

## **Women Artists - Seminar 2**

***Maria Cosway, Vigee Le Brun and others***

Bernard Courtis - 28 January 2010

**WAHG**

## Lecture Notes N°2

### Maria Cosway, Vigée Le Brun, other female painters and how to interpret costume in portraits

#### ***MARIA COSWAY – English 1759 - 1838***

Born Maria Louisa Catherine Cecilia Hadfield in Florence, Italy to English parents. Convent educated, her talent for art was recognized early for the discovery of her talents began at *Il Conventino*. The sisters gave her lessons in Italian, French, geography and history, embroidery and music. She learned to play the harp, the harpsichord, and the organ. At six years she could play astonishingly well. the precocious child sang in the choir with a lovely voice and began composing her own airs. She loved making music; it was like play to her. When she was eight years old she discovered a passion for drawing. The nuns soon realised that her new talent exceeded theirs and arranged for her to be instructed by Violante Siries Cerruoti, a highly accomplished painter

Violante Siries Cerruoti realized that Maria needed additional instruction and contacted Johann Zoffany who was staying at her father's inn, the *Locanda di Carlo*. Zoffany took Maria to study the Grand Duke of Tuscany's fabulous collection of painting whilst he was painting *La Tribuna*, then the most famous Medici room.

By the time she was 15 she had almost the free run of the palace to study and she painted copies of almost all its paintings included one of the most recent acquisitions by the Grand Duke

which was a self portrait by Reynolds, the newly appointed first President of the Royal Academy

Amongst the many English painters who stayed at *Locanda di Carlo* were::

- Ozias Humphrey who became a great friend and who later proposed marriage to Maria but was refused
- Joseph Wright of Derby with whom she visited the Uffizi gallery every morning during his stay
- Edward Edwards who later became the first Professor of Perspective at RA (before Turner)
- Charles Towney the sophisticated collector of antiques

Whilst absorbing the techniques of these painters and others she continued in the evenings to play her harp and the harpsichord and enjoyed singing to her father's guests.

From 1773 to 1778, she copied Old Masters at the Uffizi Gallery. For her work, she was elected to the *Accademia del Disegno* in Florence. Later in 1778 She went to Rome, where she studied art under Pompeo Girolamo Batoni. There she received further tuition from Mengs, Fuseli, and Joseph Wright of Derby. She also visited Naples. **Thus it can be stated that she did the *Grand Tour* and later was able to converse on equal terms with other painters and wealthy Englishmen who had done so**

In January 1781 she moved to London with her mother and siblings and shortly after married Richard Cosway, the fashionable portrait painter and miniaturist. He was a quick witted man of fortune with a good position in the fashionable circles of London who attracted satirical comments at his expense.. Mary Cosway had three paintings accepted at the RA annual exhibition of 1781 and met Angelica Kauffmann. During the 1780s Maria Cosway was hostess

at some of the most fashionable musical evenings in London; Maria entertaining the guests with her music and quick wit.

In 1782 Maria became friends with Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire and painted her as Cynthia from Spenser's *'Faerie Queene'*. It was exhibited at the Royal Academy and won acclaim. It was probably Maria's most successful picture. One paper wrote: "*The fair artist has unquestionably a claim to a poetic fancy. In the personification of Cynthia, she has evidently introduced the Duchess of Devonshire. The sprightly air which distinguishes that Beauty is admirably hit off in the advancing step of the Regent of the night. The different shades of azure diffused through the piece, is an argument of consistence much in favour of the artist*"

However her marriage was not successful. Visits to Paris in 1786 and 1787 were the setting for a love affair with Thomas Jefferson the American Ambassador to France, Thomas Jefferson, met the Cosways in August 1786 at the Halle aux Bleds in Paris. Maria and Jefferson developed a deep infatuation for one another. Jefferson was smitten during their acquaintanceship; he wrote a now famous love letter known as "*A Dialogue Between the Head and Heart*" in which Jefferson compares his desire for Maria and his need to maintain his integrity. The letter concludes with Jefferson's reason winning over the desires of his heart. Their correspondence, however, continued for many years.

The Cosways separated. Mary Moser who in 1793 shortly after she had married Hugh Lloyd had an open affair with Richard Cosway, Moser travelled with him for six months on a sketching tour in 1793. In his notebooks he made "*lascivious statements*" and "*invidious comparisons between her and Mrs Cosway*", implying that she was much more sexually responsive than his wife. However it is unlikely that Maria read these remarks.

After a period in Italy (1790–94) she worked in London on a series of projects published by Rudolph Ackermann, which included her etchings of Richard Cosway's drawings (1800) and her original designs illustrating two moral tales for women (both 1800), as well as more successful illustrations (1803) to a poem by Mary Robinson

Maria spent several years in Paris after the birth of a daughter where a friendship with Jacques-Louis David, then a member of the Committee of Public Safety, painted her as a revolutionary in the British press. Following the death of her young daughter in 1796, she worked for the Louvre for two years before she and Cardinal Joseph Fesch, founded a college for young women in Lyons, which she ran from 1803 until it was closed in 1809. She then accepted an invitation from Francesco Melzi d'Eril, Duke of Lodi, to come to Italy and establish a convent school for young girls. She ran the Collegio delle Grazie in Lodi until 1817, when she returned to London to be with her ailing husband. After his death in 1821, she returned to her school in Lodi where in 1834 her educational efforts saw her created a Baroness of the Austrian Empire. She died at Lodi at the age of 78. The town erected a bust to her memory, and the school which she founded and endowed still exists.

During the second half of the eighteenth century three highly talented women worked in England as professional painters. In their time their paintings won acclaim but art history have not credited them with their due; this is especially true of Mary Cassatt. Only Angelica Kauffmann's paintings feature in several international collections. Concurrently in France there were several highly skilled and successful female painters. In their time they won acclaim and examples of their paintings today are proudly displayed in the

Louvre. The two outstanding names are Vigée-le Brun and Labille-Guiard. The former worked for a short time in England and two examples of her work are in the National Gallery in London. Whereas examples of the former's work are in several international collections very few have the latter's have been collected internationally

### ***ELISABETH VIGÉE-LE BRUN - French 1755 – 1842***

She is recognized as the most famous woman painter of the eighteenth century. Although most of her work was undertaken in France she worked in England for a while

Her father, who was also an artist, provided lessons for her in her youth, but she mostly self-taught herself how to be an artist. At the age of fifteen, Vigée-Lebrun had demonstrated such skill that she was able to provide support for herself, her widowed mother, and brother. At the age of twenty her mother pushed her into marrying their landlord, Jean Baptise Pierre Lebrun

Vigée Le Brun knew and painted the portraits of many prominent figures in Europe and Russia from approximately 1770 to 1835.

As a Royalist, Vigée Le Brun fled France at the outset of the revolution. She lived an adventure in exile for 12 years travelling across Europe while increasing her fame and fortune. During her travels she became a member of the Academies of Florence, Rome, Bologna, St Petersburg and Berlin.

Vigée Le Brun was one of the most in demand portrait artists of her time. She completed over 900 paintings including 700 portraits. This included many self portraits, 30 portraits of her friend Marie Antoinette and 67 portraits while living in Russia for six years.

Vigée Le Brun was an intelligent, talented, fun loving and

exceptional woman who enjoyed life and the people she painted and knew. She was admired by all who knew of her talent.

Her Style is generally considered a Rococo painter with neoclassical tendencies in that she created mostly portraits in neoclassical dress. However in her choice of colour and style while serving as the portrait painter to the French Queen, Marie Antoinette she is purely Rococo. After the arrest of the royal family during the French Revolution Vigée-Le Brun fled France with her young daughter Julie. She lived and worked for some years in Italy, Austria, and Russia, where her experience in dealing with an aristocratic clientèle was useful. In Rome, her paintings met with great critical acclaim and she was elected to the Roman Accademia di San Luca.

In Russia, she was received by the nobility and painted numerous members of the family of Catherine the Great. While there, Vigée-Le Brun was made a member of the Academy of Fine Arts of Saint Petersburg. Much to Vigée-Le Brun's dismay, Julie married a Russian nobleman. She was welcomed back to France during the reign of Emperor Napoleon I. Much in demand by the élite of Europe, she visited England at the beginning of the nineteenth century and painted the portraits of several British notables including Lord Byron.

Her great rival was Mme Labille-Guiard who like her specialised in portraiture.

## Some points to consider when studying costumes in portraiture of the eighteenth century

Portraiture prior to the eighteenth century was mainly confined to the depiction of royalty and its court., However portraiture especially in Britain flourished from the eighteenth century and a plethora of highly skilled portrait painters flourished. It coincided with a huge increase in wealth of the upper classes arising from trade, improvements in agriculture and increasing pace in the burgeoning of industrialisation

Dress in portrait paintings provides a wealth of information about the sitter, the period and the artistic context. Most portraits prior to the twentieth century are of aristocrats or of wealthy and successful middling class though from the eighteenth century a few sportsmen in particular jockeys and their successful mounts feature in portraits. The poorer classes are rarely represented in portraiture, though they feature in genre paintings.

The costume depicted can roughly be divided into *non period specific* and *specific to the period*. The former normally shows the sitter wearing a classical dress indicating that the sitter is sophisticated, educated and wealthy Such a portraits acts as a record that will not date with time and establishes a visual record of a hereditary line. The later usually reflects class and the prevalent artistic style. Painters however with the connivance of the sitter at times will depict a sitter wearing the costume in the style and period used by a previous famous portrait painter for example the portrait of *Lord John Simpson* by Angelica Kauffmann where the sitter is depicted dressed in a theatrical 'Van Dyck' style costume. Famous



actors such as Garrick and other actors were often portrayed wearing the costume of their most successful parts.

The background and accoutrements supplement the costume in identifying the class and occupation of the sitter. The aristocracy usually indicate their rank by displaying ermine and/or had a coronet nearby to indicate it. Hair, shoes and corsetry all are good indicators of the period and its fashions.

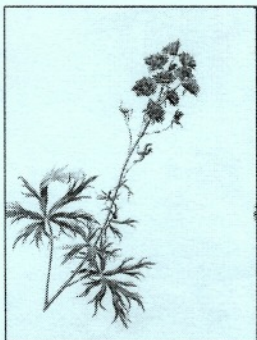
During the eighteenth century five distinct styles occurred, namely the Baroque, the Rocco (including Chinoiserie and Chinese export fabric designs), Neo-classicism, Romanticism and the French Empire style. Women's fashion was largely dictated by French tastes and variations in it were spread amazingly quickly through magazines, dolls and imports throughout Britain even during the wars with France. Male fashion was more conservative except that the greatest revolution in boys wear occurred in Britain in 1780 with the introduction of the Skelton suit which led British men to generally wear trousers instead of breeches by the 1800's

Perhaps the most obvious change that occurred during the eighteenth century was the plethora stylistic changes in the wearing of wigs. By the 1770/s women's hairdos rose higher and higher necessitating the use of wire constructions and hair-pieces. In the 1790's women started to wear their hair short. Up until then, most women did not have to wear wigs because social convention demanded long hair in women thus most pre-1770s hairdos could be realised with the natural hair. As for men wigs became shorter and by the end of the century wigs were no longer in fashion except for the legal profession. In the 18th century wigs were powdered in order to give them their distinctive white or off-white colour for men and grey, or blue-ish grey for women



**Maria Cosway née Hatfield 1760-1838**

**Margaret Meen  
1775-1824**





**Élisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun 1755- 1842**