

A detailed oil painting of a woman in 18th-century fashion. She is seated, wearing a voluminous green dress with intricate floral embroidery in shades of red and pink. Her hair is styled in an elaborate updo with white ribbons. She is looking slightly to her right with a calm expression. Her right hand rests on an open book, which is placed on her lap. The background is dark and indistinct, focusing attention on the woman and her dress.

# THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY WOMAN

OLIVIER BERNIER

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city

THE  
EIGHTEENTH  
CENTURY  
WOMAN

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To J.K.O.

Who asked me to write this book, and whose advice and encouragement were of immeasurable help

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FOREWORD  
DIANA VREELAND

Courage, Gallantry, Beauty. Honor: The standards of the eighteenth century always remained in view - through war, revolution, evolution, intrigue, and dishonesty - with etiquette and order the people's companion and guide.

Everything was a form of exultation and triumph . . . trumpets, bugles, fanfares, and banners . . . splendid architecture . . . escutcheons and trophies on palace walls and on rooftops . . . graceful interiors filled with objects designed to be as useful and as beautiful as the craftsman could make them . . . spreading gardens scented with the fresh smells of nature before petrol and pollution . . . fountains like huge jets of crystal . . . barges floating down canals beneath the stars, with musicians serenading pretty women . . . the language of the streets, the language of scholars.

Everything was emerging and growing - the whisper and murmur of change were everywhere. Villages were becoming towns; towns were becoming cities, cities were dominating nations. The eighteenth-century woman in Europe and America was born into a world of opening doors, of opportunity. She came forward, walking quite naturally into the vista of promise that lay before her, translating ambition into opportunity . . . and reality.

- Diana Vreeland



# PREFACE

"Women reigned then," Madame Vigée-Lebrun, a highly successful painter, wrote about the France of the 1770s and 1780s, and she was right. After many centuries of darkness, women came into the light during the eighteenth century. They molded public opinion, governed countries, set literary and artistic standards, made fashion a universal necessity, and ruled society. Still, they never thought they were the same as men: They required and expected to be treated with the deference, the admiration which was obviously their due.

It wasn't that women, as in the nineteenth century, were considered fragile flowers who needed protection from the rough world outside. They hunted and rode, just like men. They chose their sexual partners freely and changed them frequently. They spent what they wished, went where they wanted, and did what amused them, whether it was giving a costume ball, attending a physics lecture, or running a salon. The *maréchale de Luxembourg* was a patron of writers and became Rousseau's great benefactor. Madame de Pompadour helped to start a porcelain factory. Women's lives, unhampered by obstinate husbands, were theirs to spend as they pleased.

That, at least, was the custom, although the laws that had been made centuries earlier had not changed. While it was almost unheard-of for a husband to exercise his legal powers, in theory, he could do so at any time. The law assumed that a woman occupied one of four categories: She was under age (that is, under twenty-five), married, separated, or widowed. Unmarried women were a rarity since matrimony was based on social convenience, not on mutual love. The decision to marry was made by the couple's families; after the details were settled, and only then, the bride and groom were informed. In this respect, certainly, men and women were equal: Neither was consulted about marriage, and both were expected to give automatic consent to the family's choice.

Young, unmarried women were entirely in their parents' power. They were married off or, if there was no dowry, put into a convent: In either case, they could only obey. Of course, a woman who was over twenty-five and had her own money could live as she chose. Since estates were usually entailed to the eldest son, however, women were not likely to be rich unless they were the last of a great family.