





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 on-lookers 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's 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.)

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

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