



Jean Honoré Fragonard
French, 1732 - 1806

Mountain Landscape at Sunset

c. 1765

oil on paper

overall: 21.5 x 32.8 cm (8 7/16 x 12 15/16 in.)

framed: 32.2 x 43.5 x 4.4 cm (12 11/16 x 17 1/8 x 1 3/4 in.)

Chester Dale Fund 1997.22.1

ENTRY

This small painting on paper, recently rediscovered, is among the few surviving oil sketches by Fragonard that plausibly could have been painted in the open air. It thus represents a significant addition to the artist's oeuvre, illuminating a little-known aspect of his practice as a landscapist.

The study has all the character of a quick response to observed nature, as if the artist were recording an impression glimpsed from a carriage window as it rolled through the countryside. Beginning with paper prepared with a thin white ground, the artist quickly outlined the major forms, possibly using black chalk or crayon. [1] He then thinly brushed in the foreground and the masses of trees, returning with thicker brushstrokes to add volume and character to the foliage. The mountain range at the lower center and the cloudy sky were articulated with broader, more opaque passages, the blue of the sky at times describing the contours of the dark green trees. The pale yellows and purplish grays in the cloudy sky at left convincingly suggest a setting or rising sun. Despite the obvious spontaneity of the study, Fragonard took care to compose the scene, balancing the heavy mass of trees at the right with smaller bushes and clouds at the left.

Mountain Landscape at Sunset first appeared in 1996, undocumented and uncatalogued, at a small auction at the Hôtel Drouot in Paris, [2] yet there can be no question that it is by Fragonard. It is best compared to another oil sketch on paper, universally accepted as an authentic Fragonard, in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Chartres [fig. 1]. [3] Though slightly larger and more elaborate—Fragonard introduced animals and people into the scene—the Chartres study is characterized by a similar deft handling of paint, particularly in the stormy sky, where one can make out the individual dabs of color that the artist applied, a technique clearly evident in the sky of the Washington study. Furthermore, its intimate scale and informality aside, *Mountain Landscape at Sunset* conforms to a number of small finished landscapes produced by the artist in the 1760s, such as *Shepherd Playing a Flute*, a version of which Fragonard exhibited at the Salon of 1765 [fig. 2]. [4] The billowing foliage of the trees, darkly silhouetted against a cloudy sky, for example, is similar in design and effect, if not in touch. The low viewpoint taken in the oil study is another common feature of Fragonard's landscapes from this period, when he was particularly influenced by seventeenth-century Dutch art. [5] While it is probably impossible to determine precisely, a date in the mid-1760s would seem reasonable for the Washington study.

In the mid-eighteenth century the custom of drawing outdoors was an established part of a young artist's training, and Fragonard is justly famous for the spectacular series of landscape drawings he produced during his early sojourn in Italy from 1756 to 1761, when he was a pensioner at the Académie de France in Rome. [6] He continued to draw from nature throughout his career. Making open-air studies in oils, however, was still relatively unusual during this period, although there had been notable precedents going back at least to the 1630s, when Claude Lorraine (French, 1604/1605 - 1682) and others are said to have painted in the out-of-doors in Italy. [7] In France the practice was given a theoretical underpinning in 1708 with the first publication of Roger de Piles' *Cours de peinture par principes*, which remained an influential treatise throughout the eighteenth century. In an important section devoted to landscape painting, de Piles emphasized making studies from nature in both drawings and oils in all its aspects, including rocks, plants, trees, and the sky: "I would have [the landscape painter] likewise study the effects of the sky in several times of the day, and seasons of the year, in the various dispositions of clouds, both in serene, thundering, and stormy weather. And in the off-skip, the several sorts of rocks, waters, and other principal objects." [8] De Piles' recommendations were to a large degree codifying what was rapidly becoming a standard practice among landscape painters. Around the same time, the painter

Alexandre-François Desportes (French, 1661 - 1743) was producing informal oil sketches of all sorts of fauna and flora, including open-air studies of the countryside outside Paris, which were the subject of later discussions at the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture. [9] Closer to Fragonard's time, Claude-Joseph Vernet (French, 1714 - 1789), the greatest French landscape painter of the day, had frequently painted in the open air, especially during his years in Italy from 1734 to 1753, although until recently none of these studies had been discovered. [10] Indeed, Vernet's belief that "the shortest and surest means [to artistic mastery] was to paint and draw after nature" could trace its lineage back to de Piles' theories, which had inspired subsequent generations to respond directly to natural phenomena when making landscapes. [11] The clearest expression of the value of making open-air oil studies would come in the early 1780s, when Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (French, 1750 - 1819) made a great number of oil sketches in and around Rome. [12]

In this broader context, the re-emergence of *Mountain Landscape at Sunset*—together with the few other known oil studies by Fragonard—takes its full significance, for it reminds us that Fragonard was more than a late rococo decorative painter in the mold of Boucher. Always a changeable and quixotic artist, he could also respond to and participate in the more "advanced" naturalist tendencies of the art of his time, as Jacques Wilhelm pointed out as long ago as 1948. [13] Even so, for Fragonard—as for Desportes, Vernet, and, later, Valenciennes—such open-air oil studies were invariably intended not as ends in themselves but as *aides memoires* of field research to be used in producing more convincing studio landscapes. In making a sketch like *Mountain Landscape at Sunset*, Fragonard turned to oil paint to best study the fading light as it reflected off clouds and backlit a stand of trees, an effect impossible to capture adequately in a monochromatic drawing. [14] As modern as his technique may have seemed in the 1760s, it was thoroughly in keeping with de Piles' by-then-familiar insistence that successful landscape painting must be rooted in careful observation and recording of natural phenomena. *Mountain Landscape at Sunset* precisely captures the effect described in de Piles' passage *Of the Sky and Clouds*: "We must observe, that this light being either yellow or reddish in the evening, at sun-set, these same objects partake not only of the light, but of the colour: Thus the yellow light, mixing with the blue, which is the natural colour of the sky, alters it, and gives it a tint more or less greenish, as the yellowness of the light is more or less deep." [15] Undoubtedly Fragonard made many other such oil sketches, now lost forever or remaining to be rediscovered.

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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

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Le Gué*, 1765–1770, oil on paper affixed to panel, Cliché musée des Beaux-Arts de Chartres



fig. 2 Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Shepherd Playing a Flute*, 1770, oil on canvas, Musée-château, Annecy, on loan from Musée du Louvre, Paris

NOTES

- [1] The outline is most easily seen via infrared reflectography of the mountain range in the distance.
- [2] Conversation with James Mackinnon, from whom the National Gallery acquired the painting.
- [3] Oil on paper affixed to panel, 28.5 × 38 cm; Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), 201, no. 97.
- [4] Annecy, Musée-château (on loan from Paris, Musée du Louvre); Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), 86, no. 135.
- [5] On this question, see Jacques Wilhelm, "Fragonard as a Painter of Realistic Landscapes," *Art Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1948): 296–305; Seymour Slive, "A

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Fragonard Landscape after Jacop Van Ruisdael's *Wooded Landscape with a Pond*," in *The Shape of the Past: Studies in Honor of Franklin D. Murphy* (Los Angeles, 1981), 268–276; Pierre Rosenberg, *Fragonard* (Paris, 1987), 184–201.

- [6] For a fine selection of Fragonard's Italian landscape drawings (from both his early trip and his second trip in 1773–1774), see Catherine Boulot, Jean-Pierre Cuzin, and Pierre Rosenberg, *J.H. Fragonard e H. Robert a Roma* (Rome, 1990).
- [7] For a historical overview, see Philip Conisbee, "Pre-Romantic Plein-Air Painting," *Art History* 2, no. 4 (Dec. 1979): 413–428; Philip Conisbee, *Painting from Nature: The Tradition of Open-Air Oil Sketching from the 17th to 19th Centuries* (London, 1980); Philip Conisbee et al., *In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open-Air Painting* (Washington, DC, 1996).
- [8] Roger de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes (The Principles of Painting)* (London, 1743; French ed. Paris, 1708), 244–245; the quote is from the English edition of 1743, 148.
- [9] H.N. Opperman, *Jean-Baptiste Oudry 1686–1755* (Paris, 1982).
- [10] Philip Conisbee et al., *In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open-Air Painting* (Washington, DC, 1996), 112–113, no. 2.
- [11] See the discussion by Conisbee in Philip Conisbee, *Claude-Joseph Vernet, 1714–1789* (London, 1976).
- [12] See, most recently, Jean Penent et al., "*La nature l'avait créé peintre*": *Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, 1750–1819* (Toulouse, 2003).
- [13] "In these landscapes Fragonard is revealed as one of the pioneers of naturalistic landscape painting, which was the precursor of the Barbizon school" (Jacques Wilhelm, *Bergeret de Grancourt, voyage d'Italie 1773–1774, avec les dessins de Fragonard* [Paris, 1948], 298).
- [14] As a comparative example, see Alexandre Ananoff, *L'oeuvre dessiné de Jean-Honoré Fragonard*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1961–1970), 2:144, no. 970, fig. 266, a small black chalk drawing that shows a similar motif to the present oil study.
- [15] Roger de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes (The Principles of Painting)* (London, 1743; French ed. Paris, 1708), English ed., 127–129; French ed., 208–210.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a handmade laid paper with an undecipherable watermark in the lower left quadrant. There is a pinhole at the center of the top edge. The paper

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was prepared with thin white ground. Infrared reflectography at 1.2–2.5 microns reveals underdrawing in a dry medium outlining the mountain range in the distance. The paint consistency varies from liquid to pastose, and brushwork is visible throughout the composition. The artist painted the foreground thinly, leaving the ground visible. The trees, prepared in the same manner, have been worked over with green and gray dabs of color for more detail. The middle mountain range was begun in a manner similar to the foreground and trees but finished with longer and opaque brushstrokes of impastoed paint. The sky and the clouds are elaborate in detail, color variation, and paint application. The darkest blue in the sky was applied last and in many areas defines the shapes of the trees and of the clouds.

The paper support is in good condition except for its corners, which have been replaced. There is also minor damage along the edges. The paint is in excellent condition with no abrasion or insecure areas. The layer of varnish that coats the surface remains clear.

PROVENANCE

(Sale, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 1996);^[1] (James Mackinnon, London); purchased 14 February 1997 through (W.M. Brady & Co., New York) by NGA.

[1] According to a verbal communication from James Mackinnon, he acquired the painting in 1996 at a small auction at the Hôtel Drouot in Paris, where it was undocumented and uncatalogued.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1996 Aspects of Landscape 1760-1880, W.M. Brady & Co., Inc., New York, 1996, no. 1, repro.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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