

# Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Marie Antoinette and Her Children*, 1787



Identities in art and architecture

Louise-Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842)

*Marie Antoinette and Her Children* (1787)

Oil on canvas

275 x 216.5 cm

Palace of Versailles, France

Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Marie Antoinette and Her Children*, 1787, oil on canvas, 275 × 216.5 cm. Collection Palace of Versailles (MV 4520). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

## ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject Matter: Louise-Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun's large scale formal portrait *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* was commissioned in 1785 by the *Direction des Bâtiments* as a public image for the Palace of Versailles. The full length family group portrait with life-size figures is on the scale of a History painting, and commanded a similarly high fee. It was official Royalist propaganda, as well as commemorating a particular moment in the life of the royal family. Under French Salic law Marie Antoinette, although known as the Queen of France, could never reign, as women were excluded

from succession; she had no authority in her own right, no official political role and no shared property. She was forever 'foreign' – a Hapsburg, married for dynastic allegiance, of diplomatic value only, so it is no surprise that the sitters are located in the Salon de Paix. She was expected to be subservient and show obedience to Louis XVI as both her husband and her King. At the top right of the painting the King is symbolised by the royal crown sitting on a cushion, above the family, reigning over the image. Below the crown is their eldest son, Louis Joseph (1781-89) the Dauphin. On the left is their eldest daughter, Marie Thérèse. Marie Antoinette's role was to be the mother of kings, to produce sons: *'to bear children, that is why you have been summoned, it is by bearing children that your happiness will be secured'* (Sheriff p.154). Sitting on her knee is her youngest son Louis Charles (1785-95) reaching towards his brother, who is pointing to the empty cot, a memorial to the baby girl born July 1786, who died in June 1787 – a detail intended to evoke sympathy from the public. Despite Marie Antoinette's signature *pouf* hairstyle and toque with ostrich plumes, this is a portrait of a solemn mother surrounded by her affectionate children; as befits a Queen. She is upright, regal and dignified, gazing out at the viewer, wearing little jewellery. The piece of furniture is in fact a jewellery cabinet – possibly a way of making a classical reference to Cornelia, Ancient Roman citizen and mother of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, who famously said her children were her jewels.

Left Carle Van Loo, *Queen Marie Leszczinska*, 1747, oil on canvas, 274 x 193 cm. Collection Palace of Versailles (INV 6281). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

Right Jean-Marc Nattier, *Marie Leszczinska*, 1748, oil on canvas, 138.9 x 107 cm. Collection Palace of Versailles. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia



Vigée Le Brun's portrait has rejected the usual format for French queens standing, wearing highly decorated dresses with royal ermine, as seen in Carle Van Loo's *Queen Marie Leszczinska*, wife of Louis XV from 1747. Instead she looked to the more informal seated version by Nattier from 1748, even

borrowing the red velvet of the dress, though this time with sable lining, to elicit some of the generosity and warmth French subjects had felt towards their previous queen.

Visual Analysis: The composition is highly structured with strong parallel verticals, on the left a classical half-column separates the inner chamber from the famous Hall of Mirrors, on the right the symbol of the King, and his male heir. A central axis consolidates this gender division. A clear triangle encloses Marie Antoinette and her other children, following neo-classical painter J L David's advice, to recall Renaissance depictions of the Holy family such as Raphael's *Madonna of the Meadow* (1505/6) to suggest motherhood as sacred, emblematic even of the mother and a son.



The Queen's eldest daughter passively leans in towards her to create a pyramid, looking up at her adoringly and holding her arm, while both sons have active poses and gestures. The younger Louis though enclosed within his mother, with one hand on her breast, none the less leans towards his brother who in turn points back to him, pointing out the male dynastic line. Standing solidly the Dauphin indicates the empty cot with his other hand, pulling back the curtain to reveal its emptiness, perhaps indicating the fear of death prevalent at this period. The overall impression is of a loving and united family.

Top Raphael, *The Madonna of the Meadow*, 1505-1506, oil on wood, 176 cm × 117 cm × 8.5 cm. Collection Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Gemäldegalerie, 175). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia



The liveliness of children is also due to the influence of English portraiture such as Ramsay's *Queen Charlotte with Her Eldest Sons* (1764), or the exceptional Reynolds *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire with Her Daughter* (1784-6), both representative of the new cult of



motherhood emerging at the time. Spatially the Dauphin is in the foreground, and his gestures, together with the cot and perspective lines of the cabinet, work to lead our eye back to the long hall of mirrors. The male children are still dressed in cool, pale pastels linking to the pink and green striped interior decoration loved by late Rococo artists such as Vigée Le Brun. The strong red dominates, giving warmth and also hinting at a change in style during this period. The cast shadows indicate a clear cool light from windows to the left, highlighting the soft pale flesh and clear blue eyes of the family. *'The play of light and shadow across the figures blends their individuality into personages who transcend their historical context'* (Chadwick).

Left Allan Ramsay, *Queen Charlotte with her two Eldest Sons*, circa. 1764-9, oil on canvas, 247.8 x 165 cm. Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust (RCIN 404922)

Right Joshua Reynolds, *Duchess of Devonshire and her Daughter Lady Georgiana Cavendish*, circa. 1785, oil on canvas, 112 x 140 cm. Collection Chatsworth House. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

## **CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS**

Elisabeth Vigée was the daughter of a pastelist portrait artist, and initially trained by copying Old Masters. By the age of 15 she was established as a professional portrait painter; at 19 she became a member of the Academy of St Luc in Paris and achieved great commercial success, supporting her family. At 21 she married the art dealer Jean-Baptiste Le Brun, whose commercial career barred her from entry into the prestigious Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. It took the royal intervention of King Louis XVI (probably via Marie Antoinette) for her to be admitted to the Academie on 31 May 1783. The same year her *Portrait of Marie Antoinette en Chemise* caused a scandal for the Queen when shown at the Salon. The large scale formal *Marie Antoinette with Her Children* was deliberately commissioned to change public perception, and show a caring maternal figure, in keeping with the impact of the philosopher J J Rousseau's ideas on the family, and newly emerging concepts of childhood, as outlined by Pollock & Parker:

*'Vigée Lebrun's practice as an artist involved an encounter with conflicting ideologies in a period of radical social upheaval, a period in which not only the whole structure of society, and relevantly women's roles within it, were transformed, but also in which the roles of artists and the content of their art changed and were publicly debated... Family, for instance, no longer meant merely line or dynasty, but designated the affective relations between parents and their children;... childhood was being distinguished as a unique phase of human growth characterized by such notions as innocence and naturalness.'*

The painting *'emphasizes the central role of women in the generational representation of class power at the same time that it points towards the new ideology of the loving family'* (Chadwick p.161).

Commissioned in September 1785, Vigée Le Brun was paid an astounding 18,000 livres, four times the usual rate. The painting was to be the centrepiece of the Salon of 1787 but was not on view at the opening. The artist had not dared to send it, fearing another scandal. A famous contemporary scam, known as the Diamond Necklace Scandal (1785-6), involved a Bishop being enticed to buy a 650 diamond necklace for one million francs (c. \$5m today) as a gift for the Queen. The latter was entirely innocent of the affair but regarded as guilty. The power of court gossip, scurrilous pamphlets, and the revolutionary ideas of the Enlightenment in France on the brink of revolution

were more powerful than the new bourgeois ideal of a motherhood when it came to Marie Antoinette. After the Salon it was shown in the Salon de Mars in the royal palace in Versailles until the Dauphin's death in June 1789 when it was removed.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

The full scale, life-size compositional sketch was completed in July 1786, and approved. *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* had to be reworked after the death of the Queen's baby daughter in June 1787. Unlike male contemporaries such as J L David, Vigée Le Brun did not have studio assistants. In her memoir, written when she was 80, Vigée Le Brun wrote: '*Having finished the Queen's head as well as separate studies for the Premier Dauphin, the Madame Royale and the Duc de Normandie, I returned to the painting which had become so important to me and completed it in time for the Salon*' (p.34).



Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Marie Antoinette and Her Children (detail)*, 1787, oil on canvas, 275 × 216.5 cm. Collection Palace of Versailles (MV 4520). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia



Her career as a pastel artist prepared her well for this task, particularly the extraordinary details of the lace cuffs, as did the many studies she did of her own daughter Julie, and other babies such as *Head-and-Shoulders Portrait of a Baby*, ca. 1782–85 (Coll. H M King Charles III). It is possible she used mannequins to stand in for the composition of the figures to avoid the royal family spending too much time posing, as did other artists. All the clothes

would have been accurate, lent by Marie Antoinette herself.

Louise-Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Head-and-Shoulders Portrait of a Baby*, circa. 1782–85, dimensions unknown. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

## WAYS IN WHICH IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

After the scandal *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* had caused, Vigée Lebrun worried about the reception of this great work; never one to downplay her own achievements, she wrote '*so frightened was I of being abused by the public. My terror grew to such a size that I developed a temperature; I went and locked myself in my room... when my brother burst in... to say that I had received universal acclaim.*' (p.34)

*Marie Antoinette and Her Children* (1787) was a great success as a formal piece of monarchist dynastic propaganda, and the Divine Right of Kings, in France on the brink of revolution. It is interesting to compare it to Vigée Le Brun's *Self-Portrait with Julie (Maternal Tenderness)*. This gives form to '*an intense pleasure in her daughter's body and touch...*



*represents the promotion of motherhood as both sensuously gratifying and psychologically fulfilling*' (Pollock p.209). After the Salon, *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* was shown in the Salon de Mars in the royal palace in Versailles until the Dauphin's death in June 1789 when it was removed.

Above Louise-Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Self-Portrait with Julie (Maternal Tenderness)*, 1786, oil on canvas, 105 cm × 84 cm. Digital image courtesy of Musée du Louvre (INV 3069 ; LP 5727)

We now regard *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* as '*one of the masterpieces of eighteenth century political painting and the last serious attempt to revive the Queen's reputation*' (Chadwick p.156). '*Vigée Lebrun's name... calls to mind two or three "icons" emblematic of female coquettishness, motherly affection, or the memory of a martyred queen*' (Baillio, Baetjer & Lang).

## FURTHER READING/LINKS

Parker, Rozika & Pollock, Griselda *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981) Routledge & Kegan Paul

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

Vigée-Le Brun, Louise Élisabeth *The Memoirs of Madame Vigée-Lebrun* (1869) trans 1989 Camden Press

[https://resources.metmuseum.org/Vigee\\_Le\\_Brun](https://resources.metmuseum.org/Vigee_Le_Brun) (Baillio, Baetjer & Lang)

[https://collections.chateauversailles.fr/?permid=permobj\\_1478c0e7-fa68-4da5-9b94-dc9eacc2e68a#/query/c8a69f15-1b2b-4855-a82b-5209ed89b624](https://collections.chateauversailles.fr/?permid=permobj_1478c0e7-fa68-4da5-9b94-dc9eacc2e68a#/query/c8a69f15-1b2b-4855-a82b-5209ed89b624)