



PROJECT MUSE®

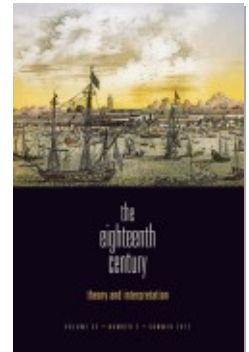
Revolutionizing the Study of Female Artists

Lindsay Dunn

The Eighteenth Century, Volume 53, Number 2, Summer 2012, pp. 253-256
(Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecy.2012.0015>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/477658>

Revolutionizing the Study of Female Artists

Lindsay Dunn

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Laura Auricchio's *Adélaïde Labille-Guiard: Artist in the Age of Revolution* (Oxford, 2009) draws on archival research, cultural history, and French Revolutionary history to position Labille-Guiard (1749–1803) as a product of both the art world and the volatile political climate of Revolutionary-era France. Art Historian Auricchio's monograph draws from Anne-Marie Passez's *Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, 1749–1803, Biographie et catalogue raisonné de son œuvre* (1973), but instead of focusing on attributing paintings to the artist, Auricchio's project centers more on the ways in which Labille-Guiard's evolving career correlated with the political events of the French Revolution and their effects on the art world. Auricchio offers a comprehensive and compelling description of Labille-Guiard's artistic career, beginning with her early years as the daughter of a fashionable haberdasher, and continuing to the relative stability of her court position during the reign of Louis XVI, to her political involvement with the Feuillants during the Revolution, and finally to her posthumous influence over female pupils. Auricchio's general argument is that Labille-Guiard's career reveals important aspects of the era's artistic production and, given this, Auricchio offers an analysis of the political and social conditions of women artists during the French Revolution. Her beautifully illustrated book is biographically and contextually comprehensive. She chooses not to analyze each of Labille-Guiard's images in detail, using art objects primarily as evidence of how the artist successfully negotiated her various positions in Revolutionary France.

Auricchio's book, arranged chronologically, is divided into five chapters that situate Labille-Guiard's life within the political events before, during, and after the French Revolution. She also includes an appendix, which both adds and subtracts attributions of works to Labille-Guiard that were originally made by Passez. In the introduction, Auricchio discusses the predicament of women artists, who had to transgress laws governing proper female deportment by working in the male-dominated art world while still maintaining their feminine virtue. Labille-Guiard, Auricchio explains, was different from many other

female artists, as she had no artist father to show her the way. Consequently, she was forced to negotiate the virtually irreconcilable positions of artist and woman on her own through the personal and professional relationships she fostered with the French aristocracy and, later, with politicians, actors, and the Parisian urban elite (2). Discussions of women artists' delicate negotiation between the public world of art commerce and their proper place in the domestic realm as women has been previously examined by art historians Mary Sheriff, Melissa Hyde, and Angela Rosenthal.¹ Auricchio adds to this scholarship, positioning Labille-Guiard as both subject to the same gendered limitations as the other female artists and as a product of the shifting political, economic, and social worlds of Revolutionary France.

Auricchio's discussion of Labille-Guiard and other female artists' negotiation of their gendered position in the male-dominated art world sets the stage for what she sees as Labille-Guiard's many breaches with contemporary mores governing proper female deportment. Auricchio stresses Labille-Guiard's unconventional female behavior in chapter 1, "Painting in the Margins, 1774–1783," when describing Labille-Guiard's early artistic training, submissions to the Academy of St. Luke, and her father's influence on his daughter's ability to depict fabrics and costuming. Labille-Guiard's career, Auricchio posits, offers a model of how a woman draws attention to her work without jeopardizing her moral stature and, as a result, her career. Labille-Guiard's early success painting miniature portraits, a genre considered more suitable for women artists due to its imitation of the human figure and its small, portable size, diffused accusations of impropriety and ultimately paved the way for her success during the twilight of the French monarchy. In chapter 2, "Notice, Networks, and Notoriety, 1783–1787," Auricchio situates the artist as a pioneer of late eighteenth-century female self-portraiture and history painting through the artist's subtle manipulation of traditional tropes and subjects. Auricchio elaborates on Labille-Guiard's ability to make a place for herself in the Parisian art world, suggesting that Labille-Guiard fashioned a persona for herself through a selection of sitters and subject matter that affirmed her status as a moral woman and exceptional artist, eventually earning her the title, first painter to *Mesdames Tantes*, Louis XVI's aunts. Here Auricchio discusses two of Labille-Guiard's most famous works, *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils*, *Mademoiselle Marie-Gabrielle Capet and Mademoiselle Carreaux de Rosemond* (1785) and *Adélaïde of France, Daughter of Louis XV, known as Madame Adélaïde* (1785), two images that combine allegorical elements, traditionally associated with history paintings, that lift these portraits beyond the realm of merely imitative portraits. This idea was first discussed in Hyde's "Under the Sign of Minerva: Adélaïde Labille-Guiard's *Portrait of Madame Adélaïde*," and Auricchio adds to this argument, stating that the artist intended these allegorical portraits to appeal to the French royal family and, ultimately, attract royal commissions.²

The subsequent chapters of the book, chapters 3–5, are the most compelling,

since she is able to more fully integrate politics into Labille-Guiard's personal and professional trajectory. The volatile political climate, Auricchio convincingly argues, influenced the artist's choice of subject matter, patronage, and living conditions. In chapter 3, "Reinvention: 1789–1792," Auricchio exposes the ways in which Labille-Guiard again manipulated her image to attract new non-aristocratic clientele, changing her approach to costuming, or making her portraits appear more spartan or luxurious as different regimes gained prominence. She had to distance herself from her title as first painter to *Mesdames Tan-tes*, whose names were now tainted by despotism and excess. The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, which previously granted her membership as one of only four female members in 1783, opened its doors to all artists, including women. This advancement facilitated more economic and commercial success for female painters, yet, as Auricchio explains, the economic recession and the dissolution of the royal family severely impeded commissions. "Production and Destruction, 1792–1794," chapter 4, points out that Labille-Guiard was somewhat involved in politics herself, given her creation of several portraits of members of the Feuillants, a liberal political party that continued to argue for a constitutional monarchy even after the royal family's failed attempt to flee France (79). The changing political climate during these years forced Labille-Guiard to rely on her own network of friends and patrons as well as her careful negotiation of stylistic trends to attract commissions. By the early 1790s, the preferred aesthetic privileged actual likenesses over beautifully rendered costuming or idealized physical features (74). Labille-Guiard employed this new, more simplified style for representations of former aristocrats and emerging political heroes alike, illustrating the Revolution's aim of erasing differences of social and economic status. In chapter 5, "Returns: 1795–1803," Auricchio discusses the drastically different art world that greeted Labille-Guiard once she returned to Paris from Pontault-en-Brie. The popular style of portraiture that greeted Labille-Guiard upon her return combined "naturalism and realism highly characteristic of the aesthetic trends that dominated the period after Robespierre's fall," and sharply contrasted with the luxurious costuming that originally made her a popular portraitist to the aristocratic elite (100). In the epilogue, Auricchio firmly establishes Labille-Guiard's artistic legacy by briefly analyzing *Studio Scene: Adélaïde Labille-Guiard Painting the Portrait of Joseph-Marie Vien* (1808), which was painted by Marie-Gabrielle Capet, one of Labille-Guiard's most famous pupils. She posits that the professional attitude and practical dress of Labille-Guiard contrasts with the social graces and stylish dress displayed by Capet who greets visitors as they enter the studio, illustrating the inherent tension of a female artist's identity: she must be at once beautiful and hardworking, graceful and professionally driven (108).

Adélaïde Labille-Guiard provides a comprehensive account of the effects of political and social circumstances on the career of a female artist. Auricchio's approach offers a fresh perspective on Labille-Guiard's work, by adding to

the meticulous archival material of Passez's *Catalogue raisonnée*. She fills in the cultural context that precipitated Labille-Guiard's stylistic changes, varying choices of subject matter, and position in the male-dominated art world. Her attention to the revolutionary climate makes this book appealing to art, cultural, and political historians. Auricchio interweaves political, social, and cultural history throughout her discussions of Labille-Guiard and the paintings she created, showing how analysis of subject matter, iconography, and style complements historical accounts of the Revolutionary era. Her approach to the material is truly interdisciplinary and offers a model for future studies. The book is also an excellent source for undergraduates who would benefit from readings in the history of women artists presented in a scholarly and accessible manner, and would be a nice supplement for materials covered in undergraduate art history courses. Auricchio's book offers a comprehensive and readable study of women artists during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

NOTES

1. See Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (Chicago, 1996); Melissa Hyde, "Women and the Visual Arts in the Age of Marie-Antoinette," *Anne Vallayer-Coster: Painter to the Court of Marie-Antoinette*, ed. Eik Kahng and Marianne Roland Michel (Dallas, 2002); and Angela Rosenthal, *Angelica Kauffman: Art and Sensibility* (New Haven, 2006).

2. Hyde, "Under the Sign of Minerva: Adélaïde Labille-Guiard's *Portrait of Madame Adélaïde*," *Women, Art and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Hyde and Jennifer Milam (Burlington, 2003), 139–63.