

ÉLISABETH VIGÉE LE BRUN

1755 – 1842

The most celebrated
portrait painter
of the 18th century

*“I have been alive,
no one can deny it,
and I have painted.”*

– Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun



TIMELINE

- 1755**
Born in Paris
- 1776**
Married art dealer
Jean-Baptiste
Le Brun
- 1783**
Appointed Painter
to Queen Marie
Antoinette
- 1789**
French Revolution
– leaves France
- 1789–1801**
Travels across
Europe and Russia
- 1802**
Returns to France
- 1842**
Dies in Paris

THE ARTIST

Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun showed extraordinary talent from an early age. She trained with the leading portrait painters in Paris and quickly earned a reputation for capturing the personality and elegance of her sitters.

At just twenty-seven she was appointed Painter to Queen Marie Antoinette. She painted kings, queens, princes, artists, writers and thinkers across Europe. Her charm, intelligence and professionalism won her lifelong friendships among the great and powerful.

When the French Revolution began, she left France and travelled for more than twelve years. She worked in Italy, Austria, Germany, Russia and England, successfully building an international career.

A SUCCESSFUL CAREER



Painter to Queen
Marie Antoinette



Sought-after by
royal courts across
Europe



Built an international
reputation through
her talent



Traveled widely
and supported
herself and
her daughter



Over 600 known
portraits

HER ART

Vigée Le Brun's portraits are refined, luminous and psychologically astute. She had a rare ability to reveal both the beauty and the character of her sitters.

Her brushwork is elegant and sparkling, her colours fresh and harmonious.

She gave confidence to women by portraying them with dignity, intelligence and individuality.

LOOKING BEYOND THE MYTH

Later writers sometimes dismissed Vigée Le Brun as merely the fashionable painter of aristocratic women. In reality, her work was admired by critics and peers alike.

She was a serious artist with exceptional skill and business acumen.

We should remember her because she was a brilliant portraitist who navigated political upheaval with courage and independence.

AT A GLANCE

Nationality:	French
Movement:	Neoclassicism / Portraiture
Specialty:	Portrait painting
Active:	Paris – Across Europe
Career:	Over 60 years
Patrons:	Royal courts and European aristocracy
Reputation:	Internationally celebrated in her lifetime

HER CONTEMPORARIES

Joshua Reynolds	1723–1792
Thomas Gainsborough	1727–1788
Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun	1755–1842
Jacques-Louis David	1748–1825
Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres	1780–1867

Vigée Le Brun was the only woman among the leading portrait painters of her time—yet she was the most famous in Europe.

1

Marie Antoinette
in a Muslim Dress, 1783
Musée du Louvre, Paris



2

Self-Portrait with
Her Daughter, Julie, 1786
National Gallery of Art,
Washington



4

The Duchesse
de Polignac, 1804
Musée des Beaux-Arts,
Rouen



6

Julie Le Brun (née Vigée),



WHY HISTORY OVERLOOKED HER

- Art history long focused on male artists and grand history painting.
- Because she was successful with royal patrons, some later critics dismissed her as merely fashionable.
- Many of her paintings remained in private collections for generations.
- Changing tastes led to her style being undervalued.
- Only recent scholarship has restored her rightful place in the story of art.

History did not deliberately erase her. Shifting priorities and gender bias gradually pushed her into the background.

★ WHY HER WORK MATTERS

- She was the most sought-after portrait painter in Europe.
- Her portraits are among the finest of the 18th century.
- She opened doors for women artists in a male-dominated world.
- Her independence and global career were remarkable for her time.
- Her work continues to inspire portrait painters today.

DID YOU KNOW?

During the Revolution, Vigée Le Brun saved her life by disguising herself and escaping France with her young daughter.

WHERE TO SEE HER WORK

- Musée du Louvre, Paris
- National Gallery, London
- Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg
- Location of many works in private collections worldwide

CONTEMPORARIES FOR CONTEXT

Joshua Reynolds	1723–1792
Thomas Gainsborough	1727–1788
Jacques-Louis David	1748–1825
Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres	1780–1867

Vigée Le Brun stood among the greatest portrait painters of the Enlightenment.

*“I have had but one ambition,
that of becoming a great painter,
without neglecting the duties
of a woman.”*

— ÉLISABETH VIGÉE LE BRUN



FORGOTTEN WOMEN ARTISTS IS NOT ABOUT REWRITING HISTORY. IT IS ABOUT COMPLETING IT.