

## Stefania Biancani

### **The impossible portrait: Death in the Visual Story of Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun**

In the story of her *Souvenirs* (1835-1837) the old painter Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842), recalls the portraits of European aristocracy long journey to the outbreak of the French Revolution. Away from France, the painter thinks with anxiety the fate of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Clery, a servant of the king in the Temple prison, in a long letter urges her to do a painting that represents the last moments of the rulers. But the pain is too strong and Élisabeth abandons the plan. The refusal expressed by the artist on this occasion provides an opportunity to investigate the special relationship that the portrait shows towards the death. The years of Revolution and Terrorism coincide with particular increase of the representation of death in visual arts. The death of the sovereign is represented with dignity and without any compassion. This is the case of Jacques-Louis David, which he recorded by the contempt in the image of Marie Antoinette led to execution. For David, champion of the revolutionary motion, true martyrs are Marat or young Bara. This is how new iconography is formed: in reading secular history, the revolutionary hero's sacrifice takes the place of martyrdom of the saint. Seen as perpetrators or victims, the protagonists of the Revolution and the Terror are thus immortalized in the moment of death. The paintings, the funeral ceremonies with the display of bodies, the practice of the cast of the death-mask are increasingly frequent in those years. The guillotine is a true "portrait machine".

Faced with this proliferation of images of death Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun seems to withdraw. She is essentially a portrait painter and she describes humanity woven of faces, gestures and looks. Elisabeth describes the dead body of the Empress Catherine II of Russia, refusing to look at the face. The face of a dead person must not, in fact, remain in the memories of a portrait, because it no longer corresponds to what was in life. Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun left some descriptions and guidance in her *Souvenirs*: death lies and distorts the faces beyond recognition and it carries with it the true essence of people.

A portrait should represent its model in the most natural shape, with special regard to expression. The artist painted many portraits during her long career: portraits in action, caught almost by surprise, suspended while persons write, sing, enjoy, walk, smile ... This is precisely what a good portrait painter has to do - reveal the soul. The death may exist, but only as an anecdote: a portrait of death is simply impossible.