

All that Glitters

LIFE AT THE RENAISSANCE COURT

Courtiers feasting at elaborately set tables, knights in gleaming armor, a richly clad monarch presiding over elegant festivities: these images are often associated with the medieval and Renaissance courts of Europe. While ruler and retinue pursued pleasurable activities in extravagant surroundings, these pastimes were rigorously choreographed. Myriad rules governed a hierarchical society, and medieval chivalric codes continued to shape courtly behavior in later centuries. The court affirmed its political authority through pageantry: hunting, jousting, banqueting, and dancing were intended to display the power of the monarchy and nobility. The trappings of a court were meant to inspire awe, announcing the wealth and vitality of the kingdom, not only to visiting dignitaries and rival princes but also to the monarch's own subjects. For the ruler and the nobility at the center of these privileged spaces, the visual arts—illuminated manuscripts, paintings, drawings, enamels, and textiles—actively helped to construct their political and cultural identities.



Non-flash photography and video for personal use are welcome.

The pages of manuscripts are made of parchment (specially prepared animal skin), painted with tempera. Because these materials are sensitive to light, this exhibition is presented at low light levels.

For further information on the objects and music in the gallery, and for events related to the exhibition, visit getty.edu/art/exhibitions/renaissance_court.



The J. Paul Getty Museum

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Devotion and Display

In the palaces and castles of late medieval and Renaissance Europe, religious faith often found expression in luxurious material form. Noble patrons had commissioned illuminated prayer books to guide their devotions since the thirteenth century, and at the Renaissance court these luxurious manuscripts advertised wealth and good taste as well as piety. Sought-after court artists produced small illuminated books that could be worn as fashionable accessories, their decoration imitating the elegant fabrics, precious metals, and glittering jewels that adorned the residences of Europe's elite.



Codes of Conduct

Lords and ladies, and even kings and queens, observed strict rules of comportment, and a deeply ingrained sense of social hierarchy dictated every aspect of daily life. Rank determined a courtier's physical proximity to the monarch, including where he sat at the banqueting table, as well as his right to wear certain luxury fabrics. Such protocols demanded a delicate dance of proper etiquette from courtiers, as well as vigilant attention to systems of heraldry expressing family connections, ownership of certain lands and territories, and membership in official military orders. Richly illuminated manuscripts enshrined ideals of chivalry that continued to guide official conduct into the sixteenth century, even as absolutist empires and powerful monarchs replaced the feudal systems of the medieval era.



Socializing in Style

The court was a space of leisure, entertainment, and display, where members of the aristocracy spent their time in pursuits that included tournaments, hunting, feasting, and games such as chess. The environment in which these activities took place was sumptuous and visually captivating; manuscripts that recorded courtly pastimes were themselves valued as luxury goods. The Venetian ambassador to the court of King François I reported that “dresses and tapestries” consumed a large part of the monarch’s household budget. Courtiers were served the finest food and drink in elegant vessels, while musical entertainment further enhanced the social theater in which the nobility actively participated. The spectacle delighted courtiers, but it was also intended to remind them of their monarch’s magnanimity.



Dangerous Glamour

The splendor of European court life reached its apex at the seventeenth-century court of King Louis XIV at Versailles. He famously eradicated the political aspects of medieval feudalism and centralized state government at the capital. Medieval codes of social conduct and hierarchy nevertheless found new and intricate expression amid the palace's dramatic Baroque decor. As enthusiastic patrons of the visual arts, the king and his court created an atmosphere unsurpassed in splendor. The display of heraldry, personal emblems, fine textiles, and luxury books continued to affirm social standing and good taste. While the luxury of the Sun King's court dazzled all who encountered it, this opulence would soon become a potent symbol of an oppressive monarchy. Ultimately, the very trappings of magnificence that once cemented the king's authority would help spark a revolution.



Renaissance Remix

Music was an integral part of the court experience. Monarchs and the aristocracy employed skilled composers as well as singers and players, who performed regularly at court. The patronage of the court stimulated innovation in musical styles, and secular forms such as the madrigal and chanson flourished. Instruments, including woodwinds, violin, and guitar, began to look more like their modern forms. With the advent of printing, compositions circulated far and wide, spreading a shared popular musical culture across Europe. Here in the gallery we hear a compilation of pieces by influential composers across three centuries, beginning with Josquin des Prez (1450/55–1521), who popularized polyphony (independent lines of melody played simultaneously), and concluding with Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687), a master of the lively French Baroque style fashionable at the court of Louis XIV.



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