JEAN HONORÉ FRAGONARD (French: 1732-1806)

The Charlatan
Oil on canvas: 19 1/4 x 15 1/4 inches
49 x 38.7 cm.
Executed c. 1775-76

This painting has also been entitled The Quack Doctor (Le Marchand d'orviétan) and The Performance (La Parade). Executed in a rapid and spirited technique, it is one of three preliminary oil studies for one of the greatest masterpieces of eighteenth-century French painting, the large so-called Fair at Saint-Cloud (Fête de Saint-Cloud) (Banque de France, Paris; Wildenstein 436), a work that many historians have rightly compared to Watteau's seminal painting of 1717, Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera in the Louvre. The vast canvas (216 x 335 cm.) is organized in four, fairly distinct sections which Fragonard amalgamated into a gracefully poetic, fairy-tale like tapestry.

At the far left, the scene for which the present painting is preparatory, a crowd is attentively observing carnival actors performing before a large banner painted with the royal arms of France and what may be vignettes or signs of the zodiac. Garlands of flowers are draped over the rod from which the backdrop is suspended and a crimson red banner flaps in the wind from the standard. The charlatan, or bonimenteur, who wears a cape and a red triangular bonnet (a piece of apparel discarded in the final painting), spreads his arms as he delivers his harangue from atop a soapbox. A woman in a red skirt and bodice gracefully bows to the crowd and gestures toward the trained monkey crouching at the feet of her partner. (Present in the large painting, but missing from the sketch, are the figure of a second woman and the hoop propped against the charlatan's box.) At the left, a little girl is distracted and wanders off from the group in which a young man gesticulates toward the actors. Light is sharply focused on the stage, which is also draped in red, and, of course, on the actors. In the Banque de France painting, immediately to the right of this group is the stand of a toy seller, which is the subject of the second oil study (private collection; Wildenstein 434). It is painted in the same, almost Impressionistic style, but is characterized by a golden yellow palette. Both works have the same provenance.

Dore Ashton (1988, cited under References below) has given a compelling interpretation of the beauties of the present work:

The Charlatans...is an almost self-contained tableau of the charlatan's theater mounted in a clearing closely bounded by dense foliage and lofty trees. Fragonard has already cast his spectators in a strange, blanching light while the background of forest is a glimmering mass, as though at twilight. He picks out the figures with the same Rembrandtesque flourish of the brush as he does the foliage on the nearest trees. The composition mounts from the naturally observed figure of the small child turning away, to the actress leaning forward to show her wares, and then the banner flying in the wind at the crest of the painting.

In the center of the Banque de France picture, a group of figures lean on a stone balustrade admiring a large water spout, while customers gather round the stand of a
woman selling costumes. And at the far right, children amuse themselves with the

game of a woman spinning a dial and a group of onlookers observe the puppeteer's
guignol. Nestled in the foliage is a marble statue of a figure that some authors have
identified as the Roman deity Pan. Fragonard worked out the composition of this
large section of his painting in a third oil sketch (Wildenstein 435), which in turn was
prepared with a watercolor, pastel and gouache drawing (both formerly Veil-Picard
collection, Paris; for an illus. of the drawing, see J. Baillio, 1987 [cited under
References below], p. 46, fig. 7). This sketch is less broadly treated than the other two
and may have been executed first.

The Fair at Saint-Cloud has been in the Banque de France on the rue de La Vrillière
at least since the mid-nineteenth century. Many theories have been posited about its
original location. One would have it that it was acquired, and may even have been
commissioned by the owner of the Hôtel de Toulouse (the site of the Banque de
France since it was installed there in 1811) in Fragonard’s time, the Duc de
Penthièvre, who was a descendant of Louis XIV and the Marquise de Montespan.
This theory is not farfetched, given that Penthièvre’s daughter was married to the Duc
d’Orléans, who owned the Château de Saint-Cloud where the scene has traditionally
been said to take place. In the second half of the eighteenth century and a part of the
nineteenth, in late September, the idyllic park of Saint-Cloud was a site that Parisians
flocked to for amusement. There, actors, acrobats, clowns, jugglers and itinerant
merchants of toys, geegaws, lottery tickets and all sorts of refreshments could easily
display their talents or hawk their goods to a public starved for entertainment. And
they were also drawn by the beauty of the multitude of fountains, cascades and other
waterworks scattered throughout the lush gardens of Saint-Cloud.

More recently, Pierre Rosenberg tantalizingly suggested that the Banque de France
painting was one element of a large, five-paneled decoration by Fragonard that was
included as lot 41 in the sale of Louis René Marchal de Saincy in Paris on April 29,
1789 (see Paris, 1987 [cited under References, below], pp. 338-343, no. 161).
Unfortunately, the accompanying auction catalogue does not specify the subjects or
dimensions of the paintings. Saincy lived in the Petit Hôtel de l’Hôpital at the
beginning of the rue d’Aboukir, i.e. just off the Place des Victoires and very close to
the Hôtel de Toulouse. This house also belonged for a time to the Banque de France.
Pierre Rosenberg (see Paris, 1987 [cited under References, below], pp. 344-347)
further broadened his hypothesis by adding to the Saincy group two no less
magnificent decorative paintings by Fragonard with fête galante subjects, which share
the same height as the Fair at Saint-Cloud but are narrower in width: Blind Man’s
Bluff and The Swing. (These two works were sold by Wildenstein in 1954 to the
Samuel H. Kress Foundation and were presented in 1961 to the National Gallery of
Art, Washington, D.C.)

Some skepticism may be warranted here. To begin with, the Fair at Saint-Cloud is in
a different tonal register (perhaps attributable to the varying age and color of the
varnishes on all three pictures) from that of the National Gallery of Art’s more
Italianate pictures. In the Banque de France’s painting, representatives of the
proletariat mix with the wealthier classes, whereas in the Washington panels, the
protagonists are all very elegantly and expensively attired and are shown playing
society games. Moreover, the figures are on a relatively smaller scale and their cloud-
filled skies occupy a much larger proportion of their respective compositions.
Another factor gives one pause. As has been seen, there exist three small-scale
preparatory paintings and at least one preparatory drawing for sections of the *Fair at Saint-Cloud*, whereas not a single study for either of the National Gallery of Art’s canvases is known. The always enigmatic Fragonard leaves us with a mystery that may never be solved to everyone’s satisfaction.

*The Charlatans'* first documented owner, Hippolyte Walferdin, trained as a physician, but later worked as an inventor, customs official and, during the Second Empire, a member of the Chambre des Députés. He was among the greatest collectors of eighteenth-century French art of his day, and his holdings of works by Fragonard was "the finest in existence." (See F. Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion and Collecting in England and France*, London, 1976, p. 63.) His estate sale in 1880 (see Reference below) featured more than seventy-five paintings by the master and more than two hundred drawings, among which was a lot containing one hundred thirty-six illustrations for Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. (On Walferdin’s collecting habits, see exh. cat. Paris, Musée du Louvre, *Les Donateurs du Louvre*, 1989, p. 342.)

**PROVENANCE**

François-Hippolyte Walferdin (1795-1880), Paris, as of 1860, his estate sale (Paris, Hôtel Drouot, April 12-16, 1880, lot 11); acquired by the Brame collection, his sale (Paris, Hôtel Drouot, *Tableaux anciens...,* March 20, 1883, lot 11)

Auguste Courtin (1825-1875), Château de Poulangis, Poulangis, near Joinville (Val-de-Marne), and Paris, his estate sale (Paris, Hôtel Drouot, March 29, 1886, lot 5);

acquired by Paul Watel; by inheritance to

Madame Paul Watel, as of c. 1907

Camille Marcille (1816-1875), Osienne, near Chartres

Camille Groult (1832-1908), Paris

Wildenstein & Co. Inc., until 1954; when acquired by

Emil Georg Bührle (1890-1956), Zurich; bequeathed to his wife,

Frau Charlotte Bührle-Schalk, until 1980; when acquired by

Private collection

**REFERENCES**

W. Bürger [E.-J.-T. Thoré, called Thoré Bürger], "Exposition de tableaux de l'école française ancienne tirés de collections d’amateurs," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, VII, No. 6, September 15, 1860, pp. 347-348


L. Réau, "Fragonard," *Connoisseur*, CXXIII, No. 512, June 1949, pp. 73-74


L. Réau, *Fragonard, sa vie et son œuvre*, Paris and Brussels, 1956, pp. 95, 184


Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, and elsewhere, *Drawings by Fragonard in North American Collections* (cat. by E. Williams), 1979, p. 106, cited under no. 39


J. Baillio, "La Fête de Saint-Cloud de Fragonard," *L'Oeil*, No. 386, September 1987, pp. 40, 46. Illustrated p. 43, fig. 3 (color)


Paris, Institut de France, Musée Jacquemart-André, *De Watteau à Fragonard: Les fêtes galantes*, 2014, pp. 179 and 192, cited under no. 59 (entry by M.T. Holmes)

Paris, Musée du Louvre, *Hubert Robert 1733-1808* (under the direction of G. Faroult, with the assistance of C. Voirirot), 2016, p. 352, cited under no. 110 and note 11 (entry by G. Faroult). Illustrated in color, fig. 126
Exhibitions


**Exhibitions**

Paris, 25 boulevard des Italiens, Galerie Martinet, *Catalogue de tableaux et dessins de l’école française, principalement du XVIIIᵉ siècle, tirés de collections d’amateurs*, 1860, no. 139


Zurich, Schloss Jegenstorf, *Alte Meister aus der Sammlung E. Bührle*, May-August 1955, no. 42


