

# Vigée-Lebrun paints an ambassador of Tipoo-Saïb

In 1788, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun must ask for the French king's intervention to paint an ambassador who does not accept portraiture. She accepts the stance he strikes of his own accord. The charming illusion of control over one's own image is gleefully noted by the career portraitist who usually keeps excellent records of her pieces and their ownership: upon completion, as it dries, the image is hidden by the ambassador who is betrayed by his servant—and returned to the painter who reminds him that the work ultimately belongs to the king. Vigée-Lebrun notes that the image eventually evades even the king's ownership as it disappears after the Revolution. Its total eclipse past the Revolution projects the portrait into general ownership in loss alternating with recovery. Moreover, the portrait results from a forceful encounter answering some degree of mutual seduction with odd undertones. She wants “his head” and he must comply while averting his face. Yet, as the dinner orchestrated by the ambassador with her and Mme de Bonneuil attests, harmonious dissonance between the portraitist and the anti-portrait ambassador stands in the envelope of polite diplomacy. The fact that the mutual hospitable encounter barely silences cultural differences makes it somewhat comical. The most unusual perspective places the painter sitting on the ground, not only for the curious dinner with rose water and without silverware, exotic poetry and French songs, but obviously while she painted Mohammed Dervish Khan she also sat very low. In January 2019, the portrait sold at Sotheby for 7.2 million US dollars “with a little pre-sale help from Victoria Beckham”

