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Melissa Percival, *Fragonard and the Fantasy Figure: Painting the Imagination*. Farnham and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2012. xvi + 260 pp. Illustrations, bibliography and index. \$124.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4094-0137-7.

Review by Jennifer Milam, The University of Sydney.

In her introduction to *Fragonard and the Fantasy Figure*, Melissa Percival considers the relative value of uncovering a new “crucial document” (p. 5) that would unlock “the meaning” of a series of half-length figures in fancy dress painted by Jean-Honoré Fragonard around 1769. Little did she know that six months after the publication of her book, such a document would appear on the Paris art market.[1] This drawing by Fragonard, previously unknown to scholars in the field, includes rapid sketches of eighteen portraits with names written underneath each figure. Not all of the names can be deciphered, but at least thirteen of the sketched figures are connected to the series by Fragonard which is the focus of Percival’s book.[2] As a group, the paintings are known as Fragonard’s “portraits de fantaisie,” a term first coined by George Wildenstein in 1960 and traced historiographically in chapter one by Percival, who prefers the term “fantasy figures.” At the crux of the debate over terminology is the central problem that both Percival’s book and the newly discovered drawing bring into question. Were these paintings intended to be read as portraits by the artist, which the annotated drawing appears to support? Or are they “teasing visual puzzles” (p. 5), as Percival argues, that were kept deliberately ambiguous to engage beholders in a “game of possibilities” (p. 50) around the painted human figure?

The most convincing answer comes from Percival, who cautions against the limitations that arise if we view these works strictly within the category of portraiture. Her approach follows on from Mary Sheriff’s insightful chapter on the series in *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism*, which appeared in 1990.[3] In fact, Percival’s study is the first to engage with Sheriff’s provocative contention that this group of paintings fundamentally interrogates the nature of portraiture itself. From this perspective, the series is more significant when considered as paintings about portraiture than as portraits in a conventional sense. Percival argues for the need to discard the “portrait label,” which now appears to overstep the mark in light of recent documentary evidence. Nevertheless, it was her very rejection of the status of the paintings as portraits that allowed her to explore new and important contexts in which they should be understood.

The first of these contexts is the subject of chapter two, which looks at the tradition of half-length, single-figure paintings in European art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Percival embarks upon a careful and detailed analysis of Fragonard’s stylistic debts to Dutch, Flemish, Italian and British artists: works by Carravaggio and the *carravaggisti*; Hals and Rembrandt; Rubens; Rosalba Carriera and Giambattista Tiepolo. Moreover, she considers parallels with the contemporaneous “fancy picture” in British art, and the “têtes de fantaisie” of Fragonard’s compatriots: Jean-Baptiste Santerre, Jean Roux, Alexis Grimou, and Jacques Courtin. This section is particularly informative for scholars in the field, as these artists are rarely discussed as anything more than derivative followers. In her third and fourth chapters, Percival demonstrates how these lesser-known artists were collectively responsible for fashioning a distinctive genre of fantasy figures in the first half of the eighteenth century. Fragonard would have been aware not only of their works, but also of the subtleties that they introduced to the conventions of single-figure painting. Percival describes these works as “variously elegant, humorous, mysterious and self-consciously painterly”(p. 78). She then proceeds to connect these nuances to Fragonard’s

development of his own innovative approach and his interest in displaying painterly skills in the half-length studies of individual figures. While the technical virtuosity exhibited in these works is often noted, the layered references to Old Master and contemporary works revealed by Percival adds a new dimension to our understanding of the different forms of artistry employed by Fragonard and appreciated by his audiences.

Chapter three takes up this perspective on the pastiche in more detail, describing the self-conscious borrowings of style and format as an inside joke between artist and connoisseur. Following from this issue of spectator engagement stimulated by Fragonard's fantasy figures, chapter four provides more detail on the context of a "spectator-based aesthetic" (p. 14), which emerged in France around 1700 and responded to novel challenges set up by works of art. Describing Fragonard's primary audience as "a private clientele who paid scant regard to academic doctrine" (p. 121), Percival delves into the tastes of beholders who preferred a sustained visual challenge rather than a test of resemblances, an aesthetic experience that she describes as akin to seduction. Here Percival joins the ranks of revisionist accounts of Fragonard's art, as seen in studies by Sheriff, Milam and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, while maintaining a firm commitment to placing these works along a trajectory of stylistic and thematic inheritance.[4] Through this analytical distinction, Percival adheres to her methodology, which places Fragonard in dialogue with other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European painters who took up figure painting and blurred the boundaries between genres. She clearly succeeds in demonstrating that genre hierarchies were not at the forefront of the artist's mind when approaching the human figure, even if, as has now been shown, Fragonard's subjects were known individuals.

Chapter five takes up this question of who is represented by the figures. While that question has now been answered for most of these works, the problem of identity remains. As Percival notes, many of the figures wear different types of costumes. Additional work on the correlations between specific costumes and individual sitters may reveal if these forms of "fancy dress" relate to issues of character and personal interests. Judging from Percival's research into the "blurrings" (p. 159) of distinctions stimulated by the costumes, whether imaginary or real, such additional information will ultimately expose new tensions that tested the eighteenth-century imagination as it engaged with ideas of individuality and social performance. For this reason, the final chapter's focus on the visual and aesthetic history of "fantaisie" and "caprice" is a fitting conclusion to a study that seeks to trace the roots of eighteenth-century artistic practice back to the Renaissance. Most interestingly, this chapter exposes the "aesthetic charge" (p. 218) that unfolds from the uncertainty of a viewing experience that derives from fantasy but extends towards the sublime. While Percival makes some convincing headway into the relationship between caprice, fantasy, the sublime and the imagination in artistic traditions, it would be useful to explore these terms in relation to philosophical thinking around these issues that was not specifically concerned with art.

Both chapter two and four represent a substantial contribution to knowledge about the series specifically, and more generally, about Fragonard's engagement with approaches to art making that he inherited from previous generations. More might be said about Fragonard and the ideas of his own time—those that do not come out of art writing, but from philosophy and literature—but Percival's purpose was to ground Fragonard's practice in the European visual traditions. To do this, she looked backwards, rather than full circle into the terrain of other disciplines. For this reason, the book may appeal more to art historians than to interdisciplinary scholars who would like to think more about issues of identity and the individual during the Enlightenment. The value of this book to art historians, especially when combined with the subsequent discovery of such an important new drawing, is undeniable.

Scholars are rarely presented with an opportunity to consider the relative value of primary source materials in comparison with innovative interpretations that emerge independently of new archival discoveries. While it is true that the newly discovered drawing overturns several of the central hypotheses of Percival's study, it does not diminish the value of her careful research into the visual context of Fragonard's paintings and her insightful consideration of the place of portraiture and painted figures in eighteenth-century art. In her own review of Carole Blumenfeld's book about the revelations of the drawing,[4] Percival correctly remarks that while the document provides

significant information about the relationship of the individual sketches to actual sitters, it also presents scholars with a number of new problems and raises issues that have not been considered in the past. While the drawing contributes to our understanding of the series and has value as an archival document, is not a key that unlocks definitive meaning for any of these paintings. Like the drawing, Percival's study provides new information that adds to our appreciation of Fragonard's interpretive puzzles set up by the fantasy figures—portraits or non-portraits.

## NOTES

[1] The drawing was sold at auction on the June 1, 2012, at the Hôtel Drouot, and published in Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey's review of Percival's book in *The Art Tribune* on July 20, 2012: <http://www.thearttribune.com/Fragonard-and-the-Fantasy-Figure.html>. A subsequent article in *The Art Tribune* by Didier Rykner noted that the discovery of the drawing should keep art historians "humble," quoting the Louvre curator and Fragonard expert Jean-Pierre Cuzin, who reportedly said: "if this sheet had disappeared forever, these identifications might never have been made and we would hold forth with learned discourses on these 'figures de fantaisie' as fancifully as their title." Rykner, "Fragonard: 'La Guimard' Is Madame de Grave and 'Diderot' is Meu(s)nier," *The Art Tribune*, 30 November 2012: <http://www.thearttribune.com/Fragonard-La-Guimard-Is-Madame-de.html>.

[2] Carole Blumenfeld, *Une facétie de Fragonard: Les révélations d'un dessin retrouvé* (Paris: Editions Gourcoff Gradenigo, 2013).

[3] Mary Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[4] Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism*; Jennifer Milam, *Fragonard's Playful Paintings: Visual Games in Rococo Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Fragonard in Detail," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 14/3 (2003): 34-56.

[5] Melissa Percival, "Fragonard's Reverse Whodunnit and Other Tales of Relocation," *Art History*, 37/1(2014): 169-74.

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