

PORTRAIT OF ANNE CATHERINE LE PREUDHOMME, COUNTESS OF VERDUN

ÉLISABETH LOUISE VIGÉE LE BRUN

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IT WAS PROBABLY IN 1782 when Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, one of the most interesting French painters of the second half of the 18th century, painted this portrait of her best friend, Anne Catherine Le Preudhomme, Countess of Verdun.

The young countess, of about 22 years old, is depicted in bust, dressed in informal rural attire, with a loose-fitting white shirt, a red lace-up waistcoat, and a delicate, almost transparent, tulle shawl, which covers her shoulders. Her hair is powdered and loose, and she is wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat, decorated with a light blue ribbon to which a small bouquet of flowers and wheat ears is attached. The naturalism and realism of the portrayal; the calm, bright expression of the pale blue eyes; the harmony achieved by the subtle use of juxtaposition and association of tones; the sensitivity in the application of light on the complexion of the face and the economy and balance of the colour palette are some of the aspects of this painting that so clearly convey the talent of Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun as a painter and portrait artist.

The life and artistic career of Vigée Le Brun constitutes a rare and unique journey among the art of her time. Her work, especially the countless portraits she did, is the narrative of an aristocratic society in a world in total transformation, the outcome of which would be the French Revolution in 1789. For Le Brun this would be the beginning of a 12-year exile, which her talent and intellectual abilities, coupled with the independent, resilient and competitive spirit she was known for, would transform into a brilliant international career that would take her to Bologna, Florence, Rome, Naples, Berlin, Vienna, London, Geneva, Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Over the course of her life of 87 years, France and the whole of Europe underwent radical political, social, economic and cultural transformations. From the *Ancien Régime* to the beginning of the industrial era, the work of Vigée Le Brun, however, is characterised by a serenity and consistency that doesn't show any trace of her intense and turbulent life, marked by great upheavals that were not only political and social but also personal. In her vast collection of portraits, she achieves a synthesis of natural expression,



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Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun
***Portrait of Anne Catherine
Le Preudhomme, Countess of Verdun***

1782

Oil on canvas

102 × 82 cm

NOVO BANCO Collection

the moment and the pose, immortalising a sense of tranquillity that suspends her subjects in time, portraying them in a very personal way, as if they existed outside of the political and social turmoil of the world in which they live.

Élisabeth Louise Vigée was born on 16 April 1755, in Paris, the daughter of Jeanne Maissin and Louis Vigée (1715-1767), a reputable oil and pastel painter. It was in her father's studio that she began her apprenticeship and established first contact with the artistic community. Extremely gifted at drawing and painting, at 12 years old, after the death of her father, she attended an academy where she refined her oil painting technique. An avid learner, she studied the great masters, practised copying the paintings in the Louvre, and sought advice from established artists such as Joseph

Vernet, of whom she would do a beautiful portrait in 1778. Later, in her *Memoirs*, which she started to write in 1825, and which were published between 1835 and 1837, she recalled Vernet's advice not to follow a specific school and to study the great Italian and Flemish masters, above all developing her drawing and painting according to what she saw, saying to her that "nature is the first of all masters".

A painter of renowned talent at the age of 15, one of the most interesting aspects of her long artistic career, which became apparent very early on, was her insatiable curiosity for the work of other painters, with which she enriched her training, and the way she developed and consolidated an artistic personality that was very much her own, using a method that was practically self-taught. In the great masters, such as Raphael, Rubens and Van Dyke, she found the audacity to try out new models, new colours and new brush techniques, which would turn her into an adept colourist. On her visit to Flanders, in 1782, she was deeply impressed by Rubens' painting, technique and colour palette. This influence, which she explored and reinterpreted, is evident in the portraits she did over the following years, most notably in her self-portrait in a straw hat, inspired by Rubens' portrait of Susanna Fourment. These countless sources of inspiration would be a constant source of creativity throughout the course of her career.

Although she specialised in portraiture and oil painting, Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun practised a wide range of painting genres. She painted dozens of landscapes, especially during her visits to Switzerland. She painted mythology and allegory, such as *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*, in 1780, and submitted it for her admission into the Royal Academy of Painting. At 23 years old, already with an established career, she was called to Versailles by Queen Marie Antoinette to paint her portrait. They were both of the same age and this meeting marked a breakthrough in the social and artistic life of Vigée Le Brun, who became the Queen's official painter and, consequently, one of the most desirable artists among the nobility and aristocracy. With the support of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, she was admitted to the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1783, at the age of 28, the ultimate accolade for an artist who could from then on exhibit her work twice a year in the "Salon" of the Louvre. When the revolution broke out, on account of her being professionally and socially associated with the royal family and an entire clientele of nobles and aristocrats, Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun left France and settled in Rome, the first of many cities she would visit over the course of

12 years of travelling and remarkable artistic production. In 1792 she went to Austria, where she spent two years and established her fame as a painter, earning admiration and respect for her talent. In 1795, on the advice of Count Andrey Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador in Vienna, she left for Saint Petersburg. For six years, in spite of rivalry with Russian painters, it was in Saint Petersburg and Moscow that she consolidated her career and her fortune in the service of the aristocracy, of whom she left a vast collection of portraits. In 1800, thanks in part to the support of her husband, the art collector and merchant Jean-Baptiste Pierre Le Brun, she managed to have her name taken off the list of citizens banned from France and recovered her nationality. In 1803 she travelled to England, going on to Switzerland in 1807 and returning to her native land for good in 1808.

Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun was a woman who was simultaneously of and ahead of her time. Although she lived in one of the most tumultuous periods of eighteenth-century Europe, she never gave up, overcoming social barriers and prejudices that she was faced with for the simple fact of her being a woman, a mother and a painter. Up until the end of her life, she succeeded in not letting anything stand in the way of her talent or prevent her from painting. She was a member of the Royal Academy of Paris and the academies of Rouen, Avignon, Rome, Parma, Bologna, Berlin, Geneva and Saint Petersburg.

The portrait of Anne Catherine Le Preudhomme has never been exhibited before and is now being presented to the public for the first time. In her *Memoirs*, Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun dedicates a whole page to her "first and best friend" of a good and joyful character, and notes that this friendship is a source of great happiness in her life. At the end of the first volume are records of the portraits that she did before leaving France in 1789 and references to five portraits of the Countess of Verdun, painted in 1776, 1779, 1780 and 1782. Of these portraits, two are very similar to what is now presented at the MNAA, except small differences in details such as flowers and ribbon on the hat. One of these portraits is in the Helsinki Museum (Sinebrychoff Art Museum), the other is part of a private collection.

Before arriving in Portugal, at the beginning of the 1970s, this portrait formed part of the collection of Hannah Ezra Gubbay (1886-1968), England, and in 1969 was integrated into the Koetsler Gallery, in Zurich.

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