

# Marie-Antoinette: An Eye for Beauty

**2 February – 31 March 2026**

**FREE trail**

**Objects of exquisite artistry, intimately connected with Marie-Antoinette (1755–1793), the ill-starred queen of France, provide remarkable insights into the multi-faceted character and life of one of the most (in)famous and fascinating people in French history.**

An elegant writing desk, a pair of glittering candlesticks and two paintings commissioned for one of her private retreats are among the objects highlighted in a free trail of highly personal furnishings and artworks that reveal Marie-Antoinette as so much more than a doomed figure of myth and stereotype.

More than 230 years after her execution during the French Revolution, Marie-Antoinette remains an intriguing and beguiling figure – currently the star of a sold-out V&A exhibition. Renowned for her style, she was a woman who possessed a discerning eye and, as Louis XVI's queen, used her almost limitless wealth and influence to commission interiors and artworks of unparalleled refinement.

The Wallace Collection contains some of the greatest works of art associated with Marie-Antoinette anywhere in the world thanks to the 4th Marquess of Hertford (1800–1870), one of the founders of the museum. Among the greatest collectors of his day, Hertford was renowned for his passion for the arts of 18th-century France. He acquired many of the queen's masterpieces in Paris in the decades following the Revolution, when they were dispersed from royal collections. Importantly, Hertford also played a role in the rehabilitation of Marie-Antoinette's character by lending to the first ever major exhibition dedicated to her, which was held at the Petit Trianon in 1867.

The first object featured in the trail is a profile portrait of the queen, made around 1774. Cast, gilded and set against white marble, it depicts her around 19 years old, shortly after she was crowned queen. The frame is trimmed with fleurs-de-lis, laurel branches and ribbon bows, a motif of which Marie-Antoinette was particularly fond. Although it is not known for whom the sculpture was made, Louis XVI presented a similar example to Hyder Ali, ruler of Mysore, in 1775.

Marie-Antoinette was a keen collector of Sèvres porcelain, and a set of sumptuous vases (1781) by the celebrated factory was likely purchased by her before Louis XVI gifted them to Prince Heinrich of Prussia, when on a diplomatic visit to the French capital. At first glance, they appear to be mounted with gemstones. These, however, were made using a rare and elaborate enamelling technique perfected by Joseph Coteau (1740–1812), who worked at the factory for only a few years before being dismissed due to his difficult personality. The enamels frame scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as imagined by Boucher and Eisen, on the fronts of the vases and idyllic scenery on the backs.



A fall-front desk (1780) made by the king's official cabinetmaker, Jean-Henri Riesener (1734–1806), was delivered to her *cabinet intérieur* at Versailles in 1780, yet, despite its splendour, it must have been considered old fashioned by the queen, as shortly later it was sent to store before being given to Louis XVI. Later that year, Riesener devised a chest of drawers (that also features in the trail) that was in a more refined classical style, and which later became the model for much of the royal furniture he produced in the 1780s. During the Revolution, officials removed the back of the desk to search for incriminating material but uncovered nothing.

Three years later, as part of her refurbishment of Marly, a pleasure house on the edge of the Versailles estate, Riesener created a suite of furniture, which included a desk and cupboard for her *cabinet bas*. The delicate mounts of trailing flowers and foliage were likely made by the leading bronziers Etienne Martincourt (about 1730–1796) and François Rémond (1747–1812) and show Riesener's capacity for design.

Indeed, Marie-Antoinette's seemingly endless passion for redecoration projects involved a line-up of distinguished architects, designers and craftspeople. Remarkably, they were frequently able to achieve cohesive aesthetic results, as was the case with the queen's *cabinet intérieur* at Versailles. In 1779, the room was refurbished and fitted out with luxurious wall silks – again featuring her signature taste for delicate neoclassical motifs – which, the following year, were complemented by furniture, including a chest of drawers from Riesener. Although the once-striking colours of the marquetry have faded with time, the sheer quality of the craftsmanship is still evident.

Two paintings, *Sleep and Awakening*, by Nicolas-René Jollain (1732–1804) and Hugues Taraval (1729–1785) respectively, were commissioned, appropriately, for Marie-Antoinette's bedchamber at Marly, which the queen had redecorated in 1781. Nestled in serene, pastoral landscapes, rosy cheeked cherubs seemingly doze in the picture by Jollain, before springing to life in the other by Taraval. Skilfully, the two artists painted light and shadow onto the canvases in a way that reflected their arrangement in relation to the windows of the room in which they were hung.

The trail is accompanied by a programme of free lunchtime talks looking up close at the objects, as well as a free lecture, 'Introducing 'Marie-Antoinette: An Eye for Beauty' on Thursday 19 February, unveiling how the queen's personal taste left a lasting mark on one of the most elegant periods of European art.

Director of the Wallace Collection Dr Xavier Bray, says: "Marie-Antoinette's legacy lives on at the Wallace Collection, where you can see up close the remarkable objects that once belonged to her in an intimate and opulent setting. The sold-out V&A exhibition has swept up a nation in Marie-Antoinette fever and there is always more to unravel about this captivating queen. Our free trail invites you to piece together a glimpse of the private woman behind the celebrity image through the objects she lived with, including the desk where she penned her personal letters."

"There has been a total transformation in the understanding of Marie-Antoinette as queen, her character and her life in recent years. Through her style and taste her power was, and remains, profoundly visual and this is the key to why she is still so culturally potent today."

We are grateful to Sophie and Christopher North for their generous support of this display.

#### **NOTES FOR EDITORS**

#### **IMAGES**

[\*\*HIGH RESOLUTION IMAGES FOR MEDIA USE CAN BE DOWNLOADED HERE\*\*](#)

#### **About the Wallace Collection**

As one of Britain's preeminent cultural institutions, the Wallace Collection is home to one of the most significant ensembles of fine and decorative arts in the world. Highlights include oil paintings from the 14th to the late 19th centuries by artists such as Titian, Velázquez, Rubens and Van Dyck; princely arms and armour; and one of the finest

collections of 18th-century French paintings and decorative arts. Visitors can also enjoy superb medieval and Renaissance objects, including Limoges enamel, maiolica, glass and bronzes. Displayed at Hertford House, former home to Sir Richard and Lady Wallace, this outstanding collection is displayed in a manner designed to evoke the lives and tastes of its founders, creating a special ambiance that remains an essential part of its charm.

[www.wallacecollection.org](http://www.wallacecollection.org)

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION, INTERVIEWS AND IMAGES**

Tracy Jones, Brera PR – [tracy@brera-london.com](mailto:tracy@brera-london.com) / 01702 216658 / 07887 514984 / [www.brera-london.com](http://www.brera-london.com)