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Nicolas Party's pastels celebrate the art and artifice of Rosalba Carriera

New York's Frick Collection commissioned the Swiss artist to reflect on its recent Rococo acquisition

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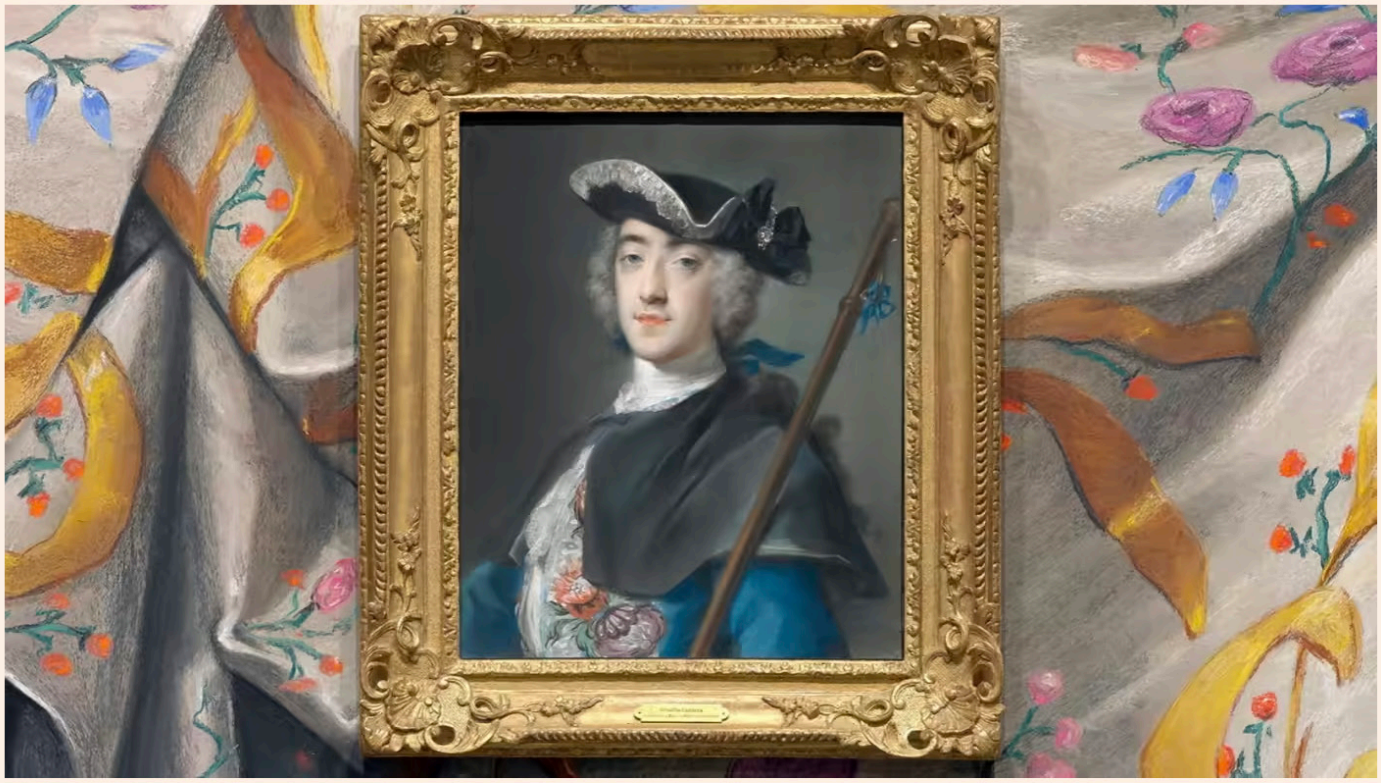

'Portrait of a Man in Pilgrim's Costume' (c1730) by Rosalba Carriera © Photograph by Joseph Coscia Jr

An alcove in the Frick Collection's temporary home on Madison Avenue harbours a bright, incongruous figment. You might walk right by and register only an odd apparition, before doubling back to the bay where three portraits, one on each velvety black wall, hover against billowing curtains. The centrepiece of this little dream box is Rosalba Carriera's 18th-century "Portrait of a Man in Pilgrim's Costume". The companion portraits on either side, and the trompe-l'oeil murals of deluxe drapery, are fresh from the hand of Swiss pastel virtuoso Nicolas Party.

"Pilgrim" is a Delphic, sensual figure who scrutinises us through heavy-lidded eyes. No one knows who he was (or she was? or they were?), this person who slipped like a sexy ghost through one of the most famous portrait studios in all of Europe. Dressed as a religious traveller but likely without pious intent, he visited Venice in the 1730s to carouse.

Born in 1673 and widely known by her first name, Rosalba was renowned for delicate, vaguely melancholy portraits. Her studio in Venice drew keen collectors, especially at the hedonistic high point of the year, the Carnevale. To those high-born tourists and pleasure-hunters, she was a mistress of the Rococo. Neither her sex nor her style presented any disadvantage then, though art history has been tough on both. Rococo fell sharply out of fashion, and the sisterhood associated with it — Rosalba, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, Angelica Kauffman and Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (who at 23 became the official painter for Marie Antoinette) — sank into footnotes.

Nicolas Party has reimagined Rosalba's 'pilgrim' as twins embodying night . . .

. . . and day. © Photographs by Joseph Coscia Jr

Yet the sensual, androgynous pilgrim at the Frick glides smoothly into our time. He could be a Brooklyn clubber, a downtown dandy or an actor in a flowered vest, powdered wig and blue velvet cape, pursing crimson lips. Rosalba's speciality was to catch her sitters engaged in flagrant self-curation. She recorded them both as themselves and as the selves they tried to create with the help of masks and make-up. She was a human selfie-making machine, a mirror who reflected the character that her subjects dreamt up for themselves. Then as now, it was hard to know where pose ended and personality began.

The Frick recently acquired her portrait and welcomed it by commissioning Party to take on its themes of self-presentation and masquerade in Rosalba's chosen medium: pastel. He recounts in a catalogue essay how pastels seduced him. When he opened his first box a decade ago, that "first glance at the sticks was like looking into a candy jar. The colours were so rich and vivid. I could not resist touching each one and feeling the fine pigment on my fingertips." He liked its vividness and fragility, its invitation to rub.

He had never painted portraits before but, inspired by a Picasso head of a woman done in pastel, he decided to depict an imaginary person, constructed out of memory and desire. Then he did more and, each time, developed a sensual attraction to his own work. Like Pygmalion, he wanted to bring his portraits to life, touch their skin and get to know them intimately.

At the Frick, Party complements Rosalba's "pilgrim" with two fantastical figures, a pair of twins embodying night and day. One has an *Avatar*-blue face and ruby lips, haloed by a volume of dense black hair that glitters like a starry sky. The other, too, has a fire-alarm-red mouth, but the skin is milky and the wig cottony. These opposite doubles are decorative by design, as blank, sexless and expressionless as masks.

To Party, the mask is not an outer layer, but the substance of the face itself, inseparable from its wearer. In that first physical encounter with pastels, he reported that it had the powdery, greasy feel of make-up, and he suddenly understood the synthesis of form and material. "It felt like I was painting the portrait with make-up, not applying cosmetics on top of the skin but rather creating the skin and features solely with make-up."

Later, he discovered that pastels and make-up share an intimate history: in the 18th century, the same shops sold both. Rosalba's Rococo portraits were literally made with the same material that composed the contours of her subjects' faces. In effect, she was making a meta-pastel, an image not designed to conjure the souls of her subjects, but rather to express their disguises. "Is the face untruthful because it is disguised under make-up," Party asks, "or is the

disguise the true face?" Oscar Wilde put a similar sentiment another way: "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances."

Party's otherworldly portraits aren't even the heart of his installation, since it's the extravagant illusionistic drapery unfurling behind the pictures that draw our attention. He derived the fabric for Rosalba's "Pilgrim" from the gown worn by Madame de Pompadour in Maurice-Quentin de La Tour's rendering in the Louvre. The textiles on the other walls evoke the work of another Rococo pastel master, Jean-Étienne Liotard.

Installation view of the works by Rosalba Carriera, left, and Nicolas Party at Frick Madison © Photograph by Joseph Coscia Jr

Party has surrounded Rosalba's poseur with an essay on artifice and facade. But this gloriously superficial installation also hints at the sadness behind the Rococo's exuberant scrim. Rosalba was temperamentally gloomy, her life pitted with periods of intense despondency. Her friend and colleague Jean-Antoine Watteau also used a radiant brush to paint over his depression. He "was an invalid and melancholy, saw the dark side of everything, and had no rose colour save on his palette", observed Théophile Gautier. Watteau returned to

the subject of the mournful clown Pierrot with relentless frequency, drawn by the tears behind the painted smile.

The Rococo addressed the complex art of appearances, the techniques we use to conflate performance and reality, allowing dull people to cast themselves as stars. For that reason, the cross-century collaboration of Rosalba and Party resonates today, when camera filters and beautifying algorithms take the place of brushes and wigs. Instead of affixing coloured paste to our skin, we can instead produce a digital version of ourselves and dispatch it into the world. These tools allow us to fashion the illusions we wish to project, so that the screens we hold, pinch and stroke glow with our haunted, seductive obsessions. We parade meticulously edited images of ourselves past those little windows not to examine who we are, but precisely so we don’t have to.