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Reappraising the Rococo:
The Enduring Relevance of Eighteenth-Century French Painting

by

Emma M. Woodberry

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By: Emma M. Woodberry

Often regarded as purely decorative, obsolete, and inconsequential, the rococo paintings of eighteenth-century France acquire historical significance and contemporary resonance once interpreted with fresh eyes. After the French Revolution, rococo paintings were associated with the politics and aristocracy of the ancien régime, a conflation that has colored aesthetic reputation of frivolity and artifice over the course of its history. This research centers on the claim that the rococo survived the Revolution, and continues to be called upon by contemporary artists as a productive artistic idiom. First, the cultural and aesthetic significance of eighteenth-century French rococo paintings will be considered with particular attention to Antoine Watteau, François Boucher, and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. Through a summary of its etymology and historiography of reception, a distinction can be made between the rococo's intrinsic and acquired significations. Further, consideration of the rococo's persistence as an artistic current of influence will be analyzed in the twentieth-century works of Florine Stettheimer and Andy Warhol, and the contemporary art of Yinka Shonibare and Genieve Figgis. By acknowledging the historical biases, multivalence, and historicity of the French rococo, this exploration engages with an effort to articulate alternative histories of modernism and the potential for reappraisal of the rococo.

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Introduction

Since its emergence in eighteenth-century France, rococo painting has been condemned as aristocratic, frivolous, artificial, and ultimately out-dated, dismissed by scholarly and popular opinion and relegated to the margins of Art History. Coinciding with the death of Louis XIV and the onset of the French Revolution, the "rococo period" is usually bracketed on art history timelines between the years 1715 and 1789. Most closely associated with Antoine Watteau, François Boucher, and Jean-Honoré Fragonard and exemplified through their paintings, the rococo style is often characterized by painterly gestures, idyllic and dynamic conceptions of nature, veiled eroticism, and glimpses of aristocratic leisure. Due to the extensive criticism of *ancien regime* society in post-Revolution France, its aesthetic considerations have been suppressed and its potential artistic achievements overlooked as 19th century critics conflated its depictions of the aristocracy with moral and political allegiance. In the words of art historian Mary Sherriff, "the rococo artists have never recovered from a revolution that left them despised and forgotten,".[1]

Commenced by Remy Saissellin in the 19th century and Fiske Kimball in the 20th century, an emerging field of scholarship advocates for a retrospective assessment of the style, in an attempt to dispel centuries of perpetuated biases and articulate its historical importance. Additionally, a second strand of rococo scholarship has emerged within the

[1] Mary D. Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999), 2.

last few decades, nearly three hundred years after its apogee, distinguishing a strain of rococo influence that is observable in modern and contemporary art.

Productive efforts towards a retrospective assessment of the rococo style have been initiated by cultural institutions in recent history, including the Cooper-Hewitt's exhibition and catalogue, *Rococo: The Continuing Curve, 1730-2008*,[2] and Oxford University's publication of a collection of essays titled *Rococo Echo: art, history, and historiography from Cochin to Coppola*.[3] These studies have firmly established the concept of the rococo's survival from the eighteenth century into the modern epoch, but reassessments of the rococo and its revivals are often broad in scope, encompassing furniture, decorative arts, and the rococo as a transnational style. For the purpose of this particular reappraisal, the scope of my discussion is limited to the French rococo and subsequent usage of the term refers exclusively to the medium of painting, unless otherwise noted.

In an effort to mitigate the perpetuated cultural biases that afflict its reputation, the rococo must be reconceptualized as two seperate yet entangled manifestations: as the eighteenth-century aesthetic impulse characterizing the paintings of Fragonard, Boucher, and Watteau, and as an atemporal current of influence that originated in the eighteenth century but has continued to evolve over the course of history and is identifiable the diverse oeuvres from nineteenth-century Gustave Courbet to twentieth-century Florine Stettheimer to living artists like Genieve Figgis. The existence of one rococo does not

[2] Cooper-Hewitt Museum, *Rococo: The Continuing Curve, 1730-2008,* ed. Sarah Coffin (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2008).

[3] Melissa Lee Hyde and Katie Scott, eds., *Rococo echo: art, history and historiography from Cochin to Coppola. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

negate the legitimacy of the other, as they are both generative within the realm of art historical discourse and relevant to the contemporary observer.

Through an analysis of the political, social, and cultural discourse evoked by rococo paintings, past and present, the intention of this body of research is not to reimagine the Rococo or re-write history, but rather to re-examine, re-contextualize, and re-assess its cultural and aesthetic validity. In chapter one, I establish the historical basis for the unfavorable reputation of rococo paintings through a brief discussion its eighteenth century context and summarize its historical reputation through the etymology and evolution of meaning of the word "rococo". Additionally, I adopt the theoretical framework of Clement Greenberg and Charles Harrison's model of modernity to propose the ways in which rococo artists, namely Fragonard, Boucher, and Watteau, expressed a proto-modern impulse. In chapter two, I identify the nineteenth century as a key period of rococo revision through a summary of the discourse of rococo critics and proponents and its aesthetic and ideological revival within artistic production. Then, using Wolfgang Kemp's methodology of reception history, I identify the myths and misconceptions that continue to inform the rhetoric of rococo's feminine and decorative interpretations. Chapter three traces the evolution of the rococo current of influence into the twentieth century, and by invoking the feminist art historian Linda Nochlin, I will analyze a selection of works by Florine Stettheimer and Andy Warhol. Lastly, chapter four explores the rococo's modern-day manifestations through the post-colonial lens provided by critical theorist Homi Bhaha, applied towards an analysis of appropriative works by Yinka Shonibare and Genieve Figgis.

By rejecting the simplistic assumptions rooted in cultural biases, that the rococo was a trivial and aristocratic style, it becomes possible to recognize the aesthetic and ideological achievements of eighteenth-century French rococo painters. Furthermore, by rejecting the notion of a static rococo, classified as a historical style or period terminated with the French Revolution, it is possible to identify and evaluate the survival of a rococo current from the *ancien regime* to today. The acknowledgement of a rococo impulse expressed in the works of modern and contemporary artists vastly expands the horizons of rococo scholarship, and its participation *avant la lettre* in feminist, post-colonial, and post-modern dialogues undeniably asserts the rococo's modern relevance.

Chapter One
The Genesis of the Rococo: Origins, Etymology, and the Discourse of the Modern

The word "rococo," with its rhyming syllables and flowery cadence, aptly reflects the *joie-de-vivre* of the art it describes, but its etymology is rooted in political tensions and pejorative connotations. In order to determine why the Rococo has been previously discredited in popular and scholarly criticism, I will untangle the web of the term's historical definitions and usages. The locution of rococo has evolved from the colloquial to terminological lexicon over the centuries, and in the process accumulated a proliferation of meanings. Subsequently, its evolving definitions may be interpreted as documents of the fluctuating attitudes towards the style over time and a chronicle of its turbulent reception history. Whether consciously or inadvertently, modern perceptions are often filtered through that historical discourse, and its significance as a pivotal moment in the history of art is obscured in the process. By examining the varied meanings and connotations of the word "rococo" from its origins to present day, and considering both its colloquial and art historical usages, I will attempt to demonstrate how common misconceptions about the rococo style—particularly that it is purely decorative and inherently feminine—were acquired and not inherent of the style itself.

First, it is critical to acknowledge there was no such thing as rococo art in eighteenth-century France. The word "rococo" simply did not yet exist and the works produced by artists such as Watteau, Boucher, and Fragonard were, in their own time, regarded as *le style modern* or *le goût nouveau*.[4] The inaugural designation of their

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[4] Melissa Lee Hyde, "Rococo Redux: From the Style Moderne of the Eighteenth Century to Art Nouveau," in *Rococo: The Continuing Curve, 1730-2008,* ed. Sarah Coffin (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2008), 13.

collective aesthetic as “modern” and “new” evinces their objective to express the contemporary zeitgeist, and its conscious recognition as a progressive undertaking. Though today they are often interpreted as old-fashioned or outmoded, French rococo paintings were, to their eighteenth-century audience, the epitome of modern art.

The exact origins of the term rococo are still subject to speculation, but the general consensus of scholars traces its roots to 1790s artist’s studios.[5] Etymologically, it probably derives from a combination of the French words *rocaille*, a form of colorful and irregular rockwork used to embellish grottoes and fountains, and *coquillage*, shell motifs.[6] It may also be a combination of the word *rocaille* with the Italian adjective *barocco*, meaning misshapen, malformed, and convoluted, an apt association considering the term was originally used as studio slang to denigrate the art of the ancien régime.[7]

In the immediate wake of the French Revolution, the word rococo appeared in the artist vernacular as a pejorative expression and neologism for paintings associated with the era of Louis XV. The documented usage of the word was by the artist Etienne Delécluze in his biography of the neoclassical French painter Jacques-Louis David.[8] Ironically, its earliest recorded usage was not in reference to an actual rococo artist, but applied to David himself. According to the account of Delécluze, one of David’s pupils,

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[5] Colin B. Bailey, “Was there such a thing as rococo painting in eighteenth-century France?,” in *Rococo echo: art, history and historiography from Cochin to Coppola. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment,* eds. Melissa Lee Hyde and Katie Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 172.
[6] Hyde, “Rococo Redux,” 13.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Though his journal was published in 1855, Delécluze notes that the term was used by Maurice Quai at David’s atelier. Quai died in 1803, so his usage of the term had to occur prior to that year. As its earliest recorded instance, Quai is attributed with coining the word “rococo”. The account is documented in E.J. Delécluze, *Louis David: son école et son temps: souvenirs* (Paris: Didier, 1855), 421, 426.

Maurice Quai, criticized the artist's *Intervention of the Sabine Women* for not adhering closely enough to classical principles. Quai denigrated the painting as "Van Loo, Pompadour, rococo,"[9] thus coining the term and imbuing it with an explicitly negative connotation. Moreover, by contextualizing the term in relation to Pompadour, the notorious mistress of Louis XV, rococo acquired an additional association with femininity and politics, and it has been conceptually entangled with issues of gender and class ever since.

A journal published in 1828 by realist writer Marie-Henri Beyle, known as Stendhal, corroborates that the term was politically-charged and highly pejorative into the early nineteenth century: "Allow me to use a low word? Bernini was the father of this bad taste designated in the studios by the somewhat vulgar name of rococo. The "wigged" genre triumphed in France under Louis XV and Louis XVI,[10]". In prefacing his usage of the word, Stendhal equates the term to a profanity. He then reiterates its political connotations by referring to the style as "le genre perruque" or "the wig style". From the reign of Louis XIV to the beginning of the Revolution, wigs functioned as visible markers of social rank within court culture. Stendhal's equivocation of "le genre perruque" with "rococo" reinforces its feminine connotations and evidences a political crusade launched against the style based on its associations with the *ancien regime* court culture.

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[9] Delécluze, *Louis David: son école et son temps: souvenirs*, 421, 426.

[10] "Me permettra-t-on un mot bas? Le Bernin fut le père de ce mauvais goût désigné dans les ateliers sous le nom un peu vulgaire de *rococo*. Le genre perruque triompha en France sous Louis XV et Louis XVI" in M. de Stendhal, *Promenades dans Rome* (Paris: Delaunay, 1829), 323.

As early as the 1840s, the word rococo acquired a colloquial usage, bridging the gap from the artistic realm to the common vernacular. Consequently, its first dictionary definition in 1842 distinguishes between its two distinct usages. The first usage defines the rococo in the context of the *beaux-arts*: "Il se dit triavalement Du genre d'ornements, de style et de dessin, qui appartient à l'école du règne de Louis XV et du commencement de Louis XVI. *Le genre rococo a suivi et précedé le pompadour, qui n'est lui-même qu'une nuance du rococo*,".[11] A significant and often disregarded aspect of this particular definition is the distinction between *rococo* and *pompadour*. The 1842 definition of rococo distinguishes between the art produced during the reigns of Louis XV and XVI, suggesting that the art it describes harbors sociopolitical connotations based on its association with the regime of government. Also in the 1842 dictionary volume is a definition of *pompadour*: "Il se dit Des objets d'art qui datent du règne de Louis XV et de la favorite de ce prince, la marquise de Pompadour; ils affectent particulièrement des formes contournées et des couleurs fraiches et tranchantes".[12] In its current terminology, when referring to the medium of painting there is no longer a distinction between *pompadour* and *rococo*, or the reign of Louis XV and Louis XVI. By distinguishing between the two and classifying *pompadour* as a "nuance of Rococo", it seems clear that by 1842 the negative reception of rococo art was a product of post-Revolutionary political sentiment rather than purely aesthetic judgement. The second usage of rococo according to the same dictionary entry identifies its broader colloquial definition: "Il se dit, en général, de Tout ce qui est vieux et hors de mode, dans les arts, la littérature, le

[11] Académie française, *Complément Du Dictionnaire De L'Académie Française* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1842), 1058.
[12] Ibid, 970.

costume, les manières, etc.,".[13] In the mid-nineteenth century, the term rococo in its artistic usage had become so reflective of the animosity towards the *ancien regime* that it was adopted as an adjective to describe anything old-fashioned, and in doing so, strengthened the negative political and moral connotations of its art-related counterpart.

When the term "rococo" was adopted into the lexicon of art historians as an official term at the end of the nineteenth century, many of its overt pejorative connotations were neutralized but the derogatory sentiment remained. The lingering connotations of its original definition and centuries of use as a disparaging term have skewed the reception and inherent cultural value of rococo paintings, perpetuating the associations of the genre with the highly decorative and the feminine. Even in its terminological usage, the word rococo carries inflections of its derogatory historical usages and colloquial definition. In the words of art historian Mary Sheriff, "the style's adversaries first articulated its characteristics negatively and retrospectively, and those who appreciate the rococo have wrested with their definition every since,".[14] The term "rococo", and consequently the art now classified as rococo, still harbors the sentiments of the word's historical usage and perpetuates the distorted interpretation of rococo paintings as decidedly feminine, purely decorative, and old fashioned.

In stark opposition to those who dismiss the rococo as an antiquated style, or dismiss its classification as an independent style altogether, a new perspective has emerged in art historical discourse that recognizes the rococo as the threshold of

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[13] Ibid, 1058.
[14] Quoted in Hyde, "Rococo Redux," 16.

subjective modernity. In the mid-twentieth century, Art Historian Arnold Hauser articulated this viewpoint:

> After the rococo there is no such canon of form, no such universally valid trend of art. From the nineteenth century onwards the intentions of each single artist become so personal that he has to struggle for his own means of expression and can no longer accept ready-made solutions; he regards every pre-established form as a fetter rather than a help.[15]

The concept of modernism gained prominence with the emergence of abstract expressionism during the mid-twentieth century, but its relevance and validity within art historical discourse precedes its terminological usage. The notion of modernism is complex and multifaceted, and its definition has been interpreted variously by scholars such as Greenburg, Fried, and Foucault, however, the fundamental attribute that pervades all modernist theory is "the intentional rejection of classical precedent and classical style".[16] If rejection of tradition is the prerequisite of modernism, then why is it the Rococo continuously omitted from modernist discourse?

Much like the modernist styles of Realism and Impressionism, the rococo was perceived by its critics as an affront against the prevailing stylistic and ideological conceptions of art, most of which are rooted in the classical tradition, and was highly controversial for its defiance of established conventions and artistic norms. By assessing the political, social, and economic context of its origins in eighteenth-century France, I will attempt to mediate between the Rococo's innate and acquired meanings, and assess

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[15] Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art: Rococo, Classicism, and Romanticism* (New York: Vintage, 1951), 35. Quoted by George Poe, "The Eighteenth-Century French Rococo: Some Terminological, Methodological, and Theoretical Considerations," *L'Esprit Créateur* 33, no. 3 (1993): 62.

[16] Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art Histor, 2nd Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 189.

the potential ways that artists like Watteau, Boucher, and Fragonard expressed a proto-modern impulse.

It is critical to acknowledge that the genesis of the rococo was not simply pre-determined by the cultural shift that occurred in early-eighteenth century France. It required the synthesis of two conditions: the unique political, cultural, and intellectual context—what may be referred to as the "contemporary cultural program"[17]—and the creative agencies of the artists themselves. The genesis of the rococo impulse was not a deliberate attempt to overthrow the prevailing classical conventions of painting, but rather an artistic manifestation of the contemporary zeitgeist. As the etymology of the term itself has demonstrated, the cultural milieu of eighteenth-century France simultaneously cultivated the rococo as an emerging aesthetic, and as a consequence, condemned it to centuries of disdain through its association with the *ancien regime*. Accompanying momentous shifts in the political, social, and economic fabric of France, an aesthetic shift occurred simultaneously that initiated the emergence of a distinctly French form of cultural expression, the Rococo.

The *fin de siècle* was a critical juncture, not only for artistic practice, but also for determining the political and cultural identity of France. Until his death in 1715, the absolutist regime of Louis XIV demanded a narrow approach to artistic practice, with the primary directive of artists being to glorify France, its king, and his conquests.[18] The Academié Royale de Peinture, established by Louis XIV in 1648, reiterated and

[17] A term used by George Poe in Poe, "The Eighteenth-Century French Rococo," 58.
[18] On Louis XIV's artistic direction, see chapter four of Mary D. Sheriff, *Enchanted islands: picturing the allure of conquest in eighteenth-century France* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 106.

reinforced the propagandistic mission of Le Roi Soleil by adopting universal standards for artistic production and institutionalizing artistic education in accordance with classical formulae. Additionally, the main form of patronage for artists was the royal court, so their adherence to the academic model effectually determined the financial and critical success of their career. By the early-eighteenth century, the Academy monopolized artistic education, practice, and exhibition in France, however, the numerous wars initiated by Louis XIV had impoverished the nation, instigating a sharp decline in artistic patronage and escalating widespread criticism of his absolutist policies.[19] Following the death of Louis XIV in 1715, the liberation of French society from absolutism generated a new cultural ethos, and "the lifting of political repression in the Regency and under the youthful government of Louis XV directly translated into the freedom and joy of rococo form"[20]. While the Regency occupies only a brief section of the French History timeline, the new phase of leadership cultivated an anti-Louis XIV sentiment with broader cultural implications. The Duke of Orléans' efforts towards economic recovery reinvigorated artistic production, and his reputation as a libertine and opposition to censorship perhaps may have influenced the lighthearted and licentious subject matter of the young generation of artists. With the increasing demand of private patrons and new sociopolitical regime, artists and theorists began to reconsider the purpose of art, abandoning the propagandistic mission of Louis XIV for the pursuit of pleasure.

[19] Sheriff, *Enchanted islands*, 106.
[20] Quote by Katie Scott, paraphrasing the viewpoint of art historian Emilia Dilke, in Katie Scott, "Foreward, Rococo Echo: Style and Temporality" in *Rococo Echo,* eds. Hyde and Scott, 8.

Since its founding, the Academy dictated artistic production in France according to two central doctrines: the hierarchy of genres and the classical theory of painting.[21] Proponents of the Academy saw France the heirs of classical tradition, advocating for loyalty to Greco-Roman tradition and revering Renaissance works as the basis for an explicitly formulated conception of painting. The principles of style dictated by the academy thus included geometrically-structured, rational compositional arrangements, accurate anatomical proportions, and highly-finished surfaces that rendered the artist's brush strokes imperceptible. In style and subject matter, Rococo painters transgressed both of the fundamental tenants of the Academy and classical system, and in doing so, tested the boundaries of a modernist impulse and incited criticism from the defenders of the classical pictorial regime.

Traditionally regarded as a paradigm of rococo decadence and eroticism, Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *The Swing* (figure 1) is practically a metonym for the rococo style, characterized by its idyllic settings, elegant eroticism, and pastel-hued palettes. Fragonard's *The Swing* embodies the qualities of rococo painting that were criticized for defying the prevailing conventions of subject and style, rooted in the classical tradition and re-established by the authoritarian vision of Académie and its Ecole des Beaux Arts. Fragonard's depiction of nature departs from the tradition of a purely mimetic representation of reality. The trees and greenery are animated by the fluidity of the brush strokes, and twist and turn in impossible, expressive shapes. Fragonard's garden could never exist in reality, and thus defies what was determined by the classical and

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[21] Michael Fried, "Toward a Supreme Fiction: Genre and Beholder in the Art Criticism of Diderot and His Contemporaries," *New Literary History* 6, no. 3 (Spring 1975), 543.

renaissance tradition as "acceptable" forms of representation. The stylistic tendencies that characterize rococo paintings include the proliferation of sibilant, organic shapes, painterly gestures, saturation of the entire picture space, dynamic, asymmetry and rejection of linear perspective, abstraction of natural forms, and an opulent palette of predominantly pastel hues.

Above all other stylistic considerations, rococo painters masterfully articulated the notion of *le faire*, a concept that describes the artist's application of paint on the canvas, and an embrace of the creative agency of the artist and the value of unique expression.[22] During the lifetime of the original rococo artists, another major cultural phenomenon was occurring in the social and intellectual domain of France, the Enlightenment. The emphasis on human agency, philosophy, and emotion and interest in natural phenomena was an intellectual pursuit, and in turn began to raise questions about the purpose of art and the artist's capacity for self-individuation. The concept of *le faire* is important to consider within the context of rococo works in particular, at the intersection of aesthetic autonomy from classical models and the individual agency of the artist. It is an elusive term that was studio slang, derived from the verb "faire" meaning "to make" or "to create", used to describe the artist's pictorial touch and handling of paint that is perceptible to the viewer.[23] The artist and draftsman Charles-Nicolas Cochin, fils, in his defense of rococo painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, summarized the meaning and significance of the term to argue that execution was a mark of authenticity and mastery of the artist:

[22] Sheriff, *Art and Eroticism*, 120.
[23] Ibid.

> It is this *faire* (as the artists call it) that distinguishes the original of a great master from the best rendered copy and characterizes the true talents of the artist so well that a small part of the painting, even the least interesting, reveals to the connoisseur that the piece must be by a great master.[24]

By appropriating the verb *faire* as a noun, the action of painting, material dimension of the canvas, and authorial role of the artist are given a newfound sense of importance. *Le faire* emphasizes the action of making, the direct link between artist and canvas, and the significance of the artist's distinct presence within the painting. This was a radical departure from the finished surfaces of the classical aesthetic, suggesting that rococo painters valued the materiality of the paint as a sign of their individualistic expression above traditional precedents. Clearly discernible in the practice of eighteenth-century French rococo painters, this emphasis on authorship and artistic individuation is at the crux of modernist theory and continues to be a hallmark of contemporary art.

Returning to the realm of eighteenth-century subject matter, history painting was situated at the apex of the hierarchy of genres constructed by the Academy, heralded as an intellectual pursuit in its subject matter derived from biblical, classical, or mythological sources.[25] After 1715, the ensuing period of economic recovery and the dissolution of absolutism provided new opportunities for artists to pursue avenues of private patronage among the aristocracy. Regarded as a risky endeavor, reliance on private patronage granted creative freedom to artists—freedom from financial reliance on state-sponsored art institutions, from Academy politics, and from the strictures of what

[24] Ibid.

was deemed appropriate or moral subject matter.[26] Rococo painters entertained the whims of their private patrons and were no longer required to paint according to an established set of principles, and could instead paint in response to their own expressive impulses.

Broadly speaking, a hallmark of rococo paintings is the absence of narrative resolution, and although critics disparaged this quality of "subjectlessness"[27] it was fundamentally tied to the same principle of *le faire* of advocating for human agency. The narrative is viewer-created as opposed to artist-determined, allowing for autonomous, enlightened individuals to formulate their own conclusions and, in doing so, exercise their individual human agency. In terms of subject matter, rococo paintings commonly depicted scenes of aristocratic leisure and amorous encounters set within idyllic, fictive landscapes. In fact, Watteau formulated and pioneered a new genre altogether, the *fête galante*, which depicted scenes of aristocratic courtship and leisure set within idyllic, fictive landscapes. The common thread that unites these diverse oeuvres was not necessarily the subject of the work itself, but rather the investment by the artists in subjects that were considered irrelevant or unconventional to the prevailing academic notion of art determined and endorsed by the Academy.

Eroticism, another proclivity of rococo painters, similarly appealed to the enlightenment capacities of the viewer in its ability to provoke an emotional or sentimental response. In a culture overwhelmed by ceremony and control of

[26] For a quotation by rococo contemporary Charles-Joseph Natoire explaining the limitations and restrictions of patronage during the eighteenth century, see Bailey, "Was there such a thing as rococo painting in eighteenth-century France?," 187.
[27] The term "subjectlessness" is used by Fried to summarize the Comte de Caylus's criticism of Watteau in lecture addressing the painters of the Académie Royale in 1748. See Fried, "Genre and Beholder," 548.

comportment, the veiled eroticism of rococo paintings provided an momentary escape from reality and rigid social constraints. These erotic subjects permitted moments of suspended decorum and permitted actions and free display of emotion that were otherwise prohibited as violations of social propriety. While Watteau's *fête galantes* evoked an atmosphere of intimacy, later rococo artists were more brazen in their depictions of sensuality. Nudity and acts of passion had previously been condoned within the context of history paintings because the mythological context redeemed the morality of the figures, but within the context of rococo gardens and sumptuous aristocratic interiors, the sexual innuendos of rococo masters boldly transgressed moral conventions. The subject of Fragonard's *The Swing*, an adulterous woman knowingly exposing herself to a man, offers a striking departure from the edifying tradition that was enabled by the taste of its private patronage. The Abbé du Bos, Fragonard's primary patron, and other proponents of rococo artists celebrated the capacity for paintings to satisfy and provoke an emotional response within the viewer without subjecting them to the negative repercussions of love, the risks of disappointment and despair.[28] Rococo eroticism held the capacity to relieve emotional ennui, and the viewer could experience the anxieties of love without the risk of emotional windfall.[29] In the opinions of its critics, however, such wanton displays of sexuality threatened morality by promoting hedonism and promiscuity.[30] Enlightenment theory in France instigated a critical interrogation of

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[28] Mary D. Sheriff, *Moved by love: inspired artists and deviant women in eighteenth-century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 78.
[29] Abbé Dubos, *Réflexions Critiques Sur La Poësie Et Sur La Peinture* (Paris: Pissot, 1755).
[30] Karen Junod,"Luxe, Calme, et Volupté: François Boucher's Rococo Seductions," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 147.

traditional customs and morals and aroused cultural anxieties about the relationships between manners and morals, and as a consequently, between virtue and aesthetics.[31] This became a central aspect of anti-rococo criticism as figures like Rousseau and Diderot condemned the overt sexual displays in rococo paintings. They were perceived as transgressions of virtue and modesty, threats to civility and France's cultural reputation. This moralist critique can be summarized in the following remarks by Lenoir, in his assessment of Fragonard's paintings: "Fragonard is guilty, and one should not approve, even in admiring the painter, the genius whose product inflames the dangerous passions and leads to the corruption of morals,".[32]

In both subject and form, Fragonard and his rococo contemporaries waged a war on established conventions and departure from the conventions of tradition to facilitate progress in artistic expression. This act of defiance is at the very crux of modernist theory. Fragonard's *The Swing*, and the contemporary works of his fellow rococo painters, aptly demonstrates how even works produced before our conception of the chronological "modern period" can be implicated in modernist discourse. French philosopher Michel Foucault, for example, describes the eighteenth century as the threshold of modernity because of the proliferation of discourses concerned with sexuality—a discourse that Fragonard undeniably engages with.[33] While the rococo may not be considered a "Modernist" genre, it certainly incorporates many of the determinative characteristics put forth by scholars in their efforts to define modernism.

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[31] Ibid.
[32] Quoted in Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism*, 4.
[33] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An archaeology of the human sciences* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 227-228.

Elaborating on the theories of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, in his own essay on modernism, Charles Harrison identifies three interdependent usages of the term "modern" within art historical discourse.[34] One such usage defines modernism as "the critical achievement of an aesthetic standard *within* aa given medium and *in the face of* (though emphatically *not* in disregard of) the pervasive condition of modernity,"[35]. According to Harrison, this adjectival usage of "modernism" should be "modernist" rather than "modern". In the broad definition of modernism, particularly relating to Harrison's three definitions, Fragonard's painting is not "modern", but is definitively "modernist". In Fragonard's revolt against prevailing artistic values and his emphasis on individual liberty/self-expression of the artist, he unknowingly engaged in a modernist discourse and divorced his art from the "concerns of society", an important characteristic of modernism according to the theories of Fried.[36] It is important to recognize that it was not solely the "immoral" subject matter and wanton sexuality which links *The Swing* to modernist discourse. It was the eroticizing technique and fluid application of paint which became recognizably "Fragonardian"—an articulation of *le faire*—and bestowed upon him a recognizable artistic individuality he achieved through his unique artistic process. The artist himself, Fragonard, thus becomes a recognizable subject and inherently invokes the notion of self-generation. Fragonard's artistic subjectivity and individualism make *The Swing* an emblem of modernity. Perhaps, given the previous considerations,

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[34] Harrison provides a thorough discussion of Fried and Greenberg's theories of modernist, and elaborates on the distinct usages in his essay, providing examples for each case in Charles Harrison, "Modernism," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Nelson and Shiff, 188-201.
[35] Ibid, 189.
[36] Quote by Michael Fried in Harrison, "Modernism," 193.

there is an alternative origin of modernity wherein the rococo and genre painting act as a locus of modernity in art historical discourse.

There was no "rococo manifesto" or formal doctrine consciously adhered to by the eighteenth-century practitioners of rococo painting, however, their cultivation of a new artistic idiom undeniably subverted the established conventions of painting in France. The objectivity of our historical distance as contemporary viewers allows us to reassess and reappraise the rococo, and to distinguish between its innate and acquired meanings with two objectives: to attribute French rococo painters the validity and historical significance they have long been refused, and to preface how modern and contemporary expressions of the rococo impulse have suppressed or revived these dialogues. Their investments in artistic individuation, the materiality of painting, and provocative subject matter resonate with the modern conscience, and having recognized their historical significance, it becomes possible to acknowledge the survival of the rococo impulse as a current of influence in artistic production from the eighteenth century to today.

Chapter Two
Revivals, Revisions, and Reception History of the Nineteenth Century

As demonstrated by the etymology and various connotations of the word "Rococo" itself, the reception history of rococo paintings, its intermittent periods of revival, is the key to interpreting its impact as a current of influence and its twenty-first century artistic manifestations. The process of unraveling the ascribed significance of the rococo, past and present, requires a broadening of the traditional art historical lens, beyond the realm of visual and iconographic analysis, to consider not only the aesthetic discourse of a painting but also the evolution of its social narrative. T.J. Clark's influential theory on the "social history of art" considers how artists, and consequently their works, are influenced by their society, and by broadening the scope of his theory, it becomes possible to consider the degree to which society continues to influence artworks that predate them.[37] Having identified the social, political, and economic milieu that influenced artistic production and creation of the rococo in ancien régime France, a further reappraisal of the rococo requires an examination of its historiography of reception and recuperation.

The nineteenth century was a crucial period in the formation of contemporary conceptions about the rococo, and was the site of multiple inadvertent and self-conscious revisions coinciding with a shifting cultural, social, and political ethos and major reconsiderations of artistic theory and criticism. The cultural context of eighteenth-century France informed, but did not entirely determine, artistic production of rococo

[37] For his theory on the social history of art, see chapter one of T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 9-20.

works, as mentioned in chapter one, and the cultural context of any subsequent viewer is involved in the hermeneutic process of observing an artwork, continuing to inform its broader reception and interpretations of meaning.

The methodology for this discussion relies on the basic assumption that reception of a work is mediated by the socio-political context of the beholder, with the two predominant determinative aspects being *the subjective* and *the objective*. The objective is the fixed image on the canvas, what is contained within the four borders of the painting's frame, the pictorial arrangement of figures, the composition of the work, and the material existence of the painting and its visual attributes. The subjective is what determines the fluctuations in historical reception of a work or style, the relationships and associations assigned to the image by a viewer or the consensus of a collective generation of viewers. Broadly speaking, the subjective encompasses two fields of influence: the *internal*, or the influence of the viewer's gender, class, and personal identity, and the *external*, the influence of the social, political, and ideological conditions of the viewer's epoch as well as the existing field of discourse they have been exposed to about the work or style. With the production of meaning and interpretation of the artwork reliant on a network of influences, the image becomes a site of indeterminacy.[38] The pictorial field is fixed within the frame, but the interpretation of its content relies on the observer, their context, and extraneous conditions dependent on the cultural, political, and social

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[38] Wolfgang Kemp, "The Work of Art and Its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception" in Mark A. Cheetham, ed., *The subjects of art history: historical objects in contemporary perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 180-196.

moment, producing semantic ambiguities impossible to determine through art history's traditional iconological methods of interpretation.

Alongside the assertion that the meaning of a painting or broader style of painting is not static, I also wish to reject the assumption of the rococo's artistic isolation. Formalist art historians tend to conceive of the history of art as the succession of distinct styles, for example, the progression of baroque to rococo to neoclassicism to romanticism, ascribing to a convenient taxonomic ordering of styles. The history of artistic production, however, is not evolutionist, evidenced by the coevality of styles occurring at any given moment. By acknowledging that artistic production is an intersection of aesthetic and socio-political processes, it becomes possible to dismiss the notion of art history as a habitual chronology of styles and, instead, conceive of such "styles" as currents of influence. The survival of a rococo impulse in artistic production beyond ancien régime France is best understood according to the non-evolutionary models of art history proposed by theorists like Aby Warburg and Georges Didi-Huberman.[39] The theory of *Nachleben* proposed by Warburg suggests the atemporal influence of artistic ideologies, wherein surviving forms—what is often classified as a "style"—are not confined to their original periods of production, but rather survive through later works, "disappearing from a point in history, reappearing much later at a moment when it is perhaps no longer expected, and consequently having survived in the still poorly defined reaches of a 'collective memory',".[40]

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[39] Georges Didi-Huberman, "Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time," *Common Knowledge* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 273-285, Project MUSE.
[40] Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Surviving Image: Aby Warburg and Tylorian Anthropology," *Oxford Art Journal* 25, no. 1 (2002): 68.

In order to reassess the significance of the rococo, we must reconcile the difference between the experience of viewing a painting—its aesthetic immediacy—and the production of external associations—its political, social, and cultural nuances. Elaborating on the notion of *nachleben*, with the goal of identifying the rococo's manifestation in art history post-eighteenth century, the survival of rococo can be evaluated in three forms: rococo revivals (later imitations of the original style), renewed interest in collecting the original rococo works, and new artistic styles that resurrect the ideologies of the rococo through a new visual language.

After the French Revolution, criticism of rococo paintings broadly shifted from aesthetic concerns, articulated by contemporary academicians like Diderot, to socio-political preoccupations. Rococo paintings became symbols of a frivolous, indulgent ancien régime aristocracy and the oppressive system of power they upheld.[41] These political sentiments coincided with a collapsing art market, as the rococo's aristocratic patrons lost their fortunes, fled to avoid persecution, or were sentenced to the guillotine. Furthermore, it must be considered that Diderot's art criticism, which has largely shaped the historical scholarly opinion dismissing the rococo's aesthetic virtues, was first published posthumously in his *Salons* beginning in 1795. Written in 1765 and published posthumously in 1796, Diderot's *Essai sur la Peinture* offers his personal account of Boucher's works exhibited at the Salon, to which he lamented, "degradation of taste, color, composition, character, expression, and drawing have kept pace with moral depravity,".[42] Boucher's "depravity of morals", conceived by Diderot as the depiction of

[41] Sheriff, *Art and Eroticism*, 9.
[42] Denis Diderot, *Diderot on Art I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), *222*.

erotic subjects and debasement of pictorial tradition, would become conflated with the "depravity of morals" attributed to the ancien régime aristocracy according to post-revolutionary sentiments. Much of his criticisms, emphasizing the axiomatic importance of classical doctrines and censure of erotic and unconventional subject matter, influenced public opinion even after his death and became a vehicle for the post-Revolution politicization and denunciation of rococo painters. Consequently, in conjunction with its waning source of aristocratic patronage and drastic shifts in the socio-political ethos, the rococo seemed to vanish during the First Republic.

In the context of the rococo's reception history, it is necessary at this point to introduce the sub-branch of reception aesthetics. The methodology of reception aesthetics emphasizes the relationship between the artwork and beholder, acknowledges that the beholder has a specific gender, presence, and history, and thereby asserts/implies/imputes the multivalence of imputed meanings. If reception history documents "the migration and transformation of artistic formulas,"[43] an assertion made by art historian Wolfgang Kemp, reception aesthetics pursue the relationship between the work and its beholder, assuming that perception dictates reception. According to Hegelian aesthetics, a work of art is intrinsically addressed to an ideal beholder and exists in two related but discernible modes of being: the existence of the work "for itself" and "for us".[44] Generally speaking, for rococo paintings the ideal beholders are the patrons, the ancien régime aristocrats who commissioned the works. Additionally, the subjects within the works were typically those aristocrats, who served as vehicles of identification for the patrons and figurations of the

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[43] Kemp, "The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception," 181.
[44] Ibid.

ideal beholder within the painting itself. With the persecution of the ancien régime aristocracy proceeding the Revolution, the fetes gallants and aristocratic portraits of Watteau and Boucher could no longer appeal to their ideal beholder, largely because they ceased to exist. In the nineteenth century, the slippage between ideal beholder and actual beholder opened the rococo and its paintings to a proliferation of new interpretations, and in the words of Sheriff: "symbols are culturally determined; and others who could shift their perspectives found in rococo paintings other meanings convenient to their own ideologies,".[45]

The psychology of perception, the fundamental premise of reception aesthetics, explains why different generations have demonstrated a revived interest in the rococo according to the inclinations of their own historical position—the social, cultural, and political factors that resonate with a rococo aesthetic. The first real revival of rococo paintings occurred during the Bourbon Restoration, when collecting rococo paintings became a social gesture. For the aristocratic emigrés returning to post-Revolution France, the scenes of aristocratic leisure became vehicles for self-identification, evocative of their former prestige, and symbols of the elevated social status they sought to restore.[46] They still conceived of themselves as the ideal beholder and resonated with the objective, the aristocrats situated within the composition, and the subjective, the nostalgic evocation of an opulent and unafflicted haut-monde. At the same time, wealthy members of a burgeoning bourgeoisie class sought to legitimize their new status as occupants of the former aristocracy's elevated social tier and economic privilege through conspicuous

[45] Sheriff, *Art and Eroticism*, 10.
[46] Hyde, "Rococo Redux," 17.

consumption.[47] Motivated by social aspirations/ambition, they similarly adopted rococo paintings as legitimizing symbols of social distinction.

Aristocrats and the newly rich bourgeoisie continued to collect rococo art into the 1830s as emblems of heritage and social authenticity, but in the context of the July Monarchy, rococo connoisseurship was reinscribed as a political gesture. For republicans, the political radicals of the 1830s, to be rococo, in the terms colloquial usage, was "to be subservient to all forms of authority"[48] and advocating for rococo style was a symbolic endorsement of *ancien regime* policies. In the realm of scholarly discourse, debates about the rococo were simultaneously being reinvigorated by a circle of critics.[49] One of those critics was Théophile Gautier, an ardent defender of Romanticism, who notably coined the phrase "l'art pour l'art", or "art for art's sake". By advocating for artistic freedom over moral, didactic, religious, or political concerns, Gautier and his contemporaries were enshrining the very quality of "subjectlessness" that Diderot had once condemned in Boucher's paintings.

Perhaps enabled by the historical distance from the Revolution, during the Second Empire (1852-1870) the underlying sociopolitical meanings of rococo that had previously contributed to abandonment of the style were re-ascribed a positive and aspirational value. During this period, rococo paintings experienced a profound revival of interest among collectors and imitations by contemporary artists, as well as a reemergence in critical discourse through the advocacy of the Goncourt brothers.[50] There was also a

[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid, 14.
[49] Sheriff, *Art and Eroticism*, 12.
[50] Hyde, "Rococo Redux," 14.

deliberate and conscious attempt by the governing body to define a distinctly French cultural heritage, a project pursued by Napoleon III and evidenced by the Hausmannization of Paris. At a time when France was attempting to consciously construct a national identity, the Goncourts' impassioned reveries of the rococo age proposed the rococo as an authentically French style and legitimate expression of French culture.

Together with Diderot, perhaps the most influential historical source that shaped the modern opinion of the rococo was the Goncourt Brothers, whose series of journals published between 1851 and 1870 convey a series of sentimental reveries of rococo artists. Kemp's methodology cautions against the branch of reception history reliant on literary sources as intermediary sources are problematic testimonials that express a limited vale of the broader public opinion, but it is impossible to deny that their historic literary contributions have not affected the broader rococo consensus and therefore must be considered within this discussion.[51] While Diderot was undoubtedly critical of Boucher, Watteau, and Fragonard, the Goncourt brothers were ardent proponents of the eighteenth century rococo artists and devoted collectors of their works. The association between femininity and the rococo style, as previously mentioned, was not inherent of the rococo aesthetic and many art historians, including Hyde, attribute the Goncourts as the source of this "feminine" designation; "Until the Goncourts, proponents of rococo did not regard it as an inherently feminine style, but as one signifying refinement and privilege". [52] The theory of rococo was not expressly defined by its artists but retrospectively

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[51] Kemp, "The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception,", 181.
[52] Hyde, "Rococo Redux," 17.

envisioned by its nineteenth century critics, and by declaring Pompadour the "godmother and queen of the rococo"[53], the Goncourts informed later academic and public perceptions of the rococo as an inherently feminine style. Not only were the rococo artists predominately male and soliciting the endorsement of male patrons, the rococo had been fully developed as a stylistic idiom before Pompadour's patronage.

Summarized by Hyde, "the Goncourts reaffirmed the notion that rococo was aristocratic and feminine, but their celebration of the reign of woman was meant to ascribe positive values to the terms of eighteenth-century critiques of the style,"[54]. The perpetuation of the Goncourt's claim that the rococo was inherently feminine continues to pervade modern scholarship and influence popular opinion. A popular Art History survey textbook published in 2020 boldly asserts: "the feminine look of the Rococo style reflects the taste and social initiative of women"[55]. This seems to be a conflation of the Rococo and Enlightenment, and ignores the fact that rococo artists were almost exclusively men, with predominately male patrons, and entirely removed from any contemporary conceptions of a feminist agenda.

Since the 1820s, aristocratic and wealthy bourgeoisie collectors and connoisseurs had adopted rococo paintings as a commodity of cultural authority and social legitimation. During the Second Empire, from 1852 to 1870, the rococo acquired a new symbolic meaning as a symbol of political authority, an attempt to establish legitimacy through self-referential identification with the ancien régime, a period when royalty was

[53] E. and J. de Goncourt, *Madame de Pompadour* (Paris: Oliver Orban Editions, 1982), 309.
[54] Hyde, "Rococo Redux," 17.
[55] Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's art through the ages: the Western perspective, Volume II* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2020), 773.

uncontested.[56] At this point, the political and social associations of rococo paintings were considered a priori to its visual and aesthetic qualities. Empress Eugenie promoted a rococo-esque aesthetic and commissioned her portrait by Franz-Xavier Winterhalter in 1854 *en Marie-Antoinette*, initiating a fad for women's portraits in eighteenth-century costume, ultimately reinforcing the feminine associations asserted by the Goncourts.

Coinciding with renewed interest in rococo collecting, the advent of Realism resumed the rococo legacy of interrogating the two doctrines of the academy: the hierarchy of genres (the supremacy of history painting) and a classical theory of painting.[57] A comparison of Boucher's "The Four Seasons: Summer" (figure 2) and Courbet's "The Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine" (figure 3), painted nearly a century later, yields the shared ideologies between rococo and realism. Both paintings are characterized by a somnolent sensuality, depicting contemporary women lounging in verdant outdoor settings. While, to the modern viewer, Boucher's depiction seems more explicitly sexual because its female figures are nude, Courbet's women were perceived as equally indecorous as they are clearly sprawled along the banks of the Seine rather than a fictional landscape, denying any possibility that they are derived from mythological sources and insinuating their occupation as prostitutes. Additionally, while Boucher's women are the objects of the viewer's gaze and clearly fashioned to appeal to a male beholder, they are all situated internally to the composition. Courbet's women gaze out at the viewer, confronting the male viewers gaze and admonishing the act of voyeurism. Courbet's oeuvre revived questions of moral decency and overt sexual expression in

[56] Hyde, "Rococo Redux," 14.
[57] Fried, "Genre and Beholder", 585

artistic representation through his provocative depictions of the female body, most famously in his painting *L'origine du monde*, harkening back to the censorship and criticism of Boucher and Fragonard's promiscuous exposed women.

If Boucher and his rococo contemporaries articulated the notion of materialism through their works, Courbet fully developed the concept through his realist artistic idiom, outlining human figures with black lines to emphasize the materiality of the paint and flatness of the canvas, thus and reinvigorating questions of *le faire* and distinct authorship. With the advent of realism, the hegemonic order of the Academy first interrogated by the Rococo was beginning to erode, allowing for an even greater freedom of expression and genre concerns that would eventually become fundamental tenets of modernism.

The nineteenth century used rococo to evoke the ideals of the republican order, liberated from the hierarchical and oppressive conditions of monarchical government, similarly to how Louis adopted classicism to legitimize, validate his absolutist policies. The rococo's distance from royal patronage and academic standards dictated by the king allowed for it to exemplify the republican ideals of liberty and independence. The rococo redefined by the Second Empire artists, collectors, and advocates like the Goncourts was a distinctly French, feminized, eroticized, rococo that would persist for centuries to inform readings and reinterpretations of the style.

The hedonism of the aristocracy gave way to a celebration of middle-class materialism near the end of the eighteenth century, and the emergence of impressionism in France fulfilled the notion of *le faire*. Impressionism is not frequently discussed in rococo discourse, but merits further consideration as perhaps the most poignant

expression of its stylistic ideologies post-*ancien regime*.[58] Having discussed the notion of *le faire* in the context of rococo painting, the impressionists exemplify the most direct manifestation of its emphasis on fluidity of paint, saturated palette, and materiality of canvas, and above all, emphasis on the visible engagement between the artist and picture surface. In many ways, the impressionists materialized the rococo, breaching the confines of classical academic tradition to a degree that eighteenth-century artists could not have dared of. Continually rejected by the Salon which favored classical pictorial tradition, the impressionists and realists organized alternative exhibition venues that directly challenged the legitimacy of the official Salon and, by association, the Academy. The success of their "Salons des Refusés" provoked reconsiderations of the prevailing classical doctrines and cultural institutions, demanding a republican system suited to the new republican regime. The shift in power from government jurisdiction to the artists granted the artistic freedom pursued by artists since the age of rococo, and the Academy no longer dictated the standards of content and style. Boucher, Watteau, Fragonard, and their rococo contemporaries initiated and proved the potential success of private patronage, both financially and in its capacity to promote artistic liberty. To the nineteenth-century audience, the impressionists were perceived as progressive and radical to a similar extent as the Rococo artists were to its eighteenth-century critics, and it should be noted that the term "impressionism" similarly was coined as a pejorative moniker. Although both terminologies were created by critics with disparaging intent, the impressionists ultimately shed the pejorative connotation by adopting the term for

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[58] See Anne Higonnet, "Irregular rococo Impressionism," in *Rococo echo,* eds. Hyde and Scott, 149-166.

themselves, whereas the rococo artists predated their own classification and thus were condemned to its negative insinuations.

The retrospective consideration of Realism and Impressionism as manifestations of rococo *Nachleben* dismisses the notion that visual parity determines the fundamental relationship between asynchronous artistic styles. The rococo served model for artistic independence that would later be articulated by realism, developed through impressionism, and eventually become the precepts of modernism and post-modernism. For this reason, it is intrinsically relevant to the contemporary dialogue and merits recognition as a progressive moment in art history. Furthermore, its historiography of revival collecting and its artistic current of influence was not simply a matter of evolving taste, but rather the result of discursive processes simultaneously occurring within the political, artistic, and social realm of nineteenth-century France.

Chapter Three
The Rococo-esque: Idiosyncratic Expression in the Twentieth Century

Having established the *historical* significance of the Rococo and its proliferation of acquired meanings through centuries of discourse, revival, and renewal, it is finally possible to assert its *modern* significance. There are two key aspects for consideration of the rococo's modern relevance: first, how the paintings of Fragonard, Watteau, and Boucher participate in twenty-first-century dialogues of race, class, and gender, and second, how it is continually evoked by modern and contemporary artists as a stylistic, aesthetic, and ideological impulse. Within the last fifty years, the majority of scholarship and reappraisals of the rococo correspond with the first aspect by recontextualizing eighteenth-century art in modern dialogues about racial politics, social divisions, and gender identity. The second aspect—the continued influence of rococo on subsequent artistic production—has been acknowledged in recent scholarship and variously defined as the "rococo echo", neo-rococo, and the "rococo curve", but these discussions are typically broadly inclusive in their scope and include rococo furniture and the decorative arts.

As asserted by Melissa Hyde, "it has become possible to speak of the Rococo as a cultural mode of being, thought, and representation rather than exclusively as a formal idiom,"[59]. Consequently, a distinction arises between *the* rococo, the terminological classification for some eighteenth-century French paintings, and *a* rococo, its persistence as a current of artistic influence. Its impact and existence specifically within the medium

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[59] Melissa Lee Hyde, *Making Up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Critics* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 11.

of painting merits equal consideration, especially when considering that modern artists such as Andy Warhol engaged with the rococo, yet it remains a neglected and overlooked aspect of their careers. Though it may seem radical to suggest that twentieth-century artists expressed a rococo impulse, to disregard its potential validity and the capacity is to also dilute its enduring legacy and only brush the surface of its long-deserved and long-denied status of significance.

Through the assertion of *a* rococo—its surviving current of influence—the parallelism and shared ideologies between the supposed binaries of rococo and contemporary painting become perceptible. Modern and Rococo artists are ultimately attentive to a similar set of artistic concerns; the cult of individuality, autonomy of the artist, primacy of subject over narrative, and the materiality of paint. By acknowledging that rococo echoes can be manifested as stylistic impulses and ideological expressions, not necessarily presenting as mimetic or formulaic copies of eighteenth-century paintings, it becomes possible to consider the postcolonial, post-Old Master, poststructuralist relevance of the rococo.

The rococo that is resurrected by modern artists does not solely reference the isolated, eighteenth-century rococo but rather the broad ensemble of its reception history and acquired meanings. Any post-ancien régime century expression of the rococo impulse inevitably refers to the original rococo works of Fragonard, Watteau, and Boucher, but also invokes the centuries of popular and scholarly discourse, history of reception. Katie Scott, in her 1995 study, *The Rococo interior*, posits: "…criticism did not defeat the rococo; on the contrary it resurrected it, cutting it loose from its moorings in decoration and setting it free to prosper as a richly derogatory sign in a multitude of

other discourses,”.[60] Conscious of its accumulated feminine, political, social and moral innuendos, modern artists have recognized the subversive potential and deployed its historical criticism to generate productive modern discourse.

In the twentieth century, feminist ontology established itself as a central preoccupation of modern scholarship, prompting new perspectives and methods of interpretation within the field of Art History. Traditionally considered to be a masculine domain, the artistic profession historically denied women from being considered as serious artists and excluded them from acceptance into the Academy and other artistic institutions, with a few rare exceptions. In its historic ties to patriarchal ancien régime society, interpretation as a “feminine” aesthetic, and prominence of female figures centrally-located within the composition, rococo paintings present themselves as ripe for feminist interpretation. Within the feminist art history dialogue, Boucher and Fragonard’s lustful depictions of libertine women pose a new question: are they enshrining or exploiting their female subjects?

Within the modern rococo echo, the nineteenth century’s assertion of the rococo’s “feminine” character, and its consequent connotation of artifice and superficiality, is often emphasized to incite questions about female agency and the cultural legitimacy of feminine aesthetics. In the words of Hyde, “In these current reincarnations, rococo is more vehemently “feminine” than ever…”[61], a claim that is substantiated through the oeuvre of Florine Stettheimer. As a modernist painter, feminist, and salonnière, Stettheimer’s ethereal and ebullient social portraits of the New York elite could be

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[60] Quoted by Satish Padiyar, “Out of time: Fragonard, with David,” in Hyde and Scott, eds., *Rococo Echo*, 219.
[61] Hyde, “Rococo Redux,” 13.

described as the *fête galantes* of the Jazz Age. Her grammar of artifice, spectacle, and saturated palette resonates with the rococo's stylistic tendencies, and as an elite member of society herself, her depictions of *haut-monde* gatherings allude to the rococo's aristocratic lineage within modern society. In a retrospective essay on Stettheimer's career, prominent feminist art historian Linda Nochlin assertively characterized her aesthetic within the title, "Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive", acknowledging and legitimizing the notion of the survival of a rococo idiom within twentieth-century artistic production.[62] Furthermore, Nochlin's title dismisses the prevailing opinion of rococo as a passé, outdated, and irrelevant style, asserting its merit as a progressive impulse by employing the term in reference to body of work critically defined as modernist and avant-garde.

Stettheimer's *Sunday Afternoon in the Country* (figure 4) exemplifies her modern-rococo aesthetic, described by some critics as "flamboyant feminism"[63], and demonstrates the ways in which her artistic vocabulary invokes the rococo as an aesthetic and ideological influence. Stettheimer's conscious departure from traditional aesthetic concerns and moreover her departure from modernist paradigms evoke the familiar undertaking of her rococo predecessors, who abandoned the standards of classicism and the Academy in pursuit of an idiosyncratic artistic form. The composition is brimming with detail and the whimsical garden setting suggests a fictive reality, where trees are

[62] Linda Nochlin, "Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive," *Art in America* (September 1980): 64–83.

[63] The term has been used by various authors to describe her body of work, including the following example, Alexxa Gotthardt, "The Flamboyant Feminism of Cult Artist Florine Stettheimer," Artsy, published March 15, 2017, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-flamboyant-feminism-cult-artist-florine-stettheimer.

pink and emerald-green and the sinuous, elongated figures appear to be weightless, suspended in the ether above a pastel pink foreground. The palette of jewel-toned hues and unmodulated fields of color in her realm of fantasy exude a sense of rococo frivolity, and Stettheimer's improbable interpretations of color suggest a conscious articulation of artifice. The figures in the Stettheimer's garden are not eighteenth-century aristocrats. Instead, they depict Stettheimer's own personal acquaintances, including distinguished New York socialites and luminaries such as photographer Edward Steichen and fellow artist Marcel Duchamp in the lower left foreground. The familiar figures in her works articulate its contemporary relevance to the viewer and signify the presence of an elite social milieu—the modern aristocracy of New York society. Derided as frivolous social portraits and deliberate artifice, Stettheimer's paintings were dismissed in her time and denied the merit or distinction of "serious" art. Ironically, the contemporary criticism that dismissed her art decorative and trivial echoes Diderot's eighteenth-century critique of the rococo. Unlike Boucher, Watteau, and Fragonard who were largely successful during their lifetimes, the vast majority of her paintings remained unsold at the time of her death in 1944, although later generations recognized her achievements and redeemed her reputation as a notable artist.

Returning to Nochlin's seminal essay, she recovers the message and social consciousness within Stettheimer's paintings by deploying Susan Sontag's 1964 definition of "Camp" as "a certain mode of aestheticism".[64] Elaborating on Sontag's interpretation, Nochlin distinguishes the essential motive of the camp aesthetic:

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[64] Nochlin, "Rococo Subversive," quoting "Notes on 'Camp'" in Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 277.

"opposing both the moralism of high culture and the tension between moral and aesthetic passion which she [Sontag] finds characteristic of avant-garde art,".[65] As discussed in the previous chapter, the tension between moral and aesthetic concerns was fundamental to rococo discourse, articulated by Diderot and reiterated by critics throughout the nineteenth century. Nochlin notably only uses the term "rococo" once in her essay on Stettheimer, but her commentary on the Camp sensibility invokes further parallels to its eighteenth-century precedent. She later defines the Camp sensibility as "disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical", but identifies this as its subversive potential, a subversiveness which "may be quite validly viewed as social or political commitment in its own right,".[66] In their refusal to explicitly declare a social or political consciousness, Stettheimer's works and Nochlin's analysis proves that "feminine" art and the rococo current can possess intrinsic meaning and socio-political relevance even when not expressly concerned with a moral or didactic narrative. Furthermore, the façade of artifice, ornamentation, and frivolity—the aesthetic qualities that classify her works as "feminine"—do not preclude cultural authenticity and transcendent meaning, as demonstrated by Nochlin's reassessment of Stettheimer's oeuvre. The feminine façade, dismissed as purely decorative or intellectually bereft by rococo critics, is reconceptualized as a productive and subversive character within Stettheimer's paintings. Obscured beneath an unthreatening "feminine" façade, her paintings deploy a rococo-subversive aesthetic to effectively harbor an expression of sub-cultural ideals and interrogate the legitimacy of patriarchal social structures and the masculine-feminine

[65] Nochlin, "Rococo Subversive,".
[66] Nochlin, "Rococo Subversive,".

dichotomy that persisted in early twentieth-century society. The Goncourt's claim of rococo's inherent feminine character may have skewed perceptions and perpetuated misconceptions about its origins, but it also depoliticized the rococo aesthetic and rendered it useful for modern and contemporary appropriations, wherein "depth and meaning are disguised by distracting prettiness".[67] Through Stettheimer, it becomes clear that the simultaneous admiration of femininity and its dismissal as trivial within Western culture persisted from the eighteenth century into the 1900s, an attitude that overlooks its subversive potential and capacity for social rhetoric. The rococo guise of artificiality, femininity, artifice, and ornamentation employed by Stettheimer demonstrates the provocative potential of the rococo aesthetic within the modern artistic program to engage in veiled critiques without the threat of being perceived as radical or heretical to the existing social order. Summarized in *Rococo Echo*, "Rococo has offered a certain mode of rebellion against the constraints of the modernist grid, as well as an assertion of alternative sexual politics that stresses the power of femininity and the blurring of traditional dichotomies and hierarchies of gender"[68].

The parallelism of rococo and Camp in the first half of the twentieth century, identified through Nochlin's description of Stettheimer as rococo-subversive, was fundamentally tied to the artistic expression of sub-cultural impulses and a conscious attempt by artists to develop an alternative and personal artistic idiom. Though he is most widely recognized for his Pop-Art aesthetic, Andy Warhol was "transcendentally camp"

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[67] Rebecca Arnold, "The New Rococo: Sofia Coppola and fashions in contemporary femininity," in *Rococo echo*, eds. Hyde and Scott, 297.
[68] Allison Unruh, "Warhol's Rococo: style and subversion in the 1950s," in *Rococo Echo*, eds. Hyde and Scott, 273.

and a expressed a rococo sentiment in the early phase of his art during the 1950s, an aspect of his career that is frequently overlooked. Like Stettheimer, Warhol was drawn to the campiness of the rococo, its aesthetic of artifice and frivolity, and its capacity to deploy coded commentaries on social and moral expectations. Warhol strategically employed the rococo echo in two ways: as an aesthetic vocabulary for satirical societal critiques and as a tool for self-representation and identity politics. Allison Unruh's essay, *Warhol's Rococo: style and subversion in the* 1950s, recognizes that, similarly to Stettheimer, Warhol rarely made explicit visual references to the Rococo. Instead, the rococo manifested in his work as an ideological impulse, produced via "the melding of Rococo and camp".[69]

In 1955, while working as a commercial artists for the I. Miller shoe company, Warhol produced a portfolio series of eighteen hand-colored lithographs titled *À la recherche du shoe perdu* (figure 5). Each lithograph featured a unique sketch-like prototype of a woman's shoe, most of which appear to reference eighteenth-century styles, accompanied by witty captions of pop-culture reference by the poet Ralph Pomeroy.[70] Riffing on Marcel Proust's famous novel, *À la Recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, or *Remembrance of Things Past*), the title of Warhol's series unconsciously evokes the "lost shoe" of Fragonard's swinging woman*,* whose pink, heeled slipper appears to have slipped from her foot at the height movement and is suspended in the air. The perhaps unintentional allusion is made even more evocative in

[69] Unruh, "Warhol's Rococo," 280.
[70] The Museum of Modern Art, gallery label from *Andy Warhol: Campbell's Soup Cans and Other Works, 1953-1967*, April 25-October 18, 2015, accessed November 2, 2020, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/17459.

Warhol's decision to use a French title, despite that the image captions written in English. While the connection between Warhol and Fragonard may seem contrived, according to his biographers Warhol discovered and admired the Rococo works stored in the New York Public Library's image collection during the 1950s, just after Fiske Kimball's *The Creation of the Rococo* (1943) had resurrected Boucher and Fragonard into the conscience of the American public.[71]

Regardless of whether or not *À la recherche du shoe perdu* was a deliberate reference to his coinciding research on rococo paintings and drawings, a current of rococo influence can be identified within his works of the period. Furthermore, by depicting shoe designs as his subject, a material commodity that evokes glamour, femininity, fetish, and self-image, Warhol daringly attempted to elevate commercial advertising into the realm of "high art" and provoked the question of what dictates "high" versus "low" art. This question had also plagued the reputation of rococo artists during their own lifetimes, not only by opponents who defamed the style as feminine and decorative, but also by critics who construed their reliance on private patronage and reproduction of their paintings through printmaking as a financially-motivated agenda. In 1769 a contemporary critic named Louis Petit de Bauchemont disparaged Fragonard for "working for money" rather than "for posterity", suggesting he turned his back on a prestigious career as a history painter in exchange for the financial reward of seductive subjects with aristocratic appeal.[72] Boucher, in particular, was associated with taboo consumerism through his commercial collaborations designing for Sevres porcelain and

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[71] Scott, "Foreward, Rococo echo," 21.
[72] Bauchemont paraphrased in Perrin Stein, *Fragonard: Drawing Triumphant: Works from New York Collections* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), 2.

the Gobelins tapestry factory. Blurring the boundary between high and low art, commercialism and culture, Warhol's *À la recherche du shoe perdu* resurrects the criticisms of the rococo's eighteenth-century opponents and the historic disregard of "feminine" artistic expressions.

Many of his works during the 1950s were characterized by the ambiguous representation of gender roles and expressed a rococo impulse by adorning men with effeminate iconography such as butterflies and flowers. A recent publication of his early drawings, "Andy Warhol: Early Drawings of Love, Sex, and Desire," recognizes his works that were rejected from exhibition due to their overt depictions of non-normative sexuality, including two of his pen drawings, *Decorated Penis* (figure 6) and *Male Nude (c. 1957)*.[73] Yet again, the cultural anxieties of morality and aesthetics that prevailed in eighteenth-century rococo criticism are resurrected within the rococo echo two hundred years later, as early twentieth-century society adhered to rigid gender roles and homosexuality was taboo. As a gay male artist, Warhol himself did not fit within the traditional gender paradigm, and the ambiguity of gender expressions within his art may be perceived as the manifestation of an artistic process of self-identification.

Decorated Penis is overtly phallic, depicting a sketched outline an erect penis subversively embellished with rococo-esque, feminine-coded iconography of floral motifs and hearts and wrapped in a bow, a popular motif in both men and women rococo fashion and now a decisively feminine symbol. *Male Nude (c. 1957)* is a similarly daring depiction of the effeminized male sex, partially eclipsed by seashells in an iconoclast

[73] Michael Dayton Hermann, ed., *Andy Warhol: Early Drawings of Love, Sex, and Desire* (Taschen, 2020).

interpretation of the rococo shell motif.[74] In *Male Nude (c.1957)* and *Decorated Penis*, Warhol subverted gender expectations by deploying feminine iconology in the context of masculine sexuality, deconstructing the paradigm of dichotomous sexuality and simultaneously invoking his identity as a gay artist. His playful and imaginative yet explicitly sexual drawings are suggestive of the erotic proclivities of the Boucher and Fragonard, and just as their rococo paintings were derided as moral transgressions, Warhol's drawings were subjected to the same vein of criticism. Warhol and the "original" rococo painters refused to conform to the established rules of society and ignored moral censorship in the pursuit of artistic self-individuation.

[74] Unruh, "Warhol's Rococo," 285.

Chapter Four
Rococo-Appropriation and the Postmodern Condition

The obscurity of the rococo's signification, diluted by its various nineteenth-century interpretations as a feminine style, a political gesture, and a social commodity, has rendered its meaning ambiguous and therefore versatile to adaptation by contemporary artists through pastiche or parody. Through the postmodern strategy of appropriation, contemporary rococo artworks have the dual capacity to celebrate hyper-femininity and deconstruct gender dichotomies, appreciate luxury and criticize elitist hedonism, commemorate history and interrogate its prejudices. Used by contemporary artists like Yinka Shonibare and Genieve Figgis, the visual parallelism of appropriation deliberately deploys the rococo's subversive character to address relevant modern concerns about race, gender, and society. Through their direct and immediately perceptible allusions to old master works, contemporary artists construct a juxtaposition that exposes the parallels between ancien régime and contemporary culture to incite questions about the modern condition of artifice, corruption, and inequality.

To elaborate on the notion of parallelism and appropriation, Yinka Shonibare's sculptural installation *The Swing (After Fragonard)* (figure 7) visually appropriates Fragonard's *The Swing* in order to address contemporary concerns—including misogyny, globalism, and racial identity—through the postcolonial lens. Shonibare's instillation features a headless mannequin suspended from the ceiling, imitating the gesture of Fragonard's swinging woman and serving as a physical, three-dimensional manifestation of the rococo painting. In his modern interpretation, Shonibare substitutes the voluminous pink fabric of the *robe à la française* with an "African" textile, an important feature of

the artist's social critique. Acclaimed critical theorist, Homi Bhabha, defines the function of post-colonialism as "the urgency of making present in the display of art what is often rendered unpresentable or left unrepresented—violence, trauma, dispossession—in the making of a global cultural perspective,".[75] Through his appropriation and modern revision of the familiar rococo painting, Shonibare reveals the "otherness" absent from the painting as a result of the Western canon's transnational cultural claims and makes visible the violence and exploitation concealed within Fragonard's lighthearted depiction of French aristocracy. His reinterpretation of Fragonard's work lays claim to the modern globalized world by making the Other visible, sustaining the postcolonial impulse to "replace these grand narratives with new ethical demands on modes of historical interpretation,"[76]. Furthermore, his appropriation of a distinguished rococo artwork invokes the question of authenticity that is central to his interrogation of the dominant, white male perspective.

Shonibare defers this question of authenticity from a concern about the "originality" of artistic appropriations to concerns about the authenticity of cultural production, particularly through his choice of fabric. To the uninformed viewer, the ornately patterned textile of the dress "appears African". They are actually Dutch-wax fabrics, a product of European imperialism, originally based on the motifs of Indonesian batiks and manufactured in England and Holland in the early nineteenth-century. The European imitation textiles were eventually marketed to their West African colonies as a

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[75] Homi Bhabha, "Postmodernism/Postcolonialism," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 450.
[76] Valérie Morrison, "Yinka Shonibare, MBE, and Satrorial Parody: Costuming the Body as a Subversive Practice," *Études britanniques contemporaines* 51 (December 2016): 4.

cheap alternative to local cloth, were they have since been integrated into local visual culture. Because they are often misinterpreted as African in heritage, these fabrics symbolize the potential dangers of misinterpretation and stereotyping in cultural discourse and signify the complex economic and cultural entanglements of European imperialism. Shonibare capitalizes on the "otherness" of the fabric and the ambiguity of its identity—as neither Dutch nor African—to produce a discourse on cultural hybridity.

Born in England and raised between Lagos and London, Shonibare proclaims his own identity as a "postcolonial hybrid"[77] and reinscribes his unique heritage in Fragonard's narrative through his use of fabric. Once again, the rococo current functions as a vehicle for self-identification of the artist, expressed by Shonibare's ethnicity, Warhol's sexual identity, and Stettheimer's femininity and privileged social status. Informed by his own dual heritage, Shonibare's use of the wax-fabrics simultaneously invokes the notion of hybridity and criticizes the inequity and exploitation produced by European colonialism and its commodification of culture. Consequently, Warhol's kitchy lithographs can be interpreted as satires of fragile masculinity and consumerism, and Stettheimer's social portraits become parodies of her own elite social milieu.

In his elaboration on postcolonial theory, Homi Bhabha explores mimicry and hybridity as ways of negotiating the power relations between colonizer and colonized. By re-contextualizing wax-print fabrics on the body of an aristocratic rococo woman, Shonibare uses both mimicry and hybridity to visually represent the "Postmodern

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[77] Quoted, "I am a Post-colonial hybrid. The idea of some kind of fixed identity of belonging to an authentic culture is quite foreign to my experience," in Yinka Shonibare, "Fabric and the Irony of Authenticity," in *Annotations 1: Mixed Belongings and Unspecified Destinations,* ed. Nikos Papastergiadis (London: International Institute of Visual Arts, 1996), 40.

Condition"[78], which insists on a rejection of universalist histories and the erosion of historicity. Whereas in Fragonard's painting the history of the colonized is completely omitted, Shonibare makes the associations between aristocracy, imperialism, and exploitation unavoidable, thereby attempting to recuperate the forgotten histories of the marginalized identities within Western art.

Based on the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and developed by film critic Laura Mulvey, the concept of "the gaze" has been expanded by modern feminist art historians, referring to the network of relationships produced by the acts of seeing and being seen. Mulvey proposes that a gendered dichotomy is produced through the male gaze, often assuming the dominant perspective heterosexual, white male projected onto a female object of desire within Western art; "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly".[79] In *The Swing*, the presence of the gaze is initially manifested in the relationship between the swinging woman and her male suitor, peering up her skirt through the shroud of vegetation. The act of his voyeurism is then transposed onto the viewer through the perspectival arrangement of the composition, thereby implicating the viewer in the pictorial scenario by assuming the role of voyeur.

Shonibare expands the function of the gaze in his installation beyond the male gaze to the concept of the imperial and postcolonial gaze—a reflection of the relationship between colonial powers and their colonies. The multivalent implications of the gaze in

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[78] Bhabha, "Postmodernism/Postcolonialism," 450.
[79] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no.3 (Autumn 1975): 366.

art historical theory was suggested in an essay by Margaret Olin, who articulated an "awareness of the extent to which the gaze the painting answers is not only an artistic one but also the powerful gaze of a wealthy patron or multinational concern,".[80] Shonibare activates the postcolonial gaze by omitting the two male figures from Fragonard's painting, and in doing so, brings questions of eighteenth and nineteenth-century social hierarchy and repressive cultural practices into the present. Because of its three-dimensionality and the absence of Fragonard's male figures, the contemporary viewer physically occupies their position in relation to the swinging woman and is implicated to assume the role of voyeur. The viewer, as voyeur, thus internalizes the gaze and must confront the implications of their voyeurism, complicit in the objectification of the female figure and the upholding of hegemonic colonial order.

Colonialism was founded on the Western claim to cultural supremacy and produced a system of binaries—colonizer and colonized, Western and Other, civilized and primitive—which Bhabha emphatically rebukes in his postcolonial theory. By calling attention to these binaries, Shonibare revisits Fragonard's painting which becomes a scene of fetishism and critique of the ambivalence of voyeurism. Furthermore, the scopophilic tendencies associated with the male gaze also apply the postcolonial gaze, and through the self-reflexive act of voyeurism the viewer is urged to reflect on the modern condition and the perpetuation of racism, sexual objectification, and economic class disparities.

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[80] Margaret Olin, "Gaze," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003): 326.

The function of the postcolonial gaze in *The Swing (after Fragonard)* yields an examination of parallels between questions of social hierarchy and cultural identity in the colonial epoch and the modern era. Shonibare's bi-cultural identity informs the questions he provokes through his composition, engaging with notions of hybridity to reject a system of identity hinged on binaries. In his installation, the swinging woman takes the form of a headless mannequin, an overt allusion to the Revolution's Reign of Terror and the role of guillotines in the mass execution of the aristocracy.[81] Considering that the French Revolution occurred just twenty-five years after Fragonard painted *The Swing*, Shonibare's modern interpretation of the rococo painting using a headless mannequin cautions the rigid class distinctions, exploitation of labor, and excessive indulgence of the upper class that sparked the French Revolution in 1789. Additionally, the questions of identity and hybridity, most explicitly signaled by the fabric of her dress, are also provoked through her indeterminate skin tone. The inability to assign a distinct ethnicity to the mannequin—a simulacrum of Fragonard's white, French aristocrat—functions as a counter-narrative to the hegemonic institutions of colonization. In his rejection of binary categories of identity, Shonibare participates in a counter-discourse to the dominance of the Western hegemonic structures, that according to Bhabha, "seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation".[82] By inscribing the hybrid narrative within the context of a rococo painting, Shonibare demonstrates the constructedness of marginalized identities and disputes the "linear perspective upon which the West makes its claim to cultural supremacy…".[83]

[81] Valérie Morrison, "Sartorial Parody," 8.
[82] Bhabha, "Postmodernism/Postcolonialism," 447.
[83] Ibid*,* 448.

Shonibare's appropriation of Fragonard's *The Swing* in his sculptural installation, *The Swing (after Fragonard)* calls into question the modern implication of the social hierarchy and repressive cultural institutions of ancien régime France. The intentional act of appropriation by Shonibare illuminates how the cultural mechanisms of racism, sexism, and elitism were already being performed within Fragonard's painting, and demonstrates how art can be an agent for cultural awareness in the post-colonial era by recuperating the lost or excluded histories of the marginalized.

In its post-modern manifestations and twenty-first-century appropriations, the Rococo continues to provoke social anxieties to generate critical discourse and push the boundaries of convention to question the value of heterodox forms in artistic representation. In her appropriations of old master paintings, Contemporary artist Genieve Figgis corrupts the rococo realm of fantasy by renegotiating viewer expectations of its sensuous, buoyant aesthetic character and visual tropes. Based on the eponymous canvases by Fragonard and Boucher, Figgis' *The Confession of love (after Fragonard)* (figure 8) and *Madame de Pompadour (after Boucher)* (figure 9) maintain the compositional arrangements of the original works, permitting their immediate recognition as conceptual appropriations, but the darkened tonalities and murky application of paint assert their unquestionably modern origin. *The Confession of love (after Fragonard)* reveals the decay of Fragonard's lush, verdant garden, neglected over the centuries and left to stew into a swampy puddle of decaying vegetation. There is still a perceptible sense of intimacy in the interaction between the two aristocratic figures, but the obscurity of the woman's face and body denies any potential subjection to the male gaze. Figgis' painting *Madame de Pompadour (after Boucher)* similarly produces a sense of anxiety

through its darkened tonality and ominous ambience, and the face of the female figure is smudged and distorted as though Boucher's painting were held up to a candle and left to melt.

Figgis vaguely yet recognizably adheres to the compositional arrangement of the original canvases by Boucher and Fragonard, creating visual parallelism that permits their immediate recognition and association with their eighteenth-century reference works. Based on Fragonard's *The Confession of Love*, Figgis's *The Confession of love (after Fragonard)* (2018) reveals that Fragonard's lush, verdant garden has been neglected for centuries, left untouched and uncultivated to stew into a swampy puddle of decaying vegetation. The dark tonality of *Madame de Pompadour (after Boucher)* creates an ominous ambience and produces a tangible sense of anxiety, and the face of Pompadour is smudged and distorted as though Boucher's Pompadour held by a candle and allowed to melt. With her distinctive physiognomy obscured by blotches of paint, Figgis' woman is hardly discernible as Madame de Pompadour, with the only indications of her social rank being the sumptuous ornamentation of her distinctive *robe a la francais*.

Her canvases, like zombies of the rococo, are composed of grotesque and incoherent forms, and by obscuring the features of Boucher and Fragonard's forgotten aristocrats, their elite identities are rendered imperceptible. The macabre appropriations resonate with a broad range of rococo sentiments, permitting various interpretations of their signification. To rococo proponents, Figgis' ghostly canvases might symbolize the abandonment of the rococo masterpieces by the modern public, discarded over the centuries and ultimately grieved in Figgis' paintings as elegies of the dismal fate of Boucher and Watteau's legacies. To the defenders of contemporary art, or to those

apathetic about the rococo, the decaying canvases are evocations of what the rococo truly was, the ill-fated and hedonistic pursuit of trivial aristocratic aesthetic. Without giving validity to either claim or interpretation, Figgis' paintings emphasize the perceived dichotomy between rococo and contemporary art, and by straddling the boundary between the two realms, her appropriations suggest they are not mutually exclusive and that the old masters possess enduring relevance once recontextualized in a contemporary dialogue.

Conclusion

Through the continued rococo expressions of living artists and new perspectives in scholarship, the narrative of the rococo and its legacy will continue to expand, and to quote Ellen Lupton in *Rococo Echo*, " The energy and attitude of the rococo has continued to live and evolve, like a mutating germ passing through a gauntlet of host organisms,".[84] Despite the recent efforts by scholars like Mary Sheriff and Melissa Lee Hyde to reassert relevance and significance of the eighteenth-century rococo, it continues to be denied serious consideration despite the persistence of a rococo echo within modern and contemporary art.

The notion of rococo survival is precariously reliant the non-evolutionary, interdisciplinary model of art history, espoused by Warburg and developed by Didi-Huberman. The rigid concept of a successional, chronological history of art is still engrained within the American education system, even at the collegiate level, as survey courses and textbooks usually divide groups of artist and works into an over-simplified, easily-digestible series of "periods" or "styles"—from Renaissance, to Baroque, to Rococo, to Neoclassical, and so on. This chronological framework, while easy to interpret, reproduces an obfuscating notion of artistic development as a systematic institutional process that consequently diminishes the Rococo to a footnote of the Baroque chapter. By revising the established academic structures, a familiar pursuit within the rococo's own history, future generations may succeed in distancing themselves

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[84] Ellen Lupton, "The Modern Curve: Form, Structure, and Image in the Twentieth Century and Beyond," in *Rococo echo*, eds. Hyde and Scott, 242.

from historical prejudices, while still acknowledging their impact on the narrative of art history. Modern society has set a precedent for opening new dialogues on once taboo subjects, questioning indoctrinated values, and interrogating cultural prejudice, so why is this not the case for the rococo?

As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout the previous chapters, the aesthetic and formal qualities of rococo paintings, past and present, do not preclude authenticity and transcendent meaning. If aristocratic patronage sealed the rococo's fate and its reputation as an aesthetic to artifice and ornament, than according the precedent set by rococo, Neoclassicism would also be condemned for its royal patronage, deemed as propagandistic and equally devoid of meaning and merit. Artists like Jacques-Louis David and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, however, have been bestowed a more positive reputation, heralded as a noble and edifying style by later generations. The disparity between the treatment of the legacy of Rococo and Neoclassical artists, also acknowledging the preserved cultural status of post-rococo artists like Courbet and Stettheimer, thus suggests to dismiss the rococo as "aristocratic" and "decorative" today is to inevitably uphold a cultural hierarchy by accepting the verdict of past generations rather than upholding our modern perspective. Similarly, the reputation of modern and contemporary art is not diminished by its elite patronage—the twenty-first-century aristocracy of ultra-wealthy collectors and high-society. The modern-day dismissal of the rococo clings to the assertion that its aesthetic of ornament and artifice precludes intellectual meaning and critical recognition, a reductive assumption I attempted to disprove in chapter three by constructing parallels between rococo, modern, and contemporary visual tropes. Like the rococo, contemporary artwork typically rejects

didacticism and narrative structure, and as a result are as elusive as the rococo in the interpretation of meaning. Thus, it must be presumed that the denigration of rococo's reputation is not a consequent of its style or aesthetic, but is the result of decades of post-Revolution social and political discourse.

The perspective that rococo paintings merely exist as pretty, but unassertive, pictures completely disregards its historical and continuing influence as a heterodox, transgressive, and subversive impulse generated by eighteenth-century artists who boldly turned against convention in their pursuit of free expression and artistic self-individuation. While we cannot disregard its historicity and its history of reception, we can attempt to overturn the verdict on the rococo by reassessing its original eighteenth-century works, recognizing its impact on revising traditional framework, and acknowledging its persistence within contemporary artistic production.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767-1768; oil on canvas; 81 x 64 cm; courtesy Warburg.edu. Location: The Wallace Collection, London

Fig. 2. François Boucher, *The Four Seasons: Summer,* 1755; oil on canvas; 57.2 x 72.7 cm.; © The Frick Collection, Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, Location: The Frick Collection

Fig. 3. Gustave Courbet, *Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine (Summer),* 1857; oil on canvas; 174 x 206 cm.; Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, Location: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Paris

Fig. 4. Florine Stettheimer, *Sunday Afternoon in the Country,* 1917; oil on canvas; 198 x 92.5 cm.; Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. Location: The Cleveland Museum of Art

Fig. 5. Andy Warhol, *À La Recherche Du Shoe Perdu*, circa 1957; 16 offset lithographs, 15 with hand-coloring, 247 x 348 mm (sheet dimensions); © 2021 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Courtesy of Sotheby's

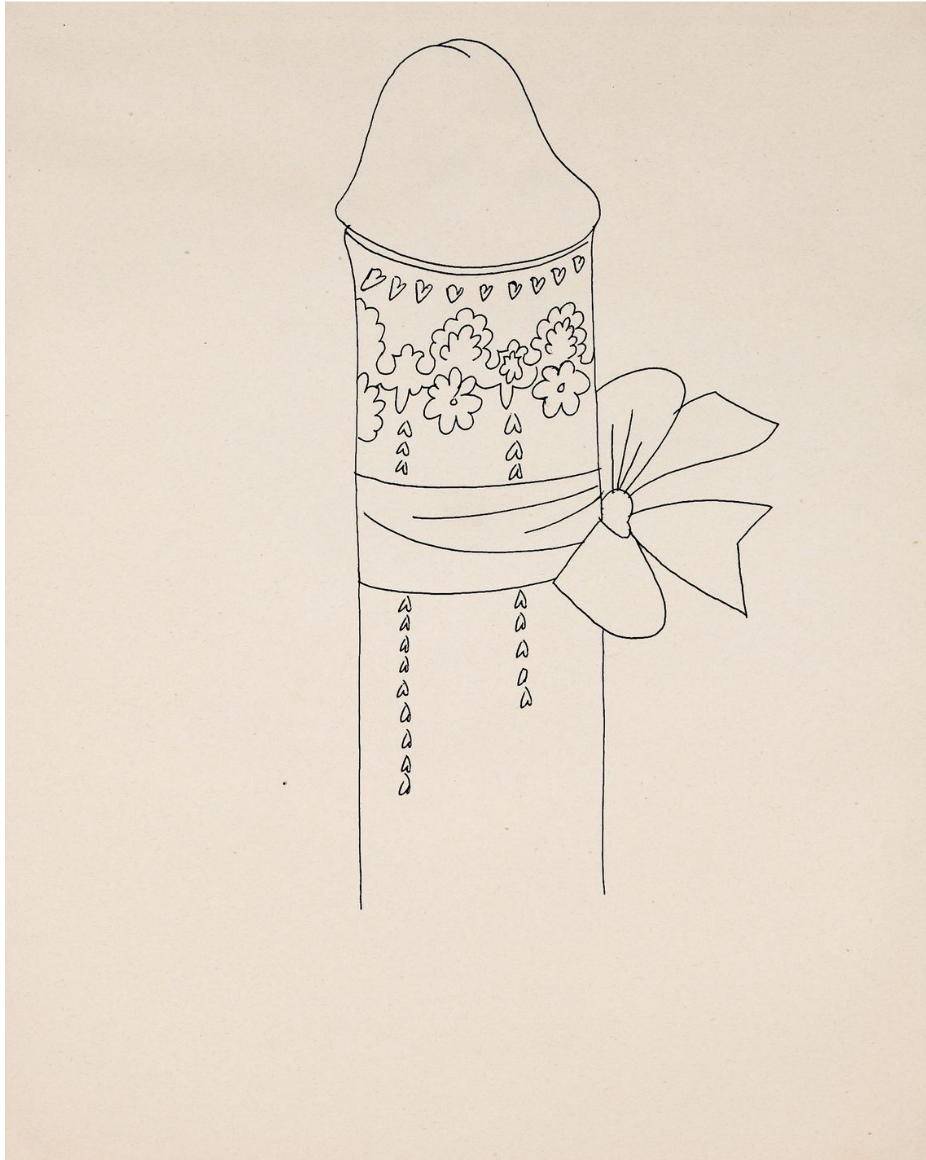

Fig. 6. Andy Warhol, *Decorated Penis,* c.1957; ballpoint pen; dimensions unknown; The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, Founding Collection, contribution The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Courtesy of © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Fig. 7. Yinka Shonibare CBE, *The Swing (after Fragonard)*, 2001; installation; dimensions unknown; Artistic work © Yinka Shonibare, courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, Photograph © Tate. Location: Tate Gallery, London

Fig. 8. Genieve Figgis, *The confession of love (after Fragonard)*, 2008; acrylic on canvas; 120 x 100 cm; Artistic work © Genieve Figgis, courtesy the artist and Almine Rech Gallery, London, Photo courtesy the artist. Location unknown

Fig. 9. Genieve Figgis, *Madame de Pompadour (after Boucher)*, 2016; acrylic on canvas; 39 x 31 in.; Photograph © Jiménez - Colón Collection. Location: Jiménez-Colón Collection, Ponce, PR.

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