



“Guide me so that I can imitate you”: Revisiting the Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun’s *Julie Le Brun Looking in the Mirror*

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Abstract

The article revolves around the Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun’s 1787’s canvas “Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror”, depicting the artist’s daughter. The text takes a deeper look at the possible inspirations behind the portrait’s intriguing composition and tries to find out how the artwork might be responding to the Enlightenment’s changing conception and depiction of childhood. After presenting the circumstances of the effigy’s creation and its visual qualities, the attention is drawn to the “impossible perspective” depicted in the portrait and its plausible ties with the earlier iconographic examples or “The Paragone debate”. The article also looks into what influences the painter could have experienced from her colleagues, when it came to the changing rendering of children. Finally, the question, how Vigée Le Brun personally, as a mother and as an artist, may have been affected by the new perception of childhood, defined in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s seminal work “Émile”, and whether it is visible in Julies’ portrait, is discussed. In this context, Julie’s portrait gradually emerges as one of Vigée Le Brun’s most unique portraits, presumably directly corresponding to the social and artistic novelties of its age by bringing the image of the individual, sensible and “enlightened” child forward.

Keywords: Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, Julie Le Brun, Children Portraiture, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Enlightenment

An Artist and a Mother

“My happiness was bound up in my daughter and this joy was one I had hoped to carry with me into old age” – wrote Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (née Louise-Élisabeth Vigée, 1755–1842).ⁱ These tender lines, left in the memoirs of a woman, widely accepted as one of the most successful and influential female artists of the early modern period really do seem to be particularly accurate. It appears that despite being a very popular and productive artist with such clients as Marie-Antoinette (1755–1793) and the other European royals on her list and leading a remarkably independent life for a woman at that time, the French portraitist saw her role as a mother equally as important as her artistic career. Even though at the beginning, the painters’ passion for her profession seems to have rivalled her motherly instinct for a bit, the slight internal conflict, between being a good mother for her only daughterⁱⁱ Julie (Jeanne-Julie-Louise Le Brun, later Gaëtan-Bernard Nigris, nicknamed “Brunette”, 1780–1819) and the committed artist at the same time, soon vanished:

Now you will see how my devotion to art made me careless in the day to day details of life; for happy as I was at the idea of becoming a mother, after nine months of pregnancy, I was not in the least prepared for the birth of my baby. The day my daughter was born, I was still in the studio, trying to work with my *Venus Binding the Wings of Cupid*ⁱⁱⁱ in the intervals between labour pains. My oldest friend, Mme de Verdun^{iv}, came to see me in the morning. She felt certain that a child would be born that same day and, since she was also acquainted with my stubborn nature, asked if I had everything I needed. I replied that I had no idea what it was I needed. ‘That’s typical of you,’ she rejoined. ‘A tomboy to the last. I’m warning you, that baby will be born tonight.’ ‘Oh no,’ I said, ‘I have a sitting tomorrow, it can’t be born today.’ Without saying another word, Mme Verdun left and sent for the doctor. He came at once. I sent him back but he remained hidden in the house until the evening and at ten o’clock my daughter was delivered into the world.^v I shall not even attempt to describe the joy I felt on hearing her first cry. It is a feeling that all mothers will understand [...].^{vi}



1. Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror*, oil on canvas, 73 × 59.4 cm, 1787, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. In: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/438132>

The artist's love and attention for her daughter is visible in her art too. Around fourteen canvases are known to depict Julie individually or along with her mother, while there could be even more if one took the various unidentified pastels, drawings and sketches into account. Thus, one could say that Julie was by far the favourite model of Vigée Le Brun.

Let us take a closer look at one of these artist's sensitive takes on her daughter – the 1787's canvas *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror* (fig. 1)^{vii}, the artwork that has only fairly recently been added to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's (further – MMA) collection.^{viii} This portrait is rather intriguing for a few reasons. Firstly, it belongs to the quite often still overlooked, and yet, no less important part of Vigée Le Brun's oeuvre – the children portraiture. Secondly, the painting's history, wider context and thought-provoking composition seem to be able to evoke the certain interpretations concerning both – the travelling of the iconographic motifs and patterns as well as the period of the changing conception and depiction of childhood towards the second half of the 18th century.

A Closer Look at the Portrait

Since the portrait depicts the painter's daughter, it is probably safe to presume that the artwork must have been created in a rather homely and personal space, such as Vigée Le Brun's own studio. Various short mentions and

small hints in the artist's memoirs lead to the thought that such place was an adjacent or an integrated part of her house in Paris.^{ix} Luckily, the address of Vigée Le Brun's family home before the French Revolution is known. The artist lived in the Lubert mansion (later known as "Hôtel Le Brun"^x) at the Cléry street No. 19.^{xi} Thus, it is highly plausible that *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror* was created in that exact place.^{xii}

In the engraving by Pietro Antonio Martini (1738–1797) depicting the installation of 1787's Salon (fig. 2)^{xiii} – the event which marked the first public exhibition of the portrait – one is able to see that *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror* was given a prominent place. The painting hung on the main doorway's left, next to another important Vigée Le Brun's work – the portrait of Marie-Antoinette and her children.^{xiv} Thus, Julie's effigy must have been well seen by the visitors of the exhibition. As Xavier Salmon remarks, precisely during this Salon, the artist

"won general acclaim as a painter of childhood"^{xv}, and as Angela Rosenthal adds – of motherhood^{xvi} – the newly relevant topics in the society of the Enlightenment. Apart from the mentioned two artworks, Vigée Le Brun displayed another five canvases, which depicted children with or without their mothers. However, it was clear who her favourite child model was – Julie appeared in three of the painter's submissions for that year's Salon.^{xvii}

The portrait was generally favourably received by the critics. They described the artwork as "pretty" and praised the resourcefulness of the painter: "It is most ingenious to display twice, in a single portrait, the same subject holding a [mirror – J. V.] in such a way that no one can object that the artist is repeating herself". Yet the art connoisseurs also had some suggestions for improvements: "We offer Madame Lebrun the following observations: shouldn't *the portrait of the portrait* be a bit more mysterious?"^{xviii} Nevertheless, one thing that may be taken from



2. Pietro Antonio Martini, *Exposition au Salon du Louvre en 1787*, print (etching and engraving), 32.2 × 49.1 cm, 1787, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. In: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/393346>

these reviews is that the composition of the artwork and its execution was valued as fairly successful and original.^{xix}

When a contemporary viewer sets her or his eyes on *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror* for a very first time, the arrangement of the painting might not seem that complicated. The figure of the girl stands facing to the left, holding a rectangular mirror with orangey-red, flower-ornamented frames. The girl's head is slightly bent down while she curiously examines her reflection with the light falling directly on the front of her body, from the left side of the painting. The colour scheme consisting of mainly warm calming tones does not offer major contrasts. The only opposing hues might be the colours of the mirror frame and the girl's dress. However, they are toned down and not too sharp. The flat brownish background formed by the loose brushstrokes, boasts a subtle play of shadow turning into light, while moving from left to the right side of the painting.

The simplicity of the background perfectly correlates with the unpretentious but still pretty wardrobe of Julie. The girl wears a delicate green dress complemented with the white cuffs and *fichu*. Her brown curls flow unrestricted, just supported by the white headscarf, fastened on the top of the head. The appearance of Julie corresponds to the gradual change from the overly elaborate to the simpler clothing, seen in the Western fashion during the period of 1775–1795. Under the growing influence of the classical ideals of the Enlightenment and the new countryside-aesthetic promoted by Marie-Antoinette's court, the women of the French nobility turned to the more naturalistic and less restricted style.^{xx} Being close to the Queen and not indifferent to the cultural tendencies, Vigée Le Brun must have taken it into account while dressing and depicting her child whose look really does remind of a country girl – small shepherdess or milkmaid. Of course, one must also not overlook the possibility that the wardrobe of the girl was nothing more but just her daily home and therefore not that exquisite attire.

Let us get back to the composition of the portrait. Even though, it does not seem to be that sophisticated, if one took a closer look, it would become quite clear that the painter depicted “an impossible perspective”.^{xxi} Julie holds the rectangular mirror angled outward, towards the viewer. In reality, this precise position would not allow the beholder to see the girl's face with her large and expressive blue eyes in full.^{xxii} Judging from Vigée Le Brun's oeuvre, there is no doubt that she was a skilled artist who must have had a rather strong base in the perspective and human anatomy. Therefore, it is hard to believe that the painter made an unintentional mistake. In contrary, as Joseph Baillio remarks, “Mme Le Brun's stated purpose was to represent her daughter in profile and full-face”.^{xxiii} If so, why was the artist aiming for this kind of composition? Was she influenced by the other iconographic examples and wanted to follow them? Or was the painter after something else?

The Origins of a Mirror-Reflection Iconography and The Paragone Debate

Vigée Le Brun painted this particular portrait of her daughter more than once.^{xxiv} It shows that the artist was interested in this artistically compelling composition and, probably, tried to improve its execution with each take. However, this ingenious depiction by no means was the invention of the painter herself. The visually captivating iconography of a mirror and its younger or older spectator can be traced back to the 17th century or even earlier.

Many early examples of a “mirror-play”^{xxv} usually had a lot to do with the symbolism of such themes as “The Allegory of Sight” (as a part of “The Five Senses”) or “Vanity”. In contrast, at the same time, the act of looking in the mirror could have also been associated with the philosophical side of human nature, mysticism, prudence and self-reflection.^{xxvi} The latter topics can be seen in the Spanish painter and printmaker Jusepe de Ribera “*Lo Spagnoletto's*” (1591–1652) canvas *A Philosopher Holding a Mirror* (fig. 3).^{xxvii} Precisely this painting, according to Baillio, might have been a significant starting point for Vigée Le Brun.^{xxviii} Salmon also suggests another possible influence, such

as Nicolas Régnier's (1591–1667) canvas (fig. 4).^{xxix} Whatever, the case might have been, one thing may be true. Vigée Le Brun could have found some kind of iconographical guidance in her then husband's (a painter and art dealer Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun (1748–1813); the couple later divorced) art collection of prints, drawings and paintings, which she herself had acknowledged as a very impressive one.^{xxx}



3. Jusepe de Ribera “*Lo Spagnoletto*”, *A Philosopher Holding a Mirror*, oil on canvas, 114.4 × 80 cm, the first half of the 17th century private collection (?), Bilbao, Spain. In: <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/jusepe-de-ribera-lo-spagnoletto-jativa-valencia-5701788-details.aspx>

Baillio and Salmon's versions, linking the portrait to the more sophisticated mirror iconography, seem truly valid. Especially, when one compares the portrait with the other type of "mirror-related" paintings, which are quite fittingly illustrated by George Romney's (1734–1802) *Portrait of Anne Barbara Russell née Whitworth with Her Son Sir Henry Russell* (fig. 5), created around the same time as Julie's effigy.^{xxxii} This is what one of the main subjects of the painting, the little boy playing with his mirror image, or more precisely – Sir Henry Russell, 2nd Baronet (1782–1852) – reminisced about the circumstances of the portrait's creation:

On coming one day to dine with my father [Sir Henry Russell, 1st Baronet (1751–1836) – *J. V.*] in Bedford Row, Romney, the painter, found my mother [Anne Barbara Whitworth (1763–1814) – *J. V.*] holding me on one of the pier tables, playing with the looking glass. He said, 'That would make a very pretty picture'. 'Then' said my father 'as you think so, you shall paint it', and this picture was the consequence.^{xxxiii}



4. Nicolas Régnier, *Vanity or Young Woman at Her Toilette*, oil on canvas, 130 × 105.5 cm, 1616/1626/1630–1635, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon. In: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vanity-Nicolas_Regnier-MBA_Lyon_1976-7-IMG_0383.jpg



5. George Romney, *Portrait of Anne Barbara Russell née Whitworth with Her Son Sir Henry Russell*, oil on canvas, 144 × 113 cm, 1786/1787, private collection. In: <https://www.woolleyandwallis.co.uk/departments/paintings/pw150611-2/view-lot/335/>.

As we can see, this portrait was, most probably, nothing more but just an accidental capturing of a joyful moment witnessed by the painter. Romney's portrait relies on simple and purely playful act of a child-mirror interaction.

Yet, it probably would be quite wrong to describe Julie's portrait as a "consequence" of a short impression. The calm, balanced aura of the portrait brings the work closer to the allegorical compositions of Ribera and Régnier, in which, the heroes and heroines of the painted stories, however, are not children. Interestingly, Julie does not seem to be very childish either. The tranquil expression and a focused pensive gaze of a girl immediately strikes the viewer as an image of a serious and mentally grown-up child character. While looking at Julie, one also cannot help but remember Michael Levey's (1927–2008) remark that the women in Vigée Le Brun's paintings "are usually idle or maternal – but certainly never intellectual".^{xxxiii} This artwork alone should make one doubt such a categorical statement. Yes, Julie is not yet physically an adult but the way her figure carries herself is a far cry from a frivolous, vain and shallow girl – she is already a thoughtful and reflective "little woman".

However, one thing that immediately intrigues the observant viewer is the already mentioned "impossible perspective".^{xxxiv} In real life, the nature of Julie's stance and the grip of the mirror would never allow us to see her profile and the reflection of her full face at the same time. As Rosenthal notes: "If Vigée-Lebrun had chosen to depict the mirror's actual reflection, we would have seen the artist studiously focused on her easel".^{xxxv} As it was stressed before, there is almost no possible way that the painter could have made such an error accidentally. Especially when the artist herself was not only a

competent painter but also acknowledged mirror as one of the most important assets, an artist could have, since it "is the best guide and will show up faults clearly".^{xxxvi} Thus, it looks like that Vigée Le Brun deliberately created this illusory trick, which, interestingly, the critics of the 1787's Salon did not seem to mind.

Nevertheless, why did the artist choose to disobey the laws of the perspective? Rosenthal relates it to the painter's wish to symbolically capture the "child's naïveté" and the "childlike manner of perception". The mind of a little one rarely relies on the common rules and therefore usually does not match a well-informed grown-up's version of the world – just like the stance of Julie does not match her reflection. The author also reminds us of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–1778) position, according to which, it is children who are "unsullied by received opinions, conventions, and prejudices" and therefore "possess true knowledge", almost equal to a philosopher's.

These kind of considerations lets Rosenthal to once again suggest that the portrayal of a girl is connected to the discussed versions of the 17th century masters, clearly making Julie “an allegory of Sight or ‘pure’ sight”.^{xxxvii}

However, this whole viewer’s manipulation with double images, optics, reality and illusion might open up another possible approach to the meaning behind the portrait’s false perspective. One can spot that by showing the profile and front face of the girl at the same time, Vigée Le Brun, creates the sensation of tangibility or – speaking in the contemporary terms – the “3D effect”. This did not go unnoticed by Rosenthal as well: “the skewed perspective may also imply the painter’s claim that art can achieve much more than simply reflect reality” – writes the author.^{xxxviii} If we narrowed this quote a bit by saying that the artist claimed that not the whole concept of *art* but the component part of it – *painting* – could do more than just vaguely mirror the real world, we would get an entirely new view of Julie’s portrait. It could be that by openly exploring the three-dimensionality in *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror*, Vigée Le Brun purposely joined the *The Paragone Debate* in support of the painters.^{xxxix}

The Antiquity-reaching debate became prominent in 15th century, during the Italian Renaissance, and was still active in the 19th century. It questioned which medium – painting or sculpture – is superior in not only depicting the real world but also in the competition against nature itself. Many stressed the painting’s inability to imitate the world due to its two-dimensionality, lack of sophistication and form, while the sculpture was championed for providing several truthful views of the same object from different perspectives. Meanwhile, the supporters of the painting encouraged to perceive it as a “*mirror* [italic – J. V.] of nature”.^{xl} According to them, by creating the illusion of textures, by using colors, hues and the rules of perspective, painters engage not in a merely physical but in a way more mentally demanding activity, which brings them closer to the scholarly work and therefore – the reflection of truth. The iconography of a mirror was brought into the discussion as a counterpoint as well. The reflective surfaces, incorporated in the compositions of the canvases, showed that the painter could not only depict the figure from the multiple angles but also enable the viewer to view them all at the same time – the thing that the sculpture cannot achieve.^{xli}

So, could Vigée Le Brun have been affected or inspired by *paragone*? The debate was truly relevant in the 18th century’s France (especially during the third quarter); also, the analyzed compositional characteristics of *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror* seem to strongly suggest the connection too. Even more so, when, according to Peter Hecht, none other but Ribera – a very likely influence to Vigée Le Brun – was often engaging in the debate of *paragone* in his works.^{xlii} This revelation naturally gives us the different perspective on the discussed Ribera’s *A Philosopher Holding a Mirror*. Yet – however convincing the discussed circumstances might look like, one can never be entirely sure that Julie’s portrait has the direct connection to *paragone* and can be perceived as a response to it. Over the years, many paintings were included into the debate without knowing the authors’ exact motivation behind them. Nevertheless, whatever reasons encouraged Vigée Le Brun to depict her daughter like that, one thing we still be quite sure of – the artist saw the act of painting as a strong force, which, despite it not being immediately obvious to all, still might be capable of “improving nature”^{xliii} in general. As Vigée Le Brun charmingly wrote in the portrait painting instructions dedicated to her “second daughter”, niece Eugénie Tripier-Le Franc (née Le Brun, 1805–1872)^{xliv}: “do not be discouraged if some people cannot find any likeness in your portraits; there are a great many people who do not know how to look at a painting”.^{xlv}

The Influence of the Contemporaries

Another important circumstance that cannot be ignored while discussing the possible meanings behind the artwork is the time in which Vigée Le Brun actually lived and created. Julie’s portrait emerged during the wake of the new fascination with childhood in art which had a direct connection to the Enlightenment’s changing perception of a child and its upbringing.

It was not until the late 17th and mid-18th centuries when, under the influence of works by such Enlightenment philosophers as John Locke (1632–1704) and later – Rousseau^{xlvi}, the childhood started to be considered as an essential period of a human life; the period, which is very distinct from being a grown-up, and therefore requires a special care and attentive approach. “A child is only a child. [...] Nature wants children to be children before being men. [...] Childhood has its ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling which are proper to it. Nothing is less sensible to substitute ours for theirs [...]”^{xlvii} – wrote Rousseau. The growing culture of sentimentality in general also contributed to the increasing sensitivity towards children. In turn, not only the education and fashion of the youngsters changed, but also the art of portraiture strengthened the focus on their childish character traits, such as innocence, naivety and playfulness. In other words, in the Western world, children started to be treated and depicted not as miniature adults but, more or less, as to what we are used to these days – just simply as children.

The first signs of the discussed changes in the French children portraiture, could be traced back to the paintings by Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) and François Boucher (1703–1770).^{xlviii} However, it was the canvases of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779), Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805), François-Hubert Drouais (1727–1775) and the Swiss artist Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702–1789), that were able to capture the newly individualistic and sophisticated imagery of childhood. In many of such examples, quite often inspired by the

Dutch art, we see the little ones depicted in the closed interiors or in the unspecified backgrounds most probably suggesting them being inside their family homes – in a reclusive and safe environment. Usually the children are engaging in homely activities, such as various crafts, learning or playing with their pets. None other but Chardin's



6. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Portrait of Auguste Gabriel Godefroy with a Spinning-Top*, oil on canvas, 67 × 76 cm, circa 1736–1738, Musée du Louvre, Paris. In: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean-Baptiste_Sim%C3%A9on_Chardin_006.jpg

poetic genre paintings from 1730s and 1740s were especially hailed by his contemporaries. The critics even named the artist “an inventor of a “nouveau gout” in the representation of a child”^{xlix} – the manner, which offered something new and had a long lasting influence on his followers. His lyrical portraits, accompanied by the subtle light distribution and calm tones, concentrated all the attention on their main objects – children and youngsters, usually deeply immersed in their occupation and in their thoughts.^l “In the Enlightenment period that paralleled Chardin’s career, children’s play came to be seen for the first time as something constructive, rather than merely the product of idleness” – writes Mark Hudson. According to the art critic, the contemporary scholarship argues that Chardin “was fascinated by the developmental processes of childhood and adolescence, by how we learn through our daily experience”, in this way directly corresponding to the relevant ideas of Locke and, later – Rousseau.^{li} “Do not give your pupil any kind of verbal lessons; he ought to receive them only from experience” – wrote the latter philosopher.^{lii} Thus, Chardin, was able to clearly and inspiringly respond to the formation of the new “enlightened view of childhood”^{liii}, while bringing the

character and individuality of his young sitters to the front.

The echoes of Chardin’s unique brush can be “heard” in the silent and yet so thought-provoking *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror* as well. Just like most of the Chardin’s models, Julie is turned to the viewer’s left, she is calm, reflective and composed. Julie’s portrait clearly corresponds to the changing perception of childhood too. Just like the children in the paintings of Chardin and the other Vigée Le Brun’s contemporaries, Julie conveys something deeper and more complicated. She is a little person with the mind of her own who is in a process of discovering herself. And yet, in contrast to Chardin’s little sitters, Vigée Le Brun provides us with a front view of her daughter’s face, reflected in the mirror too. The viewer is challenged by the pensive gaze of the girl, studying herself (or us?).

Thus, in *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror*, Vigée Le Brun not just simply combines the possible other artists’ influences. She gives the artwork the individual touch of her own. The carefully constructed composition, the subtle light effects and the tasteful colouring, the sweet and calmingly romantic atmosphere and the big, intelligent eyes of the girl, which the artist loved to picture her models and especially Julie with, would not hide from the painter’s fans that it is a true “Le Brunian” portrait. The canvas, which, according to Baillio, “is surely one of the most sensitive child portraits of the eighteenth century. It is as fresh in its appeal as a Renoir”.^{liv}

Educating Julie According and Against *Émile*’s Instructions

Yet it seems that the Enlightenment’s perception of childhood and consequently its depiction might have influenced Vigée Le Brun not only through the interpretations of her fellow artists but also directly through the works of the period’s thinkers, especially Rousseau. As Gita May notices, Vigée Le Brun “greatly admired” the philosopher “in spite of her abiding loyalty to the Royalist cause”.^{lv} Maybe not by a chance Vigée Le Brun’s beloved daughter was named Julie – just like the main heroine of one of Rousseau’s bestsellers^{lvi} – too?

Whatever the case might have been, still the question remains – if Julie’s name was, perhaps, inspired by one Rousseau’s work, was her upbringing then possibly based on another? Unfortunately, no direct mentions of *Émile* – an immensely influential classic of the child education literature – are found in the artist’s memoirs. Despite that, the painter’s documented high evaluation of Rousseau^{lvii}, allows to presume that Vigée Le Brun was aware of the philosopher’s educational work. Especially when her famous sitter and the overall trendsetter Marie-Antoinette herself, whom the painter greatly admired, “identified as a modern, Rousseauian-inspired woman in her care of and devotion to children” and must have had a copy of *Émile* in her library.^{lviii}

However, it seems that the artist could have had a rather tense relationship with the book. One the one hand, she, as a single mother, and as a diligent “disciple de Jean-Jacques”^{lix}, was truly invested in the Julie’s education from an early age:

I had resolved to take care of her education as far as possible, even though I might be running around the world. In Naples I arranged for her to have tutors in writing, geography, Italian, English and German. She preferred the latter to other languages, and showed a remarkable aptitude in her various subjects. She also declared an interest in painting; but her favourite pastime was writing stories. Returning from an evening with my friends I would find her with a quill in one hand and another in her bonnet; I put her to bed, but it was not rare for her to get up secretly in the night in order to finish a chapter, and I remember very well that by the age of nine she had written a little novella, remarkable for both its story and its style. Since we were living in Italy, I did not delay long in acquiring a music teacher for her.^{lx}

Vigée Le Brun's efforts did not seem to go to waste. Julie turned out to be not just a blue-eyed beauty, at whose gaze we have marvel in the portrait. The lessons stimulated the girl's inherent talents and resulted in the smart and attractive woman who become an independent painter towards the end of her life.^{lxi}

On the other hand, Vigée Le Brun must have encountered some confronting ideas by Rousseau too. Throughout *Émile*, he stresses the inherent inertness and weakness of women, their constant reliance on men and emphasizes the cliché feminine qualities, such as an inclination to decorum and seductiveness, as their only actual source of strength. In turn, women are thought not be capable to excel at the same amount of education that the man gets.^{lxii} Rousseau does not see more potential in girls rather than just becoming beautiful, pleasing wives and successful mothers. "Woman has everything against her – our defects, her timidity, and her weakness. She has in her favour only her art and her beauty. Is it not that just that she cultivates both?" – rhetorically asks Rousseau.^{lxiii}

One can clearly notice that Vigée Le Brun's way of living and educating Julie has diverged from the philosopher's opinions. Firstly, despite the fact that the painter gave a lot of attention to the artistic and therefore more "decorative" education of the girl, it seems that she did not deprive her daughter subject-wise, in this way, according to May, subconsciously rebelling against Rousseau's view of women as "men's intellectual inferiors".^{lxiv} One must also not forget that Vigée Le Brun – the highly successful artist working and travelling independently – itself did not coincide with the philosopher's celebration of a domestic woman. The painter was surely not the one who followed the path of a female "whose dignity lay in being ignored".^{lxv}

Thus, all the discussed nuances of the girl's upbringing and the artist's way of life itself show that the painter must have had a complicated relationship with *Émile*. Even though the book offered a new view of childhood and motherhood, Vigée Le Brun might have not counted on its every word. She could have picked out certain things that Rousseau suggested (even the ones appointed directly to the boys) and used them in the actual practice of raising Julie. As a single parent, Vigée Le Brun, was truly free to make various combinations and choices according to her own discretion. Interestingly, one can even suppose that this selective nature of the approach to the educational treatise is also visible in *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror* – a possible artistic embodiment of the painter's personal interpretation of *Émile*.

The Rousseauian Traces in Julie's Portrait

There might be two apparent *Rousseauian* thematic threads, deliberately or maybe just simply by accident, united in *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror*.

The first one is the visualisation of the habits, which, according to the philosopher, are characteristic to the girls: "boys seek movement and noise: drums, boots, little carriages. Girls prefer what presents itself to sight and is useful for ornamentation: *mirrors* [italic – J. V.], jewels, dresses, particularly dolls".^{lxvi} So, in the portrait the artist might be capturing a moment of Julie's silent and calm play, in this way highlighting her daughter's natural inclination towards adornment, which later developed into the girls love for art. The quite similar situation is depicted in Vigée Le Brun's *Portrait of Alexandrine-Emilie Brongniart* (fig. 7) clearing her sewing kit, which symbolically relates to Rousseau's observation that the girls love engaging in needlework.^{lxvii} But as we follow Julie's deep and composed look, directed towards and gazing out of the mirror, it is hard to believe that by examining her reflection the girl thinks of just adorning herself. As it was noted before, there seems to be no inclination of the childish vanity in the picture. This brings us to the second – the educational theme in the portrait. Here, the painter touches upon the self-perception and individuality of a child. This is the topic that Rousseau himself saw as an essential part of the child's education: "Each mind has its own form [...]. Observe your pupil



7. Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Portrait of Alexandrine-Emilie Brongniart*, oil on wood, 65.1 × 53.3 cm, 1788/1789, The National Gallery, London. In: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/elisabeth-louise-vigee-le-brun-alexandrine-emilie-brongniart>

well before saying the first word to him [...], let the germ of his character reveal itself freely [...].”^{lxviii} While looking at the mesmerizing portrait of Julie, it seems that for a minute Vigée Le Brun and the viewer of the portrait are suddenly turned into those teachers observing their pupil. The girl appears to be caught in a symbolic act of self-reflection marking the early learning process. One cannot help but admire the purity of the scene.

In the portrait, precisely the act of seeing is playing the most important part at Julie’s self-revelation and education. Rousseau noted the significance of sight among the other human senses too:

To exercise the senses is not only to make use of them, it is to learn to judge well with them. It is to learn, so to speak, to sense; for we know how to touch, see, and hear only as we have learned. [...] Swimming, running, jumping, spinning a top, throwing stones, all that is quite good. But have we only arms and legs? Have we also not eyes and ears; and are these organs superfluous to the use of the former? Therefore, do not exercise only strength; exercise all the senses which direct it. Get from each of them all that they can do.^{lxix}

In the context of Rousseau’s thoughts, by examining herself in the mirror with the help of the sense of sight, Julie might also be training both – her mental and physical strengths that should help the girl to better adapt to the adult world. And maybe it is that world, which she symbolically observes in the mirror? As we discovered from her early writing attempts, Julie had great gift of imagination, so this kind of phantasy would not have been that out of reach for her. Especially when one learns that, the mirror can also be interpreted as a mediating or transitional object.^{lxx}

However, it necessary to note that some researchers are also leaning to the side of the not entirely Rousseau-based interpretation of Julie-mirror interaction, relating it to the special bond of Vigée Le Brun and her daughter. Rosenthal writes:

For in gazing into the mirror, Julie hypnotically fixes not on her own self-reflection, but on her mother whom she considers with the aid of the mirror as the figure of the primary identification. [...] Seen this way, the reflected child’s face can also be interpreted as a self-projection by Vigée-Lebrun, who reflects herself (masked through childhood) in the representation of Julie.^{lxxi}

Interpreting, the portrait as a display of the mother-daughter relationship, in which the offspring imitates or at least is expected to imitate her mother to the extent when the two become the mirroring images of each other, seems to be a rather plausible idea. Especially when knowing that this kind of approach to the girls’ upbringing was still very much alive in the 17th and 18th centuries’ France. According to Katherine Ann Jensen:

In early modern France, ambitious women were preoccupied with representing a certain kind of mother-daughter bond: one in which a daughter was supposed to mirror her mother. In other words, certain prominent *ancien régime* women writing about mother-daughter relations seemed to find the metaphor or myth of mother-daughter mirroring culturally available and desirable.^{lxxii}

For instance, in his 1639’s book *The Virtuous Daughter (L’Honnête Fille)*, the French writer François de Grenaille (1616–1680) shares this scenic art-related metaphor:

Women serve not only in forming them [virtuous daughters], but since they use themselves as models, and since in order to produce a daughter the mother makes her own image; one can further say that they have the same right over their work as a painter over his self-portrait.^{lxxiii}

Even though such thoughts date back to the pre-Rousseauian times, it seems that these views did not cease to exist for quite a long time. In *Émile*, we also catch the philosopher describing all children as the “great imitators”^{lxxiv} as well as offering a particularly interesting quote:

In the arts which aim only at being pleasing, everything can serve as a master for young people – their fathers, their mother, their brothers, their sisters, their friends, their governesses, *their mirrors* [italic – J. V.], and above all their own taste.^{lxxv}

Having this context in mind one can clearly associate Julie’s action of looking in a mirror – the symbolic master of hers – with taking an example from her mother whose reflection, even though not visible to us, metaphorically coexists with her daughter’s, since she is the one the girl looks adoringly at. In other words, Julie learns about herself through her mother’s image.

In fact, the paintings with similar connotations had appeared in French art before. One work that should be mentioned is the 1740–1741’s canvas created by Chardin. In *The Morning Toilet* (fig. 8)^{lxxvi}, the artist depicts a

young girl, who, while being dressed up, gazes in the mirror reflections of both, herself and her mother. As Johnson notes:

Several contemporary observers of the painting understood the young girl gazing at herself in the mirror as an image of vanity [...]. It appears, however, that something much more serious is at issue here. [...] The solemn mood of the painting indicates that the mirror, if interpreted emblematically, should be understood as an emblem of instruction and the acquisition of social values [...]. According to [...] Locke, imitation is the primary mode of learning for the young child, and the girl, gazing in the mirror, learns the correct form of comportment and appearance by observing her mother. According to the popular manuals on the education of daughters, the most important lesson a girl can learn from her mother is how not to be vain. [...] We observe a process of education and thereby learn how and what to teach children.^{lxxvii}



8. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Morning Toilet*, oil on canvas, 49 × 39 cm, 1740–1741, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. In: <http://collection.nationalmuseum.se/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=17785&viewType=detailView>

women.

Finally, one could claim that out of all the portraits of her daughter, the potential Vigée Le Brun saw in the girl is the most visible in none other but *Julie Le Brun Looking in the Mirror*. With the help of the mirror-reflection symbolism, the canvas subtly radiates the spirit of Enlightenment, showing that with a good example nearby, everyone, no matter the gender, can successfully fulfill hers, his or their family's aspirations. The clever and receptive gaze of Julie only strengthens the impression, seemingly silently referring to *Émile*'s concluding plea said to his master at the end of Rousseau's treatise: "guide me so that I can imitate you".^{lxxx}

ⁱ *The Memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun*, translated from French by Siân Evans, London: Camden Press, 1989, p. 212.

ⁱⁱ The artist's other daughter, whose name did not reach us, died in infancy.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Venus Binding the Wings of Cupid*, pastel on paper, 1780, unknown measurements and owner.

^{iv} Anne Catherine Le Preudhomme de Châtenoy, Comtesse de Verdun.

^v Julie was born on the 12th of February 1780, see: François Pitt-Rivers, *Madame Vigée Le Brun*, Paris: Gallimard, 2001, p. 56.

^{vi} *The Memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun* 1989, p. 28.

^{vii} Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror*, oil on canvas, 73 × 59.4 cm, 1787, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

^{viii} In November 2019, MMA announced that Jayne Kirkman Wrightsman (née Larkin, 1919–2019) left a bequest of \$ 80 million and more than 375 artworks and rare books, including the portrait of Julie to the museum.

The portrait (Classification: Paintings; Credit Line: Bequest of Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 2019; Accession Number: 2019.141.23) is now exhibited at The Met Fifth Avenue, at the hall of the *European Paintings, 1250–1800*, gallery 616.

^{ix} *The Memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun* 1989, p. 43; Hannah Williams, “Artists’ Studios in Paris Digitally Mapping the 18th-Century Art World.” http://www.journal18.org/issue5_williams/artists-studios/ (Access date: December 20, 2021).

^x “Chronology of the Life of Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun.” In *Vigée Le Brun*, edited by Joseph Baillio, Katharine Baetjer and Paul Lang with contributions by Ekaterina Deryabina, Gwenola Firmin, Stéphane Guégan, Anabelle Kienle Poňka, Xavier Salmon and Anna Sulimova. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016, p. 241.

^{xi} *The Memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun* 1989, p. 26, 39; Williams.

^{xii} Vigée Le Brun painted two versions of the canvas. For the earlier one, see: Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror*, oil on wooden panel, 73 × 60.3 cm, 1785/1786 (?), private collection of Michel David-Weill, New York City. To this day, it is still not clear which version was presented during the first public exhibition of the portrait at the 1787’s Salon at Louvre. Thus, let us make a presumption that precisely the second version of the artwork hung in the hall of the Palace during the August–September of 1787. See: Xavier Salmon, “35. Julie Le Brun Looking in a Mirror.” In: *Vigée Le Brun*, 2016, pp. 128–129; Joseph Baillio, “Catalogue Number 25. Julie Le Brun, 1787.” <https://www.batguano.com/catno25.html> (Access date: December 20, 2021); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Julie Le Brun (1780–1819) Looking in a Mirror. 1787. Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun.” <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/438132> (Access date: December 20, 2021).

^{xiii} Pietro Antonio Martini, *Exposition au Salon du Louvre en 1787*, print (etching and engraving), 32.2 × 49.1 cm, 1787, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

^{xiv} Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Marie-Antoinette and Her Children*, 275 × 215 cm, 1787, Le château de Versailles.

^{xv} Salmon 2016, p. 128.

^{xvi} Angela Rosenthal, “Infant Academies and the Childhood of Art: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun’s “Julie with a Mirror”.” In: *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 4, *Artistic Interactions* (Summer, 2004), p. 607.

^{xvii} For the full list of all Vigée Le Brun’s paintings exhibited in 1787’s Salon, see: Pierre de Nolhac, *Madame Vigée-Le Brun. Peintre de Marie-Antoinette*. Paris: Goupil et cie, Manzi, Joyant, et cie, 1912, pp. 251–252.

^{xviii} Rosenthal 2004, p. 608, 617; Salmon 2016, p. 128.

^{xix} Perrin Stein, “68. Julie Le Brun Holding a Mirror.” In: *The Wrightsman Pictures*, edited by Everett Fahy with a preface by Pierre Rosenberg and contributions by Elizabeth E. Barker, George R. Goldner, Alain Gruber, Colta Ives, Asher Ethan Miller, Sabine Rewald, Perrin Stein and Gary Tinterow. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Yale University Press, 2005, pp. 248–251.

^{xx} Jennifer M. Jones, “Repackaging Rousseau: Femininity and Fashion in Old Regime France.” In: *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Autumn, 1994), pp. 939–967.

^{xxi} Salmon 2016, p. 128; Baillio 1982.

^{xxii} Baillio 1982; Stein 2005, p. 250.

^{xxiii} Baillio 1982.

^{xxiv} See note No. 12.

^{xxv} Salmon 2016, p. 128.

^{xxvi} Rosenthal 2004, p. 618.

^{xxvii} Jusepe de Ribera “*Lo Spagnoletto*”, *A Philosopher Holding a Mirror*, oil on canvas, 114.4 × 80 cm, the first half of the 17th century, private collection (?), Bilbao, Spain.

^{xxviii} Baillio 1982.

^{xxix} Nicolas Régnier, *Vanity or Young Woman at Her Toilette*, oil on canvas, 130 × 105.5 cm, 1616/1626/1630–1635, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon; Salmon, p. 128.

^{xxx} *The Memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun* 1989, p. 26, 39.

^{xxxi} George Romney, *Portrait of Anne Barbara Russell née Whitworth with Her Son Sir Henry Russell*, oil on canvas, 144 × 113 cm, 1786/1787, private collection.

^{xxxii} “George Romney (1734–1802) Portrait of Anne Barbara Russell née Whitworth with her son Sir Henry Russell”.

^{xxxiii} Michael Levey, *From Rococo to Revolution: Major Trends in Eighteenth-Century Painting*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1966, p. 154; *Idem, Painting and Sculpture in France 1700–1789*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 282.

^{xxxiv} Salmon 2016, p. 128; Baillio 1982.

^{xxxv} Rosenthal 2004, p. 620.

^{xxxvi} Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, “Advice on the Painting of Portraits”, In: *The Memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun*, p. 355.

^{xxxvii} Rosenthal 2004, pp. 617–618.

^{xxxviii} Rosenthal 2004, p. 618.

^{xxxix} *Paragone* – comparison (in Italian).

^{xl} Hecht 1984, p. 125

^{xli} For more about the history of the debate, see: Lippert 2019.

^{xlii} Peter Hecht, “The Paragone Debate: Ten Illustrations and a Comment.” In: *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1984), pp. 127–129, 131, 136.

^{xliii} Rosenthal 2004, p. 618.

^{xliv} Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun. “Pen Portraits.” In: *The Memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun*, p. 349. Eugénie Tripiet-Le Franc became an artist on her own and mostly specialized in portraits.

^{xlv} Vigée Le Brun. “Advice on the Painting of Portraits.”, p. 355.

^{xlvi} John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. London: A. & J. Churchill, 1693; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, ou De l'éducation*. Amsterdam: Jean Néaulme, 1762.

^{xlvii} Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile; or On Education*, translated from French with an introduction and notes by Allan Bloom. London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 79, 90, 105.

^{xlviii} Amanda Kristine Strasik, *Reconceiving Childhood: Women and Children in French Art, 1750–1814*, PhD dissertation, University of Iowa, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2016, pp. 32, 64–65, 258; Jo Hedley, *François Boucher: Seductive Visions*. London: Wallace Collection, 2004.

^{xlix} Dorothy Johnson, “Picturing Pedagogy: Education and the Child in the Paintings of Chardin.” In: *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Autumn, 1990), p. 48.

^l Let us take the famous Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin’s *Portrait of Auguste Gabriel Godefroy with a Spinning-Top* (oil on canvas, 67 × 76 cm, circa 1736–1738, fig. 6) as one of the examples.

^{li} Mark Hudson, “Boy Building a House of Cards: Genius Who Took His Secrets to the Grave.” <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/9167611/Boy-Building-a-House-of-Cards-Genius-who-took-his-secrets-to-the-grave.html> (Access date: December 20, 2021).

^{lii} Rousseau 1991, p. 92.

^{liii} Johnson 1990, p. 56.

^{liv} Baillio 1982.

^{lv} Gita May, *Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun: The Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 5.

^{lvi} Rousseau 1761.

^{lvii} Melissa Percival, “Sentimental Poses in the Souvenirs of Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun.” In: *French Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (April, 2003), pp. 149–165.

^{lviii} Strasik 2016, pp. 151–152, 157.

^{lix} André Blum, *Madame Vigée-Lebrun: peintre des grandes dames du XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: H. Piazza, 19, Rue Bonaparte, 1919, p. 11.

^{lx} *The Memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun* 1989, p. 113.

^{lxi} On the 31st of August 1799, while living in Saint Petersburg, Julie married Gaëtan-Bernard Nigris (circa 1766 – circa 1831) against her parents’ wishes. This strained the young woman and Vigée-Le Brun’s relationship. In 1807, the couple separated and Julie returned to Paris, where she started to work as an independent artist. Despite regularly seeing Vigée-Le Brun, Julie refused to stay with her. She continued to work, participating in a few Parisian exhibitions throughout the years. After the death of Julie’s father in 1813, she inherited his debts and mortgages and struggled to get by. Apparently, she did not ask for (or maybe refused?) her mother’s financial aid. A few years after that, already living close to poverty, Julie fell gravely ill (most probably with pneumonia) and died on the 8th of December 1819. Her funeral service was held the following morning at the Parisian Bernardine convent Church of the Abbey of the Woods (*Abbaye-aux-Bois*). “It was as if all the wrongs of my little one had never happened and I saw her again in her childhood... Alas! She was so young! Why should she not survive me?” – touchingly wrote Vigée Le Brun.

See: *The Memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun* 1989, pp. 212–214, 265, 304; Katharine Ann Jensen, “Mirrors, Marriage, and Nostalgia: Mother-Daughter Relations in Writings by Isabelle de Charrière and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun.” In: *Women’s Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Autumn, 2000), p. 293; Angelica Goodden, *Sweetness of Life: A Biography of Elizabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*. London: Andre Deutsch 1997, pp. 298–301; Neil Jeffaries, “Le Brun, Jeanne-Julie-Louise, Mme Gaëtan-Bernard Nigris. Paris, 1780–1819” In: *Dictionary of Pastellists before 1800*, London: Unicorn Press, 2006, p. 1 (page is indicated according the online edition of the book via: <http://www.pastellists.com/>; Access date: December 20, 2021), p. 1. Also see: Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

^{lxii} Rousseau 1991, pp. 357–358, 386–387.

^{lxiii} Rousseau 1991, p. 371.

^{lxiv} May 2005, pp. 102–103.

^{lxv} Rousseau 1991, p. 366; Paula Rea Radisich, “Que peut définir les femmes?: Vigée-Lebrun’s Portraits of an Artist.” In: *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4, *Special Issue: Art History: New Voices/New Visions* (Summer, 1992), p. 465.

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- lxvi Rousseau 1991, p. 367.
- lxvii Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Portrait of Alexandrine-Emilie Brongniart*, oil on wood, 65.1 × 53.3 cm, 1788/1789, The National Gallery, London. Rousseau 1991, p. 368.
- lxviii Rousseau 1991, p. 94, 177.
- lxix Rousseau 1991, p. 132.
- lxx Rosenthal 2004, p. 624.
- lxxi Rosenthal 2004, pp. 620–624.
- lxxii Jensen 2000, p. 286.
- lxxiii Jensen 2000, p. 286.
- lxxiv Rousseau 1991, p. 143.
- lxxv Rousseau 1991, p. 375.
- lxxvi Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Morning Toilet*, oil on canvas, 49 × 39 cm, 1740–1741, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.
- lxxvii Johnson 1990, pp. 62–64.
- lxxviii Rosenthal 2004, p. 621.
- lxxix See note No. 61.
- lxxx Rousseau 1991, p. 480.