

Reframing Marie Antoinette: The Queen's Transformation through Portraiture During Late 18th-Century France

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Abstract. This research paper delves into a certain time period of the captivating history of Marie Antoinette's reign as the Queen of France from 1774 to 1793 through the lens of 18th-century portraiture. Amidst her declining image, her portrait artist Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun emerged as a key influencer in salvaging Marie Antoinette's tarnished reputation. After providing an overview of the socio-political context of the time period, a comparison is made between two portraits of the queen – Marie Antoinette en Chemise and Marie Antoinette and Her Children – that demonstrates the similarities and differences in the queen's intentions and behaviour. Through a detailed visual analysis, we argue that the queen changes from a carefree spirit who exhibits limited adherence to French conventions to a responsible and mature woman and mother. In this transformation, she aligns herself with France's traditions, showing her country that the people's priorities and values come first. Related works and other scholarly opinions are embedded in this analysis to provide a variety of viewpoints and pinpoint the distinctive departure of this paper from their interpretations.

Keywords: Marie Antoinette; Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun; late 18th-century Portraiture; Marie Antoinette en Chemise; La Reine en Gaulle; Marie Antoinette and Her Children.

1. Introduction

Reigning as queen of France from 1774 to 1793, Marie Antoinette, along with her husband King Louis XVI, were the final monarchs to rule the country before the outbreak of the French Revolution. As the queen's image declined, the French public grew unhesitant in challenging the authority of the monarchy. During this tumultuous period, one of Marie Antoinette's favourite portrait artists, Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, proved to be an instrumental figure in improving the queen's deteriorating reputation. [1]



Figure 1. Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, Marie Antoinette en Chemise, 1783, oil on canvas
 Private Collection of Hessische Hausstiftung, Krongberg, Germany

Numerous scholars have delved into the history and life of Queen Marie Antoinette including her relationship with close acquaintances, especially her portrait artist, and the impacts of portraiture on her image and public perception. For instance, Bailey Compton's article proposed that the queen and her portrait artist had a strong bond, were both symbols of power and womanhood in their respective fields, and grew in influence together.[2] Lauren De Angelis argued that the queen was unjustly slandered by the public and not given the chance to prove her true capabilities as queen of France. [3]

Among the examined articles and issues, Kelly Hall's paper is of great relevance as it focuses on one of the queen's earlier portraits, *Marie Antoinette en Chemise*, which was displayed at the Salon of 1783. (Figure 1) Hall argues that the problematic aspect of this painting was that it was put on display to the public at the Salon of 1783.[4] This portrait did not represent the moral values of the time or the political and familial duties of a queen; it instead offered a portrayal of the queen's frivolity and vanity, so Vigée Le Brun's painting was eventually removed from the Salon. [5] A different view can be found in Todd Larkin's dissertation, stating that the queen initially intended for this portrait to be viewed by a small circle of friends as a distinct representation of herself from her formal role as a consort. She was very fond of this painting and likely requested Vigée Le Brun to include it in the Salon. [6] Then, in Lydia Katherine Duggins' scholarly article about Queen Marie Antoinette, she argues that after the reveal of *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* to the public and the severe criticism from the French people, the queen has been attempting to recapture their approval through two of Vigée Le Brun's portraits: first, *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* (1787) and later, *Marie Antoinette "en robe de velours bleu"* (1788).[7] (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Marie Antoinette and Her Children*, 1787, oil on canvas, Château de Versailles

Whereas Duggins focuses on the queen's efforts to please the public and compares her portraits to those of previous queens, this paper focuses on the comparison and analysis of two of the queen's most famous paintings, *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* (1783) and *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* (1787). It will visually analyze artistic elements in these portraits, aiming to delve into the artist's underlying intentions. This paper investigates how through personal growth and maturity, Marie Antoinette's rationale for commissioning portraits from Vigée Le Brun developed over time. It argues

that initially, she may have prioritized her personal interests more, but as she faced the harsh judgments of the public, her motivations shifted towards taking a more strategic approach that instead appeals to the interests of the people. She became acutely aware of the need for regaining public favour, demonstrating to the French populace that their concerns took precedence over her own, and endeavours to dispel the outrageous myths created about her.

The following section of this paper will be comprised of two parts. The first section will introduce the queen's passion for fashion and her relationships with her royal portrait artist Vigée Le Brun and fashion designer Rose Bertin. The second section will be a comparison between the two portraits of the queen, *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* (1783) and *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* (1787). This offers valuable insights into the complexities of Marie Antoinette's character and her roles as both a queen and a mother.

2. Marie Antoinette's Transformation Through Portraiture

2.1. The Story Behind Marie Antoinette: Fashion, Influence, and Resilience

Queen Marie Antoinette's indelible mark on history extends to many realms; this section covers her influence on fashion, where her extravagant tastes and sartorial choices both defined an era and ignited public scrutiny. As we delve into this account of the queen's life, we unveil the layers of Marie Antoinette's world, where fashion, art, and political tumult interweave to shape her legacy.

Queen Marie Antoinette was born and raised in Austria as the fifteenth and penultimate child of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria and Holy Roman Emperor Francis I. [8] At the age of 14, Marie Antoinette married the Dauphin of France, Louis-Auguste (who later became King Louis XVI), in 1770 as part of a strategic political alliance between France and Austria.(Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Marie Antoinette.") Upon ascending to the throne in 1774, Marie Antoinette became Queen of France, a position that would shape her life and reputation in many ways unforeseen to herself and the general public as well. During her reign, the queen faced numerous challenges, including political turmoil, economic difficulties, and negative public sentiment. As public resentment peaked in 1789, it led to the storming of the Bastille, marking the beginning of the French Revolution— a period that lasted until 1799 which officially ended the French monarchy.(Duggins, 6.)

At the beginning of her reign, Marie Antoinette faced numerous challenges during her time at Versailles. Dealing with an unaffectionate husband and being separated from her family at a young age, she sought solace by immersing herself in fashion and frivolous pursuits to temporarily escape her unhappiness.(Lauren De Angelis, "Misunderstood Monarch?" 3.) It was during this time that Rose Bertin, the talented dressmaker for the queen, took charge of creating Marie Antoinette's attire. Bertin gained fame for her innovative and diverse designs, which included extravagant dresses, intricate pouf hairstyles, and elegant muslin gowns. [9] By embracing these distinct styles, Marie Antoinette quickly became a trendsetter in the fashion world. The queen's affinity for Bertin's designs drew attention from various members of her inner circle, including Princesse de Lamballe and Vigée Le Brun, who became clients of the celebrated dressmaker. [10]

Despite Marie Antoinette's undeniable influence on fashion, her pursuits in this area did attract criticism from some of the French people. The public was enraged by her extravagant spending and held her accountable for the country's financial troubles, even though other members of the court had equally extravagant expenditures.(Duggins, 23.) For instance, Comte d'Artois purchased 365 pairs of shoes to wear each day of the year, and both he and Comte de Provence accrued a staggering 31 million livres in gambling debt.(Ibid., 23.) While Marie Antoinette was not the sole cause of these financial problems, being a foreigner in the French court made her an easier target to blame.(Ibid., 23.)

As the queen's reputation was constantly under attack, one person could help save her: Vigée Le Brun. Vigée Le Brun was born in 1755, the daughter of pastel painter Louis Vigée, whose artistic talent she inherited from.[11] She quickly rose to prominence as an artist in France and had an extraordinary

talent for painting since her youth. At just fifteen years old, she became a professional artist and began accepting portrait commissions, quickly gaining popularity among the French aristocracy.[12] Vigée Le Brun's career reached new heights when she was appointed as the official portrait painter of Queen Marie Antoinette in 1778, and then admitted to the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture under the request of Marie Antoinette in 1783. She held a special place in Marie Antoinette's heart, being one of her favourite portrait artists who could capture the queen's grace, charm, and regal demeanour in a special way, unlike previous portrait artists. The deep connection between Vigée Le Brun and Marie Antoinette is evident in the emotion and tenderness that emanate from each canvas, making these portraits not merely representations but windows into the soul of Marie Antoinette herself. Throughout her career, Vigée Le Brun stood out among portrait artists with her innovative techniques and daring use of colours by portraying her sitters in clothing that emphasized simplicity and grace, rather than conforming to the extravagant fashion of the time. [13]

2.2. A Visual Comparison of Two Portraits

In this section, a visual comparison will be made between *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* (1783) and *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* (1787) in order to highlight the change in the queen's character and behaviour and how she has become a mature individual with a different set of priorities for herself and her country. By analyzing the similarities and differences in the queen's visual portrayal, we are able to achieve a more complex understanding of these pivotal moments during her life.

Portraiture was very popular and important in the 18th century. It not only served as a form of artistic expression but also a powerful tool for shaping public perceptions, social status, and political narratives. These portraits were commissioned by the nobility, bourgeoisie, and even the emerging middle class as a way of displaying their wealth and status. [14] Particularly during the reign of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette, royal portraiture took on heightened propagandistic significance. This period was characterized by political unrest and revolutionary movements in France, and so it became essential for the monarchy to uphold a favourable public image and secure the continued trust of their people. (Duggins, 1) Through these carefully crafted portrayals, the monarchy sought to reinforce its legitimacy and inspire loyalty and admiration from the populace, thereby ensuring its stability and authority during turbulent times.



Figure 3. Élisabethh Louise Vigée Le Brun, Marie Antoinette in a Court Dress, 1778, oil on canvas
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Queen Marie Antoinette was often portrayed in typical Rococo-style portraits such as Vigée Le Brun's first painting of the queen, *Marie Antoinette in a Court Dress* (1778). (Muffet Jones, Introduction To Art (Boise: Boise State Pressbooks, n.d.). The most prominent portrait styles during Vigée Le Brun's career were Rococo and Neoclassical styles. The Rococo style prioritized asymmetry, bright colours, and ornateness, whereas the Neoclassical style, in contrast, emphasized order, minimal use of colour, and simplicity. In fact, Neoclassical artworks were often seen as a reaction to the frivolous and light-hearted nature of the Rococo period. These art styles spread to many different mediums of art including architecture, music, sculpture, and portraiture.) (Figure 3) This painting conforms to French tradition; the queen is in a very extravagant ball gown, her hair styled exquisitely, and overall portrayed in regal finery. Although this painting suggests that the queen did initially try to adhere to traditional French portraits, this portrait eclipses the queen's personality. The queen wanted to see herself depicted in activities she enjoyed; seeking a departure from the norm, she decided to commission a different-styled painting entitled *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* in 1783. [15]

In *Marie Antoinette en Chemise*, the queen is depicted in a simple and carefree manner. She is dressed in a white muslin dress with a gold ribbon, known as "l'enfant" (child), tied around her waist. [16] Her hair is loose and tucked underneath her straw hat that is embellished by a blue feather. There is no jewelry on the queen. She is holding a single rose, in the process of making a bouquet, an activity likely done during her time at the Petit Trianon. (Ibid.) The queen has a rosy complexion and subtle smile, exuding a sense of youthfulness and gaiety in this portrait. There is a slightly mystical aura to this portrayal, as the background is completely dark, providing a stark contrast to her white dress; this lets the queen's presence truly shine through in this painting. [17] The colours of her hat, the blue feathers, the dress, and the bundle of roses are soft and toned down, making it pleasant and calming for viewers. This depiction demonstrates the carefree manner of the queen during this time.

In *Marie Antoinette and Her Children*, the queen is also portrayed simply, but with more serious undertones than the simplicity shown in *Marie Antoinette en Chemise*. The queen is in a red dress, sitting down with her youngest son, Louis XVII, in her lap. Her daughter, Marie-Thérèse, is beside her, gazing lovingly at her mother. Her eldest son, Louis-Joseph, is a few feet away from them standing on the right. He is pointing at an empty cradle, which signifies the death of Marie Antoinette's baby girl, Sophie-Béatrice, who died of Tuberculosis while the painting was still in progress. [18] This element was included with the aim of demonstrating the queen's vulnerability and relatability to other mothers of the country, representing the similar responsibilities and challenges the queen faces as a mother. (Ibid.) Similar to *Marie Antoinette en Chemise*, she wears minimal jewelry. She has on a modest pair of earrings and does not wear a necklace. This deliberate choice holds significance, as it reflects her desire to distance herself from the infamous Diamond Necklace scandal, proving that diamonds hold little importance to her. (Duggins, 25. The Diamond Necklace Affair (1784 - 1786) was a turning point in Marie Antoinette's career as queen as this event further showed the public's lack of respect and trust for Marie Antoinette. Even though the queen had nothing to do with this scandal and had no intentions of using malicious ways to take the necklace commissioned for Madame du Barry as she was framed to be, her fabricated involvement in this scheme led the French people to question that her actions might have not been all that implausible. The court case then ruled that the individuals involved in this affair were not guilty, believing that the queen's actions could have been entirely possible based on her reputation at the time. Amid such events, the queen realized that almost whatever she does elicits negative and fabricated stories about herself and comes to terms with the public's dissatisfaction and hatred towards her. The portrayal of the queen is much different in *Marie Antoinette and Her Children*.) Instead, her true treasures are her beloved children. In this portrait, the queen's complexion retains its rosy glow, similar to her previous portrayal in her chemise dress. However, it now emanates a sense of maternal love and tenderness, signifying a notable shift in her character and temperament. (Duggins, 35.) The prevalence of the colour red in this painting, especially shown in the matching shade between the daughter and the queen, underscore feelings of love and affection that permeate the entire portrait. It is evident that

from this portrayal, *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* captures a more serious undertone that conveys the queen's motherhood and sense of responsibility that is less apparent in *Marie Antoinette en Chemise*.

2.3. The Change in Marie Antoinette's Public Image: A Shift in Priorities

The significance of *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* is that this painting shows how the queen prioritizes her personal interests slightly more at the beginning of her reign. The dress that she is depicted in was commonly worn at the Petit Trianon, where she spent most of her time, and Marie Antoinette wanted to reflect a truer version of herself on a daily basis in her portraits. Kelly Hall contends that the decision to display *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* in the Salon was "due to the myopic nature of Marie Antoinette's reading of her place in court" and Vigée Le Brun's inexperience with monarchical portraits. [19] However, in reality, these actions taken by Marie Antoinette were because of her determination to construct a new public identity demonstrating her independence as a queen, and not "the older model of queenly duty and passivity." [20] In fact, at the Salon of 1783, she was heard to have said, "Je ne suis plus la Reine, je suis moi" (I am no longer the Queen, I am me). (Ibid.) This statement shows that at the start of her reign, the queen prioritized her interest in presenting herself as this new and independent woman, not like the queens from the past – no matter how the public may react to her.

Upon observing the 1787 portrait of *Marie Antoinette and Her Children*, we can identify the queen's changed character and her willingness to uphold traditional French values. As the queen's reputation was plummeting at the time, Marie Antoinette's goals were no longer prioritizing that the public should see her as an independent and unconventional woman, but instead, a caring and loving mother who was just like other mothers of the nation. The portrayal of her with her children shows Marie Antoinette's alliance with French tradition, embracing and putting her role as a mother first before politics and her other duties as queen. (Duggins, 39.) This can be seen in the painting as her crown is positioned aside, and cast into the shadows. Unlike *Marie Antoinette en Chemise*, this painting shows that the queen is taking her duties more seriously and not in the lighthearted manner she may have exhibited four years prior. Showing the French people that she values their traditions more than her own personal values became Marie Antoinette's most important priority. It represents her genuine desire of showing the public that she really is not what the libels recreate her to be and crafts this portrait of her with her children with a deliberate and oriented goal of winning the hearts of the French public again.

2.4. The Public Response

When *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* was unveiled to the public, people were enraged. As evidently shown in the portrait, the queen is clothed in a *gaulle* – a sheer white muslin dress – which fits loosely underneath more decorated clothing. (Duggins, 18.) People at the time saw it as the queen being portrayed in her undergarments and many criticized Marie Antoinette for her improper and unqueenly behaviour. [21] What drew even more criticism was the fact that this white fabric was made of imported cotton, and not Lyonnaise silk, which eventually led to the decline of the silk industry in France, causing further uproar. (Ibid.) The public saw this portrayal of the queen as unpatriotic and the media continued to depict the queen this way until her demise. (Ibid)

In comparison, after the reveal of *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* in 1787, there was a mixed public reaction. Many critics argued that the painting showed that the queen lacked affection and was rather stiff sitting upright. (Duggins, 34.) These critics assert that the portrait inadvertently portrays the queen as distant from her children, despite the original intent being to depict her in a dignified and regal manner. (Ibid., 34.) Despite these remarks, many people responded positively to the portrait. Reviews praised that the painting demonstrated Marie Antoinette's dual identity as queen and mother. Viewers were also able to see the tenderness and affection of their queen. (Ibid., 35.) However, the painting was publicized a little late as *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* was made public four years ago in 1783, and the intensity of rumours and stories about the queen had sufficient time to circulate and

escalate. Thus, while this portrait did achieve Marie Antoinette's goal of regaining public favour to some extent, the queen would still need to continuously redefine her image to maintain this positive public perception before it succumbed to the media's influence.

3. Conclusion

In sum, Marie Antoinette's portrait journey, as captured by Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, offers a fascinating glimpse into the queen's evolving character and her attempts to navigate the challenges of her reign. While *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* emphasized the queen's yearning to be seen as an independent and new woman, someone unlike conventional portrayals of queens in the past, it faced intense public backlash. After a series of events following the reveal of this portrait, it was necessary for the queen to change the way she was perceived. The public's opinion mattered more than the opinion of her own. When *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* was revealed four years later, a completely different side of the queen was shown to the public; as part of a painting that was grounded in traditional French values, it received a more positive public response. Ultimately, these portraits transcend mere artistic representations, serving as poignant historical documents that illuminate the complex journey of a queen who sought not only to understand herself but also to be understood by her nation.

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