As the Eye is Formed: Marie-Gabrielle Capet and the Artist in her Studio

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Marie-Gabrielle Capet's painting *Studio Scene* lay invisible for 185 years, between the Paris Salon of 1808 and its purchase in 1993 for the Munich Neue Pinakothek. This paper analyses this complex work within the context of women's art education, self-portraiture, and exhibition culture in France during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Capet's painting documents how a French woman artist navigated a man's world and succeeded in putting forward powerful messages on women's rights to an education within the studio, and equality among men and women artists. First, Capet's journey to becoming an established working artist is examined. Then, the Salon of 1808, its politics and the critical reception of Capet's painting are discussed. Finally, the image of the professional woman artist and the underlying messages are analysed. This paper concludes by discussing the importance of Capet's painting for art history and its relevance to today's viewer.



Figure 1: Marie-Gabrielle Capet (1769-1818), *Studio Scene (Adélaïde Labille-Guiard paints Joseph-Marie Vien)*, 1808, oil on canvas, 69 x 84cm, Neue Pinakothek, Munich

1 Introduction

"As the Eye is formed, such are its Powers."¹



Figure 2: Angelika Kauffman (1741-1807), *Self-Portrait*, oil on canvas, 64,8 x 50,7cm, 1784, Neue Pinakothek, Munich

Since the early 1970s and the advent of feminist art historians, increasing research into past Western women artists, their education and how they succeeded as professional artists, has led to the successful emergence and rise to international fame of a select few.² Indeed, some of these women's artistic production has been showcased in major museums. Recently, one of the largest exhibitions ever dedicated to a single eighteenth-century woman artist was held in 2015 at the Grand Palais in Paris, presenting the life and work of Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun (Chapman, The Female Gaze, p. 77). Other women artists, less prolific or less known during their lifetimes, have been neglected, overshadowed by these "blockbuster" women artists. Furthermore, in this beginning of the twenty-first century and the age of the selfie, self-portraits by women artists have proliferated and become familiar, and the genre

¹ Quote from a letter sent by William Blake (1757-1827) to Dr Tousler, 23 August 1799 (Keynes 35).

² One of the first major exhibitions on women artists, called *Women Painters: 1550-1950*, held at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1976 (Greer 1).

might well be considered less relevant now than at the time of the Paris *Salon* of 1808.³ Thus, a visitor today to the Neue Pinakothek in Munich would be unsurprised to find a self-portrait of the well-known artist Angelika Kauffmann (Figure 2) - but might not remark another self-portrait, by a little-known Frenchwoman, Marie-Gabrielle Capet (1761-1818). Her painting, *Studio Scene* (1808), returned to the public eye in 1993, after the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen purchased it from a private owner in 1991 (Rosenburg 320). Since then, the work has been displayed in the Neue Pinakothek.⁴ The *livret* (catalogue) of the *Salon* indicates that the painting had first been shown 185 years before, in 1808, at the *Salon* in the Musée Napoléon (Musée du Louvre today).⁵

Although Capet's painting fits into a "studio scene" genre, prevalent in France at the turn of the nineteenth century, her careful choices concerning who and what to depict render her work highly unusual for her time: indeed, it is unique. Capet's *Studio Scene* makes an extremely modern statement about art education for women at the time, the role of the studio for women artists in Paris, and how women fitted into a male-dominated artistic community.

A recent publication by Caroline Chapman has been an important source. However, in Chapman's words, her book is not "a scholarly overview of the subject" (Chapman, Eighteenth-Century Women Artists 22). In fact, since Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971), it seems that no definitive study has been written on the current state of scholarly research into the history of women artists in the West, their artistic education and production, although "[r]evisionist scholars" (Jensen, Marketing the maternal body 18) have shown that women artists likely had more opportunities for full artistic training and a career than previously thought.⁶ Marie-Josèphe Bonnet states that during the second half of the eighteenth-century, 'French women

³ The *Salon du Louvre* will be referred to as the *Salon* throughout this paper. The first *Salon* took place in 1725 and was "[n]amed after the Salon carré in the Louvre". It was a grand exhibition which showcased the best of contemporary French art (and sometimes a few works by foreign artists) (Kearns et Mill 1).

⁴ Due to ongoing renovations (since January 2019), Capet's work has been taken down and will be exhibited in the Alte Pinakothek for the remainder of the renovations.

⁵ The *livret* was a small portable catalogue, about 90 pages long, which divided the exhibitors into four categories. Their names are listed in alphabetical order along with their addresses and numbered works. Some works are accompanied by a short description. A copy could be bought at the entrance for "75 centimes" (Explication des Ouvrages).

⁶Gen Doy, a Marxist art historian, is another scholar advocating this point.

represented close to 70% of all professional working women artists in Europe.⁷ Nochlin mentions that many of the women who succeeded in becoming professional artists at the turn of the nineteenth-century lived in France (Nochlin 163) while neglecting to point out that Capet was one, and another, her well-known, prosperous teacher, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard. Regarding methodologies, iconography and feminism have proven most pertinent. Psychoanalytical feminist theory will not be the principal methodology used here, although Alexandra Wettlaufer's interpretation will be briefly touched on.⁸

In writing on Capet, I am aware of perpetuating a tendency for female scholars to focus on women artists. This said, until Séverine Sofio's article of late 2019, the most important texts on Capet and her Studio Scene were by men.⁹ Only one monograph has ever been written: Gabrielle Capet (Paris, 1934) by the French count and art historian Pierre Marie Arnauld Doria (Doria). Although interesting, Doria's biography romanticised Capet's life and has been overtaken by new research by scholars like Labille-Guiard's biographer, Anne-Marie Passez (1973), Laura Auricchio (2009) and Séverine Sofio (2019), particularly since the recent emergence of Capet's paintings on the art market, in museums and private collections. Another important source of information about Capet, written specifically on her Studio Scene, is a 1999 German article by Thomas Gaehtgens (Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie). However, having never been translated into French or English, its reach has remained limited. Capet's Studio Scene has occasionally been mentioned in publications and monographs on other artists. The consensus is that Capet's 1808 Studio Scene was an important "homage" and "tribute" to her "mentor" and much beloved teacher, Labille-Guiard (Chapman, Eighteenth-Century Women Artists 55). However, this exceptional painting is much more, as the following analysis of Capet's intricate and impressive creative thought process will show. First, Capet's journey to becoming an established working artist will be examined. Then, the Salon of 1808 and the contemporary reception of Capet's

⁷ "[…] les Françaises représentent à elles seules près de 70% des femmes artistes qui exerçaient alors une activité professionnelle en Europe." (Bonnet, Liberté, égalité, exclusion. 12-13)

⁸ Although her research into Jacques-Louis David's work and French post-revolutionary art and culture is fascinating, this dissertation will not be using Ewa Lajer-Burcharth's psychoanalytical feminist-based art historical research and analysis.

⁹ This paper is based on a dissertation submitted to the University of St Andrews (Scotland) in August 2019. In September 2019, Séverine Sofio published her article "Gabrielle Capet's Collective Self-Portrait: Women and Artistic Legacy in Post-Revolutionary France," Journal18 Issue 8 Self/Portrait (Fall 2019), http://www.journal18.org/4397. It is very heartening to see an entire article dedicated to Marie-Gabrielle Capet and her intricate *Studio Scene* published so recently!

Studio Scene will be discussed. Finally, the underlying messages of the painting and the crucial role of the viewer will be analysed.

2 Marie-Gabrielle Capet's Journey to becoming a Professional Artist

A veritable 'golden age for women's painting'.¹⁰

2.1 Who's who and the temporal conundrum

The viewer gazes into an indoor scene. To the left, daylight pours through a large window onto a parquet floor, illuminating a group of fifteen figures, gathered to watch the creation of a portrait of a man, by a woman. They are not anonymous. All twelve men are artists, and two of the three women. The woman gazing out at the viewer is the artist herself, Capet, and beside her sits Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, her teacher and friend. Splendidly dressed, the elderly Joseph-Marie Vien, 'the founder of the Neoclassical School', sits on the right.¹¹ His son, known as Joseph-Marie Vien "fils" ("the younger"),



Figure 3: Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, *Portrait of Joseph-Marie Vien, painter of the King*, 1782/83, pastel on paper, 58.5 x 48.2 cm, Musée Fabre, Montpellier

¹⁰ "âge d'or de la peinture des femmes" (Bonnet, Femmes peintres 142).

¹¹ "Begründer der neoklassizistischen Schule" (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 216).

stands behind him, with his wife, Rose-Célèste Bache.¹² The gentleman leaning over Labille-Guiard's right shoulder is François-André Vincent, a distinguished history painter, Labille-Guiard's lifelong friend and, ultimately, her husband.¹³ The large easel in the centre of the painting cuts the room in half, dividing the remaining nine male figures into two groups. The left-hand group surrounds Labille-Guiard, and on the right sits her subject, Vien. The remaining gentlemen are identified as Vincent's "principal" students (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 210). The protagonists stand out: Capet and Labille-Guiard wear rich dresses, Vien and Vincent official uniforms.

Capet's painting immediately poses a temporal conundrum: it is an "Anachronism" (Rosenburg 320). By 14 October 1808, the opening of the Salon, Labille-Guiard, the central figure, had been dead for five years (Explication des Ouvrages).¹⁴ Thus, Capet is depicting a scene from the past, evoking a real event from 1782, when Joseph-Marie Vien, then Rector of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, sat for Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 212).¹⁵



Figure 4: Numbered figures in Studio Scene

¹² Rose-Célèste Bache will be referred to by her maiden name throughout this paper.

¹³ Labille-Guiard married Vincent in 1800 (Greer 268).

¹⁴ Labille-Guiard died in 1803 (Greer 268).

¹⁵ "L'Académie royale de Peinture et de Sculpture" was founded by Jules Mazarin in 1648 (Bonnet, Femmes peintres 143). This institution will be referred to as the Royal Academy for the remainder of this paper.

Subsequently, in 1783, Labille-Guiard exhibited her pastel portrait of Vien (Figure 3) at the *Salon du Louvre* and the *Salon de la Correspondance* (Doria 84). However, this portrait is not that shown in *Studio Scene*, the dimensions of Labille-Guiard's real portrait of Vien being smaller. Nonetheless, the scene cannot date from 1782, as three of the figures (Picot, L. Pallière and Alaux) had not yet been born. Furthermore, the styles of clothing are mostly post-revolutionary: the women in *robes à la grecque* and the younger men with short, unpowdered hair, "*à la Titus* or *à la Brutus*" (Ribeiro, Clothing Art 246), wearing trousers, rather than the knee-breeches of the *ancien regime* (Ribeiro, The Art of Dress 85). Vien's and Vincent's knee-breeches are part of a uniform, to which we will return.¹⁶ Finally, each individual has been appropriately aged for the year 1808 (Figure 4).¹⁷ In short, Capet has inserted real



Figure 5: Marie-Gabrielle Capet, *Portrait of François-André Vincent*, c. 1808-1810?, oil on canvas, 27 x 21,5cm, Private Collection, Paris.

Inscription on back of canvas: "François André Vincent Peintre / d'histoire membre de l'Institut décédé / en Août 1816 peint par Mlle Capet / Sa fille adoptive / offert à l'excellent ami de son / frère Mr. Boivin en 1817".



Figure 6: Detail of Vincent in Studio Scene

¹⁶ In 2017, a portrait of Vincent by Capet was sold at the Artcurial auction house in Paris. Vincent is shown wearing the same jacket, vest, wig and medal, thus suggesting either that Capet painted this small portrait as a study for her *Salon* exhibit, or that she created it shortly afterwards (Artcurial). Figure 5 and Figure 6 ¹⁷ A numbered list of the figures' names and ages can be found in the Appendix.

people from 1808 into an event which took place in 1782, constructing an entirely fictitious scene. Furthermore, she knew all the individuals in her painting, and thus, before examining it in detail, we must understand how Capet became a part of this community of artists.

2.2 Capet and Labille-Guiard: Female Art Education in Paris before the Revolution

Marie-Gabrielle Capet was born in Lyon on September 6th, 1761. Her parents, Henry Capet and Marie Blanc, were servants (Doria 51). It is unclear when exactly Capet arrived in Paris, gateway to a successful career in the arts (Doy 37). As a young woman of modest means, Capet's principal option for studying art was through an established artist's private studio. During the second half of the eighteenth-century, some French male artists, such as Jacques-Louis David and Vincent, opened their studios to women and taught them separately from their male students (Greer 298). Women artists, including Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun and Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, also opened studios (Chapman, The Female Gaze, 2018, p. 69). The latter was known to promote the teaching of "young women 'sans fortune".¹⁸

Capet began studying with Labille-Guiard in her newly-opened studio around 1779, and quickly became her best student (Passez 20). Labille-Guiard taught four techniques: miniature, pastel/oil painting, and drawing (Passez 19). Before becoming a member of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1783, Labille-Guiard had been accused of having her work "touched up by her teacher and future husband, François-André Vincent" (Chapman, Eighteenth-Century Women Artists 36). Therefore, to disprove this, in 1782 she invited prominent Academicians to sit for her. Vincent, recently elected to the Royal Academy, used his influence to ensure that they did (Passez 16). Among them were Vien and the sculptor, Augustin Pajou (Greer 266), whose son, Jacques-Augustin-Catherine Pajou appears in Capet's *Studio Scene*. Capet would have been present for Vien's sitting, and her 1808 *Studio Scene* reflects this specific event.

¹⁸ 'young women 'without a fortune'' (Wettlaufer 40).

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Although Capet produced one large oil self-portrait in 1783 (Figure 7), she was primarily a talented and well-known miniaturist (Chapman, Eighteenth-Century Women Artists 55). Her 1808 painting is regarded by Gaehtgens as marking her public return to oil and large-scale painting (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 218). As a student and precious assistant to Labille-Guiard, Capet would have undertaken various duties for her teacher, including completing less important elements of her paintings (Chapman, The Female Gaze, 2018, p. 68). The two women became inseparable, sharing a home from 1781 until Labille-Guiard's death in 1803 (Chapman, Eighteenth-Century Women Artists 55).¹⁹



Figure 7: Marie-Gabrielle Capet, 1761 -1818, Self-portrait, c. 1783, oil on canvas, 77.5 x 59.5 cm, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo.

¹⁹ Doria claims that Capet was living with her Godmother in Paris, when, in 1781, she and another student, Mlle Carreaux de Rosemond, moved to 739 rue de Richelieu with their teacher Labille-Guiard (Doria 51, 56).

Female art education is an integral theme in Capet's *Studio Scene*, and Labille-Guiard's *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils* (1785) Figure 8 is a key to understanding Capet's work. *Studio Scene* can be



Figure 8: Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils*, 1785, oil on canvas, 210,8 x 151,1 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

considered a direct response to Labille-Guiard's 1785 *Self-Portrait*. The points of resemblance between the two paintings are pronounced; what is hidden in Labille-Guiard's *Self-Portrait* is revealed in Capet's *Studio Scene*. First, in Labille-Guiard's *Self-Portrait*, the artist's sitter is not revealed; he/she is, in fact, the viewer. In her own painting, Capet reveals the subject of Labille-Guiard's portrait: Vien. Second,

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Labille-Guiard's pose is similar in both paintings, and in neither can the viewer see her work. In Capet's *Studio Scene*, Vincent leans over Labille-Guiard's left shoulder. His body language indicates his affection for his wife and his role as her teacher, confirmed in the 1808 title of the piece, '*Painting representing the deceased Madame Vincent (her husband's student)*'.²⁰ The placing of his right hand echoes that of Capet's in Labille-Guiard's *Self-Portrait*. This gesture is repeated twice in Capet's painting, demonstrating the mirroring of the two groups; the easel and canvas also act as a mirror, reflecting each group back to itself. +Figure 9 Finally, the most important groups of figures are grouped into pyramidal compositions in both paintings.

In *Studio Scene*, Capet's role has changed: she is now a middle-aged, established artist, actively assisting her former teacher by preparing her palette, which she has daubed with black, red, yellow and white paint, the practice of the time (Chapman, Eighteenth-Century Women Artists 68). In Labille-Guiard's *Self-Portrait*, the artist shows the colours on the tips of her paint brushes, rather than on the palette itself; they are identical to those on Capet's palette. Thus, while continuing to attract the viewer



+Figure 9: Hands and Composition in Studio Scene

²⁰ The original title found in the *livret* of the *Salon* in French: "Tableau représentant feue Madame Vincent (élève de son mari)." (Explication des Ouvrages 13)

by revealing elements hidden in Labille-Guiard's *Self-Portrait*, Capet implicitly shows the viewer (principally the Parisian artistic community) that a woman without official training could prepare her palette as correctly as any Academy-trained male artist. Finally, in demonstrating through her imposing *Self-Portrait* that an elegant, attractive woman could also function as an immensely skilled and professionally able artist, showing her virtuosity in composition, painting fabrics, portraiture and every painterly skill that would "attrac[t] a new clientele" (Chapman, Eighteenth-Century Women Artists 122), Labille-Guiard strongly promoted women's rights to an artistic education. She legitimised herself as an important female artist and teacher. Capet's *Studio Scene* repeats, amplifies and emphasises this legitimisation, thus fully justifying them both as skilled professional artists.

3 Capet and the Salon of 1808

'One observation which it would be unfair to neglect, is that no country, in any previous era, has reaped the glory of having seen so many women simultaneously cultivating the art of painting with such decided success.'²¹

3.1 Women artists in a Post-Revolutionary society

According to Bonnet, up to 70% of women working as artists in Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century were French (Bonnet, Liberté, égalité, exclusion. 12). Indeed, Bonnet describes the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century as a time of female emancipation in France, largely initiated by women artists (Bonnet, Liberté, égalité, exclusion. 8). In her 2002 article, she remarks that this era of female emancipation has been largely overlooked by scholars (Bonnet, Femmes peintres 142). Jensen writes that from 1789 on, women became far more visible within French society, especially in the visual arts (Jensen, The Journal des Dames 33). Many entered male-dominated professional artistic and cultural spheres. Unlike Jensen, Bonnet regards the Revolution as a defeat for women's rights, seeing women artists' professional status relegated to 'amateur'.²²

In 1792, France's monarchy disappeared, and in 1793, the Royal Academy "was abolished" (Halliday 71). The Institut de France, created in 1795, succeeded the former royal academies; women were excluded (Bonnet, Femmes peintres 163). In Bonnet's opinion, the only positive consequence of the Revolution was that women artists were permitted to exhibit at the *Salon* (Bonnet, Femmes peintres 163). Certainly, in post-revolutionary France, the ideology that women should be exclusively devoted to the home was strongly encouraged (Bonnet, Femmes peintres 141). However, Doy explains that bourgeois women were given "increasing educational and economic opportunities" to work, as "teach[ers], writ[ers] and paint[ers]", and does not consider the Revolution to have been as great a defeat for women as feminist scholars suggest (Doy 133, 47).

For Bonnet and Wettlaufer, French women artists developed a new image of the contemporary woman: active in their time, not anonymous, allegorical, mythical, fictitious or long-dead, as portrayed

²¹ On the *Salon* of 1812 : "Une observation qu'il serait injuste de négliger, c'est qu'il n'est point de pays qui, à aucune époque antérieure, ait pu se glorifier d'avoir vu naître à la fois tant de femmes cultivant la peinture avec un succès décidé." (Durdent 19)

²² "amatrice" (Bonnet, Femmes peintres 163)

by Jacques-Louis David and other male painters (Bonnet, Femmes peintres 142; Wettlaufer 40). For Bonnet, the self-portrait was a means by which French women could publicly question their new 'social status'²³ as professional artists and ultimately impose their image of women as creators (Bonnet, Femmes peintres 144-145).

Few women artists portrayed themselves or other women artists in a world of idealised motherhood and "bourgeois marriage" (Doy 50). Thus, Capet produced her *Studio Scene* in an artistic and social environment new for her sex.

3.2 Vincent, Vien and the politics of a Napoleonic Salon

Due to delays in installing the many works of art submitted and accepted that year, the *Salon* began a month late, running from 14 October 1808 to early January 1809.²⁴ Entering the first exhibition room, the visitor, equipped with his/her *livret*, published by Dubray, was met by a crowd of eager



Figure 10: Louis Léopold Boilly, The Public Viewing David's "Coronation" at the Louvre (1808-1810), 1810, oil on canvas, 61.6 x 82.6 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

²³ "statut social" (Bonnet, Femmes peintres 145)

²⁴ The *Salon* usually began in September (Zieseniss 124).

spectators, as in Boilly's painting *The Public Viewing David's "Coronation" at the Louvre* Figure 10. Indeed, David's *The Coronation of Napoleon* Figure 11 drew huge numbers, and 29,410 *livrets* were sold that year (Van de Sandt 78; Jackall 36).



Figure 11: Jacques-Louis David, *The Coronation of Napoleon*, 1808, oil on canvas, 6,21 x 9,79m, Louvre, Paris

Although it is not clear where Capet's *Studio Scene* hung, her painting was seen by thousands of visitors, including influential aristocrats and bourgeois. Napoleon himself visited the *Salon* to see David's colossal painting, and to tour the exhibition.²⁵ The Emperor and his entourage undoubtedly noticed Capet's *Studio Scene*, showcasing Vincent and Vien, elite members of the French contemporary artistic community and well-known to the Emperor (Zieseniss 206). Furthermore, the creation of Capet's *Studio Scene* coincided with the publishing of the "Rapport sur les Beaux-Arts", an official report on the state of the Arts in France over the previous twenty years, written by Vincent and Vien, amongst others (Le Breton 1). Thus, Napoleon may well have known of Capet's existence, as she lived with Vincent until his death in 1816 and was favourably mentioned twice in the report (Rosenburg 320).

²⁵ Napoleon visited the *Salon* at eleven in the morning on 22 October 1808. He was accompanied by the Empress Joséphine, his wife, and various artists, including David (Zieseniss 206).

²⁶ Capet is mentioned on pages 59 and 82 (Le Breton).

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Capet's *Studio Scene* explicitly shows Vincent's and Vien's artistic and political status within Napoleonic society: Vincent wears his Academician's uniform for the "Institut de France" and Vien his elaborate Senator's robes.²⁷ On 26 April 1808, Vien, who was already a "Sénateur", received the hereditary title of "comte d'Empire"; Capet is highlighting this honour (Marcheteau de Quinçay 22). Furthermore, both men wear the Legion of Honour. Not only did Capet pay homage to Vien in her painting, but also directly linked her work to two others shown at the *Salon*. David also painted Vien in



Figure 12: Detail of Joseph-Marie Vien in *The Coronation of Napoleon* by David

his Senator's robes (Figure 12), watching Napoleon place the crown on his own head, and the younger Vien depicted his father in a family portrait, wearing the Legion of Honour medal (Figure 13). Whether or not Capet knew of these paintings before creating her own, her inclusion of Vien in his Senator's robes was a brilliant stroke, as Vien was an important and politically influential subject. It is no wonder that three artists, including Capet, chose to include him in their *Salon* works. Thus, through their clothes and medals, Capet has drawn attention to Vincent's and Vien's social and political status. Moreover, Capet is showing the *Salon* viewer that she herself is intimately connected to artists of this calibre.

²⁷ Recognized by olive leaves embroidered on dark cloth, Vincent's Academician's costume appears in Labille-Guiard's inventory, taken after her death ("un habit de drap foncé brodé de soie verte, grand costume de membre de l'Institut" ("Inventaire après le décès de Madame Vincent". [29th April 1803].) (Passez 307) Napoleon named Vien "Sénateur" in 1799 (Gaehtgens and Lugand, Joseph-Marie Vien 46).



Figure 13: Joseph-Marie Vien fils, *Portrait of the artist, his wife and son* (the painting in the background represents Joseph-Marie Vien, his Father), 1808, oil on canvas, 258,5 x 210,5cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen

The *Réunion des Musées Métropolitains Rouen Normandie* could not provide a higher quality photo of this painting.

3.3 Self-portraits, women artists and the critical viewer at the Salon of 1808

What can the *livret* tell us? The total number of exhibitors was 410, including painters (323), sculptors (38), architects (10) and engravers (39). Amongst the artists, fifty were women, all painters. Nine artists exhibited self-portraits, and Capet was one of only four women to do so.²⁸ Bonnet states that Adèle Romany also exhibited a self-portrait, set in her studio: *Portrait en pied de l'auteur dans son atelier* (Bonnet, Femmes peintres 167). However, no mention of this work appears in the *livret*. Therefore, it would seem that in the entire exhibition, Capet was the only woman to present herself in a woman's studio, and the only artist to present herself in an artist's studio. ²⁹ Of the five male artists to exhibit self-portraits, Dubray has provided a description only for the younger Vien's family portrait.³⁰ Consequently, Capet's *Studio Scene* presents a unique female self-portrait at the *Salon* of 1808.

²⁸ The other women artists are listed as: 'Mlle Charlu (p.16, n.109. *Portrait de l'auteur*), Mme DUMERAY (née BRINAU), (p.30, n.195. *Portrait de l'Auteur*), Mlle PICHOREL (Eugénie) (p.73, n. 473. *Portrait de l'auteur*. Miniature.).'

²⁹ It is worth noting that Louis-Léopold Boilly also displayed a painting (*Game of Billiards*) at the *Salon* of 1808, which shows women actively participating in a usually male dominated setting and activity, in this case, playing billiards.

³⁰ The other four male artists are listed as: Bédert (p.4, n.18), Callet (p.13, n.87), Charpentier (p.16, n.113) and Langlois (p.51, n.347).

Furthermore, public recognition of women artists' skill was on the rise: that year, three women were awarded a medal of encouragement from the Emperor.³¹ Capet's *Studio Scene* is listed as number 89, on page 13 of the *livret*. The title is very different from today's, and is accompanied by a short description:

'M.^{lle} Capet, Palais des Beaux-Arts

89. Painting depicting the deceased Mme Vincent (her husband's student).

She is occupied in creating the portrait of Senator Vien, count of the Empire and member of the Institute of France, rejuvenator of the current French School, and teacher of M. Vincent. The author has represented herself preparing Mme Vincent's palette, and has placed M. Vincent's principal students in this painting.

90. Several portraits. Same number.'32

Capet produced her *Studio Scene* in a society which included ever more women "spectator[s]", "artists", "patrons", "connoisseur[s]" and "critics" (Jensen, The Journal des Dames 33), who would have been part of her targeted *Salon* public. Furthermore, as Doy comments, female art critics had begun to emerge (Doy 46): the critic Mme de Vandeul visited the *Salon* of 1808 (Vialleton 79). Although she did not write about Capet's work, her presence at the *Salon* reflects a society in which women were increasingly visible, entering male-dominated spheres despite the new civil code ("Code Napoléon") of 1804 which eliminated many women's legal rights (Roulan 178). In December 1808, the newspaper *Mercure de France* called Capet's painting 'an estimable work'. ³³ The *Salon* of 1808 was commented upon in an article by a male critic (Le Centyeux) and in a letter to the editor from a certain Mlle "Fanny Tatillon", whom Jensen believes to have been the editor himself (Jensen, The Journal des Dames 42). The letter condescends towards the women exhibitors and female spectators. According to Jensen, this type of writing is an example of male backlash to women's ever-growing public presence (Jensen, The

³¹ "Artistes Auxquels Sa Majesté l'Empereur a décerné une médaille d'encouragement." (Examen critique et raisonné des tableaux des peintres vivans, formant l'exposition de 1808).

³² "M.^{lle} Capet, Palais des Beaux-Arts / 89. Tableau représentant feue M.^{me} Vincent (élève de son mari). / Elle est occupée à faire le portrait de M. le Sénateur Vien, comte de l'Empire et membre de l'institut de France, régénérateur de l'École française actuelle, et maître de M. *Vincent*. L'auteur qui s'est représenté chargeant sa palette, a placé dans ce tableau les principaux élèves de M. *Vincent*." / 90. Plusieurs portraits. Même numéro." (Explication des Ouvrages 13).

³³ "un ouvrage estimable" (Melle Capet 560-561)

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Journal des Dames 42). Indeed, some male critics stated that women should not become professional artists, others arguing that women should confine themselves to particular genres, mainly landscape and never history painting (Jensen, The Journal des Dames 41).

However, the critic Charles-Paul Landon commented:

'Mme Romani and Mlle Capet have exhibited several paintings which have been viewed with all the more interest because representing for the most part persons much-loved by the public.'³⁴

Indeed, Capet's inclusion of contemporary, well-known artists, was extremely clever. On the surface, her painting reflects womanly decorum: although Capet shows a revered female artist at work, the latter is deceased, and Capet presents herself "merely" as her assistant, in a room full of other people. Capet's humble subtlety is further affirmed in the dimensions of her painting: this is not a colossal self-portrait like Labille-Guiard's, but a modest oil painting, reflecting her career as a miniaturist.³⁵ The painting thus appears to offer a humble view of women artists, while flattering the men portrayed, the teachers of the women. *Studio Scene* was so well-received that the highly reputed Landon listed her in his critique of the *Salon* of 1808 as a "Peintre d'Histoire et de Portraits à l'huile", thus granting her equal status with the most prestigious male painters of her day.³⁶

³⁴ "Madame Romani et mademoiselle Capet en ont exposé plusieurs qui ont été vus avec d'autant d'intérêt qu'ils représentent pour la plupart des personnes aimées du public." (Landon 96)

³⁵ Capet's *Studio Scene* measures 69 x 84cm. Labille's Guiard's *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils* is a life-size painting, measuring 210,8 x 151,1 cm.

³⁶ 'A History Painter and Painter of Oil Portraits.' (Landon 106)

[&]quot;He [Landon] also published attacks on miniaturists, pastellists and, most insistently, women artists." (Halliday 79)

4 Liberty, Equality, Solidarity

'I will absolutely convince the members of that haughty sex who still doubt the moral powers of Women, that we have been able, that we are able, and always will be able, in the career of Arts and Sciences, to proudly march at their side, as equals.' ³⁷

4.1 The image of the professional working woman artist

Bonnet states that from 1774 to 1808, 'over sixty self-portraits or portraits of women artists at work were exhibited' at the Salons.³⁸ For example, at the Salon of 1796, Marie Victoire Lemoine depicted a woman artist and her female student, possibly Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun teaching a female student in the late 1780s (Baetjer 347). Like Capet, Lemoine recreated a scene from the past, and Rauser argues that "[...] this portrait is a constructed homage to a leading woman artist and to female artistic solidarity" (Rauser 27). Capet takes this homage to another level by painting Labille-Guiard in her studio. Gaehtgens writes that only two elements indicate that the room depicted in Capet's 1808 oil painting is indeed an artist's studio: the large easel and the screen in the background (behind which a model could change) (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 211). In fact, at least five further elements confirm that this is a specific artist's studio. First, the large windows, letting in natural light (Chapman, Eighteenth-Century Women Artists 60). Then, Capet's preparation of the artist's palette for Labille-Guiard. Also, both Labille-Guiard and Vien have a pencil-holder, into which a piece of chalk, pastel or charcoal was inserted for sketching. Furthermore, Capet's left arm rests on a piece of furniture specific to an artist's studio; Gaehtgens describes it as an 'an unfolding table'.³⁹ The large lid of this elegant wooden item opens to reveal a storage cavity for the artist's tools and paints. Wheels and a gilded handle indicate its mobility. A similar table/cabinet is depicted in Marie-Victoire Lemoine's painting The Interior of the Atelier of a Woman Painter, 1789 Figure 14/Figure 15 (Salon of 1796) and Boilly's Artists in Isabey's Studio (Salon of 1798). Furthermore, the small green footstool on which

³⁷ "Je convaincrai décidément ce sexe hautain, qui doute encore des puissances morales des Femmes, que nous avons pu, que nous pouvons, que nous pourrons toujours, dans la carrière des Arts & des Sciences, marcher fièrement ces égales." (Avis Important d'une Femme sur le Sallon de 1785. Par Madame E.A.R.T.L.A.D.C.S. Dédié Aux Femmes 2-3)

³⁸ "Plus d'une soixantaine d'autoportraits ou de portraits de femmes artistes sont ainsi exposés entre 1774 et 1808 [...]." (Bonnet, Liberté, égalité, exclusion. 11)

³⁹ "aufgeklappten Tisch" (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 211).



Figure 14: Marie Victoire Lemoine, *Interior of an Atelier*, 1796, oil on canvas, 116.5 x 88.9cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Figure 15: Detail of table/cabinet in Lemoine's Interior of an Atelier

Labille-Guiard's left foot rests in both paintings is listed in the inventory of her belongings, made after her death.⁴⁰ Capet - originally a miniaturist, with an eye for detail - painted items which had truly belonged to her teacher. Last, the beautiful parquet floor in Capet's scene is identical to that in Labille-Guiard's *Self-Portrait with Two Students* (Salon of 1785) Figure 16. Here, Labille-Guiard appears with her two favourite students in her pre-revolutionary Parisian studio, at 8 rue Ménars (Passez 19).⁴¹ Thus, Capet's 1808 painting reveals the likely interior appearance of Labille-Guiard's studio in the early 1780s.⁴²

However, neither Labille-Guiard in her 1785 Self-Portrait nor Capet in her Studio Scene show the true state of Labille-Guiard's studio, which would have been far more cluttered (Chapman, The

⁴⁰ "un petit tabouret de pied couvert de marocain vert" ("Inventaire après le décès de Madame Vincent". [29th April 1803].) (Passez 305)

⁴¹ In the "Catalogue" section of his book, Doria has given Capet's 1808 *Studio Scene* a different title from that of the *livret* of the Salon of that year: "Mme Vincent dans son atelier". This new title would also point to this scene taking place in Labille-Guiard's pre-revolutionnary studio (Doria 84).

⁴² Google Maps street view shows that this "seventeenth-century" building is still standing in Paris today (Passez 16).



Figure 16: Details of parquet floor in Labille-Guiard's *Self-Portrait with Two Students* and Capet's *Studio Scene*

Female Gaze, 2018, p. 68). Furthermore, neither woman is wearing clothes she would actually have worn to paint in. Indeed, what practical garments women artists actually wore when they worked is not clear (Chapman, The Female Gaze, 2018, pp. 70, 68). Very few women artists presented themselves in their actual working clothes, not wishing to show themselves in spattered, "dirty" garments (Chapman, Eighteenth-Century Women Artists 70). In both paintings (Self-Portrait and Studio Scene), Labille-Guiard and Capet depict themselves finely attired - but a large white cloth protects their dresses. Capet also wears a white *camisole* and a *collarette* (Ribeiro, The Art of Dress 123). Although such a ruff was fashionable at the time, it was constrictive and unlikely to have been worn to paint. In Capet's Studio Scene, Labille-Guiard is shown wearing a "plain" white gown (Auricchio, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard 108), compared to Capet's fine fur-trimmed brown dress and rich blue shawl. However, Labille-Guiard's white empire-style gown was the height of bourgeois fashion - and her hair is swept away from her face by an elegant white and gold scarf (Rauser 13, 23). This dress, however fashionable, is simple and practical: Capet has portrayed Labille-Guiard as a "serious", "professional" artist (Auricchio, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard 108). By contrast, Capet herself is "not dressed for labour" (Auricchio, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard 108). She portrays herself in this particular gown and shawl in order to make a specific statement about her social status and class: she has become a bourgeois woman who mixes with the crème de la crème in society and artistic circles. Capet is also directly referencing Labille-Guiard's 1785 Self-Portrait. Here, the roles have been inversed. Capet is the finely-dressed

artist, holding a palette, looking straight at the viewer, standing out from the crowd, while demonstrating her artistic skill by having created the painting. Looking closely at Capet's clothes, the brushstrokes for the fur, for example, are minute, precise and very fine: the talents of a miniaturist.

Finally, in her 1785 *Self-Portrait*, Labille-Guiard displays not only her skill as a painter, but also "her own physical attractions." (Chapman, Eighteenth-Century Women Artists 123). In her *Studio Scene*, at forty-seven years old, in 1808, Capet has chosen not to stress her own womanliness. She presents herself as good-looking, but respectful and demure, with no *décolleté*: simply a charming "hostess" (Auricchio, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard 108), welcoming the viewer into the scene. Indeed, Capet's personal choices are clear: she chose never to marry or have children. She chose her career over the traditional domestic path, devoting her life to art and to her two parental figures: Labille-Guiard and Vincent. The same is true of Capet's intentions in *Studio Scene*, which represents a major statement in support of women's equal rights and a message to all women of her time and to future generations, encouraging them to take their rightful place in the world of culture, as professional artists, or in other spheres, like Rose-Célèste Bache.

4.2 Rose-Célèste Bache, Capet and Vien's drawing

Capet has been selective about whom she has included in her *Studio* Scene. For example, only certain of Vincent's students are depicted, thereby gaining in prestige. The inclusion of Rose-Célèste Bache is also significant, chosen for herself, not merely in homage to Vien and his family. She plays an important role, pointing at Vien's drawing, attracting attention to herself and to her husband. For Gaehtgens, this pretty young woman is impressed that such an elderly artist (Vien was ninety-two in 1808) is still actively producing work (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 210). But Rose-Céleste Bache was far more than a conventional domesticated beauty: she was a highly educated woman, who wrote poems and translated works from Latin and Greek into French (Feret 18). Capet specifically chose to include her, perhaps as a way of showing that all educated women could enter male-dominated sectors of society, have a voice and an opinion. Rosenburg and Gaehtgens state that

the drawing toward which Bache is gesturing is that of Vien's *Andromaque en pleurs montrant à son fils les armes d'Hector* (Rosenburg 320; Gaehtgens and Lugand, Joseph-Marie Vien 50).⁴³

Rose-Célèste Bache was also a Mother.⁴⁴ Although her son is not shown in Capet's painting, it is no coincidence that she is pointing to a drawing of a famous Mother of Antiquity, Andromache, with her son Astyanax. Thus, Capet emphasises that a woman can be a virtuous Mother and loyal wife, yet also the intellectual equal of men. Vincent, Capet's friend and mentor, had been Vien's student, and Labille-Guiard had known him since at least 1782. Therefore, Capet would also have known Vien well, and would likely have been shown his 1807 drawing of *Andromaque* - just at the time when she was painting *Studio Scene* for the *Salon* of 1808. This again emphasises to what degree Capet was part of this eminent contemporary artistic community, and further legitimises her role as an active working artist in Paris.



Figure 18: Detail of Joseph-Marie Vien's drawing in *Studio Scene*



Figure 17: Joseph-Marie Vien, Andromache in tears, showing Hector's weapons to her son (Andromaque en pleurs, montrant à son fils les arms d'Hector), 1807, Private Collection, Paris - (black and white photo of the work from Gaehtgens and Lugand, Joseph-Marie Vien, 1988, N. 285 - size and media unknown)

⁴³ "Andromache in tears showing Hector's weapons to her son" is now part of a private collection in Paris, according to Gaetghens's catalogue raisonné of Vien's life and work. In fact, Vien executed two versions (both studies most likely) of this scene, one dating from 1794 and one from 1807 (Figure 18/Figure 17).
⁴⁴ Her son is depicted in the family portrait by Vien fils exhibited at the Salon in 1808.

4.3 Gazes: vision, visibility and the power of the viewer

Capet's painting also demonstrates other important choices: not commissioned by a patron, the conception was exclusive to the artist herself (Cuzin 280). While many women artists did depict themselves holding a palette, in front of a canvas, looking at the viewer, images showing women artists actually at work in a crowded studio are extremely uncommon (Chapman, Eighteenth-Century Women Artists 62).



Figure 19: Tracing of Gazes in Studio Scene

Vision and visibility are central to this "conversation piece", and the different gazes present in the scene play a significant role (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 216; Wettlaufer 11) (Figure 19). Yet in fact, no gazes actually meet. Adélaïde Labille-Guiard looks straight at her model's face, although holding her paintbrush lower. Her sitter Vien's diagonal gaze reaches across the room, at first glance seeming to encompass both Labille-Guiard and Capet. However, on closer examination, Vien's gaze seems in fact to pass beyond Labille-Guiard, almost through her, to Capet - from the past to the present. Needless to say, Labille-Guiard (dead five years by 1808) wears only white, giving her a discretely spectral air. Only the gaze of an eminent living artist can reach the talent of the younger, living painter of the scene, Capet. Nine gazes are focused on the left side of the scene. Five individuals in the left-hand group study Labille-Guiard's portrait, concealed from the viewer. Their gazes converge where Vien's head would be positioned on the canvas. The face is the most challenging part of a portrait and, if done well, truly displays the talent of the artist. The younger Vien and Labille-Guiard alone look straight at Vien: the artist who is immortalising him on canvas, and his son, who will continue his line.

Capet's gaze is singular and potent, directly meeting the viewer's own gaze, and thus indirectly removing her from the activity within the scene. Her body is partially turned away from the other figures to enable her to look straight at the viewer. Significantly, the equally powerful gaze of the viewer encompasses everyone. The viewer can observe the figures in the scene without being seen by them; only Capet gazes at the viewer. Her gaze alone directly links the viewer to this moment, inviting him/her into the scene, as another guest in the studio. Thus, Capet plays with the private/public dichotomy, including the public viewer in this private scene, offering him/her a privileged role.

Furthermore, for Gaehtgens and Wettlaufer, this public yet intimate scene demonstrates an "artist's genealogy", representing three generations (Wettlaufer 43). The esteemed painter Vien, the "progenitor", taught the eminent Vincent; he in turn taught the famous Labille-Guiard, who taught Capet, painter of the scene. ⁴⁵ Vien was also his son's teacher, and all the other younger male artists are Vincent's students (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 216). Rosenburg argues that, through her *Studio Scene*, Capet was seeking to promote a studio and school which was not that of David (Rosenburg 320), proposing a different artistic school: the "Vien-Vincent-Labille-Guiard School" (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 216).

By showing the lack of connection between the younger men, whose gazes never meet, Capet displays her awareness of their search for a new post-revolutionary artistic identity, in a world where the art market too had changed (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 218; Doy 45). In post-Revolutionary Paris, within a community of artists in the process of redefining itself, she is advocating solidarity "between artistic generations", but also, within a community of men and women artists

⁴⁵ "Stammvater" (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 216)

(Wettlaufer 45). Since all the individuals in this painting, except Labille-Guiard, were alive in 1808, they would all have seen the painting at the *Salon*. Capet's temporal conundrum would have sparked their interest, and that of the general public. Capet's gaze encompasses in particular these privileged viewers, though not identified in the painting as being artists, appearing simply as 'citizens', spectators.⁴⁶ Capet's fictitious scene demonstrates how women (artists) were constantly watched - and judged - by their male counterparts (Jensen, The Journal des Dames 37). In *Studio Scene*, the five direct witnesses to Labille-Guiard's creative powers are all men. They affirm Labille-Guiard's talent, while the viewer sees both Labille-Guiard's past ability and the contemporary talent of her former student, Capet.

Public opinion determines whether an artist has talent, and the fact that this painting was wellreceived by public and critics alike legitimises the strong and unusual female gazes at work within it. In *Studio Scene*, Capet pays homage to her past and to her deceased teacher, but also inserts herself into a group of influential living Parisian artists, as a valid member of this bourgeois post-revolutionary artistic society. Capet further achieved something truly extraordinary with her painting: she transformed the illustrious Vien into a passive object of contemplation for the active gaze of two women artists (Wettlaufer 45). Thus, *Studio Scene* expresses a strong message of female emancipation by an active, modern, professional artist.

⁴⁶ "Bürger" (Gaehtgens, Eine gemalte Künstlergenealogie 216).

5 Marie-Gabrielle Capet's Legacy

In January 1809, Capet presumably collected her painting from the Louvre (Journal de Paris 76)⁴⁷ and took it back to the home which she shared with Vincent, keeping it until her death in 1818 (Passez 312-313). She left *Studio Scene* to a Mr. Boivin, her executor, whose family discretely owned the painting for over 170 years.⁴⁸

Capet's *Studio Scene* is a landmark in Art History. Far from embodying a vision of female oppression, it declares that educated women were visible, had an active voice, and could become accepted professional artists, demonstrating their talent to the world at exhibitions like the *Salon*. Capet is not condemning male artists, but conveying a diplomatic message of gratitude, publicly acknowledging Vincent's and Vien's importance in her journey to becoming a professional artist. Far from denying the influence of male artists on her female mentor, Capet emphasises her artistic heritage, linking herself through Labille-Guiard to Vincent and Vien; Capet's family, in essence (Auricchio, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard 107).

Capet's life and works deserve to be thoroughly researched and brought out of the shadows in a modern monograph, biography and catalogue raisonné. This artist has left an important legacy to future generations, strikingly relevant to today's viewer. Indeed, in today's western society, Capet's painting can be seen as a very early precursor to movements like HeForShe, which is described as "[...] an invitation for men and people of all genders to stand in solidarity with women to create a bold, visible and united force for gender equality." (HeForShe)

In 1808, although women artists still had far to go to gain rights equal to those of their male counterparts, artists like Vincent and Vien did in fact openly support women artists, like Capet. Capet documents this fact and leaves a powerful legacy: one which does not show the image of an oppressed woman, but which accentuates the fact that, despite all odds, a woman like Capet, the daughter of two servants, fought her way to the top of the French artistic elite, helped by women and by men equally.

⁴⁷ The *Journal de Paris* published an article asking all artists to collect their exhibits from the Louvre in January 1809 ((Journal de Paris).

⁴⁸ Rosenburg quotes a "M. B[oisson]" (p.320), but Capet's inventory after her death as well as Vincent's Will indicate their executor to be a "Me. Boivin, avoué" (i.e. a lawyer) (*Inventaire après le décès de Mademoiselle Capet* (1818).) (Passez 312-313)

[&]quot;Testament olographe de François-André Vincent".[22nd May 1816] (Passez 310-311).

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7 Appendix

List of names of figures in Capet's 1808 *Studio Scene* according to numbering in Figure 4

- 1. Marie-Gabrielle Capet (1761-1818) : 47 in 1808.
- 2. Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749-1803): she was 54 when she died and would have been 59 in 1808.
- 3. François-André Vincent (1746-1816) : 62 in 1808.
- 4. Joseph-Marie Vien (1716-1809) : 92 in 1808.
- 5. Rose-Célèste Bache (comtesse Vien) (1774-1843) : 34 in 1808.
- 6. Joseph-Marie Vien Fils (1761-1848) : 47 in 1808.
- 7. François-Edouard Picot (1786-1868) : 22 in 1808.
- 8. Charles Meynier (1768-1832) : 40 in 1808.
- 9. Charles Thevenin (1764-1838) : 44 in 1808.
- 10. Joseph-François Léonor Mérimée (1757-1836) : 51 in 1808.
- 11. Jean-Joseph Éléonore Antoine Ansiaux (1764-1840) : 44 in 1808.
- 12. Louis-Vincent-Léon Pallière (1787-1820) : 21 in 1808.
- 13. Etienne Pallière (1761-1820) : 47 in 1808 (Louis-Vincent-Léon's Father).
- 14. Jean Alaux (1786-1864) : 22 in 1808.
- 15. Jacques-Augustin-Catherine Pajou (1766-1828) : 42 in 1808.