

Introduction:

Medals and the material turn in the king's history

Louis alone inhabits the Temple of Glory,
The greatness of his name and his immortal deeds
Would have been worshipped by any nation.
For centuries to come he will dominate history,
Princes like him should live forever,
Neither the Greeks nor the Romans produced his like
And our nephews will one day struggle to believe it.
Heroes begone, he eclipses you all,
What he has done for himself, what he has done for us
Sets a lofty standard for posterity.
But by suppressing heresy and crushing vice
In the rubble of over a thousand shattered temples
He will surely be honoured by the entire universe.

Claude-François Ménéstrier, 1689

A sonnet inscribed on a pedestal in the frontispiece (Fig. 0.1) for Claude-François Ménéstrier's *Histoire du roy Louis le Grand par les médailles ...* (1689) claims that the deeds of the Sun King, Louis XIV (1638–1715), are so magnificent that in light of them previous heroes would disappear in the mind of posterity. His grandeur effaces all others. The pedestal supports a portrait medal of the king, the sole monument in the *Temple de la Gloire*, a new shrine for the universal celebration of him in perpetuity. This frontispiece and sonnet set the stage for the first book to present the history of Louis XIV narrated through medals, emblems, devices, inscriptions and other public monuments. Ascending to the throne as a child of four in 1643, these modes of image-making were produced continuously to commemorate the auspicious occasions, military victories and political coups that marked his astounding 72-year reign. Humanists and amateur savants had written many histories

of the ancient Greeks and Romans divined from the material remains of their once-vast empires. This antiquarian mode of inquiry into the ancient past would remain popular throughout what is now called the early-modern period (roughly 1500–1800). But it was not until the seventeenth century that contemporary history was written in this way.¹ Ménestrier was the first to write an antiquarian history dedicated to a single contemporary figure, based on the richly coded artifacts produced under Louis XIV's patronage to celebrate his reign.

Ménestrier (1631–1705) was a consummate erudite of the *grand siècle*, a Jesuit educated in Lyon who came to Paris in the 1680s and soon became an active participant in fashionable intellectual society.² Under the patronage of the king's confessor, Père François d'Aix de La Chaize (1624–1709) (known as Père La Chaize), he was introduced to the most famous antiquarian salon of the age held by Louis-Marie-Victor de Rochebaron, duc d'Aumont (1632–1704) in his Paris town house.³ Members of this group were intricately networked into the Court: The duc d'Aumont was First Gentleman of the King's Chamber, Père La Chaize was the King's Confessor; Jean Foy-Vaillant (1632–1706) held the title of *Antiquaire du Roi* (Royal Antiquary); Pierre de Carcavi (1603–84) was the Royal Librarian and Keeper of the king's medals; and Pierre Rainssant (1640–89) would be the future Keeper of the king's medals.

This illustrious circle of *curieux des médailles* and professional antiquaries set themselves the task of writing histories of the ancient Roman rulers by way of the artifacts and inscriptions, but principally coins and medals, that remained from their times.⁴ The king was very interested in this project and agreed to pay for the publication of the group's historical exegeses, though regrettably this never came to pass. It was during one of these meetings that Ménestrier claims to have had the idea of writing a contemporary history of the reigning king of France in the same manner, by way of medals, inscriptions and other public monuments.⁵ Ménestrier's antiquarian history of Louis XIV was met with great approval at the duc d'Aumont's salon. Père La Chaize presented a copy of the text to the king, who was delighted and demanded to know the name of the author.⁶ It is the principal claim of my study that such a text was inevitable, given that antiquarian methodology, and especially the study of ancient coins, inspired the king's image-makers to produce new objects and images as visual histories of Louis XIV for the benefit of posterity.

Medals borrow their form from coins, with a portrait on one side and a device on the other, but have no other function than to mark an event or to celebrate the prowess of a ruler or person of high status. Invented in Italy during the Renaissance, they were inspired by ancient Greek and Roman coins that had proven invaluable as bearers of historical data from the past.⁷ This is a definition of medals as we understand them in the modern sense—but to add to the confusion, early numismatists often referred to ancient coins

as medals too. Ancient coins and modern medals were once fashionable objects of courtly collection and erudition and they were central to the *ancien régime* conception of historical interpretation. They are the key to understanding a huge variety of art works that commemorate the reign of the Sun King that I call “the visual histories of Louis XIV.” Yet today medals fail to capture the cultural imagination to the extent that they once did. Numismatics is a distinguished, but rarified field, the province of collectors and classicists, and rarely the topic of art historical discourse. They are easily overlooked in modern gallery vitrines without the allure of their flashier painted and sculpted counterparts, or hidden in trays in the vaults of the museum. These objects that once held the promise of eternal fame now seem, to most viewers at least, to be little more than esoteric relics.

These diminutive hand-held sculptures are not the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of the Sun King’s commissions. The vast and ebullient palace of Versailles with its grand interiors and labyrinthine gardens is much better known. Here more than at any of the other royal houses the arts flourished, reflecting in microcosm the ideal of a new unified France under Louis XIV, and marking the ascendancy of French culture as a dominating force in Europe and further afield. Those living under Louis XIV were keen to promote this concept, labeling the seventeenth century *Le siècle de Louis le Grand*, a golden age that was also to be held up by the generation that followed as an exemplary era.⁸ As the subject of much of the artistic endeavor to be produced at Court, Louis XIV’s image is intrinsically linked to this palace.⁹ His persona was embodied in art and architecture that continue to hold a place of special interest for the public today, with up to 6.5 million people visiting the vast complex of Versailles each year.¹⁰ Perhaps more than any other figure of the early-modern period Louis XIV captures the public and academic imagination alike through the grandeur of his palaces and the riches that they once contained. The splendors of his Court have held an enduring fascination for scholars, with the study of the material culture that surrounded him inspiring a rich and vital field of interdisciplinary research. Yet there remains much to be said about the program of commissions in the visual arts that took the history of Louis XIV as their subject.

No doubt the influence of antiquarianism, and more particularly medals, on the formation of some of the best-known works of art in tapestry, painting and sculpture commissioned by Louis XIV to celebrate his reign will be surprising to many readers. I propose that these items were not just sumptuous decorations with the double purpose of reminding the king’s contemporaries of his position at the apex of society and his right to rule unchallenged. They were also a means to record the king’s history for posterity—an audience of future viewers in the centuries to come. This is a significant departure from studies such as Peter Burke’s *The Fabrication of*

Louis XIV (1992) that have concentrated on the instrumental role of the arts in establishing and maintaining the king's political power.¹¹ Burke's was the first English-language study to take up Louis Marin's semiotic analysis of the role of representation in the fashioning of Louis XIV's symbolic power.¹² Through an empirical approach to the historical material Burke rightly attributed the profusion of contemporary images in every imaginable media to a centralized, government-led arts policy to serve the political ambitions of the king. To date this remains the predominant model for the analysis of the king's commissions in the arts.¹³

But there is much more to be learnt from the visual histories of Louis XIV than to simply reaffirm the absolutist ideology that is perhaps the best-known and least-debated aspect of the era. This study looks beyond a self-evident political reading of the iconography of Louis XIV to discover an artistic process deeply entrenched in a sophisticated intellectual and connoisseurial culture. Here I present a new reading of the Sun King's iconography through the lens of antiquarianism to which the visual histories of Louis XIV owe a great debt.

Antiquarianism and material culture

Antiquarianism is an especially empirical branch of historical inquiry that flourished in early-modern Europe. Often characterized (or caricatured) as the connoisseur or aficionado, the antiquarian studies the past in detail via the evidence presented by primary artifacts, without attempting to produce a broad synthetic study of period or culture. Antiquarians, or "antiquaries" as they are also called, produce synchronic analyses focusing on the detailed study of isolated events and historical characters. This is quite different from the historian's diachronic approach that aims to situate particular people and incidents within a broader chronology and cultural context.

Coins and medals are the perfect antiquarian objects, well suited to detailed synchronic analysis, and particularly favored for their combination of image and text that enabled a wealth of information to be conveyed in a terse fashion. Early-modern antiquarians would often catalogue collections of ancient coins, dealing with each item separately as a discrete artifact and without attempting to establish broad analyses of the cultures from which they came. They might narrate the events of a particular emperor's reign (as the members of the duc d'Aumont's salon did), but these histories would be formed as a collage of individual events that presented a series of historical vignettes rather than a fluid narrative. Historians and antiquarians share an interest in the study of the past, but they produce very different representations of history. Where the antiquarian aims for precision of particular details to produce an

inventory of facts, the historian writes a historical discourse that outlines cause and effect in order to draw together a narrative of people living in a particular time and place.

Despite these differences, antiquarian methodology did help to form the modern discipline of history. As Arnaldo Momigliano persuasively argued, the origins of current historical method are to be found in late seventeenth-century Europe, where the distinction between primary evidence and secondary commentary was elucidated for the first time.¹⁴ The seventeenth century, so Momigliano contended, was the age of historical skepticism:

religious and political disputations had pervaded history and discredited the historian. Bias was easily scented everywhere, and the natural conclusion was to distrust the whole tribe of historians. At the same time attempts were made to put historical knowledge on a safer basis by analyzing sources thoroughly and drawing, if possible, on other evidence than that provided by past historians.¹⁵

Momigliano's study prefigured the "material turn" in the humanities long before studies of "thing theory" and "material culture" became fashionable.¹⁶ He exposed a particular moment of skepticism in early-modern Europe when historians began to look for more certain evidence, privileging objects and objective statements over historical discourse. He averred that "antiquaries saved history from the skeptics" in the seventeenth century by rejecting the canon of ancient literary histories in favor of the study of artifacts such as coins, medals, and inscriptions on ancient monuments. Momigliano's essay continues to fuel debate in the field of cultural studies,¹⁷ and art historians have drawn upon his findings to chronicle the role of art as historical evidence.¹⁸ Yet to date no study has investigated how historical skepticism and the antiquarian turn effected artistic production in early-modern Europe.

The relationship between "history and its images" is a fundamental question that has been the subject of much scholarly inquiry.¹⁹ Historians, art historians and cultural historians alike analyze the visual remains of past cultures to re-create them, at least speculatively, but the extent to which art objects can provide evidence is a contentious issue.²⁰ As scholars have noted, the visual arts form:

a special class of evidence, shaped by imagination as well as tradition and purpose. Unlike a file of state papers, the contents of a parish register, or a set of commercial accounts, a work of art is a subjective creation. Furthermore, the artist often seeks to provide something that is difficult to quantify but dangerous to dismiss—a sense of delight, awe, and beauty.²¹

Images and objects are a problematic form of evidence as they are often exceptional, the results of the creative process of an individual, and not necessarily the best means to elicit general principles about a past culture.

Moreover, artists often flattered their patrons by making grand claims about their deeds to promote them to posterity, and the visual histories of Louis XIV are no exception.

In the digital age we are inclined to be skeptical about the veracity of images. We have learned to distrust photographic media that purport to be the least-mediated images of human production, due to their ability to distill an optical event seamlessly through lens technology. As Francis Haskell observed, however, "that the camera can lie was recognized and exploited within some thirty years of its invention."²² With the advent of digital technologies and their extraordinary capacity to re-create the world as it appears to the human eye, our suspicions deepen. In comparison with photographic and digital media, the reliability of handcrafted objects as visual testimony is more dubious still. When the hand of the artist renders an image it is no less subject to capricious invention and biased inflection than the words written by a partisan historian. But contrary to this commonsense thinking, objects of human manufacture were once thought to provide dispassionate and unmediated testimony of the cultures that produced them. Objects and images on the subject of Louis XIV's history were made in great numbers, inspired by a culture of antiquarianism that privileged material artifacts over written historical exegeses. The makers of these visual histories deemed them to be authentic and reliable historical documents that could communicate detailed information to the future historian.

The project of Louis XIV's history, and its limitations

Medals were a central part of the strategy to record Louis XIV's reign for posterity. Soon after the young king took personal control of the state in 1661, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–83), who would become Finance Minister and Superintendent of the king's buildings, outlined a plan to document Louis XIV's history.²³ The first musings on this vast project are found in a letter dated November 18, 1662 written to Colbert by leading intellectual, poet and founding member of the Académie française Jean Chapelain (1595–1674).²⁴ The letter opens with Chapelain's recommendation of medals as an excellent means to glorify the king. In an age in which classical antiquity was revered, medals would demonstrate the status of the king by association with the emperors and princes of ancient Greece and Rome. Just like the ancient coins that had survived the centuries, Louis XIV's medals would recall the great events of the reign for a future audience long after the king's political ambitions would be obsolete. If they were made from bronze, silver or gold, coins and medals could last for millennia buried in the ground. When later exhumed they would be barely tarnished and as crisp as the day they were struck.

To this end (and following a long tradition) medals would be placed in the foundations of new buildings raised to the glory of Louis XIV in anticipation of a distant future when all would be ruins but these durable bearers of historical data.²⁵

In citing medals as one of the best and most lasting forms of evidence of the “heroic actions of princes,” Chapelain recounts a commonly held belief of his time. As John Evelyn wrote in his *Discourse of Medals* of 1697: “of all Records (transmitting to us antient things) they prove the most Authentic and certain Reporters, preferable to any other [*sic*].”²⁶ Unlike texts of the ancient writers that might be subject to the inflections, misunderstandings and bias of the men that transcribed them as they passed down through the centuries, ancient coins (or medals as they were called) were original artifacts of the culture from which they came. The point was made well by French antiquarian Charles Patin (1633–93), who wrote: “One could say that without Medals, history would be without proof, passed through many hands, and from the effect of the interests of Historians writing in their own times, or from descriptions of memories alone, would be false or biased.”²⁷ Here Patin voices the concerns of many of his contemporaries that one could not rely on texts that were probably altered by successive generations of transcribers, or worse, false from the start due to the bias of the writer. Unlike texts, coins from antiquity were thought to provide facts about events and the people involved with them rather than voice a particular view in a rhetorical manner. They were not historical discourse, but a document of a particular event that could be located historically by an inscription and the indexical portrait of an historic figure; they were history made with images.

To leave a favorable impression of Louis XIV to posterity, the king and his advisor Colbert employed an expert team of intellectuals to oversee every aspect of the formation of his historical identity in objects, images and text. Chapelain concurred with Colbert that history was “one of the principal means to preserve the splendor of the king’s enterprises.”²⁸ But it was not only medals and historical panegyrics that were apt for recording the king’s history, as Chapelain wrote:

There are, Monsieur, other praiseworthy means of disseminating and maintaining the glory of His Majesty, the ancients have left illustrious examples that still command respect in the eyes of the people, such as pyramids, columns, equestrian statues, colossi, triumphal arches, busts in marble and bronze, bas-reliefs, all historic monuments to which we could add our own rich tapestries, our fresco paintings and our engravings²⁹

The production of artifacts to document Louis XIV’s history would be broad in scope, inspiring cycles of paintings, sculptures, architectural monuments, tapestries, commemorative medals and prints on an unprecedented scale.



0.2 *RERVM GESTARVM FIDES* ["Faithful monuments to great actions"] (ca. 1701). Silver medal. © Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques, BnF

In 1663 Colbert set up a new committee to supervise the process, the Académie Royale des Inscriptions that would come to be known as the Petite Académie.

A medal designed by the Petite Académie (Fig. 0.2) at the end of the seventeenth century to commemorate their founding presents them allegorically as a society of antiquarians.³⁰ The scene is set within a gallery space, in the background windows or perhaps framed paintings open on to a landscape beyond. Mercury perches on a plinth, behind him a vase overflows with medals, and his foot rests upon a box full of the same. Next to him there is a monumental pedestal decorated with bas-reliefs of soldiers on horseback, much like those that adorn the plinths of the equestrian monuments raised to

the glory of Louis XIV.³¹ These reliefs refer to ancient historical monuments such as Trajan's Column or Roman triumphal arches that image great victories of the past committed to eternal memory in marble. Leaning against the pedestal are two trays filled with carefully organized medals that have been subject to the antiquarian's study, selected, catalogued and described from the jumble of coins strewn about the floor. Mercury gazes down on these neatly arranged artifacts as he writes a contracted Latin inscription with a stylus on a large tablet propped up on top of the pedestal: LVD. MAG. PIO. FELICI. P. PATRIAE. TRIVMPH. ["Louis le Grand brings joy to his nation through triumph"]. Around the medal is the inscription RERVM GESTARVM FIDES ["faithful monuments to great actions"], and below is the exergue: ACADEMIA REGIA INSCRIPT ET NVMISM INSTITVTA. M. DC. LXIII. ["The Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Médailles established in 1663."]

The Petite Académie is represented as an antiquarian messenger, surrounded with artifacts that formed "faithful monuments" to the history of the king. They are shown in the act of inscribing an aphorism to their monarch to memorialize his rule as one that brought "joy to his nation," by the "great actions" evidenced in the visual histories that surrounded them. They do so following the mandate through which their company was established at the beginning of Louis XIV's personal rule: "From the high opinion held of the king in his first years, strengthening more and more, it was easy to foresee that his reign, already so fecund in wonders, would produce an infinite number of events worthy to be transmitted to posterity."³² From the outset posterity was the intended audience for the visual histories of Louis XIV.³³ The Petite Académie laid claim to a hand in all of the major royal commissions. Nothing in the Palace of Versailles and its immediate environs was beyond their purview, as every painted ceiling, allegorical fountain and statue in the gardens was made as an artifact for the future historian.

Despite the broad remit of their project it was the design of the king's medals that would be the primary focus of the Petite Académie's endeavors. They claimed the production of the *histoire métallique* (history in medals) of Louis XIV "became their principle, or often their only occupation."³⁴ In July 1701 they were renamed the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Médailles [Royal Academy of Inscriptions and Medals] to reflect this.³⁵ The production of the king's medals was at the center of their activities, and an antiquarian sensibility is found throughout the royal commissions of images and objects celebrating the reign of Louis XIV that they were instrumental in devising.

It is the central claim of this study that antiquarianism, and the fashion for collecting and studying coins and medals in particular, informed the iconography devised to commemorate Louis XIV in perpetuity. The influence is felt in certain principles that the visual histories have in common: The *histoire métallique*, the *Histoire du Roi* series of tapestries or Charles Le Brun's ceiling

for the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles each fashioned the king's history as a series of independent episodes collaged together, reflecting the synchronic nature of antiquarian histories; They each contained inscriptions as an integral element, inspired by the combination of text and image found in ancient coins that had made them such useful historical documents. Furthermore, they were subject to a simultaneous process of creation and interpretation through a series of illustrated texts authored by members of the Petite Académie following an antiquarian methodology.

Not only did they oversee the production of the visual histories of Louis XIV, the Petite Académie also supplied official interpretations of these objects and images, writing explanations of their iconography and descriptions of the events and concepts that they represent. The most significant of these explanatory texts is *Médailles sur les principaux événements du règne de Louis le Grand*, published in 1702 after eight years of deliberation by the company. In the opening lines of the preface to this book the Académie hinted at their goal to provide contemporary interpretations of Louis XIV medals for the benefit of posterity. If the ancient Greeks and Romans had left such treatises about their coins and medals "we would have been spared much trouble and many dissertations; and would have been enlightened of many things which have slipped into obscurity," they averred.³⁶ Their book on the medallic history of Louis XIV's reign was an official interpretation of the objects they designed made to provide the future historian with a definitive reading of these medals written at the time they were created.

The Petite Académie's explanations of the images and objects that document Louis XIV's reign expose a contradiction between the ideal of the artifact as unmediated primary evidence, and the desire to prescribe how these objects would be interpreted by posterity. Artifacts were the preferred form of evidence for the historical skeptics because of their direct connection to the events that they commemorated. Yet the official explanations of artworks made to function in this way, and written by the king's men, would surely constitute the type of partisan testimony that the skeptics found so dubious. Herein lies the paradox at the heart of the Petite Académie's project to document the king's history. By publishing lengthy inscriptions and exegeses to accompany these works they aimed to inform the future historian's reception of the king's visual histories. In doing so they compromised the integrity of these artifacts as a trustworthy form of evidence by exposing their partisan origins. Explanatory texts were written in the hope to supply the future historian with the kind of information that was lost from the ancient world. If the ancients had provided such explications then so much more could be understood about the coins, buildings and monuments that survived them, they lamented. While such artifacts were deemed to be an excellent form of historical evidence, the information that they provided was by no

means comprehensive. In writing antiquarian histories of the objects made under their auspices the Petite Académie hoped to provide posterity with additional material and “genuine historical knowledge” about their culture, a notoriously slippery kind of information.

As Hayden White argued in his seminal text *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), at best the historiographer can aim to provide a formal analysis of the various approaches to history over time.³⁷ It is possible to identify various patterns in historical method, but it would be a fool’s errand to make qualitative judgments about them, as history is a product of the times and culture in which it was produced. A historical text is always the expression of a distinct worldview that remains perpetually beyond the grasp of those who seek to truly know it.³⁸ The word “history” does not correspond to a fixed and universal methodology and has multiple meanings over time or in different cultural contexts. Even within a given period there can be many different approaches: eyewitness accounts, memoirs, chronicles, synchronic analyses focused on particular events, or diachronic narratives that aim to establish causal relations and teleology. Still, “history” is a word of inescapable utility, and throughout this study I use it broadly to refer to all of these various historical modes. I do not labor the discussion of how each object or image might fall within the parameters of a particular mode of historical discourse, and my goal is not to argue in favor of images and objects as a less mediated and more direct form of historical testimony. This idea seems quaint to us today, as it did to some early modern figures too.³⁹ Yet I have uncovered much evidence to support the claim that this was a belief held to be true by many savants of the *grand siècle*.

At the heart of the project for constructing the king’s history visually in seventeenth-century France is the presumption of an epistemological continuity between the classical past, the present, and the future. It was assumed that a contemporary individual could gain a genuine understanding of the ancient world, or assemble data to communicate their ideas into the future, a task that implies a fallacious intellectual congruity across humankind from all eras and cultures. Early-modern humanists had codified the arts and literature of ancient Greece and Rome into a universal language for an international community of scholars. They drew upon forms that had proven capable of withstanding the ravages of time to communicate between the past and present and across cultures. Underlying this approach is the flawed assumption that classical antiquity was immutable and would continue to transcend the barriers of time, remaining legible to an unbroken line of antiquarian scholars. It must not be forgotten that the goal to *transmettre à la postérité* details of Louis XIV’s reign in an accurate and unmediated fashion by way of objects was a near impossible task. There was never any guarantee that the specialist audience of future antiquaries hoped for by the king’s history-makers would have the requisite cultural knowledge or skills to decode this information.

While the iconography and inscriptions on artifacts from the ancient world made aspects of the cultures from which they came available to antiquaries, a process of translation and decryption mediated the information provided by such objects. To make things easier for the future historian, the members of the Petite Académie acted as antiquarian intermediaries making the more esoteric aspects of the works of art that they played a part in devising accessible to those without the requisite skills to read them. Their explanatory treatises expose an anxiety of erudition that might be seen to undermine the authority of the objects that they refer to. Nevertheless, (and especially in the case of medals) these texts did not supersede the artworks that they described. Printed on paper, they were relatively ephemeral supplements to objects fashioned out of more durable materials designed to survive for millennia.

Not all of the visual histories of Louis XIV would require classical learning to understand them. There were also modern images that eschewed heavily coded allegory. The *Histoire du Roi* tapestries and the paintings of Adam-Franz van der Meulen, for example, present events from Louis XIV's reign in a documentary manner without the veil of classical allusions. This modern iconography would feed back into the medals, adding new forms to that most classicizing of media.

The pull towards and push away from the authority of the classical world was a defining feature of the *ancien régime*, famously expressed in the "quarrel of the ancients and the moderns," where scholars publicly debated whether classical culture was superior to their own. Members of the Petite Académie were among the leading voices in that debate, and the tension between the two sides can be found in the visual histories of Louis XIV. The vacillation between ancient and modern forms, and Latin and French inscriptions and descriptions in their output, reveals that not all of the king's history-makers agreed that Latin text and classical allegory was a universal language for all ages. The use of classical script and iconography in tandem with modern imagery and text in the works of art designed under the direction of that company exposes the equivocation of a group of intellectuals immersed in a scholarly debate.

As much as the Petite Académie endeavored to create an inviolable account of the king's history through the production of artifacts, inscriptions and explanations, they could not control the future reception of their work. It would have been impossible to anticipate the political and cultural changes of the centuries to come that would radically alter the shape of historical discourse and render obsolete the "great man" model of history to which they ascribed.

Louis XIV as a "great man" of history

The antiquarian influence on the visual histories of Louis XIV also explains the problematic conflation of two histories into one: the history of an individual figure (Louis XIV the man); and the history of the institution that

he represented (the nation and state of France). The king's history was not a personal narrative of his life as such, but an official narrative of the events of his reign. This conforms to the absolutist ideology of the famous declaration attributed to Louis XIV "l'état c'est moi" ["I am the state"], a concept that has received much scholarly attention.⁴⁰ Without wishing to repeat the most well-known aspects of this monarch's tenure, suffice it to say that during his reign he was at the apex of political power, he ruled on all matters, and his decision was final. As Louis Marin has shown, absolutist ideology is central to the conception of the king's visual histories, where Louis XIV must always be shown as the "agent and actor of a history in the making."⁴¹ The cult of the individual formed during the Renaissance, with man being the measure of all things, is, in part, responsible for this genre of history-making. The "great man" mode of history is also aligned to the design of coins and medals where historical events are attributed to a single figure through a portrait on one side and an allegorical reference to the event on the reverse. Antiquarian histories, based on the evidence of coins and other artifacts, presented the past through the lens of particular historical personalities. When these figures were kings, queens, emperors and empresses there was little separation made between the history of the state and the individual who represented it.

While the model of history to which this type of centripetal narrative belongs is rightly discredited today, it was a mode of historical exposition prevalent at the French Court.⁴² French kings had long employed royal historiographers to write histories of their reigns. Chantal Grell and Orest Ranum have documented this institution, showing that this position existed in France since the fifteenth century.⁴³ Beginning with Michel Pitoin named "Francorum historiografus" in 1437, and continued by Jean Castel, who succeeded him during the reign of Louis XI, the role was premised on written histories that would chronicle contemporary events.⁴⁴ The position of *Historiographe du Roi* was continued under Louis XIV by the illustrious writers Jean Racine (1639–99) and Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636–1711) (known as Boileau), who were awarded the office in the late 1670s.⁴⁵ The panegyrics and odes written by these men framed the king's military conquests as feats worthy of eternal memory and perpetual glory.⁴⁶ These texts followed a typical pattern narrating history through the actions of a great man, the principal method of historical writing in the early-modern period. The same pattern is found throughout the visual histories of Louis XIV, with the king presented in the lead role of historical agent, often at the expense of the talented men and women surrounding him who were responsible for his success.

In seventeenth-century France the example that great men (and sometimes women) could provide to current and future leaders was seen to be the central function of historical study. Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704) in the preface to his *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* (1681), written for the

education of Louis XIV's son, avowed that a young prince could gain much from the study of history:

Where History would be useless to other men, reading it is necessary for Princes. There is no better way for them to discover passions & interests, eras & economic situations, good & bad council. History is made up only of the actions that occupy them, & all seems to be there for their use.⁴⁷

Bossuet proposed that history was the best possible teacher for a young prince, who could be exposed to all aspects of leadership, and he went on to say that, through the lessons of history, the prince could put himself in dangerous situations and experiment with outcomes without causing any loss to his subjects or to his own reputation. Furthermore, history revealed "the most hidden defects of Princes, that in spite of the false praises that one gives them during their life, are exposed to the eyes of all men."⁴⁸ From an early age princes were made aware that their every deed would be subject to eternal scrutiny. The idea that the actions of a ruler had a lasting effect, rendering them a praised immortal or infamous tyrant by degree, was a deeply ingrained concept. By the example of historic figures, Louis XIV grew to learn of the dual imperatives of his deeds and to balance the immediate political gains of his actions against their lasting effect on his reputation.

In his concise but rigorous study "Philosophy of History Before Historicism" (1964), George Nadel persuasively argues that before the mid-eighteenth century, history was primarily used as data for moral or political science.⁴⁹ He traced this model from antiquity to the early-modern period, revealing that early histories centered on the actions of people, rather than on historical phenomena. This interpretive model for history, following the narrative of the main actors on the world stage, would remind the prince to be cautious as his history would be written in each and every of his deeds. Louis XIV and his advisors were keen to ensure that his rule was presented in the best possible light, as it was the future historian who was held to be his ultimate judge. The visual histories of Louis XIV were produced as a strategy to ensure that the king would be received by posterity as a great man of history. To attain perpetual glory and to be held as an exemplar to those who followed was an end in itself. As Louis XIV commented to the members of the *Petite Académie*, "I entrust you with the thing that is most precious to me in the world, which is my reputation [*gloire*]."⁵⁰

Artifacts for a future past

Louis XIV's image-makers based their prediction of how future historians would interpret the material remains of their time on contemporary antiquarian studies, creating new works of art as a form of historical evidence.

They were artifacts for a future past made to communicate information to posterity. The need for objects and images to function as artifacts led to many pictorial developments, and medals played a central role in this. Coin-like in form but not currency, the medal was the consummate antiquarian object, made in imitation of the ancient coins used to study the past. However, medals have been largely elided from the narrative of the arts of *ancien régime* France, and their neglect is wholly disproportionate to the cultural status they once held. This study seeks to reposition them at the center of a broad artistic program for documenting the history of Louis XIV by demonstrating their influence across media.

In what follows I analyze the place of numismatics in the project to preserve the memory of Louis XIV through the creation of visual histories. The production of the *histoire métallique* of Louis XIV was inspired by the fashion for antiquarianism at the *ancien régime* Court. The king's enthusiasm for his numismatic collection—a taste cultivated by his lessons in history by medals as a child—places him among the great *curieux des médailles* of the age. The *Cabinet des Médailles*, installed at Versailles in 1684, housed one of the greatest numismatic collections in Europe. It was an opulent space that I present as a site of historical self-fashioning, with modern medals commemorating Louis XIV's deeds displayed alongside the ancient coins that inspired them. The *histoire métallique* of Louis XIV was at the center of the Petite Académie's project for recording the history of the king, and a numismatic sensibility is found throughout the designs for other media produced under their auspices.

The *Elements* tapestries were one of the first series to be designed in consultation with the Petite Académie in the early 1660s. They present a series of historical allegories with a combination of text and image that strongly recalls the format of medals. The *Elements* were also the first of the visual histories of the king to be simultaneously designed and described by the Petite Académie—the subject of a richly illustrated text made to record and to disseminate otherwise esoteric content. Antiquarian histories written from the objects created under their aegis would continue to occupy the Petite Académie until the close of the seventeenth century. This project reached an apogee in a book narrating the history of Louis XIV in medals from his birth in 1638 to the ascension of Philip V (his grandson) to the Spanish throne in 1700. *Médailles sur les principaux événements du règne de Louis le Grand* (1702) was the publishing event of the age and took nearly a decade in the making. As part of the process of producing this book the Petite Académie wholly revised the *histoire métallique* of Louis XIV with new medals designed retrospectively to complete the story. Existing medals were redesigned and re-struck for a new uniform series that corresponded exactly to those described in the book—a surprising reversal of the generative process where new artifacts were produced to complete the antiquarian text that explained them.

The finishing touch to the medals book was a sophisticated frontispiece that formed an allegory of the *histoire métallique* of Louis XIV. Clio, the muse of history, rests her book upon the wings of Time and gazes to the king's portrait for inspiration, with medals scattered before her and a medals press in the background. The portrait of the king that forms the focal point of this allegory is based on the famous likeness of Louis XIV painted by Hyacinthe Rigaud in 1701. The peculiar eschewal of flattery in the aging face of the king in this portrait is intriguing and can be attributed, I argue, to an antiquarian use of physiognomy as a means to read the character of historical figure through their portraits. Throughout his reign the king's physiognomy held an important place in the creation of his historical persona. Contemporary debates about the accuracy of physiognomy in the portrait bust of Louis XIV that Bernini sculpted in 1665 inspired the medalist Jean Warin (or Varin) to go into competition with the Italian virtuoso. When Warin made a portrait bust of the king he transferred a medal-maker's taste for detail and surface decoration to sculpture in the round.

An antiquarian sensibility is found throughout the visual histories of Louis XIV, and particularly in the famous ceiling that Charles Le Brun painted for the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Le Brun, the consummate painter-courtier, produced a new kind of imagery for this cycle that would blend explicit historical references with the elevated poetics of the allegorical mode. While relatively new to painting, this mixed mode of design, between allegory and history, recalls the composition of medals, coins and engraved gems dating back to antiquity. The importance of medals and gems as incorruptible bearers of historical truth made them a natural source for the iconography of this cycle. Drawing upon the preceding themes, a new reading of the best-known monument to the history of Louis XIV is presented here through the lens of the antiquarian turn in history. In sum, the goal of this study is to demonstrate the antiquarian culture behind the creation of new objects and images celebrating the history of Louis XIV that were made as conduits between the past and the future. Not just an expression of absolutist ideology, the visual histories of Louis XIV document his deeds for the benefit of the future historian.

Notes

1. The first contemporary antiquarian history, written by Pierre Bizot, was published only two years before Ménestrier's, in 1687: Pierre Bizot, *Histoire métallique de la république de Hollande* (Paris: D. Horthemels, 1687).
2. The details of Ménestrier's career appear in a partly autobiographical document that he wrote in his own defense against accusations of plagiarism for his medals book: Claude-François Ménestrier, *Factum Justificatif* (Paris, 1694). For an overview of Ménestrier's career, see Paul Allut, *Recherches sur la vie et sur les oeuvres du P. Claude-François Menestrier ... Suivies d'un recueil de lettres inédites de ce Père à Guichenon, & de quelques autres lettres de divers savans ...* (Lyon: N. Scheuring, 1856).

3. On the antiquarian salon of the duc d'Aumont, see Ménestrier, *Factum Justificatif*, 12–14, and Ézéchiél Spanheim, *Relation de la cour de France en 1690* (Paris: Renouard, 1882), 135. See also commentary by Ernest Babelon, *Traité des monnaies grecques et romaines* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1901), col. 154.
4. I preserve the French term *curieux* as there is no English equivalent that captures the various aspects of these men as collectors, connoisseurs and aficionados that this word sums up so well. On the term *curieux*, see Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500–1800*, trans. Elizabeth Wiles-Portier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 132.
5. Ménestrier, *Factum Justificatif*, 14.
6. *Ibid.*
7. On the history of the modern commemorative medal, see: John Graham Pollard, Eleonora Luciano and Maria Pollard, *Renaissance Medals*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2007–10); George Francis Hill and John Graham Pollard, *Medals of the Renaissance*, 2nd ed. (London: British Museum Publications, 1978); Mark Jones, *The Art of the Medal* (London: British Museum Publications, 1979); Stephen K. Scher, *The Currency of Fame: Portrait Medals of the Renaissance* (exhibition catalogue) (New York: H.N. Abrams in association with the Frick Collection, 1994).
8. *Le siècle de Louis le Grand* was the title of a poem written by Charles Perrault in 1687 to proclaim the ascendancy of modern culture over the ancient. Charles Perrault, *Le siècle de Louis le Grand* (Paris: J.-B. Coignard, 1687). The title was later borrowed by the philosophe Voltaire for his history of the previous reign written in the mid-eighteenth century: Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, 2 vols. (Berlin: C.-F. Henning, 1751).
9. See Gérard Sabatier, *Versailles ou la figure du roi* (Paris: A. Michel, 1999).
10. Catherine Pégard, *Conférence de presse de Madame Catherine Pégard, 26 Janvier 2012* (Versailles: Château de Versailles, 2012).
11. Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).
12. Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha Houle (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
13. Examples can be made across the king's commissions in the arts, architecture and garden design; see in particular: Claire Goldstein, *Vaux and Versailles: The Appropriations, Erasures, and Accidents that Made Modern France* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), Chandra Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Thomas Kirchner, *Le héros épique: Peinture d'histoire et politique artistique dans la France du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2008).
14. Arnaldo Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 3.3/4 (1950): 285–315.
15. *Ibid.*, 295.
16. See: Dan Hicks, "The Material Cultural Turn: Event and Effect," in Mary C. Baudrey and Dan Hicks, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 25–98; Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 1–22, and idem, "Objects, Others and Us (The Refabrication of Things)," *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2010): 183–217.
17. Peter N Miller, ed., *Momigliano and Antiquarianism: Foundations of the Modern Cultural Sciences* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).
18. Francis Haskell, *History and Its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 4–5; Peter Burke, "Images as Evidence in Seventeenth-Century Europe," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64.2 (2003): 273–96.
19. Haskell, *History and Its Images*; Burke, "Images as Evidence in Seventeenth-Century Europe"; Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); David Freedberg and Jan de Vries, eds., *Art in History, History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture* (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities and University of Chicago Press, 1991). See in particular the three introductory papers of this edited volume that problematize the relationship between the disciplines of art history and history: *ibid.*, 1–25.
20. Stephen Bann has also shown that images made to reconstruct a lost past are also deeply problematic: Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Cleo: A Study in the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

21. Jonathan Brown and Theodore K. Rabb, "The Evidence of Art: Images and Meaning in History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17.1 (1986), 5.
22. Haskell, *History and Its Images*, 4.
23. On Colbert's particular contribution to the arts, see *Colbert: 1619–1683* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Hôtel de la Monnaie (Paris: Ministère de la Culture, 1983).
24. Jean Chapelain to Colbert November 18, 1662, in Pierre Clément, ed., *Lettres, Instructions et Mémoires de Colbert* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1868), 5: 587–9.
25. For the history of coins and medals as foundation deposits, see Minou Schraven, "Out of Sight, Yet Still in Place: On the Use of Italian Renaissance Portrait Medals as Building Deposits," *RES* 55/56 (2009): 182–93.
26. John Evelyn, *Numismata: A Discourse of Medals Antient and Modern* (London: B. Tooke, 1697), 243, cited in Burke, "Images as Evidence in Seventeenth-Century Europe," 277.
27. Charles Patin, *Histoire des médailles: ou Introduction à la connoissance de cette science* (Paris: Vve. S. Mabre-Cramoisy, 1695), 8. On Charles Patin, see Haskell, *History and Its Images*, 23.
28. Ibid.
29. Chapelain to Colbert, November 18, 1662, in Clément, *Lettres, Instructions et Mémoires de Colbert*.
30. While there was no séance dedicated to the design of this medal by the Petite Académie, the medal can be dated to ca. 1700 as it was not described by the Académie for publication in their book of medals until December 7, 1700: *Reg. Journal*, December 7, 1700.
31. See Michel Martin, *Les monuments équestres de Louis XIV: une grande entreprise de propagande monarchique* (Paris: Picard, 1986).
32. *Med. L. le G. 1702*, 73.
33. Posterity is named as the audience for the visual histories of Louis XIV in several contemporary descriptions of artwork in various media. The phrase *transmettre à la postérité* and *transmis à la postérité* was used to describe the function of medals in the preface and text of the Petite Académie's medals book: Tallemant, *Preface*, and *Med. L. le G. 1702*, 73. Claude Nivelon wrote of the beauty and nobility of the allegorical language that Charles Le Brun employed in his design for the central panel for the ceiling of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles as an excellent means to *perpetuer à la postérité* the great deeds of the king: Claude Nivelon, *Vie de Charles le Brun et description détaillée de ses ouvrages: édition critique et introduction par Lorenzo Pericolo* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2004), 439. An epigram beneath Van Schuppen's portrait engraving of the Flemish émigré painter Adam Franz van der Meulen finishes with the line that the painter's work *le fait voir ce qu'il est à la postérité* [shows what he [Louis XIV] is to posterity].
34. Ibid.
35. The academy would change its name again in 1716 to the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. On the history of the naming of the Petite Académie, 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* 111.1 (1967): 134–49.
36. Tallemant, *Preface*.
37. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).
38. On this, see Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 3rd ed. (London: Continuum, 2011).
39. No sooner had the art of medals begun to thrive in the sixteenth century than some began to question their authority as historical documents. In a discussion with Ptolemy, who used medals to support his argument about the relative movements of the sun and earth, Copernicus commented "medals were formerly the proof stones of history, but they have become false and flattering," cited in Mark Jones, "The Medal as an Instrument of Propaganda in late 17th and Early 18th Century Europe," *The Numismatic Chronicle* 142 (1982), 117.
40. Paul Fox has written an excellent summary of the history of absolutism relating to the politics of Louis XIV: Paul W. Fox, "Louis XIV and the Theories of Absolutism and Divine Right," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science/Revue canadienne d'Economie et de Science politique* 26.1 (1960): 128–42. Herbert Rowen's account of the king as "state" makes clear the personal accountability of the king in all state matters: Herbert H. Rowen, "'L'état c'est à moi': Louis XIV and the State," *French Historical Studies* 2.1 (1961): 83–98.

41. Louis Marin "Classical, Baroque: Versailles, or the Architecture of the Prince," trans. Anna Lehman, *Yale French Studies* 80 (1991), 171.
42. On the "great men" model of history, see: Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History; Six Lectures Reported, with Emendations and Additions* (New York: Wiley & Halsted, 1859), and Robert A. Segal, ed., *Hero Myths: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).
43. Chantal Grell, "Les historiographes en France XVIe–XVIIIe siècles," in Chantal Grell, ed., *Les historiographes en Europe de la fin du Moyen Âge à la Revolution* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2006), and Orest Ranum, *Artisans of Glory: Writers and Historical Thought in Seventeenth-Century France* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).
44. Grell, "Les historiographes en France XVIe–XVIIIe siècles," 127.
45. Ibid., 146. For Racine's particular contribution to the king's history, see Marie-Claude Canova-Green and Alain Viala, eds., *Racine et l'histoire* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2004).
46. See the work of Jacques Cassagnes of the Petite Académie: Jacques Cassagnes, *Sur la conquête de la Franche-Comté, poème* (Paris: S. Mabre-Cramoisy, 1668); idem, *Ode sur les conquêtes du Roy en Flandre* (Paris: E. Martin, 1667).
47. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Discours sur l'histoire universelle ...* (Paris: S. Marbre-Cramoisy), 1–2.
48. Ibid.
49. George H. Nadel, "Philosophy of History Before Historicism," *History and Theory* 3.3 (1964): 291–315.
50. Charles Perrault, *Mémoires de ma vie*, ed. Paul Bonnefon (Paris: H. Laurens, 1909), 41.