Young Girl Reading

C. 1770

oil on canvas, 81.1 × 64.8 (31 15/16 × 25 1/2)

Gift of Mrs. Mellon Bruce in memory of her father,
Andrew W. Mellon

Technical Notes: The support is a slightly coarse plain-weave fabric. The painting has been lined, and the tacking margins have been removed. Prominent cusping on all four edges suggests that the painting has not been cut down. The support was prepared with two ground layers: a pale gray layer covered by a fawn-colored layer. The paint was applied vigorously, with impasto in highlights and thin washes that leave the ground partially visible in the shadows. The gray shadowed lines in the girl’s collar and fichu were created by incising into the wet, white paint with the butt end of the brush to reveal the gray layer beneath. The X-radiographs reveal the presence of an earlier painting of a male head with an elaborate feathered headdress beneath the head of the girl. Due to an increase in the translucency of the surface paint, the outline, eyes, and feathered headdress of the man are now slightly visible as pentimenti through the head and the background to the right of the girl. Cross-sectional analysis shows that there is no intermediate paint layer between the two heads, nor is there varnish or dirt between them, suggesting that very little time elapsed before the girl was painted over the man.

Overall, the painting is in good condition. To the right of the girl’s neck there is a small complex tear. A larger J-shaped tear extends through the pillow and arm of the chair at the bottom right. The paint is slightly abraded in the thinly painted folds and shadows of the dress and in the darks along the bottom of the painting. In 1985 a discolored varnish was removed, and the two distorted tears were realigned and inpainted. The sitter’s head from the previous painting, which had become distractingly visible, was also inpainted at that time. In 1986 a slightly toned varnish was applied. The inpainting of the larger tear has discolored slightly, but the remainder of the inpainting and the varnish have not.


Cat. 31. Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Young Girl Reading*
Among Fragonard’s most innovative compositions are his so-called portraits de fantaisie, or “fantasy portraits,” a series of half-length figures of men and women dressed in fanciful costumes and usually accompanied by attributes or emblems of a profession or activity. At least fifteen of these paintings have come to light. The figures are invariably placed behind a ledge, tabletop, or other object that defines the interior space of the picture, and many turn dramatically and are brilliantly lit, adding to the theatricality of the representation. The fifteen canvases are uniform in dimensions (roughly 80 × 65 cm) and are marked by bright colors and an extraordinary brio in the handling of paint; tradition has it that Fragonard could paint them in “an hour’s time.” Young Girl Reading has always been considered one of the portraits de fantaisie, although it does not conform precisely to the dominant characteristics of the majority of the others.

In Young Girl Reading a woman in a lemon yellow dress leans against a plump pillow, her arm resting on a balustrade, as if she is seated at a window. Quietly reading a little book, she is oblivious to our gaze. Her self-absorption and strict profile are in marked contrast to most of the other women portraits de fantaisie, such as the one known as The Singer (fig. 1), in which the figure turns warmly to the viewer, her arms open as she apparently prepares to sing from her music book. The National Gallery of Art’s painting is unusual in that we seem to have intruded upon a private moment but have failed to disturb the young woman’s intense concentration on her book. X-radiographs of the painting, however, have revealed that at an earlier stage the composition was more in keeping with the others in the series, with the head turned toward the viewer and the sitter (who appears to be male) wearing a feathered cap (fig. 2). Why Fragonard transformed the painting is uncertain.

Young Girl Reading cannot be termed a “portrait,” properly speaking. Turned in profile, she is not presented directly to the viewer, nor are her features individualized, as one would expect in a painting meant to capture a likeness. The sitters in the other works in the group are equally mysterious, although attempts have been made to identify them, with varying degrees of success. For example, the so-called Portrait of Diderot (Paris, Musée du Louvre) does indeed appear to portray the famous philosopher, although Fragonard gave the sitter blue eyes rather than brown. Another example (fig. 3) was meant — if we believe an old inscription on the back of the canvas — as a portrait of M. de La Bretêche, the older brother of the abbé de Saint-Non, one of Fragonard’s patrons. It has been observed recently that this painting is a clever reinvention of Jean Baptiste Greuze’s (1725 – 1805, cats. 54 – 56) Ange Laurent de La Live de Jolly (cat. 54), exhibited ten years before at the Salon of 1759, although this relationship does not preclude the painting being a portrait of someone else.

The term portrait de fantaisie was first used in reference to Fragonard’s paintings only in 1960 by Georges Wildenstein, who defined it as “works in which the expression of the face is not stressed.” As Mary Sheriff has observed, however, this characterization is not an appropriate one for Fragonard’s subjects, which, if nothing else, dramatize and exaggerate the facial expressions of the figures. She cites a passage in the Encyclopédie article “fantaisie,” which states that “[a] painter makes a fantasy portrait that is after
If *Young Girl Reading* is not a portrait as traditionally defined, what did Fragonard intend to depict? Given the theatrical nature of many of the poses and costumes, some of the fantasy portraits have acquired literary or allegorical titles, such as *Inspiration, Music, The Warrior, or The Actor*, depending on the individual figure’s demeanor and attributes. The National Gallery’s painting might be interpreted as an allegory of reading. If we understand Fragonard’s young girl to be reading a novel — not unreasonable given the book’s size and the distribution of writing on its pages — then her demure comportment takes on a certain irony. For most eighteenth-century critics, novel reading by proper young women was to be discouraged. As Jean Jacques Rousseau warned at the beginning of his best-selling romantic potboiler, *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761): “No chaste girl has ever read novels, and I gave a title to this one definitive enough that anyone would know what it was about before opening it. She who, despite this title dares read but one page is a fallen girl.” The dangers are explicit in *Lady Reading the Letters of Héloïse and Abélard* (fig. 5), c. 1780, by Bernard d’Agesci (1756–1829), stark testament to the erotic wantonness brought on by the novel, which in this case is slipping from her fingers in her distraction. In comparison, Fragonard’s prim girl is a model of self-composure. Whatever she is reading, it has not yet stirred her to immodest fantasy. Her bodice is
neatly bound, her hair is properly pulled back, and she presents an air of studied concentration, seemingly oblivious to the viewer’s gaze. For some, of course, these attributes only add to her allure.

Given their relative uniformity in style and composition, the portraits de fantaisie were probably all painted within a relatively circumscribed period. The so-called Portrait of M. de La Bretèche (fig. 3) is dated 1769, and most scholars have assigned all the paintings in the series to the late 1760s and early 1770s. Although Fragonard’s style was changeable and did not evolve in a linear fashion, this dating seems plausible for Young Girl Reading. We can be certain that it was painted before 1776, when it appeared in a sale of works thought to belong to the comte du Barry, but it was more probably produced in the years around 1770, perhaps shortly after Grimou’s Girl Reading (fig. 4) was engraved in 1768. The girl’s delicate features, beribboned hair, and small ruffled collar reappear in the women in Fragonard’s famous series The Progress of Love (New York, Frick Collection), painted in 1771–1772 for Madame du Barry (1743–1793). Her notorious husband may have acquired the present painting from the artist at the same time.

The circumstances in which Fragonard created his series of fantasy portraits — if indeed he intended them as a series at all — are as enigmatic as the people they ostensibly depict. Some have been associated as pendants because they appeared together in sales, or their sitters are thought to be related, or they seem to complement each other compositionally and thematically, but it is impossible to know whether this was the artist’s purpose. Various hints have come down to us: for example, the Swedish miniaturist Peter Adolf Hall (1739–1793) wrote in 1778 of “a head, after myself, from the time when [Fragonard] painted portraits in a single sitting for one louis,” a remark that may refer to the fantasy portraits. According to a descendant of the duc d’Harcourt — another presumed sitter — Fragonard painted a group of fantasy portraits for the Pavilion de Fantaisie at the family’s château in Normandy. Pierre Rosenberg has proposed that the pictures were perhaps quickly painted records of the frequent visitors — many of them distinguished — to Fragonard’s studio in the Louvre, which, according to the artist’s grandson Théophile, contained “a gallery of paintings entirely by his [Fragonard’s] own hand.” But Théophile did not stipulate whether these paintings were portraits, and given the important place the fantasy portraits hold in Fragonard’s oeuvre — they are generally considered among his greatest achievements — it is unlikely that they were made simply for the artist’s own amusement or to decorate his studio. More recently, Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey has speculated that the fantasy portraits might have been made in the context of one of the literary salons that were ubiquitous in late-eighteenth-century Paris. She notes a neglected nineteenth-century source that identifies Fragonard as belonging to one such society, dubbed “l’Ordre de la Table ronde,” presided over by one of his patrons, Constance de Lowendal. Dupuy-Vachey conjures an image of just such a sophisticated society — the Table ronde included several of the poets, musicians, and collectors in Fragonard’s orbit — gathered at one of their soirées to discuss the latest play or publication, all the while surrounded by the artist’s brilliantly theatrical portraits, in essence painted performances, created, as it was said, “en une heure de temps.”

Fig. 5. Bernard d’Agesci (Auguste Bernard), Lady Reading the Letters of Héloïse and Abélard, c. 1780, oil on canvas, Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago, Mrs. Harold T. Martin Fund; Lacy Armour Endowment; Charles H. and Mary F. S. Worcester Collection
Such an appealing scenario must, unfortunately, remain hypothetical. Fragonard’s contemporaries did not comment on these paintings, and only in a few instances are individual works in the series traceable to the artist’s lifetime. *Young Girl Reading* first appeared on the market in 1776 (as confirmed by a sketch made by Gabriel de Saint-Aubin in a copy of the auction catalogue) and again in 1777. Several years later it came on the block again, this time as part of the collection of Léroy de Senneville, who also owned a set of *Love as Folly* and *Love the Sentinel* (see cats. 34, 35); this noted fermier général, however, appears to have acquired paintings on the open market rather than directly from artists, further frustrating any attempt to discover the original destination of these works.

Whether Fragonard’s fantasy portraits represent actual people may be, in the end, beside the point. The nature of portraiture was a topic for vigorous debate in the eighteenth century, and recording a likeness was considered to be only one of its goals. For viewers who did not know the sitter, a portrait had to convey something more than a record of an individual’s features or even his or her character. In Diderot’s words, “the merits of resemblance are passing; it is those of the brush which astonish in their time and make the work immortal.” As Sheriff has proposed, Fragonard seems to have met this challenge by creating representations of inspired thought, psychological insight, and intellectual enthusiasm. She has interpreted the pictures as essentially self-portraits, in which Fragonard demonstrates his virtuosity and *alla prima* confidence in these brilliantly painted canvases, which become embodiments of the artist’s own genius and inspiration. The notion that they were painted “in a hour’s time,” while a technical improbability, is testimony to the wonder and sheer visual pleasure the works must have given Fragonard’s contemporaries, as they still do today: “This piece, done all at once,” wrote Paillet in 1780 of *Young Girl Reading*, “has all the feeling of a finished work, due to the accuracy of its touch and the harmony of its color.” Like others in the series, *Young Girl Reading* was painted in a fluid, wet-into-wet technique that may be compared to the works of Frans Hals (1581/1585–1666) and Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), two artists who were particular influences for Fragonard. In *Young Girl Reading* the brilliance of the artist’s technique is fully revealed, especially in the striking color combinations (such as the juxtaposition of pale lilac and lemon yellow) and the use of the butt end of the brush to define such details as the ruff collar. In terms of its extraordinary handling, in the sheer visual pleasure it provides, *Young Girl Reading*, like the other fantasy portraits, epitomizes Fragonard’s art at its absolute peak. In the words of the critic Thoré, who saw the picture when it reappeared in 1844, “It would be difficult to imagine a more direct and more lively execution.”

Notes
1. Analysis was performed by the NGA scientific research department, May 9, 1985. The cross sections also confirmed the presence of the two ground layers.
2. Provenance according to Wildenstein 1960, no. 391.
3. Jacques Dumont de Montroy, *Les Kergorlay dans l'Oise et en Normandie* (Beauvais, 2006), 167–170; Portalis 1889, 282. Comte Denis de Kergorlay kindly provided a copy of the 2006 book about his family, enabling the identification of the “Comte de Kergorlay” named as the painting’s owner in 1889. Pierre de Kergorlay’s second wife, Marie de Caulaincourt de Vicence (1839–1902), was through her mother a granddaughter of Casimir Perrin, marquis de Cypierre, who owned the painting in 1844, the year of his death. Although the painting appears to have sold at the marquis’ 1845 estate sale, it possibly remained in the family and came to Pierre de Kergorlay through his second marriage in 1880.
4. An annotated copy of the 1905 sales catalogue in the NGA Library names Ducrey, who possibly was buying for Tuffier. Correspondence between the Paris and New York offices of Duveen Brothers, Inc., in 1927 and 1928 discusses the painting and the possibility of purchasing it from Tuffier; Wildenstein is also mentioned as a possible buyer (Duveen Brothers Records, Getty Research Institute Library, Los Angeles, acc. no. 960015, reel 97, box 242, folder 16; copies in NGA curatorial files). René Gimpel, in a diary entry of February 16, 1930, writes of seeing the painting two days before at the Erickson residence and describes it as “from the old Coustonier [sic] Collection, bought at his sale by Profesor Tuffier.” Gimpel 1966, 398.
5. See Rosenberg 1989, 92–93, nos. 190, 192, 194–206, where all the portraits are reproduced.
7. Even in the work most compositionally compatible with the present painting, *Portrait of a Lady with a Dog* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Rosenberg 1989, no. 204), the woman turns to engage the eye of the spectator. *Young Girl Reading* thus conforms to a tradition of absorptive themes in French painting of the mid-eighteenth century, analyzed by Michael Fried (Fried 1980). The girl in the National Gallery’s painting picture is similar in physiognomy, pose, and activity to the one who appears in a wash drawing but is surrounded by a large group of men, women, and children who
listen to her recitation from a letter (see Ananoff 1961–1970, 2: no. 640, fig. 518).

8. The sitter in the National Gallery’s painting appears too old, given the probable date, to be Fragonard’s sister-in-law, Marguerite Gérard, as is sometimes suggested (see Tokyo and Kyoto 1980, no. 61).


10. For the two paintings, see Paris and New York 1987–1988, nos. 127 and 132. Mary Sheriff (Sheriff 1987a, 81–83) has discussed the relationship of these two portraits de fantaisie to other works of art, suggesting that part of Fragonard’s purpose was to re-create and comment on the original portraits, both of which had been exhibited publicly. Not only, in her view, does M. de La Brethêche relate to Greuze’s portrait of La Live de Jullly, exhibited at the Salon of 1759, but the so-called Portrait of Diderot is clearly a reinterpretation of Louis Michel Van Loo’s Portrait of Denis Diderot (Paris, Musée du Louvre), shown at the Salon of 1767.

11. Wildenstein 1960, 14; Sheriff 1987a, 81.

12. Sheriff 1987a, 81, n. 30: “Un peintre fait un portrait de fantaisie, qui n’est d’après modèle.”

13. See Cuzin 1987–1988, 117, who points out that the costumes are really inspired by seventeenth-century French costume.


15. Oil on canvas, 92 × 77 cm; see Gabillot 1911b, 319–320, and Réau 1930, 210, no. 36. A Portrait of a Young Man by Grimou, showing the sitter in a “Spanish” costume with a ruffled collar (Frankfurt, Staedel Museum), was in the collection of Fragonard’s patron Jacques Onésyme Bergeret; see Wildenstein 1961, 61 (the painting was no. 4 in Bergeret’s inventory). Cuzin (1987–1988, 122–123) discusses the relationship between Grimou’s paintings and Fragonard’s fantasy portraits.


18. Women readers appear occasionally in Fragonard’s painted oeuvre, although they are shown reading letters more often than books. See, for example, The Letter (New York, private collection; Rosenberg 1989, no. 227) and Le Billet-doux (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Rosenberg 1989, no. 262).


21. This picture, along with another, Presumed Portrait of the Abbé de Saint-Nom (Paris, Musée du Louvre; Rosenberg 1989, no. 197), has old inscriptions on labels affixed to the backs, also dating them to 1769.

22. For Levilain’s engraving, see Gabillot 1911b, 417, repro.


27. The copy of the du Barry sale catalogue with Saint-Aubin’s sketches is in the Philadelphia Museum of Art; see Paris and New York 1987–1988, 282, fig. 1.

28. Leroy de Senneville (1715–1784) was a tax farmer and secretary to the king who had assembled an impressive collection of modern French paintings (including fifteen Fragonards) as well as many seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish works. He typified the sort of patron Fragonard cultivated increasingly after his apparent decision, in the late 1760s, to forsake a public career for a more lucrative private market. Many of these collectors were drawn from the select group of financiers—the fermiers généraux and receveurs généraux—whose activities were a conspicuous part of French political and cultural life in the eighteenth century (see Durand 1971 and Janzé 1886). The author of the Dialogues sur la peinture, published in 1773, noted that “[Fragonard] s’est fait cependant une réputation chez les financiers, et pour un Peintre elle vaut bien une autre. Pour l’un c’est un Raphael, et pour l’autre un Guerchin. Tous leurs cabinets sont ornés de ses œuvres” (Renou [1773] 1973, 24). Like other collector-speculators, Leroy de Senneville acquired many of his paintings through the trade.


32. “C’est du Franz Hals enragé!” was Baron Portalis’ memorable phrase (Portalis 1889, 1:112); see also Massengale 1993, 92.