

The Feminist Research Institute  
presents

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



**Kelsey Martin**

Winner, 2014 FRI Graduate Student  
Paper Prize

Wednesday, November 19

12:00-1:00 PM

SUB Cherry/Silver

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.



Kelsey Martin is a Master of Arts student in the University of New Mexico's College of Fine Arts' Art and Art History Department. She is also a participant in the Women's Studies Graduate Transcribed Program. Her research interests focus on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French artwork with an emphasis on the graphic arts and issues of gender construction and sexual identity.



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