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Gita May, *Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun: The Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution*. New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 2005. 237 pp. Color plates, black and white illustrations, notes, and index. \$30.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-300-10872-9.

Review by Gretchen van Slyke, University of Vermont.

In the introduction to this slim, elegant volume Gita May states her aim to present "a full-length portrait of a woman artist who managed to achieve greatness in spite of numerous obstacles due to her gender and to the explosive political times in which she lived" (p. 6). Although Vigée Le Brun's name is generally well known because of her many fine portraits of European aristocrats and seductive self-portraits, May contends that her talents have been grudgingly recognized not only because the artist was a woman, but also a shrewd self-promoter who made clever use of her beauty, charm, and social connections to foster her ambitions. "What has been overlooked is that Vigée Le Brun deserves her place alongside such great eighteenth-century artists as Fragonard, Boucher, Chardin, and Greuze, rather than as a merely successful portraitist in her own time because of her uncanny ability to please and flatter many individuals, and especially the women of high rank, who posed for their likeness" (p. 2). May undertook this book in the wake of some notable reappraisals of Vigée Le Brun following a 1982 exhibition at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth and while awaiting the appearance of a catalogue raisonné of her oeuvre (on which Joseph Baillio, who curated and catalogued that exhibition, has apparently been working for over twenty years). Included here are sixteen luscious color-plates of her most celebrated canvases and eighteen black-and-white illustrations, twelve of works by Vigée Le Brun, and the remainder by her one-time student Marie-Guilhemine Benoist, her husband Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun, George Romney, Jacques-Louis David, Alexander Roslin, and François Gérard. The accompanying commentary points up Vigée Le Brun's individual style as well as her colorist technique reminiscent of Rubens and Van Dyck, her graceful nods to rococo and neoclassicism and subtle shifts to pre-Romantic sensibility. May also brings into the discussion the political dimension of some of Vigée Le Brun's portraits. Whereas the artist excelled at capturing subjects, such as her brother in spontaneous and revealing moments which seem to have no value other than the "intimate and inner truth of individuality," (p. 20) other portraits are clear ideological statements whose sitters and entourage were well aware of their propaganda value. May describes the famous *Marie-Antoinette and Her Children* (1787) as "a translation in pictorial terms of a moral and bourgeois ideal of motherhood and family values propounded by such Enlightenment *philosophes* as Diderot and Rousseau," (p. 40) an attempt to rehabilitate the scandal-tainted queen and ward off growing public animosity toward her person and position. Such efforts could also backfire. In an earlier portrait which has come to be known as Marie-Antoinette "*en gaule*" (1783), Vigée Le Brun painted the queen as an appealing and vulnerable woman wearing a simple muslin dress and a feathered hat. This unconventional representation of a royal figure, far outside of the traditions of formal portraiture, gave rise to the rumor that Marie-Antoinette had posed in her nightgown and led to more vicious gossip about her purported promiscuity and questionable sexuality.

May also means to recreate for her reader the various ambiances in which Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun lived and worked over the course of her long and rich life, and mainly from the artist's particular vantage point—from the splendors of ancien régime Paris with its lively salons, the turmoil and terror of the French revolution, the years of exile in aristocratic venues across Europe, and the uneasy return to the homeland that under Napoleon no longer felt like home. Her intended audience is not necessarily specialists of art history and professional scholars, but well-read people who are relatively conversant

with French culture and history of those years and curious to learn more. Every chapter contains authoritative references, an intriguing mix of quite recent and now classic works of scholarship, for readers who wish to pursue leads about Vigée Le Brun's family members, fellow artists and aristocratic patrons, about the paradoxical popularity of anti-feminist philosophes among their female contemporaries, about the scandals that swirled around Marie-Antoinette and the aesthetics of the sublime. Every name and notion is thoroughly indexed. May's range of reference is broad, occasionally chatty and quirky. With regard, for example, to the portraits of Emma Hart, the future Lady Hamilton, that Vigée Le Brun painted during her sojourn in Naples, May is delighted to footnote Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover*, to explain the title of this fictionalized biography of Lord Hamilton, and to remark that the 1941 production *Lady Hamilton* starring Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh was apparently Winston Churchill's favorite film. It should also be added that knowledge of French is not generally required of the reader. The titles of Vigée Le Brun's paintings, of books by Rousseau and Diderot are given in English, and May often signals good English translations of French sources, primary and secondary. Likewise, most of the scholarship to which she refers is in the English language, and even Marie-Antoinette's epithet *l'Autrichienne* is parenthetically translated.

Neither is any familiarity with psychoanalytic, feminist or post-modernist theory required of the reader. This is certainly not the case of Mary Sheriff's *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (1996), which May qualifies in a note as "a highly theoretical and ideological interpretation" (p. 205).^[1] In the same breath she presents Angelica Goodden's *The Sweetness of Life: A Biography of Elisabeth Louise Le Brun* (1997) as a "more straightforward narrative."^[2] It may also be fair to describe May's book in the same terms, for it seems to me that her method is to follow the chronological development of *Souvenirs* (the memoirs that Vigée Le Brun penned near the age of eighty) to supplement their "enticing but incomplete insights" (p.5), and to probe the "significant gaps... in order to gain a fuller understanding of her life and career in the context of her tumultuous times" (p. 6). This enriching commentary about noteworthy personalities and facets of culture in France and across Europe grows out of various interests that May has been exploring over the course of her distinguished career as a professor of French literature at Columbia University.

The first six chapters deal with Vigée Le Brun's childhood, in which her artistic talents were revealed early on, the marriage into which she reluctantly entered at age twenty and soon judged a mistake, her experience of motherhood and the spectacular success that this largely self-taught painter quickly earned for herself. In the years leading up to the Revolution, members of the highest ranks of society eagerly awaited their turn to sit for a portrait, and her self-portraits were proud and self-confident assertions of herself as a subject and as an artist. Aside from encouraging remarks from her portraitist father who died when she was only twelve, friendly support from some of his friends, such as Greuze and Doyon, and private lessons with Briard in his *atelier* at the Louvre, there are so few details about how Vigée Le Brun learned to draw and paint that one is left wondering how she ever developed the necessary skills. Likewise, especially for the non-specialist audience that this volume seems to have in mind, it would have been helpful to have some discussion in the text or references in the notes regarding the paucity of artistic training for women at the time of Vigée Le Brun. By the age of twenty, she already was earning such a handsome income from her portraits and felt such a consuming passion to paint that she had no particular desire to marry. Exploited at home by a stepfather who pocketed her fees, she finally chose to marry and promptly found herself being put to use by a spendthrift, profligate husband who was nowhere near as wealthy as she had been led to believe. Despite these failings, Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun was an influential art-dealer whose expertise and connections proved useful to her career. Likewise, his defense of his *émigrée* wife during the Revolution helped protect Vigée Le Brun from her political enemies. While a mother's duties always competed for the artist's time and energy, Vigée Le Brun's relationship with her daughter Julie, who figures so prominently in many of her self-portraits, would also enrich her inspiration. In the new age of sensibility ushered in by Rousseau and Diderot, she soon discovered that the maternal motif was a powerful, seductive message that resonated

with the public. At least three times, May refers to the *philosophes'* advocacy of "family values" (pp. 33, 41, 57), and I cannot help but wonder if this contemporary buzzword is appropriate to the eighteenth-century context. A curious feature to which May frequently returns is this. Despite Vigée Le Brun's unwavering allegiance to Marie-Antoinette and the aristocratic caste, whom she considered hapless victims of unruly, bloodthirsty mobs and their unscrupulous leaders, she would never sever her ties to certain Enlightenment figures. Neither would she ever cease expressing her admiration for Rousseau, though not in his role as a domesticator of women or as the political theorist who came to inspire many revolutionaries. It was to the romantic dreamer and solitary wanderer that she remained so attached. As May puts it so well, "Vigée Le Brun may have been politically tone-deaf, but she was closely and intuitively attuned to all the new aesthetic currents of her time" (p. 76).

The last eight chapters catalog the remainder of her life, including her twelve years of wandering through Europe as a political exile. Horrified by the increasingly violent turn that the Revolution was taking in October 1789, the queen's official portraitist disguised herself as a working woman, packed up her daughter and a few linens, and headed for Turin in a public carriage. Despite the considerable fortune that she had amassed, she left France with only eighty *louis*, her husband allegedly not allowing her to embark with more in her pockets. Though she would never stop grieving for ancien régime France and Marie-Antoinette, her experience of the sublime in nature during her travels—crossing the Alps, climbing Mount Vesuvius several times, even in a raging storm—and her eagerness to explore the cultural riches of Rome, Naples, Berlin, Vienna, and St. Petersburg (to name just a few of the cities she visited) could snap her out of the periodic depressions into which she fell. In all of these places, she endeavored to recreate the kind of life that she had enjoyed in pre-revolutionary Paris, devoting her days to painting in order to support herself and her growing daughter and her evenings to socializing with the local nobles and notables. May details Vigée Le Brun's many friendships, her contacts with artists such as Angelica Kauffmann and women writers like Juliane von Krudener and Adélaïde de Souza. The text includes verbal portraits of many who sat for their portraits, such as Lady Hamilton, and some who did not, notably Catherine the Great. Reading the artist's life in the 1800 self-portrait that Vigée Le Brun painted in Moscow, May remarks that this is her most "profoundly spiritual self-portrait. It lacks the bravado and narcissism of her previous self-portraits of 1781 and 1790, where she had so proudly proclaimed both her youthful beauty and artistic pre-eminence. But it is relentlessly truthful in the representation of a middle-aged woman facing her declining physical beauty while also affirming her essential selfhood, dignity, and continued creativity as an artist. It is also a powerful affirmation of a woman's capacity for survival in the face of overwhelming odds against her as an artist" (p. 146). Returning home in 1802, she found France so transformed that "her expatriation would become a permanent state of personal, spiritual, and artistic estrangement from her motherland " (p. 76). Her relationship with Napoleonic France was strained and uneasy, quite like her infelicitous contacts with Caroline Murat, a sister to Napoleon whose portrait was commissioned by the emperor himself. Murat's capricious behavior and poor manners so irritated Vigée Le Brun that one day she observed loudly enough to be overheard by the imperial sitter, "I have painted *real* princesses who have never tormented me or kept me waiting"(p. 178). Restless and receiving few commissions in France, Vigée Le Brun undertook more travels to England, to Switzerland as well where she met Germaine de Staël, even more estranged from the glories of the Empire, and painted her portrait in the guise of Corinne, the tragic heroine of the Romantic novel. Though Vigée Le Brun's glory had now faded, art remained her exclusive passion, and she continued painting for her own pleasure. She died at the ripe old age of eighty-seven, having left instructions that her tombstone bear this simple inscription, "Here I rest at last: Louise Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun. Died 30 March 1842." Aside from these words on the marker, there was just a medallion displaying a pedestal entwined with laurel and topped with a palette and paintbrushes. This was the painter's chosen symbol for the work that she had so single-mindedly pursued throughout her life (p. 201).

The book contains a few problems that could have been avoided with more careful copy-editing, listed here in the order of their appearance. On page 16 May purports to describe the 1778 portrait of Joseph Vernet, but her words obviously pertain to the 1788 portrait of Hubert Robert; on page 109 she says that Louis XVI's flight to Varennes occurred in 1792; on page 163 she talks about Vigée Le Brun back home in 1802 entertaining "Russians and German who were then part of the occupying forces in Paris" (France was occupied in 1815 after Napoleon's fall at Waterloo, but I cannot think to what the author is referring here); on page 197 she says that the artist was sixty-five years old when the 1830 Revolution broke out, but she surely means to say seventy-five.

NOTES

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

[2] Angelica Goodden, *The Sweetness of Life: A Biography of Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun* (London: André Deutsch, 1997).

Gretchen van Slyke
University of Vermont
Gretchen.vanSlyke@uvm.edu

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