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## Foliage as a Modifier of Erotica and Indicator of Politics in Fragonard Paintings

Michael Walker

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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# Foliage as a Modifier of Erotica and Indicator of Politics in Fragonard Paintings

Michael D. Walker, Virginia Commonwealth University

## Introduction

The French Revolution invoked prejudice against the aristocracy and the Rococo works they purchased, including those by eighteenth century artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard. Today that stigma persists; Fragonard's works, though included in authoritative texts, are described as superficial and banal. This study examines a collection of Fragonard's paintings and shows that painted flora symbolically modifies the erotic themes of his works.



Figure 1. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767. London: Wallace Collection.

## Acknowledgements

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## Overview

My research began when I questioned my personal dislike for the Rococo. Initial study showed that many historians had marginalized the style, combining the Rococo with the Baroque or Neoclassical, using derogative language to describe Rococo works, or excluding discussion of the Rococo altogether. I decided to investigate this bias against the Rococo, initially focusing on Fragonard's *The Swing*, a fundamental Rococo work. From there, I narrowed my research to Fragonard's treatment of nature, something that he began experimenting with during his time at the Academy. After thoroughly reading about contemporaneous French gardening practices and revolutionary political strife I began to objectively contextualize Fragonard's work.

## Results

Many of Fragonard's paintings are intended to be erotic. This eroticism is often embedded in the symbolism of the work. In *The Swing* for example, the young man's hat and the woman's flying shoe are symbols of sexual availability. In the late eighteenth century political unrest foreshadowed the French Revolution, which had a symbolism of its own. Revolutionary concepts were conveyed through depictions of nature. For instance Hubert Robert's *Felling Trees at Versailles* juxtaposes the elite and the poor, pairing them with different kinds of trees. Fragonard's paintings make use of botanical symbols as well. Works such as *Fête At Rambouillet* place aristocrats in the middle of an untamed natural world. The swing in *The Swing* is tied to pruned branches, suggesting that the aristocratic lovers' fun is unstable and should be regulated. In *Blindman's Bluff* Fragonard places a flirtatious couple in a garden where nature has overcome the construction of man. Flora here may be quickly interpreted as a symbol of uncontrolled passion. However, this point is blunted by the fact that the young lady can see under her blindfold. This shows that the calculated amorous game stands, like the decorative construction of the wealthy, in opposition to the workings of nature.

## Contact Information

For more information or for a pdf copy of the original paper, contact me at: [walkerm2@vcu.edu](mailto:walkerm2@vcu.edu)



Figure 2. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Fête At Rambouillet*, c. 1770. Libson: Museu Calouste Gulbenkian.



Figure 3. Hubert Robert, *Felling Trees at Versailles*, 1774-5. Versailles: Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon.



Figure 4. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Blindman's Bluff*, 1750-52. Toledo: Toledo Museum of Art.



Figure 6. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Blindman's Bluff*, detail of young lady looking under blindfold, 1750-52. Toledo: Toledo Museum of Art.

## Conclusion

Fragonard's depictions of trees and shrubs politically recontextualize the erotic imagery in his artworks, suggesting that his paintings are criticisms of the French aristocracy. This calls for a reconsideration of Fragonard's work in general.



Figure 5. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, detail of pruned trees supporting swing, 1767. London: Wallace Collection.

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