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Vigée Le Brun



Synopsis

A sumptuous monograph of the renowned portraitist and friend of Marie Antoinette in Revolutionary France Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842) was one of the greatest 18th-century French painters and among the most important women artists of all time. Celebrated for her expressive portraits of French royalty and aristocracy, especially of her patron and friend Marie Antoinette, she exemplified artistic success and personal resourcefulness in an age when women were rarely allowed either. Forced to flee France during the Revolution, Le Brun traveled throughout Europe for sixteen years, painting royal and noble sitters in the courts of Naples, Russia, Austria, Poland, and Germany. She returned to France in 1805, under the reign of Emperor Napoleon I, where her artistic career continued to flourish. Alongside 85 of her finest paintings and drawings from international museums and collections, this handsome volume details Vigée Le Brun's story, portraying a talented and intelligent artist who was able to negotiate a shifting political and geographic landscape. Providing further context for the life of this extraordinary individual, essays by international experts address topics such as her travels in exile and the position of women artists in the Salons.

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Customer Reviews

As a teenager, Elizabeth Vigée was already renowned for her portraits. Meanwhile, Marie Antoinette was unhappy with every painter she engaged to convey her likeness. So she summoned Vigée Le Brun to portray her. Both the queen and the painter were twenty-five at the time. This portrait would launch the young artist's career. Vigée Le Brun and her sitters lived in an age of tremendous

political upheaval, and the painter had an adventurous life. She lost her considerable earnings first to a tyrannical stepfather, then to an extravagant husband. When the bloody revolution erupted in France, she fled the country with her daughter just in time. Her peregrinations through Italy, Austria, Prussia, Switzerland, England and Russia are full of interest, and we learn how these travels influenced her art. Just as fascinating are the obstacles she encountered from the official art establishment. Misogynists did her best to bar her advancement, and even spread vicious rumors about her. All in vain, for Vigee Le Brun was deluged with honors and commissions everywhere she went, despite the exorbitant fees she charged. This book is helpful at pointing out Vigee Le Brun's artistic innovations, which we might not otherwise perceive from our modern perspective. The explanations of her technique are also enlightening, and not too technical. We read how she achieved the effect in the lovely complexions of court beauties of blood pulsing under skin. We learn the secrets behind her success in integrating sitters into romantic background landscapes. The painter's principles and prejudices emerge in the narration. For example she hated powdered hair and usually managed to talk her sitters out of that omnipresent fashion. And she felt that "Women must be comfortable."

Read and enjoyed at The Balcony Lounge at the Met. (Incidentally, the Lounge is a marvelous benefit for folks who are supporter or sustainer members. The Great Hall Balcony Bar right next door has its charms, especially if there is a good musical ensemble playing, but can often be incredibly noisy. The Lounge is very quiet, the food and drinks are excellent, and many of the current catalogs are on offer to read for free.) The current exhibit of Le Brun's work is absolutely exquisite. Somehow, I had totally missed learning about her although several of the paintings were totally familiar to me. Her life was fascinating -- so close to the royal family and yet able to escape to Italy, Switzerland and Russia before returning to finish her long life in France. The exhibit and the catalog contain a wide range of her work from each of these periods of her life; a few photos from the exhibit will be posted here later if the system permits. But this beautifully produced book describes those events in even more detail, and the reproductions of the art, including some fascinating details, are beautifully presented. (The Met also has some excellent virtual representations free on its website.) I was struck by Le Brun's superb technique -- she had tremendous support from her father and especially her mother, and Le Brun seemed to delight in learning from other artists all her working life. At the end of the exhibit, the Met has mounted a very large landscape and a self portrait, the landscape owing some debt to the influence of Franz Niklaus Konig, a genre painter, and the self portrait a thank you gift to the artist and his wife. Women of my

acquaintance are enthusiastic about this exhibit and the catalog, and frankly so was I.

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