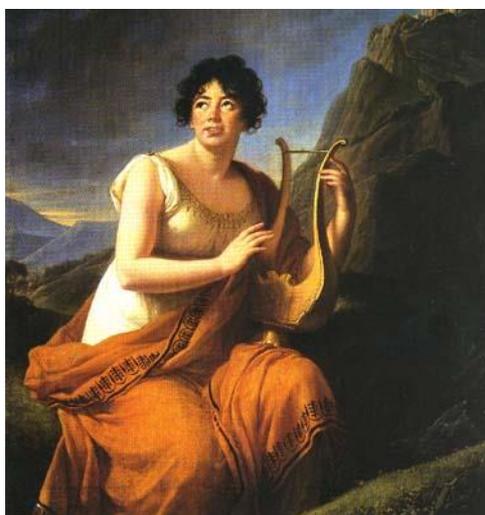


The Napoleon Series

The Female Artist in the Ancien Regime versus the Napoleonic Regime: Different Systems of State Sponsorship?

By: [Ignacio Paz](#)

“When women oppose themselves to the projects and ambition of men, they excite their lively resentment; if in their youth they meddle with political intrigues, their modesty must suffer.” – Germaine de Stael



Today the name of Napoleon Bonaparte invokes an image of raw masculinity and strength for many. It invokes the image of a short, arrogant man, wearing a frock coat and hat, his hand by his chest and a smug face looking towards the people he sent to their deaths and the countries he destroyed. He is the epitome of the masculinity that produces constant war and dictatorship, and his demise represents the failure of said masculinity. However, that is an image most usually derived at when one critiques Napoleon by the terms of the war he conducted and when he or she places the moralities of today and the lessons of history

on the critique. Yes, Napoleon was clearly a masculine fellow, as well as a womanizer with several mistresses, but he realized that while he may have such a view on women it was not his place to force the rest of society to as well, in much a similar way as some Libertarians in American politics will not agree with certain freedoms themselves such as gay marriage but will agree that it is not the role of the state to impose such views. In this similar vein, many aspects of the Napoleonic regime were not as constricted for women to play a role in as some would like to believe and indeed very often allowed for them to develop such roles. Specifically, the art field was one in which women were not necessarily allowed to be in but were also not as excluded as they would have been in the Ancien Regime.

Before examining the opportunities women could have in the art world in France before and after the revolution with specific examples, it's necessary to explain the general constraints of women as defined by society and by the state in those two time periods. In the eyes of the French state marriage and family “was almost exclusively under the control of the Church and Canon Law”. Until a woman was married her father essentially controlled her, and after which it was her husband who did. Divorce was non-existent and legal

separation could only happen on the grounds of physical abuse or defamation – the husband’s adultery was not a ground for separation while the adultery of the wife was, and she could be held indefinitely in a convent while her wealth was split between the family and the convent (“Women and the Code Napoléon”).

In the years leading up to 1789, papers began circulating that argued for the equality of women and that all humans were equal. Once the National Assembly was formed many debates took place over gender and citizenship, and in June 1791 Olympe de Gouges, an advocate of women’s rights wrote her famous declaration “of the Rights of Women”. While some improvement occurred with civil marriage being granted in 1791 and divorce laws being enacted the following, there was a moralistic and paternalistic backlash against feminists once Robespierre took power in 1793. Olympe de Gouges was soon guillotined (“Women and the Code Napoléon”).

This was the utter mess that Napoleon found his country’s legal structure in. To fix it he aimed “for a complete legislative statement of principles rather than rules”. And interpretations of such principles in court cases were to be deduced by adequate judges by “means of logical reasoning and analogy from other provisions”. And while Napoleon was heavily influenced by Rousseau (who believed women were inferior) when working on the Civil Code there were some gains for women. For one, Olympe de Gouges’ idea of “the social contract between the husband and wife was adopted in part”; the Code introduced the idea of Community in which assets and liabilities were defined to be managed by the husband, just like in the Ancien Regime. However, many things that the wife could consider part ownership over could not be exchanged or moved by the husband without her consent. Furthermore a couple had the option to have a separation of debts or goods or both, which could give women more power to manager her own property. In terms of succession, there was “no difference between brother and sister in relation to succession from a parent” (“Women and the Code Napoléon”). The divorce section was left mostly the same as in the Anicen Regime, though many say this was done mostly in order for Napoleon to divorce the barren Empress Josephine in order to have an heir.

As stated earlier, religious law heavily dictated a woman’s role before the revolution, which allowed for the men in the woman’s life to exert full authority over her. The positive side to the church and not the state defining this role was that if a woman ended up not having a man in her life, or had one with a very liberal attitude, she could be fortunate enough to explore the world of art. Elisabeth-Louise Vigee-le Brun is an example of both. She was lucky enough to have a father who gave her instructions in art at a young age as he himself was a portraitist. At 12 years of age her father died and could expand her talents with the advice of nearby painters such as Jean-Baptiste Greuze (Sheriff 283). While she managed to enter the Academie de Saint Luke in 1774, it’s very possible her career wouldn’t have grown even more had it not been for her marrying the art dealer and fellow painter Jean-Baptiste Pierre le Brun. This connection allowed her to expand her portraits of the nobility and was soon invited to Versailles and became a favorite of Marie Antoinette. To

be able to get noticed by the 'state' then was much more than difficult than it would be under Napoleon for the simple fact that the 'state' rested solely on the monarchy, at least in theory. But once one got their attention it was hard not to become famous. The opposite would become the problem under Napoleon – that while more women could be 'found' by that state, they would get hampered and pushed into a corner by the bureaucracy.

Many of Le Brun's works are prime examples of how a woman's role should ideally be about – that of complacency and motherhood. Modesty is obvious, as well as the need to nurture your child. All ironic given that this was painted by a woman (Le Brun), and one was known to not be so nurturing with her child. At the same time, paintings such as her Self portrait with Daughter (1789) could have been produced to show her strength to the public even more; most of her works were not about feminine scenes like the aforementioned, and her blend of the rococo and classical style is neither feminine nor masculine, and by showing off her motherhood she is saying to the world that a woman can have everything. Le Brun could produce hundreds of works that included the high class of history painting, be famous, be in the circle of the monarchy and have and raise a child all at the same time (Cresseveur). That takes quite a woman indeed, and perhaps some would have said, albeit quietly, that that takes quite a person, period.

In 1783, when Le Brun entered the Academie Royale, she did so at the same time as another contemporary, Adelaide Labille-Guiard, who was free of the male influence due to her separation from her husband, was also free of authority, allowing her to teach art to female students. Her Self-portrait with two pupils is perhaps her most famous piece, and shows a common theme among women during this time – the need to portray themselves as an artist, with palette and paintbrush ready, yet usually in luxurious dresses to elevate their status. In addition, she is highlighting the fact that she teaches and it's to two women. Yet even in this painting there appears in the back a bust of a male figure – that of her father by Pajou. However "its relatively minor role in the shadows to the left of the painting suggests that it was included to imply that her father would have been proud of his daughter's achievements, rather than as a symbol of patriarchal authority" (Doy 190). While she did many close works for aristocratic circles she was a closet republican. Creating works of art on such conservative subjects helped her publicity, as "in the struggle to gain access to institutions and to acquire reputations women tend to focus on the status quo, on participating in the existing establishment from which they want and need recognition" (Parker 33). This would not help her argument though when she and Le Brun were criticized once the revolution began for their royal links. While Le Brun would exile herself, Guiard pulled through and up until 1800 showed works of art at the Salons.

Another female artist whose reputation fell following the French Revolution because of her association with the Ancien Regime was Anne Vallayer-Coster. Best known for her still-life paintings of flowers, Marie Antoinette popularly supported her, and most historians believe the painter to be a clear Bourbon enthusiast. However, her works were much more than mere still lifes, immensely detailed and realistic, they seem to have dozens of different styles

and combine elements of history painting that makes them extremely unique, notably her *The Attributes of Painting*, which also shows well the importance of the mind and thought process are for her rather than mere physical presence (Ed. Eik Kahng 10). The three artists described briefly above are perhaps the most famous of any female artist up until the mid 1800's. But that does not mean they were the only ones around. Le Brun said of her time period after she went on her exile that "women reigned then: the Revolution dethroned them". Jean Starobinski amended that in *The Invention of Liberty* by saying "Women reigned (she was made to believe she reigned)" (76). Many scholars like to cite the vast deterioration of the role women held before the revolution, by explaining how they became excluded from academic training schools, were not permitted to study human anatomy from the nude, live model, and they were excluded from the Academie and the Institut des Arts (Parker 35). The new system though was not as negative as it is often portrayed, and instead revealed the one under the ancien regime to allow for very few women to explore the art world, even if those who did well were able to rise.

However, the problem with this trickle down method of creating female artists is that it leaves thousands and thousand of women behind, as most of them had fathers or husbands who did not believe it to be right for a woman to make a living out of creating art. And even high-class women could find it difficult to take art as simply a hobby more than anything else. What Napoleon aimed with his Civil Code was to bring about standardization, one that was applied to the search of female artists. At the same time, though, they were very clearly and very straightforwardly placed in a limiting sphere that did not allow them to grow much.

The most obvious indication that more female artists were allowed to enter the field were numbers – those showcasing their works at the Salons or exhibitions were rising (Doy 28). Patronage increased as well with the Empress Josephine and Empress Marie Louise spending thousands on works of art. Josephine's collection is exceptionally notable for its high amount of painting with either strong female character or 'femenized' male characters (Pougetoux). And there were a very great number of female artists such as Pauline Auzou who did genre as well as history paintings, such as *Arrival of the Archduchess Marie-Louise in the Gallery of the Chateau of Compiègne*; Constance Mayer who collaborated with Jacques Louis David, and always managed to insert a self image into her works, and had lodgings at the Louvre; and Angelique Mongez's beautiful history paintings (*Gaze* 199, 938). However, if they were so 'great', why did the 'memoire' of society not preserve them? Did the bureaucratic system of organizing the art world fail, leaving women to fall into its cracks even when they were able to do anything more than genre painting? After all, Jean Antoine Gros did say that a mix of the autonomous art with politics was doomed. Or did the Restoration of the monarchy after Napoleon fell try to obliterate anything that could be taken as liberal and positive from the Napoleonic regime? The argument I present is that the State sponsorship system of the Napoleonic regime had too many constraints, too many glass ceilings for many women to get out of the genre painting that was viewed with a lower status. And when they did learn and

participated even less received recognition or support, because those were very simply the rules as laid down by the state.

There was one female artist under the Napoleonic regime who has continued to be very famous - Marie Benoist, who painted *Portrait d'une négresse*, in 1800. In it a sleek, tall, black exotic looking woman sits comfortably on a fairly nice chair covered in blue cloth. The woman wears a white Empire style dress with a thin red belt around her; the colors are very strikingly familiar to the French Tricolour Flag. Already the subject is different and risqué. While slavery had been abolished 6 years previous to the exhibition of the piece, the idea of a former slave to be dressed so nicely, like any other common bourgeois French woman was scandalous – to make matters worse she sits on the very nice chair. One of the most common arguments from art historians is that Benoist, a feminist for her time period, was trying to push for more rights to be granted for women – what better way to make people think of the hypocrisy of abolishing slavery while not allowing women to have rights, than to paint a female former slave in a very luxurious setting. But the highlight is the fact that her right boob is entirely exposed and stares out at the audience, in the same direction as the subject herself. Very likely Benoist was simply emphasizing the female attributes of her subject, to get her message across, or she could be reminding people of the hypocrisies of wanting egalite, liberte, fraternite while pursuing the slave enterprise. The painting itself is very classical and clearly shows the influence David had on Benoist when he taught her years before.

Ultimately, the struggle of the women artist before the French Revolution and after, represent different systems for the status quo to keep a rein over women artists. More specifically, it brings to light the role of state sponsorship in the art field. Through the experiences and lives of the women discussed above one can see the positive and negative aspects of the two systems. In the Ancien Regime the state had not have much of an application of legislation against women from becoming artists – instead they left that up to social agents to make sure that occurred, like the Church. Those few women who were able to make it, like Vigee-Lebrun, and Coster, made it big, and had expansive freedoms once they were in the presence of the state, as the state did not make direct action for or against such a role. In contrast, the Napoleonic regime was all about standardization – including how women could enter the field of art. While more women would find means via the state to enter the art world, the constraints against them had to be set in stone since it was no longer up to social conservatism to stop female artists, and what resulted was a clear cut sphere of influence for women separate from the men. They were like a bubble, and because of the growing strength of state imposition women were increasingly blocked from learning the 'higher' forms of art and many who could have learned art within their families had to render their services to the state, which mean adhering to its rules. That could very possibly explain why there were very few 'famous' women artists during the Napoleonic Empire.

To say one system was better than the other is difficult, but one should keep in mind that even today state sponsorship of the arts is not necessarily a bad

thing – that's what funds many of the arts and sciences in the U.S. And lastly, one should at least appreciate the fact that by having a Civil Code women's status in the eyes of the state were raised, which allowed for women to do their art in instances that would not have been possible before. Benoist herself was married to an administrative official, and worked on her art at the same time. She might not have had full rights but she had a sense of equality in that she could do this alongside her husband's job. When Napoleon was defeated and the Restoration occurred in 1815, her husband continued to work in the administration, but the rights and wrongs of art as viewed by the Church could not allow a woman to pursue such a role when married, especially with one in a high profile position – so she had to stop painting. Perhaps Benoist herself is the best artist to critique, for she encompasses the two eras, and with her one can see the highs and lows the women artist experience during these times.

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