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# *High Society*

## *The Portraits of Franz Xaver Winterhalter*

With essays by Helga Kessler Aurisch,  
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and an introduction by Richard Ormond

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## 56 Empress Eugénie in a Straw Hat

1857

Oil on canvas, 55  $\frac{7}{8}$  × 43  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (142 × 111 cm), oval  
Hillwood Museum, Washington, inv. no. 51-11

This composition is obviously derived from an earlier idea Winterhalter had for the figure of Eugénie in *Empress Eugénie and Her Ladies-in-Waiting* (1855, cat. 52). In fact, as is shown by a preparatory watercolor sketch for that painting (cat. 51), the painter had at first envisaged representing the empress in it wearing a large straw hat. This iconography was undoubtedly inspired by the celebrated portrait of Marie Antoinette said to be *en gaulle* [in a straw hat] by Élisabeth Vigée-Le Brun (1783, the original has vanished), which was inspired in turn by Rubens's *Woman in a Straw Hat* (about 1622–25, National Gallery, London). Eugénie professed a particularly ardent admiration for that queen. Apart from the hat, there are numerous parallels between the two portraits, especially the importance given to flowers for adding elegance and richness to the whole, to the exclusion of other finery. The empress and the queen are each wearing dresses of transparent white muslin shot through with colored ribbons, a style of dress that Eugénie particularly liked for summer and evening wear. In the definitive version of the empress with her ladies-in-waiting, the gesture of holding a bouquet of honeysuckle is another direct echo of Marie Antoinette's portrait.

It has been frequently assumed that the portrait of the empress wearing a straw hat was painted about 1854, perhaps before the larger painting or during the same period. This conjecture would seem unlikely because the painting kept in Washington, which is documented as a personal commission from the empress intended to be given to Count Bacchioni, is signed and dated 1857. If the painting discussed here is a second version, the artist would certainly not have indicated the date, according to the practice prevailing at the time, unless there were substantial differences between the later work and the original. Besides, comparison with the related painting provides indications of congruence. In the latter, Eugénie is seated in a three-quarter profile pose within the circle formed by her companions, but she is turning her head and her gaze to the right to present the bouquet to the related Princess of

Essling. The individual portrait features the same pose, but in this case it seems far less motivated, especially since both her hands are resting on her knees. The clothing worn by the empress is also very similar in both, except for the straw hat and the hairstyles. In the individual portrait the ruching has been replaced by ribbons, not lavender ones, but bright blue ones that echo the sky and the mountains in the background. Even the background greenery features details that are astonishingly identical (the cut of the foliage, the large oblique branch). This portrait is, for all these reasons, very likely to be a picture derived from the famous painting of 1855, which circulated widely in lithographs and photographs. Three non-signed versions are known, one of which was the companion piece to a portrait of Napoleon III kept in Compiègne (cat. 57). LC

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REFERENCES: Ormond/Blackett-Ord 1987, pp. 48–50, fig. 36, p. 49, no. 476, p. 238 (comparative paintings); Panter 1996, p. 140, no. 88, p. 233; Washington D.C. 1998, no. 146, p. 267; Granger 2005, pp. 217–18; Chabanne 2008, p. 42; McQueen 2011, p. 101, fig. 2.11, p. 100; Barilo von Reisberg, "The Winterhalter Catalogue," no. 579  
EXHIBITIONS: Venice, 29th Biennale, 1934, no. 355; French and Company 1958, no. 50.

PROVENANCE: Given by the empress to Count Félix Bacchioni, grand chamberlain to the emperor; Anna Maria Bacchioni, his sister, 1865; Marquise Rosselli of Turco, née Bacchioni, 1904; French and Company, New York, about 1942; Marjorie Merriweather Post Collection at the Hillwood Estate since 1952, inv. no. 51-11.

