

Vigée-Lebrun

Louise-Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun 1755 - 1842

1755 – Born in Paris daughter of Louis Vigée, a pastel painter and member of the Academy of St Luke (the Paris painters's guild). Her mother, Jeanne Maissin, was a hairdresser of peasant origin. Her brother, Étienne Vigée, became a successful playwright. Baptized at St Eustache she was sent to the country in Epernon to be nursed as was the custom often in the 18c.

1761- Elisabeth is brought back to Paris at the age of 6. She is will be later a boarder at the convent of St Trinity, rue de Charonne, in Paris where she begins drawing in her notebooks and on the walls.

1766 – At 11 she leaves the convent to live with her parents. Her father will be her first art teacher.

1767 – Her father dies suddenly. Elisabeth is bereft. Her art education will, however, be taken on by a family friend, a well known painter, Gabriel-François Doyen, who will encourage her to take up oil painting.

1768 – Her mother re-marries a wealthy jeweler, Jacques-François Le Sèvre.

1769 – Doyen sends her to study with a mediocre but well introduced academician with a studio at the Louvre, Gabriel Briard. She makes quick progress with her new teacher and begins to be noticed. At the Louvre she meets Joseph Vernet, one of the most fashionable painters of the day who will also take her under his protection. Another influential early acquaintance will be the genre painter Jean-Baptiste Greuze, who advises her to study Rubens's paintings at the Luxembourg palace (the Marie de Medici cycle) and who facilitates her entry to many great private collections in Paris.

1770 – Marriage of the Dauphin, Louis-Auguste, grandson of Louis XV, with princess Marie-Antoinette of Austria at Versailles. Elisabeth's family moves to the rue Saint-Honoré, opposite the Palais-Royal. Louise-Elisabeth is established as a professional painter and accepts portrait commissions. She is only 15. Two society ladies take her under their protection, Mme de Verdun, wife of a wealthy tax farmer, and Louise Adélaïde de Bourbon-Penthièvre, wife of the duc de Chartres, cousin of the King, the future Philippe Egalité.

1774 – Death of Louis XV. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette come to the throne.

1775 – Elisabeth presents two portraits to the Royal Academy and is admitted to the public meetings of the academicians. She marries Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun, a distant nephew of the great Charles Le Brun, first painter to Louis XIV. An unfaithful husband and gambler, he will nevertheless prove to be an excellent agent and art dealer who will definitely launch his wife's brilliant professional career.

1779 – First portrait of Queen Marie-Antoinette. In the next 6 years she will paint 30 portraits of the Queen and her family.

1780 - Elisabeth gives birth to her first and only child Jeanne-Julie-Louise. According to the legend she continues painting right up to the beginning of labor only dropping her brushes to give birth.

1781 – She tours with her husband Flanders and Holland where she studies the 17c masters and paints the local nobility (Prince of Nassau).

1783 – Thanks to the Queen's influence Elisabeth is admitted by royal order to the academy along with her rival Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, against the wishes of Pierre, first painter to the King (the objection rested on the fact that her husband was an art dealer). She insisted that her reception piece be an allegorical and classical painting, Peace bringing Abundance, and belonging to the History category which is more prestigious than portraiture. She was admitted but with no precise category being mentioned. Her success raises much jealousy and her gender encourages wild gossip. She is accused of debauchery, of being spendthrift and participating in orgies and of having multiple lovers in high society.

1787 – Elisabeth's celebrated portrait of the Queen with her children is presented to the Louvre Salon at the height of the Queen's unpopularity in Paris.

1789 – On 14 July Elisabeth is painting a portrait of Mme du Barry the old mistress of Louis XV as the Bastille falls. On the night of 5 to 6 October as the royal family is forcibly taken from Versailles to Paris she flees the capital with her daughter and 100 louis, leaving behind her work, her husband and her fortune. Alexander Kucharsky succeeds her as

court painter. In the next decade she will spend her time travelling in quest of commissions in the European capitals: Rome, Vienna, London, St Petersburg.

1800 – Her beloved daughter Julie marries to her mother’s consternation an adventurer, Gaëtan Bertrand Nigris. The two will never be completely reconciled. In France Elisabeth is struck of the list of undesirable émigrés.

1802 – She returns to Paris where she is introduced to Napoleonic society. She paints Caroline Murat, Napoleon’s sister, whom she finds vulgar in 1805. In 1807 she paints in Switzerland Napoleon’s arch-enemy Madame de Staël.

1813 – Death of her ex-husband.

1819 – Death of Julie.

1820 – Death of her brother Etienne. Elisabeth has stopped painting.

1835-37 – She publishes her memoirs which will become a best seller.

1842 – Dies in Paris and will be buried near her country house in Louveciennes.

Portraits:

Marie Antoinette Queen of France (30 portraits altogether) 1779 – 1788

Gabrielle Yolande duchesse de Polignac 1782

Madame Elisabeth (sister of Louis XVI) 1782

Self Portrait with Straw Hat 1782

Charles Alexandre de Calonne (finance minister 1783-87) 1784

Madame Thèrese-Charlotte (Madame Royale) and the Dauphin Louis Xavier François 1784

Baronne de Crussol 1785

Madame Moté Raymond of the comédie italienne 1786

Self portrait with Daughter Julie 1786

Marquise de Péze and the Marquise de Rouget with their Children 1787

Adélaïde Labille Guiard – Self portrait with 2 Pupils 1785

Marie Antoinette and her Children 1787

Adélaïde Labille Guiard – Madame Adelaïde (daughter of Louis XV) 1787

Huber Robert (painter) 1788

Madame de la Chatre 1789

Prince Heinrich Lubomirski as the Genius of Fame 1789

Madame Adelaïde Perrregaux (banker’s wife) 1789

Countess Marie-Theresia Bucquoi née Parr 1793

Countess Skavronska

Queen Louise of Prussia 1802

Marie Caroline Murat, Queen of Naples 1805

Madame de Staël as Corinne 1807