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## The Women of the French Royal Academy: An Improved Online Exhibition Experience

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THE WOMEN OF THE FRENCH ROYAL ACADEMY:  
AN IMPROVED ONLINE EXHIBITION EXPERIENCE

by

Nicole Chapman

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Art History and Visual Culture  
at  
Lindenwood University

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Art and Design Department  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
at  
Lindenwood University

By

Nicole Chapman  
Saint Charles, Missouri  
December 2023

## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE WOMEN OF THE FRENCH ROYAL ACADEMY: AN IMPROVED ONLINE EXHIBITION EXPERIENCE**

Nicole Chapman, Master of Arts in Art History and Visual Culture, 2023

Thesis Directed by: Dr. Trenton Olsen, Associate Professor

The purpose of this project is to demonstrate the capabilities of digital spaces to engage and create in-depth teaching opportunities for museum educators. The final deliverables consist of a mock museum website and virtual exhibition that features artwork created by the female artists of the French Royal Academy during the Eighteenth-Century. The content within is tailored for Advanced Placement curriculum and the public.

Keywords: virtual exhibition, museum education, art history, 21<sup>st</sup> century learning

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I would also like to dedicate this to my loved ones; all have supported me in ways I can not possibly give enough thanks for. Johnathon, Jen, and Seth—Thank you! Kai and Koa, thank you for being the two brightest lights in my life. Dad, without your unrelenting support for my success, I would not be here. Mom, this final achievement is for you. Like the women I have studied extensively for this project, your passion and legacy are resounding. I love you always.

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## Introduction

Art museums have long been excellent institutions for not only the preservation of artifacts and paintings created throughout the centuries but as informal “classrooms” for those interested in the in-depth learning and close-up viewing experience the brick and mortar have to offer. Museums offer on-site explorative and critical thinking opportunities with museum education programs that serve to engage groups of k-12 classes or guided tours with museum educators that have the ability to converse face-to-face and provide commentary and answer any questions the public may have. These services are integral to the traditional museum experience, but with the transition into the technology age, museums have had to adapt to the way their communities engage with art collections and the institutions themselves. Though debatable, distance learning and presence on social media have encouraged creative problem-solving regarding visitor engagement and museum sustainability.

The question of whether the digital age has affected the museum experience is irrelevant. The brick-and-mortar experience will always be one of novelty; to come face-to-face with artworks that have survived long past their creators is an experience that cannot be matched, online or otherwise. What about those who cannot easily visit these institutions or learn from the museum educators? How can art museums use their online presence to expand educational opportunities and foster a connection with a community online, one that extends beyond their own surrounding area? Exhibitions hosted online through institutions such as the MET or university galleries have become a part of the museum experience to integrate technology into their community outreach mission, but from personal experience, I have found them to be unengaging and simple in design. For institutions with access to resources and educated staff, the presentation of artworks in exhibitions are often simple slideshows of what the physical



exhibitions have to offer with basic background information regarding the artist or theme of the exhibition available to read. With technological advancements such as VR and more access to web design software that is created to be user-friendly, online exhibition experiences can be far more engaging and educational for visitors.

As an online student and future educator, I recognize the value of online education and encourage institutions such as art museums to create or improve their online learning programs. To inspire such changes, my project will consist of a mock website and embedded virtual exhibition about four of the French Royal Academy's female artists: Anne Vallayer-Coster, Marie Therese Reboul (or Madame Vien), Elisabeth Louise Vigee LeBrun, and Adelaide Labille-Guiard. The exhibition will include a selection of artworks that highlight the various mediums and genres of paintings the female artists were known for and include background historical information to provide visitors with in-depth knowledge about each.

### **Literature Review**

Museum education focuses on the whys and hows of learning experiences and in recent years, 21st century and global learning has become an integral part of the education system. The integration of technology within the classrooms has been an important development in the future of K-12 curriculum; however, informal educational institutions such as museums and historical preservations must also be included. In the Art Museum Director 2022 Survey: Documenting Change in Museum Strategy and Operations, nearly 80% of art directors at academic and municipal museums prioritized the expansion of virtual engagement. Well over 75% of these same directors reported "providing educational programs", "being a trusted source for

information and learning”, and “providing digital experiences” as incredibly important museum missions.<sup>1</sup> How can museum educators meet these target objectives?

Fortunately, there are a plethora of peer-reviewed sources which one can reference when thinking about how museum education can be improved online, and the opportunities technology can present. In their article, “The Educational and Economic Value of Online Learning for Museums,” Crow and Din discuss the benefits of web-based learning for museums and other informal educational institutions to engage students and teachers via online platforms.<sup>2</sup> The authors discuss two major points in their article, global outreach and access and the ability to engage with the community in familiar spaces – two factors that are integral to the success of online museum education.<sup>3</sup> While art museums have largely operated using object-based learning on-site, finding ways to bring these artifacts to viewers online creates an opportunity for the museum educators to create another digital space for learning—spaces such as social media, news media sites, and others the public has become accustomed to sharing and receiving information from daily.

Museum educators can also support teachers in classrooms. For example, the American Museum of Natural History began creating free online content for distribution such as video documentaries of the museum’s collection, online forums with updated scientific news, and a

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<sup>1</sup> Liam Sweeney and Joanna Dressel. “Digitizing Collections.” *Art Museum Director Survey 2022: Documenting Change in Museum Strategy and Operations*. ITHAKA S+R, 2022. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep49582.10>.

<sup>2</sup> William B. Crow, and Herminia Din. “The Educational and Economic Value of Online Learning for Museums.” *The Journal of Museum Education* 35, no. 2 (2010): 161–72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25801345>.

<sup>3</sup> Crow, The Educational and Economic Value of Online Learning for Museums, 163.

website tailored to children to include interactive programs, videos, and activities.<sup>4</sup> Teachers were able to access the educational content created by museum research staff and tailor their lesson plans to create a more personal learning experience for their students. This way, the relationship between museums and public schools continues beyond the physical trips to sites.

So, how can an online educational experience be tailored to suit art museums and their unique operations? We must consider both the pedagogy for museum education and online learning for the visual arts. Quay and his co-authors in “The Art of Education and the Work(ing) of Art: Theorizing Museum Educator Pedagogies” begin by suggesting the manner in which education is carried out within the museum setting is different from the teaching pedagogies used within the school classroom.<sup>5</sup> While traditional curriculum learning is focused on academic or fact-based education, the museum’s education is focused on encouraging reflective and analytical learning—creating a learner experience where “truth” of artwork is constructed through the relationship or engagement between viewer and object.<sup>6</sup> While artworks certainly have fact-based knowledge such as historical background information regarding the details of its creation (i.e., artist, production date, materials used), visitors will contemplate and form new questions or thoughts that derive from their own interactions within the exhibition experience.

The museum learning experience is also explored in Sederberg’s article, “Bringing the Museum to the Classroom, and the Class to the Museum: An Approach to Content-Based Instruction” where the author suggests educators adopt museum-based pedagogy to create

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Gano, and Ro Kinzler. “Bringing the Museum into the Classroom.” *Science* 331, no. 6020 (2011): 1028–29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41075749>.

<sup>5</sup> “The Art of Education and the Work(ing) of Art: Theorizing Museum Educator Pedagogies.” 2022. *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 56 (1): 1–21. doi:10.5406/15437809.56.1.05.

<sup>6</sup> Quay, *The Art of Education and the Work(ing) of Art: Theorizing Museum Educator Pedagogies*, 86.

lessons in their classrooms—that is to mimic the experimental and multidisciplinary learning that occurs in museum settings.<sup>7</sup> The author’s section on the inclusion of museums visits, both physical and virtual, to compliment classroom instruction highlighted a challenge with the virtuality of museums—that it lacks the affective engagement and object-interactions that actual museum visits possess.<sup>8</sup> From her details, both exhibitions seem to have been websites with photographs of the exhibition objects and short videos about the exhibition. This critique highlights the pros and cons of the virtual museum experience for students and provides an excellent challenge for the development of my own virtual museum to overcome.

Continuing with the concept of individualized perceived meaning, Hubbard’s article “Negotiating Personal and Cultural Significance: A Theoretical Framework for Art Museum Education” states that the museum educator must be prepared to expect differing visitor experiences with artwork and welcomes them to facilitate differing interpretations.<sup>9</sup> When creating the text for my virtual exhibition, I need to keep in mind the pedagogy Hubbard embraces—one that balances the viewer’s interpretation with the artist’s intent. How can I present facts in a way that does not interfere with one’s process of gathering and interpreting information? Hubbard provides museum educators with guidelines to facilitate contextual learning in group settings that do not prevent individuals from forming their own understanding of artwork in her article, “Productive Information: Contextual Knowledge in Art Museum

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<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Sederberg. “Bringing the Museum into the Classroom, and the Class into the Museum: An Approach for Content-Based Instruction.” *Die Unterrichtspraxis / Teaching German* 46, no. 2 (2013): 251–62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/unteteacgerm.46.2.251>.

<sup>8</sup> Sederberg, “Bringing the Museum to the Classroom, and the Class to the Museum”, 259.

<sup>9</sup> Olga M. Hubard. “Negotiating Personal and Cultural Significance: A Theoretical Framework for Art Museum Education.” *Curator* 50, no. 4 (2007): 401–16. doi:10.1111/j.2151-6952.2007.tb00282.x.

Education”.<sup>10</sup> She urges museum educators and teachers to format their discussions to create opportunities for what she terms ”productive viewing”. To successfully create these opportunities, the author suggests educators first determine what information is relevant and will provide valuable information for the interpretation of the artwork and artist intention—avoiding cliché facts about the author such as Van Gogh’s renowned manic episode that led to his disfigurement.<sup>11</sup> Hubbard states that educators before jumping into discussions with viewers discern between what is factual information and what is interpretation. She also urges educators to allow students to ”look” for information rather than instantly providing descriptions of the artworks. This also leads to her next point of waiting for viewers to gather information before providing answers. This allows the viewer to exercise their critical thinking and provides opportunities for them to make connections between their own experiences and what they are viewing. With this, the author wants educators to remember that viewers will bring their own knowledge and cultural meanings to artworks and to encourage dialogue between visitors to create collaborative meaning-making opportunities.<sup>12</sup> Overall both articles by Hubbard provide effective guidelines for how museum educators can facilitate information processing and meaning-making that I will reference during the creation of the mock museum website and exhibition text.

Ebitz’s article “Sufficient Foundation: Theory in the Practice of Art Museum Education” discusses museum education practices, specifically the theories that inform the art museum

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<sup>10</sup> Olga M. Hubbard. “Productive Information: Contextual Knowledge in Art Museum Education.” *Art Education* 60, no. 4 (2007): 17–23. doi:10.2307/27696223.

<sup>11</sup> Hubbard, Productive Information: Contextual Knowledge in Art Museum Education, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Hubbard, Productive Information..., 22.

educator's teaching pedagogy.<sup>13</sup> Ebitz's findings place Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's Flow or Psychology of Optimal Experience as the most frequently cited learning theories in the development of critical theory practices art museum educators use. Like Hubbard's thoughts, Ebitz believes art educators must consider the visitor experience while honoring object-based learning in the museum. More so, he focuses on what's missing from museum education. He notes critical theories such as feminism and queer theory have changed how art historians in museums curate (or how they have been reluctant to acknowledge new art history) but also how the institutions should consider the social and economic differences among visitors when developing museum programs and exhibitions.<sup>14</sup> Such theories will inform the way I pose questions regarding the artworks within the exhibition to create opportunities for critical thinking and reflection for the viewers.

“Creating space for active learning: (Opportunities from) using technology in research-based education” provides an excellent overview of how technology positively impacts student engagement and fosters active learning. Gallou and Abrahams state that technology can provide multisensory experiences that change or enhance the way information is being processed therefore creating more memorable learning experiences.<sup>15</sup> Technology can also provide valuable feedback for educators and partners when qualitative data is needed to support the

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<sup>13</sup> David Ebitz. “Sufficient Foundation: Theory in the Practice of Art Museum Education.” *Visual Arts Research* 34, no. 2 (2008): 14–24. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=aft&AN=505274056&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>14</sup> Ebitz, Sufficient Foundation, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Gallou, Eirini, and Peter Abrahams. “Creating Space for Active Learning: (Opportunities from) Using Technology in Research-Based Education.” In *Shaping Higher Education with Students: Ways to Connect Research and Teaching*, edited by Vincent C. H. Tong, Alex Standen, and Mina Sotiriou, 165–75. UCL Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt21c4tcm.27>.

development and integration of technology in 21<sup>st</sup> century focused education. With this in mind, I will also be able to utilize features available within the virtual exhibition to serve all learning styles: visual, auditory, and in a way kinesthetic learners.

There are also a range of sources focused on the development of exhibitions both physical and virtual as well as critical reviews of online exhibitions that will drive my design choices. Hybrid museum experiences introduce technology into the day-to-day museum operation and create opportunities for visitors to engage with collections and each other to create more individualized and informed experiences.<sup>16</sup> In the collaborative article, “Hybrid Museum Experiences from the text Hybrid Museum Experience: Theory and Design”, ways that technology, including augmented reality devices and online social platforms, influence visitor engagement are discussed. Of course, Løvlie et al. state the obvious that online exhibitions allow institutes to be able to highlight more of their collection without spatial constraints commonly experienced onsite. However, they explore how technology can allow for more social and interpersonal opportunities among museum goers. While these practices are informed for a hybrid experience within the brick and mortar, certainly the emphasis on the social as well as an improved visitor-object relationship can be considered when creating online experiences.

Giaccardi’s case study of the “Virtual Museum of the Collective Memory of Lombardia” creates the argument that digital spaces can redefine the physical objects in collection.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning of her article, she begins by outlining the three ways in which virtual museums differ

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<sup>16</sup> Løvlie, Anders Sundnes, Annika Waern, Lina Eklund, Jocelyn Spence, Paulina Rajkowska, and Steve Benford. “Hybrid Museum Experiences.” In *Hybrid Museum Experiences: Theory and Design*, edited by Anders Sundnes Løvlie and Annika Waern, 31–56. Amsterdam University Press, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2cxx8x6.5>.

<sup>17</sup> Elisa Giaccardi. “Collective Storytelling and Social Creativity in the Virtual Museum: A Case Study.” *Design Issues* 22, no. 3 (2006): 29–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25224061>.

from the traditional physical settings: duplication and extension of reality, recombination and personalization, and interconnection. Like statements by Crow and team, the virtuality of a museum creates more opportunities for accessibility and communication. Recombination and personalization pertain to the virtual space's ability to reorganize and construct viewer paths throughout collections that are without constraints to physical areas. Last, interconnection refers to the viewer's ability to pull other "information" into the virtual museum experience by way of the internet and other digital tools.<sup>18</sup> Giaccardi's "elements" of virtuality becomes especially useful when we think about new ways virtual exhibitions can be transformed.

Fateman's review of the curated online exhibition "Body Anxiety" highlights the varying contemporary pieces that revolve around derived female sexual image and online presence.<sup>19</sup> Fateman successfully details the multitude of mediums and media in the collection including artist made videos, scanned diary pages, and photographs and the relevance around artist presentation of artworks on digital spaces; a generation of young female artists are utilizing these spaces that both influence their sexual image while also serving as a place for networking and curation of their artwork. In the end, Fateman notes that while there were limits to the number of female artists exhibited, the online exhibition experience was a performative extension of the themes of the collection, that is the circulation and rapid consumption of the young female artist's content.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Giaccardi, Collective Storytelling and Social Creativity in the Virtual Museum: A Case Study, 31-32.

<sup>19</sup> Johanna Fatemann. "Women on the verge: Johanna Fateman on art, feminism, and social media." *Artforum International*, April 2015, 218+. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed October 30, 2023). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A409713695/AONE?u=sain20269&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=5e4f8f20>.

<sup>20</sup> Fatemann, Women on the verge: Johanna Fateman on art, feminism, and social media.



Lydiate's review of the Tate's online immersive exhibition "Gallery of Lost Art" details the structure of the institute's online website and the content viewers were able to find when they visited the page.<sup>21</sup> The reviewer states that visitors to the online exhibition are greeted with tabbed category selections such as the nature of the artwork's loss or destruction or selection of the 40 plus artists featured. Because these artworks are no longer available for physical curation, the online exhibition allows site visitors to access documents, audio, film, and images of the lost art, making it the only way these works can be experienced.<sup>22</sup> In this case, Lydiate's review of the Tate's online exhibition highlights the different enrichment opportunities that museums are able to create online.

### **Methodology**

The written research of this project is primarily qualitative, and peer reviewed as I will be collecting resources that explore the online exhibition and benefits of technology within the art history and museum education field to support my vision of an improved, engaging online exhibition experience. These resources will provide fundamental ideas of how online exhibitions are created and will address some of the concerns with online exhibitions that I will hopefully address in the development of my own designing. Resources regarding museum pedagogies will be used to develop a clearer understanding of the teaching methodologies art museum educators use as I design the online website and virtual museum exhibition.

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<sup>21</sup> Henry Lydiate. "Gallery of Lost Art." *Art Monthly*, no. 359 (2012): 41.  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=aft&AN=79468956&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>22</sup> Lydiate, Gallery of Lost Art.

For the development of the online exhibition, I will be utilizing two online programs to create an interactive experience. The website that I plan to use for the initial introduction of the exhibition subject and artists associated with it will be Squarespace. Not only does this platform support multi-media such as video, audio, and imagery, it also features in-depth editing and user-friendly interfaces which will be useful as I consider my technological skills as intermediate. Within this website, there will be background information presented to the user about the royal academy of France during the eighteenth century and introduce the artists to be presented within the online exhibition. I hope to embed the virtual exhibition within the website's design to allow for easier access for visitors and will continue to explore several options for virtual exhibition creation software in hopes that I can find one that will integrate into the website's interface. For the physical exhibit, I will be utilizing an exhibition design software called Exhibit. From my initial viewing of sample galleries, it has a useful array of features including simple gallery design options, labeling abilities for artworks, and additional features such as liking and sharing buttons.

### **Production**

The online exhibition experience is created with two primary features in mind, a website where visitors will first be introduced to historical background information regarding the exhibition's theme and the virtual exhibition that is embedded into the website. I have chosen to combine the two into one scrolling website to create a streamlined and easily accessible experience for users. The first section of the landing page visitors are met with is a title card of the exhibition and background of Labille-Guiard's self-portrait with her pupils (figure 1). As the visitor scrolls, they are met with sections that provide historical information and critical thinking opportunities such as a series of questions placed immediately after the title card to gauge the

viewer's knowledge before scrolling. The drop-down menu for these questions gives the viewer time to think, or if in a classroom, the instructor time to lead discussion before seeing the answers. The about artist section includes images of the four female artists with collapsable biography excerpts for each (figure 2). Each biography includes the artist's birth and death dates, genre of painting or medium they were known for, and short biography. Following this is a section for the museum educator's introductory biography—in this case I created mock “about me” for myself as the museum educator for the exhibition. I chose to include this to model an interpersonal action that can be taken online—in this case, introducing myself and my academic credentials to my “group” before beginning the tour. The embedded section where the visitor can navigate the online exhibition follows the museum educator bio (figure 3). In addition, there is a link to take the visitor to the third-party platform where the virtual exhibition is hosted as an option for viewing. The bottom of the web page includes information regarding the museum's physical location, hours, and donations.

Exhibit, the online exhibition creator, provides users with three designs, each at a different pay tier. For my theme, I chose the layout that features French window accents and adjusted the wall and floor colors to compliment the works of art and time period's opulence. For overall audio ambience, I included 18th century chamber music to engage the viewer's auditory senses. The viewers are met with the portraits of the artists once again as they begin the tour (figure 4). Users can navigate the virtual space with the keyboard directional keys or by dragging their mouse or touchpad. Paintings from the four female artists are placed throughout the exhibition floor with labels placed by each (figure 5). As viewers interact with each artwork, background information regarding each is accessible via the “i” button on each label as well as a pop-up window on the right-hand side of the screen (figure 6). For certain works of art such as

Vigee LeBrun's "Peace Bringing Back Abundance", I included voice recordings that provide viewers with additional information about the artist or the works of art—like how museum educators may address the tour groups or in a class setting. Beforehand, I created scripts to read from to streamline my thoughts and recorded them with a boom microphone. I then used Adobe Audition to edit and export the files in a .mp3 format to attach to the corresponding artworks within the exhibition.

### **Results and Conclusion**

During the production phase, I noted a few issues that affect the efficiency of the virtual exhibition. The entirety of the website and virtual exhibition has been worked on and viewed from my Chromebook with no issues. Complications such as longer loading times, webpage crashes, and extreme lagging when viewing the virtual exhibition occurred when I accessed the project via my desktop computer. I deducted these issues as a result of two major differences in the devices used; the operating systems (the desktop uses the older Windows 10 operating system) and wifi connectivity. To be sure, I checked the Exhibit website to confirm the requirements needed for optimal experience. For future consideration, virtual exhibitions like this can be viewed on devices that meet the minimum requirements but favorably viewed on devices that are regularly updated such as smartphones or computers with the latest operating systems. I have made note of additional ways museums, and their program educators can create engaging online exhibition experiences. While I used a third-party platform to create a virtual art exhibition, museums can consider designing their own virtual spaces that are identical to the existing museum architecture. This way, site visitors can familiarize themselves with the actual environment without having to take a step on site. For the website, there is certainly the ability for museum educators to create different web pages with age-appropriate content. For example,

the website can provide a navigation menu that features a scrolling page for elementary school kids that can include downloadable coloring pages or keyword word searches related to the exhibition or artist they are viewing.

The completion of this project serves as a basic model for future museum education programs. I feel moving forward museum education will have to adapt to the evolving trends and innovations in technology to include more online opportunities. At the conclusion of this project, I have begun following museum educators that utilize social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to create content for audiences online. While museum education has maintained the traditional onsite program format, my project and the individuals turning to the latest trends are proof that museum education can be more accessible and more enriching than its current state.

**FIGURES**

Figure 1. Screen capture of landing / title section of website. Background image of Labille-Guiard's "Self Portrait, with Two Pupils.."



Figure 2: About The Artists Section. Shown are artist portraits of Adelaide Labille-Guiard and Anne Vallayer-Coster as well as example of the expanded view of artist biography viewers can access by clicking on the ”+” symbol.



Figure 3: Screenshot of the embedded virtual exhibition.





Figure 4: Entrance perspective of the virtual exhibition.

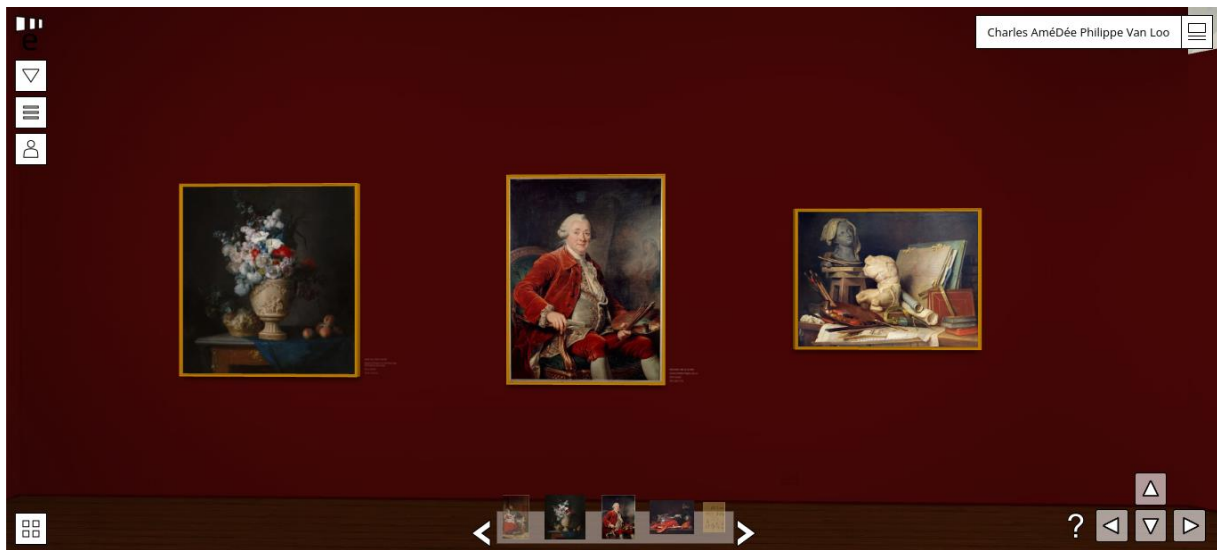


Figure 5: View of gallery wall.



Figure 6: Close up of Vigée Le Brun’s “Peace Bringing Back Abundance”. Shown are the multiple ways visitors can interact with each artwork including background information, audio voice over (if available), sharing, and like buttons.

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