This early masterpiece by Jean-Honoré Fragonard demonstrates his brilliant command—even at the beginning of his career—of the rococo pictorial idiom that was in its ascendancy in the 1750s and that he had absorbed through his close relationship with François Boucher (French, 1703 - 1770). On an ethereal mountaintop (the Mount Latmos of myth), the youthful shepherd Endymion, seminude, sleeps unaware, along with his dog. Several of his sheep lie beside him; one appears to notice the arrival of a glowing Diana, identified by a hazy crescent moon that surrounds her like a mandorla. Struck by Endymion’s great beauty, she leans back, her hand held out in wonder. She is accompanied by a rosy-fleshed Cupid, who mischievously aims an arrow at the object of her delectation. The cool night sky provides a shimmering backdrop for Endymion’s mountaintop, with its rocky ground enlivened by flowering shrubs.

With its pendant, *Aurora* (sometimes called *Venus Awakening*) [fig. 1], *Diana and Endymion* clearly was intended as interior decorations, undoubtedly meant to be installed into the paneling of overdoors. [1] Both canvases have been extended from their original curvilinear shapes, which were scalloped at top and bottom, as was often the case with such decorations produced by Fragonard during these
At some later date the canvases were made into rectangles and
turned into easel paintings. Yet the low perspectives employed in both
compositions work best if they are seen from below. In the National Gallery of Art’s
painting, for example, the figure of the slumbering Endymion is angled away from
the viewer, while Diana appears to float above, as if the expanse of sky reaches
out over our heads. The composition of Aurora is essentially the mirror opposite of
Diana and Endymion. The graceful figure of Aurora, or Dawn, identified by the
morning star above her head, sails into the composition on a cloudburst as Night
draws a heavy blanket over her form. When seen side by side, the two paintings
present equally balanced and complementary designs—both organized around the
perpendicular placement of the figures to each other—but for all its painterly
virtuosity and scintillating color, Aurora betrays a more schematic solution than
Diana and Endymion, in which the protagonists exist in a more integrated spatial
relationship.

Besides complementing each other compositionally, Fragonard’s two paintings are
related in their themes. Aurora, ushering in the new day, provides the counterpart
to Diana and Endymion, which symbolizes night. Entranced by the shepherd’s
beauty, the goddess Diana visits him one night as he sleeps. She steals a kiss,
causing him to fall in love with her; their liaison angers Jupiter, who offers
Endymion a choice between instant death and a perpetual slumber that will always
preserve his youth. The iconology of the subject is complex, but the arcane
references of the story probably would have been less important for Fragonard’s
purpose. Here the subject serves the needs of the decorative program, providing a
thematically juxtaposed with Aurora, representing Morning, in what must have been
a fairly standard evocation of the Times of Day. As Colin Bailey observed, however,
these paintings may have been part of a larger cycle, since the theme of the Times
of Day was painted in sets of up to four compositions. Fragonard probably drew
his inspiration for Diana and Endymion from visual tradition, although his sensitive
and appealing rendition of the myth is remarkably similar to the fullest literary
account, told by Lucian in the Dialogues of the Gods, in which the writer imagines a
conversation between Aphrodite and Selene, the moon goddess (who would later
be associated with the Roman goddess Diana):

I think he’s very good-looking, Aphrodite [says Selene], especially
when he sleeps with his cloak under him on the rock, with his
javelins just slipping out of his left hand as he holds them, and his
right hand bent upwards round his head and framing his face

Diana and Endymion
© National Gallery of Art, Washington
makes a charming picture, while he’s relaxed in sleep and breathing in the sweetest way imaginable. Then I creep down quietly on tip-toe, so as not to waken him and give him a fright, and then—but you can guess; there’s no need to tell you what happens next. You must remember I’m dying of love. [6]

The appearance of Cupid in Fragonard’s painting alludes to an earlier part of the exchange, when Aphrodite asks why Selene frequently descends from the sky to gaze upon Endymion. She replies, “Ask your own son, Aphrodite; it’s his fault.” [7] Fragonard’s representation of the myth betrays a familiarity with Lucian’s ancient text that is less surprising when we remember that an important aspect of the curriculum at the Ecole des élèves protégés—the elite school that he attended from 1752 to 1756 after winning the Rome prize in 1752—focused on a thorough immersion in the study of classical literature.

When it entered the National Gallery of Art in 1960, *Diana and Endymion* carried an attribution to Boucher, Fragonard’s first teacher. Boucher’s name had been associated with the painting since at least the late nineteenth century, when it was in the collection of Sir Richard Wallace in Paris. [8] It was only in 1985 that Alan P. Wintemute recognized it as an early work by Fragonard, an attribution agreed to by all subsequent scholars. [9] The mistaken attribution to Boucher is understandable given the close similarities the painting shares with a great number of decorative works by Boucher. In subject and composition, if not in style, it is indebted to Boucher’s own rendition of the subject (private collection), a painting that dates to the artist’s youthful period in the 1730s. [10] Although the two principal figures are reversed, the general disposition of their forms is the same, and both works include such details as nestling sheep, a sleeping dog, and a mischievous Cupid. Compared to Fragonard’s exquisitely asymmetrical composition, however, Boucher’s is more static and less lively in its centralized grouping of forms; Diana’s glowing crescent moon, which in the Fragonard discreetly shimmers behind her in the upper left of the picture, becomes in the Boucher a distracting and flattened disc in the heart of the composition, while the awkward pose of his Endymion—with his wrenched shoulder and thrown-back head—lacks the poise and elegance of Fragonard’s figure. [11] Whether or not Fragonard had access to Boucher’s painting (its early history is unknown, and it does not appear to have been engraved), the similarities between them are probably due more to the constraints imposed by the subject matter than by any true relationship or influence. As two *oeuvres de jeunesse*, however, only the Fragonard anticipates the brilliance that its creator
would achieve in full maturity.

Once the true authorship of the Washington painting is recognized and it is reunited with its pendant, *Aurora*, the two paintings fit comfortably with several works Fragonard produced while a student in Paris before his departure for Rome in 1756. For example, the combination of two mythological characters in decorative compositions clearly intended as overdoors and of similar style, color, and elegiac mood had already been employed in a pair of paintings produced around 1755: *Jupiter and Callisto* and *Cephalus and Procris* (Angers, Musée des Beaux-Arts). These two works had also been attributed at one time to Boucher. [12] *Diana and Endymion*, however, is characterized by a greater complexity in the organization of the figures in space, and its composition—like that of the pendant *Aurora*—is marked by strong opposing diagonals that give a coherent structure to the profusion of colors, swirling draperies, billowing clouds, and rampant foliage and flowers. *Diana and Endymion* is better compared to Fragonard’s most important painting completed during his tenure at the Ecole des élèves protégés, the resplendent *Psyche Showing Her Sisters the Gifts She Has Received from Cupid*, which was exhibited, along with works by Fragonard’s classmates, to Louis XV at Versailles in 1754 [fig. 3]. [13] The composition of this complex painting also centers on a series of opposing diagonals, particularly in the figure of Psyche. Her reclining form, swathed in glowing white robes and mirroring that of Endymion, is set against the excited gestures of the haggard personification of Envy, flying into the scene at the upper left, who has a more beautiful counterpart in the figure of Diana. Moreover, the startling crimson of Endymion’s draperies, which sets him apart from the icy blues and steel grays of the Washington painting, was used to similar provocative effect in the sister kneeling at the right of the London painting. *Diana and Endymion* and *Aurora* undoubtedly date from the same period, if not shortly thereafter. [14]

The evolution of Fragonard’s early career has been the subject of debate. As Bailey has discussed, Boucher clearly continued to exert an important influence on his former protégé, even during the years Fragonard was attending classes at the Ecole des élèves protégés. [15] The close formal relationship between *Diana and Endymion* and *Psyche Showing Her Sisters the Gifts She Has Received from Cupid* is proof enough that not all of Fragonard’s Boucher-inspired decorative pictures can be assigned to the years 1750–1752, as Georges Wildenstein had presumed. [16] Despite the strict regulations to which the students at the Ecole des élèves protégés were held (as well as the indisputable influence the school’s director,
Carle Van Loo (French, 1705 - 1765), had on his students) it seems clear that Fragonard managed to continue working on outside projects, both on his own and in collaboration with Boucher. [17]

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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. 2 X-radiograph composite, Jean Honoré Fragonard, *Diana and Endymion*, c. 1753/1756, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Timken Collection, 1960.6.2

NOTES

[1] The two paintings were reunited in the exhibition *The Loves of the Gods: Mythological Painting from Watteau to David* (New York and Fort Worth, 1992), nos. 59, 60.


10. When it appeared in an anonymous sale on March 20, 1773, lot 23, it was described as “Belle composition où on trouve le faire de Lemoyne,” a reference to Boucher’s teacher (see Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, François Boucher [Lausanne and Paris, 1976], 1:73, no. 36, who confused the early provenance of Fragonard’s Diana and Endymion with that of the Boucher).

11. The pose of Boucher’s Endymion appears drawn from the figure of the dead Christ in Michelangelo’s Piétà, which might argue for a date in the early 1730s, shortly after Boucher’s return from Rome (see Alastair Laing, François Boucher (1703–1770) [New York, 1986], 17).


TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a fine-weight, plain-weave fabric. The tacking margins have been removed, and the painting has been double-lined. There is a vertical seam in the original fabric approximately 24 cm from the left edge. The painting’s original shape was changed radically during an early conservation treatment. The X-radiographs indicate that four fabric inserts were added to the painting to change it from a curvilinear, scalloped shape to a rectangular format. There is almost no sign of cusping along the edges of the original fabric, indicating that the painting may have been larger at one time.

The ground consists of a smooth, white layer that partially conceals the fabric texture. The artist used a wet-into-wet technique to apply the paint as a generally thin, fluid paste with no impasto. There are no obvious pentimenti, but the X-radiographs reveal that the position of Diana’s head was changed and that Endymion’s staff originally was longer. The X-radiographs also indicate that slight adjustments were made to the position of Endymion’s legs and to the right horn of the moon.

The painting is in good condition. The joins and seams between all the fabric pieces are slightly raised, and weave interference from the lining fabric is visible on
the surface. There is a large U-shaped tear in the sky in the upper left quadrant and a smaller tear in the lower left corner. Both tears have been mended. Numerous small losses to the ground and paint are scattered throughout the painting. It was treated in 1982 to remove discolored varnish, and the varnish and inpainting applied at that time have not discolored.

PROVENANCE


[2] Provenance information beginning with Knoedler’s 1914 purchase from Seligmann’s through their 1924 sale to Timken is from David Rust’s notes of a telephone conversation on 15 July 1981 with Nancy Little, Knoedler librarian (in NGA curatorial files).

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1883 L’Art du XVIIIe siècle, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 1883-1884, no. 7, as by Boucher.
1920 Loan Exhibition of Paintings by Old Masters, Palace of Fine Arts, San Francisco, 1920, no. 90, repro., as by Boucher.


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