

Elisabeth Vigee LeBrun

Lead: In 1778, young French portrait painter Elisabeth Vigee LeBrun was summoned to Versailles to become the court painter of one of the most fascinating figures of French history—Queen Marie Antoinette.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Marie Louise Elizabeth Vigee LeBrun was born in Paris in 1755. She received art lessons from her father. She was largely self-taught at a time when female artists were denied admittance to art academies. By age fifteen, Vigee LeBrun had demonstrated such skill that she was able to help support her widowed mother and brother. At the age of 20, at the insistence of her mother, Vigee LeBrun married their landlord, Jean Baptise Pierre LeBrun, an art dealer and artist. By copying many of the fine works around her, she later recalled that she “received the best lessons I could have attained.”

In the mid-1770s her work became known to the French royalty, and she became court painter to the Queen. The two women, both the same age, became friends and confidants. For the next ten years, Vigee LeBrun would paint Marie Antoinette more than thirty times. A visit to Flanders in 1782 brought her into contact with the works of Rubens and other great masters and she reached a developed sense of style and a powerful mastery

of color. In 1783, after the Queen's intervention. she was inducted into the French Royal Academy, one of the few women so accepted in that era.

After 1789, in the turmoil of the French Revolution, Vigee LeBrun, as a royalist with very close ties to the court, was in almost constant danger. She fled the country traveling to Vienna, Prague, Dresden, London, and St. Petersburg, painting heads of state and other aristocrats. After a twelve-year exile, she returned to Paris, published her memoirs and continued to paint until her death in 1842. There remain two centuries later over 600 elegant and captivating portraits of historical subjects found in art museums throughout the world.

Research assistance by Sarah Zika and Ann Johnson, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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