

Horloger du Roi (King's watchmaker)

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In England, France, and other countries with monarchs, many clock makers labeled their clock dials or movements with the phrase “clock maker to the king” or queen, or prince... Some didn't label their timepieces in this way, yet are recognized in horological history as having had an official attribution of this sort.

It's not always clear what were the general (or specific) rules (and procedures) for a clock maker being conferred this title, and for maintaining the title. Because of my interests, I am more familiar with French clock makers (horlogers), of which there were several “horloger du roi” (clock maker to the king) at the same time (over a dozen at times), in the 17th and 18th centuries (and probably before). In some cases, it seems the title was conferred because the clock maker had distinguished himself by producing a timepiece of some significant merit, or new design that impressed the king. In other cases, the title seemed to confer an official role at court, and lodging; for example: maintaining and winding the king's clocks, with a salary associated.

Some families seem to have been able to hand down the title to descendants through generations (the Martinot family of horlogers in Paris, for example, from 1572 to 1729 according to Chamberlain. Obviously, being able to advertise this title on one's timepiece or business sign over the workshop/store would confer some competitive advantage over other clock makers who couldn't make that claim. I assume there were checks and balances to prohibit clock makers from misleadingly customers by illegally conferring themselves the title.

Anyway, it's not very clear, and very little explicit information seems to be available, on exactly HOW a clock maker became honored with that title of “clock maker to the King”, and what they needed to do to maintain that title during the many years of their practice.

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In the wonderful book “[Les Bronzes Dorés Français du XVIIIe siècle](#)”, probably the finest book on this subject, long time curator and expert Pierre Verlet offers these insights on the topic:

A lovely clock is a useful object; it also pleases and amuses by its ingeniousness. Its author will generally be recompensed and his talent officially recognized. The king of France is faithful to an old tradition in ensuring to the best [craftsmen] a special situation. He provides dwelling in the Louvre and highlights the most remarkable horlogers with a privileged status. This is where, during the eighteenth century, work successively and side by side Thuret, Bidault, the Martinots, Baillon, the Le Roys, Passemant, Roque, Lepaute, Robin, Janvier. Beside those just cited, Caranda, Pinon, Lamigouge, Lépine, Furet also promoted their title of “horloger du Roi” or “horloger et valet de chambre du Roi”. In a century where protection from the greats is sought after, it's not negligible to be conferred a title of this nature. [Other horlogers are also favoured by other important figures of Court – the queen, Dauphin, counts, etc., including:]

Baillon, Augustin Bidault, Robin, Le Gros, Daillé, Germain Dubois, Hessen, Jarossay, or Dubuc, to name only the main ones. Others claim [as their protectors] the duc d'Orléans, duc de Chartres, prince de Condé, prince de Conti. Some are proud to be "horlogers du garde meuble" (Bouchet), "horloger des menus plaisirs" (Leloutre, Janvier), "horloger suivant la cour" (Causard and a few others). The great names inscribed beside theirs on the porcelain dial further raise their status.

It appears that the honorific title of Horloger du Roi was conferred by the king in part to horlogers who had particularly distinguished themselves in the products that they made, most of them winding up of course at Court or in the homes of the various affluent members of nobility and high parisian society. In this case, the title was actually a sort of reward for their work, to distinguish them from the vast majority of other horlogers plying their trade in Paris and other cities in France.

Having said that, it should be remembered what Louis de Loménie wrote in his two-volume biography of Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (whose life has been summarized in a pair of articles we wrote and which appear elsewhere on this site, about the lives of horloger André-Charles Caron, his son Pierre-Augustin, and his son-in-law Jean-Antoine Lépine). Beaumarchais, as he came to be known, had started as a horloger, trained in his father's shop, but eventually left "the four glassed walls" of the watchmaker's shop, for a life of influence and intrigue around the Court and within circles of nobility. He did this by first acquiring a title from a low-level official in Court administration whose widow Beaumarchais married after the old man had died. Loménie writes about this title, and the vast number of often-meaningless similar titles, at Court during the eighteenth century:

Cette charge de contrôleur clerk d'office était une de ces mille fonctions de cour que nos rois créaient jadis quand ils avaient besoin d'argent, et qui, une fois vendues au premier titulaire, se transmettaient ensuite par lui à ses héritiers ou à d'autres acheteurs avec l'agrément du prince, comme aujourd'hui les charges d'avoué ou de notaire. C'est au sujet de ce trafic que Montesquieu dit dans ses Lettres persanes : « Le roi de France n'a point de mines d'or comme le roi d'Espagne , son voisin ; mais il a plus de richesses que lui , parce qu'il les tire de la vanité de ses sujets, plus inépuisable que les mines. On lui a vu entreprendre ou soutenir de grandes guerres, n'ayant d'autres fonds que des titres d'honneur à vendre , et, par un prodige de l'orgueil humain, ses troupes se trouvaient payées, ses places munies , ses flottes équipées. » Ceux qui voudraient se faire une idée de l'innombrable variété de ces charges de cour n'ont qu'à consulter un des almanachs qui se publiaient avant la révolution sous le titre d'Almanach de Versailles : ils y trouveront des fonctions burlesques comme celles de cravatier ordinaire du roi ou de capitaine des levrettes de la chambre, qui probablement avaient coûté beaucoup plus d'argent qu'elles ne donnaient de travail aux titulaires.

As Loménie writes, there were hundreds if not thousands of such frivolous titles that the King would sell to people wanting to have some connection to the Court, as a means of raising funds for royal expenditures. It is known that granting membership to some of the Parisian guilds (including the one for watchmakers) was often done for money, again for fundraising purposes, when the applicants did not meet the requirements of the guild (for ex., to have done their apprenticeship in Paris, as was the case in André-Charles Caron when he joined the guild and was allowed to open up his shop on rue Saint Denis).

However, the title “horloger du roi” appears to have been conferred based on merit, and in many cases, offered a monetary reward to the holder of the title, for services rendered to Court (for ex., winding and caring for the clocks and watches in the various palaces).

Dean T. from NAWCC forums summarized this text from Reiner Plomp’s book on Pendules Religieuses (of the 17th century):

Horloger du Roi were not subject to the rules of the clockmakers guild. Horlogers de Sa Majeste were in service for a quarter of the year to maintain the clocks in the kings apartment and stop them at the hour of his death. Horlogers de Sa Majeste had the right to propose who they wanted to pass the title to. The official positions continued after a King’s death as the throne could never be empty although after the Queen’s death all functions automatically came to an end. Not restricted only to King or Queen but could be granted by other members of the Royal family with the prestige proportional. Titles were not honorary but sold for a considerable amounts of money! 6,000 to 15,000 livres. Care was taken to ensure functions were undertaken by capable craftsmen. Apart from the title holder mentioned already, ouvriers libres were also not bound by the rules of the guild and the most important group were permitted to use the workshops in the Louvre. These clockmakers were free to sell their products unhindered by the Jurés and were allowed two apprentices who had to be recognized as masters in Paris after 5 years. The privileged clockmakers were allowed to call themselves Horloger du Roi. Page 13 has a list of Royal appointments from 17thC. Page 15 and 16 gives examples of clockmakers and details of the clocks including the cost made for the Royal family.

In Charles Allix’s book “Carriage Clocks”, Jonathan from NAWCC Forum summarizes:

“The information in Allix’s book comes from three sources, the main one being Francois Beliard who was himself a H. du Roi in 1767. Beliard said that at that time there were 8 legitimate Horlogers du Roi and three types, four were par charge, two were par brevet and two were recu en survivance, one of them Pierre Le Roy didn’t use his title while at least a dozen Paris makers were unlawfully using the title. The difference in the three types isn’t clear but it seems par charge followed the court everywhere and paid for the privilege, their duties appear to have been supplying clocks/watches and keeping them in running order. Par brevet held the title by direct royal appointment on merit for their actual work as clock and watch suppliers to the king and were paid, they served for 3 months at a time. Recu en survivance was a trained successor of a par brevet, Beliard himself was one of these. Another term mentioned by other authors, including Edey, is Horlogers suivant la Cour but it isn’t clear as to whether this was another term for Horloger du Roi par charge or a different office altogether.”

(A bit of research informs me that “horlogers suivant la Cour” just means that the horloger(s) (like other servants and tradesmen associated with the King) would accompany the Court of the King when he traveled with his considerable retinue (to summer residences, to visit other monarchs, go to war?, etc.). So that someone would be there to wind and set the King’s timepieces, and do any required repair during the journeys and sojourns in places other than his usual palace(s).)

I then read for myself Béliard’s booklet (a quick 20 pages). More of a little manifesto from him (written in 1767) on the declining nature of French/Parisian watchmaking practices and quality. In large part

due (according to him, but it's historically accurate) to massive importation from Geneva/Switzerland of watches of lower quality (often engraved fraudulently with names of famous Parisian makers to fool buyers), often sold by merchants who are not watchmakers, and don't have qualified workers to maintain them.

He also rants about countless inventions of useless escapements and other features (phases of moon, etc.) which according to him do nothing to improve the quality of the watch and timekeeping, quite the contrary (Henry Sully had criticized this similarly, fifty years before, in *Règle artificielle du tem(p)s*). Finally, Béliard laments the fact that many of the clocks and watches supplied to the Court are not made by horlogers du roi. So he questions the usefulness of the title (often purchased! – as Dean T. quoted from Plomp) if it doesn't confer this benefit, of making timepieces for Court. Béliard says that he worked 20 years for the venerated Julien Le Roy, and several years for the son of the master (Pierre) so he knows what he is talking about when he discusses escapements and useless inventions.

Poor Béliard sounds like a frustrated and not very optimistic man, regarding the present and future of watch and clock making in Paris. But he did provide those useful numbers about “horlogers du roi” at the time of his “manifesto”, as was well summarized by Jonathan above.

Here's how Béliard ends his 20 page booklet (my translation, with the help of Mr. Google):

“What results from the lack of use that is made of horlogers du Roi? That they are forced to constantly bother the Ministers, and to implore Her Majesty's Graces to get pensions or bonuses, that can allow them to honorably support an expensive position, which obliges them [by dress code] to appear as becoming officers approaching the person of the King, and who cannot make a humiliating contrast with the rest of the Chamber. These requests are always distressing for an artist who, driven by a noble sentiment, would not want to owe anything but to his talent, and to occasions that could be provided for him to showcase it. This is the only honest way to support himself without being dependent on the State; something that is always painful for a zealous Citizen and a good servant of the King.”

I cannot help but thinking of Antide Janvier, who had to live in abject poverty for the last decades of his life, after producing such superlative astronomical clocks, supported only by a meager pension associated with a title of horloger du roi given to him almost by pity, by Louis XVIII. I suppose Béliard probably anticipated this kind of situation, 60 years before Janvier's old age. But that is another story...

Not all horlogers du roi served the king in his bedchamber, as the four in the document indicated previously, taking 3 month stints. Some, like Caron, were responsible for providing and maintaining the various clocks in the royal “garde meuble” (essentially, the collection of all furniture and objects in the various royal palaces).

You can find this information on pages CXVII-CXIX of this book, available in google books: [Livre-journal de Lazare Duvaux, marchand-bijoutier ordinaire du Volume 1](#), By Lazare Duvaux, Louis Courajod

I have a photocopy of a document that was issued by King Charles X to the great clockmaker Antide Janvier, granting him the title of “Horloger du roi” (watch/clockmaker to the king). So there appeared to have been a formal procedure and document to confer the title to a watch/clockmaker. With this title

came a small pension that allowed Janvier to live out the last few years of his life in something a bit less than abject poverty, which in itself is rather shameful for someone who made such sizable contributions, but that is another subject.

In the document describing the Chamberlain collection in 1921, the following is written about the long line of “horlogers du roi” in the Martinot family:

“The court horologist had lodging at the Louvre in apartments reserved for distinguished artists, dined in the castle at the table of the Gentlemen of the Chamber, had the right of entry to the King’s presence along with the distinguished members of his household and the one on duty assisted in preparing the King for the day by selecting and winding up his watch. The salary received was 395 livres quarterly.”

Similar preferential arrangements likely existed for other such favoured horologists, whether in France or England or Germany or...

On the Parisian side of things, following is a list of parisian watchmakers of the 16th-18th century who have the title “horloger du roi” associated with their name, in an impressive German wiki list I consulted. This gives you an idea that there was quite a few of them at any one time:

Abaty,	Charles Garendeau,	Denis Martinot,
Bernardin Albo,	Pierre Gautier,	Jacques Martinot,
Jean Aubert,	Bertrand Samuel Godard,	Jean Massoteau de Saint-Vincent,
Jean Jaques Aury,	Jean Baptiste Greban,	René Miconnot,
Jacques Benoist,	Alphonse Greban,	Henri Mynuel,
Mathurin Bergier,	Jean Gregson,	Louis Pelletier,
Pierre Bidault,	Jean Pierre Hesse,	Antoine Petit,
Augustin-François Bouchet,	André Janvier,	Jean Regnault,
Jean Louis Bourgeois,	Antide Jourdeval,	Pierre Antoine Rieussec,
Jean Léonard Collier,	Yves Lancelot,	Nicolas-Mathieu Rieussec,
Jacques Dauthiau,	François Landier-Duparc,	Joseph-Ferdinand Riolé,
Louis Delagarde,	Louis Le Chevalier,	Florimon Robin,
Abraham Dupont,	Ferdinand Le Faucheur,	Robert Sicot-Dujardin,
Samuel Fernet,	Alexandre Le Faucheur,	?Sourdeval,
Guillaume Ferrier,	Jean-Ignace Leblond,	Yves Thuret,
Antoine Ferrier,	Pierre Lefebvre,	Isaac Thuret,
Guillaume Fol,	Jean Legaigreur,	Jacques Tollé,
Jean Gallonde,	Jean Leloultre,	Pasquier Vollant,
Louis Charles Gamard,	François Lorry,	Nicolas Waltrin
Antoine Simon Gamard,	Claude Martinot,	

And obviously this list is not complete, as here a number of famous watchmakers that I know or seriously suspect were “horlogers du roi” and don’t appear in the above list:

- Jacques THURET
- Julien et Pierre LE ROY (and probably many other LE ROYs...)
- Henry SULLY (?)

- Jean-André LEPAUTE
- Jean ROMILLY
- Ferdinand BERTHOUD (and other BERTHOUDs)
- André Charles CARON and his son Pierre Auguste CARON (Beaumarchais)
- Jean-Antoine LÉPINE
- Abraham Louis BREGUET
- Charles OUDIN
- Antide JANVIER– etc.

Rich Newman from NAWCC wrote:

I think use of slogans like “Chronometer Maker to the Admiralty” was marketing. However, “Watchmaker to the King” was an appointment. Quare, Antram, Vulliamy, Mudge included. I am not aware of such a list existing for English watchmakers. Does anyone know of one? Quare is reported to have been watchmaker to the King but because of his Quaker beliefs would not use the title.

To which Martin Rosen of NAWCC replied:

As to the first, the title “Chronometer Maker to the Admiralty” indicated that the Admiralty had actually ordered a chronometer from the maker ... except in a very few cases where makers adopted the title fraudulently – notably John Forrest who sent chronometers to the Admiralty at no cost and without an order, then (semantically accurately) claimed that he “supplied” them. This title was the highest accolade that could be accorded to a chronometer maker, because the Admiralty conducted extensive expert tests on a chronometer before placing orders with the maker.

By contrast, a Royal Warrant was granted on the whimsy of the monarch, who probably knew nothing about watches, and there is a strong suspicion that the Prince Regent (later George IV) was actually paid a stipend by some suppliers to grant them a Royal Warrant. This title is of meaning only to people who believe that wealth automatically buys quality.

Coming back to the French watchmakers to the King (horlogers du Roi) for a second, here is part of a paragraph I wrote in an article about a parisian “horloger”, that was published in the NAWCC Bulletin(*). This paragraph was based on more recent findings I had made:

*According to Reinier Plomp(**), the titles of horloger du Roi could sometimes be sold (as were many of the administrative titles in French society) for considerable sums of money (6,000 to 15,000 livres). There were also possibly some additional horlogers fraudulently calling themselves horlogers du Roi for commercial advantage. (In another document I recently found online, listing all the accounts and people employed by the French King’s Household for the year 1775 (***), only four “horlogers” are indicated: Jean Martinot and François Béliard; Antoine Pelletier and his son Jean. Each pair was paid the sum of 150 livres, which is rather low compared to most of the other numerous people paid by the household. In today’s Euros, 150 livres equates to about 1700, which was likely not enough to live on. So these horlogers had other means to support their families (selling watches and clocks out of their shops in the city). Their responsibilities as “horlogers du Roi” were probably rather minimal: wind the clocks and watches, service them when necessary. But they probably made a lot of money*

selling new watches and clocks to members of the Court. And if they could sell their title, as the paragraph above states, then there was a considerable windfall.

Perhaps there existed similar dynamics and rewards associated with the title “watch/clock maker to the King” in England — I defer to others who are better informed than I on that side of the Channel.

(*) St-Louis, Robert, *André-Charles Caron—A Watch Maker’s Shop (boutique d’horloger) on rue Saint-Denis, Paris, Circa 1750*, Bulletin of the NAWCC, July-August 2019

(**) Plomp, Reinier, *Early French Pendulum Clocks*, Schiedam, 2009.

(***) *Comptes de la Maison du Roi*, 1775