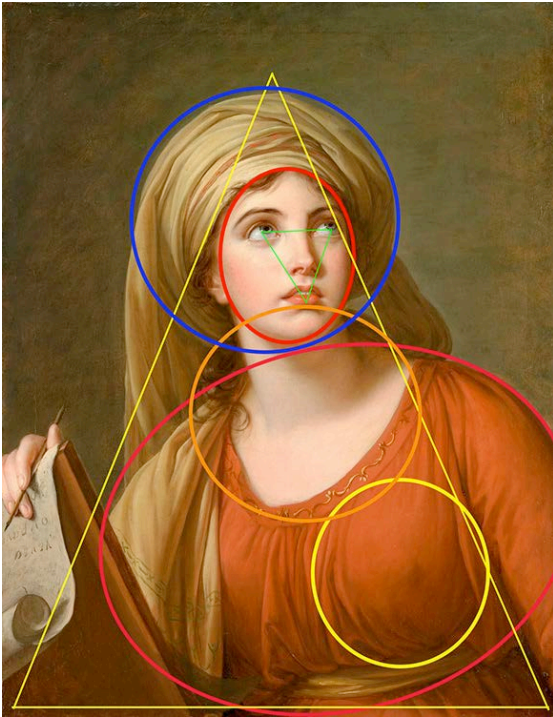
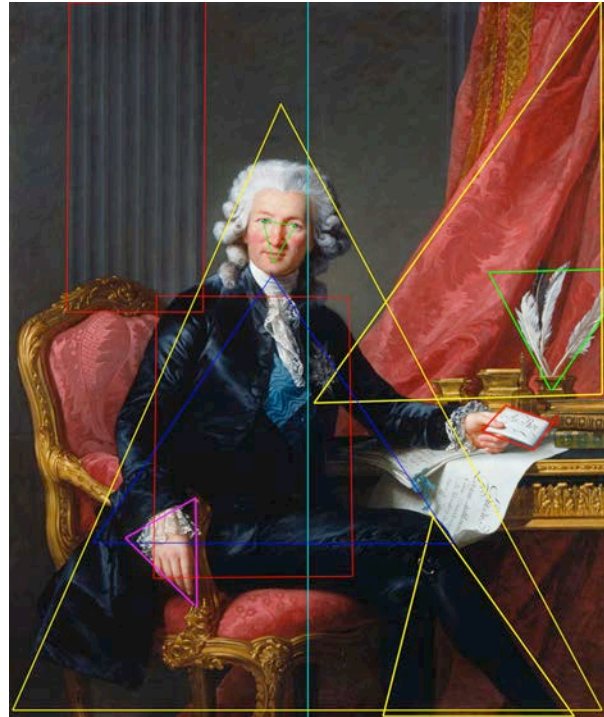


Geometric Observations in  
Some Paintings by  
Elizabeth Vigée Le Brun



*Life Study of Lady Hamilton as the Cumaean Sybil, 1792, o/c, private coll.*



*Charles Alexandre de Calonne, 1784, o/c, Royal Collection Trust*

John Christopher Lee

AH 436 Neo-Classicism to Romanticism

Dr. Matthew Simms

CSULB

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Elizabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842) is one of the most celebrated artists of the Neo-classical period. Mostly self-taught but famous in her lifetime, Madame Le Brun navigated the gender biases of her age to become *peintre du roi* to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Despite her limited training in physiology (women were banned from sketching or painting the male nude), Le Brun's portraits show a simple yet dynamic mastery of the human form within representational composition. While there is no evidence of deliberate geometric sketching by the artist on her canvas, this author presents his own observations of geometries that guide the eye to a fuller appreciation of the works of Le Brun, and may reflect modes of gender representation in the *ancien régime* of France.

During my personal studies of Le Brun's work, I noticed certain geometric forms that overlaid the subject. For example, I could, with imagination, perceive a perfect inverted triangle connecting the eyes and the mouth of the face. Le Brun's 1773 portrait of her brother Etienne Vigée (fig 1), made when she was 18, depicts him as a draftsman, though he would go on to become a well-known poet and die later in life of alcoholism. Etienne is presented from his right side, waist-up, with brilliant eyes gently fixed upon us from a three-quarter profile. The facial triangle as I described above connects with the centerline of the canvas (fig.2). The centerline also brushes the edge of Etienne's left eyebrow, perforates the center of his chin, edge of his collar and bisects the right bicep. If we consider the overall use of space from the left corner of Etienne's hat to the his middle knuckle and the tip of his drawing brush, we can see that he is perfectly balanced on the canvas. His upper torso, from back to elbow, is held within a strong rectangle (fig. 3), and a second parallelogram is formed by the ninety-degree intersection of bicep, elbow and forearm. Interestingly, the upper corner of this second rectangle connects with

the lower apex of the face triangle. I found these observed geometries fascinating, and began looking for more.

*Madame Jacques François Le Sèvre, the Artist's Mother* (fig. 4) shows a wonderful use of triangular forms that reflect feminine gender. The facial triangle does not connect to the centerline (fig.5) and sits to the left by a few inches, as does the center point of Madame's chin (fig. 6). This writer likes to think it was an error on the part of the youthful artist. All can be forgiven since she was only nineteen and supporting her family after the death of her father Louis Vigée. Elizabeth's portrait income paid for her brother's education, clothing and food, but still the family suffered. Her mother, Jeanne Maissin, married a silversmith who turned out to be miserly.<sup>1</sup> Vigée Le Brun's painting fees were still needed to prevent starvation. Lastly, although it has not been marked on figure 5, examine the plunging neckline of Madame Le Sevre's dress to see the (invisible) inverted triangle that connects with her shoulders.

The young Elizabeth had taken lessons from Gabriel Briard, a history painter of the Royal Academy whose influence on Le Brun is lightly regarded by historians.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Vernet, considered the greatest marine and landscape painter of France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was one of the first Masters to greatly inspire the young Elizabeth with these simple words: "*My child, do not follow the systems of other schools. Consult only the works of the great Italian and Flemish masters. But above all things, make as many studies as you can from Nature. Nature is the supreme master. If you study Nature with care it will prevent you from picking up any mannerisms.*"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Haldane MacFall, *Vigée Le Brun, Masterpieces in Colour*, 1922. London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, Ltd., New York: Frederick A. Stokes (hardback, author's personal collection), pg. 28.

<sup>2</sup> MacFall, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Baillio, *Vigée Le Brun, Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, 1755-1842*. Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1982, pg. 39.

Le Brun's 1778 portrait of Vernet (fig. 7) contains certain geometries that reveal masculine conventions guided by the feminine gaze. Many of Le Brun's paintings can be sectioned into three zones by a vertical triangle aligned with the apex and centerline (figs. 8, 11-13). Trisecting the canvas creates lines that direct the eye down, across and back up, or cause the eye to take in the entire canvas in a circular motion (from this writer's observations, that is). Other shapes are prompted by the subject's painted form. Vernet's upper torso is turned slightly but held within a square (fig. 9). Le Brun's facial triangle is present as usual, but we can also imagine two joined triangles overlaying Vernet's right hand and brush. The straightness of the brush, combined with the delicate yet confident grip of the fingers holding it, conform to the shape of a diamond. Here we have a solid union of upright "masculine" and inverted "feminine" triangles. Vernet's gentlemanly posture exudes a feminine gracefulness emphasized by the depiction/composition of hand with brush. Observed geometries convey these impressions in a most subtle way. Note also that the centerline touches the corner of Vernet's right eye (fig. 10) while perfectly bisecting the second blob of yellow on the painter's oval palette (fig. 9).

Vigée Le Brun was moved by far more than dry geometry. At least three of her female portraits<sup>4</sup> depict the subject with eyes raised in a saintly or visionary mood (fig. 18), in "a transformation of mind that fascinated" the artist.<sup>5</sup> Giovanni Paisiello may be the only male whom Le Brun depicted in this manner (figs. 14). Painted in Naples in 1791, the portrait is a fine example of male geometries enveloped by the feminine. Like Vernet, Paisiello's right eye touches the centerline but a torso triangle connects the tip of the nose to the left elbow and right hand. Paisiello's body is heavily framed in a powerful rectangle, as are the chair and the facing

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<sup>4</sup> *Life Study of Lady Hamilton as Cumaean Sybil* (1792), *Angelica Catalani* (1806), and *Madame de Staël as Corinne at Cape Miseno* (1807-09).

<sup>5</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Giovanni Paisiello, 1791, by Elizabeth Vigée Le Brun," online. N.d., n.p. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/638226>

side of the clavichord (fig. 15). Because of this painting, Le Brun was praised as “Van Dyck reborn” during the Salon of 1791; ironically, this is the same painting that moved Jacques Louis David to say, “One would think my painting was done by a woman, and the portrait of Paisiello by a man.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the subtle masculine geometries of Le Brun’s composition, along with a personal dissatisfaction with his own portrait of *Madame de Sorcy Thelluson* (Neue Pinakothek, Munich, and which was hung directly above Le Brun’s), contributed to David’s reaction. Doubtful, but I can hope. Considering Le Brun’s business acumen, some writers have suggested that her sending of the portrait to the 1791 Salon corresponded with a successful opera by Paisiello in Paris and was a clear statement of Le Brun’s monarchist beliefs, because the score is dedicated to “the Queen [of Naples!].”<sup>7</sup>

Hubert Robert is a much-loved painter, not only by his friend Elizabeth Vigée but also this writer. Her painting of Robert depicts a stocky, handsome and vibrant man. Le Brun breathed so much life into her “likenesses” that Robert is about to leap from the canvas and go paint some ruins. This work reflects the personal and society-wide influence of Chardin and Greuze: intense concentration on life and the appreciation of labor. Robert was a royal painter and architect, but he sometimes used the canvas medium to question social hierarchies and poke fun at the life of the artist.<sup>8</sup> Robert was a witty and earthy bon vivant who studied long in Rome,

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<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *The Memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun*. Translated by Sian Evans, Women on Art series. London: Camden Press, 1989, pg. 316 and Baillio, 95.

<sup>7</sup> Rice, John A. “Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun’s Portrait of Giovanni Paisiello,” in *Artists and Musicians: Portrait Studies from the Rococo to the Revolution*. (Daniel Hertz, Beverly Wilcox, et al.) Ann Arbor: Steglein Publishing, 2014, pgs. 324-5 and 337.

<sup>8</sup> Robert’s *Vue de Dieppe* (1773-5, Rouen) and *Polichinelles peintres* (1760, Amiens, Musée de Picardie), in Robert Radisich, *Hubert Robert: Painted Spaces of the Enlightenment*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pgs. 75, 41-42 and 44.

painted enormous caprice paintings for patrons on the Grand Tour, and later found the will, while imprisoned, to satirize the Terror using watercolors.<sup>9</sup>

In Le Brun's painting, Robert's confident power is framed as a square around his torso and a horizontal stone shelf that he grips with his right hand. Cubic or elongated shapes dominate this canvas, despite the vertical trisector and oval palette. Le Brun's feminine gaze, skill and long friendship with Robert easily captured his spirited personality. Her works give voice to Enlightenment ideals of social equality, as the paintings of Robert and Paisiello were highly praised. Instead of being only a propagandist, Le Brun's choice of subjects also came from her strong appreciation of culture. This too could be self-serving. She may have timed her showing of Paisiello in the salon of 1792, just when his operas were becoming popular in Paris, and one week before an opening. Today, how do we discuss and appreciate the creatives and thinkers of our own milieu? Twitter cannot compare to *un souper grec*.

Le Brun met and depicted women of sharply different origins. The *Life Study of Lady Hamilton as the Cumaean Sybil* (figs 18-19) is a far cry from the hulking female oracles of the Sistine Chapel, and the sitter's life, as told by Le Brun, is one of rags to riches and rags again. This painting may be the one described by Le Brun<sup>10</sup> as a gift to Lord Hamilton, and which he sold in 1801.<sup>11</sup> Observed geometries in the painting of Lady Hamilton include prominent circles and ellipses (fig. 19). Aside from the writing tablet on the left, every geometry to the Sybil's form is of the feminine. My sources do not indicate why Lady Hamilton was depicted as a Sybil, though Le Brun described her personality as bereft of wit, sarcastic and critical, "astute" in

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<sup>9</sup> Frédérique Baumgartner, "Hubert Robert in Prison: Self, Revolution, and the Contingencies of Artistic Inscription." *Journal18*, no. 8 (2019): *Journal18*, 2019 (8).

<https://www.journal18.org/issue8/hubert-robert-in-prison-self-revolution-and-the-contingencies-of-artistic-inscription/>

<sup>10</sup> *Memoirs*, pg. 102

<sup>11</sup> Baillio, 101.

finding a husband, poor social graces and a terrible sense of dress and makeup. For example, after removing her Sybil costume and performing her own “toilette,” Hamilton was unrecognizable by several of Le Brun’s guests who had witnessed the sitting.<sup>12</sup> Who is this frumpy bargirl and where had the Sybil gone? No one knew.

This serves as another example of how Le Brun idealized her clients, either at their request or her own initiative. Le Brun visually associated many of her clients with virtues and ideals culled from Greek philosophy and popular during the Enlightenment. The geometries of composition draw the eye to basic aspects of form, but here the elliptical figures we can imagine in Le Brun’s *Cumaean Sybil* serve to represent the feminine principal. Hamilton was not a visionary, but perhaps Le Brun noticed everything about a person, the beautiful and the ugly. She writes about people in just such a way.

In 1792 Le Brun visited the wax museum of Felice Fontana and saw models of female internal anatomy. Greatly disturbed, Le Brun could not un-see visions of guts and viscera overlaid every female client sitting for a portrait. She went back to Fontana, complained and asked for his help, saying, “I hear everything; I see too much and sense all from a mile away.” He replied, “What you consider as a weakness and as an evil... is your force and talent; however, if you want to diminish the inconveniences of that susceptibility, paint no more.”<sup>13</sup> Le Brun later called herself a fool and thanked Providence for her abilities. We should note also that in 1775 Pierre Roussel wrote *Système physique et morale de la femme*, proposing how a female’s “active or sensory organs conditioned her imagination.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, women were far superior to men in quickly seeing details, but they lacked male ability in concentration, reflection and reason.

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<sup>12</sup> *Memoirs*, 105.

<sup>13</sup> Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun and the Cultural Politics of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, pgs. 18-19.

<sup>14</sup> Sheriff, 20-21.

Roussel, went further to say that women's imagination deters them from "those true and picturesque expressions which are the sublime of the imitative arts... she receives more easily in her mind the image of objects she cannot reproduce."<sup>15</sup> Such misogyny (and corresponding lack of self-confidence in many women) was the norm in those days, but Le Brun's portraits put Roussel's theory to shame.

The depiction of Hamilton as a Sybil served many purposes for her lover Lord Hamilton and the artist Le Brun, though the sitter remained little more than a once-loved woman who died in abject poverty. Her image lives on with us, fortunately, through Le Brun.

Elliptical geometries of the feminine abound in the *Portrait of the Artist with Her Daughter Julie* (fig. 20-21) and *Baronne de Crussol Florensac* (figs. 22-23). The former is unique in its tight organization of round forms and strong triangles; it also has a decisively masculine block surrounding hands that support and protect her child. This painting was a real hit in 1787, reminding the French of Rousseau's plea for motherly love while perhaps ignoring his pessimistic views about public virtues.<sup>16</sup> One critic, in fact, wrote of how Le Brun "shows how beauty and talent are enhanced when... allied to the tenderest and most delightful of affections... thus Art can serve mankind better than the demonstrations of a moralist."<sup>17</sup> Let us question this further: Le Brun's maternal portrait hung in the same Salon depicting Marie Antoinette as mother/Mother of the State.<sup>18</sup> Together, such filial propaganda and bourgeois biography promote a Royal ideological manipulation of the rabble that Rousseau warned against.

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<sup>15</sup> Sheriff, pgs. 20-21.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, et al. "Discourse on the Arts and Sciences," *Art in Theory 1648-1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, pg. 433

<sup>17</sup> *Collection Deloynes, XV*: No. 379, "L'Ami des artistes au Sallon," Paris, 1787, pg. 35, cited in Baillio, pgs. 70 and 74.

<sup>18</sup> Baillio, *ibid*.



I briefly discuss the *Baronne de Crussol Florensac* only because it is a vivacious and lovely portrait that looks captured à la sauvette par Henri Cartier Bresson. Such decisive moments attract me to Le Brun's work. It is full of elliptical geometries that enhance the dynamic energy of motion.

The portrait of *Charles Alexandre de Calonne* (figs. 24) is the first Le Brun dose of art that made me forever addicted to her. The overall composition, natural grace of Calonne's pose and magnetic brilliancy of his eyes leapt from the canvas and moved me deeply. The painting resembled a photograph with stunning intensity. These features remain, but in comparing his portrait with Vigée Le Brun's 1785 Royal image of Marie Antoinette (fig. 26), the observed geometries of Calonne's power are moderated by Le Brun's feminine gaze.

Calonne is connected to rectangular or square elements of masculinity. The fluted column of the wall connects to the high backed chair in which Calonne sits. His triangular pose connects to the square desk where documents and a letter marked, "Au Roi" (to the King) are rectangular. The centerline brushes Calonne's left temple and eye, and he is nested within or connected to the usual triangles, but more appear around his right hand, crossed legs, feathered-pen inkwell and red fabric on the upper right. The brilliance of Le Brun's portrait lies within the compositional elements of the environs and the relaxed yet formal pose of the sitter.

Le Brun's success as royal painter and social rock-star drew venomous snipes and egregious rumors. The poet Lebrun-Pindare wrote ten celebratory lines that basically told Vigée-Le Brun to "Keep being a Great Man!"<sup>19</sup>

Le Brun's first portrait of the Queen did not challenge the male worldview. Massive columns, a bust of Louis XVI on a pedestal bearing a relief of Caesar, a red-cloaked table and pillowed crown: all emphasize kingly masculinity. However, a vase of roses breaks the rigidity

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<sup>19</sup> Sheriff, 180-181.

of the pedestal as a circular chair blocks the columns; a rose in Antoinette's right hand rests near the uterine seat of her power as Queen. Her white satin *robe à paniers* support an inverted half-ellipse geometry, signifying the wide hips of fruitful reproduction. Despite Le Brun's gestures of personalized femininity, the young queen is still held within court conventions of gender inequality. She is still a pretty young *thing*. Le Brun's later portraits of the Queen wearing cotton chemise, flowing natural hair and straw hats not only shaped evolving fashions, but gave Marie Antoinette some fun expressions of womanhood and a break from court intrigues.

I wish to close with some comments about Le Brun and the Revolution. The birth of French democracy was traumatic to all. Vigée Le Brun experienced it with self-exile and the memory of friends murdered on the guillotine. Neither Le Brun, Robert nor David were innocent in what occurred; perhaps Le Brun was a bit short sighted in her awareness of the impact her works would have on the public. She was encouraged to continue by people of both sexes, and the dangerous politics of French male insecurity (disguised as civic heroism) were not her responsibility. She would not stop painting and we must be glad for it, but the dearth of artworks in her *oeuvre* that depict the lives of the lower classes is questionable.

Louise-Elizabeth Vigée-Le Brun's life resonates with the development of gender equality; while her clients were mostly kept women in a man's world, Le Brun depicted them as participants in the Enlightenment search for meaning. Le Brun helped to sustain European illusions of empire, but she cannot be faulted. There are few words for her achievement. The words on her gravestone say, "Ici, enfin, je repose." I hope that most of us will earn a lasting peace as she did.

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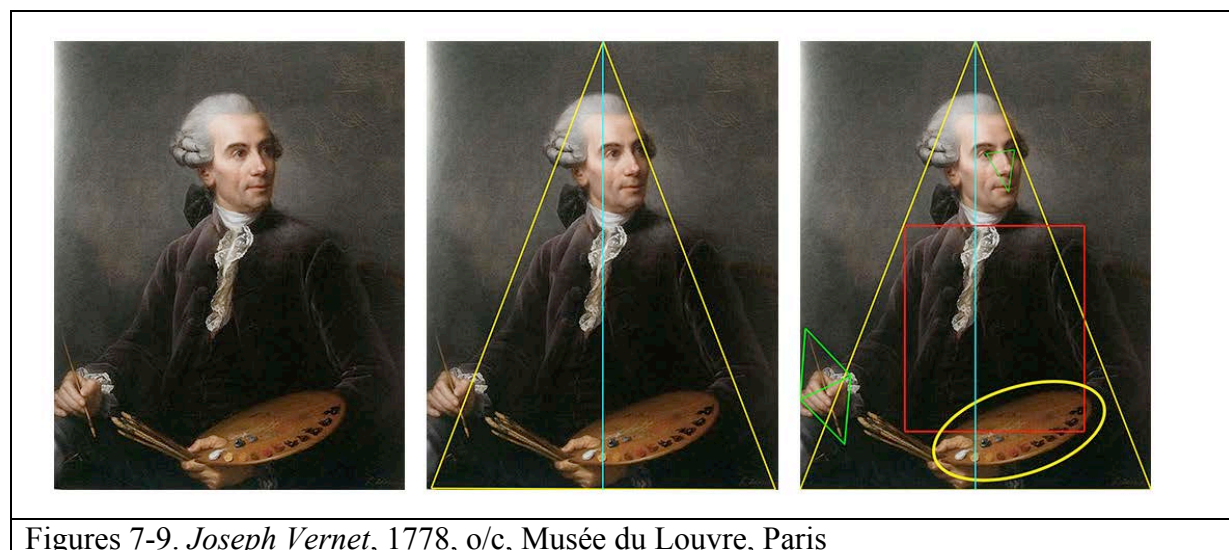
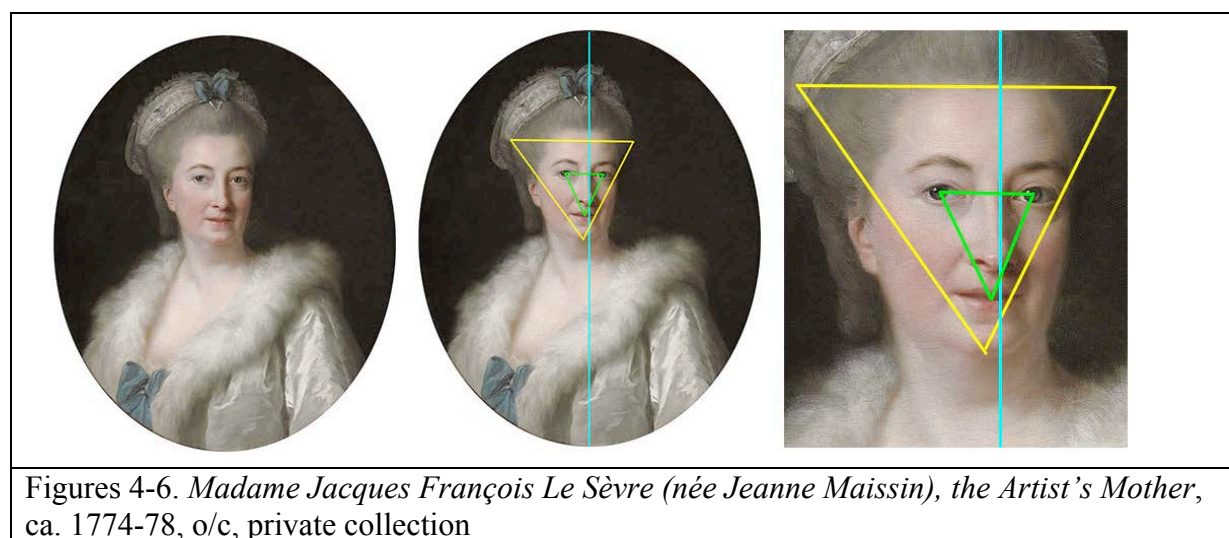
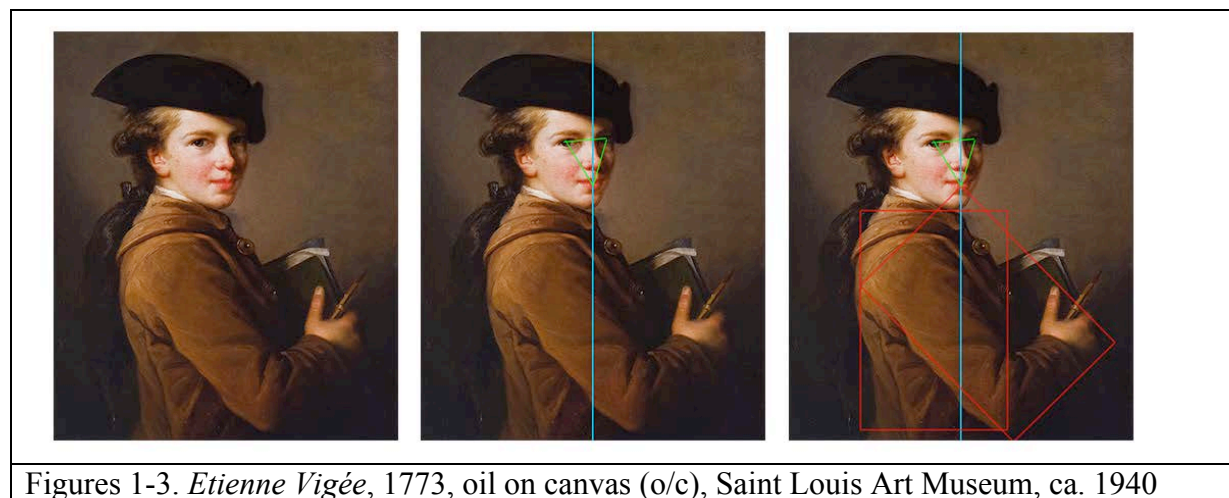
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Appendix 1 – Figures





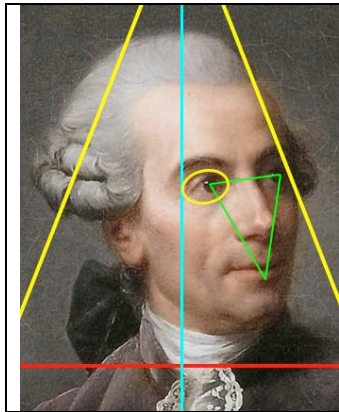
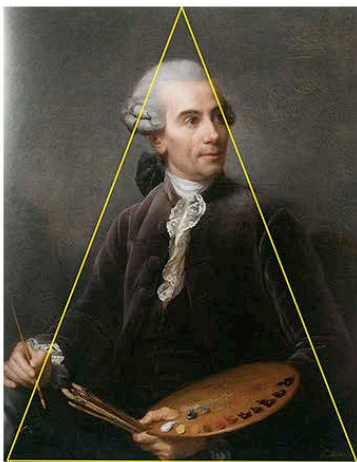
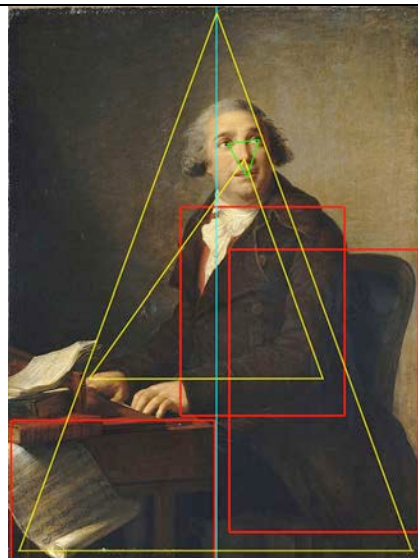
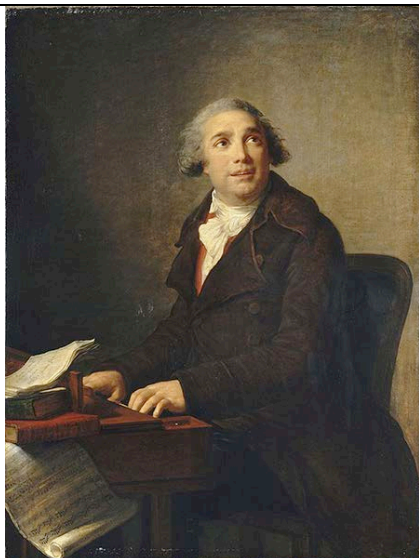


Figure 10. Details of study of *Joseph Vernet*, 1778, o/c, Musée du Louvre, Paris

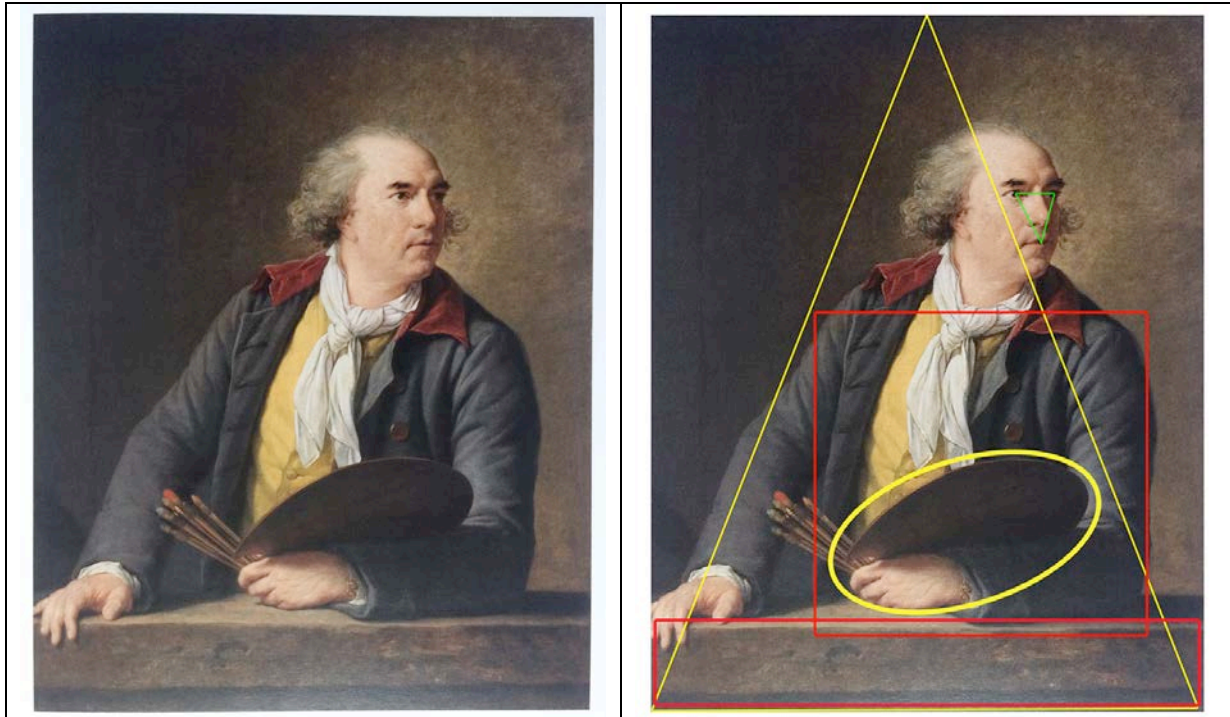
The corner of Vernet's right eye aligns with the center-line of the canvas.



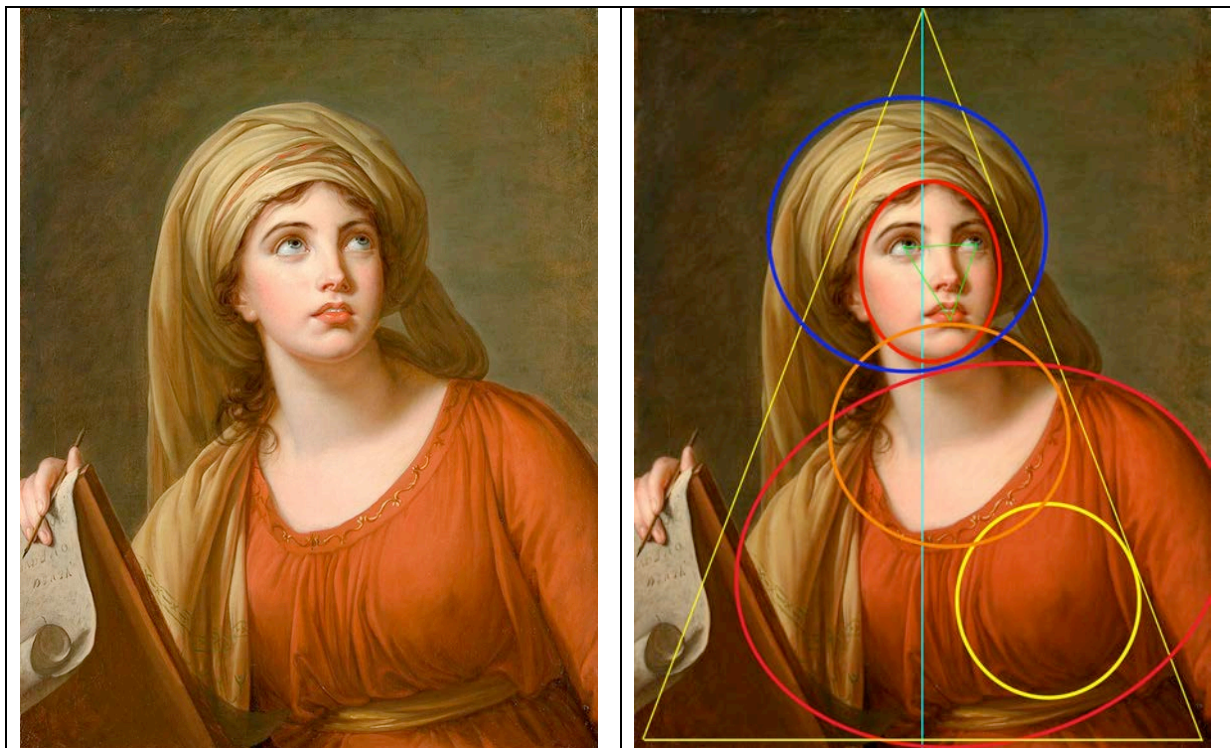
Figures 11-13. Canvas with imagined trisectors



Figures 14-15. *Giovanni Paisiello*, 1791, o/c, Musée du Louvre, Paris

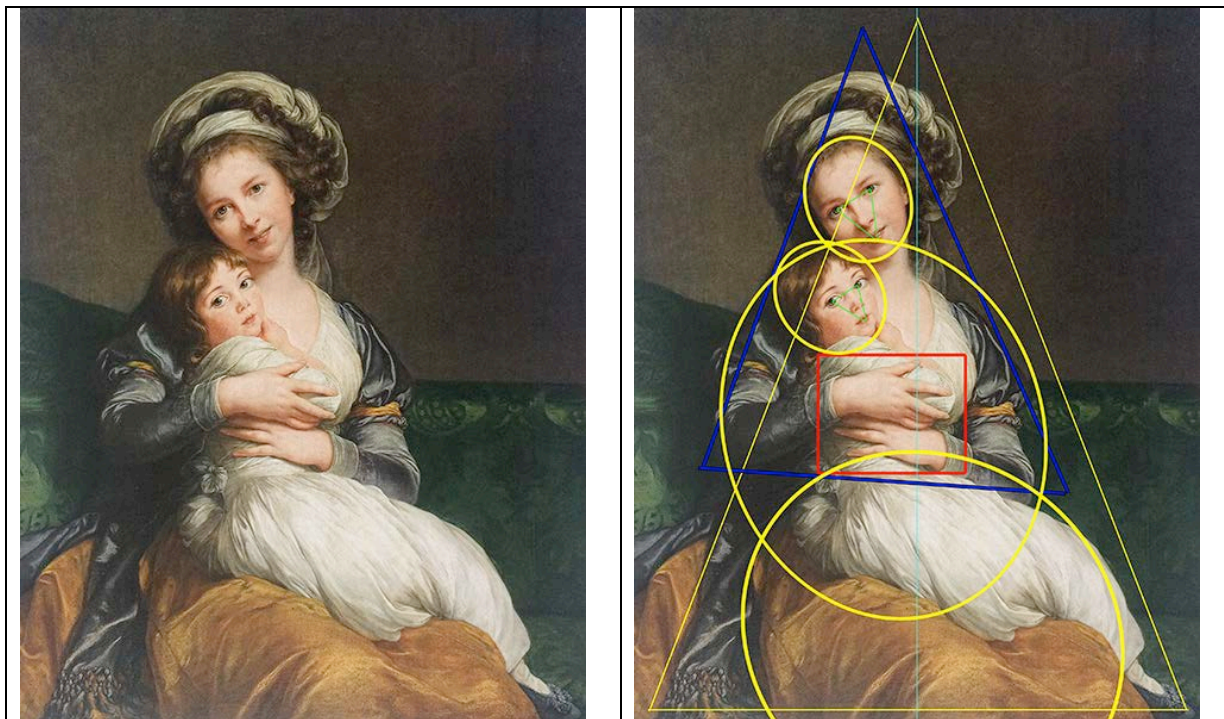


Figures 16-17. *Hubert Robert*, 1788, o/c, Musée du Louvre, Paris

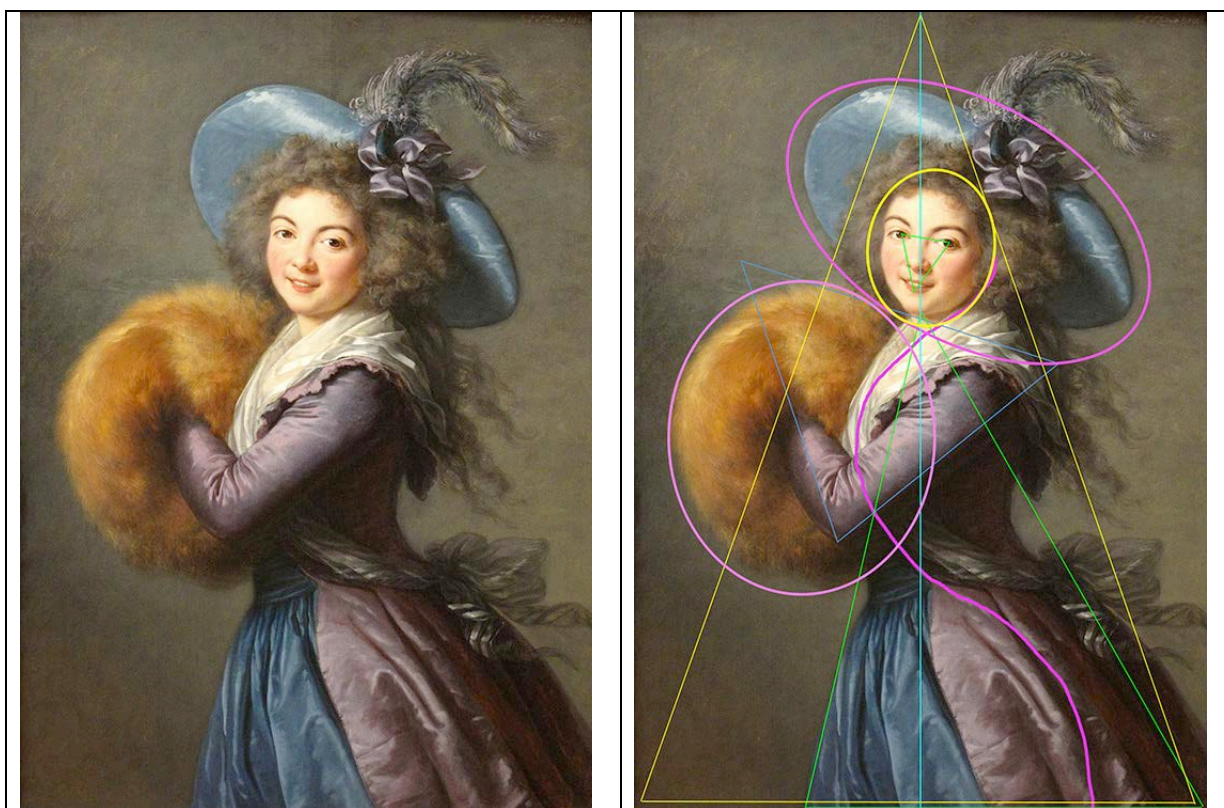


Figures 18-19. *Life Study of Lady Hamilton as the Cumaean Sybil*, 1792, o/c, Private coll.



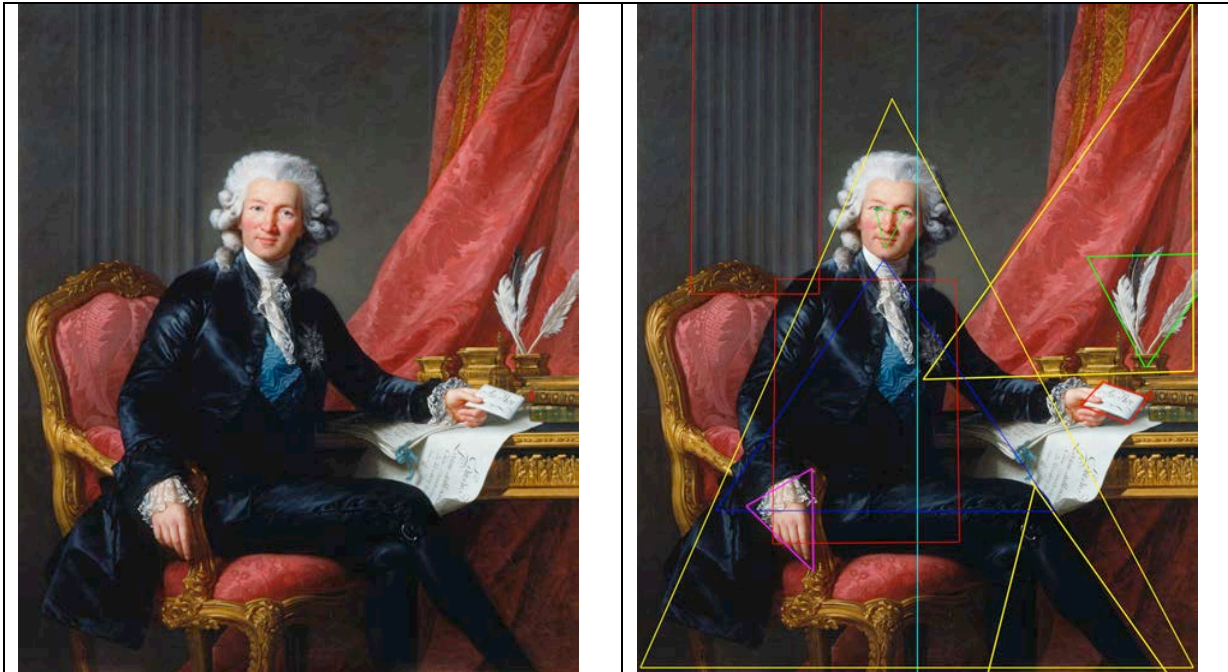


Figures 20-21. *Portrait of the Artist with Her Daughter Julie*, 1786, o/c, Musée du Louvre



Figures 22-23. *Baronne de Crussol Florensac*, 1785, o/c, Musée des Augustins, Toulouse





Figures 24-25. *Charles Alexandre de Calonne*, 1784, o/c, Royal Collection Trust (HM QEII)

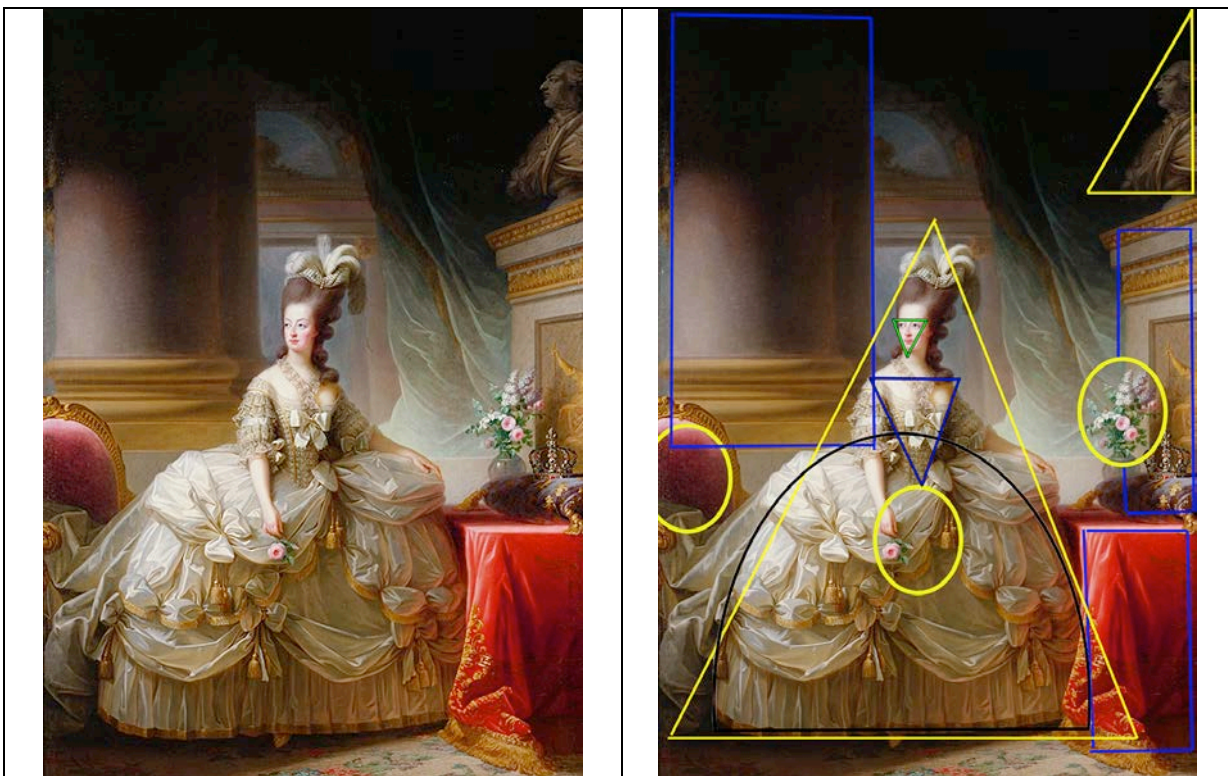


Figure 26-27. *Baronne de Crussol Florensac*, 1785, o/c, Musée des Augustins, Toulouse