



**Pictures of people are called portraits.** You probably have a portrait of yourself—a family photo or a school picture. Today the click of a camera can produce a portrait, but what did people do before the camera was invented? Some hired painters or sculptors to capture their appearance and personality. Colors, lines, costumes, pose, and place—the elements of portraits are as varied as portraits themselves.

Stroll through the National Gallery of Art and you will find many portraits. Each one is a little bit of history. In gallery 56, you'll find two portraits by Elisabeth Louise Vig e-LeBrun (1755–1842). Her works mirrored fashionable life in France before the Revolution.

Elisabeth Vig e-LeBrun, *The Marquise de Pez  and the Marquise de Rouget with Her Two Children* (detail), 1787, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Bay Foundation in memory of Josephine Bay Paul and Ambassador Charles Ulrick Bay

# 1

## Pleasing Portraits

Vigée-LeBrun was one of late-eighteenth-century France's most successful portrait painters—often she had a waiting list! Why was she so popular? Because Vigée-LeBrun pleased her clients by making them look attractive, with graceful poses and happy expressions.

Today Vigée-LeBrun is known especially for her pictures of women and children, such as the paintings in the National Gallery's collection. In both, the figures are nearly life-size. The group portrait depicts two of Vigée-LeBrun's close friends: The Marquise de Pez , in the blue gown, and the Marquise de Rouget, the mother of the two young boys.

The sitter is unknown in *Portrait of a Lady*. With her right arm resting on a pillow, the young woman appears to be watching and listening to you.

**If you could talk to her, what would you ask?**



Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun,  
*The Marquise de Pez  and  
the Marquise de Rouget  
with Her Two Children*

# 2

## Style and Skill

Vigée-LeBrun was interested in fashion and painted clothing with great detail. Through depictions of luxurious garments and accessories, she showed her sitters' wealth and elegance.

Observe the paintings closely to see Vigée-LeBrun's brilliant technique. Imagine the textures of the fabric—the shimmering silks and iridescent taffetas of the flowing dresses of the Marquise de Pez  and Marquise de Rouget, and the meticulously painted, small embroidered gold circles on the unknown lady's white chiffon skirt. Vigée-LeBrun carefully observed details, such as lace or gold edging.

Vigée-LeBrun often selected her sitters' attire. For example, she designed imaginative headdresses inspired by turbans from the Near East.

**Look at the Gallery's two paintings and compare the way each woman's hair is elaborately wrapped in sheer silk.**

# 3

## Tell me more about the artist.

Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun was born in Paris during the reign of Louis xv. Her father, an artist, introduced her to painting, but he died when Vigée-LeBrun was only twelve. Mainly self-taught, Vigée-LeBrun began a career as a portrait painter to support her mother and brother. Talented and hard-working, Vigée-LeBrun soon earned critical and financial success. She married an art dealer, and they had one daughter. In 1778, Vigée-LeBrun was summoned to Versailles, the palace of King Louis xvi and Queen Marie-Antoinette. She became the queen's favorite painter, and while making portraits of Marie-Antoinette, the two became friends.



Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun,  
*Self-Portrait (detail)*, c. 1781,  
oil on canvas, Kimbell Art  
Museum

# 4

## An Historic Time in France

Vigée-LeBrun lived during a time of political turmoil in France. Most of the people were commoners and resented the royals and nobles, who enjoyed extravagant lives while imprisoning dissenters. Finally, the situation exploded into the French Revolution, which brought years of violence. Vigée-LeBrun's friends and patrons, including King Louis xvi and Queen Marie-Antoinette, were beheaded. As court portraitist, Vigée-LeBrun's life also was in danger, and she fled Paris in disguise. She spent sixteen years traveling in Italy, Germany, Austria, Russia, and England, while continuing to paint portraits of royalty and wealthy families. Finally in 1805, after Napoleon had established an empire and the Revolution ended, Vigée-LeBrun returned to France. Again, she continued painting and was even asked to paint Napoleon's sister. A celebrity in her own lifetime, Vigée-LeBrun painted more than 800 portraits.

**If you could have your portrait painted by Vigée-LeBrun, how would you want to be portrayed? In a group portrait with family and friends, or alone? How would you like to be dressed in your portrait?**

Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun,  
*Portrait of a Lady (detail)*,  
1789, oil on wood, National  
Gallery of Art, Samuel H.  
Kress Collection



Attributed to Elisabeth  
Vigée-LeBrun, *Marie-  
Antoinette (detail)*, c. 1783,  
oil on canvas, National  
Gallery of Art, Timken  
Collection

## book nook

These books about portrait painting can be found in the Children's Shop located on the Gallery's concourse level or at your local library or bookstore.

### **Little Girl in a Red Dress with Cat and Dog**

By Nicholas B. A. Nicholson,  
illustrated by Cynthia Von Buhler  
ages 4 and up

A little girl narrates, describing how her portrait's creator, a self-taught artist named Ammi Phillips, traveled from state to state in the 1830s, painting farm families.

### **The Joke's on George**

By Michael O. Tunnell,  
illustrated by Kathy Osborn  
ages 4 and up

An entertaining story about George Washington's visit to the museum of American portrait painter Charles Willson Peale.

### **Chuck Close Up Close**

By Jan Greenberg and  
Sandra Jordan  
ages 8 and up

Learn about Close's unique process of creating larger-than-life portraits and his inspiring struggle to overcome physical challenges.

### **Portraits (Artists' Workshop series)**

By Penny King and Clare Roundhill  
ages 8 and up

Lively information about artists and their techniques combine with fun projects that will excite young readers to make portraits of their own.

## try this!

# activity

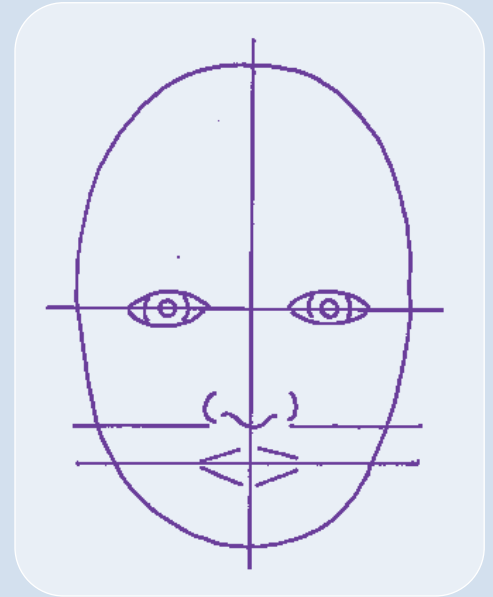
### Be a portraitist!

**You will need paper and paints, colored pencils, or markers.**

Who will you make a portrait of? Choose someone special in your life or an important public figure. You can use a photograph from a magazine or newspaper, or have someone pose for you. Consider your subject's hobbies and interests. Will you portray him or her indoors, outdoors, reading a book, playing a game, dressed casually, or in fancy clothes? After you've made these decisions, begin your portrait.

#### Here's a Tip:

Faces can be tricky to draw but start by sketching an oval. Then, divide the oval down and across, as shown in the diagram. The eyes and the bridge of the nose are just about halfway between the top of the head and the chin. The tip of the nose is a little less than halfway from the eye line to the chin. The mouth is about a third of the way from the nose to the chin. Once you have the proportions of the



face established as a guideline, you can begin focusing on the details. Carefully observe your subject. What colors are the hair, eyes, and skin? Draw them in.

# web activity



To learn about Jacques Louis David's painting of Napoleon in his study, a portrait from post-Revolutionary France, explore this interactive Web tour: [www.nga.gov/kids/napoleon/nap1.html](http://www.nga.gov/kids/napoleon/nap1.html)

Then, make a portrait online with Pixel Face, an interactive portrait maker, at [www.nga.gov/kids/zone/zone.htm](http://www.nga.gov/kids/zone/zone.htm)

Jacques-Louis David, *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries* (detail), 1812, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection