

## A Small Diamond-Set Badge of “les Ordres du Roi” circa C18th

In 1469 Louis XI created the Ordre de Saint-Michel as the highest order in French chivalry. Then in 1578 Henri III introduced a new supreme order, the Ordre du Saint-Esprit (Order of the Holy Spirit). However the prestige of the earlier Saint-Michel continued, and whenever entry was awarded into the Saint-Esprit, the recipient was automatically entered in the Saint-Michel as well.

The two combined orders became known as "les Ordres du Roi" (the Royal Orders). They were intended to recognise and confirm the loyalty of the king's closest nobles. The King of France led the orders. He made all the appointments and awarded the insignia. These consisted of a large breast plaque and a sash badge worn on a blue riband, the Cordon Bleu, which led to the meaning “of the highest distinction”, now applied to cordon bleu cooking.

The Kings wore their insignia prominently, as seen below in the portraits of Louis XV, XVI & XVIII.



The orders were abolished by decree of Louis XVI in 1790 as the French Revolution was gathering steam. However Louis XVIII awarded both orders while in exile and they were re-established on the Restoration of the monarchy in 1814, until they were finally abolished by Louis-Philippe in 1830.

The present jewel conforms to the standard format of a les Ordres du Roi sash badge. The reverse has a central enamel of St Michael with raised sword vanquishing a dragon, surrounded by an eight pointed Maltese cross and four fleurs de lis. On the obverse the central panel shows the Holy Spirit as a dove descending against a background of green enamel flames.



The enamel panel of St Michael has stylistic similarities to the panel on a small les Ordres du Roi medallion at Sotheby's Paris sale in September 2015, item 133, attributed to the period 1750 to 1770. The Sotheby's medallion was purchased and donated to the Musée de la Légion d'honneur, and the museum confirmed it as C18th, with a use reserved for children of the royal families. (The King's sons were automatically enrolled in the orders at birth, but not received into them until aged twelve).

The illustrated piece is silver and gold, pave set with one hundred and seventy-three diamonds (four absent). These are rose, single and cushion cuts, a mix of cutting styles characteristic of late C17th to C18th jewels.

These diamond cuts fit within the period attributed to Sotheby's item 133, but could be even earlier. The possible date range for this item is likely c1730 until 1790 when the Orders were first abolished. This would place it during the reigns of Louis XV (1715 to 1774) or Louis XVI (1774 to 1792).

The smaller size of this piece (30mm x 23mm - h x w) indicates its use was intended for the royal children. See the small insignia in the portraits below worn c1751 by Louis Joseph Xavier (grandson of Louis XV) on the left, and c1785 by Louis Antoine, Duke of Angoulême (eldest son of the future Charles X) on the right.



The fact that it is decorated with diamonds makes this badge extremely rare. It's one of only two known extant C18th (or earlier) diamond-set Saint-Esprits and/or Saint-Michels. It is unique as the only known diamond-set royal children's Ordre, and also unique amongst the surviving Ordres for being diamond-set on both sides.

Although it is well documented that the French Kings commissioned jewelled versions of the Ordres, the only other known surviving diamond-set les Ordres du Roi is the C19th diamond and emerald sash badge of the Duke of Angoulême (above right as a child), sold by Sotheby's in 2018 alongside Marie Antoinette's jewels.

There are two known extant diamond-set Ordres du Saint-Esprit, both of the large breast plaque size. The first was awarded by Louis XV to his son-in-law, Philippe, Duke of Parma and is now in the Louvre. The other, also sold in Sotheby's Marie Antoinette sale, is the plaque of the Comte d'Artois, future King Charles X, which survives as an empty frame, the diamonds having been removed in 1903 to create a wedding tiara.

This small diamond-set les Ordres du Roi turned up in New Zealand with all provenance lost. It is fascinating to speculate how it survived the desperate days of the Revolution and the turmoil of post-revolutionary France to surface on the far side of the world two centuries later.



## Reflections on the Diamond Ordres

In 1643 Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, the famous traveller and gem trader, returned to France with his first shipment of diamonds from the Golconda mines in India. This started a boom in the diamond trade between India and Europe, with major customers being the French court and its Chief Minister, Cardinal Mazarin.

Mazarin had become the effective leader of France after Louis XIII died in 1643 when his son Louis XIV was only 4 years old. Mazarin tutored the child, ran the country, and amassed a huge fortune, including a number of magnificent diamonds obtained from Tavernier. These were left to Louis XIV on Mazarin's death in 1661.



Louis XIV then took full control of France and continued the trade with Tavernier, sponsoring his travels, and buying his diamonds, which were famously worn lavishly by the King.

Louis XIV's first son was born in 1661 and in a 1663 portrait we see the infant Louis de France draped with the Cordon Bleu and a diamond Saint-Esprit sash badge.

In the portrait Louis de France is a two year-old toddler. All the staging, including the crown his hand is resting upon, and his Cordon Bleu and Saint-Esprit, is scaled down to convey the impression of an older child.

His diamond Saint-Esprit was probably made by the royal jeweller Lescot in 1663, at the same time as a diamond Saint-Esprit breast plaque for the King, documented in the 1691 inventory of the French Crown Jewels.

Few pictures of Louis XIV show him [wearing his diamond Saint-Esprits](#), and despite his famous ostentatiousness, [portrayals of Louis XIV](#) in his [full diamond finery](#) are rare.

The successor to Louis XIV was his grandson Louis XV, who became king at just 5 years old.

Within a few years of coming to the throne the young king demonstrated that the royal passion for diamonds was still strong.

Shown circa 1720, when aged about 10, the King is wearing a large diamond Saint-Esprit breast plaque and sash badge, and a coat and hat studded with hundreds of diamonds.

His jewellery and regalia conforms to the broad descriptions in the 1691 Inventory, however it is not certain they're the identical items described in the Inventory of 30 years earlier.

The artist's depictions of his jewels do not appear to be painted as exact representations, and the royal jewels were often remodelled over time to cater to royal whims, new family members, and changing fashions.



In 1729 Louis XV's son and heir Louis de France was born to Queen Marie Leszczynska. It was soon time for the obligatory royal baby pictures. One of these shows the [Queen dripping in diamonds and pearls](#), holding the baby Louis, who wears the Cordon Bleu with the standard gold and enamel Saint-Esprit sash badge.



However another painting in the same series shows the baby alone, with his hand resting upon a crown.

His bonnet has been changed and the Cordon Bleu has been re-tied, and the Saint-Esprit sash badge appears to be different too, possibly it is diamond-set.

While this Louis was the Dauphin of France (Crown Prince), he was outlived by his father Louis XV and so never became king, however three of his sons came to the throne as Louis XVI, Louis XVIII and Charles X.

The Dauphin's first son, Louis Joseph Xavier, died aged 9. He is shown above (Page 2) as a baby c1751 wearing a Saint-Esprit breast plaque, the Cordon Bleu, and a Saint-Esprit sash badge that is possibly diamond-set.

Also on Page 2 is Louis Antoine, Duke of Angoulême, eldest son of the future Charles X. He seems to be wearing a Saint-Esprit that may be diamond-set. His black ribbon should be worn with the Ordre de Saint-Michel, however it's possible his badge has flipped over during the sitting.

Without certain provenance or a period portrait exactly showing this small diamond-set les Ordres du Roi, it cannot yet be pinned down to an exact date, royal recipient or maker. However it is possible to attribute a date range relative to other Saint-Esprits and Saint-Michels.

The strongest similarity is with [Sotheby's item 133](#) from the 2015 Paris sale. Like the present piece, it has a textured background to the Saint-Michel enamelled panel, a feature not seen on any other Saint-Michel. Sotheby's attributed item 133 to the period 1750-1770, based on its provenance and the dates the likely owners were admitted to the Ordre du Saint-Esprit. However Sotheby's did not realise the item was a royal children's Ordre. This pushes the earliest date back to 1725 when the oldest of the potential recipients in the chain of provenance was born (Louis-Philippe d'Orléans, 1725-1785).

A date in the 1720's also fits with the Baroque borders of Sotheby's 133. The Baroque style was going out of fashion in the French court by the mid-1720's, to be replaced by the short-lived Rocaille style, or French Rococo. This was similar to Baroque but with asymmetric elements.

[Sotheby's item 131](#) in the same sale is a standard gold and enamel les Ordres du Roi. Here Saint Michel's shield is asymmetrical and likely Rococo. It has flourishes down one side only and a concave inset opposite. Sotheby's attributed it as late C18th, however based on the shield shape it may be 1725 to 1750.

The illustrated small diamond-set les Ordres du Roi has similar Rococo features on its shield, the over-all shape of which is similar to a Norman kite shield. [This kite shape](#) had become known in 1729 when detailed drawings of the [Bayeaux Tapestry](#) were first published in France.

The above suggests an earliest date for the item of about 1729. Since there are no records of any Saint-Esprit crosses being issued to royal children under the Restoration, this means the latest date for the item is probably 1790 when the Ordres were first abolished under the Ancien Régime.

Much more research is still required. One promising area for investigation is how the various Ordres compare in size, as there appears to be an approximate size relationship:

Small diamond-set les Ordres du Roi (Children's Ordre)	23.0mm	Half size of Saint-Michel
<a href="#">Gold and enamel Saint-Michel</a> , Goodwin collection	46.5mm	Double size of Children's Ordre
<a href="#">Duke of Angoulême's diamond sash badge</a>	72.0mm	150% of size of Saint-Michel
<a href="#">Duke of Parma's diamond breast plaque</a>	110.0mm	150% of size of diamond sash badge