H-France Review Vol. 25 (March 2025), No. 19

Alan Hollinghurst and Xavier F. Salomon, *Fragonard's Progress of Love*. New York, NY: The Frick Collection; in association with Lewes, UK: D Giles Limited, 2022. $29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1911282983.

Review by Satish Padiyar, The Courtauld Institute of Art.

This volume is the thirteenth of the Frick Diptych series of books. Begun in 2018, the admirable museum initiative seeks to spotlight a single artwork in The Frick Collection, New York, by juxtaposing, in the manner of a diptych, two contributions, one by a museum curator and the other by a contemporary creative figure. With this series, The Frick has hit upon an innovative way to offer new perspectives and fresh research questions beyond the specialisations of academic art historians.[1] Wisely, individual books in the series are presented as dual-authored: the contribution by the creative figure is given equal weight and not, in a modish way, appended as a contemporary afterthought to what might be perceived to be properly historical exegesis. This volume in the series consists of an essay by distinguished British novelist Alan Hollinghurst, and one by Frick Chief Curator Xavier Salomon. While not presented as a conversation between the authors, a common theme emerges. This is the still understudied topic of the world of flora and vegetation, the ubiquitous landscape elements, in rococo artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard's painterly practice.

Fragonard's painting cycle *Progress of Love* was the most ambitious project of the artist's chequered career, and it is the most debated painting cycle in eighteenth-century French art. Commissioned by Comtesse Du Barry, the mistress of Louis XV, in 1771 to decorate the walls of her newly constructed music pavilion at Louveciennes, which was designed by a youthful Claude-Nicholas Ledoux, the cycle has an unusually tortuous history. After four large-scale panels were completed and installed at Louveciennes, Fragonard experienced a humiliation when Du Barry promptly ordered them to be taken down, leaving the artist with a meagre total payment of 1,200 *livres* and the now rejected paintings. For two years, these lay in his studio in the Louvre, after which the artist transported them south to his birthplace at Grasse. Long after his death, they were privately purchased, found their way to London, and thence to New York, purchased by Henry Clay Frick for his mansion on 1 East 70th St.

"Researching and writing about the Fragonard room seems to be a requirement of every chief curator here," states Salomon at the outset (p. 9). Indeed, Salomon's concise text is necessarily indebted to his predecessor at The Frick Colin B. Bailey's deeply researched and authoritative book-length monograph on *Progress of Love*.[2] Deploying a theatrical metaphor, Salomon divides his blow-by-blow account of the history of Fragonard's cycle, which truly defies easy summary, into two acts as it were. The first act comprises Fragonard's art practice in the years leading up to 1771, Madame Du

Barry as an art patron and collector, the circumstances of the royal commission, the architectural conception and decorative ensemble of the new pavilion at Louveciennes, the context of Du Barry's rejection of the paintings; and their replacement with Joseph-Marie Vien's utterly different response to the contingencies of decoration at the site. The second and more abbreviated act continues with the historical fate of the troubled project; Fragonard's decision to replenish it in the early 1790s with the execution of ten additional canvases for a privately produced ensemble at Grasse; and the fortune of the *oeuvre* following the artist's death in 1806, when, after a period of relative neglect, they were enmeshed in new art market forces in the early twentieth century and the rise of a powerful elite of American collectors of French rococo art. The book closes with an account of the most recent re-display of Fragonard's cycle: the temporary installation, in 2021, of the entire corpus of fourteen paintings within the Brutalist spaces of Marcel Breuer's former Whitney Museum of Art building on Fifth Avenue in New York.

Lavishly illustrated, the book offers a condensed and lively account of the vicissitudes of this complex history. Since Bailey's study of 2011, no new documentation has emerged that would incontestably dissipate the mysteries of the *Progress*. Why did the patron reject the decorative paintings that were already *in situ*? And what did Fragonard mean to convey with a chain of images on the theme of elite heterosexual love that is bizarrely disconnected and discontinuous? Salomon offers no new answers to these questions--he remains largely agnostic over problems of interpretation in an essay which essentially is intended to be a synthesis--but correctly identifies the continuing scholarly uncertainty and the apparently unstoppable plethora of hypotheses that have been advanced to address them. Bailey minutely reconstructed the total decorative ensemble at Louveciennes within which Fragonard inserted his canvases (painted in the studio) and presented it as key to understanding the ultimate failure of the commission. He argued that Ledoux's refined architectural aesthetic conflicted with Fragonard's relatively rough painterly touch. Salomon follows Bailey in foregrounding the importance of the original site and usefully adds some pieces, not exactly missing but heretofore underplayed, to the puzzle. In the recent modernist display of *Progress of Love* at Met Breuer, beholders could experience the paintings as if they were radically autonomous. But at Louveciennes, Fragonard's paintings shared the viewers' attention with other painting and different media. Salomon cites François-Hubert Drouais's 1772 *Boy with a Tambourine* (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), one of four small roundel works (the other three are lost) on the theme of child's play that the younger artist painted as overdoors in the music pavilion. The luscious pink roses and tambourine in Drouais's painting would have chimed with the very same elements centrally positioned in Fragonard's *The Lover Crowned* on the wall. Salomon is also able to draw on recent research on Du Barry's collection of sculpture, and its role within the original decorative ensemble of the pavilion.[3]

As has often been noted, the scenes of Fragonard's *Progress* insistently teem with an abundance of vegetation. Fragonard drew upon the Rubensian and *fête champêtre* tradition of the *jardin d'amour* and took it in a distinctly idiosyncratic direction. In the foreground of each of the four original canvases for Du Barry, floral blooms spill out towards the viewer. An orange tree is heavy with fruit, and chains of flowers bedeck the female figure in *The Lover Crowned*. Throughout, rose bushes are everywhere, heavy with blossom. When Fragonard added ten panels to the original four at Grasse around 1791, four--possibly the last paintings he executed in his career--simply depicted tall hollyhocks proud against soaring trees in the far background (a further five depicted cupids, and one a slouched, forlorn woman). The sheer abnormal abundance of vegetation subtly threatens to tip the viewer's attention away from the poised human protagonists of the cycle towards the raw dynamism of the natural world.[4] Salomon subtly accentuates the aspect of vegetation and landscape

throughout his essay: it becomes something of a leitmotif in his narrative. The cover of the book reproduces a detail of the pink rose bush from *The Lover Crowned*, and as an epigraph to his contribution he selects a sentence from Marcel Proust's 1913 *Du côté de chez Swann* on the passage of time ("le temps des lilas…") in the domain of flora (p. 21). It is apt, not only because the publication of Proust's novel virtually coincides with the reception of Fragonard's *Progress* on American soil, but also because he advances the case that the painter's experience of the gardens of Tivoli, in Italy, which he had visited and sketched in 1760, was so epiphanic--"etched in his mind for the rest of his life" (p. 32)--that it is key to understanding Fragonard's later prodigal representation of nature in the cycle. The painter's cyclical work here becomes a work of memory. At the same time, Salomon suggests that the relationship of the depicted garden in *Progress* with the gardens, or parks, at the sites of Louveciennes and Grasse is "fundamental" (p. 84)--although it is not quite explained how and requires further elucidation. This is a relationship that, by extension, would be revived in subsequent locations of the cycle, adjacent to Hyde Park in London, and the garden of the Frick mansion in New York and Central Park beyond.

The theme of landscape is taken up with greater focus and depth in Hollinghurst's contribution titled "The Garden and the Forest". The francophone British novelist--he is also a translator of Racine--is celebrated for his forensic eye and Jamesian minuteness of social observation. What does this chronicler of contemporary gay men's lives, who is also known for his gritty descriptions of sex, make of the rococo painter's eros-drenched canvases?[5] Interestingly, he largely ignores the erotic narrative of the paintings for Du Barry (the ten additional panels are not addressed), although occasionally brilliant observations are made on individual erotic scenes. *The Meeting*, which is the second and most narratively tense moment of the cycle is, for instance, penetratingly described as "in its secular and sexy way like an Annunciation" (p. 15). Instead, Hollinghurst sees a marked and compelling disjunction in all four panels between what is happening in the foregrounds (events) and the drama of the backgrounds (landscape), or, as in his title, between garden and forest. This perceived opposition is then further reduced to one between the human and the tree in Fragonard's cycle; and it is the latter element in *Progress* which is the subject of the essay, for he recalls of the Fragonard cycle, "always it was the trees which caught my eye" (p. 11). The line of thinking proves highly productive, opening, so to speak, new vistas for thinking about Fragonard's relationship to nature and, specifically, the mysterious pictorial dynamism of the tree in his practice. For it could be argued that just as much as modish erotic subject matter, it was the expressive dimensions of vegetation--flower painting but also, allowing maximum grandeur, the form of the tree--that afforded Fragonard an alternative route to history painting; and that this precisely was the nature of the epiphany at Tivoli in 1760. Certain early drawings by Fragonard reveal a propensity to botanical accuracy, but the artist took this in the direction of expressive deformation, autonomous compositional effects, and ungraspable magnifications of scale that approached the sublime. For Hollinghurst, the key to understanding Fragonard's unusual treatment of the tree in the artwork is as an indicator of time, since "tree time is different from human time" (p. 12). Accordingly, the author tracks this other temporality--behind the erotic action--with a close reading of the verdant backgrounds of the Louceviennes panels. What emerges from his reading is a pictorial preoccupation with a longer cycle of life and death, articulated through an orgasmic arboreal plenitude that occasionally is undermined by desiccating and aged branches. This suggests that there is a more complex relationship with time in the work of Fragonard than what has been termed the artist's and the rococo's aesthetic of the moment.[6] The instantaneity of human play and life appears to be set off by a deeper and more protracted temporal cycle, namely the grandeur of a longer time span glimpsed in the implacably slow-growing and soaring trees.

The volume is capped with a bibliography, usefully citing Fragonard literature on *Progress* and the considerable scholarly work on Fragonard since the publication of Bailey's landmark and still fundamental study of the cycle. Hollinghurst is an inspired choice of creative artist for the one part of the diptych and The Frick is to be congratulated on its stated mission in the Diptych series to open up its major works of art to critical dialogue.

NOTES

[1] Other French artworks in the series are Pierre Gouthière's porcelain and bronze vases and Claude Monet's painting *Vétheuil in Winter*.

[2] Colin B. Bailey, *Fragonard's Progress of Love at The Frick Collection* (New York and London: The Frick Collection in association with Giles, 2011).

[3] See Malcolm Baker, "Fragonard, Vassé and Caffieri: Addressing the relationship between painting and sculpture at Madame Du Barry's Louveciennes," in Marion Boudon-Machuel, Pascal Julien, and Fabienne Sartre, eds., *La Sculpture dans son rapport avec les autres arts (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires Du Midi, 2023), pp. 203-208.

[4] The point has been made by Richard S. Rand, about Fragonard's oil *The Island of Love*. See Richard Rand, "Fragonard dans le Jardin d'amour," in Thomas Gaehtgens, ed., *L'Art et les normes sociales au XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, Éditions de la Maison, 2001), pp. 493-508. Also, on the pre-eminence of the natural world in Fragonard's *Progress*, see Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *The Painter's Touch. Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 223-233.

[5] There is at least one mention of this eighteenth-century artist's name in Hollinghurst's novels. The dilapidated neo-rococo park Hermitage, which has taken on new life as a gay cruising ground, is described as "like a three-dimensional Fragonard." Alan Hollinghurst, *The Folding Star* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 407.

[6] I am referring to Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Esthetics of the Moment. Literature and Art in the French Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). On Fragonard and time, see also Satish Padiyar, *Fragonard. Painting Out of Time* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020).

Satish Padiyar
The Courtauld Institute of Art
Satish.Padiyar@courtauld.ac.uk

Copyright © 2025 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the

Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172