



Jean-Honore Fragonard. *The Swing*, 1767. Canvas, 31 7/8 ins x 25 1/4 ins., Wallace Collection, London.

Fragonard and Greuze SEX OBJECTS AND VIRTUOUS MOTHERS

The lightly veiled eroticism of Fragonard's *The Surprise* (right) which proved too much for Madame du Barry, had been given much more explicit expression five years earlier in *The Swing* (left). A woman on a swing was an established motif in French rococo art, especially in paintings of *fetes galantes*, those poetic celebrations of the aristocratic life of leisure. Children were occasionally shown enjoying the pastime, very infrequently men. Women and girls monopolized it and the swing soon acquired further connotations. It seemed to epitomize the pleasure-loving, licentious spirit of the *ancien regime* and in particular the fickleness and inconstancy ascribed to women, especially in high society, their teasing changes of mind if not of heart in the perpetual to-and-fro game of light-hearted, feet-off-the-ground flirtation.



The origin of Fragonard's is by chance known. The writer Charles Colle recorded having met the painter Gabriel-Francois Doyen on 2

October 1767, who said to him: 'Would you believe it!' A gentleman of the court had sent for him shortly after a religious painting of his had been exhibited in Paris and when Doyen presented himself he found him at his 'pleasure house' with his mistress. 'He started by flattering me with courtesies', Doyen related, 'and finished by avowing that he was dying with a desire to have me make a picture, the idea of which he was going to outline. "I should like", he continued, "to have you paint Madame (pointing to his mistress) on a swing that a bishop would set going. You will place me in such a way that I would be able to see the legs of the lovely girl, and better still, if you want to enliven your picture a little more..." I confess, M. Doyen said to me, that this proposition, which I wouldn't have expected, considering the character of the picture that led to it, perplexed me and left me speechless for a moment. I collected myself, however, enough to say to him almost at once: "Ah Monsieur, it is necessary to add to the essential idea of your picture by making Madame's shoes fly into the air and having some cupids catch them." 'Doyen did not accept the commission, however, and passed it on to Fragonard. The identity of the patron is unknown, though he was at one time thought to have been the Baron de Saint-Julien, the Receiver General of the French Clergy, which would have explained the request to include a bishop pushing the swing. This idea as well as that of having himself and his mistress portrayed was evidently dropped by the patron, whoever he may have been. The picture was depersonalized and, due to Fragonard's extremely sensuous imagination, became a universal image of joyous, carefree sexuality.

The theme is that of love and the rising tide of passion, as intimated by the sculptural group in the lower center of the picture. (Dolphins driven by cupids drawing the water-chariot of Venus symbolize the impatient surge of love.) Beneath the girl on the swing, lying in a great bush, a tangle of flowers and foliage, is the young lover, gasping with anticipation. The bush is, evidently, a private place as it is enclosed by little fences. But the youth has found his way to it. Thrilling to the sight now offered him, the youth reaches out with hat in hand. (A hat in eighteenth-century erotic imagery covered not only the head but also another part of the male body when inadvertently exposed.) The feminine counterpart to the hat was the shoe and in *The Swing* the girl's shoe flies off her pretty foot to be lost in the undergrowth. This idea had been suggested originally by Doyen, as he recounted to Colle, and in French paintings of the period a naked foot and lost shoe often accompany the more familiar broken pitcher as a symbol of lost virginity.

However, all these erotic symbols would lie inert on the canvas had not Fragonard charged the whole painting, with the amorous ebullience and joy of an impetuous surrender to love. In a shimmer of leaves and rose petals, lit up by a sparkling beam of sunshine, the girl, in a frothy dress of cream and juicy pink, rides the swing with happy, thoughtless abandon. Her legs are parted, her skirts open; the youth in the rose-bush, hat off, arm erect, lunges towards her. Suddenly, as she reaches the peak of her ride, her shoe flies off.

Conjugal love was also celebrated by Fragonard and by other painters of the time with the same, or almost the same, vibrant sensuality. The joys of family life were extolled, usually from the point of view of the husband, and motherhood was associated above all with sexual gratification. But later, as the social and moral climate changed, other aspects of the female sex were emphasized, notably that of the Virtuous Mother or woman as the consoler and dispenser of charity. These moralizing works were created for a new and different public. Whereas Fragonard and other hedonistic Rococo painters had worked for private patrons and often, as in the case of *The Swing*, strictly for private consumption, the painters who extolled such themes as that of the Virtuous Mother had a larger and more general public in mind. By the second half of the eighteenth century visitors to the biennial Salons had become quite numerous and were not drawn from any particular class of society. The effect of their patronage soon began to be felt and its influence was greatly augmented by their purchase of prints after the paintings they admired, thus creating a new and wider public for art.

The Benefactress by Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805) is typical of this new genre. A well-dressed woman is visiting an elderly sick man, apparently in hospital and attended by a nun who stands in the background. Visiting the sick was one of the Seven Acts of Mercy derived from the Gospel according to St Matthew and the woman has brought her daughter with her to teach her Christian virtue. Though not exhibited in the Salon, since Greuze had quarreled with the Academy, the painting quickly became known and its absence was publicly regretted. It was



Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Benefactress*, 1775. Canvas, 3ft 8ins x 4ft 9 ½ ins. Musee des Beaux Arts de Lyon.

thought an eloquent and edifying work, sublime in sentiment as in feeling. Diderot, who never tired of repeating how Greuze ‘spoke to vital moral issues’, would have greatly admired it as exemplifying ‘that poetry that touches our feelings, instructs us, improves us and invites us to virtuous action’. Even six years later it was singled out for its exceptional tenderness in the depiction of moral subjects—and, it might be added, one in which a woman is given the central role as the noble exemplar of Christian virtue. It was a far cry from the world of thoughtless escapades with women as sex objects so beloved by Fragonard less than a decade earlier.

(Continue to next page, please)

Excerpted from Janson, *History of Art*, 5th ed., 1995, 608 – 611.

ENGLAND

Painting

Across the Channel the Venetians were the predominant artists for more than a half-century, but the French Rococo had an important, though unacknowledged, effect and, in fact, helped to bring about the first school of English painting since the Middle Ages that had more than local importance.

HOGARTH. The earliest of these painters, William Hogarth (1697-1764), was the first English artist of genius since Nicholas Hilliard. Although he certainly learned something about color and brushwork from Venetian and French examples, as well as Van Dyck, his work is of such originality as to be essentially without precedence. He made his mark in the 1730s with a new kind of picture, which he described as "modern moral subjects ...similar to representations on the stage." He wished to be judged as a dramatist, he said, even though his "actors" could only "exhibit a dumb show." These pictures, and the engravings he made from them for popular sale, came in sets, with details recurring in each scene to unify the sequence. Hogarth's "morality plays" teach, by horrid example, the solid middle-class virtues. They show a country girl who succumbs to the temptations of fashionable London; the evils of corrupt elections; and aristocratic rakes who live only for



839. WILLIAM HOGARTH. *The Orgy, Scene III of The Rake's Progress*. c. 1734. Oil on canvas, 24 1/2 X 29 1/2". Sir John Soane's Museum, London



840. WILLIAM HOGARTH. *He Revels (The Orgy), Scene III of The Rake's Progress*. 1735. Engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1932

ruinous pleasure, marrying wealthy women of lower status for their fortunes, which they soon dissipate. Hogarth is probably the first artist in history to become a social critic in his own right.

In *The Orgy* (figs. 839 and 840), from *The Rake's Progress*, the young wastrel is overindulging in wine and women. The scene is so full of visual clues that a full account would take pages, plus constant references to the adjoining episodes. However literal-minded, the picture has great appeal. Hogarth combines some of Watteau's sparkle with Jan Steen's narrative gusto, and entertains us so well that we enjoy his sermon without being overwhelmed by its message.

GAINSBOROUGH. Portraiture remained the only constant source of income for English painters. Here, too, the eighteenth century produced a style that differed from the Continental traditions that had dominated this field. Its greatest master, Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), began by painting landscapes, but ended as the favorite portraitist of British high society. His early portraits, such as *Robert Andrews and His Wife*



841. THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH. *Robert Andrews and His Wife*. c. 1748-50. Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 X 47". The National Gallery, London. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees

(fig. 841), have a lyrical charm that is not always found in his later pictures. Compared to Van Dyck's artifice in *Charles I Hunting* (see fig. 781), this country squire and his wife are unpretentiously at home in their setting. The landscape, although derived from Ruisdael and his school, has a sunlit, hospitable air never achieved (or desired) by the Dutch masters, while the casual grace of the two figures, which affects an air of naturalness, indirectly recalls Watteau's style. The newlywed couple—she dressed in the fashionable attire of the day, he armed with a rifle to denote his status as a country squire (hunting was a privilege of wealthy landowners)—do not till the soil themselves. The painting nevertheless conveys

the gentry's closeness to the land, from which the English derived much of their sense of national identity. (Many private estates had been created in 1535, when Henry VIII broke with the Catholic church and redistributed its property to his supporters.) Out of this attachment to place was to develop a feeling for nature that became the basis for English landscape painting, to which Gainsborough himself made an important early contribution.



843. SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS. *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse*. 1784. Oil on canvas, 93 x 57 1/2" (236.5 x 146cm). Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California

Gainsborough spent most of his career working in the provinces, first in his native Suffolk, then in the fashionable resort town of Bath. Toward the end of his career, he moved to London, where his work underwent a pronounced change. The very fine portrait of the famous actress Mrs. Siddons (fig. 842) has the virtues of Gainsborough's late style: a cool elegance that translates Van Dyck's aristocratic poses into late-eighteenth-century terms, and a fluid, translucent technique reminiscent of Rubens' that renders the glamorous sitter, with her fashionable attire and coiffure, to ravishing effect.

REYNOLDS. Gainsborough painted Mrs. Siddons in conscious opposition to his great rival on the London scene, Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), who had portrayed the same sitter as the Tragic Muse (fig. 843). Reynolds, president of the Royal Academy

since its founding in 1768, was the champion of the academic approach to art, which he had acquired during two years in Rome. In his famous *Discourses* he formulated what he felt were necessary rules and theories. His views were essentially those of Lebrun, tempered by British common sense. Like Lebrun, he found it difficult to live up to his theories in actual practice. Although he



842. THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH. *Mrs. Siddons*. 1785. Oil on canvas, 49 1/2 X 39". The National Gallery, London. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees

preferred history painting in the *grand style*, most of his works are portraits "enabled," whenever possible, by allegorical additions or disguises like those in his picture of Mrs. Siddons. His style owed a good deal more to the Venetians, the Flemish Baroque, and even to Rembrandt (note the lighting in *Mrs. Siddons*) than he conceded in theory, though he often recommended following the example of earlier masters.

Reynolds was generous enough to give praise to Gainsborough, whom he outlived by a few years, and whose instinctive talent he must have envied. He eulogized him as one who saw with the eye of a painter rather than a poet. There is more truth to this statement than it might seem. Gainsborough's paintings epitomized the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume's idea that painting must incorporate both nature and art. Gainsborough himself was a simple and unpretentious person who exemplified Hume's "natural man," free of excessive pride or humility.

Reynolds' approach, on the other hand, as enunciated in his *Discourses*, was based on the Roman poet Horace's dictum *ut pictura poesis*. His frequent borrowing of poses from the antique was intended to elevate the sitter from an individual to a universal type through association with the great art of the past and the noble ideals it embodied. This heroic model was closely related to the writings of the playwright Samuel Johnson and the practices of the actor David Garrick, both of whom were friends of Reynolds. In this, Reynolds was the very opposite of Gainsborough. Yet, for all of the differences between them, the two artists had more in common, artistically and philosophically, than they cared to admit. Reynolds and Gainsborough looked back to Van Dyck, drawing different lessons from his example. Both emphasized, albeit in varying degrees, the visual appeal and technical proficiency of their paintings. Moreover, their portraits of Mrs. Siddons bear an unmistakable relationship to the Rococo style of France—note their resemblance to Vigée's *Duchesse* (right)—yet remain distinctly English in character.



Vigée-Lebrun, *The Duchesse de Polignac*, 1783