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Satish Padiyar, *Fragonard: Painting Out of Time*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020. 248 pp. 114 color illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. £35.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9781789142099.

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Jean-Honoré Fragonard, one of the most celebrated artists of eighteenth-century France, is also one of the most elusive. In his art, he flitted between styles and subjects, as though thumbing his nose at the notion of a coherent artistic identity. He left almost no written traces of his own life--no memoirs, diaries, or correspondence. Scattered recollections and letters from his family, friends, and patrons provide tantalizing clues about the artist's personality, but nothing substantial. Because he stopped exhibiting at the Salon early in his career, we also have little critical commentary on his art. In the last few decades, a substantial scholarly literature has built up around Fragonard, situating him in aristocratic culture, libertinage, *galanterie*, contemporary art theory, and the art market, among other areas.[1] But what does it all add up to? Who was Fragonard?

Satish Padiyar's *Fragonard: Painting Out of Time* offers a provocative answer. Padiyar has synthesized the vast literature on Fragonard, and he stakes his own contribution on providing a "clear picture" of this enigmatic artist (p. 11). He aims above all to understand why Fragonard spurned the established path of professional success--why he repudiated history painting and the prestige that came with it, why he changed styles and subjects so frequently, why he quarreled with his patrons, and why he seems to have stopped painting decades before he died. In tackling these questions, Padiyar eschews the traditional monograph, with its linear, comprehensive account of an artist's biography and the development of his or her work. His agenda is far more ambitious. He seeks the key that unlocks the man and his work, the master theme that unifies Fragonard's personality, career, and art.

This, Padiyar proposes, is time. According to Padiyar, Fragonard was fundamentally out of step with normative time, refusing to march in rhythm to the relentless, regular tic of the mechanical clock. Fragonard's unusual relationship to time not only shaped his personality and his art, it also made him "one of the most…liberated" artists of the eighteenth century (p. 99). By setting himself "out of time," Fragonard freed himself from the social conventions and institutional constraints of *his* time. Even more radically, he channeled that freedom into his paintings and drawings, making them into sites of subjective emancipation.

Padiyar unfolds his argument across three chapters, each devoted to a theme in Fragonard's art and life that represents a disruption in the normal flow of time. The first, "Secrets," addresses a

halt in time: Fragonard's decision largely to stop painting in the late 1780s. For Padiyar, this was not, as is usually thought, an abrupt end brought about by external factors like the Revolution but the natural outcome of a will to conceal that "was fundamental to the painter's sense of himself" (p. 13). Short, shy, and secretive, Fragonard was, he argues, ill-suited to the *grand genre* of history painting and to public life, and uncomfortable in the elite, hierarchical society whose patronage he sought. The artist therefore sought to protect himself from public scrutiny and the unforgiving social world of his patrons by rejecting the career of an official history painter.

In his art, this effort manifested itself in his turn towards *petits sujets* that emphasized secrecy and concealment: clandestine love affairs; naked women in intimate boudoirs; withholding, uncommunicative children; portraits of friends and patrons in masquerade; and mysterious landscapes marked by shadowy caverns and *allées*. These secret moments and spaces, Padiyar claims, gave image to a fantasy of liberation from the oppressive society around him, "a pleasurable form of freedom from restrictions of given identity, caste and class, and the prescribed behaviours that were expected to flow from them" (p. 71). But with the advent of the French Revolution and its culture of radical transparency, the fantasy could no longer be sustained, and Fragonard largely stopped painting, withdrawing into total, non-communicative silence. When he did pick up the brush, he effaced his authorial presence behind the identity of another in his collaborations with his younger sister-in-law, Marguerite Gérard.

Padiyar's second chapter turns to the theme of surprise. Revisiting territory explored by Thomas Kavanagh in his *Esthetics of the Moment: Literature and Art in the French Enlightenment*, Padiyar argues that the "the logic of surprise" was a "major governing principle" of Fragonard's art and life (p. 92).[2] In life, this logic is apparent in "Fragonard's mysterious switches of allegiance and his unpredictability" in not following the established academic path, which nonetheless granted him an unprecedented amount of professional freedom (p. 99). In art, it manifested itself in his explorations of sudden disruptions in the flow of time, temporal ruptures that suspend the image between fragmentation and dissolution on the one hand and balance and repose on the other.

Drawing on the writings of Roger de Piles, who championed the surprising, seductive visual effect of painting over its intellectual and narrative dimensions, Padiyar argues that Fragonard's paintings were meant to strike spectators bodily, disrupting their normal sense of being. This physical and psychic jolt Padiyar finds epitomized in some of Fragonard's most famous works: *The Swing*, *The Bolt*, and the four paintings that comprise *The Progress of Love*. In the latter series, Padiyar argues that *The Pursuit* and *The Surprise*, contrasting violently with the atmosphere of repose in the cycle's other two paintings, *The Lover Crowned* and *Love Letters*, were "Fragonard's grandest statement on the poetics of surprise" (p. 122). Disrupting the logic of steady "progress," these paintings, he suggests, took the series in "an *unacceptable*...direction," perhaps explaining why their patron, Madame du Barry, rejected them (p. 122, emphasis in the original). Finally, Padiyar sees in Fragonard's many depictions of kissing couples an extended exploration of the visual expression of surprise. "If the instant of the kiss," he writes, "was for Fragonard an overture to a new temporality, the volatility of this artist ensured that it was never going to be certain what the new time was to be" (p. 135). States of "temporal oblivion," Fragonard's painted kisses have an affective power that exceeds the tidy bounds of narrative and language: where the artist's early history painting, *Coresus Sacrificing Himself to Save Callirhoe*, merely depicted surprised people, these paintings embody surprise in their formal and narrative structure (p. 135).

Padiyar's final chapter takes on a different temporal logic, dreams. Expanding on Michael Fried's remark about "the palpable dreamlike atmosphere" of Fragonard's art, Padiyar explores the way in which Fragonard used his remarkable drawings to create a space of reverie, a fantasy world out of time (p. 174).[3] (Here is a good place to note that the subtitle of Padiyar's book, "Painting Out of Time," while striking, does not accurately capture its scope: in this chapter and throughout the book Padiyar devotes more space to drawing than to painting.) Exploring the possibilities that the emergence of drawing as an autonomous work of art in the mid-eighteenth century afforded Fragonard, Padiyar argues that "as a liberated medium, drawing could sanction imaginative license" (p. 173), and that "in the case of Fragonard, a certain wish for subjective emancipation went hand in hand with the historic liberation of the medium" (p. 152).

The achronic Fragonard was, Padiyar argues, temperamentally unsuited to the regimented practice of academic drawing--to copying masterpieces of other artists or to following the well-trodden path from compositional sketches, to individual studies, to a highly finished model of the final composition. Instead, he made drawings for their own sake and developed a highly original set of techniques that took unfinishedness, the *non-finit*, to new extremes: distortions of scale, figures reduced to mere scribbles, washes of ink and gouache that seem to float free of their underdrawings, dissolutions of contours and boundaries. In his mature drawings, Padiyar notes, "Fragonard *played* with the system of signs in the manner of a daydreamer," in a way that recalls Diderot's and Rousseau's own experiments with dreams in their writings (p. 174, emphasis in the original). As sites of fantasy and imagination, out of time, drawing offered Fragonard "a certain space and time of freedom in the midst of eighteenth-century bourgeois society that, in public life, valued action, alertness, time-discipline, work and the individual's productiveness…." (p. 176). Fragonard's graphic dreams could get him into trouble, however. His drawing practice was, Padiyar proposes, a major cause of his fallout with his patron Pierre Jacques Onésyme Bergeret de Grancourt during their 1783-1784 trip to Italy. But, later in life, drawing also provided much-needed solace and escape amid the epochal shifts of the Revolution, which left Fragonard, the archetypical artist of the Rococo, further out of time.

Has Padiyar found the master theme that weaves together the disparate strands of Fragonard's life and work? Unfortunately, as a unifying thread, time proves rather thin. In recent years, temporality has become a subject of much serious reflection in eighteenth-century art history and in the discipline more broadly.[4] But Padiyar engages little with this literature and largely sidesteps temporality's historical, aesthetic, and methodological complexities. In fact, time all but disappears in his first chapter on secrets and applies only in a loose way to his third chapter on dreams, in the sense of a dream taking place outside of normal time and space.

When temporality is addressed, we are told little about the different conceptions of time or history current in eighteenth-century France, the cultural practices and mental habits they gave rise to, and the ways in which these phenomena shaped artistic production and aesthetic thought. Padiyar gestures towards these issues, to be sure. He asserts, citing canonical scholarship on eighteenth-century French art and cultural history, that time was increasingly thought of in subjective terms during the Enlightenment, that the academy strictly regulated the way its students spent their time, that surprise was an essential element in Rococo culture in general and de Piles's artistic theories in particular. But a fine-grained account of what, exactly, time meant to Fragonard and for his art never quite materializes.

This is a missed opportunity, because the disruptive temporal dimension of Fragonard's work can be richly historicized within the social and cultural developments of the period. In characterizing Fragonard as "out of time," however, Padiyar's intention seems to be quite the opposite: to de-emphasize historical explanation to focus instead on individual psychology. If Padiyar's Fragonard does not emerge quite as "out of time" as promised, he is an outsider in a more general sense, an artist unorthodox in his behavior and his art, deeply uncomfortable with society's constricting rules. It is a seductive portrayal, but it is often too boldly drawn to persuade as wholly accurate.

Part of the problem is rhetorical. Padiyar likes to gild the lily. Fragonard did not simply paint fluidly; he was "exceptionally fluent in his discharge of oil paint" (p. 14). His paintings do not merely capture a moment; they represent a "caesura in the flow time" (p. 110). Whether or not one likes this kind of writing is of course a matter of personal preference, but trouble arises when Padiyar's sometimes overheated prose runs ahead of the historical and visual evidence. We are told, for instance, that Fragonard's waning output beginning in the 1780s amounted a "death" that preceded "biological death," that the artist "had virtually interred his brushes" by the 1780s. (pp. 19-20). Lost in this sensational rhetoric are other projects, now destroyed or lost, that Fragonard painted for his own enjoyment, including landscape decorations for his apartments at the Louvre, as well as his home at Évry-Petit-Bourgeven.[5] These he made despite the blow of his daughter's death in 1788 and after the Revolution decimated his client base and ushered in profound shifts in taste, suggesting that Fragonard's final years were, at least artistically speaking, less "tragic" and unaccountable than Padiyar claims (p. 22).

Similar problems are evident when Padiyar discusses Fragonard's decision to abandon history painting and the Salon. "In crucial ways," Padiyar claims, "Fragonard deprived himself of the support--ideological, material and social--of both elite networks of *le monde* and the power of publicity. Fragonard was, in short, profoundly unaccommodated by the existing structures of the art world of his time" (p. 29). Really? History painting, Padiyar neglects to mention, was a notoriously time-consuming and poorly remunerated pursuit, especially after the Seven Years War drained the state's coffers. The art market, which came into its own in mid-eighteenth-century Paris, promised money and fame, and Fragonard proved remarkably adept at obtaining both. His paintings fetched among the highest prices at auction throughout the 1770s and 1780s, and prints after his work, marketed at a wider audience, also sold for exceptionally high prices. These conditions, moreover, bear directly on Padiyar's stated concerns. The market had its own distinct temporality, with its quick succession of fashions and trends, its emphasis on novelty and instant gratification. Might the temporal logic of early capitalism help us understand the variety of manners Fragonard adopted over the course his career or his signature aesthetic of surprise?[6] Far from being "profoundly unaccommodated" by the eighteenth-century art world, Fragonard can be seen as a prescient and canny adapter to one of the most powerful forces transforming that world: this artist supposedly "out of time" may turn out to have been more in tune with his time than most of his peers.

The absence of any serious discussion of the market is symptomatic of a broader problem with the way Padiyar treats Fragonard's relationship to his cultural and social context. More often than not, Fragonard is portrayed as sailing against the prevailing winds of French culture, as "perverse, out of step with the Enlightenment avant-garde of his time" (p. 35). To Fragonard's cultivation of privacy, opacity, smallness, pleasure, and luxury Padiyar opposes the broader culture's valorization of publicness, transparency, grandeur, virtue, and simplicity. This clash

between an eccentric artist and his society has a certain dramatic, even romantic, effect, but it hardly reflects Fragonard's relationship to his milieu. From Jean Starobinski's account of Rousseau's slide into obstruction and opacity to Elena Russo's exploration of the *philosophes'* embrace of theatricality despite their protestations against it, generations of scholars have demonstrated that Enlightenment thought and culture were riven by tensions and contradictions.[7] Fragonard's art belongs to this wider dialectic.

But Fragonard's precise relation to his context is not Padiyar's primary interest. In most instances, context is mobilized to set off a personal, psychological perspective of the artist, in which his behavior and art stem from his "unconventional personality" (p. 12). The problem lies in how Padiyar tries to access that personality. For him, Fragonard's art unproblematically reflects his motivations and desires, allowing us "to penetrate his psychological state" (p. 20). It is an oddly old-fashioned approach. Over thirty years ago, Mary Sheriff critiqued the long tradition of writers linking Fragonard's personality and temperament to his art--epitomized by the Goncourt brothers' effusive 1865 essay on the artist--and the mythologies it has perpetuated.[8] Padiyar's account, informed by psychoanalysis (Freud is cited at least four times), emphasizes deeper psychic forces than these earlier accounts, and his Fragonard is decidedly more neurotic than the happy hedonist of myth. But it is telling that Padiyar cites the Goncourts uncritically in several places. At one point, he even indulges in an extended digression on their characterization of Fragonard as the "Cherubino of painting," the amorous servant in Beaumarchais's play *The Marriage of Figaro*, that ends up linking the parody of military marches in Cherubino's famous aria "No più andrai" in Mozart's opera to Fragonard's refusal to conform to his society's temporal norms (pp. 94-97).

Of course, the success of any method has to be judged on the persuasiveness of the interpretations it produces. But even on their own terms, Padiyar's visual analyses sometimes overreach. Take the three bust-length self-portrait drawings, less than five inches in diameter, that Padiyar analyzes to introduce his contention that Fragonard was edging further and further into secrecy at the end of his career. Adopting Marianne Roland Michel's (debatable) proposition that the portraits, now at the Louvre, were made at roughly five-year intervals between 1780 and 1790, he proposes that, in them, Fragonard "is chronicling his self-effacement, his withdrawal into secrecy and a-sociality" (p. 26).[9]

The first, a smiling portrait, is said, reasonably enough, to be "the very image of eighteenth-century Parisian sociability" (p. 25). But then the interpretation begins to fly off the rails. In the second drawing, we are told, "the insistent communicative effort of the first *Self Portrait*…is abruptly *voided* in the now slouched and inexpressive gnomic figure" (p. 25, emphasis mine). The face, further, "emerges as if *scarred* with shadows" (p. 25, emphasis mine). Is depicting a different expression from an earlier portrait really an act of voiding the former, and how abrupt could this voiding be if the two drawings in question were made five years apart? What exactly does it mean to say that a face is "scarred with shadows," evocative though the phrase is, and how could it apply to a drawing as lightly shaded as this? In the third drawing, finally, Padiyar claims that Fragonard has withdrawn even further into secrecy. Here, he writes, the pose has "stiffened into something hieratic and dolorous." He then asks, "Might we glimpse in this drawing's palpable air of *inquiétude*, the contours of his tragic fate, the artist's consciousness of his passage into self-oblivion?" (p. 26). (Rhetorical questions like this are a favorite strategy of Padiyar's, especially when his arguments are at their most implausible.) Try as I might, I cannot see anything hieratic or dolorous in the self-portrait's rather conventional frontal pose or in its appraising, somewhat

ironic gaze, nor do I see how this little drawing, evidently executed quite quickly by this least introspective of artists, can manifest anything like the existential drama of his "consciousness of his passage into self-oblivion." Rembrandt this is not.

That these drawings might simply be bagatelles, made for amusement, or that their aim might be to capture fleeting moods rather than chronicle "the tremor of identity" over ten years is not even considered (p. 23). Instead, Padiyar lets portentous language imply meaning that is not supported by visual evidence. Straining under so much verbal weight, his interpretation collapses into a kind of psycho-melodrama.

Elsewhere his readings are more astute, but the conclusions he draws from them still sometimes give pause. His analysis of the drawings Fragonard made during his 1783-1784 tour of Italy with Bergeret de Grancourt, who insisted on keeping all of them even as the artist sued him to get them back, is a case in point. Padiyar explains, with great insight, how Fragonard deployed luminous washes, loose underdrawings, and manipulation of scale to transform the Italian countryside into placeless, timeless dreamscapes. But problems arise when he proceeds to read the drawings as a symptom of Fragonard's rocky relationship with Bergeret, as "implicated in his latest form of asocial behaviour" (p. 187). Linking the drawings with Bergeret's complaints about Fragonard's failures as a tour guide and their subsequent falling out, Padiyar claims that Fragonard must have been dreaming on the job, "plunging into his own sense of duration and time" while ignoring his social obligations to Bergeret (p. 187). The drawings were themselves, he suggests, uncommunicative, even asocial, private fantasies that could have alienated Fragonard's patron.

But just because the drawings have a dreamlike effect, on what grounds can we deduce that Fragonard himself was in a dream state while he made them or, more radically still, that the drawings give us "a sense…of an artist who has lost his grip on reality" (p. 187)? And if the drawings were so personal and alienating, why did Bergeret go to such lengths to keep them? It may have been in bad taste to dream in company, but reverie, as Padiyar himself shows in linking Fragonard's practice to Diderot's and Rousseau's writings, was a culturally sanctioned, even celebrated, mode of experience in the eighteenth century.[10] Rather than manifesting a breach of sociability that Bergeret found unacceptable, perhaps the drawings' dreamlike quality was precisely what made them so appealing to him. To be able to disregard time and give oneself over to reverie, after all, was a prerogative of aristocrats like Bergeret, who staked their identity in not having to *do* anything. Far from being purely private fantasies, Fragonard's a-temporal drawings likely spoke directly to the self-image of eighteenth-century French elites. In short, it is not clear that Fragonard's drawings and his deficiencies as a tour guide have much to do with each other.

With its handsome format, light touch with historiography and methodological questions, and succinct explanations of basic background information, *Fragonard: Painting Out of Time* seems to be aimed a wider (albeit rarified) audience than most academic monographs. For this audience and art historians alike, perhaps the book's most intriguing--and appealing--suggestion will be that Fragonard's art represents a quest for personal and artistic freedom. This notion, which runs like a leitmotif throughout Padiyar's text, recalls the central theme of Jean Starobinski's classic *L'Invention de la liberté*, another book aimed at a wider public.[11] (Padiyar quotes Starobinski's book once but does not engage it head on.) For Starobinski, as for Padiyar, eighteenth-century art's celebration of surprise and sensation, of masquerade and secrets, and of reverie and fantasy

represented a quest for "a higher liberty [that] existed on the plane of the imagination and interiority."[12] However foreign it might have appeared to twentieth-century eyes, Starobinski showed, eighteenth-century art gave expression to a characteristically modern consciousness of subjective autonomy.

Starobinski's poetic, lapidary book was ahead of its time in its interdisciplinarity and its conviction about the intellectual seriousness of eighteenth-century art, but in Anglo-American art history it has been mostly passed over in silence. It is therefore most welcome to see its central idea taken up again by Padiyar, especially as the appeal (or at least awareness) of eighteenth-century French art seems continually to shrink for the public. But the world has changed since 1964. In the wake of Me Too and Black Lives Matter, Fragonard's art, with its unapologetic celebration of social and economic privilege, its objectification of the female body, and its numerous scenes of what may be non-consensual sexual encounters, appears in some lights more politically and morally suspect than it has at any time since the Revolution. What is lost finally in Padiyar's highly personal response to Fragonard's art is how this context should inform our understanding of it. Whether or not he was "out of time" in his time, what do Fragonard and his "emancipatory" vision mean for *our* time?

NOTES

[1] Some of the most important of these contextual accounts include Mary Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Étienne Jollet, *Les figures de la pesanteur. Fragonard, Newton et les hasards de l'escarpolette* (Nîmes: Editions Jacqueline Chambon, 1998); Jennifer Milam, *Fragonard's Playful Paintings: Visual Games in Rococo Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Melissa Percival, *Fragonard and the Fantasy Figure: Painting the Imagination* (Farnham and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2012); Guillaume Faroult, ed., *Fragonard amoureux: galant et libertin* (Paris: Réunion de musées nationaux, 2015); Perrin Stein, *Fragonard: Drawing Triumphant* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016); Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *The Painter's Touch: Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 177-326.

[2] Thomas Kavanagh, *Esthetics of the Moment: Literature and Art in the French Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 129-147, 216-238.

[3] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley, CA, and London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 138 and pp. 138-45.

[4] For eighteenth-century art history, see Nina L. Dubin, *Futures and Ruins: Eighteenth-Century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010); Richard Taws, *The Politics of the Provisional: Art and Ephemera in Revolutionary France* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 2013); Melissa Lee Hyde and Katie Scott, eds., *Rococo Echo: Art, History and Historiography from Cochin to Coppola* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2014); Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Drawing Time," *October*, no. 151 (2015): 3-42. Padiyar contributed an essay to *Rococo Echo*, "Out of Time: Fragonard, with David," pp. 213-231, which treats questions of temporality with greater subtlety and depth than his book.

[5] These have been highlighted by Anne L. Schroder, "Fragonard's Late Career: *The Contes et Nouvelles* and the Progress of Love Revisited," *The Art Bulletin* 93 (2011): 172. Schroder offers a far rosier take on Fragonard's final years than Padiyar.

[6] On the temporality of the art market in eighteenth-century France, see Oliver Wunsch, "Watteau, through the Cracks," *The Art Bulletin* 100 (2018): 37-60.

[7] Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971); Elena Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics, and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

[8] Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism*, pp. 9-29.

[9] Marianne Roland Michel, "Sur sept médaillons de Fragonard," in *Hommage au dessin. Mélanges offerts à Roseline Bacou*, ed. Marie Teresa Caracciolo (Rimini, Galeria: 1996).

[10] See Robert J. Morrissey, *La Rêverie jusqu'à Rousseau. Recherches sur un topos littéraire* (Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum Publishers, 1984).

[11] Jean Starobinski, *L'invention de la liberté* (Geneva: Skira, 1964).

[12] Jean Starobinski, *The Invention of Liberty, 1700-1789*, translated by Bernard C. Swift (Geneva: Skira, 1987), p. 13.

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