

The etiquette expert reviving the Versailles art of good manners

France de Heere is bringing back a system that goes back to the Sun King and the palace gardens



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Annoyed by aristocrats trampling through his flower beds, Louis XIV's gardener at the Palace of Versailles is said to have put up signs called "étiquets" to warn them off.

The nobles ignored them, however, until the king himself stepped in and decreed that no one was permitted to go beyond the bounds of the signs — thus the French system of etiquette was born.

Today, France de Heere, an expert in the rules of refined manners, is perpetuating the tradition by coaching people in *savoir-vivre* at her home in Versailles, a short stroll from the palace.



France de Heere offers clients sessions on subjects such as "the art of conversation" or "rules of courtesy in daily life"

"We live in an age of incivility, even rudeness, and we spend so much time immersed in our digital devices that we sometimes forget how to treat each other," de Heere said. "We need to return to the sources of elegant behaviour, to learn the often-forgotten rules of respecting others and treating them with courtesy."

De Heere, 55, credits what she described as her "strict, formal, old-school upbringing" for her expertise in good manners and etiquette.

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"I am passionate about history and the Palace of Versailles was a great inspiration for me. It was perhaps not the only cradle of etiquette, but it was certainly where it was most developed," she said.

Modern etiquette was born under King Francis I in the 16th century, but Louis XIV, the "Sun King", developed it into a strictly codified system of manners in the 17th and 18th centuries.



Louis XIV (1638-1715), also known as the Sun King

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Louis XIV's gardener is said to have put up signs at the palace called "étiquets" to stop aristocrats trampling through his flower beds

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At first deriving from the signs in the palace gardens, the meaning of "étiquette" gradually expanded to refer to the tickets for royal functions, which set out rules for courtiers about where to stand and what to do.

Louis XIV used the code to confine the French nobility to set patterns of courtly behaviour, thereby asserting his supremacy over them and keeping them busy at court, where they could be more easily controlled.

Despite the long history, de Heere believes it is needed more than ever in the 21st century.

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She also teaches classes at colleges that train the staff of luxury goods companies, such as Modart International, which specialises in courses for fashion students.

"Our students do internships from the first year and we realised that we were sometimes getting negative feedback because of their behaviour," Marie Cherifi, Modart's dean, told Le Parisien newspaper. "They weren't always punctual or polite."

She offers French and foreign clients three-hour sessions on subjects such as "the art of conversation" or "rules of courtesy in daily life", which cost up to €250.

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The sessions were initially aimed at tourists, but now she says the majority of those attending are French. Some are sent by luxury goods companies such as Givenchy, Max Mara or even the Jaguar carmaker to polish up the manners of their staff.

"Companies, especially those working in the luxury goods sector, see the benefits of receiving and welcoming potential customers properly and presenting the best image of the company, especially when they are marketing exclusive or prestige products," de Heere said.

"Many people are isolated, spending so much time online that they forget how to create good everyday relations with others. This has gone too far, so I try to help people take the time to reflect and place more value on mutual respect and elegance," she said.



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She devotes time to explaining how to set a table, how to receive guests and how to place them, and how to dress appropriately for each occasion.

Modern social codes vary depending on context, she acknowledges. "Holding a door open for a woman in a public space is appropriate, but not at the office, where it could be seen as an affront to gender equality," she said.

"Nevertheless, gallant gestures by a man are always a sign of a good education and upbringing. A lot of young people are adopting this to suit current tastes and they are very successful. A return to good manners appeals to many people," she said.