



**Louise-Élisabeth Vigée  
Le Brun (1755-1842),  
*Self-Portrait in a Straw  
Hat (c.1782/3)***

Oil on canvas 97.8 x 70.5 cm

Identities in art and architecture

Collection The National Gallery, London (NG1653).

Digital image courtesy of The National Gallery

### **ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS**

Subject Matter: French artist Louise-Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun painted this self-portrait to represent herself at the age of 27 as a beautiful, feminine young woman of taste and class, despite her modest background. She is wearing the latest informal fashion, introduced by Queen Marie Antoinette, with her dress – *une robe en chemise* – without a corset, of an expensive soft and silky satin with a muslin scalloped collar. She wears drop earrings and her hair is *négligé*, layered, unpowdered and shockingly natural, yet at the same time the result is one of great artifice as she plays the part of a non-threatening woman. She looks directly at the viewer with her eyes in shadow and her mouth slightly open, with the hint of a smile *coquette*-like and an elegant rhetorical hand gesture, all of which would have made her a heterosexual object of desire at the time when women were expected to have closed lips and a demure downwards glance.

By identifying herself with a palette and brushes, she is also using the work as a vehicle to promote herself as an artist at the peak of her career, still in search of glory. Yet she has not shown herself appropriately dressed in the act of painting in front of her easel in a studio. Instead she pays homage to Peter Paul Rubens' sexualised marriage *Portrait of Susanna Lunden* (1622-5) also with décolletage,

wearing a hat and posing in a landscape with a three-quarter length, three-quarter body pose and hands. By gazing full face directly at the viewer Vigée Le Brun confidently asserts her right to a place within the history of art. Her left arm rests on a pedestal illustrating that she is in a park or garden rather than wild nature. This carefully constructed image allows her double-coding as a woman and as an artist (though neither category is stable). There is nothing to indicate that Vigée Le Brun was in fact a married woman and mother at the time.

Visual Analysis: The style of this painting is influenced by Rubens and contemporary Rococo with its focus on colour and light. The colours used are literally shown on the palette, and repeated in the



flowers on her hat, with Rubens' reds and black lace shawl offering some drama, while the subtle pinks, pale blues and greys of the Rococo dominate. The light is naturalistic with gentle sunlight from the top right highlighting her mouth, cleavage, hands and fingernail, casting a soft shadow across her face such that one pearly earring is highlighted, the other in the shadow.

*"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."*

Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of Susanna Lunden*, circa. 1622-5, oil on wood, 79 × 54.6 cm. Collection The National Gallery, London (NG852). Digital image courtesy of The National Gallery, London

Depiction of texture is important with the curves of her straw country hat and fashionable ostrich feather against the hard wooden palette. The viewpoint, set by the low horizon line, allows us to look up at her with her figure in the foreground dominating the composition. Her face is central yet her pose, and black paint, weigh the image to the right. The feathering of her hair softens the focus on her recognisable facial features.

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

There were many obstacles – gender, age, class, education, training and status – for an ambitious and talented woman artist to overcome in eighteenth century France during the patriarchal *ancien regime* with its belief in the Divine Right of Kings, and absolutism: *'l'etat c'est moi'*. Yet it was also a time of major social upheaval, and philosophical developments including the new interest in nature (J J Rousseau) and the cult of sentiment, from which she benefited. 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 later allowed her to exhibit at their house, host a fashionable salon and meet contacts for commissions. However, *'the true story of her earnings was that they went straight into her husband's pocket'* (Greer) and his commercial career barred her from entry into the prestigious Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. It probably took the royal intervention of King Louis XVI (prompted via Marie Antoinette) for her to be admitted to the Academie on 31 May 1783, overcoming the final institutional obstacle to success, despite a 1706 ruling which forbade female membership. However, in her memoirs, Vigée Le Brun wrote: *'M. Pierre started the rumour that I had been omitted only on the Court's command. In all honesty I believe that the King and Queen were pleased to see me received into the Academy, but that was the limit of their goodwill'*. As required, she exhibited a historical painting as well as portraits at the Salon in August.

Vigée Le Brun painted the first version of *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat* (Rothschild Collection) in 1782 while in Brussels, the National Gallery version is an autographed copy made in Paris in 1782/3 and shown in the Salon in August 1783. The same year the equally successful and ambitious Labille-Guyard was admitted. After this threat of yet another woman being admitted to the *Académie*, it was decided there would be a limit of four women members at any time. Though both were recipients of royal patronage, Vigée Le Brun was a staunch royalist, Labille-Guyard a republican, so contemporaries liked to play the 'divide and rule' game: *'The threat they represented to existing stereotypes of male creativity was contained by consistently comparing women artists with each other rather than other artists working in the field'* (Pollock & Parker p.32).

The historical context of Vigée Le Brun's career, her status, wealth, success and reputation were intrinsically linked to the court culture of the French royal family; she had been Royal Painter to the Queen since 1778, and her refined flattering Rococo style matched the aristocratic environment on the brink of collapse with the Revolution of 1789. She fled both Paris and her husband, accompanied by her only daughter, 9-year-old Julie, bound for the Italian city states, 12 years of exile, and continuing success.

## **DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES**

Although an accomplished and successful portraitist, Vigée Le Brun learnt her technique of painting outside the rigid rules of the Academy. The oil technique used in *Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat* was influenced by Rubens, whose work she saw in 1781 on a visit to Flanders. Multiple thin layers of transparent or translucent walnut oil paint were built up gradually over an off-white ground. Her

smooth handling of the various fabrics contrasts with the feathery strokes of her hair. Her face is very finely modelled and there is great detail on the lace edging. The softer handling of the clouds offers a flattering setting for the self-portrait. The consequent informality summarises the changes to *ancien regime* fashion and society wrought by Marie Antoinette.

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

When first exhibited in the Salon of 1783 critics noted *Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat* was a '*Charming production[s]*' with '*personal grace*' (NRLA), commenting on the femininity of the artist rather than the skilful painting, her child-like eyes, messy hair, or her touching expression. Little had changed by 1966 when Michael Levy wrote in *Rococo to Revolution*: '*Ravished by the charm of her own appearance ... by removing any suggestions of intelligence as if it had been rouge, she created the limpid, fashionably artless portrait.*' It is noticeable in the reception history of women artists that their work is found most acceptable when its style shared characteristics with gender expectations of femininity at the time. This was pointed out by second wave feminist art historians Parker & Pollock in 1981:

*'She offers herself as a beautiful object to be looked at, enjoyed and admired...As an image of an eighteenth-century artist it is wholly unconvincing... 'Woman' as a sign carries in the language of art, meanings quite opposite to the notion of artist, being instituted by critical discourse of the late eighteenth century but by very different criteria than those applied to men. She was acceptable only in so far as her person, her public persona, conformed to the current notion of Woman, not artist.'* (pp.96-97)

In 1996 Sheriff suggested this was a knowing performance, a strategy: '*Vigée-Lebrun associates herself with a heterosexual object of desire [Ruben's painting] at the same time an intimacy with other women, for its costume and pose...signal an allegiance to the queen's circle at Trianon [Versailles]. At the very least the image embraces the erotic elements of female friendship. ... 'Vigée-Lebrun's self-portrait assumes a theory of art within which paintings are not expressions of an artist's inner self, but skilful artistic performances dependent on the ability to mimic signifying codes, gestures and styles.'* (p.220)

While in 1999 Perry focused on the artist's status, writing that the self-portrait '*conforms to a general convention for artists to depict themselves as affluent, successful and well-dressed*', Vigée Le Brun as artist, and as woman, continues to fascinate. Anne Higonnet, a professor at Barnard College, New York notes how she portrayed her sitters as glamorously natural and naturally glamorous, like "going to a super-intuitive stylist that will make you look perfect for Instagram."

## **FURTHER READING/LINKS**

Borzello, Frances *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self Portraits* (2016) Thames & Hudson

Chadwick, Whitney *Women, Art and Society* (1990) Thames & Hudson

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

Perry, Gill *Gender and Art* (1999) Yale University Press

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

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

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-elisabeth-louise-vigee-le-brun-scandalized-18th-century-paris-art-smile> - see quotation from Higonnet, Anne

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/catalogues/wine-2018/self-portrait-in-a-straw-hat> - for technical details, and contemporary critics

<https://drrichardstemp.com/2020/05/12/day-55-a-straw-hat/>



Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842) *Marie-Antoinette en Chemise* (1783) 90 x 72cm oil on canvas. Collection Hessian House Foundation, Germany. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia



Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749-1803) *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils*, 1785, oil on canvas, 210.8 x 151.1 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (53.225.5)