



Jean Honoré Fragonard
French, 1732 - 1806

The Happy Family

c. 1775

oil on canvas

overall (oval): 53.9 x 65.1 cm (21 1/4 x 25 5/8 in.)

Timken Collection 1960.6.12

ENTRY

The Happy Family must have been one of Fragonard's more popular compositions, for it is known in numerous variants and was engraved twice. [1] As is often the case when more than one version of a picture exists, the early provenance of any one is difficult to establish. The dimensions of the example in the National Gallery of Art are very close to those of a painting that appeared in a 1777 sale, which combined the collections of the comtesse du Barry and Radix de Sainte-Foy, among others. [2] Another version, however, now in the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum [fig. 1], is of similar size and has equal claim to being that painting. Complicating the matter, the version reproduced in Nicolas Delaunay's (1739–1792) engraving, issued in 1777, belonged—according to the inscription on the print—to a “Monsieur Servat.” [3] Unfortunately, Fragonard's two paintings are identical enough in composition and details—although very different in tone and color—that it is impossible to determine which one was the model for the engraving. It is conceivable that a third, smaller, version (Palm Beach, Florida, Palm Beach Atlantic University), served this purpose. [4] The resplendent watercolor in the Musée Cognacq-Jay in Paris [fig. 2], sometimes claimed to be Delaunay's source, is probably a replica made by the painter as a work of art in its own right, a practice that was not uncommon for Fragonard. [5]

The expert in charge of the du Barry et al. sale, Alexandre Joseph Paillet, described the painting as “handled with much verve and of excellent effect; it represents an interior of a room in which there is a woman and several children; a man, who appears to surprise them, is seen at the casement window.” [6] This man is usually taken to be the father, who leans through the window to gaze adoringly at his bountiful family; the title of Delaunay’s print was *L’Heureuse fécondité* (blissful fecundity). The mother is surrounded by four children—a large number given the high infant mortality rate, especially in the provinces, during the middle decades of the eighteenth century. One child plays with a dog, while another feeds hay to the donkey. [7] In the background, obscured in deep shadow, an older woman, perhaps a maid, leans into the scene; a fifth child cowers behind her, as if shying away from the fire that burns behind a stone column base. Fragonard emphasized the family’s poverty with the meager assortment of leeks at the right (a reminder that he began his career in the studio of Jean Siméon Chardin (French, 1699 - 1779)); the apples that have been gathered in a hat in the foreground; and the classical architecture, which suggests that the family has set up house in an abandoned ruin. Despite such material destitution, the family is rich in love and emotional feeling, finding joy in the mere sight of one another.

As pointed out, the subject and general composition of *The Happy Family* recall the small genre scenes that Fragonard painted during his first trip to Italy, from 1756 to 1761, while he was a pensioner at the Académie de France in Rome. [8] Like his friend Hubert Robert (French, 1733 - 1808), with whom he sometimes worked, Fragonard seemed fascinated by the picturesque life in and around Rome, and he produced a series of paintings as well as innumerable drawings inspired by what he saw. Some of these scenes—women laundering clothes at public fountains, rustic kitchens, barn interiors, and landscapes—were undoubtedly based on reality, while others were clearly the product of his imagination. [9] In *The Happy Family*, the rectilinear composition, with its planes of forms receding in an architectural interior, and the focus on the mother and child in the center of the scene are reminiscent of such Roman period works as *The Happy Mother* [fig. 3], dated by most scholars to around 1760. [10] When painting *The Happy Family*, Fragonard must have remembered this early work, for he borrowed such motifs as the antique column base or altar decorated by a sculpted garland and ram’s head and topped by an urn; the playful dog; and the looming columns in the background. Like the crowded family in *The Happy Mother*, the humble folk in *The Happy Family* have evidently found shelter in an ancient ruin, adapting to their

present needs what must originally have served as a pagan temple. The Goncourt brothers aptly characterized these scenes: “The ruin plays with foliage; the antique tomb enlivens the landscape; the archeology no longer recognizes its relics; the monuments become decor.” [11]

Despite its resemblance to earlier works, however, *The Happy Family* and its variants are usually dated to the mid-1770s, after Fragonard’s second trip to Italy in 1773–1774. Most of the genre scenes painted in the earlier period are characterized by a very free handling that gives the works the feeling of oil sketches, quickly dashed off with the energy one would expect from a youthful artist’s first response to the stimulating environment of Rome. [12] *The Happy Family*, by contrast, was painted with a desire to create solid forms in a readable space. The pyramidal composition is much more clearly arranged than in such works as *The Happy Mother*, and the brushstrokes are fluid yet in complete control. Moreover, the sophisticated orchestration of light and shade—in which the brightly lit mother and child stand starkly against a dark background, while the shadowed face of the father forms a striking silhouette against warm sunlight—are signs that the work dates from the artist’s full maturity. The National Gallery’s painting recalls the various versions of *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* [fig. 4], which date to the mid- or late 1770s. [13] The general placement of the figures in the oval format, the use of a rectilinear stone element to establish the foreground plane, and the theatrical lighting of the central figures are similar in both paintings. We can be fairly certain that *The Happy Family* and its variants were painted sometime between Fragonard’s return from his second visit to Rome in 1774 and the production of Delaunay’s engraving in 1777.

The formal relationships between *The Happy Family* and *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* reinforce the sense in which Fragonard has invested *The Happy Family* with spiritual feeling, if not outright religiosity. The subject of the National Gallery’s painting is undoubtedly secular, but the artist has clearly sought to remind the viewer of the Holy Family, living in their humble shed yet brilliantly illuminated by a heavenly light. Fragonard frequently made this allusion, repeating it in *The Visit to the Nursery*, in which the attitudes of the figures and organization of the composition recall many familiar adoration scenes from religious painting. The tumble-down ancient building in *The Happy Family* recalls the tradition of representing the Nativity in a ruined classical structure to suggest the passing of the pagan world. If Fragonard’s painting does not actually represent a religious subject, it nevertheless preaches the secular gospel of Jean Jacques Rousseau

(1712–1778), whose ode to the ideal family in *Émile* (1762) could serve as a description of the present work: “The attraction of domestic life is the best counterpoison for bad morals. The bother of children, which is believed to be an importunity, becomes pleasant. It makes the father and mother more necessary, dearer to one another; it tightens the conjugal bond between them. When the family is lively and animated, the domestic cares constitute the dearest occupation of the wife and the sweetest enjoyment of the husband.” [14]

Like other genre scenes painted by Fragonard in the 1760s and 1770s, *The Happy Family* bears the unmistakable influence of Jean-Baptiste Greuze (French, 1725 - 1805), the most innovative genre painter of the second half of the eighteenth century. Fragonard had met Greuze during his first trip to Italy, probably in 1756, [15] and the genre paintings that he produced shortly after his return to France—such as *The Parents’ Absence Turned to Account* (St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum), exhibited at the Salon of 1765, where Denis Diderot admired it—were clearly attempts to match Greuze at his specialty. [16] Images of family life—particularly dramatic subjects that seemed to participate in contemporaneous debates about conjugal love, gender roles, and child rearing—were especially popular in the 1760s and 1770s. [17] In conceiving *The Happy Family* Fragonard may have drawn inspiration from such paeans to family bliss as Greuze’s *The Beloved Mother* [fig. 5], completed in 1769 (Madrid, private collection). When Diderot saw a study for *The Beloved Mother* at the Salon of 1765 he remarked, “This preaches population, and depicts very movingly the happiness and inestimable prize of domestic peace,” a comment that could just as easily be made about Fragonard’s *Happy Family*. [18] Nevertheless, one should be wary of interpreting Fragonard’s family scenes as overtly moralistic or even entirely sincere. This was an artist who was, after all, equally if not more comfortable representing libertine subjects. Fragonard’s primary audience was a somewhat closed circle of sophisticated connoisseurs who would have delighted in a painting like *The Happy Family* more for its technical skill and beautiful pictorial effects than from any keen identification with the subject. [19]

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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, *The Happy Family*, c. 1775, oil on canvas, Tokyo Fuji Art Museum Collection. Tokyo Fuji Art Museum / Bridgeman Images



fig. 2 Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Happy Family*, c. 1775, watercolor, Paris, Musée Cognacq-Jay. © Musée Cognacq-Jay / Roger-Viollet



fig. 3 Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Happy Mother*, c. 1760, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1946 (46.30). www.metmuseum.org



fig. 4 Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, c. 1778, oil on canvas, Yale University Art Gallery, Lent by the Barker Welfare Foundation, in memory of Catherine Barker and Charles V. Hickox, B.A. 1911



fig. 5 Jean Baptiste Greuze, *The Beloved Mother*, 1769, oil on canvas, Madrid, private collection.

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NOTES

- [1] All of these compositions are reproduced in Pierre Rosenberg, *Fragonard* (Paris, 1987), 458. For the watercolor, see 459–460, no. 223, and Thérèse Burollet, *Musée Cognacq-Jay: peintures et dessins* (Paris, 1980), 241–242, no. 132.
- [2] [Du Barry, Radix de Sainte Foy, La Ferté et al.] sale, Paris, February 17, 1777, lot 55.
- [3] M. Hébert and Y. Sjöberg, *Inventaire du fonds français*, vol. 12, *Graveurs du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1973), 509–510, no. 159.
- [4] Oil on paper, affixed to canvas, 19 × 22 cm (Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard* [Paris, 1989], no. 338).
- [5] See Thérèse Burollet, *Musée Cognacq-Jay: peintures et dessins* (Paris, 1980), 241–242, no. 132, where it is claimed that the watercolor was made as a model for Delaunay's engraving. As Pierre Rosenberg has shown, however, the engraving was after a painting (Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard* [Paris, 1989]). Nor does the watercolor have the characteristics of having been made for the print; it is not squared for transfer and is considerably larger than Delaunay's engraving.

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- [6] “Un tableau touché avec beaucoup de feu et d’un effet excellent, il représente l’intérieur d’une chambre dans laquelle est une femme avec plusieurs enfants; on voit paraître à une croisée un homme qui semble les surprendre” (cited in Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l’oeuvre peint de Fragonard* [Paris, 1989], 125).
- [7] Roger Portalis, somewhat effusively, referred to the picture’s “avalanche de bébés joufflus, grimant au giron maternel jaloux d’avoir leur part de caresses” (avalanche of chubby babies climbing on their mother’s bosom jealously trying to get their share of hugs; Roger Portalis, *Honoré Fragonard: sa vie et son oeuvre* [Paris, 1889], 1:115).
- [8] Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard, Life and Work* (New York, 1988; French ed. Paris, 1987), 189. For examples of these early paintings, see Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l’oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), nos. 51, 60–84.
- [9] Jean-Pierre Cuzin and Pierre Rosenberg, “Fragonard e Hubert Robert: un percorso romano,” in Catherine Boulot, Jean-Pierre Cuzin, and Pierre Rosenberg, *J.H. Fragonard e H. Robert a Roma* (Rome, 1990), 21–30.
- [10] For the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s picture, see Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l’oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), no. 79; Catherine Boulot, Jean-Pierre Cuzin, and Pierre Rosenberg, *J.H. Fragonard e H. Robert a Roma* (Rome, 1990), no. 38; Jean Montague Massengale, *Jean-Honoré Fragonard* (New York, 1993), 62.
- [11] Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt, *L’art du dix-huitième siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1880–1884), 1:302.
- [12] A notable exception is the highly finished version of *The Stolen Kiss* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), painted around 1759 for the Bailli de Breteuil; see Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l’oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), no. 63.
- [13] Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l’oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), no. 367. Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard, Life and Work* (New York, 1988; French ed. Paris, 1987), no. 317, dates the work to c. 1778; Georges Wildenstein, *The Paintings of Fragonard: Complete Edition* (New York, 1960), no. 22, is the only specialist to place it earlier, in the 1750s, as a student work. A beautiful watercolor version (Paris, Musée du Louvre; see Pierre Rosenberg, *Fragonard* [Paris, 1987], no. 229), which is similar in style to the watercolor of *The Happy Family*, was exhibited at the Salon de la Correspondance in 1781.
- [14] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom, 4 vols. (New York, 1979), 46.
- [15] Edgar Munhall, *Jean-Baptiste Greuze 1725–1805* (Hartford, CT, 1976), 20.
- [16] Pierre Rosenberg, *Tout l’oeuvre peint de Fragonard* (Paris, 1989), no. 118. For a discussion of Greuze’s influence on Fragonard, see Jean-Pierre Cuzin,

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Fragonard, Life and Work (New York, 1988; French ed. Paris, 1987), 89–92.

- [17] See Carol Duncan, “Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in French Art,” *Art Bulletin* 55 (Dec. 1973): 570–583; Mary D. Sheriff, “Fragonard’s Erotic Mothers and the Politics of Reproduction,” in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Baltimore, 1991), 14–40.
- [18] “Cela prêche la population, et peint très-pathétiquement le bonheur et le prix inestimables de la paix domestique.” Jean Seznec and Jean Adhémar, eds., *Diderot, Salons*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1957–1967; rev. ed. Oxford, 1975–), 2:155.
- [19] Martin Schieder makes this point in *The Age of Watteau, Chardin, and Fragonard: Masterpieces of French Genre Painting* (New Haven and Ottawa, 2003), 282.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is secured to an eight-member oval stretcher with inset horizontal and vertical crossbars. The stretcher is probably original to the painting. The primary support is a loosely woven, medium-weight, plain-weave fabric. The painting has been lined, and the original tacking margins remain intact. The support was prepared with a double ground consisting of a red layer beneath a gray layer. The paint film is thin, and much of the foreground is painted in dark brown glazes with thin blocks of opaque white colors pulled over them. Opaque paints were also used in the dark architectural background.

The condition of the painting is generally good. In a past restoration prior to its acquisition, the painting was selectively cleaned. The varnish was left on the dark passages but removed from the lighter areas. A subsequent layer of varnish was applied, and all of the varnish on the painting has darkened and yellowed.

PROVENANCE

Possibly collection of Monsieur Servat, at least in 1777, or possibly (sale of Comtesse du Barry, Radix de Sainte Foy, La Ferré, et al., by Alexandre J. Paillet at Hôtel d’Aligre, Paris, 17 February 1777, no. 55);[1] purchased by Aubert.[2] Duc de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt [1747-1827]. Poilleux collection, Paris. Eduardo Guinle [1878-1941], Rio de Janeiro.[3] (Wildenstein & Co., Inc., Paris and New York); sold

1919 to Nicolas Ambatielos, London.[4] William R. Timken [1866-1949], New York, by 1935;[5] by inheritance to his widow, Lillian Guyer Timken [1881-1959], New York; bequest 1960 to NGA.

[1] This provenance is a revised and clarified version of the provenance 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, D.C., 2009: 176, no. 26.

Numerous variants and engraved versions of the painting exist, and in the absence of accurate size information and detailed descriptions, it is difficult to establish with certainty the early provenance. Georges Wildenstein (*The Paintings of Fragonard*, New York, 1960: 280, no. 368) identifies the NGA painting with the one that appeared in a February 1777 sale of works from several collections; dimensions are given in the sale catalogue and they are close to those of NGA 1960.6.12. Pierre Rosenberg (*Fragonard*, exh. cat., Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, Paris; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1987: 456-459, no. 222) suggests an additional possibility, that the NGA painting was the one after which Nicolas Delaunay made an engraving that was issued in 1777. According to the inscription on the print, the original painting belonged to "Monsieur Servat." The engraving gives no indication of the size of the painting, but the image agrees with the particulars of the NGA painting.

[2] Aubert is identified by Wildenstein (see note 1) as "the jeweller."

The Wildenstein provenance includes a Mesnard de Clesle sale on 5 January 1804, in which the painting was supposedly lot 22 as *Un ménage rustique*. However, Frits Lugt, *Répertoire des catalogues de ventes publiques intéressant l'art ou la curiosité*, 4 vols., The Hague, 1938-1964, lists no sales on this date. There was a Mesnard de Clesle sale three days earlier, on 2 January 1804 (Lugt no. 6728), but it only included a small number of paintings, none of them by Fragonard. Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Jean-Honoré Fragonard: Vie et oeuvre, Catalogue complet des peintures*, Paris, 1987: 319, no. 311,

matches the Wildenstein reference to a drawing by that title in the 1804 sale, but does not correct the sale date. The painting did not appear either in an earlier Mesnard de Clesle sale on 4 December 1786, and days following (Lugt no. 4101).

[3] Guinle was the son of Eduardo P. Guinle, patriarch of the immensely wealthy Brazilian family whose company received in the late 19th century the concession to build and operate until 1972 the country's major port of Santo. Between 1909 and 1914, the younger Eduardo built in Rio de Janeiro the Palácio Laranjeiras, a Beaux-Arts mansion (now the residence of the city's governor) that housed an art collection that included paintings, furnitures, tapestries, and nearly two hundred bronze sculptures by Antoine-Louis Barye.

[4] The sequence of owners from La Rochefoucault-Liancourt to Ambatielos, minus Wildenstein, is first published in the catalogue of a 1936 exhibition that included the painting (*Catalogue of the Twentieth Anniversary Exhibition of the Cleveland Museum of Art: The Official Art Exhibition of the Great Lakes Exposition*, exh. cat., Cleveland Museum of Art, 1936: 32, no. 59, in which the final name is incorrectly spelled Ambaticios). Wildenstein is included in the provenance thanks to Diana Kostyrko, who has kindly shared her suggestion that an entry in the dealer René Gimpel's diary (*Journal d'un collectionneur*, Paris, 1963: 112) dated 6 March 1919, in which he records receiving a letter from Nathan Wildenstein reporting a sale of four small Fragonards to Ambatielos, refers to the NGA painting and three others (see her e-mails of 15 and 17 July 2014, in NGA curatorial files). The painting was included in a 1912 exhibition at Wildenstein, so perhaps the painting was part of their stock from then until the sale to Ambatielos. Nicolas Ambatielos was a Greek ship owner who lost his fortune in the early 1920s as the result of a failed ship-building contract with the British government.

[5] The Timkens lent the painting to an exhibition in New York in 1935.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

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1912 Exposition de tableaux anciens principalement de l'école française du XVIIe et du XVIIIe siècle, Galerie Wildenstein, Paris, 1912, no. 16.

1935 French Painting and Sculpture of the XVIII Century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1935, no. 49, repro.

1936 Twentieth Anniversary Exhibition of the Cleveland Museum of Art. The Official Art Exhibition of the Great Lakes Exposition, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1936, no. 59.

2003 The Age of Watteau, Chardin, and Fragonard: Masterpieces of French Genre Painting, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Altes Museum, Berlin, 2003-2004, no. 79, repro.

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- 1906 Nolhac, Pierre de. *J.-H. Fragonard*. Paris, 1906: 130.
- 1960 Wildenstein, Georges. *The Paintings of Fragonard*. New York, 1960: no. 368
- 1965 *Summary Catalogue of European Paintings and Sculpture*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1965: 52.
- 1968 National Gallery of Art. *European Paintings and Sculpture, Illustrations*. Washington, 1968: 44, repro.
- 1972 Mandel, Gabriele. *L'Opera completa di Fragonard*. Milan, 1972: no. 390, repro.
- 1975 *European Paintings: An Illustrated Summary Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1975: 132, repro.
- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 341, no. 461, color repro.
- 1985 *European Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1985: 158, repro.
- 1987 Cuzin, Jean-Pierre. "Jean-Honoré Fragonard: Vie et oeuvre." Fribourg, 1987. English edition New York, 1988: 188-189, 193, fig. 230, 319, no. 311, repro.
- 1987 Rosenberg, Pierre. *Fragonard*. Exh. Cat. Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1987-1988. Paris, 1987: 456, 458, fig. 1.
- 1989 Rosenberg, Pierre. *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Fragonard*. Paris, 1989: no.

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336, repro.

- 1991 Sheriff, Mary D. "Fragonard's Erotic Mothers and the Politics of Reproduction." In *Eroticism and the Body Politic*. Ed. Lynn Hunt. Baltimore, 1991: 15, 17, 19, fig 1.1.
- 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. 36, 176-181, color repro.
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