

Under the Shadow of Her Teacher: Marie-Gabrielle Capet in the Studio of Adélaïde Labille-Guiard

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In 1785, French artist Adélaïde Labille-Guiard painted her most famous work of art, *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils* (Figure 1). A splendid display of the talent and character of a female artist, this seven-foot tall portrait was the first large-scale, full-length self-portrait painted by a woman, and its unprecedented nature makes it especially noteworthy. The exquisitely detailed oil painting depicts the artist seated at her easel, brush and palette in hand, with two of her students eagerly leaning over her shoulder, fascinated by what the artist is painting. As this is the first portrait showing a woman artist with her students¹, this work makes an ambitious statement about Labille-Guiard, but it also introduces her two dearest students—Marie Marguerite Carreaux de Rosemond and Marie-Gabrielle Capet.



Figure 1. Labille-Guiard, Adélaïde. *Self-Portrait with Two Students*, 1785, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

As one of the most prominent female artists of the late 18th century, Labille-Guiard was an innovative portraitist who painted a unique and powerful image that was meaningful on numerous levels and intended to be admired and remembered for posterity. My interest, however, lies

with the young woman in brown standing behind the artist. Marie-Gabrielle Capet is seen here as the brunette dressed in a rich russet satin dress and tulle cap, engrossed in the creation of her teacher. She is embracing her friend and fellow student, but more importantly, her hand gently rests on the back of Labille-Guiard's chair, which subtly but purposefully draws an affectionate connection between the artist and the student.² It is telling that Capet is widely known by her representation in this portrait. She was featured here because she was special to Labille-Guiard; she was more than just a student. This artist-student relationship grew into a close friendship, approaching familial relation, and facilitated Capet's flourishing as an artist. As Capet lived and worked in the studio of Labille-Guiard for the majority of her life, the relationship they established informed Capet's artistic practice and reputation. Capet worked under the shadow of her teacher and never fully set out on her own as an independent artist, but she was nevertheless a talented artist in her own right who has been overshadowed, both then and now, by her teacher.

Working as a female artist in eighteenth-century France was an extremely difficult and unconventional thing to do. The Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, the primary arts institution in France, held the power and influence over French art at this time and made it difficult for women to function as skilled and independent professional artists. Restrictions were enforced on the training and participation of women in the Academy; acceptance was limited to four women at a time. Despite this, quite a few women did manage to practice as professional artists in the eighteenth century, and Capet was one of these. Women sought out other resources to receive artistic training and display their talent, such as studying in the studios of recognized artists and receiving private commissions from wealthy patrons. Women were also able to exhibit work at the Académie de Saint Luc, Salon de la Correspondance, and Exposition de la Jeunesse—all options for painters of both sexes who did not have access to the Royal Academy. As women were not allowed to study in the Academy, the importance of studios such as Labille-Guiard's where women could train and become practicing artists was monumental. Labille-Guiard taught many young female artists and cared for them as a mother would, but she felt a limitless admiration for Capet, who quickly became a favorite to the artist.

Born in Lyon in 1761 to a modest family, Marie-Gabrielle Capet was a distinguished artist in her own time, but now nearly forgotten.³ In her youth, she may have

attended a free and public drawing school in Lyon⁴, but her career commenced upon her arrival in Paris in 1781, where she began working with Labille-Guiard, under whose tutelage Capet had a very successful career in her own right, even if she is not well known now. Capet is really only mentioned in art history books today because of her appearance in Labille-Guiard's *Self-Portrait with Two Students*, but this mention is never more than a few brief sentences about her status as a student of Labille-Guiard. If it were not for Labille-Guiard's painting, Capet's name would be remembered even less than that of women like her teacher, who was famous in her time, and who has only begun to attract scholarly attention in recent years. A talented artist deserving of her own attention, Capet was a skilled portraitist, with her primary talent being the production of miniatures, but she also worked in pastel and oil paint. Over her long career, Capet painted hundreds of works, most being portraits of members of Parisian society as well as self-portraits; she exhibited at the Salon for nearly twenty years; and she repeatedly demonstrated her ability to paint with strength and virtuosity.

At the age of twenty, Capet made her first appearance at the Exposition de la Jeunesse where she was praised for her ability to display truthfulness and emotion in her "trois crayons tête d'expression," or "expressive head in three colors."⁵ Joining "les Demoiselles," the nine female students of Labille-Guiard, Capet again exhibited artwork at the 1783 Exposition de la Jeunesse.⁶ Here she displayed her first *Self-Portrait* (Figure 2), where, as opposed to being the young observer in Labille-Guiard's *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils*, Capet appears with greater confidence and expresses her feminine beauty and artistic talent in her eloquent rendering of colors, textures, and emotion. Most importantly, she makes a statement with this vivid portrait about her ambition to become an outstanding pupil of Labille-Guiard.⁷ At the Exposition de la Jeunesse, critics commended Capet above her fellow students for her contributions.

With the coming of the French Revolution, visibility of female artists increased. The Salon opened more spaces for women, and alongside the additional opportunities at the Académie de Saint Luc, Salon de la Correspondance, and the Exposition de la Jeunesse, women were able to exhibit more work than ever.⁸ Two categories of artists stood out as especially ambitious during the post-revolutionary time period: female artists and miniaturists.⁹ As Capet fit both of these categories—she was considered one of the best French miniaturists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—one may assume that she was able to attain increased visibility. The artist achieved prominence in her time, yet her reputation has been lost through the course of history. Despite the increased visibility of women, art history has been written as though a limit has been placed on the number of female artists worthy of regard. In spite of Capet's great skill, her recognition has

been overshadowed by her brilliant teacher Adélaïde Labille-Guiard.



Figure 2. Capet, Marie-Gabrielle. *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1783, oil on canvas, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo.

At the beginning of her career in the studio of Labille-Guiard, Capet became an essential part of the work of her teacher. One of the roles that the young artist quickly embraced was that of serving as a model for her teacher's figure studies. This artist-model relationship was dynamic—as Capet was primarily a portraitist, she completed portraits of her teacher as well. Around the year 1798, the artist painted a miniature *Portrait de Mme Labille-Guiard*, depicting the artist seated with poise and elegance, dressed in a blue silk dress, tulle scarf, and feathered hat. Portraits such as these, conducted in the privacy of the artist's studio, emphasize the close and personal relationship maintained by these artists and record the *amitié* of painter for sitter, which was especially evident when painters showed portraits of their teachers.¹⁰

Collaboration in the studio consisted of more than serving as models for one another; it also meant creating artwork together. It is likely that as a student, Capet assisted Labille-Guiard in finishing her works or executing certain sections. The artist came to be more than solely an assistant, continually creating her own works while still under Labille-Guiard's roof. An important part of Capet's artistic practice was producing miniature copies of oil paintings by Labille-Guiard. Despite Capet's talent as a portraitist in oil paint, as demonstrated by her ravishing *Self-Portrait* of 1783, her tendency to create these miniature versions of her teacher's work is a notable way that being in Labille-Guiard's studio impacted Capet's

work and career. For example, in 1787 Capet painted *Françoise de Châlus* (1734-1821), *duchesse de Narbonne-Lara* (Figure 3) after Labille-Guiard's *Portrait de la duchesse de Narbonne-Lara*. As demonstrated in this image, Capet was learning how to imitate the work of her teacher in the same style, although in a different medium, as the model is seated in the same three-quarter pose, sporting an identical attire and hairstyle. Based on the number of these similar occurrences, it can be argued that this technique was essential to Capet's work and methods of production, rather than solely a means of practice and learning.



Figure 3. Capet, Marie-Gabrielle. *Françoise de Châlus* (1734-1821), *duchesse de Narbonne-Lara*, 1787-1788, watercolor on ivory, Tansey Miniatures Foundation.

Thanks to Labille-Guiard, Capet also attained some commissions for portraits. Labille-Guiard opened the doors to a prestigious clientele, and Capet found the opportunity to complete portraits for members of the royal family. When Labille-Guiard was commissioned to paint the portraits of the aunts of King Louis XVI in 1785, Capet joined her and portrayed Madame Adelaide and Madame Victoire in profile drawings and miniatures.¹¹ The young artist was also fortunate to be able to accompany her teacher on professional travels to produce artwork. It is evident that Capet's oeuvre was incredibly influenced by her mentor, as throughout a large portion of her career she was primarily emulating the work of her teacher as well as independently painting portraits of eminent patrons brought to her by Labille-Guiard.

Nevertheless, Capet did prove that she possessed the ability to flourish independently as well. In 1790, Marie-Gabrielle Capet produced a captivating *Self-Portrait* (Figure 4) drawn "en trois crayons" that upholds a customary portrait format but is unique in its informality of style. This is one of multiple self-portraits created through the course of the artist's career, but it is especially

significant as a more personal portrait of the artist at work than her previous self-portraits, and it represents a culmination of the drawing talents learned under the guidance of her teacher.¹² Capet is seen in this image dressed in a simple black gown, seated on a wooden chair in an ambiguous studio setting, leaning on the large portfolio of drawings resting on her knees, and touching her pen to the paper as she turns to address the viewer.¹³ The beauty of Capet's sincere expression, slight smile, and comfortable posture suggests that she has been caught in a moment of private work as opposed to posing for a portrait. Moreover, the bright and uniform lighting of Capet's drawing demonstrates her excellent talent and distinguishes her drawings from those by Labille-Guiard.¹⁴ With this unique portrait, Capet makes herself visible as an independent female artist displaying authenticity about who she is and her artistic process.



Figure 4. Capet, Marie-Gabrielle. *Self-Portrait*, 1790, pastel on paper, The Horvitz Collection, Boston.

In 1798, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard represented the talent of her close friend and student with *Portrait of Marie-Gabrielle Capet* (Figure 5). As one of Labille-Guiard's last known works, this portrait is a poignant portrayal of teacher and student identities.¹⁵ Capet is in the middle of painting a miniature portrait, which speaks to Labille-Guiard's acknowledgment of her student's mastery of the miniature technique. This portrait is somewhat unusual, however, as Capet is crowded into a tight space, bound by the chair she is sitting on, the desk before her, and the picture plane to her left. While Capet appears to be confined to a small space, the close proximity may have been a way for Labille-Guiard to display the intimacy of her student at work as well as their relationship. It is an unassuming portrait of a wise artist at an older age doing what she does best. This composition also emphasizes the

privacy that was attributed to miniature painting as a personal activity assumed by women.¹⁶ At this time, it was thought that women should be cautious of displaying themselves in public, and it is within this context that Labille-Guiard exhibits this portrait of her student, celebrating her talent as a miniaturist yet protecting and confining her to their studio.



Figure 5. Labille-Guiard, Adélaïde. *Portrait of Marie-Gabrielle Capet*, 1798, Wikimedia Commons.

These two artists worked side by side and created work with such similar technique that a description of Capet's work could just as easily represent the work of Labille-Guiard.¹⁷ Capet's *Self-Portrait* of 1784 epitomizes this, as it resembles the pastel self-portrait that Labille-Guiard exhibited at the Salon de la Correspondance in 1782.¹⁸ Wearing an elegant dress, striped scarf tied across her chest, and wide-brimmed hat, Capet turns away from her canvas to face the viewer with determination and poise, with paintbrush in her right hand and palette resting on her left arm in the same way as Labille-Guiard in her self-portrait. Rather than seeking to differentiate herself from her teacher by altering the composition and stylistic details, Capet aims to define herself by using similar methods as those used by Labille-Guiard. Because of this, the portrait is more of an homage to her teacher, expressing Capet's desire to represent herself like her teacher as opposed to attempting to outdo her.¹⁹ As portraits were methods of representing the self, Capet's portraits and self-portraits merge to form a cohesive image of the artist and allow the viewer to understand her life, practice, and aspirations.²⁰

Marie-Gabrielle Capet lived with Adélaïde Labille-Guiard for the majority of her life, moving with her from their first studio on Rue de Richelieu, to the Louvre, to the

National Institute, and constantly surrounding her with affectionate care.²¹ Capet ultimately aided Labille-Guiard through sickness at the end of her life until her death in 1803, always remaining devoted to the woman who assisted in developing Capet's career as a young artist.

Years after Labille-Guiard's death, Capet paid homage to her beloved teacher, showing that although Labille-Guiard was physically gone, Capet was never able to truly leave the side of her teacher. *The Atelier of Madame Vincent* of 1808 (Figure 6) was Capet's way of leaving one last legacy of her teacher's life.²² This painting is incredibly different from Capet's previous works, and it can even be considered the painting that earned her the title of history painter.²³ Illustrated here is not a traditional three-quarter portrait in pastel or miniature, rather it is a large-scale painting of a gathering in the studio of Labille-Guiard that occurred in the past and celebrates the artists pictured. One of the reasons this portrait is tremendously important is Capet's decision to embrace her role as assistant to Labille-Guiard, as in her depiction of her teacher and herself, she raises Labille-Guiard to the role of a professional and widely popular artist while contrasting herself as a fashionable, feminine observer and assistant. This portrait centers on praising her teacher rather than promoting herself as an artist, although in a sense she does promote her artistic skill as the maker of this painting. In essence, Capet accentuates the prominence of both Labille-Guiard, who is painting Joseph-Marie Vien and surrounded by visitors, and her husband François-André Vincent as he guides her, paying homage to these two influential individuals. As Capet embarks on a stylistically different composition and advances her skills with this painting, she still homes in on the importance that these two individuals held not only in the art world, but also in her life.



Figure 6. Capet, Marie-Gabrielle. *Atelier of Madame Vincent*, 1808, oil on canvas, Neue Pinakothek, Munich, Wikimedia Commons.

During this period after Labille-Guiard passed away, Capet remained living with Labille-Guiard's husband, François-André Vincent, and she continued to take care of

Labille-Guiard's home with dignity.²⁴ Capet considered Vincent a true adoptive father, and she remained with her "père" until his death in 1816.²⁵ After Vincent's death, Capet was forced to leave their shared apartment and live on her own for the first time. Living in solitude, Capet experienced mental and physical suffering and did not produce any more work.²⁶ Only living for a few more years on her own, Marie-Gabrielle Capet died in 1818 at the age of fifty-seven.

In sum, Capet was neither an amateur artist nor merely a studio assistant to Labille-Guiard. She completed a body of impressive artworks of her own and created a career for herself as an artist, taking professional commissions and exhibiting at salons. On top of exhibiting at the Salon de la Correspondance and the Exhibition de la Jeunesse, Capet was able to exhibit numerous pastels and miniatures at the official Salons of 1791 and 1795 after the doors of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture opened up to non-members. In analyzing the work that Capet created throughout her career, the portraits completed of her, and the relationships formed throughout her career, it becomes apparent that the amity and training from Labille-Guiard was invaluable to the person and artist that Capet became. This relationship is arguably the most influential aspect of her life, and she likely would not have achieved artistic success without it. Considering this, it is probable that Capet was content with living in the shadow of her teacher. Capet never showed any desire to compete with or outdo her teacher; in fact, she wanted to be defined in similar terms as Labille-Guiard and evoke her symbolic mother in her works.²⁷ Capet was indeed an artist in her own right, but she never embarked on a separate career of her own, and she remained in the comfort of the family she formed with Labille-Guiard and Vincent.

Marie-Gabrielle Capet played a more active role in her time as an artist than she has been granted through history, as is the case with most women artists. By exploring her life and her work, we gain insights about what the experience of becoming a woman artist was like for all unrecognized and underappreciated female artists at this time. Capet's gender, in addition to her secondary position under her teacher, contributed to the challenge of visibility that she faced. Most artists who worked beneath more prominent artists found it difficult to follow their esteemed teachers, achieve independent visibility, and surpass their talent and acclaim. Capet likewise faced difficulty in attaining visibility, but ultimately she established a career for herself as a talented portraitist and found a loving home in the studio of Adélaïde Labille-Guiard.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Melissa Hyde, « Peinte par elle-même? », 12.
- ² Christophe Marcheteau de Quinçay, “Marie-Gabrielle Capet,” 11.
- ³ Arnould Doria, *Gabrielle Capet*, 3.
- ⁴ Charlotte Foucher Zarmanian, “Review.”
- ⁵ Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of Pastellists*, 1.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Melissa Hyde, “Marie-Gabrielle Capet *Self-Portrait*.”
- ⁸ Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves*, 17.
- ⁹ Amy Freund, *Portraiture and Politics*, 26.
- ¹⁰ Tony Halliday, *Facing the Public*, 66.
- ¹¹ Delia Gaze, *Dictionary*, 345.
- ¹² Marcheteau de Quinçay, 59
- ¹³ Hyde, “Marie-Gabrielle Capet *Self-Portrait*.”
- ¹⁴ Jeffares, 1.
- ¹⁵ Laura Auricchio, *Adélaïde Labille-Guiard*, 104.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 14.
- ¹⁷ Anne-Marie Passez, *Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, 1749-1803*, 20.
- ¹⁸ Marcheteau de Quinçay, 14
- ¹⁹ Hyde, « Peinte par elle-même? », 13.
- ²⁰ Freund, 8.
- ²¹ Anne-Marie Passez, 280.
- ²² Auricchio, *Adélaïde Labille-Guiard*, 108.
- ²³ Gaze, 345.
- ²⁴ Doria, 34.
- ²⁵ Marcheteau de Quinçay, 28
- ²⁶ Doria, 43.
- ²⁷ Hyde, « Peinte par elle-même? », 13.