

INTERNATIONAL ARTS | EXHIBITION REVIEW

Vigée Le Brun: A Delayed Tribute to a French Trailblazer

By **RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS** OCT. 2, 2015

PARIS — “You will be a painter, my child, if ever there was one,” declared the pastel artist Louis Vigée to his precocious young daughter, Louise. That prediction was soon born out, though he did not live to see it.

Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun became one of the most sought-after and highly paid portrait painters of the age, her long life spanning the second half of the 18th and first half of the 19th centuries. But her success as a young female painter in a male-dominated profession made her an object of envy and the target of vitriolic, often misogynistic libels in the anti-establishment press during the years leading up to the French Revolution, and her association with the anciens régimes of Europe was a source of lingering prejudice against a remarkable artist and independent woman.

Now, for the first time, Vigée Le Brun is being accorded a magnificent monographic exhibition in her native France, which will continue at the Grand Palais in Paris through Jan. 11, and then travel on to the Metropolitan Museum in New York in February and National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in June. She was last the subject of a show in 1982 at the Kimbell Museum of Arts at Fort Worth, Tex., but in the last decades many works have been rediscovered and valuable new research carried out. Elegantly curated by Joseph Baillio and Xavier Salmon, the

Grand Palais exhibition contains 160 works, including some very large canvases and exceptional loans from Versailles. Nearly half the pictures are from private collections and many have never been seen in public.

The narrative of the exhibition judiciously draws on contemporary documents and on her “Memoirs,” written between 1825 and 1837, which give a vivid and entertaining account of the artist’s life. The show opens with eight of Vigée Le Brun’s self-portraits, among them one she made in Italy in 1790 — for the venerable collection of artists’ self-portraits in the Corridoio Vasariano at the Uffizi in Florence — that has been meticulously cleaned and can at last be fully appreciated. Another, a sketch of herself in her early 20s, only came to light last year in a French salesroom in Deuil-la-Barre. All these pictures, including one executed in her 50s, confirm both her enduring physical allure and accomplishments as an artist.

Élisabeth Louise Vigée was born in Paris in 1755 of humble parentage, although her father Louis’s reputation as a pastel portraitist gave the family access to artistic and upper bourgeois society. Her younger brother Étienne also showed talents as a writer, further affording the family an entrée into intellectual circles. At the age of 12, the budding artist lost her adored father and first teacher to a botched medical operation, and her mother was forced by economic circumstances to remarry, to a man her daughter came to detest. Encouraged by her mother to pursue her art education as a distraction from her unhappiness, by the time she was 15 Louise had her own studio and was attracting an increasingly prestigious series of sitters. But the financial rewards went to her grasping stepfather, who appropriated the fees she was paid.

In around 1774 the artist caught the attention of a neighbor, the handsome artist and picture dealer Jean-Baptiste Pierre Le Brun, whom she married in 1776. He turned out to be a philanderer, addicted to gambling and prostitutes, and also relieved her of her earnings. But his own professional expertise and collection of old masters and prints helped Louise to expand her artistic horizons and perfect her painting techniques. At the beginning of the 1780s Le Brun took his wife on a trip to the Low Countries, which allowed her to deepen her understanding of Netherlandish art, and especially of Rubens’s use of color and glazes, which was to have a lifelong influence on her art.

These early years are covered in a series of sections — “Family and Friends,” “The Years of Training,” “Recognition” and “Female Emulation and Competitiveness” (in the last, her works are juxtaposed with those of her main rival, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard) — showing the remarkable rapidity with which Vigée Le Brun established an unmistakable style of her own. In addition to the self-portraits, among the works here are pastels by her father, a self-portrait by her husband Le Brun, portraits of the artist’s early aristocratic sitters and allegorical pictures.

At the age of 23 Vigée Le Brun was called to Versailles to paint Marie-Antoinette, with such success that she soon became a quasi-official, and extremely well-paid, court artist. The section devoted to these works includes the most famous of them all, “Marie-Antoinette and her Children,” from Versailles. This was supposed to present a doting, maternal figure to counter attacks on the queen for her alleged frivolous and libertine lifestyle, but while some critics praised the picture, others remarked on the queen’s apparent air of distraction, and the painting ultimately failed to rescue Marie-Antoinette’s public image.

It was the artist’s privileged position at court in particular that exposed her to increasingly scurrilous accusations, among them that her rise was entirely thanks to her sexual charms and that she did not even paint her own pictures. Unquestionably in danger of arrest and possible execution when the Revolution broke out, in October 1789 she fled with her 9-year-old daughter, Brunette, to Italy. This marked the beginning of more than 12 years of exile. Barred from returning to France, on the proscribed list of émigrés, she traveled as a peripatetic portraitist through Italy, the Hapsburg Empire, Germany and Russia. She was entirely responsible for supporting herself and her daughter, while in 1793, during the Terror, her husband was forced by the Revolutionary authorities to divorce her. Vigée Le Brun’s peregrinations, her final return to France and later excursions to England and Switzerland are followed in the second half of the exhibition on the upper floor of the Grand Palais.

Despite her unsettled life, these years were highly productive. In the majestic procession of portraits from this period she most fully manifests her sheer brilliance as a colorist and her ability to convey not just the beauty but the erotic magnetism of some of her sitters — as her portraits of Hyacinthe Gabrielle Roland,

Countess Varvara Nikolayevna Golovina and Varvara Ivanovna Lodomirskaya, to take but three examples, amply demonstrate.

Her travels stimulated her to make hundreds of landscapes in pastels and oils. Only a handful have been identified. The exhibition closes with some fascinating examples: an oil of a mountain festival at Unspunnen, from Bern, and eight pastels of land-, river- and cloudscapes, made after she had bought a house outside Paris at Louveciennes in 1809. These rapidly executed pastels, from a private collection, have an atmospheric immediacy that seems almost to anticipate Impressionism.

Vigée Le Brun never remarried, continuing to dedicate herself to her art until her death in Paris at 86. As she wrote in her “Memoirs”: “The passion for painting was innate in me. This passion has never diminished; indeed, I believe it has only increased with time. Moreover, it is to this divine passion that I owe not only my fortune but also my happiness.”

Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun. Grand Palais. Through Jan. 11. The show travels to New York (Feb. 9 to May 15) and Ottawa (June 10 to Sept. 12).

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