

# 18th-Century France: Boucher and Fragonard

## *The Enlightenment*

During the eighteenth century Enlightenment thinkers transformed western Europe into a modern society. Critical of orthodoxy, these *philosophes* radically changed the way men thought about religion, economics, political philosophy, and education. Their method was rational and secular, founded on a belief that the exercise of reason alone could reveal ultimate truths and move man to improve his condition.

Montesquieu analyzed the forms of government to discover the “spirit” behind them. In despotism he found fear; in the republic, virtue. The Enlightenment invested man with “inalienable rights.” It led eventually to revolution in the American colonies and France, and in the process created a climate for art that served a “higher” purpose. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who contrasted the innate virtue of man in his natural state with the artifice of civilization, noted that the prevailing rococo style “contributed little to...public virtue.”

## *The Salon*

Beginning in 1737 the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture presented a public exhibition about every two years of up to 450 paintings and sculpture in the Salon Carré, a great square hall in the Louvre palace. From this location, the expositions themselves came to be called Salons.

In the active intellectual climate of the eighteenth century the Salons presented yet another arena for inquiry. Newspapers described the works exhibited, and the Academy sold programs. Unofficial guides were also written. Although often anonymous and circulated privately, these guides established art criticism as a subject of intelligent discourse. The most perceptive and influential of the new critics was the encyclopedist Denis Diderot. His preference for art that was morally uplifting fueled growing sentiment against the sensuous and decorative rococo style.

## *Boucher and Fragonard*

The criticism of Diderot and others stimulated artists to a new seriousness but did not change the pastel complexion of rococo overnight, as demonstrated by the works of Boucher and Fragonard in this gallery, all done after 1750.

Boucher was influenced by the subjects and delicate manner of Watteau's *fêtes galantes*, which he had copied for published engravings. He soon came to the attention of the king's mistress, Madame de Pompadour, and rose to prominence under her patronage. In addition to a productive career as a painter, he was also the principal designer for Sèvres porcelain and the Beauvais tapestry works, both projects dear to Madame de Pompadour. Boucher imparted the intimacy of the boudoir to all of his subjects, whether domestic scenes, pastoral idylls, or mythological themes.

Fragonard began to study painting first with Chardin, then with Boucher, adopting the latter's subjects but painting with a freer technique. He won both admiration for his fluid brushwork and criticism for the dashed, unfinished look of his canvases. During study in Italy he sketched Renaissance gardens, and these continued to haunt his expansive outdoor scenes peopled with tiny figures.

Fragonard's popularity made him wealthy, but he outlived his own era. Even before the revolution sober neoclassical styles were replacing the giddiness of rococo. Fragonard was forced to flee France as the world he portrayed—and the patrons he served—fell to the guillotine.



**François Boucher**  
French, 1703–1770

### *Venus Consoling Love*

1751. Oil on canvas. Chester Dale Collection 1943.7.2

This painting belonged to Madame de Pompadour and, with a companion work, was probably part of the decoration in her quarters at Versailles or the chateau at Bellevue given her by the king.

Youthful and engaging, the goddess of love disarms Cupid of the arrows he uses to inflict desire. It has been suggested that Boucher's young wife, or even Madame de Pompadour, posed for Venus, but it is more likely that the goddess is simply an ideal of beauty, as soft and appealing as the luxurious silks that surround her. Boucher has used the mythological scene, not to tell a story of gods or heroes, but simply to capture the goddess with clear pastel tones and silvery light.

Artists sought commissions from Madame de Pompadour not only for the prestige of working for the king's mistress but because she paid her bills promptly. Others among the aristocracy were plagued with financial difficulties, “treading,” one wrote, “on a bed of roses that covered an abyss.”

### *Allegory of Music*

1764. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.2

In 1765, when the second of these two allegories by Boucher was painted, the artist was appointed director of the Academy and first painter to the king. He had prospered under the patronage of Madame de Pompadour, who had died the year before. He was at the height of his prestige and had a considerable atelier. It is likely that some assistants' work can be seen in this gallery, especially in the *Allegory of Painting*, which lacks Boucher's deftness. However, both allegories were intended as over-door decorations and were probably placed high overhead, away from close scrutiny. Perhaps they were designed for a library or music room, where listeners could ponder the relationship between the arts and love. This was a popular theme in the eighteenth century, suggested here by the presence of cupids and Venus' doves.

**Jean-Honoré Fragonard**  
French, 1732–1806

### *Diana and Endymion*

about 1753/1755. Oil on canvas. Timken Collection 1960.6.2

In this scene Diana, virgin goddess of the hunt, steals forth through the moonlight to kiss the sleeping shepherd Endymion, whom the gods granted eternal sleep to preserve his beauty and youth. *Diana and Endymion* was painted when Fragonard was still a student at the Academy and heavily influenced by Boucher, who was his teacher. It was one of several mythological vignettes set at different times of the day; another depicts Aurora (Dawn) rising. Both compositions, painted as over-door decorations, were based on designs Boucher had done for the Beauvais tapestry works. Despite similarities to the older artist's work, *Diana and Endymion* already displays important elements of what would become Fragonard's own style: rich colors and a fluid handling of paint.



### *A Game of Horse and Rider*

1767/1773. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.5

Boys are shown romping at the edge of a forest park in a game of horse and rider, their disheveled exuberance in contrast to the rather prim couple nearby. These boys benefit from a new attitude toward childhood, influenced by Rousseau, who argued that children should be left to follow their natural instincts. In *A Game of Hot Cocks*, also seen in this gallery, young men and women amuse themselves in a garden. The youth who is “it” kneels and extends a hand behind him for other players to slap while he guesses their identities. The game is a form of flirtation. The players touch and tease each other, and the youth who is “it” hides his face in the lap of a young lady. And while the rough boys are framed by nature—beeches and a craggy tree—this courting scene is framed by art. Eighteenth-century viewers would have recognized the garden sculpture on the right as Falconet's *Cupid the Admonisher*.



**Jean-Honoré Fragonard**  
French, 1732–1806

### *The Swing*

probably about 1765. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.17

With children's games glimpsed from above in an immense expanse of earth and sky, Fragonard presents a vision of nature, imposing yet tamed by civilization. These are not forests, but gardens—resembling the magical Villa d'Este, where Fragonard sketched in Italy. Light creates volume in the towering clouds and breaks through in patches on the ground to illuminate the small figures as if they were on a distant stage.

*The Swing* and *Blindman's Buff*, designed together, trace the progress of love. In one, a blindfolded young woman reaches out to tag and identify another player in a game that since the Middle Ages had symbolized the folly of love. In the 1700s this meaning was viewed with indulgence: youths were meant to grasp at love. In the companion painting another young woman sits on a swing pulled by a youth who is barely visible in the shadows between the lion fountains. The swinging motion, which brings her skirts and legs into view, suggested erotic abandon. The two are lovers, who have “found” each other, as the players in *Blindman's Buff* are attempting to do.



**François-Hubert Drouais**  
French, 1727–1775

### *Group Portrait*

1756. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.4

On the floor a box lid, opened to reveal lace, pearls, and gaily striped silk, is painted with the legend “this first of April 1756.” Probably the gifts, the girl's flowers, and the paper held by the man—a poem perhaps—are all *poissons d'avril* (“fish of april”), tokens named after the zodiac Pisces that were exchanged by family and intimate friends on April 1 to mark the beginning of spring.

Drouais studied with Boucher, and this painting is probably among his earliest commissions. The older

artist had painted a number of similar domestic scenes of figures lit by a window opposite them. Drouais, however, increased the drama with a bright sky and billowing curtain. He painted with stronger contrasts of color than did Boucher and with meticulous realism—seen, for example, in the lace at the man's cuff and throat.

The setting places these family members among the wealthy bourgeoisie, though their identities remain unknown. After exhibiting at the Salon of 1758, Drouais quickly became a favorite of Louis XV's last mistress, Madame du Barry, and attained great fame, especially with portraits of children and older women.



**Jean-Honoré Fragonard**  
French, 1732–1806

### *A Young Girl Reading*

about 1776. Oil on canvas. Gift of Mrs. Mellon Bruce in memory of her father, Andrew W. Mellon 1961.16.1

Fragonard painted several young girls in moments of quiet solitude. These works are not portraits but evocations, similar to the “fantasy portraits” Fragonard made of acquaintances as personifications of poetry and music. He painted these very quickly—in an hour, according to friends—using bold, energetic strokes. *A Young Girl Reading* is painted over such a fantasy portrait and shares its brilliant technique. The girl's dress and cushion are painted with quick and fluid strokes, in broad unblended bands of startling color: saffron, lilac, and magenta. Her fingers are defined by mere swerves of the brush. Using the wooden tip of a brush, Fragonard scratched her ruffled collar into the surface of the paint. This is the “swordplay of the brush” that Fragonard's contemporaries described, not always with universal approval. His spontaneous brushwork, rather than the subject, becomes the focus of the painting. Fragonard explored the point at which a simple trace of paint becomes a recognizable form, dissolving academic distinctions between a sketch and finished painting.



### *A Visit to the Nursery*

before 1784. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.7

This tender scene may illustrate an episode from a sentimental novel, *Le Roman de Miss Sarah Th...*, in which a young English girl put aside wealth and position for life in the countryside with a poor but virtuous man. The narrator relates, “together they bent over the cradle and looked, first at the child and then at each other, holding hands and smiling.” The theme's popularity reflects Rousseau's emphasis on natural human emotions and family life as well as a general longing to escape the artificiality of society. Fragonard is also responding to critics and middle-class audiences who called for art to

contribute to domestic virtue. Not only is this nursery far from the light-hearted games in the artist's other works, the more subdued style emphasizes the story rather than his painting technique. The rigidly formal composition, restrained color scheme, and more controlled brushwork all point to the increasingly sober character of painting in France during the years before the revolution.



**Hubert Robert**  
French, 1733–1808

### *The Old Bridge*

probably about 1775. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.50

Hubert Robert was nicknamed “Robert des ruines.” His view of the sixth-century Ponte Salaria in the countryside around Rome includes real as well as imaginary elements. He and Fragonard studied together in Rome, sketching often in the Italian countryside. Robert drew ruins; his friend, the tree-lined alleys of Renaissance gardens. On his return to France, Robert himself redesigned Louis XVI's gardens at Versailles, and served on the commission that established the Louvre as a museum.

In the eighteenth century Rome retained little of its former glory; garbage in some quarters reached to the windowsills. Yet the city continued to attract artists and wealthy young gentlemen who completed their education on the Grand Tour. In the 1770s landscape artists gained a new means of support—which had been difficult, given the low esteem accorded them by the Academy—by producing works that could be engraved for the lavishly illustrated travel books that were gaining popularity.

*The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.*

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