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NICOLAS PARTY HONORS ROSALBA CARRIERA, THE ROCOCO QUEEN OF PASTELS, IN A NEW INSTALLATION AT THE FRICK

By Taylor Dafoe



An installation view of "Nicolas Party and Rosalba Carriera" at the Frick Madison.
Photo: Joseph Coscia Jr. Courtesy of the Frick.

Ten years ago, Nicolas Party came to use what is today his signature tool: pastels. Drawn to the medium for its ability to capture soft, glowing gradients—another hallmark of the Swiss artist’s work—he began to trace its use back through art history.

Eventually, Party got to Rosalba Carriera, an 18th-century Venetian Rococo painter considered to be the queen of pastels. Rosalba—who was successful enough in her time that even today, she’s referred to only by her first name—popularized the once-marginalized medium, using it to enliven her portraits of aristocrats across Europe.

“She really transformed those people [with] an amazing energy,” Party said, his admiration for his forbear still strong. What excited him the most was the ways in which Rosalba exploited the material properties of pastels to emphasize the theatricality of her era—a brief period before the French Revolution when the makeup industry exploded, big dresses and wigs were all the rage, and gender felt a little more fluid.

That moment, Party continued, “was subversive in many ways, and Rosalba was a key part of that aesthetic.”

Now, Party is revisiting his love of the Rococo genius once more. At the Frick Collection in New York, he has created a site-specific installation inspired by Rosalba’s *Portrait of a Man in Pilgrim’s Costume*, created around 1730.

The canvas, one of two works by Rosalba bequeathed to the Frick in 2020, by the late publisher Alexis Gregory, doesn’t actually depict a pilgrim, but rather a person

donning a pilgrim costume for Venice's famed Carnival celebration. It's joined on adjacent walls by a pair of Party portraits created in response to Rosalba's original.

But as much as the project is a tribute of Rosalba, it's also a simple celebration of her—and Party's—favorite instrument. The installation's three artworks are mounted on murals depicting billowing drapes, all of which are based on those found in paintings by two other pastel masters: Étienne Liotard and Maurice-Quentin de La Tour.

“With pastels,” Party said, “you have a more intimate, deep involvement with the medium itself.”

The Frick installation is not the artist's first project organized around the medium—or Rosalba. In 2020, he organized a show called “Pastel” at the Flag Art Foundation, which included one of several Rosalba pieces he owns: *Portrait of a Lady at Three-Quarter Length*. It was through that exhibition that Party met Xavier Salomon, the Frick's deputy director and chief curator. They bonded over a love of the 18th century artist—but also a discovery related to her work.

During a studio visit around that time, the two men removed Rosalba's *Portrait of a Lady* from its frame. Sandwiched between the canvas and its stretcher, they found a tiny woodblock print—a portrait of the magi, or the three kings that brought Jesus gifts after his birth.

Later, Salomon would discover that other Rosalba paintings also had tiny magi prints pinched inside too. (*Portrait of a Man in Pilgrim's Costume* did not have one, unfortunately.) For the artist, the print was “basically a lucky charm,” Party explained, one that she included when shipping pastels—a notoriously fragile medium—across long distances. Her hope was that the Three Kings would protect the paintings, just as they protected their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh on their journey to Christ.

“It was a really amazing moment,” Party recalled. “The last person that touched that [part of the painting] was her. We felt like Indiana Jones!”