Amateur Painting: Honoré Daumier's "Homage to Fragonard" and the Rococo

Elizabeth Saari Browne

The prolific artist Honoré Daumier's small oil paintings remained virtually unknown until the end of his life when an exhibition of his work was mounted at the Paris art gallery Durand-Ruel in 1878.[1] Focusing on the particular sketch-like aesthetics of Daumier's brushwork, reviewers of the show compared his paintings of families, theater goers, chess players, singers, readers, and print viewers, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, to the work of several Rococo artists.[2] This paper will argue that for Daumier, the loose brushwork and free paint handling associated with the sketch was part of an eighteenth-century tradition that appealed to an audience of *amateurs*, the audience for whom Daumier typically painted. Rather than explicit social content or narrative, their appreciation and judgments were inspired by works in which contemplation, imagination, and intimacy were of more value. More specifically, this paper will consider Daumier in relation to Rococo artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard as a model for understanding the aesthetic and social context in which Daumier worked.

Also known by the alternative title *Homage à Fragonard*, Daumier's *L'atelier* shows the artist at his most "Fragonardian" as he translates Fragonard into his own idiom by evoking the Rococo master's brushwork and style and by transforming his thematics (Figure 1). The small canvas depicts a scene which explores the compound relationships of figures in an artist's studio. Absorbed in his composition, the artist is relegated to the background, obscured in darkness and a palette of muted browns and ochres. Though the artist's composition is indiscernible, the woman in the foreground presumably acts as his model, despite the fact that the artist appears more interested in his work than in her beauty. Her luminous skin, sensuality, and the shimmering materials of her dress captivate not only the viewer, but also another man, who leans into the composition from behind the studio furnace. Gripping the chimney pipe to move closer, he is attentive as the model gesticulates with her left hand, turning her body from the viewer toward her visitor as the painter in the background remains oblivious or unconcerned.

Though the scene is translated into Daumier's idiom, it is operatively in "Fragonardian" terms. The social interaction in the juxtaposition between the two figures engaged in conversation versus the artist at work echoes certain Rococo compositions including those by Fragonard. More erotic than Daumier's piece, in Fragonard's *The Debut of the Model* there exist similar playfully humorous yet ambiguous relationships (Figure 2). Lifting her skirt with his mahlstick, the artist here attempts to undress the model as her companion (who by leaning over reveals her own décolletage) likewise grabs at the garments. Though one of the model's hands is at her skirt where the artist is trying to reveal more skin, her passivity, combined with her companion's frozen gesture at either helping the artist or protecting her friend's modesty and perhaps seeking the attention of the artist herself, leaves these erotic tensions unresolved. While Daumier's *L'atelier* is a less explicit example of such studio liaisons, the ambiguous relationships and interests between the model, the artist, and the other man produce similar relational humor.

L'atelier pays further "Homage to Fragonard" by translating figures and conventions of the Rococo master and his time. With her hair upswept into a loose chignon and her scintillating white-lined orange-yellow dress, the young woman in *L'atelier* appears to be a citation of Fragonard's *The Debut of the Model*. It is as if Fragonard's young girl has covered herself and adjusted her pose for a new painting. Though depicted in casual conversation, her turned head explicitly imitates the *profil perdu*, a common eighteenth-century convention in which the facial features are lost to the viewer as the figure is turned inward. With such direct reference to Fragonard and the eighteenth century, one wonders what the artist in the background is rendering in Daumier's painting. Is he just a necessary component of studio scenes as popularized during the eighteenth century? Could the painter be a self-portrait of Daumier painting a canvas as the actual Daumier paints *L'atelier*—or, since *L'atelier* represents Daumier at his most "Fragonardian," might the painter in the background be Fragonard himself applying the finishing touches to *The Debut of the Model*?

Daumier's focus on gazing and conversation imbues the scene with an emphasis on sensual pleasure and accentuates elements of ambiguity and intimacy, tropes common to Rococo painting.[3] The unknowable conversation between the two foreground figures and the indistinct gazes allow the

[1] For a detailed account of this exhibition and its role in understanding the "art history" of Daumier, see Michel Melot, "Daumier and Art History: Aesthetic Judgement/Political Judgement," *Oxford Art Journal* 11, no. 1 (1988): 3-24.

[2] For instance, see Edmond Duranty, "Daumier: son point de départ, sa vie, son talent," *Beaux-Arts illustrés* 5 (1879).

[3] For a discussion on the role of conversation in Rococo paintings, par-

viewer to "complete" the scene, a function originating with the aesthetics of the *amateur* and the eighteenth century, by imagining what those eyes could see or what those mouths might say.[4] Thus the intimacy of the painting exists not only between the model and her probable suitor engaged in close conversation and between the artist and his work, but also between the beholder and this painting, which demands viewer participation. Measuring only thirty-one by twenty-five centimeters, the small oil invites the viewer into a physical closeness, a position that encourages slow contemplation and attention to the relationships within the scene, where potentials for multiple narratives can be discerned.

While similarities in themes and motifs might be substantial enough to consider this singular painting an homage to Fragonard, theme and motif alone do not fully explain why Daumier's other paintings are so often compared with this particular Rococo artist.[5] In fact, more often, stylistic comparisons are made between the two, including their paintings' sketch-like qualities.[6] That Daumier's paintings are most consistently characterized as "sketches," which relates to Fragonard's own *faire*, requires that consideration be given to the historical and revived meaning of the sketch, not just for an admiring artist like Daumier, but for the specific audiences who purchased and cherished the works in such an "unfinished" state.

Considered to be symbolic of the artist's "first thought," the *esquisse* was a privileged form of the sketch which came to be seen in and as completed works in the eighteenth century.[7] Notable among these "finished sketches" were the *figures de fantaisie*, non identity-specific portraits which exhibit Fragonard's most fluid brushwork. Though in the mid-nineteenth century the oil sketch came to public prominence as it appeared on a larger scale in the salons and was often connected to social or avant-gardist purposes, the process and imagination associated with the *esquisse* initially attracted a particular, more private audience of connoisseurs, artists, and *amateurs*.[8] As Mary Sheriff argues in her book *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism*, the *amateur* was a man "well versed in the history of art, well read in aesthetic theory and familiar with the conventions of picture making, and more interested in art fully capable of appreciating the cleverness of painting that commented upon itself."[9] This "cleverness" to which Sheriff alludes is actually embedded in the surface quality of the paint itself. Superficially, a sketch-like execution seems natural and easy. However, this "spontaneity" is actually practiced artifice, concealing significant training required to carry off such "ease." Additionally, the "unfinished" state of such canvases leaves its "completion" to the viewer.[10] Mentally filling in details, refining contours, even embellishing what was left "undone," the work engages the viewer and allows him to participate, to step into the artist's role and creatively imagine and finish the painting where it has been left off.

Fragonard's *figures de fantaisie* are also the paintings by Fragonard most often cited as influencing Daumier.[11] Like *L'atelier*, they depict figures engaged in quiet contemplation or artistic practice including writing, reading, and playing music (Figure 3). However, this emphasis on the senses is at one remove; the viewer cannot "hear" the music, nor "read" the texts, just as in Daumier's *L'atelier* the viewer cannot discern what the artist depicts or listen to the model's words. Instead, the viewer's imagination is called upon to provide the words and sounds which cannot be fully expressed in paint, adding another degree of subjectivity to the painting. In this manner, several of Daumier's oils seem to be nineteenth-century *figures de fantaisie*. In *Pierrot jouant de la mandoline*, the loose brushwork barely defines Pierrot's form, engulfed as he is in the entangling lines of brushwork (Figure 4). The blue streaks radiating from his open mouth, mid-song conflate sound and sight. As in Fragonard's *figures*

ticularly those of Antoine Watteau, see Mary Vidal, "Style as Subject in Watteau's Images of Conversation," in *Antoine Watteau: Perspectives on the Artist and the Culture of His Time*, ed. Mary Sheriff (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2006), 76-93.

4 The aesthetics of the *amateur* are examined by Mary Sheriff and are discussed in more detail following note 8 in this paper. Mary Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). See in particular chapter 4, "Easel Painting and the Aesthetics of Brushwork," 117-152.

5 See Claude Roger-Marx, *Peintres, aquarelles, dessins* (Paris: Orangerie, 1934); Claude Roger-Marx, "Un Grand Peintre du Mouvement Daumier," *Jardin des Arts* 44 (1958): 513-520; Claude Roger-Marx, *L'Univers de Daumier* (Paris: H. Scrépel, 1972); Pierre Georgel, "Daumier Peintre," in *Tout l'œuvre peint de Daumier*, ed. Gabriele Mandel (Paris: Flammarion, 1972); Jean-Pierre Cuzin and Dimitri Salmon, "Daumier et Monticelli, 'Baroques Provençaux,'" in *Fragonard: Regards/Croisés* (Paris: Mengès, 2007), 135-137.

6 For example in "Daumier et Monticelli," Cuzin and Salmon say: "Il existe des analogies fortes entre les deux peintres: les reprises inlassables des mêmes tableaux à plusieurs moments de la carrière, la pratique d'une peinture laissée à l'état d'esquisse et recommence sur une autre toile. L'amour du clair-obscur, de la monochromie, et le gout de la simplification des formes existent chez l'un comme chez l'autre, dans une commune fascination pour Rembrandt: gout des contre-jours, des effets orageux, des éclats de lumière la pénombre" (135).

7 For the role of the sketch in the eighteenth century, see Philippe Le Leyzour and Fabrice Hergott, eds., *L'apothéose du geste: L'esquisse peinte au siècle de Boucher et Fragonard* (Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2003). For overviews of the sketch in earlier history, see Rudolph Wittkower, *Masters of the Loaded Brush: Oil Sketches from Rubens to Tiepolo*, exh. cat. (New York: Columbia University, 1967).

8 See Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon Press, 1971); and Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle, 1848-1871* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

9 Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism*, 183.

10 Ibid., 126.

11 Georgel, "Daumier Peintre," 6: "On comprend l'attraction qu'ont très probablement exercée sur notre peintre les 'figures de fantaisie' de Fragonard, triomphe de la spontanéité jointe à la possession suprême du métier." For Fragonard's audience see Guillaume Faroult and Sophie Eloy, eds., *La collection La Caze: chefs-d'œuvre des peintures des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2007).

de fantaisie, the viewer decides what he "hears." Likewise, the far-away gaze of the artist depicted in *Le peintre*, as well as the highlighting of his countenance and his brushes, recalls Fragonard's *Inspiration* (Figure 5). Just as the *fantaisie* figure clutches his quill inspired to write, *Le peintre's* brushes are loaded for action, the blank canvas poised to receive his *première pensée*. Incomplete, it is not *Le peintre's* inspiration that provides the image to be painted, or "finished," on the background canvas, but rather the viewer's own imagination, fired by intimate engagement in reflecting on the *esquisse*.

Even works featuring multiple figures emphasize viewer participation and "seeing beyond" what is immediately perceived. In *Une loge au théâtre*, the viewer "sits" among the audience, watching them watch the show (Figure 6). A blur of yellows and greens, two figures vaporously appear on stage, though no formal or iconographic qualities provide a discernible narrative; that remains for the viewer to determine. Similarly, in *Galerie de tableaux* (1860-70, private collection) three *amateurs* casually contemplate the surrounding artwork. Their viewing action blatantly mirrors that of the painting's owner. As their gazes supersede the boundaries of Daumier's oil, excluding the artwork they are studying, the viewer mentally "creates" the work upon which the figures are focused, perhaps imagining them gazing at the same painting he contemplates or even another painting from his collection. Like Fragonard's paintings, these images blur the distinctions between the artist representing and the figure represented, between imagination and reality, and between the senses expressed in subject matter with the viewer's visual sense, all of which would appeal to an audience delighted by interplays of representation.

The relationship between the *amateur* and the *esquisse* continued in the works of early nineteenth-century Rococo *petit-maîtres*, Romantics, Realists, and Impressionists whose works were likewise purchased by the *amateur*, collector, and fellow artist.[12] In fact, during the Second Empire when Daumier produced the majority of his oils, the revived interest in the Rococo was due in part to the many *amateurs* who remained devoted to collecting eighteenth-century art throughout the nineteenth century.[13]

Examining these collections reveals a taste for eighteenth-century art in which the formal properties of line, brush, and scale were valued. For the Goncourt brothers, this interest is specifically revealed in their essays on French eighteenth-century painters.[14] Though historically and biographically embellished, their descriptions of work by Antoine Watteau, Quentin de La Tour, François Boucher, and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin reveal their taste for seemingly briskly executed paintings, loose brushwork, evocative line, and sketches. Of all the artists about whom the Goncourt brothers wrote though, Fragonard appears to be the artist who best exemplifies their aesthetic opinions, their "de Pilesian" conception that painting should delight the eyes in a sensuous materialist sense. The Goncourt brothers crowned Fragonard the "sketcher of genius," his cultivated *esquisses* not merely a stage of painting but instead its ideal.[15]

Other nineteenth-century *amateurs* were equally enamored of this style of handling, including Louis La Caze, whose collection of Rococo works would later establish the Louvre's eighteenth-century wing.[16] Most exemplary in his collection of modestly scaled pictures and intimately treated subjects was Fragonard's *figure de fantaisie L'Abbe de Saint-Non* (1769, Musée du Louvre, Paris). Through exhibitions mounted in the 1860s and 70s featuring eighteenth-century paintings and drawings from the collections of *amateurs* and collectors like La Caze and the Goncourt brothers, it is obvious that Daumier would have had access to Fragonard's works, if he had not seen them even earlier.

These exhibitions—including the 1860 "Ancienne école française" show, the 1867 Rococo exhibition held at Petit Trianon, and the 1867 *Exposition Universelle*—not only inspired artists like Daumier to experiment with this type of paint handling but also interested collectors. While the Goncourt brothers and La Caze represent more affluent nineteenth-century *amateurs*, the rise of the middle class during the Second Empire also produced a new population of collector-*amateurs*.[17] Though their wealth might not have been extensive enough to purchase paintings by eighteenth-century masters, collecting more modest works by nineteenth-century artists allowed these new *amateurs* to participate in the culture of collecting, as well as to indulge their own aesthetic appreciation for eighteenth-century-esque works. Regardless of finances, the consumers of Daumier's oil paintings during this time period represent the same type of engaged audience that pertained to Fragonard's paintings.

Investigating the subject matter, style, and provenance of Daumier's paintings reveals the nature of the connection to the artist-, critic-, and collector-*amateur*. Unlike the overt social and political epoch depicted in his lithographs for *Charivari*, Daumier's paintings speak to a private audience rather than to the public. Combined with the sketch-like

12 Carol Duncan, "The Persistence of Rococo" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1970), 30.

13 Allison Unruh, "Aspiring to la Vie Galante: Reincarnations of Rococo in Second Empire France" (PhD diss., New York University, 2008). For writing about and collecting eighteenth-century art during the nineteenth century, see particularly chapters one and four.

14 Jules de Goncourt and Edmond de Goncourt, *French Eighteenth-Century Painters*, trans. Robin Ironside (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

15 Ibid., 288.

16 Unruh, "La Vie Galante," 265. Unruh also notes how La Caze's collection included artists such as Rembrandt van Rijn, Frans Hals, and Chardin, all artists known for their "loose" handling of paint and/or drawn sketches. These artists have also been connected to Daumier; see Melot "Daumier and Art History."

17 Unruh, "La Vie Galante," 223.

brushwork and unfinished surface, the mundane subject matter of the paintings (peopled landscapes, chess players, Don Quixotes, etc.) generates reflection and reverie.[18] Intimate, somewhat ambiguous, and relying on the beholder's imagination, Daumier's images, like Fragonard's paintings, appear impulsive and incomplete but are actually carefully constructed, the "spontaneous" line articulated in alignment with the "simple" subject matter for deliberate contemplative purpose.

While Daumier's paintings may have been "discovered" by the broader public in 1878, a private audience had been quietly purchasing these never-exhibited works years before they were "revealed." These owners include prominent collectors who also purchased eighteenth-century art, other artists who used "loose" paint handling, and writers sympathetic to the poetic, inward-looking qualities.[19]

Ignoring Daumier's emphasis on materiality and looking disregards the depth of his work and his influences. Well known in his own time for his biting caricatures, Daumier's oil paintings emphasize a softer visual and material sensuous appreciation. This is true not only of his paintings which directly recall or cite Fragonard and eighteenth-century themes, but even extends to Daumier's scenes "of their time"—of bourgeois subjects examining prints in shops (*L'amateurs d'estampes*, 1860-65, Philadelphia Museum of Art), of passersby staring at the moon (*Les noctambules*, 1845-48, National Museum Wales, Cardiff), and of readers pondering the written word (*La lecture d'un poeme*, 1857-58, Germany, private collection). Based on an engagement with eighteenth-century painting and audiences that had a continued presence throughout the nineteenth century, Daumier appears as a more complex artist working as a "witness to the times" not just politically and socially, but artistically as well, engaged in the nineteenth-century continuation of Rococo visual and aesthetic ideals.

University of Florida

[18] Georgel, "Daumier Peintre," 5: "Temps poétique et contemplative: l'artiste, las de suivre la minute qui passe, se retrait, prend *son* temps… Que cet art n'ait pas rencontré, du vivant de Daumier, l'approbation de la multitude, il n'y a pas de quoi s'étonner. En fait, il ne lui était pas destiné. Au caricaturiste de s'adresser au plus grand nombre; le peintre, lui, se parle d'abord à lui-même."

[19] Daumier's paintings were owned by collectors such as Georges de Bellio (*L'atelier/Homage à Fragonard*) and Isaac de Camondo (*Galerie de tableaux*); artists Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (who owned several versions of *L'amateur d'estampes*), Charles-François Daubigny (*Une loge de théâtre* among others), Nadar (*Don Quichotte et Sancho Pansa*, *c*.1860, Itami City Museum of Art, Japan), and Edgar Degas (*Don Quichotte lisant,* 1865-70, National Museum Wales, Cardiff); and writers including Octave Mirbeau (*La femme au ruban bleu*, *c*.1860, Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington, DC), and Roger Marx (*Don Quichotte et Sancho Pansa sous un arbre*, *c*.1865, Abegg Foundation, Switzerland). Paintings not sold directly to these collectors, artists, and writers, were purchased by dealers such as Ambrose Vollard, Gaston Alexandre Camentron, and Paul Durand-Ruel, who sold similarly styled paintings to private collectors and *amateurs*. Dr. Georges de Bellio (1828-1894) was a physician and avid art collector. De Bellio's collection of Impressionist paintings, gifted by his daughter in 1957, formed the foundation of the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris. For de Bellio and his collecting, see Remus Niculescu, "Georges de Bellio, L'ami des Impressionnistes," *Paragone* 21, no. 247 (Sept. 1970): 25-66. In the nineteenth century, Isaac de Camondo, a member of the wealthy Parisian Camondo family, whose home and eighteenth-century art collection is preserved in Paris as the Musée de Camondo, was also known for his collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painting, much of which is now at the Musée d'Orsay. As landscape painters of the Barbizon school, Corot's and Daubigny's own paintings are often referred to as études, exhibiting similar fluid brushwork to Daumier. For the Impressionist connection to the eighteenth century and for Degas' collection of Daumier's works, see Ann Dumas, ed., *Inspiring Impressionism: The Impressionists and the Art of the Past* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); and Ann Dumas, ed., *The Private Collection of Edgar Degas* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997).

Figure 1. Honoré Daumier, *The Studio* (*L'atelier*), *c*.1870, oil on canvas, 16 x 12 1/2 inches (40.6 x 31.8 cm). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Figure 2. Jean Honoré Fragonard, *The Debut of the Model*, *c*.1770, oil on canvas, 19.7 x 24.8 inches (50 x 63 cm). Musée Jacquemart-André, © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Photo credit: Jean Schormans.

Figure 3. Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Inspiration*, 1769, oil on canvas, 31.5 x 25.2 inches (80 × 64 cm). Musée du Louvre, © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Photo credit: Daniel Arnaudet.

[*below left*] Figure 4. Honoré Daumier, *Pierrot Jouant de la Mandoline*, *c.*1873, oil on panel, 13.8 x 10.6 inches (35 x 27 cm). Oskar Reinhart "Am Römerholz" Museum, Winterthur, Switzerland.

[*below right*] Figure 5. Honoré Daumier, *Le Peintre*, *c.*1865, oil on panel, 11.4 x 7.5 inches (29 x 19 cm). National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

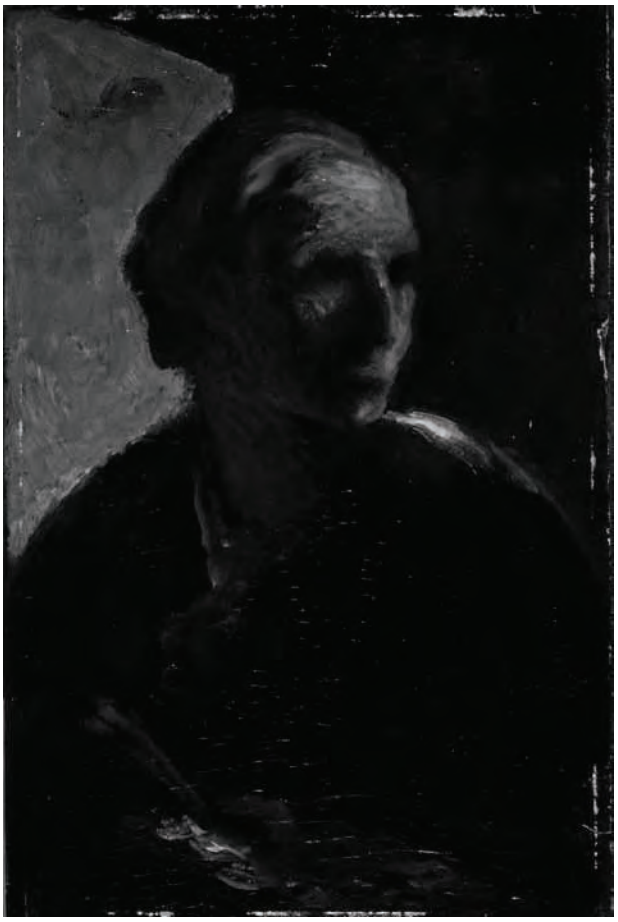

Figure 6. Honoré Daumier, *Une Loge au Théâtre*, *c*.1865, oil on wood, 10.4 x 13.8 inches (26.5 x 35 cm). Kunsthalle, Hamburg. bpk, Berlin. Photo credit: Elke Walford / Art Resource, NY.