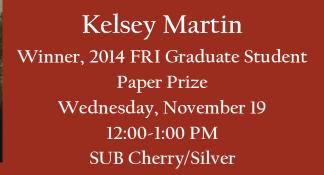
The Feminist Research Institute presents

Ambiguous Consent: An Analysis of Female Agency in Eighteenth Century French fêtes galantes



In the age of Enlightenment, eighteenth-century French women held little influence in the development of their education regarding love and relationships (both visual and literary), while the work of male philosophers was highly exalted. This male theoretical discourse is reflected in the artwork most consumed by French women during the first half of the eighteenth century: the *fêtes galantes* (or gallant imagery) of the Rococo. By applying the prevailing theoretical ideas of philosopher and author Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) to a visual analysis of French *fêtes galantes*, one sees an association between prominent theoretical public discourse involving love and sexuality and gallant imagery of the Rococo. Specifically, Rousseau's ideas on female sexuality and its association with nature, along with Rousseau's formula of initial feminine resistance to masculine sexual advances, can be found within ambiguous portrayals of consent in gallant imagery. In turn, these images reflect an ambiguity in eighteenth-century female agency: on one hand, women were bestowed the right to choose their sexual partners (perhaps for the first time in pre-modernity); on the other



hand, simultaneously, women maneuvered a patriarchal structure where the path to sexual consent was manipulative, unclear, and rife with strict gender binaries.

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