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A TALE OF TWO QUEENS: ÉLISABETH VIGÉE LE BRUN AND MARIE ANTOINETTE

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ARTH35400: Nineteenth Century Art
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What started as an unlikely partnership would blossom into a powerful and close friendship between artist Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun and Queen Marie Antoinette. The former was able to enjoy increased career success and esteem, with many thanks owed to the patronage of the latter, who would experience a decline in general popularity. The working friendship of the two powerful women is shown under the guise of Vigée Le Brun's famed portraiture. Vigée Le Brun's gentle, soft, and dew-like detailing and treatment of her subjects enabled her to portray Marie Antoinette in a fresh light. However, the artist's daring approach often won her a fair amount of criticism at the Salon. Even in her familiarizing self-portraits, the influence of the Salon and the pressing need to control audience perception of the subject are evident. Study of Vigée Le Brun's portraits of Marie Antoinette from the late 1770s through the 1780s reveals striking parallels to the artist's self-portraits of similar style. Both subjects reveal Vigée Le Brun's ingenious rendering of femininity as something both commanding and familiar. That the artist could represent herself and the Queen of France in similar ways illustrates the kind of relationship the two women shared. The comfort and ease felt by Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun in her interactions with her most famous subject, Marie Antoinette, are evident when portraits of the two women are compared throughout the artist's career and as their powerful relationship grew.

Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun was born in April of 1755 to Parisian portraitist Louis Vigée and hairdresser Jeanne Maissin.¹ Although Élisabeth was an awkward child who was not looked upon as favorably by her mother as her younger brother, Louis-Jean-Baptiste-Etienne,

¹ Gita May, *Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun: The Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 7.

Élisabeth's father fostered her artistic talent at a young age and showed her great affection. Louis Vigée was himself a skilled portraitist, though not a particularly renowned one. He was a professor at the honorable but less-prestigious Academy of Saint Luc.² His daughter's penchant for art would become apparent at a rather young age. From the age of six to the age of eleven, Élisabeth was enrolled in a convent to learn basic skills such as reading and sewing, a common educational practice for members of the bourgeoisie.³ While at the convent, the young Élisabeth would sketch on nearly every available space, including the margins of her books and to the dismay of the convent, the walls of her dormitory. She once kept a drawing of a bearded man to show her father, who "cried out with joy: 'You will be a painter, my child!'"⁴

Unfortunately, while his daughter was at the age of 12 and himself only 52, Louis Vigée passed away as a result of an infected wound, leaving Élisabeth feeling alone and depressed. Working on improving her painting skills would provide her with the emotional solace she needed to endure these hard times. Élisabeth would be influenced and taught by "a succession of male artists from an early age", including painter Pierre Davesne and esteemed history painter Gabriel-François Doyen.⁵ Because she was a budding woman artist, her training would not be as organized as a man's would be. While studying under the painter Briard, Élisabeth was urged by him not to "follow any school of painting [and to]... look only to the old Italian and Flemish masters; but above all, [to] draw as much as [she could] from nature."⁶ As the artist grew out of her awkward phase as an adolescent, her artistic talent continued to grow as well. Despite her

² Ibid., 8.

³ Ibid., 11.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Francis Borzello, *A World of Our Own: Women as Artists Since the Renaissance* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2000), 85.

⁶ Ibid., 88.

drawing lessons with Briard, Élisabeth was proud of the fact that she had been an essentially self-taught artist, with her innate artistic skills present from a very young age.

Early in her painting career, her mother and brother often sat in for portraits. One work, *Portrait of Étienne Vigée (Brother of the Artist)*, has been dated to 1773, when Élisabeth would have been a teenager (Figure 1). In this work, the artist's brother is shown with spirited youth, holding a portfolio and pen as if eager to begin his studies or to follow his passion. The freshness and emotional spontaneity captured by Vigée Le Brun in this work foreshadows aspects of her later portraits, in which she also carefully captures details of those who are dear to her. Now a talented and beautiful young artist, Vigée Le Brun entered the fabulous French social circles, leading to commissions from several "ladies of the court".⁷ As her success grew, so did the rank of her portrait sitters. One such "highly ranked" sitter was Madame du Barry, an ex-mistress of the late Louis XV.⁸ From 1781-89, Vigée Le Brun would paint three portraits of Madame du Barry. She would also, however, have been painting portraits of her most notorious sitter by this time.

Although Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun notes being very nervous her first time painting Marie Antoinette at Versailles, the monarch would become one of her most beloved friends. From the start of their time together, Marie Antoinette treated Vigée Le Brun with gentle compassion. In her memoirs, Élisabeth recounts one instance in which she had been pregnant and after kneeling down to retrieve paintbrushes she had spilled, was told by Marie Antoinette to "leave everything" because she was "too advanced in [her] pregnancy to bend down" after which the

⁷ Gita May, *Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun: The Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

queen herself picked the items up.⁹ At some point during their portrait sessions the two women would conclude each session by singing together, although Marie Antoinette lacked a proper singing voice, because she had learned that Élisabeth possessed a pleasant singing voice.¹⁰

In 1778, Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun painted her first portrait of Marie Antoinette, *Marie Antoinette "en robe à paniers"* (Figure 2). It was the first of many portraits the artist would produce of Marie Antoinette from the year 1778 to 1789.¹¹ In this work, Marie Antoinette is depicted in a formal manner that is traditional for monarchs. Simply put, it is a full-body portrait with the subject in full regalia, surrounded by a rich setting. The queen wears a heavily decorated satin gown with a somewhat revealing low-cut neck. Ruffles, tassels, bows, tufting, lace, and fringe adorn the bluish-white satin gown. Touches of gold highlight the gown's tufts and draw the eye upward, from the variously placed tassels up to the piping on the bodice to the queen's shoulder and neckline. Marie Antoinette's massive skirt is supported by a whalebone frame (called a *panier*), much like a traditional hoopskirt but more oriented to the sides. A long train flows away from the back of the dress and onto a chair in the background. A single bejeweled foot peeks out from under the imposing skirt. Her hairstyle and feather headpiece add height to her stature, giving her an even more dominating presence.

The backdrop does not stray from the norms for formal monarch portraiture. A massive column in the background sets the grandiosity of the scene. The colors found in the gown are seemingly transposed onto the backdrop. A large, bluish curtain is draped in the background,

⁹ Ibid., 38.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Catherine R. Montfort, "Self-Portraits, Portraits of Self: Adelaide Labille-Guiard and Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun, Women Artists of the 18th Century," *Pacific Coast Philology* 40, no. 1 (2005): 5.

with gold trim accenting both it and the walls. Dusty, velveteen red colors are balanced to the sides of the queen, on the chair and on the tablecloth. On the table sits a vase of flowers (one of which the queen is holding) and a luxurious pillow upon which the royal crown sits. Above the table, on a ledge, sits a marble bust of Louis XVI. These objects also signify Marie Antoinette's power as a ruler. The finely achieved textures of this portrait illustrate Vigée Le Brun's breadth of skill and ability as a painter. Her choice of setting and adornment demonstrate her prowess as a court painter. However, these masterful elements do little in the way of revealing much about Marie Antoinette personally. This may be to be expected of Vigée Le Brun's first portrait of the queen, of which she was reportedly quite nervous about undertaking. The queen's gaze does not meet ours and she almost apathetically, although delicately, holds the rose in one hand and rests the other on her skirt. The overall formality of this single-subject portrait pleased Marie Antoinette, however, and she ordered two copies of it.¹²

Just as Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun depicted Marie Antoinette as a monarch, she depicted herself as an artist. In her 1783 *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat*, she depicts herself as both an artist and a feminine woman, unafraid of comparing herself with the great masters who came before her (Figure 3). In this self-portrait, she wears a dusty pink-colored satiny gown with white trim. The gown is relatively unadorned except for a ruffled collar. The black shawl she has around her also features a few ruffles. Her straw hat, or *chapeau de paille*, is richly adorned with rustic flowers and a large ostrich feather. The clouds in the background reflect the coloration of

¹² Gita May, *Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun: The Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 37.

her gown. The artist's hands tell us a story. In one hand she clutches her paintbrushes and palette. Her other hand is in an "open" position, as if inviting the viewer in. Unlike in the portrait of Marie Antoinette, Vigée Le Brun meets us directly with her gaze and warm smile. This expression is part of her feminine charm.

For this work, Vigée Le Brun took her cues from Rubens' *Portrait of Susanna Lunden*, or *Le Chapeau de Paille* (Figure 4). The compositions of both works are nearly identical although small differences between the two subjects exist. Rather than have a décolletage that is forced upwards by a tight corset, Vigée Le Brun's is "low and free".¹³ Additionally, rather than peering up coyly like Rubens' subject, Vigée Le Brun's gaze meets ours straight on. A third difference is in the hands, which in the Rubens work are held high and tight under the chest. As discussed, the hands in the self-portrait are shown in a more open position while grasping painting materials. In her efforts to reproduce the Rubens work, Vigée Le Brun hoped to capture the lighting that had so enchanted her about the work previously: "the two different light sources, simple daylight and the light of the sun, so the highlighted part is that illuminated by the sun, and what I must call the shadow, for lack of another term, is in fact daylight."¹⁴ Vigée Le Brun's imitation of Rubens and her replacement of his subject with herself positions her as master of her (artistic) domain in a way that is different than her representation of Marie Antoinette as the powerful queen of her domain.

Although they came from two different economic and social backgrounds, Marie Antoinette and Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun are both mothers. In one of the artist's most famous and

¹³ Ibid., 42.

¹⁴ Catherine R. Montfort, "Self-Portraits, Portraits of Self: Adelaide Labille-Guiard and Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun, Women Artists of the 18th Century," *Pacific Coast Philology* 40, no. 1 (2005): 10.

somewhat controversial portraits of Marie Antoinette, *Marie-Antoinette and Her Children*, the maternal aspect of womanhood appears to transcend social boundaries (Figure 5). In the portrait, Marie Antoinette appears at ease among her brood of children, seated high and proper, dressed in a red gown and feathered hat. This likeness of the queen was created in an effort to improve her public image that had been dwindling, further fueled by the so-called 'Diamond Necklace Affair'.¹⁵ This work communicates a political message about morality and ideal middle class values. It was shown in the Salon of 1787 alongside two other portraits of similar subject matter. This portrait can be studied as being loosely based on altarpieces depicting Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi. As such, Marie Antoinette's children are her jewels, not her literal ones, and are her gifts to the French populace. Angelica Kauffmann's 1785 painting of Cornelia is an example of a literal depiction of the mother of the Gracchi (Figure 6). The excited energy of her children and the pointing, pulling, and grasping they are engaged in is balanced by Marie Antoinette's somewhat stoic but contented pose. This is much like Kauffman's Cornelia who gently gestures to her sons.

One source of controversy surrounding *Marie-Antoinette and Her Children* is that the queen seems too stoic and stiff when compared to the warm embrace given by Vigée Le Brun in her self-portrait *The Artist and Her Daughter* (Figure 7). This work was also displayed at the 1787 Salon and showed viewers that Vigée Le Brun was capable of depicting motherly warmth, giving rise to some issues people had with the previously described work. Biblical cues were also taken by this work, as the artist and her daughter can be compared with the Virgin and

¹⁵ Paula Rea Radisich, "Que Peut Définir Les Femmes?: Vigée-Lebrun's Portraits of an Artist," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 25, no. 4 (1992): 449.

Child, such as in Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia* (Figure 8).¹⁶ Some similarities are present in the textile colors of both works. But it is the close embrace shared by mother and child that is most recognizably similar between Élisabeth and her daughter and the Virgin and Child. Both mothers overlap their hands as they keep their child close. Both mothers look directly at the viewer, Vigée Le Brun with her trademark sweet smile. The artist excels at portraying the maternal facet of womanhood, regardless of her subject.

Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun's friendship with Marie Antoinette brought her as much drama as it did fortune. The artist was admitted into the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1783 thanks in large part to the involvement of Marie Antoinette.¹⁷ Vigée Le Brun does not highlight this factor in her later memoirs, but rather focuses on her *Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat* as a major reason for her admittance. Several rumors would circulate regarding Vigée Le Brun, including one regarding relations with a former finance minister. She continuously denied the rumor. Another rumor circulated about her legitimacy as an artist and whether or not she had created works attributed to her. Yet another rumor came about at the time of Vigée Le Brun's admittance into the Académie. Another woman artist, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, was admitted at the same time as Vigée Le Brun and it was being said that while the latter gained her admittance principally due to Marie Antoinette's aid, the former had earned her admittance all alone. This eventually created a rivalry between the two women, at least in the public eye. Once the French

¹⁶ Catherine R. Montfort, "Self-Portraits, Portraits of Self: Adélaïde Labille-Guiard and Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun, Women Artists of the 18th Century," *Pacific Coast Philology* 40, no. 1 (2005): 11.

¹⁷ Gita May, *Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun: The Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 43.

Revolution hit, it was Marie Antoinette's influence in the life Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun that led to her decision to flee France in 1803.

When comparing French portraitist Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun's self-portraits and portraits of Marie Antoinette, the growing bond between these two powerful women becomes evident. In addition, both subjects are presented in similar ways, under the guise of Vigée Le Brun's famed style of painting. What started with pomp and formality in *Marie Antoinette "en robe à paniers"* soon became comfort and familiarity in *Marie-Antoinette and Her Children*. When compared with two similar self-portraits of the artist, it is seen that these women from two distinct backgrounds were not actually that dissimilar. They both stood as symbols of power, womanhood, and motherhood. Vigée Le Brun fearlessly put herself in a powerful position by not only imitating works of late masters, but by replacing the former subjects with herself. As for Marie Antoinette, being Queen of France gave her her power, but it was Vigée Le Brun's genius brush that expressed her femininity and maternal tenderness. Together Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun and Marie Antoinette, masters of their own domains, grew in influence, as illustrated by their portraits by the artist.

FIGURES

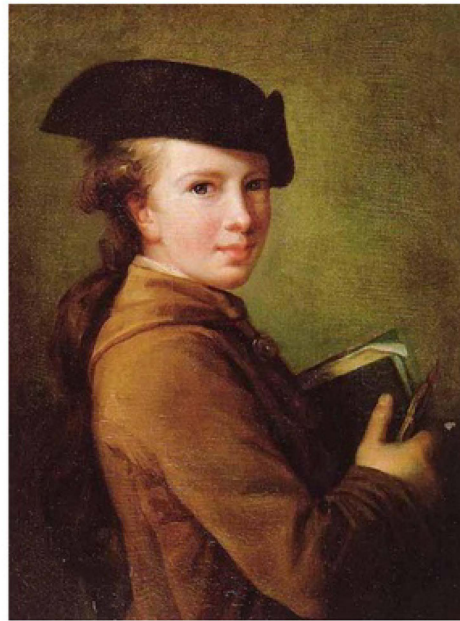


Figure 1: Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Portrait of Étienne Vigée*, 1773, oil on canvas, 24 1/4" x 19 7/8"



Figure 2: Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Marie Antoinette "en robe à paniers"*, 1778, oil on canvas



Figure 3: Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat*, 1782, oil on canvas, 97.8 x 70.5 cm



Figure 4: Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of Susanna Lunden*, 1622-26, oil on oak, 79 x 54.6 cm



Figure 5: Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Marie-Antoinette and Her Children*, 1787, oil on canvas



Figure 6: Angelica Kauffmann, *Cornelia, Mother of the Gracchi*, 1785



Figure 7: Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *The Artist and Her Daughter*, 1786, oil on canvas



Figure 8: Raphael, *Madonna della Sedia*, 1514, oil paint

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