

The Visit to the Nursery

c. 1775

oil on canvas, 73 × 92.1 (28¾ × 36¼)

Samuel H. Kress Collection

Technical Notes: The support is a tightly woven, medium-weight, plain-weave fabric that has been lined. The original tacking margins have been removed, but cusping visible in the X-radiographs indicates that the painting probably retains its original dimensions. The ground is a thick, textured white layer. The texture probably comes from sand or agglomerations of large pigment particles in the priming mixture, a somewhat common practice in grounds from this period. The paint was executed thinly and rapidly with low impasto only in the brightest highlights. The shadows were accomplished with thin glazes of dark, transparent colors. The finer of these shadows were brushed in first to serve as a guide for the painting.

The condition is generally good, with either a little fading or slight abrasion from past cleanings in the thinnest of the glazed shadows. There is only one small loss of paint and ground in the collar of the woman's white dress. The painting was relined in 1943 by Stephen Pichetto, who also carried out minor inpainting. A discolored varnish was removed and the painting was restored in 1988.

Provenance: Traditionally associated with the collection of Jean François Leroy de Senneville [1715–1784], Paris; (his sale, Chariot and Paillet at Hôtel de Bullion, Paris, April 5–11, 1780, no. 50, bought in); (his sale, Paillet, Paris, April 26, 1784, no. 26); purchased by Basan, Paris, possibly Madame Goman, Paris; (her sale, Le Brun and Julliot, Paris, February 6, 1792 and days following, no. 100); Le Brun, possibly Amédée Constantin, Paris; (his estate sale, at his residence by Pérignon, Paris, November 18, 1816 and days following, no. 365); bought in or purchased by Pérignon.¹ possibly purchased 1851 by the father of Jules Burat; by inheritance to Jules Burat, by 1883; (his estate sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 28–29 April 1885, no. 71, bought in); probably by inheritance to Madame Louis Burat, Paris, by 1907 until at least 1921. (Wildenstein & Co., Paris, New York, and London), by 1939; sold 1942 to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York.

Exhibited: *L'Art du XVIII^e siècle*, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 1883–1884, no. 53.² *Exposition Chardin et Fragonard*, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 1907, no. 90. *Exposition d'œuvres de J.-H. Fragonard*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Pavillon de Marsan, Paris, 1921, no. 69. *The Great Tradition of French Painting*, Wildenstein & Co., New York, 1939, no. 22. *Masterpieces of Art. European and American Paintings, 1500–1900*, New York World's Fair, 1940, no. 201. *Recent Additions to the Kress Collection*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1946, no. 772. *Intimate Encounters: Love and Domesticity in Eighteenth-Century France*, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire; Toledo (Ohio) Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1997–1998, no. 25. *Jean Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806): Orígenes e influencias. De Rembrandt al siglo XXI*, CaixaForum, Barcelona; CaixaForum, Madrid, 2006–2007, no. 41. *Fragonard: les plaisirs d'un siècle*, Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris, 2007–2008, no. 45.

Fragonard is usually associated in the popular imagination with amusing and mildly erotic works, yet he was also an observant and sometimes sincere painter of family life. *The Visit to the Nursery* is one of his more ambitious and successful domestic scenes, a touching and evocative image of parental affection. In a rustic interior, a fashionable young couple gaze lovingly at their sleeping child, who is looked after by an elderly woman seated beside the cradle. Three other children have wandered into the room and look on attentively. A soft light spills through the parted drapes at left, illuminating the scene with an ethereal glow. The quasi-devotional tenor of the scene is not unlike that found in Fragonard's *The Happy Family* (cat. 36), although the characters are more fashionably dressed. The motif of a young husband and wife admiring their infant was popularized by such artists as Jean Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805, cats. 54–56),³ and the theme undoubtedly would have had wide appeal in the years following Jean Jacques Rousseau's (1712–1778) educational treatise *Émile* (1762), which advocated the development of emotional bonds between parents and their children.

The subject of a well-to-do couple admiring their sleeping child must have had a certain appeal for Fragonard, for he painted a number of variants. Several versions were circulating in Paris in the 1780s and 1790s, when there was a particularly active market for Fragonard's work. The National Gallery of Art's painting traditionally has been associated with one that appeared in the 1780 sale of Jean François Leroy de Senneville (1715–1784), a *fermier général* and important client of Fragonard; at one point he owned *Young Girl Reading* (cat. 31). The compiler of the sale catalogue, the dealer A. J. Paillet, described it in glowing terms: "This piece, with its broad and fluent handling, brings together all the spirit and the character suitable to the subject." According to Paillet, "the picture is composed of eight figures, in which the subject is taken from the novel of *Miss Sara* by M. de Saint Lambert. This interesting composition represents the moment when the two spouses come to visit their child."⁴ This description is a plausible one for the National Gallery's painting, although it has seven figures, not eight. When Leroy de Senneville's painting came on the block again in 1784, the sale catalogue repeated the earlier description, with the addition that "this work . . . makes a great impact even if it is hardly finished," a characterization difficult to reconcile with the National Gallery's painting, which has all the appearance of a completed work.⁵

The issue is complicated further by the fact that Leroy de Senneville owned a second version of the subject, smaller and with "a completely different composition, in which one counts four figures, the principal one a pretty young woman wearing a straw hat; her husband sitting beside her appears to admire a child in his cradle, on which his nurse leans."⁶ The best candidate for this second version is a painting in the Rothschild Collection (fig. 1), despite there being seven figures (Paillet easily might have overlooked the three children at right): the dimensions he recorded are accurate, and the description is reasonably precise, particularly the straw hat worn by the mother and the young nurse who has taken the place of the old crone at the side of the cradle.⁷ Yet its composition cannot be described as "completely different" from the Washington version, if that is the one accepted as Leroy de Senneville's larger picture.⁸



Cat. 37. Jean Honoré Fragonard, *The Visit to the Nursery*

The emergence of another version of the subject, from a collection in Estonia, could help to resolve the puzzle (fig. 2). Recently published by Jean-Pierre Cuzin, the canvas is characterized by a “broad and fluent handling”—much more so than the National Gallery’s painting—and indeed could be described as “hardly finished,” particularly in the background figures, the dog at lower left, and the bedclothes in the center, where the paint film is thin, revealing the brown ground layer. Moreover, it features the requisite eight figures, and its composition is undeniably “completely different” from the smaller Rothschild version.⁹ Of all the known variants, it best fits the descriptions in the Leroy de Senneville sale catalogues. If that is the case, the early history of the Washington painting remains to be discovered.¹⁰

Far from being unfinished, *The Visit to the Nursery* appears to have been carefully prepared and executed. Fragonard worked out the composition in a large oil sketch, a practice he employed on only rare occasions in his smaller canvases (fig. 3).¹¹ Painted more fluidly and broadly, the sketch nevertheless established the principal distribution of forms and lighting that appear in the National Gallery’s painting. In the final conceptualization, Fragonard made the composition slightly more horizontal and worked up the details—particularly of the faces—with a finer technique and more evenly applied paint surface (which the artist enlivened by mixing sand or some other grainy

material into the ground layer). Only slightly smaller than the final version, it was perhaps intended to convey to the patron what the finished painting would look like. Unfortunately, the provenance of this oil sketch cannot be traced back to the eighteenth century, further frustrating an identification of Fragonard’s patron.¹²

The specific subject of *The Visit to the Nursery* has been interpreted in various ways. For Roger Portalis it represented parents visiting their child at the home of a wet nurse; he suggested that Fragonard’s painting indicated that Rousseau’s condemnation of the practice of wet-nursing in *Emile* had not yet taken hold in French society.¹³ Georges Wildenstein felt that here, as in all his family pictures, Fragonard was responding to his own presumably happy domestic life.¹⁴ Mary Sheriff, whose complex and nuanced analysis of the painting focused on its ambiguous depiction of class identity and gender roles, also understood it as probably depicting an urban couple visiting their child in the rural home of a wet nurse.¹⁵

Yet in 1780 the two versions owned by Leroy de Senneville (presumably figs. 1 and 2) were identified as representing a scene from Jean François de Saint Lambert’s sentimental tale, *Sara Th...*¹⁶ First published in 1765, this moralizing romance tells the story of a beautiful and well-bred young English woman who falls in love with a humble but educated Scottish farmer. For-saking an arranged marriage, Sara weds the farmer, Philips, and the couple

Fig. 1. Jean Honoré Fragonard, *The Visit to the Nursery*, c. 1770–1775, oil on canvas, Buckinghamshire, Waddesdon, The Rothschild Collection (Rothschild Family Trust)



Fig. 2. Jean Honoré Fragonard, *The Visit to the Nursery*, c. 1770–1775, oil on canvas, private collection



lives happily and productively on the farm, their relationship and attitude toward life continually inspired by the extraordinary library that was the gift of her father (among its volumes are copies of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and Rousseau's *Émile*). Saint Lambert's tale is a paean to *sensibilité*, the virtues of honesty and sincerity, and the emotional satisfaction of parenthood. Notably, Sara breastfeeds her children, and one of Saint Lambert's points is that such "natural" mothering is a primary reason for their intimate familial bonding. The scenes depicted in Fragonard's paintings are evidently the one witnessed by the story's narrator, a traveler who visits Sara and Philips at their farmhouse: "I saw them enter a room off the garden, its window open: they went together to a cradle where their fifth child was lying; the two of them knelt by the cradle, by turn looking at their child and at each other, all the while holding hands and smiling. I was enchanted by this touching scene of conjugal love and parental tenderness."¹⁷

Can one assume that the subject of the National Gallery's painting is also drawn from Saint Lambert's tale, even though it cannot definitively be identified with the picture described in the Senneville sale?¹⁸ Its general subject, specific actions, and overall mood are entirely consistent with the story of Sara and with Fragonard's representation of the key moment in the small version in the Rothschild Collection (fig. 1). The depiction of Sara herself is remarkably similar to the description of Saint Lambert's narrator: "a woman of twenty-five or thirty, she was blonde and fresh, if a bit sunburned; she had large dark eyes and a very white throat, which she left completely exposed."¹⁹ One would not demand or expect that Fragonard be so literal in his conception, but if additional evidence were needed, it has been provided by Emma Barker: she recognized the striking relationship between *The Visit to the Nursery* and an engraving after a design by Jean Michel Moreau le Jeune for an edition of Saint Lambert's tale published around 1776 (fig. 4).²⁰ The images are so similar in composition and details—for example, the pairing of the two children at the right edge, the tilt of Sara's head, the cat and ball—as to suggest the artists were responding directly to each other's work. Barker believed that Moreau's print must have come first, "since it explains the elegant dress, befitting a prosperous farmer and his wife, which sets the couple apart from the figures who people Fragonard's other rural genre scenes."²¹ Yet surely Fragonard did not need Moreau's example, since figures in elegant dress populate his genre scenes throughout his oeuvre, even if he may have been inspired by the 1775 luxury illustrated edition to paint a series of pictures based on the story of Sara. In any case, he made the subject his own, reimagining the scene as a broad and stable horizontal composition (as opposed to Moreau's strongly vertical arrangement) and introducing the elderly woman in place of the old man (Sara's father) who appears in the print. She has been identified convincingly not as a wet nurse but as a *sage-femme*, or midwife.²²

As is often the case with Fragonard's oeuvre, the date of the present painting has proved elusive, and scholars have placed it anywhere from the mid-1760s to the late 1770s, a time when he is considered to have painted several other family pictures.²³ *The Visit to the Nursery* is an unusually classical composition consisting of a series of horizontal, vertical, and triangular forms arranged neatly before the viewer, which might argue for the earlier



Fig. 3. Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Oil Study for The Visit to the Nursery*, c. 1770–1775, oil on canvas, private collection

Fig. 4. B. L. Prevost after Jean Michel Moreau le Jeune, *J'étois enchanté du spectacle touchant de cet amour conjugal*, 1776, engraving, in Jean François de Saint Lambert, *Les saisons: poème*, 7th ed. (Amsterdam [Paris], 1775), Williamstown, Massachusetts, Chapin Library, Williams College



dating in the mid-1760s, near the time of the grand *Corésus and Callirhoé* (Salon of 1765; Paris, Musée du Louvre), his most academic production. Yet the blond tonality, the figure types, and the evenly applied paint surface point more toward the mid-1770s. This date would be consistent with the appearance of Moreau's engraving around 1775. Alexandre Ananoff published a pen and wash drawing that closely resembles this painting. Rather than being a study, this highly finished drawing would appear to have been done afterward, as a finished work of art in its own right, as Colin Eisler proposed.²⁴ It first appeared in a sale in 1779, suggesting a terminus ad quem for the date of the oil.

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Notes

1. See the discussion in the text, and the associated notes, for details about this possible early provenance for the painting.
2. Eisler 1977, 334, incorrectly gives the catalogue number for the painting in this exhibition as 50. The smaller version of the painting, then owned by Madame Louis Stern, was no. 56 in the exhibition.
3. On this point see Cuzin 1987–1988, 89–92; Rosenberg 1989, 104. For other family scenes from the 1770s, see, for example, Rosenberg 1989, nos. 306, 307, 334–338, 349, 351, 352. Fragonard may have known Greuze's drawing *La Paix du ménage* (*Household Peace*), disseminated by Moreau le Jeune's engraving of 1766, with its similar scene of a doting husband and wife huddled over their child's cradle.
4. "Ce morceau joint à une touche large et facile tout l'esprit et le caractère convenables au sujet." "Un tableau compose de huit figures, dont le sujet est tiré du *Roman de Miss Sara* par M. de Saint Lambert. Le moment que represente cette composition intéressante est celui où les deux époux viennent visiter leur enfant." Leroy de Senneville sale, Paillet, Paris, April 5–11, 1780, lot 50; see Rosenberg 1989, 126. The painting failed to sell and was auctioned again in 1784, this time purchased by Basan (Senneville sale, Paillet, Paris, April 26, 1784, lot 26; see Rosenberg 1989, 128). The smaller version of the painting is Rosenberg 1989, no. 305.
5. Senneville sale, Paillet, Paris, April 26, 1784, lot 26: "Ce morceau, ingénieusement composé, est d'un grand effet, malgré qu'il soit peu terminé" (quoted in Rosenberg 1989, 128).
6. Lot 51 in the Leroy de Senneville sale of 1780: "Il représente le même sujet que le précédent, mais d'une composition toute différente. On y compte quatre figures, dont la principale est une jeune et jolie femme, coëffée d'un chapeau de paille, son mari, assis près d'elle, paraît considérer un enfant qui est dans son berceau, sur lequel est appuyée sa nourrice." Rosenberg 1989, 126–127.
7. The painting is now in the Rothschild Collection, Waddesdon Manor, England (Rosenberg 1989, 105, no. 306). Neither picture found a buyer at the 1780 auction, and both were included in a second sale of Leroy de Senneville's collection on April 28, 1784; see Wildenstein 1960, 285, 300–301; Rosenberg 1989, 128.
8. Paillet specifically noted the woman's straw hat in the small picture, presumably to distinguish it from the larger version. The woman in the Washington version, of course, wears a similar straw hat.
9. "Presque certainement celle des ventes Leroy de Senneville de 1780 et 1784" (Almost certainly the one from the Leroy de Senneville sales of 1780 and 1784), according to Cuzin 2001, 173, fig. 9 (ill. reversed). Nor does the woman wear a straw hat.
10. The Washington painting has also been identified with a work featured in a sale in 1792, although the description in the sale catalogue (Goman sale, March 24, 1792 [February 6, according to Lugt], no. 100) is too vague to be convincing: "Une com-

- position de 6 figures dans un intérieur de chambre. Cette esquisse terminée est connue sous le titre de la Bonne Mère. H. 28 p[ouces]; L. 33 p. T[oile]. (A composition of 6 figures in a bedroom interior. This finished sketch [*esquisse*] is known by the title of the Good Mother.)
11. Rosenberg 1989, 104–105, no. 305; Cuzin (Barcelona 2006–2007, 96, 211) proposes (implausibly, it would seem) that the two paintings might be independent works rather than an oil sketch and a finished canvas. Rosenberg also catalogued a small oil sketch for the two children at right (Rosenberg 1989, 104–105, no. 304a). Another small painting, depicting a standing girl very similar to the girl at right, may be an independent work rather than a study for the Washington painting (Rosenberg 1989, 105, no. 307; Cuzin 2001, 170–171, fig. 5). Fragonard often made oil sketches for his larger projects (see, for example, Rosenberg 1989, nos. 22, 23, 62, 114–117, 277–279, 309–311, 335, 377–378, 381, and 399, although some may simply be variants painted in a different style rather than true oil studies).
 12. For the provenance, see Cuzin 1987–1988, no. 124.
 13. Portalis 1889, 1:119.
 14. Wildenstein 1921, 362; see also Wildenstein 1961, 26–27.
 15. Sheriff 1991, 16–40.
 16. “The subject is taken from the *Roman de Miss Sara* by M. de Saint Lambert. The moment that this interesting composition represents is that when the two spouses go to visit their child” (Le sujet est tiré du *Roman de Miss Sara* par M. de Saint Lambert. Le moment que représente cette composition intéressante est celui où les deux époux viennent visiter leur enfant.). See Rosenberg 1989, 126.
 17. “[J]e les vis entrer dans une chambre qui donnoit sur le jardin & dont la fenêtre étoit ouverte: ils allèrent ensemble vers un berceau où reposoit leur cinquième enfant, ils se courboient tous deux sur le beceau, & tour-à-tour regardoient l’enfant & se regardoient en se tenant par la main & en souriant. J’étois enchanté du spectacle touchant de cet amour conjugal & de cette tendresse paternelle.” Jean François de Saint Lambert, *Sara Th... nouvelle traduite de l’anglois* (Lausanne, 1766), 17. The novella was first published in the *Gazette Littéraire de l’Europe*, April 15, 1765.
 18. For a survey of various opinions, see the excellent entry by Eisler 1977, 333–335; Rosenberg 1989, 104, has given the identification new credence. Sheriff’s reading of Fragonard’s young parents as “an urban couple from the more privileged classes who have come to visit their nursling, put out in the country” (1991, 22) is not necessarily inconsistent with Saint Lambert’s novella, a text Sheriff does not mention as a possible source for the painting’s subject. Sara was, after all, an upper-class woman raised in London, and Philips is described as “very well put out, his face was rather beautiful, and his countenance noble and agreeable” (fort bien fait, son visage étoit assez beau, & sa physiognomie étoit

- noble & agréable) (Saint Lambert, 16; see n. 17). Nevertheless, Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey (Paris, 2007–2008, 100) has questioned the identification, claiming that the man and woman in the Kress painting are too finely dressed for Saint Lambert’s rustic farmer and wife. She suggests that the scene may indeed depict an aristocratic couple visiting their child at the home of a country wet nurse. Another painting by Fragonard, *Le Retour au logis*, which also exists in several versions (Rosenberg 1989, nos. 349, 351, 352), might also represent the scene described by Saint Lambert (see Wildenstein and Mandel 1972, 107).
19. “[U]ne femme de l’âge de vingt-cinq à trente ans; elle étoit blonde & fraîche, quoiqu’un peu hâlée; elle avoit de grands yeux noirs & une gorge très blanche, qu’elle laissoit voir toute entière” (Saint Lambert, 11; see n. 17).
 20. Barker 1994, 163–166; Barker 2005, 139–143. This edition of the story of *Sara Th...* is in Jean François de Saint Lambert, *Les saisons: poème*, 7th ed. (Amsterdam [Paris], 1775) (the imprint is 1775, but some of the engravings are dated 1776). The illustration, engraved by B. L. Prevost after a design by Jean Michel Moreau le Jeune, is opposite 267 and is entitled *J’étois enchanté du spectacle touchant de cet amour conjugal*.
 21. Barker 1994, 165.
 22. See the excellent discussions by Barker 1994, 164, and by Sheriff 1991, 30, who notes her resemblance to one of the fates.
 23. Sheriff 1986, 333–354.
 24. Private collection, Paris (see Ananoff 1961–1970, 2:39, no. 634, fig. 185; Eisler 1977, 334; Cuzin 1987–1988, 91, fig. 119). There are two finished pen and wash drawings after the Estonia painting (fig. 2) (see Ananoff 1961–1970, 2:37, no. 628; Ananoff 1961–1970, 4:22, no. 1950). For Fragonard’s tendency to make drawings after paintings as works of art in their own right, see Portalis 1889, 201–202; Wildenstein 1960, viii.

References

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1960 Wildenstein: 27, 300–301, no. 459, pl. 101.
1965b NGA: 51.
1968 NGA: 43, repro.
1971 Watson: 86.
1972 Wildenstein and Mandel: no. 482, repro.
1975 NGA: 132, repro.
1977 Eisler: 333–335, fig. 292.
1984 Walker: 341, no. 460, color repro.
1985 NGA 1985: 158, repro.
1987–1988 Cuzin: 89–92, no. 123, pl. 118.
1989 Rosenberg: no. 304.
1990 Sheriff: 117, fig. 27.
1991 Sheriff: 16–40, fig. 1.2.
1994 Barker, 1:163–165.
2001 Cuzin: 173 n. 18.
2005 Barker: 139–143.