



Jean Honoré Fragonard  
French, 1732 - 1806

## *Love as Folly*

c. 1773/1776

oil on canvas

overall (oval): 56.2 x 47.3 cm (22 1/8 x 18 5/8 in.)

framed: 78.7 x 62.2 x 8.3 cm (31 x 24 1/2 x 3 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower center: frago

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.111

---

### ENTRY

Fragonard repeated the compositions of the small pendant paintings known as *Love as Folly* and *Love the Sentinel* [fig. 1] numerous times during his career; a second pair also belongs to the National Gallery of Art (*Love as Folly* and *Love the Sentinel*). [1] In *Love the Sentinel* a chubby Cupid stands before a flowering rosebush at what appears to be the edge of a garden or park (a balustrade marking its outer limits is visible in the left and right middle ground). He looks out at the viewer, proffering an arrow in his right hand while holding his left hand to his lips; a quiver lies at his feet, and two doves fly away against a cloud-filled sky. *Love as Folly* shows a matching figure in a similar setting, although he flies jauntily through the air, raising aloft a stick topped by a fool's cap; his action seems to frighten away a flock of doves, several more of which are visible on the ground. The paintings clearly were intended as a pair: they are of similar size, the subjects and scale of the figures are compatible, and the compositions balance nicely. The earthbound, stable putto in one complements the more active flying boy in the other. In all likelihood *Love the Sentinel* was intended to be hung to the left of *Love as Folly*, so that the figures are turned toward each other.

Scholars usually have dated the various versions of the compositions to the early 1770s on the basis of style. Their light color scheme, rapid brushwork, and lighthearted subjects are similar to numerous small paintings, often in oval format, that Fragonard produced in the years around 1770. [2] During this period he was at work on his most celebrated cycle of decorative paintings, the large canvases called *The Progress of Love*, painted around 1771–1772 at the request of Madame du Barry for her pleasure pavilion at Louveciennes outside Paris and now in the

Frick Collection, New York. [3] The present works related closely to two of four overdoors associated with this commission [fig. 2] [fig. 3], although there are minor differences in details (such as the position of the putto's legs in *Love as Folly*) and the Frick canvases are considerably larger and are rectangular rather than oval. More significantly, the compositions of the overdoors are in reverse of the small ovals.

The precise relationship between the various versions of *Love as Folly* and *Love the Sentinel* and the Frick's overdoors is difficult to determine. It is not certain when Fragonard painted the latter pictures, which are not usually thought to have been part of the original commission for Madame du Barry in the early 1770s. After the main panels of *The Progress of Love* were rejected by their patron, Fragonard purportedly kept them rolled in his studio until he returned to his native Grasse in 1790. There he installed the cycle in the house of his cousin, Alexandre Maubert. At that time he added several new paintings to the series, including a fifth large panel, a group of narrow canvases representing hollyhocks, and a chimneypiece, *Love Triumphant*, showing a group of putti rising—appropriately enough—through clouds of smoke, the top figure holding two flaming torches. [4] It has generally been assumed that the four overdoors also date to this later period of 1790–1791. [5] Therefore, they would have been produced long after the small oval canvases, versions of which were engraved by Jean François Janinet (1752–1814) in 1777. [6] René Gimpel even suggests that when painting the overdoors in Grasse, Fragonard relied on these engravings, accounting for the reversal of the compositions. [7] Pierre Rosenberg has argued, however, that the Frick overdoors were part of the original commission from du Barry, placing their execution date to the same period of the small oval canvases. [8]

This text was previously published in Philip Conisbee et al., *French Paintings of the Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Century*, The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue (Washington, DC, 2009), 167–172.

Collection data may have been updated since the publication of the print volume. Additional light adaptations have been made for the presentation of this text online.

Richard Rand

January 1, 2009

---

**COMPARATIVE FIGURES**



**fig. 1** Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Love the Sentinel*, c. 1773/1776, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection



**fig. 2** Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Love the Jester*, 1790 (?), oil on canvas, The Frick Collection, New York. Copyright The Frick Collection, New York



**fig. 3** Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Love the Sentinel*, 1790 (?), oil on canvas, The Frick Collection, New York. Copyright The Frick Collection, New York

---

#### NOTES

- [1] For other examples, see Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), nos. 288, 292a. According to an account of 1807, Fragonard repeated the compositions no less than twelve times (see Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard, Life and Work* [New York, 1988; French ed. Paris, 1987], 308).
- [2] Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), nos. 154–160, 235–243.
- [3] See Donald Posner, “The True Path of Fragonard’s *Progress of Love*,” *Burlington Magazine* 114, no. 833 (Aug. 1972): 526–534.
- [4] See Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard, Life and Work* (New York, 1988; French ed. Paris, 1987), 233; Georges Wildenstein, *The Paintings of Fragonard: Complete Edition* (New York, 1960), 31; *Love Triumphant* is catalogued by

## NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

*French Paintings of the Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*

Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), no. 445.

- [5] The traditional dating of 1790–1791 for the overdoors is followed by Roger Portalis, *Honoré Fragonard: sa vie et son oeuvre*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1889), 102, 239; Georges Wildenstein, *The Paintings of Fragonard: Complete Edition* (New York, 1960), 268, 320; Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard, Life and Work* (New York, 1988; French ed. Paris, 1987), 335–336.
- [6] A version of *Love the Sentinel* appeared in the marquis d'Arcambal sale, February 22, 1776, lot 27 (cited in Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard* [Paris, 1989], 124).
- [7] René Gimpel, *Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Fragonard, at the Galleries of E. Gimpel & Wildenstein* (New York, 1914), 8–9. Portalis (in Roger Portalis, *Honoré Fragonard: sa vie et son oeuvre*, 2 vols. [Paris, 1889], 102) implied as much.
- [8] Pierre Rosenberg, *Fragonard* (Paris, 1987), 322–323. Rosenberg (Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard* [Paris, 1989], 22) notes that Fragonard was paid 18,000 *livres* for the du Barry commission, while Jean Marie Vien, the artist who painted the replacements, was paid 16,000; he plausibly suggests that Fragonard's commission was higher because he painted overdoors to go with the four main panels. He does not exclude the possibility that one of the overdoors, *Love the Avenger*, was repainted in Grasse. On the dating of the overdoors, see also Jean Montague Massengale, *Jean-Honoré Fragonard* (New York, 1993), 44.

---

### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Both *Love as Folly* and *Love the Sentinel* were executed on medium-weight, plain-weave fabric. The original tacking margins have been removed and the paintings have been lined, but cusping indicates that they retain their original dimensions. The X-radiographs reveal a line of missing paint approximately 1 cm from the edge along the bottom of each painting, the left side of the top half of *Love as Folly* and the right side of the top half of *Love the Sentinel*, which suggests that the supports were folded over to accommodate smaller stretchers at one time. Both supports were prepared with a moderately thick white layer followed by two thin layers of red and then a thin layer of gray. Some large particles, probably sand or coarse pigments, were mixed with the ground to give the paintings grainy, pebbly surfaces. The paint was applied with a fluid consistency. There are appreciable brushmarks in the highlights of the clouds, the birds, and the flesh tones of the putti. Fragonard created these highlights by dragging his brush through the paint

and revealing the paint underneath. The leaves and stems of the rosebushes have been delineated with red-brown glazes.

The condition of both paintings is good. *Love as Folly* has a moderate amount of inpainting, mostly around the edges and along a horizontal band that goes through the center of the painting. In *Love the Sentinel*, there is inpainting around the perimeter of the painting, but it is hidden by the frame. There are a few small areas of inpaint in the center of the sky, in the right-hand bushes, in the sky above the birds, and below the arrow quiver. The varnish on both paintings remains clear, but the inpainting of *Love the Sentinel* has discolored.

---

## PROVENANCE

Possibly (Dennoor sale, Le Brun, Paris, 5-7 April 1797, no. 73). Rothschild collections, probably Paris and London. Andrew W. Mellon [1855-1937], Pittsburgh and Washington, by 1934;<sup>[1]</sup> by inheritance to his daughter, Ailsa Mellon Bruce [1901-1969], New York; bequest 1970 to NGA.

[1] Given the numerous versions of this painting and its pendant, *Love the Sentinel* (NGA 1970.17.112), it is difficult to establish their early provenances. Although Georges Wildenstein, *The Paintings of Fragonard*, New York, 1960: 271, listed the other NGA pair (NGA 1947.2.1 and NGA 1947.2.2) as appearing in the Véri sale in 1785, Roger Portalis, *Honoré Fragonard: Sa vie et son oeuvre*, 2 vols., Paris, 1889: 2:270, associated this painting and its pendant with that sale.

The identity of the Rothschild collection that included the pair is also uncertain. Portalis 1889, 2:270 cites Alphonse de Rothschild (probably Mayer Alphonse de Rothschild, 1827-1905) at the Château de Boulogne-sur-Seine; Pierre de Nolhac, *Jean-Honoré Fragonard: 1732-1806*, Paris, 1906: 156, cites Alphonse without a location; and Wildenstein 1960, 271, cites Alphonse at the Château de Boulogne and Arthur de Rothschild in London. The Rothschild Archive in London kindly searched Alphonse's records for the paintings without success and also noted that the Château de Boulogne was the residence not of Alphonse, but of his brother, Edmond James de Rothschild (1845-1934) (Melanie Aspey, e-mail message, 3 March 2006, and Barbra Ruperto, e-mail message, 21 August 2007, both to Anne

## NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

*French Paintings of the Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*

Halpern, NGA curatorial files). Pauline Marcilhacy, whose expertise is the Rothschild collections in France, kindly checked the available records for the Château de Boulogne but did not find the National Gallery's paintings (e-mail message to Anne Halpern, 5 September 2007, NGA curatorial files).

The "C" number that appears on a label on the reverse of the painting likely indicates that the painting was in the hands of M. Knoedler & Co., whose stock numbers for objects on consignment took this form. Mellon could well have purchased the painting from this dealer (by 1934 when he lent it to a San Francisco exhibition), or at some point during his ownership he may have attempted unsuccessfully to sell it through Knoedler's.

---

### EXHIBITION HISTORY

1933 Three French Reigns (Louis XIV, XV & XVI): Loan Exhibition in Aid of the Royal Northern Hospital, 25 Park Lane, London, 1933, no. 119, repro.

1934 Exhibition of French Painting from the Fifteenth Century to the Present Day, California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, 1934, no. 28, repro.

1935 French Painting and Sculpture of the Eighteenth Century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1935-1936, no. 48, repro.

1982 Fragonard and His Friends: Changing Ideals in Eighteenth Century Art, Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1982-1983, no. 21.

---

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1960 Wildenstein, Georges. *The Paintings of Fragonard*. New York, 1960: no. 321, repro.
- 1972 Mandel, Gabriele. *L'Opera completa di Fragonard*. Milan, 1972: no. 345, repro.
- 1975 *European Paintings: An Illustrated Summary Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1975: 134, repro.
- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 338, no. 453, color repro.
- 1985 *European Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art,



## NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

*French Paintings of the Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*

Washington, 1985: 160, repro.

1987 Cuzin, Jean-Pierre. "Jean-Honoré Fragonard: Vie et oeuvre." Fribourg, 1987. English edition New York, 1988: 308-309, nos. 256-257, repro.

1989 Rosenberg, Pierre. *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard*. Paris, 1989: 102, no. 284-285, repro.

2009 Conisbee, Philip, et al. *French Paintings of the Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, D.C., 2009: no. 32, 167-172, color repro.

---

**To cite:** Richard Rand, "Jean Honoré Fragonard/*Love as Folly*/c. 1773/1776," *French Paintings of the Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/52255> (accessed April 11, 2025).