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## Title of Object

The Poorly Defended Rose (64.63.1) and The Letter (64.63.2)

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Michel Garnier

**Culture:** French

**Date of Object:** 1789 (Poorly Defended Rose)  
and 1791 (The Letter)

**Country:** France

**Accession Number:** 64.63.1,2

**File Created:** 11/7/2016

**Material/Medium:** oil on canvas

**Author of File:** Elizabeth Winga

**Department:** Paintings

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 7/10/2017

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## Tour Topics

Betrayal, Group 5, Highlights 1600 to 1850, Love\_Honor\_and\_Betrayal, Rococo, Neoclassical, women, fashion/dress, morality, gender roles, flowers, writing, stories/storytelling, relationships, symbolism

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. These two paintings are small, projecting a feeling of intimacy. So first, come up close and examine some of their details. See what you can decipher about these paintings with your detective eyes: *What did you see that tells you the story in these paintings?* The elegantly dressed young couple having an amorous encounter is typical of Rococo themes.
2. To fill in some of the details about the story in these paintings, listen to the audio clip from the curator. Continue discussion about symbols and the paintings as amorality message. Talk about the relationship between the two figures in each painting, with the first painting representing LOVE and the second representing BETRAYAL.
3. Consider how this scene fits into its time and place. Rococo was a period style that was most prominent in 18<sup>th</sup> century France, between the Baroque and Neoclassical eras. *What was life like in France at this time?* Rococo paintings often featured the aristocrats at play, but this one has a darker background, feeling more like a staged scene in a play rather than real life. Consider whether the French

Revolution (1789-1799) had an impact, when many aristocrats fled France. Could that be the reason the suitor left?

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### Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

These two paintings contain a narrative about love and betrayal between a man and woman in 18<sup>th</sup> century France, with particular focus on the couple before, during and after a music lesson. At this time in France, the “music lesson” setting was thought to be an “occasion for sexual transgression.” In the novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782), the music lesson provides the instructor “with an opportunity to seduce the weak-willed, convent-educated “rosebud” Cecile Volanges.” The theme proved to be popular in imagery and other literature. (*Dangerous Liaisons*, p. 45) This amorous encounter turns into an unhappy ending depicted in *The Letter*, where the woman reads the letter and holds a picture of her suitor, who is no longer a part of the scene.

At the heart of the narrative is a morality message about the pitfalls of a love affair or a seduction. The hidden meaning is made known through symbolic objects: a broken vase, a potted rose, a bouquet of roses, and a music book on the floor. The man plucking the rose symbolizes that the woman is about to lose her virginity. The bouquet of cut roses and the broken vase tell us the seduction took place. At the end, the woman has received a letter and only a small portrait of the man as a remembrance. The implied message is that the woman loses both her virginity and lover.

Description of imagery: *The Poorly Defended Rose* - A man and woman are the focus, with the woman appearing to be in motion, moving away from the window, while the man stands behind her and holds her around the waist so she cannot continue to move away. Their gazes are focused on each other. One of the woman's hands is raised in the air exhibiting excitement or caution. Both of their garments are elegant, reflecting the fashion of the times with ruffles & ruches. Roses adorn her hair and a pink sash with a large bow highlights her small waist. Blue satin shoes with bows peek out from under her white gown. The figures are lit by natural light from a window on the left, a window that is showcased by a swag of gold satin drapery. On a deep window sill sits a potted rose plant, from which the man is plucking the last visible rose. The woman's second hand may be trying to stop him or encourage him. On the floor in front of them is a broken vase and an opened book of music that has been dropped. On the right side is a statue of a baby/putto with the man's plumed hat plopped on top of it. The remainder of the background is visually difficult to read, creating a rather shallow space in which the two people stand – a factor in making this scene feel staged.

Description of imagery: *The Letter* – The same woman as above is now faced forward with a letter in her hand. In her other hand she is holding what is likely a small oval painting of the man. She is showing the miniature painting to her older female companion. The young woman is wearing a different white dress that is not as fancy as the one in the other painting. No longer are there roses in her hair, and her hair is now powdered. A blue sash wraps around her waist and she is now barefoot. The other woman standing beside her is likely a maid in that she is dressed more simply in darker clothing. The “props” in this scene include a two-tiered table. On the top tier is a tea service that has been used; the bread has been torn apart. Disheveled books lay on the lower shelf. On the left side of the painting is a piano with an oval-backed chair. The music book is now in place above the keyboard. A bouquet of cut roses sits atop the piano. The envelope for the letter lays askew on the floor in front of the woman.

Concerning the composition, two figures placed in the central space of the canvas that are somewhat triangular in form, gives the compositions a stable feeling. The contrast of the figures in lighter clothing

against a quite dark background adds visual drama to the scene. The rich visual details around the figures are set off by a lack of details in the areas surrounding the action in the paintings.

Rococo in the choice of subject matter – aristocratic drama, the wealthy at play. The loose brushwork also illustrates how the style differs from the realism of the Renaissance & Baroque eras. The label suggests a link to neoclassical in the solidly-defined figural forms placed within a shallow picture plane.

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### **Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)**

These two paintings are typical of Rococo subject matter in that they focus on fashionably-dressed aristocrats in an elegant interior of a French home. However, their creation date coincides with the dates of the French Revolution when many aristocrats fled France. It is uncertain what impact the Revolution had on the artist or the choice of subject matter. During the Rococo, the bourgeoisie commissioned paintings that told the story of their daily activities of pleasure and play. They could be real activities or imaginary. These paintings reflected the fashions and interior design of the wealthy class in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. (various sources)

Artist Michel Garnier can be compared to other 18th century French genre painters who focused on daily life of the aristocratic, both real and imagined. Fragonard & Boucher most clearly depicted the Parisian society at play in utilizing the lightest palettes & subject matter. Watteau & Chardin incorporated darker backgrounds & scenes in some of their paintings. Elements of all of these artists can be identified in Garnier's paintings. Rococo artists present us with a clear picture of fashionable dress and elegant home interiors. (Bailey)

Michel Garnier was a respected artist in France during those turbulent times. According to Sotheby's, "Garnier was born in Saint-Cloud and studied with the painter Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre (1713-1789). From 1793 until 1814, he was an exhibitor at the Salon in Paris, mainly of genre subjects in the fashion established by such contemporary painters as Marguerite Gérard and Louis-Léopold Boilly. Garnier also painted portraits and, later, still lifes. ... Garnier's elegant, yet highly refined and crisp handling of paint was particularly well suited for the depiction of fashionable and ornately dressed Parisians. The artist's detailed attention to both costume and interior adornments reflect an understanding of the Dutch *fijnschilder* technique, which enables him to accurately represent the luxuriance of the era's interior spaces. Although the narrative of Garnier's subjects are solidly rooted in the Rococo, the stoic poses of the characters, coupled with their placement within a shallow and more traditionally planar pictorial space hearken back to Neoclassical influences, such as the work of Jacques Louis David."

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### **Current Mia Label Information (optional)**

The similar size, complementary subject matter, and the appearance of the same young woman in each of these paintings indicate that they narrate the beginning and end of a moralizing romantic tale. In *The Poorly Defended Rose*, both the lady's inability to prevent her lover from picking the rose and the broken vase at her feet predict her moral compromise. In *The Letter*, with her seduction complete, she must subsist with the miniature portrait her lover has sent to make up for his absence.

Michel Garnier's delicate and highly polished painting style was particularly suited for depicting the elegant lifestyle of fashionable Parisians. The artist's detailed attention to decor accurately conveys the richness of the era's interiors. Although the narrative of these paintings is Rococo in sentiment, the solidly-modeled forms and their placement in a shallow picture plane are more typical of Neoclassical compositions.

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## Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

*Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century*, by Koda, Harold, and Andrew Bolton, with an introduction by Mimi Hellman (2006), Metropolitan Museum of Art:  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/Dangerous\\_Liaisons\\_Fashion\\_and\\_Furniture\\_in\\_the\\_Eighteenth\\_Century#](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/Dangerous_Liaisons_Fashion_and_Furniture_in_the_Eighteenth_Century#)

Mia Accession Records

Marilyn Stokstad, Art History

Class Notes

*The Age of Watteau, Chardin, & Fragonard – Masterpieces of French Genre Painting*, C. Bailey – Mia library

Sotheby's, June 2013 sale: <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.64.html/2013/old-master-paintings-n09003>

PROPS Ideas – 1] photos on a tablet to view details up close; 2] audio clip on Mia's website could be shared with a tour group. For children, samples that show 3] fabric textures & 4] pottery design could be shared.