

**Louise-Élisabeth
Vigée Le Brun
(1755-1842), *Marie-
Antoinette en
Chemise (1783)***

Oil on canvas

90 x 72cm

Hessian House Foundation, Germany

Identities in art and architecture



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ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject Matter: The Hapsburg Marie Antoinette (1755-1793) from Austria was the Queen of France, married to King Louis XVI. In 1774 he gave her an estate at Versailles, the Petit Trianon, where she could escape the formalities and etiquette of French court culture, and play at being a shepherd with her friends, one of whom was the artist Louise-Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun. This small scale, intimate, three-quarter-length private portrait shows her in this environment, in a private chamber, as though she has just come from her English-style garden (wearing a straw hat) with pink roses which she is tying with a blue ribbon to make a nosegay, indicative of her beauty in full bloom. The Queen herself must have chosen to be represented in her *robe en chemise* made from an expensive fine white muslin known as *mousseline*, with a soft *fichu*, tied with a sash at the back. Although fashionable in England, in France such informal dress was considered improper. In her memoir Vigée Le Brun described her sitter: *'She had superb arms and small perfectly formed hands...she bore the long, narrow, oval face of her family. Her eyes were not particularly large and a shade approaching blue. Her expression was intelligent and sweet, her nose fine and pretty, her mouth not wide, although her lips were rather full.'* This image with her lightly powdered ash blond, layered hair, lack of jewellery and natural simplicity caused a scandal when exhibited at the Salon of 1783. It did not depict her

power as Queen, nor her status as a married woman with two children, rather she is seen as young, fashionable and beautiful with elegant gestures and a slight smile on her closed lips.

Visual Analysis: The primary focus is on Marie Antoinette's face which is in the centre of the composition, and on the rose in the top half of the composition to which our attention is drawn by an anti-clockwise C-curve of her arm, and the highlighting of her flesh. In her memoir Vigée Lebrun wrote: *'Her most outstanding feature, however, was the clarity of her complexion. I have never seen another glow in the same way...for her skin was so transparent, that it could not catch a shadow. Indeed I was never satisfied with the way I painted it; no colour existed which could imitate that freshness or capture the subtle tones.'* The large feather of her hat balances the soft grey of her lightly powdered hair. The flattering soft natural light suggests a range of textures from skin, to petals, to satin ribbons and muslin as she glows against the dark interior. The gold thread of her sash is also highlighted to balance the gilded table on the right. The typically Rococo pastel colours in shades of white, grey, pink and blue compliment her eyes. Crisp details of the flowers and neckline stand out in this decorative painting of a stereotypically feminised space; Vigée Le Brun's late Rococo style is perfectly suited to her royal patron's aristocratic leisure pursuits.

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Both women were twenty-eight years old when this portrait was painted, both were married and had recently become mothers. Marie Antoinette finally had two children - her marriage had not been consummated for three years. Vigée Le Brun had one daughter. Marie Antoinette (1755-1793) was the daughter of Maria Theresa of Austria. For dynastic and political reasons she was pledged to the Dauphin of France at the age of 10, married to him at the age of 15 and in 1774 became Queen when he inherited the throne as Louis XVI of France. French courtiers were not kind to her and her need for escapism was soon interpreted as being superficial, frivolous, indulgent, and extravagant. Vigée Le Brun was *'industrious, beautiful and socially in demand'* but the Queen's decision to allow Vigée Lebrun to exhibit such an intimate portrait at the Salon did her no favours. The Queen acting out an escapist masquerade with her ladies-in-waiting was one thing, the Queen represented as an immodest woman quite another, and only exacerbated rumours of her immorality.

Louise-Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun 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 though without a licence, so at 19 to avoid being barred she became a member of the Academy of St Luc in Paris and achieved great commercial success. At 21 she married the art dealer Jean-Baptiste Le Brun, which enabled her to exhibit at their house, host a fashionable salon and meet contacts for commissions. However, according to Greer, *'the true story of her earnings was that they went*

straight into her husband's pocket' and his commercial career barred her from entry into the prestigious Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. Although she first painted the Queen in 1778 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, and for this portrait to be exhibited in public at the Salon. A staunch royalist, she had first received royal patronage in 1778 and this portrait cemented her triumph as an artist. Vigée Le Brun would forever be associated with the final days of the monarchy during a period of major political upheaval. After the Revolution of 1789 she fled France.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Largely self-taught, Vigée Le Brun learnt her technique of painting outside the rigid rules of the Academy. She would have made preliminary sketches from life before painting the final work. Her oil technique involved building up thin layers of transparent or translucent paint gradually over an off-white ground. Her smooth handling of the various fabrics contrasts with the visible strokes of hair and feathers. The face is very finely modelled and there is great detail on the collar of the chemise. The darker setting allows for the Queen's face to glow in the light. The informality of subject, style and technique summarises the changes to *ancien regime* fashion and society wrought by earlier Rococo artists, embodied in the persona of Marie Antoinette. Vigée Le Brun helped train the next generation of women artists such as Marie-Guillemine Benoist.

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

The relationship between an artist and a royal patron is always '*an exchange: the ruler lends prestige to the artist who makes her portrait; the artist's skill gives the ruler immortality or fame*' (Sheriff p.132). *Marie-Antoinette en Chemise* broke with the conventions of society portraits, and the expectations of the Salon audience. It was the Queen's favourite portrait of herself; she had copies made to send to three female relations. However, her decision to allow it to be shown publicly in the Salon caused infamy. The *en chemise* attire – equivalent to being shown in one's underwear to some sections of society – was a further storm for the woman whose every move was already considered scandalous. The Queen was known to buy 300 dresses a year, see her dressmaker twice a week, and pamphlets were already circulating describing her 'sexual deviances' including lesbianism, known as the 'German vice'. The portrait was quickly withdrawn from the Salon. The contemporary publication *Mémoires secrets* blamed the Queen and not the artist, noting such a 'liberty' could only have been with 'the consent of her sitter'. It '*both stole the show and embarrassed the monarchy*' (Sheriff p.148). '*It was a society portrait rather than symbolic of French monarchy*' (Baillio).



Vigée Le Brun's later memoir supports this notion, writing that everyone 'broke into applause' even though she herself was considered a 'coquette' by the court and always walked a tightrope between feminine persona and professional artist. To combat the criticism she immediately painted another version, known as *Marie-Antoinette with a Rose* (1783) to replace it. This time the Queen is much more elaborately dressed and coiffed wearing a formal grey blue silk gown made by the weavers of Lyon. It was a great success and is still in the collection at Versailles.

In terms of the representation of gender, the extreme stereotypical femininity of both works sit solidly within the eighteenth century's 'notions of nature, the cult of sentiment, the "spectacle" of "beautiful women"' (Pollock & Parker p.97).

Louise-Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Marie-Antoinette with a Rose*, 1783, oil on canvas, 116.8 cm × 88.9 cm. Collection Palace of Versailles, France (INV 3063, MR 1948, INV.1850 4629). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

FURTHER READING/LINKS

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