

Magazine : Royal Initials, Imperial Emblems and Republican Letters



Chiffres royaux, emblèmes impériaux et lettres républicaines
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Introduction

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Visual symbols of power can be found throughout the Palais du Louvre in the initials and emblems of kings, emperors and, finally, the Republic.

From the royal L to the Republican RF

The construction of the Louvre was an ongoing process, enabling the different political regimes to assert their capacity to organize and finance a complex endeavor, and giving them the opportunity to leave a trace of their presence in stone. But how could they sign their work? The simplest way was to have their portrait done somewhere in the palace: Charles V, Henri IV, Napoleon I and Napoleon III did not hesitate to do so, while Louis XIV had considered it. There were other simpler and less costly ways, however, like using symbols and coded signs. They can be found throughout the Louvre on its facades, gates, locks and woodwork, and on the ground as well. Emblematics is a science that teaches us what these signs resemble and how to read them. They can be monograms or initials, mottos, objects or mythological characters associated with a sovereign, or even coats of arms. They all tell a story, but this story might not always be true. During the Revolution, emblems were considered signs of seigniorship. This was not a very accurate notion, however, since anyone could give himself an emblem provided he respected the emblems of others. But in an effort to rewrite history, many of the signs were hammered out or hidden beneath plaster. The regimes that followed made a habit of adapting the emblems to tell their own version of history. Appearances can be deceiving...

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Saint Louis (Salon Denon)
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From Saint Louis to Charles IX

Royal initials were not yet the fashion in the thirteenth century. But under Napoleon III, in a bid to link himself with the former monarchical lineage, the emperor decided to pay homage to the patronage of Saint Louis by adding the initials SL to the ceiling of the Salon Denon in 1866. Although François I had undertaken to build a new wing on the Louvre in 1546, no decoration dates back to his era. However, under the Restoration, the corner of the Salle des Bijoux, now devoted to antique glassware, was decorated with large, gilt carton-pierre trophies stamped with royal insignia. An FF was also added in the nineteenth century during the painting of the Salon Denon ceiling. Most of the Hs that adorn the Louvre were created after 1815, under the Restoration. Thus, the large H of Henri II, on the central tympanum of the Pierre Lescot facade, did not exist in the sixteenth century. There were simply the fleurs-de-lis, destroyed during the Revolution and replaced by the initials of the Republic of France, RF, which were later erased. The sections built by Henri II, king from 1547 to 1559, such as the facade of the Cour Carrée, the Henri II staircase, the royal chamber and the antechamber, feature either the letter H or the monogram H with two interlacing Ds. Although this was at one time interpreted as a blatant homage to the king's favorite, Diane de Poitiers, it is now seen as two overlapping crescent moons, for the king had indeed made the moon his emblematic choice. Charles IX, the second son of Henri II and Catherine de Medici, ordered the construction of a section of what is called the Charles IX Wing, in the Cour Carrée, where his monogram in the form of a crowned K or two intertwining Ks can be found.

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Henri II (Cour Carrée, aile Pierre Lescot
et aile Henri II)
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Henri II (Cour Carrée, aile Henri II) ©
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Charles IX (Cour Carrée, aile Charles IX)
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Henri IV (Cour Carrée, aile Charles IX)
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The Louvre of Henri de Bourbon

An immense H is drawn in large stone slabs on the sidewalk of the Pavillon Lesdiguière, along the River Seine. On the other side, in front of the Pavillon de La Trémolle, a gigantic N, for Napoleon III, is written. Having arrived in Paris in 1594 in the aftermath of civil war, Henri de Bourbon wanted to affirm his sovereignty and thus decided to make the Louvre a genuine royal residence, connecting the queen mother's palace to the kings' palace by a long gallery. He also had the Pavillon de Flore built and the Petite Galerie decorated. The king's initials and emblems are repeated countless times on its facades. In addition to the H, there are also the crown, scepters, fleurs-de-lis and the scale of Justice, to name a few. Most often there is the simple initial H, but a few surprises are in store as well. In the Cour Carrée, almost in the middle of the south wing, the king completed the construction of the last bay with a short Renaissance wing that links the Pavillon du Roi (King's Pavilion) to the medieval Louvre. There, HDB, for Henri de Bourbon, is displayed in reference to his original lineage. On the eastern section of the Grande Galerie facade, you can see the initials H and G surrounded by marriage torches. Out of love for his favorite, Gabrielle d'Estrées, the king had already united their initials in anticipation of their marriage. Mother of the king's natural children, Gabrielle could not become queen until the pope had annulled Henri's marriage to Marguerite de France, known as "La Reine Margot". Everything was ready for the ceremony when Gabrielle died suddenly in childbirth on Holy Saturday in 1599.

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Henri de Bourbon (Cour Carrée, aile Charles IX)
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Henri IV et Gabrielle d'Estrées (Aile Denon, côté Seine) © Droits réservés

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Louis XIII (Cour Carrée, aile Lemercier)
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From L for Louis to L for Louvre

Louis XIII, Louis XIV, Louis XV, Louis XVI, Louis XVIII, Louis-Philippe, Louis-Napoleon... Oh, the Louis who left their mark on the Louvre! Louis XIII, who built the Pavillon de l'Horloge (now known as the Pavillon Sully) in the Cour Carrée, distinguished himself by using the Greek letter Lambda for his initial. A double lambda adorns the keystone of the pavilion arch. This surprising initial escaped the Republican cleanup operation. A much more common sight are Louis XIII and his wife Anne of Austria's interlacing initials A and L, which often mark the areas created under the queen's regency. Louis XIV was a very proud man and rarely united his initials with those of Queen Marie-Thérèse, LLMT. Nevertheless, they can be found on the frieze of the Cour Carrée, saved by their intricacy from the demolition hammer. The king's preference was for a double L, with the two mirrored letters interlacing. These initials were too well known, however, and were hammered out. Thus, under the Empire, it was transformed into an N on the colonnade. This N was in turn removed and replaced by Louis XVIII, under the Restoration, with a less ornate double L. Louis XV had his initials, LXV, put along the frieze of the Cour Carrée. Ruthlessly destroyed, these initials were replaced by plaster volutes. The sovereigns of the Restoration reinstated the initials lower down between the columns. They redid the H of Henri II, the K of Charles IX, the AL and, oddly enough, they added an LB for Louis de Bourbon, which was valid for all the Louis. There was also an L all on its own, which became the logo for the Louvre in 1848. It was rare and often confused with the royal L. In fact, this L was very short-lived, for two sets of initials would soon cover the Louvre: the Napoleonic N and the Republican RF.

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Lambda (Cour Carrée, aile Lemerrier)
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Double lambda (Cour Carrée, au-dessus
du portique du pavillon de l'Horloge) ©
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Louis XIII et Anne d'Autriche (Cour
Carrée, au-dessus du portique du pavillon
de l'Horloge) © Droits réservés



Louis XIV © Droits réservés



Louis XIV et Marie-Thérèse d'Autriche
(Pavillon Marengo) © Droits réservés



Louis XVIII (Médaillons de la colonnade
du Louvre) © Droits réservés

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Napoléon
© Musée du Louvre / P. Philibert

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Under the sign of the Napoleons

Most of the Ns that adorn the facades of the Louvre celebrate the emperor Napoleon III, who was responsible for a much larger part of the palace than his uncle Napoleon I. Indeed, almost nothing remains of the imperial emblems from Napoleon I's long stay at the Louvre. The Bourbons were scarcely in power when they hastened to hammer, file, and carve away all signs of the usurper. The Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel, which had been deprived of its bas-reliefs, was partly re-sculpted, and finials replaced the imperial Ns. When Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte came to power, becoming Napoleon III on 2 December 1852, he took the opposite course of action. The construction of the new Louvre was the opportunity to make a show of the imperial symbolism. Initially, at the very beginning of the construction of the New Louvre, Louis-Napoleon used his real initials, LN. They can be found only in the Pavillon de Rohan, on the arch keystone of the guichet near the Turgot Wing, for example. His marriage to Eugénie De Montijo on 29 January 1853 provided an opportunity to unite the initial N with E. By doing so, the emperor imitated the intertwining letters of the sovereigns of the Ancien Régime and thus flaunted his conjugal love to the Bonaparte family, who had difficulty accepting the marriage. NE and E are sculpted into the arches and beneath the porticos of the Cour Napoleon. Obviously, the N alone, isolated, prevailed throughout the new construction. Plain, in wreaths of oak or laurel, or even bizarrely twisted like a baluster, it replaced the Ns of his uncle Napoleon I that had disappeared.

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"L" et "N"
pour Louis Napoléon.

Louis Napoléon
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Louis Napoléon et l'impératrice Eugénie
(Aile Denon, côté Seine) © Droits réservés



Louis Napoléon et l'impératrice Eugénie
(Aile Denon, côté Seine) © Droits réservés



N napoléonien (Cour Visconti) © Musée du Louvre / P. Philibert

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Le "R" de la République, sur une cheminée du pavillon de Marsan.
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From the First to the Third Republic

With the First Republic in 1792 came the letters R and RF to replace the emblems of royalty and then the emperors. Not only letters, but other symbols also took the place of the royal initials. Thus, a rooster with outspread wings encircled by a snake biting its tail replaced the fleurs-de-lis and the royal crown on the pediment of the eastern facade of the Cour Carrée. Fleurs-de-lis, a royal crown and chain from the Order of Saint-Michel disappeared from the Pierre Lescot Wing, giving way to the initials RF for "Republic of France", accompanied by the ultimate in revolutionary symbols: two winged Victories presenting a lictor's fasces. When Louis XVIII came to power in 1814, he restored, as we have seen, all the royal symbols. Yet in his haste, some republican signs were forgotten and now share the same space with those of the kings. Thus, Louis XVIII's initials LL are sometimes accompanied by a bee, the symbol of Napoleon I. When the Third Republic was proclaimed, Lefuel, the architect behind the reconstruction of the Flore and Marsan pavilions that had burned in the Paris Commune of 1871, inscribed the R of the Republic all along the frieze of the first floor of the Pavillon de Marsan, as well as on the chimneys.

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Un coq aux ailes déployées (Cour Carrée, façade Est)
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Armes de France (Cour Carrée, frontispice de l'aile Jean Gougeon) © Droits réservés



Chiffre républicain (Cour Carrée, frontispice de l'aile Jean Gougeon) © Droits réservés



Chiffre royal d'Henri II restitué sous Louis XVIII (Cour Carrée, frontispice de l'aile Jean Gougeon) © Droits réservés



Cour Carrée, frontispice de l'aile Jean Gougeon (Détail) © Droits réservés



Louis XVIII (Médaillons de la colonnade du Louvre) © Droits réservés

