



Jean Honoré Fragonard
French, 1732 - 1806

Love as Folly

c. 1773/1776

oil on canvas

overall (oval): 55.9 x 46.4 cm (22 x 18 1/4 in.)

framed: 82.6 x 61.6 x 10.2 cm (32 1/2 x 24 1/4 x 4 in.)

In memory of Kate Seney Simpson 1947.2.1

ENTRY

These versions of *Love as Folly* and *Love the Sentinel* [fig. 1] are essentially the same as the Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection examples [fig. 2] [fig. 3]. The primary differences are in *Love the Sentinel*, where the setting is less defined (the balustrade is missing) and less luxuriant; the second tendril of roses that rises to the left in the Bruce version is replaced by a cloud bank; and no doves appear in the sky. Some minor adjustments were made between the Bruce and Simpson variants of *Love as Folly*, but they are less significant. The surfaces of the Simpson variants are less well preserved, giving the canvases a decidedly drier quality, with little of the sparkling brushwork and luscious impasto that must have originally enlivened them and are still apparent in the Bruce paintings. Georges Wildenstein associated the Simpson pictures with those that appeared in the 1780 sale of Leroy de Senneville, where they were described as among the artist's "most agreeable works," [1] a characterization that would be hard to defend today, their state of preservation notwithstanding.

The fact that the pictures, or works like them, belonged to such an important collector as Leroy de Senneville—who also owned Fragonard's *Young Girl Reading*—shows how treasured such "minor" decorative pictures were. Indeed, versions of

the two compositions were owned by several of the most prominent collectors of the second half of the eighteenth century, including the marquis de Véri (who commissioned *Le Verrou*, now in the Musée du Louvre, Paris); Ménage de Pressigny (the owner of the famous *Swing* in the Wallace Collection, London); Randon de Boisset; and the prince de Conti, among others. [2] The subjects were also engraved at least twice during Fragonard's lifetime, a further indication of their popularity.

Minor or not, these compositions and their variants typify the kind of quickly painted, small-scale decorative pictures that Fragonard frequently produced during his career. Small oval canvases depicting Cupids or *amorini* are abundant throughout his catalogued oeuvre, but most often in the late 1760s and early 1770s, when the painter was enjoying one of his most lucrative periods. [3] Sometimes the figures' attributes or attitudes have suggested allegorical associations, such as the seasons or the times of day. [4] But it is doubtful that such paintings were intended to carry great iconographic meaning. The titles of the present pair are taken from prints made in 1777 by Jean François Janinet: *L'Amour en folie* and *L'Amour en sentinelle*, which, according to Wildenstein, were based on a pair of gouaches rather than any of the oil paintings. [5] As with so many of Fragonard's paintings, but especially *The Progress of Love* cycle with which these pictures are associated [fig. 4] [fig. 5], the subjects allude to the various faces of love—whether it makes one foolish, symbolized by the foolscap lofted by the flying Cupid in *Love as Folly*, or whether it conquers all, as the Cupid showing us an arrow in *Love the Sentinel* seems to imply. Roger Portalis, in his pioneering monograph on Fragonard, was reminded by these works of the kind of erotic-sentimental poems produced later in the century by Evariste Parry (1753–1814): “Seeing a rose on a bush, the butterfly alights there. Is he happy, frivolous lover? Suddenly he flies away to other games.” [6] As if that were not enough, Fragonard also gives us doves—the birds of Venus—and rosebushes, which with their sweet scent but prickly stems offer, as does love, both pleasure and pain.

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), 172–176.

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

NOTES

- [1] “[D]es plus agréables,” Leroy de Senneville sale, Desmarest, Paris, April 5, 1780, no. 56; quoted in Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l’oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), 127 (Georges Wildenstein, *The Paintings of Fragonard: Complete Edition* [New York, 1960], 271).
- [2] See Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l’oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), 103.
- [3] Georges Wildenstein, *The Paintings of Fragonard: Complete Edition* (New York, 1960), 19.
- [4] See Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard, Life and Work* (New York, 1988; French ed. Paris, 1987), nos. 249–251; Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l’oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), nos. 157–160.
- [5] Georges Wildenstein, *The Paintings of Fragonard: Complete Edition* (New York, 1960), 271. For the gouaches (Alexandre Ananoff, *L’oeuvre dessinée de Jean-Honoré Fragonard*, 4 vols. [Paris, 1961–1970], 2: nos. 1000, 1001), which belonged to the important collector marchal de Saincy (his sale, Paris, April 29, 1789, and days following, lot 79), see *Fragonard, le peintre de la ville des parfums* (Grasse, 1995), 32–33. Of the extant paintings, Janinet’s prints are closest to the Simpson versions, although they do not reproduce them exactly. A print after *Love the Sentinel* was also made by Simon Charles Miger in 1779; all three prints are reproduced in Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l’oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), 102, nos. 284a, 284b, 285a.
- [6] “Sur buisson / Le papillon / Voit-il la rose, / Il s’y repose. / Est-il heureux / Amant frivole / Soudain il vole / A d’autres jeux” (Roger Portalis, *Honoré Fragonard: sa vie et son oeuvre*, 2 vols. [Paris, 1889], 102, 197–198). The lines are from “Eclogue,” in *Oeuvres choisies de Parny* (Paris, 1826), 306–310. These works also reminded the Goncourts of the poetry of Parny (Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt, *L’art du dix-huitième siècle*, 2 vols. [Paris, 1880–1884], 2:326).
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Love as Folly and *Love the Sentinel* were executed on medium-weight, plain-weave fabric. Both paintings are oval-shaped, and though they have been lined and the original tacking margins have been removed, cusping indicates that they retain their original dimensions. The ground consists of three layers: a moderately thick white layer, a thin red layer, and a thin gray layer. Large particles, possibly sand or coarse pigments, were mixed into the ground to produce a subtle surface texture. The paint was applied in multiple opaque and glazed layers. Glazes were used to create the flowers and to delineate stems in the bushes. In *Love the Sentinel*, there is low impasto in the flowers and brushmarkings in the pale colors of the putto, the foreground, and some of the clouds. There are fewer brushmarkings and no impasto in *Love as Folly*.

The structural condition of the paintings is good, but the visual condition is rather poor. The impastoed brushstrokes have been slightly flattened, and the tops of them are dark with surface grime. There are sigmoid cracks in the sky of *Love as Folly*, and there is a significant amount of inpainting in this area. Both paintings have inpainting along the perimeters; it has discolored significantly, but it is hidden by the frames. The varnish has yellowed significantly, and although it appears to have been thinned, it remains disfiguring, with numerous areas of discolored residues.

PROVENANCE

Possibly Jean François Leroy de Sennéville [1715-1784], Paris; possibly (his sale, Chariot and Paillet at Hôtel de Bulion, Paris, 5-11 April 1780, no. 56); possibly purchased by Verrier. possibly Marquis de Véri; possibly (his sale, Paillet, Paris, 12 December 1785, no. 39); possibly purchased by Millin. possibly Folliot; possibly (Folliot sale, Regnault, Paris, 15 April 1793, no. 50). Marquis des Isnards; (Wildenstein, London, New York, and Paris); probably held jointly with (Ernest Gimpel, New York); sold 1905/1906 to John Woodruff Simpson [1850-1920], New York; by inheritance to his widow, Katherine Seney Simpson [d. 1943], New York; by inheritance to her daughter, Jean W. Simpson [1897-1980];[1] gift 1947 to NGA.

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[1] Georges Wildenstein wrote to Fern Shapley that his father had purchased this painting and its pendant, *Love the Sentinel* (NGA 1947.2.2), from the marquis des Isnards, whose unwritten family tradition was that they had owned the pair since they were painted (letter of 21 June 1948, in NGA curatorial files). The "CA" numbers on the stretchers of both paintings, and the corresponding prospectus for the pair (in NGA curatorial files) indicate that they were on consignment with M. Knoedler & Co. at some time during the Simpsons' ownership.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1914 Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Fragonard. Gimpel & Wildenstein Galleries, New York, 1914, no. 3.

2015 Fragonard amoureux: galant et libertin, Musée du Luxembourg, Paris, 2015-2016.

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- 1906 Nolhac, Pierre de. *J.-H. Fragonard*. Paris, 1906: 156.
- 1907 Dayot, Armand, and Léandre Vaillat. *L'oeuvre de J.-B.-S. Chardin et de J.-H. Fragonard*. Paris, 1907: 14, no. 108, repro.
- 1948 Wildenstein and Company. *French XVIII Century Paintings*. New York, 1948: 4
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- 1956 Réau, Louis. *Fragonard: sa vie et son oeuvre*. Brussels, 1956: 146.
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- 1972 Mandel, Gabriele. *L'Opera completa di Fragonard*. Milan, 1972: no. 344,

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- 1975 *European Paintings: An Illustrated Summary Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1975: 132, repro.
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- 1987 Cuzin, Jean-Pierre. "Jean-Honoré Fragonard: Vie et oeuvre." Fribourg, 1987. English edition New York, 1988: 308, nos. 354-355.
- 1989 Rosenberg, Pierre. *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard*. Paris, 1989: 102, no. 286-287.
- 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. 34, 172-176, color repro.
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