Marie Antoinette

Early life (1755–70)

Maria Antonia was born on 2 November 1755 at the Hofburg Palace in Vienna, Austria. She was the youngest daughter of Empress Maria Theresa, ruler of the Habsburg Empire, and her husband Francis I, Holy Roman Emperor. Her godparents were Joseph I and Mariana Victoria, King and Queen of Portugal; Archduke Joseph and Archduchess Maria Anna acted as proxies for their newborn sister. Maria Antonia was born on All Souls Day, which was a day when Catholics mourned their dead, and everything was black. Therefore, it would make sense during her childhood to celebrate her birthday on the eve of it, which was All Saints Day, where everything was white and gold. Shortly after her birth she was placed under the care of the governess of the imperial children, Countess von Brandeis. Maria Antonia was raised together with her sister, Maria Carolina, who was three years older, and with whom she had a lifelong close relationship. Maria Antonia had a difficult but ultimately loving relationship with her mother, who referred to her as "the little Madame Antoine".

Maria Antonia spent her formative years between the Hofburg Palace and Schönbrunn, the imperial summer residence in Vienna, where on 13 October 1762, when she was seven, she met Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, two months her junior and a child prodigy. Despite the private tutoring she received, the results of her schooling were less than satisfactory. At the age of 10 she could not write correctly in German or in any language commonly used at court, such as French or Italian, and conversations with her were stilted.

Under the teaching of Christoph Willibald Gluck, Maria Antonia developed into a good musician. She learned to play the harp, the harpsichord and the flute. She sang during the family's evening gatherings, as she had a beautiful voice. She also excelled at dancing, had "exquisite" poise, and loved dolls.

Queen of France and Navarre (1774–91)

Early years (1774–78)

Upon the death of Louis XV on 10 May 1774, the Dauphin ascended the throne as King Louis XVI of France and Navarre with Marie Antoinette as his Queen. At the outset, the new queen had limited political influence with her husband, who, with the support of his two most important ministers, Chief Minister Maurepas and Foreign Minister Vergennes, blocked several of her candidates from assuming important positions, including Choiseul. The queen did play a decisive role in the disgrace and exile of the most powerful of Louis XV's ministers, the Duke of Aiguillon.

On 24 May 1774, two weeks after the death of Louis XV, the king gave his wife an estate, the Petit Trianon, and free rein to renovate it; soon rumours circulated that she had plastered the walls with gold and diamonds.

Motherhood, changes at court, intervention in politics (1778–81)

Amidst the atmosphere of a wave of libelles, the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph came to France incognito, using the name Comte de Falkenstein, for a six-week visit during which he toured Paris extensively and was a guest at Versailles. He met his sister and her husband on 18 April 1777 at the château de la Muette, and spoke frankly to his brother-in-law, curious as to why the royal marriage had not been consummated, arriving at the conclusion that no obstacle to the couple's conjugal relations existed save the queen's lack of interest and the king's unwillingness to exert himself. In a letter to his brother Leopold, Joseph described them as "a couple of complete blunderers."

Suggestions that Louis suffered from phimosis, which was relieved by circumcision, have been discredited. Nevertheless, following Joseph's intervention, the marriage was finally consummated in August 1777. Eight months later, in April 1778, it was suspected that the queen was pregnant, which was officially announced on May 16. Marie Antoinette's daughter, Marie-Thérèse Charlotte, Madame Royale, was born at Versailles on 19 December 1778. The child's paternity was contested in the libelles.

In the middle of the queen's pregnancy two events occurred which had profound impact on her later life: the return of her friend, the Swedish diplomat Count Axel von Fersen to Versailles for two years, and her brother's claim to the throne of Bavaria, contested by the Habsburg monarchy and Prussia. Marie Antoinette pleaded with her husband for the French to intercede on behalf of Austria. The Peace of Teschen, signed on 13 May 1779, ended the brief conflict, with the queen imposing French mediation at her mother's insistence and Austria's gaining a territory of at least 100,000 inhabitants—a strong retreat from the early French position which was hostile towards Austria. This gave the impression, partially justified, that the queen had sided with Austria against France.

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