

CONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE: ELISABETH VIGÉE-LEBRUN AND THE
ACADÉMIE ROYALE

by

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INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to cast one's eyes over so many charming works by Madame Lebrun without recalling with irony all the torments, all the petty persecutions, which for a long time closed the door of the Académie to her and which finally gave way only to the power of authority.¹

Frederick Melchoir Grimm, 1783

As Grimm wrote in the *Correspondance Littéraire*, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842) was not admitted to the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture without incident. Her initial attempt to become a member of the Académie was unsuccessful. Because she was married to an art dealer, Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun, the Académie, represented by its director, Charles-Claude de Flahaut, Comte de la Billarderie d'Angiviller, held her in violation of the statute forbidding artists from mixing in commerce. Vigée-Lebrun was eventually admitted on 31 May 1783, by order of the king, presumably at the insistence of her close friend and benefactor, Queen Marie-Antoinette. Contrary to ordinary admission procedures, which required the artist's *morceau de réception* (reception piece) to be presented on the same day as admission, Vigée-Lebrun presented her work to the academicians on 3 June 1783. The Académie kept scrupulous records of these items, and remarkably, there was no academic documentation of her reception piece, which was virtually unprecedented. Other accounts, including Vigée-Lebrun's memoirs, *Souvenirs*, written at the age of eighty, the Salon livret, and the 1783 Salon literature, indicate that her *morceau de réception* was the 1780 allegorical history painting, *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* (Fig. 1).

¹ All translations are by the author, except where indicated. *Correspondance Littéraire*, 13 (1783): 440 as quoted in Mary Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 89, 287.

Art historians – in particular Mary Sheriff and Emma Barker – have engaged with this historic episode, explaining it in terms of the artist’s gender. In her 1996 book, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art*, Sheriff dismantled the traditional notion that Vigée-Lebrun’s initial rejection from the Académie Royale was a result of her marriage to an art dealer. Sheriff indicated that it was not her marriage that prompted the Académie Royale to initially bar her entrance into the institution; it was Vigée-Lebrun’s ambition, talent, beauty, and intelligence that threatened the male members, prompting them to reject her.² In her essay, “Women artists and the French Academy: Vigée-Lebrun in the 1780s,” Barker states that the painter’s presentation of *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* as a reception piece indicates her ambition as well as her revolutionary and proto-feminist spirit.³ Although these explanations have become widely accepted, they characterize Vigée-Lebrun as ambitious and revolutionary, when she was, in fact, a product of the eighteenth century and played her role as courtier and unofficial painter to the queen according to strict contemporary social and cultural mores. In the study of this event, gender has overshadowed the effects of politics and social class, two factors that are equally significant.

In eighteenth-century France, social status and political affiliation directly affected one’s opportunities. Status as a member of the nobility or even the *noblesse de robe*, minor nobles who purchased their titles from the government, offered exposure to new ideas, as well as prestige. With France being extremely class conscious during this time period, the daughter of a second-rate guild painter and a hairdresser, such as Vigée-Lebrun, must have been discriminated against by the nobles in control of the Académie.

² Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 82.

³ Emma Barker, “Women artists and the French Academy: Vigée-Lebrun in the 1780s,” in *Gender and Art* ed. Gill Perry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 110-113.

An examination of the historical context of this episode indicates that Vigée-Lebrun was a conservative supporter of the monarchy and that the volatile political climate was the decisive determinant of all artistic decisions in 1783. In this climate, the condition of acceptance for this artist was inextricably linked to her political affiliation and social class.

Chapter 1 situates Vigée-Lebrun firmly in the eighteenth century by examining her artistic training and childhood. I will discuss the way in which she presented herself to the public, with reference to her self-portraiture and her *morceau de réception*, *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*. I also address her close relationship with Marie-Antoinette and staunchly Royalist sympathies. Chapter 2 discusses the history of the Académie Royale in regard to female membership. In addition, I deal with Vigée-Lebrun's contemporary, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, and the differences between the admission procedures of the two female artists. Chapter 3 explains the intimate connection between social hierarchy and the Académie Royale, and suggests that Vigée-Lebrun's relatively low social status alienated her from the noble Académie members and the more prestigious bourgeois members of society. In chapter 4, I address the general dislike of Marie-Antoinette during the early 1780s and the ways in which this likely affected Vigée-Lebrun's career. Finally, I discuss contemporary associations of *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* with the American War of Independence.

CHAPTER 1: A PRODUCT OF HER TIME

Vigée-Lebrun's Childhood, Education, and Marriage

Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's childhood and early artistic training indicate that she enjoyed a comfortable and modest upbringing, which did not encourage her to embrace reformist leanings. Like other celebrated eighteenth-century female painters – most notably Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807) – Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun was the daughter of an artist, the pastel portraitist, Louis Vigée, and his wife, the former hairdresser, Jeanne (née Maissin). Her father was an assistant professor at the Académie de Saint-Luc and remained a lifelong member. A talented pastelist, Vigée supported the monarchy and passed his Royalist sympathies on to his daughter.¹ The savvy portraitist likely felt that the structure of the *ancien régime* was conducive to his business, especially since he drew most of his clients from the aristocracy and the court. Louis Vigée served as his daughter's teacher until his untimely death in 1767, which left the family penniless.²

Vigée-Lebrun's background typified that of the daughter of a successful guild painter. At the age of three months, she was sent to board on a farm at Epernon, near Chartres, which was the standard practice in all but the poorest of French families.³ She stayed at the farm until she was five years old, when she was sent to the Convent de la Trinité on the rue de Charonne, in the faubourg Saint-Antoine. At this time, most convents stressed morality and social graces. When she left the convent, she was only

¹ Angelica Gooden, *The Sweetness of Life: A Biography of Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*. (London: André Deutsch, 1997), 8.

² Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, trans. Lionel Strachey (New York: G. Braziller, 1989), 9.

³ Gooden, *The Sweetness of Life*, 9.

eleven years old. Whether or not her convent was one of the establishments where drawing was taught, she took every opportunity to express her artistic talent. When discussing her time at the convent in her *Souvenirs*, she later wrote, “I scrawled on everything at all seasons; my copy books, and even my schoolmates’, I decorated with marginal drawings of heads, some in full-face, others in profile...”⁴

After her stay in the convent, her traditional education ceased and she never indicated a desire for further learning. Perhaps she left the convent because her parents believed that she had sufficient education for a girl, while that of her brother, Etienne, seems to have been taken much more seriously.⁵ She indicates in *Souvenirs* that her brother was spoiled by her parents. She accepts this injustice, stating, “I was not nearly so lively as he, and far from being so clever or so pretty.”⁶ In her memoirs, she indicates that her mother instilled her with moral and religious principles. She also states that she did not begin to read novels until after her marriage. Before her marriage, she read nothing but sacred literature, such as moral teachings and the Bible, which she believed contained “everything one needs to know...”⁷ The eighteenth century did boast a number of femme savants, such as Diderot’s lover, Sophie Volland, Emile du Châtelet, and Julie de Lespinasse, who were well-read, but Vigée-Lebrun had no desire to imitate them intellectually.⁸

As is the case with most eighteenth-century women, Vigée-Lebrun’s personal life was governed by the men around her. Following her father’s death, Vigée-Lebrun’s

⁴ Vigée Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸ Gooden, *The Sweetness of Life*, 11. See also Bernard Minoret and Claude Arnaud, *Les Salons* (Paris: J.C. Lattès, 1985). See also Judith P. Zinsser, *La Dame d’Esprit: A Biography of the Marquise du Châtelet* (New York: Viking Press, 2006), and Janine Bouissounouse, *Julie, the life of Mademoiselle de Lespinasse: Her Salon, Her Friends, and Her Loves* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962).

mother married forty-four-year-old jeweler Jean-François Le Sèvre in 1768. In her memoirs, Vigée-Lebrun accuses her miserly stepfather of pocketing all of her early artwork sales.⁹ Her stepfather took a serious role in her upbringing, and eventually forbade her to stroll in the gardens of the Palais-Royal to preserve her chastity and honor, which he feared could have been compromised if she continued to walk around Paris unaccompanied. He initiated the contact between Elisabeth and Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun, a distinguished art dealer and connoisseur, which eventually resulted in marriage in 1776. Lebrun was the son of the art dealer, Pierre Le Brun, but did not inherit the artistic talent of his great-uncle Charles Le Brun.¹⁰ His main interest lay in dealing in Old Master paintings and drawings and building up the private collections of his clients. Part of Vigée-Lebrun's dowry, which amounted to over 15,000 livres, consisted of unspecified savings from the sale of her paintings.¹¹

According to her memoirs, Elisabeth was indifferent to her marriage transaction.¹² Eighteenth-century marriage was less an institution or sacrament than a contract, entailing neither constancy in the man nor fidelity in the woman.¹³ Elisabeth's own marriage was an unhappy one, for her husband was a gambler and a philanderer, who spent most of her earnings in the pursuits of money and women. After her marriage, she attempted to secure her financial position by petitioning for a separation of property, the best legal redress available at a time when divorce was virtually impossible. The couple stayed married until 1792, when her husband eventually petitioned for a divorce. In 1780, fulfilling eighteenth-century marital expectations, she had a daughter, Julie

⁹ Vigée Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, 9-10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³ Gooden, *The Sweetness of Life*, 13.

(1780-1819). Vigée-Lebrun was a doting mother and looked upon her daughter as a source of joy and comfort.¹⁴ She never separated from Julie during her years abroad following her departure from Paris at the start of the Revolution, and provided her with excellent teachers.

Vigée-Lebrun's artistic education was quite traditional for an eighteenth-century female artist. She first studied with her father, who offered her a foundation for her career in portraiture. After his death in 1767, she studied with Gabriel Briard (1725-1777). Although there is no other mention of Vigée-Lebrun studying with Joseph Vernet, she records in *Souvenirs* that he instructed her to study the Italian and Flemish masters, but above all to follow nature. She followed his advice and studied the works of Rubens, Van Dyck, Greuze, Domenichino, and Guido Reni.¹⁵ Her close study of the Italian masters is apparent in one of her head studies for *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* (Fig. 2), which was originally attributed to an eighteenth-century Italian artist.¹⁶

Fame and Notoriety

According to her memoirs, at the age of fifteen, Vigée-Lebrun was already a sought-after portraitist. Her fame and prestige caught the eye of the court, and in 1778 she painted her first portrait of Marie-Antoinette, *Marie-Antoinette en chemise* (Fig. 3). They later became close friends. In spite of their very different social situations, they shared mutual respect, and probably a common sense of dissatisfaction as unhappily

¹⁴ Gita May, *Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun: The Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 141-142,

¹⁵ Michael Levey, *Painting and Sculpture in France, 1700-1789* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 282.

¹⁶ Pierre Rosenberg and Paul Falla, "A Drawing by Madame Vigée-Le Brun," *The Burlington Magazine* 123 (1981): 739-741.

married women, and as targets of increasingly vicious slanders, one as a foreigner – the so-called *l'Autrichienne* (literally “The Austrian Woman”, but figuratively “The Austrian Bitch”) – and the other as a woman artist in a prominent and public position. Given her upbringing in a family with conservative political views, Vigée-Lebrun likely welcomed involvement in court life, as she continued to be quite attached to the queen and fiercely loyal, especially after Marie-Antoinette’s death in 1793.¹⁷ In *Souvenirs*, Vigée-Lebrun obviously intended to rehabilitate the public’s perception of the queen’s character by describing numerous kind anecdotes intended to underscore her humanity and generosity, especially in her dealings with ordinary people.¹⁸ In addition, she praised the queen’s physical attributes:

She had the best walk of any woman in France, carrying her head erect with a dignity that stamped her as queen in the midst of her whole court, her majestic mien, however, not in the least diminishing the sweetness and amiability of her face.¹⁹

She goes on to praise Marie-Antoinette’s merry and kind eyes, delicate nose, and flawless complexion.²⁰

Like other women of culture and wit, Vigée-Lebrun began to host salons in 1780. Unlike the politically influential salons of Madame de Tencin and Madame Geoffrin, Vigée-Lebrun’s salons were occasions for musical recitals, poetry readings, and friendly conversation. Certainly, one could hardly expect to see such representatives of the Enlightenment as Diderot or d’Alembert frequent the salon of a protégé of Marie-Antoinette. Instead, her guests were noble men and women who were all supporters of the monarchy and connected to Versailles. Among her titled guests were such notable

¹⁷ May, *Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun*, 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Vigée Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, 25.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

personalities as Catherine Grand, the future Princesse de Talleyrand, the Comte de Vandreuil, and his mistress, Yolande de Polignac. Among the untitled guests at her entertainments was fellow academician, Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). The two artists remained quite cordial in their dealings until the late 1780s, just before the French Revolution, when David's vengeance and frustration led him to attack the Académie and the Monarchy. This resulted in the end of their friendship, since David's position against privilege forever alienated him from the royal favorite.²¹ Her participation in these salon events indicates that she was a part of the cultural tradition of court life and most certainly a woman of the eighteenth century, with strong connections to the monarchy.

Vigée-Lebrun's *Self-Portrait* (c.1781, Fig. 4) at the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, highlights the artist's pleasure in her role as a fashionable lady of high society, not a revolutionary. Although by this time famous for her artistic profession, she portrays herself as a charming and attractive society lady, without an artist's palette or brushes to indicate her trade. If she had wished to use this work as an assertion of her vocation and ambition, surely she would have included these elements. The Kimbell portrait evokes the eighteenth-century fashionable dress, *en chemise* (in a simple dress), with its sash at the waist, bow at the front, scalloped collar, and simple fabric.²² The plumed straw hat was one of Vigée-Lebrun's favorite accessories, and was worn by Marie-Antoinette in Vigée-Lebrun's 1783 portrait (Fig. 3). The artist repeated the composition and costume of the Kimbell self-portrait for another contemporaneous self-portrait (Fig. 5) and for a portrait of the Duchesse Yolande de Polignac (Fig. 6). By utilizing the same fashionable dress for self-portraits and for portraits of these royal women, Vigée-Lebrun affirms her

²¹ Simon Lee, *David* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), 131-132.

²² Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 213.

attachment to the royal court and her association with these powerful and sophisticated court ladies.

Although she was famous for her images of women during the early 1780s, Vigée-Lebrun's portraits and self-portraits never challenge gender stereotypes. She depicts herself as a beautiful society lady and a member of the leisure class, like Marie-Antoinette and the Duchesse de Polignac. All of these images depict women, as either idle or maternal. It could be argued that Vigée-Lebrun exploits her own femininity by painting images of women in this manner. At any rate, she is certainly not fashioning herself as an agent of change with these depictions. It is not until 1790, when Vigée-Lebrun is forced to advertise her talent as an artist in order to receive business outside of France, that she depicts herself actively painting (Fig. 7).

Not En Vogue: Style, Subject Matter, and Vigée-Lebrun's *morceau de réception*

Another dimension of Vigée-Lebrun's desire to fit into the French court is the style of her *morceau de réception*, the allegorical history painting *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* (Fig. 1). Rendered in the rococo style, the composition is characterized by delicate colors and soft curving forms. Eighteenth-century viewers would have understood this style to be courtly, which underlined Vigée-Lebrun's connection to Marie-Antoinette and the French monarchy. Her utilization of the rococo style is also evident in the female figures' gently inclined bodies, flowing outlines, and warm hues. Although Vigée-Lebrun's adherence to the rococo was quite successful in court circles, it was deemed outdated by d'Angiviller and his associates at the Académie, who were actively striving to rescue French painting from what they believed to be the frivolous

rococo manner.²³ Critics linked Vigée-Lebrun's history paintings to those of François Boucher (1703-1770), whose rococo work was not favored by the Académie.²⁴ Furthermore, the allegorical subject Vigée-Lebrun depicts in *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* was not favored by academicians or the Salon-going public, who preferred more historical works, such as David's depiction of an episode from Homer's *Iliad*, *Andromache Mourning Hector* (Fig. 8, 1783).

Peace Bringing Back Abundance's style and subject matter adheres to the rococo tastes of the French court; a prototype of this same subject existed at Versailles, Simon Vouet's *Prudence Leading Peace and Abundance* (Fig. 9, 1630), owned by Philippe, Duc d'Orléans. However, unlike Vouet's with its almost identical female bodies depicted in an abstracted presentation,²⁵ Vigée-Lebrun's naturalistic figures are rendered more individually. To enhance her individual portrayal of the two figures, she contrasts a billowing garment for Peace, with the controlled drapery of Abundance. Peace is more adorned in finery, with colorful flowers in her hair, whereas Abundance is presented as sober and simple.²⁶

The arrangement of figures in *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* reveals the allegory's meaning.²⁷ The personification of Abundance (here the abundance of the earth) displays many fruits in her cornucopia and a bared breast to emphasize her fecundity. What protects Abundance and allows her to flourish is the harmony between peoples,

²³ Ibid., 120-121.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 124.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

indicated by the figure of Peace crowned with laurel, draped in purple, and holding an olive branch.²⁸

Based on this analysis of Vigée-Lebrun's early life, art, and court associations, she never presented herself as a revolutionary nor as a reformer of women's position in the art world. During this period, she portrayed herself as a sophisticated and attractive courtier, not as an active painter. Like other eighteenth-century society ladies, she hosted salons as occasions for amusements and merry-making, not hotbeds for reformist philosophies. Her conservative politics and her close friendship with Marie-Antoinette indicate that she was quite content with her position, and likely never presumed to threaten her prosperity by being overly ambitious or deliberately challenging male authority. She worked in the rococo style and submitted an allegorical history painting in that manner as her *morceau de réception*, underscoring her intimate connection to the French court. Despite her adherence to eighteenth-century social conventions and her connections with the French queen, she was not initially welcomed into the Académie Royale. To understand this issue, I will examine the admission of other female artists in the next chapter.

²⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER 2: ONE OF MANY: OTHER FEMALE ACADEMICIANS

A Brief History of Female Member Admission Procedures

Vigée-Lebrun's adherence to eighteenth-century tradition in terms of her artistic output, family, education, and life at court indicates that she was a conventional woman of the time period, despite her unorthodox profession. An examination of other eighteenth-century female artists and the events surrounding their admissions into the Académie substantiates this claim.

During the seventeenth century, the Académie lacked regularized admission procedures, and the circumstances in regard to the acceptances of academicians were not systematically recorded. In the early eighteenth century, however, the differences between male and female admission procedures became evident. Male painters usually went through the Académie's training program, which was off-limits to women. They presented a *morceau d'agrément* for their provisional acceptance and were then assigned a topic for their *morceau de réception*, which they later submitted for evaluation.¹ Women were never received this way; the Académie made them *agrée* and *académicienne* on the same day. Most women brought several of their paintings to the session from which the academicians could select appropriate reception pieces.² Women received letters informing them of their acceptance, instead of swearing oaths, as did male members.

¹ Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 80-81.

² *Ibid.*, 81.

Admission of a woman into the Académie was unusual, but not unprecedented. The first woman accepted into this institution was Mademoiselle Catherine Girardon in 1663, during the directorship of Colbert. Her acceptance, like that of all academicians, was based on the king's grace. This indicates how the king could order Vigée-Lebrun's admission, since the king was viewed as sanctioning every member's acceptance.³ That the Académie was willing to accept Girardon might be explained by Colbert's desire to increase membership by recruiting artists who had never been associated with a guild. For the history of female artists, it is significant that Girardon was related to the king's sculptor, François Girardon, and that many women who were subsequently admitted were the daughters or wives of academicians.⁴ At the meeting in which Girardon was accepted, the Académie also admitted fourteen male members, with a noticeable difference in their acceptances. Girardon was sent "la Lestre," which was a letter that informed women of their admission, unlike all the male members, who took an oath in which they swore to uphold that statues and rules of the institution.⁵ Oath-taking in *ancien-régime* France formalized and added strength to commitments, but women were barred from swearing them except at their marriages.⁶

Eighteenth-Century Female Members: How Was Vigée-Lebrun Different?

Other eighteenth-century female artists were admitted following an established procedure. The 1720 admission of Rosalba Carriera, for whom the Académie revoked their edict of 1706 limiting the number of female academy members to four, was

³ Ibid., 80.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

qualified with the phrase, “it [was] without having consequence,” meaning that her admission was not to set a precedent for additional female members.⁷ In 1722, the same phrase marks the record of admission of a second foreign woman, Marquerite Haverman. Although it was thirty-two years before the next woman was admitted, the Académie still recorded that the admission of Madame Marie-Thérèse Vien (née Raboul), wife of the academician Joseph-Marie Vien, on 30 July 1754 was not intended to set a standard, indicating that her admission should not encourage other female members to apply and should not relax the institution’s views towards the acceptance of female members.⁸

Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744-1818) was the daughter of a Parisian jewelry dealer who at the age of 26 was accepted unanimously to the Académie Royale in 1770. Because of her husband’s position as a *parlementaire*, Vallayer-Coster was a member of the highest rank of the bourgeois members of the *noblesse de robe*, who passed on state offices they had purchased from father to son. She was admitted to the Académie following the protocol adopted in the eighteenth century for female acceptance and was given space in the Louvre beside other artist’s *ateliers*, working spaces provided as an academic privilege. Studio space in the Louvre was most unusual for a female artist and signals Vallayer-Coster’s prestige, based on her wealthy bourgeois social status and court connections.

The acceptance of Adélaïde Labille-Guiard on 31 May 1783, the same day as her historic rival, Vigée-Lebrun, followed procedure. She was presented to the other members by an established academician, the portraitist Alexander Roslin, and elected by

⁷ “ce sans tirer à consequence.” Ibid., 79.

⁸ Ibid.

the routine vote.⁹ She brought paintings to the session from which the academicians selected her reception piece, a pastel portrait of an Académie member, the sculptor, Augustin Pajou, and ranked her as a portrait painter (Fig. 10). Although her *morceau de réception* was created using pastels, she also worked in oil, a medium that would mark her as more than a charming pastellist or miniaturist.¹⁰ Throughout her career, Labille-Guiard worked at the French court, in particular for Mesdames Tantes, the sisters of Louis XVI. In 1787, two weeks before the opening of the Salon, Labille-Guiard was awarded the distinction of first painter to Mesdames Tantes, based on the strength of her portrait of Madame Adélaïde, which was to be shown in the Salon.¹¹ Her new title was conspicuously affixed to her name in the Salon livret, which added to her notoriety. Unlike other female *académiciennes*, Labille-Guiard was not the daughter of a painter or other type of artisan. Instead, she was the daughter of a haberdasher, but she married a minor state functionary in 1769, making her a member of the *noblesse de robe*.

Labille-Guiard, much more of an activist for women's rights than Vigée-Lebrun, attempted to gain equality for women within the Académie. The memoirs of the engraver Jean-Georges Wille recounts that Labille-Guiard gave a speech declaring that the Académie must accept an unlimited number of women and not be capped at four as mandated in the 1706 statement.¹² Wille also mentioned a second motion made by Labille-Guiard and supported by the painter François-André Vincent that would allow women to be distinguished with various honors. She justified this request by arguing that women could not participate in the governance of the Académie and they could not be

⁹ Ibid., 75.

¹⁰ Levey, *Painting and Sculpture in France, 1700-1789*, 281.

¹¹ Melissa Hyde, "Under the Sign of Minerva," in *Women, Art and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. M. Hyde and J. Milam (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2003), 141.

¹² Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 81.

professors in its schools, so women had no way to elevate themselves within the existing hierarchy.¹³ Both of Labille-Guiard's requests were approved by the Académie. Labille-Guiard also petitioned and eventually succeeded, after a long dispute, in getting studio space in the Louvre, a privilege seldom granted to a woman.

Although the Académie was certainly not eager to admit women to its ranks during any period of its history, it did not exclude all of them. Assertions that Vigée-Lebrun was barred from entry simply because of her gender are thus suspect. On the surface, Vigée-Lebrun's situation seems similar to that of Raboul-Vien, Vallayer-Coster and Labille-Guiard. All four women lived during the eighteenth century, worked for the French court, and were monetarily, commercially, and socially successful. On closer inspection, Labille-Guiard actively fought for women's rights, especially during and following the Revolution, making her a great example of a groundbreaking female artist and the most ambitious of the three women. Mary Sheriff suggests that Vigée-Lebrun challenged both the power of the Académie to name the *morceau de réception* and the power of the male artist to dominate the genre devoted to texts of moral, historical or intellectual significance. However, Vigée-Lebrun was refused admission before she even presented her *morceau de réception*. Why, then, was there a controversy surrounding her acceptance into the Académie Royale? Vigée-Lebrun was not related to an Académie member, as was Girardon, or married to an academician, like Raboul-Vien. Nor was Vigée-Lebrun a member of the *noblesse de robe*, as were Vallayer-Coster and Labille-Guiard. It appears likely that Vigée-Lebrun's lower social station influenced her initial admission into the Académie. This topic will be explored in the next chapter.

¹³ Ibid.

CHAPTER 3: HUMBLE ORIGINS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CLASS

Académie as Social Hierarchy

Based on my analysis of Vigée-Lebrun's upbringing and social endeavors, it is unlikely that gender was the sole reason she was initially rejected from the Académie Royale as previous scholarship has indicated. Claims that she challenged gender stereotypes are countered by Vigée-Lebrun living her life according to cultural expectations for proper female deportment, despite her unorthodox profession. Although female artists were not necessarily enthusiastically welcomed into the Académie, they were not all refused admission, making the claim that gender was the most important determinant of Académie membership less plausible. This chapter considers her relatively humble social class and her marriage to an art dealer as fundamental to her initial rejection by the Académie.

In eighteenth-century France, a strict hierarchy of social orders had existed at least since the seventeenth century. In Old Régime France, society was divided into three orders: the First Estate, which included the monastic orders as well as priests and bishops; the Second Estate, the hereditary nobility; and the Third Estate, consisting of the rest of the population.¹ The division expressed the purportedly divine origins and nature of society, for the number three recalled the Holy Trinity, a Catholic Church doctrine stating that while there is one God, he exists as three entities. This concept reflects not only the importance of religion to the French nation, but also the link between the monarchy and

¹ Gordon Wright, *France in Modern Times: From the Enlightenment to the Present* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 15.

society. Although not every Frenchman was a member of the same social class, they were all part of France.² The Third Estate included the members of the bourgeoisie, together with many peasants, artisans and manual workers. According to a 1709 police report on the population of Paris, guild members, like Louis Vigée and Vigée-Lebrun, were at the bottom of the social ladder.³ As a member of the Third Estate, Vigée-Lebrun's acceptance into the Académie Royale challenged the hierarchy of the institution, unlike the admission of Labille-Guiard, who belonged to the Second Estate.

Given the history of the Académie Royale and the eighteenth-century focus on class, it is not surprising that social hierarchy would play a major role in the acceptance of members. The Académie was founded in 1648 by Louis XIV (1638-1715), and was modeled on Italian examples, such as the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, in an attempt to recreate the artistic production and style of the Italian Renaissance. In 1661, it came under the control of Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), who made the arts a major component in the glorification of the king. Although not of old aristocratic blood, Colbert's father Nicolas used his wealth as a *clothier* to purchase a title for his son. In 1640, he held the post of *commissaire ordinaire des guerres* in the war office, by which he inspected troops. The next director, Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), enjoyed a privileged position at court. He was ennobled by Louis XIV and was appointed first painter to the king. In 1683, under his directorship of Charles Le Brun, the Académie enforced a strict hierarchy of members and a rigorous system of education. In emulation of the Italian hierarchy of genres, narrative painting took precedence over descriptive painting and a linear classicizing style over color and the application of paint. In order to

²Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

enforce this rule, the Académie barred genre painters, who were associated with the northern “colorists,” from teaching in the Académie School, thus ensuring students received instruction in life drawing.⁴ This led to a hierarchy of members, with history painters occupying the position of most prestige, followed by painters of genre, landscape, portrait, and still lifes.

The social hierarchy of the Académie roughly approximated the class structure in society, with the *officiers* analogous to the aristocracy. This group received preferential treatment in the Salons and made all administrative decisions. Even their places in the assembly were distinguished by richly upholstered armchairs, as opposed to the wooden benches of the academicians.⁵ The status and ultimately the regulation of a painter’s precise standing in the Académie depended on his or her category, with history painting meriting royal distinction. The subjects of these paintings were often selected from biblical, mythological, and ancient history, but they often included themes glorifying the king and depicting significant events of his reign. French kings often justified their royal positions through mythological, religious, and historical allusions to their exalted ancestry.⁶ Those painters in this category were those who became *Premier Peintre*, or First Painter, and Officers of the Académie.

The Académie’s hierarchy of subject matter corresponds to contemporary class consciousness in eighteenth-century France. Artists were discriminated against based upon their subject matter, just as lower members of society were marginalized because of their social standing. Given the link between higher ranking members and history

⁴ Paul Duro, *The Academy and the Limits of Painting in Seventeenth Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 53.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

painting, artists often tried to achieve the rank of history painter in order to rise in artistic society. In 1769, Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805) submitted the history painting, *Septimius Severus Reproaching His Son Caracalla for Having Made an Attempt on His Life in the Defiles of Scotland* (Fig. 11). The Académie decided to receive Greuze as an academician on the basis of his past works, with the rank of genre painter, not history painter: “Monsieur, the Académie receives you but as a genre painter; we have taken into account your former productions, which are excellent, and shut our eyes to this one which is worthy neither of the Académie nor of you.”⁷ This event betrays the ideas of the top level of the social hierarchy in place in the eighteenth century. His failure attests to the class prejudices of the aristocracy. Like the peasants in Greuze’s genre paintings, Greuze himself was supposed to remain exactly in his subordinate position as a genre painter.⁸

Greuze’s inability to move between artistic categories mirrors the inability of the French people to flow between social classes during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. A few years earlier, in 1750, this was less so, as ennoblement by the king or the purchase of government offices, as in the case of Labille-Guiard’s husband, permitted wealthy bourgeois members to become nobility.⁹ However, starting in the mid-1760s, a drastic change in this system occurred. The old nobility embarked on a successful campaign to monopolize all high offices of state, blocking the upward channels of mobility against the ambitious bourgeoisie.¹⁰ By 1780, Jacques Necker was the only remaining top-level bureaucrat of common birth. In the Church, there were twenty non-noble bishops in 1740, but the last one disappeared in 1783. By a royal decree in 1781,

⁷ Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Revolution, 1750-1800* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 43.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Wright, *France in Modern Times*, 19.

¹⁰ Ibid.

officer's commissions in certain elite army regiments were reserved for men who could show four generations of noble lineage.¹¹ Forced to abandon aristocratic aspirations, the bourgeoisie began to adopt views of the reforming *philosophes*, a group of reformist thinkers who encouraged reason, knowledge, and education as a means to combat social injustice. The *philosophes'* ideas reflected the principles generally associated with the Enlightenment movement. By the 1780s, Enlightenment ideas were in wide circulation in the bourgeois salons and publications. However, Greuze's desire to move from the lower hierarchical subject of genre painting to history painting was checked by the power of the Académie. Just as the hierarchy of genres was an expression of the authority of history painting, the orders of French society were an expression of the sovereign's authority. The hierarchical structure of both French society and the Académie was arranged as a ladder to ensure discipline, stability, and the effective use of power, making a former guild painter of the Third Estate unlikely to have been welcomed into the august and noble Académie.

État and Vigée-Lebrun

Similar to the case of Greuze, Vigée-Lebrun's submission of a history painting as her *morceau de réception* insinuated a move between social classes, not only because she was moving from the Third Estate into the aristocratically controlled Académie, but also because she was primarily a portraitist. The entry of Vigée-Lebrun into the Académie was particularly problematic, for she was also the wife of an art dealer, the daughter of a guild painter, and a former member of Académie de Saint Luc guild. Thus, her admission challenged the social hierarchy of the Académie Royale.

¹¹ Ibid.

In an institution such as the Académie Royale that was so explicitly linked to social hierarchy, the social status of every member was closely examined. D'Angiviller aptly indicated the importance of social status in the case of Vigée-Lebrun's acceptance into the Académie Royale:

The Lady Le Brun (La Dame Le Brun), wife of an art dealer, is very talented and would have long ago been elected to the Académie were it not for the commerce of her husband. It is said, and I believe it, that she does not mix in commerce, but in France a wife has no other *état* than that of her husband.¹²

In this statement, the meaning of *état* is ambiguous. The term *état* generally meant social position or the rank a family shares. Social rank was determined by the husband's position, and a woman from a noble family would lose her rank if she married a man of a lower social station. In the context of d'Angiviller's statement, *état* may better be translated as "occupation," but in her *Souvenirs*, Vigée-Lebrun mentions the arrogance and pomposity of Jean-Baptiste-Marie Pierre (c. 1713-1789), the Académie's First Painter. She states that Pierre had the money to buy his entrance into certain circles, even though he was a mediocre artist.¹³ Pierre, who was from a rich family, ennobled by Louis XV, was always watchful of social position and may have been particularly irritated to see Vigée-Lebrun, the daughter of a second-rate guild painter and a hairdresser in the prominent, if unofficial, position of favorite painter of the queen.¹⁴ A letter from Pierre to d'Angiviller in which he asks for changes in the regulation of the *Ecole royale des élèves protégés*, Pierre mentions his goal "to proscribe the vile masses

¹² Anatole de Montaiglon, *Procès-verbaux de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, 11 vols. (Paris, Charavay Frères, 1889), 9:156.

¹³ Vigée-Lebrun, *Souvenirs*, 34.

¹⁴ Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 89.

who inundate the schools.”¹⁵ The most important conditions of admission to this institution would be “to not be the son of a lackey and to have no sort of physical deformity.”¹⁶ The fact that Pierre addressed this letter to d’Angiviller suggests that both men had a class bias. The assumptions that d’Angiviller presumably shared with eighteenth-century culture and his class about women’s nature and their inability to rise above their husband’s social status certainly influenced Vigée-Lebrun’s acceptance. Given the construction of eighteenth-century society, Vigée Lebrun had the same *état* as her husband, the art dealer, Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun. Her special relationship with Marie-Antoinette and the court, her rapid ascendancy from humble origins, her intelligence, good looks, and social success surely made her a target for the class conscious Pierre and d’Angiviller.¹⁷

It was likely d’Angiviller who played the most important role in the Académie’s decision to bar Vigée-Lebrun’s admission, for he signed the documents that rejected her. Along with a class bias, d’Angiviller was deeply committed to raising the status of the fine arts, by definitely separating painting and sculpture from crafts and commerce. D’Angiviller ardently believed that painting and sculpture were noble, liberal arts. The liberal arts, like the noble estates, were those most distanced from labor, or whose productions pertained more to the mind than to the body or the hand, in the case of painting and sculpture.¹⁸ Vigée-Lebrun’s marriage to an art dealer imbued her works with a trade association. This was most undesirable for d’Angiviller, who actively campaigned to dismantle art guilds, in order to remove the taint of trade on the

¹⁵ Ibid., 90.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 94.

production of painting and sculpture. Vigée-Lebrun's contemporary, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard married a minor state functionary in 1769, which removed her from her non-aristocratic upbringing as the daughter of a haberdasher, and offered her a prestigious position in society. This distanced her from her association with the Académie de Saint-Luc, making her a better candidate than Vigée-Lebrun for an *académicienne*.

Enlightenment Ideas as a Bourgeois and Noble Construction

Enlightenment ideas, centered on the concept of humanism, were popular in both the Académie and the French court during this time. According to Enlightenment thinking, the individual man was the central figure in the universe. He was fundamentally rational in nature, basically good and almost infinitely perfectible, if provided with education. In addition, he had the right to expect freedom from arbitrary rules and restrictions and to develop his potential to its ultimate limit.¹⁹ While none of the major *philosophes* directly challenged the monarchy, the church, property rights, or the existence of social hierarchy, the Enlightenment's main principles ran counter to the fundamental ideas on which the old regime rested, because the institutions of pre-Revolutionary France were still based on authority and tradition.

The Enlightenment began with the titled noblemen, who had the leisure time to converse on philosophical subjects. Given her association with the court from the late 1770s onward, Vigée-Lebrun was certainly aware of these Enlightenment ideas, but as a staunch Royalist in close association with the court, she was most likely not interested in or exposed to the political and social reform dimension of these ideas. It was the formerly bourgeois members of the Second Estate, to which Labille-Guiard belonged,

¹⁹ Ibid.

who harnessed these ideas into a movement. These bourgeois members of society were especially attracted to the rational and individualistic worldview and to the idea that status and advancement should be based on merit rather than birth, because some of these members paid for their noble titles as a result of financial success.²⁰

On the basis of their membership in the ranks of the titled nobility, many academicians believed in Enlightenment ideas. D'Angiviller, for instance, was a member of the ancient sword nobility and eventually served the royal family as Gentleman of the Sleeve to the Dauphin.²¹ A further indication of his affiliation with the Enlightenment is his relationship with Madame de Marchais, who was his lover and future wife. Madame de Marchais, like Madame de Pompadour, cultivated Enlightenment thinkers. Unlike the aristocratic d'Angiviller, Jacques-Louis David came from a bourgeois family, more closely resembling the family of Labille-Guiard. His father, Louis-Maurice, worked as a wholesale iron merchant, and his mother, Marie-Geneviève Buron, was from a family of Freemasons and architects.²² Determined to raise his status in society, Louis-Maurice bought himself a minor administrative post, making David a member of the *noblesse de robe* and uniting him with the bourgeois Enlightenment movement. The subject matter and style of his paintings were viewed as a regeneration of French art, thanks to their clarity of line and intellectual historical subject matter, which highlighted the nobility of the human character, inextricably linking his works to the Enlightenment movement.

Given the strict hierarchical structure of both French society and the Académie Royale, Vigée-Lebrun's humble social class undoubtedly played a role in her initial

²⁰ Wright, *France in Modern Times*, 28.

²¹ Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 190.

²² Lee, *David*, 17.

rejection from the Académie. She was an outsider to Enlightenment principles and to the preferred intellectual subject matter of the Académie. The subject matter of the history paintings Vigée-Lebrun displayed at the 1783 Salon, *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* (Fig. 1) and *Venus Binding Cupid* (Fig. 12), embraced the rococo style. Therefore, they were inconsistent with the inspiring intellectual subject matter of Jacques-Louis David favored by the Académie. Vigée-Lebrun's humble origins, lack of exposure to the Enlightenment, her *état* as an art dealer's wife, and her membership in the Académie de Saint-Luc ostracized her from this institution. Furthermore, Vigée-Lebrun's prominent position in the court of Marie-Antoinette may have influenced the noble Académie members to bar her admission. Ordinarily, a close association with the French queen would have guaranteed anyone, especially a charming female courtier, success and praise, but, together with her low social status, the political climate during this period surely produced a negative effect on Vigée-Lebrun's acceptance into the Académie Royale.

CHAPTER 4:
UNFORTUNATE CIRCUMSTANCES: POLITICS IN 1783

Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette: Separation of Husband and Wife

Another important factor affecting Vigée-Lebrun's acceptance into the Académie Royale was the volatile political climate of the 1780s and the artist's friendship with Marie-Antoinette, who became the scapegoat for the nation's problems. This chapter will look at the uniquely French understanding of kingship and queenship, and the ways in which Vigée-Lebrun's *morceau de réception* and her other submissions to the Salon of 1783 would have reinforced her relationship with the monarchy, making her acceptance problematic for the academicians and her works undesirable to the French public.

The French people believed that their king needed no coronation, because he reigned by the grace of God. The quote famously associated with Louis XIV, "L'État, c'est moi," applied to all the monarchs from Louis XIV until the Revolution, in the sense that the king was considered to be the symbol of the nation and the sole source of authority in the state.¹ The king of France was thought to have had two different bodies, the immortal or immaterial body and the physical body, with each being entirely separate from the other. In 1547, King Henri II changed the *ordo*, his vows to his kingdom, stipulating that the king married his kingdom, that is, he took France as his bride.² The king's mystical marriage to the kingdom indicates that the state of France, and therefore

¹ Herbert H. Rowen, "L'État, c'est moi: Louis XIV and the State," *French Historical Studies* 21, no. 1 (1961): 91.

² James B. Collins, "State Building in Early Modern Europe: The Case of France," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 605.

the king himself, was not connected to the physical human queen. The king's marriage to France suggests that he was God's agent in protecting the kingdom.

The French queen only served a practical role, for she functioned as a means of forming political and military alliances. Most importantly, she bore children in order to assure the succession. The Salic Law (c.509), which prohibited the inheritance of the French throne by a woman, cemented the queen's marginal role in the governance of the kingdom. As the foreign-born wife of Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette was not only separate from the king, but also seen by the people as a taint on his physical body and an agent of corruption. She received blame for the difficulties facing the French kingdom. Consequently, the Third Estate's turn against Louis XVI occurred much later than their abandonment of Marie-Antoinette. After the royal family's removal from the Palace of Versailles to Paris on 5 October 1789, Louis XVI maintained a high level of popularity and was obliging to the social, political, and economic reforms of the revolution. He was still officially recognized as King of France until 20 August 1792, just ten days after the Insurrection, when the Paris Commune took possession of the Hôtel de Ville (the seat of city government), attacked the Tuileries, and took the royal family into custody. After Louis XVI's arrest, he was tried by the National Convention, found guilty of treason, and executed on 21 January 1793. But, the hostility towards Marie-Antoinette had been persistent from the late 1770s, a fact that influenced the lives of the queen's close friends, especially Vigée-Lebrun.

The mid-1770s through the early 1780s saw a growing dislike for the queen. Sarah Maza and Lynn Hunt have shown that libels against Marie-Antoinette often

focused on the queen's sexualized body.³ Following the conventions of pamphlets that denounced women in the public sphere, particularly the king's mistresses, these libels suggested that unbridled female sexuality, once relegated to the margins of power, had now moved to the center, through Marie-Antoinette.⁴ The *libellistes* also criticized the queen for not yet producing an heir and her undeniable enjoyment of the company of the Comte d'Artois, the attractive royal brother. In addition, two influential pamphlets, the *Essais historiques sur la vie de Marie-Antoinette* (1781) and the *Portefeuille d'un talon rouge* (1783) portrayed the queen's garden walks with friends as occasions for licentiousness.⁵ One of the favorite charges against the queen called her a tribade, or a lesbian, naming her intimate friends, the Princesse de Lamballe and the Duchesse de Polignac, as her favorite lovers.

Marie-Antoinette's involvement in politics fueled the French people's rampant dislike of the queen. After the death of the king's mentor, M. de Maurepas, in 1781, Joseph II, Grand Duke of Austria and brother of the French queen, began to use Marie-Antoinette as a political pawn. In 1782, Joseph II planned to reopen the mouth of the Scheldt River, for the sake of the city of Antwerp, which had been blocked from access to the sea by the Treaty of Westphalia that had ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648. Marie-Antoinette mounted a campaign to obtain Louis XVI's approval of this plan. By June 1783, two months before the Salon, it was clear that her efforts were not soliciting

³ Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette," and Sarah Maza, "The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited (1785-1786): The Case of the Missing Queen," in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991).

⁴ Ibid. See also Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 130.

⁵ Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 130.

the emperor's desired result, and Joseph II begged her to "prove her devotion to the august house of her family."⁶ He was certainly not referring to the Bourbons.

Marie-Antoinette's position as a political pawn working on the part of the Austrian state ostracized her from the good graces of the French people, while offering more confirmation to the popular conception that she was a foreign blight on the king. The king himself grew suspicious of Marie-Antoinette's intentions, and his doubts were supported and furthered by his tutor, the Duc de Vauguyon. Long before their marriage, Vauguyon had frightened him with tales of the dominance that his Austrian wife would exert over him. Despite her efforts, Marie-Antoinette wielded little political power. Yet, she let the public believe that she had more influence than she actually did by regularly summoning the King's ministers into her chambers to discuss France's relationship with Austria. These meetings were surely not unnoticed by the *libellistes* and the queen's enemies. Her involvement in the affairs of France reinforced the public's negative opinion of her.

Royal Friendship as the Catalyst of Rejection

At a time when most members of the Third Estate, of which Vigée-Lebrun was a member, vehemently disliked Marie-Antoinette's involvement in French politics, Vigée-Lebrun's submissions to the 1783 Salon underlined her close relationship to the queen. Along with her self-portrait,⁷ she exhibited *Marie-Antoinette en chemise* (Fig. 3), portraits of the royal children, and an image of the queen's close friend, the Marquise de la Guiche, as a milkmaid. Two of the artist's paintings in the 1783 Salon are listed as

⁶ Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 197.

⁷ Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's *Self-Portrait* (1782), exhibited in the 1783 Salon, is in a private collection. The autograph copy in the National Gallery of Art, London, is a copy of the work exhibited in 1783.

belonging to members of Marie-Antoinette's circle, *Juno Borrowing the Belt of Venus* (location unknown) to Comte d'Artois, the King's younger brother, *Venus Binding Cupid* (Fig. 12) to the Comte de Vaudreuil, lover of the queen's favorite Yolande de Polignac, who was hated by the French public.⁸ The connection between the artist and the queen was surely evident to visitors to the Salon and the Academicians, who already disliked Vigée-Lebrun because of her rapid ascendancy from the Third Estate. *Vers à Madame Le Brun*, signed by M. de Miramond and published as a Salon pamphlet in 1783, indicates that the public was aware of the close relationship between Marie-Antoinette and Vigée-Lebrun:

If the embellished throne offers you a worthy model,
Whose enchanting features are soon recognized!
The pride of Alexander called for an Apelles
It is Le Brun whom Venus needs.⁹

M. Miramond portrays the relation between Vigée-Lebrun and Marie-Antoinette as analogous to that between Apelles and Alexander the Great, while also drawing attention to their personal and commercial relationship.

Because of their references to Vigée-Lebrun's intimate relationship with the queen, all of her works displayed at the 1783 were surely problematic, especially in light of the Marie-Antoinette's growing unpopularity. It is likely that Vigée-Lebrun intended *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* for the Salon de la Paix (Salon of Peace), a central room in the queen's state apartments that functioned as a large drawing room, because the iconography of the work links it to the works already placed there. For example, Charles le Brun's *France Victorious Offering the Olive Branch to the Powers that had United*

⁸ Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 131.

⁹ M. de Miramond, *Vers à Madame Le Brun, de l'Académie Royale de Peinture, sur les principaux ouvrages, dont elle a décoré le Salon cette année* (1783), *Collection Deloynes*, 308:3, as quoted in Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 131, and note no. 85, 299.

against Her, which commemorates the marriages that tied France to Bavaria and Spain, and Lemoyne's 1729 *Louis XV Offering Peace to Europe* (Fig. 13) were located in this area. Lemoyne's painting centralizes the figure of Louis XV, who represents Peace holding out an olive branch to Europe. On the other side of the king is Fecundity, represented by a mother nursing two infants. Since there was no image that celebrated peace during the reign of Louis XVI, Vigée-Lebrun may have executed this painting in order to extend the images already decorating the queen's chambers.¹⁰ The rococo style of *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* complemented the ornate and elegant Renaissance-Baroque grand manner, which was the most common style at Versailles, indicating that this work was likely intended to be a part of the decorative program at the château. Surely, *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* would have been recognized by the French Public as being similar to existing works in the queen's drawing room, the Salon de Paix, because of its iconography and style. The iconography of *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* associates it with the existing allegorical works in the Salon de Paix, insinuating that it could be an allegory of Louis XVI's reign for the woman who was seen as a foreign taint on the king.

The assertion that Vigée-Lebrun intended this work for Marie-Antoinette is reinforced by two other allegorical works featuring Peace and Abundance associated with another Hapsburg queen, Anne of Austria, mother of Louis XIV. La Hyre's 1648 *Allegory of the Regency of Anne of Austria* depicts the figures of Peace, Abundance, and Fame, and Simon Vouet's *Prudence Leading Peace and Abundance* (Fig. 9), which was likely a prototype for Vigée-Lebrun's *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*. In the eighteenth century, it was generally believed that Vouet's work was part of the decorative

¹⁰ Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 128-129.

scheme commissioned by Anne of Austria in the 1640s,¹¹ making it a perfect model for an important work for another Austrian queen, Marie-Antoinette. *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*'s iconography and allegorical subject matter places it within the decorative scheme for Marie-Antoinette's Salon de Paix. Furthermore, it was an image conceived expressly for the queen by her close friend, Vigée-Lebrun, who wanted to glorify her.¹²

The American War of Independence and Vigée-Lebrun's *Morceau de Réception*

The iconography and style of *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* indicates that it was likely created to decorate the queen's Salon de Paix, a room where other similar allegorical works espoused the virtues and victories of past French kings, imbuing the area with a political aura. Based on this evidence, contemporaries likely took *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* to be a comment on the reign of Louis XVI, a reign which was entirely unsuccessful and tainted by his foreign queen. Specifically, the painting could have been viewed as an allusion to Louis XVI's disastrous involvement in the American Revolutionary War, which caused deep financial distress in France. The French public could also have considered this work in conjunction with a contemporaneous print celebrating the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the American Revolution, in which Louis sits in his regalia under a palm of victory while holding the olive branch to England.¹³ To Abundance, he hands the caduceus of Mercury, another symbol of peace. In this print, Louis XVI is the distributor of peace and a restorer of abundance. The *Mémoire secrets* makes a connection to *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* and recent political events:

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 129.

¹³ Ibid., 127.

... *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*, an allegory as natural as ingenious: one could not have chose better for this situation. The first figure, noble, decent, modest as the peace that France has just concluded, is characterized by the branch from the olive, her favorite tree.¹⁴

This writer links the subject matter of *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* to the American Revolutionary War in a positive light, but this sentiment was not likely shared by many other Salon-goers or members of the Académie, who were all too aware of the sad state of the French treasury as a result of the war.

In 1778, France was still suffering under the burden of debt bequeathed by previous wars and an unsuccessful taxation system. The appointment of Jacques Necker (1732-1817) as director of the Trésor Royal in October 1776 further indicates the financial distress of the French nation, while highlighting the French's distrust of foreigners. The French people's suspicions were directly connected to Necker's foreign birth, and he became a scapegoat for France's financial problems, much like Marie-Antoinette. In June 1777, Necker became Directeur-Général des Finances, for as a Protestant, he could not hold the more prestigious position of Contrôleur-Général.¹⁵ In addition to Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, Louis XVI's foreign minister, other high ranking court officials had been pressing for Necker's dismissal since late 1779, for they believed he had secret relations with the English to end the war and profit his bank.¹⁶ Their belief that Necker had ulterior motives was likely fueled by suspicions based on his foreign birth. Like Marie-Antoinette, he was seen as a foreign contaminant to the French kingdom. His release of the *Compte de rendu au roi*, the first ever public

¹⁴ Bachaumont, *Mémoires secrets*, 24: 5-6, as quoted in Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 128, 298-299.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

balance sheet of the French monarchy's finances, brought the nation's finances into the public sphere, drawing attention to the ineffective government and the uncontrolled spending of the French involvement in the American Revolutionary War. With its associations to the American Revolutionary War, *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* would have reminded academicians and Salon-goers of the depleted French treasury.

Salon-goers in 1783 surely would have understood the political associations of *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*. Art historian Thomas Crow's examination of the 1785 Salon, for instance, indicates that it was not just Académie members and court intimates who would have been aware of the political connotations of the artwork displayed at the Salon. Unofficial art criticism was bound up with political dissidence since its first appearance in 1747, as was the related event which Crow called the "reaction against the Rococo."¹⁷ By the time Vigée-Lebrun exhibited at the 1783 Salon, the Académie had been urging painters to take episodes of antique heroism as their subjects and forsake rococo mannerisms for the example of antique art and the classicism of Poussin. Consequently, the rococo became connected to conservatives and the neo-classical style to progressives.¹⁸ As previously mentioned, Vigée-Lebrun's submissions to the Salon were certainly representatives of the rococo style and were unintentional indications of the power of the ineffective monarchy, for they unanimously celebrated the royal family and betrayed her conservative sympathies. In 1785, just two years after Vigée-Lebrun's acceptance into the Académie, David's history painting, *Oath of the Horatii* (Fig. 14), prompted conservative art critics to focus on the negative qualities of the work, namely errors they noticed or his disregard of tradition. The review of the 1783 Salon in the

¹⁷ Thomas Crow, "The *Oath of the Horatii* in 1785," *Art History* 1, no. 4 (December 1978): 437.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 426.

Memoires secrets states that Vigée-Lebrun's paintings are the most highly praised among those at court.¹⁹ The praise of members of the court indicates that Vigée-Lebrun's work would most likely not have been accepted by the French public. In the Salon of 1783, it is reasonable to believe that the public would have seen Vigée-Lebrun's work as supporting the monarchy and highlighting her close relationship to Marie-Antoinette. This association alienated the reform-minded Salon-goers and the academicians who likely disapproved of Vigée-Lebrun's artistic style and close relationship to the queen. David's works such as *Oath of the Horatii* and *Andromache mourning Hector* (Fig. 8, Salon 1783) represented a new style, one that was the antithesis of the courtly rococo style of Vigée-Lebrun. The public responded favorably to David's work and so did the later revolutionary movement. Vigée-Lebrun's work was indicative of a past that was at odds with current events and Enlightenment ideals.

Vigée-Lebrun's status as unofficial First Painter and intimate of the queen surely had some effect on her initial refusal from the Académie. With Marie-Antoinette's popularity waning, Vigée-Lebrun's choice to display *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* (Fig. 1), *Marie-Antoinette en chemise* (Fig. 3), *Venus Binding Cupid* (Fig. 12), *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 5), and various portraits of the Royal children at the 1783 Salon was particularly unfortunate, for they were simply out of fashion with the public's sympathies. The artist's selection of these works indicates that she supported the monarchy and adored the queen. She was proud of her powerful position at court and unaware of the magnitude of the public's outcry against her close friend. The public's view of Marie-Antoinette as a meddling and immoral foreigner likely sparked the Académie's decision to reject Vigée-Lebrun's application, because in the public's mind, the two women were

¹⁹ Ibid.

intimately connected. Another foreigner, Jacques Necker, also contributed to the Académie's decision. His betrayal of the French people influenced the reception of *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*, because it drew attention to the disaster of the French finances as a result of their involvement in the American Revolutionary War. The Salon-going public's increased awareness of political issues during this time period could have prompted them to connect the subject matter of *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* to the American Revolutionary War, resulting in a negative view of the painting.

CONCLUSION

Whereas previous examinations of this event insist on Vigée-Lebrun's gender as the cause of her initial rejection, the artist's Royalist political sympathies and membership in the lowest social class were equally important. Her rejection from the Académie Royale was based on her social class and the volatile political climate during the time she applied. Her association with Marie-Antoinette likely incited the Académie's initial decision to refuse her admission. Most members of the Académie supported King Louis XVI, who was revered and respected until right before his execution, but they disliked the queen, for she was seen as a foreign blight on the physical body of their king. As a courtier and a close friend of Marie-Antoinette, it is unlikely that Vigée-Lebrun realized the magnitude of the public's contempt for her beloved queen, and she continued to relish her role as a courtier. Vigée-Lebrun's *morceau de réception*, *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*, underscored her relationship to the queen and the court, and was interpreted by the public as a reference to the disastrous state of the French treasury as a result of French involvement in the American War of Independence. As a staunchly Royalist eighteenth-century woman, she believed this royal connection would incite the admiration and goodwill of the French people and enhance her prestige. Instead, it resulted in the initial rejection of her application to the Académie.

Vigée-Lebrun's social station was also to blame for her naïveté concerning her reception piece. She was not a member of the bourgeois class and was consequently unsympathetic to the reform views of the Enlightenment philosophy. The hierarchical structure of the Académie Royale facilitated Vigée-Lebrun's marginalization, for the

entire institution was controlled by wealthy members of the nobility, such as d'Angiviller and Pierre. These men believed that Vigée-Lebrun's inferior social status, along with her affiliation with trade, made her unworthy to join the Académie. Perhaps most importantly, Vigée-Lebrun's ability to transcend her social class and become a courtier to the queen and her unofficial First Painter was too much for the socially conscious, hierarchical academicians to bear.

The lesser role gender played in this episode is supported by an analysis of Vigée-Lebrun's portrayal of women in portraits, as well as her adhesion to eighteenth-century social and cultural mores. Her portraits reinforced gender stereotypes by portraying idle women at leisure. Although Vigée-Lebrun was an active artist, she still represented herself as a charming society lady. She married, bore children, and supported her husband, even though he was a womanizer and accrued massive gambling debts. She did not pursue further learning beyond her education at the convent. More education arguably could have enhanced the prestige of her work, for she could have produced more intellectually ambitious history paintings. Vigée-Lebrun's conformity to cultural expectations for women, despite her unorthodox profession, is reinforced by an examination of her contemporary, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, who fought for the rights of female artists in the Académie Royale.

Although I do not discount a feminist perspective on Vigée-Lebrun's entire career, her initial rejection and eventual acceptance into the Académie was not solely a result of her gender. Instead, the circumstances of her acceptance reflected the general cultural climate of eighteenth-century France. It was precisely her naiveté and genuine reverence for the French monarchy, especially Marie-Antoinette, that alienated her from the

Académie's bourgeois and noble members, prompting her initial rejection from the Académie Royale.

IMAGES



Figure 1

Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun
Peace Bringing Back Abundance, 1780, Salon of 1783
Oil on canvas
Musée du Louvre, Paris

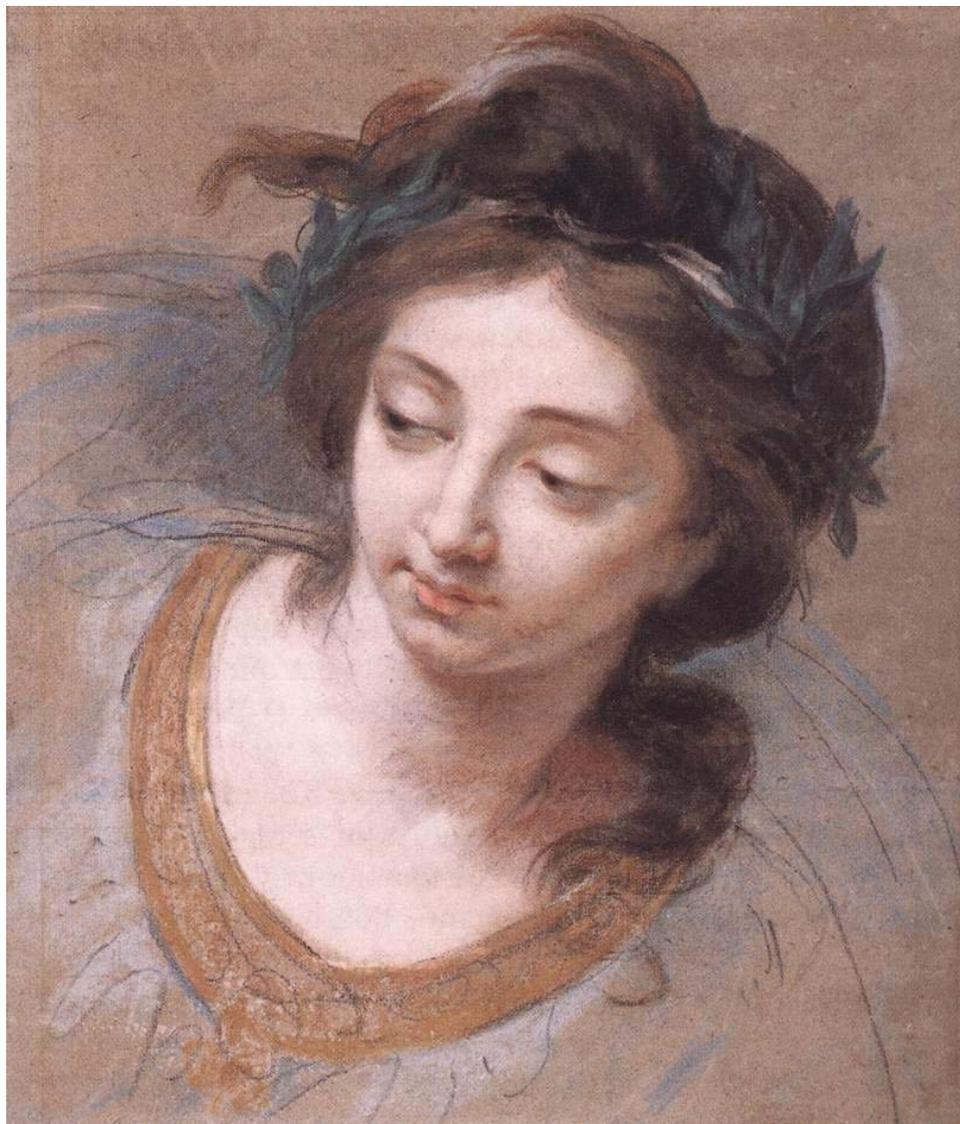


Figure 2

Vigée-Lebrun

Study of Head, preliminary study for Peace Bringing Back Abundance

Black and colored chalks on paper, 18 ½ x 14 ½ in.

Private Collection, Paris



Figure 3

Vigée-Lebrun

Marie-Antoinette en chemise, 1779, Salon of 1783

Oil on canvas

Private Collection, Germany.



Figure 4
Vigée-Lebrun
Self-Portrait, c. 1781
Oil on canvas
Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth



Figure 5

Vigée-Lebrun

Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat (Autograph copy), after 1782 original

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, London



Figure 6

Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun

Portrait of the Duchesse de Polignac, Salon of 1783

Oil on canvas

Private Collection



Figure 7

Vigée-Lebrun
Self-Portrait, 1790
Oil on canvas
Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Figure 8

Jacques-Louis David
Andromache Mourning Hector, c. 1783, Salon of 1783
Oil on canvas
Musée du Louvre, Paris



Figure 9

Simon Vouet

Prudence Leading Peace and Abundance, c. 1645

Oil on canvas

Musée du Louvre, Paris



Figure 10

Adélaïde Labille-Guiard
Portrait of Augustin Pajou, c. 1783
Pastel on paper
Musée du Louvre, Paris



Figure 11

Jean-Baptiste Greuze

Septimius Severus Reproaching his Son Caracalla, 1769

Oil on canvas

Musée du Louvre, Paris



Figure 12

Vigée-Lebrun

Venus Binding Cupid, 1780, Salon of 1783

Pastel on paper

Hôtel Drouot, Paris



Figure 13

François Lemoyne

Louis XV Offering Peace to Europe, 1729

Oil on canvas

Musée Nationale du Château, Versailles



Figure 14

Jacques-Louis David
Oath of the Horatii, 1784, Salon of 1785
Oil on canvas
Musée du Louvre, Paris

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VITAE

Lindsay Meehan Dunn was born on June 24, 1981 in Indianapolis, Indiana to Andrew William Meehan and Linda Kay Pearce. She grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana, Fort Wayne, Indiana and Canton, Michigan. She graduated from Mercy High School in Farmington Hills, Michigan in 2000. After originally attending the University of Michigan-Dearborn, Lindsay later transferred to Texas Christian University, where she graduated summa cum laude in December 2005. She continued her studies at Texas Christian University, where she anticipates a Master of Arts in Art History in May 2008.

While working on her graduate degree, Lindsay received a Tuition Scholarship and Kimbell Fellowship, as well as a Mary Jane and Robert Sunkel Travel Endowment award. Lindsay completed an internship with the curatorial department at the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, and served as a teaching and research assistant to the art history faculty of TCU.

ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the effects of politics and social class on Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's initial rejection from the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1783. The Académie officially rejected her, because she was married to an art dealer, and therefore, in violation of the statute that forbade academicians to mix in commerce. Art historians, most notably Mary Sheriff, have dismantled this popularly held explanation, instead focusing on the artist's gender as the fundamental cause of this event. Yet, the volatile political climate and the overall class consciousness likely played an equally important role. To further illuminate this historic episode, this thesis will discuss the ways in which Vigée-Lebrun presented herself to the French public. It will offer a history of the Académie's procedures governing female admission, as well as an account of other female academicians. It will argue that Vigée-Lebrun's humble social class alienated her from the noble Académie members and the bourgeois members of society. Finally, this thesis will address the general dislike of Marie-Antoinette during the early 1780s and the ways in which this likely affected Vigée-Lebrun's career.