

from the **Memoirs of Madame Vigée-Lebrun**

by **Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun**

SETTING THE STAGE Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun was a gifted artist who painted portraits of the French nobility. In her memoirs she recalls events of her own life amidst the turmoil of the French Revolution, which began in 1789. She frequently painted Marie Antoinette, queen of France. Vigée-Lebrun became frightened by the increasingly aggressive harassment of the nobility by the revolutionaries and resolved to leave France. She and her daughter escaped at night by stagecoach.

PRIMARY SOURCE

I had my carriage loaded, and my passport ready, so that I might leave next day with my daughter and her governess, when a crowd of national guardsmen burst into my room with their muskets. Most of them were drunk and shabby, and had terrible faces. A few of them came up to me and told me in the coarsest language that I must not go, but that I must remain. I answered that since everybody had been called upon to enjoy his liberty, I intended to make use of mine. They would barely listen to me, and kept on repeating, “You will not go, citizeness; you will not go!” Finally they went away. I was plunged into a state of cruel anxiety when I saw two of them return. But they did not frighten me, although they belonged to the gang, so quickly did I recognize that they wished me no harm. “Madame,” said one of them, “we are your neighbors, and we have come to advise you to leave, and as soon as possible. You cannot live here; you are changed so much that we feel sorry for you. But do not go in your carriage: go in the stage-coach; it is much safer.” . . .

Opposite me in the coach was a very filthy man, who stunk like the plague, and told me quite simply that he had stolen watches and other things. . . . Not satisfied with relating his fine exploits to us, the thief talked incessantly of stringing up such and such people on lamp-posts, naming a number of my own acquaintances. My daughter thought this man very wicked. He frightened her, and this gave me the courage to say, “I beg you, sir, not to talk of killing before this child.”



▲ *Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat* by Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun

DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTIONS

1. What does Vigée-Lebrun do to escape the Reign of Terror in France?
2. What details does Vigée-Lebrun use to create a vivid picture of the national guardsmen? What impression of them does the author convey?
3. What concerns does Vigée-Lebrun reveal in her account of her escape from Paris?
4. As you read, how did you feel about the situation Vigée-Lebrun finds herself in?
5. What seem to be Vigée-Lebrun's feelings about the French Revolution?
6. Do you find Vigée-Lebrun a sympathetic person? Why or why not?