

King Louis XV Handout

The Death of Louis XIV and Louis XV's Succession to the Throne

Olivier Bernier:

"All through Europe the statesmen were feeling a mixture of relief and anxiety: relief because they would soon be rid of the man who had determined the course of Continental politics for so long, anxiety because he left a sickly five-year-old as his successor. If the little boy died, the complex settlement reached at Utrecht [ending the War of Spanish Succession] only two years before might well become obsolete, and no one wanted the European war to start all over again."

"Even if his great-uncle ruled, however, Louis XV remained all-important: everything depended on his remaining alive, besides which he was just as much the elect of God as if he had been twenty years older. Miraculously, given the usual paucity of good looks among European royalty, the young King actually looked the part. He was a handsome child, we are told (and his portraits confirm it), with delicate features, dark hair, big black eyes, and a perfect complexion. All who saw him admired him and said so: more than a little boy, he was a kind of icon whom people came to worship, and though, uneasily aware of it, he behaved with preternatural dignity."

“The child was enormously popular because it was generally assumed, as was always the case in France during minorities, that once he was old enough to rule, he would bring forth a new golden age.”

Phillipe, duc d'Orléans

Some courtiers attributed the death of Louis XV's parents and brother to him, and “it was an easy and widely shared assumption that he would clear his way to the throne by arranging the little boy's demise” (Bernier).

Rigaud's Portraits of Louis XIV and Louis XV

While on one level the images of Louis XIV fulfilled a “collective need” for a “French hero-king” (153), they also tricked the public by neglecting to mention that the king stood only 5'3” tall in his bare feet and that his wig was more than a fashion choice—it hid the fact that he had lost hair in an illness (Burke 125).

Rigaud painted one of the most famous portraits of Louis XIV and used much of the same imagery in the portrait of Louis XV.

This portrait depicts Louis XV in coronation regalia at the time of his succession to the throne at the age of five. His actual coronation took place when he was 12.

Sources:

Bernier, Olivier. *Louis the Beloved: The Life of Louis XV*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1984.

Burke, Peter. *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

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