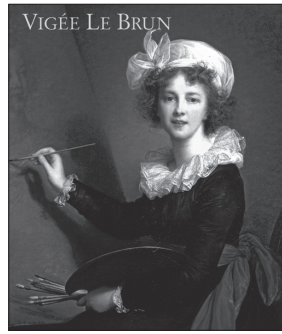


Vigée Le Brun. Woman Artist in Revolutionary France

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
15 February – 15 May 2016
Curators: Joseph Baillio, Katharine Baetjer and Paul Lang



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In 1971 the American art historian Linda Nochlin started to point out the difficulties that women painters had encountered during centuries by trying to answer the question: “Why have there been no great women artists?”¹ Her argument points out various assumptions underlying this essay title, especially relating to the “genius factor”, and also shows the manifold inequalities of the established “art system”. For example, for a long time women had been excluded from essential teachings within academic education, including some of the most important keystones to building up a career that could allow the “artistic genius” to fully unfold. Showing that the question about greatness is to a large extent a misconstruction distracting from the real issue, the author emphasizes that the “miracle is, in fact, that given the overwhelming odds against women”, they “have managed to achieve so much excellence—if not towering grandeur—in those sailiwicks of white masculine prerogative like [...] the arts”.

The recent exhibition *Vigée Le Brun. Woman Artist in Revolutionary France* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (15 February – 15 May 2016) has put the focus on one of those miracle women artists Nochlin refers to, the painter Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842). This artist became famous amongst European contemporaries during the final decades of the Ancient Régime, counting amongst her clients many illustrious members of French nobility as well as Queen Marie Antoinette, who became her most important patron. She was one of the rare women who got access as a member to the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture (Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture) in Paris. Hence, her curriculum vitae exemplifies well that women artists could achieve much, but also that they had to constantly struggle to overcome obstacles that their male peers would never encounter.

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1. NOCHLIN, L., “Why have there been no great women artists?”, in GORNICK, V.; MORAN, B.K., *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*. New York: Basic Books, 1971, pp. 344-366; the essay was reprinted the same year in the January issue of *ArtNews*.

The art show about Vigée Le Brun, presented on two continents, is in fact the first retrospective of this French artist and a joint project of several scholars, namely Joseph Baillio (independent scholar), Katharine Baetjer (curator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and Paul Lang (curator at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa). It was very well received when first presented (in a bigger version) in Paris at the Grand Palais (23 September 2015 – 11 January 2016) and then afterwards in New York (9 February – 15 May 2016), and at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa (10 June – 11 September 2016). The different exhibition venues already indicate that this venture intended to make Vigée Le Brun known to a wider audience, an objective—to anticipate—that has been certainly achieved when looking at the media coverage and the positive reception of the show.

(Marie) Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun was born on 16 April 1755 in Paris, the daughter of the portraitist Louis Vigée and his wife Jeanne Maisin.² After having spent the first years of her life with close relatives on a small farm near Épernon she returned at the age of six to Paris to start school. The young girl was enrolled as a boarder at the Couvent de la Trinité in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, where she would demonstrate her artistic talent for the first time. In her memoirs she retrospectively wrote about that time:

I scrawled on everything at all seasons; I decorated my copy-books, and even the ones of my schoolmates with marginal drawings of heads, some full-face, others in profile; on the walls of the dormitory I drew faces and landscapes with charcoal.³

Although the nuns who ran the school would very often reward such behaviour with punishment, she would remember this self-initiation to the arts rather positively. This was certainly due to the fact that her father would at that time become aware of his daughter’s gifts. “At seven or eight”, she remembered, “I made a picture by lamplight of a man with a beard [...]. When my father saw it he went into transports of joy, exclaiming, ‘You will be a painter, my child, if ever there was one’”⁴.

Convinced of her artistic talent, Louis Vigée started to give his daughter drawing lessons when she returned to live at her parents’ home in 1766 and also allowed her to attend [duced Elisabeth Louise to pastel, a technique that he had specialized in as a portrait painter. It had become very pop-

2. HAROCHE-BOUZINAC, G., *Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun. Histoire d’un regard*. Paris: Flammarion, 2011, p. 24; for a historiographic account explaining the different angles of research on Vigée Le Brun see pp. 9-13.

3. “Dans cet intervalle, je crayonnais sans cesse et partout; mes cahiers d’écriture, et même ceux de mes camarades, étaient remplis à la marge de petites têtes de face, ou de profil; sur les murs du dortoir, je traçais avec du charbon des figures et des paysages, aussi vous devez penser que j’étais souvent en pénitence”: VIGÉE LE BRUN, E.L., *Souvenirs de Madame Vigée Le Brun*, 2 vols. Paris: Charpentier et cie., 1869 [1835-1837], vol. 1, p. 2.

4. “Je me souviens qu’à l’âge de sept ou huit ans, je dessinai à la lampe un homme à barbe, que j’ai toujours gardé. Je le fis voir à mon père qui s’écria transporté de joie: Tu seras peintre, mon enfant, ou jamais il n’en sera”: VIGÉE LE BRUN, E.L., *Souvenirs...*, p. 2.

ular during the eighteenth century and satisfied especially the demands of Louis Vigée's clientele from the upper echelons of the bourgeoisie: pastel was much cheaper than oil paint but nevertheless produced high-quality results, as the medium's blendability and luscious texture led to results that often emanating a depth and richness of colour comparable to painting. His daughter being thus initiated into the professional art world also learned from her father that sociability was an important skill of a painter, be it in order to always keep a finger on the pulse, to come to know prospective clients, or to entertain customers during their tiring portrait sessions.⁵

Such a profound artistic education was, in the eighteenth century, still not the rule for girls. For them it was much more difficult than for men to choose painting as a career path. Although some artists also taught girls, such as Marie Rosalie Hallé, for example, who would take on Elisabeth Louise as a student some time later, much fewer (and often lesser) teachers were available for girls than for boys. As Nochlin had already pointed out, some teachings, like painting after nude models, were in general not taught to them, and their artistic education would often have to rely more heavily on copying from existing artworks. An "all-inclusive" patronage of a close family member with a real personal interest was therefore a lucky chance, and family connections could help decisively to overcome the invisible barriers women were constantly facing in the form of social conventions or the gender-discriminating rules of art institutions.⁶

Unfortunately, this very promising period of Elisabeth Louise's artistic tutelage lasted only about one year, as her father died on 9 May 1767. He left his family penniless and in order to clear debts and pay for schooling for Elisabeth's brother of three years younger, Louis Jean Baptiste Étienne, her mother would very soon marry again. Her new husband, Jacques François Le Sevre, was a jeweller, and his wealth allowed the family to move into an apartment close to the Palais Royal. Thanks to the support of her mother Elisabeth Louise started taking painting lessons, first at a drawing academy run by the aforementioned Marie Rosalie Hallé and then with the academic painter Gabriel Briand. She copied from a lot of sculpture, drawings and paintings, and would also start taking lessons in oil painting. Around this time she came to know, amongst others, Gabriel François Doyen and Jean Joseph Vernet, who would help her with advice and later on also foster her career.

At the *Vigée Le Brun* exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum in New York about 80 paintings were on view. The earliest dated from the early 1770s, a time when Elisabeth

Louise started to win renown. The visitor could see in the first room various private portraits in smaller formats from around 1774, including one of the painter's mother, one of her brother and one of her stepfather. Opposite these works hung the large painting *Marie Antoinette in Court Dress*, a full-length portrait that the artist had painted in 1778 at Versailles, inviting comparison.⁷ All of these works showed the whole range of portraiture that would unfold during Elisabeth Louise's career as a portrait painter, spanning from private, almost intimate depictions that could even bear a sentimental touch, to prestigious and ostentatious representations of social rank and aspiration. Furthermore, they all showed features that would become her hallmark: the exquisite treatment of colour, fabric and texture all bound together by a delicate glazing.

Elisabeth Louise's career started to gain momentum around the middle of the 1770s. By 1774 her growing recognition as well as her productivity had become a thorn in the side of the painters' guild Academy of Saint Luke that controlled painting production in Paris, and her studio was seized for unauthorized practicing of the craft. Consequently, she would join the guild that very same year, providing her artistic production with a legal basis in order to prevent any further problems. Two years later, in 1776, she married the art dealer, connoisseur and auctioneer Jean Baptiste Pierre Le Brun, taking on the family name Vigée Le Brun. Although her husband's financial situation was by far not as substantial as her mother had anticipated from looking at Le Brun's expensive taste, the marriage would prove important for her professional future. For example, Elisabeth Louise would acquire through her husband's business activities as an art dealer a broad pictorial knowledge, which was, at the exhibition amongst others, visible through a number of portrait paintings on wood panel that reflected the painter's experience in 1881 when accompanying her husband on a trip to the Netherlands. In the end the couple would find a mutually beneficial *modus vivendi*: he would promote his wife's career, for example, by presenting her work favourably in the art sales he was organising. In return, this allowed his wife to focus on her painting.

The couple's business arrangement worked out quite well. Vigée Le Brun had, thanks to this marriage, managed to escape the unfavourable financial dependency on her stepfather and gained more independence. Her husband put his sales skills in the service of his wife, as his luxurious lifestyle also depended on her doing professionally well. Their financial situation would thus improve successively, allowing the couple to hold fashionable soirées and social-

5. Summing up the various facets of the year with her father and touching on her education, HAROCHE-BOUZINAC, G., *Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun...*, pp. 28-34.

6. It is interesting to note that quite a number of women painters had actually benefitted from this kind of support. This was, for example, also the case with Vigée Le Brun's contemporaries Angelika Kaufmann (1741-1807) and Marguerite Gérard (1761-1837). Whereas the former was the daughter of a painter, the latter received her initial teaching from her brother-in-law Jean-Honoré Fragonard.

7. Vigée Le Brun, *Madame Jacques François Le Sèvre, The Artist's Mother*, c. 1774-1778, oil on canvas, oval, 25 5/8 × 21 1/4 in. (65 × 54 cm). Private collection [cat. 2]; Vigée Le Brun, *Etienne Vigée*, 1773, oil on canvas, 24 1/4 × 19 7/8 in. (61,6 × 50,5 cm), signed and dated (lower left): *M(lle) Vigée / 1773*. Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, MO [cat. 1]; Vigée Le Brun, *Jacques François Le Sèvre*, c. 1774, oil on canvas, 23 5/8 × 19 1/2 in. (60 × 49,5 cm). Private collection [cat. 3]; Vigée Le Brun, *Marie Antoinette in Court Dress*, 1778, oil on canvas, 107 1/2 × 76 in. (273 × 193,5 cm). Inscribed (lower right): *Peint par M(de) Le Brun âgée de 22 ans, en 1780*. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna (GG 2772) [cat. 7].

ly mix with the upper echelons of society. The painter's eloquence, charm, as well as her beauty, would win over their guests, which included artists, writers and important members of Parisian society.⁸ These events, where she was able to put her father's teaching in sociability to work, would provide the perfect recruiting ground for new clients and consequently her art became more and more known.

In 1776 Vigée Le Brun eventually received her first royal commission when she was asked to paint a series of portraits of the Comte de Provence, the king's brother. Just two years later the aforementioned painting *Marie Antoinette in Court Dress*, shown at the beginning of the exhibition, followed. Although this work lacks spatial definition due to two bases of large columns placed in the background to the sitter's right, which seem much too large, the queen has a very compelling appearance that shows a lot of veracity regarding her physical traits. In the end the latter convinced the queen's mother Maria Theresa of Austria, for whom the stately painting was created. This satisfying outcome would lead to a whole series of royal commissions and Vigée Le Brun, having thus gained access to Marie Antoinette's inner circle, would eventually become its official painter and portraitist to the queen, which helped decisively to solidify her reputation.

In her two-volume memoir published between 1835 and 1837, the *Souvenirs de Madame Vigée Le Brun*, the painter recounts an anecdote that should become legend.⁹ She remembers a day having missed an appointment with Marie Antoinette, who was to sit for a portrait. She had been feeling ill due to a pregnancy some time after her first and only child to survive, Jeanne Julie Louise, had been born. When she apologised the following day and the queen then cancelled her plans to sit for her, Vigée Le Brun's eagerness to please Marie Antoinette led to her spilling the brushes all over the floor. According to the painter's memoir, the queen picked them up for her, stating that she was too advanced in her pregnancy to bend down. In the exhibition a painting by Alexis-Joseph Pérignon from around 1859 depicts this anecdote. This way the visitor was visually confronted with the queen's personal esteem for the painter. Furthermore, Pérignon's posthumously created work demonstrated, although not explicitly mentioned, how the *Souvenirs de Madame Vigée Le Brun* helped in transmitting a decisive image of the painter's fame to following generations.

Another work shown conveying an anecdote about Marie Antoinette's support for Vigée Le Brun is the painting *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*,¹⁰ painted in 1780. After the Academy of Saint Luke had been dissolved in 1777, the painter's legal position had successively weakened again and she increasingly struggled.¹¹ When her name was then

put forward in 1883 by Joseph Vernet for election to membership at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture she would hand in the painting, finished three years prior, as a reception piece. In New York, it was exhibited together with a preliminary study in pastel. Both works showed the mastery Elisabeth Louise had acquired by that point despite some lacks in her formal education. Even though she could not paint after nude models and had acquired her compositional skills mainly through copying, the composition is dynamic, convincing and pleasing, and it satisfied the Academy's standards for reception pieces. Nevertheless, back in 1883 her work had been neither categorised by the Academy within portraiture nor within history painting. Many of her peers, jealous of her connections and her success, were against her admission and rejected her application on formal grounds: her husband was an art dealer, which (according to the Academy's statutes) excluded her from being eligible. Eventually an order from Louis XVI, surely incited by his wife Marie Antoinette, overruled the officials of the Academy and Vigée Le Brun had—against the efforts of her envious contemporaries—won back legal security and gained, as one of very few women, access to the most distinguished art institution in France.¹²

The largest section of the exhibition *Vigée Le Brun. Woman Artist in Revolutionary France* at The Metropolitan Museum was devoted to the portraits she had painted for aristocratic customers in France and abroad and the royal court at Versailles. These paintings of noble-born members of French society that followed the section explaining the painter's relationship with the academy served to build up the suspense that led to the works created for the queen Marie Antoinette. Numerous three-quarter and bust-length portraits were the most striking evidence of Vigée Le Brun's capacity to charmingly idealise her sitters' expressions and to captivate with mastery the manifold textures of, for example, the different fabrics of dresses and costumes, the powdered curls of hair and the various material qualities of props, like feathers, flowers and decorative art objects. Her technical skills and her sensuous approach, certainly founded in the pastel technique that she had started with, which was unfortunately not well represented in the exhibition, provided the final results with a delicate glazing that is still answering to the sensibility of the Rococo.

Various paintings of close members of the queen's circle, for example, *The Duchesse de Polignac in a Straw Hat*¹³ from 1782, depicted the new fashion that Marie Antoinette had initiated, abandoning the formal attire of Versailles for much more comfortable, loosely belted muslin chemise dresses worn when the queen wanted to escape the rigid etiquette

8. Pointing out her success as a *salonnière*; MAY, G., *Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun. The Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution*. New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2005, pp. 22f.

9. VIGÉE LE BRUN, E.L., *Souvenirs...*, pp. 47–48.

10. Vigée Le Brun, *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*, 1780, oil on canvas, 40 3/8 × 52 1/8 in. (103 × 133 cm). Signed and dated (lower center): *M(de) LeBrun. f. 1780*. Paris, Salon, 1783, no. 115. Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Paris (3052) [cat. 9].

11. This meant, in fact, that the possibilities of exhibiting her work publicly had diminished significantly.

12. Of the 550 individuals who had become members of the organization from its foundation in 1648 until that point, only fourteen had been female; BAETHER, K., "The Women of the French Royal Academy", in BAILLIO, J.; BAETJER, K.; LANG P. (eds.), *Vigée Le Brun*, exh. cat., 15 February 2016 – 15 May 2016, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016, p. 43.

13. Vigée Le Brun, *The Duchesse de Polignac in a Straw Hat*, 1782, oil on canvas, 36 3/8 × 28 7/8 in. (92,2 × 73,3 cm). Signed and dated (lower left): *L(se). LeBrun 1782*. Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles (MV 8971) [cat. 11].

at Versailles and enjoy the pleasures of Petit Trianon or of her more rustic retreat Le Hameau with her closest entourage. The painting furthermore showed, with the slightly parted lips of the smiling duchess de Polignac, the subject's teeth, a painterly novelty first shown in France by Vigée Le Brun in a self-portrait. This latter hung in New York next to the Polignac portrait, admirably showing off Vigée Le Brun's inventive capacity.¹⁴ Whereas today a toothed smile is fairly normal it scandalised back in the eighteenth century and created quite a polemic, as the visitor would learn from the corresponding picture labels.

Painterly novelties like these would show the viewer that Elisabeth Louise did not hesitate to go against conventions, and maybe she even tried to push the boundaries of the well accepted. This was also visible in the painting *Marie Antoinette in a Chemise Dress*, which was exhibited at Vigée Le Brun's first Salon in 1783.¹⁵ The characterisation of the queen was admired, but her pastoral attire, consisting in a white muslin dress with a straw hat, was considered inappropriate for a public portrait of royalty. After having been obliged to remove the painting, Elisabeth Louise would work on the large formal portrait *Marie Antoinette with a Rose*, installing it just one month later at the Salon.¹⁶ These works, both shown next to each other, demonstrated well the mastery Vigée Le Brun had acquired by that time. Looking at them it became evident that she had repeated in the second version the queen's much appreciated pose and expression from the removed painting and changed the sitter's inappropriate attire for a lace-trimmed dress that completely satisfied the decorum prevailing conventions demanded.

Visitors to the exhibition in New York were confronted with an impressive array of the painter's portraiture and also introduced to the varying demands that this field of painting could involve. The works exhibited did not just exemplify Vigée Le Brun's technical mastery as well as her inventiveness, and sometimes daring spirit when it came to novelties, but also the range of sentiments that her paintings could incite in the viewer. Remarkable are, for example, her portraits of children and her family portraits, such as a self-portrait with her daughter Julie from 1786, unfortunately not shown in New York but at the show's Parisian venue.¹⁷ These works reflect some ideas of the Enlightenment as set out in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's book *Emile*, attaching importance, for example, to the aspect of maternal love. Such ideas became increasingly important and would eventually even leave a trace in Vigée Le Brun's official court portraiture.

14. Vigée Le Brun, *Self-Portrait with Cerise Ribbons*, c. 1782, oil on canvas, 25 1/2 × 21 1/4 in. (64,8 × 54 cm). Signed (lower right): *L.E. Vigée / Le Brun*. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas (ACK 1949.02) [cat. 12].

15. Vigée Le Brun, *Marie Antoinette in a Chemise Dress*, 1783, oil on canvas, 35 3/8 × 28 3/8 in. (89,8 × 72 cm). Hessische Hausstiftung, Kronberg (WO B 8050) [cat. 16].

16. Vigée Le Brun, *Marie Antoinette with a Rose*, 1783, oil on canvas, 46 × 35 in. (116,8 × 88,9 cm). Paris, Salon, 1783, no. 110. Collection of Lynda and Stewart Resnick [cat. 17].

17. Vigée Le Brun, *Portrait of the artist with her daughter*, called *La Tendresse maternelle*, 1786, oil on oak panel, 105 × 84 cm. Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Paris (3069).

When, in 1785, the painter received the request to paint a dynastic portrait of Marie Antoinette with her children with the goal of rehabilitating the public image of the French queen, who had become increasingly unpopular, this would become the most important commission of her career. The masterfully painted full-length court portrait *Marie Antoinette and her Children*, finished in 1787, was certainly the highlight of the exhibition and summed up the artistic qualities of Vigée Le Brun's art.¹⁸ The queen is seated in a chamber within the royal palace and with her feet on a cushion. She is flanked by her son Louis-Joseph and her daughter Marie-Thérèse Charlotte and holds, inspired by Italian Renaissance compositions of the Madonna with child, her youngest infant Louis-Charles on her lap. Marie Antoinette's oldest son lifts the covers of a cradle standing next to her, pointing out that it is empty. The children's bed is a reference to Princess Sophie, the queen's daughter who had died shortly before and it adds not just to the dynastic aspect of the work, but also provides the scene with an aspect of maternal love, giving the official court portrait a human touch. Nevertheless, although Vigée Le Brun's inventiveness presented Marie Antoinette as an attentive mother and virtuous wife, the socio-political climate had already shifted so much that a painting as part of a royal publicity campaign could not alter the course of history.

In comparison to the fate of her royal patron, Elisabeth Louise was more fortunate. While Marie Antoinette was to lose her life by the guillotine, the painter would lose her home country but could escape into exile. In October 1789 she took her daughter Julie and embarked on a twelve-year long odyssey through Europe that would eventually also lead to a legal separation from her husband, who had stayed in Paris. This period brought her to Italy, Austria, the Russian Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, England and Switzerland. Two rooms at the exhibition presenting various portraits of Russian and European aristocrats reflected on Vigée Le Brun's exile, showing how she adapted her talent to the changing tastes and fashions. Her artistic and business skills allowed her to make a living and even to foster her recognition as, for example, her reception as member of the Imperial Academy of Arts at Saint Petersburg in 1800 proves. In 1802 she would return to Paris for the first time and after a longer period of travel in Europe, England and Switzerland amongst other countries, she would eventually settle in France, dividing her time between Paris and her country house in Louveciennes, in the western suburbs of Paris. During the last years of her life she wrote and published her memoir *Souvenirs...*, which would shape the image that she wanted to leave for posterity.

The exhibition *Vigée Le Brun. Woman Artist in Revolutionary France* is certainly an important exhibition, not just because it is the first large retrospective dedicated to the artist, who was well known throughout Europe during her

18. Vigée Le Brun, *Marie Antoinette and her Children*, 1787, oil on canvas, 108 1/4 × 85 1/4 in. (275 × 216,5 cm). Signed and dated (lower left): *L. Vigée. Le Brun 1787*. Paris, Salon, 1787, no. 97. Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles (MV 4520) [cat. 32].

active lifetime and famous for her portraiture but also for the insights that it provides into a shift of pictorial conventions that occurred from Early Modern times to the Modern Period. The portraits of the last section of the show covering the painter's exile and final years demonstrated well how she put her skills to the service of the changing conventions, still emphasizing her qualities as an outstanding colourist. Within the treatment of skin and flesh, where she applied transparent glazes over preparatory layers of warm and bright colours mixed with sections of colder hues, her mastery becomes visible; it sometimes seems as if blood would actually flow through the veins, pulsing, for example, into the red parts of the cheeks.

When the show opened for the first time in Paris almost 130 works of art were shown. Unfortunately, just 80 paintings, drawings and sketches would travel to New York and visitors to The Metropolitan Museum were not able to see the full panorama the initial project at the Grand Palais presented. But, to be fair, one has to consider that organising such a show involves several years of planning and negotiating and not all works are allowed to travel due to loan restrictions; and although "just" 80 works were shown, visitors could get a good idea of this female artist. The large number of portraits were presented in a greyish painted exhibition space quite advantageous for emphasizing the paintings' colouring, one of the outstanding qualities of the artist's work. Nevertheless, one might have just wished that at The Metropolitan Museum a wider range of techniques, especially more pastels and sketches, had been presented, which might have made the show even more fascinating.

The English exhibition catalogue, considered by the curators as part of the contextual approach, contains three essays that go much more in-depth regarding some of the above-mentioned aspects, such as women at the Royal Academy.¹⁹ Although it was adapted for the exhibition in New York, it might have been wise to also translate the articles from the French catalogue, which would have made up for the lesser number of artworks presented in the US. For example, the interesting text by Xavier Salmon would have shed more light for the English speaker on Vigée Le Brun's royal portraiture as it provides, with the commissions of the Comte de Provence, precise examples regarding the painter's copying practice.²⁰ This way it would have become clear how the painter could paint *Marie Antoinette with a Rose* for the Salon in 1783 in less than one month, copying the appreciated aspects of *Marie Antoinette in a Chemise Dress* and changing just the attire, deemed indecent for an official court portrait.

As suggested previously, the exhibition's intention to make Vigée Le Brun known to a wider audience has been achieved and one can congratulate the curators for this accomplishment. However, there were important issues the

exhibition only hinted at in some wall texts and picture labels connected to the problems mentioned at the beginning of this text referencing Linda Nochlin's essay: namely, the different treatment of women artists and the manifold obstacles that they encountered on their way up. With the exhibition's subtitle *Woman Artist in Revolutionary France* one would have expected a reflection on the issue of gender. It seems odd that since Nochlin a lot of interesting approaches have been established in the field of art history and cultural studies and the exhibition seemingly put aside many of these concerns.²¹ For example, Joseph Baillio's article for the catalogue states that the painter "poses a serious problem for certain proponents of a hard-line feminism. She never experienced her femininity as a curse or an obstacle to the full realization of her intellectual and creative potential. She gloried in it."²² It would be wrong to take, for example, Vigée Le Brun *Souvenirs...* as literal proof for the assumption that "she never experienced her femininity as a curse or an obstacle". Reading the artist in context invites a problematization of this literary source, which was consciously created with an agenda. In fact, the two volumes represented a (successful) attempt to positively reinforce the legacy of a painter who had throughout her life as a woman artist—not just after the French Revolution as a royalist—a more difficult stance than most of her (male) peers. For example, her marriage could be interpreted from this angle not only as an escape strategy from her stepfather's home; but also it gave her more personal liberty for her work as a painter. For instance, a painting session with a male client no longer had to be chaperoned as the marriage assured her social reputation.²³ To be fair, it must be said that certain aspects of a feminist approach are also visible in the catalogue. For example, Katharine Baether's contribution contextualising Vigée Le Brun within the history and the politics of the Royal Academy provides a very good picture of some of the obstacles women had to encounter.²⁴ Nevertheless, with a slightly modified and less traditional approach, framed more by questions and less by the painter's curriculum, the exhibition *Vigée Le Brun. Woman Artist in Revolutionary France* could have shown more explicitly for the visitor how this self-made woman managed to overcome the obstacles that constantly obstructed her way.

Those visitors who saw Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun's work for the first time in New York have certainly been seduced by this exhibition. Its emphasis on the painterly qualities and her reputation amply displayed the "towering grandeur" Nochlin's text refers to and showed what women artists could achieve despite the disadvantages that came with their gen-

19. BAILLIO, J.; BAETJER, K.; LANG P. (eds.), *Vigée Le Brun...*

20. SALMON, X., "Je ne me connais pas en peinture; mais vous me la faites aimer. Portraitureur la famille royale", in BAILLIO, J.; SALMON, X. (eds.), *Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*, exh. cat., 23 September 2015 – 11 January 2016, Grand Palais, Paris. Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2015, pp. 37-45.

21. See for example the standard work of POLLOCK, G.; PARKER, R., *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981; for a more recent overview on feminist approaches see ROBINSON, H., *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000*. Oxford: Wiley, 2001.

22. BAILLIO, J., "The Artistic and Social Odyssey of Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun", in BAILLIO, J.; BAETJER, K.; LANG P. (eds.), *Vigée Le Brun...*, p. 28.

23. About that aspect see HAROCHE-BOUZINAC, G., *Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun...*, p. 44.

24. BAETHER, K., "The Women of the French..."

der. *Vigée Le Brun. Woman Artist in Revolutionary France* contributed largely to creating general interest in an exceptional artist, who lived and worked in a time of profound changes in mentality and sometimes we can even get a glimpse of these changes by looking at her sumptuous portraits.

BAILLIO, J.; BAETJER, K.; LANG P. (eds.), *Vigée Le Brun. Woman Artist in Revolutionary France*, exh. cat., 15 February 2016 - 15 May 2016, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016, 288 pp.