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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.

Response by Satish Padiyar, The Courtauld Institute of Art.

At the generous invitation of the editors of *H-France Review*, I am happy to be given the opportunity to make some comments on Aaron Wile's review. The review divides into two parts. I am grateful to Wile for his meticulously balanced description of *Fragonard* in the first half. It is, however, in tension with a problematically characterised account of it in the second.

Fragonard's famed elusiveness renders him, as a subject of enquiry, especially resistant to monographic encapsulation. Any attempt to understand this fascinating cultural figure requires a subtle and complex set of questions, for example, about the relationships between the painter's subjectivity, the volatile social situation of *ancien régime* and Revolutionary France, patrons' demands and expectations, and the contingent acts of drawing and painting that, ever-vivid, continue to hold fascination for scholars and wider art-loving publics alike. Instead, Wile claims that I seek "the key that unlocks the man and the work, the master theme that unifies Fragonard's personality, career, and art." This would be highly reductive indeed, and I do not attempt to do it. Nor do I propose, as the reviewer states, that "time" is the "key." In my account, temporality is just one of the deeper forces at play in Fragonard's work (as I clearly state in my introduction, p. 11).

While not the key, time, as is indicated by the title of the book, is a leitmotif. Building on the richness of the theme, Wile asks if Fragonard's art, which was commercially profitable for the artist, might be explained by the temporality of the early capitalist art market in eighteenth-century France. It is an intriguing point, and valid—erotic engravings after Fragonard's paintings continued to sell successfully even during the morally austere years of the Terror. It is also true however that Fragonard cannot in any simple sense be aligned with the temporality of the burgeoning commerce in art. Not only did he continue to paint for elite patrons and art collectors, but also it was inconceivable that a trained history painter—a *Peintre du Roi*—could have solely painted to the power of market forces, especially given that, at this time, the art market was emergent and not fully-fledged. One of the larger claims of the book is that Fragonard, indeed, was *between* worlds, and a misfit. It is for this reason that a detailed account of normative (be it early capitalist, or other) temporality is rather beside the point, instead of, as Wile claims, sorely absent from my account. Fragonard blatantly disregarded the norms: in his painting, he disrupted the convention of sequential narrative then dominant in history painting

and genre; he devalued duration, both in the making of art and in its beholding; and he contradicted all the temporal assumptions informing professional career development (thus the book begins with Fragonard stopping painting). It is the logic of this particular perversity that the book attempts to track and, in doing so, critically to re-assess Fragonard's art and career, which in so many ways has proved resistant to any totalising interpretation.

Further, I would point to what I see as a misapprehension of the book's focus on Fragonard's "personality." Wile claims that my preoccupation with it is decidedly old-fashioned and, moreover, a throwback to the rightly discredited nineteenth-century idea promulgated by the Goncourt brothers of a seamless fit between Fragonard's art and late-nineteenth-century assumptions about French Southern temperament (as constitutionally lighthearted). He points out that it is telling that I cite the Goncourts uncritically in several places in the book. It is a sad state of affairs when one cannot mention the Goncourts without fear of reprisal. Rather than repudiation, what is required is continuing critical engagement with a complex text that is indelibly part of the historical archive of Fragonard studies. In critically rethinking the appellation "Cherubino" which the Goncourts applied to Fragonard in 1865 through Mozart's contemporaneous articulation of that character in *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), this is what I have sought to do. In my account, Cherubino becomes less of an essential character trait--Fragonard as the ever-flighty amorous butterfly--than a culturally articulated, subversive figure performed on the public stages of the Enlightenment. This lends a new meaning to the Goncourts' outmoded, but still much-repeated characterization. The eighteenth-century rise of individualism forced a new way of being an artist in the public sphere. Investigating the contours of Fragonard's personality--the sense of self, self-positioning in the world, and social performance (or, in Fragonard's case, the idiosyncratic refusal of it)--appears to me, rather than retrograde, to be crucial to the examination of a historical subject that has long been considered elusive.

Wile takes issue with my verbal analyses of visual works. He, for example, finds particularly unconvincing my description of Fragonard's final and late self-portrait drawing as, relative to the earlier self-portrait drawings by this artist, "stiffened into something hieratic and dolorous" (p. 26). This of course is for readers to judge--efficacy of verbal description of the non-linguistic is notoriously difficult and for that very reason we grope towards a common consensus. Yet perhaps the crux of the disagreement here is rather the tenor of interpretation that my visual description abets. "Rembrandt this is not," Wile claims, conjuring the name of the seventeenth-century artist presumably to denote subjective depth. Wile is right to point out that these small self-portrait drawings are relatively slight, and perhaps unlikely vehicles for imparting human tragedy. Yet, the reviewer's stated failure to see may be rather a result of an inability to envision a Fragonard--in his words, "this least introspective of artists"--of any self-reflection or depth at all. Who is to say Fragonard is not a Rembrandt (or indeed that Rembrandt did not have his own lighter moments)? The opposition of Rembrandt and Fragonard creates a boundary and a non-identity of depth, on the one hand, and lightness on the other. In my view, it is unsustainable. Fragonard was in fact a lifelong admirer of Rembrandt. The evidently stubborn stereotype of Fragonard as always and essentially a lighthearted artist is one that the book fundamentally questions and explores--in order to render Fragonard serious again.

I should clarify two further points. Wile sees a problem in my statement that the artist "had virtually interred his brushes by the 1780s" (p. 20). This language he views as "sensationalist

rhetoric” which, he claims more seriously, obscures the well-known fact that Fragonard always painted the walls of the places he resided in: first at the Louvre (where, alongside his atelier, he lived with his family); then on the staircase of the Villa Maubert at Grasse in Southern France; and subsequently at the property he jointly purchased with his wife, Marie-Anne, and Marguerite Gérard in 1797. That Fragonard continued to paint beyond the 1780s in this way (all but the Grasse house paintings are lost) surely does not contradict, however, the incontrovertible fact that Fragonard ceased any form of public and ambitious painting. The house decorations executed beyond 1790 were purely private and, unlike Francisco Goya’s late “black” paintings that decorated the interior of his farmhouse, left no material or visual traces that attest to the painter’s ambitions.

Finally, Wile suggests that my theme of the “freedom” achieved by Fragonard, along with the aesthetic liberation evident in his art, is powerfully resonant of Jean Starobinski’s important 1964 study *L’Invention de la Liberté*, indeed that it is a welcome, but now quite dated re-assertion of it.[1] In *Fragonard*, however, I draw only passingly on Starobinski’s study. Since it has been raised, I should perhaps clarify that Starobinski’s “freedom” is not the same as Fragonard’s. The ethical dimension that is present in the former--Starobinski’s eighteenth-century lesson to the society of 1964--is foreign to the latter and the two freedoms and their two distinctive social dilemmas ought not to be confused.

NOTE

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

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