



*The Fantastic Flights of*

# *Sophie Blanchard*

*Reanimating a Ballooning Superstar*

“The Fantastic Flights of Sophie Blanchard” is a documentary, currently in production, that explores the life of the first professional female pilot in history. The film combines live-action interviews and animated reenactments to portray the story of one woman’s spectacular rise from rural poverty to international celebrity in Napoleonic France.

I am a filmmaker and animator with a passion for one extraordinary balloonist. I first encountered Sophie Blanchard in an aviation book my father gave me in 2001. It noted that Blanchard, who first soloed in 1805, was the Official Aeronaut of Napoleon’s Empire and one of the most successful fliers of her day. To read of a woman pilot so early in aviation history was exciting; a woman with an official appointment in the French Empire was altogether astonishing.

So, who was Sophie Blanchard?

To answer this question, I embarked on a decade-long personal journey. I discovered a pioneering woman who overcame countless obstacles to reach the peak of her profession. With a career that spanned 15 years and 66 successful flights, Sophie Blanchard was an international icon who changed the face of ballooning.

While touring festivals including Telluride and Sundance with my award-winning film *The Velvet Tigress*, I began to investigate Blanchard’s story. I was disappointed by the lack of information in U.S. archives and online.

During a trip to the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in July of 2003, a librarian presented me with an 1879 *Scientific American Supplement* article. The Victorian author cited several of Blanchard’s major accomplishments and lamented that she was forgotten. It was as though, in modern times, Sophie Blanchard had virtually disappeared from the records of history.

As Blanchard was a Frenchwoman, the librarian recommended that I approach the Air and Space

*Story & Animation Art by Jennifer Sachs*



*Blanchard's first solo flight ended with a landing that could have ended her career and life! She was captured by rural French peasants who believed her to be an otherworldly demon.*

Museum in Paris for further information. I took a hiatus from my commercial work as an animator to embark on a self-funded trip to archives in France and Italy where I might uncover more about the iconic pilot.

My first day in Paris, a holiday, the libraries were closed. On a tip from my *Scientific American Supplement*, I made a pilgrimage to Père Lachaise Cemetery to look for Sophie Blanchard's tomb, a sizeable monument erected by fans and supporters after her death. Long neglected, the memorial's inscriptions were effaced, echoing Blanchard's historical erasure. Deeply touched, I determined to make it my personal mission to restore her story to the world.

Over nearly ten years, and numerous trips abroad, I collected and translated a comprehensive archive on this singular balloonist.

Marie Madeleine Sophie Armand was born in the small village of Trois Canons, France in 1778, before the dawn of aviation. At 19 years of age, Sophie married the pioneer balloonist Jean-Pierre Blanchard. Her husband, 25 years her senior, had been the aerial hero

of France during her childhood, but had since fallen on hard times.

The couple's first joint flight in 1804 ended in disaster. Jean-Pierre fell from the balloon to a rooftop, leaving his naïve young bride to force an emergency crash landing. To the shock of her contemporaries, Sophie could not wait to return to the air—alone.

Sophie was a tiny and deceptively timid young woman. On land, she was afraid of loud noises, confrontations, and riding in carriages, but she was fearless in the air.

Her first solo flight from the city of Toulouse in 1805 was a great success. The landing was less so. Touching down in the rural community of Lux, Sophie was perceived as a demon and captured by superstitious peasants armed with guns, sticks, and various makeshift weapons.

Having successfully negotiated her way out of this dangerous situation, Sophie went on to perform more solo flights under the tutelage of her husband. In 1808, after ten years of marriage, Jean-Pierre suffered a stroke that would prove fatal. He left Sophie with massive

debts and recommended that she drown or hang herself.

Sophie did neither. She vowed to repay her husband's debts and clear the family name. She designed a more economical hydrogen airship and embarked on a solo career.

In that era, there were few opportunities for women outside the home. Though Sophie Blanchard had not been the first woman to fly in a balloon, she was the first to make flying her profession. Her flights, from major European cities, drew massive crowds of spectators. In sheer number of successful flights, Sophie Blanchard triumphed over her contemporaries. Her popularity emboldened a new generation of female pilots.

Sophie thrived on challenges and was renowned for her daring. In 1810, she was low on hydrogen, but unwilling to disappoint her fans. She removed her basket and rose above Frankfurt poised upon the fragile ring that secured the ship's netting. She later remarked, "I felt the hoop shake under my feet, but I would rather have died than miss an engagement I had taken."

In recognition of her feats and

skill, the Emperor Napoleon named Sophie Blanchard the Official Aeronaut of the Empire, even as his laws rescinded women's rights. She outlasted Napoleon to become the Official Aeronaut of the Restoration to King Louis XVIII.

Sophie Blanchard was one of the most cherished performers of her time. In 1819, she fell to her death during her 67th aerial performance.

Every piece of information I've found about Sophie Blanchard's flights has made me want to learn more. After years spent scouring archives, in 2009, I finally began production of my documentary with the assistance of fellowships at the CAMAC Center of Art in France, the Bogliasco Foundation in Italy, and Yaddo in New York. I set out to shoot interviews with the few rare individuals who were able to shed additional light on the life and times of my balloonist.

In Paris, I had the rare privilege to interview Auduoin Dollfus, record-breaking balloonist, astronomer, and author.

Filming continued in the tiny village of Montebruno, Italy, where I found Sophie Blanchard's memory alive and well. Local author Giovanni Ferrero discussed Blanchard's unexpected landing there in 1811 when villagers took the flying woman to be the Madonna. Mayors past and present described a ballooning festival they held annually in Montebruno in Blanchard's honor and discussed the lasting impact of her appearance on their community.

In my interviews in the U.S., Tom Crouch, Senior Curator at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, and authors Michael Lynn and Rachel Schneider, offered insights into the history of aeronautics, life in the Napoleonic era, and the global cultural impact of ballooning.

My film, "The Fantastic Flights of Sophie Blanchard" will combine these live-action interviews with archival illustrations and colorfully animated reenactments of Blanchard's adventures. The style of the animation is inspired by the popular illustrations of Blanchard's



*Top: Sachs' working animation art derived from the filming in Montebruno, Italy.*

*Center: Jen Sachs, director, and Davide Nardelli, DP, in Montebruno, Italy, in July 2009 on the site of Blanchard's 1811 landing where the locals mistook her for the Madonna. Photo by Sandro Del Rosario.*

*Bottom: Jen Sachs, director and animator, at CAMAC Center of Art in Marnay-Sur-Seine, France in 2009, at work on storyboards and animation tests for her film. Photo by Greg Habiby.*



## THE AUTHOR

Jen Sachs is an independent filmmaker who lives and works in Los Angeles. Her films have won several prizes for “Best Animation,” including a Student Academy Award, and have been screened in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and U.S. festivals including Sundance, Telluride, and Ann Arbor. They have been programmed in more than 70 festivals in over a dozen countries and broadcast domestically on public television and cable. In 2003, Jen was named one of Filmmaker Magazine’s “New Faces of Independent Film.”

***“I felt the hoop shake under my feet, but I would rather have died than miss an engagement that I had taken.”***

*Mdme. Blanchard after an 1812 ascension over the city of Frankfurt, Germany.*

era. Sophie Blanchard earned her place in history, but she is most generally noted, if at all, as the first woman to die in an aviation accident, a misleading summation to her groundbreaking career. The animated scenes will allow the balloonist to emerge from the dusty pages of obscure documents and come to life before a modern audience.

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The animation, the most challenging part of this feature-length production, is currently underway. My goal is to finish the film in 2012. To do so will require additional animators and post-production personnel.

This self-funded production has in recent months received grants from the Wolf Aviation Fund and the Puffin Foundation. Throughout my long journey, I have met many wonderful people who have contributed their time and expertise to restore Sophie Blanchard to history.

I am now reaching out to the ballooning community to join in the completion of this unique production.

Help share the roots of aviation history and introduce the thrill of ballooning to others. Please visit [www.fantasticflightsmovie.com](http://www.fantasticflightsmovie.com) for a trailer of the film and information about how you can Help Sophie Take Flight.



<sup>1</sup>Robert Chaussois, “Madame Blanchard: Aéronaute des Fêtes Publiques du Premier Empire.” *Historama* 166 (1965): 56-60.

<sup>2</sup>Poterlet, Jeune. “Notice sur Madame Blanchard.” (Paris; 1819).



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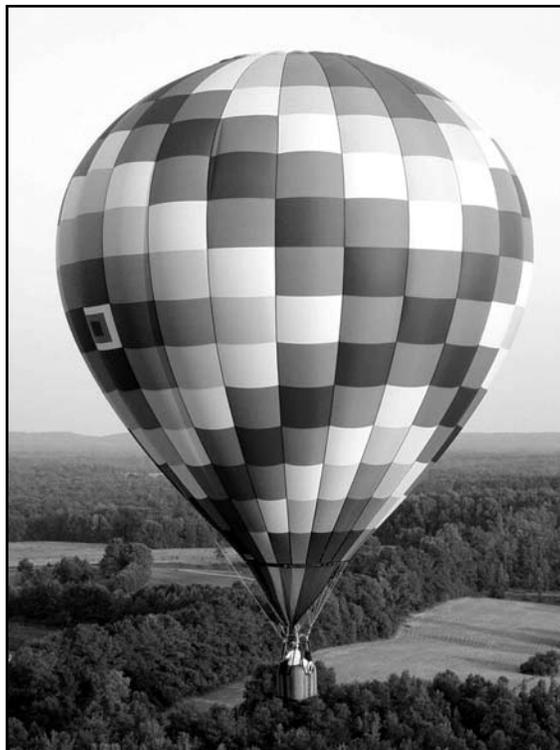
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