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ART 110

4 February 2020

Focus Art Assessment 1: *Happy Accidents of the Swing* by Jean-Honoré Fragonard



Happy Accidents of the Swing

Jean-Honoré Fragonard created *Happy Accidents of the Swing* in 1767 with oil on a $31^{7/8} \times 25^{1/4}$ canvas.

This piece is currently on display at the Wallace Collection in London and the Bridgeman Art Library.

Happy Accidents of the Swing includes most of the visual elements of art, especially light, color, and space.

The shading of the dark trees varies with the light coming from the clearing between the trees, which Fragonard highlights with tinting the clearing and shading the unlit corners. Additionally, the subject of the piece—the

woman on the swing—is situated in the center of the light, while the men surrounding her are reaching for the light from their dark shadows. Fragonard uses color to further distinguish the woman from the surrounding trees and men. While other characters are dressed in neutral clothing that almost camouflages them into their environment, the woman wears a bright pink dress that does not match other elements of the painting. This element draws attention to the center of the work, further expressing that the woman is the subject. Finally, Fragonard exercises space by creating spatial depth between the scene at the forefront of the painting and the trees in the distance. The woman and surrounding trees are larger and more clarified than the patch of trees in the

background. The trees in the background also have a blue tint on them, highlighting atmospheric distance.

Among other principles of design, Fragonard uses balance, directional forces, and contrast. Fragonard's piece has asymmetrical balance; if you separate the artwork from the top right corner to the bottom left corner, you identify an equal balance of darkness (the shade from the trees and the shadow beneath the swinging woman) and light (the bright clearing between the treetops and the illuminating effect of the woman's dress, as well as the light cast on the trees beside her). Directional forces draw the viewer's eye in a diagonal direction to land on the swinging woman, then to the plant life and light around her. Finally, *Happy Accidents of the Swing* indicates significant contrast—the dim shadows and treetops are a stark contrast from the bright dress and the path of sunlight from between the treetops.

Overall, Fragonard's painting is a bright, delightful, and harmonious masterpiece. The work in its entirety moves the viewer to contentment and happiness. Furthermore, this painting elegantly depicts aristocratic life and emotions; as the woman swings, a young man admires her from the bottom left corner. *Happy Accidents of the Swing*, as foreshadowed by the title, implies that the shoe flying from the woman's foot will land in the young man's lap, thereby providing an opportunity for the two to speak. Such opportunities for conversation and further courtship were a strong social goal for most aristocrats at this time. Fragonard's piece is beautiful, seeking to tell the beginning of a potential love story and capture an uplifting moment. Fragonard accomplishes this with lively, yet gentle, motion and complementary color schemes that do not clash. Fragonard arguably utilizes an analogous scheme with a dash of complementary colors; while most of the piece is composed of blues and greens, the woman's dress and a few small flowers in the painting contrast without clashing. Rather, these separate hues complement each other without overpowering or canceling each other out.

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Focus Art Assessment 2 | Chapters 6-14

Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *Happy Accidents of the Swing*



Happy Accidents of the Swing by Jean-Honoré

Fragonard is made with oil on canvas. In the Middle Ages, oil paint was originally made by mixing pigments and vegetable oils, including linseed, walnut, and poppyseed. In contrast to other painting methods, oils have a longer drying time, better opacity, stronger covering power, and better transparency when painted thinly. Fifteenth-century Flemish paints made oil paint with linseed oil pressed from flax seeds. Early artists used oil paint on wood panels covered with gesso. Oil paints allow a variety of artistic techniques by being applied thickly (impasto) or thinly, wet onto wet, or wet onto dry. An oil painting is considered a “direct painting” if it is painted wet onto wet and completed in one sitting.

In contrast to other mediums, oil allows better opacity, covering power, and transparency, as well as a slow drying time that provides more time to blend colors and change elements of the painting. Oil also remains flexible, even when painted in many layers, allowing early artists to move from painting oil paint on heavy pieces of wood to painting on

canvas stretched over wooden frames instead. This flexibility allowed the artwork to be removed from the wooden frames and rolled up for easier transportation.

If *Happy Accidents of the Swing* were a charcoal drawing instead of an oil painting, it would be monochromatic and lose its brightness. Additionally, the artwork would be easily smudged, blurred, and erased, putting its lifespan at risk. While the work would be able to maintain some elements to a degree (such as depth, shape, and movement), *Happy Accidents of the Swing* would lose the dramatic effects of light and color in the process. This loss would affect the initial attractiveness of the artwork to the eye, causing the viewer to require a closer study of the black-and-white piece in order to appreciate its beauty instead of having his or her attention caught at first glance by a bright splash of pink against a dark green background.

If I was an architect and had to make a space for this artwork, I would put it in a library. Patrons who enter the library to read or study would get to see the piece. I would choose this location because the painting is pleasing to the eye and invokes joy while encouraging a peaceful environment. These elements, along with the color scheme, seem fitting for a serene studying environment. *Happy Accidents of the Swing* would fit well in a library whose interior and shelving is made of dark wood with deeply colored rugs, such as maroon, emerald, and sapphire. The room would have tall shelves of beautifully bound classics with a grandfather clock and a fireplace, as well as comfortable seating areas and large desks. There would also be high ceilings and tall windows to let in enough light to suit the painting and promote a happy, serene, alert environment inside of the building.