

Books  
Forward

**BOOK CLUB KIT**



## *Dear reader friends,*

I am so grateful to have the privilege of sharing the story of the remarkable Adélaïde Labille-Guiard's life with people who may never have heard of her or have only a vague knowledge of who she is. And nothing is more gratifying than knowing a group of intelligent people are reading my book, thinking about it, and discussing it. That's because to me, the purpose of historical fiction is to immerse readers in a different world that reveals both the differences and commonalities between the past and the present, that does more than just tell a compelling story—important though that is.

While I am writing a story like this, I become deeply engaged with both my historical and my invented characters. I fall in love with them. Sometimes they frustrate me or make me angry. Often they make me sad as I stand beside them through their trials and disappointments. I become obsessed, and it can be hard to let them go!

But if I didn't let them go, I would never be able to send them out into the world for readers to get to know and, I hope, love as much as I do. Talking to those readers, hearing different, individual reactions to the story, reminds me of why I persist in doing this demanding work.

I sincerely hope you enjoy *The Portraitist*, and look forward to meeting with you. Thank you for doing me the honor of selecting my book!

— *Susanne Dunlap*



AN INTERVIEW WITH

# Susanne Dunlap

Susanne is the author of twelve works of historical fiction for adults and teens, as well as an Author Accelerator Certified Book Coach. Her love of historical fiction arose partly from her studies in music history at Yale University (PhD, 1999), partly from her lifelong interest in women in the arts as a pianist and non-profit performing arts executive. Her novel *The Paris Affair* won first place in its category in the CIBA Dante Rossetti awards for Young Adult Fiction. *The Musician's Daughter* was a Junior Library Guild Selection and a Bank Street Children's Book of the Year, and was nominated for the Utah Book Award and the Missouri Gateway Reader's Prize. *In the Shadow of the Lamp* was an Eliot Rosewater Indiana High School Book Award nominee. Susanne earned her BA and an MA (musicology) from Smith College and lives in Biddeford, Maine, with her little dog Betty.



## What inspired you to write about Adélaïde Labille-Guiard?

I've always been interested in women in the arts, and the 18th century has a special place in my heart (my dissertation was about 18th-century opera). Also, Adélaïde's self-portrait with her two students that hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is a huge favorite of mine. But originally, when I first conceived of the book, I thought of her in relation to her rival, Vigée Le Brun. Through research, I began to know her in her own right and to appreciate how different her life must have been from her rival's, how much more stood in her way. I also love the difference in her painting style from Le Brun's. It feels much more real, more present, less beautiful in a good way.



### **Why focus on Adélaïde instead of Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun?**

Originally, I thought I would write about Vigée Le Brun. But I love an underdog, and after discovering that they literally followed each other's footsteps — but Le Brun doesn't even mention her rival's name in her three-volume memoir — I was intrigued.

### **Of course art plays an important role in this book. Are you an artist as well as a musician and writer?**

Alas, I am no artist! I took a drawing class in college but... no. I love art and have always gone to museums and have done a lot of reading about art history and artists. As research for this book, I did read an 18th-century treatise on oil painting. However, as André Vincent says to Adélaïde before he starts to teach her, there's a great deal of difference between reading a treatise and actually making art.

### **Did Adélaïde really do a portrait of Robespierre and get a huge commission from the Comte de Provence just as the revolution was starting?**

Yep. All true. All the paintings mentioned in the book existed at one time or still exist. The two mentioned in this question are among those that were probably destroyed during the Revolution.

### **While the story is based on a true story, there are some characters that you've created. Which of the characters are real?**

Most of the characters are, in fact, historical. The ones I've created are Adélaïde's first student (the rest of the named students are historical), her father's lover, and a few very minor, walk-on characters. However, I took major liberties with the characters of her father and her estranged husband to the point where I might as well have invented them, partly because there was very little available information about them. In those cases, the story comes first.

### **Did Adélaïde really sell erotic pastels?**

Alas, no. At least, I could find no evidence of such a thing. However, erotic drawings were a lucrative trade in 18th-century Paris, and my cash-strapped heroine could easily have decided to capitalize on her talents in this way.

*Connect with Susanne*

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# Discussion Questions

1. Of the two most famous women painters in Paris in the late 18th century, Adélaïde was the underdog. What effect does that dynamic have on the story?
2. France was a Catholic country at the time the book takes place, and divorce was illegal. Do you think the way Adélaïde chose to conduct her life after she and her husband were separated was justified or moral?
3. How might Adélaïde's — and her rival Elisabeth's, for that matter — career trajectories have been different today?
4. Was the system of patronage in the arts an effective way to support those activities? Could we benefit from a similar system today, at a time when artists often find it difficult to make a living through their art?
5. The French Revolution and the subsequent Terror under Robespierre had far-reaching consequences, but *The Portraitist* only deals with how they affected a narrow slice of daily life for a specific group of people. How did this narrow focus impact your understanding of the conditions at that time?
6. What surprised you most about the depictions in *The Portraitist* of Paris, the French court, the art establishment, and everyday life?
7. Adélaïde was as important as a teacher of art during her life as she was an artist. How did that play out in her relationships in *The Portraitist*?
8. There is only one documented meeting between Adélaïde and Elisabeth, and Elisabeth does not mention her rival's name in her three-volume memoir. Can you think of two “stars” of today who might have a similar relationship, where they dog each other's footsteps but never really interact?
9. Although divorce was made legal after the Revolution, André and Adélaïde didn't marry until 1800. Why do you think that was? What did Adélaïde have to gain or lose by marrying the love of her life?
10. Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun came from an artistic family, where Adélaïde did not. How much do you think this difference affected her ability to make a name for herself in the art world?





Little is known about Adélaïde's youth and early training. We do know she studied miniatures and watercolors with François-Élie Vincent — the father of her eventual second husband, François-André Vincent — and pastels with Maurice Quentin de la Tour. Her first public exhibition was at the salon of the Academy of Saint-Luc in 1774, where her chief rival, Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, also exhibited for the first time. It's not certain when she started teaching, but she became a well-respected teacher of art to women, who were barred from taking the classes at the Louvre. One of her students became a lifelong friend, and she and André eventually adopted that student after they finally married so that she could inherit their estates.

## SELECTED WORKS BY *Adélaïde Labille-Guiard*



**TOP:** *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils*, 1785

**FAR LEFT:** *Madame Alexis*, 1787

**LEFT:** *Adélaïde Labille-Guiard self-portrait*, 1774; this is one of the works Adélaïde displayed in the Académie de Saint-Luc salon in 1774, the same year her rival, Elisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun exhibited for the first time.



Adélaïde was elected to the Académie Royale in 1783, the same year Vigée Le Brun was elected. A couple of years after that, she gained an appointment as official portraitist to Mesdames, the king's aunts. The appointment brought prestige, but the stipend was only a thousand Livres per year, and Adélaïde always struggled financially.



**ABOVE RIGHT:** *The Sculptor Augustin Pajou, 1783*; this portrait was Adélaïde Labille-Guiard's reception piece when she was elected to the Académie Royale in 1783.

**ABOVE LEFT:** *Helena Massalska, 1779-1792*

**BOTTOM:** *Marie Gabrielle Capet and Marie Marguerite Carreaux de Rosemond, 1785*



Adélaïde took a keen interest in the politics leading up to the Revolution and worked hard to bring about reforms in the Académie, which persisted in its unfriendly policies toward women artists. Adélaïde continued working as long as she could in Paris, until the events of the Terror drove her, André, and her two best students out to the suburbs for safety. She survived, but many of her artworks — including the massive commission for Provence — were destroyed in the chaos of the Revolution.

In 1795, she became the first woman to be awarded accommodations in the Louvre. She and André married in 1800 (divorce was not legal in France until after the Revolution), and she died in 1803 in Paris. The cause of death and where she is buried are both unknown.





# A TIMELINE

## *The French Revolution*

1789

*January 24*

Louis XVI summons the Estates General



*May 5*

Estates General convenes

*June 20*

The "Tennis Court Oath"

*July 14*

Storming of the Bastille

*July 11*

Louis dismisses Necker, a popular minister

*August 4*

Abolition of feudal rights

*August 26*

Declaration of the Rights of Man



*October 5-6*

Women's March on Versailles;  
Louis "kidnapped" back to Paris

1790

*May 19*

National Assembly abolishes the nobility





1791

*November 27*

Clergy instructed to swear  
allegiance to France



*June 20*

Louis and Marie Antoinette  
flee; captured at Varennes

*September*

New Constitution  
ratified (with  
support of Louis)

1792

*April 25*

First use of  
guillotine



*July 12*

Civil Constitution of the French Clergy



*March 10*

Pope Pius VI condemns the  
Civil Constitution of the Clergy

*August 27*

Declaration of Pillnitz: Austria and  
Prussia express support for Louis



*April 20*

France declares war on Austria

*June 13*

Prussia declares war on France



*August 9*

Paris Commune established

*September 20*

French cannons drive  
back Prussians at Valmy



1793

*August 10*

Parisians storm Tuileries palace;  
end of Louis XVI's power

*September 21*

French Republic proclaimed

*January 21*

Louis XVI executed

*February 1*

France declares war on  
Britain and Netherlands

*April 6*

Committee of  
Public Safety founded

*June 24*

New Constitution proclaimed

*August 12*

Mass conscription instituted

*October 16*

Marie Antoinette executed



1793

*October 5*

Republican calendar adopted



*July 28*

Robespierre guillotined



P R A I S E   F O R

# *The Portraitist*

“An imaginative work that brings the story of a little-known artist to vivid life.”

– **Kirkus Reviews**

“Deeply researched and imagined, *The Portraitist* offers a fascinating and dramatic plunge into the world of a brilliant female artist, struggling to make her mark before and during the turbulent and treacherous era of the French Revolution. I loved this novel.”

– **Sandra Gulland, international bestselling author of *The Josephine Trilogy***

“Written with breathless drama, *The Portraitist* follows the rise of the gifted portraitist Adélaïde Labille-Guiard in Paris during the last years of the late eighteenth century. The novel is a luminous depiction of Paris and those terrible times seen through the astute, compassionate eyes of a woman who had to paint. Every bit of lace, or royal carriage or bloody cobblestone is alive in the writing. The rain drumming on the skylight and a misbuttoned coat speak. Go to those streets with this book in your hand to follow her footsteps and those long-gone turbulent times will come alive to you as if they were yesterday.”

– **Stephanie Cowell, award-winning author of *Claude and Camille***

“In *The Portraitist*, Susanne Dunlap skillfully paints a portrait of a woman struggling to make her way in a man’s world — a topic as relevant today as it was in Ancien Regime France. Impeccably researched, rich with period detail, Dunlap brings to life the little known true story of Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, who fought her husband and society to make a name for herself as a painter to the royal family, the very apex of success-- only to find everything she had built threatened by the Revolution. A stunning story of determination, talent, and reversals of fortune. As a lifelong Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun fan, I am now questioning my allegiances!”

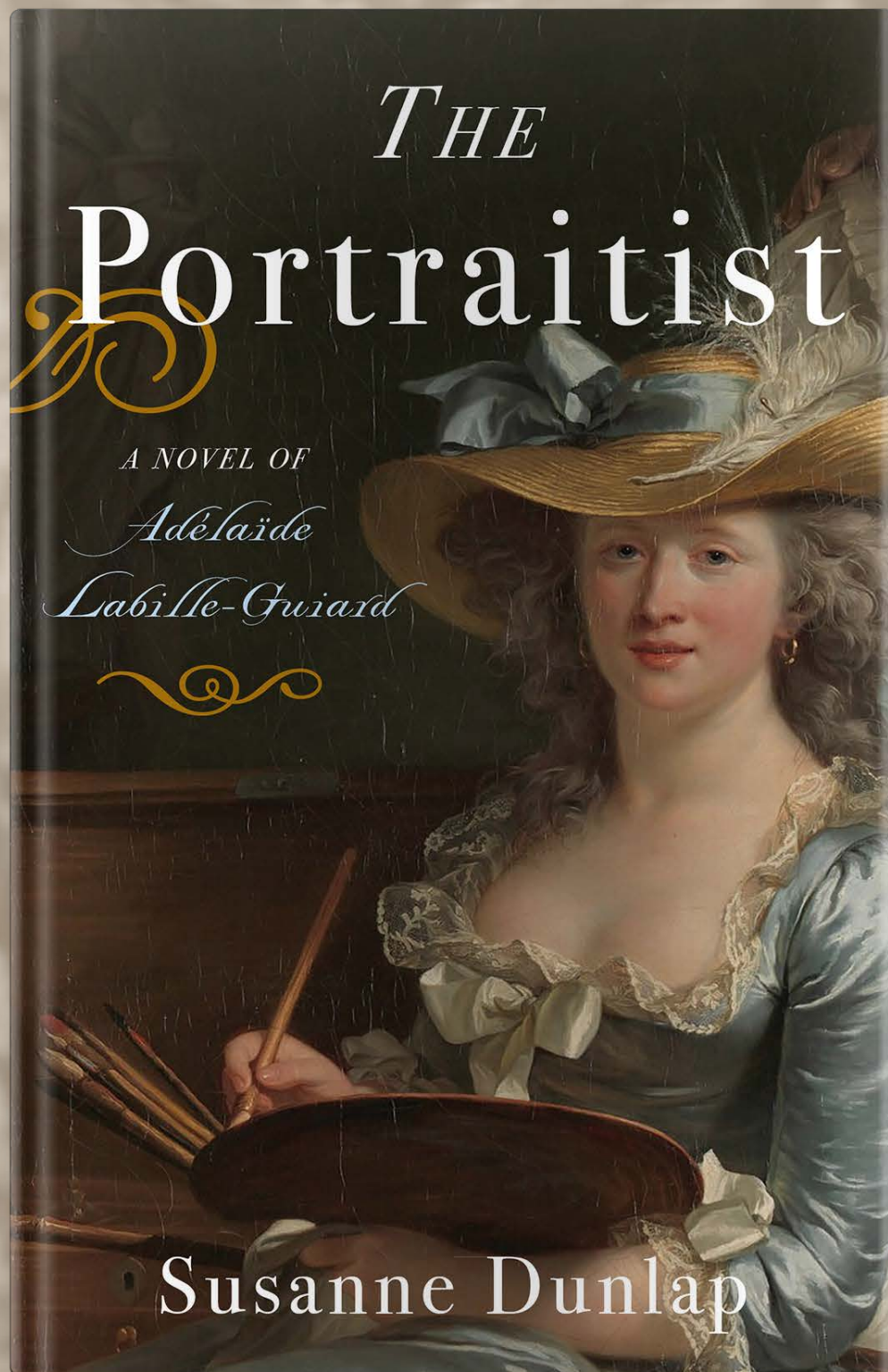
– **Lauren Willig, New York Times bestselling author of *The Summer Country* and *Band of Sisters***

“[*The Portraitist* is a] luminous novel of Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, whose livelihood and longing for respect are threatened by the institutions that deny women artists their due, compounded by the tumultuous events of the French Revolution.

Deftly written and impeccably researched. Highly recommended.”

– **Michelle Cameron, award-winning author of *Beyond the Ghetto Gates***





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