

Fantastically French!

Design and Architecture in 16th- to 18th-Century Prints

10: Jean-Honoré Fragonard

The eighteenth-century artist Jean Honoré Fragonard is known for his flirtatious and fanciful scenes that capture the curvaceous ornamental forms and elegance of the Rococo style. Here, we see relief carvings on fragments of stone, depicting satyrs and nymphs in playful and erotic encounters. In classical Greco-Roman mythology, satyrs were woodland deities that often appeared in the hybrid form of half-man and half-horse or goat. These raucous spirits were troublemakers known for their love of wine, music, dancing, and women. Satyrs are often depicted alongside nymphs, who are feminine nature spirits known for inhabiting rivers and woodlands.

In the print on the left, Fragonard depicts a sweet, familial scene. The satyr father and nymph mother lift up their children, who grasp each other's hands affectionately.

In the print on the right, a nymph steps over the arms of two satyrs. It is unclear exactly what the three figures are doing here -- perhaps playing some sort of flirtatious game? Interestingly, the arrangement of one female caught between two males is repeated in the print to your right, called *The Swing*.

Fragonard made this series of four *Bacchanales* -- two of which we see here -- in Paris after his return from Italy, where he studied ancient Roman artifacts. While these relief carvings are rooted in Fragonard's study of classical antiquity, they are also representative of the Rococo style for which he is best known. The organic free-flowing lines, as well as the intertwined themes of love and nature, are quintessential components of the Rococo.