On June 28th, 1681, beloved and fashionable Marie Angélique de Scorailles, Duchess of Fontanges, entered eternal rest after being ‘wounded in the service’ of her stillborn son’s birth. She was 19 years old, residing at the Abbey of Port-Royal. A simple country girl, the Mademoiselle de Fontanges captured the court of Versailles’ hearts from her very first appearance. According to M. de La Beaumelle in “Memoirs for the History of Madame de Maintenon and of the Last Age”, “Mademoiselle de Fontanges was tall, well made, her complexion of a dazzling whiteness, her beauty would have been absolutely perfect if her hair had not been red” (164-165). Described to King Louis VIX as “an exact marble statue”, the young maid easily seized the king’s favor, earning herself the title of Duchess, the admiration of the court, and the scorn of the Marquise de Maintenon and Madame de Montespan, the Queen and the chief mistress, accordingly.

The Mademoiselle had a transformatory effect on the king. Before her influence he had been on a path of simplification concerning his wardrobe, turning away from giant feather plumes, gold and silver embroidered boots, and the traditional long scarfs of his previous years. However, the Mademoiselle, with her youthful passion and energy, reinvigorated both the King’s attitude as well as his wardrobe.

Madame de Montespan, in particular, held disdain for the fresh-faced beauty and her influence over the king. She was
jealous that "all [she] was soliciting for twelve years, Mademoiselle de Fontanges had only to desire for a week" (169).

Most famously, Mademoiselle de Fontanges was the originator of the coiffure known now as the Fontange, created on one eventful fall hunt with the king. During this hunt, the Mademoiselle de Fontange’s riband, or ribbon in her hair, was caught on a tree branch, leaving her hair falling down around her shoulders. As having unprepared hair while in the company of the king is extremely disgraceful, she immediately reattached the ribbon to her hair, but this time on the very top of her head, creating a new style that “suited her face”. Thus beginning the fashion craze that has only grown higher and higher, in both popularity and literal height. All courtiers felt obliged to adopt the style, as the king himself originally found it favorable.

The Mademoiselle de Fontanges was known across the nation as a figure of beauty; and while described by her rival Madame de Montespan as “beautiful as an angel”, she was also known as being as “stupid as a basket” (123). And so the young duchess easily lapped up the admiration of the king and let herself fall into false security. By thinking herself better than even Marquise de Montespan, the Queen, Mademoiselle de Fontanges became a target of political scorn, and soon rumors that she had “lost her senses or was on the road to madness” developed.

The style consist of the Fontange, ribbons, lace, cap, and other decorations, the Commode, the wire support, and the Frelange, the hair itself, stiffened with egg yolk before styled. The Fontange’s height followed a positive trend over the next one hundred years as the headdress grew vertically, following the French fashion pattern of emphasizing a vertical line with the body and dress. The evolution of the Fontange went from hair gathered above the forehead with ribbons, to high hair paired with extravagant amounts of lace, ribbon, and sometimes occasional boat.

The Mademoiselle leaves behind a deadly influence, spanning countries and decades. In Germany, 1711, Sophie von Hannover spoke about an apparently common accident, “there is no news here but that good Mrs. Von Ilten has burnt neck, face, and hands; her Fontange caught fire, she stared and fell and did not think to throw it off as I use to do…” As France in the 17th and 18th century had a surprising lack of electrical lights, lanterns and oil and gas lamps adorned the palace walls in Versailles. The nature of the Fontange, mainly of its relative height and flammability, made catching fire a normative experience for many
Mademoiselle Babette de Barrau

Died October 7th, 1770, at the age of sixteen years. Mademoiselle Babette de Barrau, daughter of Nobleman Bernard de Barrau, left behind an extensive collection of dresses, jewelry, and hair adornment. Her fantastic sartorial collection was due to her father’s wish for the young beauty to go to Versailles and maybe catch the attention of the king, much like Mademoiselle de Fontanges had previously. However, due to the premature death of the girl, this dream was never realized.

Mademoiselle de Barrau’s collection exemplifies French social culture in an extremely pleasing visual form.

Due to the increasing pertinence of colonialism, clothing and fashion became a national concern. To distinguish a nation and her people from those across borders or across oceans became necessary in creating and maintaining identity. The textile industry bloomed into its full importance, spawning domestic markets as countries attempt to exert more control over their own citizen’s dress and the economic boom that is born with changing fashions. With sartorial regulations, known as sumptuary laws, citizens were limited in their choice of clothing, fabric, and design, to those that reflected their social status. This way, it was clear from first sight what social level someone belonged to, protecting the status quo, a sense of morality, and against excessive extravagant clothing.

Fashion in 17th and 18th century France centered on the art and shape of the human body. The noblewoman’s dress, like this robe à la française from 1765 (a favorite of Mademoiselle Babette), focused on emphasizing the narrowness of the waist above all else. This illusion was created by accentuating the hips to an outlandish level. However shape alone was not a defining
mark of the aristocratic fashion, the Metropolitan Museum of Art describes the intricate dress style of 18th century France shown in the image to the left:

“the flat folds of fabric, known as robings, that edge the sides of the gown were left over from the large pleats that once fell from the shoulders. As the sack became more formal, robings presented an opportunity for embellishment, as in the pleated folds adorning the sides of the blue gown pictured here. They were often stuffed with sheep's wool to give them volume. Other types of adornment included metallic lace and fly braiding on a trim of silk floss tied into tiny multicolored knotted tassels. The flounces that decorated the front of the petticoat were known as falbellas or furbelows, and were usually affixed only to the front of the petticoat, where they were visible. By the last quarter of the century, trimmings for formal dress had become increasingly elaborate, often costing more than the dress fabric. It was common practice to wear the same dress to different occasions, merely changing the trimmings to give a different effect” (metmuseum).

Embellishment was not only for textiles. As dresses got wider, hairstyles focused on getting taller, while both became more elaborately embellished.