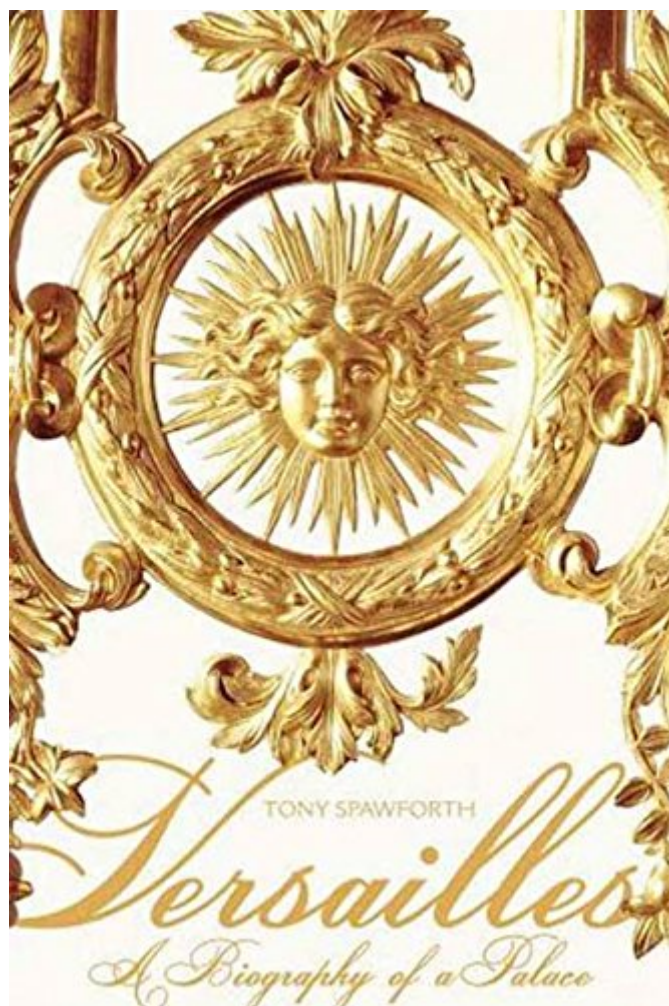


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Versailles: A Biography Of A Palace



Synopsis

The behind-the-scenes story of the world's most famous palace, painting a picture of the way its residents truly lived and examining the palace's legacy, from French history through today. The story of Versailles is one of historical drama, under the last three kings of France's old regime, mixed with the high camp and glamour of the European courts, all in an iconic home for the French arts. The palace itself has been radically altered since 1789, and the court was long ago swept away. Versailles sets out to rediscover what is now a vanished world: a great center of power, seat of royal government, and, for thousands, a home both grand and squalid, bound by social codes almost incomprehensible to us today. Using eyewitness testimony as well as the latest historical research, Spawforth offers the first full account of Versailles in English in over thirty years. Blowing away the myths of Versailles, he analyses afresh the politics behind the Sun King's construction of the palace and shows how Versailles worked as the seat of a royal court. He probes the conventional picture of a "perpetual house party" of courtiers and gives full weight to the darker side: not just the mounting discomfort of the aging buildings but also the intrigue and status anxiety of its aristocrats. The book brings out clearly the fateful consequences for the French monarchy of its relocation to Versailles and also examines the changing place of Versailles in France's national identity since 1789. Many books have told the stories of the royals and artists living in Versailles, but this is the first to turn its focus on the palace itself---from architecture and politics to scandal and restoration.

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Customer Reviews

A well-written history of the building and various remodeling efforts undertaken at Versailles, this book managed on a several occasions to prove interesting. However, I found the amount of detail on the actual construction of the palace to be, on the whole, rather meager; greater emphasis was devoted to the ridiculous court etiquette. As noted in the book, there were a a few occasions where court etiquette necessitated a quirky floor plan or structural modification to the palace, but on the whole the emphasis on etiquette seemed odd. Also, strangely, the history of the palace after the revolution, particularly in the 19th century during which most of the modifications were made to the palace in its transition to a museum and conceivably better documented, were glossed over. Warning to fellow e-book readers - there were no illustrations and the formatting/footnotes were useless. There were also a myriad of typos and punctuation errors, which I presume happened during the translation into an electronic format. Lastly, I laughed-out-loud when the author lamented that Versailles is a victim of global warming, because a 200+ year-old tree planted by Marie Antoinette was felled by a recent windstorm. Um...old trees have been toppled by wind since there were old trees and wind.

If you wished to know how the Palace of Versailles came to be built and the manner in which the occupants lived there, this is the book for you. If you want a book written by an excellent writer whose "charm" infuses the writing, this is the book for you. The conventional historical details are given in the order of events. Beyond this, there are snapshots of the actual lives lived within the Palace in each era and phase of its construction. The author has created a well crafted tapestry of documentation based on actual diary and journal writings of the period. In this way, one can appreciate a fully fleshed set of images and human sensibilities. For those who have a special interest in French Eighteenth Century History in general and a desire to know more of an indepth "portrait" of the actual characters and those who worked for them and how they lived specifically, this volume will be enormously enriching. Finally, the author is first-rate. This is not a fluff or coffee table book. It is also very accessible and not scholarly to the point of being a cool calculated

breakdown of events. The author has an elegant sense of humor and some related "tidbits" should be amusing to the reader. For example, not many books on Versailles tell you about the "bathroom facilities" or where everyone lived in the Palace if you were not the King or Queen themselves. My most marked response is having a sense of the "personalities" of the actual people of the period. My most delightful response was having a sense of the "personality" of the writer, who seems happy to relate the story and never to be pedantic. I felt I had spent a lovely time with him in a quiet place and shared in his extraordinary knowledge of his subject. I loved this book and hated for it to end. I would purchase anything written by Tony Spawforth. I would love to meet him. When writing is this good you feel uplifted and pleased not to have wasted a single minute of your time. Thomas Lee Randleman

This is not a "coffee table" picturebook of Versailles. There are plenty of those to be had. What's been missing from the literature on this subject has been a book that explains the workings of the palace, its social and political context and the routines and rhythms of day-to-day life in what was, essentially, an enormous gilded cage for the French nobility. This book begins to fill that niche. My only complaint would be that the author could have included a few more architectural drawings to illustrate the evolution of the palace and the changing arrangement of rooms over the reigns of the three kings of France who lived in Versailles. These developments are discussed in interesting detail, but the effect is diminished without a visual to assist the reader. Overall, a very good and interesting read.

Being crazy about Versailles, and fascinated by all things related to that era, I thought I would be in love with this book, but there were several chapters that were seriously dry reads. I was expecting more "behind the scenes" palace intrigue, and got a lot more geography of the actual building construction than I was personally interested in. I think I know a lot more about the palace now--which was my goal before taking our trip, but I probably could have skimmed a few chapters (as I had purchased many books to read, and this one slowed me down a bit). I do believe it to be a well-researched book, that examines the palace (and surrounding village) with great attention to detail.

After touring the Palace of Versailles, I returned home eager to read more. This book was great at breathing life into Versailles. However, I gave it four stars because sometimes the timeline didn't seem to connect. Other times, I was given information that seemed on the edge of more, yet that

was the all of it. It also wasn't always clear why the book jumped back and forth in time. Overall, I really enjoyed the book. I highly recommend it if you have an interest in Versailles. I wish I had read it before touring the palace. Thankfully, I had my iPod and took lots of pictures and video to look at as I read.

My wife loved this. We'll be spending a day touring Versailles on an upcoming trip, and she really enjoyed, and got a lot out of, this book. My turn next.

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