

Jean Honoré FRAGONARD (Grasse 1732 - Paris 1806)

Ruggiero Meets Two Young Women on Unicorns

Brush and brown and grey wash, over an extensive underdrawing in black chalk.

396 x 249 mm. (15 5/8 x 9 3/4 in.)

Beginning in the late 1770s, perhaps to compensate for a lack of painting commissions brought about by a change in taste in favour of Neoclassicism, Jean-Honoré Fragonard began to turn his considerable talents towards illustrations from literary texts. His work in this genre – numbering almost three hundred drawings in total - resulted in some of his most exuberant, atmospheric wash drawings, perhaps best epitomized by the series of large sheets depicting scenes from Ludovico Ariosto's 16th century epic poem Orlando furioso. Other literary works illustrated by Fragonard include editions of Cervantes's Don Quixote and the Contes et nouvelles en vers of La Fontaine. While these drawings were greatly admired in the 19th century and were collected by the Goncourt brothers and Baron Roger Portalis, among others, none of them appear to have ever been translated into printed images.

First published in full in 1532, the romance epic Orlando furioso (Roland Enraged) by the Italian poet Lodovico Ariosto, with its themes of love, war, chivalry and magic as seen in the adventures of two knights, the Christian Orlando (or Roland) and the Saracen Ruggiero (or Roger), was a source of inspiration for artists throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. It was probably in the 1780s that Fragonard produced almost 180 large drawings of scenes from Ariosto's poem, a series which, as one

scholar has noted, is ‘notable for its radical freedom of execution and surprising lack of conventional “finish”. Strokes of black chalk and gray wash intertwine in these drawings with an openness and scribbling energy comparable only to Fragonard’s bravura large-scale oil sketches. The images leave ample room for the viewer’s imagination to complete the details, and they retain a vivid sense of the inspiration, energy and spontaneity that went into their making.’

Although Fragonard’s Ariosto drawings are among the finest and most admired of his works – as one modern scholar has noted, ‘the drawings show Fragonard in fullest expression of his artistic imagination and expression’ - the dating and purpose of these pen and wash compositions remains a matter of conjecture. While the drawings are consistent in style, they are arguably too free and spirited in handling to have served as designs to be engraved for book illustrations. As the scholar Karl Parker has written, ‘There is no evidence of Fragonard having been commissioned by, or having enlisted the support of, either a patron or publisher…Rather it would seem that the sheer joy of creation, heedless of any thought of after-use, fired the imagination and quickened the hand of the artist. Such was the case, too, with those amazingly prolific Tiepolo series.’

It has been suggested that Fragonard may have read Ariosto in the original Italian, since the drawings capture details of the stories that are true to the original text. However, he may never have completed the project, as the vast majority of the subjects that the artist illustrated are taken from the first sixteen cantos of the poem, while very few seem to be based on the remaining thirty cantos.

As Parker points out, however, ‘Fragonard studied his Ariosto with searching minuteness. He held himself very close to the printed line. But did he really capture more than the poet’s words?… Fragonard’s drawings are always admirable, sometimes ravishing; but they are much more Frago than Ariosto. To look at them who would guess (if he did not already know it) that the poem was cast in the severely formalized mould of the ottava rima? Who would think that their exuberant vivaciousness, rising on occasion to really dramatic effects, illustrates a narrative which, with all its beauties, its melody, its music, is today as unreadable as a whole as the Fairy Queene?’

The present scene is taken from Canto VI of Orlando furioso, lines 68-70, and depicts the heroic knight Ruggiero, who has been attacked by the monstrous forces of the sorceress Alcina, as he is approached by two women riding unicorns. (One holds out her hand to him, while the other, behind the first, remains difficult to see.) The arrival of the two women allows Ruggiero to defeat the horde of grotesque figures that he had been battling, some of which can be seen lying in the foreground of the present sheet.

As a translation of Tasso's text describes the scene:

'Be that as it may, better were he dead

Than be rendered captive by such a crew.

And yet, behold, from out the gate, instead,

That portal in that wall, of golden hue,

Two maids appeared, who both seemed nobly bred,

As witnessed by their clothes, and manner too;

Not raised, in truth, among the common herd,

But nurtured in some palace, in a word.

Each maid was seated on a unicorn;

Whiter than whitest ermine was each steed.

Both maids were lovely, and their garb was worn

In such a gracious fashion, rare indeed,

That he who looked upon them would have sworn,

Divine sight one, who viewed that pair, would need

To judge between those two, who did embody

Gracefulness on this side, and there, Beauty.

These lovely ladies rode into the field,

Where Ruggiero held his ground alone,

And each a kind hand to our knight did yield.

Like chaff, away the villains now were blown;

While he, with blushes scarce to be concealed,

Filled with shame, his thanks to them did own.

And then, content to wait upon his fate,

Returned with them, to pass the golden gate.'

François Hippolyte Walferdin (1795-1880) owned around eighty paintings and more than seven hundred drawings by Fragonard, whose reputation he helped to revive in the 19th century. While Walferdin presented his collection of paintings to the Louvre, his collection of drawings from the Ariosto series, numbering 137 drawings, were acquired en bloc at the posthumous Walferdin sale by the champagne maker Louis Roederer (1845-1880), who died very soon afterwards. The drawings passed to his nephew, Léon Olry-Roederer (1869-1932), who sold them in 1922, via the London dealers Agnew's, to A. S. W. Rosenbach (1876-1952), an American dealer in rare books and manuscripts.

Exhibitions

Paris, Galerie Éric Coatalem, Fragonard: Collections privées, 2022, no.25.

Literature:

Elizabeth Mongan, Phillip Hofer and Jean Seznec, Fragonard Drawings for Ariosto, New York, 1945, p.79, pl.134 (as illustrating either Canto XXXIV, 24: Lidia Advances to Meet Alceste, or Canto VIV, 49-51: Mendricarlo appears to Doralice?); Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey, Fragonard et le Roland Furieux, Paris, 2003, pp.110-111 and p.381, no.40; Sarah Catala, Fragonard: Collections privées, exhibition catalogue, Paris, 2022, p.72, no.25.

Artist description:

Jean-Honoré Fragonard was a pupil of Jean-Baptiste Chardin and François Boucher, whose studio he entered around 1749. Although he only remained in Boucher's studio for about a year, he continued to assist the elder artist on large-scale works for some time thereafter. After winning the Prix de Rome in 1752, Fragonard studied under Carle Vanloo at the Ecole Royale des Elèves Protégés before arriving in Rome in 1756. While a pensionnaire at the French Academy in Rome, Fragonard made numerous drawings after ancient sculpture and paintings by Italian artists, as well as a series of superb landscape drawings, in which he was encouraged by Charles-Joseph Natoire, the director of the French Academy.

On his return to France in 1761, Fragonard was agrée at the Académie Royale with a large history painting of Coresus and Callirhoe, but he was never appointed a full Academician. Rejecting the practice of history painting, he turned his attention instead to genre and landscape painting, choosing not to exhibit at the official Salons. Among his finest works were a series of large mural paintings of The Progress of Love, painted between 1770 and 1773 for Madame du Barry at Louveciennes and today in the Frick Collection in New York. Following the completion of the series, Fragonard made a second trip to Italy, in the company of the financier Pierre-Jacques Bergeret de Grancourt. In the late 1770s, to compensate for a lack of painting commissions brought about by a change in taste in favour of Neoclassicism, Fragonard began to turn his considerable talents towards book illustration. From the 1790s onwards, he painted very little, although he continued to draw. His only pupils were his son, Alexandre-Evariste Fragonard, and his sister-in-law, Marguerite Gerard.

Fragonard was among the most gifted draughtsmen of the 18th century in France. He drew in a variety of media, using pen and ink, red or black chalk or brush and wash with equal freedom and complete assurance. It is often difficult to securely date his drawings, as few are dated and only rarely can they be specifically connected with his paintings.