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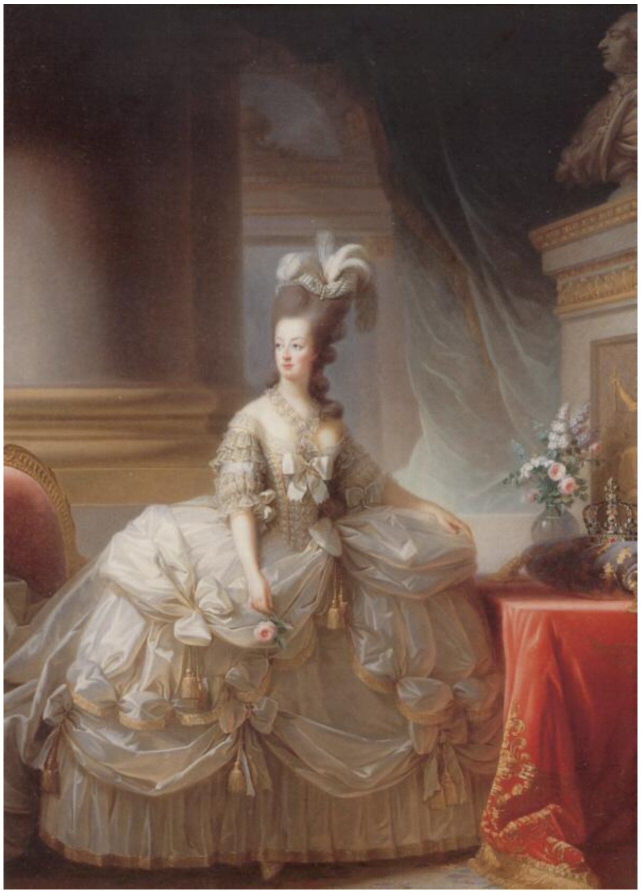
Portraits of a Foreign Queen

Perhaps no other period in French history saw a more pervasive or more violent change in the status-quo than the French Revolution. The effects of this Revolution carried far beyond the recognized end date of 1799 and well beyond the borders of France. It had an immense impact on all aspects of life, including philosophy, music, literature, technology, society, and government. The Revolution itself is based upon the ideals of the Enlightenment, the American Revolution, and the Rousseauian ideas of freedom. Social mobility was not possible within the social structure of France at this time. The 3rd Estate, or commoners, comprised a vast majority of the population and by the 1780's, they led desperately impoverished lives. There was an astounding wealth gap between the 3rd Estate and the nobility; while the peasants were starving due to poor harvests and high inflation, the clergy and the monarchy enjoyed very luxurious lifestyles (Censer and Hunt).

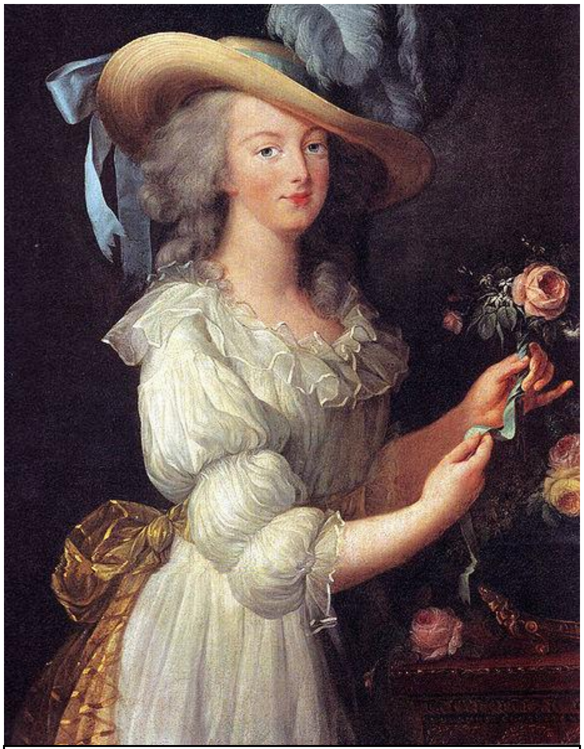
Before all of the problems in France coincided to produce a revolution, Marie Antoinette was living a privileged life in the Austrian aristocracy. Her natural charm and having a shrewd mother positioned her to marry the dauphin of France, Louis XVI, at fourteen. Marie Antoinette's change from an innocent Austrian Archduchess to a reviled French Queen is manifest through her



Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie Antoinette, Queen of France*, 1778

portraits. She stood for many royally commissioned portraits to encapsulate her status, her beauty, as well as record major events in her life, both in Austria and in France. Looking at paintings of her as a young girl, one can see a playful child with few worries. In France, her portraits were often more formal and stilted, befitting her position, but revealing little of her person. She was no longer allowed to be carefree; she had to maintain a strict regal manner. The pressures that come with being Queen of such an unstable country are evident in her later portraits, which were used to combat political troubles and rumors, and in some cases, caused them.

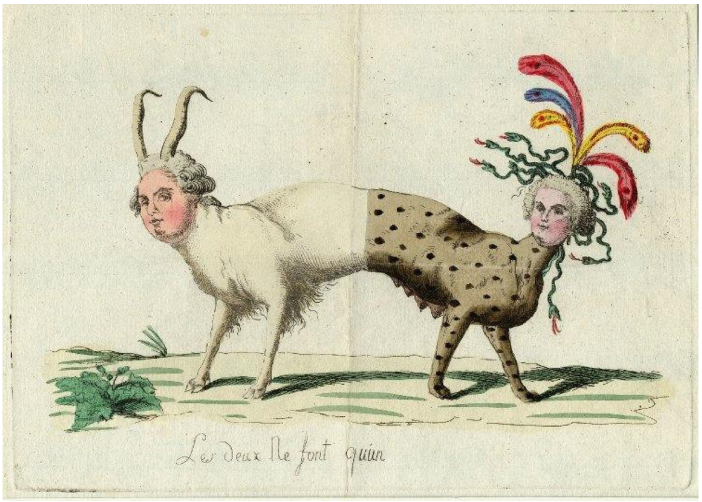
At the salons, portraits of the monarchy afforded the public the opportunity to see who ruled their country. Royal portraits specifically served to capture the likeness of a person as a symbol of the state. They were meant to be dignified representations of the subject’s royal and divinely-appointed status. From the start, the salons attracted great crowds; they highlighted the best and most fashionable works and they were set in a royal residence. Marie Antoinette became a fashion leader in France, but often, her costumes were viewed as outrageous and ostentatious. Marie Antoinette's struggle to adhere to the strict rules of the French court is evident in a portrait by Élizabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie Antoinette en chemise*. This portrait was painted in 1783 and exhibited in the Salon of that year. The Queen is depicted against a plain, darkened background, wearing a simple white muslin dress, loose except for a ribbon tied to cinch her waist. She is wearing a large but rather simple hat with a plume of feathers and ribbon tied around the crown. Under the hat, her unpowdered hair flows unrestrained down to her shoulders. The only accompanying prop is a wooden table with a vase of roses. She idly gazes at the viewer, with a small smile as she absentmindedly arranges a delicate rose, her signature flower.



Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie Antoinette en Chmise*, 1783

The portrait of her *en chemise* is much more naturalistic than her previous, more formal paintings and critics said it was unbecoming of a queen. In her personal memoirs, Vigée-Lebrun reflects on these criticisms: "…when it was shown at the Salon, the malicious did not refrain from saying that the Queen was represented in her underwear (Sheriff, 46)." The *Correnspondance littéraire*, a French newspaper focusing on culture, published that viewers were shocked by the Queen's immodesty. Pamphleteers were also quite critical. One such pamphlet said she was meant to resemble the "noble simplicity" of ancient Greek nudes, but failed and came across inappropriately naked and defenseless. Marie Antoinette, on the other hand, judged this portrait to be her best likeness. She admired it so much she sent three versions of it to close relatives, perhaps an indication of her naïveté and lack of political acumen (Sheriff, 46-47).

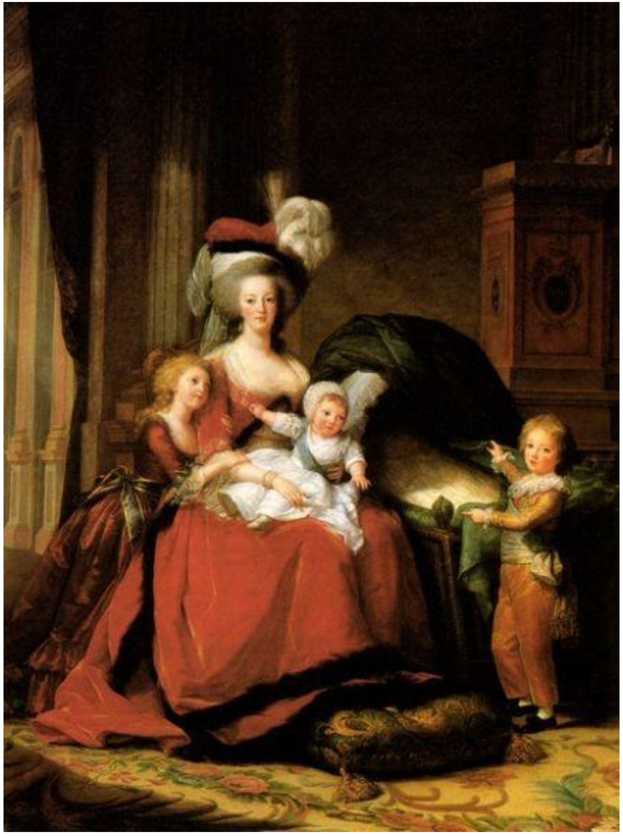
By 1781, the pamphlets were printing increasingly severe allegations. These parallel the rapidly growing popularity of Revolutionary ideals. The pamphlets were intended to be viewed by the masses, which were largely illiterate. Improper spelling and grammar were common, and many were accompanied by drawn pictures. One such pamphlet portrayed Marie Antoinette and King Louis XVI as a double-ended beast. Other pamphlets proceeded to completely disrobe the Queen. Frequently, she would be depicted having liaisons with both men and women of the court. The pornography of these pamphlets was meant to humiliate the Queen and be entertaining only on that level; they were created to cause repugnance instead of arousal. The descriptions and the imagery were so base that the body of the


Les deux Ne font quun

Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI as a Double-ended Beast , from *Les Deux ne font qu'un*, 1791

Queen became an object of indignation; once a viewer saw her in this light, she could not possibly be seen as a regal figure above approach (Thomas, 107).

The 1783 portrait of her *en chemise* only seemed to validate the rumors of her immodesty. At the Salon of that year, the portrait was displayed alongside historical paintings depicting great men of achievement and women of virtue. The move toward Neoclassicism meant that immodesty and immorality were not tolerated. Marie Antoinette's portrait *en chemise* was seen as both.



Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie Antoinette with her Children*, 1787

In an attempt to salvage Marie Antoinette's image, the Department of the Household of the Kings of France, commissioned a portrait of her with her children. The pamphleteers used images to discredit her; now she would try the same tactic to garner any respect she could. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, was assigned the daunting task of convincingly painting Marie Antoinette as a loving mother.

Because she was a woman and a mother, it is supposed that Vigée-Lebrun was able to connect with Marie Antoinette in a more intimate way than other portraitists. The portrait of Marie Antoinette emanates a more distant tone, however, the portrait, which was completed in 1787, depicts Marie Antoinette in the center of the frame. She gazes at the viewer, uninterested and non-confrontational, while her youngest child is teetering in her lap. She seems almost to have forgotten he is there. Meanwhile, her daughter looks up at her, clinging to her arm. Her elder son is separated from the rest, standing erect and looking at the viewer with a much more challenging stare, a reminder that he is the heir to the throne and will one day be the most powerful man in France (Fraser, 255).

Vigée-Lebrun took great care to make several allusions in this portrait. Behind the royal family sits a large box meant to contain jewelry and other accessories, a reference to Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, who indicated her children were her most precious jewels. On top of the box, directly above the dauphin, sits a crown, another symbol of the monarchy. The royal family is clearly sitting in the hall of mirrors in Versailles, another reminder of their status. Nearly everything is draped in red, black, or white, the royal colors. Additionally, the pyramidal structure of the Queen, sitting prominently in the middle, harkens back to images of the Holy Family, with Marie Antoinette taking the place of the Madonna.

It seems strange that Vigée-Lebrun would choose to show Marie Antoinette as a distant woman when her personal memoirs suggest she was a sweet and caring mother. Perhaps Vigée-Lebrun intended for her to look resigned and helpless. However, it is not likely that a “helpless” Marie Antoinette would invoke the sympathy of the suffering lower classes, especially since she is wearing such lavish clothing in a highly decorative setting. It is hard to say whether these choices were made by Vigée-Lebrun or the government.

The Rococo style of the painting was popular in portraits of the monarchy, or any painting officially commissioned by the aristocracy. Rococo paintings and designs were highly ornate and decorative and sometimes criticized for being frivolous. Nevertheless, it was the favored style amongst the elite because it allowed for the rich to show off their wealth. *Marie Antoinette with her Children* was painted in the style. Her elaborate dress and headdress were evidence of her attention to her appearance and seemingly endless wealth. It was displays like this that earned Marie Antoinette her famous nickname among the revolutionaries, “Madame Deficit”. Although it seems tactless to portray her sitting amongst her wealth when the peasants were starving and destitute, the goal of the portrait was to portray her as a royal figure, one meant to be respected.

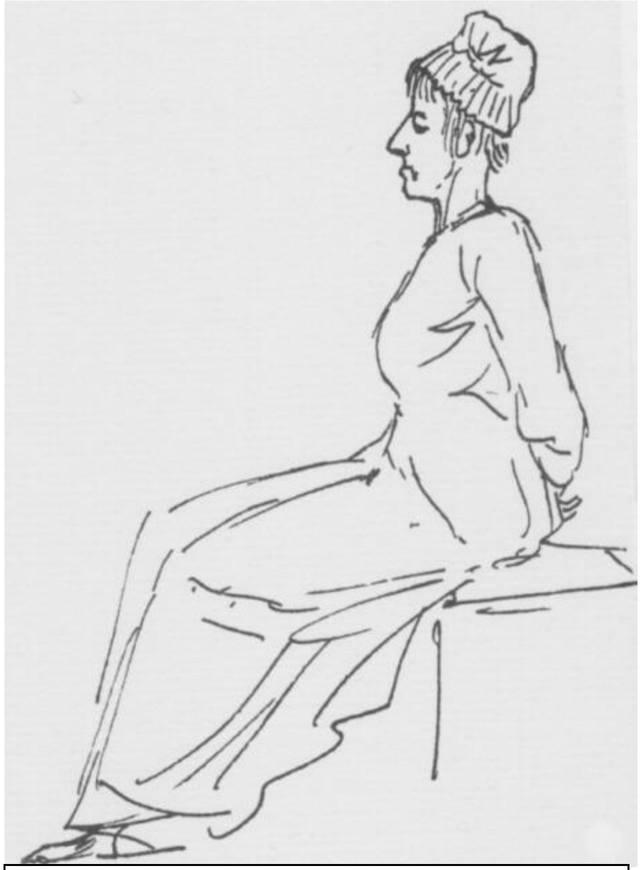
This image of Marie Antoinette as an austere Queen and mother was not convincing to the public after the controversial depiction of her *en chemise* and, especially, the degrading images of her in the pamphlets. She was meant to be portrayed as the Queen and mother of the future King. The most crude and licentious claim disseminated appeared in pamphlets from 1789 onward- that of incest with the King’s brother and grandfather, Louis XV, her own father, and her son, Louis Charles, the Dauphin.

After only two days of proceedings, Marie Antoinette was found guilty of all charges brought against her. She wrote in her final letter to Madam Elisabeth, the King's sister:

> “I have just been condemned to death to rejoin your brother. Innocent like him, I hope to demonstrate the same firmness as he did at the end. I am calm, as people are whose conscience is clear. My deepest regret is at having to abandon our poor children; you know that I only lived on for them and for you, my good and tender sister (Fraser, 436).”

The letter to her sister-in-law not only demonstrates Marie Antoinette's love for her children, but it also reveals her strength of character. In her final days, she resolved to remain calm and dignified to the end. Ironically, the artist who sketched her final moments was the Painter of the Revolution, Jacques-Louis David.

David, who had once painted portraits for the nobility, changed his ideologies to suit whoever was in power, thus saving himself from the Revolution. He presented many anti-monarchist speeches and exhibited portraits meant to inspire the viewer to fight. Yet it was his quick portrait of Marie Antoinette described by Henri Bouchot of the National Library in Paris, quote: David had the last sitting with the



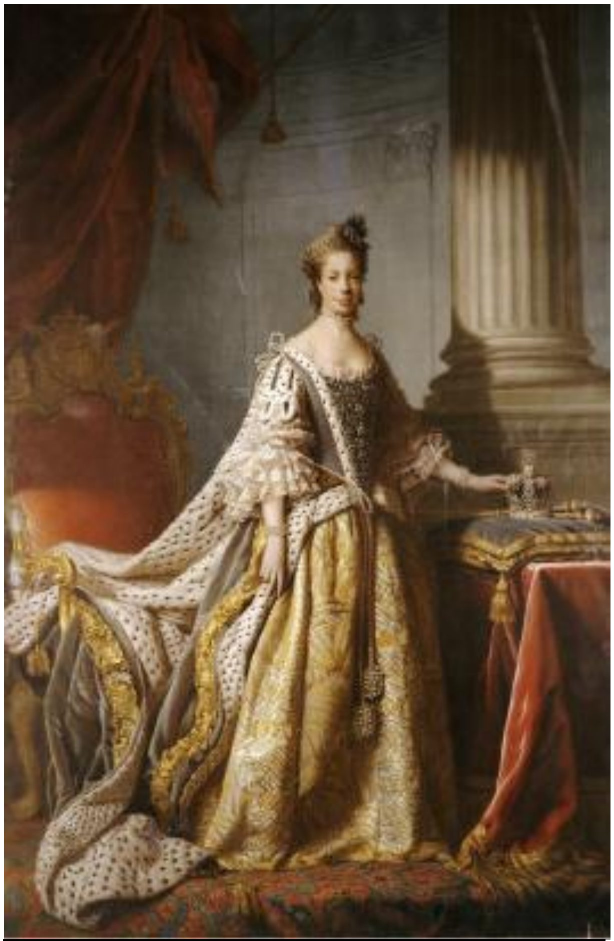
David, *Marie Antoinette on her way to the Scaffold*, 1793

> queen; he saw her for a few seconds before him more majestic and more sovereign than Madam [Vigée-]Lebrun or the others had known her. No rouge on her cheeks, no powder in her hair. A linen bonnet has replaced the toque of velvet, a little white robe garbs her miserably; it is again a portrait "en gaulle," the last one this time (Sheriff, 66).

She sits erect, looking straight ahead, though it can be assumed that leering crowds surrounded her. In this moment, though she had been cruelly and publicly debased and stripped of all queenly accoutrements, she appeared stoic and calm, ignoring the malicious crowd. It was her last chance to win respect. David created the quick sketch of Marie Antoinette as she was carted away to the guillotine, hands tied behind her back, in a simple muslin gown. She was once again dressed "en gaulle", the simple white gown of the peasants, a symbol of how far she had fallen. It was reminiscent of her portrait from ten years earlier en chemise. Then, a young woman who posed a threat to the French traditions, was hot a victim of her foreign heritage.

Marie Antoinette, though born with many privileges, was ultimately a victim of her high status and nationality. Being forced to leave one's home country for the purpose of a politically advantageous marriage was nothing new to the European court. Royal girls were often married off in the hopes that their union would bring prosperity to their home countries. A well-coordinated marriage could mean political and economic progress for both families involved. Marie Antoinette's case is known to be unusual for the unfortunate timing of her arrival in France. The burgeoning French Revolution made an example of her and viciously turned the public against her.

Such was not the case for Charlotte Sophia (1744-1818), daughter of Charles Louis, Duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, Germany. Mecklenburg-Strelitz was a modest territory- 120 miles long by 30 miles wide- and the chances for Charlotte to marry a man of exceptionally high status were slim. Nevertheless, she was raised with a good education. She learned many languages, was interested in botany, natural history, and music, and was adept at household activities such as needlework. Most importantly, she was deeply religious and moralistic. From an early age, she showed compassion for peasants, often communicating directly with them (Fitzgerald, 6).



Ramsay, *Queen Charlotte*, 1762

It is this compassion that caught the interest of King George III of England. A copy of an expressive and honest letter which Charlotte had written to Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, was passed from the German ambassador to King George's mother. In the letter, Charlotte appealed to Frederick to cease his dominating policies which brought devastation to Mecklenburg. It demonstrates uncommon compassion and drive for a seventeen-year-old girl of this age. Although Frederick was seemingly untouched by her words, the letter caught the attention of the English ambassador to Berlin, who sent a copy to England. It was widely acknowledged by the English that the writer of this letter must have a decent character, and King George III, who was pressured by his mother and other authorities at court to find a wife, selected Charlotte as his future bride (Dwelle, 6).

While King George III selected Charlotte based on the kindness and intelligence expressed in her letter, they soon learned that they had similar interests. They both enjoyed music, books, philanthropy, science, and theater (Roberts, 16). Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, however, were brought together without their consent. Louis XVI was not given the opportunity to choose a wife based on attributes he thought desirable, and a harmonious match was never a priority to Maria Theresa or King Louis XV, who arranged their marriage. Louis XVI was brought up with a well-rounded education and he developed a particular interest in mechanics and the sciences, often preferring to tinker with watches and other gadgets on his own. Marie Antoinette had a very different upbringing: her education was often neglected because she was the fifteenth child. She was very social and interested in the arts, especially music. Unlike Charlotte, she never felt compelled to play an activist role on behalf of the peasants, but on a few occasions, she did demonstrate compassion for them.

Queen Charlotte and Marie Antoinette also differed greatly in their physical attributes. Much has been made about Charlotte’s appearance, for she is not known to have been a very attractive woman. Politician and historian

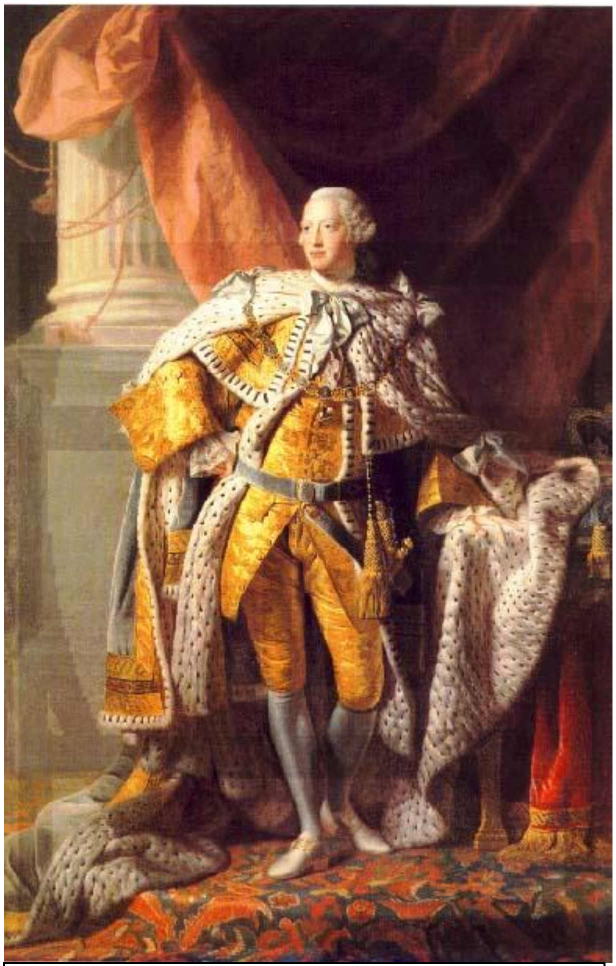
Horace Walpole (1717-1797) described her in his memoires: “Her person was small and ‘very lean,’ not well made; her face, pale and homely, her nose somewhat flat, and mouth *very large*. Her hair, however, was of a fine brown, and her countenance pleasing. She had an unfailing good humour and animation, which supplied for these defects (Fitzgerald, 20).” King George III was apparently either not informed of many details of her appearance, or did not care, because he arranged for marriage soon after one of his aides visited the princess.

Marie Antoinette was known to be quite beautiful and possess a very pleasing and graceful presence. She easily charmed those she met and, initially, the French public was quite satisfied with her. Charlotte, on the other hand, had a harder time winning over the English public.

In 1761, Charlotte was escorted to England to meet her future husband. The coronation ceremony, the new Queen Charlotte of England was not initially warmly embraced by the public. Many remarked on her disagreeable appearance. However, over time, she proved to have a charming and very likeable personality. She eventually won the love of the English people and became known as the “Good Queen Charlotte (Fitzgerald, 1).”

King George III came to rule what is now sometimes referred to as the first modern monarchy; during his reign of nearly sixty years, he navigated his country through the American War for Independence, effects of the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and a growth of radicalism and desire for religious toleration (Roberts, 10). He and Queen Charlotte had no patience for waste or lack of control. They lived by a strict routine and steadfast Protestant morality, which King George III hoped would inspire his people during the turbulent and changing times. Queen Charlotte enjoyed playing a domestic role. She willingly, with the admiration of her followers, took charge of the household, including strictly regulating expenses (Fitzgerald, 43).

The atmospheres of the English and French courts of this time could not be more dissimilar. The strong moral standards of King George III and Queen Charlotte contrast the more apathetic attitudes of King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, who seemed to involve themselves in political affairs only when necessary. Their court was one of pomp-and-circumstance, all to prove the glory of France through the monarchy, a standard set by Louis XIV. John Adams (1735-1826), elected to represent the newly independent United States, detailed in his diary about an instance when he had supper with King Louis XVI and the royal family and the knights were forced to keel for over two hours. Adams, who held the American values of stoicism, modesty, and hard work, cared little for the frivolity and formal rituals of the French court, remarking that he “suspect[ed] that the more elegance, the less virtue in all times and countries (McCullough, 192).” The French and British courts operated completely differently: in France, the king was seen as a man superior to the rest of the people, someone to be adored and feared. In England, the king shared powers with parliament and was meant to represent the people. John Adams, who was meant to find a political ally in King Louis XVI for the war for American independence from Great Britain, actually related more to King George III, his enemy in war. Adams and King George III



Ramsay, *King George III*, 1762

actually shared similar values; the King was fair, honorable, and a man of his word. The war, however, meant that the public image of the King in America was that of an irrational and cruel tyrant and he needed to be seen as such to motivate the Americans. Interestingly, though the Americans were fighting against the principles of monarchy, they accepted the support of King Louis XVI, an absolute monarch. George III, a principled man, always fought for his beliefs; Louis XVI supported the American's in their quest for independence, while attempting to quell the revolutionary uprising in his own country.

The disparity between the French and the British is manifested in their representative styles- the Rococo being closely associated with the French monarchy, and a more classical style emerging from England. In the 18th century, portraiture in England was growing into a very popular genre. Among some of the most notable portraitists were Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Thomas Lawrence, and Allan Ramsey, all of whom painted portraits of Queen Charlotte.

Allan Ramsey painted the Queen over forty times, but one of his particularly celebrated portraits was painted shortly after she arrived in England.

The portrait of Charlotte in coronation robes depicts the young Queen wearing an opulent dress of pale blue and gold, trimmed in ermine. Her stomacher is covered in jewels and finishes with tassels attached to long strands of pearls. Her hair is pinned up with ringlets hanging in the back, and a black feathered ornament topping it off. She stands erect, smiling slightly, with her hand delicately placed upon a bejeweled crown. Though it is clear she stands in a stately room, the background is sketchy and obscured. Given her reportedly slight frame, she is an imposing figure in this portrait, and she seems quite comfortable in her position.

Ramsey painted this portrait along with a companion portrait of King George III. His portrait closely matches the one of Queen Charlotte; they are wearing matching coronation robes and the setting is identical. Ramsey said of his sitting with the Queen, “Soon after her majesty’s arrival, she likewise did the honour to sit [for] me; and these two pictures in coronation robes are the originals from which all the copies ordered by the Lord Chamberlain are painted (citation). Horace Wapole offered his opinion of the portrait: “It is much flattered, and the hair vastly too light (Roberts, 135).”

Though this portrait of Queen Charlotte displays all the wealth associated with the English monarchy, it is still less pretentious than Marie Antoinette’s first state portrait in 1778, painted by Vigée-Lebrun. There are many similarities to be drawn from the two portraits: they are clearly set in royal palaces, they are both wearing very fine clothing, and they are standing next to crowns, indicating their royal status. In Marie Antoinette’s portrait, however, a bust of the King is situated high over her head, purposefully indicating his place above her. There is no such indication in Charlotte’s portrait, as the Queen was much more valued in England since the reign of Elizabeth I. Additionally, in Marie Antoinette’s portrait, she is wearing a gown with very wide panniers, making her appear quite large. Her gown is very frilly, covered in shiny gauze material with bows and tassels. She also wears a giant plume of feathers atop her elaborate, large, and powdered hair. In Charlotte’s portrait, though she is dressed in fine furs, her gown is more reserved and less decorous; the omission of frivolity evokes seriousness though which her status is reinforced. Marie Antoinette looks like a dressed-up doll in comparison. These two portraits served the same purpose: to present the Queen to their people. However, they are two differing portraits of a foreign queen.

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