

## Marie Antoinette and her Children: An Icon of French Painting

By Katherine Stauble, NGC Staff on April 19, 2016



Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Marie Antoinette and her Children*, 1787, oil on canvas, 275 x 216.5 cm. Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, France (MV 4520). © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY. Photo: Gérard Blot

In September 1785, when Marie Antoinette's popularity with the French people was on a dangerous downward slide, Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun was summoned to Versailles. The brilliant young painter had already been commissioned to paint several portraits of the queen, posing her alone in various elegant gowns. Now, however, she was asked to create something different: something that would restore Marie Antoinette's image as a loving mother and guarantor of dynastic continuity.

The result, Vigée Le Brun's *Marie Antoinette and her Children* (1787), is a masterpiece of portraiture, and is today considered one of France's most important national treasures. "This is an iconic painting," said curator Gwenola Firmin of the Musée national des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, which lent the work to the exhibition. "It's one of Versailles' best known and most emblematic works."

Anne Eschapassee, the National Gallery of Canada's Director of Exhibitions and Outreach, who grew up in France, adds, "It's familiar to every French child, because it's reproduced in all the history textbooks to illustrate the late 18th-century period in France."

Given its cultural importance, it is not surprising that Vigée Le Brun's monumental work has rarely left Versailles, and has never been seen outside Paris — until now, that is. This June the painting is coming to the National Gallery as part of the exhibition *Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842)*. As the first comprehensive retrospective devoted to this great artist, *Vigée Le Brun* has already received rave reviews at New York's Metropolitan Museum and the Grand Palais in Paris.

The exceptional loan of *Marie Antoinette and her Children* from the Musée national des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon offers art lovers and history buffs alike a tremendous opportunity to see this sumptuous portrait — the largest ever created by Vigée Le Brun. Imbued with warm tones and luxurious textures, it shows the queen life-sized, dressed in a sable-lined red velvet gown, and seated with her youngest son on her knee. Her daughter leans lovingly on one arm, and her eldest son, the *dauphin*, stands on the right. An empty bassinet memorializes the baby girl who died while the painting was in progress, and suggests the reason for the queen's solemn expression.

Countless other details suggest that Vigée Le Brun took her assignment — to rectify the queen's reputation for frivolity and licentiousness — very seriously. Indeed, the painting is rich with references to religious and historical painting, each intended to resonate with French viewers of the time.

On the advice of celebrated painter Jacques-Louis David, for instance, Vigée Le Brun used a triangular composition recalling Renaissance depictions of the Holy Family. She borrowed the red of the queen's dress from Jean-Marc Nattier's portrait of Marie Leszczyńska, wife of Louis XV, who was beloved for her generosity and piety. According to Paul Lang, Chief Curator at the National Gallery and co-curator of this exhibition, the artist has depicted her royal subject as a sacred figure: centred in the canvas, and with her feet hidden beneath her, "she appears almost to be floating," he told *NGC Magazine*.

Viewers familiar with Versailles might recognize, in the left background, the famed Hall of Mirrors: a tribute to Louis XIV, the first absolute monarch of France. An impressive jewellery cabinet in the shadows on the right is equally symbolic, referring to Cornelia, a citizen of ancient Rome, and mother to the politicians Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus. Faced one day with a visitor at her door selling jewellery, Cornelia famously brought out her children, revealing that they were her most precious treasures. Likewise, Vigée Le Brun signals that the queen's true jewels are her children.

Born in Paris in 1755, Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun is considered one of the most important portrait artists of her time. She was a master of technique, a daring colourist, and a lively portrayer of character who used studio props such as bright red shawls, turbans, plumed hats and ribbons to dramatic effect. She studied the great masters, especially Raphael, Rubens and Van Dyck, and drew inspiration from classical sculpture and contemporary French portraiture. Her roster of subjects constitutes a Who's Who of Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, including the Queen of Prussia, the last king of Poland, and family members of Catherine the Great.

In 1778, Vigée Le Brun was invited for the first time to paint a portrait of Marie Antoinette, who was suitably impressed. The two were exactly the same age, and struck up a sympathetic friendship. Vigée Le Brun would go on to make some 30 portraits of the queen, several of which are among some 90 masterpieces on display in this exhibition. *Marie Antoinette and her Children* is unusual among them, as it was commissioned not by the queen herself, but rather by the office of the Bâtiments du Roi, the equivalent of our Department of Canadian Heritage. "It's her only real state picture," says Lang.

The painting did not, of course, save Marie Antoinette from the guillotine. "From a political point of view," says Lang, "the picture failed. But not artistically. It is magnificent."

***Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842)* is organized by the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, and Réunion des musées nationaux – Grand Palais, Paris, with the generous support of the Musée national des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon. The exhibition is on view at the National Gallery of Canada from June 10 to September 11, 2016.**

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