

‘The Reader’: the Barber’s new acquisition by Marguerite Gérard



The Reader, Marguerite Gérard, about 1817, oil on canvas, 32 x 24cm.
The Henry Barber Trust, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.

Transcript

Welcome to this Tuesday Talk, from the weekly series of podcasts given by staff and students at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, the Grade I listed art gallery part of the University of Birmingham. I'm Helen Cobby, the Assistant Curator, and I'm excited to discuss our fascinating new acquisition with you - a small oil painting entitled *The Reader*. Leading expert Dr Carole Blumenfeld has recently identified this work to be by the French artist Marguerite Gérard (1761-1837), and dates it to about 1817 when the artist was in her fifties. This intimate interior, focusing on an upper-class woman's everyday activities, is typical of Gérard's practice. Director Nicola Kalinsky purchased the painting for display at the Barber using funds generously provided by the Henry Barber Trust, just before the UK's lockdown in March 2020.

The composition centres on a young woman intently reading a book, possibly a sentimental novel with an amorous plot line of a type popular in France at the time, while a young boy, we assume her son, stands listlessly to her side. He gazes out as though appealing to the viewer for attention, so desperate is he for attention. The woman's face and hair catch the light, emphasising her focus on the book as well as her elaborate coiffure. A certain ambiguity and playfulness pervades the composition: is this about romantic love, a subtle image of escape from the expectations of maternal devotion?

Although currently she is not widely known outside of France, Gérard was one of the most successful painters of her time. This new work at the Barber dates to the height of her career, which flourished across a period of prolonged political upheaval, from the French Revolution to the Restoration of the monarchy in 1830. Gérard's paintings were purchased by clients including Napoleon and she was one of the only female artists to receive recognition from the art market at the time. Before the Revolution, she was unable because of her sex to exhibit at the Académie

Royale - the leading institution for the intellectual study of art in Paris. Instead, her work was popularised at first through engravings, which, by their nature as cheaper multiple products, reached a wide audience. She also made prints herself, and in some of her paintings she depicts women examining prints after old masters.

Once the Salon - the most prestigious place for public art exhibitions in France - was open to women, Gérard exhibited regularly and to critical acclaim for 25 years, from 1799 to 1824. However, she did not always follow convention: she turned down the offer of membership at the Académie Royale and never married. Not much is known about her private life, there are no letters preserved by her family, and she herself was very discreet and seemed aware of the importance of controlling her own image, particularly through such turbulent decades.

After training and collaborating with her famous brother-in-law Jean-Honoré Fragonard, the master of Rococo painting, she developed her own style inspired by seventeenth-century Dutch genre scenes, which I'll explore more later. One reason that she is not as well known today as other successful female artists of the time, such as Elizabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842), is because, historically, Fragonard was assumed to be the painter of many of her works. There have also been disproven and damaging rumours that teacher and pupil were lovers. However, in recent years, the pioneering work of art historians Sally Wells-Robertson, Mary Sheriff and Carole Blumenfeld has re-addressed these errors and sexist interpretations.

In the last few years, several of Gérard's paintings have appeared on the art market and entered prestigious collections. These include the Louvre in Paris, which acquired the artist's first major canvas, *The Interesting Student*, last December. Although her work mostly hangs in French museums and private collections, the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge has a painting also called *The Reader*, which, yes, includes a reading woman, but is an early work by both Gérard and Fragonard. A third in

the UK, at the Holburne Museum in Bath, is merely 'attributed to' Gérard. This means that the Barber's work is the only painting fully ascribed to Gérard in a UK public collection.

The painting is typically small, being just 32 by 24 cm unframed (about the size of a baking tray), indicating it was intended for viewing within a private home. Small-scale works like this, depicting genre scenes (often playful or pious snapshots of home life), were increasingly popular with individual collectors, being easy to display and with subject matter suitable for all the family.

Gérard was particularly inspired by seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings. She was exposed to these works through her intimate knowledge of the Louvre's collection (where she lived and had her studio) and via engravings. We know, for example, that Fragonard bought 280 prints after Netherlandish masters in 1771 alone. These genre scenes, depicting everyday life, were often originally intended to convey an allegorical or moral message - sometimes playful or ambiguous - helping to reflect, define or comment on ideals about family, love, courtship and duty. By the later seventeenth century, genre paintings had become less obviously didactic and, with more generalised depictions of domestic interiors, often provided a focus on women. The extent to which seventeenth-century genre paintings did or did not contain different layers of meaning became a matter of intense art-historical debate in the second half of the twentieth century. We need to be wary about 'over reading' these - and Gérard's - works. However, they certainly had their own visual language and the artists concerned were exceptional storytellers.

Gérard turned to these Dutch paintings to develop her own unique style and subject matter, namely intimate interior scenes depicting women reading, making music, conversing with lovers, or engaged in domestic chores and maternal responsibilities. The Barber's painting is an exquisite example, and powerfully illustrates why she became the first French woman to achieve success as a painter of genre scenes. Her style was

especially informed by such Dutch 'fine painters' as Gerrit Dou. She was particularly inspired by their precise detail achieved with subtly mixed brushstrokes and colour palettes, with a carefully controlled range of naturalistic tones and a beautifully crafted glossy surface.

In the Barber's painting, Gérard characteristically references several details often found in Dutch genre paintings: the blue-and-white Delftware inspired by Chinese porcelain, a rug perhaps imported from Persia or India and used as a table covering, the canary bird in the painting at the back of the room, and even the cat. They may all have symbolic meaning, creating an intricate story and subtext within a grand but sparsely decorated room. Unlike in the East, where rugs were mostly used on the floor, in seventeenth-century Netherlandish paintings - and in Gérard's work - they appear draped on tables together with silverware, precious objects such as gold and glass, musical instruments and food. All these items were symbols of European wealth and social status.

I've suggested that the woman in the Barber's painting could be reading a sentimental novel. At the time, such books were highly popular in France, and all over Europe, with both male and female readers. They coincided with the great surge of female readers, which had developed since the second half of the eighteenth century. These novels featured romantic plot lines that explored heightened feelings, encouraging emotional responses in the reader; often they also provided an education in morality. Uncertainty and ambiguity were narrative strategies, so readers became highly invested in the plot and the characters' emotional states. With this came societal anxiety around women reading such literature and the extreme passions which might be ignited and the problems this could cause, from loss of virginity outside of marriage, to melancholia and madness, conditions which were increasingly discussed in medical literature.

Like these sentimental novels, uncertainty and ambiguity lie at the heart of Gérard's painting and are structural devices. For instance, at first sight,

Gérard seems to present the woman according to the expectations placed by society upon young upper-class women at the time. The woman holds herself upright in her chair and is modestly dressed with a high neckline. She appears to be engaged in a quiet past-time, reading, in her neat and orderly home: surely this is the sign of a good wife and mother? However, on closer inspection, the scene suggests an intriguing ambiguity. Is she so engrossed in her book that she ignores her son? This uncertainty and ambiguity steers our experience of viewing the painting and is similar to the experience of reading the type of novel I've suggested is represented in the picture. Both the reader, within the composition, and the viewer, outside of it, are prompted to look, imagine and perhaps even fill in the gaps in the amorous stories with which they are presented. To an extent then, the painting and the novel within it can be understood by, and as, reflections of each other; they are constructed realities that can only be understood in relation to other constructs. With the artist positioning them as such, Gérard thereby questions the seemingly perfect reality in which the woman in the painting finds herself, and, by extension, the society in which she herself lived. This use of reflection and repetition, I think, suggests that Gérard provides a sort of *mise-en-abyme* framework to her painting - a complex device also found in literature, which is fitting for presenting and critiquing such a multifaceted figure at this point in France, namely the mother.

Gérard lived during a period of dramatic social and political transition, where mothers were only just starting to be acknowledged as having more to their life than children and a home. However, equally, the late eighteenth century was the period when motherhood was held up as a sentimental ideal much more than previously, for example, this is when wealthy women first began to breastfeed their own children (something that Gérard for whatever reason chose not to depict). In many of her paintings, including this one, she implies that the women of France could combine multiple roles, and could be creative, imaginative, and form strong bonds of friendship between themselves, thereby establishing

loving and supportive environments - something that we could still look and learn from today.

The romantic themes suggested by the possible sentimental novel in the Barber's work are echoed by the painting of a bird in a cage hanging on the background wall. There is a long tradition of artists using birds as sexual symbols, notably in seventeenth-century Dutch painting, with caged canaries signifying pent up passion waiting to be released. Bird motifs often functioned in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France in more subtle and allusive ways than their seventeenth-century Dutch counterparts, as deeper tokens of love rather than just lust. However, there were also highly charged examples, such as the series by the male French artist, Greuze, of adolescent girls weeping over their dead pet birds, which have escaped or been let out of their safe cages, and paid a heavy price for this freedom or carelessness.

Either way, through the subtle and very careful inclusion of various objects open to layered and symbolic interpretation, the Barber's painting suggests that this woman is distracted from her motherly duties by amorous thoughts. The picture hanging in the background wall echoes the scene before it, giving additional weight to this reading of the scene. Does this understanding of the painting prompt similar romantic thoughts within ourselves, or are we asked to condemn rather than to empathise? With these ambiguities in mind, Gérard playfully reveals how the mixture of eroticism and moralism that characterises the sentimental construction of femininity creates a similarly ambivalent response in the viewer. Do we root for the woman or not, and who are we to judge?

I hope, if and when you are next able to, that you will come and see Marguerite Gérard's painting for yourself. We have hung it in the Beige Gallery, which displays most of the Barber's paintings from the eighteenth century, and made other changes to group relevant French works together. You will find the Gérard next to a painting by Ingres, her junior by about 20 years. His similarly small canvas shows lovers inflamed by

their reading of the Arthurian romance of Guinevere and Lancelot and was made at almost exactly the same time as Gérard's painting. The other works shown alongside are Vigée Le Brun's *Portrait of Countess Golovina* (about 1797-1800), Etienne Aubry's *Paternal Love* (from about 1775), and a scene by Hubert Robert, one of Gerard's mentors who supported her and who perhaps helped with her publicity by sitting to her for his portrait. Gérard's subtle take on motherhood provides an interesting contrast to Aubry's sentimental vision of humble lower-class family life with every detail, even the pet cats - one stony-faced and aloof, the other serenely snoozing - are worlds apart.

Thank you very much for joining me here, and thanks to Jack Davies for playing his guitar compositions to accompany these weekly talks. We have another talk next week and look forward to welcoming you back then.

Select Reading List

Blumenfeld, Carole. *Marguerite Gérard: 1761-1837*. Paris: Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2019.

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Rand, Richard. 'Love, Domesticity, and the Evolution of Genre Painting in Eighteenth-Century France' in *Intimate Encounters: Love and Domesticity in Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. Richard Rand. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Sheriff, Mary. *Moved by Love: Inspired Artists and Deviant Women in Eighteenth-Century France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

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Wells-Robertson, Sally. *Marguerite Gérard*. New York: New York University, 1978.

Weintraub, Alex. 'On Girls and Birds: The Structure of Aesthetic Feelings' in *Journal 18*, Issue 7 Animals, Spring 2019: <https://www.journal18.org/3819>.

Speaker info

Helen Cobby joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as the Assistant Curator in the summer of 2017. She works on a variety of projects including the care, interpretation and display of the Prints and Drawings collection, the digitisation of the collections, and research into new acquisitions. She has also curated an exhibition about the Scottish Colourists with the Director Nicola Kalinsky, and assisted with the curation of the Spring 2020 exhibition, 'Cornwall as Crucible: Modernity and Internationalism in Mid-Century Britain', as well as contributing essays to the accompanying exhibition booklets. Her research interests also include Rodin's sculpture and photography (the subject of her MA dissertation at the University of London), JMW Turner's early prints and drawings, feminist art history and criticism, and 20th-century American women printmakers. For the latter, she was awarded a Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Grant from the Art Fund to undertake research in New York City. Prior to the Barber, Helen worked in a variety of museums, including Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum - as the research curator, Cheltenham's Art Gallery and Museum, and most recently the Ashmolean Museum, where she curated a touring exhibition of Turner's early architectural work.

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.