



François Boucher  
French, 1703 - 1770

## *The Bath of Venus*

1751

oil on canvas

overall: 107 x 84.8 cm (42 1/8 x 33 3/8 in.)

framed: 132.1 x 110.2 x 7.6 cm (52 x 43 3/8 x 3 in.)

Inscription: lower left in black paint: F Boucher / 1751

Chester Dale Collection 1943.7.2

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### ENTRY

This important canvas, less well known than its companion piece *The Toilet of Venus*, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [fig. 1], [1] is among Boucher's most poetic and graceful images of one of his favorite subjects. The setting is a lush clearing deep in a forest, where Venus and Cupid have come to bathe at the edge of a pond, just visible at the lower center. The naked goddess, her long-limbed figure concealed only by a bit of striped brocade, reclines easily on the bank, draperies spread out beneath her. She reaches across her body toward a somewhat petulant Cupid, who steps tentatively into the water. At the right of the composition two *amours* look on, while a pair of doves, symbol of the goddess of love, nestle among the reeds at her feet.

The focus of the composition is the youthful and beautiful Venus, the soft contours of her figure highlighted against the rich greens and blues of the background. Her body is displayed to the viewer, and her relaxed pose, in contrast to the uncomfortable stance of Cupid, reinforces the notion that she is the presiding deity in this verdant and remote bower. A fine study in red and white chalks, drawn from a live model in the studio, demonstrates the care Boucher took in working out the pose [fig. 2]. [2] In transferring the drawing to his painting, he changed slightly the angle of the model's head and left leg and placed a bit of drapery across her thighs. In so doing he was adhering to decorum, but the covering also has the effect of obscuring a disjuncture in the anatomy, specifically the relationship of the figure's right thigh to the hip. In the drawing, the parts of the body plausibly fit together, but in relocating the figure from studio to fictive landscape, Boucher clearly was more concerned with fitting her pliant form into the abundant

surroundings than with any anatomical exactitude. Nevertheless, the fact that he based the figure on a life study (the drawing has been called an “académie de femme” [3]) shows the degree to which Boucher, even at this stage in his career, could follow standard academic procedure when attending a commission of importance. [4]

According to Elie Cathérine Fréron, writing in *L'Année littéraire* in 1757, “Venus and her court have chosen [Boucher] as their painter.” [5] His youthful goddess in the National Gallery of Art’s painting is one in a long line of female nudes, such as *Diana at the Bath* of 1742 (Paris, Musée du Louvre) [6] or, even closer, with its motif of stepping into water, his *Venus Descending from Her Chariot to Enter Her Bath*, a canvas painted in 1738 as an overdoor decoration for the Hôtel de Soubise in Paris. [7] Although Boucher made life studies for each of these figures, their ultimate source is one of the most ravishing of all rococo nudes, *The Bather*, painted in 1724 by Boucher’s teacher, François Lemoyne (1688–1737) [fig. 3]. [8] Even if Boucher claimed that his short apprenticeship in Lemoyne’s studio in the early 1720s had little if any effect on his art, [9] he must have admired *The Bather* when it was exhibited at the Salon of 1725, for when he painted his Venuses of 1738 and 1751 he clearly remembered her long-limbed, small-breasted figure, her downcast eyes, and the tentative step into the water. Lemoyne’s bather, attended by her maid, is a wholly secular figure, but her ethereal beauty and unabashed sensuousness were easily adapted, with the addition of suitable attributes, to Boucher’s goddesses of love.

A compositional sketch first published by Ananoff has also been associated with *The Bath of Venus*, showing the care Boucher took in working out his design before beginning to paint [fig. 4]. [10] We see the same figure, the position of her head already altered, placed in a landscape similar to the one in the painting. The main differences are that at this stage Boucher had yet to introduce the two *amours* to the left of the goddess, placing there instead the two doves; and the position of the little Cupid, who now seems to be turning to his mother for protection rather than struggling away from her. The drawing also demonstrates that Boucher had at first contemplated a more vertical format with the top and bottom shaped as scallops. Indeed, this drawing may represent the original contours of the painting, since technical evidence indicates that the Washington canvas was first stretched in a narrower format and that pieces of canvas have been added to the corners, squaring off what was a shaped composition.

The original contours of *The Bath of Venus* and its pendant *The Toilet of Venus* [11] undoubtedly related to the architecture in which the pictures were intended to be set: the Château de Bellevue, the country retreat outside Paris built by Lassaurance the Elder in 1748–1750 for Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, marquise de Pompadour (1721–1764), the *maîtresse en titre* of Louis XV (r. 1715–1774). [12] Bellevue, Pompadour’s primary residence from 1750 to 1757, when the property was ceded to the king’s daughters and most of its contents were removed, became a showpiece for the marquise’s favorite artists, especially Boucher. Among the many works he painted for the château was *The Love Letter*. [13] *The Bath of Venus* and *The Toilet of Venus* were installed in the *appartement des bains* in the Pavillon de la Conciergerie to the right of the courtyard, where they were described in situ by Antoine Nicolas Dezallier d’Argenville (1723–1796) in 1755. [14] Both paintings would have been visible from the main *salle de bain*, with *The Bath of Venus* placed above the door leading to the *pièce des bains* on the left and *The Toilet of Venus* hung above the door to the *cabinet de commodité* on the right. [15] The slightly low viewpoint of each composition is appropriate for their original location.

The suitability of the two subjects—the goddess of beauty and love about to bathe and attending to her toilette—as decorations for Pompadour’s bathroom is clear enough. As Georges Brunel remarked, Boucher must have sought in these two works to juxtapose a country scene, in which Venus is caught in all her natural and unadorned beauty, with an interior scene, where we see the same goddess primping before a mirror amid a profusion of luxurious manufactured goods. [16] The wooded backdrop in *The Bath of Venus* is replaced in *The Toilet* by the heavy folds of the blue-green drapes, and the shimmering, reflective surface of the forest pond is exchanged for a mirror, silver and gold ewers, bowls, and cassolette. Given his patron and context, Boucher probably did not intend to admonish feminine vanity here, yet the images could not have helped but remind their viewers of the lengths to which many women, including Pompadour, went to present themselves. [17] Although Alastair Laing has rightly debunked the myth that these Venuses are actual portraits of the marquise, [18] the association would not have been lost on most; Pompadour apparently had no compunction about seeing herself depicted in this manner, as is evident in Boucher’s 1758 portrait of her at her toilette. [19]

How one reads the actions of the figures in *The Bath of Venus* may hold the key to the iconography of the picture. According to a description in the catalogue for the marquis de Ménars sale, “[Venus] holds her son in her arms, who appears

frightened of the water in which she seems to want to bathe him.” [20] Fear does seem to account for the distressed expression on Cupid’s face and the pose of his body, leaning away from the water in an attempt to free himself from his mother’s embrace. A tentative step into water was the idea that gave Lemoyne’s *Bather* its piquancy, and Boucher might have recalled it when he came to create his picture intended to decorate a bathroom. [21] Yet the action of Venus has also been interpreted as an attempt to take away Cupid’s quiver in a manner similar to the artist’s various versions of *Venus Disarming Cupid*, one of which may have been painted for Bellevue in the same year as the National Gallery of Art’s picture. [22] As Colin Bailey has observed, this iconography, which appears in several of Boucher’s depictions of Venus and Cupid dating to the 1750s, may have been inspired by Pompadour’s changing status with Louis XV. Starting about 1750, when their relations turned from carnal to purely platonic, the *maîtresse en titre* “effected a subtle but brilliant transformation of that goddess’ venereal powers through the commission of public statuary in which Venus came to represent Friendship rather than Love.” [23] Relieving Cupid of a full quiver of arrows might be seen as an appropriate metaphor for the ending of the king’s passion for his mistress.

Whether we are meant to read such significance into *The Bath of Venus* is uncertain. It is unlikely that the painting, installed in the private space of the *appartement des bains*, would have been visible to any but the most intimate of Pompadour’s circle. Boucher’s young goddess—in both the Washington and the New York canvases—is still an alluring, sensuous being whose sexual attributes are plain to see. Presumably the marquise herself did not need, while bathing, visual reminders of her new relationship with the king. In any case, the paintings did not remain for long at Bellevue. In all likelihood they were removed around 1757, when the marquise turned the château over to the royal household. Both pictures were next recorded in 1764, as part of an inventory drawn up at Pompadour’s death. They are described in the vestibule of the ground floor of her Parisian residence, the Hôtel d’Evreux (now the Palais de l’Élysée), without frames, indicating that they had been integrated into decorative paneling. [24] The two works were bequeathed to the marquise’s brother, the marquis de Ménars et de Marigny, the *surintendant des bâtiments*, who installed them in the gallery of his *hôtel particulier* on the rue St. Thomas du Louvre in Paris. [25] They next appeared at the sale of his effects after his death in 1782, where they were separated. [26]

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Collection data may have been updated since the publication of the print volume. Additional light adaptations have been made for the presentation of this text online.

Richard Rand

January 1, 2009

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#### COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** François Boucher, *The Toilet of Venus*, 1751, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of William K. Vanderbilt, 1920 (20.155.9).  
[www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)



**fig. 2** François Boucher, *Seated Female Nude*, c. 1751 (?), red and white chalks over black chalk on buff paper, private collection. Photo © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images



**fig. 3** François Lemoyne, *The Bather*, 1724, oil on canvas, Dallas Museum of Art. Lent by the Michael L. Rosenberg Foundation, 29.2004.7



**fig. 4** Compositional Study for François Boucher, *The Bath of Venus*, c. 1751, chalk on paper, State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. Photographed from Alexandre Ananoff, *François Boucher* (Lausanne, c. 1976), vol. 2

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## NOTES

- [1] Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2: no. 376. Unlike the National Gallery's picture, the Metropolitan's picture was popularized through an engraving, Jean François Janinet's masterpiece of color printing (see Pierrette Jean-Richard, *L'oeuvre gravée de François Boucher dans la collection Edmond de Rothschild* [Paris, 1978], no. 1225), and, unlike the former due to restrictions of the Dale bequest, has been available for loan to exhibitions.

- [2] Inscribed on the back of the mount: “Academie de Femme. C’est le plus beau dessein de cette espece que l’on puisse voir. Il est de/ Mr. Boucher nommé avec beaucoup de justice le peintre des graces”; 36.4 × 29.2 cm; red and white chalk over black chalk on buff paper (not blue paper, as cited by Alexandre Ananoff. *L’oeuvre dessiné de François Boucher 1732–1806* [Paris, 1966], no. 464, fig. 88); ex-collection J.P. Heseltine; Sotheby’s, New York, January 13, 1989, lot 18. This drawing, or one like it, was adapted by Jean Baptiste Michel (1748–1804) for an engraving published with the title *Vénus sortant du bain* and inscribed “Boucher delin” (see Pierrette Jean-Richard, *L’oeuvre gravée de François Boucher dans la collection Edmond de Rothschild* [Paris, 1978], no. 1425, and its pendant, *Vénus entrant au bain*, no. 1424). A finished drawing *aux trois crayons*, focusing on the figures of Venus and Cupid (Didier Aaron & Cie, Paris, October 2–31, 1975, *Tableaux et dessins anciens*, no. 6, repro.), listed as a copy by Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2:82, 377/4 (“Très fortement retouché”), is signed and dated 1748, suggesting that Boucher was already at work on the project at that date, completing the pictures only three years later.
- [3] Inscribed on the back of the mount: “Academie de Femme. C’est le plus beau dessein de cette espece que l’on puisse voir. Il est de/ Mr. Boucher nommé avec beaucoup de justice le peintre des graces”; 36.4 × 29.2 cm; red and white chalk over black chalk on buff paper (not blue paper, as cited by Alexandre Ananoff. *L’oeuvre dessiné de François Boucher 1732–1806* [Paris, 1966], no. 464, fig. 88); ex-collection J.P. Heseltine; Sotheby’s, New York, January 13, 1989, lot 18. This drawing, or one like it, was adapted by Jean Baptiste Michel (1748–1804) for an engraving published with the title *Vénus sortant du bain* and inscribed “Boucher delin” (see Pierrette Jean-Richard, *L’oeuvre gravée de François Boucher dans la collection Edmond de Rothschild* [Paris, 1978], no. 1425, and its pendant, *Vénus entrant au bain*, no. 1424). A finished drawing *aux trois crayons*, focusing on the figures of Venus and Cupid (Didier Aaron & Cie, Paris, October 2–31, 1975, *Tableaux et dessins anciens*, no. 6, repro.), listed as a copy by Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2:82, 377/4 (“Très fortement retouché”), is signed and dated 1748, suggesting that Boucher was already at work on the project at that date, completing the pictures only three years later.
- [4] *Pace* Joshua Reynolds, who, in his Twelfth Discourse (December 10, 1784), recounted an anecdote about Boucher’s use of models: “When I visited [Boucher] some years since in France, I found him at work on a very large Picture, without drawings or models of any kind. On my remarking this particular circumstance, he said, when he was young, studying his art, he found it necessary to use models; but he had left them off for many years.” Henry William Beechy, *The Literary Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds: To Which*

*Is Prefixed a Memoir of the Author...* (London, 1855), 2:58. Three recent exhibitions have fruitfully explored the many issues Boucher's drawings raise, particularly his figure drawings; see Pierre Rosenberg, "Boucher and Eighteenth-Century French Drawing," in Alastair Laing, *The Drawings of François Boucher* (New York, 2003), 11–19; Alastair Laing, "Boucher—A Painter or a Draftsman Born?" in Alastair Laing, *The Drawings of François Boucher* (New York, 2003), 21–37; Françoise Joulie and Jean-François Méjanès, *François Boucher, hier et aujourd'hui* (Paris, 2003); *François Boucher et l'art rocaille dans les collections de l'École des beaux-arts* (Paris, 2003).

- [5] "[Q]ue Vénus & sa Cour ont choisi pour leur Peintre." Quoted in Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 1:79.
- [6] Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 1:215.
- [7] Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 1: no. 163; for this figure Boucher also made a finished life study (fig. 530).
- [8] Jean-Luc Bordeaux, *François Le Moyne (1688–1737) and His Generation* (Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1984), no. 48; see the excellent discussion by Alan Wintermute, "François Lemoyne," in *Master Paintings, 1400–1800* (New York, 1993), 48–53, no. 15.
- [9] Pierre Jean Mariette, *Abecedario de P.J. Mariette et autres notes inédites de cet amateur sur les arts et les artistes*, ed. Philippe de Chennevières and Anatole de Montaiglon, 6 vols. (Paris, 1851–1860; reprint 1966), 1:165.
- [10] Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2:81, fig. 1109.
- [11] The Metropolitan picture also shows signs of having had curved corners, although Janinet's engraving (see note 1; Pierrette Jean-Richard, *L'oeuvre gravée de François Boucher dans la collection Edmond de Rothschild* [Paris, 1978], no. 1225) reproduced the painting in a rectangular format. The original ornate rocaille frame for the Metropolitan picture is in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.
- [12] On Bellevue, see Paul Biver, *Histoire du Château de Meudon* (Paris, 1923), esp. 66–67; Christopher Tadgell, *Ange-Jacques Gabriel* (London, 1978), 155–159; *Madame de Pompadour et les arts* (Paris, 2002), 99–109.
- [13] For other works by Boucher and his contemporaries, including Carle Van Loo, Claude Joseph Vernet, and Jean Baptiste Oudry, see *The Love Letter*.
- [14] "L'Appartement des bains, placé sur la droite dans la cour du Château, renferme deux ouvrages du même Peintre; Vénus dans le bain, & Vénus à



sa toilette servie par les Amours” (The bathing rooms, situated at the right of the château’s courtyard, contain two works by the same painter, Venus at her bath and Venus at her toilet attended by Cupids). Antoine-Nicolas Dézallier d’Argenville, *Voyages pittoresque des environs de Paris ou description des maisons royales* (Paris, 1755), 29.

- [15] Paul Biver, *Histoire du Château de Meudon* (Paris, 1923), 66–67; *Madame de Pompadour et les arts* (Paris, 2002), 176–177.
- [16] Georges Brunel, *Boucher* (New York, 1986), 233.
- [17] In a poem appended to René Gaillard’s engraving (Pierrette Jean-Richard, *L’oeuvre gravée de François Boucher dans la collection Edmond de Rothschild* [Paris, 1978], no. 1024) after *The Milliner (Morning)*, a genre scene painted in 1746 as part of an incomplete suite of pictures for Louisa Ulrica, crown princess of Sweden (Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* [Lausanne and Paris, 1976], 1: no. 297), the aristocratic lady seated at her vanity is gently criticized for covering up her natural beauty: “Les Dieux ont pris plaisir à vous rendre parfaite,/ Et ces vains ornemens qu’à tort vous empruntez,/ Ne servent qu’à cacher de réelles beautés, etc.” (The Gods have taken pleasure at making you perfect/ And the vain ornaments that you so mistakenly apply/ Achieve nothing but to hide your true beauty, etc.).
- [18] Jean Cordey, *Inventaire des biens de Madame de Pompadour rédigé après son décès* [Paris, 1939], 90 n. 5; John Walker, *National Gallery of Art, Washington* (New York, 1963), 210; Gloria K. Fiero, *The Humanistic Tradition: The Age of the Baroque and the European Enlightenment* (Dubuque, Iowa, 1992), 138–140; Alastair Laing, “Boucher: The Search for an Idiom,” in Alastair Laing, *François Boucher (1703–1770)* (New York, 1986), 257. It is worth noting that Fréron’s comments (see note 8) that Boucher was the favored painter of Venus and her court were made in reference to the monumental portrait of Pompadour (on loan to the Alte Pinakothek, Munich; Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* [Lausanne and Paris, 1976], 2: no. 475), which Boucher exhibited at the Salon of 1757.
- [19] For two analyses of this portrait and the theme of the lady at her toilette, see Elise Goodman-Soellner, “Boucher’s *Madame de Pompadour at Her Toilette*,” *Simiolus* 17, no. 1 (1987): 41–58; Melissa Hyde, “The ‘Makeup’ of the Marquise: Boucher’s Portrait of Pompadour at Her Toilette,” *Art Bulletin* 82, no. 3 (Sept. 2000): 453–475.
- [20] “[Vénus] tient son fils dans ses bras, qui semble craindre l’eau où elle paroît le vouloir baigner.” F. Basan and F. Ch. Joullain, *Catalogue des différens objets de curiosité dans les sciences et les arts qui composoient le cabinet de feu M. le Marquis de Ménars* (Paris, 1782), lot 21.
- [21] As Jean-Luc Bordeaux, *François Le Moyne (1688–1737) and His Generation* (Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1984), 96, noted, “[Lemoyne’s *Bather*] is the first of a long

series of bathers in French art and the first to exploit a new sensation in art: *le frisson*. That sensation of chill caused by the contact of cold water established a new sensibility, a kind of epidermic sensuality, which became a source of inspiration for countless eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paintings, sculptures, and miniatures.”

- [22] This interpretation was apparently first advanced by Pierre de Nolhac, *François Boucher: premier peintre du roi (1703–1770)* (Paris, 1907), 47 (“Le dieu irrité est tout prêt au combat et lutte dans les bras de sa mère, pour recouvrer l’arc qu’elle vient de lui arracher”). For *Venus Disarming Cupid*, see Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2: no. 375, and the discussion by Bailey in *The Loves of the Gods: Mythological Painting from Watteau to David* (New York and Fort Worth, 1992), 410–414, no. 48.
- [23] *The Loves of the Gods: Mythological Painting from Watteau to David* (New York and Fort Worth, 1992), 413; the primary study of this phenomenon is Katherine K. Gordon, “Madame de Pompadour, Pigalle, and the Iconography of Friendship,” *Art Bulletin* 50, no. 3 (Sept. 1968): 249–262.
- [24] “1230.-78. La *Toilette [de] Vénus* et *Vénus qui tient l’Amour*; ces deux tableaux sont peints par F. Boucher en mil sept cent cinquante un, sans bordure; prisés quatorze cens livres” (*The Toilet of Venus* and *Venus Holding Cupid*; these two pictures were painted by F. Boucher in 1751, without frames; value 1400 pounds [livres]). Jean Cordey, *Inventaire des biens de Madame de Pompadour rédigé après son décès* (Paris, 1939), 90; see also 5 n. 1: “Vers la fin de sa vie, [Pompadour] s’en servit comme d’un garde-meubles où elle faisait rassembler les mobiliers et les objets d’art provenant des divers châteaux qu’elle cessait d’habiter” (Near the end of her life [Pompadour] used it as a warehouse where she had gathered all the furniture and objets d’art coming from the various châteaux she had stopped living in). As Laing pointed out, it is unlikely the works came directly to the Hôtel d’Evreux (Alastair Laing, *François Boucher (1703–1770)* [New York, 1986], 256–257).
- [25] They were recorded there in 1777, when the marquis had them cleaned by Hoogstaël. The documents, in the Archives de la Ville de Paris, Fonds Marigny, NA 102, fol. 90 verso, were discovered by Alden Gordon, and his notes from them were sent with a letter to David Rust dated March 15, 1983, all in NGA curatorial files.
- [26] F. Basan and F. Ch. Joullain, *Catalogue des différens objets de curiosité dans les sciences et les arts qui composoient le cabinet de feu M. le Marquis de Ménars* (Paris, 1782), lot 21: “Vénus au bain, Composition aussi intéressante que les précédentes. La Déesse est représentée dans un fond de Paysage des plus riens; elle est accompagnée de deux Amours, & tient son fils dans ses bras, qui semble craindre l’eau où elle paroît le vouloir

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baigner. Sur toile de 3 pieds 4 pouc. sur 2 pieds 6 de large” (Venus at the bath, composition as interesting as the preceding ones. The goddess is represented before a most cheerful landscape; she is accompanied by two cupids, and holds her son in her arms, who seems afraid of the water in which she appears to want to bathe him). Purchased by the art dealer Le Brun for 605 livres; *The Toilette of Venus* (lot 19) was bought by Chereau for 587 livres.

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### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting was executed on medium-weight, plain-weave fabric, and it has been lined. The original tacking margins have been removed at the top, bottom, and left edges. With almost no cusping evident, it is difficult to determine whether the present dimensions are original; it is known, however, that the painting’s shape has been changed at least twice. Today’s vertical dimension is listed as far back as 1782, but the painting had already been restored four years earlier, when its format probably was altered. The X-radiographs reveal the alteration as a conversion from an oval format to a rectangle by the addition of triangular fabric inserts, which were painted to match the original paint. Dense patches in the X-radiographs suggest a more ornate curvilinear shape, suggesting that the picture originally was mounted in an architectural framework. By 1764 the painting had been moved from its original site to the Hôtel d’Évreux (now the Palais de l’Élysée), where it was exhibited in the vestibule “sans bordure,” indicating that it was mounted in the paneling, so it probably remained shaped at that time. The alteration to a rectangular format is likely to have occurred when the painting was restored in Paris by Hoogstaël in 1777, because by 1782 at the Marigny sale it is listed with rectangular dimensions, and there is no mention of an oval format, as there was for other works in the sale. The additions at the bottom corners are 23 cm on a side, while those at the top corners are much smaller. The right tacking margin was unfolded and inpainted to incorporate it into the picture plane. The pendant of the same dimensions, *The Toilet of Venus* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), contains similar-sized inserts, and its left tacking margin appears to have been unfolded in a similar manner. Analysis of cross sections taken from *The Bath of Venus* revealed that, unlike the rest of the painting, there is no ground on the unfolded tacking margin. Air-path X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy indicated that some of the pigments used in this section were different from those used in the body of the painting. [1] This information suggests that the tacking margin was

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unfolded and painted at some point after the creation of the painting. The right tacking margin on *The Bath of Venus* remains in the picture plane, but it is covered by the frame.

The support was prepared with two layers of ground: an orange-brown layer followed by a light gray layer on which the paint was applied in a variety of techniques, ranging from pastose opaque paint to thin glazes. Brushmark striations from an underlying white paint layer indicate changes in Cupid's wing and in the folds of blue cloth draped over Venus' legs. The X-radiographs show that Boucher originally oriented Cupid's quiver along the opposite diagonal.

Although its format has been altered, the painting is generally well preserved. There is an L-shaped tear that measures 5 by 5 cm in the foliage at the top right. The lining of the painting has resulted in a prominent weave impression on the surface of the paint layer and a somewhat lumpy surface. Despite a history of blistering, documented in the conservation files, there is little paint loss or abrasion, and inpainting is confined to the corner inserts, the expanded right edge, the old tear, and some small scattered losses. The painting was relined in 1948, probably by Frank Sullivan. A discolored varnish was removed in 2004, and the varnish and inpaint applied at that time have not discolored.

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### TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] The cross-section analysis and air-path X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy as well as media analysis by gas chromatography were conducted by the NGA scientific research department, April 20, 2004, September 13, 2004, and March 22, 2004, respectively.
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### PROVENANCE

Painted for Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, marquise de Pompadour [1721-1764] and installed in the *appartement des bains* in the Château de Bellevue, outside Paris; removed c. 1757; recorded 1764 in the vestibule of the ground floor of the Hôtel d'Evreux, Pompadour's Parisian residence; by inheritance to her brother, Abel François Poisson, marquis de Ménars et de Marigny [1727-1781], Château de Ménars, Paris; installed in the gallery of Marigny's residence, rue St. Thomas du

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Louvre, Paris, by 1777;<sup>[1]</sup> (his estate sale, at his residence by Basan and Joullain, Paris, 18 March-6 April 1782 [postponed from late February], no. 21); purchased by Jean Baptiste Pierre Le Brun [1748-1813], Paris and London.<sup>[2]</sup> Baron Alfred Charles de Rothschild [1842-1918], Halton House, near Wendover, Buckinghamshire, by 1884;<sup>[3]</sup> bequest to Grace Elvina Hinds Duggan Curzon, marchioness of Curzon [1879-1958], Kedleston Hall, Derby, Derbyshire; (her sale, American Art Association-Anderson Galleries, New York, 22 April 1932, no. 80); Chester Dale [1883-1962], New York; gift 1943 to NGA.

[1] The painting was recorded there in 1777, when the marquis had them cleaned by Hoogstael. The documents, in the Archives de la Ville in Paris, Fonds Marigny, NA 102, fol. 90 verso, were discovered by Alden Gordon, and his notes from them were sent with a letter to David Rust dated 15 March 1983, all in NGA curatorial files.

[2] Paul Matthews, of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, kindly brought to the Gallery's attention a Boucher *Venus and Cupids* that appeared in the 1785 sale of Noël Desenfans (d. 1807), a dealer who was one of Le Brun's business partners (sale, Christie's, London, May 11-14, 1785, 2nd day, no. 53; e-mail to Curatorial Records, May 6, 2004, NGA curatorial files). There is no description of the painting in the sale catalogue, so it is not possible to say with certainty that this was the Gallery's painting. The purchaser at the 1785 sale was recorded as "Dillon," who also purchased two other lots. Marijke Booth, of Christie's Archives Department, suggests that this could either be Charles Dillon-Lee, 12th viscount Dillon (1745-1813) or Edward Count Dillon (1751-1839), both collectors during this period (e-mail to Anne Halpern, August 9, 2007, NGA curatorial files).

[3] Alfred did not inherit the painting from his father, and the painting is not included in Alfred's 1884 catalogue, so he must have acquired it himself at a later date (e-mail from Michael Hall, curator to Edmund de Rothschild, to Anne Halpern, August 3, 2008, NGA curatorial files).

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

*The Bath of Venus*

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## NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

*French Paintings of the Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*

1965 The Chester Dale Bequest, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1965, unnumbered checklist.

1973 François Boucher in North American Collections: One Hundred Drawings, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Art Institute of Chicago, 1973-1974, unnumbered brochure for Washington venue (shown only in Washington).

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