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Yonan, Michael

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2 “Rococo Aesthetics and the Problem of Trompe l’Oeil”

Michael Yonan

Rococo is an art of great artifice. Nothing more needs to be said, perhaps, after a statement that so clearly conveys the truth. Abundantly curvaceous ornamentation is the rococo’s hallmark, seductive surfaces its *métier*, and disorienting illusion its mode of communication. A work of rococo art plays with what the eye sees, and can see, in an image, and in so doing ensorcells the eye with its beauty. Even in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, the moment of its initial appearance, rococo art was thought to be oriented purely toward demonstrating an artist’s talent in alluring and entrapping his audiences, with sensual appeal given priority over rational rules of good art. The modern heritage of this belief takes a different form, namely in the idea that observers sometimes struggle to understand rococo art as serious. It is easy to characterize rococo as an art without rules, one devoted to pleasures without purpose, or in a nutshell, reveling in frivolity. Add to this that rococo art is the outgrowth of a refined cultural sensibility and the elite tastes of *ancien régime* Europe, and the problem grows by orders of magnitude. Nowhere have I noticed this difficulty more than in my teaching. The formal rigidity of Italian Quattrocento painting, its reliance upon one-point linear perspective, and its creation of a seemingly rational illusion of reality in art speak to students who wish for art to be grounded in logical principles of clarity. The eighteenth century is a harder sell. Rococo’s playfulness, its attention to surfaces, its manifold symbolic references, and its illusionistic complexity disorient those who wish for art to recreate visual experience along (literally) rationally conceived lines.

This trepidation before rococo art has generated many misunderstandings of its visual structures. Rococo art may seem to be lacking in organizing structures of any kind, but this is not the case. This chapters intends to trace the illusionistic basis of rococo art so that I can make the argument that rococo is rooted in the traditions of representations inherited from previous centuries. I shall argue that art is not best described as a radical break with the visual structures of previous eras. Rather, rococo art is an art that layers illusions on top of each other to create a multivalent experience—disorienting, perhaps, but ultimately with a coherent basis to it. There is a kind of piercing through illusionistic space that characterizes all rococo art, and this is embedded in rococo forms themselves in every medium, from ornamental prints to narrative paintings, trompe l’oeil imagery, and even spatially in architecture. To see this, we must let go of the idea that rococo visual complexity is a kind of meaningless elaboration, an idea propounded frequently in modernist discourses about art and unfortunately projected retroactively onto the eighteenth century. Instead, we should appreciate rococo art for its abundance of meaning and excess of illusion, rather than their absence, and recognize in that abundance the basis of a more accurate attempt to account for human perception of the world.

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Figure 2.1 Jean-Honoré Fragonard, French, 1732–1806, *The Laundresses*, c.1756–1761; oil on canvas; 28 3/4 × 24 3/16 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum Purchase 76:1937

To begin our journey, we shall look at what might be called a “typical” rococo painting by one of its most famous practitioners—the French painter Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806). The image is *The Laundresses*, a painting of uncertain date, but thought to derive from the artist’s journey in Rome in the late 1750s (Figure 2.1). In creating this scene, Fragonard places us in a dark and humid space; a hint of the sky can be seen through the arch of the building in which this scene takes place, but much around the central figures is occluded in darkness and steam. A historical analysis of this image would direct us to questions about why Fragonard chose to make a painting on this subject. It is a recurring theme in eighteenth-century French art, common enough to allow Pierre Rosenberg to propose that we see no everyday washerwoman, but a special category of laundress called *blanchiseusses*, women whose task was to launder more delicate and expensive garments like fine fabrics or lace.¹ That may be true, but documenting a historical reality seems less Fragonard’s purpose than exploring the dynamics of its representation. How Fragonard paints this scene is more the image’s focus; he uses this subject as an opportunity to explore how paint creates the illusion of reality through sensation.

The artist has given us enough visual information to understand the scale of the space presented to us, how human beings occupy that space and relate within it, and the location of objects and surfaces that add meaning to the scene. There is enough of an illusion created here to produce what one might call the “reality effect” through visual cues that signal that it is supposed to represent a real moment. Yet Fragonard has repeatedly violated the illusionistic principles that these visual cues provide. One way he does this is by drawing attention to the canvas’s surface through rough, gestural application of paint, with many brushstrokes left visible to draw attention to the artist’s touch.² This kind of textural paint application is associated with several innovative figures in the history of European art, including Titian, Rubens, Velázquez, and most importantly for Fragonard, and Rembrandt. For Fragonard to continue this practice places him self-consciously within a specific painterly lineage known broadly as *rubénisme*, a kind of art making in which color is the structuring element of illusion. This kind of paint application would later inspire experiments characteristic of artistic modernism; one finds it in the art of Goya and later the French Impressionists. Fragonard falls into a lineage of artists who recognize the importance of surface effects in creating a memorable encounter with a work of art.

Yet Fragonard does more than just loosen his brush in the service of drawing attention to the painting’s surface. He uses paint to play with our perception of reality. Fragonard’s loosely painted surface obscures the kind of detail that would permit us to identify individual elements in this image, while also drawing attention to his practice as a painter. Passages of illusionistic clarity, like the delineation of the two washerwomen at the composition’s center, alternate with moments where pure paint covers the canvas with no discernible “subject” detectable. The hazy mist billowing around the laundresses, the dark underside of the vault in which they work, and the lower left foreground in which rocks and wash basins appear only vaguely sketched are examples of this. They are moments in which Fragonard has released parts of this painting from the predominant illusionistic scheme that governs it.³ The image is therefore a mix of illusionism and artifice blended imperfectly and with only minimal attention paid to smoothing over the visual inconsistencies that arise through their juxtaposition. The result is a picture that creates an illusion only to subvert it and does so insistently across its surface.

Exactly why an artist would be attracted to such variable illusionistic authenticity is a central question that I shall address momentarily, but for now, let us note that we can even extend this ambivalence toward illusion to *The Laundresses’* subject. When I stood in front of this painting with the late Mary D. Sheriff, a noted scholar of Fragonard and eighteenth-century French art in general, I attempted to impress her with an elaborate interpretation of it, citing the known conditions of the artist’s life in the late 1750s and the sociohistorical realities of laundresses at that time, in order to extrapolate the painting’s meaning.⁴ Her response was to point out, dryly, that it is in actuality a painting about nothing. I chuckled when I realized that she was right. We barely see the laundresses doing their work; their labor is more hinted at than depicted. The surrounding space and ancillary figures add little to our knowledge of what is taking place and effectively distract from the scene’s purported theme in curious ways. The man and child playing with each other in the lower right, the befuddled dog next to them, and the substantial passages on the canvas’s surface that convey little useful scenic information all pull attention away from a coherent representation of a confirmable subject.



Figure 2.2 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Laundress*, 1761. Oil on canvas. Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California, 83.PA.387

One sees how far Fragonard has strayed from a more centralized mode of depiction when comparing this painting to another one, more firmly rooted in eighteenth-century social conditions and, by extension, in familiar illusionistic principles. This would be Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *The Laundress* of 1761 (Figure 2.2). Greuze's painting is verifiably about something in a way that Fragonard's is not, and the visual techniques he employs in making it stand in service to its professed theme. We can imagine a world in which Greuze's woman might exist, and we can even extrapolate moral themes and messages from how he portrays her.⁵ Fragonard, in contrast, seems half-formed, unfocused, illusionistically haphazard, and irreverent. To a naïve viewer, Fragonard's image might also seem less skilled, although surely this is incorrect. It takes great technical facility with paint to manipulate a canvas as Fragonard did, just as Greuze employs a different kind of

illusionistic facility to create his. Fragonard's picture is more self-consciously an illusion, more artificial than other kinds of images, and has little to no "message" for its viewers to take away.

The "nothingness" that Professor Sheriff noticed in this picture is in fact a hallmark of rococo art. A painting like Fragonard's *Laundresses* is as much about how viewers *perceive of its subject* as it is a representation of that subject, and when we recognize that it plays with and teases our drive to see an image, we get closer to what Fragonard wanted observers to experience when encountering his paintings. That attention to the experience of encounter, of the dynamic that emerges between a person's sensory capabilities and the content of a painted surface, is what Fragonard explores in much of his art. He is a rather extreme and somewhat late example of this brand of illusionism, which viewers can also find earlier in other artists traditionally associated with rococo, namely Watteau, Boucher, and Chardin. Since much rococo art deals with sensual delights, it is tempting to see this aspect of it as its overarching basis. No doubt the sensual possibilities of a scene like Fragonard's played into its appeal. But what really makes a work of art rococo is its reliance on self-conscious visual and semantic ambivalence. The challenge of rococo art is to see the apparent nothingness of its subject and the something it represents, materially balanced and blended through painterly artifice. Rococo is an art that emboldens its viewers by making the process of apprehending art very much the center of the artistic experience. Fragonard's image asks us not only to see the laundresses and their dark setting but also to see around and outside of that illusion in multiple ways. There is, therefore, an experiential aspect of rococo art that is central to what it does.

This observation begs a much more fundamental question: if that is the case, then is rococo illusion really an illusion at all, and if so, how do we describe its illusionistic character? An illusion is something that seems plausible or true but is not. It can also be what *might* be true under specific conditions, but still is not. Built into any theory of illusion is a conception of transfer, a perceptual shift that something (paint) has the ability to evoke something else (laundresses). That ability is artifice, and artifice only works when there is a shared conception of art common to an image's maker and its viewers. Without shared assumptions about what constitutes reality, illusion fails. Part of the effect of Fragonard's painting comes from our inheritance of his illusionistic assumptions, which still hold generally true nearly 300 years after he painted it. Understanding illusion as a cultural process has taken art historians down highly fruitful paths. Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, a benchmark contribution to theories of illusion, is a much-referenced authority on the subject.⁶ Gombrich understands the history of illusion as a continuous process of making art adhere better to the optical processes of vision, with his famous formula of "making comes before matching" a guide to understanding how artists strove for ever greater illusionistic authenticity through practice.

However, as Marian Hobson in particular has noted, Gombrich underestimated the cultural forces that shape vision and, by extension, the parameters that guide the acceptance of paintings as illusionistic.⁷ Today it seems obvious to state that vision is shaped by culture and is not "neutral" or "natural," and that culturally based assumptions about vision determine what will count as an illusion. The implications of this observation are immense. Some of the illusionistic qualities one finds in Fragonard rely on specifically eighteenth-century concepts about artifice, others on more general European traditions, and still others on more globally shared perceptions of pictorial surfaces. Hobson understands Gombrich to say that surface and image cannot be apprehended

simultaneously and recognizing that this is in effect possible leads her to engage with eighteenth-century aesthetics to show how writers proposed it.⁸ Hobson notes that early eighteenth-century theories of illusionism recognized the existence of bimodal illusionism, a kind of artifice in which material substance and illusionistic fantasy coexist. To use Fragonard as an example, the laundresses and Fragonard's facile brush can be apprehended together, in the same moment, demanding no switching from one visual mode to the other.⁹ She dubs this "soft illusion," an unfortunate term that implies something less than total seriousness on the artist's part, an idea that parallels the oft-made judgment that rococo art is lacking in commitment to the rules. More appropriately, soft illusionism is illusion and matter being apprehensible at once. Contrasting with it is "hard illusion," which is the system of true trompe l'oeil. Hard illusionism produces images in which the illusion is utterly convincing, the illusion that spectators believe fully and in which spectators can immerse themselves mentally. To achieve this, the artist must abandon bimodal illusion and strive toward bipolar illusionism. This is a kind of representation in which the spectator can see either the artist's facture—the material substance of the painted surface—or the illusion, but cannot apprehend both at the same time. It is this kind of illusion that Gombrich celebrates, and that is characterized by Greuze's laundress.

Hobson would have us see these two visual systems existing in an either/or relationship. However, her interpretation of eighteenth-century illusionism raises many concerns about exactly where the line is drawn between bimodal and bipolar structures of representation. I would propose that even when a work of art aims for total illusionistic plausibility, it defaults to something like the process that Fragonard displays, in other words, to a kind of rococo complexity and multivalency that is in effect inherently bimodal. One sees this even in trompe l'oeil images, which would seem to be most committed to a bipolar structure. Here we should define a trompe l'oeil image more precisely and Sybille Ebert-Schifferer offers a helpful clarification for our purposes.¹⁰ The term first appeared in European art theory in the years around 1800, but the concept has a far longer history, reaching back to ancient Greece, if not earlier. The idea of art fooling the eye (*tromper les yeux*) was well-known in eighteenth-century art theory. Building on Ernst Michalski's idea of an aesthetic boundary (*ästhetische Grenze*) between artwork and viewer, Ebert-Schifferer notes that trompe l'oeil imagery breaks the boundary between illusionistic space and the space of the beholder and that this transgression stimulates multiple human senses, including both optic and haptic dimensions of experience.¹¹ In order for this to occur, a trompe l'oeil work of art must adhere to certain rules. It should represent its subject at a plausible scale, it should not cut off the subject at the picture's edges and should contain no visible traces of the painting process.¹² In other words, the trompe l'oeil image must replicate the basic terms of the picture-as-window first articulated in Renaissance art theory by Leon Battista Alberti and subsequently held up as an artistic ideal.¹³ I might add, echoing Hobson, that a trompe l'oeil image should also strive for a bipolar mode of illusion, one in which the viewer "believes" the scene presented to them and does so by not apprehending the paint that creates it.

The problem, of course, is that not much art lives up to this ideal, and nowhere more so than in the eighteenth century, since so much rococo art orients toward seducing the eye, not fooling it, as we have seen with Fragonard. Yet seduction and foolery may be more similar than this dichotomy first suggests. To explore this we can look at another eighteenth-century image, one that conforms to the parameters of trompe l'oeil



Figure 2.3 Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Trompe l'Oeil*, 1771. Oil on silk transferred to canvas. Frick Collection, New York, CTO.119. Bequeathed by Lore Heinemann in memory of her husband, Dr. Rudolph J. Heinemann, 1997

that Ebert-Schifferer laid out. This is a pastel by Jean-Etienne Liotard (1702–1789) titled simply *Trompe l'Oeil*, dating from 1771.¹⁴ (Figure 2.3) Here the standard visual devices of *tromperie* are in place. The image represents a board with four pictures attached to it. Two of these are small plaster plaques representing Venus and Cupid. Such items were common in the eighteenth century, relatively inexpensive to acquire, and conveyed the classical learning of their owners, although Liotard's choice of subjects slants more toward the playful and sensual over the scholarly. The illusion produced is of small objects hanging from screws attached to a wooden support. The two Venuses echo each other thematically and materially. Beneath them are two additional illusions, this time of drawings in black and red chalk tacked to the board with dabs of red wax. They represent women wearing head coverings. On the left is a woman with a *coiffure Turque*, an ornamented turban, and on the right one wearing a *coiffure de Ulm*, which evokes the traditional costumes of southern Germany. This unusual pairing perhaps serves to contrast the putatively “foreign” aesthetic of *turquerie* with more familiar European clothing. Viewed as a whole, Liotard's image recreates an idea board that artistic individuals, including Liotard himself, might keep close at hand while working. Given its *trompe l'oeil* visual structure, one could imagine it being wittily funny, and an advertisement of his talents, if the artist kept it near him while he worked.

Liotard's artifice would seem worlds away from Fragonard's, seemingly more committed to verisimilitude and to fool the viewer into a bipolar acceptance of reality. Yet Liotard too seduces the eye, and his artifice is likewise about leading the beholder's gaze through different levels of illusionism. There are in fact many. There is the illusion that we are seeing a board with things attached to it, and not a single piece of paper, which is what this object actually is. There is the further illusion that there are multiple and contrasting materials on this board—plaster, paper, chalk, wax—and not carefully placed marks in pastel. There is the illusion that the sculpted reliefs are three-dimensional and that their surfaces extend forward into our space. They both exist within Liotard's illusion and define individually two further illusionistic within their pictorial subjects. Then there is the illusion that the drawings of women's heads exist as illusionistic images of their own, each separate from the other and based on "reality" since they are associated with actual modes of dress in specific geographical locales. This contrasts with the fictive illusionism of mythological space in which the two Venuses exist. Finally, there is the illusion of space beyond the four corners of this image, the illusion of workshops where the plaques were made before coming into the artist's possession, the imaginary quarries where the plaster's raw materials were mined and the linen processed to make paper upon which an artist could sketch women's heads. Multiple illusionistic strata—totaling at least six or seven, possibly more—coexist in this image. When taken together, these overlap in complex ways with the world we occupy when we look at this picture. The picture therefore creates multiple geographical and social evocations that produce coexisting and wide-ranging levels of illusion that engage as we view the picture.¹⁵ My point is that on a purely structural level, Liotard's process is not too different from Fragonard's, but he achieves it through different visual means, the visual structures of trompe l'oeil. We can add to this the observation that Liotard himself was a kind of living trompe l'oeil, a Swiss painter who assumed the identity of *Le Peintre Turc*, the Turkish painter, after spending time in Ottoman lands and returning to Western Europe. He grew a beard, an uncommon act among European men in that period, and wore Turkish-styled clothing.¹⁶ He created an illusion on his body in exactly the sense we have been examining in his art. He did not become a real Ottoman but used artifice to appear Ottoman-like while remaining a European, and this to delude (at least momentarily) those who encountered him. This reveals how central artifice could be not only to eighteenth-century aesthetics but also to the era's conceptions of selfhood.¹⁷

The implication of Liotard's image is that "fooling the eye" destabilizes the subject who ascertains the illusion and, by extension, shatters the myth of a unified subject—the viewer who apprehends art from a position of power and knowledge. It also leads to further destabilization, namely that the shifting and co-existing illusionistic levels of rococo art, its bimodal character, are characteristic of all art, even art that seems bipolar in construction. Fragonard makes explicit what all art in essence always does. Liotard knows this and builds it into his apparently fully illusionistic scene. Here we can recall Ebert-Schifferer's observation that the trompe l'oeil is never about permanently fooling the viewer into believing that what they see, but to generate "astonishment at one's own perception," a "pleasure derived at seeing through the trick."¹⁸ That pleasure correlates with the viewing subject, the painting's beholder, imagining different aspects of themselves through different associations created in the moment of looking.

Thus far my discussion has explored illusionism as developed in eighteenth-century French painting. Other national traditions engaged more or less fully with the kind of artifice that Fragonard and Liotard embraced, while some national traditions took rococo aesthetics in entirely new directions. One region that embraced rococo design

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enthusiastically was eighteenth-century Bavaria. Historical and cultural ties to France made Bavaria particularly receptive to French rococo art, but in Bavaria (and Germany more broadly) rococo often occurs in religious settings, something encountered only rarely in France. Exactly why southern Germany embraced rococo as a mode for decorating religious art and architecture is the subject for a larger study, but German rococo allows us to address an aspect of rococo aesthetics that is only implicit in French art.¹⁹ This is the way in which rococo design operates in three dimensions. In this staunchly Catholic region of Germany, numerous religious edifices, among them many pilgrimage churches, were outfitted with rococo interiors in the years between 1730 and 1770. These buildings draw frequently from the playbook of rococo design as conceived in France, but southern Germany modified rococo aesthetics to make it more vivaciously experiential through architecture, with compelling implications for its beholders.

A closer look at one of the most celebrated examples of a Bavarian rococo church, the Wieskirche, will demonstrate how this happened. Built between 1745 and 1754 near the town of Steingaden, Bavaria, it offers its visitors an elegant exterior, which like many churches in this region is adorned only minimally. (Figure 2.4) It is when entering the church that the building's full reliance on the visual language of rococo becomes apparent.



Figure 2.4 Dominikus Zimmermann, Wieskirche, near Steingaden, Germany, 1745–1754. Exterior view. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York, ART105533

Its vibrant ornamental abundance and spatial complexity are the product of two artisan brothers, the stucco artist Johann Baptist Zimmerman (1680–1758) and the architect Dominikus Zimmermann (1685–1766), who worked together with other artisans to produce this decoration. Because we have access to more specific information about the historical context of this building than we do for either Fragonard's or Liotard's paintings, it is possible to frame how we understand its interior with greater historical precision.

The Wieskirche owes its existence to the experiences of a local woman named Maria Lory. Lory was, like many in this region, a devout Catholic. Details about her life are scant, but it is safe to say that she was unconcerned with the kinds of sophisticated artistic trends that help us approach French rococo painting. Bavaria was not a hotspot of social innovation or avant-garde artistic developments, but it is a more interesting setting than has sometimes been acknowledged. Artistic progress there filtered through the region's ecclesiastically based social structure, which had shaped the lives of its predominantly rural population for centuries. Understanding Maria Lory, and by extension, the Wieskirche and its illusions, requires us to recognize this social structure and her place in it.²⁰ Key to it were the religious processions and ceremonies that typify the Catholic faith, and these took place not only in churches but also in the countryside. These processions remain commonplace today in Catholic Europe but had particular importance for this region, the rural character and remoteness of which made them key events in social life. They punctuated the calendar and lent meaning to the activities of everyday existence, as well as defined the culture of southern Germany in opposition to its Protestant neighbors in northern Germany.

One such ceremony celebrated in this area was the Good Friday processional, which at Steingaden had evolved to employ a series of fourteen wooden sculptural mannequins representing Jesus at the Stations of the Cross. In 1730, two local artists named Magnus Staub and Lukas Schwaiger produced a new set of sculptures for this processional. They were not professional artists, but apparently were talented, because one of the figures, that of the flagellated Jesus, worshippers found particularly moving due to its realism. It included open wounds and vivid dripping blood, a mode of depiction that might recall the exceptionally bloody Christs of German Renaissance art. After a few years of using it, the local ecclesiastics began to worry about overheated emotional responses to this sculpture and, in 1734, retired it from use. The German used in the official published record of this moment is particularly relevant to our discussion: the sculpture was put aside “wegen des ‘zu ernsten Affektes,’” that it conveyed too much emotion, in short, that it was too convincing, a comment that already evokes some of the concerns about the illusion we have explored in France.²¹ Once removed from use, the statue was stored in the attic of the Steingaden abbey's landowner, one Jeremias Rehle, and there it sat for several years unnoticed.

In 1738 it came into the possession of Rehle's godmother, none other than Maria Lory. She developed a profound affection for it, took it home, displayed it in her house, prayed in front of it, and preserved it. A few months later, on 14 June 1738, she saw it cry real tears. In the anonymous *Gnadenblum* book of 1746, the official record describing this moment, we encounter carefully layered language. It says:

Allda verspürte sie den 14. Brachmonats, als an dem Samstag Abends, und darauf folgenden Sonntag frühe einige Tropffen in dem Angesicht des Bildnuß, welche sie vor Zäher haltete.”²²

The text does not actually claim that Maria Lory saw the sculpture of Jesus crying. Instead, it says that she sensed or perceived it to be crying. It is an important distinction,

one that parallels the more purely art-theoretical terminology we have just examined. The German word *verspüren* means to feel or sense something, and it implies fragmentary or partial feeling. The use of the word *halten* likewise indicates something like the English phrase “take to be.” She took the drops on the sculpture to be tears. It does not confirm that the statue was crying, nor that the drops truly were tears. Instead, it proposes that the tears were Lory’s perception, leaving open any confirmation about whether a miracle did in fact occur. In a modern secular mindset, it would be ridiculous to claim that this was a miraculous event, and even among eighteenth-century ecclesiastical authorities, there was considerable skepticism on the matter.²³ But I would caution us from assuming that we can define reality for others, particularly so for historical individuals like Lory. Whether the miracle of a spontaneously crying work of art was “true” is less the point than that she *perceived it to be true* and that her perception was strong enough to produce a reaction in herself and to influence others.

We could add to this that the perception of a sculpture crying involves a kind of illusionism, a belief that appearances can be true, that parallels the phenomenon of pictorial *trompe l’oeil*. One suspends logic about how the world works in order to accept the illusion in a work of art as true. We know that a picture is a two-dimensional falsehood, but we enjoy the experience of looking at it and imagining what it shows to be real. That process links illusionistic techniques in painting to the religious experience that Lory had before her statue. Believing that an inanimate object could cry involves believing that what one imagines is true, and the illusion involved likewise plays with the possibilities of how one understands one’s senses, or as Ebert-Schifferer has indicated, about recognizing the artificiality of one’s perceptions.²⁴ The point is precisely to believe what one knows cannot be true, to have faith in the illusion, and that faith is of course a crucial dimension of religious experience. There is therefore a structural homology between looking at an illusionistic picture such as Liotard’s and a miraculous experience like seeing a sculpture cry. Both involve the spectator committing to an illusion potentially being true despite recognizing its impossibility, and indeed, willing it to be true.

It is possible to expand upon this observation considerably. Lory’s vision was a perception, but also a conception, a creative act she undertook to generate devotional fervor. In that respect she was a kind of artist, someone who produced an illusion for others to experience after she created it. Underlying this illusion is love; both a divine love associated with this religious figure, but also her love, her passion for the suffering conveyed through this that moved her to see what was not “really” there. There is also her desire to believe what she saw and her urge to convince others of its truth. All of these layers conceptions of artistry, creativity, and enthusiasm across Lory’s vision, and it is through concepts of artifice that they become possible. We might add that Lory’s vision is one example of female desire harnessed for creativity that parallels other stories of women’s religious fervor resulting in new visions. These have considerable history, with famous examples from the eighteenth century including the *convulsionnaires* of Saint-Médard and Crescentia of Kaufbeuren, both of which are examples of women who directed passionate religious fervor into the creation of new believers.²⁵

Maria Lory’s vision is therefore a kind of illusionistic experience, and the Zimmermann brothers transferred her experience into the illusionistic complexity of the Wieskirche’s interior. There are several ways a visitor to the church experiences this. As they enter the church, they are immediately confronted with a coherent, balanced, and perspectival centered view of the entire space. This provides a unified experience of the interior’s immensely rich decoration, a visual quality that echoes prominent examples in Italian

religious architecture. The clearest predecessor is Andrea Pozzo's fresco for the interior of the Jesuit Church of Sant'Ignazio, Rome, which famously contains a perspectival arranged illusionistic trompe l'oeil and a spot on the floor on which to stand for the illusion to work perfectly.²⁶ That spot in Sant'Ignazio corresponds to the initial entry point of the Wieskirche. Pozzo's design is sometimes interpreted as a triumph of rationality in the ordering of space, but viewed differently, it also represents an embrace of artifice. Sant'Ignazio's illusion works when one stands on the spot indicated, but as soon as one sits or moves around the interior, that illusionistic perfection is lost.

Something like this also happens in the Wieskirche, but the relatively straightforward perspectival arrangement of Sant'Ignazio is complicated and elaborated through the language of rococo ornament. (Figure 2.5) As one walks into the Wieskirche's nave and apse, one sees competing illusionistic systems overlapping each other, sometimes



Figure 2.5 Dominikus Zimmermann, Johann Baptist Zimmermann, and others, Wieskirche, near Steingaden, Germany, 1745–1754. Interior view looking toward apse. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York, ART105532.

becoming coherently visible, then escaping out of view, and in sum creating an experience of shifting surfaces and partial distances that disorient as much as confirm one's presence in an illusionistic cosmos. Most notable in this regard are two areas of the church. The ceiling fresco represents the moment immediately prior to the Last Judgment, structured optically through multiple viewpoints and which cannot be apprehended easily from any single point in the interior. Similarly, the colonnades around the high altar are topped with complex oversized rococo cartouches that hang in midair and allow light to pass through, while they also frame paintings on the walls behind them that come in and out of view as one looks across the apse. The illusion works momentarily, then fails, and one finds one's gaze repeatedly engaged only to be revealed as partial and fragmented. This process distracts from the putative purpose of this building, namely to be a house of worship that focuses the believer's gaze on the miracle of the crying sculpture, which is in fact housed in the interior behind the high altar.

I will here suggest that this process corresponds surprisingly well to the illusionistic schema that Fragonard applied to his laundresses. Just as Fragonard takes us in and out of illusionistic systems in his picture, centering a subject and yet diverting from it in multiple ways, so does the Wieskirche interior take the worshipper's gaze and fragment it, focusing it at times on important artistic subjects, while at other points shifting it to new registers and levels of decoration. The in-and-out play of illusion that made Fragonard's picture so appealing, and simultaneously so strange, is spatialized in the Wieskirche. Furthermore, this process echoes Maria Lory's vision. To look at the ceiling fresco in the Wieskirche is to believe in an illusion, but only for a moment, since the illusion vanishes as one's eyes move around the fresco or as the spectator's body moves from one area of the church to another. It is a process of illusion requiring desire on the part of the worshipper, a desire to believe in what one sees, and this desire transfers the miracle that Lory thought she saw onto the pilgrim who travels to worship in this building. The church activates this desire to experience illusion by fragmenting the observer's gaze as they apprehend the decoration before them. The Zimmermanns sought to make illusion exist and dissolve repeatedly through the church's rococo formal language. This is particularly evident in the apse cartouches, which both create opportunities for perfect perspectival illusionism as one looks through them, while also revealing that illusion to be impermanent. (Figure 2.6) Perhaps one could push this even further to state that Maria Lory's vision was a kind of bipolar illusion—the sculpture was either crying or not crying—translated to a bimodal experience in the church's architecture, one in which artifice and belief coexist.

Here we can connect the nexus of illusionistic principles at work in this building to broader structures linking God with art. A church is an interface between reality and the divine. Divinity is connected to art, both in that it can make the invisible visible, but also because in the European context, the process of making illusions resembles the imagined process of God creating the world.²⁷ Artifice is what makes an illusion seem true, and the suspension of reality that makes an illusion convincing is comparable to the faith required to believe. Summed, up, belief is activated in illusion. There is a structural similarity between illusionism and the miraculous that rococo art makes explicit. A miracle is an event that should not actually be real, but appears to be; illusion is similarly the thing that appears real but turns out to be fake. Illusionism is a kind of miracle. We can even broaden this more to recall anthropologist Alfred Gell's idea that all art-making is rooted in some sort of magical processes.²⁸ "Magic" here is to be understood broadly as material processes that seem impossible, things beyond the laws of reality in any given



Figure 2.6 Dominikus Zimmermann, Johann Baptist Zimmermann, and others, Wieskirche, near Steingaden, Germany, 1745–1754. View of apse cartouches. (Photo: Author.)

cultural setting. Religious belief is a kind of magic because it evokes a spiritual world beyond normal human experience, and art is a cipher that makes these experiences visible in human terms.

At this point, one might wonder if the kind of procedures I have traced visually through paintings and architecture were ever described in contemporary writings. There are some eighteenth-century writers who articulated aesthetic ideals that paralleled rococo illusionism in one way or another; these include Roger de Piles, William Hogarth, and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, among others.²⁹ Yet none of them do this explicitly. To find a site where rococo is theorized, we must turn not to a text, but to the emblem of rococo illusionism: the *rocaille cartouche*. Cartouches are where rococo aesthetics were first formulated into a visual theory of illusionism. Rococo has its origins in the appearance of shells, a fact that has given the shell pride of place in discussions of its history. In eighteenth-century German, the term for rococo was *Muschelwerk*, or shell work, a word still in use today. Recognizing this origin has the advantage of linking rococo design to areas of scholarly study today of great interest, notably the history of collecting.³⁰ Unfortunately, it also has served to obscure the attention eighteenth-century designers paid to the cartouche. Rococo print culture is rife with designs for cartouches, especially in Germany, where the print workshops of Nuremberg and Augsburg created a major industry around the production of rococo engravings in the 1740s and 1750s. When depicting cartouches, such prints do more than frame a scene: they break down barriers of



Figure 2.7 Franz Xaver Habermann, Ornamental Print (*Cartouche with Helmet*), c. 1740–60. Etching. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RP-P-1964-2673. Image in Public Domain (CC0 1.0 Universal)

illusionistic space in complex, overlapping, and occasionally disorienting ways that lay the groundwork for exactly what the artists and architectures we have discussed tried to achieve.

To see how a cartouche can theorize illusion visually, let us look at a single example: a print by Franz Xaver Habermann (1721–1796), an Augsburg-based printmaker whose output of rococo designs is substantial, although he also lived long enough to produce imagery of the British colonies in North America—now the United States—on the eve of Napoleon’s rise to power.³¹ (Figure 2.7) In this image, Habermann offers a design for a cartouche, one reminiscent of frames used around paintings or the kinds of rococo stucco work commonly employed in ornamented interiors. Yet a close examination of it draws attention to how improbable, even impossible, it would be to make something like this for actual use.

Rather, it is an opportunity for the artist to play with different levels of perception. Individual elements of the cartouche are perfectly legible within a unified imagined illusionistic framework: the crowned helmet at the composition’s upper edge, for example, makes sense spatially and illusionistically on its own terms. But as one looks across the cartouche, that illusionistic framework dissolves into others that connect inconsistently across the sheet of paper, becoming floral, vegetal, and linear at various points in the design and changing the required illusionistic focus along the way. Even the idea of framing as the function of a cartouche is subverted in Habermann’s design, which can be seen clearly in the cartouche’s central space. The hatching along its unornamented left edge suggests a frame with a receding space inside it, but as the eye travels across the empty area at its center, this illusion of depth transforms into one of movement toward the

viewer, as if the frame has suddenly changed its mind and become a plastic entity emerging from the picture plane toward us on the right edge. The cartouche produces numerous other moments of spatial and illusionistic inconsistency along these lines.

It is not “soft illusion,” lightheartedness, playfulness, or lack of seriousness that best explains these inconsistent illusions in Habermann’s print. Instead, there is a self-conscious understanding of illusionism’s artificiality prioritized in it. The goal of the work of art is neither to copy nature exactly, nor to create a fantasy world unconnected to nature, but to place the two in a constant state of movement into and out of each other to activate the beholder’s imagination. This is what is meant when it is said that rococo emphasizes the artificiality of the artistic process and the role of the imagination, of creativity, in its final effect. Rococo art may therefore seem to sit on the far end of the continuum between artifice and nature, so far from the balance point between the two that it might seem like an *artifice pur*. But rococo art never rejects naturalism and illusionism fully; it explores it through the lens of artifice. That privileging of artifice on a theoretical level is what made rococo art easy to criticize in the eighteenth century and even easier to discount in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

To return to trompe l’oeil by way of a conclusion, we can recall Michalski’s idea of an “aesthetic barrier” as applied by Ebert-Schifferer to the process of fooling the eye. Rococo aesthetics insists on a heteronomous viewing experience that rendered it suspect to the nascent professionalization of art history that took place in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³² If we recognize that a connection between illusionism and individual empowerment existed in the eighteenth century, how might we then revisit our own challenges with rococo illusion today? We would recognize that rococo art attempted to stave off the possibility of illusionism that was too true, and too convincing, and replace it with something grounded in the human sensorium. In rococo, artifice is not a distraction from truth, but a way of ensuring it when an individual viewer looks at a work of art. In its own way, rococo grounds illusion in reality, not the fictive reality of an artist’s imagination, but in the experiential one of art’s beholder. In rococo art, the beholder can become both God and Adam at the same time.

Notes

- 1 Pierre Rosenberg, *Fragonard* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Harry N. Abrams, 1988), 88.
- 2 Mary D. Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), ch. 5; and Ewa Lajer-Burchard, *The Painter’s Touch: Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), ch. 3.
- 3 Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), ch. 4.
- 4 Sheriff, *Fragonard*, especially ch. 4, for the aesthetics of Fragonard’s brushwork and its illusionism; and Lajer-Burchard, *The Painter’s Touch*, ch. 3.
- 5 Colin B. Bailey, *Jean-Baptiste Greuze: The Laundress* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2000), 46–57.
- 6 For a discussion of Gombrich, see the introduction to this volume.
- 7 Marian Hobson, *The Object of Art: The Theory of Illusion in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 9. There have been many other theorists of illusion in English-language art history, with varying degrees of applicability to rococo art. See Bryson, *Word and Image*, 89–121; and W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- 8 Hobson, *Object of Art*, 10.
- 9 Hobson, *Object of Art*, 48–52.

- 10 Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil Painting* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2002), 17–37.
- 11 Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions*, 22–31.
- 12 Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions*, 23.
- 13 Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions*, 24–25.
- 14 New York: Frick Collection, 1997.1.182. This picture was included in the 2006 exhibition on Liotard held at the Frick. *Jean-Étienne Liotard, 1702–1789: Masterpieces from the Musées d'Art et d'Histoire of Geneva and Swiss Private Collections* (Paris: Somogy/New York: The Frick Collection, 2006), 115. See also Renée Loche and Marcel Roethlisberger, *L'opera completa di Liotard* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1978), 114–15, Fig. 283.
- 15 This multivalency may have its origins in European perceptions of Asian art. See Kristel Smentek, “Looking East: Jean-Étienne Liotard, the Turkish Painter,” *Ars Orientalis* 39 (2010): 85–112; and newly Isabelle Tillerot, *East Asian Aesthetics and the Space of Painting in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, trans. Chris Miller (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2024).
- 16 Mary D. Sheriff, “The Dislocations of Jean-Étienne Liotard, Called the Turkish Painter,” in *Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art since the Age of Exploration*, ed. Mary D. Sheriff (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 97–121.
- 17 For which see Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), ch. 4; and for an application of this concept specifically to painting, Julie-Anne Plax, *Watteau and the Cultural Politics of Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 3.
- 18 Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions*, 24.
- 19 The most comprehensive treatment of this subject in English is still Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Rococo Architecture in Southern Germany* (London: Phaidon, 1968). There is a huge bibliography of local and regional studies in German, in addition to several overviews, but in general the literature on this architecture trails that of France, Italy, and England.
- 20 On the Wies miracle and its social context, see Thomas and Helene Finkenstaedt, *Die Wieswallfahrt: Ursprung und Ausstrahlung der Wallfahrt zum Gegeißelten Heiland* (Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1981), ch. 2; Thomas Finkenstaedt, “Das Gnadenbild des Gegeißelten Heiland auf der Wies und sein Rahmen: Wallfahrt und Baugeschichte,” in *Die Wies: Geschichte und Restaurierung*, ed. Michael Petzet (Munich: Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, 1992), 45–52; and Michael Yonan, “The Wieskirche: Movement, Perception, and Salvation in the Bavarian Rococo,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 41 (2012): 1–25.
- 21 Quoted in Georg Kirchmeir, “Die Wallfahrtskirche zum Gegeißelten Heiland auf der Wies: Einheit von Kunst und Theologie,” in Petzet, *Die Wies*, 17.
- 22 *Wunderbare Gnadenblum auf der Wies: Das Mirakelbuch der Wieswallfahrt*, ed. Hans Pörnbacher (Weißenhorn: Anton H. Konrad, 1999), 24–25. This is a facsimile of the original miracle book: *Neu-entsprossene Graden-Blum auf der Wis* (Augsburg: Anton Maximilian Heiß, 1746).
- 23 Yonan, “The Wieskirche,” 8–11.
- 24 Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions*, 24.
- 25 Yonan, “The Wieskirche,” 9; and Christopher M. S. Johns, *The Visual Culture of Catholic Enlightenment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 16–18 and 67–68.
- 26 On the relationship between Pozzo’s illusionism and its Bavarian successors, see Karsten Harries, *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 56–68.
- 27 Paul Barolsky, *A Brief History of the Artist from God to Picasso* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 1–7.
- 28 Alfred Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, eds. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 40–66.
- 29 On de Piles as a theorist of rococo, see Melissa Hyde, *Making Up the Rococo: Boucher and his Critics* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2006), 95–101 and 136–38; she builds on Jacqueline Liechtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age*, trans. Emily McVarish (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). On Hogarth, there is no better source than the artist himself: *The Analysis of Beauty*, ed. Ronald Paulson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 50–59. On Baumgarten, see J. Colin McQuillan, ed., *Baumgarten’s Aesthetics: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021).

- 30 This is an important subject that can only be touched upon here. See Marisa Anne Bass, et al., *Concophilia: Shells, Art, and Curiosity in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021); Vibeke Woldbye and Bettina von Meyenburg, eds., *Konkylien og Mennesket* (Copenhagen: Kunstindustrimuseet, 1983); and for an eighteenth-century artist who collected shells, see Jessica Priebe, *François Boucher and the Art of Collecting in Eighteenth-Century France* (London: Routledge, 2022), ch. 2.
- 31 Ebba Krull, *Franz Xavier Habermann 1721–1796* (Augsburg: Verlag Hieronymus Mühlberger, 1977), 61, for the function and use of prints such as this one.
- 32 Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions*, 31.

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