



Jean Honoré Fragonard (Grasse 1732-1806 Paris),

The Bolt,

around 1769-1770,

Brush and oil, graphite on laid paper, prepared and mounted on cardboard; traced with a compass, 8.5 x 11.3 cm

Apocryphal inscription, at lower left: "Lawrence coll."

Provenance:

Lawrence Guérin Collection (possibly Joseph Laurent Guérin de Tencin),¹ Paris. His sale, Paris, Hôtel des Ventes Mobilières, 16 rue des Jeuneurs, *Rare et précieuse collection d'objets d'art, curiosités, tableaux et miniatures provenant du cabinet d'un de nos amateurs les plus distingués* [Collection Lawrence Guérin], Me Ridet assisté des experts Simonet et Manheim, April 14–17, 1845, lot no. 321.

Clermont-Tonnerre collection (according to exh. cat. Bern, 1954).

Private collection.

Exhibition:

Fragonard (exh. cat. Bern, June 13 – August 29, 1954), Bern, Rösch, Vogt and Co., 1954, no. 103: "Le Verrou. Sketch for the painting, known through the engraving by Blot. [Esquisse pour le

¹ The art historian Maxime-Georges Métraux and the genealogist Xavier Robert-Mondin have suggested that Lawrence Guérin may have been the pseudonym used in the 1845 sale, as the address provided corresponds to 342 Rue Saint-Honoré in Paris, the residence of Dr. Laurent Guérin de Tencin. The list of archival documents and newspaper articles they consulted was shared with me in December 2024, for which I express my sincere gratitude.

tableau, connue par la gravure de Blot.] Oil and gouache on paper mounted on cardboard, H. 0.111; W 0.082”.

Bibliography:

Alexandre Ananoff, *L'Œuvre dessinée de Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806), catalogue raisonné*, Paris, F. de Nobele, 1970, tome IV, n° 2006, p. 45 : « Le Verrou. H. 0 m 111 - L. 0 m 082. Huile et gouache marouflé sur carton. ».

Isabelle Compin and Pierre Rosenberg, "Quatre nouveaux Fragonard au Louvre," *La Revue du Louvre*, 1974, 4-5, note 50, p. 272 (anonymous after Fragonard), *Fragonard*, ed. Pierre Rosenberg (exh. cat., Paris, Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, September 24, 1987 – January 4, 1988; New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, February 2 – May 8, 1988), Paris, RMN, 1987, p. 481.

“An interior setting featuring a young man and woman, the former locking the door bolt, while the latter attempts to prevent him. The scene unfolds near a disheveled bed, suggesting the broader context of the subject.”² *The Bolt* was described thus in the 1785 sale catalogue of the Marquis de Véri, accompanied by its pendant, *The Adoration of the Shepherds (ill. 1 and 2)*.³ *The Adoration* was donated to the Louvre Museum in 1988, joining *The Bolt*, which had been in the collection for fourteen years. Oscillating between an icon of French painting and an archetypal image of desire, *The Bolt* has generated extensive discourse⁴ on libertine iconography, corporeal dynamics, and the interplay of love and force. Embracing its ambiguity, even its inherent tension, the painting was central to the 2015 exhibition *Fragonard Amoureux, Galant et Libertin*, curated by Guillaume Faroult. The accompanying catalogue contextualized 18th century gender dynamics, recalling how “Jean-Jacques Rousseau and contemporary medical treatises argued that female resistance was a necessary illusion designed to stimulate male desire.”⁵ Beyond the themes of love, sexuality, and consent debated by art historians such as Mary Sheriff,⁶ only a small number of scholars, such as Isabelle Compin and Pierre Rosenberg (1974) and later Guillaume Faroult (2008), have examined *The Bolt* through its creative process,⁷ by connecting it to a drawings by Fragonard, dated around 1769-

² “A Painting of the same merit as the previous one, and of an entirely opposite subject; it is known and engraved under the title *Le Verrou*: it depicts an interior where a young man and a young woman are present, with the former locking the door, while the latter attempts to prevent him. The scene takes place near a bed, the disarray of which indicates the remainder of the subject. Nothing is more ingenious and cheerful than this Painting, and nothing more satisfying than the way it is rendered; this skilled Artist has placed the group of two figures under the primary light effect, in attitudes that are both graceful and provocative, making it impossible to miss the intention: all parts of the composition are equally finished and full of warmth, even in the most meticulous execution; there must be very few people whom such Paintings do not seduce, and who do not form a high opinion of the progress of our School. On canvas, Height 27 inches, Width 34 inches.” Description from the posthumous sale of the collection of Marquis Louis-Gabriel de Véri, December 12, 1785, lot 37.

³ See the detailed and earlier bibliography in *Fragonard amoureux, galant et libertin*, ed. Guillaume Faroult et al. (exh. cat., Paris, Musée du Luxembourg, September 16, 2015 – January 24, 2016), Paris, RMN, 2015, cat. 72

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 210

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 164 and 254.

⁶ See the essay by Mary D. Sheriff, “Aux prises avec le désir,” in *Fragonard amoureux, galant et libertin, op. cit.*, pp. 41-46.

⁷ Guillaume Faroult, *Le Verrou. Jean Honoré Fragonard*, Paris, musée du Louvre/RMN, 2007.

1770 that appeared in the Varanchon sale and was last traced in the Rothschild Collection (ill. 3).⁸ Additionally, a painted sketch now in the Louvre Abu Dhabi (ill. 4) and several prints after the painting⁹ contribute to its history. Despite these studies, the small version of *The Bolt* discussed here fills a crucial gap in understanding the development of this celebrated composition.



ill. 1: Jean Honoré Fragonard, *The Bolt*, around 1777, oil on canvas, 73 x 93 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre.



ill. 2: Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, around 1777, Oil on Canvas, 73 x 93 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

⁸ Skilful pastiches of works by Fragonard were made during his lifetime. On 7 July 1789, he wrote a certificate guaranteeing the authenticity of this drawing on the verso (as he did for its pendant *L'Armoire*). The connoisseur who had acquired it at the Varanchon de Saint Geniès sale on 29-31 December 1777 (no. 61). For more about this, see Pierre Rosenberg, *Du dessin au tableau: Poussin, Watteau, Fragonard, David & Ingres*, Paris, Gallimard, 2001, pp. 130-131, nos. 165 and 166 (repr.); Phippe Alasseur, "Varanchon, collectionneur d'art au XVIIIe siècle: tentative d'identification. Sa vente du 29 au 31 décembre 1777", *Les Cahiers d'histoire de l'art*, no. 10, 2012, p. 110.

⁹ They have all been analyzed and published by Isabelle Compin and Pierre Rosenberg, Jean-Pierre Cuzin, and Guillaume Faroult.



ill. 3: Jean Honoré Fragonard, *The Bolt*, around 1765-1769, red chalk, pen and brown ink, brown wash on laid paper, 240 x 365 mm, private collection.



ill. 4: Jean Honoré Fragonard, *The Bolt*, around 1774-1778, oil on panel, 26 x 32 cm, Abu Dhabi, Le Louvre Abu Dhabi.

Little known to both the public and specialists, this small painting of *The Bolt* is a composition contained within a circle, interrupted by the edges of the cardboard, giving it the appearance of an oval. It was exhibited in Bern in 1954 and later mentioned by Pierre Rosenberg in 1974 and 1987 among works related to the large *Bolt* (74 x 94 cm).¹⁰ Its reappearance raises numerous questions. How was this composition created? What are its links to the Louvre's painting *The Bolt*? In what way is its material unique? When was it created? What does this *Bolt* encircled in a circle reveal

¹⁰ See the bibliographical references in the introduction to this study, including the citation from the 1974 article: “[...] another, more interesting, in the sense of the original, set within an oval (possibly a miniature design?), paper on cardboard, 11 x 8 cm, formerly Clermont-Tonnerre collection, shown at the Fragonard exhibition in Bern in 1954, no. 103, and of which the Courtauld Institute has a photograph (Gernsheim 14615).”

about Fragonard's creative process? And what is its place within the master's corpus? The work has been so rarely discussed that it is necessary to present aspects of this work, even if it requires more time than Fragonard himself spent on its creation.

A study of the *Oval Bolt* is an opportunity to recall the issues relating to the subject chosen by Fragonard and, above all, to suggest a chronology of the drawn and painted versions of this famous composition. Drawings experts such as Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey, Perrin Stein, and Eunice Williams¹¹ have provided valuable insights into the slow development of Fragonard's compositions. For *The Bolt*, this process is marked by bursts of intense activity in drawing ideas that were reworked, repeated, transposed into painting, abandoned, and then reactivated over a period of about twenty years. The small *Bolt* alone brings us into the intimacy of Fragonard's studio, where he constantly merged his work as a painter and a draftsman. The material analysis of the small *Bolt* allows for a better understanding of the technical and stylistic characteristics of this unique work, which is both a variation of a drawing and a model for the reworking of a painting that ranks amongst the most ambiguous images in 18th century French painting.

The *Oval Bolt*, Drawing within a Painting.

The qualities of the *Oval Bolt* are numerous, starting with its excellent condition, facilitating its material analysis. This analysis started with an examination of the support and of the techniques and tools used by Fragonard. For this, the Hubert Duchemin Gallery and I worked with Ilenia Cassan and Estelle Itié from Art In Lab, a laboratory specializing in technical analysis and multispectral imaging in art.¹² This collaboration allowed us to move beyond a traditional visual examination, which is always indispensable, by studying the work in greater detail through technical engineering.¹³

The oval *Bolt* is painted in oil with a brush over a quick graphite preparatory sketch on laid paper, which is then mounted onto thick card in a landscape format. The dimensions, 8 centimeters high and 11 centimeters wide; forced Fragonard to confine his composition within a circle drawn with a compass, although the upper and lower contours remain incomplete. The narrowness of the format and Fragonard's customary haste probably caused him to rework his circle with a compass, as shown by the marks going beyond the border at the bottom of the card support.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the artist established the definitive center of his composition by positioning the point of a compass at the woman's waist, precisely beneath her left arm (ill. 5). This initial sketch not only served to stabilize the future composition but also provides insight into Fragonard's working methods, as the paper was prepared with a cream-white layer before being laid down onto the cardboard.¹⁵

¹¹ See their contributions and catalogue entries in *Fragonard, Drawing Triumphant*, ed. Perrin Stein (exh. cat., New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 6, 2016 – January 8, 2017), New Haven, Yale University Press/The MET, 2016.

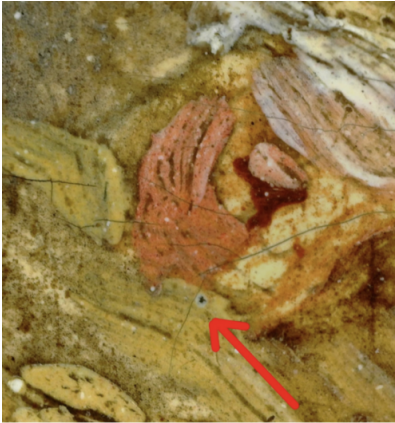
¹² See their contributions and catalogue entries in *Fragonard, Drawing Triumphant*, ed. Perrin Stein (exh. cat., New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 6, 2016 – January 8, 2017), New Haven, Yale University Press/The MET, 2016.

¹³ Their examination included infrared reflectography, digital microscopy, and photography in raking light.

¹⁴ "Overflowing lines are visible in the lower part," p. 2 of the report prepared by Art in Lab.

¹⁵ This cream-colored layer on the edges proves that the paper was prepared before being mounted.

Recent research on the sourcing of supports and materials suggests that Fragonard likely purchased a ready-made support from an unknown dealer, rather than preparing it himself.¹⁶



ill. 5: *The Oval Bolt*, detail with the compass hole at the center.

Within the circular composition, Fragonard deftly employed a mechanical pencil fitted with a stick of graphite. Delicate gray lines are discernible to the naked eye, particularly around the man's head and the feet of both figures, while others emerge under infrared reflectography (ill. 6).¹⁷ The fluid, looping strokes, some drawn without lifting the instrument, confirm the artist's remarkable spontaneity of thought and execution (ill. 7). The rendering of the man's head exemplifies Fragonard's distinctive skill in drawing, characterized by a line is retraced multiple times,¹⁸ imbuing the form with vitality and depth. The artist has lingered over the man's legs and pelvis, while defining the female figure with an undulating line that accentuates the backward tilt of her neck and head. He swiftly described the contours of the bed, the stool, and the door. While these elements correspond to Louvre's version of *The Bolt*, others, more elusive due to the small scale, diverge such as the outline of a rectangular form suggesting a painting, left incomplete in the subsequent reworking with oil. In the lower section of the composition, two rounded strokes evoke the presence of an object that we identify as the overturned chair of the Louvre composition. Among Fragonard's preferred working methods, the preparatory graphite sketch emerges as a favorite, serving both as a means to swiftly commit his ideas to paper and to anticipate the fluid gestures of a paint-laden brush.

¹⁶ Two hypotheses can be considered: either the paper was prepared by Fragonard himself, or it was prepared by a supplier. It would be necessary to compare the materials of Fragonard's work in oil on mounted paper to understand his choices.

¹⁷ This technique allows for the presence of carbon to be detected, but the photographic image must be treated with caution, as the material can be obscured by the reflective nature of white-colored substances. Worse, the lines can be confused with the texture of the paper (relief, chain lines, and laid lines), which we were able to rule out by comparing the infrared reflectography with photographs taken in raking light and microscope imaging conducted by Art in Lab.

¹⁸ We will dwell on this technique further below. However, for comparison, we refer to the sketch showing the Fantasy Figures (ill. 9) and the small sketches in the Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie de Besançon (reproduced in Claudine Lebrun-Jouve and Pierre Rosenberg, *Les Fragonard de Besançon*, Milan, 5 Continents Éditions, 2006, cat. 62 and 62bis).



iii. 6: *The Oval Bolt*, infrared reflectography.



iii. 7: *The Oval Bolt*, infrared reflectography, detail.

For the execution of the paint layer, Fragonard has remained true to his usual practice, freely reinterpreting his initial sketch. With a remarkably fine and pointed brush, he has refined the graphite contours with astonishing speed and assurance of hand. His process starts by working with a fluid, ochre-toned medium used to establish the couple's posture, delineate the curtain, which is expanded, and the bed before adding the shadows. Then he used a black pigment that was less fluid to render the artificial shadow cast above the woman and the more natural shading defining the man's side. The man's hair is painted with a lighter material, illustrating Fragonard's curiosity for experimentation with materials. Darker, earthy tones mark the floor and the legs of a folding stool, the seat of which is suggested with a single stroke of Prussian blue. In the foreground, Fragonard has placed an object on the floor, which, through comparison with *The Bolt* in the Louvre, can be identified as a fan. Beyond the composition's edges, the artist has tested colors,

such as the daub of red in the upper left corner of the support. More regularly, he has wiped his brush before continuing to work the surface, adding light brown, red, and pink impasto, reinforcing the contours of shapes, defining the eyes and mouths of the figures, as well as the man's upturned heels and the fingers reaching for the bolt. The same tones are applied with a broader brush to indicate the bed's curtain. He then introduced flickers of Naples yellow on the woman's dress, zigzagging across the bed before cascading into disorderly folds at her waist. Around her arm, the pigment coils into voluminous strokes, evoking rolled-up sleeves. Gray touches conjure the crumpled creases of the man's breeches, while defining the woman's unbalanced legs, her sharply projecting knee echoed in the bed's angular contour. These are the celebrated "ricochets of reflections, shifting half-tones of infinite complexity and richness"¹⁹ described by Jean-Pierre Cuzin. Finally, a brush laden with lead white has unified the figures, swiftly skimming the man's torso to convey the looseness of his open shirt, and, with equal energy, capturing the disheveled state of the pillow. Swept up in his momentum, Fragonard has added a striking comma of white on the woman's forehead, catching the light and exquisitely rendering her futile resistance against the man's determination. In his analysis of the *Fantasy Figures*, Jean-Pierre Cuzin rightly observed that "Fragonard's impulsivity is only apparent, his fury well calculated."²⁰ This same explosive orchestration of color, cast with fervor-if not outright abandon-is powerfully at play in our painting of the *Bolt*.

The profound complexity of the oval *Bolt* lies in the contrast between its small size and the richness of its execution, its underlying intentions, and the evolving functions Fragonard assigned to it over time. Ontologically, its paper support and graphite under drawing define it as a drawing, yet the oil paint that overlays it firmly situates it within the realm of painting. Should one approach take precedence over the other? Given Fragonard's constant defiance of artistic categories, it seems more fitting to regard the work as both drawing and painting, inextricably fused. The graphite sketch fulfills a preparatory role in the most traditional method, mapping out the composition's essential structure. Yet it also anticipates the artist's future gestures, executed in paint with extraordinary swiftness and precision on a reduced scale. Fragonard was likely conscious of this, perhaps more instinctively than deliberately,²¹ as he sketched the figures' heads and legs, the cushion, and the bed's angle in a matter of minutes, his graphite stick looping in broad, uninterrupted sweeps. The paper support, in turn, allows the brush to glide effortlessly across the surface. More than a mere application of color that elucidates the work's narrative, the textured impasto conveys the charged emotions of the figures and the disorder permeating the scene.

¹⁹ Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard. Vie et œuvre*, Paris, Vilo, 1987, p. 118.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²¹ We align with Jean-Pierre Cuzin regarding the notion of a "well-calculated fury." Through relentless work and experimentation, Fragonard masters his gesture, his impastoed touch, and the clearly visible scumbling, which ultimately become his signature. See Charlotte Guichard, *La Griffes du peintre. La valeur de l'art (1730-1820)*, Paris, Seuil, 2018, p. 140.

Around 1770: The Freedom to Invent

To understand the role of the oval *Bolt* within Fragonard's œuvre, it is essential to discuss hypotheses regarding its dating. Jean-Pierre Cuzin has already noted that the drawings related to the theme of the *Bolt* were conceived independently, only to be reformulated much later for the painting commissioned by the Marquis de Véri.²² The underlying drawing of the oval *Bolt* provides an initial indication, as its swirling execution is close to Fragonard's graphic style in the late 1760s and early 1770s. A comparison with the artist's depictions of women's bedrooms such as *Le Lever*, *Les Pétards*, and *Les Jets d'eau* (ill. 8),²³ reveals a shared dynamism in the handling of line, used to capture the tactile qualities of fabric and flesh alike. Executed around 1763–1765, these drawings depict lavishly decorated interiors animated by undressed women, framed by canopy beds with parted curtains draped over thick mattresses, ruffled sheets, and plush cushions. The interplay of folds is central to these compositions, as it heightens the disorder of the furnishings while accentuating the sensual display of the female form. In these works, Fragonard already exploits the visual echoes between the billowing textiles and the soft, voluptuous bodies of the figures, laying the groundwork for subtly anthropomorphizing accessories suggested in the oval *Bolt* and fully realized in the Louvre's *Bolt*.²⁴ The material experimentation initiated in these licentious bedroom scenes suggests narrowing the dating of the Christie's drawing of *The Bolt*, placing it somewhat later, after 1765 (ill. 3),²⁵ a hypothesis reinforced by the remarkably fluid handling of the red chalk in the sheet's draftsmanship. It appears that Fragonard sought to reinterpret this drawing as a variation, ultimately giving rise to the oval *Bolt*. I propose dating this work to around 1769–1770, as its technique, vitality, and subject correspond to a pivotal moment of artistic experimentation in Fragonard's career.



ill. 8: Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Les Pétards*,

²² Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard. Vie et œuvre, op. cit.*, p. 179.

²³ Respectively housed in Washington, The National Gallery of Art, inv. 1963.15.10; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. 44.815; Williamstown, The Clark Art Institute, inv. 1955.1967. See the commentary by Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey in *Fragonard amoureux, galant et libertin, op. cit.*, cat. 46, 48, and 49.

²⁴ Daniel Arasse identified corporeal and sexual allusions in the Louvre painting, such as the folds of the curtain on the left evoking the male sex organ, the parted folds in the background suggesting the female one, the upturned corners of the pillow resembling a female breast, and the angle of the bed resembling a bent knee covered by a white sheet. See Daniel Arasse, *Histoires de peintures*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, p. 318.

²⁵ Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey dates the execution of the Christie's *Lock* to around 1765–1769. See Fragonard, *Drawing Triumphant, op. cit.*, p. 25. Notably, the Christie's drawing shares the same paper format, measuring approximately 24 centimeters in height by 36 centimeters in width. However, it remains uncertain whether both works were executed on paper produced by D&C Blauw, a support frequently used by Fragonard and his colleague Hubert Robert.

around 1763-1765, black chalk and brown wash on laid paper 262 x 380 mm,
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts

The graphite under drawing of the oval *Bolt*, characterized by its reworked lines, inevitably invites comparison with the sheet of sketched portraits from the *Fantasy Figures*, identified by Hubert Duchemin and published by Carole Blumenfeld in 2013 (ill. 9).²⁶ In her study, Blumenfeld highlights the “remarkable economy of means”²⁷ with which Fragonard conjured his figures. It is precisely this elliptical, reworked line, which forms heads akin to sculpted stone blocks, that recurs both in the sheet at the Musée du Grand Siècle and in the oval *Bolt*. This fluid, looping stroke moves swiftly and revisits itself, eschewing the broken or jagged lines that Fragonard would later adopt.²⁸ Dated to 1769-1770, the Musée du Grand Siècle sheet provides a chronological marker that encourages a connection with the small-scale drawings inspired by *La Reine Golconde*, a novel published in 1761 by the Chevalier de Boufflers.²⁹ According to Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey, these scenes were created around 1770–1775,³⁰ although a more precise dating between 1773, the year of Fragonard’s travels to the Netherlands, Italy, and Germany, and the autumn of 1774, may also be considered.³¹ Regardless, the lightness and fluidity of line, as well as certain striking details, emphasize clear affinities, most notably the elongated body and outstretched feet of the man locking the bolt, closely mirroring the figure escaping through a bedroom window (ill. 10). Finally, the graphite sketch, which was not strictly followed in the subsequent painted rendition, reveals Fragonard’s persistent pursuit of movement, which is present in the oval *Bolt*, but is expressed with greater freedom in the *Reine Golconde* series. This distinction could suggest the chronological precedence of the oval *Bolt* over these later drawings.

²⁶ Carole Blumenfeld, *Une facétie de Fragonard. Les révélations d’un dessin retrouvé*, Paris, Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2013.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁸ With the exception of the series after *Ariosto*, Fragonard adjusted his technique based on expressiveness, adapting his style to suit the narrative he was depicting.

²⁹ They measure approximately 22 centimeters in height by 16 centimeters in width. See the commentary and illustrations in *Fragonard, Drawing Triumphant*, op. cit., cat. 87–89.

³⁰ Based on a discussion with Bill Pallot regarding the style of the furniture. See Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey, *Fragonard, Drawing Triumphant*, op. cit., p. 251.

³¹ Indeed, one might wonder if Fragonard interrupted the series due to his travels.



iii. 9: Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Portrait Sketches*, around 1769-1770, pen and brown ink, black chalk on laid paper, 235 x 350 mm, Saint-Cloud, Musée du Grand Siècle, collection Pierre Rosenberg.



iii. 10: Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Saint Pharo escaping through the window of Aline's room*, from 1770-1775, pen and brown ink, black chalk on laid paper, 225 x 168 mm, Private Collection.

While comparison of the graphite sketch suggests a date around 1769–1770, determining the execution date of the elements in oil proves more complex, given the scarcity of works in oil on paper mounted on canvas within Fragonard's oeuvre. However, the luminous quality of the composition rendered in unmodulated, warm hues ranging from beige to golden yellow and red unmistakably evokes both the technique and palette of the *Fantasy Figures*. Despite undeniable differences in format, Fragonard has employed the same short brushstrokes with impasto,

particularly evident in the folds of garments and the ruffled white collars present in works such as the presumed *Portrait of Louis-François Prault*³² and the *Portrait of the duc de Beauvron* (ill. 11). In these effigies, as well as in the *Portrait of the Comtesse de Grave* from the same gallery of characters,³³ the sitters' foreheads are illuminated by thick, bright strokes that catch the light, just like the woman in the oval *Bolt*. Immediately following the experiments of the Fantasy Figures, Fragonard lengthened his brushstrokes and, for several years, adopted a denser, equally dynamic, but even more voluptuous manner. This stylistic shift, combined with the earlier hypotheses, reinforces the proposal that the oval *Bolt* was made around 1769–1770. This small painting aligns with Fragonard's series of amorous subjects of compositions tightly focused on figures, which he developed from 1770 onward. It thus finds kinship with works such as *La Jeune Fille aux petits chiens* (ill. 12)³⁴ and *Deux jeunes filles sur un lit jouant avec deux chiens* (ill. 13), where a heavy curtain theatrically unveils the scene.



ill. 11: Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Portrait of the Duc de Beauvron*, around 1769-1770, oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

³² Oil on canvas, 80 x 64 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. M.I. 1060. See the commentary on this work in *Fragonard amoureux, galant et libertin*, op. cit., cat. 63.

³³ Oil on canvas, 82 x 65 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. RF 1974-1.

³⁴ The two works, in private collections, are reproduced in *Fragonard amoureux, galant et libertin*, op. cit., cat. 56–57.



ill. 12: Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Young Girl with Small Dogs*, around 1770, oil on canvas, 61 x 50 cm, Jeff Koons collection.



ill. 13: Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Two Girls on a Bed Playing their Dogs or Le lever*, around 1770, Oil on Canvas, 74 x 59 cm, Lynda and Stewart Resnick Collection.

Pierre-Antoine Baudouin: Inspiration, Emulation, and Surpassing

One of the singularities of the oval *Bolt* lies in the use of a thin brush to apply the paint, akin to the technique of a miniaturist or a gouache painter. During the 1760s, Fragonard was closely associated with Pierre-Antoine Baudouin (1723–1769), an illustrator, miniaturist, and above all, an audacious gouache artist whose libertine images were exhibited at the Salon. Guillaume Faroult has demonstrated how the bond between the two artists, initially forged through their shared master, François Boucher (1703–1770), evolved into a genuine friendship when they worked in the same studio from 1765 to 1769.³⁵ During these four years, Fragonard and Baudouin engaged in a stimulating artistic dialogue, drawing inspiration from La Fontaine's writings and the libertine

³⁵ See Guillaume Faroult, "Fragonard et Baudouin, l'école du libertinage," in *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.

literary world shaped by Claude Crébillon, Jacques Rochette de La Morlière, and Claude Godard d'Aucour.³⁶

Baudouin and Fragonard engaged in dialogue through their compositions, although each employed distinct techniques. For instance, *La Résistance inutile*, executed in oil by Fragonard, responds to *L'Épouse indiscrète*, painted in gouache by Baudouin and exhibited at the Salon of 1767 (ill. 14). Their exchange continued in the realm of oil painting, particularly in their playful explorations of the intimate relationship between an artist and his model, a highly reflexive theme. Thus, Baudouin's *Le Modèle honnête*, presented at the Salon of 1769, finds its counterpart in Fragonard's *Les Débuts du modèle honnête* (ill. 15),³⁷ a painting that Guillaume Faroult dates around 1770, shortly after Baudouin's untimely death in December 1769. He argues that "the tribute to the deceased is manifest"³⁸ in this painting, which other commentators have linked to the tradition of book illustration³⁹ due to its light-hearted subject and oval format reminiscent of engraved vignettes.

A comparison between *Les Débuts du modèle honnête* and the oval *Bolt* reveals striking similarities: the subtly suggested erotic subject, the oval composition structured by the diagonal positioning of the men's arms, the depiction of an interior enclosed by a cream-colored wall or drapery, the presence of a plush chair or bed where folds of yellow fabric accumulate, and a palette dominated by warm tones—beige, yellow, and red in the *Bolt*; pinks in *Les Débuts du modèle honnête*. In both works, Fragonard distills the scene to its essential elements, stripping away extraneous details to focus on objects and colors integral to the action. However, the narrow format of *The Bolt* imposes certain constraints: it does not allow Fragonard to use the fluid, undulating brushwork characteristic of his larger compositions, nor for the subtle modulations of color. Instead, it forces him to be efficient in rendering shadows, which are strikingly contrasted.



ill. 14: Pierre-Antoine Baudouin, *L'Épouse indiscrète*, about 1767-1769, gouache on laid paper, 300 x 270 mm, Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 26-27. Regarding the inspiration of La Fontaine's *Contes and Fables* in the paintings of Fragonard and Baudouin, see in this same work, Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey, pp. 100-116, and Guillaume Faroult, pp. 136, 138, and 142.

³⁷ See Guillaume Faroult, *Fragonard amoureux, galant et libertin*, op. cit., cat. 40-41.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 142.

³⁹ In particular, Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey in *Fragonard amoureux, galant et libertin*, op. cit., cat. 24.



ill. 15: Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Les Débuts du modèle honnête*, about 1770, oil on canvas, 52 x 64 cm, Paris, musée Jacquemart-André.

In the same way as *Les Débuts du modèle honnête* (**ill. 15**), Baudouin's influence is unmistakable in the oval *Bolt*. While it is evident in the choice of libertine subject matter, it also encouraged Fragonard to explore new themes and avenues, particularly the sensory potential of the oval format. Even if this form is incidental as the circular composition is interrupted by the edges of the cardboard, it nevertheless compelled the artist to engage with the compositional constraints of the oval shape. Combined with the work's intimate scale, this format evokes a range of voyeuristic imagery. In Baudouin's compositions, the voyeur is concealed in the foreground's shadow, whereas in Fragonard's *The Bolt*, the viewer assumes this role, observing the scene as if peering through a keyhole. The connection to Baudouin is further evident in Fragonard's appropriation of the tools of the gouache artist: thin brush and a paper support, which the miniaturist used to develop a graphic, animated touch highly praised by his contemporaries (**ill. 14**). From a technical point of view, what distinguishes gouache from oil painting is its higher proportion of pigments with gum Arabic binding. In the oval *Bolt*, Fragonard acts as both a painter and draftsman, and almost as a gouache artist. Like Baudouin, he has applied short, brisk strokes to render the disorder of crumpled garments and the disheveled bed, striving to limit his physical engagement to the movement of his fingers, despite his usual preference for sweeping, gestural brushwork. This artistic performance, almost playful in nature, confirms a mature engagement with Baudouin's practice, whether as a direct influence or as a homage, reinforcing the proposed dating of the oval *Bolt* to around 1769-1770.

Moreover, as Jean-Pierre Cuzin, who has extensively analyzed Fragonard's relationship with the masters, has argued, the artist works "within a 'modernism' without rupture, drawing conclusions from and capitalizing on the achievements of his peers."⁴⁰ This approach, combined with his desire to use painting as a language, enabled him to push the boundaries of artistic conventions and categorizations.

The small format of this *Bolt*, combined with its pared-down composition, expressive brushwork, and restrained color palette, minimizes the anecdotal nature of the scene in favor of its evocative

⁴⁰ Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard* (exh. cat., Paris, Musée du Louvre, 3 December 2003–8 March 2004), Paris, Musée du Louvre/Milan, 5 Continents, 2003, p. 13.

power. By favoring an allusive rather than a descriptive approach, Fragonard embraces the aesthetic of the sketch. This quality, which readily stimulates the imagination,⁴¹ invites an exploration of desire and fantasy, leaving the viewer to complete what the artist merely suggests. The viewer thus becomes a paradoxical voyeur, where the contemplation of the depicted scene intertwines with the visualization of their own desires. More than that, they become an accomplice in Fragonard's subtly orchestrated game, in which the fervor of the artist's creative impulse translates the ardent longing of the characters and ignites the imagination of the spectator.

Themes and variations, Plural Bolts

The oval *Bolt* has yet to unveil all its mysteries. The reverse of the card, covered in accounting notes, confirms its prolonged presence in the artist's studio (**ill. 16**). This suggests that Fragonard assigned multiple functions to the piece that evolved in response to his projects, commissions, and, above all, his recurring need to revisit this composition.



ill. 16: Jean Honoré Fragonard, the oval *Bolt* (reverse of our work).

Long overlooked by art historians, the oval *Bolt* has elicited few comments beyond the mere acknowledgment of its existence.⁴² Based on the stylistic and artistic criteria previously discussed, we propose a dating around 1769–1770. This places its execution between the red chalk and wash drawings dated circa 1765–1769 and the oil sketch on panel now in the Louvre Abu Dhabi (**ill. 4**), followed by the *Bolt* in the Louvre (**ill. 1**), executed between 1774 and 1778 for the former and around 1777–1778 for the latter. The extended gestation period of the Louvre *Bolt* which spans over a decade, is not uncommon in Fragonard's œuvre, as numerous scholars have observed.⁴³ It reflects his tendency to continuously refine and rework his compositions, persistently testing new gestures and developing his style. This acute sense of self-revision stands in contrast to the replicas or copies he frequently produced at the request of his patrons, which engaged his imagination to a

⁴¹ Voyeurism in libertine novels and their related iconography has been extensively discussed. See notably Michel Delon, *Le XVIII^e siècle libertin: de Marivaux à Sade*, Paris, Citadelles & Mazenod, 2021.

⁴² See the bibliographic and exhibition references at the beginning of the commentary.

⁴³ For example, Pierre Rosenberg demonstrated this by systematically mentioning works related to a painting in *Fragonard*, Pierre Rosenberg, ed. (exh. cat. Paris, Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, 24 September 1987–4 January 1988; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2 February–8 May 1988), Paris, RMN, 1987; as well as Jean-Pierre Cuzin regarding the Verrou in *Fragonard. Vie et œuvre*, *op. cit.*, p. 179, and Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey on creative processes in *Fragonard, Drawing Triumphant*, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–45.

lesser degree. Among the drawn variations of the *Bolt*,⁴⁴ a sheet auctioned at Christie's in 2022 is well documented (ill. 3), while others are known only through black-and-white photographs. Without recent firsthand examination, it remains difficult to ascertain their authenticity, analyze their materials,⁴⁵ or determine their relationship to the Christie's *Bolt*. However, one of these versions likely served as the basis for the small painted panel executed by Fragonard a few years later. The transition from a rectangular to a circular composition, necessitating a corresponding reduction in scale, compelled the artist to significantly rework the scene, drawing inspiration from the domestic and erotic universe of Baudouin (ill. 14).

The oval *Bolt* thus fulfills an initial function: it is a variation based on a drawing. The interrupted circle created by the edges of the support suggests that the work was not intended to be a miniature. Instead, the oval *Bolt*, produced with inexpensive materials and executed swiftly, can be seen as a pure exercise in virtuosity, conceived during the development of the Fantasy Figures. The choice of paper mounted on cardboard underscores Fragonard's intention to work on a surface that could withstand the application of paint. On this small panel, Fragonard playfully engages in a technical duel with his friend Baudouin, stripping the narrative to its essence and paring down his palette to the bare minimum. He appears to seek the very quintessence of expressive brushwork, heightened to its peak by the constraints of the small format. From an art historical perspective, it is tempting to interpret this circular *Bolt* as a kind of matrix, a mold containing a form ready for replication. Indeed, nearly eight years after its creation, The oval *Bolt*, which remained in Fragonard's studio (as attested by the financial notations on its verso), assumed a second function: it became the starting point for a new composition and served as a preparatory model for the Louvre's version of the *Bolt*.

The sketch on wood (ill. 4) represents a pivotal step in the fusing of the composition of the Rothschild drawing (ill. 3) with that of the oval *Bolt*. Fragonard has retained from the drawing the landscape format and closely matching dimensions allowing him to repeat the essential layout of the scene, by preserving the motif of the table draped in white fabric and the overturned chair. However, he has simplified the details in favor of the refined composition explored in the oval *Bolt*, maintaining the room's austerity, the harmonious color palette, and the striking contrast between light and shadow. With the study on wood panel, Fragonard enhanced the sexual metaphor of the bed, the curtains, and the cushion, thereby intensifying the erotic charge of the large canvas commissioned by the Marquis de Véri, in counterpoint to the *Adoration of the Shepherds* (ill. 2).⁴⁶ Guillaume Faroult has extensively commented on this unusual pairing of a religious scene with a licentious subject, reflecting the inclinations of the Marquis de Véri, a major collector of contemporary works and a free-thinker.⁴⁷

As early as 1784, the Marquis de Véri's painting enjoyed widespread dissemination through an engraving by Maurice Blot, which was announced in the *Journal de Paris*, *La Gazette de France*, and

⁴⁴ They are described and sometimes reproduced in *Fragonard*, Pierre Rosenberg, ed. *op. cit.*, under cat. 236, pp. 481-482. Among these drawings, the one featured in the Varanchan de Saint-Geniès sale in 1777 was last located in the collection of Edmond de Rothschild.

⁴⁵ Did Fragonard use red chalk as he did for the drawing sold by Christie's?

⁴⁶ Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. RF 1988 11. See Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard. Vie et œuvre*, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-179, fig. 215, n° 300, ill.; *Fragonard*, Pierre Rosenberg, ed. *op. cit.*, n° 234, repr. and *Fragonard amoureux, galant et libertin*, *op. cit.*, cat. 71, repr.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

Le Mercure de France. Laurent Guyot also created an engraving intended to be hand-colored, faithfully transposing the Louvre composition, although in reverse. Finally, A. M. de Gouy executed another engraving based on the *Bolt* in the Louvre, despite the use of a round format that evokes our version on card (ill. 17).⁴⁸



ill. 17: A. M. de Gouy after Jean Honoré Fragonard, *The Bolt*, reduced stipple engraving with color highlights added, 68mm diameter, location unknown.

The Oval *Bolt*, an object of desire

Fifty years after the Louvre painting was acquired, the oval *Bolt* emerges as a work that is both rare and unique, a true virtuoso exercise created for oneself. Its rapid execution, the theme of love, and the intertwining of painting with drawing bear Fragonard's signature. And if the artist has chosen to affirm the materiality of his art, without regard for scale, it is to develop an art that is extraordinary in its own right. Like his contemporaries, economic success was essential for Fragonard, and he thus reformulated his compositions over an extended period – more than a decade for the *Bolt*. Yet, each revisitation is profoundly self-critical. Reformulating the *Bolt* led him to push the boundaries of his own expectations, constantly re-examining his artistic practice. Ultimately, the oval *Bolt* is an object of desire: Fragonard's, as a means of fulfilling an artistic aspiration, and that of the viewer, as a matter for aesthetic enjoyment.

Sarah Catala

(Traduction : Hortense Duchemin / Jane MacAvock)

⁴⁸ According to the analyses by Art in Lab and observations under raking light, Le Verrou ovale shows no signs of tracing or transfer.

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The Oval Lock: Provenance Clarifications

Currently held in a private collection, The oval *Lock* was featured in the "Fragonard" exhibition during the summer of 1954 at the Museum of Fine Arts in Bern, where it was recorded as part of the Clermont-Tonnerre Collection¹. In 1845, the work appeared listed as lot no. 32, in a sale conducted by Ridet, at an auction held at the furniture sales hall located at 16, rue des Jeûneurs, Paris². A review of auction house records³ has determined that the owner of this small-scale painting was "Lawrence Guérin, residing in Paris, rue Saint-Honoré, no. 342⁴." The collection dispersed in this sale comprised 641 lots, including several hundred paintings, among them a canvas on the theme of *L'Amour chasseur* (lot no. 479) attributed to Fragonard, alongside works by Vernet, Oudry, Murillo, Bronzino, and Watteau. This grouping also included numerous miniatures, tobacco boxes, jewelry, stained glass, as well as decorative objects and various curiosities. Interestingly, the lot following *The Lock*, numbered 322, is described as "by the same [artist]" and as representing "the sequels and pendant" to the previous lot. This suggests the existence of additional works by Fragonard, executed in a similar format and technique, and further complements this reduced version of *The Lock*.

Thanks to research conducted by genealogist Xavier Robert-Mondin, further information has come to light regarding this enigmatic collector. Lawrence Guérin may have been a pseudonym for Laurent Joseph Guérin de Tencin (c. 1785?-1886?)⁵, known for writing *Biographie des souverains régnants de l'Europe au XIX^e siècle*⁶, published in 1845 at 342, rue Saint-Honoré⁷ — at the same address listed in the auction records. His name also appears in a roster of professors published in *The Parisian Bell or the Paris and London Advertiser* (April 15, 1849), where he is again recorded at 342, rue Saint-Honoré. Joseph Guérin de Tencin also appears to have been a recipient of the Légion d'honneur⁸ and several other medals for acts of bravery, particularly due to his role as president of the *Société des sauveteurs de France*. He passed away on April 11, 1886, in Paris, at his residence-117, rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs⁹. His estate declaration dated October 4, 1887, records that he was widowed from Sophie Éléonore Monin and later married to Louise Mougenot¹⁰.

Despite these precious pieces of information, several questions remain: how did this man come into possession of such a significant collection, including *The Lock*? Why did he choose to liquidate his holdings in 1845? What, if any, were his connections to Fragonard? Some recently uncovered archival documents raise the possibility of further discoveries regarding the path of this painting.

Maxime Georges Métraux

¹ *Fragonard* (cat. exp., Bern, Museum of Fine Arts, 13 June–29 August 1954), Bern, Rösch, Vogt and Co, 1954, no. 103: "Le Verrou. Sketch for the painting, known from Blot's engraving. Oil and gouache on paper mounted on cardboard, H. 0.111; L. 0.082."

² *Rare et précieuse collection d'objets d'art, curiosités, tableaux et miniatures provenant du cabinet d'un de nos amateurs les plus distingués*, experts : Simonnet et Mannheim, Paris, Ridet. sale from 14 to 17 April 1845, lot n° 321, p. 14. The precise dates of the exhibition and are the subject of numerous inaccuracies and errors in the catalogue, the sale poster and the auction house archives (sale mentioned by Ananoff).

³ *Minutes et dossiers de vente de maître Ridet*, Paris, archives of the city of Paris, D.42E3 16.

⁴ Our work, moreover, bears an apocryphal inscription lower left: 'Lawrence coll'.

⁵ Dates established using the various documents found and studied. At this stage, further clarification and studies still need to be carried out in order to gain a better understanding the biographical details of this character, but also but also to avoid or elude the presence of a homonym. It is indeed possible that a Laurent Guérin de Tencin and a Laurent Joseph Guérin de Tencin may have existed at the same time.

⁶ Laurent Guérin de Tencin, *Biographie des souverains régnants de l'Europe au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Guérin de Tencin, 1845.

⁷ He is listed as 'Professor in French language'.

⁸ Joseph Laurent Guérin de Tencin's file on the database Léonore database: www.leonore.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/ui/notice/174602

⁹ Archives provided by genealogist Xavier Robert-Mondin.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*