Anne Vallayer-Coster, *Portrait of a Violinist*

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At the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris, the bastion of official art in France, female members were few and far between. During the first century of its existence, only a dozen women had been elected, the men outnumbering them by more than twenty to one. Every year, an average of four new members were admitted. Although for a long time women could be regarded as an exception, they were nonetheless part of the existing power structure, as the wives, daughters or sisters of leading male members of the Academy. Around the middle of the 18th century, nothing had changed. Joseph-Marie Vien, who was in charge of artistic training at the Academy, had himself been elected a member in 1754. In March three years later, he married the 29-year-old miniaturist Marie-Thérèse Reboul. In May of the same year, Rosalba Carriera died, and within two months the vacancy was filled by Vien's wife. Such a development was exceptional in the Academy's history. Her friend Marie-Suzanne Giroust on the other hand, who married Alexander Roslin two years later in 1759, had to wait eleven years to be admitted, until September 1770.

Fig. 1 Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744–1818), *Portrait of a Violinist,* 1773. Oil on canvas, 116 x 96 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7297.

Fig. 2 Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744–1818), *Portrait of a Violinist,* 1773. Oil on canvas, 116 x 96 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 7297 (detail).

In the light of this, the election of Anne Vallayer (1744–1818) on 28 July 1770 stands out as even more exceptional. She was ten years younger than Marie-Suzanne Giroust and, what is more, unmarried. Nor did she need to follow the usual protocol of producing two reception pieces, being accepted directly on the basis of existing works "that belonged to her".[1] There is nothing to suggest that Vallayer enjoyed royal patronage at this time, but she did not lack for mentors among the academicians. The landscape painter Claude-Joseph Vernet had been her teacher, and all the indications are that Alexander Roslin actively supported her candidacy.[2] Nevertheless, the election of two women as members seems to have sent a shock wave through the male power elite, headed by the Academy's secretary, the court painter Jean-Baptiste-Marie Pierre.[3] Within a matter of weeks, therefore, they felt obliged to formalise the hitherto unwritten rule limiting the number of female members to four.[4] None of the women, apart from Mme Vien, were entitled to attend meetings of the Academy. All the same, the male academicians who were opposed to the election of women must have been worried when an order arrived from Queen Marie-Antoinette in 1779, expressly requiring that Anne Vallayer be allocated official quarters in the Louvre.[5]

It was in her capacity as a still-life painter that Vallayer was admitted to the Academy. The Nationalmuseum already has two examples of her work in that genre in its collections, *Still Life with Brioche, Fruit and Vegetables* (Fig. 3) and, in miniature format, *Still Life with Flowers* (Fig. 3). Even at that time, she was of course compared to the great Chardin, who incidentally endorsed her election. Unlike him, she did not seek to produce tactile effects by applying patches of colour in relief, side by side, aiming instead for a greater measure of illusionism by fully blending the layers of paint.[6] For that reason, she was long regarded as uninteresting in an age that measured older art by the yardstick of modernism. Things were not made any

Fig. 3 Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744–1818), *Still Life with Brioche, Fruit and Vegetables,* 1775. Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 55 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 6937.

"better" in the eyes of posterity by the fact that Anne Vallayer later achieved most fame as a *peintre de fleurs,* her work forming the basis for luxury textiles from the state manufactories.

Anne Vallayer, who in 1781 married the successful lawyer Jean-Pierre-Silvestre Coster, thus specialised above all in flower painting. Her striking use of colour and elegant illusionism meant that her still lifes were much in demand, but they enjoyed relatively low status within the subject hierarchy then prevailing. Vallayer-Coster therefore attempted to broaden her repertoire by deliberately incorporating objects that had more in common with history painting. She produced some exquisite grisailles, for example, in imitation of reliefs by Clodion and Duquesnoy. She also painted portraits, with a view to attracting royal and other well-to-do patrons. This led to commissions both from the King's aunts and from Queen Marie-Antoinette, although the quality of the results was a little uneven at times.

Keen though she was to extend her range of subjects, Anne Vallayer-Coster in

Fig. 3 Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744–1818), *Still Life with Flowers.* Oil on canvas, 9.2 x 7.9 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMB 2667.

fact painted very few portraits, and most of the ones she did produce have a direct personal link to her. It is that fact, and a certain resemblance, that has caused scholars to regard *Portrait of a Violinist* as a genre-like representation of one of the artist's three sisters, Madeleine, Elisabeth or Simone (Fig. 1).[7] Whether any of them actually played the violin we do not know, but what is clear is that Vallayer-Coster had an immense talent for painting, among other things, musical instruments. There is a sense of quiet calm and contemplation to this self-contained composition. The broken strings also contribute significantly to its considerable visual qualities (Fig. 2), while at the same time raising questions about the meaning of the painting. *Portrait of a Violinist* undoubtedly ranks among the artist's finest works, fully on a par with some of her best still lifes.

Notes:

1. Marianne Roland Michel, "Vallayer in Her Time", in *Anne Vallayer-Coster: Painter to the Court of Marie-Antoinette,* Eik Kahng and Marianne Roland Michel (eds.), New Haven and London 2002, p. 16.

2. Cf. ibid., p. 34, n. 35. Roslin later owned a still life by Anne Vallayer-Coster, and also painted a portrait of her, which was exhibited at the Salon in 1783; see *Alexander Roslin,* (exh. cat. no. 652), Nationalmuseum, Stockholm 2007, pp. 134–135.

3. This may seem surprising, given that Pierre was among the witnesses at Anne Vallayer's marriage eleven years later (see Roland Michel 2002, p. 19).

4. Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art,* Chicago and London 1996, p. 79.

5. Roland Michel 2002, p. 19.

6. Eik Kahng, "Vallayer-Coster/Chardin", in *Anne Vallayer-Coster: Painter to the Court of Marie-Antoinette,* Eik Kahng and Marianne Roland Michel (eds.), New Haven and London 2002, pp. 39–57.

7. *Anne Vallayer-Coster: Painter to the Court of Marie-Antoinette,* Eik Kahng and Marianne Roland Michel (eds.), New Haven and London 2002, cat. no. 22, p. 200.