THE PAINTER AND THE COURTIER

Vigée Lebrun's Portrait of Ivan Ivanovich Shuvalov

The old courtier sat patiently for the artist. Nearly 70 years old, he had sat for many portraits in his long and illustrious life, enduring hours of stationary tedium. Why then at his age should he endure another sitting? But why not, if the artist were an attractive woman, the favorite portrait painter of the hapless Marie Antoinette, the toast of Rome, Naples, and Vienna? To be in her company would be a pleasure.

Ivan Ivanovich Shuvalov and Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun must have had a lot to talk about while he sat and she painted. They had much in common. She had been the confidante of a queen; he had been the lover of an empress. Both were self-made, now elevated far above their origins. They conversed in the elegant language of Versailles and shared a nostalgic affection for France and French civilization before the deluge of revolution.

In her memoirs Vigée Lebrun recalled that Shuvalov "combined obliging politeness with great urbanity, and as he was also the most convivial of men, he was sought out by the best society." Even without the kind words, it is evident from her portrait that the old courtier charmed the artist. The portrait conveys not just a vivid likeness but something more elusive, an appealing likability. Turning from the light that so boldly accents his face, Shuvalov looks away without hauteur but with the calm gentility of a natural aristocrat.

Ivan Shuvalov (1727–97) was one of the true grandees of the Russian Empire. A man seemingly without guile or ambition, he yet had the wits to survive for nearly 50 years at the center of a court as renowned for opulence as it was notorious for treachery. The Shuvalovs were a noble clan with more ambition than money. Young Ivan received a thorough classical education—exceptional among the Russian nobility of his day—and his studiousness charmed the young German-born wife of the heir to the throne. The future Catherine the Great remembered Shuvalov as always having a book in his hand and "prophesied more than once that he would make his way if he went on striving to increase his knowledge." Shuvalov did make his way, but not by the book.

It may be rude to call Shuvalov a gigolo, but what is one to call a young man who began his social ascent by deliberately catching the eye of an ever-watchful empress? The Empress Elizabeth Petrovna was the mercurial and wildly extravagant daughter of Peter the Great. And she liked younger men. Knowing this, Shuvalov's relatives finessed a "chance" encounter between their shy, bookish but irresistibly handsome cousin and the empress, who was nearly twice his age.

The plan worked. Soon enough, Shuvalov found himself ensconced in the palace with the too-apt title of Gentleman of the Imperial Bedchamber. There, for the remaining 13 years of Elizabeth's reign, he honed his survival skills, crafting the persona of a model courtier, attentive and deferential to his superiors and courteous to all. A studied indolence masked a keen mind. He wisely refused most honors, affecting a protective modesty, while other more transient favorites jockeyed for titles and imperial largesse. Nothing was undertaken in haste. His guiding maxim: "quietly, little by little."

Surprisingly, given his intimacy with power, Shuvalov seems to have made few enemies. Even those who envied his position felt affection for the man. If he was rebuked, it was for his unabashed love for all things French: language, literature, music, and especially the latest Parisian fashions. (Remember, the 18th century was the last great age of the male peacock.) Frederick the Great of Prussia unkindly dismissed Shuvalov as a "male Pompadour," likening him to the fashionista mistress of Louis XV.

But Shuvalov was far more than a fop and an imperial favorite. He corresponded with Diderot, d'Alembert, and other French philosophes and commissioned Voltaire to write the majestic *History of Russia* under Peter the Great, the book that did much to change European opinion about the vast empire to the East. At home Shuvalov sought out the company of writers, artists, and scholars, including Mikhail Lomonosov, the towering intellectual of the Russian Enlightenment. While lesser courtiers schemed and connived, Shuvalov's generous patronage of Russian arts and sciences laid the foundations for the cultural flowering of his country.

Undoubtedly his greatest legacy is the University of Moscow, Russia's first university, founded by Elizabeth at Shuvalov's instigation in 1755. Two years later Shuvalov announced the establishment of an Academy of the Three Noble Arts—the forerunner of the Imperial Academy of

ABOVE: **Elisabeth Louise Vigée Lebrun, *Portrait of Marie Antoinette, "à la rose"*** (large detail), 1783, oil on canvas, Château de Versailles, France

PAGE 6: **Elisabeth Louise Vigée Lebrun, *Ivan Ivanovich Shuvalov***, about 1795–97, oil on canvas, 33 × 24 in., Purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina

Arts—which was first headquartered at the Shuvalov Palace in St. Petersburg. Shuvalov served as the university's first rector and the academy's founding president. Lomonosov, celebrating his friend and benefactor as a far-sighted patron, a latter-day Maecenas, declaimed, "What a road you strive to open up to learning!" He then touched upon the secret of Shuvalov's persuasiveness: "You give praise to all, find all agreeable and worthy of gentle courtesy."

Nevertheless, Shuvalov knew full well that his power depended upon his relationship with the empress. Elizabeth's heir was her childish and vicious nephew, the Grand Duke Peter, who was reputedly so devoted to his regiments of toy soldiers that he once court-marshaled a rat for disturbing his line. The grand duke was no friend of his aunt's lover. With careful calculation, Shuvalov made discreet overtures to Peter's estranged wife, Catherine. When Elizabeth died in 1762, Shuvalov acquiesced in the successful conspiracy that overthrew Peter and enthroned the far more imperial Catherine. Still, the new regime looked with suspicion on the wily favorite of a dead empress. Ever alert to a change in favor, Shuvalov feigned poor health and, coughing strategically, exited stage West. He remained abroad for 14 years, lionized by the courts of Poland, Austria, and especially *la belle France*. An expatriate patriot, he was always ready to perform services for the Russian government: buying paintings for the Hermitage, passing along political intelligence, or, in one case, negotiating with the papacy.

By the time Shuvalov returned to St. Petersburg in 1777, all was forgiven. Catherine warmly greeted him and showered him with honors he could not refuse. In Vigée Lebrun's portrait, he wears the silvered badges and moiré silk ribands of the chivalric Orders of St. Vladimir and St. Andrew (see detail above), bestowed by a grateful sovereign. No longer at the center of power, he contented himself with intellectual pursuits and the stately business of high society. One imagines him a prized guest at elegant soirées, the titled ladies fawning in French over *mon cher Monsieur*, the venerable bachelor, a living legend. And perhaps in the late mornings, he would glide into a drawing room of his palace, where the lovely Madame Vigée Lebrun had arranged her easel and paints. There, settling into a cushioned chair close to the window, the sunlight falling with a kindly radiance on his face, the old courtier, gazing nowhere in particular, would present himself one last time to posterity. ■

John W. Coffey, Deputy Director for Art

How did the painting get from St. Petersburg to Raleigh?

Upon Shuvalov's death in 1797, the portrait passed to his niece, Countess Varvara Nikolaievna Golovin (1766–1821), a talented and scandalous beauty who was herself painted by Vigée Lebrun. Both portraits were bequeathed to her daughter Elisabeth, wife of the Polish Count Leon Potocka (1801–67). They then passed to her daughter Leonie Wanda (1821–93), who married Count Casimir Lanckoroński of Vienna, scion of an ancient Polish noble family and a celebrated art collector. The portraits were inherited by their son, Count Karol Lanckoroński (1848–1933), an art connoisseur in his own right as well as a noted archaeologist and writer. Because of their Polish ancestry, the Lanckoroński family was targeted by the Nazis, who seized their art collection. Recovered by the family after World War II, the Shuvalov painting was sold to New York dealers and bought by the North Carolina Museum of Art in 1952.

Elisabeth Louise Vigée Lebrun, ***Ivan Ivanovich Shuvalov*** (detail), about 1795–97, oil on canvas, 33 × 24 in., Purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina