

Jean Honore Fragonard

(Zhahn Owna-ray Frah-go-nahrd)

1732-1806 (Rococo Period)

February 2009

Materials:

1. Cupid Visual Aid
2. Rococo Wallpaper
3. Elements of Composition poster
4. "Le Billet Doux" (The Love Letter) painting
5. "The Swing" painting
6. "A Young Girl Reading" painting

Docent costuming suggestions:

Costume #1: Rococo is "overdone." Think lace, ruffles, bows, flowers, taffetas, brocades, and nets. Flowers or bows in the hair can convey the mood, and even a quite plain skirt may be "rococoed up" by pinning on artificial flowers, ribbons and lace. A blouse could have a brooch pinned on it, or docents could wrap themselves in a lace shawl. A locket that is large enough for the students to notice is a nice touch.

Costume #2: You can also wear Capri-length pants or roll up some long pants, with white stockings underneath, and tie a ribbon under your knee where the pants meet the stockings. A ruffled white blouse and tailed jacket or vest will complete the look.

Costume #3 (general costume): Wear black and white clothing to match the art elements light and shadow that is taught in this lesson or something with a "love" theme like a shirt with a heart to relate to the theme of "love" in French Rococo art.

INTRODUCTION to LESSON:

Do you know what was going on in the 1770's in the United States? George Washington was alive and our country was in the middle of a Revolutionary War. America was a very young country at that time, fashion and style weren't very important. But in Europe, countries were much older and for the rich, style, fashion and fancy parties were very important.

If dressed in costume #1 or #2, start introduction with: I am dressed in a unique way. How would you describe the clothes that I am wearing? (*Flowery, lacy, frilly, ruffles, maybe rich.*) This is how the rich or upper class people dressed in France during the 1770's. (*Continue introduction with next paragraph*)

If not dressed in a costume or #3, just start introduction with: Back in the 1770's in France, men and women both wore frilly, elegant clothes and even large powdered wigs during this time. In fact, people had to have servants to help them get dressed, and even so, it could take someone hours to get dressed. The artist that we are going to learn about today painted in France during this time period. This period in art history is known as the "Rococo" period.

ROCOCO PERIOD

During the Rococo period, clothes were not the only things that were flowery or fancy. (*Show Rococo*

Wallpaper.) Do you see this Rococo wallpaper and the design? Don't you think it looks very fancy and elaborate? Buildings and furniture were also very elaborate with carvings, curves, and gilded with gold trim.

Do you remember when we listened to the Holst music of the "The Planets?" Does anyone remember the name of the goddess of love? (*Venus.*) (*Show the Cupid Visual Aid.*) This little fellow is Venus' son, Cupid. Does anyone know what Cupid does with his bow and arrow? (*He "shoots" his arrows of love at people and they fall helplessly in love with each other whether they want to or not!*)

In French Rococo art, love was one of the common themes and cupids were sometimes used to represent love. Paintings of this period often reflected the ornate dressings and furnishings of the time, as well as the fascination with love.

Do you know what "genre" (zhahn-reh) painting is? It means typical daily life activities. If someone painted a genre painting of your family, what might they paint? A genre painting should reflect both the activities and attitudes of people at the time. Genre paintings of today would show lots of business and activity in them.

Our artist for today is Jean Honore Fragonard (*Zhahn Owna-ray Frah-go-nahrd*), who painted during the Rococo era using the Rococo style and is known for his genre paintings.

PAINTING: "LE BILLET DOUX" (The Love Letter)

(*Show painting.*) Fragonard created this painting called "Le Billet Doux" (*Luh Bee-yay Doo*) in French. Before I tell you what the name of this painting means in English, let's figure it out together.

Can you guess what this lady might be doing? (*Reading a letter.*) Do you think the message in the letter is happy or sad? (*Happy.*) Why? (*The look on the lady's face, the overall happy look of the painting.*) So is the overall attitude of the painting light and joyful or shadowy or sad? (*Light and joyful.*) What in this painting shows you that it was painted during the Rococo period? (*Carving on desk, taffeta texture on the dress.*) Can someone remind us what the common theme for art at the time was? (*Love.*) So could it be that the lady in the painting is reading a love letter? So that is what the name of the painting means in English: "The Love Letter."

Look at the painting. Do you think the lady is rich or poor? (*Rich.*) Why? (*Elegant clothes, fancy hair, rich furnishings, pampered dog.*) (*Show Elements of Composition poster.*) Remember the elements of composition? Which of these do you notice in the painting? (*Answers may vary, but make sure someone mentions light and shadow.*) What do you think about the light in this painting? Is it cold and gray or warm and sunny? (*Warm.*) Look at the shadows in the painting. Are they scary and deep and dark or do they have a warm look to them? (*Warm look.*) Why do the shadows look warm instead of dreary or scary? (*Fragonard used brown instead of black or gray. Brown is a warm color.*)

ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY: Jean Honore Fragonard

Now let's talk a little about Fragonard's life. He was born in Grasse, in an area of southeastern France that was known for its lovely countryside. His friends called him by his nickname "Frago" and that is how he often signed his paintings when he was older. He began to study painting when he was only 10 years old. He was known as a happy and cheerful person, not angry and rebellious, but nevertheless he liked to do things his own way instead of the way everybody else did things.

Frago won the prestigious Prix de Rome (*Pree de Rome*) from the Art Academy which paid for a trip for him to study in Italy in 1752. So how old was he in when he won the Prix de Rome? (*20 years old.*) Instead of taking his studies seriously, he loved to wander around with his friends looking at the ruins of the city and the pretty girls.

When Frago returned to Paris after his studies, he painted historical subjects but soon abandoned this style and moved onto more profitable subjects for which he became known—landscape, portraiture, and love, like the

painting, (Show “*The Swing*” painting.) “The Swing.”

Painting for Fragonard was incredibly easy, and he was a natural improviser. He used to brag that many of his paintings were painted in less than an hour with loose, rapid brushstrokes. His paintings are full of light, and after he married in 1769 to Anne Marie Gerard and had two children, it brought about a change to his style and he painted more children and family scenes, like in this painting, (Show “*A Young Girl Reading*” painting) “A Young Girl Reading.” Before that he mostly painted young couples such as in (Point to “*The Swing*” painting.) “The Swing.” Many people have said that Fragonard created a world where no one grows old or sick, and nature is never gloomy or ugly.

During The French Revolution, Frago’s unique style went out of fashion in France and he was forced to flee from Paris. This period marked the beginning of the end for this painter of the rich. After the Revolution ended, he returned to France but never painted again. Finally he was kicked out of the apartment that the Art Academy had let him use, and he died a year later, at the age of... (let the students calculate age: 74 years old), poor and forgotten.

Do you remember the style of painting called “Impressionism”? A few lessons ago we talked about Van Gogh and he painted in this style. He was trying to capture a feeling about something. Even though Fragonard painted 100 years before the Impressionists, his painting have many of the same characteristics – quick, visible brush strokes, subtle use of light, and lots of color.