

## Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun

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In a society that idolized love and feminine beauty, Madame Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842) shone as one of Europe's finest artists. Her first teacher was her father, pastel portraitist Louis Vigée. She studied under many well-known painters, including J.B. Greuze and Joseph Vernet. Professionally, Vigée-Lebrun earned a substantial sum of money painting portraits and flowers, considered the most appropriate subjects for women artists at the time. By the time Vigée-Lebrun married at age 20, she was overwhelmed with commissions. In 1779, Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun became Marie-Antoinette's personal portraitist, going on to produce at least 25 portraits of the Queen during her lifetime.

Vigée-Lebrun was inducted into the Académie Royale de la Peinture et Sculpture in 1783, in a unique and unorthodox fashion. Her application was initially rejected because of her husband's business dealing art, but was reconsidered with royal intercession. Her salon submissions, *Venus Tying Cupid's Wings* and *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*, circumvented the traditional procedure of submitting a reception piece for membership consideration. The practice of accepting reception pieces adapted the tradition of guilds using masterpieces to confirm competency of guild members seeking promotion from the rank of journeyman to master. Artists seeking admission to the Académie offered small-scale renditions of prospective reception pieces for initial consideration. If a



*Marie Antoinette a la rose*, 1785  
(Replica of the original of 1783), Oil  
on canvas, 44 1/2" x 34 1/4"

concept was approved, the artist was then asked to execute the reception piece with a specific set of requirements. Often, the Academy even dictated the subject and dimensions of the work. Election to the Academy would then be decided by vote of the Assembly. None of these norms prevailed in Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun's acceptance as *Academicienne*, which was a source of much resentment by the establishment.

Her memoirs give perspective to many of the challenges she faced, not the least of which was her husband whose passion for extravagant women and gambling decimated both his and her fortunes. When escaping the French Revolution in 1789, she was left with less than twenty francs, despite having earned millions from her paintings.

M. Le Brun insisted she take pupils to bolster their income. Her house filled with young ladies "learning how to paint eyes, noses, and faces." This distraction from her own work only increased her eagerness to paint, and she often refused to leave her easel until nightfall.

Unprepared for their first child, she worked in her studio between labor pains on the day her daughter was born.

Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun's court affiliation was used to expel her in the Revolution of 1789. After her escape, Vigée-Lebrun moved on to paint portraits of former French Court members, such as, the Duchesse de Polignac, Madame Germaine de Staël, and Lord Byron in London, as well as other nobility in Rome, Berlin, Vienna, and St. Petersburg.

Her works now reside in collections in the Louvre, National Library in Paris, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the Geneva Musée des Beaux-Arts, the Uffizi in Italy, and many private collections throughout the world. Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun's work is exemplary of talent superseding institutionalized bias, culturally imposed limitations, and accepted societal mores. Vigée-Lebrun's determination allowed her to overcome these limitations through will-power, energy, and persistence.



*Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat*,  
1782, Oil on canvas, 38 1/2"  
x 27 3/4", National Gallery,  
London