

WINGS OF DESIRE

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CONSUMING PASSION: FRAGONARD'S ALLEGORIES OF LOVE AND PRINTED LOVE

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COUPLES CAVORT IN PLEASURE GARDENS, stealing kisses and significant looks; angels descend to Earth to encourage pleasures. Putti with pink cheeks and absurdly dimpled bottoms swirl in the sky and at the feet of enraptured young women. Jean-Honoré Fragonard's images of rococo love and sugar-spun flirtation could send a viewer into diabetic shock. But the paintings and etchings in *Consuming Passion*, from the 1770s and '80s, show that during the later part of his career, Fragonard left behind themes of artificial courtship and partook of the new ideals of romantic love.

The confectionary imagery of art in the late 1700s reflected the decadence and venality of an aristocracy whose excesses ultimately led to the French Revolution. And Fragonard's reputation has been a casualty of revolution politics: It's easy to see him as a cipher for the aristocracy for whom he worked, decorating the salons of the likes of Madame du Barry. But in this show, curated by Richard Rand, the Clark presents him as a painter who presaged neoclassical and romantic painters like David and Prud'hon. This argument sees him in a line extending to the impressionists, especially Renoir (another purveyor of the pink-cheeked maiden, and a popular artist at the Clark).

Consuming Passion contains about two dozen of Fragonard's etchings, drawings and works in oil from major museums and private collectors. The focus is on his Allegories of Love, a series that imagines lovers in classically themed moments of intense emotion. They present darker backgrounds and more dramatic compositions than one might expect from the Fragonard of the flouncing pastorals and cheeky maids. Writes Andrei Molotiu in his book *Fragonard's Allegories of Love*, "Over a period at the very center of which fall Frag-

onard's Allegories of Love . . . a whole new paradigm of love was constructed." This, of course, was "Romantic" love, a "consuming" divine state.

The Allegories portray a promise (*The Oath of Love*, 1780); a woman in orgasmic rapture (*The Sacrifice of the Rose*, 1785-88); and other idealized states. Multiple versions of each work are on display, making it easy to see Fragonard's process. In a whisper-light study of *The Invocation of Love* (1781) with sepia ink and wash, a woman in flowing classical garb supplicates at a statue of Eros, her body a beautiful rush of desire. In a more precisely limned graphite version, the melodrama is heightened as the woman's garments echo the wild overgrowth of the foliage, contrasting with the statue's formality.

Representing Fragonard's earlier, less broody mode are works such as *The Waterworks* (1765-70), a drawing showing a partly undressed woman in bed being sprayed by two hoses, and the similarly themed *Useless Resistance* (c. 1770), which shows a semi-nude coquette pillow-fighting with a boy. But even in his later, supposedly more serious allegories, the element of titillation is ever-present. Is all this creamy dreaminess just so much high-toned erotica, or does it

have a 'higher' worth? What is certain is that Fragonard provides visceral insights into the imagination of prerevolutionary France's aristocracy.

Jean-Honoré Fragonard was the son of a family of shopkeepers and glovemakers in Grasse, in the south of France (a perfumery there now bears his name). He was apprenticed to François Boucher and Jean-Siméon Chardin and traveled to Italy, gaining approval by the Académie Royale in 1765, but he did not continue to seek their acceptance. He largely abandoned the neo-baroque style that gained him entrance into the academy and instead chose to sell decorative paintings to private collectors. Whether he did so for purely monetary reasons or whether aesthetics played a part is still a matter that critics ponder. It's a claim of seriousness that's at stake: Is it a sign of a lesser talent that he went for the money? Talent certainly isn't the issue: He was gifted enough to know his audience, and inventiveness is evidenced by his *Warrior* (c. 1770), a charismatic oil owned by the Clark, known as a "fantasy portrait," a genre coined by Fragonard. He was said to have taken only an hour to complete the painting.

The other exhibit here, tied to *Consuming Passion*, is *Printed Love*, a wonderful room of illustrated books, etchings and engravings from the same period. Among these works is a gorgeous engraving of *Zephyr and Psyche* by Louis Michel Halbou (1795, after Jean Michel Moreau Le Jeune) illustrating Jean de La Fontaine's book *Les Amours de Psyche et Cupidon*; and a deliciously vampiric engraving by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, *Phrosine and Mélidore* (in a 1797 book). With an impressive range of compositions and moods, this room of works conveys a wider sense of visual life during the end of the 18th century in France. Perhaps because they are not pretending to be 'great' works of art, these printed engravings and etchings are easier to enjoy for their charm.

Ideals of romantic love notwithstanding, it's hard to see aristocratic art and life in prerevolutionary France as anything but excessively hedonistic. Still, it's worth seeing firsthand Fragonard's various interpretations of love, and the many insights in *Printed Love* show the rapid development of an intoxicating idea that has followed us into the 21st century. ■



Hedonism and ecstasy: Fragonard's *The Sacrifice of the Rose*.