Good Taste

Good taste (bon goût, buon gusto) is one of those phrases that has no meaning outside of particular social circumstances. By the later years of the seventeenth century there was considerable reaction against the "extravagances" of the Baroque. For many reasons, some of them political, European intellectuals of the eighteenth century returned to a more rational and "natural" basis for literature and art. Today we are apt to think of taste as something more instinctive than rational, a faculty that reveals basic attitudes about an individual and his or her particular cultural interests. But in the eighteenth century, there arose an interest in universal taste, the kind of taste that is normative, that we should all agree upon. Bad taste may be relative; good taste is absolute. It is no coincidence that this is the same period that saw the rise of aesthetics as an independent philosophical category. According to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), humans have autonomous capacities for rationality, morality, and judgment of beauty. It is this last aptitude that allows us to assume that there is such a thing as good taste.

So far as the Rococo style in painting is concerned (Fig. 1), the composition is frequently off-center, and the figures are often spiraling and dance-like in their movement. There are few visual tensions. In terms of color, we see pastel hues, high values (lots of white mixed in with the colors), a pervading atmosphere of colored mist, and the blurring of details. Subjects are often of aristocratic lovemaking in settings that are outdoors, idyllic, and lush. These, then, are the elements of good taste in French Rococo painting.

The Place of Love: the Grove and the Bower

In Francois Boucher's Pan and Syrinx (Fig. 2), the lecherous god Pan seeks the beautiful nymph Syrinx, but he misses his mark by groping reeds along a river bank. Syrinx, apparently now invisible to Pan, recoils and lunges for protection toward her sister, a river nymph who has brought about the deception. This is a place of love (locus amoenus), even if it is of love frustrated. While Pan's gaze is misled (although he eventually makes of the reeds his panpipe, the musical instrument of breathy lust), the beholder's gaze is rewarded with the image of two reclining, naked women. The pleasure here is reserved for the male gaze, a viewing from without, an inspection that surely is meant to result in gratification, in finding an object of one's desire and (eventual) fulfillment.

Pilgrimage to Cythera (Fig. 3) by Jean-Antoine Watteau provides one of the best-known instances of the place of love in early eighteenth-century painting. Pilgrims, dressed in the contemporary finery that Watteau popularized, are approaching (or perhaps departing from) the island of Cythera. This mythic island, sacred to Venus, not only provides the pilgrims with privacy, with isolation if not solitude, but also with freedom. The pleasure ground has a deep association with human feelings and passions; there is a melding of nature and the human.

This grove, this sacred isle of love, summons up a pleasurable association between painting and observer. The French literary critic Saint-Lambert wrote in 1769 that "if the young and amorous are placed in a delightful grove, reclining on beds of flowers, in the midst of a happy country, and under a bright and serene sky, these beauties of nature will increase the pleasing sensations that arise from representations of love." The place of love offers comfort not just for those lovers within it, but for all of us, who are potential lovers, watching. We watch because we are curious and sometimes covetous.

The Pastoral/Arcadian

These terms refer originally to a genre of poetry about the love of shepherds and shepherdesses (the Latin pastor means shepherd) and their home in Arcadia. There are two Arcadias--the geographical one in Greece and the spiritual Arcadia. The ancient Greek historian Polybius, who was born in the geographical
Arcadia, reported that the shepherds of his homeland from time immemorial had lived in simplicity, practiced the musical arts, and had instituted musical contests. By the early Roman period, Arcadia in poetry had come to represent the Golden Age, something hazy and far-off, yet intensely desirable. It is that melancholy sense of something regrettably past that fires the imaginative longing of so many later views of Arcadia as a landscape or island of dreams and wishes.

Shepherds and shepherdesses have appeared in the pastoral tradition of poetry since about 600 B.C.E. An early story tells of Daphnis and Echnais. The shepherd Daphnis was a son or favorite of the god Hermes and the beloved of the nymph Echnais. He pledged his love to Echnais, but a princess seduced him with wine and beauty. In revenge, Echnais blinded Daphnis, who—according to some accounts—turned to music for solace. Thus began the pastoral tradition dedicated to loss and founded on the need for comfort through music, which, much like the tradition of modern American country music, sings of our misfortunes. According to Bruno Snell, "From that time onward the shepherds have been in love usually without hope of success; either they indulge in their own suffering, or they wring a poetic expression of sympathy from their friends."

In Autumn Pastoral (Fig. 4), for example, by Francois Boucher (1703-1770), a shepherd and shepherdess display their tender feelings and dulcet voices while lounging and eating grapes. A dog sprawls in the noon heat while the herds lie in shadow. The shepherd flirts. He has neither the vulgarity of the peasant nor the questionable sophistication of the urbanite: he is in Arcadia. This is not a realm of heroic events, great deeds, or significant human actions. Our attention is drawn to the unremarkable, those normal things that do not usually command artistic scrutiny. This is not part of the grand manner.

So who looked at these paintings? They certainly were not intended for shepherds; rather, they were viewed by those sophisticated urbanites who longed for less complicated times when human relations were not so compromised by the competing demands of social living. These paintings also appealed to those who loved the games of life. Role playing and gamesmanship constituted a large part of the rituals, protocols, etiquette, and enjoyment of daily life for the aristocrats and newly rich who populated the salons of eighteenth-century Paris. The incongruity of a sophisticated lover searching for the simplicity of an earlier time is at the heart of games. A social group that values secrecy and wishes to distinguish itself from others, often will dress up, don masks and eccentric outfits. The masked balls and rustic posturings of Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, at Versailles' Petite Trianon may have seemed odd and scandalous to some. Yet it was part of the tradition of French high culture throughout the eighteenth century.

The Place of Excitement (locus uberrimus)

There is another place of pleasure, the locus uberrimus, from the Latin word for the rich and fertile. The Swing (Fig. 5) by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806) presents us with a typical instance. An oddly radiant light wells up within the left-hand corner and enchants this overly luxuriant glade. Nature explodes with leaves and flowers. As if the force of nature were somewhat demented, trees erupt violently from the ground and twist tortuously. Certainly, not everything is charmed here; there is more than a hint of perversity. How these blasted, intertwining, haunting trees can tether a swing so that it moves in a reasonably regular arc is astonishing. The statues, the rhythmically rocking young woman, a voyeur, and a yammering lap dog create a disturbing, fertile excitement and sensibility.

Tranquillity (otium)

Otium, the Latin word for ease, suggests that one takes up a spot, languishes, sings, and makes love. Boucher's paintings, such as the Rape of Europa (Fig. 6), where languorous, groggy, and inert figures doze or relax their lives away in various pastoral contexts, are redolent of otium. There are numerous traditions of love, one demonstrating the stressful and troubled, another the more wildly erotic (as with Fragonard's Swing), a third the light-hearted and casual. It is this last form that seemed to interest Boucher the most. His figures generally recline. Love entails no exertion, but is free from stress, worry, or work. Some of Boucher's little cupids are so indolent they seem to have no capacity for movement; they don't
shoot arrows, they just drop them like water balloons.

This is the mood depicted in *Rinaldo and Armida in Her Garden* (Fig. 6) by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770). The love story of Rinaldo and Armida comes from the sixteenth-century epic poem *Jerusalem Delivered* (*Gerusalemma Liberata*) by Torquato Tasso. In the grand tradition of love poetry, the Christian crusader Rinaldo has been bewitched by Armida, sent by Satan to waylay the formidable knight and the crusaders bent on delivering Jerusalem from the infidel Turks. Two other soldiers come to this secluded part of an island of love known as the Fortunate Isle. Rinaldo, unaware of the intruders, gazes lazily at his beloved, while she reflects upon her mirror.

The place of love--this time a bedroom--and the sweet sleepiness of *otium* are combined in a painting by Charles-Joseph Natoire of *Cupid and Psyche* (Fig. 7), part of the decoration of the Hôtel de Soubise in Paris. The god Cupid, leaning back on his wings, dozes in a pose that does not so much suggest sleeping in a bed as it does a kind of peaceful relaxation on a sofa. Psyche, his earthly beloved, holds up a lantern to gaze upon his face. He has forbidden her to see him. Her position on the couch of Cupid hardly suggests the deceit and surreptitious nature of her mission. All seems quite lovely and relaxed--but we know that she is about to spill the wax from her lamp and awaken him. Once he discovers her looking at him, he disappears.

Relaxation, tranquillity, and peacefulness are elements found throughout European art (and literature) in the eighteenth century. The enjoyment of art involved no struggle, just as the subjects of that art were also at ease. This indolence and peacefulness of our being in the world is a remarkable vision, so different from the spectacle, and sometimes the horror, of the Baroque vision.

There is an almost dream-like quality to this painting, but behind the softness and lightness of the execution is a meticulous composition: the trees behind the dancer echo the shimmering green of his costume, and the rose on his shoe matches that of his cape. And instead of Baroque drama there is a Rococo tension in the artificiality of the pose and the slight tilt of the head.
2. Francois Boucher, *Pan and Syrinx*, 1759. Oil on canvas, 13 x 17 in. National Gallery, London. The theme of seeing and being seen, with all its potential for irony, eroticism, and dramatic tension, is a popular one in Rococo art. Boucher has heightened the sensual charge of this painting by depicting not only a nude Syrinx, but also (rather gratuitously) a nude personification of the river, and by contrasting the voluptuous flesh of these two with the muscular torso of Pan.

3. Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, 1721. Oil on canvas, 4 ft 3 in x 6 ft 8 in. Louvre, Paris. Art historians have failed to agree on the central subject of this painting: are the couples about to embark for the island of Cythera, or are they about to return from it? Perhaps it is deliberately ambiguous, like the mood, which could be one of mild eroticism or melancholy.

5. Jean-Honore Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767, Oil on canvas, 33 x 26 in. Wallace Collection, London. The subject of this painting was suggested by the Baron St. Julien, who commissioned it and who is depicted in it as the rakish voyeur. Fragonard skilfully frames the scene in foliage, and uses all sorts of detail to add tension: the slipper which has flown off, the slightly frayed and slightly twisted ropes, and the tortuously curving branches.
6. Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *Rinaldo and Armida in Her Garden*, 1742. Oil on canvas, 6 ft 2 in x 8 ft 7 in. Art Institute of Chicago. This was a popular story among eighteenth-century artists, and the composer Haydn based an opera on it. Tiepolo emphasizes the central themes—pleasure versus duty, romance versus religion—by contrasting soft, flowing drapery and lush colors with firm lines and regular geometric shapes.

7. Charles-Joseph Natoire, *Cupid and Psyche*, 1738. Spandrel painting. Hotel de Soubise, Paris. Great Rococo art often appears so effortless that the skill of the artist is not always appreciated. Here Natoire has managed to turn the apparently awkward shape of the framing to advantage, emphasizing the contrast between the languid body of the sleeping Cupid and the angular tension of Psyche.