They still emphasized their autonomy, but they ceded power to the state to realize their dreams of empire.

THE MODERN STATE

Peter Burke²⁰ has argued that the propaganda promoting Louis XIV as the Sun King, including the art program, theater, and artifacts, failed miserably because in other countries people laughed at the pretensions of the French king. Written propaganda about the glorious life at Versailles was easy to ridicule, and equating Louis XIV with Apollo was

easy to reject as absurd. But Louis XIV's main political problem was not to raise his international standing, but to reduce the autonomy of French nobles that had hindered previous French kings. The administration's cultural policy did this effectively. When nobles entered into heavenly firmaments, subordinating themselves to the Sun King, Apollo, they relinquished themselves at least in part to the machinery of power.

The surprise was how quickly this cultural program worked to transfer powers to the state. Twenty-five years after Louis XIV took the throne, the administration had radically altered relations of power. The art and architecture of classical revival had successfully entangled dreams and reality in new ways. Transferring powers to the state had been convincingly portrayed as a way to seek greater grandeur, take hold of history, and speak collectively to posterity about the French heritage. So, nobles put on their costumes, and the king became ruler of a modern state. Forms of agency that had belonged only to individuals now were coordinated to fulfill dreams of history and destiny through the exercise of institutional power.

¹⁹ Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²⁰ Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (Bath: The Bath Press, 1994).