Marie-Antoinette: From hated queen to pop icon

In 1793, the Conciergerie palace-turned-prison in Paris slammed the gate behind its most famous inmate, the hated queen Marie-Antoinette, as she was led to the guillotine. On Wednesday, 226 years to the day of her execution, the former revolutionary jail on the banks of the Seine river opened an exhibition dedicated to the same woman it once detained in ignominy. But instead of focusing on her controversial life and brutal end, the display pays tribute to Marie-Antoinette’s legacy in popular culture, and her enduring ability to capture the imagination.

“Marie-Antoinette, Metamorphoses of an Image” attempts “not a rehabilitation but a renewal” of the portrayals of Louis XVI’s Austrian-born wife, said Antoine de Baecque, a historian who curated the three-month exhibit boasting more than 200 items. The attractions range from modernist portraits and Japanese manga in her image to a Marie-Antoinette Barbie doll and a shoe the queen lost when she was decapitated in front of a screaming crowd on Revolution Square in Paris-now the Place de la Concorde.

“One of the monuments with links to the memory of queen Marie-Antoinette, this one surely has the strongest: It is here that she was incarcerated and sentenced to death,” Philippe Belaval, president of France’s Centre of National Monuments, told AFP under the high stone arches of the Conciergerie.

The building had served as a residence for French Kings until the 14th century, when it was abandoned in favor of the Louvre and Vincennes, transformed first into a court, then a prison. It is here that Marie-Antoinette had spent her last ten weeks, in a tiny cell in what was dubbed the “Corridor of Death”. Future queen

Marie-Antoinette arrived at Versailles as a teenager to be married to the future king, Unaccustomed to the royal court, she broke many rules and customs in her early years and soon became a standout figure noted for her extravagant, towering hairstyles. The young king and queen became synonymous with excess, splurging on expensive clothes, food and other luxuries at a time when many French people were starving.

After the French Revolution broke out in 1789 and overthrew the monarchy, the couple were held in house arrest until they were put to death—Louis was beheaded first, followed nine months later by his widow on October 16, 1793. Marie-Antoinette’s nightgown, the shoe she is believed to have lost on her way to the guillotine, and the last letter she wrote all form part of the exhibition in an area of the Conciergerie where her cell used to be.

Also on display: the order for her execution, browned with age. But the exhibit is less about the queen’s life than about her aftermath—all aspects of it. Some portraits are caricatures and cartoonish, others deferential portrayals of sanctity or martyrdom. The show includes famous works, notably an official portrait from 1783 of the queen holding a rose by Elisabeth Vigee Le Brun. It also features a dedicated movie room where visitors can see samples from more than 100 films featuring the diva-queen.

The oldest film dates from 1903, another from the 1950s features French leading lady Michele Morgan as Marie-Antoinette, and perhaps the best known, the 2006 version directed by American Sofia Coppola. With Kirsten Dunst in the lead role and its rock-heavy soundtrack, this is the film that “made it possible for young people to identify with Marie-Antoinette,” according to Annie Duprat, an expert in historical iconography.

Fashion icon

A blue gown worn in the film is part of the display, next to a Christian Dior number inspired by the queen’s extravagant manner of dress. “Fashion is so present in France because this industry was stimulated much more by Marie-Antoinette than by preceding queens,” Duprat said. “Behind the foreign adoration of Marie-Antoinette is an appreciation for the French style of the 18th century. Also, she is a marketable figure because she is instantly recognizable: all you need is the face of a woman, a wig, and jewelry.” To end off the experience, visitors are invited to browse through an array of Marie-Antoinette-inspired trinkets: coffee mugs, chocolate—and a Barbie.—AFP