The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication

E-ISSN: 2146-5193

DOI: 10.7456/tojdac

Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

ANALYSIS OF MARIE ANTOINETTE'S COSTUMES IN ÉLISABETH VIGÉE LE BRUN 'S PORTRAITS USING THE PANOFSKY METHOD

ÉLISABETH VIGÉE LE BRUN'UN PORTRELERİNDE MARIE ANTOINETTE'İN KOSTÜMLERİNİN PANOFSKY YÖNTEMİ İLE ANALİZİ

Mücella ÖZKAN[1]

ORCID: M.O. 0000-0002-4824-4325

Corresponding author/Sorumlu yazar:
[1] Mücella Özkan
Selçuk University, Türkiye
E-mail/E-posta: ozkanmucella@selcuk.edu.tr

Received/Geliş tarihi: 06.01.2026

Benzerlik Oranı/Similarity Ratio: %10

Revision Requested/Revizyon talebi: 07.02.2026

Last revision received/Son revizyon teslimi: 23.02.2026

Accepted/Kabul tarihi: 27.03.2026

Etik Kurul İzni/ Ethics Committee Permission: There is no element in the study that requires ethics committee approval. / Çalışmada etik kurul onayı gerektiren bir unsur bulunmamaktadır.

Citation/Atıf: Özkan, M. (2026). Analysis Of Marie Antoinette's Costumes In Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun 'S Portraits Using The Panofsky Method. The Turkish Online Journal of Design Art and Communication, 16 (2), 874-889. https://doi.org/10.7456/tojdac.1857190

Abstract
This study examines the costumes depicted in the portraits of Marie Antoinette, a central figure in the political and cultural life of eighteenth-century France, focusing on how these garments reflect court aesthetics and representations of women. The portraits were painted by Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, the royal court painter and one of the most prominent female artists of the period. Data were collected through document analysis. As original costume samples were inaccessible, the study relied on high-resolution images and academic sources, which were examined using descriptive analysis. The artworks were interpreted through Erwin Panofsky's three-stage method: pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation. Within this framework, three portraits by Vigée Le Brun from the Louvre and Versailles collections were analyzed. In the first stage, the costumes were described in detail with regard to color, fabric, form, and accessories. The second stage focused on the social classes represented, their connection to court fashion, and the dominant clothing practices of the period. In the third stage, the costumes were interpreted in relation to the visual representation of absolute monarchy in late eighteenth-century France, aristocratic lifestyle, the construction of female identity, and symbolic expressions of class distinction as conveyed through art. The findings demonstrate that the costumes portrayed in Marie Antoinette's portraits function as powerful representational instruments. Rather than serving solely as indicators of personal taste, they reflect broader political, social, and cultural discourses of the period and contribute to the visual construction of power, status, and femininity.

Keywords: Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, Marie Antoinette, Costume, Fashion History, Panofsky.

Öz
Bu çalışma, 18. yüzyıl Fransa'sının siyasi ve kültürel yaşamının merkezi figürü olan Marie Antoinette'in portrelerinde tasvir edilen kostümleri inceleyerek, bu giysilerin saray estetiğini ve kadınların temsilini nasıl yansıttığına odaklanmaktadır. Portreler, kraliyet saray ressamı ve dönemin en önde gelen kadın sanatçılarından biri olan Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun tarafından yapılmıştır. Veriler belge analizi yoluyla toplanmıştır. Orijinal kostüm örneklerine erişilemediği için, çalışma yüksek çözünürlüklü görüntüler ve akademik kaynaklara dayanmış ve bunlar betimsel analiz kullanılarak incelenmiştir. Eserler, Erwin Panofsky'nin üç aşamalı yöntemi ile yorumlanmıştır: ikonografik öncesi betimleme, ikonografik analiz ve ikonolojik yorumlama. Bu çerçeve içinde, Louvre ve Versailles koleksiyonlarında bulunan Vigée Le Brun'un üç portresi analiz edilmiştir. İlk aşamada kostümler renk, kumaş, form ve aksesuarlar açısından ayrıntılı olarak tanımlanmıştır. İkinci aşamada temsil edilen sosyal sınıflar, bunların saray modasıyla bağlantıları ve dönemin baskın giyim uygulamaları üzerinde durulmuştur. Üçüncü aşamada kostümler, 18. yüzyıl sonlarında Fransa'da mutlak monarşinin görsel temsili, aristokrat yaşam tarzı, kadın kimliğinin inşası ve sanat aracılığıyla aktarılan sınıf ayrımının sembolik ifadeleri ile ilişkili olarak yorumlanmıştır. Bulgular, Marie Antoinette'in portrelerinde tasvir edilen kostümlerin güçlü temsil araçları olarak işlev gördüğünü göstermektedir. Kostümler, yalnızca kişisel zevkin göstergesi olmakla kalmayıp, dönemin daha geniş siyasi, sosyal ve kültürel söylemlerini yansıtmakta ve iktidar, statü ve kadınlığın görsel inşasına katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, Marie Antoinette, Kostüm, Moda Tarihi, Panofsky.

INTRODUCTION

Absolute monarchy, which emerged in Europe in the late sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth century, reached its strongest and most classical form in France during the reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715). During the period of Louis XIV, bureaucratic structures in Versailles and governors acting as representatives of royal authority became more powerful in relation to traditional municipal authorities or the power of large families in the provinces. The taming of the nobility through court ceremonial practices and their exemption from military power or incorporation into state administration also took place during his reign. For this reason, absolute monarchy signifies the victory of centralized authority over the traditional powers of seigneurs and local communities (Furet, 1989, s. 73). By the mid-eighteenth century, the capital of the bourgeoisie had reached much larger proportions. It is known that the main reason for this development was the transfer of land from the nobility, who had entered a period of economic difficulty, to the bourgeoisie. This process in France resulted in the wealth of one social class and the enrichment of the other between two different classes (Bloch, 1989, s. 952). Toward the end of the eighteenth century, particularly between the 1760s and 1780s, after consolidating its economic power, the creative thought of the Enlightenment combined with the power of production and scientific knowledge, leading to a weakening of the power of the French aristocracy derived from history and land (Lefebvre, 2015, s. 48). This process constituted part of the socio-economic and cultural transformations that took place prior to the French Revolution of 1789. The French Revolution, which began in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, played a highly significant role in the evaluation of the events of the eighteenth century. According to those who argue that defining French society as still feudal is misleading, the prevailing view is that the French Revolution was essentially not an anti-feudal uprising, but rather the result of libertarian and anti-despotic demands directed against absolute monarchy (Wallerstein, 2011, s. 39).

The eighteenth century can be defined not only as one of the most magnificent periods of absolute monarchies in Europe, but also as a period in which representational arts and fashion were closely intertwined with the political system. During this period, France in particular sought to legitimize the splendor, display of power, and social hierarchy of the aristocracy through visual arts. Court life became not merely a form of governance, but also a stage upon which an aesthetic understanding, a lifestyle, and social identity were shaped. One of the most striking figures on this stage was the Austrian-born French queen Marie Antoinette.

Marie Antoinette is regarded as a central figure in the visual culture and fashion representation of the period. Within the magnificent atmosphere of court culture, she existed as a figure who was both admired and criticized through her style of dress and overall appearance. The garments she wore and the manner in which these garments were presented through portraits visually represented not only her personal style, but also female identity, social class differences, and political authority. The identity she constructed through her clothing also reflected the tense relationships between the people and the aristocracy. It is considered that Marie Antoinette and the costumes through which she was represented constitute an important point of reference not only for a historical period, but also for the examination of representational approaches in contemporary visual culture and fashion history. In this respect, the population of the study consists of all portraits of Marie Antoinette painted by the female artist Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun in late eighteenth-century France. The sample of the study consists of three oil paintings produced by Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (*Marie Antoinette en Chemise*, 1783; *Marie Antoinette with the Rose*, 1783; *Marie Antoinette and Her Children*, 1787). The costumes worn by Marie Antoinette in these portraits were analyzed in depth using Panofsky's iconological analysis method. As a result of the study, it was revealed that the costumes depicted in Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun's portraits of Marie Antoinette, painted between 1778 and 1789 and portraying the queen in different garments and different sizes, are not merely aesthetic elements, but also carry powerful symbols that reflect the political, social, and cultural discourses of the period.

This study aims to examine the aesthetic, ideological, and cultural meanings of the costumes featured in Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun's portraits of Marie Antoinette in late 18th-century France. Due to the lack of sampling and physical access to the costumes, document analysis, a qualitative research method, was used in the study; data sources consisted of art history literature, academic publications, museum

catalogs, and high-resolution images from the online collections of the Louvre and Versailles museums. The sample of the study consists of three oil paintings: Marie Antoinette en Chemise (1783), Marie Antoinette with the Rose (1783), and Marie Antoinette and Her Children (1787). Erwin Panofsky's three-stage iconographic and iconological analysis method was adopted in the analysis of the costumes; within this scope, the garments were evaluated in terms of their formal characteristics, symbolic meanings, and relationships with the socio-cultural structure of the period and interpreted in the context of female identity, royal representation, and ideological discourses.

THE LIFE OF MARIE ANTOINETTE

Marie Antoinette (1755–1793) was born in Vienna as the daughter of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria and Holy Roman Emperor Francis I. Within the framework of the diplomatic alliance established by the Habsburg monarchy with France, she was married to Louis Auguste, the Dauphin of France. This marriage affected the political balance of power in eighteenth-century Europe and was carried out with the aim of ending the centuries-long hostility between the two dynasties. When she arrived in France in 1770, Marie Antoinette symbolically shed her Austrian identity and began her new life by adapting to French culture (Duggins, 2011, s. 6). However, despite ascending the throne at a young age, her legitimacy in the eyes of the public was damaged due to her indifference to court protocols and state affairs, her inability to bear children, and her extravagant lifestyle. Being referred to as "Madame Deficit" symbolized the gap between her aristocratic way of life and the economic hardships of the French people (Rigas, 2013).

Ascending the throne together with King Louis XVI in 1774, Marie Antoinette, as a member of the royal family, was subjected to intense public criticism, particularly due to the luxurious and ostentatious lifestyle maintained at the Palace of Versailles. The Petit Trianon and the artificial village she established there became one of the symbolic examples of this criticism. At the same time, her personal relationships, especially her ties with the Swedish Count Axel von Fersen, became the focus of gossip and political speculation. The French Revolution of 1789, which began as a result of the economic crisis, social inequality, and the spread of Enlightenment ideas in France, rendered Marie Antoinette's position even more fragile (Duggins, 2011, s. 6). During the revolutionary process that began with the storming of the Bastille, the royal family was forcibly brought from Versailles to Paris and placed under surveillance at the Tuileries Palace. The unsuccessful escape attempt she undertook with her family in 1791 (the Flight to Varennes) caused the public to completely lose confidence in the monarchy (Jones, 2025).

Following the abolition of the monarchy and the proclamation of the republic in 1792, Marie Antoinette and her family were arrested and imprisoned in the Temple Prison. Louis XVI was found guilty of treason and executed in 1793; shortly after this event, Marie Antoinette, in the letters she wrote in her final hours to her sister-in-law Madame Élisabeth and to her children, expressed her love for them and her deep sorrow. She refused breakfast and said, "Everything is over for me." Dressed in a white gown, with her hair cut and her hands bound, according to Fraser, she asked the executioner to untie her hands, and after resting briefly, she was taken to the guillotine at eleven o'clock in an open cart. While her husband had been transported in a closed carriage, she herself was taken to the guillotine in an open cart, exposed to the public (Fraser, 2002, s. 436). Marie Antoinette's tragic end can be considered not only the life story of an individual, but also a reflection of the collapse of absolute monarchy, the disappearance of the symbols of the Ancien Régime, and the reflection of the impact of the French Revolution on collective memory. Her life may be regarded as a historical example that offers important clues regarding class conflicts of the period, the position of women in politics, and the transformation of monarchy. Marie Antoinette's wearing of garments associated with women of lower social status was not foreign to her character; rather, she frequently created new fashions by drawing inspiration from the styles of the lower classes. As Caroline Weber has noted, the queen had previously borrowed hairstyles from Parisian actresses and prostitutes (in eighteenth-century France, the term "actress" was almost synonymous with "prostitute," and women of both professions frequently visited the Palais Royal together with the Queen) (Weber, 2006, s. 28). Marie Antoinette observed that, unlike hats, cockades (large ribboned rosettes tucked into hats or pinned to garments), and trousers, the chemise gained wide acceptance. Revolutionaries, artists, and the aristocracy adopted this garment. According to historian

Caroline Weber, the queen not only wore the chemise but was also its true creator. In the late 1770s, these white dresses, which she designed with her dressmaker Rose Bertin at the Petit Trianon to be worn without paniers, were created with inspiration drawn from the clothing styles of women living in the French colonial territories (Weber, 2006, s. 150).

Figure 1. Robes à la Creole. Chemise in Cabinet des Modes, February 15, 1786. (Lubrich, 2015, s. 280)

It gains meaning when linked to the political and social atmosphere of the period. The preference for light-colored, lightweight fabrics and loose-fitting garments over the heavy fabrics and rigid silhouettes characteristic of ostentatious court fashion signifies a conscious departure from monarchical splendor. This costume language can be interpreted as an ideological representation strategy that reimagines the queen's public image through simplicity and naturalness.

ELISABETH VIGÉE LE BRUN'S PORTRAITS OF MARIE ANTOINETTE

Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun was born in Paris in 1755 and began to develop her artistic talent at an early age with the encouragement of prominent painters of the period, such as Joseph Vernet. She emerged as an artist distinguished by a style that blended Rococo elegance with the order of Neoclassicism. By the late eighteenth century, she had gained great renown, particularly in the field of portraiture. Her appointment as the official portrait painter of Marie Antoinette in 1778 was regarded as a remarkable development within the male-dominated art world of the period. This appointment was crowned in 1783 by her admission to the Académie Royale through royal intervention. From 1788 onward, as the personal painter of Marie Antoinette, Vigée Le Brun served as a court painter until the end of the monarchy and quickly gained fame not only in France but throughout Europe as the leading male and female portrait painters of eighteenth-century court life (Nicholson, 2003). Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun's portrait *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* was considered inappropriate to such an extent that it caused a scandal at the Salon of 1783. The negative reaction to the portrait led to its removal shortly after the Salon opened. As the Queen of France was presented in a loose dress resembling an undergarment typically worn beneath clothing, the portrait was associated with her hosting an exclusive circle at the Petit Trianon, where she had withdrawn into seclusion. Such a sense of frivolity had disappeared with the decline of the Rococo style during the previous decade. Consequently, this portrait did not align with the moral aesthetic understanding adopted in the new Salon presentations of the period (Hall, 2014, s. 21). In response to these reactions, Vigée Le Brun quickly removed the painting and replaced it with *Marie Antoinette with the Rose*, depicting the queen in a blue-gray *robe à la française*, which was typical attire for a French aristocratic woman of the time, thereby substituting it with qualities that *"better displayed both her majesty and her Frenchness" (Weber, 2006, s. 163)*. In the subsequent portraits of Marie Antoinette painted by Vigée Le Brun, the queen was depicted in more formal poses, with particular attention given to restoring her damaged reputation. The 1787 portrait *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* is regarded as being more consistent with the traditional standards of royal family portraiture. In this work, Vigée Le Brun sought to emphasize Marie Antoinette's role as a mother, attempting to confer upon the queen a gentle and protective image. The date of the painting is indicative of Marie Antoinette's trust in and attachment to Vigée Le Brun; for the artist could have been dismissed following the severe criticism directed at the 1783 *en Chemise* portrait. However, Le Brun's retention of her position reveals both the

artistic success of this early portrait and the personal and strong nature of the relationship between the two women (Hall, 2014, s. 27).

The costumes, body language, and compositional arrangements seen in Vigée Le Brun's portraits of Marie Antoinette should be evaluated as a powerful representational strategy aimed at reconstructing the queen's public image. The simplification or return to court norms seen in the costumes points not only to the fashion sensibilities of the period but also to efforts to strengthen the legitimacy of the monarchy. The queen's posture, hand and arm movements, and the distant yet controlled gaze she establishes with the viewer produce a balanced representation between authority and emotional intimacy; while the spatial arrangement and placement of the figures visually reinforce the royal hierarchy and family ideology. In this respect, the costumes and body language in the portraits should be read as a conscious visual discourse that responds to the political and social expectations of the period, beyond being an aesthetic choice.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S CLOTHING

In eighteenth-century Europe, particularly in France, court life constituted the focal point of power, elegance, and entertainment. As a reaction against the dramatic and heavy atmosphere of the Baroque period, Rococo emerged during this era as an art movement that emphasized lightness and joy and exalted individual tastes. By accurately reflecting the visual splendor of the court environment and its emphasis on aesthetics, Rococo addressed themes of love and pleasure in a refined manner, while also contributing to the democratization of art by bringing it into everyday life and public spaces. Originating in France and spreading to various regions of Europe, this movement became a universal symbol of elegance that different cultures interpreted unique.

ly. By the late eighteenth century, France was the center of fashion, and the French aristocracy drew attention with excessively ornate garments. Women preferred tightly fitted bodices, dresses with lace collars, and large hats. High-quality fabrics such as Lyon silk reflected both social status and the positioning of women within the domestic sphere as decorative elements. While petticoats were worn beneath outer garments, the abdominal area was supported by rigid panels. The ball fashion dictated by the French court was widely imitated across Europe. Bone-supported corsets and sophisticated skirts were prominent. Draped mantles were also popular in English courts. Women's shoes were generally made of patterned silk, sometimes worn with leather overshoes for protection, and crystal buckles were used. In this century, the most fundamental garment shaping the body was the ***corset***. Corsets were complemented by narrow, straight, and sometimes U- or V-shaped décolletage (Tortora & Marcketti, 2021, s. 208-210)(see Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Corset. 1760 (https://www.metmuseum.org/)(20.05.2025).*

Panier: Especially during the Rococo period, the panier was designed in the form of hip pads or cage-like structures that supported the garment from the inside, allowing the skirt to expand toward the back and the sides in order to make the hips appear wider (Dereboy, 2012, s. 133)(see Figure3).

Figure 3. *Panier, 1760-1770. (https://www.metmuseum.org/)(20.05.2025).*

The chemise (undergarment), in which Marie Antoinette was also depicted, is an under-shirt generally made of linen or fine cotton fabric, worn in direct contact with the body, loose in structure, and with long sleeves (Dereboy, 2012, s. 132) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. *Chemise, 1793. (https://www.metmuseum.org/)(20.05.2025).*

Fichu: An accessory defined as a piece of tulle used to cover the neckline (Tortora & Marcketti, 2021, p. 568) (see Figure 5)**.**

Figure 5. *Fichu, 1751–1775. (https://www.metmuseum.org/)(20.05.2025).*

In the summer of 1780, one of Marie Antoinette's favorite garments for the Trianon was the white muslin dress known as the *gaulle*, which Bertin copied from the "Creole" women and colonial wives who were unable to dress in the heat of the Caribbean. This garment was placed over a hoop made of flexible fabric instead of whalebone and contained no structural elements other than a ruffled drawstring neckline, puffed sleeves fastened with "bracelets" at the rib bone, and a wide ribbon sash at the waist. Those who wore it sometimes completed the outfit with a coquettish white apron, sometimes with a white *fichu*, and almost always with a soft white cap or a wide-brimmed straw hat (Lasky, 2000, s. 61). When describing women's hairstyles and makeup in the eighteenth century, high wigs, powdered hair, artificial beauty marks, and exaggerated makeup can be identified as elements that indicated social status and became part of court aesthetics. The fabrics preferred in garments of the same period, such as silk, brocade, and taffeta, can be defined as reflections of ostentation and elegance within court fashion. During this period, pastel colors, delicate curves inspired by nature, floral motifs, lace embellishments, ribbons, and ruffles were widely used; light blue, powder pink, mint green, and gold tones formed the basis of visual expression. In contrast to the dramatic structure of the Baroque, Rococo developed an

approach focused on refinement, lightness, and ornamentation. In many fields such as architecture, painting, decorative arts, and clothing, nature-based asymmetrical forms, stage-like arrangements, and movement were encountered. Even symbolic and mystical themes were reshaped within a framework of love, entertainment, and light eroticism, moving away from serious narratives (Dağlı, 2025). In Rococo art, nature appears both as a background and as an active element; however, it is never realistic, but rather imaginary and exaggerated (Walsh, 2016, s. 106). While women preferred garments adorned with wide *panier* skirts, embroidered corsets, and ruffle and lace details, men achieved a similar splendor with embroidered silk jackets, ostentatious waistcoats, and heeled shoes. During this period, clothing ceased to be merely an indicator of taste and became a symbolic component of a staged lifestyle. The ornate and imaginative aesthetic of Rococo brought the splendor of the aristocracy and the emotional dimension of art to the forefront (Brighidin, 2012, s. 6).

In the eighteenth century, fashion reflected not only clothing but also conceptions of femininity and social roles. The female body was defined through visibility and shaped and controlled by fashion. In the case of Marie Antoinette, fashion functioned both as a symbol of power and as a space for individual expression and escape (Wei, 2024, s. 3). As the Palace of Versailles became the center of European fashion, fashion became not only an aesthetic phenomenon but also a political instrument. Royal women reflected their lifestyles through their modes of dress, and fashion visually revealed class differences. While privileged access to fashion reproduced class distinctions, social norms concerning the female body shaped the understanding of fashion (Behnke, 2016).

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, on the eve of the Revolution, the relationship between the French aristocracy and the people had deteriorated, and exaggeration was preferred in clothing choices. Bodices with rounded décolletage, surrounded by lace-trimmed necklines that closely framed the body, along with draped and padded skirts, were garments that brought the fashion of the period to the forefront. Hairstyles were extremely high and exaggerated, and hats were also quite large. The fact that women belonging to wealthy families wore only high-quality garments and preferred refined fabrics such as Lyon silk under French influence indicates that they were displayed almost like decorative elements both within the domestic sphere and in society (Fischel, Baggaley, & Gersh, 2013, s. 146).

With the French Revolution of 1789, this understanding underwent a radical transformation. Court fashion was rejected as a symbol of aristocratic privilege and corruption, and was replaced by simple and plain designs. While the Empire style inspired by Ancient Greek and Roman aesthetics came to the fore, fashion moved away from aristocratic aesthetics and was reshaped according to the ideal of republican simplicity (Lubrich, 2015, s. 281). The combination of English classicism with the elegant and magnificent style of Rococo resulted in simpler and straighter silhouettes in clothing. By favoring pastel tones and fine fabrics, feminine elegance was emphasized through floral and striped patterns. Blue became the most preferred color among aristocratic and bourgeois classes in the eighteenth century, while red carried meanings such as dynamism, passion, and revolution, drawing attention particularly with its bright tones toward the end of the century. The costumes of the period symbolized high social status through luxurious surface embellishments and created a clear distinction between the splendor of court life and the simple dress of the people. High hats adorned with feathers became fashionable for both men and women, while large shoe buckles that emerged in the 1770s and remained popular until the 1790s became an important component of attire. The fashion of this period, as a visible symbol of social status, clearly expressed the wearer's position through decorative details (Waugh, 1968, s. 75).

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

In this study, since neither the sample nor the costumes depicted in the portraits included in the sample could be accessed physically, the data were collected using the document analysis technique, one of the qualitative research methods. The primary data sources of the study consisted of art history books, national and international academic publications, museum catalogues, and high-resolution images made available through museums' online access platforms. The images were obtained from the virtual collections of the Louvre and Versailles museums, where the relevant artworks are held. All visual and written materials were used solely for academic analysis purposes and were evaluated in accordance with ethical principles.

The population of the study consists of all portraits of Marie Antoinette painted by the female artist Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun in late eighteenth-century France. The sample, on the other hand, consists of three oil paintings produced by Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun.

- *Marie Antoinette en Chemise* (1783),
- *Marie Antoinette with the Rose* (1783),
- *Marie Antoinette and Her Children* (1787).

The universe of this study consists of all portraits depicting Marie Antoinette by Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun. The sample of the study is limited to three portraits selected from this universe using a purposive sampling method. The selected works were chosen because they are examples where Marie Antoinette's public image was reconstructed through costume, where significant transformations in representation strategies can be observed, and where the production of political meaning can be clearly traced. The purposive sampling approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the historical, cultural, and ideological layers required by Panofsky's iconological analysis method, rather than aiming for quantitative generalization. In this context, the three selected portraits are evaluated as critical cases that reveal the symbolic, political, and cultural functions of costume rather than claiming to represent the universe numerically.

In the analysis of the costumes depicted in the portraits, the three-stage iconological analysis method developed by art historian Erwin Panofsky was adopted as the primary framework. This method was preferred because it allows for an understanding not only of visual elements, but also of the historical and intellectual structure to which the artwork belongs. Panofsky defines this method as iconographical and iconological art criticism. The process consists of the following three stages:

1. Pre-iconographical description: This stage encompasses the formal elements that are directly visible in the artwork. Panofsky divides this level into “factual” (objective) and “expressional” meanings (related to emotions, gestures, and facial expressions).
2. Iconographical Analysis: This is the level at which visual elements acquire historical, mythological, or religious meanings. It allows for the examination of symbols consciously incorporated by the artist.
3. Iconological Interpretation: This stage reveals the social, cultural, and intellectual structure of the period in which the artwork was created. At this level, the artwork is considered not merely as an object, but as a message (Panofsky, 2012, s. 29).

Within the framework of this three-stage approach, the garments depicted in the portraits were first described through elements such as color, texture, fabric type, form, cut, accessories, and hairstyle. Subsequently, in the second stage, these elements were analyzed in terms of their symbolic meanings, the social classes they represented, or the ideological messages they conveyed. In the third stage, the relationships of the garments with female identity, royal power, lifestyle, and the cultural structure of the period were examined. From this perspective, answers were sought not only to the question of “what” is shown in the costumes, but also to “why” and “how” it is shown.

The primary reason for choosing Panofsky's iconological approach in this study is that it allows for the analysis of costumes in portraits not only in terms of their formal characteristics but also in terms of the power relations and ideological layers of meaning they represent. Formal analysis approaches are limited to describing the color, silhouette, and placement of the costume within the composition, while iconographic analyses mostly settle for identifying symbols. In semiotic or structuralist readings, visual elements are considered within abstract networks of meaning, with the historical and social context remaining secondary. In contrast, the iconological approach offers the possibility of directly relating the costume to its historical context, social hierarchies, and political representation strategies, transforming the garment from a passive aesthetic element into an ideological vehicle of representation. In this respect, the method provides a more comprehensive and critical framework than other visual analysis techniques, particularly for analyzing the role of costume in royal portraits in relation to female identity, power, and the production of legitimacy.

***Marie Antoinette en Chemise* (1783)**

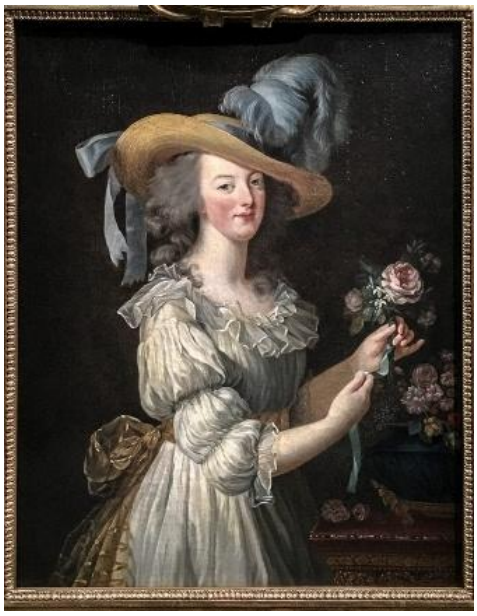

Figure 6. *Marie Antoinette en Chemise (1783) https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/ (20.05.2025).*

In the fashion of the period, the *chemise*, which carried a symbolic meaning as much as a functional one, became a subject of controversy particularly through Marie Antoinette's style known as *Chemise à la Reine*, which transferred undergarment aesthetics into outerwear. The depiction of the queen in a cotton and plain chemise dress was regarded as highly unusual and radical for the period. This demonstrates that the chemise was not merely an undergarment in the eighteenth century, but gradually became a gateway to the transformation of fashion and representation. The chemise was moving away from the vibrant colors, magnificent materials, abundant layers, corsets, and paniers of Rococo, as in France's absolutist past. Its whiteness was likened to the purity of a new cultural era. At the same time, it was also praised for technological innovations: a new blue-colored detergent made it possible to clean muslin while preventing silk from taking on the undesirable yellow hue (Waugh, 1968, s. 74).

***Pre-iconographical Description*:** The garment, presumed to be made of thin, light, and draped muslin fabric, draws attention with its semi-transparent structure. The dress, which is tightly gathered from the neckline and loose in form, is fastened at the back with a wide ribbon—thought to be silk or organza—in a semi-transparent golden-yellow tone, tied into a bow. Horizontal golden-yellow stripes are visible on the ribbon. The wide U-shaped neckline, which leaves the shoulders slightly exposed, is animated with ruffles. The detachable sleeves, of three-quarter length, are gathered at three points to create a puffed appearance. Her hair, in light gray tones, powdered and combed backward, falls at shoulder level and is seen in its natural curly form. A wide-brimmed straw hat in a natural yellow color is decorated with light blue ribbons and large gray feathers. These feathers, most likely obtained from ostriches, were worn by people of the upper classes in Europe, as ostriches were found in Africa and the importation of their feathers is known to be very costly (Herrera, 2019).

The rose she holds in her left hand and the flowers placed in the vase in the background complete the overall aesthetic understanding of the garment, presenting a simple and elegant composition. ***Iconographical Analysis:*** Her confident, singular, and calm expression, directly facing the viewer, is interpreted as an emphasis on individual identity. Although muslin, which is thought to have been used in the dress, was not considered a luxurious fabric and such materials were generally used in undergarments at the time, the depiction of the queen in this manner is thought to symbolize a desire for naturalization. The visibility of the skin through the garment is not considered a normal condition within the framework of eighteenth-century clothing practices. Contrary to this convention, the looseness of the dress in the portrait is observed as an escape from garments that tightly wrap and constrain the female

body. The absence of lace and ornamentation in the garment is considered a deliberate act of simplification. However, despite this plain representation, the aristocratic details it carries (such as her posture, the blue feather, and the rose symbol) also demonstrate that she is still presented as a queen. Thus, this portrait is interpreted both as an effort to regain the affection of the public and as a visual defense of status.

***Iconological Interpretation*:** The queen's effort to distance herself from the traditional luxury of Versailles, expressed through a depiction considered radical in its simplicity, is interpreted as a message of closeness to the people. The queen's dress was known as an undergarment within the aristocracy of the period. It is thought to make a reference to Rousseau's idea of the natural human and the artificial village life at the Trianon. A graceful yet powerful female figure is presented together with images of fertility and delicacy. The queen's attempt to mend her relationship with the public, despite being criticized as a lover of luxury, is interpreted as a symbolic rupture implying a transition from monarchy to populism and as a challenge to social norms through the image of the queen.

***Marie Antoinette with the Rose* (1783)**

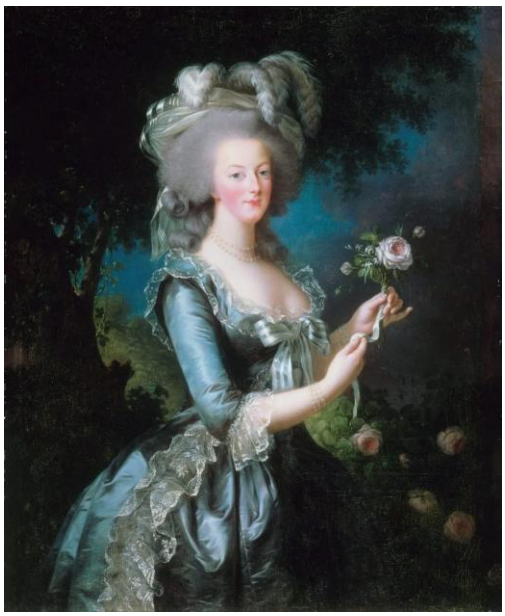

Figure 7. *Marie Antoinette With a Rose (1783) https://collections.chateauversailles.fr.(20.05.2025).*

Following the reactions to the first *chemise* portrait, this is the portrait in which Marie Antoinette posed again wearing a more traditional costume ((Chalon, 1999, s. 57-58,75-76), as cited in (Larkin, 2000, s. 211)). It became one of the portraits in which the queen was depicted with a more natural, elegant, and plain appearance. Her dress reflects both the fashion of the period and the queen's elegance.

***Pre-iconographical Description*:** Marie Antoinette is depicted within a natural landscape surrounded by dark-colored trees, bushes, and pink roses in the background. The fabric of the dress, thought to be silk taffeta or satin in dark navy/night blue tones, displays a subtle sheen free from exaggeration. The dress, presumed to be a single-piece garment fitted to the body, closely envelops the upper torso. While volume is added to the skirt through dense pleats and gathers, the fullness at the back is thought to be achieved through the use of a *panier*. In this area, the edges of the back skirt panel that enhance the volume are decorated with lightly gathered silk or organza lace tulle in a cream color, featuring small floral motifs on its surface. The wide U-shaped neckline, which leaves the shoulders slightly exposed and features a décolletage, displays the same decorative details around the neckline, along the section extending from the attachment point of the three-quarter-length detachable sleeves to the front center line, and at the narrow sleeve cuffs. At the front center of the neckline opening, a bow is formed with a satin ribbon in the same tone as the dress and in the color of the lace, featuring horizontal stripes. Raised,

slightly voluminous, powdered gray hair, combed backward with curls at the nape, is visible. A turban-style headpiece, thought to be made of silk or organza fabric in a translucent tone with horizontal white thin and thick stripes, is adorned with three ostrich feathers matching the color of the hair. Elegance is completed with two strands of pearls around her neck, three strands of pearls on each wrist, and the pink rose she holds in her right hand.

Iconographical Analysis: The color tone used in Marie Antoinette's dress expresses a combination of seriousness, simplicity, and nobility. With an elegant posture slightly turned to the side, she looks at the viewer while presenting the rose in her hand. This posture and these gestures reflect the period's understanding of femininity and elegance, while constructing an aesthetic female image in accordance with the Rococo style characteristic of French court fashion. The rose symbolizes not only femininity, delicacy, and love, but also a connection to nature and pastoral values. As in the *chemise* portrait, the use of this symbol here emphasizes the continuity of Marie Antoinette's feminine identity integrated with naturalness. The depiction of the queen within nature is interpreted as a reflection of both Rousseau's notion of a return to nature and her preference for a simple life at the Petit Trianon. Through this portrait, it is thought that Marie Antoinette was intended to be presented as a more approachable, sensitive, and gentle figure.

***Iconological Interpretation*:** This portrait was produced in response to the severe criticism directed at Vigée Le Brun's *Marie Antoinette en Chemise*, in which the queen was depicted in a plain garment. That portrait was not considered appropriate to royal dignity and was regarded as a visual scandal in public opinion. For this reason, a portrait aimed at reconstructing the queen's traditional and noble image was produced. The natural, plain, and sincere female figure seen in the *chemise* portrait here gives way to a conventional representation of a queen. Thus, this visual transformation—far from being merely a matter of fashion preference—also reveals the tension within the political strategies of representation of the period and the positioning of the female figure within the public sphere.

***Marie Antoinette and Her Children* (1787)**

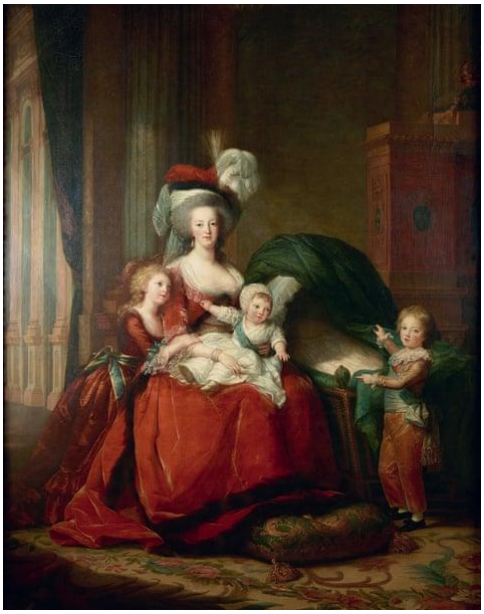

Figure 8. *Marie Antoinette and Her Children (1787) https://collections.chateauversailles.fr.(20.05.2025).*

This painting, commissioned in order to correct the queen's negative public image, aimed to portray her as a benevolent mother. It was recognized that there was a need to regain public favor, to demonstrate to the French people that their concerns were more important than her own, and to eliminate the malicious expressions that had been created about her. Her depiction together with her children indicates

Marie Antoinette's attachment to French traditions and shows that she embraced and prioritized her maternal role over politics and her other duties as queen (Duggins, 2011, p. 39). Through this portrait, in contrast to the *chemise*, Marie Antoinette demonstrates that she took the duties of queenship more seriously than the carefree attitude she had displayed four years earlier. Showing the French people that she valued their traditions more than her own personal values became Marie Antoinette's foremost priority. This portrait, which represents her sincere desire to show the public that she was not the person she had been reshaped into by slander, was deliberately commissioned with the conscious aim of regaining the hearts of the French people by depicting her together with her children (Wang, 2023, s. 64).

***Pre-iconographical Description*:** Marie Antoinette is depicted seated in a central position together with two young children and an infant. The scene includes ornate curtains, a floor cushion, a carpet with vegetal motifs, a cabinet, and an empty cradle. The dress, thought to be made of silk taffeta or velvet in burgundy or dark red tones, has an upper bodice that closely fits the body. The skirt of the dress, assumed to have been designed as a single piece, is straight-cut and voluminous. This volume is thought to have been achieved not through the use of a *panier*, but through the thickness of the fabric and the petticoat worn underneath, in order to create a soft silhouette appropriate to the queen's maternal identity. The wide U-shaped neckline, which leaves the shoulders slightly exposed and features a décolletage, is decorated around the neckline with lightly gathered silk or organza lace tulle in a cream color, featuring small floral motifs on its surface. In addition to this decoration, a plain tulle in the form of a fichu is observed to have been used to cover the neckline, in accordance with its shape, due to her status as a mother. On the upper bodice, beginning from the front center of the neckline and opening into a V shape toward the sides, and thought to also surround the back skirt, a narrow fur trimming is visible along the edge of this element. Beneath the neckline on the bodice, two rows of lightly gathered pieces made of cream-colored fabric are placed. Decorative details made of lightly gathered silk or organza lace tulle in a cream color with small floral motifs are also visible at the cuffs of the three-quarter-length detachable sleeves. Raised, slightly voluminous gray hair, shaped with curlers at the nape, powdered and combed backward, isvisible. On the rather tall turban-style headpiece, thought to be made of translucent silk fabric with small floral motifs on its surface, another headpiece matching the color of the dress is seen. At the point where these headpieces join, the same fur seen on the skirt is present. On top of the headpiece, three voluminous feathers matching the color of the tulle are placed. Her elegant appearance is completed with three strands of pearls on her right wrist. From the visible portion of the shoe worn on the foot resting on the floor cushion, it is thought to be a cream-colored satin shoe.

The costumes of the children depicted in the painting were not examined in detail. In general terms, it is observed that the boy and the girl are dressed like miniature adults. The infant is depicted wearing a plain undergarment dress thought to be made of translucent muslin fabric, with the head covered by a thin cloth. The girl's shoes are not visible. The boy's black patent leather shoes are decorated at the front with a bow made of black satin ribbon. The baby boy's shoes are thought to be cream-colored, made of patent leather or satin material, with the front decorated with satin ruffles.

***Iconographical Analysis*:** Marie Antoinette's posture reflects maternal compassion, while her gaze conveys a seriousness characteristic of queenship. In the portrait, it is thought that she represents not individual motherhood, but rather the identity of the queen as the protective mother of France. The fact that she lost her daughter Sophie Hélène Béatrice, who was born ill on 9 July 1786 and died at eleven months of age, indicates that she experienced motherhood accompanied by profound grief (Weber, 2006, s. 173). Accordingly, the detail of the empty cradle is thought to symbolize her deceased child and to have been used in order to endow the queen with a tragic yet dignified image of motherhood. The depiction of the queen together with her children in a magnificent setting and in opulent garments conveys the message that the power and prestige of the monarchy are being sustained. Her positioning at the center of her children implies that she established a strong family structure, while also suggesting that the monarchy was being presented not only as a political institution, but also as a family-based element of social security.

***Iconological Interpretation*:** By 1787, Marie Antoinette had come to be associated in public opinion with luxury and extravagance, and was perceived as a detached and foreign figure. It is thought that this portrait was constructed as a visual strategy aimed at re-establishing the queen's reputation. Built around themes of motherhood, loyalty, and innocence, this portrait is considered to function not merely as an individual portrait, but as a state message aimed at legitimizing the monarchy through emotional foundations.

CONCLUSION

Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun was not only a portrait painter, but also an active actor within the visual strategies of the monarchy. The portraits of Marie Antoinette analyzed in this study should therefore be understood as outcomes of a deliberate negotiation between political demands and aesthetic choices. Rather than merely depicting the queen, these works reveal how artistic vision, representations of womanhood, and structures of power intersect through visual means—particularly through costume.
Across the three portraits, costume functions as a key representational tool through which Marie Antoinette's public image is continuously reconstructed. The transition from informal dress to more structured court attire and, ultimately, to maternal royal imagery reflects a broader visual strategy aimed at responding to political criticism and shifting public expectations. In this sense, the portraits operate not only as individual artworks but also as visual interventions designed to recalibrate royal authority through femininity, restraint, and moralized simplicity.

This reading aligns with existing scholarship that interprets eighteenth-century court portraiture as a medium of image management and political symbolism (Weber, 2006; Hall, 2014). However, the present study extends this literature by demonstrating that costume is not a secondary or decorative element, but a central visual mechanism through which power relations, gender roles, and social hierarchy are articulated. The analysis shows that even when simplicity is emphasized, aristocratic distinction continues to be maintained through controlled silhouettes, fabrics, and accessories, revealing the tension between accessibility and authority in royal representation.

From the perspective of fashion history, the findings indicate that changes in Marie Antoinette's lifestyle and public role were directly reflected in her clothing choices. The gradual shift away from exaggerated court structures toward more natural forms signals not only stylistic change, but also the transmission of social and ideological messages through dress. In this respect, costume emerges as a historical document that records transformations in aesthetic values while simultaneously participating in the construction of political meaning.

Methodologically, the application of Panofsky's three-stage approach made it possible to move beyond descriptive observation and to interpret costume within its broader historical, social, and cultural context. At the iconological level in particular, the study reveals how female identity, power relations, and legitimacy are visually negotiated through dress. By integrating art historical analysis with fashion theory, this research offers an interdisciplinary perspective that differs from studies limited to biographical or stylistic readings.

In conclusion, this study positions costume as an active agent in visual representation rather than a passive reflection of fashion trends. By foregrounding dress as a critical site where artistic representation, fashion history, and visual power relations converge, the research contributes an original analytical framework for understanding portraiture and opens new possibilities for comparative and interdisciplinary studies in both art history and fashion studies.

In line with its stated aim, this study has demonstrated that the costumes depicted in Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun's portraits of Marie Antoinette function not merely as aesthetic elements, but as active visual instruments through which female identity, political legitimacy, and power relations were constructed and negotiated. By employing Panofsky's three-stage analytical framework, the research has revealed how shifts in costume—from informal chemise dresses to more structured court attire—corresponded to changing political strategies and public expectations. In this respect, the study contributes to the existing literature by positioning costume at the intersection of fashion history, visual representation,

and political symbolism, rather than treating it as a secondary decorative component. Methodologically, the application of Panofsky's iconological approach to fashion-oriented visual analysis offers a systematic model for interpreting garments as carriers of ideological meaning. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its focus on a purposive sample of three portraits and by its reliance on visual analysis without incorporating archival or textual sources. Future research could expand the corpus to include other royal portraits or comparative examples from different courts, thereby further enriching the discussion of costume as a tool of visual power and representation.

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