Monsieur Houdon's

Frileuse

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Last year, as the bequest of Kate Trubee Davison, the Museum received a life-size bronze figure of a scantily-clad shivering girl (Figure 2). Known as the Frileuse or as Winter, it is by the greatest of the eighteenth century French sculptors, Jean Antoine Houdon; it bears his signature and the date 1787 (Figure 1).

The composition is one that Houdon developed and refined over a period of years. We first learn of it from the records of the sculptor himself, who noted that in 1781 he had made preliminary models of the Frileuse and of a companion figure, Summer. Perhaps the small terracotta sketch, seven and a quarter inches high, that was in the Schoeller collection in Paris in 1929 is this early study for the Frileuse. It represents a girl whose figure is generously draped, though her breast is partially bare and the whole length of her legs is exposed; what seems to be a shallow urn rests on the ground beside her.

Houdon then proceeded to make life-size marble figures of the Frileuse and Summer (Figures 3, 4) (both now in the Musée Fabre in Montpellier in southern France), which were completed between 1783 and 1785. He had reorganized the drapery of the Frileuse: there is less of it, but it counts for more. A shawl now covers the shivering girl's head, almost hiding her face, and falls in rich folds over her shoulders and breast; her back, thighs, and legs are left quite bare. A large vase of classical design, also partly draped with a cloth, and cracked as if water within had expanded in freezing, stands beside the figure as a support.

These life-size versions of the two statues were apparently commissioned by a wealthy Administrator General of the Domains of France, M. de Saint-Waast, for soon after they were finished the Frileuse was recorded as being in the library of his Paris hotel in Rue St.-Honore. We presume that Saint-Waast also owned the Summer, even though no mention of it was then made; it is understandable that this figure, being more amply clothed, failed to attract the attention that her barer companion elicited.
2. The Frileuse, by Jean Antoine Houdon (1741-1828), French. Signed and dated 1787. Bronze, height 56\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Bequest of Kate Trubee Davison, 62.55
By 1785 the sculptor had produced half-life-size marble versions of the two statues, for these were refused for exhibition in the Salon of that year, an episode we shall presently turn to. They have long since disappeared, so we cannot know exactly what they looked like, but it is probable that they repeated the composition of the life-size ones.

Two years later Houdon completed work on our bronze cast of the Frileuse, a project he mentioned in a letter written in 1794: “I was long located in the workshops of the city. I profited from this circumstance by becoming at the same time sculptor and founder (in modern times the two professions have always been practiced by different persons), and I was also able to resuscitate in France this useful art, which might well have been lost. Inasmuch as all the bronze founders who had been here were dead when I got down to work, I constructed furnaces, trained workmen, and, after many fruitless and costly attempts, succeeded in myself casting two statues of the Diana, one of which belongs to me, and my Frileuse. I was forced out of my workshop in 1787.” The date 1787 appearing on our bronze (Figure 1) may be taken to mark the moment when the sculptor decided that his Frileuse was fully completed, since after the actual process of founding (which may have occurred a year or more before), lengthy finishing operations would normally have been necessary to correct casting imperfections and to achieve the desired surface.

In translating the composition from stone to metal, Houdon did away with the accompanying vase; the bronze figure, being far stronger than the marble one, needed no such artificial support to protect it from breaking at the ankles. As a result, the Metropolitan’s Frileuse rises from its base in a sweep of unbroken flowing lines and with a spectacular clarity of design.

The bronze was exhibited in the Revolutionary Salon of 1791 and at this point belonged to the Duc d’Orléans, but it was to remain his for only a short time; some months later it was confiscated as the property of an emigré. The statue was thereafter lost sight of until the reign of Napoleon III, when it turned up in the possession of the English collector the fourth Marquess of Hertford. Photographs taken in the 1860s show it on the terrace in front of his famed Paris residence, Bagatelle (Figure 7). The Frileuse passed by inheritance successively to Sir Richard Wallace, Lady Wallace, Sir John Murray Scott, and, finally, to Lady Victoria Sackville, who sold it in 1914 to the art merchant Jacques Seligmann. The New York banker Henry P. Davison acquired the statue in 1917; the Davisons twice lent it to the Metropolitan for special exhibitions, once in 1920 and again in 1935.

In the years that followed the casting of our bronze, numerous versions of the Frileuse appeared, mostly in plaster, and are now to be seen in various public and private collections. These seem for the most part to have come from Houdon’s atelier, which functioned until the sculptor’s death in 1828. The plaster versions vary – though
not significantly – from the Montpellier and New York figures. Some are closer to one, some, to the other. Occasionally a tree trunk is used as a support in place of the vase. The earliest of the "tree-trunk" versions, a terracotta statuette in the Louvre, eleven inches high, shows the shivering girl entirely undraped. Since a paper label attached to it reads, "Exposée en 1793, no. 124" (i.e., exhibited in the Salon of 1793), it is possible that Houdon planned still another variant of his Frileuse theme. Later plaster versions with tree-trunk supports, however, invariably show the girl draped as in the statues in Montpellier and New York.

In addition to the Frileuse, Houdon created two other compositions that are in essence paeans of praise of the female figure. One was the marble Diana, made about 1779-1780, which was sent to Catherine the Great of Russia and which is now in the Gulbenkian collection in Lisbon. He later made the bronze copies of it mentioned in his letter, one of which is in the Huntington collection in San Marino, California (Figure 5), and the other in the Louvre; a terracotta version is in the Frick collection in New York. And in 1782 he completed a seated Bather (Figure 6) as a fountain figure for the garden of the château of the Duc de Chartres in what is now the Parc Monceau in Paris. This Bather is in the Metropolitan as part of the Altman collection.

All three compositions are from the same period in the sculptor's career and have much in common. In all of them feminine forms of unusual natural beauty are represented in a manner at once remarkably gracious, vivid, and true to life. Just as in the modeling of portrait heads Houdon captured with an unparalleled immediacy the particular nature of his sitters, so, in his Diana, his Bather, and his Frileuse, he was a Pygmalion giving the essence of life to a succession of Galateas.

In this respect Houdon may be said to have differed basically from his contemporaries. Clodion, perhaps the greatest of these, was flawlessly expert in modeling the human form. But his gods, satyrs, and nymphs, glorious as they are, never threaten to overstep the limits of their media, whether they be in clay, marble, or bronze; as a result they never impinge too closely on one's sense of reality. Despite their often erotic character, they have always remained acceptable decorations in the most proper houses.

Houdon's figures are of another order. Life has been caught up in them, and although it is contained within forms classic in their purity and grace, it is not thereby diminished. Because of the depths of Houdon's naturalism – and for this he deserves to be ranked among the scientists of the Age of Enlightenment – theirs is the effect of almost palpably living creatures, not of simulacra formalized in the materials of sculpture. In them the difference between art and life, between the presentation of the object and the object itself, may seem at first glance to have diminished nearly to the vanishing point; then, on a more careful appraisal, that difference, owing to the genius of their creator, is found to be absolute and enduring.
Perhaps because of the fullness and frankness of Houdon's naturalism, both the Diana and the Frileuse seem to have been denied admission to Paris Salons. Painters and sculptors belonging to the Royal Academy had the right to offer their recent works for exhibition in the Salons, which were held annually in the Louvre, but their entries seem to have been subject to scrutiny by a commission that had been established in 1777 to insure that public morality was not offended. The presence of such a watchdog commission could well have been a factor leading to the rejection of Houdon's two figures. Be that as it may, a contemporary criticism of the Diana, “qu'elle était trop belle et trop nue pour être exposée en public,” could equally have been applied to the Frileuse, and reflects the unexpectedly stuffy attitude of the French in regard to works of art offered for public display during an age that, on the whole, was remarkably tolerant. One could not even then be too true to life.

The account of French reaction to the Frileuse is revealing. When Houdon sought to exhibit his half-life-size Frileuse, together with the Summer, in the Salon of 1785, Jean Baptiste Pierre, First Painter to the King, wrote the Comte d'Angiviller, Director of Arts for Louis XVI, that “tomorrow the jury is going to consider the entries for the forthcoming Salon. Among these entries are two half-life-size figures by M. Houdon: the one of these that is clothed [Summer] is nothing extraordinary, whereas the other [the Frileuse] could easily be excluded from the exhibition on account of its state of nudity. A totally nude figure” — he went on — “is not so indecent as one dressed with false modesty.” The First Painter then stated that his letter was being written to help d'Angiviller in arriving at a decision about the Frileuse, adding: “I think I should observe in its defense that this figure is the better of the two, and that it could be shown in a corner.” He concluded in wondering why “the so-called Callipygian Venus fails to offend against decency, while the present figure, which exposes the same areas, looks exaggerated and indecent.” The following reply came from d'Angiviller: “With regard to the two half-life-size figures of M. Houdon, I will act in conformity with the decision of the Academy. The solution may indeed lie in placing this partly-clothed figure in a corner, thereby screening the areas that should not be exposed.” But the Frileuse was not to be placed in a protective corner; neither it nor the patently inoffensive Summer was exhibited in the Salon of 1785.

With the Revolution, a new voice was heard in French art criticism. It was that of the citoyen, whose judgments were essentially curbside—pedestrian, sometimes humorous, and rather unconcerned with moral issues. It is exemplified in the comments on our bronze Frileuse, which, as another sign that times had changed, was accepted for exhibition in the Salon of the Year III (1791). One writer, described as a patriotic and truthful citizen (“citoyen patriote et véridique”), in his account of works in the Salon, noted the presence of “une Frileuse qui se couvre la tête et qui met son cul à l’air.” Another wrote that “the bronze of M. Houdon seems rather to want reason. When one is chilled through, one seeks to contract one’s limbs and to cover one’s body instead of one’s head. She is nonetheless agreeable to look at and the proportions are accurate.” Still another of the Revolutionary critics observed that “it seems that M. Houdon had no other object in view than to lavish his talent on a pair of pretty thighs. Why then,” he asked, “is this figure turned in such a manner that one can see nothing of it?” Obviously, to this critic’s displeasure, the Frileuse was then being shown in a corner. “We must admit, however,” he added, “that winter would be a very agreeable season if all pretty girls who were susceptible to cold turned out in such a rig.”

In our age, accustomed as it is to the shocking in art, the Frileuse has long since lost any shock value it may once have had. Its essentially sculptural virtues are now unclouded, and we can admire it for what it is.
The acquisition of the Frileuse adds further richness to our already comprehensive showing of Houdon, which includes the well-known head of Franklin and a number of other superb portraits. And, together with the Bather, it gives the Museum superb representation of what has been the most controversial and, to some, the most fascinating phase of the work of this enormously gifted artist.

**Note:** The contemporary accounts bearing on the Salons of 1785 and 1791 are taken from Louis Reau's article "Documents sur Houdon" in the Bulletin de la Société de l'Art Française (1922) pp. 381-84. The citation from the Houdon letter of 1794 comes from the text as given in Georges Giacometti's *La Vie et l'Oeuvre de Houdon* (Paris, 1929) Vol. I, p. 67; the description of Diana comes from Vol. II, p. 231.

For the first time in more than twenty years, the Bulletin appears in a new format. The last major change in design occurred in 1942, when the magazine was enlarged from the size used since 1905, and with certain modifications this design was retained through June of this year. Now once again the magazine has been enlarged — it is the same height as before, but half an inch wider. A different typeface, Monotype Granjon, has been selected, for greater legibility. The most radical change, however, has taken place in the layout of the pages. The wide outer margin is treated as if it were an extra column for pictures and captions, to permit greater flexibility in the placement of illustrations; the text is granted similar flexibility through the alternate use of two columns or a single, wide one. The greater range of choice in the disposition of words and pictures has several practical advantages, perhaps the most important of which is the closer relationship made possible between the texts of our articles and the illustrations that accompany them. But we believe that altering the form of the Bulletin must find its main justification in what is, after all, the essential function of the magazine: to present the Museum's works of art effectively to its readers. We hope that you will find this new presentation more varied, more lucid, more interesting, and more pleasing to the eye.

G.W.