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“Fragonard: The Fantasy Figures”

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, DC

Ewa Lajer-Burcharth

RARELY DOES A MERE SHEET OF PAPER radically challenge our view of a major artist’s oeuvre. But this is exactly what happened when, in June 2012, a previously unknown page of brown-ink-and-pencil sketches by Jean-Honoré Fragonard, arguably the most brilliant of the eighteenth-century painters, appeared for sale at a public auction in Paris. The piece contained Fragonard’s own thumbnail renderings of eighteen “fantasy figures,” his exuberantly creative interpretations of this established pictorial genre.¹ Produced around 1769, when Fragonard was in his late thirties, these extravagant portraits of dramatically posed individuals in antiquated costumes have always been seen as the painter’s quintessential achievement, the pictures’ loose and open manner, energetic touch, and chromatic daring exerting a lasting influence on key modern painters from Manet to Matisse. Yet these works were also enigmatic, raising a number of interpretive problems. The near-identical size of most of the canvases and their shared presentation format indicated that the works formed a series, though their function and meaning remained unclear. A few fantasy figures have been identified as portraits of specific individuals—among them the renowned

art critic and *philosophe* Denis Diderot—but the identity of others was left to speculation. Contributing to the paintings’ mystery was the legend of the extraordinary speed with which they were executed: Handwritten labels on the back of two canvases state that they were done “in one hour.”² But according to a rumor circulating in Fragonard’s time, he sold these works for just one louis (twenty-four livres) apiece, a price incompatible with their deliberate virtuosity.

Enter *Sketches of Portraits*, the recently resurfaced sheet, which sheds new light on Fragonard’s intriguing works but also confounds and even contradicts what we thought we knew about them. The artist’s renditions of his paintings, lined up in three neat rows across the length of the page, further confirm that they constitute a series, suggesting also that Fragonard may have intended to display them as an ensemble. While the names scribbled in his hand under all but one of the thumbnails dispel any doubts about the status of the fantasy figures as portraits, these inscriptions also contradict some of the long-established identifications of the sitters—most surprisingly that of Diderot—and identify other individuals who have not been associated with the works before, thus expanding our sense of the painter’s social milieu. Moreover, featuring four annotated sketches of previously unknown portraits, the sheet suggests that the series might have comprised more paintings than originally suspected, paintings that still await rediscovery.³ Finally, the drawing raises a question about its purpose: Was it meant as a record of the paintings or a plan for their installation?

These new findings and the attendant questions are taken up in a relatively small but revelatory exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Organized by assistant curator Yuriko Jackall, who collaborated on research and restoration with Michael Swicklik, the institution’s senior conservator of paintings, and John K.



Delaney, the gallery’s senior imaging scientist, this exquisite show offers us an unprecedented opportunity to reassess Fragonard’s paintings in light of the new discovery. The exhibition features Fragonard’s newfound drawing, on display for the first time in the US, together with a select group of his fantasy figures, including some rarely seen works from private collections.

Never before has the character of these paintings as an aesthetically coherent group been made more evident. The fairly tight hanging of the canvases, in a single row wrapped around the gallery walls—an arrangement that spatializes the linear presentation of the thumbnail images in the *Sketches of Portraits*—underscores the similarity of their size and shape (with the exception of one oval painting) and brings to the fore the pictorial connections between

Neither conventional likenesses nor pure fantasies, Fragonard’s paintings were, as one scholar put it, portraits of portraits.

them.⁴ At the center of the exhibition is the National Gallery’s own *Young Girl Reading*, ca. 1769, a work that, despite its notable differences from other paintings in the group, had long been suspected to be a fantasy figure and has now been confirmed as such, thanks to the curator’s and the conservators’ joint efforts. Unlike the sitters who peer out from other portraits, the young woman in the Washington canvas is shown in profile, immersed in a book. However, the fact that she appears to be facing us in *Sketches of Portraits* led the conservators to reexamine the painting. Their analysis revealed an earlier en face version of the figure beneath the present one, permitting the reintegration of the National Gallery painting with



Opposite page, from left: Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Sketches of Portraits*, ca. 1769, ink on paper, 9 × 13¾". Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Portrait of a Man*, ca. 1775, oil on canvas, 33½ × 25½". This page, far left: Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Young Girl Reading*, ca. 1769, oil on canvas, 31½ × 25½". Left, top: Simulation of the original composition of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's ca. 1769 *Young Girl Reading*, 2015. Simulated image: Becca Goodman and Denis Doorly. Left, bottom: X-ray fluorescence scan of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's ca. 1769 *Young Girl Reading*, 2015. Right: Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *M. de La Bretèche*, ca. 1769, oil on canvas, 31½ × 25½".



Fragonard's series. Aside from this new addition, the fourteen paintings on display include four that are unrecorded in the sketch but that are believed to have been either part of the series or related to it.⁵ Their inclusion speaks to the ongoing inquiry presiding over the exhibition, which, in its very form, seeks less to provide definite answers than to open up a conversation about and among the paintings.

Entering a small gallery, you find yourself surrounded by a group of strangers who, turning and gesturing, appear engaged with one another and with you. The man strumming his guitar, dressed in a saffron-yellow jacket, a white ruff, and a red-trimmed velvet toque, seems to have momentarily interrupted his play and turned to cast a warm and curious glance your way. On the opposite wall, an overdressed matronly woman holding a lapdog turns to look at you, too—but also, per the hanging arrangement, to look at the yellow-clad guitarist across the room. Who are these individuals? As the new research presented in the exhibition catalogue indicates, Fragonard's sitters belong to vastly diverse social strata: Aristocrats and financiers are shown side by side with common professionals, men of letters, and artists.⁶ Despite the difference in their status, they all sport similarly colorful, anachronistic attire à l'espagnole, of the kind then worn at masquerades and balls, and which were most likely studio props.⁷ The Spanish costumes set the tone for these portraits as a kind of performance—as fantasies, rather than likenesses in the conventional sense. The sitters are distinguished by their facial features and by their accessories—a sheet of music, a pen, a sword—but they all seem to partake in a game of appearances, a playful deception orchestrated, with their connivance, by the painter for the viewer's benefit.

But if the models are performers, so is their painter. The figures were executed with an unmatched bravado, which the exhibition allows you fully to appreciate. It's not just

that Fragonard painted with ease, but that he showed off his talents, exposing his full bag of tricks, especially his extraordinary way with colors and his nimble gestural work. Far from being confronted by the inscrutable magic of Chardin—another eighteenth-century master of chroma, and Fragonard's teacher—you see it all while it's being done: This is as close as you will ever get to witnessing an eighteenth-century painter at work. Look, for example, at the torso of *The Actor* (see page 186) (now identified as the banker Auguste-Gabriel Godefroy), whose doublet with split sleeves comes alive in thick, seemingly random strokes of yellow, white, brown, gray, and teal green, a stripe of cadmium red (marking a tassel on the hilt of his sword) cutting through the darker, fleshlike folds of paint. You see exactly how the painter's hand moved across the canvas to render Godefroy—and it moved fast; the conservators who examined these works confirmed that they were painted wet-on-wet, if perhaps not exactly “in one hour's time.” This gestural brio produces a strong sense of bodily presence with practically no depth: a bare skeleton of soft strokes suspended in a void. It conveys both the supreme self-confidence of the painter and the sense of risk in his open-ended, provisional style.

What was this ostentatious and risky pictorial performance about? To some extent, it came with the territory of the “fantasy figure,” one of the defining objectives of which was to showcase a painter's technical skill and powers of invention.⁸ Fragonard reinvented the genre, however, by applying it to recognizable individuals and pushing the display of pictorial bravura to an extreme. Neither conventional likenesses nor pure fantasies, his paintings were, as one scholar put it, portraits of portraits.⁹ Whose eyes, then, were they painted for, and why?

Basing their conclusions on the material study of the canvases and their provenance, Jackall and her team have reconfirmed the earlier hypothesis that these works were

most likely not commissioned but done on spec. They may have been intended for Fragonard's patrons, supporters, friends, and fellow artists, but, unlike traditional portraits, whose function was commemorative, few of them remained in the hands of their original owners for long, and some may not have even belonged to the person they depicted in the first place. Several were sold soon after they were produced (e.g., the *Young Girl Reading*, whose sitter has not been identified, was auctioned off in 1776).¹⁰ The standard-size canvases and sometimes shoddy wooden supports Fragonard chose for these portraits corroborates their commercial function.¹¹

Yet these works were not simply painted for money. They also reveal serious aesthetic ambitions. As Satish Padiyar suggests in his nuanced catalogue essay, the fantasy figures may have been the artist's “leap into freedom” from the constraints of the Academy, marking the reorientation of his work and career toward elite private patrons.¹² However, if these works speak of the painter's closer relation to his patrons and/or sitters, they do so in remarkably ambivalent ways.¹³ While he fleshes out these individuals with great skill, Fragonard leaves ample evidence of pictorial negligence, or an outright refusal to cooperate in representation. The degree of unfinish in some of these portraits is inexplicable even by the approximate standards of the fantasy-figure genre. In *Woman with a Dog*, a portrait of the aristocratic salon hostess Marie Émilie Coignet de Courson, the painter describes the ermine-lined coat, the attribute of the sitter's elite status par excellence (she was a descendant of none other than Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis XIV's powerful minister), in provocatively loose smears of brown and teal-blue pigments. This is not simply an openness of pictorial manner. It is as if representation were purposely halted in this part of the painting, making the overdressed lady appear undone from behind.



Courson's costume and those of other sitters bear the marks of a certain *laissez-faire* attitude, if not of cynicism, in the handling. Instead of painting the folds of the lady's high collar à la Marie de Médicis, or rendering the lace trim on the similar collar of *The Singer* (another well-heeled hostess, the amateur musician Anne Pauline Le Breton), the artist merely scraped them with the other end of his brush, substituting a crude indexical shortcut for a fully elaborated pictorial sign. By thus self-consciously abandoning the established protocols of portraiture, the painter declares that his sitters are at his representational mercy: It is up to him to decide on the mode and extent to which they appear on the canvas. And if this message is conveyed in the register of a joke—Madame de Courson's knowing look suggests she may have shared in it—the painter's wit is also laced with aggression, a streak of hostility.

And so, if Fragonard playfully engages with his sitters, his is not exactly a game of courtly politesse. On the contrary, there is a certain *bassesse* to this play. The darker, looser passages, such as those rendering Courson's ermine coat, are not exactly gratifying to look at: They are jarringly unfinished, and the paint is unappetizingly dark and inelegantly laid on. The artist's signatures in some of the paintings epitomize this provocative rejection of painterly grace: In the lower-right corner of *The Singer*, Fragonard not only curiously misspells his own name as "fragao," a bastardized version of his nickname "frago," but also daubs it on crudely, with a finger dipped in a brown pigment unsettlingly reminiscent of bodily excretion.¹⁴ A quip attributed to the painter comes to mind: "I would paint with my ass."¹⁵

What does it mean to be painting the people on whom you professionally depend in such a way? To my mind, these aspects of handling and signing evince the painter's ironic rivalry with his sitters for control in rep-

resentation. Let us note that this ambivalent approach, at once aggressive and ironic, also manifests itself in the *Sketches of Portraits*, in the impossibly knotted outlines of the sitters' bodies (see especially the last sketch in the second row, marked "hale" or "hall") and their "gouged" eyes. In his catalogue essay, Fragonard specialist Jean-Pierre Cuzin notes how atypical these inchoate scribbles were for the gifted draftsman.¹⁶ Cuzin takes this apparent de-skilling as an indication that the sheet was a kind of inventory done by the artist from memory long after the paintings were gone from his studio. It's hard to imagine, however, what purpose such an inventory would have served. I am inclined to follow the alternative suggestion that the drawing was a plan for an installation.¹⁷ But rather than a project for a salon decoration, the rendering may have been a design for an exhibition of the artist's work. The nervous energy and aggressive sketchiness of the thumbnails may be seen as a symptom of Fragonard's anxious eagerness to recuperate these works, dispersed among their owners and throughout the market, for his own artistic benefit. Such an exhibition would have foregrounded the performative self-display of the artist in these paintings—as the National Gallery show does—and reinforced what has been described as the self-promotional aspect of the fantasy figures.¹⁸ (There were, I may add, precedents for such use of exhibition by artists for self-promotional purposes.)¹⁹

As for the Washington, exhibition, it matters not only for Fragonard specialists or aficionados of eighteenth-century art, but for anyone interested in modern art, including painters. This condensed presentation of Fragonard's series lets you in on a cultural moment in the emergence of the modern artist, a key transition in the conception of the artistic profession from *métier* to vocation.²⁰ The exacerbated performativity of these paintings is a telltale sign of this transition: a shift that is not only

about painting per se but about the artist's attempt, as skillful as it was willful, to situate himself, through the depiction of an elite milieu of art collectors, connoisseurs, and amateurs, in the social world at large. The rivalrous tension that traverses these portrayals bespeaks the complexity of this process, and of the challenges the artist faced in negotiating it. In this way, the fantasy figures testify to the high aesthetic as well as social stakes involved in the effort of the painter, the son of a glove maker, to arrogate to himself the right to render the elite and the illustrious in such an idiosyncratic manner. His inclusion of professionals like himself—the miniaturists Charles Paul Jérôme Bréa, the journalist and author Ange Gabriel Meusnier de Querlon (formerly thought to be Diderot), and the publisher Louis François Prault—among these socially privileged men and women may have been, too, a self-repositioning tactic of cultural inscription.²¹ Fragonard thereby established the portrait format as the arena of direct confrontation between the artist and the culture that sustains him or her. It is precisely as a field of such confrontation with the sitter (which may have been the artist herself, or the artist's wife) that we see the portrait taken up later in, e.g., the open structure of Morisot's *Self-Portrait*, 1885; in Matisse's *Woman with a Hat*, 1905, a painting that seems to me to draw directly on Fragonard's work; and in Picasso's *Gertrude Stein*, 1905–1906.

Hovering on the threshold between flattery and mockery, Fragonard's paintings assert the artist's right to turn identity into fantasy of his own making, to transform the portrait from a mere likeness to a technique of the self in which the artist is in charge. Therein lies their modernity. □

"Fragonard: *The Fantasy Figures*" is on view at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, through December 3.

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NOTES

1. On fantasy figures as a genre, including a discussion of Fragonard's works, see Melissa Percival, *Fragonard and the Fantasy Figure: Painting the Imagination* (Farnham, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012). For the discovery of the sheet, see Carole Blumenfeld, *Une facétie de Fragonard: Les révélations d'un dessin retrouvé* (Montreuil, France: Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2013).
2. "en une heure de temps." Attached to the verso of two relined canvases, the portraits *Abbé de Saint-Non* and *M. de La Bretèche*, these notes may have reproduced Fragonard's original inscriptions.
3. At the same time, four of the paintings that have been tentatively linked to the series did not figure on the sheet, which implies either that these did not, after all, belong with the group, or that there may be other sheets with sketches of more portraits. (The enigmatic NO. 12 in the upper-left corner of the drawing would confirm this hypothesis.) For a discussion of these and other problems posed by the sheet, see Blumenfeld, *Une facétie de Fragonard*.
4. The oval *Vestal* (identified as Catherine Thérèse Aubry) makes its inaugural appearance in this group. It was not included in the series exhibited otherwise in toto for the first time in Pierre Rosenberg's "Fragonard" (Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, September 1987–January 1988, and Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February–May 1988).
5. These are the two likenesses of the aristocratic brothers the Ducs d'Harcourt (both in private collections), whose style and character are consistent with other fantasy figures, and two other works, the *Man in Costume* (Art Institute of Chicago) and one that was once believed to represent the astronomer Jérôme de La Lande (Petit Palais, Paris), whose relation to the group is less certain. The exhibition suggests the first was the "trial run" for the series and the second its distant echo, or aftermath.
6. For the new identification of the sitters see Blumenfeld, *Une facétie de Fragonard*; for an extended discussion of their social status, see the contributions of Yuriko Jackall and Elodie Kong in *Fragonard: The Fantasy Figures*, ed. Jackall, exh. cat. (London: Lund Humphries, 2017), 41–73.
7. See Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, "Fashion and Fantasy in the Eighteenth-Century Portrait à l'Espagnole," in *Fragonard: The Fantasy Figures*, 89–101.
8. Fragonard rehearsed and measured himself up to the genre by copying the work—and even the signature—of one of its masters, Alexis Grimou. For the discussion of Fragonard's pastiche of Grimou, see Melissa Percival, "Fragonard and Pastiche: The Case of the *Girl in Spanish Costume* at Dulwich," in *Enlightenment and Tradition: Women's Studies: Montesquieu* (Oxford, UK: Voltaire Foundation, 2007), 47–64.
9. Mary D. Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 169.
10. The portrait of Anne-Louise Brillon de Jouy was inscribed on the original stretcher with the name of a famous eighteenth-century art collector, Pierre Louis Paul Randon de Boisset, which would suggest that he, rather than the sitter, was the painting's first owner. See Jackall, "All Fire: Mystery, Facility, and Figuration," in *Fragonard: The Fantasy Figures*, 6–7. On the provenance and the vicissitudes of the *Young Girl Reading* on the market, the only painting that, curiously, Fragonard did not identify in *Sketch of Portraits*, see Jackall, "All Fire," 6.
11. The artist's choice of supports, described in the nineteenth century as "coarsely nailed onto pieces of wood squared off with an axe," is the more surprising given that they were used for the portraits of two aristocrats, the Ducs d'Harcourt. See Jackall, "All Fire," 16.
12. While Fragonard's preference for private patrons over institutional support by the Academy has been long established in period sources as well as modern literature, Padiyar argues specifically for a fantasy figures being pivotal in the artist's career.
13. For an expanded version of this argument, and for a reassessment of these paintings' place in the artist's oeuvre, see my *The Painter's Touch: Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 212–23.
14. A similarly crude—and possibly misspelled—signature appears in the lower-right corner of *M. de La Bretèche*. For more on the signatures, see Lajer-Burcharth, *The Painter's Touch*, 221–22. For another take on them, see Charlotte Guichard, "Fragonard et les jeux de la signature au XVIIIe Siècle," *Revue de l'art* no. 177 (2012–13): 47–55.
15. The quip—"Je peindrais avec mon cul"—was reported in Jules Renouvier, *Histoire de l'Art Pendant la Révolution Considéré Principalement dans les Estampes: Ouvrage Posthume* (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1863), 167.
16. Jean-Pierre Cuzin, "Point and Counterpoint: Reassessing Fragonard's Sheet," in *Fragonard: The Fantasy Portraits*, 111–26.
17. See Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey, "Fragonard's 'Fantasy Figures': Prelude to a New Understanding," *Burlington Magazine* 157, no. 1345 (April 2015): 241–47.
18. On the self-promotional dimension of Fragonard's fantasy figures, see Percival, *Fragonard and the Fantasy Figure*, especially chapter 6, and Jackall, "All Fire," 16–17.
19. The most relevant immediate precedent was Maurice Quentin de La Tour's use of the Salon of 1753 to exhibit his series of uncommissioned pastel portraits. For the six of them listed in the salon brochure, see Xavier Salmon, *Le voleur d'âmes: Maurice Quentin de La Tour* (Versailles: Artlys, 2004), 41. Not unlike Fragonard's fantasy figures, La Tour's portraits featured aristocrats, intellectuals, writers, artists, and musicians, some of whom—e.g., Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, the coeditor of the *Encyclopédie*—were well known. I thank Mechthild Fend for the information on La Tour's series.
20. On this transition, see Nathalie Heinich, *Du peintre à l'artiste: Artisans et académiciens à l'âge classique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1993).
21. The identity of these sitters was first established after the discovery of *Sketches for Portraits* by Blumenfeld. See her *Une facétie de Fragonard*, 26–27, 40–43.