
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Enlightenment Response: A Study of Rational Spirit in the Works of Jean-Honoré Fragonard

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| ABSTRACT

This paper utilizes Jean-Honoré Fragonard's paintings, housed in collections across Europe and North America, as primary source material. Employing methods from art history, social art history, literary analysis, and intellectual history, the study aims to explore the connections between Fragonard's artistic philosophy, the social context of 18th-century France, and the cultural trends of the time. The paper investigates Fragonard's response to Enlightenment and rationality through his paintings. The results indicate that, situated in an era oscillating between Rococo and realistic styles, Fragonard's works provide a glimpse into the social and cultural milieu of late 18th-century France. Driven by the spirit of reason, Fragonard created a series of landscapes and genre paintings. Simultaneously, his sensitivity to emotions rendered his works vivid and dynamic, embodying the collaborative interplay of sensibility and reason.

| KEYWORDS

Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Rococo, 18th-century France, Enlightenment thought, landscape painting, genre painting.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The term "Rococo" was often used in the 17th century to refer to shell-shaped crafts, synonymous with "travail de coquille" or shellwork. It gradually evolved to connote a delicate, exquisite, and ornate artistic style and manner. Rococo art flourished during the reign of Louis XV under the guidance of Madame de Pompadour, extending from architecture and decoration to the realm of painting (Yuan, 2010). Rococo paintings often depicted the extravagant, hedonistic, and amorous lives of the French aristocracy, characterized by the use of bold and vibrant colors, presenting a stark contrast to the grand and magnificent style of the Classical period.

Three painters are particularly well-known from the Rococo era: Jean Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), François Boucher (1703–1770), and Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806). Among them, Watteau is considered the first painter to portray courtly scenes of pleasure, influencing others with his "Fête galante" paintings that combine a delightful atmosphere with a touch of melancholy. Boucher often depicted secular love through mythological figures, while Fragonard's works were more straightforward and bolder, often drawing inspiration from real-life figures to meet the demands of his patrons. As a painter transitioning from the Rococo style to the period of Neoclassicism, Fragonard's works offer insights into the changes in French society at the time. While Fragonard gained fame for his depictions of love, his landscapes and genre paintings beyond the theme of romance also deserve attention.

The 18th century in France is considered the "Age of Enlightenment," marked by the rise and development of natural sciences and the search for universal laws governing the material world, leading to a fresh understanding of the world. The "Age of Enlightenment" is also known as the Age of Reason. Unlike the 17th-century philosophers like Descartes, who considered reason

as “eternal truth” and “innate experience,” in the eyes of 18th-century thinkers, reason was viewed as an ability, a power, an acquired capacity guiding people to discover truth and exercise creative intellectual power (Cassirer, 2009). Alongside the brilliance of reason, there was an undercurrent of sensibility. Sensibility is a perception-based capacity encompassing sensory perceptions such as sight, hearing, and smell regarding the natural world. It also includes personal emotions like joy, anger, sorrow, and sensitivity to others’ feelings (Nevill, 1903). Reason and sensibility together constituted the social and cultural spirit of 18th-century France.

2. Research Status

Ralph Nevill pointed out that Fragonard’s advocacy for freedom and attention to his own personality traits had a significant impact on the formation of his painting style. The contemporary context, including aristocratic patronage of the arts and the prevalence of the Rococo style, provided a conducive environment for Fragonard’s artistic development (Schroder, 2011). Anne L. Schroder primarily explored Fragonard’s later painting activities, including creating illustrations for Jean de La Fontaine’s *Contes et nouvelles en vers (Tales and Novels in Verse)* and continuing the execution of the series of paintings titled *Le Progrès de l’amour (The Progress of Love)*. Schroder noted that during the French Revolution, Fragonard maintained his independence, adding personal design and understanding to his illustration work, setting him apart from other illustrators (Yuan, 2010). Scholars such as Yuan and Zheng proposed that Fragonard was a “freedom-oriented sensualist” who harbored a love for life, a passion for exploration, and a pursuit of freedom, further diversifying the Rococo style (Zheng, 2017).

Fragonard’s works have also been a focal point of research. Jennifer Milam, using *Young Girl in her Bed, Making her Dog Dance* as an example, explored the intention expressed by the “dog” in the painting, affirming the “secularity” of Fragonard’s painting (Milam, 2015). Another article by Milam discussed Fragonard’s *Les Hasards heureux de l’escarpolette (The Swing)* and other related works, examining the entertainment aspect of Fragonard’s art from the perspectives of composition and imagery (Milam, 2000).

Many scholars have emphasized Fragonard’s imaginative richness, noting that his works are filled with a sense of freedom and poetry. While more attention has been given to Fragonard’s works on the theme of romantic love, there has been limited research on his landscapes and portraits. Scholars have focused on the influence of aristocratic hedonism, with less mention of the role of the Enlightenment movement and rational thought. Consequently, what thoughts and emotions are expressed, and what stylistic features are present in Fragonard’s works beyond the theme of romantic love? Do these works embody a pursuit of rationality? This paper seeks to build upon prior research and analyze Fragonard’s response to the spirit of the Enlightenment and rationality in this era.

3. 18th Century French Art and Culture

3.1 Rise of the Rococo Style

In the early 18th century, the dominance of the Baroque style gradually undermined the reign of classicism. Under the rule of the “le Roi Soleil”(the Sun King) Louis XIV, classicism, emphasizing adherence to certain principles, restraint, and rationality, prevailed as the monarch became the patron of literature and the arts. However, French elite culture and the aristocratic class were not entirely classical; they were influenced by the Baroque style from Italy. The magnificent, passionate, and grand celebrations at the court reflected the characteristics of this style (Borghesi, 2019). During the Regency period and after the ascension of Louis XV, the style dictated by the glory of the king and prevailing for a century collapsed. Nobles, merchants, and financiers constructed intricately designed private mansions. In terms of decoration, a lighter, softer, and more pastel-colored taste spread, replacing the popular large armchairs, ribbons, and feather decorations of the Louis XIV era with delicately decorated furniture adorned with bright colors and patterns (Cabanne, 2002; Duby & Mandrou, 2019). In 1648, due to the abolition of many artists’ privileges and in resistance to the monopolies of guilds, independent artists, led by Charles Le Brun (1619–1690), established the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture (Crow, 2021). Le Brun created a style influenced by Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) and Italian Baroque art, but his followers failed to resist the emergence of new styles and the shift in taste. The Rococo art, known for its emphasis on color and hedonism, gradually rose (Cabanne, 2002).

The development of Rococo art is considered a continuation of the debate between color and drawing (Yang, 2014). The debate between color and drawing began as early as the 16th century, pitting the Venetian school, represented by Titian (Tiziano Vecelli, 1490–1576) and Giorgione (1476–1510), known for their emphasis on color, against the Roman school, represented by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) and Raphael (Raffaello Santi, 1483–1520), who prioritized drawing. In the 17th century, classical artists like Poussin generally held an aesthetic position that favored drawing. Poussin once pointed out that color is a trap that deceives the eyes (Xing, 2003). For him, things from the soul are more important than those from the senses and personality, with the former reflected through drawing and the latter assumed by color (Cabanne, 2002). On the other hand, Rubens excelled in color, firmly believing that the painter’s function is to faithfully reproduce the world around him as seen by the eyes (Gombrich, 1998). His mastery of the primary colors and their derivatives allowed him to express the texture of different objects, such as skin and flowers, with rich colors (Dong, 2010). In the 18th century, the debate between “Poussinists” and “Rubenists” shifted from

“drawing or color” to a broader “ancients versus moderns” debate—whether to adhere to established rules with moderation or to embrace innovation. The emergence of the Rococo style symbolized the victory of the “Rubenists,” replacing the subtlety and depth of classicism with direct sensory and emotional expression (Xing, 2003).

3.2 Enlightenment and Rationality

In 18th-century France, there was a departure from the rationality and intellectual comprehension of classicism in art. While embracing the sensual and direct Rococo style, the Enlightenment wave of thought emerged and spread widely. The public (le public) gradually formed, and the responsibility of appreciation was no longer borne by a few. By the mid to late 18th century, a trend of criticism became more widespread, and more individuals expressed their views through salons, publications, and other channels. Salons, often hosted by aristocratic women, gradually became places for intellectual exchange, collective criticism, and discussions of essays or philosophical works (Rieu, 2012). This critical trend in literature, art, and even politics is considered an application of reason by people. The rational spirit of the Age of Enlightenment was characterized by wandering, activity, and extroversion, in contrast to classical thought, which pursued stability (Rieu, 2012). Emmanuel Kant (1724–1804) explained the Enlightenment as follows:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. ... Sapere aude! Dare to know! Have the courage to use your own understanding is, therefore, the motto of the Enlightenment. (Rieu, 2012)

Kant summarized “Enlightenment” as the use of one’s own intellect. The essence of enlightenment lies in thinking for oneself rather than blindly following others. Through independent thinking, one can overcome immaturity and become an independent individual—this is the meaning of enlightenment (Braeckman, 2008).

Reason is considered a rational power that guides people to discover and determine truth through innovative intelligence. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) stated that the true power of reason should be discovered not in the possession of truth but in the acquisition of truth (Cassirer, 2009). Montesquieu said, “*Our mind is born to think, that is, to understand things. But it must have curiosity because, as everything is formed in a chain where each idea precedes another and follows another, as soon as one grasps an idea, one wants to grasp another.*” Innate curiosity drives the pursuit of knowledge, and reason is the propelling force behind this curiosity—it is an inherent nature of the human mind (Cassirer, 1989).

Denis Diderot (1713–1784), in his *Encyclopédie*, interpreted “reason” as the natural ability of humans to recognize truth, a series of truths that the human mind can attain without relying on the illuminating help of faith. He emphasized that “reason” is a natural ability that guides people to discover and approach truth. Reason can be employed to analyze and study the real world, eventually leading to the formulation of universal and unified principles. At the same time, the senses serve as the bridge for rational thought to communicate and connect with the objective external world—people can only gain material for rational analysis through sensory experiences (Li, 1998). Diderot also underscored the significant role of sensation. He stated, “*Only emotion, only great emotion, can elevate the soul, accomplish great deeds*” (Diderot, 2008, p. 649). Suppressing emotions and desires leads to a loss of motivation for self-improvement and the ability to appreciate art and morality. Rationality without emotion is cold, and in the 18th century, emotions were seen as primitive and indispensable stimuli for intellectual activities (Cassirer, 2009). This emotional or sensory power, as the ability to keenly perceive emotions, is linked to moral sense, empathy, and aesthetics (Lloyd, 2013).

The primary spirit of the Enlightenment was the use of one’s own intellect, the rational spirit, to perceive, understand, transform the world, seek truth, and break free from old constraints, such as religious theology and absolute monarchy. Simultaneously, sensibility serves as the driving force for this rational activity.

4. Fragonard: The Interplay of Sensation and Reason

4.1 Fragonard's Life

On April 5, 1732, Jean-Honoré Fragonard was born into a prosperous merchant family in Grasse, southeastern France. At the age of 15, he displayed a talent for painting, and after studying with Chardin (Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, 1699–1779) for a while, he became a student of François Boucher (Yuan, 2010). Fragonard embarked on genuine learning; he handled major painting orders at the Gobelins tapestry factory, which formed his color habits (B. Goncourt, 2022; J. d. Goncourt, 2022). During this time, he nearly mastered all of Boucher’s painting techniques, reaching a level of lifelike deception. With Boucher’s support, he competed for the “Prix de Rome” (Rome Prize), eventually winning with “*Apollo Sacrificing to the Arts,*” earning him the opportunity to study in Rome as a student of the renowned historical painter Louis Michel van Loo (1707–1771) (Yuan, 2010).

In 1761, Fragonard returned to Paris. In 1765, he created a conventional historical painting titled “*Le grand prêtre Corésus se sacrifie pour sauver Callirhoé,*” based on a fashionable opera. This piece was acclaimed as the best work at the 1767 Salon, marking a

considerable achievement for Fragonard. However, subsequently, he abandoned the honors gained in historical painting and withdrew from the official art circle, becoming an independent artist who accepted commissions from art patrons (Zheng, 2017). During this period, Fragonard produced many paintings centered around themes of love, making him a popular choice for interior decorators.

In 1789, the French Revolution erupted while Fragonard was residing in Grasse. In 1791, he returned to Paris with the assistance of his friend Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). In 1793, Fragonard joined the new government and held roles as curator, connoisseur, and administrator until his retirement in 1800. During this time, due to economic constraints, the patrons supporting his independent artistic career decreased, and Fragonard did not produce new works (Schroder, 2011). He passed away suddenly due to a stroke in 1806 (B. Goncourt, 2022; J. d. Goncourt, 2022).

4.2 Landscape Painting Creation and Perception of Nature

Fragonard's studies in Rome laid a significant foundation for his artistic career. In 1756, he spent five years at the French Academy in Rome under the guidance of his teacher, Van Loo. During his time at the Academy, Fragonard copied numerous works by artists such as Federico Barocci (1526–1612), Pietro da Cortona (1596–1669), Francesco Solimène (1657–1747), and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770). Ultimately, he mastered Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn's (1606–1669) use of light and shadow and learned to employ hazy colors from Barocci.

In Rome, Fragonard befriended individuals like Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805), Hubert Robert, and Jean-Claude-Richard de Saint-Non (1727–1791) (Yuan, 2010). Father Saint-Non was an influential clergyman, artist, and patron from high society who, at the time, was traveling through Italy with De Vandière. They reignited an interest in landscape painting (Cabanne, 2002). Father Saint-Non and his friends established an art club that rewarded works depicting themes beyond historical paintings (Geitgens & Huang, 2017). Equally passionate about landscape painting, Fragonard and Hubert Robert were designated painters by Father Saint-Non from 1759 to 1761, tasked with recording the landscapes they encountered on their travels (B. Goncourt, 2022; J. d. Goncourt, 2022). Concurrently, Fragonard created numerous landscape sketches with red charcoal drawings and some oil paintings, swiftly capturing Roman street scenes and drawing continuous inspiration from daily life.



Figure 1 Fragonard, *L'orage, dit aussi La Charrette embourbée*, ca. 1759, oil on canvas, 73cm×97cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris

The painting *L'Orage* (*The Storm*, around 1759, Figure 1) depicts the scene before an impending storm. The huddled sheep, men straining to push carts, alarmed cows, the incoming dark clouds, the vanishing sunlight, and the unfolding carriage canopy all reflect Fragonard's meticulous observation of nature and life. A significant portion of the left side of the canvas portrays the depiction of dark clouds, the cart about to be engulfed by the storm, and the sheep moving in the opposite direction. Despite no visible raindrops, the imminent storm is palpable. Vividly expressing nature requires a profound understanding of its laws, showcasing Fragonard's application of reason.

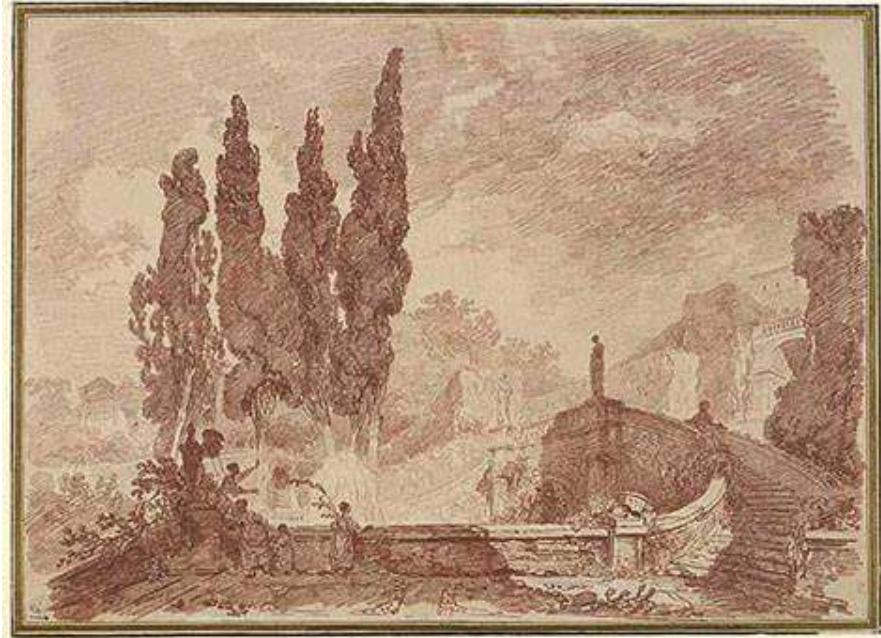


Figure 2 Fragonard, *vue de l'escalier de la Gerbe de la villa d'Este*, ca. 1760, brown watercolor and red chalk, 48.7cm×35cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie, Besançon



Figure 3 Fragonard, *The Grand Staircase of the Villa d'Este at Tivoli*, ca. 1760, oil on canvas, 81.92cm×104.78cm, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis

This red charcoal drawing, *Vue de L'escalier de la Gerbe de la Villa d'Este* (Figure 2), was created by Fragonard in 1760, vividly capturing the corner scene of the villa d'Este staircase. Fragonard depicted light and shadow variations through the weight of strokes and the density of lines. Despite being a sketch, it retains numerous details, including capturing the dynamics of the figures and portraying the shadows cast by the clouds. Fragonard also produced an oil painting version of the same scene, likely based on this red charcoal drawing (Figure 3). With the sky subtly veiled amidst layered dark clouds, the sparkling, crystalline fountain in the sunlight, a serene maiden quietly gazing at the fountain in the shade, and playful children, the addition of colors made the scene more naturally vibrant.



Figure 4 Fragonard, *Cascatelles de Tivoli*, 1750 or 1755, oil on canvas, 73cm×61cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris

The Small Waterfall of Tivoli (*Cascatelles de Tivoli*, 1750 or 1755, Figure 4) is another piece from this period, capturing the hazy ambiance of early morning and the cascading sunlight, skillfully depicted by Fragonard's brush. From these artworks, one can perceive how Fragonard, during his time in Rome, developed a strong foundation in sketching, expressed his sensitivity to color, and demonstrated keen observation of life's intricacies.

Coresus Sacrificing himself to Save Callirhoe (*Le grand prêtre Corésus se sacrifie pour sauver Callirhoé*, 1760, Figure 5) is a historical painting created by Fragonard upon his return to Paris in 1765. This piece marked a significant achievement for him, being acclaimed as the best work at the 1767 French Salon (Zheng, 2017). Fragonard drew inspiration for this piece from Pierre-Charles Roy's opera *Callirhoe* (1683–1764) (B. Goncourt, 2022; J. d. Goncourt, 2022). In the center of the scene, Callirhoe collapses into the arms of her lover while Coresus turns a dagger towards himself. The overall tone of the painting is solemn and intense, with contrasting hues of white attire against a crimson carpet, emphasizing the central figures. Every character's facial expressions are meticulously detailed: Callirhoe appears serene in unconsciousness, her lover appears puzzled and tense, gazing intently at Coresus, who seems composed but shows slight furrowing due to pain from his wound. Surrounding them, some individuals express intense fear while others cover their faces in terror. This artwork excellently showcases Fragonard's skills in sketching, composition, use of color, and depiction of light and shadow. Additionally, Coresus's facial features lean towards a softer, more feminine aesthetic rather than a masculine sternness, revealing Fragonard's unique Rococo artistic style.



Figure 5 Fragonard, *Le grand prêtre Corésus se sacrifie pour sauver Callirhoé*, 1765, oil on canvas, 309cm×400cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Edmond et Jules de Goncourt likened it to “Rembrandt in a fireworks display,” praising the dramatic and poignant warmth portrayed in the artwork. On the other hand, Diderot expressed that “*the artist’s thoughts are lofty, yet he lacks more genuine colors and more perfect techniques, which only time and experience can provide*” (Nevill, 1903). However, Fragonard didn’t continue the success he achieved in historical paintings. In 1767, his second submission to the Salon exhibition was an oval-shaped oil painting featuring a group of flying children in the sky. Diderot criticized it as “a beautiful, soft, golden, perfectly cooked omelette (à une belle omelette bien douillette, bien jaune et bien brûlée),” suggesting that it had superficial beauty and attractive colors, but lacked substantial meaning (B. Goncourt, 2022; J. d. Goncourt, 2022).

Louis Petit de Bachaumont (1690–1771) expressed regret over Fragonard’s transformation, stating, “*Today’s Fragonard no longer creates for honor or posterity; he is content to shine in the parlors and dressing rooms of noblewomen*” (Geitgens & Huang, 2017). On the other hand, the Goncourt brothers believed that Fragonard’s departure from the stage of historical painting was driven by his desire for artistic freedom. They suggested he wasn’t consumed by vanity, didn’t exploit his accomplishments, and even signed using only half of his name—“Frago.” He viewed painting as entertainment and leisure, leveraging his imagination fully in his preferred subjects (B. Goncourt, 2022; J. d. Goncourt, 2022). However, the Goncourt brothers might have overly focused on the artist’s personal qualities, possibly distorting the understanding of Fragonard’s transformation. His departure from the academy might not have solely been due to temperament and preferences but also to please patrons and secure financial support (Sheriff, 1986). Despite becoming a Royal Academy member, Fragonard struggled to receive payments for orders from the Gobelins Manufactory (Yuan, 2010).

Therefore, Fragonard’s transformation was influenced by both personal interests and economic circumstances, driven by desire, which laid the groundwork for him to better showcase his talents. Early in his artistic journey, Fragonard had already shown a fondness for Boucher’s work. During his studies in Rome, the extensive creation of landscape paintings and the emulation of Italian Baroque painters contributed to Fragonard’s adeptness in sketching techniques and mastery of color and light, and fostered his passion for genre painting. Fragonard once expressed, “*Tire toi d’affaire comme tu pourras, m’a dit la Nature en me poussant à la vie (Nature told me, ‘Do your best to overcome obstacles, and I will push you toward life)*” (Nevill, 1903). He didn’t strongly pursue fame, preferring a life of freedom, joy, and stability. For him, leaving the academy and turning into an independent painter was, of

course, a better choice. On the one hand, he followed his own desires by choosing themes he loved and excelled in; on the other, he gained freedom and a more stable income through flexible work.

Fragonard's romantic-themed paintings garnered wide popularity and recognition but also sparked controversy. In the 1785 publication *Discours sur l'état actuel de la peinture en France*, criticism was directed at Fragonard, accusing him of not utilizing his talent in historical painting but instead pursuing fanciful imagination (de Grancourt & Onésyme, 1895). Particularly, Fragonard's bold and candid depictions led to much criticism; Grimm censured him as "a lascivious libertine who interests wanton youth" (Yuan, 2010). However, Paul de Saint-Victor praised the poetic essence in Fragonard's romantic works and admired their beautiful portrayal of love, akin to a silent melody—mysterious yet incredibly captivating (B. Goncourt, 2022; J. d. Goncourt, 2022).

4.3 Return to Family and Portrait Painting Creation

In 1769, Fragonard married Marie-Anne Gérard (1745–1823), the daughter of a wine merchant, and three months later, their daughter was born (Zheng, 2017). During this period, Fragonard, enjoying domestic bliss with his wife and daughter, produced many artworks depicting family scenes.



Figure 6 Fragonard, *The Happy Family*, 1775, oil on canvas, 53.9cm×65.1cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

The Happy Family (Figure 6) is a canvas oil painting by Fragonard, created around 1775, displaying a rural family's everyday life. The wife is positioned at the center of the painting, also the brightest part of the entire canvas, while the husband, peering through a window, remains in the shadows due to facing away from the light. Several children are depicted; some are kissing a dog, holding a donkey, leaning against their mother's knees, trying to break free from their mother's embrace to look at their father, and one child is entangled with a maid. The composition lacks vibrant, flamboyant colors, primarily using warm tones like red, brown, and yellow, accentuated by shades of gray-white and deep blue.

Similarly, in Fragonard's work from 1780 titled *Say "Please"* (*Dites donc s'il vous plait*) in Figure 7, warm tones dominate the scene. The mother quietly waits for the child who has made a mistake to speak up. The child lowers their head, tightly clutching their collar with their right hand, rubbing their feet together, displaying shyness and nervousness. Other children either hide in a corner, casting concerned glances or are captivated by a jar. A beam of light shines through a small window in the upper left corner of the painting, illuminating the child who has erred. Here, we can observe Rembrandt's influence on Fragonard, particularly in the depiction of light and shadow and the hazy, cozy, and tranquil atmosphere created through colors.



Figure 7 Fragonard, *Say please*, 1780, oil on canvas, 28.9cm×37.2cm, The Wallace Collection, London



Figure 8 Fragonard, *Young Girl Reading*, 1769, oil on canvas, 81.1cm×64.8cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Figure 9 Fragonard, Girl reading a book, 1770-1806, oil on canvas, 45.3cm×37.7cm, The Wallace Collection, London

Apart from genre paintings depicting family life, Fragonard also created several portrait paintings. France was experiencing a thriving book publishing industry, with an increasing number of people owning books, ranging from large series to pamphlets, novels, and scientific works, contributing to a rise in literacy (Rieu, 2012). The painting *Young Girl Reading* (Figure 8) from 1769 and *Girl reading, a book* created between 1770 and 1806 (Figure 9), both revolve around the theme of reading. These portraits once again demonstrate Fragonard's grasp of character gestures and expressions. *Young Girl Reading* showcases his portrayal of various textures and the use of color, such as the reflections on the girl's chin and the ribbon at the corner of her mouth, the green tones revealing veins on the temple and neck, and the blush on her cheeks, tools used by Fragonard to depict nature and express emotions.

During the French Revolution, a new cultural wave was guided by Neoclassicism, progressive myths, and utopian ideas. The revolution was seen as a process of breaking away from old systems to create a "new birth," with people dreaming of the freedom, renewal and turning point it might bring. It was perceived as glorious, grand, full of hope and vigor, and passionately generous. This perception naturally influenced the work of artists. Jacques-Louis David, for instance, positioned French painting within the Roman tradition, much like what Poussin did, infusing classical elements into the French school and opposing the intricate and flamboyant works of the Rococo period. Simultaneously, new symbols and representations emerged, such as the image of a woman representing liberty, used to propagate revolutionary ideas (Rieu, 2012). Fragonard's later artistic career was affected by shifts in artistic pursuits and economic constraints. There was a renewed preference for classical and mythological themes. The patrons supporting Fragonard's independent artistic endeavors diminished, and his curatorial work at the Louvre hindered him from creating new pieces. During this period, Fragonard created illustrations for Jean de La Fontaine's *Contes et nouvelles en vers* and resumed work on *The Progress of Love*, which had been put on hold due to the cancellation of Madame du Barry's commission (Schroder, 2011). He also produced a series of sketches for his friend Nicolas-Antoine Taunay, showcasing Fragonard's witty and humorous side. Stripping away color embellishments, simple lines captured the dynamism and expressions of the figures (B. Goncourt, 2022; J. d. Goncourt, 2022).

4.4 Fragonard and Genre Painting

Genre painting (*peinture de genre*) refers to painting types other than historical painting, encompassing landscapes, still life, hunting activities, everyday life scenes, and more. As a new painting genre unrecognized by the official circles (Academicism), it boasts an incredibly diverse range of subjects and styles. It navigates between private pleasures and public discourse, between humor and seriousness, between sensuality and virtues, and between luxury and practicality, seeking an appropriate position. Gradually, it becomes a vessel for splendid technical innovations, intricate depictions, and societal processes (Bailliey, 2003). The majority of Fragonard's works belong to this genre. His landscapes, everyday scenes, romantic themes, and portraits are realistic and devoid of metaphors conveyed through mythology.

Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) highlighted that understanding classical paintings involves interpreting their images, stories, and meanings. Interpreting these images requires viewers to be familiar with the *motifs* the artist used and understand specific themes and concepts (Panofsky, 2011). Fragonard's artworks, drawn from real life, fall under the category of "genre painting." As viewers, one doesn't necessarily need specific background knowledge to sense the emotions the painter intended to convey. William Norman Bryson (1949–) argued that classical paintings are bound by their time and can be better understood within the social context of that era. Fragonard's works, however, are open-ended, leaving space for imagination. Admirers from any era or social background can experience the beauty of nature, the passion of love, and the warmth of family within his works (Burris, 2001). Fragonard's images maintain a series of free associations, ensuring a dynamic interpretation. The interaction between the audience's feelings, imagination, and the artist completes the interpretation of the artwork and the experience of beauty (Milam, 2000).

5. Conclusion

Fragonard is often hailed as a master of depicting love, a painter of freedom, imagination, and poetry, attributes primarily concentrated in his works centered around love themes. However, these traits don't comprehensively define his artistic style. Examining Fragonard's works beyond romantic themes showcases his diversity as an artist.

His early painting practices involved imitating Boucher's artworks, following teacher directives to create historical paintings, and practicing sketches and landscape drawings, a phase where he honed his skills through imitation, gradually shaping his unique style. At the pinnacle of his career with the historical painting *Le grand prêtre Corésus se sacrifie pour sauver Callirhoé*, influenced by economic circumstances, personal character, and interests, Fragonard chose to become an independent artist, serving patrons in a free manner. During this period, he created pieces like *The Swing*, maximizing the refinement, sweetness, and joy of Rococo art and love. Fragonard, in his youth, expressed his understanding of love through his brushstrokes.

However, Fragonard's body of work is diverse, with his depiction of love being just one aspect. After starting a family, he produced a significant number of artworks that captured domestic scenes, using extensive areas of reds, browns, and warm yellows, playing with light and shadow to convey the cozy, serene, and tranquil atmosphere of family life. Additionally, Fragonard created numerous etchings, novel illustrations, character portraits, and some manuscripts documenting life's anecdotes. These works are vividly lively, showcasing his artistic whimsy and expressiveness. Analyzing these artworks contributes to a better understanding of Fragonard's artistic style.

Meanwhile, Fragonard's works also showcase the cultural attributes of the 18th-century French aristocracy's extravagant indulgence and the philosophers' emphasis on rationality. He inherited elements from Rococo art but moved towards a distinctive, realistic style. His artworks reflect, on the one hand, his personal freedom and romantic nature, as well as his sensitivity to emotions. On the other hand, they mirror his observations, perceptions, and recordings of the surrounding world, blending imagination with reality. The spirit advocated during the Enlightenment was precisely about perceiving nature and emotions using reason to seek truth. Fragonard didn't replicate the formulas of classicism but rather based his work on reality, manifesting his individuality.

Therefore, the formation of Fragonard's artistic style was influenced by both societal culture and personal temperament. His works exhibit openness and diversity, being driven by rationality alongside emotional expression.

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