

THE POWER OF THE PORTRAIT: MARIE-ANTOINETTE AND THE SHAPING OF A
REPUTATION THROUGH ART

by

LYDIA KATHERINE DUGGINS

Bachelor of Arts, 2008
Rhodes College
Memphis, TN

Submitted to the Faculty
Graduate Division
College of Fine Arts
Texas Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2011

THE POWER OF THE PORTRAIT: MARIE-ANTOINETTE AND THE SHAPING OF A
REPUTATION THROUGH ART

Thesis approved:

Dr. Amy Freund, Major Professor

Dr. Babette Bohn

Dr. Heather MacDonald

Dean H. Joseph Butler
Graduate Studies Representative For the College of Fine Arts

Copyright © 2011 by Lydia Katherine Duggins
All rights reserved

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations.....	iv
The Power of the Portrait: Marie-Antoinette and the Shaping of a Reputation through Art.....	1
Illustrations.....	46
Works Cited.....	54
Vita.....	56
Abstract.....	57

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Image 1. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *La Reine en gaulle*, 1783, Private Collection of Hessische Hausstiftung, Krongberg, Germany
- Image 2. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie-Antoinette “en robe de velours bleu,”* 1788, Château de Versailles
- Image 3. Jean-Marc Nattier, *Marie Leszczyńska*, 1748, Château de Versailles
- Image 4. Carle van Loo, *Portrait of Marie Leczyska*, 1747, Palazzo Pitti, Florence
- Image 5. Carle van Loo, *Portrait of Louis XV*, 1747
- Image 6. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Portrait of Marie-Antoinette*, 1778, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
- Image 7. Adolf Wertmüller, *La Reine, Monseigneur le Dauphin, et Madame, Fille de Roi se promenant dans le jardin Anglais du Petit Trianon*, 1785, National Museum, Stockholm
- Image 8. Antoine Watteau, *La Réveuse*, 1712–14, The Art Institute of Chicago
- Image 9. Marianne Loir, *Portrait of Madame Châtlet*, c. 1745, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux
- Image 10. Louis-Michel van Loo, *Denis Diderot*, 1767, Musée de Louvre
- Image 11. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie-Antoinette and her Children*, 1787, Château de Versailles
- Image 12. Alexis Simon Belle, *Queen Marie Leczinska and the Dauphin*, 1730, Château de Versailles
- Image 13. Pierre Mignard, *The Duchess de la Vallière and her Children*
- Image 14. Joseph Boze, *Louis XVI*
- Image 15. Ternisien d’Haurdircourt and Jean-César Macre, *Marie Antoinette archi. Dsse. d’Autriche, Reine de France*, 1789, Bibliothèque nationale de France
- Image 16. Ternisien d’Haurdircourt and Jean-César Macre, *Louis XVI*, 1789, Bibliothèque nationale de France

THE POWER OF THE PORTRAIT: MARIE-ANTOINETTE AND THE SHAPING OF A REPUTATION THROUGH ART

One of the main functions of royal portraiture is propaganda. Whether the portrait of a king or queen was given as a diplomatic gift or put on display for the public, the image of the royal personage was meant to evoke thoughts of his or her grandeur, power, and majesty. During the reign of Louis XVI of France (1774–1791), royal portraiture reached a new level of propagandistic importance. This was an age of political unrest and revolution in France, and it was paramount that the monarchs disseminate a public image that promoted the royal family as benevolent rulers who cared for their subjects.

French royal portraiture relied heavily on tradition, and the French people expected to see their king and queen represented in the fashion dictated by these traditions. Louis XVI's queen, Marie-Antoinette, however, did not always adhere to the traditional structure of queenly portraiture. At the Salon of 1783, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun displayed her portrait of Marie-Antoinette titled *La Reine en gaulle* (Appendix, Image 1). This portrait, which was commissioned personally by the queen, elicited much disapproval from the public because it represented Marie-Antoinette in a thoroughly un-queenly manner. As opposed to appearing in full regal regalia and magnificence as in her previous portraits, Marie-Antoinette is shown outdoors, wearing a very casual dress, and with no symbols of her royal status. For French viewers, this improper portrait fostered the opinion that this Austrian princess did not honor and value the French traditions and way of life. For the young monarch, this portrait further jeopardized her already questionable reputation and quickened her downward spiral towards

public hatred and malignance. The remainder of her reign was spent attempting to reverse this early *faux pas* through a series of more queenly portraits.

A number of scholars have focused their research on the portraits of Marie-Antoinette. Much of this scholarship concentrates primarily on *La Reine en gaulle* of 1783 and *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* of 1787 (Appendix, Image 11), both by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, because of their significance in the shaping of the queen's public image. Two authors of particular importance in this field are Mary Sheriff and Todd Larkin. Sheriff's research concentrates on Vigée-Lebrun—Marie-Antoinette's official portraitist. In her seminal book on the artist, *The Exceptional Woman*, Sheriff explores Vigée-Lebrun's career and discusses her early reliance on the French queen. She pays particular attention to *La Reine en gaulle* and explains the effects the controversial portrait had on Vigée-Lebrun. While this portrait elicited much disapproval, the majority of negative remarks were aimed at Marie-Antoinette, not Vigée-Lebrun. Although her subject was often a source of criticism, the artist's paintings and skill were rarely questioned. Sheriff has also written extensively about Vigée-Lebrun's *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* of 1787, providing valuable insight into the meaning and interpretation of the painting.

In his doctoral dissertation, "Marie-Antoinette and Her Portraits," Todd Larkin discusses the queen's role as an active and engaged patron whose attempts to model her public image on her political ideals were consistently misunderstood. He focuses primarily on six paintings of the queen by three artists—Jean-Baptiste-André Gautier d'Agoty, Adolf Wertmüller, and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun—and provides in-depth analysis of the commissioning and reception of these works. Like Sheriff, Larking spends much time discussing *La Reine en gaulle* and *Marie-Antoinette and her Children*. He also explores Vigée-Lebrun's first painting of the queen,

Portrait of Marie-Antoinette of 1778, and, to a lesser extent, *Marie-Antoinette “en robe de velours bleu”* of 1788 (Appendix, Image 2). Larkin’s research is invaluable to the discussion of the French queen’s portraits and provides insight into the conditions surrounding and the thought that went into their production.

Although it has figured into scholarly publications, Vigée-Lebrun’s *Marie-Antoinette “en robe de velours bleu”* (*Marie-Antoinette “in a blue velvet dress”*) remains relatively unexplored. This portrait deserves attention for several reasons. First, it was the last portrait that Marie-Antoinette commissioned from Vigée-Lebrun. Secondly, and more importantly, it was the final attempt on the queen’s part to salvage her tarnished reputation. In order to fully understand this final portrait, it is important to comprehend the events and attitudes surrounding the queen at the time leading up to the painting’s completion. To the majority of the French people, Marie-Antoinette was a foreigner who did not take the welfare of France seriously. She was frivolous, deceitful, an enemy of the state, and too frequently overstepped the bounds of her queenly duties. These feelings were fed by the troubled financial situation in France, which many people blamed partly on the queen’s unchecked spending, her supposed political meddling, and her increasingly frequent absence from the court of Versailles in favor of her personal retreat, the Petit Trianon. Regardless of how often she tried to have herself represented as a good French queen in her portraits, the viewers always found evidence to convict her of failing to be a proper sovereign.

Additionally, it is important to understand *Marie-Antoinette “en robe de velours bleu”* in light of the historical events preceding the portrait’s conception. In many ways, the painting is a reference to Jean-Marc Nattier’s *Marie Leczinska* of 1748 (Appendix, Image 3). In Nattier’s portrait of Marie-Antoinette’s predecessor, Queen Marie Leczinska is depicted in “town clothes,” in an informal setting, and with very few royal trappings. Marie-Antoinette and Vigée-

Lebrun used this famous and beloved image of the former queen as a model for the artist's final portrait of the monarch in an attempt to show Marie-Antoinette's adherence to traditional Bourbon values. In *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu,"* the queen is shown seated at a velvet-draped table, holding a book, and visually engaging the viewer. She wears a sumptuous blue velvet overdress with a train and a white satin underskirt, both of which are trimmed with a dark brown fur. Her shoulders are draped in delicate lace, and her head is adorned with a blue velvet *toque* with white feathers. While her dress and setting are admittedly more regal than those of Marie Leczinska in the Nattier portrait, this painting of Marie-Antoinette is a more casual depiction of the queen in comparison to her earlier portraits, where she appears in full court regalia. Like Marie Leczinska, Marie-Antoinette takes an active role in shaping her own reputation with this specific painting.

Lastly, the public response to this portrait and the explanation of why this final piece of painted propaganda was unsuccessful for the queen are key factors in the analysis of this painting. Although this portrait presents an image of the queen in the style expected from her subjects, it was still met with disapproval. Ultimately, this paper is an exploration of Marie-Antoinette's use of portraiture to shape her reputation, an analysis of her final attempt to recapture public approval through *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu,"* and a discussion of why she failed.

A Biographical Sketch of Marie-Antoinette

On November 2, 1755, Marie-Antoinette, christened Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna, was born to Empress Maria Theresa of Austria and Francis I, the Holy Roman Emperor. She was the fifteenth child to be born to the royal couple and was followed only by one younger brother. Born in an age of multiple intermarriages between royal houses, Marie-Antoinette received several noble bloodlines. From her father, she inherited the blood of the Bourbons (the Orléans branch) and of Lorraine; from her mother, she received the Hapsburg blood, both from the Austrian and Spanish lines.¹ Later in her life, her French blood would be all but forgotten by her French subjects who were blinded by her Austrian birth and Hapsburg origin. Historically bitter enemies, Austria and France's alliance began six months after Marie-Antoinette's birth with the Treaty of Versailles, signed on May 1, 1756, which joined the two countries in a defensive pact against Prussia.² This relationship was solidified in 1770 with Marie-Antoinette's marriage to the dauphin of France, Louis-Auguste. Shortly after her marriage by proxy to the French prince, Marie-Antoinette left her childhood home in Austria for her future home at Versailles. The young princess, who was not even fifteen at the time of her marriage, was required to both literally and symbolically relinquish her ties to Austria in favor of all things French. Marie-Antoinette gradually grew accustomed to life at Versailles and developed an early passion for fashion that would continue throughout her life. On May 10, 1774, Louis XV died of smallpox, making Louis-Auguste and Marie-Antoinette the new King and Queen of France. The reign of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette was riddled with controversy. First, it took the royal couple eight years to conceive their first child. This was primarily due to Louis XVI's suffering from a condition called phimosis that made erections painful for the king.

¹ Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 10.

However, the French public did not know this, so they busied themselves with creating various rumors about the ineptitude of Marie-Antoinette. Secondly, increasing debt, due in part to France's involvement in the American War of Independence, marked Louis XVI's reign. These and other issues combined to create a less-than-desirable situation for the French. Ultimately, the people rebelled, and the French Revolution commenced in full force in 1789 with the storming of the Bastille. In October of 1789, the royal family was forced to leave Versailles for the Tuileries in Paris. For the next few years, both Marie-Antoinette and Louis XVI worked to form alliances that would help the monarchy re-establish itself in this time of crisis. This culminated in the royal family surreptitiously leaving the Tuileries in June 1791 in an effort to join counterrevolutionary forces in Germany. However, they were stopped by a pro-revolutionary postman in the town of Varennes and forced to return to Paris. This attempted escape effectively sealed the fate of the French monarchs. On January 21, 1793, Louis XVI was executed by French revolutionaries. Several months later, on October 16, 1793, Marie-Antoinette followed her husband to the guillotine.

Where did the queen go wrong? Early Portraits of Marie-Antoinette

In retrospect, one of the primary contributing factors to the demise of Marie-Antoinette's reputation and her eventual execution was her disrespect for French courtly customs. Beginning with her entry into France as the young bride of the dauphin in 1770, she was the subject of controversy. Historically, France and Austria were enemies. Thus there was a significant anti-Austrian faction at the court of Versailles that did not approve of the match between Louis and Marie-Antoinette. Given this long-standing animosity towards her homeland, it was important for Marie-Antoinette to immediately display her adoption of French customs and protocols. She

succeeded in doing this early in her reign through a series of state portraits, culminating in one painted by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun in 1778. Through these portraits, the viewer could see the young queen's adherence to the traditional courtly dress as well as the observance of long-established motifs within the painting's composition.

Before one can interpret a portrait of a French queen from the eighteenth century, it is imperative to understand the traditional role of the queen. A queen of France served two functions: first, to bear sons who would carry on the royal bloodline and become the rulers of the next generation, and second, to create political alliances. France followed Salic Law, which determined kingship by the right of succession and excluded from succession females and males descended in the female line.³ The only options a French queen had to exercise political power were by acting as a regent for a young son or through influence over the king. During the seventeenth century, queen regents had ruled France—Marie de' Medici had ruled for the future Louis XIII and Anne of Austria ruled for the young Louis XIV.⁴ Marie-Thérèse, Louis XIV's wife, never had the chance to rule for an infant son because she died many years before her husband, in 1683. Louis XIV never officially remarried, although he was privately wed to his mistress. By the time Marie Leczinska married Louis XV in 1725, there had been no queen at court for over forty years, and the role of a queen had changed dramatically as a result. In the eighteenth century, the queen no longer played the same political role as she had in the previous century due largely to the fact that the king outlived the queen, giving the female monarch no chance to rule as a regent.⁵ As a result of this lack of female power, royal women during the

³ Mary Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 150.

⁴ Jennifer Germann, "Figuring Marie Leszczinska (1703–1768): Representing Queenship in Eighteenth-Century France" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2002), 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

eighteenth century were rarely shown in artworks with signs of political power, such as globes or armor. Rather, they were depicted alone in their regal finery, with the dauphin, or occasionally with all their children and the king. Each of these compositional possibilities worked to re-enforce the fact that the queen's main function was as the mother of the future king. Queenly portraits also acted as visual reminders of the queens who came before. The queen's image was often a direct copy of earlier portraits of royal women, making these other women visible and connecting the queen backwards in a line of visual descent.⁶ This visual linkage with royal predecessors firmly joined the current queen with the past and signified her continuance of the long-standing royal traditions.

Portraits of the queen and other royals served an important function as disseminators of information to the French people. The public, which included nobles, members of the bourgeoisie, and the lower class commoners, could see these portraits in a number of places. Many royal portraits were displayed at the Salons, art exhibitions that took place at the Louvre in Paris. When not on view at the Salon, the majority of royal portraits hung on the walls of Versailles. It was there that many aristocrats viewed the images of their sovereigns. Additionally, there were days throughout the year that citizens not of noble birth could visit Versailles and observe the wonders of court life, including the artistic depictions of the royal family. Portraits of the king and queen were also disseminated through prints, greatly increasing the number of viewers who had access to their image. The ways in which the sovereigns were portrayed in the visual arts greatly affected the way their subjects viewed them. Thus, it was paramount that the visual campaign for royal women be consistent with the demands and requirements of their position.

⁶ Ibid., 38.

When Marie-Antoinette first commissioned Vigée-Lebrun to paint her portrait in 1778, both the artist and the queen looked to portraits of the former queen, Marie Leczinska, for inspiration. Like Marie-Antoinette, Marie Leczinska was subject to criticism upon her marriage to Louis XV. Born in Poland in 1703, she was the daughter of the twice-dethroned King Stanislaw of Poland.⁷ The future queen and her family found refuge in Lorraine in 1719 under the protection of Philippe d'Orléans, the regent for Louis XV.⁸ In 1724, Stanislaw began marriage negotiations with the duc de Bourbon, but these ceased when the duke indicated to Stanislaw that Marie Leczinska had been chosen as the bride for Louis XV.⁹ When Marie Leczinska became queen in 1725, there were many unhappy aristocrats at Versailles who did not approve of the king marrying a woman of such questionable background and nobility. For these aristocrats, the fact that their new queen's father had been pushed off his throne twice created the impression that this Polish woman was from a less-than-satisfactory family. This feeling was enhanced by the fact that Stanislaw was not even a hereditary monarch to begin with. Poland was an elective monarchy and Charles XII, King of Sweden, had helped establish Stanislaw as king in 1704.¹⁰ These details of her heritage cast a dubious shadow on Marie Leczinska's nobility and suitability as consort to the French king. In Marie Leczinska, Marie-Antoinette found another foreign queen who had struggled to gain the love of the French people. Therefore, because of their shared beginnings and position at the French court, it was natural that the

⁷ Ibid., 9

⁸ Ibid., 9

⁹ Ibid., 9. Germann explains how the duc de Bourbon, a legitimated son of Louis XIV, was searching for a wife in order to increase his chances of becoming king in the event of Louis XV's death. His mistress, Agnès Berthelot de Pléneuf, the marquise de Prie, had been searching for a bride for the duke and had decided upon Marie Leczinska. However, when it was determined that Louis XV should marry someone other than the very young Infanta of Spain, the duc de Bourbon and Madame de Pléneuf suggested Marie Leczinska in hopes of having influence over her in the future.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

formatting of Marie-Antoinette's portraits should echo that of Marie Leczinska's. Marie Leczinska was also an admirable role model for the young Marie-Antoinette because she had given birth to a total of eleven children, accomplishing her main goal as French queen—to be the vessel through which power was transmitted from one male ruler to another.¹¹

In order to stay within the bounds of proper queenly display, it was important that the queen's portraitists depict Marie-Antoinette in the same manner that the previous artists had portrayed the former queens. A prime example of this type of queenly portrait was Carle van Loo's *Portrait of Marie Leczynska* painted in 1747 (Appendix, Image 4). The majority of Marie Leczinska's portraits present her in the manner typical of official portraits. An official portrait of a monarch was often commissioned by the king's *Bâtiments* and given as gifts to foreign courts and monarchs or other notable figures. These portraits were meant to be grand in appearance and stress the status and power of the king and queen. In many ways, these portraits acted as surrogates for the monarchs when they were not physically present. An unofficial portrait, on the other hand, was one that was meant to have a more private and personal quality. These portraits were designed to be gifts given to favorites to remind them of their connection with the royal family and were not typically meant for public display.

French tradition dictated that the queen owed her obedience to the king as both husband and ruler, so an official portrait of the queen shows the wife of a king and was always a (possible) companion piece to the king's portrait.¹² As such, there were specific conventions that were adhered to. In Van Loo's *Portrait of Marie Leczynska*, the artist depicts the queen in a full-length standing pose, suggesting regal bearing with its straight lines and stability. Marie

¹¹ Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 155.

¹² *Ibid.*, 151- Van Loo's *Portrait of Marie Leczynska* is a pendant portrait to the same artist's *Portrait of Louis XV*, 1747.

Leczinska appears in full court dress, bedecked with jewels, ribbons, lace, and gold embroidery. She is presented as the ultimate embodiment of noble femininity.¹³ The room in which she stands is equally ornamented, with inlaid marble floors, marble-top table, and elaborate furnishings. Her royal status is indicated through the inclusion of the ermine cape embroidered with gold fleur-de-lis and the queen's crown, which rests on a fleur-de-lis covered velvet pillow on the table next to her. Her relationship to the king is visually signified through the inclusion of a portrait bust of Louis XV. The king appears to be gazing down at the queen who, in turn, looks out at the viewer.¹⁴ In her essay on portraits of Madame de Pompadour, one of Louis XV's mistresses, Ewa Lajer-Burcharth argues that the king's inclusion in Van Loo's portrait of Marie Leczinska constitutes the auspices and authority under which the queen's likeness is staged and by which it is authorized.¹⁵ In other words, the king's presence within the painting validates Marie Leczinska's status as queen.

Jennifer Germann argues in her dissertation on portraits of Louis XV's queen that Van Loo's 1747 *Portrait of Marie Leczynska* can be understood as an official image of queenship designed to bolster the image of the monarchy at a time when the king faced growing criticism.¹⁶ The king had been facing increasing discontent since the 1745 appointment of Madame de Pompadour as his official mistress. Many noble families, who were usually responsible for supplying the king's mistresses, were upset because Madame de Pompadour was a member of the bourgeoisie, and others feared that she had too much influence over the king.¹⁷ The portrait of Marie Leczinska was commissioned by Lenormant de Tournehem, the directeur general des

¹³ Germann, 18.

¹⁴ Sheriff, 154.

¹⁵ Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Pompadour's Touch: Difference in Representation," in *Representations*, No. 73 (Winter 2001): 77.

¹⁶ Germann, 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

Bâtiments, on behalf of Louis XV and was to be a companion piece to Van Loo's 1747 *Portrait of Louis XV* (Appendix, Image 5).¹⁸ This portrait attempts to fix the queen in her relationship to the king and to the state, and it presents a view of an inactive queen versus an active king. As previously mentioned, *Portrait of Marie Leczynska* depicts the queen in a standing pose, lending bearing and stability to the composition. The queen's boned bodice, which comes to a point at the center of her waist, coupled with the down-turned folded fan she holds in her left hand, enhances the verticality of the queen's posture.¹⁹ Marie Leczynska is positioned between two columns, which further highlight her verticality and solidity. The extreme verticality of the compositions effectively works to make the queen immobile. This suits a queenly image, however, because queens did not have an active role within the court. Kings, conversely, did have an active role within French society and were thus portrayed quite differently in official portraiture. In Van Loo's portrait of Louis XV, the king is centered in the picture, legs slightly parted, and with his left hand placed on his right hip, while his right hand rests on a helmet. The visibility of his taut leg muscles suggests the force attributed to the male body.²⁰ His ermine cape appears agitated in its folds, echoing the background drapery, which adds an element of energy and action to the painting. Whereas the *Portrait of Marie Leczynska* is calm and stable, the *Portrait of Louis XV* betrays a feeling of action and excitement. Thus both portraits are placed firmly within the French tradition of royal portraiture and convey traditional gender roles for royalty.

In 1778, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun appropriated the complex portrait conventions prescribed for French queens, such as Marie Leczynska, and skillfully reworked them to Marie-

¹⁸ Ibid., 53.

¹⁹ Sheriff, 151.

²⁰ Ibid., 152.

Antoinette's advantage. The year 1778 was still relatively early in Vigée-Lebrun's career. She was born in 1755 to Louis Vigée and Jeanne Maissin, and was the first of two children. She received her earliest artistic training from her father, who was an active portraitist and pastel artist. After her father's death in 1767, the young Elisabeth briefly stopped painting, but upon receiving encouragement from her father's colleagues and friends, such as Gabriel-François Doyen, she eventually began painting again.²¹ She soon began taking lessons from the history painter and academician Gabriel Briard, and her talent advanced quickly. She became friends with prominent artists such as Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Hubert Robert, and Joseph Vernet, all of whom greatly influenced the young artist. During the early 1770s, Vigée-Lebrun started painting portraits, first of family members and then of more notable personages. In her *Souvenirs*, she recalled several early sitters of note including Count Orloff, one of Peter the Third's assassins, Count Schouvaloff, the Grand Chamberlain, and Madame Geoffrin, a popular woman who was an advocate of female education.²²

These early portrait successes soon attracted the attention of Marie-Antoinette, who commissioned the young artist to paint her portrait in 1778. Vigée-Lebrun quickly became the favorite of the queen, due largely to her ability to flatter her sitter with her sensuous, brilliant, and creamy coloristic use of pigments.²³ Since her marriage to Louis XVI in 1770, Marie-Antoinette had been searching for a portraitist that satisfied her desires and those of her mother, the Empress Maria Theresa, but had thus far been unsuccessful. In a 1774 letter to her mother, Marie-Antoinette wrote, "it quite saddens me not to have been able to find a painter who catches

²¹ Gita May, *Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun: The Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 14.

²² Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Memoirs of Madame Vigée Lebrun*, trans. Lionel Strachey (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1989), 10.

²³ May, 2.

my resemblance; if I found one I would give him all the time he wanted, and although he would be able to make only a bad copy, I would have a great pleasure in dedicating it to my dear mama.”²⁴ The queen finally found what she was looking for in Vigée-Lebrun’s *Portrait of Marie-Antoinette* (Appendix, Image 6) and, true to her word, she gave the artist much of her time and many of her commissions. In *Souvenirs*, Vigée-Lebrun expressed her pleasure in painting the queen in the heyday of her youth. She wrote:

Marie Antoinette was tall and admirably built, being somewhat stout, but not excessively so. Her arms were superb, her hands small and perfectly formed, and her feet charming. She had the best walk of any woman in France, carrying her head erect with a dignity that stamped her queen in the midst of her whole court, her majestic mien, however, not in the least diminishing the sweetness and amiability of her face... Her features were not regular; she had inherited that long and narrow oval peculiar to the Austrian nation. Her eyes were not large; in color they were almost blue, and they were at the same time merry and kind. Her nose was slender and pretty, and her mouth not too large, though her lips were rather thick. But the most remarkable thing about her face was the splendor of her complexion. I never have seen one so brilliant, and brilliant is the word, for her skin was so transparent that it bore no umber in the painting. Neither could I render the real effect of it as I wished. I had no colors to paint such freshness, such delicate tints, which were hers alone, and which I had never seen in any other woman.²⁵

This recollection of the queen paints a vivid image of the young Marie-Antoinette and highlights the young artist’s interest in her subject. Vigée-Lebrun’s visual analysis of the queen also provides insight into the eighteenth century idea of beauty. The artist makes it clear that the queen is a beautiful woman, but she also mentions some of Marie-Antoinette’s unique features that accentuate her Austrian heritage. This suggests that even from a purely visual standpoint, the queen was always an Austrian first and a French queen second.

Vigée-Lebrun continued to work for Marie-Antoinette up until the queen’s execution in 1793. The royal connection proved quite beneficial throughout the early part of her career, with

²⁴ *Correspondance secrete entre Marie-Thérèse et le Comte de Mercy-Argenteau*, introduction and notes by M. Le Chevalier Alfred d’Arneht and M.A. Geffroy, 4 vols (Paris: Didot, 1874), 2: 248.

²⁵ Vigée-Lebrun, 25–26.

the artist receiving many commissions from aristocrats and notable figures. In 1783, she was elected to the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, due at least in part to the fact that “the King and Queen had been good enough to wish to see me enter the Academy.”²⁶ During the Revolution, Vigée-Lebrun lived in exile and traveled to many European countries to paint portraits of new patrons and friends. She returned to France after the Restoration and lived the remainder of her life in her native country.

In 1778, Vigée-Lebrun painted the first official court portrait of Marie-Antoinette that the queen actually liked. More importantly, it was the first full-length painting of the queen that her mother, the Empress Maria Theresa, approved of. In a letter sent to her daughter in April of 1779, the empress stated, “Your large portrait pleases me! Ligne has found it resembling, but it is enough for me that it represents your face, with which I am quite happy.”²⁷

As previously mentioned, the 1778 *Portrait of Marie-Antoinette* takes Carle van Loo’s *Portrait of Marie Leczinska* as its main influence. Marie-Antoinette is posed in a manner very similar to Marie Leczinska, only in reverse.²⁸ The curving figure that usually signaled a woman’s body is once again presented in a more stable, vertical form. The vertical accents in Vigée-Lebrun’s work, such as the straight arm and hanging tassels adorning the queen’s dress, reinforce the stabilizing effect of the massive columns.²⁹ Marie-Antoinette also wears the ermine and fleur-de-lis cape, though it is less obvious than in the Van Loo painting, and stands next to a table on which her crown rests on a velvet pillow embroidered with the fleur-de-lis. Although this image of Marie-Antoinette is simplified in comparison with the portrait of Marie Leczinska,

²⁶ May, 43.

²⁷ *Correspondance secrete*, 3:303; quoted in Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 164.

²⁸ Todd Larkin, “Marie-Antoinette and Her Portraits: The Politics of Queenly Self-Imaging in Late Eighteenth-Century France” (PhD diss., University of California at Santa Barbara, 2000) 111.

²⁹ Sheriff, 164.

there is still enough opulence to indicate her royal status.³⁰ Vigée-Lebrun, like Van Loo before her, has included certain traditional elements, such as the swag of drapery that adds complexity and an air of the theatrical to the composition and the sitter.

As in the portrait of Marie Leczinska, a bust of the king is included in the composition, situating Marie-Antoinette in her position below the king, both literally and figuratively. However, as Todd Larkin points out in his study of Marie-Antoinette's portraits, Vigée-Lebrun does not show the queen as a placid follower of the king's will.³¹ Unlike Marie Leczinska, who stares out of the canvas at the viewer, Marie-Antoinette avoids direct eye contact in this portrait. She is not made an object of the (stone) king's gaze, but rather chooses her own perspective—one that just happens to parallel the king's.³² Although Marie Leczinska's eye contact with the viewer could be seen as assertive, in Van Loo's portrait it functions to present a hierarchy of sorts—the king looks at his subject, the queen, who in turn looks out at her subject, the viewer, connecting all the actors within a circle of subject and ruler. In this instance, eye contact works to unite the viewer with the queen, which subsequently connects the viewer to the king. As a result, it firmly links Marie Leczinska to Louis XV and places her in a subordinate position. Vigée-Lebrun's portrait, conversely, eliminates the queen's role of connecting the viewer (the subject) with the king (the ruler). With the simple compositional change of the queen's gaze, Vigée-Lebrun presents Marie-Antoinette on more equal footing with the king. I argue that the statement being made is that this queen is not simply an object of the king, but rather a more active figure capable of thinking along the same lines as her husband. She is not just a vessel meant to connect the viewer to the king, but a ruler in her own right whose position mimics that

³⁰ Ibid., 164.

³¹ Larkin, 111.

³² Ibid., 111.

of her husband. As Larkin argues, Marie-Antoinette desired that Vigée-Lebrun's portrait be flatteringly faithful to her appearance and uphold the dignity of her position, while at the same time asserting her independent character and power as consort.³³ In comparison with Van Loo's *Portrait of Marie Leczynska*, it is clear that Marie-Antoinette is still being shown within the general bounds of traditional queenly portraiture but at the same time, moving towards a more assertive representation of herself as queen.

The Salon of 1783: The Queen is Shown in her Underwear

Since her 1770 arrival in France, Marie-Antoinette had been under close scrutiny at all times. Life at Versailles was stiflingly structured for the young queen, and eventually she began to rebel. She gradually renounced the elaborate court dress for a more simple style. Her change in clothing went hand-in-hand with her increasingly frequent trips to the Petit Trianon—her private residence on the Versailles grounds, given to her as a wedding present from Louis XVI.³⁴ While she had to maintain the traditional formal attire while at the court of Versailles, Marie-Antoinette enjoyed more freedom of style and activity while in residence at the Petit Trianon. In Vigée-Lebrun's *Portrait of Marie-Antoinette* of 1778, the viewer can see the beginnings of the queen's attempt to become an active figure with her own individual character stressed. In 1783, when Vigée-Lebrun's *La Reine en gaulle* (Appendix, Image 1) was shown at the Salon, the public quickly realized that this queen was not playing by the rules. As a result of this portrait and the already numerous questions about her suitability as queen, Marie-Antoinette would spend the rest of her reign trying to salvage her quickly deteriorating reputation.

³³ Ibid., 104.

³⁴ Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* (New York: Picador, 2006), 131.

La Reine en gaulle is a three-quarter-length portrait showing Marie-Antoinette standing at an angle, tying a ribbon around a small bouquet of flowers and staring directly at the viewer. Commissioned by the queen as an unofficial portrait, *La Reine en gaulle* exemplifies Marie-Antoinette's desire to see herself painted in her favorite costumes, undertaking her favorite activities.³⁵ What was controversial about this painting was the garb in which the queen chose to be depicted. Marie-Antoinette wears an outfit known as a *gaulle*—a type of dress made from sheer white muslin through which the underskirt and corset, often made of blue or pink silk, would show.³⁶ This style of dress had been imported from England, where it was quite popular as a fashion statement for the “natural woman.” The ideas of the “natural woman” and a return to nature were being espoused at this time by Enlightenment thinkers, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, so it was not so much the fact that Marie-Antoinette was wearing this type of dress that was the problem, but rather the fact that she did so in a portrait that was publicly displayed.

Todd Larkin argues that, as an unofficial portrait, Marie-Antoinette primarily intended this portrait to be viewed by a small circle of intimates and as such was meant to define a personal identity and patronage concern distinct from her official duties as consort.³⁷ He suggests that in the comfortable apparel and outdoor setting, the queen found appropriate signifiers for her life away from court.³⁸ It is likely that the queen's fondness for this portrait was her motivating factor behind requesting Vigée-Lebrun to include it in the Salon. As Larkin states, it is probable that Marie-Antoinette, accustomed to viewing portraits of aristocratic men and women dressed as shepherds and gardeners at previous Salons, saw little food for scandal in

³⁵ Sheriff, 167

³⁶ Ibid., 143.

³⁷ Larkin, 212.

³⁸ Ibid., 214.

Vigée-Lebrun's painting.³⁹ However, it is clear that the portrait did cause quite a ruckus. As Vigée-Lebrun wrote in her *Souvenirs* about *La Reine en gaulle*, "when this work was exhibited at the Salon, malignant folk did not fail to make the remark that the Queen had been painted in her chemise."⁴⁰ This was scandalous because a "chemise" was part of a woman's undergarments, only to be worn alone in the most private of settings. In other words, it was her underwear. The garment was also problematic because it did not denote Marie-Antoinette's status. This is highlighted by a pamphlet printed in 1783 that reviewed many of the paintings exhibited in the Salon. Written as a dialogue between an interested buyer, the public, and several other characters, it indirectly highlights the unsuitability of this dress. Upon approaching *La Reine en gaulle*, the buyer asks the public what they think of the portrait. They reply with a song describing the beauty of the queen, sung to the tune of a popular song called "Pour la Baronne."⁴¹ It is not so much what the public says that is significant, but the song they use to respond. "Pour la Baronne" is one that ridicules the absurd fashions of the time and the rage for feathers.⁴² By using the tune of this song to sing their response, the public is effectively making fun of the queen's appearance and choice of clothing. Though the queen is beautiful, she has chosen to wear a simple dress that makes her look more like a shepherdess than a queen, presenting the possibility for mockery. Eventually, due to the commotion caused by the work, Vigée-Lebrun had to remove the painting and replace it with a less controversial portrait of the queen.

³⁹ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁰ Vigée-Lebrun, 26.

⁴¹ "Le Sallon (sic) a l'Encan: Réve pittoresque, mêlé Vaudevilles," 1783, 27, in *Collection Deloynes*, 1980, vol. 13, pièces 285 à 287.

⁴² Emile Langlade, *Rose Bertin: The Creator of Fashion at the Court of Marie-Antoinette*, trans. Dr. Angelo S. Rappoport (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 54, <http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924024290623>, 14 April 2011.

From the point of view of many French viewers (of all levels of society), *La Reine en gaulle* represented the queen's desire to distance herself from her familial and national duties.⁴³ Unlike Marie Leczinska, Marie-Antoinette cultivated a distinct brand of femininity marked by a preoccupation with fashion and a taste for sensuality. The gaulle, one of her adopted fashions, was seen by her detractors as part of her ongoing effort to disregard court etiquette.⁴⁴ Even more detrimental than the choice of dress was the contemporary viewer's association of Vigée-Lebrun's *La Reine en gaulle* with the Petit Trianon, as she and her companions often wore this type of dress while there. The Petit Trianon was Marie-Antoinette's personal realm, where she and her friends would spend lavish amounts of money on clothing and entertainment and were even rumored to engage in promiscuous sexual practices.⁴⁵ The Petit Trianon was the place Marie-Antoinette went when she wanted to escape her queenly duties and the scrutiny of the court. Consequently, many nobles were angered by her increasingly frequent visits to this private palace. Upset that their status at court, which was validated by their daily participation in palace rituals and responsibilities, was lessened by the queen's (and king's) preference for the more intimate setting of the Petit Trianon, malicious rumors were started regarding the activities occurring at the queen's retreat.⁴⁶ Rumors of all natures circulated, but the ones that left the deepest scars on Marie-Antoinette's reputation were those dealing with her political meddling. For example, there was a rumor that the Petit Trianon was being used as a haven for those intent on furthering Austrian foreign policy, giving rise to the nickname "Petite Vienne" or "little

⁴³ Heidi A. Strobel, "Royal 'Matronage' of Women Artists in the Late-18th Century," in *Women's Art Journal* 26, No. 2 (Autumn 2005–Winter 2006): 6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁶ Larkin, 218.

Vienna.”⁴⁷ Supporters of this rumor found evidence for their suspicions in *La Reine en gaulle*. The portrait was completely devoid of royal signifiers, which was problematic for the viewers; however, the queen is shown with roses—the flower traditionally associated with the Hapsburg family. Thus, the one detail that could be used to denote queenly status is one that highlights her Austrian heritage.

The Austrian connection was not the only complaint of a political nature raised by the queen’s behavior at the Petit Trianon. To many, the queen’s actions when she was at her retreat were too king-like in nature. For example, all regulations that governed the Petit Trianon were issued “By Order of the Queen.”⁴⁸ This was an unprecedented feminization of the standard monarchical decree. Consequently, it turned Louis XVI himself into one of the *queen’s* subjects when he visited her at the Petit Trianon.⁴⁹ In addition to claiming the king’s right to issue orders, many critics thought the queen was also usurping his right to take mistresses. They did not mean this in a sexual sense (although there were many who believed that the queen engaged in lesbian activities with her intimate female companions), but rather asserted that the queen had appropriated from the king the right to seek pleasure with other women and the right to bestow the most dazzling favors upon them.⁵⁰ This, coupled with the fact that Marie-Antoinette essentially held the power of the consort and mistress due to Louis XVI’s refusal to take a mistress, made the queen much too powerful in the eyes of many of her subjects. Rumors of the queen’s political machinations abounded throughout the rest of her reign, becoming especially prominent at the time of the production of *Marie-Antoinette “en robe de velours bleu.”*

⁴⁷ Ibid., 218.

⁴⁸ Weber, 134.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 134.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 143.

The Beginning of the End: The Diamond Necklace Affair

As previously discussed, Marie-Antoinette had been fighting a publicity battle since her arrival in France in 1770. Similarly to Marie Leczinska's situation, early disapproval stemmed from the question of whether or not Marie-Antoinette was a suitable wife for Louis. As the queen, her main duty was to produce heirs to the Bourbon dynasty. However, she did not give birth to her first child until 1778—eight years after her marriage. Although it was Louis's phimosis that was the real cause of the delay in conception, Marie-Antoinette received the majority of blame. Before her first pregnancy, she was criticized for being incapable of enticing her husband into the marriage bed. One particularly painful event she had to endure was the birth of a son to the king's brother, the Comte d'Artois. Marie-Antoinette was forced to listen to the jeers of the market-women, exercising their right to be at Versailles on occasions of state importance, as they yelled after her, "When will *you* give us an heir to the throne?"⁵¹ Even after she succeeded in becoming pregnant in 1778, Marie-Antoinette could not escape the criticism, as the paternity of her children was perpetually questioned.

Once the issue of heirs had been resolved, the public turned to Marie-Antoinette's unchecked spending as a source of contention. France had been in a financial crisis since Louis XV's reign due to numerous military ventures, extravagant spending, and the use of a regressive tax structure. Additionally, the population was growing and life expectancy was increasing, turning food production into a problem.⁵² These issues stoked the fires of unrest within the French population, and they latched on to Marie-Antoinette as a scapegoat. The public resented their queen's rampant expenditures on clothing and on improvements to the Petit Trianon. While

⁵¹ Fraser, 137.

⁵² Colin Jones, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon 1715–99* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 351.

the queen's spending habits were extreme—in 1776, she spent 100,000 of her 120,000 livres allowance on accessories—she was not the only royal who abused the treasury.⁵³ In 1777, the Comte d'Artois ordered 365 pairs of shoes, one for each day of the year. Additionally, he and the Comte de Provence racked up a 31 million livres gambling debt, which they had to ask Louis XVI to settle for them.⁵⁴ Even Louis XVI's pious aunts spent extravagantly. Although Marie-Antoinette was only part of the problem, as a foreigner to the French court, it was easier for her to be blamed.

In 1785, two years after the failure of *La Reine en gaulle*, Marie-Antoinette was implicated in a scandal that would follow her for the rest of her life. The Diamond Necklace Affair was a yearlong debacle in which the queen was accused of being complicit in plans to obtain the famous necklace ordered for Madame du Barry by Louis XV (known as the “Slave's Collar”). Although the queen was certainly not involved in the plot, many of her subjects still viewed her as guilty and believed her capable of stooping to the lowest levels to obtain what she desired. In addition, the scandal caused her subjects to increasingly question the suitability of her chosen companions and the way she lived her life outside the walls of Versailles.

At the center of the scandal was a woman named Jeanne de La Motte. A woman of provincial and ruined nobility, La Motte had fashioned herself Jeanne de Valois and claimed descent from the royal family through a bastard line.⁵⁵ In 1783, Jeanne met Cardinal Louis de Rohan, a power-hungry man who desperately wanted to advance his position in society but could not due to his sour relationship with Marie-Antoinette. Jeanne saw in Rohan's desperation the

⁵³ Weber, 118.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵⁵ Sara Maza, “The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited (1785–1786): The Case of the Missing Queen,” in *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*, ed. Dena Goodman (New York: Routledge, 2003), 80.

means of achieving her goal. She convinced him that, through her connections with the royal family, she had become friends with Marie-Antoinette and had learned of her desire to acquire the famous diamond necklace once meant for Madame du Barry. The necklace had been made by the Parisian jewelers Boehmer and Bassange and consisted of 647 flawless gems worth over 1.5 million livres.⁵⁶ Jeanne described to Rohan the queen's great desire to have this diamond necklace for her own and her inability to purchase it herself because of restrictions on her spending. To ensure the Cardinal's participation, Jeanne arranged a secret meeting between the "queen" (a young woman of easy virtue named Nicole Le Guay whose features approximated those of the queen) and the Cardinal.⁵⁷ Jeanne had dressed Le Guay in an informal white linen dress (a *robe en gaulle*) and a pink petticoat, essentially creating a living version of Vigée-Lebrun's *La Reine en gaulle*. Le Guay approached Rohan in the garden, whispered a few words to him, and gave him a rose before retreating into the darkness.⁵⁸ The woman's dress as well as the rose—the queen's favorite flower—were enough to convince Rohan that he had finally been given an audience with the queen and was thus forgiven. By 1785, Jeanne had convinced Rohan to be the proxy buyer of the Slave's Collar for Marie-Antoinette. She quickly produced a purchase order with the queen's signature, and Rohan made the acquisition. The necklace was then handed off to a man purporting to be the queen's valet and was promptly picked apart and sold on the black market.⁵⁹ The plot was discovered in August of 1785, and Cardinal Rohan was quickly arrested.⁶⁰ Shortly thereafter, Jeanne de La Motte and Nicole Le Guay were arrested, and preparations began for what would become the most sensational trial of Louis XVI's reign.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 81

⁵⁸ Weber, 165.

⁵⁹ Maza, 81.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 81.

Instead of settling the matter himself, Louis XVI decided to take the case before the magistrates of the Palais de Justice. Rohan's secretary, the abbé Georgel, later observed that this decision was "a solemn homage to the great influence of the laws which protect a citizen's honor," and a testimony to "the sublime empire of reason in a well-ordered monarchy."⁶¹ However, despite these well-meaning intentions, this decision backfired on the royal family. Sara Maza aptly states that the French people wanted to know: "Should the Cardinal be charged with 'criminal Presumption' and 'lese-majesté' for believing that the Queen would stoop to dealing with the likes of Madame de La Motte and assigning a nocturnal rendezvous? Or should he be acquitted on the implicit grounds that such behavior on the part of Marie-Antoinette was not at all implausible?"⁶² The official ruling from the courts was that the Cardinal de Rohan was innocent, therefore insinuating that actions such as these were entirely plausible on the part of Marie-Antoinette. The judges even mentioned her in one brutal clause saying: "With Her Most Christian Majesty's reputation for frivolity and indiscretion, with her succession of male and female 'favorites' of dubious repute, we find it entirely plausible that the Cardinal de Rohan did so presume."⁶³ This ruling was a huge blow to the queen because it made painfully clear the low esteem in which many of her subjects held her. For her remaining years as queen, Marie-Antoinette was constantly fighting to reshape her reputation and recreate a positive image of herself as queen.

Learning to Shape a Reputation

⁶¹ Ibid., 82. Translated from Abbé Jean-François Georgel, *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire des événements de la fin du dix-huitième siècle* (Paris: A. Eymery, 1820), 2:128.

⁶² Ibid., 82.

⁶³ Weber, 170.

After several failed attempts at trying to develop her own unique portrait style, Marie-Antoinette finally realized that she needed to return to old portrait conventions after the disastrous conclusion of the Diamond Necklace Affair. Works such as Vigée-Lebrun's *La Reine en gaulle* and Adolf Wertmüller's *La Reine, Monseigneur le Dauphin, et Madame, Fille de Roi se promenant dans le jardin Anglais du Petit Trianon* (Appendix, Image 7, *The Queen, Monseigneur the Dauphin, and Madame, Daughter of the King walking in the English Garden of the Petit Trianon*) presented too informal an image of the queen for the majority of the French people.⁶⁴ The Wertmüller painting, commissioned for King Gustav of Sweden, showed the queen walking in the gardens of the Petit Trianon with her two oldest children. When it was displayed at the Salon, it was denounced as too casual for a queen and as unflattering.⁶⁵ These negative reviews, taken into account with the continuing criticism of the queen's rampant spending and her supposed self-insertion into the political sphere, indicate that Marie-Antoinette was not in good standing with her people. In order to salvage what remained of her good reputation, two portraits of Marie-Antoinette were commissioned from Vigée-Lebrun that were to be more traditional in style: *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* of 1787 and *Marie-Antoinette "en robes de velour bleu"* of 1788. Both portraits take as their model a 1748 portrait of Marie Leczinska by Jean-Marc Nattier titled, *Marie Leszczyńska* (Appendix, Image 3). Ultimately, Marie-Antoinette hoped that by associating herself once more with the former queen, she might gain back some of the love and support she had lost over the last decade.

It is interesting that the portrait of Marie Leczinska on which Marie-Antoinette chose to model her 1787 and 1788 portraits was one in which the former queen was herself trying to

⁶⁴ For an insightful discussion of Wertmüller's portrait, see Todd Larkin's "Marie-Antoinette and Her Portraits: The Politics of Queenly Self-Imaging in Late Eighteenth-Century France," 228–246.

⁶⁵ Fraser, 223.

fashion a new image. As Jennifer Germann points out, it was through Nattier's 1748 portrait that she set about to (re)imagine what the image of the queen should be. Marie Leczinska fashioned herself as queen of France but more importantly, as an intellectual woman, a woman who had her own history, and who could claim her own complex identity.⁶⁶ By choosing a more informal image of the previous queen, Marie-Antoinette was able to compromise between tradition and the new style that she had been attempting to create. She was also able to promote herself as a learned and intellectual woman, just like her predecessor. By referencing this specific portrait of Marie Leczinska, I argue that Marie-Antoinette was attempting to equate herself with the characteristics of the former queen that had made her popular with the people.

In 1748, Marie Leczinska commissioned Jean-Marc Nattier to create a portrait that would be unlike any of her previous images. This commission came on the heels of the 1747 debut of Carle van Loo's *Portrait of Marie Leczynska* and was meant to present a different image of the queen—one that was personally conceived by the queen herself. As previously discussed, Van Loo's portrait was commissioned by the king and was meant to buttress the monarchy by presenting an image that preserved the traditional hierarchies between husband and wife, sovereign and subject. The commission for Nattier's portrait, conversely, came directly from the queen. She commissioned it, she posed for it, and she was responsible for disseminating it throughout France through several requested copies. According to Nattier's daughter, Marie-Catherine Tocqué, Marie Leczinska sat for her portrait and endured the tedious hours of the portrait's creation, indicating her personal investment in the work (as it was rare at this time for royals to actually sit for their portraits). The active role that Marie Leczinska took in the creation of the portrait is indicative of her desire to create a new image of herself that was significantly

⁶⁶ In the following discussion of Nattier's portrait, I rely heavily on Germann's analysis, 58–64.

different from those already in existence. Historically, portraits of French queens acted to reinforce their ultimate role in the monarchy—the bearer of heirs. Queenly portraits showed the consort in elaborate dress, in a lavishly decorated setting, and as an accessory to the king’s majesty. Nattier’s *Marie Leszczyńska* does not meet any of these criteria.

This painting came at a time when the vogue for more informal portraiture was developing. Marie Leczinska’s choice to be portrayed in “town” dress, as opposed to a court gown, shows her desire to create an image of herself that was significantly different from the traditional depictions of a queen. In a very real way, it challenged the official image found in the 1747 Van Loo portrait. In addition to being casual, Marie Leczinska’s dress also recalls the costume of her native country, Poland. The attire of Polish women at the time consisted of open robes tied with a sash and lined with fur, and in Western Europe fur trimmings were generally considered exotic and Eastern. Germann argues that the French public would have had a preconceived idea of Polish costume based on paintings such as Watteau’s *La Réveuse* (Appendix, Image 8). Although Marie Leczinska’s complete ensemble was clearly French, it would have easily been associated with “traditional Polish” dress thanks to the images by Watteau and others. By choosing to have herself portrayed in this Polish style dress rather than in her royal finery, Marie Leczinska is making a conscious connection to her Polish heritage and firmly declaring that this is an important aspect of her identity as a woman and as queen.

In addition to calling attention to her Polish origins, her red velvet and fur-trimmed dress also connected her to the growing group of female intellectuals. This style of dress was fashionable at the time and was featured in portraits of women engaged in intellectual pursuits. One such image is Marianne Loir’s *Portrait of Madame du Châtelet* (Appendix, Image 9). Madame Châtelet was the woman responsible for translating Sir Isaac Newton’s *Principia*

Mathematica into French and was a respected intellectual. In Loir's portrait, which was painted around 1745, Madame Châtelet wears a blue velvet and fur-trimmed gown similar to the one Marie Leczinska wears in the Nattier portrait. This visual connection between the queen and Madame Châtelet places Marie Leczinska in the realm of the intellectual woman. The queen had Nattier paint several versions of this painting, occasionally making changes to the book she holds. In the majority of the portraits, Marie Leczinska is reading the Bible. This highlighted both her intellectual capabilities and her religious devotion. In other versions, such as one given to Charles-Jean-François Hénault, a famed literary talent and known intellectual (and later the superintendent of the queen's household), Marie Leczinska is depicted reading a volume of philosophical essays.⁶⁷ In all the versions of the painting, Marie Leczinska is shown looking up from her reading, gazing off in apparent reverie, lost in her internal thoughts. Germann argues that this places the queen more in the category of male intellectuals because female intellectuals were normally shown looking directly out of the canvas. She draws the connection between Nattier's portrait and the later portrait of Denis Diderot painted in 1767 by Louis-Michel van Loo (Appendix, Image 10). Both Diderot and Marie Leczinska lean into the viewer's space, but are withdrawn into their own meditations. Their eyes are cast away from the viewer, and they turn away from their reading, but their open eyes indicate that their musings are active not passive.⁶⁸ An association with male intellectuals seems to make a powerful statement for the queen. Not only is she learned, but she is also as intellectual as a man. However, this bold statement is diffused by her lack of direct eye contact. I would argue that the direct eye contact established in a portrait such as Madame Châtelet's is more challenging to the (male) viewer.

⁶⁷ Philip Conisbee, *Painting in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 124.

⁶⁸ Germann, 64.

While this woman stares boldly out of the canvas, surrounded by her intellectual trappings that highlight her knowledge, Marie Leczinska stares off to the side, lost in her own thoughts. This lack of interaction with the viewer diffuses any tension that could arise from the female assertion of intelligence. However, it is still abundantly clear that Marie Leczinska is claiming her role as an intellectual woman in this portrait by Jean-Marc Nattier.

Marie-Antoinette and Her Children: Showing Off her Real Jewels

In late 1785, the Comte d'Angiviller, the king's Directeur des Bâtiments, commissioned Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun to paint a large-scale portrait of Marie-Antoinette and her children. This portrait was meant to proclaim that the queen's motherhood and domestic concerns were in line with traditional images of French consorts.⁶⁹ The commission came in the wake of the disastrous reception of Vigée-Lebrun's *La Reine en gaulle* of 1783 and Adolf Wertmüller's portrait of Marie-Antoinette and her children painted in 1785, as well as shortly after the Diamond Necklace Affair. Due to the increasingly virulent attacks on the queen's reputation, it was critical that the monarchy present an image of the queen that would be viewed positively by the public. In line with these desires, Vigée-Lebrun's *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* (Appendix, Image 11) looked to the portraits of the past in order to place the queen firmly within the traditions of the French court.

Marie-Antoinette and her Children, which was completed in 1787, shows the queen at Versailles in her official function—that of producing heirs to the Bourbon throne—and was

⁶⁹ Larkin, 304.

meant to situate her firmly in the realm of traditional queenly portraiture.⁷⁰ She is shown in the center of a room, holding her youngest son in her lap, while her daughter embraces her arm and lovingly looks up at her mother. The young dauphin is positioned at the right corner of the canvas, holding up a curtain to reveal an empty cradle with his right hand and motioning to his mother and siblings with the other. Originally, Marie-Antoinette's youngest daughter, Sophie-Hélène-Béatrix, appeared in the cradle. However, after her death less than a year after her birth, Vigée-Lebrun reworked to the canvas and removed the young princess. The image was meant to promote Marie-Antoinette's image as the fecund Mother of the Children of France and, by extension, the French people—her most important role as queen of France.⁷¹

In the back right corner of the canvas stands the jewel cabinet given to the queen by the people of France. The inclusion of this element is a reference to the Roman matron, Cornelia, who stated that her children were her jewels. This reference was meant to diffuse the rumors of Marie-Antoinette's involvement in the Diamond Necklace Affair by associating the queen with this virtuous woman of antiquity. Atop the jewel case, the queen's crown rests on the traditional fleur-de-lis embroidered pillow. The placement of her crown so far away from her could easily be interpreted as a distancing of the queen from political affairs. In a sense, she has set aside any political desires she might have harbored in order to focus on her most important role as mother. Mary Sheriff, however, identifies the room in which the queen and her children sit as the Salon de la Paix, thereby infusing some political meaning in the composition. This room is where Marie-Antoinette would have held balls and *fêtes* and where she would have met important

⁷⁰ Mary Sheriff, "The Cradle is Empty: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Marie-Antoinette, and the Problem of Intention," in *Women, Art, and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Melissa Hyde and Jennifer Milam (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 171.

⁷¹ Fraser, 255.

foreign visitors, not where she would have spent time with her children.⁷² The inclusion of the doorway leading into the Galerie des Glaces in the back left corner is what allows Sheriff to make this identification. Sheriff suggests several possible readings, including that of a peaceful alliance between formerly hostile powers symbolized by the living symbols of the alliance—the king and queen’s children.⁷³ Another possible reason behind this placement is that French viewers familiar with Versailles would have quickly recognized this room. Consequently, Marie-Antoinette and her children are placed firmly within the realm of the palace, where they should be by tradition. There is no mistaking this room as one at the Petit Trianon.

In order to place the queen in line with French tradition still more securely, Vigée-Lebrun and Marie-Antoinette reference two portraits of Marie Leczinska in the composition. Although the commission for *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* originated from the Bâtiments du Roi, Marie-Antoinette was still very involved with the conception of the portrait. It was she who conceived of the commission, she who recommended the subject matter, and she who saw her favorite portraitist appointed to the task.⁷⁴ The dress Marie-Antoinette chose to wear for this portrait is a direct reference to Jean-Marc Nattier’s *Marie Leszczyńska* of 1748. Like Marie Leczinska, Marie-Antoinette wears a red velvet dress with fur trim. Although the similarities stop here, the viewer would have been well aware of this association. The relationship between *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* and Alexis Simon Belle’s *Queen Marie Leczinska and the Dauphin* (Appendix, Image 12) of 1730 is more pronounced. The prominence of the dauphin in the scene harkens back to earlier paintings of queens with their first-born son and allies Marie-Antoinette’s portrait with well-established tradition. Belle painted *Queen Marie Leczinska and*

⁷² Sheriff, “The Cradle is Empty,” 178.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁷⁴ Larkin, 304.

the Dauphin in 1730 to commemorate the birth of the royal heir. In his painting, the royal pair is presented as a secularized Madonna and child enthroned.⁷⁵ Marie Leczinska is dressed “en costume de sacre” and is now firmly queen, for giving birth to a male child secured her position in a way no ceremony could.⁷⁶ The composition speaks to the mother and son’s royalty. Both are dressed in elaborate costumes of fine fabric, bedecked in jewels and pearls. Marie Leczinska forms a makeshift throne for the dauphin, and the ermine and fleur-de-lis cape draped over her lap and upon which the prince sits links the pair in their royal status. The sofa on which the mother and son sit is literally crowned with the royal regalia, denoting the position of the queen and the dauphin. Belle’s portrait is more within the tradition of queenly portraiture than *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* because Marie Leczinska is shown only with her son. Since in 1785 there was no state portrait of Marie-Antoinette alone with the dauphin, it is possible that she wanted Vigée-Lebrun’s painting to fulfill a similar function by placing the young prince in a position of importance.⁷⁷ However, this function is overshadowed by the inclusion of the queen’s other children. Additionally, *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* appears far less regal than *Queen Marie Leczinska and the Dauphin*. As mentioned in the discussion on Nattier’s portrait, Marie Leczinska chose to be depicted in casual “town” clothes in order to highlight aspects of herself besides that of being queen. It is likely that Marie-Antoinette decided on the velvet and fur dress as a way of appearing more accessible as a mother—both of her biological children and the metaphorical state of France. She wanted to remain regal, but not appear aloof. A combination of Nattier and Belle’s portraits of Marie Leczinska presented a way of achieving this goal.

⁷⁵ Sheriff, “The Cradle is Empty,” 172.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

In addition to recalling portraits of French queens and dauphins, *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* also acknowledges portraits of the king's mistress with his natural children. Unlike the images of the queen with the dauphin, these works often show two or more siblings surrounding their mother. Pierre Mignard's *The Duchess de la Vallière and her Children* (Appendix, Image 13) depicts one of Louis XIV's mistresses with two of their children. This scene is more active, with both the children engaged in an activity and the suggestion of other pursuits in the lower right corner of the canvas. The duchess gazes out at the audience with a vague look instead of interacting with her children. This calls to mind one of the chief criticisms of the Vigée-Lebrun portrait—a lack of “intention” found in Marie-Antoinette's expression.⁷⁸ Critics could not ascertain what emotion the queen was meant to convey, and this greatly disturbed them. One writer of the *Mémoires secrets* (an underground and unofficial publication that critiqued Salon entries, as well as making the occasional political statement) noted that “the queen, troubled, distracted, seems to experience affliction rather than the expansive joy of a mother who is pleased to find herself in the midst of her children.”⁷⁹ Another critic states, “one complains that the Queen, in the middle of her children, does not focus her attention on them.”⁸⁰ The awkwardness that these critics detected resulted from the use of too many precedents. Because this portrait was part of an attempt to bolster the public opinion of the monarchy, it had to present an image of the queen that was traditional, regal, and maternal. Unfortunately, the inclusion of the children in a portrait where Marie-Antoinette was meant to appear austere and regal translated into a look of aloof lack of interest. It did not help matters that the portrait of

⁷⁸ Ibid., 173.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 169. Translated from “Première lettre sur les peintures, sculptures, et gravures exposées au Salon du Louvre,” *Mémoires secrets* 36: 298–9.

⁸⁰ “L'ami des Artistes au Sallon (sic),” 1787, 33–34, in *Collection Deloynes*, 1980, vol. 15, pièces 378 à 379.

Marie-Antoinette and her children hovered between traditions. Like images of the queen with the dauphin, Vigée-Lebrun's portrait privileges the first-born son, but like representations of the royal mistresses, it includes all the queen's children. One reading of the painting is that it implies a coincidence of queen and mistress.⁸¹ Because Louis XVI never took a mistress, it could be suggested that Marie-Antoinette consolidated in herself the power ordinarily divided between the queen and royal favorites. This was a common complaint about the queen throughout her reign, and many of her subjects—both noble and common—thought she was running the country through her husband. This reading is indicative of the type of criticism the queen was subject to at this time and shows the public's readiness to believe the worst about their queen.

Despite these negative reviews, the majority of critics received *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* positively. Several reviews praised the portrait for its hybrid nature showing Marie-Antoinette as both queen and mother. One critic in the widely read *Journal général de France* stated: "The princess (the Queen), majestically posed, holds on her knee Mgr. le Duc de Normandie. Madame and Mgr. le Dauphin are tenderly inclined towards her, and all converge to give a sense of maternal and filial tenderness."⁸² On the whole, the reviews seem to indicate that the portrait was successful because Marie-Antoinette appeared to possess both the dignity of a queen and the tenderness of a mother. However, negative reviews and remarks about the queen

⁸¹ Sheriff, "The Cradle is Empty," 176.

⁸² "Academie royale de peinture et de sculpture: Exposition des tableaux au Salon du Louvre en 1787: Discours des morte sur les tableaux exposés en 1787," *Journal general de France*, 1787, in *Collection Deloynes*, 1980, vol. 15, no. 402, 938; quoted in Larkin, 311- "Cette princesse (la Reine), majesteusement posée, tient sur ses genoux Mgr. le Duc de Normandie. Madame et Mgr. le Dauphin sont tendrement inclines vers elle, et tous concourent a donner l'idée de la tendresse maternelle et filiale."

persisted. It was thus essential that she keep trying to positively reshape her image through the artworks she commissioned.

The Final Attempt: *Marie-Antoinette “en robe de velours bleu”*

Following the exhibition of *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* at the Salon of 1787, the Bâtiments du Roi was sent numerous solicitations for portraits of the queen by notable men such as the Comte d’Artois, the king’s brother, the Baron de Breteuil, one of Marie-Antoinette’s ministerial appointees, and the Marquis de Sombreuil, a loyal military commander.⁸³ It was usually a rare distinction to own an image of the consort, and her portraits were typically awarded only to ministries, embassies, and foreign courts to serve as a constant reminder of the blood ties that bound France to Austria.⁸⁴ The king’s Minister of Fine Arts, the Comte d’Angiviller, denied these requests on the grounds that “there still exists only one portrait, that located in the Grand Apartments which is more a history painting of Her Majesty with the Princes and Princess, her children, than a portrait of her Majesty.”⁸⁵ In response to these requests, Marie-Antoinette commissioned Vigée-Lebrun to rework the 1787 portrait into one that featured only the queen. Although the queen could have petitioned the king for copies of the portrait of herself and her children, she chose to have Vigée-Lebrun create a new composition. This suggests the queen’s desire to have this portrait be completely under her control.

Marie-Antoinette “en robe de velours blue” (Appendix, Image 2) is arguably the most regal portrait of the queen painted by Vigée-Lebrun. Her pose and the setting are majestic, and

⁸³ Larkin, 331.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 331.

⁸⁵ Joseph Baillio, *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, 1755–1842* (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1982), 80. Translation from the original letter to the Marquis de Sombreuil, Paris, Archives Nationales, Maison du Roi, 1920, cahier 2, p. 163, fol. 206).

her royalty is alluded to through the Bourbon blue of her dress and the crown resting on the velvet cushion stitched with golden fleur-de-lis. Her left hand rests on a pillow, and she clutches a book in her right hand, the cover of which is embossed with the Bourbon and Hapsburg arms.⁸⁶ Although the queen is not in full court dress, Vigée-Lebrun has retained many of the elements traditional to official state portraits. Marie-Antoinette sits erect, her vertical posture echoed by the massive columns behind her. A curtain is pulled back in the upper right corner of the composition, lending an air of theatricality to the painting. The queen's sumptuous dress also calls attention to her status. Her dress is quite similar to the one she wore for *Marie-Antoinette and her Children*, though this time it is made of blue velvet with a white satin underskirt, both lined with fur trim. She also wears a similar *toque* on her head that is adorned with feathers. Though this costume is more casual than the traditional *robe à la française*, it is still formal in nature and simply reflects the changes in fashion that had occurred over Marie-Antoinette's reign—many of which were instigated by the queen herself. This view of the queen was a huge change from previous depictions of the elaborately fashioned Marie-Antoinette. Whereas previously she had her hair shaped in an ornate (and sometimes quite tall) *pouf* that was decorated with flowers and other props, in *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu"* and *Marie-Antoinette and her Children*, her hair is more subdued and controlled. This is a visual indication of the queen's decision to dress more conservatively after her thirtieth birthday. While her intricate *pouf* and the casual *chemise* allowed the queen to make dramatic fashion statements, they also led to negative remarks on her frivolity and disrespect for French tradition. Her appearance in Vigée-Lebrun's 1787 and 1788 portraits shows a more conservative queen more in sync with tradition.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 78.

In addition to dress, there are other factors that make the queen's portrait of 1788 nearly identical to the one of 1787. Her facial expression is equally placid, she is in a seated pose, and her body is turned three-quarters to the right.⁸⁷ This indicates that the motives for the 1788 portrait were very close to those of the 1787 portrait. Marie-Antoinette did not need an entirely new portrait created; rather, she had Vigée-Lebrun remove certain elements from the previous composition that would subtly reshape the intended meaning of the 1788 portrait.

One element that is kept constant between *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* and *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu"* is the relationship to Marie Leczinska. Whereas the 1787 portrait of the queen and her children recalls Marie Leczinska in dress only, *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu"* references her in action as well. In composition, Vigée-Lebrun's 1788 portrait of Marie-Antoinette and Nattier's 1748 portrait of Marie Leczinska are quite similar. Both queens wear a velvet fur-trimmed dress and are shown distracted from their reading. The background elements of curtain and column remain consistent as well. Additionally, references to the king have been removed. From the Van Loo portrait to the Nattier portrait, the bust of the king was removed. If it were not for the inclusion of the chair embroidered with fleur-de-lis in Nattier's *Marie Leszczyńska*, there would be no visual signifiers indicating the woman portrayed was the queen. In *Marie-Antoinette and her Children*, the location in the Salon de la Paix would have led to the viewer to conjure thoughts of the Salon de la Guerre, located across the Galerie des Glaces, which was in the king's domain.⁸⁸ As a result, it would be easy for the viewer to imagine the king walking through the doorway into the scene. Conversely, there is no reference to the king in *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu."* Her royal signifiers—the crown on the fleur-de-lis pillows, the carpet decorated with the Hapsburg

⁸⁷ Larkin, 330.

⁸⁸ Sheriff, "The Cradle is Empty," 180.

rose, and the book embossed with the Bourbon and Hapsburg arms—call attention to the queen’s royalty and power. Her subjection to the king is nowhere to be found.

While the visual similarities end here, there is a deeper connection between the two in terms of their initial conception and commission. As mentioned above, Marie Leczinska personally commissioned Nattier to paint her portrait in 1748 after the Bâtiments du Roi had commissioned her portrait from Van Loo the previous year. While the Van Loo portrait shows the queen as tradition dictated, the Nattier portrait shows the queen as she wished to be perceived. The same is true for the 1787 and 1788 portraits of Marie-Antoinette. *Marie-Antoinette and her Children* was commissioned by the Bâtiments du Roi in an attempt to politically rehabilitate the queen.⁸⁹ In the portrait, she is shown in her official function as queen—mother to the royal heirs. Although she does not appear in court finery, the message meant to be conveyed is that Marie-Antoinette is in line with traditional Bourbon values because she has contributed to the continuation of the royal bloodline. D’Angevillier hoped that this image would combat the negative press directed towards Marie-Antoinette by placing her within the traditional queenly role. To a certain extent, they succeeded. Marie-Antoinette, like Marie Leczinska before her, responded to this portrait with a commission of her own—Vigée-Lebrun’s *Marie-Antoinette “en robe de velours bleu”* of 1788. In this image, the children have been eliminated, effectively removing the interpretation of the queen as biological mother. Rather, she has now assumed the role of metaphorical mother of the French.⁹⁰ Todd Larkin argues that the removal of the children shows that the queen is also capable of assuming a more traditional, authoritarian guise compatible with her role as consort and possible regent.⁹¹ This reading gives

⁸⁹ Larkin, 330.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 332.

Marie-Antoinette political power that she was not meant to have, as dictated by French tradition. While Marie Leczinska's portrait by Nattier presents a depiction of the queen that strays from the traditional, the queen is not defying tradition. In *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu,"* tradition is being challenged through the suggestion that Marie-Antoinette wields political power.

This interpretation is further enforced when a comparison is made between *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu"* and Vigée-Lebrun's first painting of the queen, *Portrait of Marie-Antoinette* of 1778. At first glance, these paintings seem to be conveying two very different images of the queen. However, upon closer examination, a surprising number of similarities can be found. First of all, the two portraits seem to be located within the same room at Versailles. In both paintings, two massive columns appear behind the queen, stabilizing the left side of the composition. In the distant background behind the queen is what appears to be a wall with a window or doorway surmounted by a semi-circular painting. While minute details are impossible to identify, the background walls in both Vigée-Lebrun paintings are strikingly similar, strongly suggesting that both were located in the same room. In addition to location, the queen's posture is similar in both works, with her body turned slightly to her left.

Another compositional difference is found in the standing versus seated pose and in the eye contact. I would argue that the seated pose of the queen in *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu"* is meant to elicit thoughts of the monarch enthroned, thus adding more political meaning to this painting. As I argued earlier in this paper, the echoing of Marie-Antoinette's gaze with Louis XVI's in the 1778 *Portrait of Marie-Antoinette* places her on more equal footing with her husband, thereby imbuing her character with political significance. The absence of Louis XVI in *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu"* and the queen's direct eye contact

effectively usurp the king's position and suggest that Marie-Antoinette is the true wielder of political power. Whereas Marie Leczinska's direct eye contact in the 1747 Van Loo portrait effectively tied her firmly to the king, Marie-Antoinette's gaze in this portrait highlights her authority as distinct from the king's. This is only possible because of Louis XVI's absence from the composition. If his presence were indicated through the inclusion of a portrait bust or painting, Marie-Antoinette would perform the same function as Marie Leczinska in the Van Loo portrait. However, due to the king's exclusion from the painting, *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu"* makes it very clear that the queen was capable of exercising a great deal of political power.

The political situation at the time of Vigée-Lebrun's 1788 portrait of the queen was full of ups and downs for Marie-Antoinette. She went through times of public support and, more frequently, times of public disapproval.⁹² Although a majority of her reign had been spent diffusing rumors that she was a political meddler, by the late 1780s it was quite clear that Marie-Antoinette played a political role in the state of France. Upon the death of his favorite minister, Vergennes, in 1787, Louis XVI had become increasingly overwhelmed by tensions and conflicts among his remaining ministers.⁹³ As a result, he turned increasingly to the only person he could genuinely trust—his wife. This decision to include Marie-Antoinette in affairs of state was met with angry cries from the courtiers who disapproved of her ascendancy.⁹⁴ The most pressing political matter at this time was the financial situation of France. Years of spending on wars and state affairs, not to mention on the decadency of the French court, had led to a huge deficit. Arguments abounded on how to best resolve the budget crisis. The monarchy's most visible

⁹² Ibid., 335.

⁹³ Weber, 186.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 186.

action in this regard was the appointment of a string of Financial Ministers. Marie-Antoinette's role in convincing Louis XVI to recall the popular Jacques Necker to the position of Controller-General led to a momentary upswing in her popularity.⁹⁵ However, this was short-lived, as it quickly became apparent that Necker's policies were not in line with what the king desired, resulting in his dismissal. To many Frenchmen, the queen's actual political involvement was clear in *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu."* Her elevated position and direct stare make it clear that the viewers—her subjects—were substitutes for her children.⁹⁶ As such, she wielded authority over them.

Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu" was not exhibited at a Salon until 1817, after the restoration of the monarchy. While members of the upper class and nobility could have had access to the actual painting through certain owners, such as the Comte d'Artois or the Baron de Breteuil, the majority of French viewers would not have seen Vigée-Lebrun's painting in person. However, the image was made available to the public at large through print. Shortly after the completion of the portrait in 1788, Ternisien d'Haudricourt obtained permission to execute a color engraving of the painting.⁹⁷ Finished at the end of 1789, it was meant to be circulated as a companion piece to an image of Louis XVI after a painting by Joseph Boze (Appendix, Image 14).⁹⁸ In both the engravings (Appendix, Images 15 and 16), the monarchs appear in three-quarter length ovals. This required the truncation of the Vigée-Lebrun portrait and the expansion of the Boze portrait. The addition to the Boze work creates an image of Louis surrounded by treatises on good government and a coffret containing state documents.⁹⁹ The juxtaposition

⁹⁵ Larkin, 335.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 340.

between the prints of the king and queen present them within the confines of their traditional roles—Louis as political ruler and Marie-Antoinette as a woman with no political clout. The print version of *Marie-Antoinette “en robe de velours bleu”* effectively removes the queen’s claim to power—her crown. The difference in political meaning between the actual painting and the print could be explained as a desire to send different messages to different people. The painting would have been viewed primarily by nobles, many of whom were open opponents of the queen. It is plausible that Marie-Antoinette wished to send them the message that she was their monarch and deserved the respect accorded to her position and place of power. Conversely, mostly her non-noble subjects living in Paris would have seen the print version. Thus, it is likely that Marie-Antoinette wished to present them with an image of her as a harmless, loving mother who had the best interests of her people at heart.

The dissemination of the print version of *Marie-Antoinette “en robe de velours bleu”* was also an active attempt by the monarchy to combat the increasing number of pamphlets that attacked the queen’s character. Since her arrival in France, subversive literature had been circulated condemning the queen for various reasons. The first of the lampoons were the work of the court at Versailles, specifically the Comte de Provence, one of Louis XVI’s brothers, who desperately wanted to be king.¹⁰⁰ These early pamphlets raised concerns about Marie-Antoinette’s Austrian heritage and blamed her for bringing the dissolution and brutality of German morals into the French court. They also called into question the paternity of her children and pointed to another of the king’s brothers, the Comte d’Artois, as the likely father.¹⁰¹ As her reign progressed, the pamphlets became more sexualized and extremely harmful to Marie-

¹⁰⁰ Chantal Thomas, *The Wicked Queen: The Origins of the Myth of Marie-Antoinette* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 63.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

Antoinette's reputation. During 1789, while the print version of *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu"* was being circulated, pamphlets with titles such as "The Royal Dildo," "The Austrian Woman on the Rampage, or the Royal Orgy," and "The Royal Bordello" were also being distributed. The print version of Vigée-Lebrun's painting was meant to combat these slanderous publications and present an image of the queen that was in stark contrast to what was being shown in the subversive literature. The *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu"* print shows a non-threatening woman, dressed appropriately, and reading a book. She has no signs of political power and is presented as the good mother of her French subjects. Unfortunately for the queen, by this point the French people had already made up their mind that Marie-Antoinette was a monstrous queen whose only concern was her own physical pleasure. The populace had thus decided that they would be better off without a king and a queen, and no images showing a good French king and queen were going to persuade them otherwise.

Conclusion

For Marie-Antoinette, change came too little, too late. Although she tried to present herself as a benevolent mother concerned with the welfare of both her natural children and her metaphorical children of France in Vigée-Lebrun's 1787 and 1788 portraits, the public had already made up their mind about her. As many of her portraits indicate, Marie-Antoinette was constantly striving to create an image of herself that would please her people. She wanted to present herself in a way that highlighted the changes she implemented as queen, but still remained within the French tradition. *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu"* comes the closest to achieving what the queen had hoped for. In style, she was portrayed more informally, which was in line with her general desire for less structure throughout her reign. However, she

remains within the walls of Versailles, the traditional realm of the queen (as opposed to her non-traditional realm of the Petit Trianon). The content of the portrait presents Marie-Antoinette as a powerful woman who was capable of wielding political power, but who also embraced her traditional role as mother to the French people. Marie-Antoinette also hoped that she could win over the people by referencing portraits of her predecessor, Marie Leczinska, in her own portraits. However, not even a strong connection with the well-loved former queen could salvage her reputation. As a result of early errors on the queen's part coupled with the revolutionary stirrings in the air, Marie-Antoinette fell victim to her people. Although she proved that art could be a powerful tool in shaping a reputation, she also demonstrated that the reputation is not always shaped for the better.

Appendix

Image 1



La Reine en gaulle, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun
1783, oil on canvas, 93.3 x 79.1 cm
Private Collection of Hessische Hausstiftung, Krongberg, Germany

Image 2



Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu," Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun
1788, oil on canvas, 271 x 195 cm
Château de Versailles

Image 3



Marie Leszczyńska, Jean-Marc Nattier
1748, oil on canvas
Château de Versailles

Image 4



Portrait of Marie Leczyńska, Carle van Loo
1747, oil on canvas, 224 x 152 cm
Palazzo Pitti, Florence

Image 5



Portrait of Louis XV, Carle van Loo
1747, oil on canvas

Image 6



Portrait of Marie-Antoinette, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun
1778, oil on canvas, 273 x 193.5 cm
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Image 7



La Reine, Monseigneur le Dauphin, et Madame, Fille de Roi se promenant dans le jardin Anglais du Petit Trianon, Adolf Wertmüller
1785, oil on canvas, 276 x 194 cm
National Museum, Stockholm

Image 8



La Réveuse (The Dreamer), Antoine Watteau
1712-14, oil on panel, 23 x 17 cm
The Art Institute of Chicago

Image 9



Portrait of Madame Châtelet, Marianne Loir
c. 1745, oil on canvas, 180 x 96 cm
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux

Image 10



Denis Diderot, Louis-Michel van Loo
1767, oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm
Musée de Louvre

Image 11



Marie-Antoinette and her Children, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun
1787, oil on canvas, 275 x 215 cm
Château de Versailles

Image 12



Queen Marie Leczinska and the Dauphin, Alexis Simon Belle
1730, oil on canvas
Château de Versailles

Image 13



The Duchess de la Vallière and her Children, Pierre Mignard
oil on canvas

Image 14



Louis XVI, Joseph Boze
oil on canvas, 68 x 56 cm

Image 15



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Marie Antoinette archi. Dsse. d'Autriche, Reine de France
Ternisien d'Haudricourt and Jean-César Macre, 1789, engraving
Bibliothèque nationale de France

Image 16



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Louis XVI
Ternisien d'Haudricourt and Jean-César Macre, 1789, engraving
Bibliothèque nationale de France

Works Cited

- Baillio, Joseph. *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, 1755–1842* (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1982).
- Campan, Jeanne-Louise-Henriette. *Memoirs of Marie Antoinette: Queen of France and Wife of Louis XVI* (New York: Collier, 1910).
- Conisbee, Philip. *Painting in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).
- Constans, Claire and Xavier Salmon, ed. *Splendors of Versailles* (Jackson, MS: The Mississippi Commission for International Cultural Exchange, Inc., 1998).
- Correspondance secrete entre Marie-Thérèse et le Comte de Mercy-Argenteau*. Introduction and notes by M. Le Chevalier Alfred d'Arneht and M.A. Geffroy, 4 vols (Paris: Didot, 1874).
- Fraser, Antonia. *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001).
- Germann, Jennifer. "Figuring Marie Leszczinska (1703–1768): Representing Queenship in Eighteenth-Century France" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2002).
- Jones, Colin. *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon 1715–99* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
- "L'ami des Artistes au Sallon." Paris, 1787, 33–34. In *Collection Deloynes*, vol. 15, pièces 378 à 379 (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1980).
- Langlade, Emile. *Rose Bertin: The Creator of Fashion at the Court of Marie-Antoinette*. Translated by Dr. Angelo S. Rappoport (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913). <http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924024290623>, 14 April 2011.
- Lajer-Burcharth, Ewa. "Pompadour's Touch: Difference in Representation." In *Representations*, No. 73 (Winter 2001): 54–88.
- Larkin, Todd. "Marie-Antoinette and her Portraits: The Politics of Queenly Self-Imaging in Late Eighteenth-Century France" (PhD. diss., University of California at Santa Barbara, 2000).
- Lebrun, Elisabeth Vigée. *Memoirs of Madame Vigée Lebrun*. Translated by Lionel Strachey (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1989).
- "Le Sallon a l'Encan: Réve pittoresque, mêlé Vaudevilles." Paris, 1783, 27. In *Collection Deloynes*, vol. 13, pièces 285 à 287 (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1980).

May, Gita. *Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun: The Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

Maza, Sara. "The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited (1785–1786): The Case of the Missing Queen." In *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*, ed. Dena Goodman, 73–97 (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Sheriff, Mary. "The Cradle is Empty: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Marie-Antoinette, and the Problem of Intention." In *Women, Art and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Melissa Hyde and Jennifer Milam, 164–187 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003).

Sheriff, Mary. *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Strobel, Heidi A. "Royal 'Matronage' of Women Artists in the Late 18th Century" in *Woman's Art Journal*, 26, no. 2 (Autumn 2005 – Winter 2006): 3–9.

Thomas, Chantal. *The Wicked Queen: The Origins of the Myth of Marie-Antoinette* (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

Weber, Caroline. *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* (New York: H. Holt, 2006).

VITA

Personal Background	Lydia Katherine Duggins Born September 11, 1985, Houston, Texas Daughter of James Lawrence and Joy Hardin Duggins
Education	Diploma, Trinity Valley School, Fort Worth, Texas, 2004 Bachelor of Arts, Rhodes College, Memphis, Tennessee, 2008
Fellowships and Awards	Kimbell Fellowship, Texas Christian University Fall 2009–Spring 2010
Internships	Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee Curatorial Department, February 2007–May 2008 Kimbell Museum of Art, Fort Worth, Texas Education Department, August–December 2008 Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas Registration Department, May–August 2010
Publications	Four original essays published in “The Memphis World” exhibition catalogue- Brooks Museum of Art, 2008
Professional Membership	Chi Omega Fraternity, 2004–2008 Tri-Iota, 2006–2008 Order of Omega, 2008

ABSTRACT

Marie-Antoinette, Queen of France from 1774–1792, had a tumultuous relationship with her subjects throughout her reign. Early criticism stemmed from her Austrian origins, and the French public gradually transformed her into a monstrous character whose German behavior and lack of morals brought ruin to the court of Versailles. This view was confirmed for the public upon viewing certain paintings of the queen, such as Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's *La Reine en gaulle* of 1783. Paintings such as these were interpreted by the French as a blatant show of disrespect for French customs and traditions on the part of Marie-Antoinette. To combat the vicious rumors and negative publicity that surrounded her, Marie-Antoinette actively commissioned portraits that presented an image of her as a good queen and mother. This paper is an attempt to explain and understand the effect portraiture had on the queen's reputation, and an examination of how she tried to use portraits to create a positive image. Ultimately, I will highlight the importance of Vigée-Lebrun's *Marie-Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu"* as one of the queen's last portrait commissions meant to have a significant impact on her reputation.