Fragonard’s ‘fantasy figures’: prelude to a new understanding

by MARIE-ANNE DUPUY-VACHEY

IN JUNE 2012, a previously unknown drawing emerged into the public eye and prompted the re-evaluation of an entire aspect of the œuvre of a major French painter. The work in question is covered with eighteen annotated sketches (Fig.7),\footnote{In light of the date appended to the signature of one of the paintings (no.7), J.-P. Cuvau ascribes a date of between 1768 and 1772 to the series; see J.-P. Cuvau: Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Life and Work: Complete Catalogue of the Oil Paintings, New York 1988, nos.169–83 and pp.102–31; and P. Rosenberg to between 1768 and 1770; see P. Rosenberg: Tout l’œuvre peint de Fragonard, Paris 1989, nos.190–205. See also idem: exh. cat. Fragonard, Paris (Galeries nationales du Grand Palais) and New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1987, pp.255–93.} fourteen of which record celebrated paintings by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806; Fig.8) while the remaining four have, as yet, no known equivalent in his production. With one exception (no.4), the sketches correspond to the ensemble traditionally known as the ‘fantasy figures’ and dated to c.1769: fifteen energetic paintings\footnote{The inscription ‘Fragonard’ (probably dating to the late nineteenth century) appears on the support to which the drawing has been affixed, completed by: ‘Donné à M. Camille Bouchant par sa cousine germaine, Madame V[n][e] Oscar Fragonard/1879.’} of similar format (81 by 65 cm.) depicting half-length figures costumed à l’espagnole leaning against a table or a low wall. A larger (94 by 74 cm.) full-length representation of a Cavalier was also associated with the group; it, too, appears in the drawing (no.17).

To date, scholars have interpreted the ‘fantasy figures’ either as allegorical types or veritable portraits. Labels affixed to the versos identify the abbé Jean-Claude Richard de Saint-Non (1727–91; no.8) – one of Fragonard’s most devoted patrons – and his brother, Louis Richard de La Bretèche (1722–1804; no.7). Moreover, on the basis of comparisons with known portraits, it was widely accepted that Fragonard painted the dancer Marie-Madeleine Guimard (1743–1816; no.3) and the philosopher Denis Diderot (1713–84; no.12). However, in the exhibition I organised in 2007, I included the latter as ‘Portrait of a Man said to be the Portrait of Diderot’.\footnote{According to the labels formerly affixed to nos.7 and 8, they were painted ‘en une heure de temps’.} My choice was based upon research suggesting that the ‘fantasy figures’ had been created as an ensemble representing a literary or artistic gathering in which Diderot was not involved. The newly emerged sheet confirms my hypothesis and serves as the impetus to revisit the question, investigating each painting with the co-operation of several owners, institutional and private. Intensive study of the National Gallery of Art’s painting Young girl reading (Fig.17 on p.249) by Yuriko Jackall, John Delaney and Michael Swicklik expanded my ideas on the series. The timely publication of my Washington colleagues’ findings\footnote{M.-A. Dupuy-Vachey: exh. cat. Fragonard. Les plaisirs d’un siècle, Paris (Musée Jacquemart-André) 2007, pp.112–13, no.82, and p.156.} provides an apt occasion to present selected elements of my continuing research into the importance of the drawing as it relates to Fragonard’s draftsmanship, his painted œuvre, and the circles of patronage that favoured the development of his style.


Gabriel-Oscar Fragonard (1823–1874), the youngest son of Alexandre-Evariste Gabriel-Oscar Fragonard (1823–1874), the youngest son of Alexandre-Evariste Fragonard (1780–1850), was Fragonard’s grandson.
ink and its degree of fading, the inscriptions appear to have been added concurrently with the sketches and in quickly rendered lines that bespeak the same hand. The identities of Saint-Non and his brother are confirmed by the notations ‘S Non’ (no.8) and ‘La Breteche’ (no.7). Similarly, the Vestal Virgin, published in 1960 as ‘The Présidente Aubry’, is subtitled ‘Aubry’ (no.4). But none of the other traditional designations appears. These surnames are common and lend themselves to several interpretations.

Accessories help to narrow the range of possibilities. The instrument sketched in the background of the portrait entitled ‘Brillon’ (no.6; Fig.6) – and the musical scores strewn in the foreground – permit us to identify Anne Louise Boyvin d’Hardancourt (1744–1824), a talented harpsichordist and composer. In 1763, she married Jacques Brillon de Jouy (1722–87), ‘Receveur général des Consignations’, and her elder by twenty-two years. At this time, pendant portraits, listed in the archives of their descendants as ‘attributed to Drouais’, were executed. In the representation of Mme Brillon (Fig.11), her sprightly expression conveys the assured wit evident throughout her correspondence with Benjamin Franklin (1777–85). The anonymous artist seemingly attempted to lessen the age difference separating the newly-weds – Mme Brillon appears older in the 1763 portrait than in Fragonard’s representation of some six years later – but the likeness seems to have been faithful if we are to believe Charles Burney (1726–1814), a visitor to her Passy residence on 20th June 1770: ‘She is a pretty, short, little fat woman, with the most constant, agreeable and natural smile on her face in the world’.12

The 1763 painting and Fragonard’s representation served differing purposes. The first was an ‘official portrait’ in which accoutrements of the model’s station (the lace and ribbons of the dress; the silver on the table) were carefully described. Fragonard, on the other hand, was more concerned with the trappings of her musical vocation. More noticeable are the differences in the handling of paint. Although Fragonard treated the face with care, the audacity of his touch is evident throughout the rest of the canvas, appearing hasty, even negligent, in contrast to the smooth, even facture of the 1763 portrait. Marks of the brush are visible in the thick areas of impasto that congregate in the lighter tonalities. Elsewhere, the material is reduced to a transparent layer through which glimpses of the ground show. It is difficult to imagine that such a vigorously rendered work could have hung beside more typically polished paintings in the sophisticated ambiance of an aristocratic interior. This telling comparison

10 The Portrait of M. Brillon is dated: ‘X 1763’.
13 Unlike the pendant portraits given to Drouais, Fragonard’s painting is mentioned
suggests that Fragonard’s *Madame Brillon*, like the other portraits of the series, was destined for a specific purpose.13 Two vertical fold-marks helped Fragonard to position his sketches. One fold, down the centre of the sheet, facilitated the placement of the oval portrait (no.4) in the midst of the top row.14 The second fold, on the left side, approximately 6 cm. from the paper’s edge, enabled him to align the initial sketches in the first and second rows (nos.1 and 8), one over the other. The distribution of the remaining figures proceeds naturally with the exception of the sketch of the singer (no.9) which is slightly too wide, leaving the other five drawings of the second row marginally misaligned with those above.

The third row comprises four sketches, only one of which corresponds to a known painting (no.17). Its format (94 by 74 cm.) is unusual for a full-length representation but is in proportional ratio to the bust-length portraits. In the last two sketches (nos.17 and 18) of this row, the artist abandoned his pen for the more easily erasable medium of crayon. He may have attempted to correct the fact that nos.15 and 16 were disproportionate to the bust-length portraits above. The stacked effect of the rows produces another consideration. The total lengths of the first two series of seven paintings are 4.53 and 4.55 metres, respectively. One might wonder whether six sketches – and not four – were intended to occupy the final row. Multiplying by six the length of its one known painting (74 cm.) yields 4.44 metres, a number nearly identical to the respective total lengths of the first two rows.

Disparities between the sketches and their respective paintings might at first suggest that Fragonard drew his series from memory. However, examination yields a different interpretation. The head of the model in sketch no.1 is raised and her visage turned towards the spectator, presenting rapidly noted features – a spot of ink for her left eye, a finer stroke for her nose. New analyses carried out at the National Gallery of Art confirm that the sketch corresponds to an earlier version of the painting.15

8. Reconstruction of Fragonard’s paintings on the sheet of sketches with their traditional titles as of June 2012: 1) Young girl reading (National Gallery of Art, Washington); 2) Portrait of a woman holding a dog (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York); 3) Marie-Madeleine Guimard (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 4) Portrait of a lady as a vestal, said to be The Présidente Aubry (Private collection); 5) Portrait of a man, called The writer, or Imagination (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 6) Portrait of a young woman, called L’Etude (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 7) Portrait of M. de la Brebêche (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 8) Portrait of the Abbé de Saint-Noin (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 9) Portrait of a singer (private collection); 10) Portrait of a man, called The actor (private collection); 11) Portrait of Didoné (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 12) Portrait of a young artist, called Naigeon (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 13) The warrior (The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown); 14) Portrait of a man, called The actor (private collection); 15) Portrait of Diderot (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 16) Portrait of a young artist, called Naigeon (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 17) Cavalier seated by a fountain (MNAC, Barcelona).
Other discrepancies are evident in a comparison of the portrait of Saint-Non with its sketch (no.8). In the latter, two vertical strokes of the pen mark the end of the parapet (Fig.9) whereas in the painting, this low wall runs the length of the canvas. Analysis made in 1985 confirms that the structure was originally half its current size and that much of the model’s bust would have been visible, notably the flamboyant orange-red interior of his cape.16 Traces of this colour are still perceptible beneath the extension (Fig.10).

In each case, Fragonard sketched an earlier version of the painting, one that he continued to alter. It seems that he elaborated the drawing with his project in a state of only partial completion even as he continued to work simultaneously on each of the paintings. Rather than a ricordo, the drawing should thus be considered a ‘worksheet’ that enabled him to revise and perfect his overall vision as he moved it towards completion.

Additional differences may be remarked upon in this context. It would not be surprising if the singer (no.9) originally wore a small ruff (as in the sketch), not the large collar à la Médicis seen today. In the sketch for The warrior (no.14), the right elbow rests upon a low wall and the hand is pulled forwards towards the bust, recalling the Duc d’Harcourt (Fig.13), one of the three portraits absent from the sheet, a point to which I shall return. In the painting The warrior, a thin stone parapet runs the length of the foreground while the right arm is bent towards the waist leaving the hand invisible. Analysis similar to that accomplished in Washington might explain this somewhat constrained pose.

One individual in the top row – an oval representation of a Vestal Virgin in a white tunic, her veil trimmed with a gold band and secured by a crown of blue and pink flowers – comes as something of an interloper (no.4). However, archival research indicates that such a juxtaposition was not unheard of.17 At the

---

16 S. Bergeon, ed.: ‘Dossier: Fragonard’, Science et technologie de la conservation et de la restauration des œuvres d’art et du patrimoine 1 (June 1985), p.25. At the time, these traces of pigment were interpreted as a pentimento corresponding to the model’s glove.
18 Inventory after death of Jean-Marie Richard, 18th September 1783; Paris, Archives Nationales, MC/ET/XVIII/835.
20 Because the upper end of the sketch of Saint-Non collides with the lower end of no.1, Fragonard probably omitted the sitter’s name due to a lack of space.
château of Romilly near Troyes (Aube) belonging to Jean-Marie Richard (1708–83), elder brother of Saint-Non and La Bretèche, a portrait described as à l’espagnole was displayed in a room in which a Vestal Virgin presided above the chimney, presumably in a nod to her traditional function of guarding the sacred flame. Fragonard’s painting, in which the priestess holds a pot in a pose, possibly a nod to her traditional function of guarding the sacred flame, presumably in a nod to her traditional function of guarding the sacred flame. In no.15, a woman wearing a high collar sits before what appears to be a screen. Beside her, we can distinguish the form of a globe. The pendant (no.16) represents a man placed before a high desk, his shoulders draped in a large cloak, a ruff around his neck. In contrast, the models of the second pairing engage directly, their figures interacting in harmonious symmetry. Elsewhere, I have drawn attention to the similarity between the poses of the Cavalier and Michelangelo’s statue of Lorenzo de’ Medici in the New Sacristy, S. Lorenzo, Florence. Fragonard studied the statue in 1761 when he visited Florence in the company of Saint-Non; his copy (British Museum, London) appears to have inspired no.18; he employed its counterproof (sale, Christie’s, London, 24th March 1961, lot 15) for the figure in no.17. The impression of two pendant sets supports the notion of a gallery in the exact sense of the term, a room longer than it was wide. This space would have been adorned at each end with a pair of full-length portraits. The first, in which sitters are represented indoors, might have framed an interior doorway. At least one painting of the second pair appears in a natural setting (the Cavalier is seated beside a horse) indicating that they might have surrounded a window or passageway opening onto the outdoors.

In the absence of information concerning the dimensions or configuration of the room — notably the placement of doors and windows — these hypotheses remain just that, but invite us to imagine exchanges among the figures and to attend to the treatment of light in each painting. Because the ensemble essentially functioned as a single work, only one portrait (no.7), the last of the row containing the Vestal Virgin (no.4), is clearly signed and dated, ‘Frago 1769’. It should be recalled that the year in question was momentous. On 17th June, Fragonard married Marie-Anne Gérard (1745–1823). Simultaneously, he was engaged in work on a ceiling decoration for the marquis d’Argenson’s hôtel. When Fragonard’s daughter Rosalie (1769–87) was born

---

12. Hypothetic installation of one wall of Fragonard’s ‘fantasy figures’. Digital rendering by Adam Davies and Yuriko Jackall based upon contemporary architectural plans.


14 C. Blumenfeld: ‘Une nouvelle figure de fantaisie de Fragonard’, L’Objet d’art, (June 2013), pp. 52–57, reproduces a painting that copies or was inspired by the now-lost painting (no.18).

15 The signature ‘Frago’ or ‘Fraggo’ — and not as mentioned by C. Guichard: ‘Fragond et les jeux de la signature au XVIIIe siècle’, Revue de l’Art 177 (2012–13), pp. 52–53 — is barely visible on the Portrait of a young artist (no.13). The singer (no.9) is signed ‘Frago’ followed by a truncated date beginning with ‘17’. These surprising signatures may speak to the fate of the paintings once removed from the gallery.

on 16th December, he was listed on the baptismal certificate as absent.\(^{25}\) It has been supposed that he was then out of France: a copy after Rubens attests to his presence in Brussels that year.\(^{26}\) But the winter climate was hardly propitious for such a journey. Might it be supposed that instead he was detained outside Paris by the installation of his gallery of portraits?

As it appears today, the painting of the Young girl reading now in Washington is difficult to understand in the context of such a gallery. It is not, strictly speaking, a portrait. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine it hanging comfortably with a group of similar works as its model would have turned away from her neighbour. When the painting appeared at auction on 11th March 1776, Gabriel de Saint-Aubin (1724–80) sketched it as a girl in profile (Fig.28 on p.254), confirming that it had already been changed. It seems that it must have been rejected – for reasons unknown – removed from the gallery, and transformed into the more impersonal Young girl reading known today (no.1).\(^{27}\) At this point, it is probable that a new occupant took its place.

Three portraits habitually associated with the ensemble do not appear on the sheet of sketches. Two were exhibited in 1921 as François Henri, duc d’Harcourt (1726–1802; Fig.13) and his younger sibling Anne-François d’Harcourt, duc de Beuvron (1727–97).\(^{28}\) These paintings are listed in the inventory: ‘Family portraits conserved at the château d'Harcourt [Calvados] in 1886’. This document, hitherto unpublished, mentions an inscription on the frame of the portrait of the duc d’Harcourt: ‘this painting represents the count of Lillebonne made in Paris in 1770’.\(^{29}\) There is every reason to give credence to this note since François-Henri, named duc d’Harcourt and governor of Normandy in 1775, was earlier styled ‘comte de Lillebonne’. The inventory further describes each of the portraits as a ‘pochade’ or ‘rough sketch’, painted on a canvas ‘coarsely nailed onto pieces of wood squared off with an axe’.\(^{30}\) The description reinforces the inherent discrepancy between Fragonard’s rapid style and the portrayal of individuals of an elevated rank and title. More importantly, the document suggests that the paintings had been extracted from wooden panelling.

We may suppose that the portraits of the Harcourt brothers joined the gallery as substitutes for abandoned works. With his vivid costume, the duc de Beuvron would have offered a seductive alternative to the deep yellow hues of no.1. Given its similarity

---

\(^{25}\) Paris, Archives Nationales, MC/ET/XCVI/568.


\(^{28}\) Exposition d’œuvres de J.-H. Fragonard, Paris (Musée des Arts décoratifs), 1921, nos 90 and 89. The Duc de Beuvron belongs to the Musée du Louvre, Paris. The third portrait (Petit-Palais, Paris) is sometimes considered to represent Jérôme de Lalande; given its smaller format (72 by 59.5 cm.), it may not belong to the series.

\(^{29}\) ‘Portraits de famille se trouvant au château d'Harcourt en 1886’ (manuscript in private collection, p.45): ‘ce tableau représente M. le comte de Lillebonne fait à Paris en 1770’.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., p.43: ‘une simple pochade, la toile est grossièrement clouée sur quelques morceaux de bois, à peine équarris à la hache’.


\(^{34}\) This document was kindly communicated by the descendants of the Aubry family. For more information about this family, see C. Petitfrère, ‘Une famille municipale tourangelle: les Aubry (XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles)’, in P. Haudrère, ed.: Pour une histoire
to the sketch of *The warrior* (no.14), it is tempting to imagine the likeness of the comte de Lillebonne, future duc d‘Harcourt, rounding out the second row opposite his brother just as the two Richard siblings faced each other at the other end. However, slight differences are perceptible in the execution and tonalities of the *Duc d‘Harcourt*, a probable result of its later execution, in 1770. For at this date, Fragonard would no longer have had ready access to the original portraits and would have been obliged to rely upon his ‘worksheet’ of sketches.

Who instigated such an original project? This central question still lacks an answer but certain leads may be suggested. The March 1776 sale at which *Young girl reading* appeared was long considered that of the ‘comte du Barry’ but according to the Getty Provenance Index, it was actually the sale of one ‘Verrier’. At the same auction, another painting by Fragonard also appeared under the description: ‘a young vestal, half-length. She is surrounded by roses and holding a garland; behind her is an altar on which a holy fire burns’. Saint-Aubin’s sketch (Fig.14) of this Verrier Vestal Virgin (now untraced) indicates its compositional similarity to no.4, the only slight differences being in the position of the head and the presence of the garland of flowers in her hands. With its relatively similar dimensions (70 by 56.5 cm.), the former might, in fact, present an initial version of the latter, a link that has not previously been made.

Thanks to the memoirs of the dealer René Gimpel, I was able to find the family from which he acquired ‘La présidente Aubry’ in 1924. Their lineage includes several potential présidentes since the Aubry family comprised a number of highly-placed magistrates in the municipality of Tours during the Ancien Régime. But one candidate stands out: Catherine Thérèse Verrier (1733–1800), married in 1749 to Jean-Joseph Aubry (1719–63), ‘Premier président au bureau des Finances de Tours’ and mayor of the town in 1762. If Catherine Thérèse was indeed the model for Fragonard’s 1769 painting, the representation en vestale would have evoked her virtuous household (she was by then a widowed mother of two children) or, more allusively, her capacity to fan the intellectual flames of an assembly that cultivated the arts with passion. The evidence is suggestive: Catherine Thérèse bore the same surname of the vendor at the auction of March 1776. This may be a mere coincidence, but one made all the more striking by the fact that her father, Robert Charles Verrier, died on 11th May 1776, exactly two months after the sale in question and six months before a second Verrier sale.

Undoubtedly there were other dominant personalities in the group. In 1770, Fragonard appears to have given *The happy family* (Fig.16) to the Brillons couple. Precisely described in the inventory following the death of Jacques Brillon de Jouy in 1787, this painting remained in the family into the 1970s. The stretcher still bears the transcription of the words found on the verso prior to the relining of 1889: ‘Pignus / Gratitude / 1770 / or / in token of gratitude’ (Fig.15). Such an inscription directly upon the canvas was probably the work of the artist himself, although the message ascribes the painting an earlier date than that generally proposed. More to the point, what was Fragonard’s debt to the Brillons? Did they, too, play a role in the commission of the series?

While the avenues of exploration raised by this study are diverse and seductive, our impatience to designate Fragonard’s models by name – and in so doing to unlock their identities – should not overshadow the first and foremost concern: the interpretation of the drawing itself. If this ‘worksheet’, the emblem and tool of an ongoing project, does indeed represent a gallery of portraits, it should be possible to justify the presence of each sitter in the context of the overarching logic of the ensemble. Each member of the group would have been bound to the others – or at least to the patron(s) – by a series of links based on common pursuits and intertwined relationships. It is the presence or absence of these links that permits us to associate a particular individual with one of the cryptic names on the sheet while rejecting another, seemingly plausible, identification. The facts speak eloquently for the gallery I have begun to suggest here, with its specific set of members. Mme Brillon’s close friendship with Saint-Non is confirmed by his testament in which she figured, alongside Fragonard, as a beneficiary.

La Bretèche, ‘Receveur général des finances de la généralité de Tours’, doubtless had dealings with Mme Aubry’s husband just as her father, secretary of the Académie royale d’Agriculture of Tours, shared interests with the duc d’Harcourt, author of a *Traité de la décoration des dehors, des jardins et des parcs*. One certainty emerges: Fragonard painted neither Diderot nor La Guimard. But the disappointment occasioned by the loss of their likenesses is far outweighed by the discovery of a gallery of portraits that forms a unique testament to the sociability of the era.