
Vigée Le Brun
DELPHI CLASSICS

Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun

(1755-1842)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue



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Masters of Art Series

Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun



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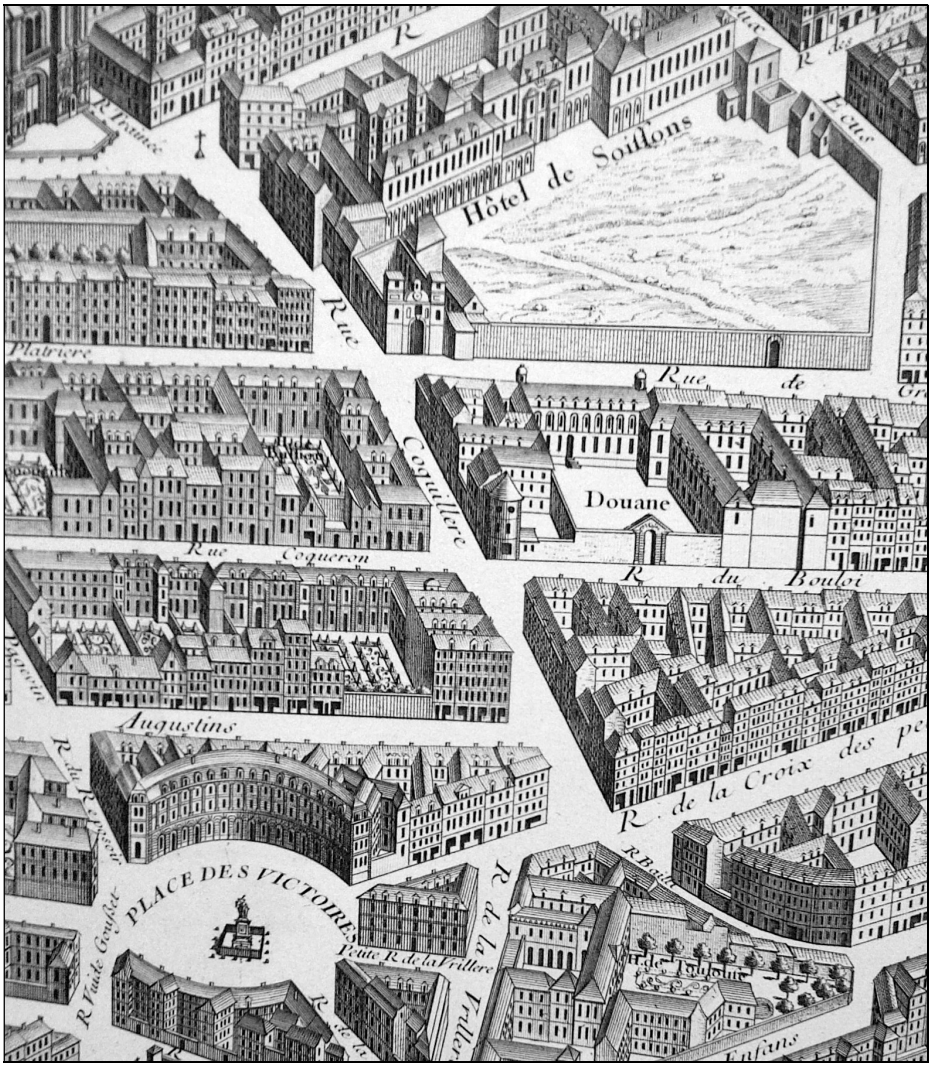
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The Highlights



The Rue Coquillière, one of the oldest paths of the 1st arrondissement of Paris — Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun's birthplace



La rue Coquillière in 1734, extracted from 'La Plan de Turgot'



A pastel self portrait of Vigée Le Brun at the age of 16



Vigée Le Brun's self portrait of 1790, aged 25

The Highlights

In this section, a selection of Vigée Le Brun's most celebrated works is provided, with concise introductions, special 'detail' reproductions and additional biographical images.

Marie Antoinette in a White Satin Gown (1778)

A French portraitist and master of the Rococo and Neoclassical styles, Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun was born in Paris on 16 April 1755. Her father was Louis Vigée (1715-1767), a minor portraitist and member of the Académie de Saint-Luc, who mostly specialised in painting with oils; her mother was Jeanne (née Maisin) (1728-1800), a hairdresser from a peasant background. From an early age, young Élisabeth revealed artistic inclinations, making a sketch of a bearded man at the age of seven or eight. When her father first saw her sketches, he was delighted and exclaimed, "You will be a painter my child, if there ever was one!" He immediately began giving her lessons in art.

At the age of five, she entered a convent, where she remained until 1766, when she started work as an assistant to her father's friend, the painter and poet Pierre Davesne. Her father died when she was twelve years old from infections after several surgical operations. In 1768, her mother married a wealthy but unkind jeweller, Jacques-François Le Sèvre, and shortly after, the family moved to the Rue Saint-Honoré, close to the Palais Royal. In her *Memoirs*, Vigée Le Brun openly states her feelings about her stepfather:

> "I hated this man; even more so since he made use of my father's personal possessions. He wore his clothes, just as they were, without altering them to fit his figure."

During this difficult period of her early life, she benefited from the advice of the artists Gabriel François Doyen, Jean-Baptiste Greuze and Joseph Vernet. Greuze's influence is evident in her portrait of her younger brother, playwright and poet Étienne Vigée. Her mother sought to raise her spirits by taking her to the Palais de Luxembourg's art gallery. The works of Peter Paul Rubens and various other Old Masters made a great impression upon her. She also visited numerous private galleries, including those of Rendon de Boisset, the Duc de Praslin and the Marquis de Levis. She took notes and copied the works of painters such as Van Dyck, Rubens and Rembrandt to improve her technique. By the time she was in her early teenage years, Élisabeth was painting portraits professionally. At this point, she disliked the contemporary High Rococo fashion and often requested her sitters to change their clothing choices. Inspired by Raphael and Domenichino, she often draped her subjects in shawls and long scarves — a loose fitting style that would inform much of her later portraiture.

Suddenly, her studio was seized, since she was practicing without a license and so she applied to the Académie de Saint-Luc, which quickly chose to exhibit her works in its Salon. In 1774, she was made a member of the Académie. Her studio's reputation grew quickly and her renown spread abroad. By 1774, she had painted portraits of the Comte Orloff, Comte Pierre Chouvaloff (one of Empress Elizabeth's favourites), the Comtesse de Brionne, the Duchess of Orléans (the future mother of King Louis Philippe), the Marquis de Choiseul and the Chancellor de Aguesseau, among many others. In 1776, she received her first royal commission for a portrait of the Comte de Provence (the future King Louis XVIII).

After her stepfather retired from his business, he moved the family to the Hôtel de Lubert in Paris, where she met Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun (1748-1813), a painter

and noted art dealer. Élisabeth visited his apartments frequently to view his private collection of paintings, which included examples from many different schools. He leant her several paintings so that she could copy them and improve her skills, which she saw as one of the greatest boons of artistic instruction she had received. After residing in the Hôtel de Lubert for six months, M. Le Brun proposed marriage. He was seven years older than her. At once, she faced in a dilemma in the offer. At the time, she had a steady source of income from her rising career as an artist and her future was reasonably secure. Until then she had never contemplated marriage. On her mother's urging and the indulging of a personal desire to escape her stepfather, she accepted the proposal, though her doubts still left her hesitant on the wedding day, 11 January 1776, when she was twenty. The ceremony took place in great privacy in the Saint-Eustache church, with only two banns being read; it was kept secret for some time at the request of her husband, who was officially engaged to another woman in an attempt to secure a lucrative art deal with a Dutch art dealer. Élisabeth acceded to his request as she was reluctant to give up her now famous maiden name.

After the wedding, she was visited by several people giving her ominous news regarding her husband, unaware that they were already married. These visitors included the court jeweller, followed by the Duchesse de Arenberg and Mme de Souza, the Portuguese ambassadress, who passed stories of M. Le Brun's habits as a spendthrift and womaniser. Élisabeth would later regret this match as she found these rumors to be true, though in her *Memoirs* she wrote that, in spite of his faults, he was an agreeable and obliging man with a sweet nature. However, she frequently condemned his gambling and adulterous habits, as these left her in a financially critical position at the time of her flight from France. Their relationship deteriorated so much that she would demand a refund of her dowry in 1802.

In spite of the anxiety surrounding her sudden marriage, her artistic career was about to enjoy a rise of meteoric proportions. After years of developing her craft in the workshops of Blaise Bocquet, Pierre Davesne and Gabriel Briard, she had gradually developed a highly sophisticated and distinctly personal technique, which made her the equal of the most gifted portraitists of the day. This technical prowess, aided by the expertise of her husband and their network of influential contacts, secured for her an exclusive clientele and a soaring reputation.

In 1770, the fourteen-year-old Austrian Archduchess Marie Antoinette had married the heir to the French throne, Louis-Auguste, and moved to the Palace of Versailles. At that time, she was a noted tomboy, who played with dogs and the children of her ladies-in-waiting. However, this changed immediately, when she came into contact with the stylish creations of the Paris milliner Rose Bertin, whom she met through her cousin-in-law, the fashion-conscious Duchess of Chartres, and her dear friend, the Princess of Lamballe. Fashion became one of the few pleasures of the unhappily married young queen, who loathed her royal duties. Soon, she created her trademark look: towering hairstyles decorated with abundant ribbons and feathers — an invention of their hairdresser Léonard Autié. Her interest in fashion earned her not only admiration, but also a great deal of ridicule. Marie Antoinette's mother, Empress Maria Theresa, who had heard the rumours in distant Vienna, deemed this interest in fashion as unworthy of a queen. Nevertheless, she longed for a portrait of her youngest daughter, whom she had despatched to be married at a young age.

Marie Antoinette was willing to comply with her adored mother's wishes, but she could not find a painter whose technique she liked. No one had ever managed to reproduce her likeness as she wanted. "The painters are killing me and driving me to despair!" she complained in a letter.

Finally, she heard of a young woman that was causing a sensation in Paris and was the same age as her. At once, Vigée Le Brun was given an audience with the queen. The two women got on well from the first and when Marie Antoinette, who was born in the music city of Vienna, found out that the painter had a beautiful singing voice, not a single portrait session went by without a duet. The first portrait, *Marie Antoinette in a White Satin Gown*, which depicts the queen in a large court robe, was well received and Marie Antoinette was happy to send it to Vienna, where it was welcomed with enthusiasm. "Your large portrait delights me!" Maria Theresa wrote back after seeing the painting in the spring of 1779; she had the painting subsequently displayed at the Hofburg.

Held today in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, the canvas is an intimate portrait of the young queen in an elaborate white satin robe. The painter accentuates the sitter's Habsburg features, notably the slightly receding chin, protruding eyes, a hint of an aquiline nose and a full lower lip. Marie Antoinette's hair is arranged in the elaborate towering hairstyle she would become famous for across Europe. Above her to the right corner, there is a bust of her spouse Louis XVI. The darkened corners of the portrait contrast with the boldly lightened centre, highlighting the queen's splendid complexion. Clearly, the canvas serves the purpose of assuring a mother of her daughter's successful integration into her resplendent position as the Queen of France.

And thus, Vigée Le Brun had won the prestigious status of becoming the official artist to Marie Antoinette. She was regularly called upon to paint the queen, producing 30 portraits in six years. Marie Antoinette enjoyed sitting for her friend Élisabeth and reportedly received her in her private apartments. Despite the uncertainty of her hasty marriage, Vigée Le Brun's artistic carer was now well and truly established.





Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



A 1796 self portrait by Vigée Le Brun's husband— Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun (1748-1813) was a painter, art collector and art dealer.



Portrait of Maria Theresa by Martin van Meytens, 1759 — Marie Antoinette's mother, Maria Theresa (1717-1780) was the ruler of the Habsburg monarchy from 1740 until her death in 1780, and the only woman to hold the position in her own right.

Juno Borrowing the Belt of Venus (1781)

After their marriage, Vigée Le Brun began exhibiting her work at their home and the salons she held there supplied her with many new and important contacts. Her husband's great-great-uncle was Charles Le Brun, the first director of the French Academy under Louis XIV. Her husband appropriated most of her income and pressed her to also take on the role of a private tutor to increase the income further. She found tutoring to be frustrating due to her inability to assert authority over her pupils, most of whom were older than her and so found the distraction from her work irritating. After two years of marriage, Vigée Le Brun became pregnant and on 12 February 1780, she gave birth to a daughter, Jeanne Lucie Louise, whom she called Julie and nicknamed "Brunette".

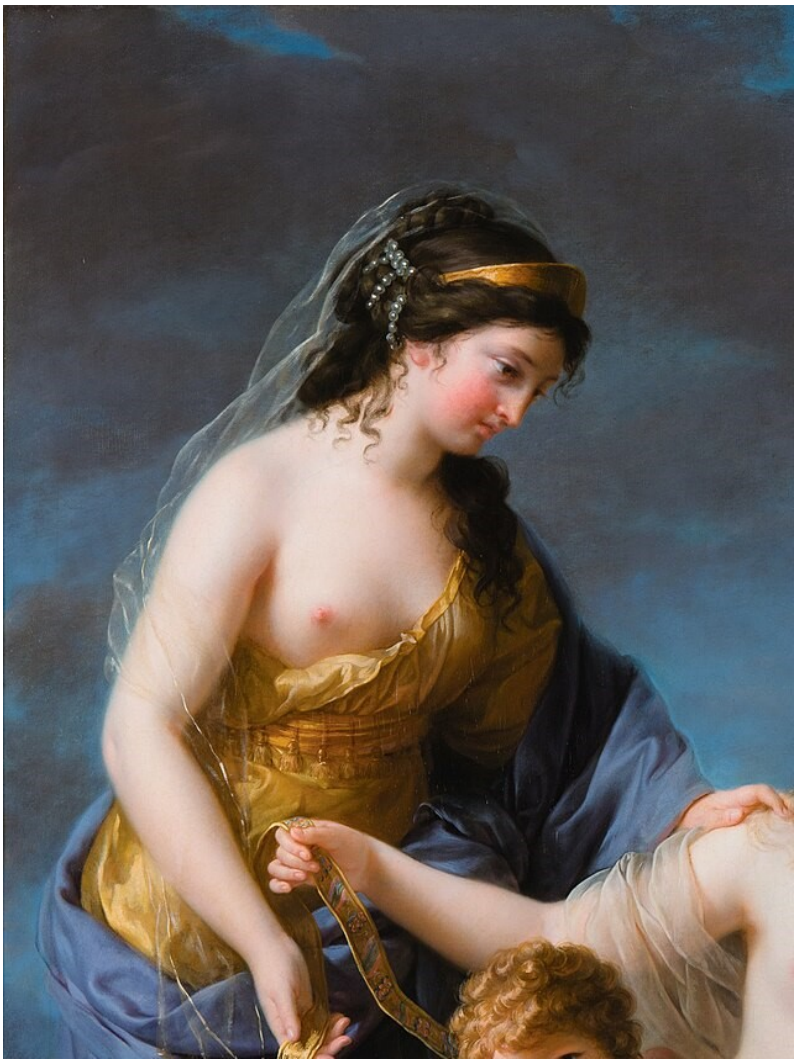
The following year, she and her husband toured Flanders, Brussels and the Netherlands, where seeing the works of the Flemish masters inspired her to try new techniques. Her 1781 masterpiece, *Juno Borrowing the Belt of Venus*, stands as a definitive milestone that bridged her transition from a sought-after court portraitist to a high-ranking history painter. Executed during the twilight of the French Ancien Régime, this mythological canvas highlights her ability to manipulate classical narratives through a distinctly soft, pre-Revolutionary feminine lens.

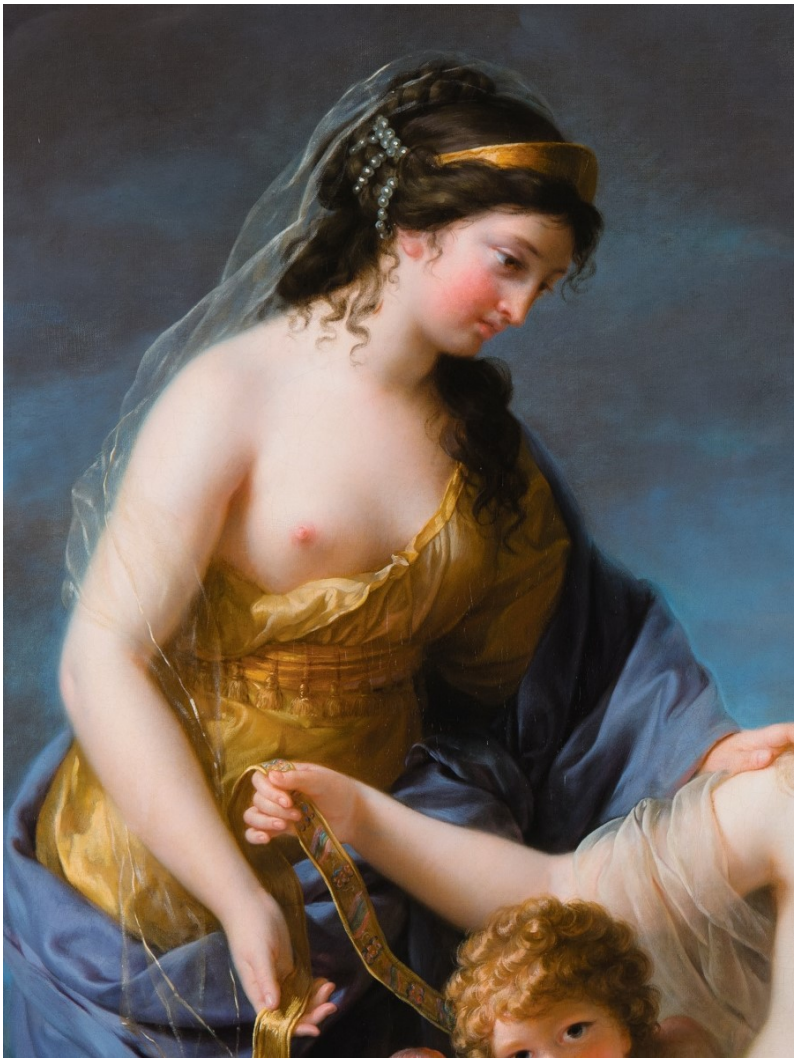
The painting was famously rediscovered in 2019 after being considered lost since 1803. Held today at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, it was originally commissioned by the Count of Artois, the future Charles X of France, for the large sum of 15,000 livres and remained in his collection till it was confiscated after the Revolution. This Count was notorious for his libertine lifestyle and expensive aesthetic whims, frequently relying on his close inner circle to source the finest modern French art. At this time, the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture maintained a strict hierarchy of genres, placing historical and mythological painting at the absolute summit, while portraiture — Vigée Le Brun's primary source of income — was demoted to a lower tier. By taking on a complex mythological narrative from Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*, she was actively proving her intellectual weight and artistic dexterity to a highly critical, male-dominated art establishment.

The canvas depicts an intimate moment of transactional power and shifting alliances between two of Olympus' most powerful deities. Derived from Greek and Roman mythology, the scene illustrates Juno, the goddess of marriage, requesting the magical girdle of Venus, the goddess of love. In Homer's text, Juno requires this talisman, which provides absolute power and can rouse overwhelming passion and desire, in order to seduce and distract her husband Jupiter from favouring the Trojans in the ongoing war. Interestingly, the painting subverts traditional and patriarchal representations of these goddesses. Venus is positioned languidly on draped fabric in a pale pink gown, her form rendered as soft, sensual and cooperative; while Juno is dressed in a rich blue gown. The Queen of the Gods is not depicted as her usual vengeful or jealous self, but rather as an independent, caring and strategically minded matriarch. Cupid, Venus' winged son, sits mischievously between the goddesses, holding an arrow, symbolising the playful yet potent nature of the weaponised love magic changing hands. The ornate and vibrant style fuses the soft, luminous palette of

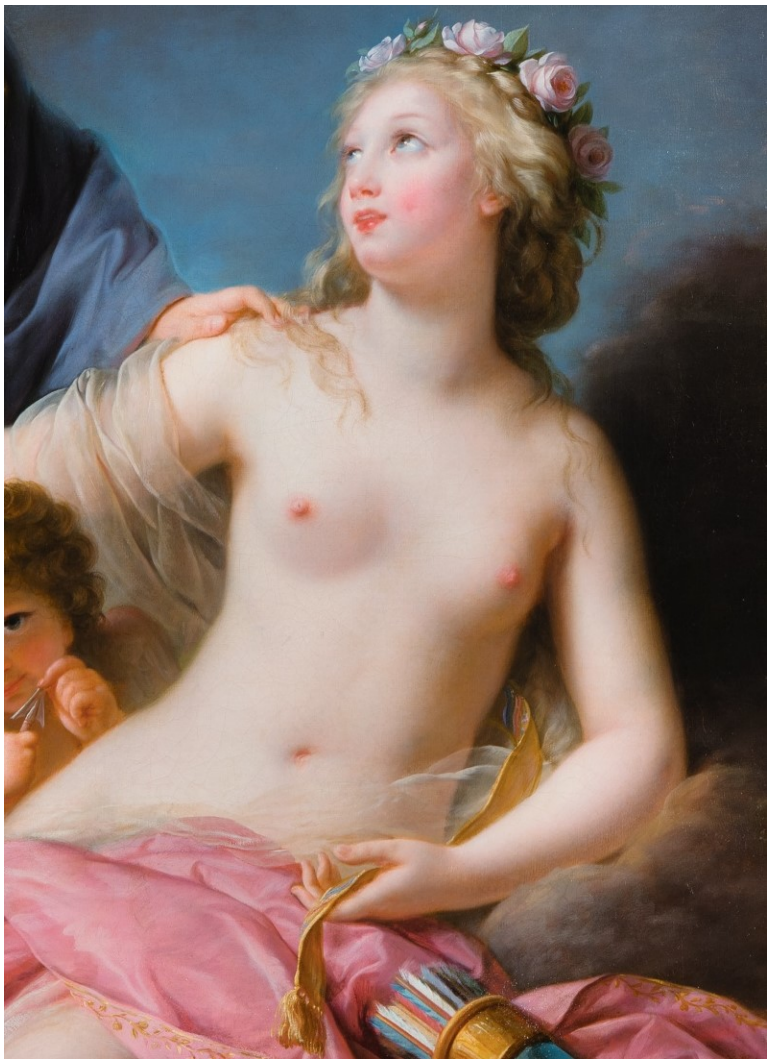
the dying Rococo era with the clean lines and classical symmetry of emerging Neoclassicism.

The impact of *Juno Borrowing the Belt of Venus* on Vigée Le Brun's career was profound. The commission's success solidified her status among top-tier royal patrons outside of her primary advocate Marie Antoinette. More importantly, it served as a crucial stepping stone toward her formal reception into the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1783. Though her final academy entry piece would be another allegorical work, *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*, the masterful execution of Juno in 1781 shattered the prevailing stereotype that female painters were only capable of copying direct likenesses in portraiture. This canvas clearly demonstrated Vigée Le Brun's command over anatomy, complex group staging and intellectual literary subject matter, cementing her legacy as one of the most versatile and influential painters of her time.





Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



The Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, Sweden

Self Portrait in a Straw Hat (1782)

Regarded by many as Vigée Le Brun's masterpiece, this self portrait is the result of her studies in early 1782 of the Flemish masters. In her *Memories* she relates how the painter Claude Joseph Vernet advised her to study the work of Peter Paul Rubens and his compatriots close up. She had journeyed to Brussels, Amsterdam and Antwerp with her husband, and during her observations she came across Rubens' famous *Portrait of Susanna Lunden* (c. 1625), which deeply impressed her. She remarks:

> "We returned to Flanders to see the masterpieces of Rubens.... at Antwerp, I found the famous 'Straw Hat', which has lately been sold to an Englishman for a large sum. This admirable picture represents a woman by Rubens. It delighted and inspired me to such a degree that I made a portrait of myself at Brussels, striving to obtain the same effects. I painted myself with a straw hat on my head, a feather, and a garland of wild flowers, holding my palette in my hand….The effect of this painting, is in the two different modes of lighting that create the simple daylight and the sunlight. The painting made such an impression on me that when I painted my own portrait I used the same effects".

Vigée Le Brun executed the first version (appearing in the following plates) of the self portrait in Brussels, as a free imitation of Rubens' painting, before working on a second version on her return to Paris. *Self Portrait in a Straw Hat* can be viewed primarily as a study of the effect of light, in the spirit of Rubens' portrait. Since the artist's eyes fall into the shadow of the hat, our gaze is immediately drawn to the neck lit from below, brightly emphasising her low-cut dress. She is presented in the open air, where clouds appear to be freely moving. Unlike Rubens, who places a stronger emphasis on the model's bust, Vigée Le Brun depicts herself as a complete and more emancipated subject.

Her appearance is unusual for the time. She adopts a natural pose, wearing neither a corset nor a wig. There is no rouge on her cheeks and her hair is not powdered. She looks back confidently and unashamedly at the viewer. There is no attempt to hide her profession, as her artist's palette and brushes proclaim her trade, which was rare for women at the time. Instead, she is assured of her own abilities and proud to present herself as the equal of a male master. She is depicted with penetrating eyes, as well as a small delicate nose and thin lips. Her clothing, embracing the "a la grècque" style, is fashionable though relatively simple, without baroque props and drapes. She wears earrings with a flamboyant straw hat decorated with flowers and ostrich feathers, which was considered artistic at the time.

Although this self portrait might appear sentimental to the modern day viewer, it was considered innovative and modern on its first unveiling, chiefly due to its natural simplicity. The canvas anticipates the Neoclassical portraiture of Jacques-Louis David, which came to predominate in Napoleon's time. This self portrait is a landmark canvas as it successfully combines high-society elegance with professional authority, breaking contemporary gender boundaries and helping secure the painter's entry into France's elite Royal Academy. Produced during the height of her success as a court painter, it remains an iconic masterpiece of female self-determination and artistic defiance on the eve of the French Revolution.





Detail



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‘Portrait of Susanna Lunden’ by Peter Paul Rubens, National Gallery, London, 1625 — the source of inspiration



The National Gallery, London

Peace Bringing Back Abundance (1783)

Specifically painted as a reception piece for admission into the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1783, this striking allegorical painting now hangs in the Louvre. A rococo painting providing an allegory of Peace and Abundance, it was first received with mixed reviews, with some critics commending Vigée Le Brun for her talent, while others rebuked her for the subject choice and questioned her abilities. At the time, it was seen as a commentary on the reign of Louis XVI and the signing of a treaty formally ending France's involvement in the American Revolution.

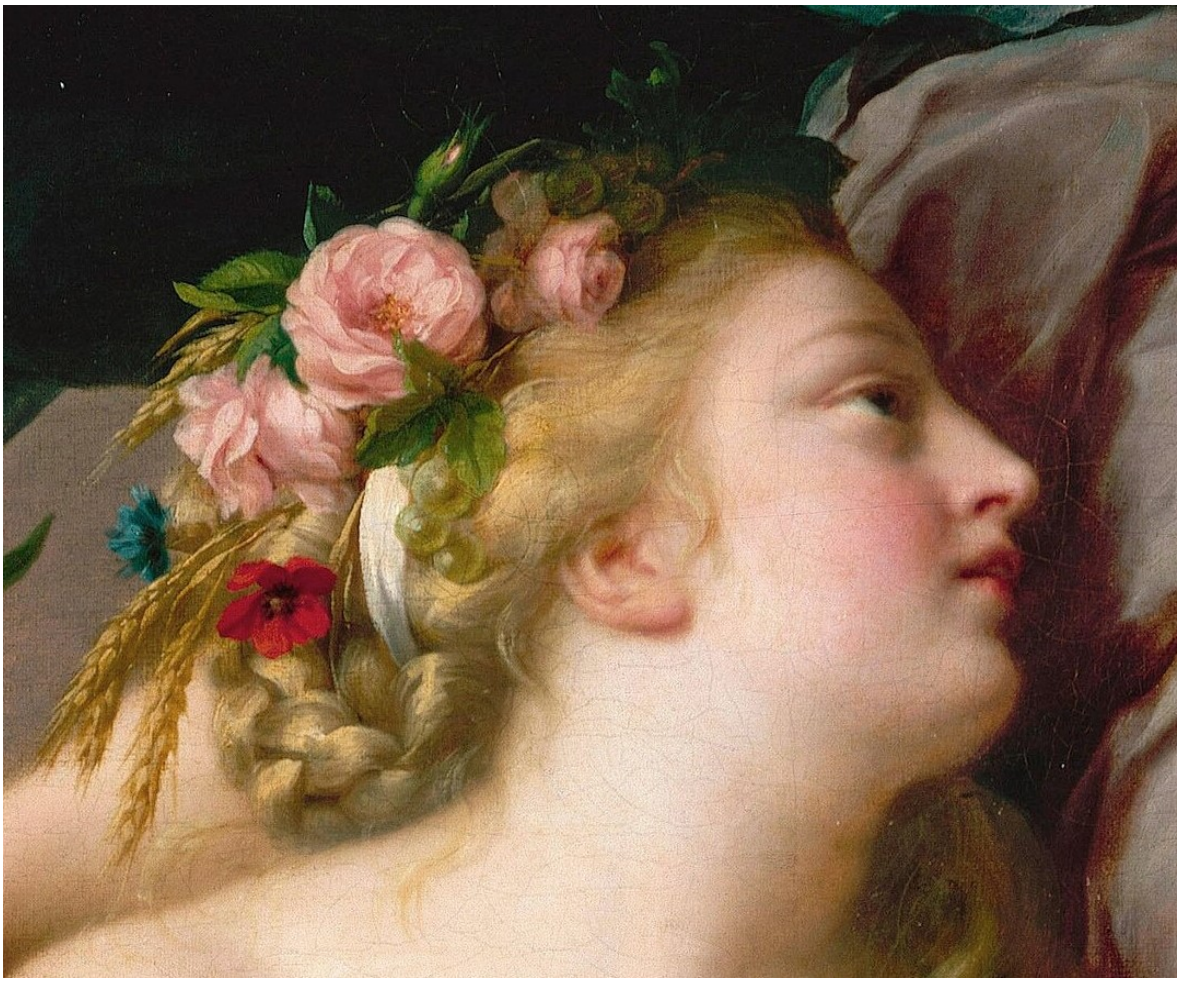
Peace is represented on the right side of the composition, with Abundance partially nude on the left. It was a typical convention of eighteenth century art for idealised female nudes to be employed as abstract ideas rather than real people. Peace is depicted with dark hair and muted clothing, while Abundance has blonde hair and a white dress. Peace's clothing seems to billow over the composition, while Abundance's drapes fall largely into shadow. The flowers and fruits surrounding Abundance associate her with finery and ornamentation, contrasting with the simplicity of Peace's depiction. Critics have pointed out how Peace is presented in a more masculine manner, guiding and controlling the more feminine Abundance. Peace's left hand holds Abundance's left wrist, while her right hand pushes on her companion's shoulder, seeming to guide, even coerce her. The physical contact between the two women and the naturalism with which they are depicted has led some to detect erotic associations. After all, typical eighteenth century allegorical figures were usually abstracted and expressionless. In contrast, Peace and Abundance are naturalistic and brimming with emotion. Their shared eye contact and facial expressions communicate a strong physical and emotional interaction between the two females. The bold composition appears to disrupt the conventional structure of an allegorical work. The figures are dynamic and independent women rather than mere symbolic representations of masculinity and femininity.

In more recent times, *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* has been interpreted in the political context of the monarchy under Louis XVI. France signed a treaty in 1783 which marked the conclusion of their assistance in the American Revolution. Vigée Le Brun's painting could be viewed as anticipating this peace, given it was executed in 1780, before the treaty was signed. Since France was no longer aiding the Americans, there would be more resources to contribute to the arts, perhaps indicating the artist's preference for her homeland to abandon the conflict. Differing from other paintings that conveyed the peace of the time, Vigée Le Brun does not include a figure that is supposed to represent Louis XVI, casting some doubt on this interpretation.

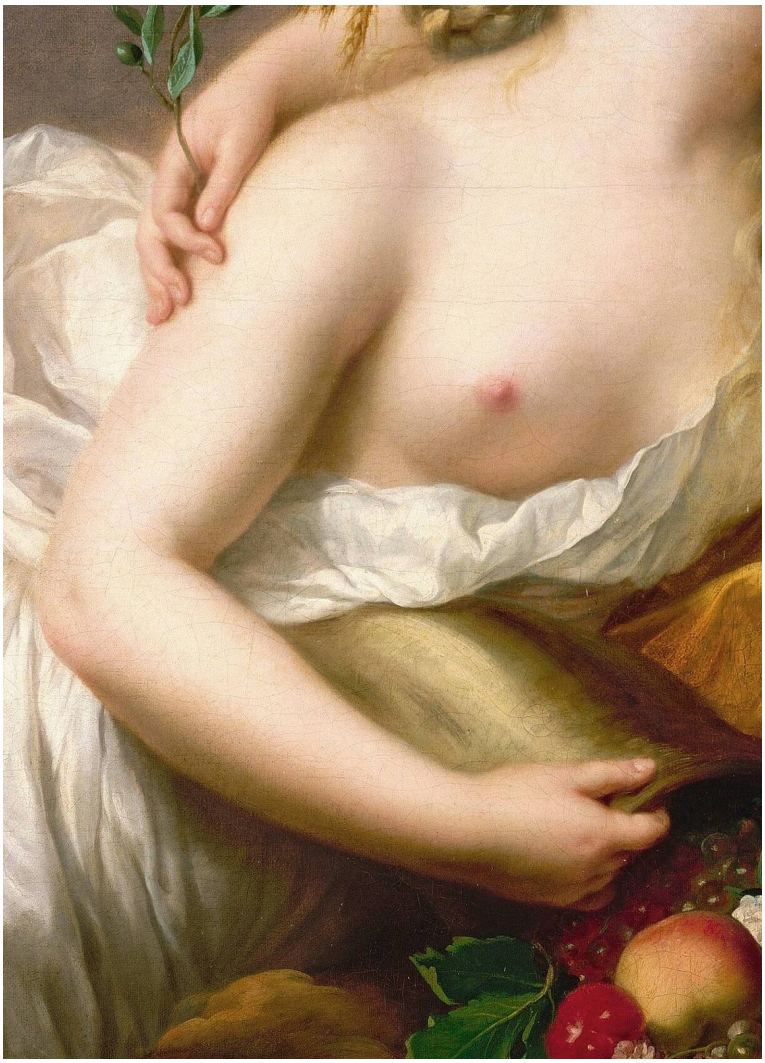
The canvas can also be regarded in the context of Vigée Le Brun's burgeoning relationship with Marie Antoinette. The painter relied on the Queen's support for her career and the image portrays one woman relying on another, reflecting the relationship of patronage between artist and queen. There were multiple paintings representing France and the monarchy in the Salon de la Paix at Versailles, which was a room part of Marie Antoinette's quarters. Since Vigée Le Brun visited this room in order to paint portraits of Marie Antoinette, it is not surprising that she would be keen

to add to the existing paintings on the theme of peace — a theme certainly appealing to many struggling Parisians of the time.





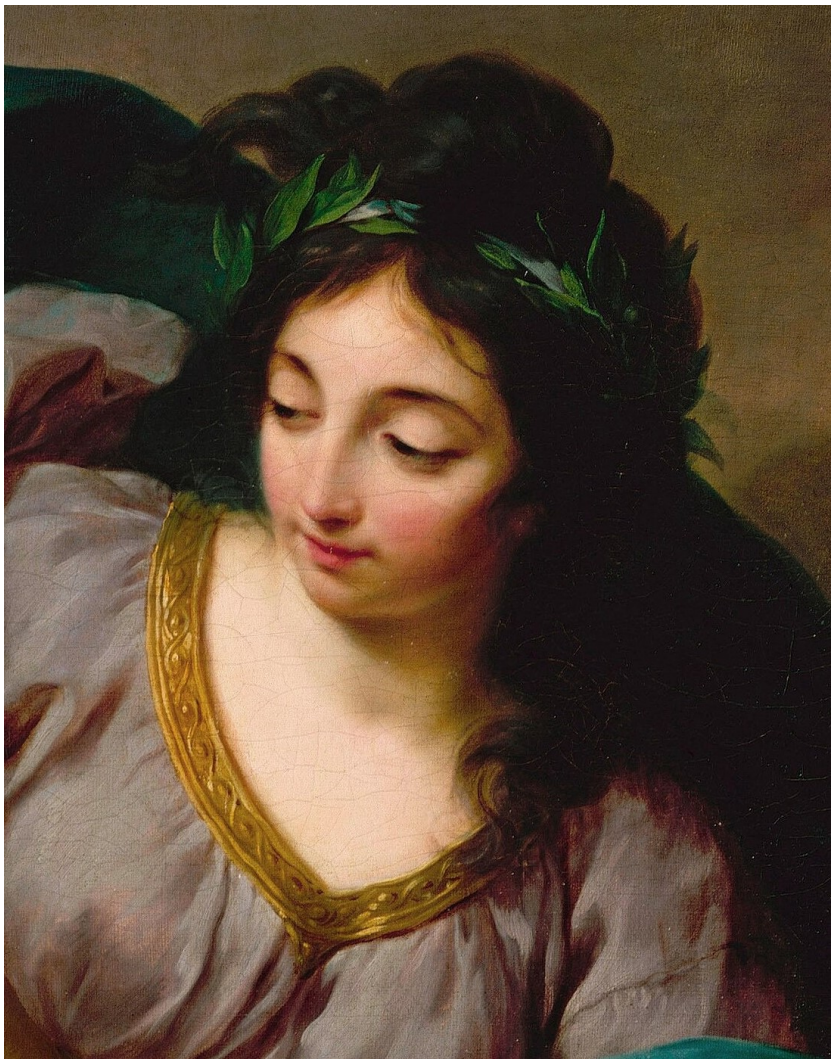
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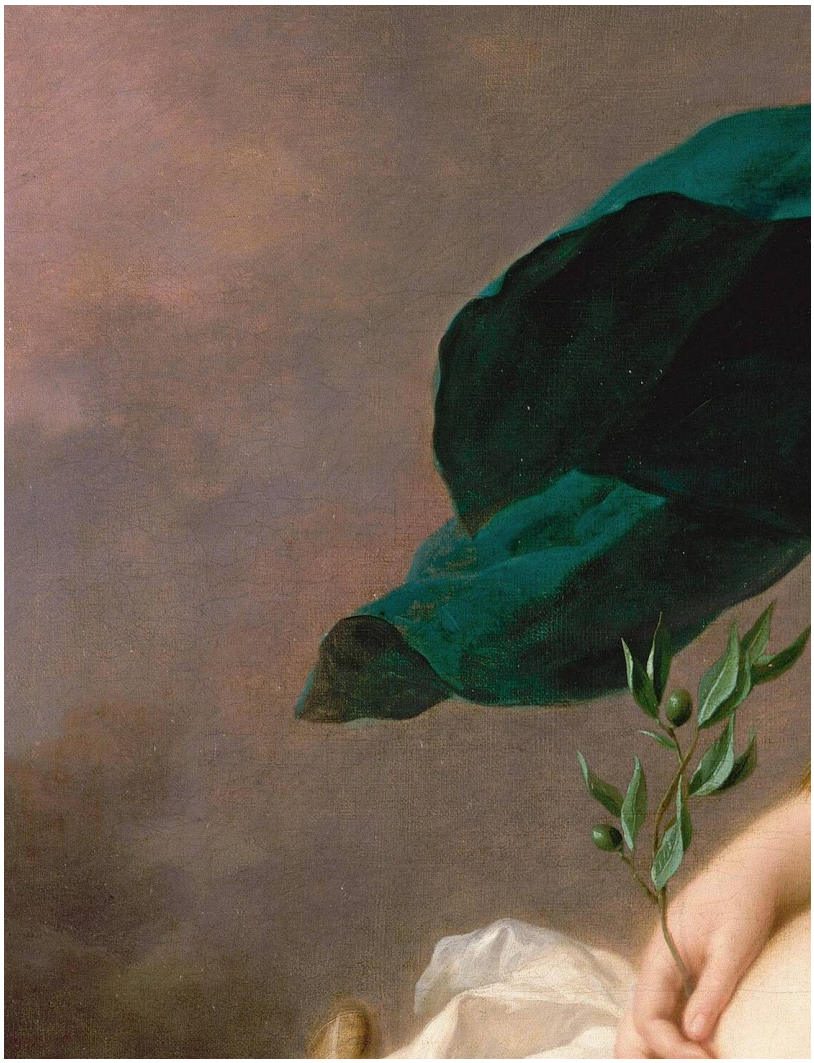
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Musée du Louvre



Portrait of Louis XVI by Antoine-François Callet, c. 1779



Vigée Le Brun's self portrait completed around the same time, Kimbell Art Museum



End of Sample