Introduction

The Fragile and the Flimsy

What is the relationship between the exquisite delicacy of art and the debased flimsiness of disposable commodities? Few people today would deny that a distinction exists between these two forms of perishability. The Louvre may sit atop an enormous mall, but no one would confuse the art in the galleries with the fashionable goods in the basement shops. A world of difference separates, for example, the delicate brushstrokes of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's paintings from the latest season of trinkets and fragrances on display downstairs in the Fragonard perfumery (fig. 1). A painting by Fragonard such as *The Warrior's Dream of Love* (fig. 2) may, like perfume, conjure evanescent pleasure, but the museum ensures that we regard the fragility of the painting itself as much more than an expression of commercial ephemerality. When the museum's informational brochure cautions us that "works of art are unique and fragile" and that "touching, even lightly" can cause irreparable harm, the warning makes no reference to market worth. The significance of art's fragile materiality goes unspecified, but we are told that whatever unnamed essence it contains "must be preserved for future generations."[1] If the perishability of a commercial product reflects the fleetingness of fashion, then the fragility of art here stands for the opposite, representing something whose value transcends time.

This book is devoted to disputing such a neat division between the delicacy of art and the ephemerality of consumer goods. More specifically, it is a book about the fragile and decaying objects from eighteenth-century France that first prompted people to wish this slippery distinction into existence. The period witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of materially unstable art. Some artists made objects that were fragile by design, creating enormous pastel portraits that were vulnerable to the slightest touch, or constructing spectacularly breakable sculptures from attenuated pieces of clay. For

FIG. 1 Fragonard shop entry at the Carrousel du Louvre mall, Paris, 2022. Photo © Carrousel du Louvre.

other artists, impermanence was an unintended by-product of a search for novel and spontaneous effects. *The Warrior's Dream of Love* provides a telling example from this second category. Until the painting's restoration in 1987, it was considered unworthy of exhibition because it was in such poor condition.[2] The painting's decay stemmed from the process of its production: Fragonard employed an unusual quantity of a drying agent when painting it, which soon caused broad cracks to form across its surface (fig. 3).[3] The use of these siccative oils was a notorious problem among painters at the time, so much so that the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture had issued warnings about it in the decades before Fragonard produced the picture.[4] These ingredients allowed artists to work more quickly and to produce atmospheric effects, but they resulted in damage within a matter of years, rendering paintings nearly unrecognizable.

FIG. 2 Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Warrior's Dream of Love*, ca. 1780–85. Oil on canvas, 61.5 × 55 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. RF 2149. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY (Stéphane Maréchalle).

FIG. 3 Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Warrior's Dream of Love*, ca. 1780–85, before completion of the 1987 restoration. Oil on canvas, 61.5 × 55 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. RF 2149. Photo © Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France.

Such techniques developed in tandem with broader changes in the artistic economy. The eighteenth century was a pivotal moment in the history of the art market: private collections grew in both number and size, art increasingly changed hands at auction, and art dealers acquired a new professional status.[5] These commercial developments subjected art to competing temporal pressures. On the one hand, the commodification of art led to a new concern for issues of conservation.[6] Collectors prized art's materiality as the bearer of an artist's autographic touch and as a source of sensory pleasure, which meant that art's value became intertwined with its physical condition.[7] On the other hand, the market created short-term incentives that were at odds with the expectation of durability. Artists had to work quickly to make a living and to keep up with trends in taste, which could lead them to take technical shortcuts. In addition, the demand for sensuous surfaces and novel techniques among collectors pushed artists to become more experimental, sometimes causing them to sacrifice permanence in the process. The painter Jean-Baptiste Oudry warned about this tendency in a 1752 lecture to the Academy, explaining that artists had been led astray in their search for beguiling surface effects: "The seduction that it achieves passes like a dream, and all this beautiful work turns yellow in no time at all."[8]

To an extent, the eighteenth-century art market simply intensified a tension that had existed within artistic technique for centuries. Artists throughout history have balanced their desire for posterity's recognition against their impulse to take technical risks. Leonardo da Vinci, to cite one notable precedent, continually tested unusual combinations of materials that compromised the integrity of his work.[9] But the art market that emerged in the eighteenth century did more than amplify the degree of such experimentation. What makes the technical transformations of the period distinctive is their connection to a deeper shift in temporal expectations, an altered outlook rooted in the instability of fashion. As Francis Haskell has shown, the collecting culture of the eighteenth century led to a new awareness of taste's capriciousness as dealers and connoisseurs observed how talented artists often fell out of favor and slipped into oblivion.[10] This change in consciousness helps explain why artists at the time began to reconsider the goal of trying to please posterity at all. The sculptor Étienne-Maurice Falconet famously proclaimed that he worked only for viewers in his own time, an assertion that drew him into a protracted debate with Denis Diderot.[11] François Boucher made comparable statements on multiple occasions, according to one of his associates: "We often heard him say that he only worked for his century and that he was convinced that his works, so praised, so sought after by his contemporaries, would not receive the approval of posterity."[12] Such declarations did not always translate into technical practices—neither Boucher nor Falconet was particularly negligent in his workmanship. Their statements nonetheless point to a significant shift in the horizon of expectation from which artists regarded their future reception. The vicissitudes of commerce

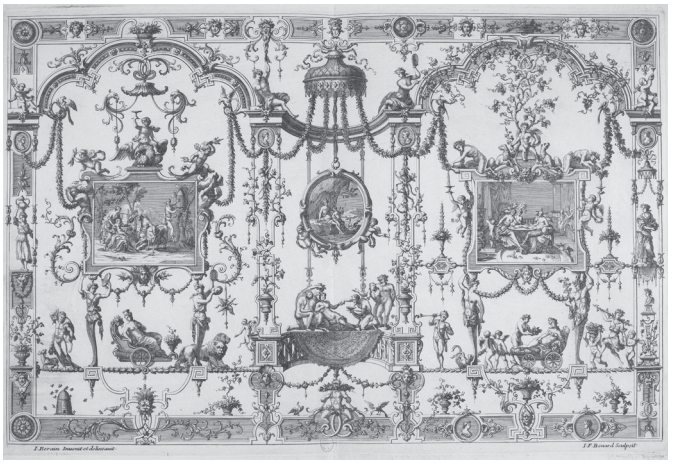

FIG. 4
Jean-François Benard after Jean Berain, *Grotesque*, second half of seventeenth century. Etching, 29.5 × 45.6 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des Estampes et de la photographie, Paris. HD-58-PET FOL. Photo: gallica.bnf.fr / BnF.

revealed the provisional nature of any cultural canon, highlighting the perils of aspiring to join its immortal ranks. And in a commercial sphere that could offer lucrative rewards in the present, the necessity of making physically permanent works could no longer be assumed.

The relationship between the market and material impermanence in eighteenth-century France has largely escaped the attention of art historians, perhaps because of a disciplinary tendency to see art's perishability as nothing more than an impediment to research. Because art historians generally study the relation between art and the period in which it was produced, we usually assume that the original appearance of an object is the only one that should matter to us. As a result, we leave questions of material instability to conservators and scientists, trusting them to halt the effects of time as best they can. When we do encounter signs of damage and temporal change in our objects of study, we typically regard these alterations as a distraction, not as a subject that demands interpretation.

This is not to say that art historians have been entirely indifferent to issues of temporality, delicacy, or instability. In fact, much of the scholarship on eighteenth-century French art addresses exactly these concerns but treats them as a question of form, not materiality. Anyone who has a passing familiarity with eighteenth-century French art knows that delicacy plays an important role in the style of the period. What we now call "Rococo"—and what was then simply known as the *goût moderne*—revolves around sinuous lines and asymmetrical shapes that appear to teeter on the brink of collapse. Foundational studies of the style trace its origins to the realm of court spectacle under Louis XIV, tracking its evolution from the playful palace decor of seventeenth-century artisans such as Jean Berain (fig. 4) to its apotheosis in the work of eighteenth-century painters such as Watteau, Boucher, and Fragonard.[13] Thanks to the groundbreaking

scholarship of Katie Scott, we now have a much clearer sense of the social and political meanings that accrued to this style in the course of its evolution, as affluent Parisians turned airy and intricate forms into a complex language of power and prestige.[14] Subsequent scholarship has further underscored the seriousness of the Rococo's seemingly lighthearted aesthetic, connecting its formal and iconographic evocations of fleetingness to theories of pleasure, risk, and the mutability of subjective identity in Enlightenment France.[15]

What requires further attention is the connection between the stylistic manifestations of transience and its physical presence in art's very substance. Grasping this link is crucial not only to appreciating the technical features of eighteenth-century French art but also to understanding how the period fundamentally altered the relationship between art, time, and value. At the heart of this transformation, I argue, is the concept of delicacy itself. The salience of delicacy lies in its dual associations with personal refinement and material instability, a double meaning that came into relief in the commercial sphere at the turn of the eighteenth century. Before this time, the French term *délicatesse* principally applied to people, referring to a person's sensitivity to subtle pleasures—a meaning rooted in the Latin *delicatus*.[16] This idea of *délicatesse* occupied an important position within seventeenth-century French court society, where it signified an ineffable sophistication in behavior and conversation (throughout this book, I will use the French word *délicatesse* and its variants when referring to this courtly norm, reserving the English equivalent, *delicacy*, for moments when material fragility is also at issue). The Jesuit critic Dominique Bouhours remarked on the word's social significance in his 1671 study of language and wit, *Les entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène*, where he provided examples of the word's usage: "Un esprit *délicat*, une raillerie *délicate*, une pensée *délicate*; c'est une affaire *délicate*; tenir une conduite *délicate* avec quelqu'un. Il a beaucoup de *délicatesse* dans l'esprit; il sait toutes les *délicatesses* de la langue" (A *delicate* mind, a *delicate* mockery, a *delicate* thought, it is a *delicate* affair; to maintain *delicate* conduct with someone. He has great *delicacy* of spirit; he knows all the *delicacies* of language).[17] Such phrases placed *délicatesse* within a broader lexicon of terms that courtiers invoked as signs of gentility, such as *honnêteté*, *galanterie*, and *urbanité*.[18] Unlike these other terms, however, *délicatesse* developed a material connotation in the marketplace that overlapped with—and significantly disrupted—its social function.

Signs of the shift appeared in the 1690s, when French dictionaries began to emphasize that delicacy could designate a physical property of manufactured goods, citing the word "fragile" as a synonym: "DELICATE refers also to that which is weak or fragile, which is unable to resist attacks, impacts from foreign bodies. . . . Glass, talc, porcelain are fragile and delicate materials."[19] The reference to materials such as glass and porcelain reflects the types of commodities that were becoming increasingly prevalent in

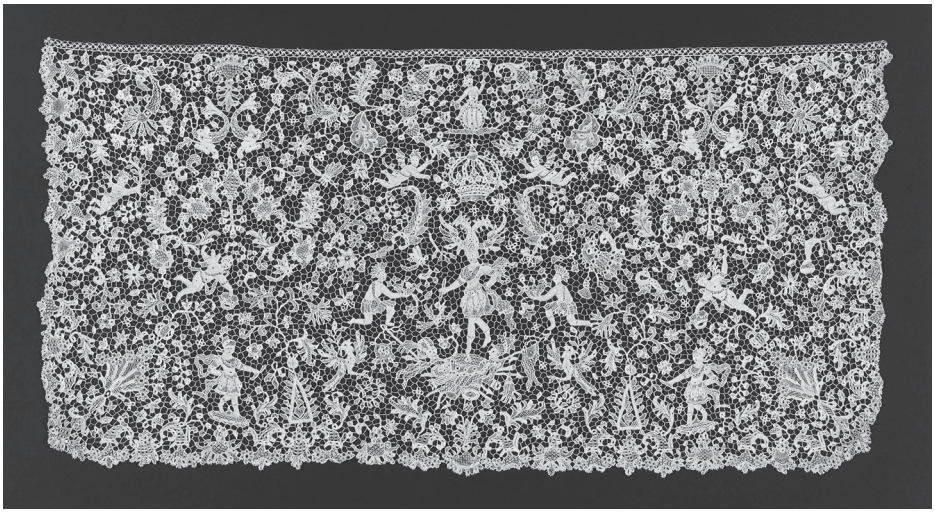

FIG. 5 *Cravat End (France)*, ca. 1695. Linen, 26.7 × 48.9 cm. Cooper Hewitt, New York. 1962-50-18-a. Bequest of Richard Cranch Greenleaf in memory of his mother, Adeline Emma Greenleaf.

the opulent decor of the Parisian elite.[20] Fueled by fortunes derived from colonial speculation and the expansion of credit markets, luxury consumption dramatically increased during this period.[21] Many of the most prized goods in this economy were characterized by their fragility.[22] Breakable ceramics displaced metal vessels on dining tables as porcelain encroached on silver's previously prominent position in the homes of the affluent.[23] Lace, which had been a key component of sartorial distinction across Europe since the early sixteenth century, reached new levels of diaphanous insubstantiality with the "point de France" lacemaking techniques that emerged in the late seventeenth century (fig. 5).[24]

Such objects offered a means of expressing the social norm of *délicatesse* in physical form, but they also highlighted a troubling problem in the process: by translating *délicatesse* into a saleable product, they provided an opportunity for class dissimulation. In a period when merchants and financiers began to compete with the old nobility for power and prestige, the commodification of courtly behavior was no small source of discomfort.[25] As luxury products became available to a wider range of consumers, the distinction between those who appreciated the refinement of these goods and those who simply flaunted their extravagance through hedonistic spending became the subject of intense debate.[26] Writers immediately derided the "false *délicatesse*" of provincials and pretenders to nobility who sought to purchase their way into polite society through ephemeral consumption.[27] The novelist and critic Charles Sorel, for example, ridiculed men who were so laden with lace that they resembled the "shop displays of merchants" and might even be mistaken for a "wandering boutique."[28] The polemicist Eustache

Le Noble, in his satire of contemporary manners, *L'école du monde*, similarly derided those who believed themselves to be "polite men" simply because they appreciated the "delicacy of lace."[29] Such comments are familiar to anyone who has studied the clashes between cultural and economic capital that resulted from the transition from feudalism to capitalism.[30] What the discourse of delicacy reveals, however, is the critical role that materiality came to play in these conflicts—a role that would ultimately reshape the conception of art itself.

Paintings and sculptures were far from the only fragile products implicated in the commodification of delicacy, and it was for this exact reason that their material instability called into question art's cohesion as a category. Perishability, because it linked art to the broader world of disposable commodities that proliferated in the eighteenth century's burgeoning consumer culture, had the potential to negate the very concept of art as a privileged domain of cultural experience. Art critics were quick to highlight the issue. Étienne La Font de Saint-Yenne was among the first to lay out the problem, condemning the "little durability" of contemporary paintings while aligning their ephemerality with glass, plaster, and other decorative materials that adorned fashionable Parisian interiors.[31] From this perspective, the distinction between art and mere manual labor, which artists had fought to establish during the preceding centuries on the premise that painting and sculpture constituted intellectual pursuits, quite literally appeared to crumble as the short-term interests of the market manifested themselves within art's materiality.[32] How could art maintain its exalted status when it was increasingly governed by the same physical and temporal forces that shaped the production and reception of other commodities? This was the dilemma that the physical instability of art made visible to eighteenth-century artists, critics, and collectors. It was also, as we will see, a problem that artists addressed through their materials and techniques. One way to respond was to reject fragility altogether, to promote materials and techniques with claims of indestructability. But the other strategy, the one that would ultimately have a more lasting impact, was to present art's delicacy as something distinct from that of other commercial products. Doing so meant investing material delicacy with new meaning, attaching it not to the fleetingness of fashion or the ephemeral patter of courtly conversation but to the indefinable essence of creative inspiration. It meant reclaiming the elusive aura that had surrounded courtly *délicatesse* for a different domain, ascribing its transcendent and ethereal powers to the specific class of delicate objects that we call art.

This book ultimately shows how the materiality of eighteenth-century French painting and sculpture transformed delicacy from a commodified extension of courtly sociability to a defining feature of art's irreducible essence. While France was not unique in witnessing the rise of fashion and consumer culture during this period, the French preoccupation with delicacy was distinctive. Period definitions of *délicatesse* make clear

that the term's social meaning was central to France's self-conception. For Bouhours, *délicatesse* distinguished contemporary France from all other nations and eras: "In a word, I know of nothing more common in the kingdom than this *délicat* good sense that previously was so rare."[33] By the early eighteenth century, French writers commonly cited *délicatesse* as a key quality separating themselves from neighboring people.[34] Even the British acknowledged the specifically French character of *délicatesse*, albeit with a note of derision. John Dryden, for example, explained that for the French, *délicatesse* was the mark of greatest distinction: "*Délicate, & bien tourné*, are the highest commendations, which they bestow, on somewhat which they think a masterpiece."[35] This association of Frenchness with *délicatesse* is significant because it explains why the material delicacy of the commodity proved to be such a confounding problem within the country. Superfluous consumption, precisely because it was not a specifically French phenomenon, threatened to degrade and erase the defining feature of the nation. If courtly *délicatesse* morphed into nothing more than the physical delicacy of the ephemeral commodity, then France would lose its essential character, becoming, like England, a country organized entirely around the crass interests of the marketplace. As it became increasingly clear that social *délicatesse* would inevitably succumb to the commercial sphere, the purified delicacy of art offered an alternative form of distinction, one that endures today in the global perception of France as a sanctuary for high culture.

I track this transformation across a series of case studies that move chronologically through the eighteenth century, each focusing on a different material or technique. My examples are not meant to provide a comprehensive survey of eighteenth-century art. Instead, in order to highlight the evolving relationship between commercial forces and artistic practices, I focus on cases where the ties between these two domains are particularly evident. What unites the varied objects that I examine throughout this book is that they make visible, in their very materiality, the problem of defining art's temporal status under the conditions of its commodification. Chapter 1 establishes the connection between commerce and material instability in the early eighteenth-century art market. I explore these conditions through the example of Antoine Watteau, an artist whose oil paintings were delicate in two senses of the word: their ravishing surface effects were *délicat* in their indescribable allure, but they were also physically delicate because of the unusual techniques that Watteau used to create them. Watteau's working methods responded to the commercial pressures that artists faced at the time. In a period of declining royal and religious patronage, an emerging private art market placed new emphasis on speed and novelty over durability. In this context, delicacy's charm became increasingly difficult to disentangle from its pitfalls.

Chapter 2 examines how, for the generation after Watteau, material delicacy emerged as a full-fledged aesthetic sensibility—something that art buyers did not merely tolerate but actively sought in their pursuit of novel fashions. I concentrate on the demand

for pastel, a highly fragile medium that came to dominate the eighteenth-century portraiture market. Pastellists such as Maurice-Quentin de La Tour aestheticized the instability of their works by aligning the fugitive materiality of pastel with the evanescent personalities of portrait sitters. The socially mobile buyers of these works similarly connected material delicacy with social *délicatesse*, which they invoked to advance their position in the realm of polite manners.

By midcentury, however, such materials and techniques faced a growing backlash. Critics and collectors expressed new concern about the potential ephemerality of contemporary art, and artists sought to allay their fears. Chapter 3 turns to these efforts, focusing on the painter Joseph-Marie Vien's ill-fated experiments with a supposedly imperishable method of painting in molten wax known as encaustic. Vien's efforts belonged to a larger group of "innovations" in the chemistry of painting from the time that promised to yield the appearance of delicacy while remaining durable. Most of these inventions are now long forgotten, and their present obscurity is understandable; the majority of them were, in fact, less durable than conventional methods of oil painting, and they proved to be products of the mercurial marketplace that they claimed to transcend. But these techniques were more than oddities of history—they underscored the power of the commercial sphere to absorb every attempt to curb its influence, converting any object into an ephemeral commodity.

If nothing existed beyond the market's turbulent forces, then how could art be salvaged from vanity, corruption, and fashion? Chapter 4 examines how this question loomed over the booming market for fragile terracotta sculptures in the 1770s and 1780s. These objects played into existing critiques of ephemeral consumption, but skillful practitioners in the medium presented its fragility in nobler terms, appealing to the emerging discourse of artistic spontaneity and the temporal instability of inspiration. Claude Michel, better known as Clodion, was the most notable among these artists, producing fanciful terracotta sculptures with a tantalizing sense of weightlessness and fragility. While Clodion's work has often been interpreted as a swan song of Rococo frivolity before the onset of the Revolution, closer scrutiny suggests that he represented the beginning of a new paradigm. By integrating the debased volatility of the marketplace with the ostensibly purified temporality of aesthetic expression and experience, Clodion embodied the union of artistry and commercial spectacle that would endure long after the fall of the old regime.

In the book's epilogue, I address these aftereffects, examining the relationship between art, ephemerality, and capitalism in the twenty-first century. While scholars have often detected echoes of the Rococo within a subset of contemporary art that evokes the stylistic ostentation and libidinal themes of the eighteenth century, I take a different approach. My concern is not so much with formal and iconographic similarities across these eras but with structural continuities in the economy of culture that

continue to bind the temporality of artistic production with the dynamics of consumer capitalism. The performance art of Tino Sehgal, which bears no obvious resemblance to Rococo painting and sculpture, serves as a case study for highlighting these underlying economic forces. Sehgal's work consists of temporary "situations" in which performers engage gallery visitors in conversation or repeat choreographed movements. Sehgal refuses to allow any documentation of his work, insisting that it survives only in the form of memory and oral tradition. Yet this very rejection of objecthood has served as a source of publicity, attracting audiences worldwide to his exhibitions and prompting museums to purchase the right to stage his work for enormous sums of money. By pushing to an extreme the commodification of transience, Sehgal's art lays bare a fact that had first become visible in the delicate paintings and sculptures of the eighteenth century: in a competitive marketplace for public attention, what the artist monetizes is not a durable repository of value but a rarified form of subjective experience whose perishability only heightens its aura of exclusivity.

The history of delicacy in art, then, is much more than a story of changing technical priorities. Throughout the eighteenth century, delicacy structured debates over morality, status, and power. It determined who belonged within a group and who was excluded from it. Physical instability provided a way to think through the social instability brought about by the rise of capitalism and the erosion of aristocratic distinction. For artists, these developments entailed both danger and opportunity. The risk was that art would come to be seen simply as one more manifestation of a degraded and superficial delicacy that pervaded a world of false appearances and upended hierarchies. Yet the growing suspicion that surrounded fragile consumer goods also created an opening that artists could exploit: it generated demand for a subset of commodities whose ties to ephemeral consumption could be plausibly disavowed, a type of object that existed in the marketplace while appearing to transcend it. Art came to fulfill this need. It did so only after artists and their audiences reimagined what the fragility of paintings and sculptures represented, turning a material weakness into a metaphysical strength. Delicacy, once reconceived, emerged as the very property through which art secured its privileged position within the conditions of commercial modernity. While this transformation was specific to the social and economic context of the eighteenth century, its effects remain palpable today. If we want to understand why some forms of perishability carry prestige while others elicit scorn, then we need to study the history of delicacy as both a material property and an idea.