

A Miniature Diamond-Set Badge of “les Ordres du Roi” circa 1690 to 1790

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, often worn on a blue riband, the Cordon Bleu, which gave rise 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, and then finally abolished by Louis-Philippe in 1830.

The present jewel conforms to the standard format of les Ordres du Roi. 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 panels on two small les Ordres du Roi medallions at Sotheby's Paris sale in September 2015, items 132 and 133, attributed to the period 1750 to 1770. The Sotheby's medallions were purchased and donated to the Musée de la Légion d'honneur, and the museum confirmed them as C18th, with a use reserved for some knights and the royal children. (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, Mazarin and Peruzzi cuts, a mix of cutting styles characteristic of late C17th to C18th jewels.

These diamond cuts fit within the period attributed to Sotheby's items 132 and 133, but could be even earlier. The possible date range for this item is likely c1690 until 1790 when the Orders were first abolished. This would place it around the reign of Louis XV (1715 to 1774) or during the reign of Louis XVI (1774 to 1792).

The miniature size of this piece (30mm x 23mm - h x w) suggests 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 is 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 miniature of these Ordres, and also unique amongst these Ordres for being diamond-set on both sides.

Although it is well documented that the French Kings commissioned jewelled versions of the royal orders, the only other known surviving diamond-set les Ordres du Roi is the large diamond and emerald 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 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 miniature 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.