

Vigée Le Brun at the Grand Palais¹

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Vigée Le Brun, La duchesse de Polignac (Versailles MV8971)

Earlier this week I went to the opening of the extraordinary Vigée Le Brun exhibition, and I cancelled my planned visit to the Fragonard exhibition the following morning to return to the Grand Palais for more. You should make every effort to go while it is on in Paris until next January, when it moves to New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art, February–May 2016) and Ottawa (National Gallery of Canada, June–September 2016).

Two people are celebrated in this show. The one whose name isn't at the top of the poster is Joseph Baillio: that rare thing, a francophone American (there are many francophiles), the doyen of Vigée Le Brun studies, a scholar–dealer who brings together the best in traditions that are sometimes thought to be in conflict. His meticulous scholarship and brilliant eye have combined with his enthusiasm, diplomacy and unwearying toil over half a century to make this show possible. It brings together some 150 pictures² many of which have been inaccessible or known only from photographs, and some completely unknown to date. The organisers are to be congratulated in so brave an approach: an exhibition of this many portraits from a single artist of two centuries past is not one that would easily fly in most countries.

But Vigée Le Brun is different. Enthusiasm comes from various quarters: feminists, ultras, social historians, costume specialists, philosophers... all have seen something in (or projected onto) Vigée Le Brun to create a vast industry ranging from Ph.D. theses and scholarly biographies to websites, social media and worthless gift-shop tat. Some of these factions are strange bed-fellows: the Americans who take Vigée Le Brun to their hearts (the number of exquisite masterpieces that grace the walls of lesser known US cities will infuriate the French establishment) also laud Lafayette (whose Revolutionary inclinations she detested) and David

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² Of 160 numbers in the catalogue, 1 is not exhibited; 17 are by other artists (1 sculpture, 13 oil paintings and 3 pastels); there are 119 oil paintings by Vigée Le Brun (including 10 on panel), 8 drawings (of which 3 have touches of pastel), 8 pastel landscape studies and 18 pastel portraits.

(whom she refused to speak to after her return to France). Time erodes the detail of celebrity. And often the research, analysis or commentary is ill informed. That of course is why we have needed this exhibition for so long: it is 33 years since the last, in Texas, and a generation of enthusiasts have got by without much idea of what her pictures are really like.

What the industry has devoured and ploughed over to exhaustion are the *Souvenirs* that the artist left (this month alone not one, but two new illustrated editions are published) and in which, upstaging almost all her contemporaries, she set her own agenda. You don't have to have a Ph.D. in post-structuralism to realise that the *Souvenirs* are unreliable (more, as Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac reminds us, by omission than deliberate falsification), but in the absence of any other narrative we all, consciously or not, fall into the traps they set. At the practical level, any new addition to the œuvre with an unidentified sitter is immediately sought in the work lists she left (a resource few artists have provided) – and however much we try to be cautious, an apparent match between date and possible sitter ends up being a certainty (several such pitfalls are mentioned in the catalogue). On a more important level, her account of her development as an artist and what she learned from others needs to be treated with some scepticism. As a document of social history, much must be read between the lines. To take a single example, her bizarre relationship with her husband is obviously far more complicated than the *Souvenirs* reveal: for some readers the penny only drops when fire breaks out at the house Countess Stroganov has lent her in Moscow – and we learn that her first concern is for the old master paintings her husband (from whom she is supposed to be completely separated) has consigned to her apparently as dealing stock.

The charge against her is that there is something false too in the portraits: something more than the inevitable glossing over of warts that any professional portraitist must do to remain in business. The charge goes on to specify the falseness of her picture of the *douceur de vivre* under the Ancien Régime, and cites how little her portraits change over the fifty years that follow the Revolution; that her tireless peregrinations through Europe evidence a prelapsarian quest (perhaps with a post-Freudian twist of father-infatuation), the *Souvenirs* being as prettified as her portraits. It's a charge that is usually levelled by those who haven't looked hard at her work, but it can't be quite so easily dismissed as Hoppner's rabid attack on the finish of her work (this was not just a rejection of prettiness but in part reflected the absence in Britain of the formal training structure required to achieve this standard of craftsmanship – a continuation of the traditional confrontation between the British and French schools discussed in my article in the Liotard exhibition catalogue). This exhibition will provide a framework within which to take on the debate in a far better informed way.

There are several approaches to single-artist retrospectives. One is to present only the finest examples, those with the "wallpower" to have the critics raving and thus bring in the crowds. But that sifting is also a distortion. What a serious scholarly show like this must do, as it does, is present a representative selection of the works: one from which we go away with as complete an idea of the œuvre as possible. In the case of an artist as good as Vigée Le Brun, it is easy to reject attributions simply because they don't meet some quality threshold that the expert sets: when those thresholds are set, say, based on what is in the Louvre, they can lead to what scientists call false negatives. The huge achievement here is the opportunity greatly to fill out our understanding of Vigée Le Brun's work. We recognise rapidly that she was at once more varied, more various and more variable than we had hitherto realized. In amongst several dozen world class masterpieces that would hold their own with any portrait from any age, and a good many more first class examples, there are others which are not at this level. I don't mean to discuss each case, though you will find your own examples.

The thematic arrangement of the exhibition is not as irritating an approach as it can so easily be since the themes themselves are broadly chronological. But a strict time sequence would still I think be preferable in explaining the evolution of her style. Particularly interesting are the variety and development of her poses, and how they reflect influences from other artists; but these are not discussed systematically. The show is generously laid out, the paintings well hung and clearly lit (but see below), and the walls attractively decorated in various sophisticated (yes, pastel) shades mostly of blue–green–grey tonality. Works in various media are intermixed, and there is a fair (but not over-generous) selection of works by other artists. The two pastels by her father are of outstanding quality (and remove one of the challenges to the veracity of the *Souvenirs* where she claimed “il y a même des portraits de lui qui sont digne du fameux Latour”). Absent however is any example by the much-maligned Davesne, from whom she may well have learned a great deal more than she is prepared to admit. The exhibition takes the line that she was as self-made as she claims: I should have liked to probe this a bit more deeply.

The catalogue is a splendid record of the exhibition (if not a substitute for the long-awaited catalogue raisonné). It was originally planned on a far larger scale, with articles from a wider range of specialists. Greatly cut down from the original prospectus, no doubt in part for financial reasons (the price is already €50), in place of a series of focused essays, we are left with narratives which largely track annotated *Souvenirs*, mostly contributed by the commissariat representing the hosting institutions. A short article on women artists confines itself only to those in the Académie royale, which is curious given the barriers to their admission: there is much more to be said about how women succeeded outside that institution – but obviously this wasn’t possible within the space allotted. The solution would have been to follow the example from the [Karlsruhe exhibition](#) and issue a second volume containing the in-depth specialist articles that were originally planned. Within these limitations the volume is beautifully produced (but not without the odd mistake that will concern only pedants: no one cares about noble titles any more, and a number of other misprints and minor errors survive).



Vigée Le Brun, Alexandrine Brongniart (National Gallery)

The articles understandably focus on the works in the show. Examples such as the primary version of the *Autoportrait au chapeau de paille*, which was not lent, would obviously have been a

valuable addition to the exhibition – and would probably have gone on the cover instead of the duchesse de Polignac which so much resembles it (one [critic](#) has already confused them). Of course it is the inability to distinguish the physiognomies that fuels the critics' charges. It is bizarre that it is not even reproduced in the catalogue: the National Gallery [copy](#) is also omitted (in favour of a print, which appears twice in the catalogue). Despite the endless discussion of Vigée Le Brun's teeth (books have indeed been written), I'm not sure if anyone else has noticed that it is her upper teeth which appear in the NG picture, but the lower ones in the primary version. (I say more about this, and La Tour's teeth, in this [essay](#).) It is not the only work requested but refused (some for legitimate conservation concerns), the reproduction of which would nevertheless have interested readers.

What neither the exhibition nor the catalogue addresses are the technical aspects of her work. There are no x-rays or micrographs, few image details (and none of signatures), nothing about her pigments, materials, choice of support. (Vigée Le Brun's mastery of oil on panel was a special accomplishment: although these works are particularly difficult to borrow, the ten in the exhibition include the extraordinary masterpieces *Hubert Robert*, *Alexandrine Brongniart* and the *marquise de Grollier*.) Pentimenti, underdrawing, condition are all part of the apparatus we need to understand a painter's work, and these angles are overlooked in favour of narrative about the sitters. I think the debate about just how far she was self-made could have been profoundly illuminated by scientific analysis of her pigments and layering techniques compared with her contemporaries' and teachers' practices.



Vigée Le Brun, Madame Adélaïde (La Fère, musée Jeanne-d'Aboville)

The two portraits of Mesdames Adélaïde and Victoire (they were of course the tantes, not grands-tantes, of Louis XVI as the catalogue has) present some interesting questions (among them that of conservation practices in La Fère and Phoenix where they are respectively housed: the former with the dull glow of French age, the latter the sparkle beloved in America). Vigée Le Brun presents them both wearing black, but otherwise bearing up remarkably well given the tragic situation they found themselves in by 1791, in exile in Italy: both would die within the decade.



Labille-Guiard, Madame Adélaïde (Versailles)

The catalogue notes that the ladies were also portrayed by Labille-Guiard: her pastels (which are at Versailles but are neither lent nor reproduced) are, we are told (justly), “étroitement liés au conventions de l’art de cour”: what we are not told is that Labille-Guiard, working within that constraint, nevertheless manages to deliver a sense of dignity which today some think more profound than the ease and freedom projected by her competitor. (Truthfulness was not always good for business: in business parlance we would identify the perverse incentives and conflicting aims of balancing future reputation with immediate market forces.) In contrast the one pastel by Labille-Guiard which is shown (correctly I think re-identified as of one of her pupils) is, perhaps by reason of its condition, not I felt the most convincing demonstration of the statement that Labille-Guiard “n’avait rien à envier à Mme Vigée Le Brun”. But the fact remains, whatever Labille-Guiard’s standing with specialists, there is most unlikely to be sufficient public demand for a Labille-Guiard retrospective on this scale.

Nowhere do the themes I have touched on already arise with greater urgency than in the generous group of thirty or so of Vigée Le Brun’s own pastels included in the exhibition. Joseph Baillio has said (for example in the BBC [report](#) cited above) that “she was one of the greatest pastellists of all time”, and I agree with that. But I’m not sure that the general visitor will come away with that impression. And you can see why that puzzle troubles me, and why I should want to delve further into some of the reasons why this might have happened – particularly since the exhibition includes perhaps half a dozen absolutely stunning examples of her pastels.

– Sometimes it can seem that pastels and oils don’t sit well together: their wallpower operates at different voltages. A string quartet will be drowned by a symphony orchestra. But the Karoline Luise exhibition at Karlsruhe showed that that need not be the case.

– What does play a role is lighting: not just because works on paper require different light levels, so mixing them can be tricky (the RA Moroni exhibition showed that). But here at the Grand Palais there was a particular problem from the use of overhead LED spots with pastels (I’ve written about this [before](#): the Edinburgh Liotard exhibition and the women artists at Stockholm, *Stoltbet och fördom*, both demonstrated the same problem). The special quality of pastel lies in its unique reflectivity and luminosity which create surfaces of unequalled beauty: those virtues invert to vices when ambient, natural light is replaced by harsh, raking LEDs which reveal all the imperfections in the surfaces. Smooth healthy flesh turns to impasto pathology; gorgeous

skintones take on eerie, Grünewaldian hues of pallid greens; joins in paper acquire a prominence that was never intended. This doesn't seem to happen in the same way with oils (although very large ones may present glare issues).

– Exacerbating this was the condition issue that attended a number of the examples. It is unnecessary to go into individual cases, but this show proved just how much pastels can lose irreparably when the equivalent damage to oil paintings can be invisibly repaired. Some were bleached by sunlight. Some had lost the “fleur”, one rather more than the fleur. The risks involved in transporting and exhibiting pastels, particularly large ovals, are discussed in Chap. V of my [Prolegomena](#).

– Several important works were missing. *Montbarrey*, from Versailles, is an important example, as is the earlier, and perhaps awkward, Angers *L'Innocence se réfugiant dans les bras de Justice* (which is larger than the Hodgkins example). Another in a private collection was refused for conservation considerations which perhaps are more readily understandable in the light of the comments above. All should have been reproduced (*Montbarrey* is, on p. 214).

Yet Joseph Baillio's comment was right, and the decision to include pastels fundamental. They were a major part of her œuvre (and certainly not just weak attempts at oil painting). (For more on this, see the main [entry](#) in my *Dictionary*, the article will shortly be updated, but includes all the pastels in the show; there is also a chronological [checklist](#) of all the datable pastels.) They were where she started (under the guidance of a father who was the one person she revered unreservedly throughout her life) – and where she finished (as the generous group of landscape sketches in the final room shows). Crucially they were how she worked out ideas and experimented and made mistakes (and with pastel those mistakes cannot be corrected). They were free from the integument that envelopes the oil portraits. And as you wonder how to penetrate the integument of the *Souvenirs*, these pastels give you the closest idea you can have as to what was really going on in her head. The gorgeous Caillot children, of unequalled mastery; the perfection of the duchesse de Guiche, epitomising everything her art stood for; the Montesquiou-Fezensac baby: these take you under her skin.



Vigée Le Brun, La duchesse de Guiche (private collection)

I'm not going to append a list of specific observations on individual works: that's for a different article. But one minor housekeeping point for the RMN: when you invite people to a private view, don't keep them out in a queue on a damp September evening for half an hour. It's not the first time you've done it to me. I go to private views to avoid queuing: when I went back the day after I walked in immediately – tip: you have to be a Sociétaire of the Amis du Louvre; a small investment for returns like those this exhibition offers.

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