

Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun



1 Pleasing Portraits

Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842) was so successful as a portrait painter in France during the late eighteenth century that she often had a waiting list! Why was she so popular? She pleased her clients by making them look attractive, with graceful poses and happy expressions. Her works mirrored fashionable life before the French Revolution of 1789.

Today Vigée Le Brun is known especially for her paintings of women and children. This group portrait depicts two of the artist's close friends: the Marquise de Pezay, in the blue gown, and the Marquise de Rougé, the mother of the two young boys. The older boy, Alexis, gazes lovingly at his mother as he hugs her tightly, while the younger boy, Adrien, rests his head in her lap. Adrien wears a dress, which was typical for young boys at the time.



Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun, *The Marquise de Pezay and the Marquise de Rougé with Her Sons Alexis and Adrien*, 1787, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Bay Foundation in memory of Josephine Bay Paul and Ambassador Charles Ulrick Bay



Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Madame d'Aguesseau de Fresnes*, 1789, oil on wood, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection

2 Style and Skill

Vigée Le Brun was interested in fashion, and she painted clothing with great detail and brilliant technique. She showed off her sitters' wealth and elegance by depicting their luxurious garments and expensive accessories.

Imagine the textures of the fabric—the shimmering silks and iridescent taffetas of the flowing dresses worn by the Marquise de Pezay and the Marquise de Rougé. In another portrait, she meticulously painted the small embroidered gold circles on the white chiffon skirt of Madame d'Aguesseau de Fresnes. Vigée Le Brun carefully observed details, such as lace or gold edging, and she often selected her sitters' attire. She even designed imaginative headdresses inspired by turbans from the Ottoman Empire.

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Painter to the Queen

Vigée Le Brun was born in Paris during the reign of Louis XV. Her father, an artist, introduced her to painting, but he died when she was just twelve years old. Mainly self-taught, Vigée Le Brun became a portrait painter to support her mother and brother. Talented and hard-working, she soon earned critical and financial success. She married an art dealer, and they had one daughter. In 1778 Vigée Le Brun was summoned to Versailles, the palace of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette. She became the queen's favorite painter, and the two women were soon friends.

This was a time of political turmoil in France. Most of the common people resented the extravagant lifestyles of the noble classes. Finally, the tense situation exploded into the French Revolution, which brought ten years of violence. Many of Vigée Le Brun's friends and patrons, including King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette, were beheaded. As an artist associated with the royal court, Vigée Le Brun was also in danger, and she fled Paris in disguise. She spent the next sixteen years traveling in Italy, Germany, Austria, Russia, and England while painting portraits of wealthy families and royalty. Vigée Le Brun finally returned to France in 1805, after Napoleon Bonaparte had established a new empire and the revolution ended. She continued painting and was even asked to create a portrait of Napoleon's sister. A celebrity in her own lifetime, Vigée Le Brun painted more than eight hundred portraits.

Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1781, oil on canvas, Kimbell Art Museum. In recognition of his service to the Kimbell Art Museum and his role in developing area collectors, the Board of Trustees of the Kimbell Art Foundation has dedicated this work from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Kay Kimbell, founding benefactors of the Kimbell Art Museum, to the memory of Mr. Bertram Newhouse (1883–1982) of New York City.



After Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Marie-Antoinette*, after 1783, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Timken Collection

Jacques-Louis David

Napoleon Bonaparte became the ruler of France in 1799 and crowned himself emperor in 1804. The artist Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) painted this portrait when Napoleon was forty-three years old. Appointed by Napoleon to the important position of “First Painter,” David created many portraits of the ruler and depicted significant events during his reign. His paintings celebrated the emperor’s accomplishments, helped people become familiar with his policies, and played a large role in shaping the image of Napoleon as the new leader of France.

This nearly life-size portrait shows Napoleon in his study at the Tuileries palace. He appears to have just risen from his desk, rumpling the carpet as he pushed back his chair. Although it seems to be a casual, spontaneous picture of Napoleon at work, it is a precisely planned composition designed to convey a message about the emperor. Study the painting’s details. They provide clues that tell us Napoleon wanted to be identified with qualities of strength, leadership, and public service.

Two years after David completed this painting, Napoleon was defeated in battle and overthrown as emperor. David was banished from France due to his loyalty to Napoleon, and the artist spent the remaining years of his career in Brussels, Belgium.



Military Leader

- Napoleon wears the blue, white, and red uniform of a general in the French military. This reminds viewers that he was the commander of the troops.
- A gold-handled sword rests nearby, another symbol of his military power.
- A half-rolled map used for military plans is on the floor, behind the left side of the desk. (David placed his name on it as a way of signing and dating his painting.)
- On the floor under the desk is the book *Lives* by Plutarch. It contains biographies of Julius Caesar, Hannibal, and other powerful generals. This suggests Napoleon is continuing their tradition of military greatness.



Jacques-Louis David, *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries*, 1812, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection



Lawmaker

- The rolled paper on the desk with the letters C O D E refers to the Napoleonic Code, a new system of laws for the people of France.

Hard Worker

- The clock reads 4:13. Has Napoleon been working all night?
- The candles on the desk have burned almost completely down, another indication that he’s been at his desk for several hours.
- The fabric on the chair is decorated with gold bees and the letter N of his imperial emblem. The bees suggest the emperor is industrious, diligent, and works tirelessly for the people of France.

“By night I work for the welfare of my people, and by day, for their glory.”

Napoleon Bonaparte