

Off the Shelf

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One of the true landmarks of numismatic literature was published in 1702 in Paris. A monumental work in more ways than one, *Médailles sur les principaux événements du règne de Louis le Grand, avec des explications historiques*¹ first made its appearance that year, initially in a sumptuous large folio format and quickly followed by a more affordable and easily handled quarto edition.

The 1702 *Médailles* is not your typical coin book. Produced by the Académie Royale des Médailles et des Inscriptions and printed by the Imprimerie Royale, it is perhaps the most sumptuous numismatic work ever produced. It was intended not simply to be a record of the medals of Louis XIV, but a carefully constructed history of his reign. In *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*,² Peter Burke discusses the publication of this work. The king himself was deeply involved in its execution and wished to supplant the previous work on the subject by the Jesuit priest Claude-François Menestrier.³

From the birth of Louis XIV in 1638 and his ascension to the throne on the death of Louis XIII less than five years later, this work traces the important events in the life of this illustrious monarch as well as the history of France itself. Louis was intensely interested in the arts and did much to create the reputation France still enjoys as a worldwide center of culture. He was determined to expand the royal coin cabinet and issued commemorative medals on many occasions. These commemorative medals are the subject of this magnificent work.

This devotion to numismatics and historiography is reflected in the

¹ Académie Royale des Médailles et des Inscriptions, *Médailles sur les principaux événements du règne de Louis le Grand, avec des explications historiques* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1702).

² Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale, 1992).

³ Claude-François Menestrier, *Histoire du Roy Louis le Grand par les médailles, emblèmes, devises, jettons, inscriptions, armoiries, et autres monumens publics* (Paris: I. B. Nolin, 1691). *Seconde édition, augmentée de plusieurs figures et corrigée*, 1693.

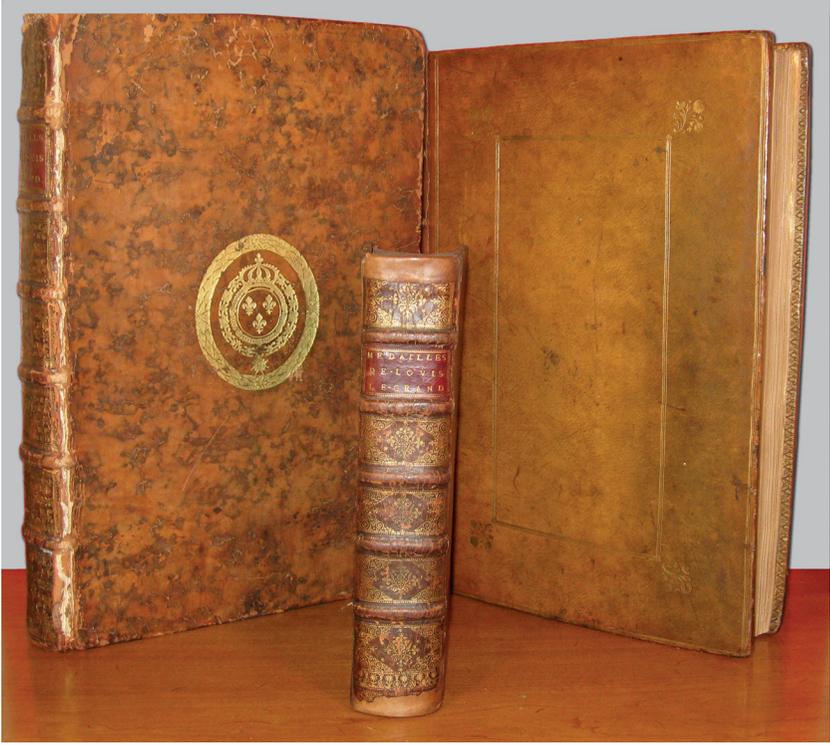


Figure 1. The 1702 folio edition, 1702 quarto edition, and 1723 folio edition (left to right).

physical production of this volume. The finest engravers were hired, the best paper available was used, and the bindings tend to be beautiful and ornate (Figure 1). One does not acquire the sobriquet *Le Roi Soleil* due to one's simplicity of taste. Even the font used to print the text was specially created for Louis: *Romain du Roy* was designed by Philippe Grandjean (1666–1714) around 1700, having been in development since 1693. This was the first work printed in this font, which attempted to use scientific principles to develop a font that was both practical and elegant. Only the royal press could use the fonts, which continued to be developed through 1745.

The historical descriptions of the medals were written by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636–1711), and the engravings and other artistic flourishes required the participation of artists Antoine Coypel (1661–

1722), Charles Simonneau (1645–1728), Louis Simonneau (1654–1727), Nicolas Pitau (1670–1724), Sébastien Le Clerc (1637–1714), Jean Berain (1640–1711) and many others. Jean Racine (1639–1699) played a role in the early development of the project, which was eventually published under the auspices of the Imprimerie Royale by Jean Anisson (c. 1642–1721). Other participants included Jean-Paul Bignon (1662–1743), the librarian to the king, and Paul Tallemant (1642–1712).

François Charpentier (1620–1702) was an important member of l'Académie Française and was involved in the production of many of the medals depicted in this volume. While primary authorship has traditionally been ascribed to him, his actual involvement in the work appears unclear and in recent years I have ascribed authorship to the Académie Royale des Médailles et des Inscriptions itself rather than to Charpentier et al.

The final product is a masterpiece of the bibliographic arts. Each page depicts the obverse and reverse of a medal, with beautifully printed descriptive text, all within intricate ornamental borders, occasionally with *culs-de-lampe* (Figure 2). The magnificent allegorical frontispiece was engraved by Charles Simonneau following a design by Coypel and integrating a portrait of Louis by Hyacinthe Rigaud (1659–1743). Fleurons and other decorative flourishes abound. (The Musée de l'Imprimerie, in Lyon, held an exhibition in 2002 to celebrate the 300th anniversary of this work.)

A handful of copies are known in bindings featuring the royal arms emblazoned on both sides and the king's double-L cipher integrated into the spine's intricately gilt design (Figure 3). Baron W. H. J. van Westreenen van Tiellandt (1783–1848), in cataloguing the magnificent library of Pierre Van Damme in 1808, wrote that those copies with the royal arms were “exécutée par les ordres du monarque même, qui s'en est réservé tous les exemplaires pour en faire des présents.”⁴

The first printing of the folio edition of this majestic work was presented to Louis XIV on January 9, 1702. It included a 14-page *Préface* suppressed from subsequent printings (Figure 4). Westreenen van Tiellandt stated that only the first 65 copies included it (“... avec la préface

⁴ (Baron) W. H. J. van Westreenen van Tiellandt [cataloguer], *Catalogue de la bibliothèque et du cabinet de médailles, antiques et modernes, ainsi que de quelques pierres gravées, antiquités &c. délaissés par M. Pierre van Damme*, La Haye, 21 mars 1808 et jours suivants (L'auctionnaire J. König et les Libraires Thierry-Mensing et P. van Daalen Wetters).

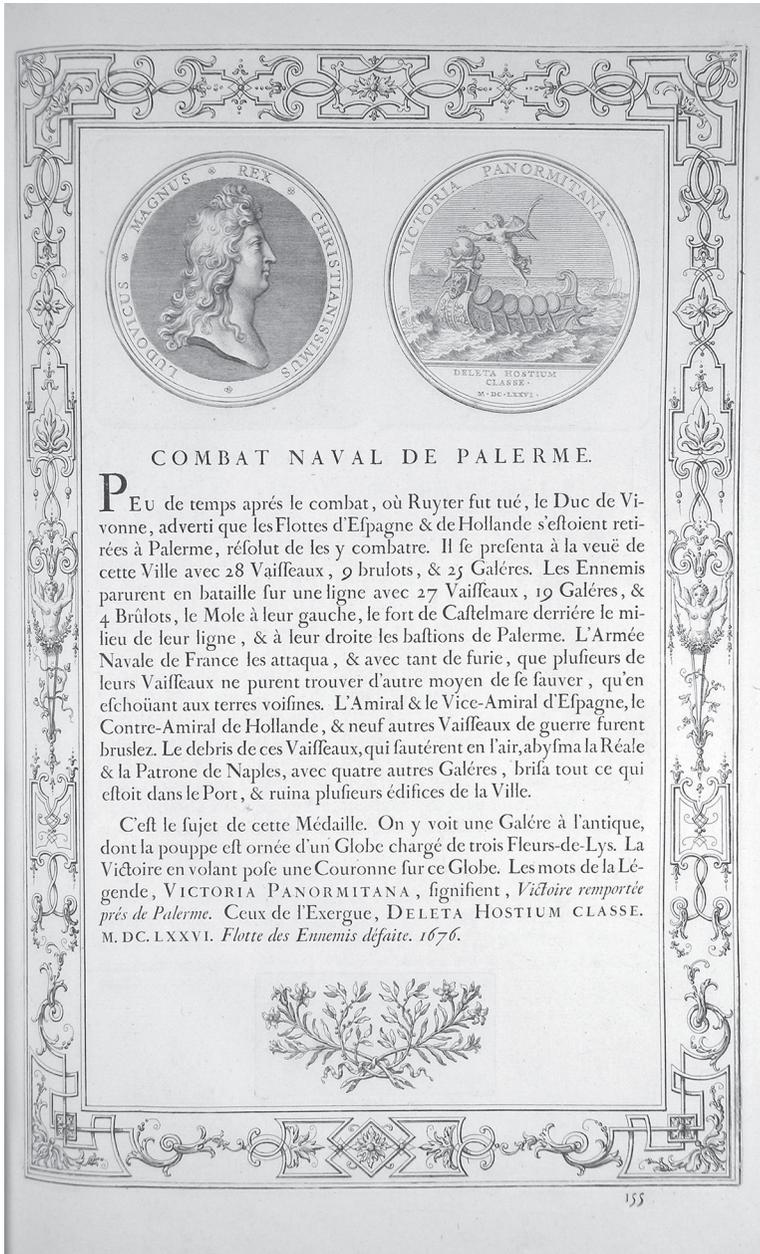
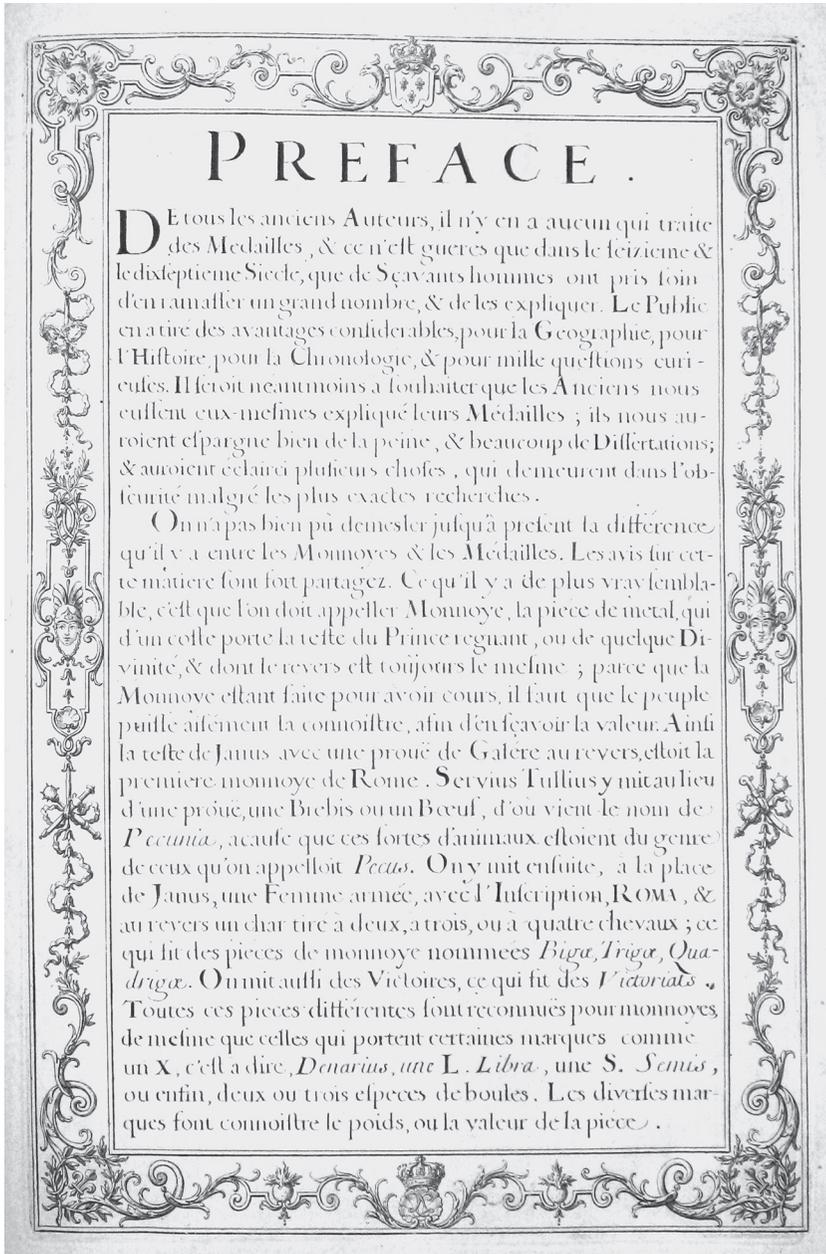


Figure 2. A leaf from the first folio edition.



Figure 3. The Royal arms impressed in gilt on a first printing of the 1702 folio edition.

Figure 4. The suppressed *Préface*.

imprimée, qui, à ce que l'on dit, ne se trouve que dans les 65 premiers distribués, et fut ensuite supprimée avec soin"). Signed by Anisson, the *Préface* identifies many of the artists used in the work, which is important as the medallion engravings are unsigned. Of the engravings, the *Préface* states that 200 were executed by Coypel, with the balance being done by Le Clerc. It also identifies the artists who created the decorative elements throughout. Why the *Préface* was suppressed is unclear. According to Auguste Bernard's *Histoire de l'Imprimerie Royale du Louvre* (1867), "Sa suppression eut lieu par ordre de Louis XIV, qui la trouva trop louangeuse!"⁵ It would appear that the king felt it distracted the reader from the intended focus of the work: himself and his *gloire*.

A quarto edition was printed the same year. The reduced format required entirely new engravings (Figure 5). The medals throughout the quarto volume have only their reverses depicted, with the obverse also shown only when there was a change in design. They are also smaller, being 44 mm in diameter, as opposed to the 73 mm diameter of the pieces portrayed in the folio edition (though, as pointed out in the *Avertissement* leaf, this means that the medals are depicted herein at their actual size). The works are essentially textually identical, though the quarto edition never includes the *Préface* found in the earliest issues of the folio edition. Though a plainer cousin of the folio, this quarto edition has its advantages to the numismatic researcher, its considerably more practical size not being the least of them.

Two other quarto editions, with added text in German, were printed in Schaffhausen (1704)⁶ and Baden (1705).⁷ These are less frequently seen than the French quarto.

Following the king's death in 1715, an expanded edition was prepared for publication in 1723.⁸ This second edition is preferred in some

5 Auguste Bernard, *Histoire de l'Imprimerie Royale du Louvre* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1867), p. 155.

6 Académie Royale des Médailles et des Inscriptions, *Médailles sur les principaux événements du règne de Louis le Grand, avec des explications historiques / Curiöse Schau-Müntzen, vorstellend die vornehmste Thaten Lüdwig des Grossen...* (Schaffhausen: Jean Rudolph Frey, 1704).

7 Académie Royale des Médailles et des Inscriptions, *Médailles sur les principaux événements du règne de Louis le Grand, avec des explications historiques / Curiöse Schau-Müntzen, vorstellend die vornehmste Thaten Lüdwig des Grossen...* (Baden: J.L. Baldinger, 1705).

8 Académie Royale des Médailles et des Inscriptions, *Médailles sur les principaux événements du règne entier de Louis le Grand, avec des explications historiques* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1723).

MÉDAILLES SUR LE REGNE DE LOÛIS LE GRAND. 159



COMBAT DE TABAGO EN AMERIQUE.

Les Hollandois estoient maistres de l'Isle de Tabago, l'une des Antilles. Ils y avoient un Fort, & y tenoient une Escadre de Vaisseaux, avec laquelle ils incommodoient beaucoup le Commerce de France dans l'Amérique. Le Comte d'Estrées eut ordre de les en chasser. Il partit de la Martinique le onze de Février avec six Vaisseaux, quatre Fregates, & un Brulot. Les Ennemis avoient dix Vaisseaux, trois autres Bastimens, & un Brulot retirez dans le Port, dont l'entrée estoit fort estroite & très-difficile à cause des bancs de sable. On mit d'abord quelques troupes à terre pour assiéger le Fort; mais comme l'entreprise tiroit en longueur, & que le succès estoit incertain, parce que les Ennemis y pouvoient envoyer du secours à toute heure, on résolut d'attaquer l'Escadre dans le Port mesme. Les Vaisseaux n'y pouvoient entrer que l'un après l'autre, & il falloit essuyer tout le feu de la Flotte ennemie, & de plusieurs batteries dressées à fleur d'eau. Ces difficultez n'empeschèrent pas le Comte d'exécuter son dessein: il les attaqua le troisiéme jour de Mars, & malgré leur grande résistance, il brussa d'abord leur Amiral, ensuite leurs autres Vaisseaux, & deux flustes, où ils avoient mis les femmes, les enfans & les Negres. Deux Vaisseaux eschappèrent & vinrent eschoier à la coste. Cette Victoire mit les François en estat de prendre le Fort peu de temps après, & cependant rendit inutiles tous les projets & tous les préparatifs des Ennemis contre les Colonies Françoises.

C'est le sujet de cette Médaille. On voit au-dessus de la proué d'un Vaisseau la Victoire, qui de la main droite tient un foudre, & de la gauche une Palme. La Légende, *INCENSA BATAVORUM CLASSE;* & l'Exergue, *AD INSULAM TABAGO. M. DC. LXXVII.* signifient, *la flotte des Hollandois brulée à Tabago. 1677.*



Figure 5. A leaf from the 1702 quarto edition.

respects because it was issued after the Sun King's death in 1715 and, hence, includes medals issued through the entirety of its subject's life. It contains 318 plates instead of the 286 of the 1702 editions. Incredibly, however, the 1723 edition didn't simply reprint the 1702 volume and then add the final years: the medals have been re-engraved throughout, as subtle differences reveal upon close examination. The editions are textually distinct as well, though the 1723 edition clearly used the earlier work as its basis.

There are also some small differences between what the two editions include: for instance, the 1702 edition includes two medals struck on the birth of Louis XIV; the 1723 edition includes only one. These differences between the two editions are worthy of further research.⁹ Produced on the orders of Louis Antoine de Pardaillan de Gondrin, Duc d'Antin (1665–1736), and under the direction of Claude Gros de Boze (1680–1753), the production values of the 1723 edition were clearly no less than for the 1702 edition published during the king's reign. Brunet felt the 1723 edition was “plus belle que la première.”¹⁰ Only 500 copies were printed of this volume, which is not only a work of art, but an important contemporary reference to these medals still consulted with profit today.

9 Brunet notes, “Au sujet des planches de ces deux éditions, consultez *Le Peintre graveur français*, VII, p. 206 et suiv.” Also, printing specifications for this edition were unearthed in the Archives nationales and published in 1885 by J.-J. Guiffrey. The question of which medals to include was always of potential political danger. Burke states that the decision to exclude certain medals was made at the highest levels.

10 Jacques-Charles Brunet, *Manuel du libraire et de l'amateur de livres...* (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères, Fils et C^e, 1860–1865), 5 ed., III.1565 (23739).