
A Tale of Two Sultans

Part I: Fragonards Real and Fake

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The bequest of Walter C. Baker in 1971 was a major event for the fledgling Department of Drawings at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Baker's collection of 121 old master and modern drawings included stellar examples from various schools and periods; it is a credit line still associated with some of the department's greatest treasures. Among the works illustrated in an article published in the Museum's *Bulletin* in 1960 to accompany an exhibition of the Baker drawings was a striking brown wash study by Jean-Honoré Fragonard entitled *The Sultan* (Figure 1). It shows a turbaned man in what appears to be Turkish dress seated at a table upon which a large volume lies open. A collector's mark at the lower right indicates that the drawing had been in the collection of Baron Vivant Denon, the first director of the Musée du Louvre, Paris. The technique is one associated with the artist's second trip to Italy, in 1773 and 1774, and was described thus in the *Bulletin* text by Claus Virch, then assistant curator of European paintings at the Metropolitan: "With a wide painterly range of tones from the most transparent to the deepest brown, and skillful use of the white of the paper, [Fragonard] creates an abundance of light."¹ *The Sultan* was also included in a compendium titled, unabashedly, *Great Drawings of All Time*, which appeared in four volumes in 1962.²

The drawing's star was not meant to be long in the sky, however. In the early 1960s many in the art market began to harbor suspicions about the authenticity of certain Fragonard drawings, especially as the publications of Alexandre Ananoff drew attention to the existence of multiple versions of many of the wash drawings.³ As the Parisian dealer and art historian Jean Cailleux put it in a letter to an American curator in 1969, "In truth, over the past few years, a few too many drawings identical to drawings already known have been discovered and come onto the market."⁴

Geraldine Norman, a sale-room correspondent at the *Times* of London, brought these discussions out from behind closed doors with a lengthy investigative article that appeared on March 8 and 9, 1978, in which she claimed that more than thirty wash drawings attributed to Fragonard were fakes. The majority had been published between 1961 and 1970 in Ananoff's catalogue raisonné of Fragonard's drawings with provenances that were vague, unverifiable, or falsified. Norman's article delivered sobering news to the many North American museums and collectors who had purchased drawings ascribed to Fragonard since the 1950s.

In the course of planning the Fragonard retrospective held at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1987 and at the Metropolitan in 1988, Pierre Rosenberg, of the Louvre, visited the Metropolitan's Drawings Study Room and examined the Baker *Sultan* with Jacob Bean, the first curator of the Department of Drawings. Together the two curators concluded that the Metropolitan's drawing had to be a forgery of the type described by Norman.⁵ Indeed, Rosenberg supplied an important piece of evidence illuminating the work of the forger: a photograph of a rare lithograph showing Fragonard's composition in reverse (Figure 3).

The lithograph had its origins in an ambitious publishing project undertaken in 1816 by Dominique-Vivant Denon (1747–1825), who was a collector as well as an artist and curator and wished toward the end of his life to immortalize his collection through a set of prints. The resulting four-volume *Monuments des arts du dessin chez les peuples tant anciens que modernes, recueillis par le Baron Vivant Denon*, which included 307 plates, saw the light of day only in 1829, four years after Denon's death.⁶ Although the lithograph after Fragonard's *Sultan* drawing does not appear in the published volumes, it survives in a few loose examples, suggesting that at some point the intention was to include it.⁷ The lithograph need not have been seen in the *Monuments des arts du dessin*, however, for the names of the maker and the collector of the drawing to have been known: the letter-

1. After Jean-Honoré Fragonard (French, 1732–1806). *The Sultan*. Brush and brown wash over graphite underdrawing, 14½ x 10⅞ in. (36.9 x 27.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971 (1972.118.213)



ing on the print identifies both the artist, “Fragonard père del.” (Fragonard the elder),⁸ and the collection: “Tiré du Cabinet de Mr Denon” (From the collection of Monsieur Denon). Presumably using this lithograph as a model—for the dimensions of the motifs are identical—the forger cleverly created his drawing in reverse direction, perhaps with the aid of transmitted light,⁹ and added at the lower right a stamp (Figure 4) imitating that of Vivant Denon (Lugt 779; Figure 5), which featured the initials *D.N.* in an oval with an

ant and a sieve, an allegory, according to Lugt, “of the continual patience of the collector who must reject everything that is not useful.”¹⁰

The well-conceived plan of the forger encountered its first obstacle in the unexpected appearance at auction at Christie’s, London, in 1962 of a virtually identical drawing being sold from the collection of Lord Currie and Mrs. Bertram Currie (Figures 2, 6).¹¹ Jean Cailleux, who was attuned to the thorny issues raised by these twin sheets,



2. Jean-Honoré Fragonard. *The Sultan (A Seated Turk)*, 1774. Brush and brown wash over black chalk underdrawing, 14 1/4 x 11 1/4 in. (36.2 x 28.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Catherine G. Curran, 2008 (2008.437)

discussed them judiciously in September of that year in an article entitled "A Note on the Pedigree of Paintings and Drawings,"¹² where he pointed out that both drawings could not rightfully claim to be the one sold at the Brunet-Denon sale of 1846.¹³ Alexandre Ananoff included the recently discovered sheet in volume two of his catalogue raisonné of Fragonard's drawings, which appeared in 1963. He addressed the fact that there were now two drawings of the same subject, of the same dimensions, and bearing the

same collector's mark, concluding that both drawings must have been part of the celebrated collection, but that it was the Baker drawing that was described as lot 729 in A. N. Pérignon's catalogue of the Denon collection sale. This was so, he said, because of the close relationship between the lithograph and the Baker drawing and because Pérignon's catalogue made no mention of the annotation on the ex-Currie sheet. He postulated that the ex-Currie sheet must have been the *première pensée* for the Baker drawing,

3. After Jean-Honoré Fragonard. *The Sultan*, ca. 1816–26. Lithograph, 14½ x 11 in. (37 x 28 cm). Prouté collection, Paris



which he considered more “complete and executed in a more meticulous manner.”¹⁴

At this point, the debate essentially came to a halt as the Currie drawing was acquired at the 1962 London sale by a private collector and fell from view. The first published reference to the Baker drawing as a copy came a quarter of a century later, in 1987, in the form of a simple caption to an illustration in Pierre Rosenberg’s catalogue for the Fragonard exhibition held in Paris and New York.¹⁵ The sheet was not discussed in the text. It was only in 1996, in the context of the A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts given at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., that Rosenberg addressed the issues of forgeries directly, using the two *Sultans* as illustrations, although the ex-Currie sheet was listed as “location unknown” and the image was based on the small black-and-white photograph that had appeared in the Christie’s catalogue in 1962 (Figure 6). The Baker sheet was described as “a forgery of exceptional skill.”¹⁶

The occasion for this article is the final chapter of the story—in fact, the happy ending. In an encounter never anticipated by the forger, the Baker *Sultan* has recently come face-to-face with the real *Sultan*. The clue to the lat-

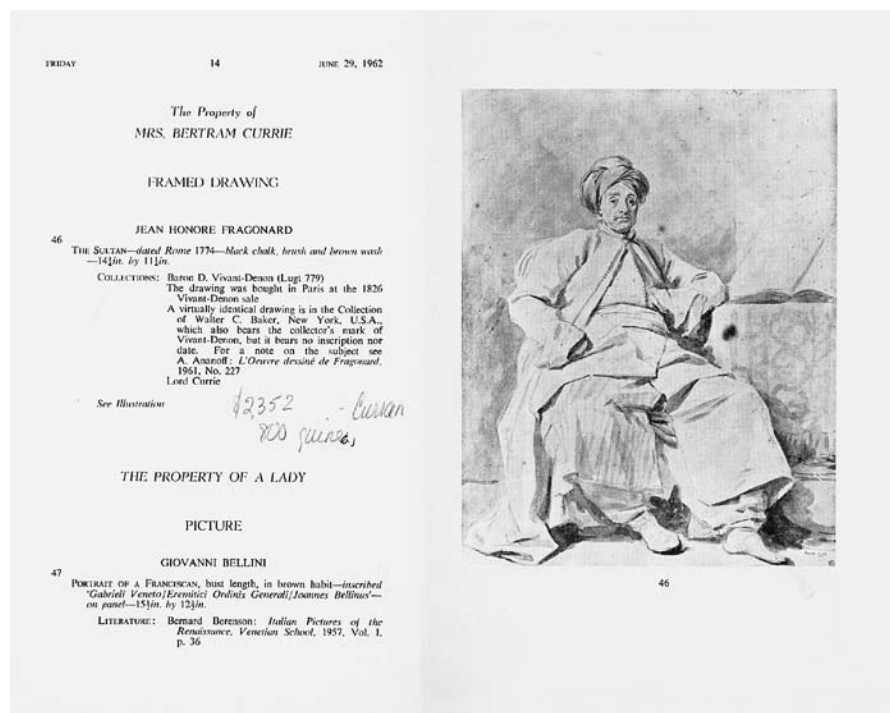


4, 5. Details of Figures 1 (left) and 2 (right), showing the collector’s mark at the lower right in each

ter’s location came in the form of a penciled annotation in the margin of the copy of the 1962 Christie’s catalogue kept in the Metropolitan Museum’s files (Figure 6), indicating the last name of the buyer, a collector who had lived in London in the 1960s but in more recent decades had resided on Park Avenue in New York City, only a few blocks from the Museum. With the genuine interest of the collector, Catherine G. Curran, the drawing was brought to the Museum for study in 2005, and subsequently offered as a promised gift.

Marjorie Shelley, Sherman Fairchild Conservator in Charge of Paper Conservation at the Metropolitan, led the examination of the two works. Her observations on issues of paper, watermark, technique, and media appear in the following pages, although certain characteristics of the style of the two sheets can be noted here. The forgery, with its shorter life span, is in fresher condition and exhibits a much higher degree of contrast. The Curran *Sultan*, which was described as “montés sous verre” as early as 1797,¹⁷ has been subjected to more light exposure, which has somewhat darkened the paper and reduced the contrast. Nonetheless, the technique of the autograph sheet is more spontaneous, in both its underdrawing and its use of wash. Indeed, the free use of black chalk underdrawing was a hallmark of Fragonard’s graphic technique throughout his career.¹⁸ This can be seen best in the area of the legs and feet of the Curran drawing (Figure 8), where curvy and loose marks in black chalk, applied with little pressure, indicate the artist’s original intentions for the placement of the limbs, but are nowhere strictly adhered to. The Sultan’s proper right foot has been moved to the right, and the edge of the fabric falling from his proper left knee was modified as well.

The comparable area in the Baker sheet (Figure 7) has much less prominent underdrawing. Under close examination, however, traces of graphite can be seen demarcating the edges of forms in a light and broken line. Unlike in the autograph sheet, the underdrawing was followed with extreme



6. Sale catalogue, Christie's, London, June 29, 1962, lot 46, with a description and illustration of *The Sultan* (Figure 2) and penciled annotations

care by the forger who applied the brown wash. A revealing glimpse of the forger's technique can be found on the verso of *La confidence*, a Fragonard forgery in the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, where another forged composition, *La lecture* (Figure 9), was left unfinished, its underlying structure of traced lines clearly visible in areas.¹⁹ When Ananoff described the Baker sheet in 1963 as "d'une technique plus

soignée" (executed in a more meticulous technique) he was certainly right. But it is ultimately this carefulness that exposes the forger's hand—Fragonard's *Sultan* and in fact all his brown wash drawings from this period are admired precisely for their qualities of freedom and improvisation. They are executed with speed, facility, and little concern for following the indications of the underdrawing.



7. Detail of Figure 1 (after Fragonard)



8. Detail of Figure 2 (Fragonard)



9. After Jean-Honoré Fragonard. *La lecture*. Brush and brown wash over black chalk underdrawing, 12 x 8¾ in. (30.4 x 22.3 cm). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (15125)

Fragonard's virtuoso handling of wash can also be appreciated by comparing the head in the Baker drawing, where the wash is more blocky and less translucent (Figure 10), with the same area in the Curran drawing (Figure 11). A profitable comparison can be made with the related study of the head alone that was left to the Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie, Besançon, by Pierre-Adrien Pâris (Figure 12).²⁰ Although Fragonard emphasized the figure's weathered and world-weary features more in this study of a head than in his full-length treatment, the technique of the drawing is directly comparable to the Curran *Sultan* (Figure 2), as is evident both in the free underdrawing and the use of layered, translucent wash. The Besançon study of a head was clearly done from life and likely at the same moment as the full-length drawing. The two have in common the angle the face is seen from and the strong light source to the left and could well have been made in the same drawing session.

The inscription on the Curran sheet reads *Roma 1774* (see Figure 2). This was during Fragonard's second visit to Italy, approximately two decades after his crown-sponsored student trip, when he accompanied the *fermier général* Pierre-Jacques-Onésyme Bergeret de Grancourt (1715–1785) on a trip to Italy and parts of central Europe. The group stayed in Rome from early December 1773 until mid-April 1774, where they participated in the life of the French



10. Detail of Figure 1 (after Fragonard), showing the wash in the area of the head



11. Detail of Figure 2 (Fragonard), showing the wash in the area of the head



12. Jean-Honoré Fragonard. *Head of a Turbaned Man*, 1774. Brush and brown wash over black chalk underdrawing, 12 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (32.2 x 26.4 cm). Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie, Besançon (D.2944)

Academy in Rome, then housed in the Palazzo Mancini. Many of the brown wash drawings Fragonard made on this trip—although not the sanguine ones—bear similar neatly penned inscriptions with the location and date. It seems logical to assume, as Pierre Rosenberg has,²¹ that this writing is Bergeret's, as Fragonard was not typically prone to such documentary urges. Whether the Roman drawings stayed in Bergeret's collection after the trip remains unclear,²² but the drawing of the seated Turk seems to have been part of Desmarests' stock when it was sold at auction in 1797 along with seven other brown wash sheets seemingly from the second Italian trip.²³ It was probably at this point that it entered the collection of Vivant Denon.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the title *Le sultan*, which both sheets claimed in the twentieth century, dates back only to the catalogue of the sale of the collection of Dominique-Vivant Brunet-Denon, Vivant Denon's nephew, in 1846.²⁴ The less fanciful title, *Un turc assis* (A Seated Turk), used in the Desmarests sale in 1797 and the Vivant Denon sale in 1826,²⁵ is more appropriate to the image, for although the costume is clearly Turkish, there are no special signifiers, in either the clothing or the iconography, to suggest the rank of sultan. While it is not impossible that Fragonard encountered a Turk in Rome, the more likely sce-

nario is that the Besançon and New York sheets represent a modeling session where a European man posed in Turkish costume. Fragonard may well have seen some of the many drawings and oil sketches made by French *pensionnaires* for the Masquerade of 1748, where as part of the Carnival festivities in Rome French students donned exaggerated home-made Turkish costumes to stage a "caravane du Sultan à la Mecque."²⁶ In contrast to the fanciful masquerade quality of the 1748 drawings, among them Joseph-Marie Vien's *prestre de la loy* (minister of the law) with his plume and pearl-bedecked turban (Figure 13),²⁷ Fragonard's Turk is sober and naturalistic and reflects the tradition at the Académie de France of drawing from draped figures as a training exercise for history painters.²⁸ Nonetheless, it is ironic that the subject of the Metropolitan's forgery is itself a forgery: a man dressing up in exotic attire, masquerading as something other than he was.

With the recent arrival of *A Seated Turk* as part of the bequest of Catherine G. Curran, the Metropolitan not only gains an important example of Fragonard's mastery of brown wash drawing at the time of his second trip to Italy but will also be able to offer future students of drawing the opportunity to study side by side an authentic example of his draftsmanship and a brilliant copy once celebrated as a masterpiece of the Museum's collection.



13. Joseph-Marie Vien (French, 1716–1809). *Le Prestre de la Loy*, 1748. Black and white chalk on blue paper, 18 x 12 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (45.8 x 32.2 cm). Musée du Petit Palais, Paris (D. Dut. 1076). © Petit Palais / Roger-Viollet

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their assistance I would like to thank Carole Blumenfeld, Sonia Couturier, Stephen Geiger, George Goldner, Suzanne McCullagh, Hubert Prouté, Pierre Rosenberg, Marjorie Shelley, and Eunice Williams. I am also indebted to the late Catherine G. Curran, who will be fondly remembered for her kindness and generosity.

NOTES

1. Virch 1960, p. 316.
2. Moskowitz 1962, no. 700.
3. This statement is based on the recollections of several scholars active in the field at the time.
4. "Il y a eu en effet, depuis quelques années, un peu trop de dessins identiques à des dessins déjà connus qui ont été découverts et mis sur le marché" (Jean Cailleux to Harold Joachim, February 3, 1969, museum files, Art Institute of Chicago).
5. Oral communication, Pierre Rosenberg, 2005.
6. Marie-Anne Dupuy in Paris 1999, p. 400, no. 438.
7. In the catalogue of the Denon sale 1826, lot 729—Fragonard's *Sultan* drawing—was marked with an asterisk, indicating that the sheet had been lithographed.
8. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the artist's son, Alexandre-Évariste Fragonard (1780–1850), was active, it was common to refer to Jean-Honoré as "Fragonard père." The collector Xavier Atger (1758–1833), for one, annotated his Fragonard drawings in this way. See Stein 2007, p. 308, fig. 16.
9. Alexandre Ananoff (1956) put forward the claim that Fragonard had made line-for-line copies of his own drawings, suggesting "transparence à la vitre" as a possible method by which he would have done this and commenting on the ease of making ink for brown wash drawings from chimney soot.
10. "[À] la patience continuelle de l'amateur qui doit rejeter tout ce qui ne peut être utile." Lugt 1956, p. 140.
11. Sale, Christie's, London, June 29, 1962, lot 46.
12. Cailleux 1962, pp. ii–iii.
13. Brunet-Denon sale 1846, February 2, part of lot 271. Dominique-Vivant Brunet-Denon was the nephew of Vivant Denon.
14. "Nous pensons que ces deux dessins firent effectivement partie de la célèbre collection, mais c'est celui décrit au no. 227 [the Baker drawing] qui figure sous le no. 729 dans le catalogue de Pérignon [of the Denon collection]. Les raisons qui nous font pencher en faveur de cette thèse sont les suivantes: 1° Les rapprochements entre la lithographie et le dessin (no. 227) comportent de nombreux points communs; 2° Pérignon ne fait aucune allusion à l'annotation; 3° Le présent [ex-Currie] dessin semble être une première pensée pour l'oeuvre no. 227, plus complète et d'une technique plus soignée." Ananoff 1961–70, vol. 2 (1963), p. 80, no. 758, fig. 209.
15. Rosenberg 1988, pp. 380–81, under no. 178, fig. 3.
16. Rosenberg 2000, pp. 132, 136–37, figs. 175–77, and more recently, Rosenberg and Lebrun Jouve 2006, p. 154, fig. 85a.
17. The catalogue of the Desmarets "Cessation de commerce" sale, Paris, March 17, 1797, and days following (Lugt 5555) lists a framed drawing by Fragonard as lot 85, "Un turc assis, dessin lavé au bistre, sur papier blanc—haut. r 14 pouces, larg. r 10 pouces 1/1," which seems likely to be the drawing that entered Denon's collection. I thank Carole Blumenfeld for bringing this citation to my attention.

18. Williams 1978, p. 21.
19. For the original drawing of *La lecture*, see Rosenberg 1988, pp. 328–30, no. 270.
20. Rosenberg and Lebrun Jouve 2006, pp. 154–56, no. 85.
21. Rosenberg 1988, p. 364.
22. Stein 2007, pp. 305–8.
23. See note 17 above.
24. As in note 13 above.
25. See notes 17 and 7, respectively.
26. Volle and Rosenberg 1974, pp. 25–43.
27. On Vien, see Paris 1992, pp. 37–75, nos. 11–33.
28. The practice was initiated by Nicolas Vleughels in 1732, mainly for ecclesiastical dress, discontinued under Jean-François de Troy, and reinstated during the tenure of Charles-Joseph Natoire (1750–1774), mainly for dress *all'antica*. See "Note sur l'enseignement de la draperie au XVIIIe siècle," in Pagliano 2005, pp. 38–47.

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