



## Portrait historié: Ladies as goddesses in the 18<sup>th</sup> century European art

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### Abstract

Portrait historié is a term that describes portrayals of known individuals in different roles such as characters taken from the bible, mythology or literature. These portraits were especially widespread in the 18th century French and English art. In the hierarchy of genres established by the Academy, history painting was at the top and portraiture came next. Artists aspired to elevate the importance of portraits by combining it with history. This article will focus on goddesses selected by history portrait artists. Ladies of the nobility and female members of the royal families have been depicted as goddesses in many paintings. French artists Nicolas de Largillière, Jean Marc Nattier and Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun; English artists George Romney and Sir Joshua Reynolds can be counted among the artists working in this genre. Mythological figures such as Diana, Minerva, Venus, Hebe, Iris, Ariadne, Circe, Medea, Cassandra, Muses, Graces, Nymphs and Bacchantes inspired the artists and their sitters. Ladies were pictured with the attributes of these divine beings.

**Keywords:** European art; Portraiture; History portrait; 18th century; Goddesses.

### Introduction

Portrait historié (historicized portrait) is a term coined in France in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to describe portraits depicting known individuals in the guise of biblical, mythological or literary personages. The type was created in the Netherlands in the later 16<sup>th</sup> century as a synthesis of history painting and portraiture. It then blossomed in the Dutch Republic and the south Netherlands after about 1630 (Clarke 2010: 197).

Art academies appear first in Italy in the later 16<sup>th</sup> century. They seem to have been private associations of artists who met from time to time to draw from the model and discuss questions of art theory. These academies later became formal institutions that took over some functions from the guilds, but their teaching was limited and far from systematic. This was the case as well with the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris, founded in 1648. But when Charles Le Brun (1619-1690) became its director in 1663, he established a rigid curriculum of instruction. The Academy even devised a method for giving numerical grades to artists past and present in such categories as drawing, expression and proportion. Subjects were also classified, from history at the top to still life at the bottom. History paintings include various types of narrative subjects, be they classical, biblical or mythological (Janson 2001: 579-581).

The academic system of study was very hierarchical. In the hierarchy of subjects, history painting was the grand genre due to its inclusion of both religious images and contemporary scenes that glorified the monarchy. Portraits were next in importance because of its aristocratic associations. The idea behind this scale of values is that man is central in the world and the quality most prized in art is imagination. Intellectual rather than manual aspect of the profession of painting was given greater emphasis. Imagination was considered to be expressed in historical painting because it required understanding of the past (Palmer 2011: 5-6).

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Rococo portraits are notable for their reformulation of established traditions and development of new modes of representation that emphasized informality and personal character. Since the Renaissance, conventions of portraiture had guided artistic choices toward the creation of an accurate likeness. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, an increasing number of patrons from the lower nobility and wealthier levels of bourgeoisie demanded more informal portraits (Milam 2011: 217).

The disguise of ladies is related to allegorical conventions dominant since classical times: the representation of moral and political values through the female form. Ladies were more easily transformed into allegorical images than their male counterparts (Perry and Rossington 1994: 23).

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was in some respects the apogee of portraiture in England and France. A huge number and a variety of images were produced in these countries (Woodall 1997: 4).

### Goddesses as Ladies

Diana, an Olympian goddess of the hunt and the moon, was the daughter of Zeus and Leto, twin sister of Apollo. Her domain was in the woods, particularly those of Arcadia where she was both protecting and hunting animals. She was associated with female chastity but also with childbirth. Depicted as a young clothed huntress holding a bow, arrows and accompanied by animals, her central attribute was the crescent or full moon (Roman and Roman 2010: 84-86).

French sculptor Antoine Coysevox (1640-1720) created a marble sculpture of Duchesse de Bourgogne as Diana in 1710 (**Figure 1**). Coysevox completed numerous garden sculptures for Versailles and Marly, working with his nephews in planning the sculptural work for the park of the latter chateau. Completed late in his career, Diana demonstrates the extent to which he modified his style with his times. The whimsical treatment of the subject matter and graceful pose adapt classical themes and Grand Manner decorum to the lighthearted spirit of the Rococo (Milam 2011: 90).



**Figure 1:** Antoine Coysevox, *The Duchesse de Bourgogne as Diana*, 1710, marble, Musée du National du Château, Versailles.

Ariadne was the daughter of King Minos who helped Theseus escape from Crete. With advice from the craftsman Daedalus, who had designed the labyrinth in which the monster lived, Ariadne guided her lover through it by means of a ball of thread. When the two lovers arrived at

the island of Naxos, Theseus changed his mind and left Ariadne asleep on the shore while he sailed away. Jupiter sent Bacchus to her rescue. The lustful god of wine took her to be his wife and the couple sped off to the island of Lemnos (Day 2007: 103).

French painter Nicolas de Largillière (1656-1746) depicted Mademoiselle Duclos in the role of Ariadne in 1712 (**Figure 2**). Bacchus in the background is pointing at Ariadne, the beautiful Mademoiselle Duclos in a splendid dress.



**Figure 2:** Nicolas de Largillière, *Portrait of Mademoiselle Duclos in the Role of Ariadne*, 1712, oil on canvas, 130.8 x 163.2 cm, Speed Art Museum, Kentucky.

Nymphs were young female nature spirits. They were associated either with water (springs, fountains and rivers), trees or mountains. Nymphs appear in myths that take place in a sylvan setting in the company of Diana, Pan and Bacchus (Roman and Roman 2010: 340).

Largillière presented Marianne de Mahony as a water nymph (**Figure 3**). She is leaning against a rock in the woods and holding a crock of flowing water.



**Figure 3:** Nicolas de Largillière, *Marianne de Mahony as a Water Nymph*, oil on canvas, 106 x 140 cm, Private Collection.

Minerva was originally an Italian goddess of crafts and trade guilds, but as Romans became influenced by the Greeks, the goddess became identified with the Greek deity Athena. She was regarded as a goddess of handicrafts, wisdom and war (Salisbury 2001: 229).

French artist Jean Baptiste Santerre (1658-1717) depicted Marie Madeleine de la Vieuville, Comtesse of Parabere as Minerva in company with Philippe d'Orleans as Regent of France in 1715-1716 (**Figure 4**).



**Figure 4:** Jean Baptiste Santerre, *Philippe d'Orleans as Regent of France and his mistress Marie Therese de Parabere as Minerva*, 1715-1716, oil on canvas, Private Collection.

Venus was the goddess of love and fertility, mother of Cupid. Among her many attributes are a pair of doves or swans (either may draw her chariot), the scallop shell and dolphins (both recall her birth from the sea) and her magic girdle (Hall 1974: 318).

French painter Noël Nicholas Coypel (1690-1734) created a portrait of Madame de Bourbon-Conti as Venus in 1731 (**Figure 5**). Madame de Bourbon-Conti (Louise Elisabeth) was a princess who supported the enlightened ideas of Voltaire. Her mother Louise-Françoise was a legitimate daughter of Louis XIV. Madame and her husband, Louis Armand II, Prince de Conti, were both descendants from the House of Bourbon. Madame is portrayed as an elegant goddess, most probably Venus, since she is attended by a winged Cupid with his dart. Her only jewelry is a wristlet of pearls tied with ribbon. The  $\frac{3}{4}$  length portrait is a typical Rococo composition, putting the sitter necessarily in the near foreground ([www.ringlingdocents.org](http://www.ringlingdocents.org)).



**Figure 5:** Noël Nicholas Coypel, *Portrait of Madame de Bourbon-Conti as Venus*, 1731, oil on canvas, 106 x 138 cm, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Florida.

Aurora, the Greek goddess of the dawn, was the daughter of the Titans Hyperion and Theia. Each morning, she would drive across the sky in a chariot pulled by two fine horses. She would ride to Olympos, home of the gods, and announce the rising of her brother Helius and fading of her sister Selene (Day 2007: 59).

Jean Marc Nattier (1685-1766) depicted the Countess de Brac as Aurora in 1741 (**Figure 6**). Master of the female portrait, whether in a natural pose or a mythological interpretation, Nattier presented his patronesses with grace and elegance using bright colors. Nattier perfected a style of posed portraiture; rather than interpreting the subject's personality, he created elegant settings and poses. His portraits are among the last examples of a still classically composed world (Tarabra 2011: 311).



**Figure 6:** Jean Marc Nattier, *The Countess de Brac as Aurora*, 1741, oil on canvas, 114 x 146 cm, Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit.

Flora was the ancient Italian goddess of flowers. Her festival Floralia was celebrated with much licentiousness. The Greek goddess of flowers was Chloris who was married to Zephyr, the west wind of springtime, who begets flowers (Hall 1974: 125).

Nattier depicted Henriette of France in the role of Flora (**Figure 7**). The Queen of France, the wife of Louis XV, Maria Leczinska, impressed by Nattier's talent, requested a portrait of her first daughter Henriette ([www.wga.hu](http://www.wga.hu)).



**Figure 7:** Jean Marc Nattier, *Henriette of France as Flora*, 1742, oil on canvas, 94.5 x 128.5 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Hebe was the goddess of youth, known to the Romans as Juventus. She was the daughter of Zeus and Hera. When the great hero Heracles was made a god after his life of toil on earth,

Hebe was given to him as his new immortal wife, symbolizing his own now eternal youth. She acts as cupbearer and pours nectar, she helps Hera to harness her divine horses and chariot (March 2014: 216).

French artist François Hubert Drouais (1727-1775) portrayed Madame la Dauphine Marie-Antoinette as Hebe in 1773 (**Figure 8**). Drouais was trained under François Boucher (1703-1770) among others and became a rival to Nattier as a fashionable portraitist. His portraits have a gracious and artificial charm (Chilvers 2009: 187).



**Figure 8:** François Hubert Drouais, *Madame la Dauphine Marie-Antoinette as Hebe*, 1773, oil on canvas, 80 x 96 cm, Musée Condé, Chantilly.

Muses are the goddesses of creative inspiration in poetry, song and other arts. Companions of Apollo, Muses are the daughters of Jupiter and the Titaness Mnemosyne (Hall 1974: 217).

Swiss artist Angelica Kauffmann (1741-1807) depicted Sarah Harrop as a Muse in 1780-81 (**Figure 9**). She was a Swiss painter active mainly in Italy and England. After forming her style in Rome, she moved to London in 1766 where her work and personality were vastly admired (Chilvers 2009: 323). A cultured, polyglot painter of international renown, she was at home in the neoclassical intellectual and artistic world. Hers was a refined, classicizing and eclectic art. Her atelier in Rome was among the most popular destinations of Grand Tour travelers, princes and princesses, intellectuals and painters (Tarabra 2011, 291).

Kauffmann's portrait, arguably the artist's masterpiece in portraiture, is a rare representation of a self-made woman, the great Handelian performer Sarah Harrop (1755–1811), by one of the very few professional women artists of the period. Kauffmann, one of two female cofounders of Britain's Royal Academy, shows Harrop seated in the wilderness, a lyre at her side and a rolled sheet of music in her hand. The lyre most likely identifies Erato, the Muse of lyric poetry. While the instrument is based on ancient types, the sheet music grounds the portrait in the eighteenth century, for it is recognizably an aria from George Frederic Handel's 1725 dated opera "Rodelinda, Queen of the Lombards". ([www.artmuseum.princeton.edu](http://www.artmuseum.princeton.edu)).



**Figure 9:** Angelica Kauffmann, *Portrait of Sarah Harrop as a Muse*, 1780-81, oil on canvas, 121 x 142 cm, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton.

Circe was the divine enchantress Ulysses met on his voyage home to Ithaca. As daughter of the Greek sun God Helios, Circe was endowed with great magical powers which she used to transform her enemies, or those who had just offended her into animals. When Ulysses' men arrived at her house on the Island of Aea, they found wolves and lions wandering around. As soon as the new arrivals were feasted by Circe, who had introduced a powerful drug into the wine, they lost all memory of their native land and turned into swine (Day 2007: 156).

English artist George Romney (1734-1802) depicted Lady Lamilton (1765-1815) as Circe in 1782 (**Figure 10**). Romney became the most successful portraitist of the day apart from Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) and Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788). His posthumous reputation was once almost the equal of theirs, but later faded considerably. As with many successful portraitists, his heart lay elsewhere and he had aspirations to be a history painter (Chilvers 2009: 539).

He made a name for himself as an acclaimed portraitist of elegant London nobles. Many painters were active in this genre in the 18th century English art. Portraits were the only source of income for English painters; the aristocracy commissioned family portraits set in landscapes that gave an idea of their landholdings. Lady Hamilton is portrayed here dressed as Circe, the famed sorceress who tried to bewitch Ulysses; the comparison is due to Lady Hamilton's fame as a great seductress of men. Lady Hamilton, coming from humble origins, became the storied mistress of London aristocrats. Charles Greville, son of the count of Warwick, settled her in a cottage in Paddington Green and introduced her to Romney, for whom she began to pose in 1782. Lady Hamilton was known for poses in which she dressed as Lucretia, Hebe and other figures from antiquity. (Tarabra 2011: 334-35).

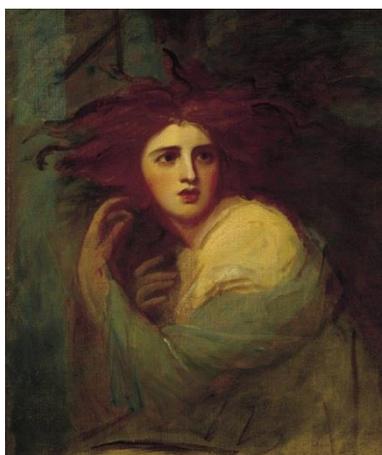
In this work, Romney chose to paint Emma as Circe, an enchantress, commenting on her influence on his friend and patron Greville. Greville can be perceived as adopting the role of Ulysses tempted by the witch Circe in Homer's 'Odyssey'. ([www.waddesdon.org.uk](http://www.waddesdon.org.uk)).



**Figure 10:** George Romney, *Lady Hamilton as Circe*, 1782, oil on canvas, Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire.

Medea, a passionate and jealous woman, was the wife of Jason in Greek legend. She fled with him from her homeland Colchis, when he returned to Greece after capturing the Golden Fleece. Later he deserted her to marry a Greek woman. Medea took revenge by killing Jason's new wife and her father. She even murdered her own children (Hall 1974: 206).

Romney depicted Lady Hamilton as Medea in 1786 (**Figure 11**). Lady Hamilton used to charm and entertain her guests with her singing and famous "Attitudes", a series of dramatic poses that acted out mythological figures wordlessly. Romney wrote to her in Naples in 1786 that his work on a series of her attitudes was progressing well, especially her re-enactment of Medea ([www.nortonsimon.org](http://www.nortonsimon.org)).



**Figure 11:** George Romney, *Lady Hamilton as Medea*, 1786, oil on canvas, 64 x 74 cm, Norton Simon Museum, California.

Cassandra, the daughter of Hecuba and Priam, was a Trojan prophetess. She was given the power of prophecy by Apollo in return for the promise of sex, but she refused him. Apollo did not take back the gift of prophecy but condemned her never to be believed. Cassandra predicted many important events. Cassandra often appears to be mad or raving, because no one believes her (Roman and Roman 2010: 110).

George Romney presented Lady Hamilton in the role of Cassandra (**Figure 12**). He frequently used Emma as the model for what English engraver and antiquary George Vertue described as 'fancy pictures', or scenes with the touch of imagination and invention. Here she appears as Cassandra, clothed in the simple drapery of ancient Greece and with wild hair flowing freely. Romney shows the ravings of Cassandra as she announces the doom of the city after its ten-year siege by the Greeks ([www.rmg.co.uk](http://www.rmg.co.uk)).



**Figure 12:** George Romney, *Lady Hamilton as Cassandra*, oil on canvas, 38 x 45 cm, Royal Museums Greenwich, Greenwich.

Bacchantes or Maenads were the female companions of the wine god Bacchus. They usually beat tambourine and express pleasurable abandonment (Earls 1987: 32).

Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842) depicted Lady Hamilton as a Bacchante in 1790-92 (**Figure 13**). Renowned for her beauty, wit and charm as well as for her talent, Vigée Le Brun had a highly successful career with many eminent sitters (Chilvers 2009: 659).

Portraitist of Parisian aristocracy and the court, Vigée Le Brun was independent, brilliant and passionate about her heart. She built an international reputation based on her exceptional talent. At a time when women were not admitted to the Paris Royal Academy, she performed a self-taught and gifted artist. She became Marie Antoinette's official portraitist, painted more than thirty portraits of her over a period of ten years. She fled France when the Revolution broke out and she spent twelve years in exile. She was the most popular portrait painter in Naples, Vienna and Saint Petersburg (Tarabra 2011: 356).

Lady Hamilton wears vine leaves in her hair and flowing classical dress, and carries a tambourine in the picture. The unusual but striking pose suggests this was one of Lady Hamilton's notorious "Attitudes". In the background, a smoking Vesuvius indicates that the work was painted in Naples, where Lady Hamilton lived as the wife of the British envoy, Sir William Hamilton, and where she was later to meet and become the mistress of Nelson. Vigée Le Brun made at least four portraits of her during visits to Naples between 1790 and 1792 ([www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk](http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk)).



**Figure 13:** Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Lady Hamilton as a Bacchante*, 1790-92, oil on canvas, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool.

Iris, daughter of Electra and Thaumas, was the Greek goddess of the rainbow and winged messenger goddess of the Olympian gods. Iris flies across the sky delivering messages or providing summons to immortals and mortals (Roman and Roman 2010: 286).

Vigée Le Brun portrayed Karoline von Manderscheid-Blankenheim, Princess of Liechtenstein as Iris in 1793 (**Figure 14**). She seems to be flying on the dark clouds with a flowing shawl on her shoulders. A rainbow appears vaguely under her feet.



**Figure 14:** Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Karoline von Manderscheid-Blankenheim, Princess of Liechtenstein as Iris*, 1793, oil on canvas, Liechtenstein Museum, Vienna.

Graces are Greek goddesses of grace, charm and beauty. The graces live in Olympos with Muses, with whom they share similar characteristics. Graces, named Euphrosyne, Aglaea and Thalia, are daughters of Eurynome and Zeus.

English painter Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) depicted Mrs. Hale as Euphrosyne in late 1700's (**Figure 15**). One of many Grand Manner paintings by Reynolds, the allegorical portrait of Mrs. Hale as Euphrosyne transforms her into an imaginary scene, surrounded by musical figures dancing with joy. Portraits such as this one were major sensations at Royal Academy exhibitions in

London, as they were large works of art portraying familiar members of society in ways that stimulated the imagination of the spectators (West 2004: 153).

Mary Chaloner was the sister in law of Edward Lascelles, later 1st Earl of Harewood. She was rendered by the artist after her marriage in the role of Euphrosyne, in a white semi-classical dress. Reynolds often used poses and roles that referred to great art of the past, in order to elevate the status of the sitter to that of a divine being. Mrs Hale proceeded to bear 21 children in her marriage, and it was once thought that the children in this picture were some of them, but this is not the case. The children, playing timpani, triangle and cymbals as Mrs Hale dances, represent the joy of music ([www.harewood.org](http://www.harewood.org)).



**Figure 15:** Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs. Hale as Euphrosyne*, late 1700's, oil on canvas, Harewood, Yorkshire.

### Conclusion

History portrait had been an important element in the category of portraiture in the 18<sup>th</sup> century European art. Especially French and English artists worked in this genre. Swiss artist Angelica Kauffmann can also be counted among the artists who transformed their sitters into classical deities. These portrait artists were working either in the style of Rococo or Neoclassicism. Romantic art, which shares the same century, did not produce historical portraiture in the disguise of divine characters.

The art of painting took the leading role over sculpture in this realm of becoming another person through artistic creation. The example of *Duchesse de Bourgogne as Diana* dated 1710 by Coysevox (**Figure 1**) is notable in this respect. Another noteworthy example is from the first decade of the 19th century by the neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova (1757-1822). He sculpted Pauline Bonaparte, the sister of Napoleon Bonaparte as Venus Vitrix in 1805-1808. This art work had created a scandal because of its semi nudity. The historical portraits present their noble and royal sitters as clothed deities therefore challenge the conventional depiction of goddesses. This can be regarded as a moral decision imposed by the society.

Real heroines from the world history, biblical figures and literary characters were presented in historical portraits: Sybils, oracular women in ancient Greece; Cleopatra, queen of Egypt in the 1<sup>st</sup> BC; Joan of Arc, a French heroine in the 15<sup>th</sup> century; Mary Magdalene, a biblical figure who traveled with Jesus as one of his followers; Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music; Titania, queen of

the fairies in William Shakespeare's play "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and Corinne, the fictitious Italian poetess in Madame de Staël's novel "Corinne in Italy" were remembered through the images of contemporary ladies. But it can be seen that, goddesses had been the main source of inspiration for noble ladies and artists. Olympian female deities Diana, Minerva and Venus; groups of divine ladies such as the Muses, Graces and Bacchantes; goddesses performing various roles in the Olympian hierarchy such as the cup bearer Hebe and the messenger Iris; mythological heroines with interesting stories such as Ariadne, Circe, Medea and Cassandra aspired ladies to pose and be immortalized in disguise on the canvases. Some other names from the mythological narratives may come to mind because of their absence as roles acquired in art works: Nike goddess of victory, Demeter goddess of harvest, her daughter Persephone, goddess of justice Themis, the beautiful heroine Helene and so on. On the other hand, the exclusion of some figures, such as Eris, goddess of discord, can be understood for their negative connotations. Some of the goddesses have been more popular among the ladies. There are numerous examples of portraits showing ladies as Hebe, Flora or Bacchante.

It can be stated that portraits of gentlemen in mythological poses were not common. Largillier's 1725 dated portrait of young John Bateman as Cupid and Nattier's 1746 dated portrait of Duc de Chaulnes as Hercules are among the few examples.

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Princeton University Art Museum

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Waddesdon Manor

<http://collection.waddesdon.org.uk/search.do?id=41558&db=object&page=1&view=detail>  
(3 August 2016)

Norton Simon Museum

[https://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse\\_artist.php?name=Romney%2C+George](https://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse_artist.php?name=Romney%2C+George)  
(24 October 2016)

Royal Museums Greenwich

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Lady Lever Art Gallery

<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ladylever/collections/paintings/gallery1/ladyhamilton.aspx>  
(20 October 2016)

Harewood

<http://harewood.org/explore/art/artwork/mrs-hale-as-euphrosyne/> (24 June 2016)