

Jul-2014

Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun: A Historical Survey of a Woman Artist in the Eighteenth Century

Evangelia Karvouni

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>

 Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Karvouni, Evangelia (2014). Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun: A Historical Survey of a Woman Artist in the Eighteenth Century. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 15(2), 268-285.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol15/iss2/18>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

**Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun:
A Historical Survey of a Woman Artist in the Eighteenth Century**

By Evangelia Karvouni¹

Abstract

Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun may be considered one of the most celebrated women artists of eighteenth century France. The elegance of her style and her ability to produce idealized images of her noble sitters made her increasingly popular within royalist circles. She was particularly favoured by the Queen Marie Antoinette whom she painted in a manner that provoked controversy among the critics and the public. Vigee Le Brun's approach to her royal subject was very sentimental as it can be seen from her statements in her autobiography, the "Memoirs". After the outbreak of the Revolution, Vigee Le Brun fled to Italy where she continued to paint portraits in the line of the Baroque rather than the Rococo tradition. Her reputation may be seen within the context of the influential role of the salon society of eighteenth century France. This society included women writers, painters and famous patrons of the arts. Their liberal behavior has become the topic of an extensive survey by contemporary feminist writers.

Keywords: women artists, portraits, France, Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun

Introduction

Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun, 1755-1842, was born in Paris during the reign of Louis XV, 1723-1774. Her life and professional career coincided with a period of profound social and political upheaval which not only led to the French Revolution but influenced almost every aspect of European life. As the painter of the Bourbons and the aristocratic circles surrounding the court of Louis XVI, the subsequent overthrow of the Monarchy with its dramatic results for the Royal family altered the course of her career. Vigee Le Brun, therefore, emerges as a painter of change whose paintings reflect the controversial social and political climate of her time.¹

Motivated by that particular aspect of Vigee Le Brun's artistic practice, the present essay seeks to explore the historical and artistic discourses which shaped her concept of portraiture from the early years of her career to those of her major royal commissions which signaled her maturity both artistic and personal. Through her paintings the spectator is able to realize that Vigee Le Brun tried vigorously to adjust a male discourse to a feminist end. Her choice of subjects and her devotion to the art of portraiture set the paradigm for a female vision of painting the human character and physiognomy. Vigee Le Brun's work was brought to light

¹ Evangelia Karvouni is an independent researcher writing and working in Athens, Greece. Her interests extend from the field of art history to archeology and cultural studies. She is particularly attracted to the intersections between art history and women studies. This is her first article on the famous eighteenth century woman artist Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun whose spectacular career altered the course of French painting and left an invaluable legacy to the next generations of women artists.

mainly during the decade of the seventies and in so far the publications referring to her work are not as many as they should be.

The Formative Years (ca. 1770 - ca. 1778)

In the catalogue accompanying the first major retrospective exhibition of the work of women artists active between the years 1550-1950, Ann S Harris has referred to Vigee Le Brun as the most celebrated woman painter of the second half of the eighteenth century.² Her fame can be largely attributed to her privileged position as the painter most favoured by Marie Antoinette, Louis XVI's Queen, whose portraits she repeatedly painted between 1778-1789. However this is only one aspect of her reputation which could equally be attributed to her sociable character and personal charm that helped launch her career and eventually gained her access to the Royal Household.³ Moreover Vigee Le Brun has been credited with an ability to produce idealized portraits, images of her noble sitters, which made her one of the most sought after painters in the aristocratic society of pre-Revolutionary Paris.⁴

The origins of Vigee Le Brun's artistic career are rather difficult to trace. In an article published in 1982,⁵ Joseph Baillio indicates the problems with the dating of her early works which prevent us from forming a clear image of her formative artistic education. According to the same source,⁶ her father Louis-Vigee, a pastel portrait painter active between 1715-1767, taught his daughter some principles of design and initiated her in the techniques of pastel drawing. Louis-Vigee also sent her to his colleague, the minor painter Davesne, to learn how to mix oil colours⁷ and thus the young artist developed a skill to work in pastel as well as in oil.⁸ Unfortunately Louis-Vigee died when his daughter was only twelve. The next years and when she was still only fifteen, Vigee Le Brun is referred to as painting oil portraits in order to support her family financially.⁹ At this age it was not usual for women to start a career in fine art since painting was a domain dominated by men as that was the case for so many other professional activities.

In her Memoirs, the artist also recognizes herself as a child prodigy when she refers to her enthusiasm for making drawings in the margins of her copy-books or on the walls of the boarding school which she attended from the age of six to eleven.¹⁰ However as Ann S Harris argues,¹¹ many women artists in history were referred to as precocious talents and this may be explained by the fact that only those who displayed an early development received further encouragement and eventually became accomplished painters.

According to the same author this might mean that other women of Vigee Le Brun's age who could potentially become artists but did not show the same premature development simply never had the chance of following an artistic career.¹²

The young artist's subsequent artistic education was not systematic. Women artists were denied access to the usual apprentice system followed by their male contemporaries in the French Royal Academy. Despite the obvious disadvantages of such an exclusion, there was also a positive side to that particular coin as far as it gave Vigee Le Brun the opportunity to work with more independence and the freedom to choose her own models instead of confirming herself to those promoted by the Academy. In 1782, for example, we can see the artist undertaking a daring experiment to model her *Self-portrait*, 1782, panel, no dimensions given, Private Collection, Switzerland upon Rubens', 1577-1640, portrait of *Susanna Lunden nee Fourment*, ca. 1622, panel, 79 x 54.5 cm, London, National Gallery.



Self-portrait with straw hat, 1782

Vigée Le Brun's exclusion from the Academy's training program may also help explain why she made her artistic debut so quickly at a time when prolonged study from Old Masters' drawings, antique casts and the live model was required before an artist was judged capable of practicing painting independently.¹³ At the same time, however, she apparently missed the chance of exposing herself to the stimulating environment of collective teaching and the constant exchange of ideas taking place in the Academy's drawing classes. Most significantly, at that time those classes were attended by such gifted students as Jacques-Louis David, 1748-1825, and discussions were centered around the revival of history painting and the return to antiquity.¹⁴ Vigée Le Brun rather modestly acknowledged those trends in her large historical composition *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*, 1780, oil on canvas, 102.5 x 132.5 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, executed for the purpose of gaining its creator the honour of becoming a member of the Academy.¹⁵



Peace Bringing Back Abundance, 1780

The next person to have played an indirect but important role in the continuation of Vigée Le Brun's artistic education was her mother Jeanne Maissin, 1728-1800. In the "Memoirs" she is described as a beautiful woman of however a 'sagesse austere'¹⁶ who helped her daughter to overcome the grief of her father's loss.¹⁷

Like Berthe Morisot's, 1841-1895, mother almost a century later, Jeanne Maissin chaperoned her daughter at her visits to the galleries of the Luxembourg Palace. Moreover, as Joseph Baillio indicates, she also posed for her daughter's first attempts in portraiture.¹⁸ If one is to accept the above author's identification of an oval bust-length portrait of a naked woman seen from behind as that of her mother 'vue par le dos',¹⁹ then it is possible that she also provided her daughter with the live nude model, an essential opportunity to which, however, female artists were so obstinately denied access. That intimate drawing shows, though, that rigid social codes could in reality be overcome. In the galleries of the Luxembourg Palace Vigée Le Brun made numerous copies of Old Masters' paintings whereas at the same time she took some drawing lessons from the historical painter Gabriel Briard, 1725-1777, together with her artist friend Anne-Rosalie Boquet.²⁰ Apart from the Luxembourg Palace Vigée Le Brun also visited private Parisian collections with examples of the great masters of every school which were owned by Randon de Boisset, the Duke of Praslin and the Marquis de Levis.²¹ The fact that Vigée Le Brun had access to those noble collections may be explained by her father's artistic status.

Although in much of the discursive literature Louis Vigée is referred to as a minor pastel painter, in reality he held position as professor at the lesser Academie de Saint-Luc²² and his associates included such distinguished persons as Francois Boucher, 1703-1770, and the influential female patron Mme Geoffrin, 1699-1777, whose portraits he is presumed to have painted.²³ Except for the minor painter Davesne, Louis Vigée was also befriended by the historical painter G. F. Doyen, 1726-1809, who gave Vigée Le Brun occasional advice before and after her father's death.²⁴ Louis Vigée's artistic status might also explain how the young artist came to be noticed by Joseph Vernet, 1719-1789, a landscape painter celebrated for his contributions in the genre of the dramatic and poetic landscape. Vernet gave useful instructions to the young painter and strongly advised her to paint primarily from "nature" because in his words "Nature is the best master of all".²⁵ Coming from a prestigious male master, those instructions further encouraged the young artist in her attempts at painting from life. Thus they may have contributed to her ability as a portraitist. Technically Vernet's lessons had little effect on Vigée Le Brun's work. Landscape painting does not appear in her portraits except as a backdrop in her compositions, as it can be seen in her portrait of *Madame Royale and the*

Dauphin Louis Joseph, 1784, oil on canvas, 132 x 94 cm, Musee National du Chateau de Versailles.



Madame Royale and the Dauphin Louis Joseph 1784

Surprisingly enough, Vigée Le Brun came back to Vernet's lessons and to those of her father as late in her career as 1807 when she executed in pastel the landscape *Le Mont-blanc*, 1807-1809, pastel, no dimensions given Chambéry, Musees d'Art et d'Histoire.²⁶

At an earlier stage a venture in the genre of the poetic landscape is suggested in the picturesque waterfalls accompanying her portrait of *Countess Potocka*, 1791, oil on canvas: 142 x 126.5 cm, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. However, the similarity between the landscape background of the portrait and the landscapes of Vernet demonstrates that although her sense of portraiture matured during her career, her sense of landscape remained under the influence of the old generation.

According to Joseph Baillio, Vigée Le Brun copied landscapes by her teacher Vernet²⁷ and she also made a copy in oil of a pastel by Quintin de la Tour, 1704-1788.²⁸ Among young artists it was not uncommon to copy the works of masters they respected and Vigée Le Brun indirectly acknowledged this respect when she referred to his father's pastels as 'dignes du fameux La Tour'.²⁹ The artist does not seem to have made any more copies but she carefully studied the works of her contemporaries as well as those of previous generations and that knowledge can be seen extensively throughout her work. As it has already been mentioned, in her 1782 *Self-portrait*, she paid tribute to her favourite master Rubens by modeling the composition upon one of his female portraits. Her portrait of *The Children of the Baronne d'Esthal*, ca. 1772, oil on canvas, oval: 72 x 59 cm, Cailleux Collection clearly seems to allude to Chardin's, 1669-1779, *The House of Cards*, ca. 1737, oil on canvas, 60.3 x 71.8 cm, National Gallery, London, whereas the same artist's influence as well as that of Rembrandt, 1606-1669, can be discerned in her portrait of her brother *Etienne Vigée en ecolier*, 1773, oil on canvas, 61 x 48 cm, Saint Louis Art Museum. The manner of the painting also recalls some of Reynolds', 1723-1792, early portraits such as for example the *Boy Reading*, 1747, oil on canvas: 78.7 x 63.5 cm, Private Collection, but it is not known whether Vigée Le Brun had seen them or not.

Another painting dating from that early period, the portrait of the author of the “Caracteres” *La Bruyere*, 1775, no dimensions given, Musee de Versailles displays the influence of Nicolas de Largilliere, 1656-1746, and Hyacinthe Rigaud, 1659-1743, who had also painted portraits of that personality.³⁰



The Children of the Baronne d'Esthal, 1772

However, Jean Baptiste Greuze, 1725-1805, was the artist who would make the strongest impression on her, and she made numerous studies of girls' heads from drawings by him. In her opinion, this had enabled her to “capture the half tones to be found in delicate flesh colours” as she later explained in her Memoirs.³¹

As a conclusion to these aspects of her artistic education it is worth noting that with the exception of the portrait of *La Bruyere*, 1775, Vigee Le Brun showed little interest in official portraitists whereas she was particularly attracted by such artists as Chardin, Greuze and Quentin de la Tour who painted portraits informally. For an artist who became best-known for her portraits of the Queen Marie-Antoinette, such evidence may cast some light on her later achievements concerning the Royal portrait.

With regard to her position as a female artist, Vigee le Brun's career was conditioned by the limitations placed upon her sex. Denied access to the official art schools, her first painting instructions came from her family environment and she also used her family members as models for her first attempts in portraiture. The portrait of her brother *Etienne* as well as that of *Her mother seen from Behind* have already been mentioned but other portraits of her family have variously been attributed to different artists, and Joseph Baillio mentions a portrait of her stepfather, *Le Sevre*, ca.1772 which has been attributed to Ducreux, 1737-1802, as a presumed portrait of Diderot.³²

However, unlike other female artists who were fortunate enough to study with male masters, such as for example Adelaide Labille-Guiard, 1749-1803³³ Vigee Le Brun was never apprenticed to a master although she received occasional instructions by her painter friends. She must, therefore, be considered a self-taught artist who developed her artistic skills independently and whose early success was, according to Whitney Chadwick, a result of “determination, ambition and hard work”.³⁴

The Years Between ca. 1778 - 1789

The Admission to the French Academy

The portraits of the Queen

The first years of the 1770's were the years of Vigee le Brun's maturing as an artist. By 1776, the year of her marriage to the art dealer and connoisseur Jean-Baptiste Le Brun, 1748-1813, she had become accomplished enough to be accepted by the Academie de Saint-Luc, the academy where her father had previously been a professor. By 1778 Vigee Le Brun had been fortunate enough to paint *The Duchesse de Chartres*, ca. 1778, oil on canvas, oval 68.5 x 53.3 cm, Private Collection, London.



The Duchesse de Chartres, 1778

This portrait of Marie Adelaïde de Bourbon may help indicate the way by which Vigee le Brun gained access to the royal Household. Marie Adelaïde, the daughter of the Duc De Penthièvre, belonged to the “bastard” branch of the Bourbon family, being by her father the direct descendant of Louis XIV and his mistress Mme de Montepan. It was also the same year that Vigee Le Brun was ordered for the Austrian court her first royal commission, a full-length portrait of the Queen, *Marie Antoinette*, “en robe a paniers”, 1778, oil on canvas; 237 x 177 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Marie Antoinette, “en robe a paniers”, 1778

Being her first royal commission Vigee Le Brun chose to follow convention. The young Hapsburg princess who had been crowned queen only four years before has been represented in full length, sumptuously dressed in the more conservative fashion ‘a paniers’ and framed against a background of columns and draperies. The only informal detail is the still-life of flowers which is nevertheless placed near to the Royal Crown. Largillierre and Rigaux inevitably functioned as models for this type of grand official portraiture. However, the figure of the Queen looking off to the left and wearing a hooped skirt brings to mind the well-known figure of the Infanta Margarita, the daughter of the King of Spain, Philip IV as portrayed by Velazquez, 1599-1660, in his famous *Las Meninas*, 1656, oil on canvas, 321 x 281 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid. A useful comparison can be made between this portrait and the portrait of the Queen painted five years later, *Marie Antoinette “en gaulle”*, 1783, oil on canvas, 90 x 72 cm, Collection of Princess von Hessen, Darmstadt. Here the Queen is dressed in more modern fashion without the artificial, bulky gown of the previous portrait and she is shown causally arranging flowers in a vase. Moreover she engages the viewer with her eyes by contrast to the more haughty manner of the previous image.



Marie Antoinette “en gaulle”, 1783

Although to the contemporary viewer, the portrait might not seem disturbingly informal, at the time when exhibited at the Salon of 1783, it caused a great deal of controversy and was attacked as being indecent and prostitute-like.³⁵ It was during these years that the queen's extravagant behaviour had made her increasingly unpopular and the portrait seems to have done further harm to her image.

Although there had been portraits of Kings' mistresses in informal poses or even semi-naked such as for example Boucher's, 1703-1770, portrait of the *Marquise de Pompadour in her Toilette*, undated, oil on canvas, 81 x 63 cm, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts or Drouais', 1727-1775, portrait of *Madame du Barry as Muse*, 1771, oil on canvas, no dimensions given, Chambre de Commerce, Versailles, the informal look of Vigee Le Brun's portrait established a familiarity between the sitter and the spectator which was still considered unacceptable for a royal image.

If a further comparison is made between this portrait and the famous *Self-portrait "Au chapeau de paille"*, 1782, also exhibited at the Salon of 1783, the artist's plaintive gaze which effects a look of sincerity contrasts with the Queen's rather devious three-quarter look and this may help explain why the Queen's portrait stimulated the mistrust of the public.

Vigee le Brun's marriage to the art dealer J. B. le Brun gave her further access to more private collections in Paris and was useful as her husband introduced her to his wide circle of leading painters of the time. The commercial and artistic success of the couple progressed rapidly. Their house in the Rue de Clery, the Hotel de Lubert, became one of the most fashionable salons before the Revolution.³⁶ Their weekly receptions were attended by a number of prominent Parisian figures, which included her old teacher, Joseph Vernet, 1714-1789, and Hubert Robert, 1733-1808, as well as distinguished members of the court such as the Polignacs and the Vaudreuil. It seems reasonable that at this stage Vigee le Brun aspired to be admitted to the Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. For this purpose Vigee le Brun executed the large allegorical painting, *Peace Bringing back Abundance*, 1780, which was submitted to the Academy as her entrance work, the "morceau de reception". The subject matter of the painting was carefully calculated as Vigee le Brun wanted to be admitted as a history painter, the highest of the painting genres. Most of her female predecessors, artists such as Rosalba Carriera, 1675-1757, and Anne Vallayer-Coster, 1744-1818, had been accepted but nevertheless as practitioners of the inferior genres of portraiture and even lowlier, as still-life painters.³⁷ Her high aspirations and her conspicuous patronage by Marie-Antoinette would clearly have annoyed her painter contemporaries, although this is not explicitly stated anywhere.³⁸

Jean Baptiste Marie Pierre, the Director of the Academy, opposed her candidacy on the grounds that her husband was a picture dealer and thus against the rules of admission.³⁹ Finally, the Queen intervened on behalf of her favourite painter and a special decree was issued on the 31st May 1783, by which Vigee Le Brun became a full member of the Academy. It is worth noting that her great painter rival at Court, Adelaide Labille-Guiard, 1789-1803, was received on the same occasion but with the less prestigious title of the "peintre des portraits".⁴⁰ Her more modest reception piece was a portrait in pastel of the sculptor *Pajou*, 1782, pastel on paper, 71.3 x 58.5 cm, Cabinet des Dessins, Musee du Louvre, Paris.

According to Pierre Rosenberg, Vigee Le Brun's entrance to the Academy was met with difficulties which were not altogether due to her sex.⁴¹ Even though, as it has already been mentioned, she was not the first woman to become a member of the Academy, it was strongly felt that she was aiming too high in her ambition to be admitted as a history painter. However,

the technical skill of *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* shows that Vigee Le Brun was equally capable of painting allegory as of painting portraits. More interesting is her apparent knowledge of Rosalba Carriera's allegorical pastels,⁴² thus showing an acknowledgement of the tradition established by her female predecessors. Pierre Rosenberg also assumes an influence by Pompeo Batoni, 1708-1787.⁴³ Batoni's historical paintings were quite well-known in France and his reputation might have increased during those last years before his death. The apparent Italianate style of *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* and the similarities in composition with Batoni's *Peace and Justice*, ca. 1745, oil on canvas, no dimensions given, Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal suggest that Vigee Le Brun must have known the latter painting.

Pierre Rosenberg also assumes that this knowledge might have been indirectly through the canvases of Lazreneé l'aine 1725-1805.⁴⁴

Vigee le Brun's admission to the Academy signaled the official recognition of her talent and opened her road to success. Between the years 1783-1789 she received a number of commissions, the most important of them being the three portraits of the Queen painted respectively in the years 1785, 1787 and 1788. Before discussing those portraits it would be interesting to consider how Vigee Le Brun recalls in her Memoirs her first encounter with the Queen at Fontainebleau: "I saw the Queen in grand attire, covered with diamonds. In the brilliant sunshine she seemed to me really dazzling. As she walked along, her head, uplifted on her beautiful neck, made her look so imposing and majestic that one was reminded of a goddess in the midst of her nymphs".⁴⁵ Written in 1835-37 thus nearly half a century after her first introduction, these words clearly reflect the old lady's idealization of the past as well as the nostalgia of the monarchist circles she frequented, a nostalgia which must have been reinforced in the period after the fall of the Empire (1814) and the Restoration of the Monarchy (c 1817).⁴⁶ In fact, the Queen was far from being goddess-like and as Baillio has indicated, her features were rather unattractive.⁴⁷

This does not mean that those last three portraits of the Queen are not beautiful. As it has been noted with regard, in particular to her 1785 portrait of *Marie-Antoinette*, 1785, oil on canvas, 93.3 x 74.8 cm, Private collection, the artist has modified these irregular features, yet "she succeeds in capturing a more than recognizable likeness".⁴⁸ Furthermore Vigee le Brun's spontaneous admiration gave birth to a friendship between the two women that may account for the emotional content with which she endowed her subject and which helped bring out the human side of the Queen even in such more formal and authoritarian images as the 1788 portrait of *Marie-Antoinette*, ca.1788, oil on canvas, 278 x 192 cm, Collection Bronson Trevor.



Marie Antoinette, 1788

Thus if a comparison is to be made between the latter portrait and Vigee le Brun's society portraits of the same period one is prompted to think the very warm portrait of the artist's close friend and an amateur painter herself, *The Marquise de Grollier*, 1788, oil on panel, Collection Comte Jean-Francois de Roussy de Saled, Chateau de Thorens, Thorens-Glieves.



The Marquise de Grollier, 1788

However, if Vigee le Brun's royal images are set against a wider iconographical context her presumed progress in royal portraiture will appear rather restrained. For example, Anthony Van Dyck's, 1599-1641, portrait of *Queen Henrietta Maria and her Dwarf Sir Jeffery Hudson*, ca. 1633, oil on canvas, 228.6 x 129 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington or his half-length portrait of *Henrietta Maria*, 1635, oil on canvas 105.5 x 84.2 cm, Private collection, New York set an example of presentation of female royalty which influenced royal painters in England until the death of Sir Thomas Lawrence, 1769-1830.⁴⁹ In fact it is interesting to compare Lawrence's *Portrait of Queen Charlotte*, 1789, oil on canvas, 239 x 147 cm, London, National Gallery with

Vigee le Brun's *Marie Antoinette*, ca. 1788, as far as it demonstrates that the Royal Houses of Europe displayed a preference for a particular type of female royal portrait. Both Queens are represented seated and in full length, framed against the obligatory columns and draperies in the background, their feet are placed on an elevated step and they are both dressed in elaborate clothing but not in formal Royal attire; Queen Charlotte is also shown hatless. Thus they give the impression more of noble women than Sovereigns.

Moreover Marie-Antoinette is holding a book which can be seen to have imprinted on its cover the Bourbon/Hapsbourg arms. The tradition of women holding books in portraits originally derived from pictures of the Virgin Mary but by the time of Marie-Antoinette's portrait the book in female portraits may be considered to reflect the Enlightenment ideas about the importance of education especially in relation to women and children who had not always enjoyed that right.⁵⁰ Books, usually in the form of a novel were often placed in the hands of distinguished female bourgeoisies as for example in Duplessis', 1725-1802, portrait of the daughter of Voltaire, *Mme Lenoir*, ca. 1764, oil on canvas, 65 x 55 cm, Musee du Louvre, Paris. More interestingly, as Philip Conisbee indicates,⁵¹ Marie Leczinska, Marie-Antoinette's predecessor to the French throne, was even portrayed as reading a volume of philosophical essays in one of the replicas that Marc Nattier, 1685-1766, executed of his original *Marie Leczinska*, 1748, oil on canvas, 138 x 105 cm, Musee National du Chateau de Versailles.

Although the book in Marie-Antoinette's portrait does not have any indications that would make clear whether it is religious or secular, Vigee le Brun's intentions to create an image of the Queen that would present her as educated and in tune with modern ideas are already apparent. Moreover, the portrait was commissioned for the French Ambassador to Constantinople, a fact that makes its propagandistic message even more clear.

The last work which will be considered within the scope of the present essay is Vigee le Brun's well-known portrait of *Marie Antoinette and Her Children*, 1787, oil on canvas, 275 x 215 cm, Musee de Versailles.



Marie Antoinette and Her Children, 1787

Considering Marie Antoinette's unpopularity in the years preceding the Revolution, the portrait may be seen as a rather desperate attempt to restore a positive image of the Queen by presenting her as a caring and affectionate mother, Mother to all France, as well as to her own children. As Joseph Baillio has indicated, the commission for the portrait was given to Vigee Le

Brun after the failure of the young Swedish artist, Adolf Ulrich Wertmuler to produce a portrait of the Queen which would redeem her in the eyes of her abused subjects.⁵² His grotesque portrait of *Marie Antoinette and Her Children in the park of the Petit Trianon*, 1785, oil on canvas, 276 x 194 cm, National Museum Stockholm had been exhibited at the Salon of 1787 and according to Baillio it became the subject of “a great hue and cry among critics who deplored the casual manner in which the august sitters had been portrayed”.⁵³ However looking at the portrait it seems more reasonable to assume that the critics were not so much annoyed by its informal manner but by its apparent superficiality which in no way flattered the royal sitters. In her equally informal portrait, Vigee Le Brun once again produced a flattering image of her noble sitters but she also animated the composition by basing it upon the triangular configurations of certain High Renaissance Holy Families. The figure of the Queen with a lively baby on her lap and her daughter leaning affectionately against her brings to mind Raphael’s, 1483-1520, portraits of the Virgin Mary with child Jesus and St John the Baptist, such as for example the *Madonna of the Meadow*, oil on panel, 1505, 113 x 88 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna or *La Belle Jardiniere*, oil on panel, 1507, 122 x 80 cm, Musee du Louvre, Paris. By choosing such a dignified model from within traditional iconography, Vigee Le Brun constructed an imposing image of monarchial power which more than competently fulfilled its propagandistic aims.

Conclusion

By 1789, the year of the outbreak of the Revolution, Vigee le Brun, though still thirty four, had already behind her more than fifteen years of artistic activity. As her most important works from those years, her portraits of Marie Antoinette may be considered to signal the way to her own artistic maturity. The first portrait of Marie Antoinette rather rigid and clumsy, is indicative of an artist who is still in the process of mastering the laws of his profession. Despite the affinities with Velazquez’s *Las Meninas*, the painting by no means equals its model. In fact more attention has been paid to the meticulous rendition of the fabrics of the Queen’s costume than to her figure or face. The second portrait, is still equally stereotypic although its informality suggests the friendship which in the meantime had developed between the artist and her royal sitter.

A remarkable shift can be discerned between the latter portrait and the one painted in 1785. The artist in absolute control of her means has endowed her subject with a psychological insight which makes Reynolds’ comment to Northcote⁵⁴ seem almost justified. By the time of the last two full length portraits of the Queen, the artist has achieved her full potential as a painter of Royal portraits. However, as it has already been mentioned, Vigee le Brun’s achievements do not break away with tradition but they are rather a successful continuation of it. This may be attributed as much to her ability as an artist as well as to the unsettled political climate which to a certain extent defined her vision.

Lastly if a comparison is to be made between Vigee Le Brun’s portraits of the Queen and the shockingly realistic sketch by David of *Marie Antoinette on her Way to the Scaffold*, 1793, pen drawing, 15 x 10 cm, E. de Rothschild Collection, Musee du Louvre Paris, Vigee le Brun would be more accurately placed within the particular ambience in which she worked and whose ambitions and failures she so adequately recorded.⁵⁵

Endnotes

¹ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference. Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), 46-47. "Vigee Lebrun's career raises important questions about the artist's relationship to social change. For artists do not passively reproduce dominant ideology; they participate in its construction and alteration. Artists work in but also on ideology. Vigee Lebrun's practice as an artist was shaped by the conflicting ideologies emerging in a period of radical social upheaval in which not only was the structure of political power in society dramatically shifted but, more relevantly, within the new class formation, women's roles were transformed."

² Ann S. Harris, *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (cat. exh. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Dec 1976-March 1977), 190. "Elisabeth Vigee Lebrun, as she is now usually called, vies with Angelica Kauffman for the title of the most celebrated woman artist of their time. No women artists since have enjoyed the kind of success and admiration that they received."

³ Denys Sutton, "Madame Vigee Le Brun: A Survivor of the Ancien Regime" in *Apollo* 116 (1982): 29. "Madame Vigee Lebrun had the right attributes for success in the carefree world of pre-Revolutionary Paris, as her Self-Portrait shows. She was good-looking, had natural charm and a fine dress sense; she possessed the art of pleasing: hers was the gift for making friends welcome."

⁴ Joseph Baillio, *Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun, 1755-1842* (cat. exh. Kimbell Art Museum Fort Worth Texas, 1982), 10. "Her success as a portraitist in a sophisticated world depended largely on her ability to idealise objective reality."

⁵ Joseph Baillio, "Quelques Peintures Reattribuees a Vigee Le Brun" in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 99 (1982): 13-26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13 "Son pere, Louis Vigee (1715-1767), etait un portraitiste d'un certain renom, aupres de qui elle apprit tres jeune quelques notions de dessin: c'est lui qui l'initia aux procedes techniques de la peinture au pastel sa propre specialite."

⁷ Eleanor Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage. Five Centuries of Women Artists* (New York: Paddington Press, 1974), 125. "Her father was a pastel portrait painter who, quickly appreciating the early evidence of his daughter's talent, sent her to his colleague, the painter Davesne, to learn how to mix oil colors."

⁸ It is only assumed that she used pastels as a young woman as there are no surviving works in this medium from this early period.

⁹ Eleanor Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage*, 127. "When her father died prematurely, Vigee Lebrun-still barely a child herself-set to work painting oil portraits in earnest to help pay for her younger brother's schooling."

¹⁰ Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun, *Memoirs* (London: John Hamilton Ltd, 1926), 12. "I will take first of all, dear friend, my earliest years, because it was in them that the nature of my future life was foreseen, my love of painting having revealed itself in my childhood. I was sent to a convent at the age of six and remained there till I was eleven. During that time I was always busy with the pencil, drawing whenever and wherever I could. My writing books and even those of my school-fellows, were filled with marginal drawings of little heads and profiles. On the dormitory walls I would draw faces and landscapes with coloured chalks."

¹¹ Ann S Harris, *Women Artists*, 42 "Several possible explanations for the apparently precocious development of women artists before 1800 can be suggested. The phenomenon might indicate that only women who demonstrated extraordinary potential as artists received any encouragement. Women who were late developers or who were less remarkably gifted as children simply never became artists."

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ The Academy's teaching methods are discussed in Anton Schnapper, *Jacques-Louis David* (New York: Alpine Fine Arts Collection Ltd, 1980), 12-16.

¹⁴ David Wakefield, *French Eighteenth Century Painting* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1984), 95. "It was, finally under Vien's Directorship (1775-81) that the Ecole de Rome (i.e. one of the Academy's art schools) became the focal point for the Neo-classical movement, when the passion for archaeology stirred by the discoveries of Herculaneum and Pompei drew hordes of foreign scholars (notably Winckelmann), travellers and connoisseurs to the city as if to the shrine of a new religion. There the seeds were sown for a totally original and revolutionary art inaugurated by J.L. David, a former pupil of Vien."

¹⁵ The painting et de sculpture are discussed in David Wakefield, *French Eighteenth Century Painting* 22-25.

¹⁶ The artist's words are quoted in Joseph Baillio, "Quelques Peintures Reattribuees a Vigee Le Brun", 14.

¹⁷ Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun, *Memoirs*, 22. "Perceiving that I was still under the impression of my cruel loss, my mother took it into her head to lead me around the picture-galleries."

-
- ¹⁸ Baillio, "Quelques Peintures Reattribuees a Vigee Le Brun", 14-15.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 16, fig.4. E-L Vigee *Portrait de Jeanne Maissin 'vue par le dos'*, undated, location unknown.
- ²⁰ Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun, *Memoirs*, 21.
- ²¹ Ibid., 23.
- ²² Baillio, "Quelques Peintures Reattribuees a Vigee Le Brun", 16.
- ²³ Louis Reau, *Histoire de la Peinture Francaise au XVIIIe Siecle* (Paris & Brussels: G. van Oest, Tome 1, 1925), 80.
- ²⁴ Ann S. Harris, *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, 190.
- ²⁵ Joseph Vernet's advice is quoted in Baillio, E-L Vigee Le Brun, 1755-1842, 39.
- ²⁶ Reproduced in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, vol.91, 1978.
- ²⁷ Baillio in E-L Vigee Le Brun, 1755-1842, 39, mentions that two of them were recorded in the 1778 sale of Mme de Cosse under the titles *Women Drawing Water from a Well* and *Boatman Pulling his Craft towards the Shore*.
- ²⁸ Baillio, "Quelques Peintures Reattribuees a Vigee Le Brun", 15. Quentin de la Tour, *Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne*, Cabinet des Dessins du Louvre.
- ²⁹ The artist's words are quoted in Reau, *Histoire de la Peinture Francaise*, 80.
- ³⁰ Raymont Couallier, "La Bruyere et ses portraits" in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 61 (1963):329. Largillier, *La Bruyere*, undated, Coll. Du duc de Mouchy, 331 H. Rigaud, *La Bruyere*, undated, dessus de port au chateau de Chantilly, Musee Conde.
- ³¹ Elisabeth Vigee Le Brun, *Memoirs*, 23.
- ³² Baillio, "Quelques Peintures Reattribuees a Vigee Le Brun", 4, fig.6. E.L. Vigee, *Le Sevre*, ca. 1772 Location unknown.
- ³³ Adelaide Labille-Guiard studied with both Quentin de la Tour and Francois Elie Vincent, 1708-1790. See Ann S. Harris, *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, 185.
- ³⁴ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 150.
- ³⁵ According to the artist's words the Queen was accused of being portrayed "en chemise." E. L. Vigee Le Brun, *Memoirs* 53-54. According to Aileen Ribeiro, the chemise or shift was worn by women as their main undergarment but in the middle of the eighteenth century a new fashion of the so-called chemise dress, a lightweight muslin gown, appeared. Often transparent and revealing, the chemise dress became the cause of numerous attacks against women's morals, especially when worn by women of an elevated status as for example a Queen. Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986).
- ³⁶ Jean-Luc Bordeaux "Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun 1755-1842" in *Art International* 26 (1983). "Le success commercial et artistique des epoux Le Brun progressa rapidement, ce qui les encouragea a acquerir le vaste Hotel De Lubert qui abrita l'un des salons mondains les plus a la mode de l' époque."
- ³⁷ Pierre Rosenberg, "A Drawing by Madame Vigee Le Brun" in *Burlington Magazine* 123 (1981):739. "Vigee Le Brun was not the first woman to become a member of the Academy: she was preceded in 1722 by Rosalba Carriera (1675-1757), in 1757 by Mme Vien(1728-1805), in 1767 by Anna Dorothea Lisiewska-Therbusch (1721-82), and in 1770 by Mme Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744-1818) and Mme Roslin (1734-72)".
- ³⁸ Rosenberg, "A Drawing by Mme Vigee Le Brun", 740. "The real ground of this objection was the simple fact that, despite the support of Joseph Vernet, Mme Vigee seems to have been unpopular with most of her painter contemporaries (especially Pierre, who became 'premier peintre du roi' in 1770), who were offended by Marie-Antoinette's conspicuous patronage of Mme Vigee."
- ³⁹ Baillio, E. L. Vigee Le Brun, 1755-1842 41.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 42.
- ⁴¹ Rosenberg, "A Drawing by Mme Vigee Le Brun", 739.
- ⁴² E.g. *Peace and Justice*, undated, unknown location, Baillio, E-L Vigee Le Brun, 1755- 1842, 43.
- ⁴³ Rosenberg, "A Drawing by Mme Vigee Le Brun" 741.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Vigee Le Brun, *Memoirs*, 56.
- ⁴⁶ Adam Brooks "Privileged Portraits: Vigee Le Brun" in *Art in America* 70 (1982): 77. "Her memoirs, published in 1835-37, are certainly her liveliest and most romantic self-portrait. The book seems to have taken shape in the course of her salons, as she dictated her reminiscences to her niece, nephew and various visiting authors. Even before she "wrote" her book, she actively participated in a nostalgic cult of royalism by re-exhibiting *Marie Antoinette and her Children* at the Salon of 1817 and by reviving her own salon during the Bourbon Restoration."
- ⁴⁷ Baillio, E-L Vigee Le Brun, 1755-1842, 63.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Christopher Brown, *Anthony van Dyck* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1982), 224.

⁵⁰ However, as Carol Duncan has amply demonstrated, the scope of women's education was still limited and mainly directed towards the fulfillment of their domestic duties, i.e. the caring of their husband and the upbringing and education of their children. Carol Duncan, "Happy Mothers and Other new Ideas in French Art" in *The Art Bulletin* LV (1973):582.

⁵¹ Phillip Conisbee, *Painting in Eighteenth century France* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1981), 124.

⁵² Baillio E-L, *Vigee Le Brun, 1755-1842*, 8.

⁵³ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁴ In 1787, after seeing Vigee Le Brun's portrait of Marie Antoinette, Reynolds had the following exchange with his pupil James Northcote: "Pray what do you think of them, Sir Joshua?" "That they are very fine" he answered. "How fine?" I said. "As fine as those of any painter," was his answer. "As fine as those of any painter, do you say? Do you mean living or dead?" When he answered me rather briskly, "Either living or dead." I then, in great surprise, exclaimed, "Good G...! what, as fine as Vandyke?" He answered tartly "Yes and finer." Quoted in Baillio, E. L *Vigee Le Brun, 1755-1842*, 63.

⁵⁵ The critical appraisal of Vigee Le Brun's portraits of the unfortunate Queen Marie-Antoinette emerged out of the discussions between the author of this article and the well-known British painter Dorian Ker. D. Ker was kind enough to provide his knowledge and expertise to the final presentation of this paper in the eighteenth century art seminar at the Department of Art History of the University of Essex, UK. (1994).

Selected Bibliography

- Baillio, Joseph; Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, 1755-1842 cat. exh. David Robb (ed), Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas June 5 - Aug 8 1982.
. Quelques Peintures Reattribuées à Vigée Le Brun; in, *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, Vol. 99, Jan 1982, pp 13-26.
- Bordeaux, Jean-Luc; Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, 1755-1842; in, *Art International*, Vol. 26, II/Aug 1983, pp. 25-87.
- Brilliant, Richard; *Portraiture* Reaktion Books, London, 1991.
- Brooks, Adams; *Privileged Portraits: Vigée Le Brun*, in, *Art in America*, Vol. 70, Nov 1982, pp.74-81.
- Brown, Christopher; Anthony van Dyck. Phaidon Press, Oxford, 1982.
- Chadwick, Whitney; *Women. Art and Society* Thames & Hudson, London 1990, repr 1992.
- Chateau de Versailles; Marie-Antoinette Archiduchess, Dauphin et reine, cat exh. Editions des Musees Nationaux, 16 May - 2 Nov 1955.
- Conisbee, Philip; *Painting in Eighteenth Century France*, Phaidon Press, Oxford, 1981.
- Couallier, Raymond; *La Bruyère et ses Portraits*, in, *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, Vol. 61, May 1963, pp. 327-36.
- Crow, Thomas; *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-century Paris* Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1985.
- De Lastic, Georges; *Vigée Le Brun*, in, *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, vol.100: supp. Sept 82, pp 33-4.
- De Nolhac, Pierre; *Mme Vigée Lebrun, peintre de la reine Marie-Antoinette* Gupil & Manzi, Paris, 1908.
. *La Reine Marie-Antoinette* Colman & Leny, Paris 1931.
- Duncan, Carol; *Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in French Art.*, in, *Art bulletin*. LV, Dec 1973, pp. 570-83.
- Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Le Brun; *Memoirs* trans. by Shelley Gerard, John Hamilton Ltd., London 1926.
- Fine, Elsa-Honig; *Women and Art. A History of Women painters and Sculptors from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century*, Allonheld & Schram/Pris, Montclair, London, 1978.
- Gallet, Michel; *La Maison de Madame Vigée-Lebrun rue du Gros-Chenet.*, in, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Vol. 56, Nov. 1960, pp. 275-84.
- Greer, Germaine; *The Obstacle Race. The Fortunes of Women Painters and their work*, Secker & Warbourg, London 1979.
- Haskell, Francis; *Rediscoveries in Art. Some Aspects of Taste. Fashion and Collecting in England and France*. Phaidon Press, London, 1976.
- Hearsey, John; *Marie Antoinette*, Constable, London, 1969.
- Levey, Michael; *Rococo to Revolution: major trends in eighteenth-century painting*. Thames & Hudson, London 1977 (repr.) 1984.
- Munhall, Edgar; *The Beauty of the Head that Ruled*, in *Art News*, vol.82, Jan 1983, pp. 106-108.
- Nochlin, Linda & Harris S. Ann; *Women Artists 1550-1950* cat.exh Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Dec 1976- March 1977.
- Parker, Roszika & Pollock, Griselda; *Old Mistresses. Women Art and Ideology*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981.
- Pollock, Griselda; *Vision and Difference. Femininity. Feminism and Histories of Art*. Routledge, London & New York, 1988.

- Reau, Louis; *Histoire de la Peinture Francaise au XVIIIe Siecle*. G. van Oest, Paris & Bruxelles, tome I, 1925 Tome II, 1926.
- Ribeiro, Aileen; *Dress and Morality*. Holmes & Meier, New York, 1986.
- Rosenberg, Pierre; A Drawing by Madame Vigee-Le Brun., in, *Burlington Magazine*, vol.123, Dec 1981, pp. 739-40.
- Saisselin, Remy; *Style, Truth and the Portrait*. Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland 1963.
- Schnapper, Anton; *Jacques-Louis David, Alpine fine Arts collection*, New York 1982 Smith L. David; *Observations on a Few Celebrated Women Artists*.in, *American Artist*, Vol. 26, Jan 1962, pp. 50-57.
- Sutton, Denys; *Madame Vigee Le Brun; A survivor of the ancien Regime.*,in, *Apollo*, ns 116, July 1982, pp. 24-30.
- Thullier, Jacques & Chatelet, Albert; *French Painting from le Nain to Fragonard*. Skira, Geneva 1964.
- Tufts, Eleanor; *Our Hidden Heritage. Five centuries of women artists*. Paddington Press, New York, 1974.
- Vigee Le Brun. In, *Art Journal*, Vol. 42, no. 4, Winter 1982, pp. 33.
- Wakefield, David; *French Eighteenth-century Painting*. Gordon Fraser, London 1984.
- Wilton, Andrew. *The Swagger Portrait. Grand Manner Portraiture in Britain from van Dyck to Augustus John 1630-1930*. Tate Gallery, London, 1992.