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The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigee-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art

Mary D. Sheriff

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The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigee-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art Mary D. Sheriff Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842) was an enormously successful painter, a favorite portraitist of Marie-Antoinette, and one of the few women accepted into the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. In accounts of her role as an artist, she was simultaneously flattered as a charming woman and vilified as monstrously unfeminine.

In *The Exceptional Woman*, Mary D. Sheriff uses Vigée-Lebrun's career to explore the contradictory position of "woman-artist" in the moral, philosophical, professional, and medical debates about women in eighteenth-century France. Paying particular attention to painted and textual self-portraits, Sheriff shows how Vigée-Lebrun's images and memoirs undermined the assumptions about "woman" and the strictures imposed on women.

Engaging ancien-régime philosophy, as well as modern feminism, psychoanalysis, literary theory, and art criticism, Sheriff's interpretations of Vigée-Lebrun's paintings challenge us to rethink the work and the world of this controversial woman artist.

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