

PART I: Portrait Painting and the Rise to Prominence of Eighteenth Century Women Artists

Vigée Le Brun stated when writing her memoirs that it was "difficult to convey an idea today of the urbanity, the graceful ease, in a word, the affability of manner which made the charm of Parisian society forty years ago. The women reigned then: the Revolution dethroned them." This statement, by a very successful woman artist of the eighteenth century is central to the discussion of women artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The period of time under consideration is divided by the great historical event, the French revolution. The measure of success achieved by women artists is determined by whether their careers preceded or followed the revolution, France being the cultural centre of Europe at this time. Women artists played a dominant role in pre-revolutionary France because they were able to provide an important service to the French and indeed the entire European aristocracy: they painted their portraits. It should be evident by this point in the historical survey that women artists often had their greatest successes as portrait painters. Many of the earlier women artists were court painters, successful enough as portrait painters to have their own studios to which royalty came with commissions for portraits that guaranteed financial success.

Women artists were able to succeed at portraiture because they could develop their talent in this subject matter area by themselves without the benefit of art school training or study from the nude. However, many of these women portrait painters received their initial training from their fathers. It is interesting to note, and this may have become apparent from the illustrations in the text, that the majority of women artists painted self-portraits. This is especially true of the artists of the eighteenth century who painted self-portraits frequently. They depicted themselves as assertive, confident in their abilities and these self-portraits were no doubt meant as a means of self-promotion or advertising their talents. Certainly in this period before the French Revolution these women artists had a ready market for their talents in the aristocracy who could provide them with commissions and in this way support them financially as well as ensuring their reputations as artists.

Portrait painting was of considerable importance during the Rococo, as the art style of the pre-Revolutionary period is referred to in art historical terms. The portraits are considered valuable today as a means of providing a record of aristocratic society in France rather always being recognized for their artistic merit. Even during the Rococo period, portrait painting was not the preferred subject matter of the

Academies. With the advent of Neoclassicism, the style that followed Rococo, and its increased emphasis on history painting, women artist were excluded from mainstream art and ultimately, recognition in traditional art history.

The Academies in Europe presented women artists with a first class obstacle to professional success. Because the contradictory relationship that existed between women artists and the Academies is documented thoroughly in the reading "Women Artists of the Eighteenth Century," only a brief overview of this relationship will be discussed at this point. Women artists did belong to the Academies, but to say that membership for women was limited is an understatement. The academies were established to provide an organizational structure for artists after the demise of the guilds. The Academy that affected women artists of the eighteenth century most directly was the Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, founded in Paris in 1648 with its own art school, "L'Ecole des Beaux Arts" and its own exhibitions. For women to become members of this academy, their reputations had to be so great that they could not be ignored. Once admitted to the academy, women were really only token members who could not hold elected office or attend the academy's art school. It was in the art schools that life drawing, so important to history painting, was taught, and it was to the members of the academies that patrons went with their important commissions.

Looking specifically at women artists and their membership in the academies during the eighteenth century, the rules of the Academie Royale in Paris originally forbade the admission of women, but by 1753 there had been four women members admitted. Then in 1770, an edict was passed that restricted the membership of women to four for fear that women members might become too numerous. Vigée Le Brun and Adelaide Labille-Guiard were admitted as members in 1783 but after their admission, membership was once again closed to women. The record of the Royal British Academy, founded in 1768 with two women artists as charter members, is even worse as no more women were admitted until 1900. Once again, membership came with privileges: access to art training in the associated art schools, commissions, opportunity to exhibit in the Salons and academy exhibitions, and prestige. Essentially the doors of the academies were closed to women and the associated privileges denied. In France, before the Revolution, women artists found their success in portrait painting, an arena where they were not subject to these restrictions and had the patronage of women of power.

The women artists who painted the portraits of the French aristocracy were directly affected by the French revolution. They quite literally lost their clientele and had to take measures to preserve their own lives such as, in the case of Vigée Le Brun, going into exile for twelve years. Stylistically, their art was no longer on fashion. The austere and often moralizing Neoclassical style of Jacques Louis David was the state

art, supporting the revolutionary cause and its philosophy. All that had been associated with the aristocracy was abolished including the Academy, but it was replaced by the equally restrictive Societe des arts to which no female citizens were to be admitted. Jean Jacques Rousseau, the Revolution's principal philosopher, espoused the "natural state" of womanhood: women's place was in the home and if she was to be educated, it was for domestic life and the service of God. It certainly was not for the purpose of becoming an artist. Fortunately, for French women artists, David was not as rigid in his thinking and took women as pupils although he was severely criticized for doing so. He also opened the Louvre to the public so that women artists, still denied access to the Ecole des Beaux Arts, were able to study the work of the Old Masters and the classical statuary that could at least serve as a partial substitute for life drawings. The women artists considered in this part of the unit worked on either side of the French Revolution and were successful in spite of lack of support from the Academies.

Prominent Eighteenth Century Women Artists and Their Contributions



Rosalba Carriera: Self-Portrait holding a portrait of her sister (1715)

http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Rosalba_Carriera_Self-portrait.jpg

Now that the importance of the French women artist of the pre and post-revolutionary periods has been emphasized, it is perhaps ironic that the first woman artist of the eighteenth century to be considered was actually an Italian woman from Venice, **Rosalba Carriera** (1675-1757, Italian). Rosalba's contribution to art history has been overlooked and her contribution was this: that she refined and popularized the technique of working in pastels, influencing other

artists including Quentin de la Tour, to whom the refinement of this technique is usually attributed. *Self Portrait of Rosalba, Holding a Portrait of her Sister* done in 1715 is one of a type of self-portraits that serves to demonstrate the artist's technical ability, especially in the use of the device of a portrait within a portrait. It also presents us with an example of Rosalba's style of portraiture. She was a society portraitist and she shared this role with her French counterparts, but her portraits were not as flattering and retained more of the sitter's individuality than was typical in the Rococo period. Looking at this self-portrait also gives an idea of Rosalba's mastery of her medium, pastels with the impressionistic renderings of the lace collars and textures of the finery of her aristocratic sitters. She was held in high esteem in Rome where in 1704 she was elected to St. Luke's Academy of Painting. In 1720 she became one of the few women admitted to membership in the academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, but the fact that she has done a portrait of Louis XV undoubtedly influenced this decision by the male members of the academy. Rosalba was only in Paris for one year in 1720, returning to Venice where she remained for the rest of her life painting the portraits of those who travelled to her studio in Venice.

Adelaide Labille-Guiard



Adelaide Labille-Guiard: Portrait of François

André Vincent (1795)

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/82/Ad%C3%A9laide Labille-Guiard 001.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/82/Ad%C3%A9laide_Labille-Guiard_001.jpg)

The pastel portrait was introduced to France by Rosalba Carriera. Other women artists in France based their careers on this type of portrait. One of these was **Adelaide Labille-Guiard** (1749-1803, French). She was unusual in the history of women artists because she was not part of the father/daughter tradition and she was from a lower class background. She began as a miniaturist and was a

pupil of Quentin de La Tour, mastered the technique of pastel and then went on to master painting portraits in oils. Her rival in France was Vigée Le Brun. Both vied for commissions from the same clientele but Adelaide's portraits were generally not as flattering and consequently she was not as popular. Some critics feel that technically her work was stronger and the quality of her work more consistent than that of her rivals. *Portrait of the Painter Francois Andre Vincent* was one of a series of portraits done by this artist as admission pieces for the Salon of the Academie Royale in 1783. She was admitted to the Academie that year and then fought

unsuccessfully to acquire an apartment in the Louvre for studio privileges equivalent to those of her male counterparts. Women were not to be admitted for fear of scandal. In pre-Revolutionary France, Adelaide Labille-Guiard was a successful woman artist who trained other women artists in her own studio as indicated in her painting *Self Portrait with Two Students*, 1785. (The significance of this painting on a number of levels is discussed by Christine Havice in her article included in the reader as optional reading). She survived the French Revolution, but her studio and her ambitions for her sister artist's did not.

Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun

Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun (1757-1842, French) had a rather celebrated rivalry with Adelaide Labille-Guiard and mentions her rival in negative terms in her memoirs, written a few years before her death. Vigée Le Brun is one of the few women artists of this period to have provided us with an autobiography providing documentation of her very active life in France before the Revolution. Her father was a pastel portraitist and began training his daughter in his craft when she was eleven. By the time she was twenty-five she was both employed by and a friend of Marie Antoinette, her patron. Her influential connections assisted her in her career. Her output was prodigious and more than 800 works can be attributed to her. Copies were made of her work, signed as originals, and many reproductions in the form of prints popularized her images. She painted the French aristocracy in a very flattering and sometimes rather vacuous way for which she has been criticized by art historians. There certainly were commissions on which she expended more effort in interpreting the individuality of the sitter than others. Her most famous painting, a large portrait in the Rococo style was *Marie Antoinette with her Children*, 1787 (illustrated in the text, chapter 5), a cause célèbre prior to the French revolution because of the high fee the artist was supposedly paid. Many paintings of French royalty were destroyed during the revolution but because of the controversy surrounding this painting, it was never publicly displayed, hidden and thus saved for posterity. Vigée Le Brun was forced into exile for twelve years but because of her reputation spent those years as a court painter for European royalty. Her career

ended with her death in 1842 but the style of painting that of the Rococo, ended with the advent of Neoclassicism, the style of the revolution.

Anne Vallayer-Coster



Anne Vallayer-Coster: Still Life with Lobster (1781)

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/50/Still_Life_with_Lobster.jpg

Not all of the French women artists of the eighteenth century were portrait painters. **Anne Vallayer-Coster** (1744-1818, French) worked in the subject area of still life as seen in *The White Tureen*, 1771. Her canvases varied from seemingly simple compositions, such as in this example, of kitchen utensils, flowers, and porcelain to more elaborate compositions of dead game or military trophies, all varying in size as well. She had many patrons, one of whom was Marie Antoinette, and was admitted to the Academie Royale. In terms of traditional art history her work has been compared to that of Chardin with its expression of simple virtues. In the past she was almost dismissed as being a mere imitator of Chardin but researchers have in recent years found her work to be more varied in content and original on its own terms than Chardin's. In 2002, the Dallas Museum of Art was able to purchase three of her works to add to their collection which attests to her more recent status as an important artist from the period.

Angelica Kauffmann

It is known that Adelaide Labille-Guiard did do some history paintings but she was primarily a portrait painter. History painting was considered unsuitable for a woman artist when in reality it was almost impossible, given the restrictions with respect to art training placed on women artists at the time. Large history paintings with their many full figures required access to study from the model-access denied for women artists. There was one woman artist who did pursue history painting in spite of these difficulties and was quite successful. This was **Angelica Kauffmann** (1741-1807, Swiss) who was of Swiss origin, part of the father/daughter artist tradition, a child prodigy who assisted her father, a minor portraitist. By the age of twenty-four, her

reputation was such that she was admitted to the academy of St. Luke in Rome. She did not remain in Rome, travelling to England in 1766. Here she established herself, becoming a charter member of the Royal British Academy in 1768 and was befriended by the British portrait painter of note, Joshua Reynolds. Again, this woman artist was considered by art historians to have been influenced by Reynolds, and the possibility that the opposite might be true was not entertained. The relaxed, friendly pose featured in her portraits did influence Vigée Le Brun, who altered her style after seeing Angelica Kauffmann's work. It is her history painting that provides an example of neoclassicism at its best and Kauffmann did have close contacts with the source of this style, the theoreticians, in Rome, counting the Wincklemans and Benjamin West amongst her friends. *Cornelia, Mother of the Gracchi* represents an allegorical classical theme interesting in its choice because it features women. The painting goes far beyond portrait painting in its inclusion of full figures, an architectural framework rendered in perspective, and a landscape. Her self-portrait *The Artist Hesitating Between the Arts of Music and Painting* done in 1794 makes a statement about the artist's commitment to the Neoclassical style as she positions herself between the classical muses. Kauffmann received many honours for her paintings in England and Italy, and when she died in Rome was given a state funeral, the greatest for an artist since Raphael's. She painted over 500 paintings of which 200 remain today, She was influential with an international reputation and would have provided a role model for other women artists had her work been brought forward.

Constance Marie Charpentier

These then were the women artists of pre-Revolutionary France and Europe. They were successful, competent and had international reputations. The artists considered represent just a few of the 300 documented women artists in the year 1800. In the salon of the Academie of 1808, 46 of 311 exhibitors were women and many of these exhibitors were undoubtedly pupils of David, the most important male artist of the post-revolutionary era. **Constance Marie Charpentier** was one of these pupils and it is because of academy records that her painting *Mademoiselle Charlotte d'Agnes* is of interest. This painting was purchased by the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) in New York for \$200,000 as a painting by David and yet because of Academy records it was discovered to be by his pupil Constance Marie Charpentier instead. David's name was removed from the frame in 1977 and the curator involved made the following comments: "Its poetry, literary rather than plastic, its very evident charms, and its cleverly concealed weaknesses, its ensemble made up from a thousand subtle artifices, all seem to reveal the feminine spirit." This statement is about a painting that was thought to be a David and as a David was perfectly acceptable. It presents a prime example of the difficulties of "value

association." About Constance Marie Charpentier very little is known, as there is no biographical material and only one other known work.