



## Famous French People

### Louis Vuitton ©

by Robert Shepherd

Vocabulary & pronunciation study by Laurent Dufour©

Words are explained alongside the text

Stressed syllables are underlined and in bold\*

Hello, you're listening to Robert Shepherd on EnglishWaves and it's time for more Famous French.

Our subject was an **entrepreneur** and designer whose name has become **iconic** and still **resonates** in the fashion world today. He is Louis Vuitton.

Monsieur Vuitton was born on 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1821 in the small **hamlet** of Anchay, **located** in the Jura **region**. **Despite** his **products** long being **synonymous** with **royalty** and nowadays with the nouveau riche, Louis Vuitton came from very humble beginnings. He **descended** from long-**established** working-class roots. His **ancestors** were **joiners**, **carpenters**, farmers and **milliners**. Louis' father, Xavier, was a farmer, and his mother, Corinne, was a **milliner**. However, she died when Vuitton was just 10 years old.

**Legend has it that** his father Xavier soon remarried, but it was to a **wicked** new stepmother just like the fairy tale **Cinderella**.

It is thought Vuitton was a **stubborn** and headstrong child, who became **antagonized** by his stepmother and bored by the **provincial** life Anchay had to offer. Vuitton **remedied** this by running away to Paris in 1835. He was only 13 at the time. Travelling alone and on foot, the **distance** of 300 miles to Paris meant Vuitton took **odd jobs** to feed himself and he stayed wherever he could find **shelter**. He arrived in 1837, at the age of 16, to a capital city **in the thick of** an **industrial revolution**. The **period** had **produced** a **litany** of **contradictions**: **awe-inspiring grandeur** and **abject poverty**; **rapid** growth and **devastating epidemics**.

Vuitton **secured** an **apprenticeship** in the **workshop** of a

**hamlet** (n.) small village, group of houses

**joiner** (n.) person trained and skilled in making finished woodwork, such as windows, doors, and stairs

**carpenter** (n.) craftsman in wood

**milliner** (n.) person who makes or sells women's hats

**legend has it that** (exp.) according to legend

**wicked** (adj.) mean, evil

**stubborn** (adj.) obstinate

**odd jobs** (n.) small jobs of various kinds, often done for other people

**shelter** (n.) refuge, protection

**in the thick of** (exp.) in the most active or intense part of

**litany** (n.) long list, stream

**awe-inspiring** (adj.) spectacular, magnificent

**workshop** (n.) place with tools

**successful** box-maker and packer named Monsieur Maréchal. In 19<sup>th</sup> century **Europe**, box-making and packing was a highly **respectable** and **urbane** craft. Vuitton had a natural **talent** for it and it only took him a few years to gain a **reputation** amongst the Paris **bourgeoisie** as one of the city's finest **practitioners** of the craft. Vuitton **continued** to **flourish** and things got even better on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1851, when Louis-Napoléon **Bonaparte** **staged** a coup d'état. Exactly one year later, Monsieur Bonaparte assumed the title of **Emperor** under the **regal** name **Napoleon** III.

The re-establishment of the French Empire under Napoléon III was a **boon** for Vuitton. The emperor's Spanish wife, Eugénie de Montijo the Empress of France, **hired** Vuitton as her **personal** box-maker and packer and charged him with "packing the most beautiful clothes in an **exquisite** way". It also **provided** a **gateway** for Vuitton to a class of **elite** and royal **cliente** who **commissioned** him for the rest of his life.

The year 1854 **heralded** much change in Vuitton's life. He met the beautiful 17 year-old Clémence-Emilie Parriaux and they married that spring. Not long **afterwards**, Vuitton left Monsieur Maréchal's shop and opened his own box-making and packing workshop in Paris.

Just four years later, Vuitton **debuted** an **entirely** new **trunk**. Grey **canvas** replaced the more **traditional** leather, because it was lighter, more durable and more **impervious** to water and **odours**. However, they weren't the **key** selling points. Instead of making the trunks in the more traditional dome-shape, Vuitton made them **rectangular** so that they were more **conductive** to travelling. The vast **majority** of **commentators** still **consider** Vuitton's trunk to be the birth of **modern luggage**.

Vuitton soon **expanded** into a larger workshop in Asnières, a **village** outside Paris, so he could manage the **orders**. He was even commissioned by Isma'il Pasha, the **Khedive** of **Egypt**.

However, just a few years later, **disaster** struck. In 1870, Vuitton's trading was **interrupted** by the **outbreak** of the Franco-**Prussian** War and the **subsequent** siege of Paris. It all gave way to a bloody civil war that **obliterated** the French Empire.

When the siege **finally** ended in 1871, Vuitton returned to Asnières to find the village in ruins, his staff gone, his

**urbane** (adj.) characterized by elegance or sophistication

**craft** (n.) art or skill

**to flourish** (vb.) to be successful, prosper

**to stage** (vb.) to plan, organize

**regal** (adj.) royal, stately

**boon** (n.) blessing, benefit

**to hire** (vb.) to employ someone for wages

**exquisite** (adj.) of special beauty and appealing excellence

**to provide** (vb.) to make available, supply

**gateway** (n.) something that serves as a means of entry or access

**to herald** (vb.) to signal the coming of

**trunk** (n.) box for storage

**canvas** (n.) coarse fabric

**impervious** (adj.) impenetrable

**key** (adj.) major, essential

**conductive** (adj.) favourable

**Khedive** (n.) viceroy of Egypt under Ottoman suzerainty

**outbreak** (n.) sudden occurrence

**subsequent** (adj.) coming later

**to obliterate** (vb.) to destroy completely

**equipment** stolen and his shop **in tatters**.

Not prepared to give up the fight, Vuitton **devoted** himself to the **restoration** of his business. Within months he had built a new shop at number 1 Rue Scribe in an **aristocratic** part of central Paris. He also began to focus on **luxury**. In 1872, Vuitton **introduced** a new trunk design featuring beige canvas and red **stripes**. It **appealed** to Paris's new elite and marked the beginning of the **label**'s modern **incarnation** as a luxury **brand**.

For the next two **decades**, Vuitton continued to **operate** out of 1 Rue Scribe, until he died on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1892, at the age of 70.

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**in tatters** (exp.) ruined, in a torn and ragged condition

**stripe** (n.) narrow band differing in colour from the background parts

**to appeal** (vb.) to be especially attractive

**brand** (n.) trademark

**decade** (n.) period of ten years

**\* Tip !**

Note the stress pattern in the nouns ending in -ION.

The stressed syllable is the penultimate syllable :

commission, contradiction, fashion, incarnation, operation, reputation, restoration,  
revolution, tradition