

François I, the Knight and the King

At once a château with a medieval appearance and the most modern of palaces, Chambord came into being in the image of its builder, the illustrious François I.

François I grew up surrounded by books and enjoyed a gentleman's education. In addition to his literary apprenticeship, he took an early liking for outdoor games and activities, and developed into a physically imposing athlete, an avid hunter and an ardent warrior, all the while remaining a prince with an inquisitive mind, an enlightened collector and a discerning patron of the arts.

Once he acceded to the throne in 1515, François I found himself at the helm of the most populated European country. From the outset of his reign, he followed in the footsteps of his predecessors by laying claim on the Italian city-state of Milan as a legacy. At the head of an army consisting in 10000 horsemen, 30000 infantrymen and 70 cannons, he approached Turin and established his camp near the town of Marignano, in close proximity to Milan. Devastatingly fierce combat pitted the French troops against Swiss confederates fighting at the bid and behest of the Duke of Milan. Due largely to their superior artillery, the French soldiers prevailed. The Battle of Marignano rendered François I, who was at once knight and king, a legendary figure.

1st painting: A tournament organized in honor of the Marignano victors

Crowned with glory following the triumph of Marignano, François I aspired to become ruler of the Holy Roman Empire; given this objective, he strove to forge alliances, with England in particular. King Henry VIII was a formidable negotiator; aware of the fact that the king of France needed English backing to carry weight with the incumbent Prince-Electors, he had no compunctions about capitalizing on his assets. Each time they met, the courts of France and England outdid each other in terms of pomp and splendor. However, François I failed in his bid; Charles V was finally the sovereign elected Emperor of the Germanic Holy Roman Empire.

2nd painting: The Field of Cloth of Gold: The courts of France and England encounter each other and enjoy a feast

Following their much-celebrated meeting at the French "Field of Cloth of Gold" in June 1520, Henry VIII and François I exchanged pledges of eternal friendship. But for Henry VIII, unfortunately, eternity lasted a mere fortnight ... In July, it was in opposition to the king of France that he signed a treaty of alliance with none other than Charles V.

3rd painting: The Battle of Pavia

In 1525, following a humiliating defeat, François I was captured by the troops of Charles V and imprisoned in Madrid for an entire year. Only after having signed the 1526 Treaty of Madrid, by which France renounced its long-standing claims in Italy, was he finally released. Pending fulfillment of the terms of the agreement, he gave over his two sons as hostages. However, the French monarch had no intention of complying with a surrender obtained

under duress, and his sons were made to pay the price, enduring no less than four years of captivity.

In 1529 Louise of Savoy, the king's mother, and Margaret of Austria, Charles' aunt, Regent of the Habsburg Netherlands (Flanders), arranged a meeting to terminate hostilities with Charles and put an end to the incarceration of François' sons. Once negotiations had been successfully concluded, the "Ladies' Peace" was signed.

4th painting: The meeting of Louise of Savoy and Margaret of Austria, Duchess of Savoy

As a token of reconciliation, François I pledged to marry the emperor's sister, Eleanor of Habsburg. While the wedding in 1530 was a subdued affair, their return to France and the crowning of the queen the year after offered occasions for impressive festivities highlighted by sumptuous banquets.

François I was a *bon vivant*, who lavished "the good life" and loved to entertain. In the aftermath of his military campaigns in Italy, the dishes, delicacies and table manners of the French king's court were graced with Italian refinement.

5th painting: Colloquium of François I and his cook on the occasion of his wedding feast

The "ladies' peace" failed to survive the passing of Louise of Savoy and Margaret of Austria, just two years later. Once again, François I and Charles V were at war.

Wishing to weaken the Emperor (Charles V), their common enemy, in 1536 the king of France concluded an alliance treaty with Suleiman the Magnificent, long-standing Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. With the so-called "impious alliance", François obtained favorable military and trade agreements as well as protections for Christians and holy places in non-Christian lands.

6th painting: The Ottoman acrobats

With his death on 31 March 1547, the reign of François I came to an end. Before drawing his last breath, he entrusted his son and successor, the future Henri II, with the affairs of the kingdom.

History remembers François I as the last "King Chevalier"; the victor in Marignano was at once knight and king. That said, he also appears in the collective imagination as Father of Arts and Letters, grand patron and devoted friend of Leonardo da Vinci, and master builder of châteaux.

All in all, François was an ambivalently inclined sovereign, at the crossroads of two epochs and two worlds, those of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. With François I, France stepped forward into a new era.