

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),¹ 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.1769:² fifteen energetic paintings³ 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'.⁴ 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



6. Anne-Louise Brillon de Jouy, by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. 1769. Canvas, 81.5 by 65.5 cm. (Musée du Louvre, Paris).

and Michael Swicklik expanded my ideas on the series. The timely publication of my Washington colleagues' findings⁵ 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.

Few known drawings by Fragonard bear a direct relationship with his paintings, making the new discovery all the more surprising.⁶ The artist's touch is felt throughout this rapidly executed composition, an array of nervous strokes that converge in elliptical, although always legible, shapes.⁷ Given the colour of the

I am deeply grateful to Eunice Williams who shared her enormous knowledge of Fragonard and her ideas on the drawing in particular. Christel Lance Haffner's unstinting support was decisive for numerous aspects of this study. Without my stimulating exchanges with Yuriko Jackall and without her steadfast encouragement, this article would never have seen the light. John Delaney and Michael Swicklik provided a fascinating scientific perspective. For their advice and assistance in various ways, I thank Katherine Baetjer, Ségolène Bergeon, François Caillou, Adam Davies, Akira Gokita, Bruce Gustafson, Badouin d'Harcourt, Marie d'Harcourt, Toshio Koganemaru, Christophe Leribault, Andrew McKenzie, Christine de Pas, Scott Schaeffer, and all those who wish to remain anonymous. This article has been translated by Yuriko Jackall.

¹ This discovery was published by the present writer in a review of M. Percival: *Fragonard and the Fantasy Figure. Painting the imagination* (Farnham 2011) in *La Tribune de l'Art*, 20th July 2012 (<http://www.thearttribune.com/Fragonard-and-the-Fantasy-Figure.html>). The drawing, now in a French private collection, was acquired at auction by Hubert Duchemin and Lilas Sharifzadeh, who commissioned a publication from Carole Blumenfeld (*Une facétie de Fragonard. Les révélations d'un dessin retrouvé*, Paris 2013); see also M.-C. Sahut: 'Le "Diderot" de Fragonard n'est plus Diderot', *Grande Galerie. Le Journal du Louvre*, 23 (March–May 2013), p.41.

² In light of the date appended to the signature of one of the paintings (no.7), J.-P. Cuzin ascribes a date of between 1768 and 1772 to the series; see J.-P. Cuzin: *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.190–206. See also *idem*: exh. cat. *Fragonard*, Paris (Galerie nationales du Grand Palais) and New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1987, pp.255–93.

³ According to the labels formerly affixed to nos.7 and 8, they were painted 'en une heure de temps'.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Y. Jackall, J. Delaney and M. Swicklik: 'Portrait of a woman with a book: a "newly discovered" fantasy figure by Fragonard in the National Gallery of Art, Washington', in this issue, pp.248–54.

⁶ M.-A. Dupuy-Vachey: 'Zeichnung-Malerei-Zeichnung. Echos, Korrespondenzen und Verwandtschaften im Œuvre Fragonards', in A. Reuter, ed.: exh. cat. *Fragonard. Poesie & Leidenschaft*, Karlsruhe (Staatliche Kunsthalle) 2013, pp.229–43.

⁷ 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 Bauchart par sa cousine germaine, Madame V[eu]ve Oscar Fragonard/1879'. Gabriel-Oscar Fragonard (1823–1874), the youngest son of Alexandre-Evariste Fragonard (1780–1850), was Fragonard's grandson.



7. *Sheet of sketches*, by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. 1769. Pen with brown ink and black chalk, 24 by 34.5 cm. (Photograph courtesy of Hubert Duchemin and Lilas Sharifzadeh).

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',⁸ 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.⁹ At this time, pendant portraits, listed in the archives of their descendants as 'attributed to Drouais', were executed.¹⁰ In the representation of Mme Brillon (Fig.11), her sprightly expression conveys the assured wit evident throughout her correspondence with Benjamin Franklin (1777–85).¹¹ 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

⁸ G. Wildenstein: *The Paintings of Fragonard*, Aylesbury 1960, no.405.

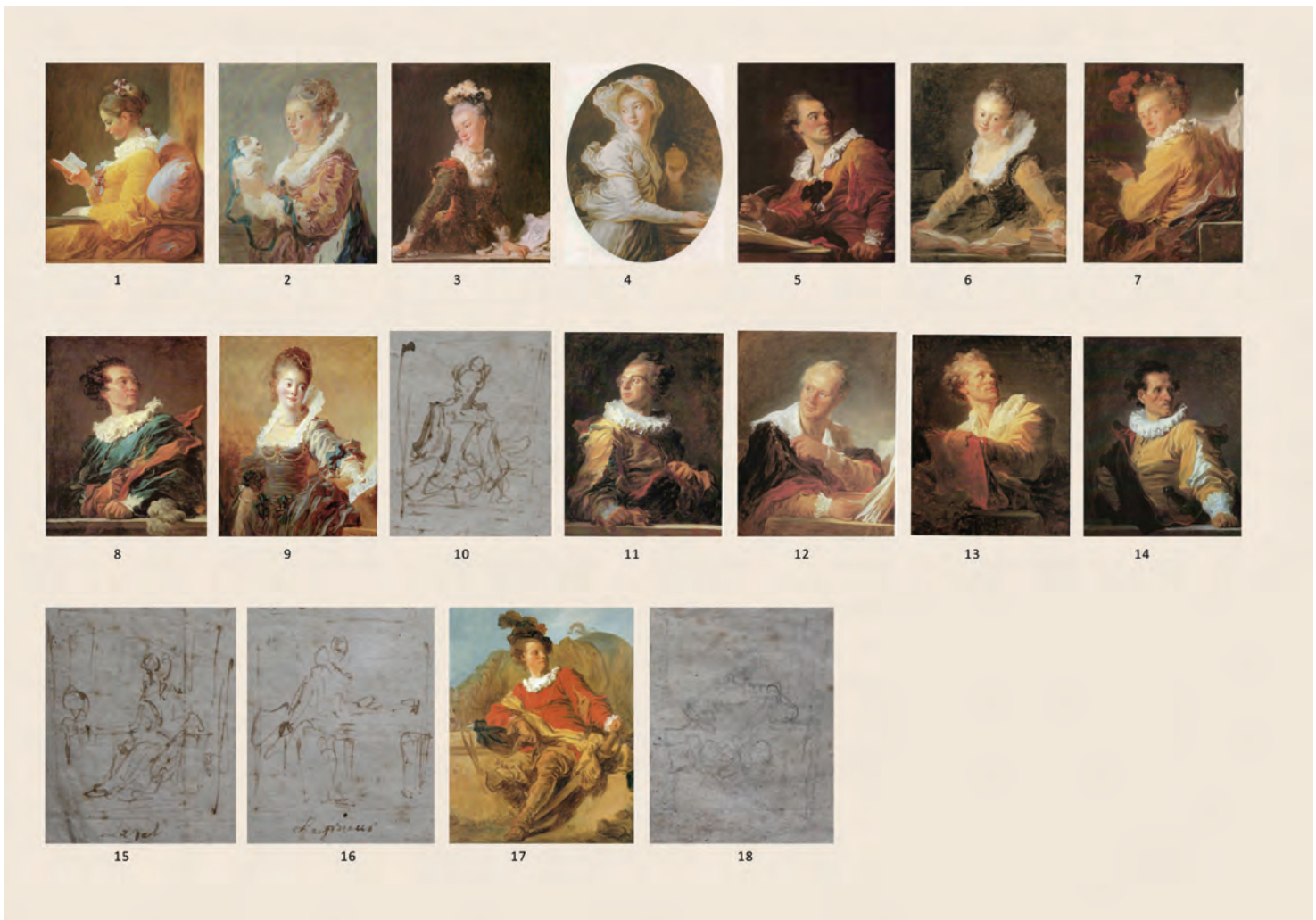
⁹ B. Gustafson: 'The Music of Madame Brillon. A Unified Manuscript Collection from Benjamin Franklin's Circle', *Notes* 43, 3 (March 1987), pp.522–43; *idem*: 'Madame Brillon et son salon', *Revue de Musicologie* 85, 2 (1999), pp.297–332; C. de Pas: *Madame Brillon de Jouy et son salon: une musicienne des Lumières*, Paris 2014.

¹⁰ The *Portrait of M. Brillon* is dated: 'X 1763'.

¹¹ See <http://franklinpapers.org>.

¹² C. Burney: *Music, Men and Manners in France and Italy 1770*. . . , ed. H.E. Poole, London 1974, p.20.

¹³ Unlike the pendant portraits given to Drouais, Fragonard's painting is mentioned



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 Inspiration* (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 6) *Portrait of a young woman*, called *L'Etude* (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 7) *Portrait of M. de la Bretèche* (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 8) *Portrait of the Abbé de Saint-Non* (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 9) *Portrait of a singer* (private collection); 11) *Portrait of a man*, called *The actor* (private collection); 12) *Portrait of Diderot* (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 13) *Portrait of a young artist*, called *Naigeon* (Musée du Louvre, Paris); 14) *The warrior* (The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown); 17) *Cavalier seated by a fountain* (MNAC, Barcelona).

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

nowhere in the family archives. The descendants were unaware of its existence until I contacted them.

¹⁴ The sheet must originally have been wider by approximately 2 cm. A narrow margin, equivalent to that on the left-hand side, undoubtedly bordered the right of the sheet as the truncated inscription at the end of the first row confirms. A tiny

fragment of paper shows from beneath the upper-right corner of the sheet, a probable confirmation that it was indeed folded over. It can thus be deduced that the oval portrait was placed exactly in the centre of the paper and not slightly to the right, as is the case today.

¹⁵ See Jackall, Delaney and Swicklik, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 248.



9. Detail of Saint-Non in Fig.7.



10. Detail of *Portrait of the Abbé de Saint-Non*, by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. 1769. Canvas, 80 by 65 cm. (Musée du Louvre, Paris).

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).

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 1988), p.25. At the time, these traces of pigment were interpreted as a pentimento corresponding to the model's glove.

¹⁷ On the theme of the Vestal Virgin in eighteenth-century France, see C. Steland: 'Vestallinen', *Artibus et Historiae* 29 (1994), pp.135–52; G. Faroult: 'Les Fortunes de la Vertu. Origines et évolution de l'iconographie des vestales jusqu'au XVIII^e siècle',



11. *Anne-Louise Brillon de Jouy*. French school, 1763. Canvas, 86 by 69 cm. (Courtesy of a private collection).

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

Revue de l'Art 152 (2006), pp.9–30.

¹⁸ Inventory after death of Jean-Marie Richard, 18th September 1783; Paris, Archives Nationales, MC/ET/XVIII/835.

¹⁹ C. Sterling: *Portrait of a Man (The Warrior)*. Jean Honoré Fragonard, Williamstown 1964, p.3.

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.¹⁸ Fragonard's painting, in which the priestess holds a pot of incense and stands before a lighted altar emitting wisps of smoke was undoubtedly positioned in similar fashion.

Multiple installation possibilities follow. It has often been remarked that the portraits were intended to be seen from below. In addition, the drawing's first two rows probably corresponded to facing walls, one with a fireplace at its centre (Fig. 12). Logically, the sketch shows the works as they would have been exhibited on the walls, from left to right. Thus no. 1 would be across from no. 14, no. 2 from no. 13, and so on; Saint-Non (no. 8) would no longer be separated from his brother La Bretèche (no. 7) but would look at him; and the singer (no. 9) would find herself opposite the harpsichordist (no. 6). Three portraits referring to music – La Bretèche holds a guitar – would be grouped in one part of the room; at least two artists would congregate in another – the young man with the portfolio (no. 13) and the ex-Guimard (no. 3), thought to have the tools of a miniaturist arrayed before her.¹⁹ If La Bretèche and his brother faced each other across the room, could it be supposed that a link existed between nos. 1 and 14? The possibility should not be overlooked: the sketch of no. 1, alone, lacks an annotation.²⁰

Two hypotheses concern the third row, composed of four – or six – portraits. The paintings might have been disposed along a third wall linking the first two and facing a fourth that was pierced with windows. Another, perhaps more convincing configuration, is suggested by the fact that the portraits in the last row function as pairs. In the first grouping, the models are back to back. 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.²¹ 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.²²

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 incite 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'.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.

²¹ Dupuy-Vachey, *op. cit.* (note 4), no. 53; P. Rosenberg and B. Brejon de Lavergnée, *Saint-Non, Fragonard. Panopticon Italiano, Un diario di viaggio ritrovato, 1759–1761*, Rome 1986, no. 151.

²² 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).

²³ The signature 'Frago' or 'Fraggo' – and not as mentioned by C. Guichard:

'Fragonard 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 'Fragao' followed by a truncated date beginning with '17'. These surprising signatures may speak to the fate of the paintings once removed from the gallery.

²⁴ See A. Leclair: 'Les plafonds peints de l'hôtel d'Argenson: commande d'un amateur parisien (1767–1773)', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 140 (2002), pp. 273–306.



13. *Portrait of François-Henri, duc d'Harcourt*, by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. 1770. Canvas, 81.5 by 65 cm. (Private collection).

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



14. Detail of *Catalogue de Tableaux et Marbres*, 11th March 1776. Printed text with drawn illustrations by Gabriel Jacques de Saint-Aubin. Graphite on paper, 20.2 by 13.8 cm. (book) (Philadelphia Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection, 1917, PDP-2265[4]).



15. Label affixed to the stretcher of Fig. 16.

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.

²⁶ S. Raux: 'Le voyage de Fragonard et Bergeret en Flandre et Hollande durant l'été 1773', *Revue de l'Art* 156 (2007), pp. 20–21 and 25, fig. 33.

²⁷ Jackall, Delaney and Swicklik, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 253.

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'.

³¹ <http://piprod.getty.edu/starweb/pi/servlet.starweb> (accessed June 2014).

³² Sale, Paris, 11th March 1776, lot 78: 'une jeune Vestale vue à mi-corps. Elle est environnée de roses, & tient une guirlande dans ses mains; derrière elle, est un autel sur lequel brûle le feu sacré'.

³³ R. Gimpel: *Journal d'un collectionneur*, Paris, edition 1963, p. 261: 'Un Fragonard: "La présidente Aubry", chez les de Vonne près de Tours'. The relevant passage does not appear in the 2011 edition.

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'.³¹ 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'.³² 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 1924.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵

Undoubtedly there were other dominant personalities in the group. In 1770, Fragonard appears to have given *The happy family* (Fig. 16) to the Brillon 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.³⁶ The stretcher still bears the transcription of the words found on the verso prior to the relining of 1889: 'Pignus / Gratitudeinis / 1770' or 'in token of gratitude' (Fig. 15).³⁷ Such an inscription directly upon the



16. *The happy family*, by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. 1770. Canvas, 54 by 64.8 cm. (Fuji Art Museum, Tokyo).

canvas was probably the work of the artist himself, although the message ascribes the painting an earlier date than that generally proposed.³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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 de Tours,⁴⁰ shared interests with the duc d'Harcourt, author of a *Traité de la décoration des dehors, des jardins et des parcs*.⁴¹ 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.

sociale des villes, Rennes 2006, pp. 59–82.

³⁵ Sale, Paris, 14th November 1776, postponed to 18th November 1776.

³⁶ Paris, Archives Nationales, MC/ET/LVIII/544, 11th April 1787: 'un tableau ovale [...] par M. Fragonard [...] représentant une femme avec plusieurs enfants, un homme monté sur un âne à qui un enfant donne à manger la regarde'. The painting was acquired by the Fuji Museum, Tokyo, following the sale of Roberto Polo, Paris, 30th May 1988, lot 10.

³⁷ This information has not previously been published. The inventory of the family's paintings (private collection), established c. 1900 by Raoul de Guestiers (1855–1934), great-great grandson of Mme Brillon, confirms the presence of this inscription on the canvas itself and its re-transcription on the label.

³⁸ All versions of the composition were previously dated to c. 1775 (see Rosenberg, *op. cit.* (note 2), nos. 336–38) or 1776–77 (Cuzin, *op. cit.* (note 2), no. 311). The inscription, credible because of its age, makes it necessary to re-evaluate the chronology of an entire aspect of Fragonard's production.

³⁹ Paris, Archives Nationales, MC/ET/XX/752. The document cites Mme Brillon, and not 'M. de Brillon' as was erroneously transcribed in P. Lamers: *Il viaggio nel Sud dell'Abbé de Saint-Non*, Naples 1995, p. 389.

⁴⁰ His paper on tree nurseries was read at the Société royale d'Agriculture de Tours (*Recueil des délibérations et des mémoires de la Société royale d'Agriculture de la généralité de Tours*, 1763, pp. 35 and 37).

⁴¹ Manuscript first published by E. de Ganay, Paris 1919.