Paragone: Past and Present

A JOURNAL ON CONTESTATIONS IN THE ARTS

Volume 6 (2025)

Editor in Chief: Liana De Girolami Cheney

Journal of the Association for Textual Scholarship in Art History (ATSAH)

Published by Brill Academic Publishers

Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun: Artist, Adventurer, Auto-Biographer[1]

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Abstract

Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun (1755–1842) was one of the most prolific and successful portrait painters in history. She was patronized by many powerful and aristocratic people of the age, most notably Queen Marie Antoinette, of whom she painted many portraits and with whom she had much in common. This included scandal for both of these women of the same age,

[1] Acknowledgement: With thanks to Sir Mark Haukohl and Arceli Aguilar for their help with information regarding the Vigée-LeBrun Self-Portrait in the Haukohl Family Collection. A special thank you also to Professor Liana De Girolami Cheney for her excellent advice and editorial assistance.

particularly regarding rumored lovers. The Comte de Vaudreuil and the Comte de Calonne were two of these men painted by Vigée-LeBrun.

Vigée-LeBrun also painted many beautiful self-portraits, including those with her daughter, Julie. Some of the best known are those that she executed in Italy after exile from France. These include the self-portraits that she did for the Uffizi Gallery in Florence and for the Accademia di San Luca, Rome. She herself was so pleased with these works that she painted many copies of them. They include a copy of the Uffizi Self-Portrait for Lord Bristol, the Duke of Berry, and a newly discovered copy of the San Luca Self-Portrait, now in the Houkohl family Collection.

Her travels in exile included many cities in Italy and also throughout Europe, including Vienna, where she painted a portrait of the Countess Bucquoi, amongst many other Austrian and Polish nobles. During her long stay in Russia (1795–1801), she painted almost every aristocrat of note, excluding Catherine the Great. She was also admitted to the Royal Academy of Painting in Saint Petersburg, one of many Art Academies to grant her membership.

Her many works (660 portraits, 200 landscapes mostly in pastel, and history paintings), show a progression of style from a lush late rococo to a drier neo-classical style and eventual romanticism, indicative of the changes in style throughout her long life. Pardoned by Napoleon, she returned to Paris in 1802, concentrating in her later life on the writing of her memoires (Souvenirs), which include many personal stories regarding her life and career.

Keywords

Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun – self-portraits – Marie Antoinette – Rococo – Neoclassical– Houkohl

Elisabeth Louise Vigée-LeBrun had one of the most prolific, profitable, and prolonged careers in the history of art. She claims to have executed more than 660 portraits and 200 landscapes—mostly in pastels—as well as mythological paintings. She attributes more than 900 works by her hand during her eighty-seven-year life span (1755–1842).[2] The fact that she was paid more for her portraits than her contemporaries was often commented upon, seldom in a positive way.[3] However, she stated in her *Memoirs*, published as *Souvenirs* in three volumes when she was in her eighties, that money was not necessary to her and that she lived very simply.[4] Even so, she amassed a considerable fortune during her long life, which she bequeathed on her death to her nieces. As shall be shown, simplicity is a relative term. Her life, career, family, exile, and travels rendered her life far from simple.

The daughter of the artist Louis Vigée (1715–1767) and hairdresser Jeanne Maissin (1728–1800), Elisabeth was exposed from an early age to the world of art, artists, and aristocratic patronage. Often referred to as a second-rate artist, her father was a well-respected pastel painter who even did works for King Louis XV's titled mistress, Madame de Pompadour.[5] Although he died when she was twelve, her father was already teaching her to do drawings and pastels before his death. She then continued to study with Madame Blaise Bocquet, Pierre

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[2] Vigée-LeBrun, *Memoirs,* xvi.

[3] Baillio, *Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun*, 140.

[4] Vigée-LeBrun*, Memoirs,* xvi.

[5] Levron, *Secrete Madame de Pompadour*; second cover page reproduces Louis Vigée's *Madame de Pompadour en Costume de Pelerine* (nd., Private Collection).

Davesne, Gabriel Briard, and Gabriel François Doyen.[6] Ignoring this background, she presented herself as self-taught. This is true regarding academic training and anatomy, since she was not allowed to take life drawing classes as a woman.

She did acknowledge the influence of her early supporter and mentor, the acclaimed marine and landscape painter Joseph Vernet (1714–1789). Vernet advised her to seek inspiration from the great Renaissance and Flemish masters, particularly nature—the best master.[7] She captured Vernet's easy charm and friendly manner in a portrait she did of him in 1778 (**Fig. 1**). She was only twenty-three when she painted a smiling Vernet at his easel with palette and brushes in hand, appearing as if he were greeting a visitor entering his studio. The competence of this work demonstrates why she was already in demand as a society portrait painter from the age of fifteen.

Vernet's advice about seeking inspiration from the Flemish masters is very much in evidence in two early self-portraits painted by Vigée-LeBrun in 1782. Of course, the most acclaimed Flemish Master was Peter Paul Rubens. As a teenager, Elisabeth made copies of his Medici Cycle in the Luxembourg Palace (now in the Louvre).[8] However, the full impact of Rubens's influence was demonstrated after she visited Flanders in 1781 with her art dealer husband, Jean Baptiste Pierre LeBrun, whom she married in 1776.

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[6] *Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, L'Expo* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux-Grand Palais, 2015). Major exhibitions of Vigée-LeBrun's work were at the Grand Palais, Paris; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and the Museum of the Fine Arts of Canada, Ottowa, 2016.

[7] Baillio, *Vigée-LeBrun*, 39.

[8] Cheney, Faxon, and Russo, *Self-Portraits of Women Painters*, 116.

Her lovely *Self-Portrait with Cerise Ribbon* (**Fig. 2**) shows this influence. Here, she captures the rich color, painterly technique, and interest in light and shadow that she greatly admired in Rubens's work. She also demonstrates her approach to fashion, which she stressed was simple and natural, much the antithesis of the prevailing taste. She is wearing a plain white muslin dress, called *en Gaulle*, with a cherry-red sash and ribbon, a black plumed hat, a black lacy shawl, and iridescent earrings. These items and others were kept in chests in her studio and would reappear in many of her portraits. Her curly brown hair, which she stressed she always did herself, is flowing and natural. She also makes evident that she is a beautiful young woman, a beauty commented upon often by her contemporaries and herself!

The direct influence of Rubens can be seen even more in a self-portrait, which she stated that she executed in Belgium after seeing Rubens's *Chapeau de Paille* painting in Antwerp: 'It delighted and inspired me to such a degree I made a portrait of myself at Brussels striving to obtain the same effects.[9] The artist dazzles viewers with this lushly colored, deftly painted *Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat.* She was so happy with this work that she subsequently painted several versions of it. The original version (**Fig. 3**) was painted in oil on wood, a medium she would often use in her portraits. She depicted herself wearing a straw hat with feathers and garlands, smiling confidently at the viewer with palette and brushes in hand. She wears the same black shawl and translucent earrings as in the Kimball *Self-Portrait*. A copy of this work done by the artist herself is in the National Museum, London.

[9] Vigée-LeBrun, *Memoirs*, 34.

The fashion choices she displays in her Rubens-inspired self-portraits would inform the dress of many of her later clients, including her best-known sitter, Queen Marie Antoinette. However, this was different from the first portrait she did of the queen a year after executing her self-portraits. It was in 1783 that she was first called upon to paint a portrait of this Austrian-born princess, the daughter of Empress Maria Theresa. It was for the queen's Austrian family that she executed *Marie Antoinette en robe paniers* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria). This very formal, full-length portrait of the queen shows her wearing a full court dress, including a stiff petticoated skirt with swags and ribbons, feathers in her hair, and holding a rose, a traditional symbol for the queen. She is in an interior setting with a large column, velvet drapery, and furnishings. As described by the artist, Marie Antoinette was very tall, blond, and regal, with blue eyes and perfect skin. This painting was very well received, and the artist would make several copies of it, including for the queen herself and Empress Catherine II of Russia.[10] Vigée-LeBrun subsequently executed thirty portraits of Queen Marie Antoinette, designating her as the artist who would present the queen to the world, then as well as in the present day.

Her later portraits of the queen would become increasingly more relaxed and freely painted, and also reflected a change in fashion embraced by the artist and sometimes credited to her. This approach, however, would lead to a scandal when Vigée-LeBrun exhibited her *Marie Antoinette en Gaulle* (**Fig. 4**) at the Salon of 1783. The sight of the Queen of France wearing a simple white muslin dress and a straw hat with feathers while still holding her

[10] May, *Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun*, 17.

symbol, the rose, shocked many and caused an outcry. Critics said that she looked un-regal and as though she was wearing a nightgown. The criticism was so intense that the artist had to withdraw it immediately from the exhibition. However, the queen's fashion in this work reflects a changing fashion in France—one that is exhibited in Vigée-LeBrun's self-portraits, as already shown, and that would increasingly become the fashion across Europe.

Despite the scandal, Vigée-LeBrun would remain the queen's preferred portraitist. The state entrusted the artist with painting the large *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* (**Fig. 5).** This work was commissioned to try to improve the image of the queen, who was often unduly maligned by the public and accused of everything from spying for Austria to incest. Here the queen is shown as an affectionate mother, surrounded by her children. She is being embraced by her oldest child, Marie Therese Charlotte, later Madame Royale. Her oldest son, the Dauphin Louis Joseph, points to an empty cradle, indicating the recent death of the two-month-old Princess Sophie, while her youngest son, the Duc de Normandie, sits on her lap. Marie Antoinette is regally dressed in a crimson velvet dress with a matching turban and looks royal and motherly. Throughout her comments regarding the queen in her *Souvenirs,* Vigée-LeBrun praised her as a kind, caring person and devoted mother. Few others were so gracious regarding the Queen.

Vigée-LeBrun underscored the role of motherhood in several self-portraits she posed with her daughter, Julie. Born on 12 February 1780, her daughter was a model in many of her works. One of the best-known and most admirable in terms of technique and style is *Self-Portrait with Her Daughter* (**Fig. 6**)*.* The pose and composition of this work reflect the influence of her favorite Renaissance painter, Raphael. Her style, shifting from a painterly style inspired by Rubens to a drier, more controlled technique that would become fashionable by the end of the

century, was influenced by the classicism of the Renaissance and attuned to the rising style of Neoclassicism.

Sadly, motherhood was not the only thing that Vigée-LeBrun and Marie Antoinette had in common. They also both lost children early. The queen lost her daughter Sophie at two months old, and Elisabeth had a miscarriage in 1784. And, despite their differing social class, they also had many other things in common. They both loved to sing and would sing duets together while working on the portraits.

They both had less-than-perfect husbands. Louis XVI notoriously took far too long to appreciate the charms of his wife after their marriage, and Vigée-LeBrun's husband enjoyed the charms of far too many women after their marriage. The queen and the artist were also recipients of much gossip, slander, jealousy, and even hatred against them. They were both accused of immorality, adultery, and avarice. So, it is not surprising that these two pretty young women would form a close bond over the six years that they spent much time together.

The rumored lovers of both women are an intriguing subject. Marie Antoinette was accused of lesbianism with her good friend the Duchesse de Polignac, also painted by Vigée-LeBrun. It is well known that she had a long affair with the handsome Swedish ambassador to the French court, Axel Fersen. He would arrange the unfortunate departure of the king and queen during the revolution, after which the queen would never see him again. However, she kept a locket with his picture until she was guillotined on a cold, windy day in October of 1793.[11]

[11] Erickson, *To The Scaffold*, 340.

Vigée-LeBrun would have better luck. She did manage to escape France on the night the king and queen were taken prisoner on 6 October 1789. Two of her rumored aristocratic *par amours*, the Comte de Vaudreuil and the Comte de Calonne, both painted by her, also managed to escape the country. The history painter François Guillaume Ménageot was a third rumored lover. He was already serving as Director of the French Academy in Rome before the revolution.

The background history of all of these men is a worthy digression. Joseph-Hyacinthe Rigaud, the Comte de Vaudreuil (1740–1817), was born of an aristocratic background in Saint-Domingue, the West Indies. He became a significant presence at the French Court under Louis XVI and a close friend to the king's brother, the Comte d'Artois, as well as to Marie Antoinette's close friend, the Duchess de Polignac. He also was known as an avid art collector, including many of the works by Vigée-LeBrun. She painted at least two portraits of Vaudreuil. The best known, painted in 1784, is now in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia (**Fig. 7**). She depicts this handsome aristocrat in all his elegant splendor, complete with medals, wig, and sash. Vaudreuil also was invited to the many Salon Soirées hosted by the artist. These included being the Guest of Honor at her famous Greek Supper of 1788, where the guests dressed in Greek style and ate with their hands out of authentic Greek pottery. The presumed magnificence of this event spread far and wide, but Vigée-LeBrun insisted that it was not costly. Even so, anyone not in attendance was unhappy about not being included.

Charles Alexandre, the Comte de Calonne (1734–1802), served as the French Minister of Finance under Louis XVI. Unlike Vaudreuil, he was described as ugly by his contemporaries. Vigée-LeBrun, however, has not depicted him as such (**Fig. 8**). In her usual manner of making her sitters look their best, she depicts Calonne as quite nice-looking, elegant, and seated at his

desk with papers in hand. It is known that Colonne did his best to try to improve France's depleted finances but failed. He was therefore dismissed from his post by the king and ultimately fled to England. The gossip regarding his relationship with Vigée-LeBrun even followed them into exile, including that he paid a fortune for the portrait she did of him and that she later rushed to England to be with him, although she did not.

It was the artist Ménageot (1744–1816) with whom she would have the most proximity in Paris and exile. He had an apartment in the Hotel Lubert, where she lived with her husband, and it is known that they often painted together. For this reason, many credited her works as being painted by him. She points out the ridiculousness of this since her sitters were present when she painted them. Later, as Director of the French Academy in Rome, he would provide her with rooms and even loan her money, since she fled France with very little money because her husband kept her earnings.[12] If Vigée-LeBrun did have affairs with other men, and one may hope she did since her husband was a notorious gambler and philanderer who kept her money, Ménageot might be a good candidate. His *Self-Portrait* (1794, Uffizi Gallery, Florence) portrays him as a handsome, affable-looking working artist. And, although Vigée-LeBrun denies having affairs with anyone, she has nothing but good things to say about him throughout her life. Ménageot also writes in praise from Rome about her work to members of the French Academy, and the two spent a great deal of time together while she was in exile. She even gifted him a self-portrait in pastel.

[12] May, *Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun*, 83.

Her exile took her out of Paris, and she was escorted to the city's border by her husband and brother, Étienne Vigée. She fled with her nine-year-old daughter Julie and her governess, Madame Chariot, in a commercial carriage dressed in working-class attire. They headed to Italy via Lyon and on to Turin, Parma, and Florence. This would begin a twelve-year exile for the artist from her native France (1789–1802), but it would be a very fruitful, exciting time for this adventurous, independent woman who loved to work, travel, and socialize. She would now certainly get the opportunity to do so.

In Florence, she was pleased to be warmly received by the Duke of Tuscany, who happened to be Marie Antoinette's brother. Famously, she would paint one of her best-known works for him, a *Self-Portrait* (**Fig. 9**). Although not explicitly requested, the Duke accepted this work for the famous Florentine Hall of Self-Portraits at the Uffizi Gallery, which includes a *Self-Portrait* by Raphael and many other renowned artists. Her Uffizi *Self-Portrait* depicts her in a simple black dress with a white lace collar and a red sash and wearing a white lace turban atop her naturally light brown, curly hair. She looks straight out at the viewer, displaying a smile that shows her teeth. Although unusual then, her nephew Justin Tripier-Le Franc described her as having straight, white teeth, so she probably wanted to show them off.[13] She is sitting at her easel while drawing a portrait of Queen Marie Antoinette. She did not paint this work in Florence but in Rome in 1790, where it was exceedingly well received. She bragged about this reception in

[13] Baillio, *Vigée-LeBrun*, 44.

letters to her good friends, the architect Theodore Brogniart and the painter Hubert Robert.[14] Vigée-LeBrun, herself, made many copies of this work. In one painted for her patron, Lord Bristol, the Bishop of Derry (Ickworth House, Suffolk), she changed the likeness on the easel to represent her daughter rather than the queen for obvious political reasons.

Throughout her career, Elisabeth made many copies of her works, especially her self-portraits. This was not unusual and was often the case with earlier painters, including women. Significantly, the seventeenth-century artist Lavinia Fontana painted a *Self-Portrait at the Spinet* in 1577 for the Accademia di San Luca in Rome. She would repaint the same work for the Uffizi Gallery in Florence two years later.[15] In early April 1790, Vigée-LeBrun would herself be elected a member of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome. As with Lavinia Fontana, she would paint a *Self-Portrait* (**Fig. 10**) to commemorate her membership. This *Self-Portrait* makes a striking contrast to the more often reproduced paintings that she did of herself. Here she does not stand at her easel with palette and brushes or accentuate a refined or stylish dress. It is a bust-length, three-quarter view of the artist in a simple grey dress with the ever-present red sash around her waist. A sheer white scarf trimmed in gold is somewhat haphazardly tied around her neck, as is the matching kerchief on her head. Her curly, light-brown hair seems not to have been attended to. She has a slight smile and gives a knowing, somewhat flirtatious look directly at the viewer, suggesting intelligence and wit, traits for which she was well known. Gooden

[14] Gooden, *The Sweetness of Life*, 110. Ménageot also wrote exceptional praise for this work. See Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 230.

[15] Cheney, Faxon, and Russo, *Self-Portraits*, 58.

points out its plainness compared to her better-known self-portraits, saying she avoids flattery and paints a practical view of a working woman artist.[16] Gooden also states that it possesses 'much charm', which it certainly does. She has captured more of her true self in this relaxed, unpretentious work than in other self-portraits. In her souvenirs, she stresses that she spent very little on clothing, did her hair herself, and usually wore a muslin cap on her head.[17] Simplicity was her ideal, although she did not consistently achieve it. Her contemporaries described her as a very stylish, even arrogant, woman, perennially pretty with perfect posture. Mixed contemporary assessments by the same person are often encountered. In Rome, the Comtesse de Boigne wrote in her memoirs that Vigée-LeBrun was a 'very good person, still pretty but always very foolish'. The Comtesse says she had a distinguished talent but 'possessed in excess all the little affectations to which her double role of the artist and pretty woman entitled her'.[18] It sounds like jealousy might be at play in this double-edged assessment by the Comtesse.

In the San Luca self-portrait, Vigée-LeBrun looks neither foolish nor affected. She looks like the usually happy, healthy, hard-working artist that she was, promoting herself very straightforwardly. Stefano Susinno, describing the self-portraits in the Accademia, calls Vigée-LeBrun's submission a notable example of the *fin de siècle* style signifying a changing taste à la

[16] Gooden, *Sweetness of Life*, 109.

[17] Vigée-LeBrun, *Memoirs*, 42.

[18] Helm, *Vigée-LeBrun 1755–1842*, 112.

Rousseau.[19] Vigée-LeBrun did read Rousseau's works, especially those that stressed the need for naturalness and simplicity. She even later made a pilgrimage to his Swiss Ile de Saint Pierre residence on Lake Bienne. Therefore, she might have seen some relationship between this work and Rousseau's aesthetic. She obviously liked this depiction of herself—so much so that it appears she painted more copies of it than any of her other works.[20]

One newly emerged copy of it by the artist herself can be found in the Houkohl Family Collection, purchased in Florence at an unknown date. This lovely copy of the San Luca *Self-Portrait* (**Fig. 11**) confirms her interest in making copies of her works to distribute as advertisements of her talents or to give personal thanks. Although this work has some over-painting and small areas of damage to the canvas, it is in excellent condition.[21] A letter in possession of the Houkohl family written by art historian Giuliano Briganti, dated Rome, March, 1970, authenticates it as a work by the artist herself.[22] Since Vigée-LeBrun visited Florence twice, once on her way to Rome in 1789 and again on her return from Rome in 1792, it is conceivable that she gave copies of it to her admirers in Florence, even the Grand Duke. This, however, has yet to be substantiated. She gave another copy of this work to Lord Bristol, as she

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[19] Susinno, *L'Accademia Nazionale de San Luca*, 269.

[20] Charles Stein's List of Self-Portraits in Kevin Kelly's website dedicated to Vigée-LeBrun, https://www.batguano.com/vigee.html.

[21] Observations courtesy of Sir Mark Haukohl.

[22] A letter written by art historian Giuliano Briganti, dated Rome, March 1979, acknowledges this work as stylistically a copy of the San Luca *Self-Portrait* by Vigée-LeBrun herself (see Addendum).

did with the *Uffizi Self-Portrait*. Other artists also made copies. The National Gallery of Women in the Arts has an excellent example painted by Charles Bianchini.

The Accademia di San Luca is one of the oldest Art Academies in Europe. Founded as a Painters Guild, it was officially granted academic recognition by Papal Brief in 1577. Under its first Director, Federico Zuccari (1593), it gained international recognition and still serves as an active art academy today.

By the time the artist was made a member of the Roman Academy, she had already been awarded membership in several prestigious academies. In Paris, she was first elected an Académie de Saint-Luc member in 1774, when she was only nineteen. Nine years later (1783), she would be nominated for membership in the *Academie Royale de Peinture et Scupture* in Paris by her old friend, Joseph Vernet, a nomination supported by King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette. After her exile, she tells us that 'all' of the academies invited her for membership. These included those in Parma, Florence, Rome, Vienna, and Saint Petersburg. This was a great accomplishment, especially for women since many academies had limits on the number of women that could join if allowed.

Shortly after her initiation into the Roman Accademia di San Luca, she left Rome for Naples on April 7, 1790. She loved to travel, especially if she was experiencing any depression or ennui. Traveling invigorated her, and she pursued it with optimism and energy. She would often walk beside the carriage rather than ride and generally displayed vigorous physical energy throughout her life, which is unsurprising for a woman who lived for eighty-seven years. She would continue to travel with her daughter and governess, but they often did not travel alone. Gallant gentlemen and sometimes couples would offer to accompany them, although only

sometimes to her liking. In her *Souvenirs*, she narrates a negative but funny story of traveling with M. Duvivier, who offered them accommodations on his large coach traveling from Rome to Naples. As she pointed out scenes *en route* that she found picturesque, M. Duvivier would negate them in a boorish way.[23] A much more acceptable traveling companion would join them later in Turin on their way north. This was Auguste Louis Jean Baptiste Rivière, the brother of her sister-in-law. An artist himself, often painting miniature portraits of Vigée-LeBrun's work, he would travel with them for nine years.[24] Vigée-LeBrun was enthusiastically welcomed to the Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies. The Queen, Maria Carolina, was another sibling to Marie Antoinette. (The Empress Maria Theresa was called the Mother-in-Law of Europe.) During her three stays in Naples, she painted many portraits for the Royal family and her neighbors, the Russian Ambassador Count Skavronska and his wife.

Most notoriously, she executed many portraits of Emma Hart, mistress and eventual wife of the English Ambassador, Lord Hamilton. Her *Emma Hamilton as Sybil* (1791–92), reflecting the influence of Baroque artists such as Guido Reni or Domenichino, particularly the upward-gazing eyes and rapturous expression, was especially well received. The artist kept this work with her on her travels and would exhibit it routinely in her studio to showcase her talent to great acclaim.

The life story of Lady Hamilton is a wild one. Beautiful but vacuous, she rose from a lowly background to become mistress to several aristocrats and eventual wife of the art collector and

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[23] Vigée-LeBrun*, Memoirs*, 63–64.

[24] Baillio, *Vigée-LeBrun*, 14.

connoisseur Lord Hamilton. While still married, she became the mistress of the British naval hero Lord Nelson. Following the deaths of these two men, she met her end as a penniless alcoholic dying in Calais.

Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun would execute portraits of a lot of women of questionable morals. These included Madame du Barry, a courtesan who became the last Titled Mistress (*Maîtresse en Tître*) to King Louis XV. Another was Hyacinth-Gabrielle Roland, whom she painted in Rome in 1791 (Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco). Madame Roland was a prostitute who worked the notorious gardens of the Palais Royale, where she met her future husband, the Marquess of Wellesley. Yet another, Catherine Noele Worlee, Madame Grand, painted three times by Vigée-LeBrun, married George François Grand in Calcutta at sixteen. When Vigée-LeBrun painted her (1782), she was a prostitute living near the artist. She would eventually marry the great French statesman Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, who would later desert her. The list goes on. These one-time women of ill-repute managed to create circumstances where they could afford the considerable price for a portrait by the portrait painter *par excellence*, Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun.

With outstanding discipline, Elisabeth painted every day possible throughout her travels, taking only a daily rest she called Calm. In the evenings, she socialized with her aristocratic patrons and fellow artists. Despite this, she managed to have several adventures and misadventures. In Naples, she took many hikes up the volcano of Vesuvius, even in the pouring rain. In Vienna, she climbed part way up Mont Blanc. She would walk whenever possible along routes and trails. Adventure has found her in many aspects of her life. She painted a dizzying list of Austrian and Polish nobles in Vienna. One of the most romantic of these, in style and color, was her *Portrait of the Countess Bucquoi* (**Fig. 12***).* The Countess looks relaxed and reflective as

she sits before a mountain background along the Danube River, complete with a waterfall. Her bright red shawl and sash contrast with the dark natural tones of the scenery. By this time in her life, the artist had gained a great appreciation of landscapes. Dramatic landscapes were now being incorporated into the works of many artists, since the Romantic Movement—which highlighted drama, color, and contrasts—was rising in popularity.

From 1795 to 1801, this now very famous French portrait painter would reside in Russia, where she was patronized by most of the significant aristocrats living in Saint Petersburg and, for a time, Moscow. These included *Prince Stanislas II Augustus, King of Poland* (1797, Versailles), who was now living in exile like herself. She described the prince as handsome and kind, features reflected in the portrait she painted of him. Princess Dolgoronsky was another Russian aristocrat painted by Vigée-LeBrun. The princess was so impressed with the artist's portrait of *Emma Hamilton* as Sibyl that she requested the same upward gaze in her own, which was incorporated by the artist.[25] Unlike Emma, the princess was erudite and sophisticated. She and Vigée-LeBrun would become good friends. The princess showed her pleasure with this work by gifting the artist an impressive carriage and a bracelet of her hair with an inscription that said *Adorn Her Who Adorns Her Century* in diamonds.[26] Elisabeth liked diamonds, which she would hide in her shoes when traveling.

In Russia, she would once again execute a *Self Portrait* on her admission to the Royal Academy of Saint Petersburg (**Fig. 13**). Now forty-five years old, she does include a hint of aging

[25] Baillio, *Vigée-LeBrun*, 48.

[26] Baillio, *Vigeé-LeBrun*, 118.

in this work since she is wearing a sheer neck covering up to her chin. As in many former self-portraits, she is at her easel but looking up toward the viewer with a smiling glance. She is wearing a simple black dress, a muslin turban, and a red sash. This same year, she also did a *Self-Portrait* in graphite (1800, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York).

Vigée-Lebrun's constant companion throughout her travels was her daughter Julie. She was described by all who knew her as very pretty, a talented artist in her own right, and certainly very well-traveled for her age. Julie would continue to serve as a model for her mother. *Julie LeBrun as Flora* (**Fig. 14**), painted when Julie was nineteen, depicts the lovely teenager in a windswept setting with a basket of flowers on her head and a garland in her hand symbolizing Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers and the coming of Spring. She is wearing a quite revealing high-waisted dress, later called the Empire style, and dominates a romanticized landscape of mountains, shrubbery, and ominous-looking clouds.

Although mother and daughter had a very close bond until this point, that would unravel by the time this work was painted. Julie would shortly later marry a Russian Secretary named Gaetan Nigris, much to the consternation of her mother, since Nigris had neither money nor position in society. This would leave the artist depressed and in despair. To counter this, Vigée-LeBrun traveled to Moscow (1800), back to Saint Petersburg (1801), then home to Paris (1802), with stops in between. The rift between her and her daughter would never really heal, even though Julie ended up separated from her husband and back in Paris, where she ended up dying before her mother at thirty-nine years old.

On arrival in Paris, Elisabeth moved back into the Hotel Lubert on the Rue de Clery with her now ex-husband since he divorced her while she was in exile. She resumed her evening Salons,

attended by many of her former patrons, friends, and rumored lovers. Vaudreuil and Calonne were also back from exile, and Ménageot was back from Italy. If the presence of all of them in Paris created a scandal, it does not seem to have mattered anymore.

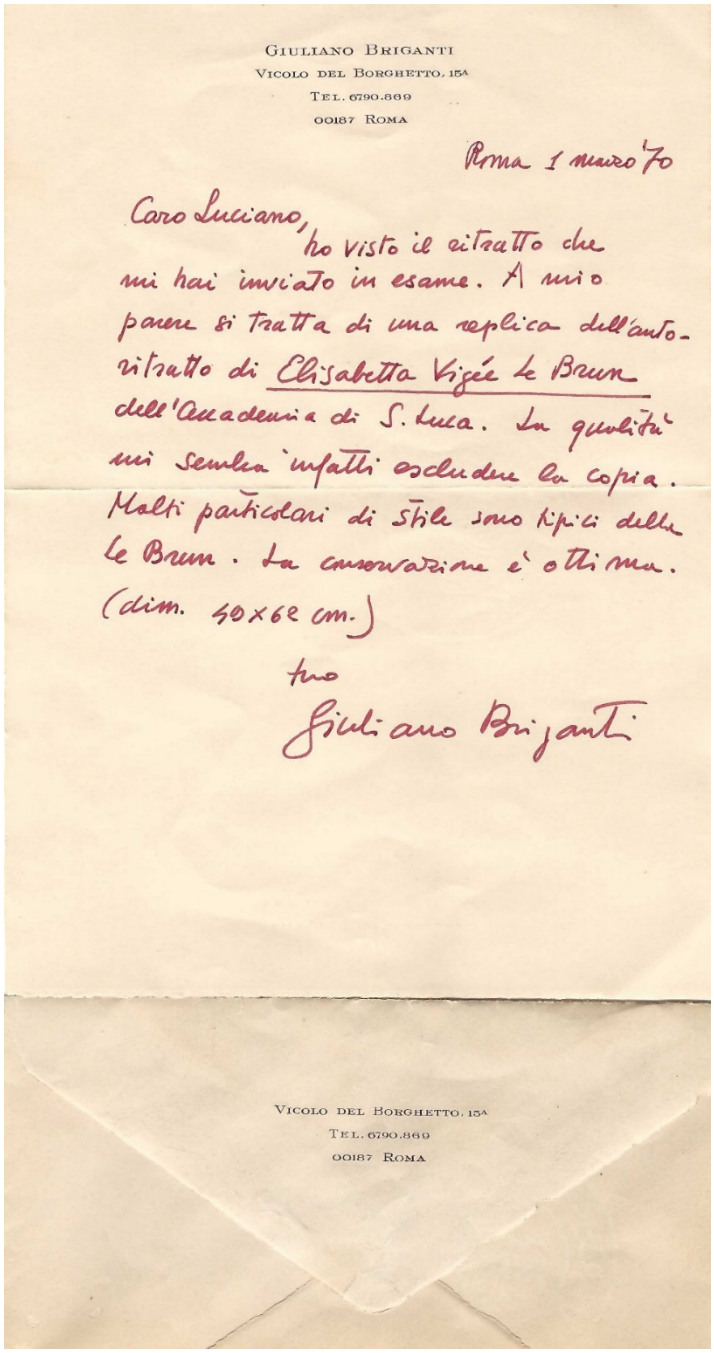
Paris was different. The king and queen were dead. Her family was different. Her mother had died in 1800, and she was estranged from her daughter and distant from her brother. According to many of her contemporaries, her work was not the same either, although she continued to work until not long before her death. She also continued to travel, visiting England, Switzerland, and, closer to home, Bordeaux, which was her last trip (1820). By this time, J.B.P. LeBrun had died (1813), her daughter died (1819), and her brother died (1820). She would live another twenty-two years. She spent these years divided between Paris and a large country residence in Louveciennes, which she purchased in 1809 and where she is buried.

In her eighties, she was persuaded to write her Memoirs (*Souvenirs*) so that she could tell her own story rather than have others do so. These were published in three volumes between 1835 and 1837. She was assisted in this endeavor by her two nieces: her brother's daughter, Caroline (Vigée) Rivière, and the daughter of her husband's brother, Eugénie (Le Brun) Tripier-le Franc. These are written partially in an epistolary format as if she were writing a letter to a friend and are an important source of information about the artist and her life. But how truthful are they? This has been a question asked by many who have written about her. She does not divulge much about her personal life, except perhaps complaints about her husband. However, her life was one of incredible energy, adventure, and work at a career that she loved to the very end.

Elisabeth Louise Vigée-LeBrun died in Paris on March 30, 1842. Her tombstone in the cemetery at Louveciennes is adorned with palette and brushes at her request and states, 'Now at last I rest'.[27]

[27] Gooden, *Sweetness of Life*, 176.

Addendum: Giuliano Briganti letter, Rome, March 1970.



GIULIANO BRIGANTI
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00187 ROMA

Roma 1 marzo '70

Caro Luciano,
ho visto il ritratto che
mi hai inviato in esame. A mio
parere si tratta di una replica dell'auto-
ritratto di Elisabetta Vigée Le Brun
dell'Accademia di S. Luca. La qualità
mi sembra infatti escludere la copia.
Molti particolari di stile sono tipici della
Le Brun. La conservazione è ottima.
(dim. 40×62 cm.)

tuo
Giuliano Briganti

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Captions

Fig. 1. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Portrait of Joseph Vernet*, 1778, Oil on Canvas. Louvre, Paris.

Fig. 2. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Self-Portrait with Cerise Ribbon*, 1782, Oil on canvas. Kimball Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

Fig. 3. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat*, 1782, Oil on Wood Panel, Private Collection, Switzerland.

Fig. 4. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Marie Antoinette en Gaulle*, 1783, Oil on Canvas. Kronberg, Germany, Hessische Hausstiftung.

Fig. 5. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Marie Antoinette and Her Children*, 1787, Oil on Canvas. Versailles.

Fig. 6. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Self-Portrait with Her Daughter*, 1789, Oil on Canvas. Louvre, Paris.

Fig. 7. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Portrait of the Comte de Vaudreuil*, 1784, Oil on Canvas. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia.

Fig. 8. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Portrait of the Comte de Calonne*, 1784, Oil on Canvas. The Royal Collection, Windsor.

Fig. 9. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Self-Portrait*, 1790, Oil on canvas. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig. 10. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Self-Portrait*, 1790, Oil on Canvas. Accademia di San Luca, Rome.

Fig. 11. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Self-Portrait*, unknown date, Oil on Canvas. Houkohl Family Collection, Houston, Texas.

Fig. 12. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Portrait of the Countess Bocquoi*, 1793, Oil on Canvas. Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Fig. 13. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Self-Portrait*, 1800, Oil on Canvas. Hermitage Museum of Art, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Fig. 14. Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, *Julie LeBrun as Flora*, 1799, Oil on Canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Saint Petersburg, Florida.