

Marquise de Pompadour

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(1721-1764)

~... she had an oval face, very regular features, a magnificent complexion, quite superb hands and arms, eyes which were pretty if on the smallish side, yet which possessed a fieriness, an intelligence and a brilliance that I have never seen in any other woman.

Another admirer recounted excitedly that he had encountered in the young Madame d'Étiolles 'one of the prettiest women I have ever seen', going on to rhapsodise on her accomplishments:

~... she understands music perfectly, sings with all the gaiety and good taste imaginable, knows by heart a hundred songs and takes part in plays [staged in her private residence].

Marquise de (marchioness of) Pompadour, Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, byname Madame de Pompadour, also called (1741-45) Jeanne-Antoinette le Normant d'Étiolles, influential mistress (from 1745) of the French king Louis XV and a notable patron of literature and the arts.

Early years

Her parents were on the fringes of a class gaining in importance, speculators in the world of finance. Some of these people made immense fortunes, but many ended in the gutter if not in prison. Her father, François Poisson, involved in a black-market scandal, had to flee the country in 1725; his beautiful wife and two small children were then looked after by a more fortunate colleague, Le Normant de Tournehem. Both children were clever, and the girl was fascinating; she was educated to be the wife of a rich man. In those days rich men, even if they came from a low class, were interested in art and literature, and they expected their wives to share these interests.

By the time Mademoiselle Poisson was of an age to marry, she could hold her own in any society and had made friends with many distinguished men, including Voltaire. Le Normant de Tournehem arranged a match for her with his own nephew, Charles-Guillaume Le Normant d'Étiolles, a rising young man; they had a little girl, Alexandrine. Madame d'Étiolles became a shining star of Parisian society and was admired by the King himself. In 1744 Louis XV's young mistress, the Duchesse de Châteauroux, died suddenly. She was soon replaced by Madame d'Étiolles, who obtained a legal separation from her husband and was created marquise de Pompadour. Nineteenth-century historians thought that Madame de Pompadour had complete ascendancy over Louis XV. These post-Revolution writers were concerned with portraying the Bourbon monarchs as poor creatures; it is now generally admitted that Louis XV was a much more able man than he has been painted. Shy and introspective, he had difficulty in communicating with people whom he did not know well. Madame de Pompadour acted as his private secretary, but, although she gave the orders, the decisions were made by the King.

She began her reign at Versailles modestly. She was lodged in a few rooms under the roof; she set out to make herself agreeable to all those who counted for anything in the palace, beginning with Queen Marie (Maria Leszczyńska). Marie could hardly have been a more unsuitable wife for the handsome, artistic, sensual, and pleasure-loving Louis XV. Eight years older than he, she was preoccupied with the welfare of her father (a deposed king of Poland), with childbearing, and with religion. After giving birth to an heir to the throne (and eight or nine other children between 1727 and 1737), she let the King understand that she had no wish to remain sexually intimate with him.

After five romantic years in her attic, Madame de Pompadour moved downstairs to a regal apartment. Louis XV now began to take other mistresses, but Madame de Pompadour was more firmly established than ever before; favours, promotions, and privileges could be obtained only through her good offices.

Artistic and political collaboration with Louis

Her collaboration with the King was twofold, artistic and political. The artistic side was wholly successful. On her suggestion, her brother was appointed director of the King's buildings and created marquis de Marigny; the brother, the sister, and Louis XV, working in perfect harmony, planned and built the École Militaire and the Place Louis XV (now the Place de la Concorde) in Paris, most of the palace of Compiègne, the Petit Trianon Palace at Versailles, a new wing at the palace of Fontainebleau, and the exquisite Châteaude Bellevue, as well as many pavilions and summer houses. He and his mistress patronized all forms of decorative art: painters, sculptors, cabinetmakers, and craftsmen worked under the royal eye; the famous porcelain factory was built at Sevres. Madame de Pompadour's 20 years of power marked the very apogee of taste in France. The protector of most of the authors and the editor of the Encyclopédie, she would have liked to do for literature what she did for the arts, but the King had no literary interests and disliked the intellectuals whom he knew.

The political collaboration between the King and his mistress was much less successful than the artistic, mainly because the French politicians and generals of the day were of such poor calibre. The Duc de Choiseul, by far the ablest of the ministers, was Madame de Pompadour's protégé. He was brought in to implement the famous Reversal of Alliances, which allied France with its old enemy Austria against the German Protestant principalities. This was a statesmanlike conception, but it was unpopular and led to the Seven Years' War, disastrous to France. Frederick the Great crushed the huge, incompetently led French and Austrian armies, while the English were driving the French out of Canada. All these defeats were laid at the door of Madame de Pompadour. She fell prey to melancholy, and soon after the end of the war she died, in the spring of 1764, probably of cancer of the lung, in her apartment at Versailles. One of her last actions was to get Louis XV's support for the revision of the Calas case, a gross miscarriage of justice in which Voltaire was interested. Voltaire said of her:

~I mourn her out of gratitude . . . Born sincere, she loved the King for himself; she had righteousness in her soul and justice in her heart; all this is not to be met with every day.

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