

'Portrait of a woman with a book': a 'newly discovered fantasy figure' by Fragonard at the National Gallery of Art, Washington

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ON 1ST JUNE 2012, a drawing by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806) appeared at public auction. The work in question showed three rows of 'thumbnail-sized' sketches, eighteen small drawings in total (Fig.7 on p.242). Seventeen were annotated with scribbled names, fourteen were identifiable with one or another of the artist's 'fantasy figures', and the remaining four suggested still-unknown works of a similar type.¹ For scholars of eighteenth-century French art, the discovery was momentous. Broad re-evaluations of the meaning and parameters of the 'fantasy figure' series were called for and undertaken.² Public re-interpretation of individual paintings followed, most prominently in the pages of *Le Figaro* where it was declared that the figure formerly considered to be Denis Diderot (1713–84) had suffered from a long-term case of mistaken identity.³ At the National Gallery of Art, Washington, the revelations of the drawing prompted a two-year investigation of *Young girl reading*, conducted as a collaborative effort of the curatorial, conservation and science divisions (Fig.17).

Before 2012, the relationship between *Young girl reading* and the 'fantasy figure' ensemble was frustratingly ambiguous.⁴ Powerful evidence supported a connection between the two. The dimensions of the Gallery's picture, 81 by 65 cm., are identical, or nearly so, to those of the more firmly established works in the group.⁵ Its palette, dominated by deep yellows, mauves and roses, recalls the colouring of *Portrait of M. de La Bretèche* (Fig.18); its energetic, gestural brushwork reappears throughout the canvases; its costume, with its elaborate collar, evokes the elegant dress à l'*espagnole* of the other models.

Yet if these dramatic, overtly posed representations were portraits – a popular interpretation even before 2012, as demonstrated by the erroneous assignation of titular names such as Diderot – *Young girl reading* was unlikely to be of the same vein.⁶ While the other models appear conscious of the viewer's gaze, the

subject of the Gallery's painting retreats resolutely into her book. Her delicate profile with its upturned nose, rounded chin and beribboned hair reappears almost feature for feature in numerous genre and narrative paintings by Fragonard.⁷ The visual distinction was acknowledged by eighteenth-century spectators: when *Young girl reading* figured at the Leroy de Senneville sale of 1780, it was described as a half-length depiction of an anonymous single figure and thereby assimilated into the many generic representations of reading women popular at the time.⁸

To complicate matters, an X-radiograph made in 1985 revealed an earlier composition lying beneath the model's profile, an outwardly turned face wearing what appears to be an inquisitive expression and a large headdress (Fig.19).⁹ In demeanour and costume, the face in the X-radiograph seemed coherent with the other 'fantasy figures'. However, its thick eyebrows and pronounced nose appeared more masculine than feminine, and the possibility was raised in scientific and art-historical literature that the features might actually belong to the face of a man.¹⁰

In the same year, cross-sectional analysis was performed on two areas of *Young girl reading*: the lilac cushion and the greenish-grey patch to the right of the current head.¹¹ Examination of the first sample revealed only a thin layer of lilac-coloured paint glaze applied directly over the ground. In the second sample, made in an area of known change in the X-radiograph, no dirt or varnish was found between the paint layers.

These results suggested that only an isolated portion of the composition (the head and its surrounding area) had been altered within a broad time frame. The absence of dirt or varnish suggested that change might technically have taken place in as little as a few months. But it was equally possible that significant time elapsed before the application of the top layer: depending upon storage conditions, it might take as much as a decade for sufficient dirt to accumulate to be visible in a cross-section; a

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¹ Because the drawing confirms that these works are portraits, the more accurate designation is now 'portraits à l'*espagnole*'. For the sake of clarity, we use the traditional term, 'fantasy figures', qualified with quotation marks.

² M.-A. Dupuy-Vachey: 'Review. Fragonard and the Fantasy Figure. Painting the Imagination by Melissa Percival', *La Tribune de l'Art* (online publication 20th July

2012); C. Blumenfeld: *Une facétie de Fragonard. Les révélations d'un dessin retrouvé*. Paris 2013; M. Percival: 'Fragonard's Reverse Whodunnit and Other Tales of Relocation', *Art History* 37, 1 (2014), pp.169–74.

³ E. Bietry-Rivierre: 'Le "Diderot" de Fragonard n'est pas Diderot,' *Le Figaro* (21st November 2012); see also M.-C. Sahut: 'Le "Diderot" de Fragonard n'est plus Diderot,' *Grande Galerie. Le journal du Louvre* 23 (2013), p.41.

⁴ For instance, P. Rosenberg: exh. cat. *Fragonard*, Paris (Galeries nationales du Grand Palais) and New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1987, no.136; J.-P. Cuzin: *Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Vie et œuvre. Catalogue complet des peintures*, Fribourg 1987, p.102; R. Rand: 'Young Girl Reading', in P. Conisbee, ed.: *French Paintings of the Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Century*, Washington 2009, no.31.

⁵ Cusping marks indicate that the canvas, of loosely woven, irregularly shaped fibres, was neither enlarged nor cut down. The dimensions are identical to those of a standard size 25 figure format; see A.-J. Pernety: *Dictionnaire portatif de peinture, sculpture et gravure*, Paris 1757, p.535.

⁶ Rand, *op.cit.* (note 4), p.162. The assumption that the Washington painting was not a portrait was also convincingly challenged in the art-historical literature; see M.



17. *Young girl reading*, by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. c.1769. Canvas, 81.1 by 64.8 cm. (National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mrs Mellon Bruce in memory of her father, Andrew W. Mellon, 1961).

painting such as *Young girl reading* could require a full year to dry before varnishing.¹² Two plausible scenarios thus emerged: the modification of the head might have occurred as Fragonard

adjusted his initial composition, presumably in the course of an organic creative process leading towards a final result, *Young girl reading*. Or, he might have reworked his painting at a significantly

Sheriff: *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism*, Chicago and London 1990, pp.153–84.

⁷ See in particular Rosenberg, *op.cit.* (note 4), nos.9, 18 and 246.

⁸ Sale, Leroy de Senneville, Paris, Hôtel de Bullion, 5th to 11th April 1780, lot 59. The initial portion of this description – ‘*Une belle Etude d’après nature. . .*’ – recalls terms such as *tête d’après nature* or *tête d’étude* then commonly used to denote anonymous single-figure representations. The dimensions indicated in the catalogue (78.5 by 59.5 cm.) differ slightly, but not significantly, from those of *Young girl reading*; on the provenance of the latter, see Rand, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.160.

⁹ Increasing translucency of the paint surface had caused the underlying image to become apparent, prompting examination. The 1985 X-radiograph was published in Rosenberg, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.282, and Rand, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.162. Because the component images of the 1985 composite were misaligned, a new X-radiograph was made in August 2014. The latter, reproduced here as Fig.19, shows the same image more legibly.

¹⁰ The possibility that the underlying face might be that of a man was evoked in the Gallery’s conservation reports and elsewhere; see Rosenberg, *op.cit.* (note 4), no.136, and Rand, *op.cit.* (note 4), p.162.

¹¹ ‘National Gallery of Art. Painting Conservation Department. Treatment Report.

July 29, 1985’ and ‘National Gallery of Art. Science Department. Analysis Report. May 9, 1985,’ Conservation file, *Young Girl Reading*, 1961.16.1. The first cross-section, taken at 25.2 by 46.1 cm. from the bottom-left corner (region of the cushion), was composed of a paint layer over a white lead ground toned with iron oxides layered over a white lead ground toned with charcoal black; for the second cross-section, see Fig.25. The Gallery’s sample reveals a paint structure similar to that of the *Portrait of Saint Non* where a cross-section was taken in the scumbled background. S. Bergeon et al.: ‘Une mise en ordre. Portrait de l’Abbé de Saint Non restauré par Jeanne Amooore’, in S. Bergeon, ed.: ‘Dossier: Fragonard’, *Science et technologie de la conservation et de la restauration des œuvres d’art et du patrimoine* 1 (June 1988), p.25.

¹² Varnishing was recommended a year after completion of a painting to allow sufficient drying time. Pierre-François Tingry confirmed: ‘Great masters rarely varnish their pictures after they are finished: they protect their tints by a coating of white of egg, and do not varnish them till a year after, when the colours are completely dry’; *The Painter and Varnisher’s Guide*, London 1804, p.136, cited by M. Swicklik: ‘French Painting and the Use of Varnish, 1750–1900’, *Conservation Research. Studies in the History of Art* 41 (1993), p.163 and p.173, note 37.



18. *Portrait of M. de La Bretèche*, by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. c.1769. Canvas, 80 by 65 cm. (Musée du Louvre, Paris).

later date, implying a more fragmented procedure. Without further certainties, the picture remained the subject of speculation until the drawing emerged to fuel new research.

A sketch relating to *Young girl reading* is easily recognisable in the upper-left corner of the sheet (fig.26, detail of Fig.7 on p.242). The quickly rendered female figure is propped upright by a large cushion. She holds a book and turns a shoulder outwards. Other elements in the painting are noted in shorthand: on the right, parallel strokes drawn from top to bottom correspond to the wall; the window railing runs the length of the lower part of the image. Differences between sketch and painting are also evident: in the former, the hair is not described and the sitter wears only a slight ruffle at her neck instead of the wider collar seen on the painted figure. Most surprisingly, the face of the sketched figure is turned outwards at a three-quarter angle, showing discernible, albeit perfunctory, facial features (two dots for the eyes, an 'L' shaped mark for the nose) that seem to correspond to those visible in the 1985 X-radiograph.

On the basis of this new evidence, we started research on *Young girl reading* in December 2012, aided and encouraged by Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey, who conducted a simultaneous study of the broader implications of the drawing.¹³ Our project had three articulated objectives: to identify the painterly alterations that produced *Young girl reading* in its current state; to determine the time frame for these alterations; and to explore why such changes were made within the context of the series as a whole.¹⁴

We began our examination in the region of the former head, initially the only area of known change. In contrast with the indications of the X-radiograph, hyperspectral infra-red false-colour reflectography shows the underlying face to be distinctly feminine (Figs.20 and 21). Elemental mapping (X-ray fluorescence or XRF scanning) reveals a concentration of lead in the region of the former face; the presence of this element, in the form of white lead paint, seems to have contributed to the startlingly masculine appearance of the 1985 X-radiograph (Fig.22).

It became clear that the alteration of the head was accomplished with an economy of effort. While Fragonard rotated the face, showing it in profile rather than at a three-quarter angle, the contours of the new head are positioned around and over those of the first one. The initial eyes are subsumed into the hair of *Young girl reading* producing a rippling effect; the original face is obscured by the ear of the second girl. However, the current head appears proportionally too small and the new neck slightly too long. Rather, it was the underlying face that was better adapted to the body, another indication that the sitter was always a woman and a demonstration that the artist pragmatically reused the entire body of his first model.

The costume was also modified, albeit more subtly. The false-colour image shows a mass of stippled marks behind the original figure's head (Fig.20). An equalised high-resolution colour detail of this region reveals a large feather, painted in vigorous strokes similar to those used to delineate the plume in the *Portrait of M. de La Bretèche*. Reflectance transformation imaging (RTI) used to capture the surface texture shows that the shaft of the feather was rendered with an incised mark, probably with the reverse end of the artist's brush (Fig.24). The mercury map indicates discrete dots, presumed to be vermilion, throughout the bottom part of the feather. These deliberately applied marks seem to have corresponded to coloured pearl-shaped beads, an ornamentation seen on the hair and clothing of several of the 'fantasy figures'. Examination under a microscope indicates that the uppermost portion of the neckpiece was added over an existing collar. The original model wore a thinner ruffle, an observation apparently confirmed by the drawing in which two wavy lines appear low on the figure's neck. This collar probably resembled that of the portrait formerly known as *Marie-Madeleine Guimard*, a white frill worn at the base of the neck with a narrow black ribbon tied an inch or two above (Fig.23).

When painting the face in profile, Fragonard left a space in reserve between the tip of the original ruffle and the new chin, possibly to create a more elegant profile than if the face was buried in the collar. To do this, he was obliged to elongate the neck. It may have been to distract attention from the resulting distortion that he filled in the area below the thin black line of the neck ribbon with scribbled strokes of white. The curving back of the new neck would still have appeared particularly long, perhaps explaining why one of Fragonard's final additions to this area was the cluster of violet bows that occupy much of this area.¹⁵

Fragonard also modified the space around his newly oriented figure. Our findings demonstrate that the background to the left originally contained a more fully elaborated shape and texture, traces of which can be seen today. Two parallel lines placed some

¹³ See M.-A. Dupuy-Vachey's article above, pp.241–47.

¹⁴ Technical procedures – except for the XRF spectra, fit using an empirical model – followed those described in K.A. Dooley et al.: 'Complementary standoff chemical

imaging to map and identify artist materials in an Early Italian Renaissance panel painting', *Angewandte Chemie International Edition* 53, 50 (2014), pp.13775–79 and *ibid.* 126, 50 (2014), pp.13995–99.



19. X-radiograph of *Young girl reading* obtained using Carestream System, 40KV.



20. False-colour infra-red reflectogram (1000, 1300, 2100 nm).



21. Overlay of details from the X-radiograph and false-colour image showing that the noses, chins and foreheads in the two images align, demonstrating that the 'male' face of the X-radiograph and the 'female' face of the false-colour image are one and the same.



22. XRF element maps showing: 1) lead (lead $L\alpha$, inferred as lead white) throughout the canvas; 2) iron oxide inferred from iron $K\alpha$ in the hair of current model; 3) mercury $L\alpha$ (probably in the form of vermilion) in the edges of the book, in both faces, and in the hair of the former model.

inches apart, one greenish-blue, one brick-red, descend from the upper-left corner of the painting (Fig. 17). The greenish-blue line ends near the middle of the book, the other stops just before the model's bust. These marks are echoed in the drawing by a pair of strokes running down from the upper-left corner, ending near the model's head and bodice, respectively (Fig. 26). In the painting, the space between the lines is faintly accented with blue and yellow strokes, creating the effect of folding material. This effect reappears, in more strongly greenish-blue tones, in the space above the hand on the window railing. The area containing these folding marks appears to sweep from left to right – from the corner to the edge of the wall – and downwards – curving

around the model's extended little finger and alighting upon the left side of the rail. To the left, the background paint is darker, more flatly applied, and more visibly reddish (traces of brick red are apparent just over the top of the book).

The entire background was subsequently toned with a greenish-grey wash, making the differentiation relatively subtle. But given the high incidence of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French portraits in which models were positioned before elegant drapery, the folding forms may be vestiges of a curtain, a rudimentarily described cloth that fell from the upper-left corner and was pulled back somewhere behind the figure's raised hand to reveal a darker space or wall behind.¹⁶ The result would have

¹⁵ The bows were painted over the expanded collar and the dark area covering the original headdress.

¹⁶ For instance, Nicolas de Largillière's *Portrait of Charles Le Brun* of 1683–86 (Musée

du Louvre, Paris). Curtains also appear frequently in Jean Raoux's paintings of anonymous models; see M. Hilaire and O. Zeder: exh. cat. *Jean Raoux, 1677–1734: un peintre sous la Régence*, Montpellier (Musée Fabre) 2009–10, nos. 30, 31 and 32.



23. *Portrait of a woman, formerly known as Marie-Madeleine Guimard*, by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. c.1769. Canvas, 82 by 65 cm. (Musée du Louvre, Paris).

enhanced the theatricality of the model's costume à l'espagnole and recalled its antecedents in seventeenth-century French court dress.

Although this curtain was rendered unnecessary, even burdensome, by the change in the model's pose, the remainder of the background was more detailed in the second version. The presence of the wall was always implied by the obliquely angled cushion, but its upper edge was concealed by the large plume adorning the headdress of the first model (Fig.24). When this decoration was obscured, the application of an opaque greenish band reinforced the outer-left contour of the wall, defining a corner in the back right. The pale highlight on the upper corner of the cushion may have been added at this point, as it is painted over the back edge of the collar.

The direction of the light source was also changed. Strong illumination on the current profile supports the impression that light falls from the left. But the relatively even lighting on the original face and the illuminated folds of the yellow sleeve suggest a more frontal light source in the initial composition, an observation proved by the fact that the head-shaped shadow on the wall was initially smaller and lower. The XRF lead map shows consistent white lead content in the paint bordering the lower two-thirds of the shadow, indicating that it was painted first, directly on top of the ground, while the lead-rich paint describing the wall was added over and around it (Fig.22). The upper third

¹⁷ The question of when a work of art may be deemed finished raises considerations beyond the scope of our investigation, particularly insofar as we treat a period in which the notion of 'finish' as an aesthetic characteristic was subject to interrogation; see D.H. Hick: 'When Is a Work of Art Finished?', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66, 1 (2008), pp.67–76; E. Rothstein: "'Ideal Presence" and the "Non Finito" in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 9, 3 (1976),



24. Details showing 1) the feather behind the head of the current model in *Young girl reading* as seen in the equalised high-resolution colour image of the painting; 2) the same area seen through reflectance transformation imaging (RTI) showing the texture of the feather; 3) the feather in *Portrait of M. de La Bretèche*.



25. Cross-section of *Young girl reading* taken at 62.1 by 46.5 cm. from the bottom left corner (area of the former feather) showing (from the bottom) a) An incomplete upper ground of lead white toned with a little charcoal black and minor amounts of earth (the red ground observed in the cross section of the region of the cushion is missing). This double preparation is closest to the canvas. b) A reddish-brown middle layer (approximately 45 µm thick) consisting of a mixture of red lake pigments (an Al containing substrate was used for the lake dye), Van Dyck brown, calcium carbonate (probably a filler) and the occasional particle of iron earth. c) An upper layer (27–30 µm thick) defining the current background, containing a mixture of lead white, Naples yellow, charcoal black, earth pigments and possibly Prussian blue. The scale bar is 100 micrometers in length. The pigments mentioned in the above descriptions are inferences based upon the elemental profile obtained from the SEM-EDX analysis of the cross-section. Sampling and initial analysis by Barbara Berrie. Final analysis and photograph by Michael Palmer.

of the shadow contains more lead-based pigment than the lower portion, proof that it was added on top of the paint of the wall, in a later campaign.

Our second goal was to ascertain the status of these now-concealed and altered elements of the composition: did Fragonard make his modifications in the course of a routine reworking of an unsatisfactory composition, or might there be a more complicated explanation? That the original painting was not varnished indicates that it was never installed for viewing. But this does not mean that Fragonard did not consider it a finished work.¹⁷ On the contrary, the evident disproportion between the original body and the current head suggests that his changes did not particularly improve the painting.

In August 2014, the cross-section taken from the area behind the model's head (the site of the former feather) was re-examined in the hopes of narrowing the window of time that elapsed before the composition was changed to its present state. This

pp.307–32. In our study, we operate on the assumption that a finished state is reached when the artist does not anticipate making further changes.

¹⁸ The old relinings of the portraits of Saint-Non and La Bretèche bore nineteenth-century labels indicating that the works had been painted 'en une heure de temps'. In addition, it should be noted that Fragonard only relied upon the slightest of under-painted marks to aid him with the placement of the figure. Two faint bluish strokes



26. Detail of Fig. 7, showing *Young girl reading*.

sample is composed of a thick stratum of the brownish-red lake – a depth consistent with the vigorous strokes visible with RTI – under a thinner layer containing lead white and iron oxides (Fig. 25). The layers are extremely well differentiated: under magnification there is no indication that pigment molecules from the respective layers mixed. However, slight puckering may be observed between the ‘feather’ layer and the thinner overlying layer, the result of the application of fast-drying pigments over a slow-drying colour when the latter was almost completely dry but still minimally tacky. The thickly painted lake would have required at least six months – and probably more time – to dry to the point that application of a lead-and-iron oxide-rich pigment mixture caused only a slight wrinkling in the sample and not severe cracking of the surface.

The intervention of several months between the first and second phases of the painting appears significant because in other respects, our observations uphold the tradition that the ‘fantasy figures’ were painted *alla prima*.¹⁸ The body and outstretched hand holding the book were painted in reserve, directly upon the ground. The dress was rendered in rapid strokes of lead-tin yellow with accents of brownish-red lake applied in large areas of reserve and into and over the still-wet yellow paint. Later, the face in profile was also painted wet-into-wet as indicated by visible mingling of pigments from one brushstroke to another.

The elapse of time also forced Fragonard to adapt his technique when he revisited his work. He did not simply scrape off the underlying face, doubtless because the existing layers were too dry to be disrupted. Obligated, therefore, to paint over an intact surface, he accomplished the new painting in discrete stages. Examination under the microscope suggests that the original features were blocked out with a pinkish layer of paint. Probably at the same time, the background and curtain were toned with the greenish-grey layer.¹⁹ At a later moment (there is no visible mixing of pigments, implying a second drying period), the second painting was accomplished: the new ear and part of the hair over the pink layer; the new profile and collar over the greenish background layer.

are visible through the flesh-tones of the left hand, one delineating the separation between the leftmost finger and the hand, the other appearing halfway between the knuckles and the wrist. This approach seems to be a staple of his working method: another such mark may be observed in the eye area of the second face in profile in which the flesh-coloured lid was painted over a dried stroke of red.

¹⁹ It is acknowledged that many of the ‘fantasy figures’ were retouched in the nineteenth



27. Hypothetical simulation of the figure in the painting underlying *Young girl reading*, here designated *Portrait of a woman with a book*, developed using information obtained through the imaging techniques described in this study. Image by Becca Goodman and Denis Doorly.

Fragonard’s concern that the original face should not show through may be inferred from his choice of pigments. In addition to the materials suggested through XRF mapping, fibre optic reflectance (FORS) reveals two lake pigments. The first, a brownish-red material, appears in the areas of the dress, the former feather and the former hair (where it was combined with the vermilion suggested by XRF). The second, a reddish-purple lake, was used liberally in the pillow as well as in the ribbons adorning the current model’s hair. Lakes, known to be translucent, thus dominate the first composition. However, they were only used sparingly in the second painting and most of the head in profile was painted with different mixtures. XRF indicates a high incidence of opaque iron-oxide-based pigments in the hair of the second model; her cheek and ear were rendered with vermilion mixed with opaque white and blue lead-based tones (Fig. 22).

In fact, Fragonard’s approach recalls advice dispensed by Antoine-Joseph Pernety (1716–96) concerning effective repainting of a work to which the ‘final touches’ had already been applied.²⁰ Had Fragonard believed himself to have put the final touches on his original painting? The ample incidence of lakes throughout the first painting – in the region of the skirt, in the cushion, in the hair, in the feather – suggests that he did not anticipate

century; see Bergeon *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 25. In the case of *Young girl reading*, the characteristic nature of the head in profile and the order in which the changes were made tends to exclude the possibility that the alterations were made by another hand.

²⁰ Pernety, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 93: ‘Si l’on veut retoucher un tableau auquel on croyoit avoir donné la dernière main, on ne doit retoucher que les bruns pour le renforcer; on ne peut réussir aux clairs qu’en les repeignant entièrement’.

changing it. The slow-drying lakes, sometimes present in thick layers, would have been added as a final glaze over the faster-drying pigments that constitute most of the work. It follows that the painting underlying *Young girl reading* was fully realised. The now-obscured composition is henceforth designated *Portrait of a woman with a book* in order to distinguish it from its successor (Fig.27).

Our third goal was to assess more precisely the relationship between *Portrait of a woman with a book* and the 'fantasy figure' series in general. Although our research will continue, certain considerations may be presented at the outset. The drawing, which includes *Portrait of a woman with a book* alongside several known 'fantasy figures', is evidence of an intimate association, one that is, at least partly, supported by formal analysis. The pose of *Portrait of a woman with a book* closely recalls that adopted by La Bretèche (Fig.18).²¹ If the sheet of sketches was, indeed, intended to lay out a gallery of portraits, the two paintings shown bracketing the top row – *Portrait of a woman with a book* and *Portrait of M. de La Bretèche* – were meant to hang at opposite ends of a wall, containing between them an enfilade of dynamic, colourful 'fantasy figures' (Fig.12 on p.245).²² In this scenario, the body of *Portrait of a woman with a book* would have faced one of the corners of the room; the potentially incongruous effect might have been attenuated by the sketchily painted curtain, designed, one might speculate, to match real draperies present in the gallery itself.

Nonetheless, *Portrait of a woman with a book* was modified in such a way as to permanently distinguish it from the articulated portrait series. Although the underlying reasons may have involved the whims of a model or a patron about whom we currently know nothing, two distinctive characteristics suggest that *Portrait of a woman with a book* never aligned with the other 'fantasy figures' in an entirely satisfactory manner. Whereas many of the other models are posed against plain backgrounds or against low accessories piled upon a single side of the painting, the pillow propped against the beige wall and the sketchily drawn curtain in *Portrait of a woman with a book* would have enclosed the central figure between them in what might be considered a constricting manner. The paint application should also be mentioned: the ruff and the newly discovered feather were described with vigorous incisions made with the reverse end of the paintbrush. This technique does not appear uniformly throughout the 'fantasy figures'.²³ Its use or non-appearance may thus constitute a criterion in establishing a chronology among the works. Might these factors have isolated *Portrait of a woman with a book* from its fellow 'fantasy figures' even before it became *Young girl reading*? Perhaps it is worth remembering in this context that the sketch related to the Gallery's painting is the only one on the sheet not coupled with a name.

The alteration was documented on 11th March 1776 when the painting appeared at the Verrier auction, described as 'A young lady seated near a window. She is propped against a



28. Detail of the *Catalogue de Tableaux et Marbres*, by Gabriel Jacques de Saint-Aubin. 11th March 1776. Printed text with illustrations and annotations in graphite on laid paper, 20.2 by 13.8 by 0.6 cm. (Philadelphia Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection, 1917, PDP-2265[4]).

cushion and holds a book that seems to occupy her'.²⁴ Gabriel de Saint-Aubin (1724–80) sketched the painting in his copy of the catalogue (Fig.12 on p.245). By this time, the transformation was complete: Saint-Aubin's marginalia show the figure in profile and the curtain has disappeared.²⁵ It is not known when the Gallery's painting entered the hands of the mysterious Verrier. Perhaps Fragonard adapted the composition under the collector's aegis, even to his specifications. After all, the Verrier sale catalogue contains several lots, all duly illustrated by Saint-Aubin, suggesting a predilection for the representations of half-length anonymous figures then increasingly popular.²⁶ As we have seen, it was not immensely difficult for Fragonard to substitute the delicate, doll-like profile, by then recurrent in his visual repertory, for the portrait face, presumably of little interest for the collector. In any case, the facility with which the artist envisaged the transformation of a portrait into a genre painting bespeaks the widespread blurring of traditional genre categories in the second half of the eighteenth century.²⁷

Our examination of the *Young girl reading* makes one thing apparent nonetheless: its alteration seems not to have been anticipated or particularly desired by Fragonard. Faced with the task of recycling a completed composition, he salvaged what he could; the new head sits on a body that it does not quite fit. It is thus a pleasure to return the 'lost' *Portrait of a woman with a book* to his *œuvre*. But it is also exciting to find new meaning in *Young girl reading*, the unexpected result of the artist's actions. For, being Fragonard, he created a final image with its own distinct charm, one whose very existence demonstrates his endless ingenuity and resourcefulness.

²¹ We thank Eunice Williams for this observation.

²² Dupuy-Vachey, *op. cit.* (note 13), pp.242–43.

²³ It is not noticeable in the Louvre's 'fantasy figures', with the exception of *Portrait of Madame Brillon* in which the irregular scratches to the paint surface appear to have been made with a thinner implement (perhaps a finer brush) than was employed in *Young girl reading*. Use of the butt of the paintbrush is also more lightly visible in the painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The markings in *Young girl reading* are closest to those seen in the painting formerly known as the *Portrait of a singer holding a sheet of music* (private collection). In this context, it is worth noting that the reverse end of the paintbrush was not used in the *Duc d'Harcourt* (private collection) for which a later date has been established; see Dupuy-Vachey, *op. cit.* (note 13), pp.242–43.

²⁴ Sale, Verrier, Paris, Hôtel d'Aligre, 11th March 1776, lot 80: 'Une jeune Demoiselle assise près d'une croisée. Elle est adossée contre un coussin, & tient un livre qui paroît l'occuper'. This sale was formerly identified as that of the comte du Barry; the identification of the collector was recently corrected in the Getty Provenance Index; see Dupuy-Vachey, *op. cit.* (note 13), pp.242–43.

²⁵ Saint-Aubin wrote the word 'Fragonard' beside the entry for *Young girl reading*; this contemporary validation of the authorship of the new composition also speaks to the concerns raised in note 17 above.

²⁶ For instance, lot 68: 'Un vieillard vu à mi-corps; il a sa main posée sur un pot; & de l'autre, il tient une pipe', by Le Prince.

²⁷ M. Ledbury: *Sedaine, Greuze, and the Boundaries of Genre*, Oxford 2000, pp.15–44.