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Melissa Percival and Muriel Adrien, eds., *“Fancy” in Eighteenth-Century European Visual Culture*. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment. Liverpool University Press on behalf of Voltaire Foundation, 2020. xvii + 325 pp. Figures, notes, summaries, bibliography, and index. £75.00. (pb). ISBN 9781789620030; £65.00 (eb). ISBN 9781800346703.

Review by Mimi Hellman, Skidmore College.

This collection of essays is the most recent link in a chain of projects. The backstory is worth telling because it exemplifies how a core concept can evolve over time through the vagaries of the historical record and international dialogue among academics and museum professionals. A decade ago, coeditor Melissa Percival published a monograph about the wide-ranging artistic traditions and cultural associations that informed an intriguing group of paintings by the eighteenth-century French artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard, paintings that have come to be called “fantasy figures.”[1] Composed like half-length portraits, they are striking for their fanciful dress, dynamic poses, virtuoso brushwork, and openness to larger questions about creativity, spectatorship, and identity in eighteenth-century visual culture.

Shortly after Percival’s monograph was published, an annotated drawing by Fragonard that emerged on the art market identified his “fantasy figures” as portraits of real people. Scholars proposed new theories about artistic motivation and display context; museums grappled with whether to revise long-accepted titles of paintings; and technical examination revealed compositional changes to a canvas now at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.[2] But even as knowledge has reconfigured around a piece of evidence that seems to pinpoint meaning more precisely, Fragonard’s paintings remain far too complex—visually, materially, culturally, historiographically—to yield a single, unified explanation. Perhaps the most interesting takeaway from the case of the rediscovered drawing is its affirmation of fundamental questions that have long informed art-historical inquiry. Is artistic intention an especially authoritative determinant of meaning? How does meaning change as artworks move in space and time and engage differently positioned audiences?

The genealogy and conceptual ambiguity of “fantasy figures” were explored further in an exhibition at the Musée des Augustins, Toulouse, in 2015-16. Cocurated by Melissa Percival and the museum’s Director, Axel Hémerly, and bearing a pointedly evasive title trailing off into ellipses (“Ceci n’est pas un portrait: Figures de fantaisie de Murillo, Fragonard, Tiepolo...”), it presented a thematically organized selection of more than eighty paintings made in England, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The beautifully illustrated catalogue explores how these arresting figures—male and

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female, young and old, elegant and ragged, alert and slumbering—demonstrated artistic virtuosity and fostered open-ended viewer engagement.[3]

In conjunction with the exhibition and in collaboration with Muriel Adrien, Percival and Hémery gathered an international group of scholars for a conference. This link in the chain retained the exhibition's interest in juxtaposing various European contexts, but focused on the eighteenth century and went far beyond the category of single-figure pictures.[4] The reframing embraced “fancy” as a salient mode of creation and reception across a more diverse range contexts; it also brought painting (art history's traditionally privileged subject) into dialogue with other mediums such as prints, garden design, and luxury goods.

Edited by Percival and Adrien, *“Fancy” in Eighteenth-Century European Visual Culture* comprises fifteen essays, most based on papers given at the conference. The majority address French and English contexts; two consider Spain; and Italy figures more tangentially in relation to English tourism and collecting. The volume has much to offer scholars across the interdisciplinary field of eighteenth-century studies, especially those interested in conceptions of creativity, the art market, consumer culture, and the cultural valences of images, objects, and designed environments.

Percival's introduction describes the book's structure as a chronological “enfilade” (p. 11), referring to the early modern architectural practice of distributing interiors so that aligned doors led from room to room in carefully calibrated trajectories of grandeur. Yet one of the book's strengths is the fact that it makes no attempt to plot a linear narrative of artistic development or to offer readers a sense of mastery or completion. While some adjacent contributions are connected by an artistic category, medium, or cultural focus, the collection is intentionally exploratory and inconclusive. Like the fanciful artworks it examines, it invites approach from different directions and idiosyncratic wandering. Accordingly, the following comments remix the content to consider just a few of many possible themes.

The introduction explains the distinctive conception of “fancy” (and related terms such as “fantasy” and “caprice”) that emerged in the aesthetic discourses of eighteenth-century Europe. Characterized by novelty, ephemerality, and often exoticism, it was a mode of creation and perception that prized artistic freedom and equally imaginative viewer responses. Fancy enfolded “a rich semantic network, connecting wit, pleasure, erotic desire, spontaneity, improvisation, surprise, deviation from norms, the trivial and inconsequential” (p. 2). At the same time, “fancy was also a contentious term, containing possible dangers: excess, oddness, irrationality, which risked offending taste, reason and morals” (p. 2). These associations also informed the playful, reflexive style that came to be known as rococo; but “fancy” was a more elastic concept that could apply to various styles (including neoclassicism, medievalism, and protoromanticism) and, in some cases, could explore emotional extremes or engage in overt social critique. Fanciful artmaking challenged aesthetic and institutional hierarchies. It crossed boundaries, not only within the art academies that sought to privilege and regulate practices of painting, sculpture, and architecture, but also between academies, artisanal spaces where luxury objects were produced, and the marketplace.

The first two essays extend Percival's introduction by addressing questions of categorization and terminology. Emmanuel Faure-Carricaburu presents “fantasy figures” by the French artist Jean-Baptiste Santerre as an example of a “dynamic genericity” that disrupted academic distinctions

based on subject matter (pp. 25, 27). Christophe Guillouet traces the emergence of the term “fantasy” to describe certain types of pictures in a variety of French primary sources, from probate inventories to art treatises.

The book’s most developed themes, playing out across numerous essays, involve the circulation of “fancy” in the marketplace, the agency of makers and consumers, and the varied meanings that fanciful artworks could produce. Several authors track the aesthetic modality across national borders. Guillaume Faroult shows that Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s “fantasy figures” were in visual and conceptual dialogue with a corpus of widely reproduced portraits by the seventeenth-century Flemish artist Anthony Van Dyck. Adrián Fernández Almoguera surveys how artistic developments in Madrid—from architecture and interior decoration to gardens to civic spaces—engaged with influences from France, England, and Italy. Addressing the English audience for fictive views (*capricci*) of Venice and London by the Italian artist Canaletto, Xavier Cervantes locates their appeal in a pervasive fantasy about England as the heir of political and commercial achievements associated with the Venetian and Roman past. Béatrice Laurent brings the notion of *capricci*, typically reserved for landscape and city views, to the portraits commissioned by English men as souvenirs of Grand Tour travel around Europe. An interesting paradox in this case study is how the paintings retrospectively commemorated individual experiences through formulaic assemblages of well-known ancient monuments that were already highly mediated by restoration, copying, and print reproduction.

Consumers’ participation in the production of meaning takes on further dimensions in discussions of objects and environments that were experienced not just visually, but also through touch and bodily movement. Pierre-Henri Biger surveys the remarkably varied design features of hand fans, an accessory used primarily by women. Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding examines the amateur practice of creating objects that imitated East Asian lacquer (known as japanning) and suggests that the medium’s aesthetic otherness and conduciveness to experimentation constituted “a form of dissent, a countercultural practice” (p. 166) for English women. Laurent Châtel explores the immersive spatial and temporal environments of English gardens, where “designed caprice” (p. 178) orchestrated dynamic experiences of motion, observation, and imagination.

The strongest contributions offer close studies of how multiple meanings could coexist within the same object or reception context, or how meanings shifted in significant ways from one context to another. John Chu considers several French artists who leveraged the commercial potential of images that depicted alluring women framed by windows. Resonating with performative moments on stage and in fiction, and also with the display of goods in shop windows, the pictures promoted artists’ skills in urban markets around Europe while inviting free-ranging interpretation by viewers. Working with a thematically similar set of English images, Martin Postle provides more specific examples of fancifulness in practice. Integrating evidence regarding artists’ models, literary conceits, and handwritten inscriptions on some copies of widely circulating prints, he documents instances in which artists refigured their models and viewers applied their own associations, yielding “a willful conflation of fact, fiction and fantasy” (p. 85). Alice Labourg explores the complex relationship between positive “fancy” and dangerous “imagination” in Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, a richly reflexive text in which vivid descriptions, inspired by visual art, encouraged readers to construct their own mental pictures. Artistic inventiveness entangles with biting social satire in Andrew Schulz’s discussion of the Spanish artist Francisco Goya’s print series known as the *Caprichos*. With their bizarre

imagery and innovations in technique and visual form, the prints were interpreted in myriad ways during their own time and remain endlessly provocative today.

Two especially interesting analyses of consumer response come from Melissa Percival and Bénédicte Miyamoto, both of whom focus on artifacts that initially might seem too banal to merit close study. Percival unpacks the visual and verbal rhetoric of an English furniture pattern book by Thomas Chippendale and the trade card of a French luxury merchant. By describing a plethora of strategically varied goods, these exercises in early modern marketing defied the parameters of practicality and stimulated consumers' desires through "agreeable yet restless viewing" (p. 150). Miyamoto shows how English drawing manuals selectively reworked Continental models in ways that encouraged active, experimental engagement by amateurs and aspiring professionals while also steering their aesthetic sensibilities toward nationalistic standards that "partook both of eighteenth-century Protestant propriety and of the Enlightenment project of rational inquiry" (p. 95).

Some questions could have been explored more fully. The first involves the definition of "fancy" as a mode of production and reception inherently opposed to prevailing rules, categories, and indeed "the whole business of classifying" (p. 9). This important course-correction challenges the stigma of frivolity that has justified dismissive scholarly (and popular) attitudes toward certain kinds of artworks since the eighteenth century itself. At the same time, it risks oversimplifying and homogenizing our understanding of the supposedly normative practices that "fancy" is thought to subvert.[5] It also begs the question of whether there is a point at which the concept of "fancy" becomes too expansive to be analytically useful because it can include any innovative means of visual expression that troubles the status quo and encourages active participation.

Another question is whether attending to the pleasures of "fancy" risks preventing us from examining what it may have negotiated, displaced, and disavowed. The volume develops a broadly affirmative perspective by emphasizing the ways in which art fostered individual expression, sensory stimulation, and social prestige within an expanding culture of consumption. The introduction alerts us to the contentiousness of "fancy" in tandem with its delights, and the essays on Goya's *Caprichos* and Gothic fiction address its capacity for critique and unease. But the possibility that playful design encoded fraught issues—regarding, for example, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, labor, and travel—surfaces only briefly in some of the essays. Postle acknowledges the fantasies of cross-class transgression and sexual availability in pictures of winsome young women. Châtel mentions objections to garden designs seen as compromising the "solidity, virility, and seriousness" of English taste (p. 186). Cervantes alludes to the sexual permissiveness associated with noblemen's sojourns in Venice. Labourg notes that the assault and robbery of travelers invoked in literature was also a real-life hazard.

Some essays hint a bit more at how "fancy" may have helped to manage cultural instability and anxiety. Percival's case study suggests that "[t]hrough fancy the transactional nature of the exchange between provider and consumer is smoothed over" (p. 152). Laurent is interested in how the staging of Grand Tour portraits constructed identities, but she moves away from eighteenth-century preoccupations to compare the later use of exotic painted backdrops for studio portrait photography, citing a French novel of the 1980s in which the practice symbolically "purified" (p. 206) French tourists in North Africa. Alayrac-Fielding's discussion of japanning considers the politics of appropriation, but it would benefit from a more nuanced

account of Europeans' complicated engagement with Chinese culture and aesthetics prior to the nineteenth century.[6]

References to global trade, colonialism, and the construction of racial identities are surprisingly absent from the collection. The loudest silence surrounds a "fantasy figure" painting mentioned by Guillouet for the purpose of authorship attribution (pp. 34-35). It depicts an idealized, pink-skinned woman using a delicately grasped needle to pierce the ear of a Black youth clad in livery and a metal collar.[7] The scene exemplifies a racist pictorial trope in which ornamental Black bodies were used to accessorize and valorize white bodies, but it is unusual in its representation of pain.[8] Pressed against the woman's body, the youth opens his eyes wide, bares his teeth, and clenches one hand just below the violated ear. Here, "fancy" sublimates the power relations that underpinned many aspects of the eighteenth-century art world and are increasingly at the forefront of scholarly investigation.[9]

Ultimately, such openings to further study affirm the promise of "fancy" as a guiding concept for the study of eighteenth-century art and culture. The variously motivated, innovative, mobile, inconclusive works discussed by the volume's contributors will likely continue to provoke new responses.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Melissa Percival, "Introduction"

Emmanuel Faure-Carricaburu, "The Fantasy Figures of Jean-Baptiste Santerre and the Limits of Generic Frameworks of Interpretation"

Christophe Guillouet, "The Parisian World of Printmaking at the Heart of the Invention of a Genre? Poilly, Courtin, and Bonnard's *Fantaisies* (1713-28)"

John Chu, "Windows of Opportunity: The French Fantasy Figure and the Spirit of Enterprise in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe"

Martin Postle, "Modelling for the Fancy Picture in Eighteenth-Century England"

Bénédicte Miyamoto, "The Influence of Drawing Manuals on the British Practice and Reception of Fancy Pictures"

Guillaume Faroult, "A *Galant* Fantasy: Fragonard's Fantasy Figures and *The Music Lesson* in Relation to Van Dyck, Watteau, and Carle Vanloo"

Pierre-Henri Biger, "Fans, Fantasy, and Fancy"

Melissa Percival, "Fancy as a Mode of Consumption"

Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding, "'A Butterfly Supporting an Elephant': *Chinoiserie*, *Fantaisie*, and 'the Luxuriance of Fancy'"

Laurent Châtel, "The Garden as *Capriccio*: The Hortulan Pleasures of Imagination and Virtuality"

Béatrice Laurent, "Grand Tour *Capricci*"

Xavier Cervantes, "Venetian Reminiscences and Cultural Hybridity in Canaletto's English-Period *Capricci* and *Vedute*"

Adrián Fernández Almoguera, "From the Private Cabinet to the Suburban Villa: Caprices and Fantasies in Eighteenth-Century Madrid"

Andrew Schulz, "Satire and Fantasy in Goya's *Caprichos*"

Alice Labourg, "Fancy Paints with Hues Unreal': Pictorial Fantasy and Literary Creation in Ann Radcliffe's Gothic Novels"

## NOTES

[1] Melissa Percival, *Fragonard and the Fantasy Figure: Painting the Imagination* (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2012).

[2] Carole Blumenfeld, *Une Facétie de Fragonard: Les révélations d'un dessin retrouvé* (Paris: Editions Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2013); Melissa Percival, "Fragonard's Reverse Whodunnit and Other Tales of Relocation," *Art History* 37 (February 2014): 169-74; Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey, "Fragonard's 'Fantasy Figures': Prelude to a New Understanding," and Yuriko Jackall, John K. Delaney, and Michael Swicklik, "Portrait of a Woman with a Book': A 'Newly Discovered Fantasy Figure' by Fragonard at the National Gallery of Art, Washington," *The Burlington Magazine* 157 (April 2015): 241-47 and 248-54; Yuriko Jackall et al., *Fragonard: The Fantasy Figures* (London: Lund Humphries, 2017).

[3] Axel Hémerly, ed., *Figures de fantaisie du XVIIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2015).

[4] The conference, titled "Fancy-Fantaisie-Capriccio: Diversions and Distractions in the Eighteenth Century," was sponsored by l'Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès and the University of Exeter and was held at the Musée Paul-Dupuy, Toulouse, in December 2015. The presentations are available at <https://www.canal-u.tv/chaines/universite-toulouse-jean-jaures/fancy-fantaisie-capriccio-diversions-and-distractions-in>.

[5] For the practice of agreeable, novel artmaking within an academic framework, see Susanna Caviglia, *History, Painting, and the Seriousness of Pleasure in the Age of Louis XV* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press on behalf of Voltaire Foundation, 2020).

[6] For example, Katie Scott, "Playing Games with Otherness: Watteau's Chinese Cabinet at the Château de la Muette," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 66 (2003): 189-247; Stacey Sloboda, *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Stacey Sloboda, "Chinoiserie: A Global Style," in *Encyclopedia of Asian Design*, volume 4, *Transnational Issues in Asian Design*, ed., Christine Guth (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 143-254.

[7] The painting, made around 1735, was acquired in 2006 by the Musée d'histoire de Nantes and is reproduced as *Peinture de jeune femme percer l'oreille de son domestique noir* at "Slavery and Remembrance: A Guide to Sites, Museums, and Memory," <http://slaveryandremembrance.org/collections/object/index.cfm?id=OB0027&lang=fra>.

[8] Regarding the trope, see Angela Rosenthal, "Visceral Culture: Blushing and the Legibility of Whiteness in Eighteenth-Century British Portraiture," *Art History* 27 (September 2004): 563-92; Jennifer Palmer, "The Princess Served by Slaves: Making Race Visible through Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century France," *Gender & History* 26 (August 2014): 242-62.

[9] To cite just a few examples that focus on French luxury goods: Madeleine Dobie's chapter on lacquer in her *Trading Places: Colonialism and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 61-88; Liza Oliver, *Art, Trade, and Imperialism in Early Modern French India* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019); Marika Takanishi Knowles, "Making Whiteness: Art, Luxury, and Race in Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal18: A Journal of Eighteenth-Century Art and Culture* 13 (Spring 2022), <https://www.journal18.org/6214>.

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