



François Boucher
French, 1703 - 1770

Allegory of Painting

1765

oil on canvas

overall: 101.5 x 130 cm (39 15/16 x 51 3/16 in.)

framed: 129.5 x 157.5 cm (51 x 62 in.)

Inscription: lower right in black paint, FB in monogram: FBoucher - 1765

Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.1

ENTRY

Although they bear different dates, François Boucher's *Allegory of Painting* and *Allegory of Music* [fig. 1] have been associated with each other since they came to light in the late nineteenth century. [1] Virtually identical in size, their compositions are well balanced and their subjects complementary. In each picture the arts of Painting and Music are personified as beautiful if rather undifferentiated young women, [2] seated against the sky on what appear to be billowing cloud formations. One turns her back to the viewer, while her companion reclines with her figure facing the picture plane. Their hair is pinned up to reveal the contours of their necks, and their bodies are wrapped in flowing drapes—one could hardly call it clothing—that fall away to reveal a bare shoulder, a leg, or a breast. The women are surrounded by attributes appropriate to their arts and are doted on by winged putti, who engage in playful activities. In *Painting*, one putto, reclining while holding a blazing torch, serves as a model for the maiden, who sketches his form on an oval canvas. A companion next to him looks on, while a third supports the canvas and holds aloft a laurel wreath. Their counterparts in *Music* serve similar functions, one holding a wreath and offering the woman a *flûte à bec*, the other pulling at the

strings of a lyre.

The paintings exhibit the free and open brushwork that Boucher favored in his later years. In both works the artist apparently applied the paint relatively quickly, using a wet-into-wet technique. Numerous pentimenti indicate the freedom with which the artist painted the compositions directly on the canvas, probably with only minimal underdrawing. Indeed, the artist in *Allegory of Painting*, who quickly sketches her subject on the canvas with chalk, suggests the method employed by Boucher himself. [3] In the case of *Music*, at least, Boucher was adapting a composition he had invented as many as ten years before in an even more freely painted canvas [fig. 2]. [4] In this simpler conception, a single putto gazes rapturously at the woman, who delicately pulls the lyre from his fingers. When he painted the National Gallery of Art's picture ten years later, Boucher added the second putto with the wreath, adjusted the position of the lyre and the figures' poses and gestures, and shifted the placement of the music book and doves. A small pen and ink drawing, long associated with the National Gallery's *Music*, must have been made as part of that process [fig. 3]. [5] Certain elements of the 1754 painting remain—the poses of the central figures, the music book and recorder—but Boucher added two more putti (mirroring the three in the *Allegory of Painting*), including one holding aloft a laurel wreath; and he adjusted the legs of the woman, anticipating how they would appear in the later painting. When he translated the design to his new canvas, however, he replaced the putto at lower right with a pair of doves and depicted the woman in a more reclining position, so that her posture mirrors that of her counterpart in *Painting*.

No corresponding compositional sketch for *Painting* has come to light, although a spirited black chalk drawing of a young boy's head is evidently a study for the child-model at the right of the picture. [6] Yet, as is often the case with such finished drawings by Boucher, it is likely that this drawing was made after the painting as a work of art in its own right, rather than as a preliminary sketch. [7] There are numerous such drawings of putti in Boucher's oeuvre, many related in type, if not in specific pose or gesture, to those in *Painting* and *Music*. [8] These drawings often served as models for prints, which were produced in large quantities by such engravers as Gilles Demarteau (1722–1776). [9]

The low viewpoints of the two paintings and the broad handling of the brushwork suggest that they were intended as overdoors, to be placed high in a decorative scheme where close examination would not have been possible. Both compositions are structured around a series of curvilinear forms, creating dynamic,

oval compositions that must have been echoed in their original framing. Pairs of holes, now filled, in the corners of both paintings were probably produced when elaborate paneled surrounds were nailed over the canvases once they were in place. [10] In the pen and ink study (see fig. 3) for *Music*, Boucher employed an oval format, although it is unlikely that the painting itself was oval. Technical evidence suggests that the canvases have not been trimmed appreciably, [11] and key elements in the lower corners of the compositions—a palette with brushes in *Painting*, a plumed helmet and sword in *Music*, not to mention the artist's prominent signature at the lower right of each work—are evidence that the framing did not cover much of the canvas surface. The upper corners may have been rounded, so that the expanses of unresolved sky would have seemed less empty than they do now. Noting the passages of pale rose and red tones, Paul Mantz, who first published *Painting* and *Music* in 1873, believed that the pictures may have hung in a salon decorated in white and gold, although this hypothesis is conjectural. [12]

The provenance of the Washington pendants, based on tradition rather than documentary evidence, derives from Mantz and is equally suspect: he believed they had been painted for the elector of Bavaria, Maximilian III Joseph (1745–1777). [13] They were supposedly returned to France in the early nineteenth century by General de Saint-Maurice, who, according to André Michel, kept them for some sixty years before selling them to Charles Maillet du Boullay. [14] As Alastair Laing has pointed out, however, Saint-Maurice never served in Bavaria and died in 1796. [15] Nor do any references to the paintings appear in the state archives of Bavaria; thus the early provenance of the paintings must be called into question. [16]

Allegories of the arts feature prominently in the oeuvre of Boucher and his circle. In conceiving the two paintings, he followed a standard formulation that he had employed on several occasions. Boucher leaves open the question of who *Music* represents: Is she a general personification of “music,” or someone more specific, such as one of the nine muses, the mythological attendants of Apollo? If so, she is likely Euterpe, the muse of music, or perhaps Clio, the muse of history, a figure Boucher represented before in similar fashion. [17] Identifying the figures precisely is difficult, however, given Boucher's carefree use of attributes. [18] Noting the doves and the roses in *Music*, Albert Pomme de Mirimonde felt that Boucher had intended to represent Venus, thus explaining the presence of the helmet and sword at the left, the attributes of her lover, Mars. [19] Mirimonde further suggested a neo-Platonic reading of the subject: Boucher shows us a celestial Venus who

reaches for the lyre with its seven strings (symbolic of the seven celestial bodies) while rejecting the *flûte à bec* (“emblème erotique”), which represents her carnal nature. [20]

The figure personifying *Painting* is even more generic. We cannot even be certain that Boucher intended to represent the art of painting rather than drawing, since the woman is shown sketching the model in white chalk. [21] Yet she sketches on canvas, and her palette and brushes are close at hand. Though Boucher was a fluent and facile painter, he was an even more brilliant and prolific draftsman. Better than any artist of his generation, he no doubt recognized the relationship between the two arts. Colin Eisler, suggesting that the figure represents *Pictura*, the personification of painting, proposed that Boucher was emphasizing the more general concept of *Design*, in which the artistic concept was more important than its actual execution. [22] Why he juxtaposed a personification of painting with one of music is less perplexing if we consider the possibility that the pair probably was part of a set of four or five pictures, the others most likely representing *Sculpture*, *Architecture*, and *Poetry*. [23] Eisler reasonably proposed that such a set may have been installed in a music room or library; no paintings by Boucher have surfaced, however, that might serve as viable candidates for the rest of the suite. [24]

The winged putti that gather around the female personifications are best described as “génies,” or geniuses, which symbolize “the expanse of the spirit, the power of the imagination, and the activity of the soul.” [25] These little geniuses, usually winged but sometimes not, flutter about throughout Boucher’s oeuvre, in paintings and in numerous drawings and the prints made after them. [26] The Goncourt brothers noted their ubiquity: “They appear everywhere in [Boucher’s] work....They amuse themselves at the feet of the Muses by playing with the attributes of the Arts and Sciences....They are always a charming spectacle, with their little fat hands, their rotund stomachs and navels like dimples, their cupid’s bottoms, their chubby calves....And what games, the sport of elves and infant gods, they play amid the allegorical scenes.” [27] Boucher’s most ambitious and elaborate use of the type was in his large canvas, painted in 1761 as a cartoon for the Gobelins tapestry works, on the subject of *Les Génies des arts* [fig. 4]. [28] Here all the arts, including music and painting as well as sculpture, architecture, and drawing, are gathered before a classical facade, the whole a hive of activity. As in the two National Gallery allegories, one genius at the top holds aloft laurel wreaths to honor the arts.

Painting and *Music* were created during a period late in Boucher's life when he was at the height of his influence, if not at the peak of his powers. In 1765 he was appointed First Painter to the King, and elected director of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture. During this time his talents as a decorator were in great demand, and his prodigious output sometimes resulted in a facility of brushwork and repetition of motifs. In *Painting* and *Music*, the fluid and open technique eschews details and complex working of the surface for a more rapid *alla prima* effect. This result may be a function of the pictures' destination as overdoor panels or, perhaps, the artist's failing eyesight, [29] although Eisler suggested that in the case of *Painting* at least, the intervention of Boucher's studio may have been a factor. [30] It is worth remembering, however, that by the 1760s Boucher's technique in general had attained a bravura confidence that had become somewhat mannered. [31]

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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

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 François Boucher, *Allegory of Music*, 1764, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection, 1946.7.2



fig. 2 François Boucher, *Clio*, 1758, oil on canvas, private collection. Photographed from *Master Paintings, 1350–1800* (London, 1989)



fig. 3 François Boucher, *Music*, c. 1764, pen and ink wash. Photographed from *François Boucher in North American Collections: 100 Drawings* (Washington, 1973)



fig. 4 François Boucher, *Les Génies des arts*, 1761, oil on canvas, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Angers. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Photo: Benoît Touchard / Mathieu Rabeau

NOTES

- [1] Their traditional provenance—that they were painted for the elector of Bavaria—is open to question (see discussion below).
- [2] Both women bear close resemblance to Boucher’s preferred type, which by this date had become an idealized representation of youthful femininity rather than an actual model; a drawing, dated 1768, shows a very similar head to that in *Music* (Alexandre Ananoff, *L’œuvre dessiné de François Boucher 1732–1806* [Paris, 1966], no. 377, fig. 78).
- [3] Given the off-white ground color used in both paintings, Boucher may have sketched in the preliminary design in a darker color, perhaps black or red chalk.
- [4] Certain passages, such as the feet of the woman and the still life at lower right, appear unfinished, although the picture bears a signature and date, *F. Boucher 1754*. The painting is unrecorded by Ananoff and was first published in Donald Garstang, ed., *Master Paintings 1350–1800* (London

and New York, 1989), 99–103, repro., entry by Wintermute. The provenance of this earlier version is traceable only to 1880.

- [5] For the drawing, see Alexandre Ananoff, *L'oeuvre dessiné de François Boucher 1732–1806* (Paris, 1966), 244, no. 940; Regina Shoolman Slatkin first associated the drawing with the Washington painting in Regina Shoolman Slatkin, *François Boucher in North American Collections: 100 Drawings* (Washington, DC, 1973), 107–108, no. 83, repro.
- [6] Black chalk with white heightening, 26.5 × 21.0 cm, private collection (see Alexandre Ananoff, *L'oeuvre dessiné de François Boucher 1732–1806* [Paris, 1966], no. 306, fig. 58).
- [7] See the discussion by Alastair Laing, *François Boucher (1703–1770)* (New York, 1986), 284–285.
- [8] For example, Alexandre Ananoff, *L'oeuvre dessiné de François Boucher 1732–1806* (Paris, 1966), nos. 813, 815, 818, 829, 835, 840; figs. 130–134.
- [9] See Pierrette Jean-Richard, *L'oeuvre gravée de François Boucher dans la collection Edmond de Rothschild* (Paris, 1978), nos. 667, 670–674, 857.
- [10] See technical reports in the NGA curatorial files.
- [11] An analysis of the cusping of the canvas weave in *Painting* indicates that the canvas may have been cut down very slightly at the bottom edge.
- [12] Paul Mantz, “La Galerie de M. Rothan,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* ser. 2, 7 (1873): 442.
- [13] Paul Mantz, “La Galerie de M. Rothan,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* ser. 2, 7 (1873): 442.
- [14] André Michel, *François Boucher* (Paris, 1906), 51.
- [15] Letter to the author, April 20, 1997.
- [16] Colin Eisler, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: European Schools Excluding Italian* (Oxford, 1977), 318, offers the possibility that they were commissioned by Joseph von Dufresne, a courtier of the duke who had a large collection of French pictures (see also correspondence in NGA curatorial files).
- [17] Private collection, 81.2 × 128 cm; see Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2: no. 489, and Denys Sutton, *François Boucher* (Tokyo, 1982), no. 53 (where it is misidentified as Polymnia, muse of heroic hymns; the correct identification comes from Jean Daullé’s [1703–1763] engraving of 1756, which reproduces an earlier version, painted along with its pendant *Erato*, for Madame de Pompadour; see Pierrette Jean-Richard, *L'oeuvre gravée de François Boucher dans la collection Edmond de Rothschild* [Paris, 1978], no. 558).
- [18] With her long flute and lyre, the figure of Polymnia (see fig. 3) more likely

personifies Euterpe, muse of music and lyric poetry.

- [19] In this regard, Slatkin understood the armor to “undoubtedly symbolize the triumph of music over the violence of men” (Regina Shoolman Slatkin, *François Boucher in North American Collections: 100 Drawings* [Washington, DC, 1973], 107).
- [20] Albert Pomme de Mirimonde, “Les allégories de la musique II: le retour de Mercure et les allégories des beaux-arts,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* ser. 6, 73 (May–June 1969): 357.
- [21] This possibility was kindly pointed out to me by Alastair Laing (letter to the author, April 20, 1997).
- [22] He calls *Pictura* the “muse of painting,” although no such muse exists; Colin Eisler, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: European Schools Excluding Italian* (Oxford, 1977), 317.
- [23] See, for example, the set of five overdoors commissioned in 1756 by Count Adam Gottlieb Moltke (1710–1792) for the Amalienborg Palace in Copenhagen (see Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* [Lausanne and Paris, 1976], 2: nos. 467–471), and the four oval allegories painted in 1758, also representing putti engaged in the arts (Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* [Lausanne and Paris, 1976], 2: nos. 492–495). In both suites *Painting* is represented by two geniuses drawing on a sketchpad. Around 1753 Boucher’s student Jean Honoré Fragonard painted a suite of overdoors, representing the four arts as idealized women attended by putti, for Bergeret de Grancourt, one of Boucher’s most important patrons (see Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard, Life and Work* [New York, 1988; French ed. Paris, 1987], nos. 3–6).
- [24] Colin Eisler, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: European Schools Excluding Italian* (Oxford, 1977), 317, wondered whether one of two overdoor paintings in the Wallace Collection, London, depicting a *Seated Nymph with Flutes* and the muse *Clio* may be associated with the Washington pair. However, the sizes and proportions do not match, and the pictures may be old copies after Boucher rather than originals. See the discussion by John Ingamells, *The Wallace Collection: Catalogue of Pictures*, 4 vols. (London, 1985–1992), 3:85–88, nos. P481, P490.
- [25] “L’étendu de l’esprit, la force de l’imagination, l’activité de l’âme, voilà le genie,” in “Génie [Philosophie & Littér.],” Denis Diderot and Jean d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres*, 17 vols. (Paris, 1751–1765; reprint New York, 1969), 7:582.
- [26] For example, in the suite of panels allegorizing the various mechanical and applied arts painted around 1750–1753 for Madame de Pompadour (New York, Frick Collection; Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François*

Boucher [Lausanne and Paris, 1976], 2: nos. 454–457). Similar figures appear in an overdoor from 1768, *Three Cupids Making Music* (private collection; Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* [Lausanne and Paris, 1976], 2: no. 659, fig. 1716). Naked little boys without wings personify the arts of painting, sculpture, and drawing in a chalk drawing published by Alexandre Ananoff, *L'oeuvre dessiné de François Boucher 1732–1806* (Paris, 1966), no. 33, fig. 8.

- [27] Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt, *L'art du dix-huitième siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1880–1884), 1:146; translation by R. Ironside in Edmond de Goncourt, *French XVIII Century Painters* (New York, 1948), 66.
- [28] Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2: no. 545.
- [29] See Alastair Laing, *François Boucher (1703–1770)* (New York, 1986), 306.
- [30] Colin Eisler, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: European Schools Excluding Italian* (Oxford, 1977), 317. Laing, letter to the author, April 20, 1997, expressed the opinion that *Painting*, rather than *Music*, is the more accomplished picture.
- [31] This point had already been made in regard to the Washington paintings by Paul Mantz, *François Boucher, Lemoyne et Natoire* (Paris, 1880), 153.

PROVENANCE

Possibly Maximilian III Joseph, Elector of Bavaria [1745-1777]. Traditionally said to have been brought into France by the early 19th century by Général de Saint-Maurice. M. Maillat du Boullay, Paris; (his sale, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 22 January 1870, no. 2); M. Féral. Gustave Rothan, Paris, by 1874;^[1] (his sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 29-31 May 1890, no. 123); Fréret. Adèle, 4th duchesse de Dino [née Adèle Livingston Sampson, 1841-1912; married first to Frederick W. Stevens], Paris, by 1907; probably by inheritance to her daughter, Countess Mabel Stevens Orłowski [married 1891 to Count Mieczysław Orłowski (1865-1929)];^[2] (Wildenstein & Co., Inc., Paris, New York, and London); sold 1942 to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York;^[3] gift 1946 to NGA.

[1] The early provenance of this painting and NGA 1946.7.2 is based on tradition rather than documentary evidence, and derives from Paul Mantz, "La Galerie de M. Rothan," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (1873): 442, who believed the pair had been

painted for the Elector of Bavaria, Maximilian III Joseph. They were then supposedly returned to France in the early nineteenth century by General de Saint-Maurice, who, according to André Michel, *François Boucher*, Paris, n.d.[1906]: 51, kept them for some sixty years before selling them to Maillet du Boullay. As Alastair Laing has pointed out, however, Saint-Maurice never served in Bavaria and died in 1796 (letter of 20 April 1997 to Richard Rand). Nor do any references to the paintings appear in the state archives of Bavaria; see Colin Eisler, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: European Schools Excluding Italian*, Oxford, 1977: 318, who offered the possibility that they were commissioned by Joseph von Dufresne, a courtier of the Elector who had a large collection of French pictures (see also correspondence in NGA curatorial files). Mantz writes that Rothan acquired the pair of paintings in 1870, probably at Maillet du Boullay's sale; Rothan certainly owned them by 1874, when he lent them to an exhibition in Paris.

[2] The Wildenstein prospectus for the pair of paintings listed the last three owners as Mme. Livingston-Sampson, Duchesse de Dino, and Comte Orllowski [*sic*]. Research for the Gallery's systematic catalogue of 15th-18th century French paintings determined that the first two names were the same person, and that the Count was her son-in-law. See NGA curatorial files for the prospectus and documentation of the family history.

[3] See also The Kress Collection Digital Archive, <https://kress.nga.gov/Detail/objects/196>.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1874 *Ouvrages de peintures exposés au profit de la colonisation de l'Algérie par les Alsaciens-Lorrains*, Palais de la Présidence du Corps législatif, Paris, 1974, no. 30.

1878 *Tableaux anciens et modernes exposés au profit du Musée des Arts Décoratifs*, Pavillon de Flore, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 1878, no. 14.

1940 *The Great Tradition of French Painting*, Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, 1940, no. 7.

1946 Recent Additions to the Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1946, no. 766.

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).

2002 Wettstreit der Künste - Malerei und Skulptur von Dürer bis Daumier, Haus der Kunst, Munich; Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne, 2002, no. 81, repro. (shown only in Cologne).

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- 1906 Michel, André. *François Boucher*. Paris, 1906: no. 938, repro. avant-propos.
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- Washington, 1968: 11, repro.
- 1975 *European Paintings: An Illustrated Summary Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1975: 38, repro.
- 1975 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. New York, 1975: 336, no. 450, repro.
- 1976 Ananoff, Alexandre, with Daniel Wildenstein. *François Boucher*. 2 vols. Lausanne and Paris, 1976: 2:232, no. 581, repro.
- 1977 Eisler, Colin. *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: European Schools Excluding Italian*. Oxford, 1977: 316-318, fig. 280, as *The Personification of Painting*.
- 1980 Ananoff, Alexandre, with Daniel Wildenstein. *L'opera completa di Boucher*. Milan, 1980: no. 614, repro.
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- 2009 Conisbee, Philip, et al. *French Paintings of the Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, D.C., 2009: no. 4, 25-32, color repro.
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