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« *Portrait de l'artiste à son chevalet* ». *La pratique de l'autoportrait par les artistes femmes et hommes dans le dernier tiers du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*

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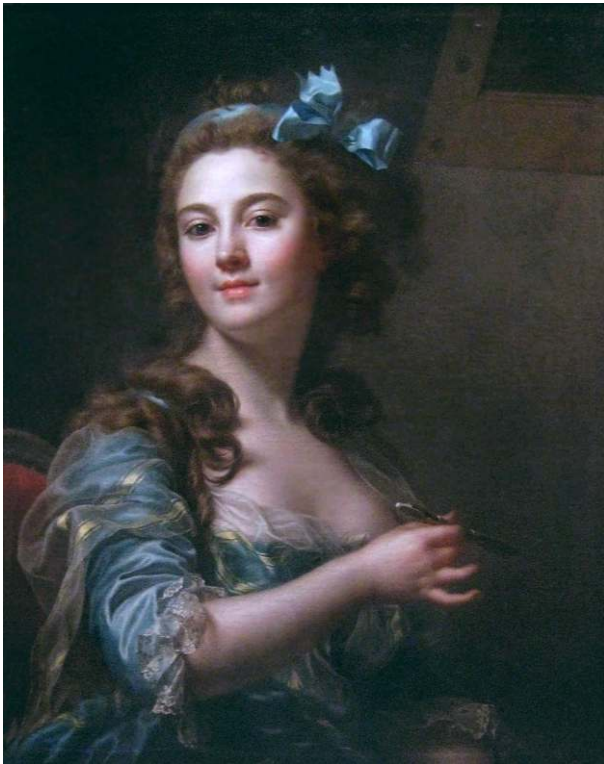
- 1 Self-portrait is as old as painting itself. As Pierre Vaisse reminds us, “self-portrait is a genre much too widespread and common, its forms and functions too varied” for it to be amenable to a single and unambiguous interpretation<sup>1</sup>. But despite the great number of books dealing with the self-portrait in painting or sculpture, there are few attempts to answer this simple question: from an artist’s point of view, why depict oneself? I shall first examine, in what might be referred to as a ‘materialist’ approach, the practice of self-portraiture among artists of the late eighteenth century, with a focus on the social and material conditions that could lead artists to depict themselves. Then, I shall examine more particularly self-portraiture as practised by women; the analysis of this practice, which was particularly fashionable for women at the time, will allow me to deal with the unprecedented process of feminisation the art world was then undergoing, one of the consequences of which was the sudden vogue for images of women at their easels.
- 2 The most obvious reason why an artist might choose to depict himself/herself is one of convenience: in terms of practicing portraiture, nothing could be easier than painting oneself (which explains why young artists, in particular, did so), especially when there was no one to model and when artists wished to try out such and such a pose, or such and such play of light and shadows. Unfortunately, since they were intended as exercises, these drawings or paintings have seldom survived to the present day<sup>2</sup>. In the same way, out of a need to practice or a desire to paint unusual expressions (in line with the treatises on physiognomics, so in vogue at the time, for instance), artists sometimes depicted themselves in original poses or in uncharacteristically realistic ways<sup>3</sup>. This type of self-portrait was a sort of studio exercise, which could (or could not) be intended for public consumption. Showing a particularly well executed self-portrait was doubtless the

best proof of the artist's talent and capacity to paint lifelike portraits: in these cases, self-portrait could be specifically designed to attract customers wishing to commission portraits<sup>4</sup>.

- 3 It was also common at this period for artists to give self-portraits to their friends or family members, as tokens of gratitude for example; it should be remembered that, in an era when drawing and painting were the sole means of preserving the likeness of a loved one, portraits were indeed very precious<sup>5</sup>.
- 4 In addition to being exercises in style or tokens of affection, self-portraits could also be made in pursuit of glory<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, self-portraits were signs of social success, validations in painted form; which is why artists often delighted in depicting themselves as refined individuals surrounded by books and precious objects, or in allegorical poses suggestive of their exceptional status<sup>7</sup>.
- 5 Finally, some self-portraits were meant to send a message – a thanksgiving or homage to some patron or master. Certain aesthetic loyalties could be proclaimed via self-portrait, for example when one adopted in his/her painting a motif (or a pose, an expression, etc.) known to refer to another artist whose follower he/she thus claimed to be<sup>8</sup>. These declamatory self-portraits often contain utterly unrealistic depictions of painting: while artists tended to depict themselves at their easel or palette in hand, it was frequently either in attire not particularly suited to the action of painting in the real world, or surrounded by objects depicted there only for symbolic significance. Some self-portraits must therefore only be seen as allegorical representations of painting, or as idealised or metaphorical illustrations of what painting meant to the artist. There are, in this latter category, enigmatic canvases, like the Van Dyck's famous self-portrait<sup>9</sup>, or Courbet's *Atelier du peintre*, which is an allegorical depiction of the painter's life, entourage and work<sup>10</sup>. In this perspective, a few women artists also depicted themselves as the muse of painting (Artemisia Gentileschi was supposedly the first to have done this) or as Dibutade, the mythical inventor of drawing<sup>11</sup>.
- 6 Finally, it is important to point out that these different categories of self-portrait (as exercise, gift, homage, or allegory) are not mutually exclusive. Likewise, none of them was limited to one sex or another: men and women throughout history have turned their hand to every kind of self-portrait.
- 7 Works by female artists do nevertheless offer a further category of self-portraiture, one that is very gendered and very much the product of the unique circumstances pertaining in the last third of the eighteenth century in France: the "circumstantial" self-portrait. These were painted by a generation of women who perfectly understood that being noticed by the public (instead of the Academy) as well as attracting press attention was now ever more important for artists who wanted to be recognized as such<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, fine arts were fashionable as never before in the 1780s: publications about the arts, technical treatises (on drawing, pastels, watercolours and painting) and specialised periodicals had never been so various and their readership so large; Salons and exhibitions (Salon de l'Académie royale ou de l'Académie de Saint-Luc, Salon de la Correspondance) drew a wider and more numerous public; above all, with knowledge of the fine arts spreading in affluent circles, the actual *practice* of drawing and painting became, at that time, a mark of distinction for the privileged classes. This is one of the reasons that facilitated the integration of artists in the most select circles of polite Parisian society; it is also one of the drivers of the soaring demand for instruction in drawing and painting among the elites<sup>13</sup>.

- 8 In affluent families, drawing and painting occupied an ever-growing place in the education of children, and in particular that of girls – such a thing had never occurred before to this extent. It was in this context that the studios of the most famous artists of the day began, for the first time, to accept these young women from the privileged classes. Greuze, it would seem, had initiated this trend as early as the 1770s, followed a few years later by the young academicians who would come to be known under the label of neo-classicism. David, Suvée, Ménageot, then Meynier, Regnault, Lethière, Girodet... trained dozens of young women to paint beginning in the 1780s. It was also at this time that the Royal Academy inducted two women into its ranks: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (who, little interested in pedagogy, soon closed her teaching studio, leaving her students to go join David's) and Adélaïde Labille-Guiard. The latter, an accomplished teacher, depicted herself in triumph next to her students in the Salon of 1785, while the young members of her studio participated regularly in various exhibitions.
- 9 This period thus saw the arrival of a whole generation of female painters, often specialising in history painting – the most prestigious genre –, born into the most affluent circles of Parisian society, blessed with an excellent education and, above all, with the finest artistic training available at the time. These young girls, who – and this is a vital point – were not daughters of artists (which is utterly new, since the overwhelming majority of female artists up until then had been daughters, wives, nieces, or sisters of artists) took the world of exhibitions by storm from the second half of the 1780s on: first of all the Exposition de la Jeunesse, then the Salons of the Académie de Saint-Luc and the Salons de la Correspondance. A note of caution, however: it is important to point out that the numbers of female artists did not go through the roof at this time. This new generation of female painters who were not daughters of artists probably only numbered thirty or so. Moreover, there was a larger number – perhaps twice as many? – of women present and working in studios belonging to (male) artists who they were related to. Their work was often invisible (which is also the main reason why it is difficult to know today how many there were exactly) just like the work of the other members of the studios – *compagnons*, apprentices, or various employees<sup>14</sup>. With the corporation system, the art world was organized along studio lines where collective work, often in a family environment, took place under the supervision of the master, the only one allowed by law to take commissions and to sell works<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, the particularity of the 1780s, in this regard, is that female artists suddenly became *visible*. For the first time, they were to be seen, talked about and listed. Above all, since they arrived 'as a group', so to speak, on the painting market, female artists were not spoken of as exceptions for the first time in the history of painting. Their presence, nevertheless, was seen by contemporaries as a new and noteworthy phenomenon, one which was often linked to the dynamism of the French School, whose remarkable renewal at all levels was evident to all<sup>16</sup>.
- 10 Women painters were the main focus of debate – we know this thanks to the periodicals, letters and diaries that have come down to us. Indeed, the gazettes' interest in these young artists was a constant feature of the decade. In its accounts of the Exposition de la Jeunesse, the *Mercure de France* reviewed the works of nine female and six male artists in 1780; of five women and five men in 1784; of seven women and seven men in 1785 (the longest description being dedicated that year to the paintings of a pupil of David, Mlle Guéret), while an editor at the *Journal général de France* observed, at the same moment that "today, many ladies are picking up painting brushes; and the best paintings at the Place Dauphine this year were by female artists..."<sup>17</sup>.

- 11 Meanwhile, between 1782 and 1786, Pahin de la Blancherie sustained the interest for the work of female artists by hosting many of them at his Salon de la Correspondance<sup>18</sup>, and by dedicating pages of glowing praise to their paintings in his *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres et des Arts*: Vigée-Lebrun et Labille-Guiard benefited from this praise, as did Marie-Anne Fragonard and Rose-Adélaïde Ducreux, whose *Self-portrait at the harp* was noticed at the Salon de la Correspondance in 1786. Probably the same year, works by the Lemoine sisters, Victoire and Elisabeth, were also shown<sup>19</sup>. More generally, La Blancherie was the first to put forward the idea, taken up in many texts by exhibition reviewers up to and during the Empire, that this period represented some sort of pinnacle of female talent in the arts<sup>20</sup>. For that matter, this was very much in this spirit that La Blancherie published an article entitled "Femmes Peintres", which offered a short history of female creativity since Antiquity, ending with praise for Vigée-Lebrun, deemed to be one of the most illustrious female painters in history<sup>21</sup>.
- 12 Hence, this general interest on the part of commentators for female artists was driven not only by the fact that they were particularly active at this period (although few in number, truth be told, they were to be seen in all the exhibitions), but also thanks to the strategies these artists managed to put into practice – probably more or less consciously – in order to make the best of the popularity they were enjoying in the art world. The rapid rate at which they produced self-portraits (or portraits of their fellow female artists) was one of these strategies. In 1783, for example, the pupils of Labille-Guiard exhibited at place Dauphine: Victoire d'Avril and Gabrielle Capet, showed self-portraits<sup>22</sup>,



Gabrielle Capet, *Portrait de l'artiste*, 1783

[PUBLIC DOMAIN], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

and Madeleine Frémy exhibited a portrait of Victoire d'Avril. Capet and Frémy are the two pupils depicted by Labille-Guiard in the famous full length self-portrait she presented at the 1785 Salon<sup>23</sup>.



Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, *Self-portrait with Two Pupils*, 1785

[PUBLIC DOMAIN], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

- 13 This self-portrait should also be seen – in my view – as a response to Vigée-Lebrun's, which had been shown at the previous Salon, in a subtle allusion to their induction into the Académie two years earlier<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, Labille Guiard was then the legitimate candidate, voted for by her peers, while Vigée-Lebrun was the Crown's choice, inducted into the Académie “byordre”<sup>25</sup>.





Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Self-portrait in a Straw Hat*, 1782

[PUBLIC DOMAIN], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

In her 1785 self-portrait, Labille Guiard thus depicts herself as the master of a school, surrounded by her two best students, and offering a discreet homage, via the presence of a bust of her father sculpted by the academician Pajou, to those who had supported her candidacy for admission<sup>26</sup>. The message put forward by this canvas was thus in direct opposition to that of the self-portrait known as “in a straw hat”, painted in 1782 and exhibited at the 1783 Salon by Vigée-Lebrun, just after their induction: she is shown in a scene directly inspired by Rubens<sup>27</sup>. The artist, who highlights her own beauty, depicts herself in place of Suzanne Fourment, Rubens’ model, but the palette she is holding puts her on an equal footing with Rubens himself: as beautiful as the model, as skilful as the master, Vigée-Lebrun depicts herself as an accomplished woman and artist, who owes nothing to anyone, everything to her own talents.

- <sup>14</sup> But talk about female artists was not limited to exhibition commentaries: they were also at the heart of more general debates on the state of society in the press. Thus, at the close of the Exposition de la Jeunesse in 1785, a debate was sparked and remained alight throughout the summer about the legitimacy of women being artists. The catalyst was the publication of an article, probably by l’abbé de Fontenay, in the *Journal général de France*, in June 1785<sup>28</sup>. The author remarked upon the “new fad for women to turn artists”, so characteristic of the period, and he counselled prudence to those “parents of the bourgeoisie” who were encouraging their daughters to become painters, thus “depriving them of the opportunity of getting married”.





Peter Paul Rubens, *The Straw Hat*, 1622-1625

[PUBLIC DOMAIN], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

- 15 This article, with its radical attack on parents and artists, sparked several responses in the same newspaper, which were perhaps written by Fontenay. But the most virulent of the reactions was published in a different newspaper – *Le Journal de Paris* – by none other than the secretary of the Académie, Antoine Renou<sup>29</sup>.
- 16 In this text, Renou presented himself as the “knight of female artists”; he poked fun at Fontenay who “decries the indecency of it all” and “inveighs against guilty parents who allow their daughters to pick up a paintbrush”: “I do not know”, he explained, “whether it is worth it to pile up a great many reasons in order to prove that teaching women to paint is not to spoil them. Holding a paintbrush does not require one to be sturdier, it seems to me, than would holding a needle...”. As a professional artist, he reminded the reader that artists, whether men or women, were not ‘inflamed’ by the sight of naked models, for that was part and parcel of their profession. Finally, against the argument that “there are already too many painters”, Renou responded by naming all the female artists of the century, which proved that “talent does not recognise sex”. He ended with a question: “in a nursery, which young tree will you choose to pull up? Do you not fear destroying one that might have become the pride of the orchard?” For the secretary of the Académie, the kingdom did not have enough painters of genius for it to have the luxury of snuffing out vocations before the artists – whatever their sex – got to show what they were capable of.
- 17 As if in answer to Renou, spring 1786 saw female artists given pride of place in Dauphine, and there was a particularly large number of self-portraits by these artists that all the commentators were talking about<sup>30</sup>. It is difficult to believe that female artists were unaware of the extreme popularity they had been enjoying for the past few years. Given the circumstances, it was logical that they take advantage. This is, in my view, the

explanation for the fashion of the female self-portrait in this period: these self-portraits were not campaigning in character, but – in a sense – opportunistic; they capitalised on a fashion which had consecrated them. These self-portraits thus apparently formed part of a promotional strategy followed by these young artists. And it was a winning strategy! They became more and more talked about.

- 18 The most famous example of the efficacy of self-portraiture in promoting these artists is the famous article published by the *Mercure de France* in June 1786<sup>31</sup>, one which is often quoted, but often poorly interpreted, for there is still a tendency to take literally the description drawn by the critic of these young and pretty female artists taking their places on the balconies above their self-portraits in order to allow the viewers to compare at their leisure the works and their models. This scene, which was mentioned nowhere else at the time (neither in papers, nor in letters or in the *Mémoires secrets* whose author just loved this type of episode), seems more the product of wishful thinking than of a realistic description. The critic whips up the attractive theme of self-portraits by young female artists into a piece of whimsy, which concludes with a moralising call on artists to embrace work and modesty.
- 19 With the advent of the Revolution, this motif of the female artist changed and took on a different aspect. From the very first months of the Revolution, women artists once again were appearing publicly, this time not as talented professionals, but first as representatives of the community of artists, then as representatives of the female community. On September 7, 1789, eleven women, either artists and/or parents of artists, led by Adélaïde Moitte (draughtswoman and wife of the sculptor, Jean-Guillaume Moitte), arrived at the Constituant Assembly in Versailles, dressed all in white and wearing a tricolour belt<sup>32</sup>. Standing before the French deputies, they would offer their jewels to the Nation as a contribution towards paying off the national debt. Everyone at the time made the link between the artists' gesture and the mythical generosity of the Roman matrons, anxious to save the imperilled Republic – an episode in Roman history perfectly familiar to everyone at the end of the eighteenth century. Before the Assembly, these women were introduced as "wives or daughters of artists", but the majority (Mrs Vien, Moitte, Suvéé, Duvivier, Fragonard, David, as well as Ms Vestier, Gérard, etc.) were themselves artists. A few days later, a certain Mme Rigal, a goldsmith, made a new appeal, *in the name of women artists*, for a voluntary contribution which, this time, was addressed to all the women of France. We know, thanks to the engraver Wille, that Mme Pajou passed on this appeal to the artists at the Louvre<sup>33</sup>.

We are artists, we are citizens; we are either mothers, or sisters or wives of artists and citizens. [...] The fatherland is our common family. [...] Two virtuous farmers from Champenil have set an example for their sex. A few artists from Versailles have set an example for ours. Their noble gesture has touched us, and through us, will touch all the women of France.<sup>34</sup>

- 20 These two successive public expressions of patriotic virtue by women artists show that, at the end of the eighteenth century, they constituted a group sufficiently recognizable and respected to be able to claim an exemplary role with regard to all the women of the realm. After this episode, women artists no longer appear as a special category, but they remained at the forefront in all the changes that were marking the art world during the revolutionary period. Perhaps it would be useful at this point to quickly recall what these events were before returning to the question of self-portraiture<sup>35</sup>.

- 21 All of 1790 was taken up with a debate in the Académie, since the need for reform of the artistic scene was clear to all. In July, the painters Restout and David broke with the other members of the Académie, taking with them some of the *agrés*<sup>36</sup> and, in September, uniting with a number of artists who were not members of the Académie, they founded the *Commune des Arts ayant le dessin pour base*. This latter institution was open to all, as long as one could claim a certain number of years of professional experience in "one of the arts that were based on drawing". At the same time, several points of contention divided members of the Académie. On September 23, 1790, Labille-Guiard rose to speak during a meeting and proposed that members vote in favor of equality between the sexes (which they unanimously did). But the director of the Académie, the painter Vien, was not present at this meeting and took this pretext to refuse the vote on the admission of women. This episode subsequently led the Officers of the Académie to break away and form a third independent group.
- 22 Meanwhile, however, the deputies of the Constituent Assembly were pressuring artists to get around to providing reform proposals that would allow the representatives of the Nation to make decisions in this regard. At the end of 1790, the group of the Officers, on one side, and the "reformers" (led by the painters Vincent and Labille-Guiard, as well as their friend, the engraver Miger, all three members of the Académie), on the other, each tendered their reform proposals to the National Assembly. The "reformers" proposed the founding of a Central Academy for the Arts, based on the notion of equality between the sexes of the artists and between the genres of art. A few months later, in the spring of 1791, the Commune des Arts would do the same and hand their own project of reform. This last proposal left unresolved the question of the acceptance or not of women to their body. They actually recommended the exclusion of women, but left the decision "to the lawmaker". The issue may seem of secondary importance; in reality, it was crucial. By asking the Constituent Assembly to decide whether women should be allowed among them, they were in fact asking for a clarification of what sort of group they were: if women were refused, the Commune des Arts was an assembly of *representatives* for the community of artists (i.e. where *some* artists, nominated by political authority and thus selected on criteria that were not artistic *per se*, represented the others); if women were accepted, the Commune des Arts was an assembly of professionals (i.e. where every professional artist is a rightful member).
- 23 In June 1791, however, the Flight to Varenne threw the Constituent Assembly's agenda into lasting disarray. Moreover, most of the summer was given over to the organisation by the Ministry of the Interior of the first *Salon libre*, which took place in August. In September, the Constituent Assembly, in an effort to bring about a reconciliation between the deputies and the monarchy, commissioned a double portrait of the King swearing allegiance on the Constitution. Symbolically, this commission was crucially important. Two painters were approached: David and Labille-Guiard, representatives of the two rival parties not only within the world of art (the secessionists of the Commune de l'art versus the reformers of the Central Academy for the arts), but also within the world of politics (Jacobins to whom David was close, versus Feuillants to whom Labille-Guiard was close). This double commission put them on an equal footing and made it seem as if the reform of the Académie was still very much in the cards. But, the road to war and the tensions within the National Assembly regarding about whether the King should be maintained or not meant that the arts were once again side-lined. In August 1792, the monarchy was overthrown once and for all; in September, David was elected to the Convention among

the Montagnards. He became a central figure in the world of art, influential in matters where aesthetics met politics. When the Convention needed a partner in the field of the fine arts, they thus naturally turned to the Commune générale des arts, co-founded by David the year before. The Académie royale, which had been effectively irrelevant for months, was abolished in August 1793; the idea of a Central Academy was all the more easily shelved now that its spokesmen – Vincent and Labille-Guiard – had left Paris; the Commune générale des arts could then take over as the sole institution capable of attracting and representing artists. The minutes of the meetings in September 1793 show that women attended and spoke at will<sup>37</sup>: the recommendations made by the founders of the Commune générale des arts regarding the possible exclusion of women had thus not been acted upon between the end of August and the middle of October 1793. We even possess a list of the artists admitted during this period because it was decided that the names of the new artists should be recorded in the minutes. Over these six weeks, a hundred or so artists entered the Commune générale des arts, in the proportion of one woman for every five men (a rate much higher than the one-in-10 exhibitors at the revolutionary Salons).

- 24 At the end of 1793 however the Commune générale des arts came into conflict with the Convention over the question of admission criteria. The Société populaire et républicaine des arts was created in the wake of these tensions by the engraver-deputy Antoine Sergent: this Société replaced the Commune des arts, and allowed anyone interested in the arts (whether artists or not) to join, as long as they were good and active citizens. Henceforth new members entered by being co-opted (four recommendations by existing members were required), then a “purification” committee examined the Republican credentials of each candidate. In other words, admission was not based on artistic skill, but rather on the type of citizen the applicant was. At the close of 1793, the session during which women were excluded was particularly stormy: the minutes reveal that women were present and took part freely in the debate. As a result of this meeting, however, they no longer had the right to either vote or speak in this assembly (which did not mean, of course, that they were no longer permitted to be artists – no one, then, questioned the fact that the Salon could be open to all, and to women in particular).
- 25 In the summer of 1794, the events of Thermidor once again changed the situation. Robespierre was put to death, David imprisoned. At the end of October 1794, at the Société populaire et républicaine des arts, the debate on the admission of women was spontaneously reopened by the members who were present (thus, men), and a majority voted for the return of their female counterparts<sup>38</sup>. In the end, women would only have been statutorily excluded from the community of artists for the ten months during which that community no longer defined itself along purely professional lines, but rather based on exogenous criteria (whether civic, moral, or political).
- 26 All these debates, however, took place in the realm of law and politics. In reality, no one ever considered excluding women from the actual business of painting during the Revolution. Thus, in the Salon libre during the 1790s and the first decade of the nineteenth century, we find several of these women artists who had made a name for themselves on the place Dauphine in the 1780s. Self-portrait remained a genre they were drawn to. It is, needless to say, difficult to work out why: the focus was not on women anymore then, so one cannot really talk in terms of “circumstantial” self-portraiture. Motivation probably varied from artist to artist, for the art market was going through an economic crisis that left it languishing from the middle of the 1790s on.

- 27 Without drawing general conclusions, we can nevertheless give some raw statistics.
- 28 First of all, self-portraits, in the strict sense of the term, were a very small part of the works exhibited by artists of either sex during this period. Between 1791 and 1799, out of approximately 5200 works exhibited at the Salon, there were only forty or so self-described self-portraits put on show by either men or women, i.e. less than 1% of the overall total.
- 29 Now, while 7% of the works (taken as a whole) were exhibited by women over this period, in the case of self-portraits it was 16%, which indicates a slight overrepresentation of women in this genre – however, given the very small numbers, the trend is not conclusive<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, due to a lack of time, the Salons from 1800-1810 have not been included in these statistics of exhibited works. We do know, however, that several well-known female self-portraits, were shown to the public during this decade, like the ones by Hortense Haudebourt-Lescot, Constance Mayer, Henriette Lorimier ou Nisa Villers, which all date from 1800-1801<sup>40</sup>.





Hortense Haudebourt-Lescot, *Autoportrait*, 1800

[PUBLIC DOMAIN], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Constance Mayer, *Portrait de l'artiste*, c. 1800

[PUBLIC DOMAIN], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Constance Mayer, *Portrait en pied d'un père et de sa fille*

[PUBLIC DOMAIN], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Henriette Lorimier, *Autoportrait*, c. 1801

[PUBLIC DOMAIN], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS





Marie-Denise (aka Nisa) Villers, *Jeune fille dessinant*, 1801

[PUBLIC DOMAIN], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Let us also mention the very moving *Atelier de Mme Vincent en 1800*, by Gabrielle Capet (1808), which combines self-portraiture and portraits of artists from her circle of friends in a fictional scene illustrating to perfection the notion of artistic inheritance<sup>41</sup>.



Gabrielle Capet, *L'atelier de Mme Vincent vers 1800*, 1808

[PUBLIC DOMAIN], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

- 30 Finally, since it seems to me that the vogue for depicting women at their easels is not limited to self-portraits, I have put together a category of “works featuring artists”, which includes, in addition to self-portraits, portraits of painters, sculptors and draughtsmen of both sexes (not an easy task, since at this time the word “*artiste*”, frequent in the titles of exhibited paintings, could as easily refer, without any further indication, to a painter, a musician or an actor), whether named or anonymous. I have also taken account of allegorical or mythical representations of the act of pictorial creation (such as scenes involving Dibutade or Zeuxis for example). Of course, in the absence of the paintings, many canvases have also been set aside due to their titles not being explicit. In this perspective, representations of museums, for instance, which were frequent at the time, have not been counted, even though they often included depictions of women drawing<sup>42</sup>. Likewise, the painters of several portraits depicting artists in the act of drawing or painting, did not necessarily mention this fact in the title. These paintings are thus not counted either. On the other hand, I have included paintings that are strongly suspected of being self-portraits (such as Geneviève Bouliar’s *Aspasie*<sup>43</sup>) or portraits of other artists like the *Portrait d’une élève de David*, attributed to Aimée Duvivier<sup>44</sup>.

- 31 Thus, between 1791 and 1799, 'works featuring artists' numbered 130, i.e. between 2 and 3% of the total number of works exhibited. Above all, 20% of works in this category were exhibited *by women*. As for the subjects depicted: among the works featuring artists (apart from self-portraits of course), women tended to depict other women; the same holds for men, who were more likely to depict – in the same proportions – men. Moreover, when the subject was a woman, whether painted or sculpted by a man or a woman, two thirds of the works depicted an *anonymous* artist (in the tradition of Boilly on this theme<sup>45</sup>); when the subject depicted was a man, on the other hand, his identity was given in 80% of cases. All of this confirms that there was indeed a marked public taste at the time for images of women painting or drawing. As we have already seen, this fashion is attested to by the fact that self-portraits by the new generation of women artists were regularly exhibited in the 1780s. But, as these figures also show, male artists also managed to find a place in this visual space by devoting a number of works to genre scenes or allegorical scenes depicting a woman with a stylus or paintbrush in her hand.
- 32 In post-revolutionary France, with the image of women painting becoming so commonplace that it even made it into fashion engravings<sup>46</sup>, the idea of a 'natural alliance between female faculties and fine arts'<sup>47</sup> seems to have become part of the collective imagination. This radical change in discourse on the arts can be illustrated, for instance, by the report written in April 1796 by Victor Chapelain, a deputy from the Vendée region, following a complaint made to the Conseil des Cinq Cents by a painter, Mme Quévanne, whose maiden name was Chézy<sup>48</sup>. Mme Quévanne, a candidate for the post of professor of drawing which had opened up at the Ecole centrale de Chartres, had been rejected in the end 'because of her sex'. Judging that she had been unjustly treated, she drew up a petition and submitted it to the National Assembly. This case is extremely interesting, firstly because it shows that the idea of a woman applying for a teaching job in a boys school was completely conceivable, so much so that the protests of the rejected candidate were deemed worthy of consideration by the deputies, who were called upon to make a discussion. Here is what Chapelain wrote in his report:
- It would be socially harmful if women, leaving their sphere, were to give in to the mania for science [...] [But] I think we should encourage their education rather than curbing it. We have neglected them too much; it is a delight to have enlightened women around us. [...] The nervous system of women is not sufficiently robust to allow them to penetrate the intricacies of the abstract sciences: the nerve bundles are too sensitive, the fibres tense up, and the machine goes into convulsions. [...] The same is not true of the arts, <which> fit well with the way women are made. They have a quick eye, their touch is exquisite; they excel in everything that involves imitation. In terms of fine detail, above all, men fail to see a multitude of things that they see straight away: they indisputably have the painterly gift. [...] Giving them a few chairs in the central schools of art is a way to reach this goal<sup>49</sup>.
- 33 Because "drawing is an institution common to both sexes", the deputy proposed that the Conseil des Cinq Cents accede to the request of citizen Quévanne, and henceforth authorise women to apply to teaching posts in the arts. Indeed, since the educational reforms begun under the Revolution and continued under the Consulate and the Empire, sciences had shared an equal place in the public teaching curricula aimed at boys. Sciences, like politics, were associated with Reason, Culture, Action – virile pursuits if ever there were any; in this respect, they were clearly distinct from the arts—instinctive, imitative and emotional pursuits, in which women were supposed to *naturally* excel. These associations were so obvious to Chapelain that he proposed to break with the principle of non-mixing in teaching (despite the fact that it featured in the law on

education of Brumaire, Year IV) by encouraging deputies to vote in favour of the naming of women as teachers of drawing in the écoles centrales.

- 34 It is clear then that, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the arts were still a matter of 'sensitivity', as the philosophers of the Enlightenment had explained, but, while it was seen as a universal attribute in a period where the "honnête homme" was the cultural ideal, at the beginning of the following century it gradually became a character trait linked with youth and femininity, which both had in common a tendency for irrationality.
- 35 After Chapelain's report had been delivered, the issue was debated in open session, but with the Assembly failing to reach a consensus, the decision was postponed. Then, with political turmoil causing the agenda to be changed, no decision was reached in the case of Mme Chézy-Quévanne. This failure of the legislative branch to take a decision, in the end, highlights the place of women in the fine arts at the turn of the nineteenth century: directly benefiting from the inertia of post-Revolutionary institution in this domain, from favourable conditions created in the world of art at the end of the Ancien Régime (notably, in terms of access to the same types of training as men<sup>50</sup>) and from this new 'feminised' perception of the fine arts which paved the way to making the status of professional female painter relatively unremarkable, women artists during the first decades of the nineteenth century enjoyed a golden age (which could be described as an "enchanted parenthesis"), without any official measure helping them on their way.
- 36 The frequency with which women artists indulged in self-portraiture at the end of the eighteenth century should thus be resituated in the larger context of the conspicuous fashion for images of "women painting". As a consequence, the image of women in front of easels, or drawing, became extremely common in the early nineteenth century: this phenomenon can be linked to the evolution of the fine arts and their "feminisation" in the collective imagination in the wake of the Revolution. As a more positivist and masculine conception of technical and scientific progress took hold, the fine arts became associated with sensitivity and attention to detail which, in the imagery of the period, were feminine traits. It is understandable from then on, that, in an art world where, if not encouraged, their vocation was at least tolerated, and where they benefited from training and working conditions very close to those of men, women had little to gain from banding together to lay claim to a specifically female tradition of creativity. It would not be until 1880, with the creation of l'Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs, that a shared female identity in the fine arts would once again be foregrounded. By that time, the situation had considerably changed, the arts having become virile again in the public mind, and the academic system having fallen into crisis. But that is another story...

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## NOTES

1. Pierre Vaisse, "L'artiste face à lui-même", in Alain Bonnet and Hélène Jagot eds., *L'artiste en représentation. Images des artistes dans l'art du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Lyon, Fage, 2012, p. 31.
2. See, for example: Amédée Van Loo, *Autoportrait présumé*, 1769, washed drawing in pencil and red pencil, private collection.

3. See, for instance: Joseph Ducreux, *Autoportrait en homme surpris et terrorisé*, c. 1791, private collection, <http://www.wikiart.org/en/joseph-ducreux/autoportrait-en-homme-surpris-et-terroris-1791>, accessed 17 May 2016; Jean-Baptiste Chardin, *Autoportrait à l'abat-jour vert*, pastel, 1775, Louvre, [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean\\_Sim%C3%A9on\\_Chardin#/media/File:Jean-Baptiste\\_Sim%C3%A9on\\_Chardin\\_023.jpg](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Sim%C3%A9on_Chardin#/media/File:Jean-Baptiste_Sim%C3%A9on_Chardin_023.jpg), accessed 17 May 2016; Anna Dorothea Therbusch, *Autoportrait au monocle*, 1777, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna\\_Dorothea\\_Therbusch#/media/File:Anna\\_Dorothea\\_Therbusch\\_001.jpg](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_Dorothea_Therbusch#/media/File:Anna_Dorothea_Therbusch_001.jpg), accessed 17 May 2016.
4. Lorne Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits. European Portrait-Painting in the 14th, 15th and 16th Centuries*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990.
5. See, for instance: Thomas Gainsborough, *Self-Portrait*, London, Royal Academy of Arts, 1787. This is a self-portrait in evening dress which was a gift to his friend Abel, and which he expressly hoped would be used as a model for engravings to be made after his death.
6. See, for example: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Autoportrait*, Florence, Galerie des Offices, 1790, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lebrun,\\_Self-portrait.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lebrun,_Self-portrait.jpg), accessed 17 May, 2016.
7. See, for instance: Angelica Kauffmann, *Portrait de l'artiste hésitant entre la Musique et la Peinture*, Moscow, Pushkin Museum, 1792.
8. See, for example: Louis Michel Van Loo, *Louis Michel Van Loo peignant le portrait de son père*, Musée national du Château de Versailles, 1762.
9. Anton Van Dyck, *Autoportrait au tournesol*, 1632-1633, private collection.
10. Gustave Courbet, *L'Atelier du peintre. Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale*, Paris, Musée d'Orsay, 1854-1855.
11. See, for example, what is presumed to be Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's first self-portrait, an allegory of painting: *La Peinture*, 1774, private collection (exhibited at l'Académie de Saint-Luc). On the myth of Dibutade, see Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux "La 'fille de Dibutade' ou l'inventrice inventée", *Les Cahiers du Genre*, "Genre, féminisme et valeur de l'art", S. Sofio, P. E. Yavuz and P. Molinier eds., n° 43, 2007/2, p. 133-151.
12. Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Paris*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985.
13. For more information about this important social and cultural change, I refer the reader to the work I have already published on this topic: Séverine Sofio, *La Parenthèse enchantée. Genre et production des beaux-arts 1750-1850*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2016.
14. Melissa Hyde, « Les femmes et les arts plastiques au temps de Marie-Antoinette », in Anne Vallayer-Coster, *peintre à la cour de Marie-Antoinette*, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Marseille, Somogy, 2003, p. 75-93.
15. In this respect, the situation changed after 1777, when a royal edict created the category of independent artist ("artiste libre") open to all as long as the work produced was artistic by nature. On this topic, see Séverine Sofio, « Vivre de son pinceau, de la corporation des maîtres peintres à l'émergence du marché de l'art (1750-1850) », in Agnès Graceffa ed., *Vivre de son art: histoire du statut de l'artiste, xv<sup>e</sup>-xx<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris, Hermann, 2012, p. 65-76. There were an estimated 300 artists of both sexes active in Paris at the end of the eighteenth century. For details and the sources for this estimate, see S. Sofio, *La Parenthèse enchantée, op. cit.*, chap. 1.
16. With the establishment of the category of independent artist and the return from Rome of the first "neo-classical" artists (at the end of the 1770s-very beginning of the 1780s) occurring at the same time, contemporaries were quick to speak of a 'regenerated' French School and a new golden age for the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, whose glory and monopolies had been restored after the elimination in 1776 of its rival, the Académie de Saint-Luc.
17. *Journal général de France*, 14 juin 1785, p. 282.
18. See Laura Auricchio, "Pahin de la Blancherie's Commercial Cabinet of Curiosity (1779-1787)", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 36, n° 1, 2002, p. 47-61.

19. Marie-Elisabeth Lemoine, *Self-portrait*, circa 1785, private collection; Marie-Victoire Lemoine, *Self-portrait*, 1786, Orléans, Musée des Beaux-Arts.
20. "A propos of the artist in question [Labille-Guiard], it has been said: Let's go see a woman who is a deft man with a brush. We have today several artists, to whom, to the glory of their sex, the same remark applies..." , Pahin de la Blancherie, *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres et des Arts*, 8 janvier 1783.
21. Pahin de la Blancherie, "Femmes Peintres", *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres et des Arts*, 2 April 1783.
22. Gabrielle Capet, *Portrait de l'artiste*, 1783, Tokyo, National Museum of Western Art, [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Gabrielle\\_Capet#/media/File:Marie-Gabrielle\\_Capet\\_-\\_1783.jpg](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Gabrielle_Capet#/media/File:Marie-Gabrielle_Capet_-_1783.jpg), accessed 17 May 2016.
23. Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, *Self-portrait with Two Pupils*, 1785, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436840>, accessed 17 May 2016.
24. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Self-portrait in a Straw Hat*, 1782, London, National Gallery, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/elisabeth-louise-vigee-le-brun-self-portrait-in-a-straw-hat>, accessed 17 May 2016.
25. This phrase figures in the minutes of the proceedings of the 31 May 1783 meeting.
26. The self-portrait doubtless left an impression on her contemporaries, since Jean-Laurent Mosnier took inspiration from it in a self-portrait the following year: *Portrait de l'artiste dans son atelier*, 1786, St. Petersburg, The Hermitage Museum.
27. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Straw Hat*, 1622-1625, London, National Gallery, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/peter-paul-rubens-portrait-of-susanna-lunden-le-chapeau-de-paille>, accessed 17 May 2016.
28. *Journal général de France*, n°71, 14 juin 1785, p. 283.
29. *Journal de Paris*, 9 juillet 1785, p. 787-789.
30. For instance, Marie-Guillemine Laville-Leroulx, *Portrait of the Artist*, 1786, (private collection), in which the artist, already known as having inspired verses by Charles-Albert Demoustiers, depicts herself with a good deal of bare flesh. This painting attracted comments from many critics at the time.
31. "On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of this month, I entered the Place Dauphine, and [...] I heard people around repeatedly say: That's the portrait of Mlle..., painted by herself. Right afterwards, I heard again people repeatedly saying: You can decide for yourself how good the resemblances are, for the originals are here. Take a look at the windows, you'll see them. I raised my eyes, and I indeed saw half a dozen balconies on which were young ladies, some adorned with nothing but their natural charms, others with every sort of enhancement, and I have to admit that this spectacle was at least as interesting as the one it had diverted my eyes. My head held high, my monocle focused in their direction, I was delighting in the image that was before me, when a man [...] I recognised as an artist, woke me out of my ecstasy by speaking in the following terms: "[...] What is this desire to show oneself off? What use is it? [...] Moreover, I never see any good coming from talent that is coquettish". Struck by the truth of these observations, I pulled my hat down on my head, and I turned my mind from these creators whose eyes had almost dominated my judgement, and I devoted my attention thereafter only to their works. Mlle Verrier, Mlle Alexandre et Mlle Rosemond were among them.", *Mercure de France*, samedi 1<sup>er</sup> juillet 1786, p. 30-32.
32. *Le don patriotique des Illustres Françaises*, 1789, engraving, Vizille, Musée de la Révolution française.
33. Wille thus wrote in his diary: "on 15 September I received a letter Mme Pajou had addressed to my wife, obviously believing her to be still alive, in order to invite her to send her jewels, like other female artists had done, in order to make a collective patriotic donation to the Nation", *Mémoires et Journal de J.-G. Wille, graveur du Roi*, Paris, Renouard, 1857, t. II, p. 312.
34. *Discours prononcé par Mme Rigal...*, s.l., s.d.[1789], p.1-7

35. For a more detailed analysis of the art world during the Revolutionary period, see S. Sofio, *La Parenthèse enchantée*, op. cit., chap. 3.
36. Part of the Académie, the *agrés* were members with no rights within the Compagnie. The *membres reçus* were the next rank above; then came the *Officiers*, who made up the governing elite of the Académie.
37. H. Lapauze, *Procès verbaux de la commune générale des arts et de la société républicaine des arts*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1903, p. 52.
38. H. Lapauze, *Procès verbaux*, op. cit., p. 334.
39. See, for instance, the two self-portraits by Constance Charpentier, which she exhibited at two successive Salons: *Portrait de l'artiste*, 1798 and *Portrait de l'artiste avec sa fille*, 1799, private collection. Also, Rose Adélaïde Ducreux, *Portrait de l'artiste*, 1799, Rouen, musée des Beaux-Arts.
40. Hortense Haudebourt-Lescot, *Autoportrait*, 1800, Louvre, [http://art.rmngp.fr/fr/library/artworks/hortense-haudebourt-lescot\\_portrait-de-l-artiste\\_huile-sur-toile](http://art.rmngp.fr/fr/library/artworks/hortense-haudebourt-lescot_portrait-de-l-artiste_huile-sur-toile) accessed on 17 May 2016; Constance Mayer, *Portrait de l'artiste*, c. 1800, Bibliothèque Marmottan, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Constance\\_Mayer\\_%281801%29.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Constance_Mayer_%281801%29.jpg) accessed 17 May 2016 and *Portrait en pied d'un père et de sa fille. Il lui indique le buste de Raphaël en l'invitant à prendre pour modèle ce peintre célèbre*, 1801, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum, [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constance\\_Mayer#/media/File:Constance\\_Mayer\\_Portrait\\_en\\_pied\\_d%27un\\_p%C3%A8re\\_et\\_de\\_sa\\_fille.jpg](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constance_Mayer#/media/File:Constance_Mayer_Portrait_en_pied_d%27un_p%C3%A8re_et_de_sa_fille.jpg), accessed 17 May 2016; Henriette Lorimier, *Autoportrait*, c. 1801, private collection; and Marie-Denise (aka Nisa) Villers, *Jeune fille dessinant*, 1801, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437903> accessed 17 May 2016.
41. Gabrielle Capet, *L'atelier de Mme Vincent vers 1800*, 1808, Munich, Neue Pinakothek, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marie-Gabrielle\\_Capet\\_-\\_Atelier\\_of\\_Madame\\_Vincent\\_-\\_1808.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marie-Gabrielle_Capet_-_Atelier_of_Madame_Vincent_-_1808.jpg), accessed 17 May 2016.
42. Voir par exemple: Hubert Robert, *Projet pour la Grande Galerie*, c. 1798, Paris, Musée du Louvre; et *La Salle des Saisons au Louvre*, 1804, Paris, Musée du Louvre.
43. Geneviève Bouliar, *Aspasie*, v. 1796, Arras, Musée des Beaux-Arts.
44. Aimée Duvivier, *Une femme peinte à son chevalet (Portrait d'une élève de David)*, 1791, private collection.
45. See, for instance: Louis Léopold Boilly, *La leçon de dessin*, 1796, Williamstown, Clarks Institute or *Une peintre*, 1785, Saint-Petersbourg, The Hermitage Museum.
46. This iconography is frequent, notably in *Le Journal des dames et des modes* under the Empire.
47. Albertine Adrienne Necker de Saussure, *L'éducation progressive, ou Étude du cours de la vie (Tome 3<sup>e</sup>, Étude de la vie des femmes)*, Paris, Paulin, 1838, p. 152.
48. Mme Chézy-Quévanne was a portraitist, and a student of Michel-Honoré Bounieu. She exhibited at the 1802 Salon. See P.[aul] L.[acroix] "Les femmes exclues de l'enseignement des beaux-arts par la République française", *Revue universelle des arts*, n°17, 1863, p. 55-61.
49. Rapport Chapelain, séance du 5 floréal an IV [25 avril 1796], reprinted in Lacroix, *art. cit.*
50. See Séverine Sofio, "'Mon élève que je regarde comme l'un de mes meilleurs ouvrages...': Former les jeunes filles à la peinture dans la première moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle", Alain Bonnet and France Nerlich eds., *Apprendre à peindre. Les ateliers privés à Paris 1780-1863*, Tours, Presses de l'Université François Rabelais, 2013, p. 105-116.

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## ABSTRACTS

In this text, I study the practice of painted self-portraiture in late eighteenth-century France, with a focus on the social and material conditions that could lead artists to depict themselves. Then, I examine self-portraiture as practised by *women* in the context of the unprecedented process of feminisation the Parisian art world was then undergoing – one of the consequences of which was, precisely, the sudden vogue for images of women at their easels.

Ce texte traite des aspects sociaux et matériels de la pratique de l'autoportrait peint, en France à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Est ensuite spécifiquement abordée la pratique de l'autoportrait par les peintres femmes, dans le contexte de la féminisation inédite du monde de l'art parisien qui caractérise cette période et dont un des corollaires est, justement, la vogue soudaine des images de femmes à leur chevalet.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** autoportrait, peinture, artistes femmes, salons, critique, mode

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