The Best Laid Plans

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Louis Stanislas Xavier (1755-1824), Count of Provence, escaped from France in 1791 at the time his older brother Louis XVI halfheartedly tried to leave and was taken at Varennes by the revolutionaries. He and his childless wife Louise-Marie-Joséphine of Savoy reached Brussels, joined his younger brother Charles Philippe, Count of Artois, later Charles X, and began at Coblenz their twenty-three-year exile, which took them to a variety of places. When, on May 3, 1814, he re-entered Paris after Napoleon’s defeat, Louis was a gouty widower of nearly sixty, and no longer interested, as he once had been, in expensive festivities. He was considered to be fairly astute politically—unlike his older brother Louis XVI and his younger brother Charles X—and to be something of a pinchpenny, again unlike his brothers. One of the first things he did after his return to Paris was to arrange a funeral for Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, and this lugubrious ceremony set the pace for the succeeding ten years. Used to the legend at least of the elaborate balls and amusements of pre-Revolutionary Versailles and to the equally expensive diversions of the imperial Napoleon, everyone expected Louis XVIII to celebrate the restoration of the Bourbons and to entertain in the same fashion. When he did not do so, there was great disappointment, especially on the part of the nobility who became his court. When he died in 1824 and was given a suitable funeral, malicious wits considered it the first real fete of his reign.

Among the festivities they had expected was a coronation ceremony, a tradition so strong in France that Napoleon upon becoming Emperor felt it necessary to put the cachet on his accession by following the custom. But Louis XVIII was never crowned. Ordinary history books do not even mention this fact, for they are all much more interested in Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna. But there is evidence of plans for a coronation—and there are some rather obvious reasons why they were never fulfilled.

A traditional French coronation ceremony required twelve peers of France, six secular and six religious. But the old nobility had been guillotined or exiled and in their place were many newly titled peers created by Napoleon. If Louis’s restoration was to be an authentic return to the old regime, he could hardly be expected to use for his coronation peers created by the usurper. Therefore Louis immediately created new peers and decreed in his famous Chartes that all the old titles were still good, that the Napoleonic ones were also valid, and that with the addition of the group of new peers the nobility would have a governing body of its own like the British House of Lords. Thus, by creating a constitutional monarchy in a time of political unrest, Louis made it increasingly impolitic to stress the divine right of kings by holding a coronation. The ceremony would have reminded everyone of the last two: that of a monarch later beheaded and that of a dictator-made-emperor later exiled at great expense to all Europe.

And by comparison with the dynamic and dramatic figure of Napoleon, who, after summoning the Pope all the way from Rome to Paris for the coronation ceremony, astounded everybody by crowning himself, poor, fat, crippled Louis hobbling several times up the temporary stairs to the throne on the rood screen for the ancient ceremony could only have been ludicrous. The Bourbon partisans were well aware of this, for

Water-color drawing by Percier for temporary decorations on the rood screen of Reims cathedral
Gift of Lincoln Kirstein, 1956
Chateaubriand wrote that he was afraid of the effect of the "apparition" of the royal invalid; it would indeed be disenchanting. Louis de la Rochefoucauld, Duke of Doudeauville, says in his Memoirs that Louis thought about his coronation for a good ten years, and that one of his main problems was the actual putting on of the crown. After Napoleon had pointed out that the crown was not bestowed by the church, and that no individual had any right to crown the king, Louis could not do less than Napoleon even though he was reluctant to do the same thing. It was decided after great deliberation that the king should arrive at the cathedral with his crown on his head—probably put there, as Henri Bouchot observed, by his hairdresser. Another problem concerned the holy oil used in anointing the king; the traditional Holy Ampulla, according to legend brought from heaven by a white dove for the baptism of Clovis in 496 A.D., had been smashed during the Revolution.

The turbulence and insecurity of the times was not conducive to elaborate preparations for a coronation ceremony. Only a few months after Louis's return to Paris in May 1814, the Congress of Vienna required in Vienna many important people whose presence would be necessary at the proper coronation of a king of France. Besides, no one was at all sure of the king's position until the Congress was concluded in 1815. During the One Hundred Days (March 20 through June 22, 1814), when Napoleon returned from Elba to threaten Europe, Louis had again become a refugee. He had escaped from the Tuileries so precipitously, indeed, that he had left behind several small gold boxes which Napoleon appropriated and later bequeathed to his son. Furthermore, France was still partly occupied by British and German troops. A letter in the Gentleman's Magazine in January 1817 says: "The number of the Allied troops quartered upon France is to be forthwith reduced, by the marching homeward of 30,000 men; of these, 6,000 are British."

A triumphal coronation ceremony held for
a ruler who had already called himself King of France for twenty years (ever since the Dauphin, called Louis XVII, was declared dead in 1795) would have been something of an anticlimax. Besides, Louis was in no condition to withstand an eight- to eleven-hour ceremony involving long slow processions, stair-climbing and kneeling, for as early as March 1815 he had ordered a wheel chair from the famous cabinetmaker Jacob-Desmalter. It was to be a large mahogany armchair covered with gold-embroidered dark green velvet, and mounted on gilded copper wheels. The Paris correspondent of the Gentleman’s Magazine wrote on January 5, 1817, “The King continues ill. Contrary to his custom he spends the greater part of his time in bed. He attends but little to business, but much to conversation, and there are not courtiers wanting. . . . His voice fails him, mental exertion fatigues him and his memory, hitherto so faithful, forsakes him, on the other hand his appetite is good, and vegetative life is still strong within him. This impaired condition of his health has given rise to a report among the Ultras, of his having fallen into a state of infancy. . . .” By 1819, when he inaugurated the Exposition des Produits de l’Industrie, Louis is shown amid his standing courtiers in his famous wheel chair. Constantly postponed, discussed and deliberated over, the coronation was put off again and again, until there was no possibility of the king’s being able to participate.

But there can be no question that a coronation ceremony once seemed not only possible but probable, especially in the beginning of the reign. The city of Reims, for which coronations had always been profitable, sent a deputation to the Count of Artois when he first rode toward Paris in 1814, to inquire whether Louis intended to be crowned there. The answer was yes. Given this promise, the French people as well as the city of Reims expected a festival as a matter of course, and as time went on certain preparations were made.

The artists Percier and Fontaine made six water-color projects for the decoration of Reims cathedral for the ceremony, and these drawings were given to the Museum in 1956 by Lincoln Kirstein. We do not know just when they were commissioned, but they are so elaborate, so finished, and so large that one can only conclude they were made to order, to be shown to the royal patron or at least his master of ceremonies.

Charles Percier (1764-1838) had known Pierre François Léonard Fontaine (1762-1853) when they were both students of Antoine Peyre the younger, and later, in 1786, in Rome as winners of the Prix de Rome. They returned to France in 1792, and for some twenty years after 1794 they collaborated so closely that it is almost impossible to distinguish the work of one from that of the other. In general, Fontaine seems to have been responsible for the architecture and engineering and Percier for the decorative arts and the draftsmanship. They worked on the completion of the Louvre, saw to the renovation and redecoration of Malmaison, and designed the triumphal arch called the Carrousel and the Rue de Rivoli with its arcades. Together they pub-
lished several books of architectural plans of existing buildings and designs for new ones as well as designs for furniture and interior decoration. They were copied and imitated all over Europe for many years. As Napoleon's architects and decorators their style became the Empire style.

That Percier and Fontaine were chosen to execute the designs for Louis's coronation is not surprising. Louis took them over from Napoleon just as he inherited the new furniture—much of it designed by them—that Napoleon had ordered for the Tuileries. Unlike his predecessor, Louis did not celebrate his sovereignty by renovating palaces and undertaking many new buildings. He simply moved into the Tuileries and for the most part used what was there. In fact he is known to have liked the furniture that he found and to have contented himself with substituting his own emblems for the Napoleonic eagles and bees.

Although our drawings are unsigned, Percier's hand is unmistakable. If we knew that he had really retired in 1814, as most accounts of his life say he did, we could date our drawings to that year. But at Versailles there is today a magnificent gold coach built, after Percier's design, for the coronation of Charles X in 1825. The coach was refurbished in 1856 for the baptism of the Prince Imperial, so it now bears Napoleonic emblems. The Second Empire made thrifty use of a beautiful and expensive Bourbon property by scraping off the royal symbols and painting in its own.

There can be no confusion over the fact that our drawings are for the coronation of Louis XVIII, for the one reproduced on page 182 is an elevation of the rood screen which bears, beneath the throne and over the entrance to the choir, the lettering LOUIS XVIII ROI DE FRANCE ET DE NAVARRE. Nor can there be any doubt of the
identity of the cathedral, for though at one time the planners considered using Notre Dame de Paris, the drawing illustrated on page 186 is a longitudinal section showing the unmistakable and unusual placing of the main altar of Reims cathedral just at the east edge of the crossing instead of in the apse. Most of the features of Reims, where French kings were traditionally crowned, are obscured by the temporary grandstand decorations. One of the few and inexplicable inaccuracies of these six drawings is the rendering of trefoils in the clerestory. This seems to indicate that the drawings were made away from the cathedral by someone extremely familiar with gothic ornament who supplied likely details automatically: the trefoils do not exist, nor did they even before Reims was restored after the First World War.

Although Percier himself had made many studies of gothic architecture and ornament—his careful drawings of Saint-Denis, for instance, are now in the Bibliothèque de l’Institut—he deplored the gothic as a style, for he is said, later, to have forbidden his students to use his gothic drawings. Together, he and Fontaine had designed stage sets for the Opéra and for the Comédie Française, and were therefore quite prepared for staging the dramatic spectacle of Napoleon’s coronation in 1804. Well aware of the strength and immutability of the façade of Notre Dame de Paris and of how ridiculous any plaster and lath accretion, however temporary, in the fashionable classical manner would look, they designed a portico in the gothic style. The decorations for the interior, however, were an-

Engraving of the coronation ceremony of Charles X in 1825  Dick Fund, 1930
Engraving of the coronation ceremony of Charles X in 1825  Dick Fund, 1930

other matter; they were strictly classical. (The spectators, incidentally, were required to wear court dress made only from French fabrics, and Isabey, who designed the important costumes and uniforms, even prescribed the colors to be worn.) The use of gothic ornament on the exterior and classical ornament on the interior for Napoleon’s coronation shows an eclectic and rather coldly accurate interest, but the interpenetration of ornamental styles projected in our drawings for the Louis XVIII ceremony—gothic and renaissance details are entwined irrevocably, like the butter and sugar in a pastry—echoes the confusion of romanticism. The cautious straddling of old and new, the compromises, and the indecision between styles are evident here in what might be called a Palladian gothic style.

The engravings showing the decorations of the interior of Reims for the coronation of Charles X in 1825 provide an interesting contrast to those executed by Percier and Fontaine a decade earlier. They are more unashamedly gothic revival in feeling—a style which in France has been delightfully called the troubadour style. But if one looks closely at the unfinished engraving shown on page 189, which was made as one of the many illustrations for an unpublished book about Charles’s coronation, one still sees caryatids, a triumphal arch for the canopy on the rood screen, and other details then supposed to be classical. Hittorf and Lecointe, who were responsible for these suffocating decorations, obviously overdid it. Whereas they did nothing different from what their predecessors had, they could not do it so well, and the effect is one of malaise. Even though Percier and Fontaine mixed gothic and renaissance forms they did so in a masterly way—the mixture is never offensive, and there are places for the eye to rest in its task of sorting out the details of this enormous stage decoration. They have stressed the ancient royal heritage by using a great many symbols, crossed L’s, fleurs-de-lis, crowns, the flames of the Order of the Holy Spirit, the arms of France and Navarre, and the figures of French kings of the past. This ostentatious use of symbols is more of a carryover from the nouveau-riche taste of Napoleon than from the less insistently monogrammed taste of Louis XVI; Napoleon’s imperial eagle and coat of arms as well as his bees appeared on everything, whereas the arms of France and Navarre were used sparingly and not as mere decoration in the time of Louis XVI. Before that, the decorations for a Reims coronation had consisted mainly of the famous tapestries used for all great occasions.

Our story of the painstaking preparation of the smallest details of Louis’s proposed coronation is made even more precise by a scrapbook of embroidery designs recently acquired by the Museum. A large blankbook with bottle-green paper boards and citron-yellow suede spine and corners, it contains yellow gouache patterns for elaborate gold embroidery. The first design (perhaps it was not always the first, for the binding has come unstitched and three or four leaves are missing) is labeled Personne du Roi. A later and shaky hand has added Louis XVIII. Successive sheets are inscribed Gardes du Corps, Gardes a Pieds du Roi, Pages du Roi, Pairs de France, Trois Bords pr Ministres, Ecusson de Minate et Collet de Petit Uniform, Poche et Sous-Poches de Ministres, Grands Bords pour Geneaux, and so forth. It is curious that no pattern is labeled as being for a woman. But after all, a return to the tradition of

Embroidery design used on royal robe of Louis XVIII and coronation robe of Charles X

Whittelsey Fund, 1957

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Portrait of Charles X, engraved after Ingres, for the unpublished history of his coronation

Dick Fund, 1930
hundreds of years instead of to the Napoleonic precedent would relegate women to the role of onlookers in the grandstand, for French queens were traditionally crowned in Saint-Denis in separate ceremonies. And by 1814 poor Louis was a widower. The designs are presumably the same size as the embroideries were to be, and they are executed very carefully indeed. This is not a designer’s sketchbook nor yet an embroiderer’s collection of working drawings. Nor is it a painter’s record book made for the sake of accurately portraying an official ceremony, like Isabey’s sketches in the Louvre of the embroidery on the uniforms worn by various dignitaries portrayed in his painting of the Congress of Vienna. These are unquestionably patterns drawn for display to a client.

We know, happily, how a fair number of these patterns were actually used. One handsome border, which is entirely unlabeled in the book, is shown at the hem of Louis XVIII’s royal robe in two different portraits of him by François Gérard—one in Toulouse, illustrated on this page, and one reputed to have been given by Louis to Talleyrand, who, having dropped his Buonaparte title Prince of Benevento, was created by Louis, on the day before his departure for the Congress of Vienna, Prince Talleyrand. In these slightly different versions of the same picture, Louis, seated on his throne, wears a royal robe embroidered with this very pattern. This rather decisively indicates that our book of patterns was made for Louis XVIII, just as the first leaf is inscribed.

Charles X, however, wore the same pattern on his coronation robe. Over a period of several years, many artists, including Ingres (whose drawings for it are in the Louvre), worked together to illustrate a large history of Charles’s coronation. (Although the original copper plates are in the Chalcographie du Louvre and have been printed many times, the book itself remains unpublished.) The plate reproduced on page 192 is a portrait of Charles wearing his coronation robe embroidered with the same pattern. Since every king would presumably have his own coronation robe, and since these robes before the time of Napoleon seem to have had borders simply of ermine or at most of larger fleurs-de-lis than those in the field of the robe, it seems hard to explain Charles’s robe until we remember that Louis was, after all, never crowned. Perhaps the robe intended for his coronation served instead for that of his brother.

Other engravings made for the same unpublished book show several of our patterns used on garments worn by others present at the coronation of Charles X. The pattern illustrated on page 194, for instance, was embroidered on the lining of the cape worn by the nobleman of the Order of the Holy Spirit who was chosen, in accord with a tradition that had existed since Henri III, to carry the Vase des Offrandes. (Napoleon, who created his Order of the Eagles to supplant the old Order of the Holy Spirit a day or so after his coronation, had the Vase carried
at the actual ceremony by a lady whose rather ambiguous title of *Dame du Palais* arouses a certain speculation as to what her more usual duties may have been.\) The pattern is composed of a floral and feathered border bearing the letter H for Henri III and a field sown with the symbolical flames of the order. Another of our patterns was used on the robes worn by the Dauphin and his brother, and the patterns labeled *Pairs de France* are shown on the costumes worn by the peers.

An unlabeled pattern for a border of fleurs-de-lis, feathers, and bold Bourbon lilies, evidently not for the coronation ceremony, was used on a royal robe for Charles, who is seen wearing it in a portrait by Gérard which, like that of Louis, was once owned by Talleyrand. A slightly different version of this portrait, with an architectural vista instead of a landscape, was presented by Charles to the Marchioness Dowager of Salisbury in 1829, and this painting was carefully copied that same year by Henry Bone, the British miniaturist. The miniature, now in the Museum, clearly shows the identical Bourbon lily border. These bold lilies are examples of the coarsening and enlarging of ornamental motifs characteristic of the time of Charles; they may be seen blooming furiously, and entwined with wheat,

*The bearer of the Vase des Offrandes. Engraving for the unpublished history of the coronation of Charles X*  
Dick Fund, 1930

*Embroidery design for the cape lining of the bearer of the Vase des Offrandes*  
Whittelsey Fund, 1957

grapes, and feathers, on a lace rochet now in the Museum that Cardinal de la Fare, Archbishop of Sens and Auxerre, wore at Charles's coronation. The amount of eyestrain, time, and manual skill expended on yards of lace designed to be worn partly concealed at that coronation is appalling.

Who actually executed the embroideries we do not know. We know that the painter Isabey designed the embroideries for Napoleon's coronation costumes and that they were executed by the firm of Picot, who also worked after designs by Percier and Fontaine. Picot was succeeded in the early 1820s by Brocard & Cie., who still exist and who are reputed to have the Picot account
books. Thinking that Picot might have executed our embroideries, and that they might have been designed, like Napoleon’s, by Isabey, we have made inquiries of Brocard & Cie., but without response. So for the present we can only guess.

Nor can we date our blankbook precisely. The evidence of the Gérard portraits and the engravings in the unpublished book on Charles’s coronation would indicate that the patterns may have been made for either Louis or Charles. The color scheme of the scrapbook itself, bottle-green and citron-yellow, was more fashionable at the time of Louis than of Charles, and the name and address given on the bookmaker’s label inside the front cover point to a date before 1815. We can tell, however, that our patterns were not all drawn by the same hand, nor do they all seem to have been done at the same time. The interval between Louis’s planned coronation and Charles’s actual one was only ten years, but it does seem possible to see the embroidery patterns becoming larger and less delicate as one goes toward the back of our book. The designs at the end of the book are for ecclesiastical robes, and we have not been able to find out whether these were actually executed or not. In any case they are coarse and heavy; one cope with a matching chasuble of red is so hideous, with its bands of roses, ribbons, and tassels, that it must have been drawn later than 1814. It is tantalizing to know that a large collection of ecclesiastical robes worn at Charles’s coronation is still at Reims, and that our patterns may appear on some of them; perhaps the opportunity will come to examine them and find out.

*Miniature of Charles X, by Henry Bone, after the Gérard portrait*

Bequest of Mary Clark Thompson, 1924

*Flounce from the rochet worn by Cardinal de la Fare at the coronation of Charles X*

Rogers Fund, 1920

*Embroidery pattern for royal robe worn by Charles X in the Bone miniature*

Whittelsey Fund, 1957