

3-23-2016

# An Alternative Ancien Régime? Elisabeth Vigée- Lebrun in Russia

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An Alternative Ancien Régime? Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun in Russia

by

Erin E. Wilson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Art and Art History  
College of the Arts  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Elisabeth Fraser, Ph.D.  
Helena Szepe, Ph.D.  
Melissa Hyde, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:  
March 22, 2016

Keywords: Eighteenth-century painting, French Émigrés, Catherine the Great, Empress Maria Fyodorovna, Empress Maria Fedorovna, Princess Anna Alexandrovna Golitzyna, Vigée-Lebrun

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## Abstract

In the last few decades interest in the life and work of Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun has increased significantly, with numerous publications and a retrospective exhibition dedicated to her oeuvre. Yet, while much new and valuable information has been introduced, very little of it deals specifically with the period from 1795-1800 when she lived as an émigré in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

In this thesis I analyze two Russian portraits by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, in relation to two earlier works she painted in Paris, *the duchesse d'Orleans* (1789) and *Marie Antoinette, Queen of France* (1783), elucidating the overt similarities to her earlier portraiture practice and exploring the cultural and political climate in which they were created. I argue that the Imperial family as well as the upper echelons of Russian society actively utilized imagery associated with the *Ancien Régime* to depict a perceived stability at a time when much of Europe was in flux. This political maneuver afforded Vigée-Lebrun the opportunity to live and work in a society similar to the one she left behind in Paris, Russia served thus as a surrogate for *Ancien Régime* France.

In addition to examining the socio political climate of Russia, I consider portraiture practices in general, noting opposing trends that were developing contemporaneously elsewhere in Europe and review Vigée-Lebrun's unusual status as an émigré. By contextualizing *Princess Anna Alexandrovna Golitsyna* and *Empress Maria Fyodorovna* I provide reasoning for her surprising level of success in Saint Petersburg while simultaneously highlighting the importance of this period in Vigée-Lebrun scholarship.

## **A Second Home Saint Petersburg and the Oeuvre of Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun**

Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun<sup>1</sup> is a fascinating figure in art history. She is well known for her role as painter to Queen Marie Antoinette and was one of the few women admitted to the *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*. Her portraits are defined by a naturalism that was tremendously popular both at home and abroad. In the 1830s Vigée-Lebrun dictated her memoirs for posterity, worrying that, if she didn't, someone else would.<sup>2</sup> She confidently recounted her childhood, her sitters, and her travels, savoring each recollection. It is with particularly great affection that she recalls her time in Russia, referring to the country as a second home and stating that when she left "Neither these sovereigns, nor all the other people who showed such a flattering interest in me during my stay...knew the sadness I felt on leaving Saint Petersburg."<sup>3</sup>

Vigée-Lebrun certainly had reason to look back fondly on these years in Russia, where she lived from 1795 to 1801. Despite her émigré status, she enjoyed numerous professional accomplishments while there. It is estimated that during this period Vigée-Lebrun produced

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<sup>1</sup> I stated her full name as Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun. However, there are other sources that refer to her as Louise Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. I chose to go with the name provided in Joseph Bailly's 1982 catalogue *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun 1755-1842*.

<sup>2</sup> Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and Sian Evans, trans., *The Memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 227.

close to seventy portraits,<sup>4</sup> developing a professional practice similar to the one she had established in Paris. As in Paris, she catered to a clientele that included members of both the nobility and the royal family. Vigée-Lebrun was supremely prosperous during a period when many émigrés throughout Europe were struggling with their status as political exiles. And yet this period of her life has been little studied.

The high proportion of Russians among her sitters painted between 1795 and 1801 suggests that Vigée-Lebrun actively sought out new patrons and social circles instead of retreating into a network of French émigrés. Two portraits—displaying the subtle elegance Vigée-Lebrun achieved so well—are of particular importance to me: her 1797 portrait *Princess Anna Alexandrovna Golitsyna*<sup>5</sup> (Figure 1) and her 1799 portrait *Empress Maria Fyodorovna* (Figure 2).<sup>6</sup> Both works display remarkable parallels to Vigée-Lebrun’s earlier imagery, suggesting that her highly finished paintings, reminiscent of her time in the French Court, were in vogue in Russia during a period when the rules of portraiture were beginning to shift elsewhere. By examining this period of Vigée-Lebrun’s work in relation to Russian history, and émigré culture, it is possible for viewers to discern why Russia was integral to Vigée-Lebrun and her oeuvre. I argue that the Imperial family as well as the upper echelons of Russian society actively sought imagery associated with the *Ancien Régime* to convey a perceived stability at a time when much of European society was in flux. This political maneuver afforded Vigée-Lebrun the opportunity

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<sup>4</sup> Malcom Jones, “Flirting Her Way Round the Court of St. Petersburg: Some Thoughts on Vigée-Lebrun’s Russian Period and Her Portrait of Varvara Nikolaevna Golovina,” in *Diagonales dostoïevskiennes : mélanges en l’honneur de Jacques Cateau* (2002): 281.

<sup>5</sup> This portrait is in the collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art and has, in the past, been referred to as *Princess Anna Alexandrovna Galitzin*. In this paper I have chosen to employ the spelling used in the 2016 exhibition catalogue, *Vigée Le Brun*, published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This catalogue is the most recent publication regarding Vigée-Lebrun’s work.

<sup>6</sup> I have chosen to utilize the phonetic spelling Joseph Baillio utilized in his essay “Vigée Le Brun at the Court of the Romanovs” in *Catherine the Great: Art for Empire*.

to live and work in a society similar to the one she left behind in Paris; Russia served thus as a surrogate for *Ancien Régime* France.

Vigée-Lebrun was truly accomplished in Saint Petersburg, and was both well received by Russian society and actively patronized. Yet, it is important to go beyond the mere fact that she was successful to probe the many reasons for that success. What made Vigée-Lebrun so desirable to the population of Saint Petersburg and, ultimately, what made it so seemingly desirable to her? Scholarly studies of Vigée-Lebrun's oeuvre have only recently gained momentum, with much new and valuable research being published within the last thirty-five years. Generally though, most of these revisions tend to focus on her years in Paris, before the outbreak of the French Revolution.

While there is little scholarship that deals specifically with Vigée-Lebrun's time in Russia, much can be gleaned from the available information. One of the more obvious sources is Vigée-Lebrun's *Souvenirs*, published in three volumes between 1835 and 1837. In them she recounts in great detail many of her personal and professional experiences living in Saint Petersburg and Moscow. Through these writings we learn much about her concerns, which tend to range from the ostensibly vacuous to the life-changing. Nonetheless, as valuable a source as this appears to be, there are many problems inherent in relying exclusively on Vigée-Lebrun's memoirs. Published over thirty years after her return from Russia, Vigée-Lebrun's *Souvenirs* are, at heart, a thoughtful construction, highlighting the moments she felt most important and negating or downplaying situations that did not fit into the vision she had for her life story. Though, as Mary Sheriff wisely points out in *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art*, it is insufficient and ultimately harmful to accept or reject Vigée-Lebrun's



ruminations outright.<sup>7</sup> Her memoirs are a re-presentation of an earlier time and, as such, we must read between the lines, corroborating text with context.

This is exactly what scholar Joseph Baillio has striven to do. By placing Vigée-Lebrun's memoirs within a broader historical framework, he has corrected many of the misunderstandings that characterized early writing on her work.<sup>8</sup> Baillio is one of the foremost scholars on Vigée-Lebrun and has produced numerous texts and articles over the decades. He successfully rescued her from the anonymity of the male-dominated canon that defined much of early art historical enterprise and his work is integral to any study of Vigée-Lebrun's oeuvre. Baillio's 1982 exhibition catalogue, *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*, is one of the first publications dedicated to examining her life and is still cited frequently by scholars. As valuable as his scholarship is, there is much concerning her work that can still be addressed, specifically her time in Russia. Baillio's 2006 essay "Vigée Le Brun at the Court of the Romanovs" examines this period in her professional career utilizing her memoirs as a guide. Yet, while he provides context for many of her original statements, he does not make a deeper connection between her Russian works and her earlier portraiture practice; nor does he sufficiently examine why Vigée-Lebrun's work was so desirable among Russian nobility during this particular period in both Russian and European history.

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<sup>7</sup> Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 6-8. See also Mary Sheriff's essay "Portrait de l'artiste en historienne de l'art a propos des *Souvenirs* de Mme Vigée-Lebrun" in *Plumes et Pinceaux: Discourse de femmes sur l'art en Europe (1750-1850)*, published in 2012 by les presses du réel.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Baillio, *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun 1755-1842*, (Fort Worth: Kimbell Museum of Art, 1982), 6. In his introduction Baillio mentions the number of misattributed works mentioned in early twentieth century catalogues and texts. He argues that these issues are pervasive in Vigée-Lebrun scholarship and that even later works, such as Lada Nikolenko's article "The Russian Portraits of Madame Vigée-LeBrun" published in the *Gazette des Beaux Arts* in 1967, contain significant errors.

A few monographs on Vigée-Lebrun have been published in the last twenty years. Angelica Gooden's *The Sweetness of Life* and, more recently, Gita May's *Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun* both attempt to address the artist's life as a whole with varying degrees of success. Gooden's work supplies useful historical context to situate the artist's memoirs, making corrections when necessary, but does not deviate significantly from Vigée-Lebrun's original account. May's text says something similar but is less well researched.<sup>9</sup> The problem with these approaches is that they are relatively uncritical, often rephrasing Vigée-Lebrun's original statements and providing little in new information. The exception to this is Mary D. Sheriff's 1996 publication *The Exceptional Woman*. Sheriff reexamines well-known works through dual lenses of gender subversion and psychoanalysis, offering new and fruitful ways of approaching this imagery, but she, too, omits analysis of Vigée-Lebrun's Russian period.

Texts dealing specifically with Vigée-Lebrun's life and work are a good point of departure. Nonetheless, they have, as has been pointed out, some weaknesses that make a study of her life from 1795 to 1801 difficult. Much can be ascertained through an analysis of her portraits in relation to other portraiture practices during this period. Amy Freund, in her recent publication *Portraiture and Politics In Revolutionary France*, examines how portraiture shifted during the French Revolution. Freund looks at these works in relation to the contemporary ideals and politics that shaped them. This cultural-historical methodology is critical to my own interpretations of Vigée-Lebrun, whose portraits were directly affected by the specific cultural and political climate of Imperial Russia. Additionally, scholarship on Russian history and

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<sup>9</sup> Gita May, *Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun: The Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution*, (London, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). I say this because of a mistake I caught concerning a specific work, *Julie Lebrun as Flora*, which May lists as being in a private collection on page 142. This is likely due to a listing in Joseph Baillio's 1982 catalogue *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le-Brun, 1755-1842*, when this work was, indeed, in a private collection. In 1983 it was acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, Florida. This is where this work currently resides.

Francophile Europe will provide context for my argument and give credence to the particular position that I see Vigée-Lebrun functioning in during the six years she resided in Russia.

Lastly, a discussion of Vigée-Lebrun, a French émigré living in a foreign country, will touch on, and benefit from, an examination of émigré history as a whole. This area of study has generally been overlooked in scholarship, perhaps because events in Paris, during this period in European history, provide such a rich avenue for interpretation. Regardless, the influx of French émigrés to other countries drastically changed politics throughout Western Europe and, as can be ascertained to varying degrees through her memoirs, affected Vigée-Lebrun personally. The publication, *The French Émigrés in Europe and the Struggle against Revolution 1789-1814*, examines the many methods European countries employed to deal with these refugees. This is critical in attempting to understand how Vigée-Lebrun's experiences in Russia deviated from those of other émigrés abroad. Additionally, *Les Français en Russie au siècle des Lumières*, provides context by focusing specifically on the French presence in Russia during this period. The portraits *Princess Anna Alexandrovna Golitsyna* and *Empress Marie Fyodorovna* are representative of Vigée-Lebrun's Russian portraiture practice. As in France, her studio in Saint Petersburg attracted patrons from among both the nobility and the royal family. Likewise, many of the portraits Vigée-Lebrun painted from 1795 to 1801 are of women, which is consistent with earlier production.

Examining these particular works in detail, I have noted certain intriguing resemblances in composition between them and her earlier French imagery, suggesting this was a popular and highly desired mode of representation. These similarities are too numerous to be considered coincidence. Yet surprisingly little scholarship directly addresses these two paintings. Visually, both portraits follow a set of motifs characteristic of Vigée-Lebrun's work. The image of

Princess Golitsyna reflects, in both posture and placement, Vigée-Lebrun's earlier work, *The duchesse d'Orléans*, painted in 1789. Similarly, the painting of Empress Maria Fyodorovna is a mirror image of Vigée-Lebrun's portrait, *Marie Antoinette, Queen of France*, painted almost twenty years before.

One could argue that the sitters of the latter works were unfamiliar with the earlier compositions and, subsequently, unaware of the similarities. However, as I shall elucidate, that might not actually be the case. Thus, while certainly Vigée-Lebrun may have worked in a recognizable style, given the agency of the patrons, I am curious why such a mirroring of images would have been requested or even accepted? This suggests that there was a specific desire amongst the Russian elite to reflect a visual code established in France during the *Ancien Régime*. That is what I will explore here. By choosing two works instead of one, I investigate numerous incidences of visual appropriation and explore two predominate themes in Vigée-Lebrun's practice: royalty and nobility.

**Seeing Double?**  
***Empress Maria Fyodorovna and Marie Antoinette, Queen of France***

Vigée-Lebrun arrived in Saint Petersburg at a key moment in Russian history. The country had been led by Catherine the Great for over thirty years and was experiencing relative stability under her administration. Throughout the course of her reign, Russia continued to grow militarily and politically, with successes on the global stage and key victories against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>10</sup> Catherine's approach to rule, much like that of her predecessor Peter I, stemmed from a desire to match Western Europe. This meant more than just expressing political power; it also meant fostering and developing a cultural identity that could equal, if not surpass, the perceived civility of the west.

Vigée-Lebrun's work had long been popular with a Russian clientele and she already had a number of Russian patrons before moving to Saint Petersburg. Given this, along with her renown as portraitist to Queen Marie Antoinette, it is unsurprising that she began receiving commissions from the Imperial family shortly after her arrival in the city. One of the most important of these was a portrait of Empress Maria Fyodorovna, wife of Paul I, whom she painted in 1799. This work seems fairly straight forward in its execution, yet woven throughout its composition is a complex negotiation of socio-political concerns that began with the sartorial reforms of Peter I and took on new resonance towards the end of the eighteenth century. In this

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<sup>10</sup> Robert K. Massie, *Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman*, (New York: Random House, 2011), 514. According to Massie Catherine the Great did not achieve all she was hoping for in the peace treaty of 1791. Nonetheless, Crimea was finally ceded to Russia and a Russian naval port was established on the Black Sea.

image, aspects of dress and modes of depiction are not so much products of almost a century of conditioning as they are a direct political statement.

The portrait *Empress Maria Fyodorovna* is a rich and luxurious work, filled with intricately rendered details and lush visual textures. Despite the importance of this commission, Vigée-Lebrun recounts the execution of this work in a remarkably cursory manner, stating, “I painted a full length portrait of her wearing her court costume and a diamond coronet. I do not care to paint diamonds; it is impossible for a brush to achieve that brilliance.”<sup>11</sup> Potentially a play at false modesty, Vigée-Lebrun is correct in stating that the diamonds are not particularly brilliant. However, this has less to do with the artist’s skill than with the shimmering, saturated colors that dominate the composition and draw the eye. Vigée-Lebrun dexterously employs color to emphasize the figure of Maria Fyodorovna. Dressed in white and wearing the elements of her coronation,<sup>12</sup> Maria Fyodorovna stands out distinctly against the warm reds, oranges, yellows and coppers that define the background. By juxtaposing the white gown against the red backdrop, Vigée-Lebrun skillfully ensures that the initial focus of her viewers will be on this sumptuously dressed royal. Nevertheless, although the use of white serves to define the importance of the central figure, the addition of colorful accents helps situate her within the overall composition.

The dress worn by Maria Fyodorovna, with its wide *panniers* and tight bodice, reflects a style popularized in the west almost a century earlier.<sup>13</sup> A floral pattern embroidered in gold thread

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<sup>11</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 206.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Baillio, “Vigée Le Brun at the Court of the Romanovs,” in *Catherine the Great: Art for Empire*, Ed. Nathalie Bondil (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Art., 2005), 236

<sup>13</sup> Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims: Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette*, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2015), 93. A style that was initially French, dresses such as these were widely adopted throughout European courts during the eighteenth century.

decorates the bottom quarter of the rich, striped, satin material of her gown. This minor detail mimics the golden fabric of her voluptuous mantle as well as the tassels that accent the footstool to her left and heightens the intricacy and perceived expense of her attire. Examining Maria Fyodorovna's gown reveals a multitude of complex patterns. The horizontal lines of her sleeves compete with the vertical stripes of the dress. At the heart of the composition, a blood red sash cuts diagonally across the Empress' bodice simultaneously drawing the eye to the ermine that drapes her left shoulder and the gesture of her right hand. Textures, too, are layered in lush and varied ways. White ruffled lace sleeves stand out against the smoothness of the satin. The bodice displays hints of gold threads which serve to complement the brilliance of the red sash and add cohesiveness to the entire garment. This rather complicated array of visual patterns is a testament to Vigée-Lebrun's skill as an artist. Moreover, the lush, shimmery fabrics and repetition of gold accents define the sitter's role as Empress while simultaneously underscoring the strength of the Russian Empire.

In addition to the visual elements of power, conveyed by gold accents and lush, expensive fabrics, is a sense of unity and history, detected in the swirls of gold fabric dominating much of the lower left hand corner of the composition. Gathered and layered, the voluminous satin is part of a mantle worn by Maria Fyodorovna. This cloak appears to be the same that graced the shoulders of Catherine the Great in earlier compositions, such as *Portrait of Catherine II* and *Announcement of Catherine II's Coronation*. The use of such identifiable imagery obliquely functions to reflect an earlier visual iconography, creating a sense of timelessness. The richness of the fabric and the inclusion of the Imperial double headed eagle decorating the mantle's surface serve as another reminder of the ongoing might of the Russian Empire and the glory of the Imperial family.

Allusions to earlier imagery of Catherine the Great are not unexpected, given that by the time she took the throne in 1762, Russia, and more specifically the city of Saint Petersburg, had already established a seemingly Francophile identity. This is due to the cultural and sartorial reforms Emperor Peter I set in motion in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Peter I decided to modernize his country through mimicry as a means of establishing Russia as a powerful player in the Western political sphere. He moved the capital of the Russian Empire from Moscow to the newly established city of Saint Petersburg, founded in 1703. This new location was built on Western models of architecture and offered a gleaming example of Russia's modernity. In addition to relocating the capital, Peter I also instituted a number of sartorial and cultural reforms aimed at abolishing traditional Russian dress and social practices in favor of Western motifs.

These initial reforms are intrinsic to Vigée-Lebrun's 1799 composition of Maria Fyodorovna. Without the political and cultural shift undertaken by Peter I earlier in the century this mode of representation would have been at odds with an Orthodox Russian sensibility. Maria Fyodorovna's attire suggests, not altogether fictitiously, the seamless inclusion of Russia into the realm of Western politics. In *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* author Martin Malia discusses the relative rapidity with which Peter I was able to transform the perception of his country from "Eastern," and thus backwards, to "Western" and culturally sophisticated. This, Malia asserts, had much to do with timing and Western Europe's emergence into what was perceived as a "modern era."<sup>14</sup> He credits initial differences between Russia and Western countries as stemming significantly from religious issues. For centuries

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 17.



Orthodox Russia, although Christian in belief, did not subscribe to the same tenants and governing body that defined Christianity in the west.<sup>15</sup> This variance is what fostered the west's understanding of Russia as backwards and barbarian. Regardless, by the eighteenth century secular concerns, and not religious, became the new measure of a civilized nation. According to Malia, civilization came to be understood as "an advanced level of material, intellectual, and moral development."<sup>16</sup>

These shifts in representation come into focus in a comparison of *Empress Maria Fyodorovna* with an earlier Imperial image, *Portrait of the Regent Sophia Alekseyevna* (Figure 3). Before the eighteenth century portraits in general were a rarity but portraits of women were almost unheard of. Those representations that did exist were largely devotional in nature and incorporated the sitter's portrait with images of saints or the Virgin Mary. Portraiture in Russia did not benefit from the compositional experimentation that developed out of the Renaissance and, as such, retained strong stylistic ties with Byzantine icon painting. Much like the portrait of *Empress Maria Fyodorovna*, the portrait of Sophia Alekseyevna functioned as a political portrayal. However, created almost a century before, Sophia Alekseyevna's image displays many compositional differences from the latter work. Structurally, it still retains an appearance of flatness that references early icon painting. With a stark black background and insufficient shading, Sophia Alekseyevna's image lacks the dimensionality of Western painting during this period. Moreover, her clothing, with its high neckline and heavy jewels, is distinctly Russian.

Comparing the latter image of *Empress Maria Fyodorovna* with the *Portrait of the Regent Sophia Alekseyevna* we see that it is not just dress that concerned Peter I but all forms of outward

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 27.

representation. The abrupt transference from Eastern to Western sensibilities in these compositions indicates that all elements of Russian culture were subject to reinterpretation. This “Westernization” of Russia’s visual iconography occurred with relative rapidity during the first quarter of the eighteenth century, as can be detected in another image, *Portrait of Catherine I* (Figure 4). Here, Catherine I, wife of Peter I, is portrayed wearing a gown of Western design and is situated in front of a pillared background reminiscent of that seen in the portrait of Maria Fyodorovna. These Western compositional elements would define Russian portraiture throughout the century.

It is important to note that the *Portrait of Catherine I* was painted by French artist Jean-March Nattier. By 1799, when Vigée-Lebrun painted *Empress Maria Fyodorovna*, the arts in Russia had been largely dominated by practitioners from other countries. During his rule Peter I brought in foreign artists as a means of fostering a Western visual identity and made strides towards establishing an Academy of Arts in Russia.<sup>17</sup> According to scholar Rosalind Blakesley, “by the eighteenth century Western European artists working in Russia enjoyed remarkably favorable terms. In 1702, Peter the Great had even issued a manifesto which afforded foreigners not only higher pay than was usual, but better living conditions and social status as well.”<sup>18</sup> In eighteenth-century Russia, foreign artists, and Western notions of what constituted fine art, was the standard against which all art and artists were measured.

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<sup>17</sup> Rosalind P. Blakesley, “Pride and the Politics of Nationality in Russia’s Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, 1757-1807, in *Art History* (2010):802. Blakesley states that in the first half of the eighteenth century arts education was considered part of the Academy of Sciences. It was not until 1757 that a true Academy, the “Imperial Academy of the Three Most Distinguished Arts” was founded in Saint Petersburg.” The foundation of the Imperial Academy will be one of many concerns in Blakesley’s new book, *The Russian Canvas*, slated to be released July, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Blakesley, “Pride and Politics of Nationality,” 804.

This preference for all things foreign extended beyond the reign of Peter the Great. During her rule, Empress Anna (1730-1740) showed distinct preference for those of German heritage.<sup>19</sup> Her predecessor, Empress Elizabeth, who came to power in 1741, preferred anything French. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century French was the established language of the Russian court,<sup>20</sup> which greatly resembled its counterpart to the west in both dress and behavior. Building on this desire to reflect the west in order to establish a national superiority, Catherine the Great, who reigned from 1762 to 1796, began acquiring Western art collections on a massive scale. Moreover, she sought to incorporate into her rule the ideas and ideals of French thinkers such as Voltaire, Diderot, and Grimm. According to Georges Dulac, the Empress' desire to pursue the policies set in place by Peter I stemmed from a need to "both emulate the old countries of the West, who regarded this new 'barbarous' power with condescension, and to liberate the latent abilities of her immense country of adoption."<sup>21</sup> Thus, through encouraging the most innovative of Western thought and culture, Catherine the Great sought to bring out the best in Russia's citizenry.

*Empress Maria Fyodorovna* displays all the characteristics of Western royal portraiture, including the sitter's sumptuous garment and the grand, embellished, backdrop.<sup>22</sup> The

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<sup>19</sup> Blakesley, "Pride and Politics of Nationality," 804.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 38. According to Malia "A command of French was necessary not only as a means of communication, but also as an international warrant of both civility and nobility."

<sup>21</sup> Georges Dulac, "The Empress, The *Philosophes*, and the Fine Arts," in *Catherine the Great: Art for Empire*, Ed. Nathalie Bondil (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Art., 2005), 179.

<sup>22</sup> Blakesley, "Pride and Politics of Nationality," 811. In her discussion of a portrait of Emperor Peter III Blakesley clarifies that "imperial status is projected not only by the insignia of royalty and the longstanding conventions of royal portraiture (full regalia and the pictorial conceit of column and drape had denoted aristocratic or royal status since at least the seventeenth century), but also by a pose derived from classical statues." It's these items: regalia, column, and drape that I am identifying with Western portraiture in my analysis of Vigée-Lebrun's portrait *Empress Maria Fyodorovna*.

background elements of this image reflect both Peter I and Catherine the Great's desires to present a cultured face to the rest of Europe. Here the strength of the Imperial family is tempered by a humanitarian element. Maria Fyodorovna stands erect, surrounded by allusions to the generosity of the Imperial family. Books and writing instruments add an element of busyness to the scene. She looks directly toward the viewer as if to address us, and though she does not speak, through her gesture she conveys her message. With her left hand she indicates a roll of papers which Joseph Baillio has noted contains architectural plans for the Smolny convent school.<sup>23</sup> The Smolny convent school, established by Catherine the Great in 1764, was an institution geared towards instructing well-born young ladies.<sup>24</sup> Maria Fyodorovna undertook its direction after Catherine's death in 1796.

If there were any doubt as to who the sitter is, Vigée-Lebrun provides a clue through carefully constructed diagonals. Positioned behind Maria Fyodorovna is a velvet covered chair with an embroidered "M." Above this initial is a stitched crown, embellished by a decorative embroidered ribbon to create a sense of unity. Behind the chair is a carefully arranged curtain with layers of fabric folding in on itself. The lines created by the layering of the curtain material create a diagonal that draws the eye from the curtain to the chair, with the embroidered monogram, to the sitter herself. In this way Vigée-Lebrun subtly reinforces the Imperial presence of her subject.

Although, from an analysis of *Empress Maria Fyodorovna*, it seems as if Russia's citizens quickly and energetically embraced the initial reforms of Peter I, this love of all things foreign was not wholeheartedly adopted by all. Time and again, this mirroring of Western modes of

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<sup>23</sup> Baillio, "Vigée Le Brun at the Court of the Romanovs," 236.

<sup>24</sup> Blakesley, "Pride and Politics of Nationality," 818.

representation served as a point of some contention. In regards to the arts, the Russian Academy was seen by many as a means of encouraging native artists. Blakesley points out that “anti-foreign rhetoric permeated even some of the early campaigns for an academy of arts. In 1725, the courtier Mikhail Avramov had declared the need to dispense with the services of foreigners by training Russian artists to a sufficient standard.”<sup>25</sup> The desire to promote Russian artists would be a continuous undercurrent throughout the eighteenth century which would become distinctly more pronounced by the nineteenth century. This gradual shift is not surprising given that, according to Malia, Russia, and its relationship with Western Europe, became increasingly more remote and inaccessible after the turn of the century.<sup>26</sup> Despite this subset of individuals who called for a distinctly Russian artistic identity, foreigners routinely dominated the Academy throughout the eighteenth century. Moreover, they were often celebrated, as was the case of Vigée-Lebrun who became an honorary member of the Imperial Academy of the Arts in Saint Petersburg on June 16, 1800.<sup>27</sup> This is a moment she recalls in her *Souvenirs* as “one of the sweetest memories I have retained throughout all my travels...”<sup>28</sup>

Maria Fyodorovna is a complex figure in this regard. While she was known to be an avid follower of French fashions of all varieties,<sup>29</sup> by the turn of the century she directed much of her

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<sup>25</sup> Blakesley, “Pride and Politics of Nationality,” 804.

<sup>26</sup> Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 84. Malia elucidates “For the first time since her intrusion into Europe, the transformation of the more advanced nations of the “West” began to make of Russia something truly alien or, more exactly, something anachronistic. Then in one short decade after 1815, her new destiny overtook her: the golden legend of Russian Enlightenment came abruptly to an end; the black legend of inveterate Russian autocracy was about to begin.”

<sup>27</sup> June 16, 1800 is the date listed in the exhibition catalogue *An Imperial Collection: Women Artists from the State Hermitage Museum*, pg. 188.

<sup>28</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 211.

<sup>29</sup> Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims*, 317. Chrisman-Campbell notes the Maria Fyodorovna was just one of many royals, throughout Europe, who patronized the French *marchande de mode* Rose Bertin.

focus to promoting local talent. Expressing concerns similar to the early detractors of foreign influence in the Russian Academy, Maria Fyodorovna began patronizing Russian artists with increasing frequency. Rosalind Blakesley notes that this “gradual shift in focus from foreign to Russian artefacts in particular [bears] the imprimatur of one attuned to contemporary debates concerning the fortunes of Russian artists.”<sup>30</sup> With this in mind, it is curious that Vigée Le-Brun, a prominent émigré artist whose work was irrevocably tied to the French court, was chosen for this commission. Moreover, instead of being an amalgamation of Western motifs, the composition of *Empress Maria Fyodorovna* appears to be a direct appropriation of Vigée-Lebrun’s 1783 portrait, *Marie Antoinette, Queen of France* (Figure 5).

In this earlier portrait Marie Antoinette is depicted in full court regalia much like the latter sitter. She, too, faces us, but her sumptuous beribboned and flounced dress reminds us that she is not one of us. Like Maria Fyodorovna, Marie Antoinette is depicted wearing a luxurious cloak, this one blue with the *fleur de lys*, symbol of the French monarchy, embroidered across its surface and, as with Maria Fyodorovna’s portrait, Marie Antoinette is depicted with her body slightly turned toward a velvet covered table. Yet, instead of emphasizing court munificence, she indicates, through posture, the crown resting on a blue pillow. The repetition of the *fleur de lys* on the pillow and on the Queen’s mantle further stresses her royal position so that, without an overt gesture, it is still obvious that the crown is hers.

In both portraits the backgrounds, with their bold architectural elements and velvet curtains, are very similar. However, while the Empress’ position in front of bright red drapes serves to

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<sup>30</sup> Rosalind P. Blakesley, “Sculpting in Tiaras: Grand Duchess Maria Fedorovna as a Producer and Consumer of the Arts,” in *Women and Material Culture, 1660-1830*, ed. Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 71.

make her an undisputed focal point, Marie Antoinette's figure tends to blend with the columns behind her. This actually works well to highlight the former Queen's fashionable nature. By situating her against the grey of the column, Vigée-Lebrun underscores the white of Marie Antoinette's powdered hair and creamy skin. Both of these are features the French monarch took great pride in.<sup>31</sup>

This particular image of Marie Antoinette might have been known first-hand by Maria Fyodorovna as a copy was supposedly sent to Catherine the Great years earlier<sup>32</sup>. This makes the similarities between the two works all the more interesting and suggests that Maria Fyodorovna wanted to replicate this depiction. Despite these parallels in compositions, in many ways this portrait is politically attune to uniquely contemporary circumstances. Although also a foreign princess, Maria Fyodorovna's loyalties appear to lie solely with Russia and its people.<sup>33</sup> Instead of emphasizing her own royal prerogative and power, as the portrait of Marie Antoinette did, Maria Fyodorovna's image emphasizes public works. Moreover, she chose to be depicted utilizing the familiar conventions of royal portraiture, avoiding the mistake that Marie Antoinette made when she allowed herself to be portrayed in public *en gaulle*.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution*, (Picador: New York, 2006). Weber discusses the creaminess of Marie Antoinette's skin and its sartorial/political implications throughout her text.

<sup>32</sup> The Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon states that numerous copies were made of this portrait. Additionally, it has been noted that one of these copies was sent to Catherine the Great. This claim, however, has yet to be fully verified.

<sup>33</sup> Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 161. Weber discusses roses and their relation to her Hapsburg origins on more than one occasion. She also discusses the troublesome political scenarios Marie Antoinette encountered because of her nationality.

<sup>34</sup> Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 160-161. A *gaulle* is a lightweight Muslin dress that Marie Antoinette popularized during her reign. Vigée-Lebrun caused a stir at the 1783 salon when she presented a portrait of the Queen dressed in one of these frocks. Weber attributes the unsettledness caused by this portrait to "a decline of clearly established social boundaries". Here the privilege and power of the French court is obfuscated, and perhaps even negated, by the Queen's ordinary dress.

The painting of Maria Fyodorovna is a calculated political image. Through dress, posture, and surrounding props Vigée-Lebrun created a portrait that conveys a message of grandeur and stability. In truth, 1799 was a more troubled year than Vigée-Lebrun's portrait indicates. After the relatively steady rule of Catherine the Great, Russia's citizens were unprepared for the unstable and erratic rule of her son Paul I<sup>35</sup>. Vigée-Lebrun dedicates a section of her *Souvenirs*<sup>36</sup> to discussing the general fear that descended upon the city of Saint Petersburg after he took the throne. She discusses Paul's insistence that members of Russian society appear with their hair powdered stating "he [Paul I] had forbidden people to wear round hats, which he considered a sign of Jacobinism...On the other hand, everyone was forced to powder their hair."<sup>37</sup> The use of powder in hair is an overt reference to the *Ancien Régime* and more specifically to Marie Antoinette.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, Vigée-Lebrun mentions that Paul I showed a remarkable preference for the French émigrés and recalls that "he showed enormous generosity towards foreigners, especially the French...he was always seen to welcome and treat kindly all travellers and émigrés who came from France."<sup>39</sup> Therefore, it is not unlikely that Paul I, who was usually

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<sup>35</sup> Peter Wortman notes that the threat to the established order introduced by the citizens of France during the French Revolution caused Paul I to reassert his absolute supremacy through military parades and other public displays of power. Additionally, Paul I created new laws prohibiting an array of objects or behaviors that he believed could lead to dangerous revolutionary actions. See: Peter S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy From Peter the Great to the Abdication of Nicolas II* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, c. 2006), 88, 93.

<sup>36</sup> Pages 200 to 204 in Evans translation.

<sup>37</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 201.

<sup>38</sup> Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 114. Powdered, elaborately styled coifs and poufs were the hallmarks of Marie Antoinette and the French court. Weber notes that the Queen's use hair powder, which utilized flour, might have led to resentment amongst French citizens during the Flour Wars of 1774-1775. This likely help fuel the idea that the Queen was more concerned with her looks than the welfare of her subjects.

<sup>39</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 202.



present for his wife's portrait sittings,<sup>40</sup> actively encouraged overt references to the *Ancien Régime*. By utilizing the royal iconography of France the Imperial family sought to make a political statement by aligning themselves with older, safer, values while simultaneously highlighting a progressiveness and a generosity absent in the earlier image.

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<sup>40</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 206.

## A Reminiscent Representation The Popularity of Vigée-Lebrun's Imagery Among the Russian Nobility

Vigée-Lebrun was well-established in Russia by the time she painted *Empress Maria Fyodorovna*. In fact she could mark among her clientele some of the most distinguished families in Saint Petersburg. While often praising her Russian sitters, Vigée-Lebrun expresses her disappointment regarding the behavior of other French émigrés, remarking that “One thing I have often noted, sadly, is that the French abroad have a tendency to malign each other; on occasions they even resort to slander.”<sup>41</sup> She makes this assessment after supposedly catching her fellow countryman in the act of gossiping about her. In a way, this anecdote nicely sets the stage for the rest of her narrative. While she occasionally mentions other French acquaintances, the bulk of her memoirs are dedicated to her Russian friends and contacts. It is interesting to note that, throughout this section of her *Souvenirs*, Vigée-Lebrun rarely comments on her former French patrons, which suggests that she may have had little contact with them in Saint Petersburg.<sup>42</sup> The Duc de Polignac, whose wife Vigée-Lebrun painted in 1783, also resided in Russia with his family,<sup>43</sup> yet Vigée-Lebrun makes no mention of them when discussing her

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<sup>41</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 168.

<sup>42</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*. 204. On page 204 Vigée-Lebrun mentions a few French compatriots that she saw while living in Saint Petersburg including the Duc de Richelieu and the Comte de Langeron. However, she asserts “My French friends did not cause me to neglect the inhabitants of this country which had welcomed me so warmly, and everyday [I] increased my acquaintance with the various Russian families.”

<sup>43</sup> Lord Mackenzie-Stuart, “French Émigrés in Edinburgh,” in *The French Émigrés in Europe and the Struggle Against Revolution, 1789-1814* Eds. Kristy Carpenter and Philip Mansel (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc. 1999), 112. Lord Mackenzie-Stuart notes that the Duc de Polignac, whose wife died in Austria in 1793, spent little time in Scotland before relocating to Russia with his sister. It is likely that his arrival in Russia coincided with Vigée-Lebrun's residence there.

clientele. This is a shift from her recollections of Austria in which she refers to a number of French émigrés, including the Polignac family.<sup>44</sup>

Many of Vigée-Lebrun's portraits of Russian nobility bear a striking resemblance to her early work displayed in the Paris Salon. Her 1797 portrait of Princess Anna Alexandrovna Golitsyna exhibits remarkable evidence of this desirability. Simply constructed, Vigée-Lebrun's painting of Golitsyna is elegant and understated. Through her relaxed posture and diaphanous gown the Princess Golitsyna appears at ease with the world around her. This naturalism reflects modes of representation that Vigée-Lebrun popularized while in France. Through the use of simple backdrops, shawls, and classically draped fabric Vigée-Lebrun constructed sumptuous compositions. Here, the image of Princess Golitsyna clearly mimics Vigée-Lebrun's earlier portrait of the duchesse d'Orléans. Completed and presented in 1789, her portrait *the duchesse d'Orléans* (Figure 6) was one of her most successful salon submissions. Joseph Baillio notes that this image was so well received in Paris that, shortly after its exhibition, another sitter, the Marquise d'Aguesseau de Fresnes (Figure 7), asked to be posed in similar fashion.<sup>45</sup> Like the portrait of Maria Fyodorovna the image of Princess Golitsyna suggests a desire to pattern her own image after Vigée-Lebrun's earlier works in France. In this case, the source of inspiration was not Marie Antoinette, but instead the duchesse d'Orléans.

The Princess Golitsyna sits indeterminately. From the shoulders down, her body is relaxed, supported in part by the overstuffed velvet cushions behind her. She leans into the couch

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<sup>44</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 139. Vigée-Lebrun discusses those she met while attending an event in Vienna at the home of Countess Thoun stating "I encountered many French refugees among her guests: the Duc de Richelieu, the Comte de Langeron, Comtesse Sabran and her son, the Polignac family, and later the amiable Comte de Vaudreuil..."

<sup>45</sup> Baillio, *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*, 83.

utilizing her left arm to prop herself. This gesture indicates familiarity with her surroundings yet, despite this seeming torpor, from the neck up she is alert and focused. Something, or someone, outside the perimeter of the canvas has caused her to look away from the viewer. With upturned eyes and a slight smile she greets this individual. Alert as she is, she is nonetheless comfortable enough to remain casually seated. In this composition, the dichotomy between action and inaction creates an interesting tension. A similar feeling of unsettledness is present in *The duchesse d'Orléans*. However, instead of manifesting itself through physical movement, it is revealed through the duchesse's direct gaze. Here, the duchesse d'Orléans sits, in similar fashion, with her left hand positioned under her chin. She looks directly ahead, confronting us, the viewer, with a direct and unwavering stare. Baillio describes the duchesse as depicted with "a languid, sad expression" and notes that she was categorized as "melancholic" by contemporaries.<sup>46</sup> Though the image of Princess Golitsyna lacks this sadness, both portraits share the same casual posture and enigmatic smile.

Although the physical positions of the sitters are rendered similarly, the color palette Vigée-Lebrun employs in each of these portraits varies. The most significant difference is in the clothing. The duchesse d'Orléans is represented all in white with only slight accents of pigment to break up the monotony, while the Princess Golitsyna's dress is a riot of color. Despite these obvious differences, the color in both compositions serves the same underlying purpose. It subtly functions to highlight the presence of the sitter and create a compositional tension that adds dynamism to an otherwise static image.

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<sup>46</sup> Baillio, *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*, 81.

In *the duchesse d'Orléans* Vigée-Lebrun uses white to create an interesting positive/negative which effectively serves to emphasize the duchesse's gaze. She sits, dressed in an elegant but casual gown, of ivory edged with gold thread. The corresponding headscarf, creamy skin, and possibly powdered hair further enhances the relatively monochromatic nature of the duchesse's garb. Her eyes, dark in contrast, stand out all the more intensely due to the relative lack of color surrounding them. A green blue pendant at her waist is the only element which potentially disrupts this focus. As Joseph Baillio has noted, this too, serves to enhance the overall emotional impact of the painting. He argues that it alludes to "'Poor Maria,' forlornly seated under a weeping willow with her faithful dog Sylvio."<sup>47</sup> Thus, we are once more reminded of her gaze and the notion of melancholy is discreetly emphasized.

Though this painting has a subtle color palette, uniquely chosen to reflect the nature of the sitter, Vigée-Lebrun's use of bright, saturated colors was noted early on by contemporaries. This use of color was often criticized and, as Mary Sheriff elucidates, "Beginning at the Salon of 1783, commentary on Vigée-Lebrun's works either hailed them for their brilliant color or criticized them for their conspicuous artifice."<sup>48</sup> We can detect her bold use of color in her *Portrait of Hubert Robert*, exhibited, along with *the duchesse d'Orléans*, in the 1789 salon. In this work green, blue, red and yellow compete for prominence and a close examination reveals notes of blue in his otherwise ruddy complexion. Her portraits with Italianate landscapes further show Vigée-Lebrun's ability to create brilliant and colorful canvases.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Baillio, *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*, 81.

<sup>48</sup> Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 186.

<sup>49</sup> Other images where this landscape can be seen are: *Portrait of Madame de Staël as Corrine* (1807-1808) and *Julie Le Brun as Flora* (1799).

Therefore, in the painting of the Princess Golitsyna, it is unsurprising that Vigée-Lebrun has provided visual impact through bold, complementary colors. Instead of drawing attention towards the sitter's eyes as she had with the duchesse d'Orléans, Vigée-Lebrun utilizes a palette that is both bright and expressive to emphasize a static form of movement. Here the orange and red tones of Princess Golitsyna's dress stand out brightly against the deep green of the sofa behind her. Visually, the combination of green and red serve to strengthen the presence of the sitter in ways that other color combinations might fail to do. Woven throughout this clash of color are areas of white that further enhance the presence of the sitter Golitsyna. Repeated sections of blue-grey paint, detected in the creases and folds of her dress, further enhance the feeling of energy and suspended motion. Her bodice is darker than her skirt, reinforcing the idea that her body is twisted in a temporary fashion, an impression which the tilt of her head confirms.

*The duchesse d'Orléans* and *Princess Anna Alexandrovna Golitsyna* share similar compositional features. Their figures are dominated by vertical lines creating a sense of visual motion. Creases and folds in the fabric of their dresses run predominately up and down the length of the figures. In the case of the duchesse d'Orléans this verticality is enhanced by her hair which is casually draped over her left shoulder. Vigée-Lebrun mimics this sensation in the portrait of the Princess Golitsyna through the employment of a white scarf draped across the sitter's shoulders. In both paintings this vertical thrust is counteracted by the bold horizontal line that defines the edge of the couch and runs the length of the canvas. This edge delineates the active and inactive aspects of the composition. The background, a swath of brown, offers little visual stimulation; instead it serves as a means to draw the viewer back to that which is being depicted.

Both women are portrayed in loose, flowing gowns cinched at the waist with a tasseled sash. Additionally, twisted through their hair are impromptu headpieces created out of matching silk fabric. These particular garments and curious headscarves are present in many of Vigée-Lebrun's portraits and reflect a stylistic approach that Vigée-Lebrun popularized early in her career. Despite the simplicity of their clothing, both the duchesse d'Orléans and the Princess Golitsyna exude an aura of sophistication and elegance that clearly distinguishes their privileged stations. The severe backdrops which finish off the compositional scene offer little to challenge the immediacy of the figures.

It is impossible not to detect the similarities between these two works. This suggests a number of possibilities. It is likely that the Princess Golitsyna was aware of this earlier image and actively sought to be portrayed in similar fashion. As discussed earlier, Russian nobility had long made allusions to that which was deemed popular in France. This echoing of French culture served as a referent for Russia's own cultural sophistication. While residing in Russia, Vigée-Lebrun maintained a studio in which, as Joseph Baillio elucidates, "clients could admire the two portraits of Lady Hamilton and a large canvas on which Marie Antoinette was depicted full-length and life-size."<sup>50</sup> In fact, Vigée-Lebrun references this portrait of Marie Antoinette in her *Souvenirs*, reminiscing, "I had had my large portrait of Queen Marie Antoinette brought over from France, the one in which she was wearing a blue velvet dress, and the general interest it aroused was a source of great pleasure to me."<sup>51</sup> Therefore, firsthand knowledge of her imagery was available, and of apparent interest, to Russian patrons.

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<sup>50</sup> Baillio, "Vigée Le Brun at the Court of the Romanovs," 232.

<sup>51</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 204.

It is possible that Vigée-Lebrun portrayed the Princess Golitsyna in a pose similar to that of the duchesse d'Orléans, knowing it would be a mode of representation pleasing to her sitter. It is also interesting to note that another Russian sitter is depicted similarly. Vigée-Lebrun's 1790 portrait, *comtesse Skavronskaia* (Figure 8), displays almost the exact same compositional structure as the earlier duchesse d'Orléans image.<sup>52</sup> In all three portraits, *the duchesse d'Orléans*, *comtesse Skavronskaia*, and *Princess Anna Alexandrovna Golitsyna*, it is impossible not to see overt similarities in both clothing and compositional structure.

Though these Russian portraits bear striking resemblance to their earlier French counterparts, little is known about Vigée-Lebrun's studio practice and her working relationship with her patrons. How much say did they actually have in their own representations? As had been previously mentioned, Vigée-Lebrun hung samples of her work in her studio for potential patrons to view. Additionally, she maintained a collection of props to use as needed for various compositions. However much this may have affected her customer's ability to make compositional edits is unknown, yet, through these particular examples, as well as numerous reproductions and engravings, they would have likely been aware of some of her more popular modes of representation. Also, as has been shown in the case of the Marquise de Fresne d'Aguesseau, Vigée-Lebrun did, at times, adhere to specific client requests.

Vigée-Lebrun generally painted directly onto the canvas<sup>53</sup>, which suggests little in the way of client intervention. Nonetheless, at times she created preparatory sketches that deviate in small

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<sup>52</sup> Baillio, *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*, 87. Baillio highlights that “In this portrait, it is the rich variety of textures — flesh, hair, satin, silk, velvet, muslin, pearls; the languorous pose (patterned on that of *the duchesse d'Orléans*, cat. No. 28); and the unusual combination of colors which vie for the spectator's attention.”

<sup>53</sup> Florence Gétreau, *Musée Jacquemart-André: peintures et dessins de l'école Française* (Paris: Éditions Michele de Maule, 2011), 345.



ways from the finished work. One such sketch exists for the portrait of the comtesse Skavronskaia (Figure 9). In this drawing, Vigée-Lebrun transcribes intentions for the portrait across the bottom of the page, making note of color and design choices<sup>54</sup>. The final composition differs slightly with the inclusion of a pearl necklace and earrings adorning the sitter as well as the addition of a fluted column in the background.

The preparatory drawing of the comtesse Skavronskaia includes the sitter's name in the lower right hand corner. Labeling is a practice Vigée-Lebrun appears to have employed with many of her sketches. Her Russian sketchbook, in the collection of the National Museum of Woman in the Arts, contains over thirty small drawings each labeled similarly. These sketches are more refined than that of the comtesse Skavronskaia, but do not appear to be finished compositions. Although the specific dates of creation for these sketches are unknown, some of the sitters represented in Vigée-Lebrun's Russian sketchbook did commission paintings from her as well. The occasional employment of sketches, along with Vigée-Lebrun's practice of displaying her earlier work in her studio, suggests some sort of artist/patron negotiation. This makes the similarities between the Russian portrait *Princess Anna Alexandrovna Golitsyna* and the French portrait *the duchesse d'Orléans* all the more interesting. Russian sitters would have been well aware of Vigée-Lebrun's work. Moreover, they would have likely had some say in how they wished to be represented. The overt similarities between the two works indicate that this was a well-noted and highly desired mode of depiction.

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<sup>54</sup> Gétreau, *Musée Jacquemart-André*, 344-345. The text across the bottom of the drawing reads “*robe de satin violet foncé, manche de mousseline blanche comme le bonnet; ceinture de gaze dor canapé de velours vert idem le coussin, fond grisatre-le petit portrait noir en dehors, un[e] chene d'or de ce cotté elle regarde le portrait.*”

### **Professional Instability Vigée-Lebrun's Negotiations as a Political Exile**

As has been outlined, the portraits *Empress Maria Fyodorovna* and *Princess Golitsyna* reflect a Russian desire for a very specific form of representation. This correlation between Vigée-Lebrun's later works and her earlier imagery hints at why she was so successful in Russia. Yet, the popularity that Vigée-Lebrun experienced in Russia is unique. As an émigré, banned from returning to France, she was essentially at the mercy of her host country. Vigée-Lebrun was one of thousands who fled the shifting politics brought on by the French Revolution. These émigrés were met with varying degrees of acceptance by neighboring countries and were subject to restrictive policies enacted to police them. Considering these varying experiences, it is difficult to discuss émigré history as a whole. Though, by assessing this aspect of pan-European politics, it is possible to more firmly situate Vigée-Lebrun's place within it.

In the "Introduction" to *The French Émigrés in Europe and the Struggle against Revolution, 1789-1814*, scholar William Doyle acknowledges that the definition of who, exactly, constitutes an émigré is remarkably loose and difficult to define. He argues, "True émigrés had acted on principle-however self-interested. Most had been persons of authority before 1789, and had turned their backs on a revolution which had diminished or dispossessed them."<sup>55</sup> Doyle makes a distinction between those "émigrés of legend"<sup>56</sup> and exiles, those non-aristocratic individuals who left out of fear. This broad categorization underscores the multivalent interpretations of the

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<sup>55</sup> William Doyle, "Introduction," in *The French Émigrés in Europe and the Struggle Against Revolution, 1789-1814*, Eds. Kristy Carpenter and Philip Mansel (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999), XVI.

<sup>56</sup> Doyle, "Introduction," in *The French Émigrés in Europe*, XV.

word émigré. Those who fled France during the French Revolution left for numerous reasons both personal and professional.

Vigée-Lebrun, fearful of the political uncertainties and aggressions that marked the early days of the French Revolution, fled Paris in 1789. In her *Souvenirs* she positions herself as a clairvoyant, stating that while her friends were cautiously optimistic about the future she, herself, became ill from the stress. She laments, “So much care and attention should have calmed me for my friends were not as pessimistic as I, but they found it impossible to reassure me that the evils I foresaw were only imaginary.”<sup>57</sup> Although it is likely that at the time she was not as prophetic as she later makes herself out to be, she and others certainly had much to fear. She describes the hostilities that ensued during the *promenade de Longchamp*<sup>58</sup> and states that vandals attacked her house.<sup>59</sup> In choosing to leave when she did Vigée-Lebrun became part of the first wave of exiles to leave France.

Doyle views this first exodus from France as a “voluntary exodus.”<sup>60</sup> He points out that it was not politically necessary for many to leave before the Terror of 1792. Instead he sees this initial flight as a response by French elites to the increasingly popular desire for change among the French populace. According to Doyle, early émigrés fled not out of fear for their lives but

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<sup>57</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 71.

<sup>58</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 71. See also *Fashion Victims* pages 116-127 and 266. Chrisman-Campbell dedicates an entire chapter to the *promenade de Longchamp*. It was a three-day event that occurred in the town of Longchamp the week before Easter Sunday and, unofficially, capped the Lenten season. This event was more secular than religious, and became the place where classes could mingle indiscriminately and one could advertise, or even rise above, their perceived social status. In April 1789, after the announcement of the Estates General, hostile crowds, shouting sentiments such as Next year, you will be behind your coaches and it's we who will be inside them!” threatened those attending the annual promenade.

<sup>59</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 71.

<sup>60</sup> Doyle, “Introduction,” in *The French Émigrés in Europe*, XV.

because of the French Revolution's threat to the current social order.<sup>61</sup> They found themselves at a crossroads and opted to flee instead of face the reforms being called for. Doyle argues, "The émigrés were the ones who refused [this call to change]; and in doing so they played a fateful part in driving the Revolution to the very extremes they later deplored and claimed to have foreseen."<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, he would likely see Vigée-Lebrun's flight as reflecting larger concerns of privilege and status. Alternatively, Kimberly Chrisman Campbell argues that emigrating at this moment in history was considered a fashionable thing to do.<sup>63</sup> In Vigée-Lebrun's case, the emigration of French nobles before 1792 was a threat to her livelihood, which was tied to the established social order. Vigée-Lebrun's success as a painter directly correlated to that of the nobility that patronized her. With the growing unpopularity of Queen Marie Antoinette, whom Vigée-Lebrun's work was associated with, as well as the increasingly unstable position of the upper class it is likely that her choice to leave corresponded more with her professional concerns than with worries about personal social standing or safety.

For Vigée-Lebrun, trouble at home meant the opportunity to further her career by practicing abroad in Italy. Mary D. Sheriff adroitly makes this connection in her chapter "Elisabeth, or Italy" from *The Exceptional Woman*, seeing this moment as a chance for Vigée-Lebrun to utilize her connections to expand upon her already lucrative career.<sup>64</sup> Vigée-Lebrun never planned to stay in Italy indefinitely, yet by 1792 her name had been added to the list of émigrés and she was

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<sup>61</sup> Doyle, "Introduction," in *The French Émigrés in Europe*, XX.

<sup>62</sup> Doyle, "Introduction," in *The French Émigrés in Europe*, XX-XXI.

<sup>63</sup> Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims*, 288.

<sup>64</sup> Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 224.

unable to return to Paris.<sup>65</sup> Curiously, Vigée-Lebrun does not mention this moment in her memoirs. She discusses her desire to return to France by way of Turin. Upon entering Turin she is surprised to find that “the streets and squares were full of men and women of every age who had fled from the towns of France and were seeking asylum.”<sup>66</sup> Vigée-Lebrun is so unsettled by what she observes in there that she chose to go to Milan instead. Here, Vigée-Lebrun acknowledges that she was briefly detained due to her nationality but does not once mention her émigré status.

It is likely that Vigée-Lebrun’s choice to leave Italy altogether might be connected to heightened uncertainty regarding her continued acceptance within the country. Angela Gooden discusses briefly the heightened Italian hostilities towards the influx of French refugees. She states that “having arrived in Italy with next to nothing, they needed food, work, clothes and lodgings.”<sup>67</sup> Additionally, she points out that Vigée-Lebrun “paid her way, but she could not avoid being tarred with the same brush as her fellow-countrymen.”<sup>68</sup> This reaction to émigrés is not unusual and continues today. As the horrors of the Revolution progressed, French émigrés received varied treatment from countries abroad. Like Vigée-Lebrun, many émigrés moved from locale to locale as the reception in their host country shifted and changed. As circumstances worsened in France many surrounding countries tightened their policies towards the influx of dislocated French nationals, at times fearing those they would shelter might seek to undermine their own governments.

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<sup>65</sup> Joseph Baillio, *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun 1755-1842*, (Fort Worth: Kimbell Museum of Art, 1982), 14.

<sup>66</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 134.

<sup>67</sup> Angelica Gooden, *The Sweetness of Life: A Biography of Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1999), 134.

<sup>68</sup> Gooden, *The Sweetness of Life*, 134.

French émigrés spread throughout Europe and the United States. In England, where many émigrés fled due to accessibility and familiarity, policy shifted and changed as the Revolution advanced. How England viewed and accommodated this influx of émigrés is an example of how many other countries reacted to these refugees. In the early stages of the French Revolution émigrés were viewed with sympathy. Charitable organizations were created to assist those who, having left all their possessions behind in France, were forced to start over. Émigrés existed as a subgroup in Britain and established numerous French enclaves. Few spoke English with any fluency and most chose to interact solely among other émigrés instead of integrating into local British communities.<sup>69</sup> As the revolution progressed, distrust and aversion began to build throughout Britain. In 1793 the Alien Act was passed “aimed to regulate the movement of potentially subversive refugees.”<sup>70</sup> While some countries were more restrictive, many followed a similar formula when dealing with these uninvited guests.

Instead of returning to France as originally planned, Vigée-Lebrun left for Vienna stating that the Austrian Ambassador in Milan, Count Wilsheek, urged her to come and assured her that her “presence there would give much satisfaction.”<sup>71</sup> Gooden, contradicts this friendly interpretation by remarking that Austrian policy towards the French was mingled with distrust. She points out that France and Austria went to war with one another in 1792, and that Austria and Prussia shared similar viewpoints in regards to the political troubles abroad. Prussia maintained a strict policy in regards to French émigrés. As scholar Thomas Höpel explicates,

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<sup>69</sup> Kristy Carpenter, “London: Capital of the Emigration,” in *The French Émigrés in Europe and the Struggle Against Revolution, 1789-1814* Eds. Kristy Carpenter and Philip Mansel (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc. 1999), 48.

<sup>70</sup> Toby R. Benis, *Romantic Diasporas: French Émigrés, British Convicts, and Jews*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3.

<sup>71</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 136.

“the French émigrés who came to Prussia during the revolutionary era were watched very closely both by the Prussian government and regional administrations.”<sup>72</sup> Therefore, as Gooden points out, it is logical that Vigée-Lebrun’s presence could have been less welcome than she indicates in her memoirs. Briefly mentioned in her work, Gooden does not give due consideration to an alternative interpretation. It is possible that Vigée-Lebrun’s close relationship with Marie Antoinette, daughter of Francis I of Austria, did indeed garner for her a warmer reception than was afforded other French émigrés. Vigée-Lebrun arrived in Austria in the final months of 1792, almost a year before Marie Antoinette was beheaded in October 1793. Her loyalty and familiarity to the deposed Queen likely endeared her to the Austrian court.

Two and a half years later, Vigée-Lebrun left for Saint Petersburg. Once more she was encouraged to travel abroad, this time by the Russian Ambassador in Austria who assured her of a warm reception by the Empress.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Catherine the Great was aware of Vigée-Lebrun’s work, and likely the gossip that surrounded it, due to her correspondence with Grimm and Diderot, among others. Georges Dulac notes in “The Empress, The Philosophes, and the Fine Arts” that Catherine the Great subscribed to the *Correspondance littéraire*, a French publication established by F.M. Grimm to which Diderot regularly contributed.<sup>74</sup> This desire to stay abreast of French culture afforded her the opportunity to read reports on the most recent salon exhibitions in Paris. It is conceivable that she read Grimm’s salon criticism of 1783 in which he

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<sup>72</sup> Thomas Höpel, “French Émigrés in Prussia,” in *The French Émigrés in Europe and the Struggle Against Revolution, 1789-1814* Eds. Kristy Carpenter and Philip Mansel (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 1999), 101.

<sup>73</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 151.

<sup>74</sup> Dulac, “The Empress, The *Philosophes*, and the Fine Arts,” 180. Dulac states that Catherine the Great subscribed to the *Correspondance littéraire* around 1765, the same year she began her correspondence with Diderot.

addresses Vigée-Lebrun's controversial entry into the academie. He describes her work as "charming" and decries the petty reasons for her exclusion.<sup>75</sup>

Despite this apparent interest Catherine the Great had in Vigée-Lebrun's work, determining Russia's policy towards the influx of émigrés is difficult. Early in the revolution Empress Catherine expressed horror at the blatant disregard by French revolutionaries of the traditional monarchical system. Moreover, by 1791 she employed censorship within the Russian press to limit access to inflammatory revolutionary ideology.<sup>76</sup> Despite these precautions, the convergence of Russian citizens and French émigrés appears to have been relatively amiable in relation to other countries.

This is not surprising given the prominence French fashion and French ideology had in Russia for close to a century. Leading up to the French Revolution, Russian nobility held a general admiration for the France of the *Ancien Régime*. Despite Empress Catherine's token gestures to preserve a uniquely Russian aesthetic,<sup>77</sup> she, like previous rulers before her, did not hesitate to support French art and artists, at times over their Russian counterparts. As Allen McConnell argues, "Catherine...underestimated home talent and did less than she could have done to foster it."<sup>78</sup> And while she did employ many Russian portraitists, such as Vladimir Borovikovsky, she

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<sup>75</sup> Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman*, 88. See also page 287, endnote 50, for Grimm's original text.

<sup>76</sup> Massie, *Catherine the Great*, 549.

<sup>77</sup> Catherine II did make strides to incorporate Russian heritage into her rule, perhaps because she herself was not Russian but German born. In the 1780's she instituted a policy that required those attending court functions to do so in fabrics made by Russian manufacturers. The styles themselves were still of French origin. For certain ceremonies Catherine went a step further by requiring that Russian national dress be worn by ladies of the court. Nonetheless, as author Tamara Korshonova suggests in *The Art of Costume in Russia 18<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century*, these "Russian" garments were likely a curious mixture of French and Russian elements.

<sup>78</sup> Allen McConnell, "Catherine the Great and the Fine Arts" in *Imperial Russia 1700-1917*, Eds. Ezra Mendelsohn and Marshall S. Shatz (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1988), 50.



also actively sought out French artists and artworks. Accordingly, as the foreword to *Les Français en Russie au siècle des lumières* argues, French influence in architecture, painting, education, commerce, civil engineering, and the military during the eighteenth century is undeniable.<sup>79</sup> Yet, in the same foreword the authors state that many émigrés in Russia, like émigrés in Britain, did not actively engage in the community of their host country.<sup>80</sup>

Despite Russia's general acceptance of these political exiles, it appears that overall opportunities for émigrés were slim. Moreover, at the height of the Terror, many of these exiles, who had escaped with little more than their lives, were viewed with increasing suspicion in the countries where they sought refuge. Therefore, it is striking that the acquaintances Vigée-Lebrun made in Saint Petersburg appear to be mostly Russian nobility. Moreover, a significant majority of her commissions in Russia come from Russian patrons. Catherine the Great herself went out of her way to acknowledge Vigée-Lebrun's arrival and quickly requested an audience with her. Vigée-Lebrun's success in Russia is indicative of both her professional and likely personal proclivities to exist among nobility. Moreover, it hints that she had something to offer the Russian elite—a specific form of representation that was all the more desirable because she, herself, was the creator.

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<sup>79</sup> Anne Mézin and Vladislav Rjéoutski, *Les Français en Russie au siècle de lumières*, (Ferney-Voltaire: Centre international d'étude du XIIIe siècle, 2011), xix. According to Mézin and Rjéoutski “*Leur influence sur la culture russe de cette époque est indéniable. Architecture, peinture, enseignement, commerce, génie civil, art militaire, les Française avaient leur mot à dire dans tous les domaines.*”

<sup>80</sup> Mézin and Rjéoutski, *Les Français en Russie*, xxii. The authors speak of small French and French speaking communities developing in Russia during this period and point out issues of identity. “*Il faut donc considérer que les émigrés francophones formaient une communauté étendue aux frontières floues, une sorte de nébuleuse à l'intérieur de laquelle chacun s'identifiant avec tel groupe plutôt que tel autre, au risque de former des factions, voire de créer des divisions. Ces rapprochements reflètent sans doute une certaine recherche identitaire: comment expliquer en effet les mariages célébrés en Russie entre personnes originaires de la même ville française?*”

## Symbolic and Stylistic Shifts

Vigée-Lebrun's *Empress Maria Fyodorovna* and *Princess Anna Alexandrovna Golitsyna* both overtly display a longing for a pre-Revolutionary depiction, characteristic of Vigée-Lebrun's earlier portraits. This desire goes against trends in portraiture developing contemporaneously elsewhere in Europe, making it even more interesting to consider why her Russian sitters chose the representations they did. In France, the practice of portraiture had undergone a rapid transformation. In her text *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France*, Amy Freund discusses the burgeoning importance of the portrait as a means of underscoring an individual's citizenship. Portraiture, once the expressive domain of the *Ancien Régime*, became a symbol of equality and fraternity categorically opposed to earlier virtues of rank and status. Women's portraits in particular seem to shift from the sumptuous to the simple, as the focus is redirected from their elegance to their loyalty. Amy Freund points out that women's portraits of this era are often mediated by the implicit presence of a man, arguing that "[the] reluctance to picture active and independent female citizenship speaks to the constraints that the Revolution imposed in the political activity of women despite (or because of) its promises of universal liberty and equality."<sup>81</sup> Thus, the construction of Vigée-Lebrun's Russian portraits, such as that of Princess Golitsyna, would have been horribly at odds with the compositions developing in France.

Revolutionary imagery occasionally utilized themes that were prevalent before the fall of the monarchy, particularly imagery of motherhood which had been popularized by Rousseau a

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<sup>81</sup> Amy Freund, *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 126.

quarter of a century earlier. Freund maintains that “at no time in the eighteenth century were Rousseau’s ideas about nature and society more current than during the Revolution.”<sup>82</sup> Whereas motherhood was once simply a popular convention to be portrayed,<sup>83</sup> in Revolutionary France it took on new meanings and increasingly defined how a woman was meant to function in the new state. Freund discusses the underlying political message inherent in François-André Vincent’s portrait *François Bernard Boyer-Fonfrède, and his Family* (Figure 10), a scene of domestic bliss. She sees this as a stilted image emphasizing proper revolutionary values. Madame Boyer-Fonfrède’s bared breast and the presence of her children underscore her role as mother, whereas the father is positioned in a generic role of paternal support. Both figures are dressed in contemporary fashion and every element of the composition is meant to reinforce their adherence to post-Revolutionary values.<sup>84</sup>

At the turn of the century, portraiture in France was irrevocably linked to the country’s specific political concerns and, as such, became a very specific and highly charged form of depiction. However, in countries not undergoing such drastic changes, it would stand to reason that representational trends would remain more static, evolving over time instead of quickly fluctuating. Therefore, wouldn’t Vigée-Lebrun’s work remain relevant elsewhere? This does not appear to be the case, as indicated by the memoirs of another émigré artist, Henri-Pierre Danloux. Danloux immigrated to London in 1792, where he lived for the next decade. Unlike Vigée-Lebrun, who ingratiated herself within Russian society, Danloux struggled to maintain his

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<sup>82</sup> Freund, *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France*, 188.

<sup>83</sup> Vigée-Lebrun did a number of mother and child portraits both in France and Russia.

<sup>84</sup> Freund, *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France*, 201. Freund states that “The portrait feels more like an official revolutionary injunction about the importance of the family than an image of a particular group of individuals; portraiture seems to cede to propaganda.”

practice abroad. According to scholar Angelica Gooden, “during his ten years in Britain Danloux painted about 135 portraits, of which 44 were of British sitters and the majority of the remainder were French.”<sup>85</sup> This is at odds with Vigée-Lebrun’s output where the majority of her sitters appear to be Russian. Danloux claimed that British patrons tended to prefer British portraitists. Moreover, he found that English sitters were less fond of the highly finished canvases that characterized the French school of painting.

Vigée-Lebrun’s painting of Princess Golitsyna contrasts with a contemporaneous portrait composed by British painter George Romney. Romney’s portrait *Emma Hart, Later Lady Hamilton, in a White Turban* (Figure 11), is surprisingly similar in composition.<sup>86</sup> Much like Vigée-Lebrun’s image, Romney depicts Hart simply clad in a white dress, pink sash, and headscarf. But, from a painterly perspective, Romney’s composition is very different. Instead of the highly finished, intricately detailed luminescence that characterizes Vigée-Lebrun’s portrait of Princess Golitsyna, Romney’s portrait of Hart is characterized by bold line and seemingly quick execution. Individual brush strokes can be seen throughout Romney’s portrait. Three wide swaths of pink represent the belt at Hart’s waist. Her dress is composed of blocks of white and grey indicating areas of light and shadow. Even Romney’s outline of Hart’s figure is bold and loosely defined. His composition is demarcated by a looseness of line not present in Vigée-Lebrun’s image.

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<sup>85</sup> Angelica Gooden, “Danloux in England (1792-1802): an Émigré Artist,” in *The French Émigrés in Europe and the Struggle Against Revolution, 1789-1814* Eds. Kristy Carpenter and Philip Mansel (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc. 1999), 166.

<sup>86</sup> Vigée-Lebrun painted numerous images of Hart including *Emma Hart As Ariadne* (1791) and *Lady Hamilton as the Cumaen Sibyl* (1792).

It is this method of painting that Danloux criticized British painters for. Gooden states "...he never really admired what he thought of as the looseness of the English style: to him it betrayed carelessness...and a reprehensible reliance on inborn aptitude."<sup>87</sup> It is precisely this lack of looseness that caused Vigée-Lebrun's work to be criticized in Britain. After briefly returning to Paris, Vigée-Lebrun departed for London in 1803 where she resided for approximately a year and a half. While there, the finish of her canvas, so desirable in France in the past and Russia in the present, is dismissed by her British contemporaries. In a vicious critique of her work, portraitist John Hoppner states:

"Few things have tended to produce more error in judgment passed on pictures, than the imposing quality of smoothness, which is generally conceived to be the effect of successful labour, and close attention to finishing; and appears to have been spread over the works of the insipid, as a kind of snare to catch the ignorant. On the art of spreading these toils, and on a feeble, vulgar, and detailed imitation of articles of furniture and dress, rests the whole of Madame Le Brun's reputation."<sup>88</sup>

Joseph Baillio credits this as a vicious attack from a jealous contemporary.<sup>89</sup> Taking Danloux's experience into account, it would appear that, whether jealous or not, there were obvious differences between British and French portraiture and between British and French taste. Moreover, it suggests that Britain did not feel the same need to appropriate a French visual idiom as did the Russians.

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<sup>87</sup> Gooden, "Danloux in England," 176.

<sup>88</sup> Baillio, *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*, 139.

<sup>89</sup> This was said by Baillio in a recent interview with BBC correspondent Hugh Schofield. See "A delayed tribute to France's most famous woman artist," published September 24, 2016. Accessed October 1, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34340907>

### ***An Alternative Ancien Régime?***

Vigée-Lebrun's memories of Russia, overall largely affirmative, do occasionally veer to the negative. Yet these complaints tend to deal largely with personal, and not professional, matters. In her *Souvenirs* she bitterly recalls the falling out she had with her daughter during her time in Russia<sup>90</sup> and, in a letter to her ex-husband, complains about the cold and the strangeness of the country she found herself in.<sup>91</sup> This latter grievance appears minimal and, potentially, exaggerated given how similar the upper echelons of Russian society were to the Parisian world she left behind. As previously elucidated, early in the eighteenth century Peter I took drastic measures to ensure his country was accepted in what was then defined as the civilized world. While an occasional attempt had been made, over the years, to celebrate Russian nationalism through arts and dress, by the time Vigée-Lebrun arrived in 1795, Russian nobility communicated largely in French and wore fashions similar to those of her home country.

There was a politically expedient reason for Russia to continue identifying with the *Ancien Régime*. Though Russia's initial incursions into Poland and the Ottoman Empire were largely accepted by the Western world, by the end of the century its expansionist policies were beginning to draw negative attention. According to Malia, Catherine the Great's second war with Turkey, begun in 1787, did not win the support of the Philosophes who had long touted her

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<sup>90</sup> Pages 211 to 214 in Evans translation.

<sup>91</sup> Sent from Moscow and dated January 29, 1801. Thank you to Mary Sherriff for providing me a transcript. Portions of this letter can also be found in Evan's "Introduction" to *The Memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun*, page 2.

as an enlightened ruler.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, Malia states that “England, by now concerned about her ambitions, refused to let the Russian fleet sail out of the Baltic to the Mediterranean.”<sup>93</sup> In many ways the outbreak of the French Revolution provided Russia an opportunity to bolster its political identity among other Western countries. By embracing a form of representation associated with the *Ancien Régime*, members of Russia’s nobility attempted to ameliorate their increasingly negative reputation and garner acceptance by associating with the deposed French court. What better way to associate oneself with the French monarchy than by employing Vigée-Lebrun, an artist who made her name as the favored court painter to Marie Antoinette.

In her memoirs Vigée-Lebrun discusses being summoned almost upon her arrival by the Empress, Catherine the Great.<sup>94</sup> This became the first of many interactions she would have with the Imperial family. Indeed, Emperor Paul I, who took the throne after Catherine’s death in 1796, realized the benefit of supporting French émigrés and those who constituted the old guard of the French elite. Therefore, while many Russian citizens feared for their safety under his rule, French émigrés, such as Vigée-Lebrun, received continued backing. This support appears to be generally at odds with policies established in other countries, many of whom seemed to fear the political doctrines that these émigrés might bring.

We see evidence of this desire for *Ancien Régime* imagery in the portraits *Princess Anna Alexandrovna Golitsyna* and *Empress Maria Fyodorovna*. Both works, painted within two years of one another, bear striking resemblance to images Vigée-Lebrun produced over a decade before. And, while Vigée-Lebrun did have a very recognizable aesthetic few of her works

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<sup>92</sup> Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 79.

<sup>93</sup> Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 80.

<sup>94</sup> Vigée-Lebrun, Evans, trans., *Memoirs*, 159.

painted elsewhere abroad show the same exacting level of visual engagement with her earlier French imagery as those she painted while living in Russia. It is well documented that Vigée-Lebrun kept examples of her painting in her studio. This suggests that these portraits were appealing to her new patrons. Moreover, with the Imperial family's knowledge of the contemporary arts practiced in Paris, it is likely that they were aware of many of her images through reports and engravings. Regardless of how Russian society became aware of Vigée-Lebrun's work, given the particularly lucrative career she had in the country, her imagery was highly desired.

In "Catherine's Retinue: Old Age, Fashion, and Historicism in the Nineteenth Century" author Luba Golburt discusses how Russia's ageing nobility, those who served under Catherine the Great, were represented in nineteenth-century literature. She quotes a passage where the main character, Hermann, investigates the bedroom of an elderly countess, finding "two portraits, painted in Paris by Mme Lebrun, hung on the wall. One of them showed a man about forty years old, red-faced and portly, wearing a light-green coat with a star; the other a beautiful young woman with an aquiline nose"<sup>95</sup> The author sought to create an instantly understood image of the ageing countess through a description of her belongings. That these possessions include two works by Vigée-Lebrun suggests how much of the late eighteenth-century Russian nobility identified with her work.

Could Vigée-Lebrun have predicted the popularity of her work in Russia? It is possible that she was, to some extent, certain of success there. After all, in her *Souvenirs*, she recalls that the Russian ambassador encouraged her to relocate with oblique references to potential patronage

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<sup>95</sup> Luba Golburt, "Catherine Retinue: Old Age, Fashion, and Historicism in the Nineteenth Century," *Slavic Review* 68, no. 4 (2009): 786.



from Catherine the Great. Moreover, she had a number of Russian clients already. It is not unthinkable that she would have been aware of her positive reception and thus chose to relocate for financial reasons. It is equally possible that this affinity for her work was serendipitous. Though Vigée-Lebrun left Russia in 1801, it appears she never forgot her time there. Considering the political upheaval that was occurring in France when Vigée-Lebrun moved to Russia in 1795, it is possible she found herself more at home in her new country than if she had been able to return to Paris. In short, Vigée-Lebrun arrived in an alternative *Ancien Régime*.

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Figure 1: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. *Princess Anna Alexandrovna Golitsyna*. c. 1797. Oil on canvas. 135.9 x 100.3 cm. Baltimore Museum of Art.

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Figure 2: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. *Empress Maria Fyodorovna*. 1799. Oil on canvas. The State Hermitage Museum.

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Figure 3: Artist unknown. *Portrait of the Regent Sophia Aleksyevnna*. c. 1680's.

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Figure 4: Jean-Marc Nattier. *Portrait of Catherine I*. 1717. Oil on Canvas. 142.5 x 110 cm. The State Hermitage Museum.

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Figure 5: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. *Marie Antoinette, Queen of France*. 1783. Oil on canvas. 278 x 192 cm. Musée National des Château de Versailles et de Trianon.

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Figure 6: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. *The duchesse d'Orléans*. 1789. Oil on canvas. 101 x 83.5 cm. Musée National des Château de Versailles et de Trianon.



Figure 7: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. *Marquise d'Aguesseau de Fresnes*. 1789. Oil on wood. 107 x 83.2 cm. National Gallery of Art. Samuel H. Kress Collection. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.

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Figure 8: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. *Comtesse Skavronskaia*. 1790. Oil on canvas. 135 x 95 cm. Musée Jacquemart-André.

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Figure 9: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. *Sketch for the Portrait of Ekaterina Vassilievna, comtesse Skavronskaia*. Before 1790. 20.4 x 18.7 cm. Musée Jacquemart-André.

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Figure 10: François-André Vincent. *François Bernard Boyer-Fonfrède, and his Family*. 1801. Oil on canvas. 253 x 166 cm. Musée National des Château de Versailles et de Trianon.

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Figure 11: George Romney. *Emma Hart, Later Lady Hamilton, in a White Turban*. c. 1791. Oil on canvas. 81.3 x 65.4 cm. The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens.

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