

# Self-Expression in Rococo Art: Analyzing the Social and Political Roles of Women through Fashion and Artistic Representation

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## Abstract:

Feminism and gender equality are the topics that are often discussed in modern societies. On social media, there are also clothes designed for women to protest the inequality imposed on them. As these problems are frequently discussed, it leads to a feminine aesthetic fashion—Rococo. This paper's research background is based on 1700-1785 in France, known as the Rococo period. Rococo style began in the 1730s, focusing on its intricate and delicate decorations. This paper first used the comparison to analyze the difference between Rococo and Baroque styles by listing the famous architecture—Palace of Versailles. The study also examines the women's roles during the Rococo period, highlighting the roles of significant figures like Madame de Pompadour and Marie Antoinette. Through the detailed analysis of clothing, arts, and social roles of women, this paper includes how women used fashion as a tool to express themselves in 18th-century France. The results show that women who employ fashion and art as a method to navigate the restrictive gender roles of their time are particularly effective.

**Keywords:** Rococo; women; fashion; feminine; artistic.

## 1. Introduction

Feminism and gender equality are the topics that are often discussed in modern societies. On social media, there are also clothes designed for women to protest the inequality imposed on them. As these problems are frequently discussed, it leads to a feminine aesthetic fashion—Rococo. The Rococo fashion is one of the most famous styles in France and has now been extended to the Lolita style trending worldwide.

The change in fashion trends has somehow reflected women's changing social and political roles during time. The gorgeous Rococo style clothing, centered the theme on women, implies women's self-expression.

This study focuses on the women in the Rococo period in France. Rococo art and architecture represent a style that shifted from the drama of the Baroque style to a lighter and feminine aesthetic. The significance

of this research relies on its exploration of how the Rococo style reflects broader social and cultural trends and effects on the role of women in 18th-century France. This study primarily examines the intersection of art, fashion, and social status during the Rococo era, highlighting figures such as Madame de Pompadour and Queen Marie Antoinette.

The ultimate goal of this research is to provide a deeper understanding of how Rococo art both shaped women and was shaped by the social dynamics of its time. To achieve this goal, the study analyzes both visual and textual sources such as the Palace of Versailles and Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun's painting "Marie Antoinette and Her Children" to offer a comprehensive explanation of the Rococo period.

## **2. The Characteristics of Rococo Art and Architecture**

Rococo art is a style that combines and extends the border of the previous Baroque style instead of breaking the last style from 1700 through 1785. The Rococo style began in France in the 1730s as an origin of rebellion against the geometric Louis XIV style and soon spread to other parts of Europe [1]. Rococo style is known for its intricate, delicate decorations which often incorporate curved lines and elaborate patterns, creating a lightness and refinement look. Moreover, Rococo-style architecture loves using soft and pastel colors, such as light blues, pinks, and yellows to construct an impression of gentleness and femininity. The style emphasized the interior structure decorations by featuring rich carvings, paintings, and murals. Thus, the architects often blend various artistic elements to detail but also enhance the overall visual experience. Rococo architecture is also closely associated with feminine aesthetics, particularly in places like Venice, where this style was deeply influenced by feminine elements in society. Because of the influence of feminine elements, the overall feel of Rococo architecture is more elegant and sensual which allows it to move away from the weighty and serious atmosphere of earlier Baroque styles. For example, the Palace of Versailles is a typical type of Rococo-style building that applies gilded moldings, stucco work, and detailed carvings. At Versailles, the technique of adding gold leaf in moldings is used extensively to highlight architectural features and add the characteristic of opulence to the palace. The gold leaf is applied to complex patterns to create a shimmering effect that catches the light beautifully. The gilded moldings often incorporate motifs such as shells, flowers, and foliage, which are common in Rococo design. These elements all symbolize nature

and beauty, reflecting the Rococo emphasis on elegance and refinement. Additionally, the technique of Stucco—creates three-dimensional decorative elements on walls and ceilings, has been used at Versailles too. The stucco work includes elaborate scrolls, garlands, and cherubs to add depth and texture to the surfaces. Detailed carvings are especially prominent in the furniture and woodwork at Versailles such as delicate carvings of flower patterns feature all over Chairs, tables, and cabinets, adding a layer of sophistication to the building. With all these elegant details combined, the architecture has created a cohesive aesthetic for the palace and contributed to one of the representations of the Rococo era [2].

Comparing the Rococo style with the last style that is popular in France—The Baroque style—differentiates it from the new Rococo style. The Baroque style emerged in Europe around the early 17th century and lasted until the mid-18th century before the Rococo style started. It is mainly characterized by the elements of dramatic expressions, grandeur, and a sense of movement. Further, Baroque art and architecture often feature profound contrasts, complex details, and a strong sense of emotion and tension [1]. On the emotional and expression side, Rococo drawings are mostly light and playful while Baroque drawings are often concepts with dramatic intensity. On the scale side, Rococo works mostly focused on charm and elegance while Baroque works are grand and monumental. On the ornamentation side, both styles are highly decorative while Rococo is more intricate, and Baroque is more dramatic [3].

## **3. The Social Status of Women during the Rococo Period**

In 18th-century France, during the Rococo period, women's social status was legally and politically lower than man. Women's dissatisfied feelings broke out in Gender and the French Revolution in the Late 18th Century, in which they submitted a petition to the National Assembly, asking male legislators to end privileges based on gender, granting women the same rights and liberties as men. However, the petition was ultimately rejected, and the inequalities were further codified in the "Code Napoléon" of 1804 [4]. Before the French Revolution, the Old Regime society was a highly hierarchical "corporatist" society, where people's status was determined by their group membership rather than individual traits. This means that women's social positions were determined more by their class than by their sex. Although the social status is mainly determined by the class, women in the upper class, particularly royal mistresses like Madame de Pompadour,

had considerable influence but never on the same side as men. For instance, Pompadour wielded power through her role as Louis XV's mistress, but her influence was often criticized as contributing to the "effeminacy" of Old Regime politics.

Madame de Pompadour and Marie Antoinette can be considered as the two well-known figures in shaping the cultural and social landscape of the Rococo period. They exemplify how women utilized art and fashion to craft their public images and assert their social status. Madame de Pompadour, mistress to Louis XV, was one of the most influential women of her time. Beyond her role as the king's companion, she was a key patron of the arts and an advisor in political areas in France. As one of France's leading cultural figures, she has shaped public taste and fashion, especially in architecture, painting, and design. Pompadour created a public image that extended her influence beyond the court to sponsoring artists and participating in national affairs. Her patronage helped to shape the Rococo art movement, "cementing her legacy as a tastemaker and cultural leader" [5]. Through her involvement in the arts, Pompadour not only solidified her status but also contributed to the wider cultural development of France during the period. The distinct role that art played in reflecting and strengthening political power during the French Revolution is highlighted by how visual symbols such as busts were "paraded solemnly through the city to the Place Louis XV" [5]. This connection between art and political symbolism extended even to the representation of influential figures like Pompadour, reinforcing the political and cultural dynamics of the time.

Similarly, Queen Marie Antoinette, who is the wife of Louis XVI, utilized art and fashion to establish her public persona. Because she is known for her extravagant taste in clothing, hairstyles, and jewelry so that she became a symbol of French luxury and opulence. While criticized for her lavish lifestyle, her influence over fashion was undeniable with efforts to shape trends not just in France but across Europe. Marie Antoinette also created an exclusive social circle centered around herself at Versailles which positioned her as a trendsetter in aristocratic society. She introduced and popularized styles such as the pouf hairstyle and the chemise à la reine, a simple muslin dress that contrasted sharply with the elaborate court attire. Her use of fashion as a means of asserting her identity and status was both a strength and a vulnerability. Her sartorial choices and patronage of the arts were tools to project authority and reinforce her royal status. As Goudie notes, Marie Antoinette's fashion choices "confirmed her undiminished ability to conjure up both the flamboyance and the folly of a vanished aristocratic world" [5]. However, while her extravagant tastes and lavish spending on cloth-

ing and accessories earned her admiration, they also contributed to her unpopularity among the French populace, who viewed her as a symbol of royal excess. Stefan Zweig captures this sentiment, describing her as "the portrait of an average woman" whose life was marked by extremes of adulation and infamy [6].

Both Madame de Pompadour and Marie Antoinette understood the power of art and fashion in shaping public perception. By aligning themselves with the Rococo style, they not only set trends but also communicated their cultural and intellectual aspirations. Pompadour's penchant for pastel colors, delicate floral motifs, and elaborate gowns with lace trimmings epitomized the Rococo aesthetic. Her influence extended beyond courtly fashion, as her style choices "popularized the use of floral-patterned silks and pastel tones, which came to define Rococo fashion" [7]. Additionally, Pompadour's support of the Enlightenment and her patronage of philosophers like Voltaire further solidified her reputation as a progressive and enlightened figure [5]. Despite this, as Nochlin explains, women of this era often faced limitations in their participation in the arts due to societal expectations: "Women were often relegated to the private sphere, and their artistic endeavors were seen as secondary to their roles as wives and mothers" [8].

Similarly, Marie Antoinette's extravagant wardrobe was known for setting trends across Europe, especially with her introduction of the "pouf" hairstyle, which "rose to towering heights, adorned with feathers, flowers, and even model ships" [7]. Her patronage of the arts and involvement in the creation of the Petit Trianon and a private retreat at Versailles have directly showcased her desire to cultivate a personal space that reflected her tastes and interests. Through her sartorial choices, such as the chemise à la reine—an informal muslin gown that broke away from the rigid court attire—Marie Antoinette "asserted her individuality and sparked a new trend toward simpler, more natural fashion" [6]. However, she has also been seen as detached from the hardships of the French population's choices which symbolized the excesses of the monarchy [5]. This public view has somehow contributed to her unpopularity.

#### **4. Art as a Tool for Self-Expression and Social Protest**

Art has long been a powerful tool for self-expression and social protest, and this is exemplified in Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun's painting "Marie Antoinette and Her Children". The artwork portrays the queen in a more modest and maternal light, as opposed to her typical illustration

in extravagant Rococo attire. This shift in representation was strategic during a time of increasing political turmoil, as Marie Antoinette sought to soften her public image and present herself as a caring mother. The painting was an effort to counteract the perception of her as a symbol of royal excess. As Foley notes, women during this period “were often confined to the domestic sphere yet utilized their maternal roles to project political messages” [4]. Through this imagery, Marie Antoinette attempted to realign her persona with the values of family and motherhood.

Additionally, Rococo art and fashion were often used by women to communicate status and personal aspirations. Sanda Brighidin discusses how Rococo women “strategically employed fashion and art to assert their influence and express their societal roles” [9]. This is evident in how Marie Antoinette used this portrait to shift public perceptions, presenting herself as relatable and compassionate during a time of growing unrest.

Moreover, François Boucher’s work, often criticized for its focus on aristocratic frivolities, serves as a broader example of how Rococo art could be both a reflection of societal indulgence and a medium for critique. As Melissa Hyde explains, artists of the Rococo period were key figures in shaping public opinion and often became embroiled in political discourse through their depictions of the aristocracy [10]. Thus, “Marie Antoinette and Her Children” exemplifies how art functioned as both personal expression and a tool for navigating complex social and political landscapes.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this research reveal that Rococo art and architecture were not only characterized by their elegance and lightness but also served as tools for women like Madame de Pompadour and Marie Antoinette to assert their social influence in a male-dominated society during 18th-century France. The research concludes that the strong feminine associated with Rococo art played a critical role not only in reflecting gender roles and status but also in shaping the social dynamics of 18th-century France.

This study provides valuable insights for future research on the intersection or combination of art, social power, and gender during historical periods. Its impact lies in highlighting how art can be a medium for both personal expression and broader social commentary, especially for

women to handle restrictive societal structures or social protests.

However, hopefully, future research should focus more on expanding the understanding of how other lesser-known women of the Rococo era used art to challenge or reinforce societal norms and how women nowadays use art to rebel against social norms. Additionally, further exploration of the connections between Rococo and other artistic movements would deepen the analysis of art’s role in shaping historical narratives.

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