

those years, a dating followed by Bailey, in Paris, Philadelphia, and Fort Worth 1991–1992, 482, although Rosenberg 1989, 74, dates them to “1754?”

16. Paris, Philadelphia, and Fort Worth 1991–1992, 482.
17. Wildenstein 1960, 1–5. Cuzin 1987–1988, 27, has questioned whether many of these pictures could not have been produced during the years Fragonard was at the Ecole des élèves protégés.
18. See the relevant discussion by Bailey in Paris, Philadelphia, and Fort Worth 1991–1992, 474–475, 482, where he compares *Diana and Endymion* and its pendant to Boucher’s grand paintings for Pompadour, *The Rising of the Sun* and *The Setting of the Sun*.

References

- 1906 Michel: no. 124.
1965b NGA: 18, as Boucher.
1968 NGA: 11, repro., as Boucher.
1975 NGA: 40, repro., as Boucher.
1985 NGA: 59, repro., as Boucher.
1985–1986 New York, New Orleans, and Columbus, 137, as early Fragonard?
1986 Cuzin: 65–66, n. 6.
1987–1988 Cuzin: 39, fig. 43, 270, no. 56.
1987–1988 Paris and New York: 34, fig. 6.
1989 Rosenberg: no. 28, repro.
1991–1992 Paris, Philadelphia, and Fort Worth: no. 60, repro.
2005–2006 New York: 214–215, fig. 80a.

30

1997.22.1

Mountain Landscape at Sunset

c. 1765

oil on paper, 21.5 × 32.8 (8⁷/₁₆ × 12¹³/₁₆)

Chester Dale Fund

Technical Notes: The support is a handmade laid paper with an undecipherable watermark in the lower left quadrant. There is a pinhole at the center of the top edge. The paper was prepared with a thin white ground. Infrared reflectography at 1.2–2.5 microns reveals underdrawing in a dry medium outlining the mountain range in the distance. The paint consistency varies from liquid to pastose, and brushwork is visible throughout the composition. The artist painted the foreground thinly, leaving the ground visible. The trees, prepared in the same manner, have been worked over with green and gray dabs of color for more detail. The middle mountain range was begun in a manner similar to the foreground and trees but finished with longer and opaque brushstrokes of impastoed paint. The sky and the clouds are elaborate in detail, color variation, and paint application. The darkest blue in the sky was applied last and in many areas defines the shapes of the trees and of the clouds.

The paper support is in good condition except for its corners, which have been replaced. There is also minor damage along the edges. The paint is in excellent condition with no abrasion or insecure areas. The layer of varnish that coats the surface remains clear.

Provenance: (Sale, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 1996); (James Mackinnon, London); purchased February 14, 1997 through (W.M. Brady & Co., New York) by NGA.

Exhibited: *Aspects of Landscape, 1760–1880*, W.M. Brady & Co., New York, 1996, no. 1.



Cat. 30. Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Mountain Landscape at Sunset*

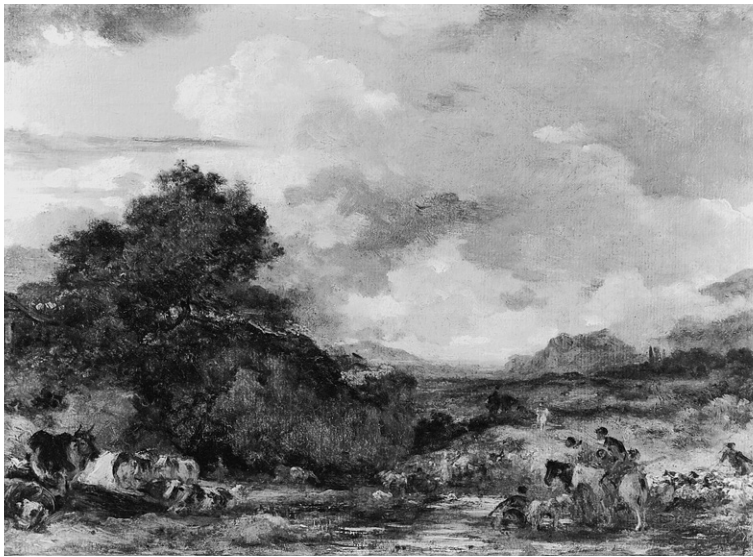


Fig. 1. Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Le Gué*, 1765–1770, oil on paper affixed to panel, Chartres, Musée des Beaux-Arts

Fig. 2. Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Shepherd Playing a Flute*, 1770, oil on canvas, Annecy, Musée-château, on loan from Paris, Musée du Louvre



This small painting on paper, recently rediscovered, is among the few surviving oil sketches by Fragonard that plausibly could have been painted in the open air. It thus represents a significant addition to the artist's oeuvre, illuminating a little-known aspect of his practice as a landscapist.

The study has all the character of a quick response to observed nature, as if the artist were recording an impression glimpsed from a carriage window as it rolled through the countryside. Beginning with paper prepared with a thin white ground, the artist quickly outlined the major forms, possibly using black chalk or crayon.¹ He then thinly brushed in the foreground and the masses of trees, returning with thicker brushstrokes to add volume and character to the foliage. The mountain range at the lower center and the cloudy sky were articulated with broader, more opaque passages, the blue of the sky at times describing the contours of the dark green trees. The pale yellows and purplish grays in the cloudy sky at left convincingly suggest a setting or rising sun. Despite the obvious spontaneity of the study, Fragonard took care to compose the scene, balancing the heavy mass of trees at the right with smaller bushes and clouds at the left.

Mountain Landscape at Sunset first appeared in 1996, undocumented and uncatalogued, at a small auction at the Hôtel Drouot in Paris,² yet there can be no question that it is by Fragonard. It is best compared to another oil sketch on paper, universally accepted as an authentic Fragonard, in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Chartres (fig. 1).³ Though slightly larger and more elaborate — Fragonard introduced animals and people into the scene — the Chartres study is characterized by a similar deft handling of paint, particularly in the stormy sky, where one can make out the individual dabs of color that the artist applied, a technique clearly evident in the sky of the Washington study. Furthermore, its intimate scale and informality aside, *Mountain Landscape at Sunset* conforms to a number of small finished landscapes produced by the artist in the 1760s, such as *Shepherd Playing a Flute*, a version of which Fragonard exhibited at the Salon of 1765 (fig. 2).⁴ The billowing foliage of the trees, darkly silhouetted against a cloudy sky, for example, is similar in design and effect, if not in touch. The low viewpoint taken in the oil study is another common feature of Fragonard's landscapes from this period, when he was particularly influenced by seventeenth-century Dutch art.⁵ While it is probably impossible to determine precisely, a date in the mid-1760s would seem reasonable for the Washington study.

In the mid-eighteenth century the custom of drawing outdoors was an established part of a young artist's training, and Fragonard is justly famous for the spectacular series of landscape drawings he produced during his early sojourn in Italy from 1756 to 1761, when he was a pensioner at the Académie de France in Rome.⁶ He continued to draw from nature throughout his career. Making open-air studies in oils, however, was still relatively unusual during this period, although there had been notable precedents going back at least to the 1630s, when Claude Lorrain (1604/1605–1682, cats. 19–22) and others are said to have painted in the out-of-doors in Italy.⁷ In France the practice was given a theoretical underpinning in 1708 with the first publication of Roger de Piles' *Cours de peinture par principes*, which remained an influential treatise throughout the eighteenth century. In an important section devoted to landscape painting, de Piles emphasized making studies

from nature in both drawings and oils in all its aspects, including rocks, plants, trees, and the sky: “I would have [the landscape painter] likewise study the effects of the sky in several times of the day, and seasons of the year, in the various dispositions of clouds, both in serene, thundering, and stormy weather. And in the off-skip, the several sorts of rocks, waters, and other principal objects.”⁸ De Piles’ recommendations were to a large degree codifying what was rapidly becoming a standard practice among landscape painters. Around the same time, the painter Alexandre François Desportes (1661–1743) was producing informal oil sketches of all sorts of fauna and flora, including open-air studies of the countryside outside Paris, which were the subject of later discussions at the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture.⁹ Closer to Fragonard’s time, Claude Joseph Vernet (1714–1789, cat. 92), the greatest French landscape painter of the day, had frequently painted in the open air, especially during his years in Italy from 1734 to 1753, although until recently none of these studies had been discovered.¹⁰ Indeed, Vernet’s belief that “the shortest and surest means [to artistic mastery] was to paint and draw after nature” could trace its lineage back to de Piles’ theories, which had inspired subsequent generations to respond directly to natural phenomena when making landscapes.¹¹ The clearest expression of the value of making open-air oil studies would come in the early 1780s, when Pierre Henri de Valenciennes (1750–1819, cat. 87) made a great number of oil sketches in and around Rome.¹²

In this broader context, the re-emergence of *Mountain Landscape at Sunset*—together with the few other known oil studies by Fragonard—takes its full significance, for it reminds us that Fragonard was more than a late rococo decorative painter in the mold of Boucher. Always a changeable and quixotic artist, he could also respond to and participate in the more “advanced” naturalist tendencies of the art of his time, as Jacques Wilhelm pointed out as long ago as 1948.¹³ Even so, for Fragonard—as for Desportes, Vernet, and, later, Valenciennes—such open-air oil studies were invariably intended not as ends in themselves but as *aides memoires* of field research to be used in producing more convincing studio landscapes. In making a sketch like *Mountain Landscape at Sunset*, Fragonard turned to oil paint to best study the fading light as it reflected off clouds and backlit a stand of trees, an effect impossible to capture adequately in a monochromatic drawing.¹⁴ As modern as his technique may have seemed in the 1760s, it was thoroughly in keeping with de Piles’ by-then-familiar insistence that successful landscape painting must be rooted in careful observation and recording of natural phenomena. *Mountain Landscape at Sunset* precisely captures the effect described in de Piles’ passage *Of the Sky and Clouds*: “We must observe, that this light being either yellow or reddish in the evening, at sun-set, these same objects partake not only of the light, but of the colour: Thus the yellow light, mixing with the blue, which is the natural colour of the sky, alters it, and gives it a tint more or less greenish, as the yellowness of the light is more or less deep.”¹⁵ Undoubtedly Fragonard made many other such oil sketches, now lost forever or remaining to be rediscovered.

RR

Notes

1. The outline is most easily seen via infrared reflectography of the mountain range in the distance.
2. Conversation with James Mackinnon, from whom the National Gallery acquired the painting.
3. Oil on paper affixed to panel, 28.5 × 38 cm; Rosenberg 1989, 201, no. 97.
4. Annecy, Musée-château (on loan from Paris, Musée du Louvre); Rosenberg 1989, 86, no. 135.
5. On this question, see Wilhelm 1948b; Slive 1981; Paris and New York 1987–1988, 184–201.
6. For a fine selection of Fragonard’s Italian landscape drawings (from both his early trip and his second trip in 1773–1774), see Rome 1990–1991.
7. For a historical overview, see Conisbee 1979; Cambridge and London 1980–1981; Washington, Brooklyn, and St. Louis 1996–1997.
8. Piles 1743, 244–245; the quote is from the English edition of 1743, 148.
9. Paris 1982–1983.
10. Washington, Brooklyn, and St. Louis 1996–1997, 112–113, no. 2.
11. See the discussion by Conisbee in London 1976.
12. See, most recently, Toulouse 2003.
13. “In these landscapes Fragonard is revealed as one of the pioneers of naturalistic landscape painting, which was the precursor of the Barbizon school” (Wilhelm 1948a, 298).
14. As a comparative example, see Ananoff 1961–1970, 2:144, no. 970, fig. 266, a small black chalk drawing that shows a similar motif to the present oil study.
15. Piles 1743, 127–129; French ed., de Piles 1708, 208–210.

References

Unpublished.