Four French Paintings from the Berwind Collection

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In the early years of this century, when many outstanding collections of paintings were being formed in America, the majority of collectors followed the fashion of buying early Flemish or Italian paintings or English ancestor portraits. Rare indeed was the collector who foreshadowed today's taste and bought paintings by the French impressionists or by eighteenth century French painters. Such a rare collector was Edward J. Berwind who, with his sister Julia, filled his imposing town house here in New York and his beautiful French villa, The Elms, in Newport with fine objects of the eighteenth century. The rooms were furnished with French furniture and decorated with French and Russian tapestries, beautiful Chinese porcelains, and French, Italian, and English paintings.

In 1953 Miss Berwind destined for the Museum most of the paintings, tapestries, and objets d'art that she and her brother had collected, but reserved a life interest. In May 1961 the collection was received by the Museum, and some of the most important objects are currently on exhibition in the Room of Recent Acquisitions. The paintings, entirely from the eighteenth or early nineteenth century, include two beautiful works by Guardi and fine French and English pictures, which have greatly enriched our representation in these fields.

Four of these paintings by French artists of the eighteenth century, two landscapes, a genre scene, and a portrait, represent different facets of the art of the period. They capture perfectly the graceful lightheartedness of a society dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure in beautiful surroundings—the landscapes are more idyllic than nature, scenes of everyday life are transformed into picturesque vignettes, portraits emphasize the charming surface without insisting on the penetrating character analysis of an earlier age. There are two large landscapes with figures by François Boucher, The Two Sisters by Fragonard, and a Portrait of the Artist with Two Pupils by Adélaïde Labille-Guiard.

The two landscapes by François Boucher, Shepherd's Idyll and Washerwomen (Figures 1

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and 4), both dated 1768, were painted very late in the artist's career, two years before his death. Three years earlier, in 1765, following a series of commissions under the patronage of Mme de Pompadour, Boucher had been named First Painter to the King and director of the Royal Academy. For some years before this he had been artistic director of the Gobelin factory, and as a result of all these positions under the royal favor he exerted an enormous influence on the art world of his day.
The two landscapes are characteristic of Boucher's pastoral scenes of elegant rusticity. The shepherd lolls by a brook, desultorily playing his flute, while shepherdesses bring him offerings of flowers, and a few cows and sheep huddle together under a picturesquely dilapidated shed near a fountain decorated with putti. In the companion picture a well-dressed laundress is hard at work, while others watch from the bank of the stream, accompanied by children, dogs, and a donkey.

These pictures remind us of the charming descriptions given by the Goncourt brothers of Boucher's pastoral subjects: “These delightful shepherds, these adorable shepherdesses . . . their sheep are silken and their crooks flowered. . . . For him, nature is a charming tumult. He loves above all some little plot of ground, singing and trembling with fresh colour, full of bursting foliage, encumbered with complex tree forms, with pollarded willows, with volleys of branches. In the foreground a stream chatters and splashes, running water glitters in the sun . . . He trains the moss over agglomerations of marble ruins; he hides the grass beneath the broad leaves of the mullein. . . . As a landscape painter Boucher's unique pre-occupation seems to have been to preserve his generation from the tedium of nature” (from the translation by Robin Ironside).

We do not know who gave Boucher the commission to paint these large decorations. Possibly it was Jean Marie Roslin, seigneur d'Ivry, maître des requêtes, for his Château de Bouglainval, near Maintenon. After the death in 1883 of his grandson, the second Baron d'Ivry, these paintings were sold at auction with the rest of his collection of eighteenth century French paintings. The catalogue describes them as “first rate in the work of this gracious artist, for the importance of the composition, the astonishing facility of the execution, the exquisite taste of the arrangement, and also for their seductive aspect. One could not conceive of two paintings more accomplished from the point of view of the decorative effect.”

Boucher's pupil, Jean Honoré Fragonard, won a Prix de Rome in 1752 and went to Italy to travel and study for a number of years. Upon his return to Paris in 1761 he received important commissions to paint decorations for the financier Bergeret de Grandcour, Mme de Pompadour, and others. In 1769, when he was thirty-seven years old, he married. He was much attached to his wife and children, and from this period date a series of brilliant and enchanting paintings of scenes from family life. He never tired of por-
traying Mme Fragonard at her domestic tasks and his children at their games. The two little girls shown in our painting (Figure 6) are probably Fragonard’s young daughter and his wife’s sister, Marguerite Gérard, who had come from Grasse to live with the Fragonards in Paris in 1775, when she was about fourteen years old. Besides helping to look after her sister’s children, Mlle Gérard studied painting and engraving with her famous brother-in-law. In our painting she is supporting her little niece on a hobbyhorse. The painting has been cut down, but the whole original composition is preserved in a lively sketch in the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon, in an engraving by Géraud Vidal, and in a pastel copy of the painting (Figure 5) by Fragonard’s friend, the Abbé de Saint-Non, dated 1779.

In the final composition, the two girls are very much more dressed up and posed than they appear in the preparatory sketch, and the spontaneity of the sketch has been sacrificed to the more decorous air of the finished painting. The pink and red dress of the older girl forms a harmonious contrast with the changeable yellow and green silk of Rosalie’s costume. Fragonard’s flashing brush preserves all the freshness and liveliness that should belong to young models and at the same time, in its lightness and grace, symbolizes the style of the entire epoch.

Soon after this picture was painted it was acquired by the Marquis de Veri and appeared in the sale of his collection in 1785, when it was bought by the Marquis de Saint-Marc. It was not seen again until about 1916, when it was in the collection of the Consul General of Russia in Paris, Mr. A. Zarine, who had found the painting in an unnamed Swedish collection. Mr. Berwind bought the picture in 1918.

The largest and perhaps most entertaining picture among the French paintings in the Berwind collection is the full-length group portrait of Mme Labille-Guérard and her pupils (Frontispiece). In 1783 Adélaïde Labille-Guérard and Louise Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun were received into the Royal Academy, the last two women to be accorded this honor. Two years later, when she was thirty-six, Mme Labille-Guérard painted herself with her two favorite pupils, Mlle Capet and Mlle Carreaux de Rosemond. This triple portrait was shown in the Salon in Paris in 1785 and received much critical acclaim and even inspired a poem. One critic noted that “this artist is of very distinguished and rare merit, since she joins to the graces of her sex the vigor and the force which characterize the work of men”—high praise indeed! Mme Labille-Guérard was at the peak of her success at this time, re-
ceiving important commissions from the aristocracy and a royal pension in her capacity as painter to the princesses of France.

Adélaïde Labille was born in 1749 and when she was twenty married M. Guiard, whom she divorced after nearly a quarter of a century. She studied with the miniaturist François Elie Vincent and the pastellist Quentin de la Tour. She then continued her studies with the son of her first teacher, François André Vincent, whom she married many years later, in 1800. She died in 1803. During the Revolution Mme Labille-Guiard did not go abroad for safety as Mme Vigée-Le Brun did. She remained in Paris, where she painted Robespierre and other political leaders.

The artist has pictured herself here seated before an easel, one elegant satin slipper showing beneath her skirt and her hands full of professional impedimenta, palette, brushes, and painter’s stick. Her décolleté costume of rich gray-blue satin and her fantastically plumed and ribbed hat are a surprise in a picture of a painter at work. The assured beauty and sophis-

6. The Two Sisters, by Jean Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806), French. Oil on canvas, 28 1/4 x 22 inches. 53:61.5

tication of the seated painter contrast with a demure and youthful quality in the dress and demeanor of the two pupils affectionately and modestly posed behind her chair. In the shadowy depths of the room near the easel are a statuette of a vestal virgin and a bust said to represent the artist's father.

Marie Gabrielle Capet, shown behind her mentor's chair, and Mlle Carreaux de Rosemond, in the background, became successful artists themselves. Mlle Capet made her debut as a painter in 1781 and continued to exhibit until her death in 1818. She achieved critical acclaim for her portrait miniatures, and in another charming portrait by Mme Labille-Guiard she is shown seated at a table painting a miniature. Mlle Carreaux de Rosemond, who exhibited in 1783 and 1784, married the engraver Charles Clément Bervic in 1788 and died the same year.

The Museum's triple portrait remained in the collection of the artist's husband, François André Vincent, who left it to his sister and her descendants. It remained unknown to connoisseurs until its rediscovery in the collection of Mme Griois sometime shortly before 1900. The painting was exhibited in this Museum from 1906 to 1908 and was acquired soon after by Edward Berwind. It hung until this summer in the ballroom of his beautiful villa in Newport.

These four charming French pictures, added to the Museum's other paintings by Boucher, Fragonard, and their contemporaries, should stimulate new interest in our many treasures of the eighteenth century.