



Jean Honoré Fragonard  
French, 1732 - 1806

## *A Game of Horse and Rider*

c. 1775/1780

oil on canvas

overall: 115 x 87.5 cm (45 1/4 x 34 7/16 in.)

framed: 145.1 x 116.8 x 12.1 cm (57 1/8 x 46 x 4 3/4 in.)

Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.5

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### ENTRY

As with so many of Fragonard's paintings, the original destination of *A Game of Horse and Rider* and *A Game of Hot Cockles* [fig. 1] remains mysterious; the paintings made their first public appearance only in the late nineteenth century. [1] They were undoubtedly intended as pendants, however, and meant to be installed in boiseries as part of a larger decorative program. The paintings are equal in size and have similar color schemes and compositions, and their subjects are perfectly complementary; each focuses on richly verdant gardens in which groups of figures have gathered to enjoy games in the outdoors. In style and theme they can be compared to the larger canvases of *Blindman's Buff* [fig. 2] and *The Swing* [fig. 3], works that include similar figures that appear in the present paintings. For example, the dashing couple—the man in blue suit, the woman in red dress, their white lapdog beside them—seated on the bench to the left of the game in *Hot Cockles* seem to have wandered over from *The Swing*, where we see them lounging at the left, about to dip a similar white dog into the fountain. Despite the differences in size, the four garden paintings in the National Gallery of Art were very likely painted about the same time, probably between 1775 and 1780.

The similarities among the four paintings have often been noted, but whether they were intended as part of the same decorative scheme that also included another monumental garden scene, *Fête at Saint-Cloud* [fig. 4], is still an open question. [2] The figures in *Horse and Rider* and *Hot Cockles* are more carefully finished and richly detailed than those in the larger garden scenes, perhaps a function of their better state of preservation, with the impasto of the brushwork and the delicate

glazes applied to the figures still mostly intact. Nevertheless, the canvases are probably fragments, as Jean-Pierre Cuzin first suggested. [3] The branches and trunks of the towering trees are somewhat arbitrarily cropped at the top edge, and technical evidence suggests that the paintings have been cut down. [4] The two paintings may originally have been much taller, perhaps equal in height to *Blindman's Buff*, *The Swing*, and *Fête at Saint-Cloud* (about 216 cm). The resulting compositions, while extremely tall and narrow, would not have been unusual for decorative painting, which often was conceived to fit into established wall paneling. [5] Many garden scenes by Hubert Robert (French, 1733 - 1808), for example, combine a soaring landscape and cloud-filled skies with groups of figures occupying themselves in the lower section of the painting [fig. 5]. [6]

The games of blindman's buff and swinging have remained popular with children today, but horse and rider and hot cockles may be less familiar. Yet both were common in Fragonard's time, and they appear with some frequency in works of art produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. [7] Fragonard's paintings marvelously evoke the spirit of both activities. In *Horse and Rider* (in French the game is called "le cheval fondu," or melted horse), the players have divided into two teams, one acting as a multilegged "horse," bracing itself against a tree; the second team consists of "riders" who run and leap, one by one, onto the back of the "horse." Once they are all aboard, the horse team tries to shake them off. In Fragonard's painting two of the riders already seem to be losing their grip as they anticipate the charge of a teammate. Hot cockles ("la main chaude" or "frappe main"), by contrast, is a less physical game in which sleight of hand and close attention are rewarded. One player, the "penitent," hides his face in the lap of a second (called the "confessor," a referee who monitors the game) and places his hand flat behind his back. In turn, the other players slap the penitent on the hand, and he tries to identify who hit him. The player who lets himself be discovered becomes the penitent. This moment apparently is captured in the painting, as we see the penitent gesturing toward the person he has identified (either the standing woman in the light blue dress or the recoiling young man behind her). Fragonard records with his usual prescience the expressions, gestures, and body language that convey a sense of their amusement and absorption in the game.

The genesis of Fragonard's paintings is as mysterious as their original purpose. Although the landscapes and figures in *Horse and Rider* and *Hot Cockles* are among the artist's most accomplished inventions, no preparatory studies for them exist. [8] As with much of his oeuvre, it is as if Fragonard created them directly on

the canvas, with little of the preparation and planning that one usually expects in such elaborate productions. Yet he did not invent these scenes out of whole cloth, for there was an established tradition for representing games in landscape settings; Fragonard undoubtedly had access to this tradition, and the National Gallery's paintings are clearly indebted to it. For example, Fragonard certainly was aware of the series of prints representing games published by Jacques Stella (French, 1596 - 1657) and Gabriel Perelle (French, 1603 - 1677) in the seventeenth century [fig. 6]. [9] But, as with the larger canvases showing *Blindman's Buff* and *The Swing*, the present paintings owe a debt to Jean-Baptiste Oudry (French, 1686 - 1755), whose designs for a tapestry cycle on the theme of *Amusements champêtres* include representations of *Horse and Rider* and *Hot Cockles* that are closely related to Fragonard's compositions [fig. 7]. [10] Despite their extraordinary inventiveness and incomparable technical mastery, these paintings continue a convention of decorative pastoral art that has its roots in the *fête galante* of the earlier eighteenth century.

As with Fragonard's larger garden paintings, the possible meanings of these games have been a matter of debate among scholars. We may wonder whether Fragonard's intention was to invest them with allegorical or emblematic meaning or whether he used them merely to enliven a pair of decorative landscapes. As Colin Eisler pointed out, Pieter Brueghel the Elder (?1525/1530–1569) included boys playing horse and rider in his painting *Children's Games*, which has been interpreted as an evocation of the folly of youth. [11] In Fragonard's painting the rowdy play of the boys is juxtaposed with the older couple at the left, who, it is perhaps implied, enjoy a more adult game of flirtation. This activity is expanded upon in *Hot Cockles*, in which the amusement—like the related one of blindman's buff—is an obvious allegory of courtship. [12] This interpretation is emphasized by the sculptures included in the scene: at the right edge, surmounting a pedestal with a carved relief of dancing figures, is Étienne Maurice Falconet's (1716–1791) *Menacing Cupid*, who holds a finger to his lips. This work, exhibited at the Salon of 1757, had already been used by Fragonard in his early version of *The Swing* (London, Wallace Collection); here it plays a similar role of commenting on the proceedings, for the success of the game of hot cockles depends on the participants remaining discreet. It is balanced on the left by a second sculpture, which Eisler understood to represent an altar to love, similar to the one depicted in Jean Baptiste Greuze's painting *The Offering to Love* of about 1767. [13]

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*French Paintings of the Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*

In conceiving *A Game of Horse and Rider* and *A Game of Hot Cockles*, Fragonard clearly meant for the viewer to measure one painting against the other, and he invested the landscape settings with a greater significance than is apparent in Oudry's tapestry designs. Each picture depicts a corner of a vast parkland, with figures playing in the foreground and a view deep into the center distance. With typical sophistication and wit, Fragonard placed the two amusements in settings that comment on and amplify the activities. As with *Blindman's Buff*, *The Swing*, and *Fête at Saint-Cloud*, Fragonard contrasts two different styles of garden design popular in the eighteenth century—the picturesque and the formal—and populates them with suitable figures enjoying activities proper for their nature. [14] In *Hot Cockles* the game is played by elegantly dressed young adults in a formal garden, with clipped hedges, smooth parterres, potted trees, and discreetly placed sculptures. In *Horse and Rider*, by contrast, the garden is natural, with no signs of human manipulation; its principal motif is a gnarled and twisted tree that acts to support the rowdy horseplay of the youths. Their roughhousing is appropriate to the rugged ground on which they play, so different from the well-maintained parterre on which the demure game of *Hot Cockles* is enjoyed. Fragonard created internal points of contrast as well. The craggy contour of the tree at the right in *Horse and Rider* is distinguished from the graceful stand of birches at the left, just as the carousing youths are opposed to the well-dressed couple reclining nonchalantly on the ground. In each painting there are half-glimpsed views into the further reaches of the garden, suggestive of hidden attractions and intriguing corners yet to explore. Garden paths lead off in several directions in each painting. *Hot Cockles* is dominated by a principal central path, on which two women have stopped to admire an unseen view off to the right. In *Horse and Rider* a large river or basin occupies the middle ground, and in the distance a gondola, unloading a group of promenaders, can just be discerned. The original extreme verticality of these two paintings, with their towering trees and monumental skies, would have visually complemented the emphatically horizontal formats of *Fête at Saint-Cloud* and, when taken together, *Blindman's Buff* and *The Swing*, works that articulate the vast expanse of the landscape rather than the infinite heights of the sky.

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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

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**COMPARATIVE FIGURES**



**fig. 1** Jean Honoré Fragonard, *A Game of Hot Cockles*, c. 1775/1780, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection, 1946.7.6



**fig. 2** Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Blindman's Buff*, c. 1775/1780, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection, 1961.9.16

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**fig. 3** Jean Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, c. 1775/1780, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection, 1961.9.17



**fig. 4** Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Fête at Saint-Cloud*, c. 1775–1780, oil on canvas, Banque de France, Paris, France. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Photo: Gérard Blot





**fig. 5** Hubert Robert, *Jet d'eau*, 1783, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Photo: Daniel Arnaudet / Gérard Blot



**fig. 6** Claudine Bouzonnet-Stella after Jacques Stella, *Hot Cockles (La Main Chaud)*, 1657, engraving, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris



**fig. 7** Jean Baptiste Oudry, *Hot Cockles (La Main Chaud)*, 1728, black and white chalk, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. Cecilia Heisser, [www.nationalmuseum.se](http://www.nationalmuseum.se)

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## NOTES

- [1] See Pierre Rosenberg, *Fragonard* (Paris, 1987), 348–349.
- [2] Pierre Rosenberg first advanced the hypothesis (Pierre Rosenberg, “Les mystères d’une fête,” *L’Objet d’art* 1 [Nov. 1987]: 62–67) that the present paintings, along with the three larger garden scenes, formed a suite of decorative pictures belonging to the Maréchal de Saincy that appeared in the sale of his estate in 1789 (see Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l’oeuvre peint de Fragonard* [Paris, 1989], 130).
- [3] Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard, Life and Work* (New York, 1988; French ed. Paris, 1987), 203.
- [4] X-radiographs show no evidence of cusping at the top edges, indicating that these works have probably been cut down at the tops, as Jean-Pierre Cuzin thought (Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard, Life and Work* [New York, 1988; French ed. Paris, 1987], 203). Other Fragonards also suffered this fate, including his early pendants, *The Seesaw* (Madrid, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza) and *Blindman’s Buff* (Toledo, Ohio, Toledo Museum of Art), which, judging from eighteenth-century engravings, were similarly cut down at the top; see Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard, Life and Work* (New York, 1988; French ed. Paris, 1987), nos. 43, 44. I am grateful to Elizabeth Walmsley, conservator of paintings at the National Gallery of Art, for her help in interpreting X-radiographs of the paintings.



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*French Paintings of the Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*

- [5] For example, see Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, 1995), 158, figs. 164, 165.
- [6] For example, Robert's *Jet d'eau*, painted in 1783 as part of a decorative ensemble, suggests what the proportions of Fragonard's landscapes may have been before their alteration (oil on canvas, 168 × 59.5 cm, signed and dated 1783, Paris, Musée du Louvre). Fragonard's four canvases of hollyhocks (New York, Frick Collection; Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard* [Paris, 1989], nos. 447–450), painted around 1790 as additions to *The Progress of Love* cycle, are also extremely attenuated compositions intended as wall decorations.
- [7] For a history of the games, including numerous illustrations, see Henry René d'Allemagne, *Récréations et passe-temps* (Paris, 1905), 230–243; Gaston Vuillier, *Plaisirs et jeux depuis les origines* (Paris, 1900), 199–200, 214–218.
- [8] Colin Eisler, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: European Schools Excluding Italian* (Oxford, 1977), 331, thought that two drawings (Alexandre Ananoff, *L'oeuvre dessiné de Jean-Honoré Fragonard*, 4 vols. [Paris, 1961–1970], 1: nos. 336, 357, pls. E, F) showed similar groupings of figures to those in *Horse and Rider* and *Hot Cockles*, but the relationship is tenuous.
- [9] Jacques Stella, *Games & Pastimes of Childhood*, engr. Claudine Bouzonnet-Stella, trans. Stanley Appelbaum (1657; reprint New York, 1969), nos. 23 (*Le Cheval Fondu*), 28 (*Le Frappe Main*).
- [10] See H.N. Opperman, "Observations on the Tapestry Designs of J.-B. Oudry for Beauvais (1726–1736)," *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin* 26 (Winter 1968–1969): 50 n. 4, 57–59; Hal N. Opperman, *Jean-Baptiste Oudry*, 2 vols. (New York, 1977), 396–397, nos. P95–P102.
- [11] Colin Eisler, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: European Schools Excluding Italian* (Oxford, 1977), 332. For Brueghel's painting, see James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, The Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., and New York, 1985), 498–499, fig. 565.
- [12] Donald Posner, "The Swinging Women of Watteau and Fragonard," *Art Bulletin* 64 (March 1982): 75–88.
- [13] Colin Eisler, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: European Schools Excluding Italian* (Oxford, 1977), 331. For the Greuze, see John Ingamells, *The Wallace Collection: Catalogue of Pictures*, 4 vols. (London, 1985–1992), 3:202–205, P441.
- [14] See Marry D. Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago, 1990), 85–89.

## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Both *A Game of Hot Cockles* and *A Game of Horse and Rider* were executed on plain-weave, medium-weight fabric, but the fabric of *A Game of Hot Cockles* is a slightly finer weight than that of *A Game of Horse and Rider*. Both paintings have been lined, and the tacking margins have been removed. Both have cusping only along their right and bottom edges, which may be an indication that they have been cut down on the top and left side. *A Game of Horse and Rider* has a series of small holes along the bottom edge. These may be old tack holes, but they are not related to the original stretching of the canvas because they are not in alignment with the cusping.

The lowest ground layer is red in both paintings, and a local white imprimatura layer may be present over the red ground. The lowest ground layer in both paintings appears to have a faint texture, possibly caused by agglomerations of large pigment particles or sand. The paint has been applied similarly in both paintings, in thin, overlying layers of opaque and glazed paints. The artist used different-sized brushes for different paint layers. The multiple layers that make up the paint film were allowed to dry between working sessions, and thinly painted forms and details can be seen through overlying glazes. The figures were created with color patches of an opaque, paste paint applied in fluid, rapid brushstrokes. The color patches are delineated occasionally with contour lines of a brown, black, or red glazed paint. Much of the paint texture is smooth, but there is brush texture in the skies and in the foregrounds. Infrared reflectography at 1.5–1.8 microns revealed a tree trunk extending through and below the brightly lit island in the left middle ground of *A Game of Horse and Rider*, indicating that the island may not have been part of the original design.

The paintings are in good condition. They are structurally secure, but they have been somewhat flattened by past linings. According to conservation records, Stephen Pichetto relined both paintings in 1943. He also removed a discolored varnish and restored the paintings at that time. There is evidence of moderate abrasion of the paint layers and some loss of glazes in the foliage in the foreground of *A Game of Hot Cockles*. *A Game of Horse and Rider* has no significant paint losses; there are only two small areas of damage in *A Game of Hot Cockles*. One area, which measures about 4 cm, is located in the upper left arm of the woman in blue to the right of center, and the other, a 2.5-cm area, is located in

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*French Paintings of the Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*

the top of the blue, middle-ground trees on the right. Between 2006 and 2007, both paintings were treated to remove the discolored varnish and inpaint applied in 1943.

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### PROVENANCE

Possibly William Williams Hope [1802-1855], Rushton Hall, Northamptonshire, and Paris; possibly by gift to Madame Jenny Colon [1808-1842], Paris.[1] Emile [1800-1875] and Isaac [1806-1880] Péreire, Paris, by 1864; (Péreire sale, at their residence by Pillet and Petit, Paris, 6-9 March 1872, no. 61); Frédéric-Alexis-Louis Pillet-Will, comte Pillet [1837-1911], Paris, until at least 1910.[2] (Wildenstein & Co., Inc., Paris, New York, and London), by 1932;[3] Calouste Gulbenkian [1869-1955]; (Wildenstein & Co., Inc., Paris, New York, and London);[4] sold 1942 to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York; gift 1946 to NGA.

[1] For the Hope-Colon provenance, see W. Bürger, "Galerie de MM. Pereire," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* ser. I, 16 (April 1864): 201.

[2] The painting was lent by Pillet-Will to an exhibition in Berlin in 1910.

[3] The painting was lent by Wildenstein to a 1932 exhibition in London.

[4] Georges Wildenstein's letter of 21 January 1952 to John Walker (NGA curatorial files) confirms Gulbenkian's ownership and the fact "that my father bought [it] back from him."

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### EXHIBITION HISTORY

1885 Exposition de tableaux, statues et objets d'art au profit de l'oeuvre des Orphelins d'Alsace-Lorraine, Salle des États au Louvre, Paris, 1885, no. 192, as Le Colin-Maillard.

## NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

*French Paintings of the Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*

1910 Ausstellung von Werken französischer Kunst des XVIII. Jahrhunderts, Königliche Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 1910, no. 317 (no. 44 in French ed.).

1932 Exhibition of French Art 1200-1900, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1932, no. 183.

1946 Recent Additions to the Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1946, no. 770.

1987 Fragonard, Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1987-1988, no. 164.

1996 Das Capriccio als Kunstprinzip. Zur Vorgeschichte der Moderne von Arcimboldo und Callot bis Tiepolo und Goya: Malerei - Zeichnung - Graphik, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne; Kunsthaus Zürich; Palais Harrach, Vienna, 1996-1997, no. 92, repro.

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*French Paintings of the Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*

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- 1972 Mandel, Gabriele. *L'Opera completa di Fragonard*. Milan, 1972: no. 468, repro.
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