Online Course

International Artists:
Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun and Rosa Bonheur

Dates	Wednesday 24 and Thursday 25 March 2021
Times	18.00–20.00
Location	Zoom Webinar
Tutor	Jo Rhymer
Level	All Levels

Jacques Thouron (after Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun),
Madame Vigée Le Brun, after a self- portrait, c.1782-1790 (detail)

Course Description

Timed for March's annual celebration of the achievements of women, explore the work of French artists Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842) and Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899), both of whom were successful, professional artists in a male-dominated art world.

Although their lifespans briefly overlapped, their lived experiences, choice of subject matter and style of painting are markedly different. Focusing on a small selection of works in order to look closely, we will consider the different ways in which each artist negotiated the art world to become successful in their respective fields, despite the limitations placed on women during their lifetimes.

As well as introducing some of the artists' key works in the Wallace Collection, each session will also provide insights into the experiences of women artists in 18th- and 19th-century France. The course is also designed to help you develop visual analysis skills from looking at paintings slowly, and in detail.

Session One: Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun

Vigée Le Brun established herself as the most successful portrait painter in pre-revolutionary France, counting the queen of France, Marie-Antoinette, as one of her enthusiastic patrons. However, when the dangers of the 1789 Revolution in France became severe, she and her daughter were forced to flee the country. Not only did she overcome this setback but she was able to use this experience to establish her reputation internationally, leading to commissions in Europe and Russia.

Looking closely at Thouron's enamel miniature in the Wallace Collection, we'll begin by considering the context in which Vigée Le Brun's ambitions to become an artist developed. Thouron's work is a copy of a self-portrait by Vigée Le Brun, which is now in a private collection. Our discussion will explore a related painting in the National Gallery to consider ways in which self-portraiture might function as self-promotion. Looking at Vigée Le Brun's painting of Madame Perregaux in the Wallace Collection, we'll also discuss how her admiration of Rubens' work influenced her painting methods, and provided her with the opportunity to test and prove her own outstanding skills.

Session Two: Rosa Bonheur

In our second session, we'll explore the context of Rosa Bonheur's work. She became the most celebrated female artist in 19th-century France and was the first woman to be awarded the legion d'honneur, France's highest honour of merit. Bonheur's reputation was built mainly on her representations of animals which, devoid of sentimentality and often set within rural landscapes, were the result of careful observation. The popularity of her paintings of rural France and depictions of animal strength was not limited to France: she gained approval from Queen Victoria as well as from viewers across the Atlantic.

We'll compare the Wallace Collection painting, *Sheep in the Highlands* (1857) with her monumental and famous work *Ploughing in the Nivernais*, which was commissioned by the State a year after the 1848 Revolution. In our discussion, we'll consider Bonheur's realist approach to painting and consider why her work proved so popular in mid-19th- century France. We will also discuss the limitations women artists experienced at the time, and how Bonheur negotiated these restrictions to become both wealthy and celebrated.

Course Tutor

Jo Rhymer is a history of art lecturer. She has broad experience of working in museum and gallery learning departments and was previously Head of Adult Learning Programmes at the National Gallery. She leads tours in the UK and abroad and lectures for various organisations including the Institute of Continuing Education at the University of Cambridge and the Victoria & Albert Museum. Her particular interests include 19th-century French art, representations of women and women artists.

Previous Skills, Knowledge or Experience

None required. This course is designed as an introduction to the subject.

Joining Information and Format

This course will be taught through Zoom Webinar. For more information, including instructions on how to download and use the system, please visit www.zoom.us/support.

Each course session duration is 120 minutes, including a five-minute break and Q&A session with the tutor.

Participants will be emailed the Zoom Webinar ID and Passcode 48 hours in advance of the first course session.