



François Boucher
French, 1703 - 1770

The Love Letter

1750

oil on canvas

overall: 81.2 x 75.2 cm (31 15/16 x 29 5/8 in.)

Inscription: upper right on lintel beneath lion: f. Boucher / 1750

Timken Collection 1960.6.3

ENTRY

The Love Letter—also referred to as *The Two Confidantes*, *The Messenger*, *The Lovers' Secret Mail*, and, less convincingly, *The Beloved Sheep*—typifies the pastoral idiom François Boucher had already made his own by the late 1740s. In a lush and verdant garden or wooded countryside, two young women recline at the base of a stone pillar surmounted by a carved lion. [1] One ties an envelope around the neck of a pigeon with a blue ribbon while looking with admiration at her companion. The sheep that lounge about and the dog standing sentry tell us that these are shepherdesses, but like many such characters of Boucher's they pay little attention to their responsibilities, preferring to idle the day away gathering flowers in a straw basket and sending missives via carrier pigeon. Boucher never concerned himself with the verities of country life, but employed the shepherdess type as an idealized and voluptuous protagonist for his decorative pictures. In this example he lavished his brush on the women's satin dresses, their powdery skin, and the casual perfection of their hair. Despite their affectations, they are wholly at ease in their accommodating setting.

The Love Letter originally formed a pair with *The Interrupted Sleep*, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [fig. 1], another pastoral subject that matches the Washington painting in size, composition, and amorous theme. [2] In *The Interrupted Sleep* a young shepherdess has dozed off and is about to be awakened by a young swain, who sneaks up from behind and tickles her face with a bit of straw. [3] Once again the setting is rich and fertile, enlivened by sheep and a dog; views into the distance balance the compositions. The palette in *The Interrupted Sleep* is somewhat more somber—one could say more rustic—than that of *The Love Letter*, particularly in the clothing, tending to pale ochers and brownish

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reds in the former and bluish purples and pale pinks in the latter. The artist's exquisite brushwork unites the pair, particularly the delicate glazes that enrich the treatment of the draperies or articulate the petals of the flowers. In each painting Boucher uses a subtle orchestration of the lights and darks to enhance the visual experience, resulting in such lovely passages as the shadow that falls across the face of the woman in *The Interrupted Sleep* or the soft illumination of the woman's ankles and toes in *The Love Letter*.

The two paintings, both signed and dated 1750, were not original compositions but were adapted by Boucher from a monumental tapestry cartoon that he had painted in 1748, probably with the help of studio assistants. [4] The tapestry, called *The Fountain of Love*, was first woven in 1755 at Beauvais as part of the series *Le Noble Pastorale* [fig. 2]. [5] One of Boucher's grandest designs, it weaves together a series of intimate tête-à-têtes played out in a luxuriant landscape. The figures from *The Love Letter* and *The Interrupted Sleep* are visible, in reverse, on the right side of the composition, at the foot of a magnificent fountain topped by playful cupids. The picturesque mill at Charenton, which Boucher painted on numerous occasions, is prominent in the left background.

Although they were taken from an earlier project, *The Love Letter* and its pendant are wholly autograph. They were produced for no less prestigious a client than Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, marquise de Pompadour (1721–1764), Louis XV's *maîtresse en titre*, undoubtedly the reason Boucher took special care in painting them. The royal provenance is confirmed by the inscription on Jean Ouvrier's (1725–1754) engraving of 1761 after *The Love Letter, The Two Confidentes* [fig. 3]. [6] When the two paintings were exhibited at the Salon of 1753, they were described as overdoors for Pompadour's residence at Bellevue outside Paris. [7] They are no doubt identical to the works described in situ by Antoine Nicolas Dezallier d'Argenville (1723–1796) in his *Voyage pittoresque des environs de Paris*, published in 1755: "The little room that follows the bedroom of Her Majesty is entirely paneled. The moldings are carved with garlands of flowers, which have been naturalistically painted; and in the middle of the panels are cartouches where we see various childhood activities. There are two pastorals, by M. Boucher, over the doors." [8]

Although d'Argenville's account of the paintings is vague (even if he took care to relate the details of the room's decoration), we can be confident that they are the canvases now in Washington and New York based on descriptions made when they were exhibited in Paris and on measurements recorded later. [9] As their

dates indicate, the pictures were produced in 1750, but their inclusion at the Salon of 1753 presupposes that they were not installed at Bellevue until sometime after the exhibition closed. While the château was dedicated in November 1750, work on the interior continued until 1754. [10] Examination of the surfaces of the canvases suggests that the compositions were framed as ovals in boiseries. [11] In any event, the paintings did not remain for long in the paneling of Bellevue. They very likely were removed around 1757, when the château was ceded to the king's daughters and much of its contents were emptied. [12] They are next recorded in 1764 in the vestibule on the ground floor of the Hôtel d'Évreux (now the Palais de l'Élysée), Pompadour's Parisian residence. An inventory of the marquise's effects drawn up in 1764 following her death described them in that location, along with other paintings from Bellevue. [13] Eighteen years later they resurfaced in the sale of the marquis de Ménars et de Marigny (1727–1781), Pompadour's brother, who had inherited the bulk of her estate. The National Gallery of Art's painting is described in sufficient detail that we can be certain of the identification: "Two young women are seated on the grass, attaching a letter to the neck of a dove. They are surrounded by a number of sheep and a dog in front of a pleasing and picturesque landscape." [14]

Pompadour's enthusiasm for Boucher is well established, and Bellevue was the setting for several of his most impressive productions. [15] Besides the overdoors described here, Boucher painted two scintillating pictures of Venus for the *appartement des bains*, *The Toilet of Venus* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art) and *The Bath of Venus*; [16] what is probably the artist's most celebrated religious picture, the so-called *Lumière du monde* (Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts), for the chapel; [17] and the pendant masterpieces *The Rising of the Sun* and *The Setting of the Sun* (London, Wallace Collection), woven at Beauvais. [18] Thus in the mid-1750s visitors to Bellevue could enjoy an extraordinary survey of Boucher's art in several genres, including mythologies, a devotional painting, and the category most closely identified with his hand, the pastoral.

The latter genre was perhaps most amenable to the function of Bellevue, with its striking site overlooking the Seine and its luxuriant and intimate gardens. [19] According to Pompadour, "It's a delightful site for the view, and the house, while not very large, is accommodating and charming, and not without a sort of magnificence." [20] The château, the only residence built for the marquise from the ground up, had been designed as a retreat for her and the king, although soon after its completion, their relationship had changed from carnal to platonic. [21] At

Bellevue in 1751 Madame de Pompadour played the role of the male lead, Colin, in a production of Jean François Marmontel's (1723–1799) pastoral operetta *Le Devin du village*. [22] The influence of the literary pastoral was not lost on commentators who admired *The Love Letter* and *The Interrupted Sleep* at the Salon of 1753. The abbé Leblanc noted that Boucher had virtually invented the pastoral subject in painting, just as Fontenelle had brought new life to pastoral imagery in literature: “The *Eclogues* of M. de Fontenelle have enriched our pastorals with a new kind of shepherd, notable for the gallantry and delicacy of their sentiments. Those that M. Boucher has introduced into painting join all the merits of the former with a precious simplicity and naiveté that are not always those of M. de Fontenelle.” [23]

In the 1740s and 1750s Boucher was one of the most prolific painters of pastoral decorations, and his overdoor panels were often treated in pairs or series intended to represent allegories such as the Times of Day or the Four Seasons. [24] The Washington and New York canvases represent an innovative solution to relating decorative paintings, for here Boucher sought to create a narrative link between them, fanciful though it may be, centered on the developing love of a shepherd and a shepherdess. As the Goncourts observed, “Rustic life at [Boucher’s] touch became an ingenious romance of nature.” [25] In *The Interrupted Sleep* the youth teases the object of his affections as he tries to win her over; in *The Love Letter* we see the later stage of a relationship, where a young woman confides in her friend, who encourages her to send what is undoubtedly a love letter. This “narrative,” such as it is, is understated, for we cannot even be sure if we are meant to believe it is the same shepherdess in each painting; her clothes have changed and she is accompanied by a different dog. Boucher continued this strategy in later works, such as the pastoral paintings made for Madame Geoffrin and exhibited at the Salon of 1765. [26] By then, however, he had tired the patience of his critics, who grew increasingly frustrated with his candy-box representations of a dreamlike peasant life. [27] When he painted the present canvases in 1750, however, Boucher still could be credited with offering something new, even if the subject of the pastoral could be traced to artists of an earlier generation, such as Nicolas Lancret and Antoine Watteau. [28] In its review of the 1753 Salon, for example, the *Mercure de France* noted that “M. Boucher has continued to delight us by the grace and charm of his compositions...in the overdoors made for Bellevûe.” [29] Others expressed similar sentiments: “His two pieces characterize best the author’s lively and cheerful imagination, filled throughout with wit and charm. He has created a genre that is suitable to himself, and we are obliged to admit that he has succeeded admirably at it.” [30]

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Boucher's two compositions must have been popular, for numerous copies are recorded, and the composition of *The Love Letter* inspired a host of lesser artists and decorators, appearing as an oval tapestry, as decoration on snuffboxes, and in gouaches by Boucher's son-in-law Pierre Antoine Baudouin (1723–1769). [31]

Boucher himself—or, more likely, his studio assistants—painted a more upright version, *en camaïeu rose*, supposedly for Madame de Pompadour's apartments at Versailles [fig. 4]. [32] In a more profound way, these small pictures sparked the imagination of Boucher's greatest pupil, Jean Honoré Fragonard (French, 1732 - 1806), who employed the older artist's strategy in a far more ambitious project, painted for Pompadour's successor as royal mistress, Madame du Barry (1743–1793): the celebrated *Progress of Love* cycle (New York, Frick Collection), in which again a series of amorous episodes link a group of decorative pictures. [33]

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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, *The Interrupted Sleep*, 1750, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Jules Bache Collection, 1949 (49.7.46). www.metmuseum.org



fig. 2 François Boucher, *The Fountain of Love*, 1755, tapestry, Courtesy of the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California. © Courtesy of the Huntington Art Collections, San Marino, California



fig. 3 Jean Ouvrir after François Boucher, *The Two Confidantes* (*Les Deux Confidentes*), 1761, engraving and etching, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Photo: Thierry Le Mage



fig. 4 Workshop of François Boucher, *The Letter* (*Le Billet-Doux*), 1750s, oil on canvas, location unknown

NOTES

- [1] The stone lion—which appears in other pastorals by Boucher, such as *The Enjoyable Lesson* (Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* [Lausanne and Paris, 1976], 2: no. 311), exhibited at the Salons of 1748 and 1750—is based on the pair of antique sculptures at the base of the Capitoline Steps in Rome; see Ursula Hoff, *European Paintings before 1800 in the National Gallery of Victoria*, 4th ed. (Melbourne, 1995), 22.
- [2] Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2: no. 363. The pendants remained together until they were dispersed at the sale of the marquis de Ménars and Marigny's collection in 1782.

- [3] Alexandre Ananoff, *L'oeuvre dessiné de François Boucher 1732–1806* (Paris, 1966), no. 261, fig. 48, publishes a drawing by Boucher formerly in the collection of Princess Mathilde, showing a similar subject, but indoors.
- [4] The painting survives only in mutilated condition. The main sections are in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, and the section corresponding to *The Love Letter* is in a private collection; see Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2: nos. 321, 324. For a full discussion of these paintings, see Jean-Luc Bordeaux, “The Epitome of the Pastoral Genre in Boucher’s Oeuvre: *The Fountain of Love* and *The Bird Catcher* from *The Noble Pastoral*,” in *J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 3 (1976): 87, repro.
- [5] See Maurice Block, *François Boucher and the Beauvais Tapestries* (Boston and New York, 1933), fig. 8.
- [6] “Tiré du Cabinet de Madame la Marquise de Pompadour”; see Pierrette Jean-Richard, *L'oeuvre gravée de François Boucher dans la collection Edmond de Rothschild* (Paris, 1978), 346, nos. 1435–1437, repro. The engraving after the Metropolitan picture, by Nicolas Dauphin de Beauvais, also noted that it was “Tiré du Cabinet de Madame la Marquise de Pompadour” (Pierrette Jean-Richard, *L'oeuvre gravée de François Boucher dans la collection Edmond de Rothschild* [Paris, 1978], 279–280, nos. 281–284, repro.; *Madame de Pompadour et les arts* [Paris, 2002], 244–245, nos. 95–96). *The Love Letter* was also reproduced in an etching by Anne Charbonnier (Pierrette Jean-Richard, *L'oeuvre gravée de François Boucher dans la collection Edmond de Rothschild* [Paris, 1978], no. 463, repro.).
- [7] No. 181 in the Salon *livret*: “Deux pastorales dessus de Porte, du Château de Belle-Vûe, sous le même no” (Two pastorals, overdoors from the Château de Bellevue, under the same number).
- [8] “Le petit cabinet qui suit la chambre à coucher de Sa Majesté, est entièrement boisé. Les moulures de ses lambris sont relevées par des guirlandes de fleurs peintes au naturel; et dans les milieux des panneaux, des cartouches font voir divers exercices de l’âge tendre. Sur les portes il y a deux pastorales, de M. Boucher.” Antoine-Nicolas Dézallier d’Argenville, *Voyages pittoresque des environs de Paris ou description des maisons royales* (Paris, 1755), 29.
- [9] For example, Père Laugier’s review of the Salon describes the National Gallery painting in this way: “Dans l’autre, une Bergère reçoit de sa Campagne un Cigne qui porte une lettre liée à un ruban; elle le reçoit d’un air inquiet & rêveur” (In the other, a shepherdess in the countryside receives a swan that carries a letter tied by a ribbon; she receives it with a worried and dreamy expression). Quoted in Anonymous [probably Père Marc Antoine Laugier], *Jugement d’un amateur sur l’exposition des tableaux, Lettre à M. le Marquis de V**** (Paris, 1753), in *Catalogue de la collection de*

pieces sur les Beaux-Arts (Paris, 1881), 59:29–30.

- [10] Fiske Kimball, *The Creation of the Rococo* (Philadelphia, 1943), 195; Paul Biver, *Histoire du Château de Meudon* (Paris, 1923), 57, who notes that the room, just off the king's bedroom, was known as the *chambre doré*.
- [11] See Technical Notes; *The Interrupted Sleep* is still framed as an oval.
- [12] See Christopher Tadgell, *Ange-Jacques Gabriel* (London, 1978), 155–157. The fact that they were no longer in situ at Bellevue is confirmed by later editions of d'Argenville's *Voyage pittoresque* and by the inscription on Ouvrier's engraving of 1761 ("Tiré du Cabinet de Madame la Marquise de Pompadour"; see Pierrette Jean-Richard, *L'oeuvre gravée de François Boucher dans la collection Edmond de Rothschild* [Paris, 1978]), which implies that by that date they had already been made into easel pictures.
- [13] "Dans le vestibule au rez-de-chaussée:...1231.-No. 79....Deux autres tableaux du même maître, peints en mil sept cent cinquante, représentant des *pastorales*; prisés neuf cens livres" (In the vestibule on the ground floor:...1231.-No. 79....Two other pictures by the same master, painted in 1750, representing pastorals; value 900 pounds [livres]). Jean Cordey, *Inventaire des biens de Madame de Pompadour rédigé après son décès* (Paris, 1939), 90.
- [14] "Deux jeunes filles assises sur un gazon, attachant une lettre au col d'une colombe. Elles sont entourées de plusieurs moutons et d'un chien, sur un fond de paysage agréable et pittoresque." The entry goes on to note the engraving by Ouvrier and the dimensions of the picture (2 1/2 ft. high by 27 in. wide in eighteenth-century measurements); see 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), 336, no. 17; the Metropolitan Museum of Art's picture is fully described under no. 13.
- [15] See Danielle Gallet-Guerne, *Madame de Pompadour ou le pouvoir féminin* (Paris, 1985), 132–136; *Madame de Pompadour et les arts* (Paris, 2002), 99–116. Boucher, of course, was not the only painter to decorate Bellevue. Among the significant works by other artists were two landscapes by Claude-Joseph Vernet (French, 1714 - 1789), acquired by Pompadour's brother, the marquis de Marigny, during his trip to Italy in 1749–1751, and important decorations by Carle Van Loo (French, 1705 - 1765), including a set of four overdoors representing *Allegories of the Arts* (1752–1753, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco), painted for the Salon de Compagnie (see Pierre Rosenberg and Marion C. Stewart, *French Paintings 1500–1825: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco* [San Francisco, 1987], 292–306); and a suite of exotic subjects painted for the *chambre à la turque* (for an assessment of this room's political significance, see Perrin Stein, "Madame de Pompadour and the Harem Imagery at Bellevue," *Gazette des Beaux-*

Arts ser. 6, 123 [Jan. 1994]: 29–44).

- [16] For the Metropolitan picture, see Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2: no. 376; Alastair Laing, *François Boucher (1703–1770)* (New York, 1986), no. 60.
- [17] Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2: no. 340; Alastair Laing, *François Boucher (1703–1770)* (New York, 1986), no. 57.
- [18] Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), nos. 422–423. While the tapestries were intended for Bellevue, evidence suggests that the paintings were also displayed in the château; see John Ingamells, *The Wallace Collection: Catalogue of Pictures* (London, 1989), 3:68–78.
- [19] See Paul Biver, *Histoire du Château de Meudon* (Paris, 1923); Danielle Gallet-Guerne, *Madame de Pompadour ou le pouvoir féminin* (Paris, 1985), 132–138. On Pompadour's role in the construction and decoration of the château, see Donald Posner, "Madame de Pompadour as a Patron of the Visual Arts," *Art Bulletin* 72, no. 1 (March 1990): 81–84; *Madame de Pompadour et les arts* (Paris, 2002), 99–109.
- [20] "C'est un endroit délicieux pour la vue, la maison, quoique pas bien grande, est commode et charmante, sans nulle espèce de magnificence." Quoted in Christopher Tadgell, *Ange-Jacques Gabriel* (London, 1978), 157.
- [21] On this point, see Katherine K. Gordon, "Madame de Pompadour, Pigalle, and the Iconography of Friendship," *Art Bulletin* 50, no. 3 (Sept. 1968): 249–262; and Donald Posner, "Madame de Pompadour as a Patron of the Visual Arts," *Art Bulletin* 72, no. 1 (March 1990): 77; Pigalle's marble *Amitié* (Paris, Musée du Louvre), part of Pompadour's iconographic campaign celebrating her new friendship with the king, originally graced the "Bosquet de l'amour" at Bellevue. Katherine K. Gordon, "Madame de Pompadour, Pigalle, and the Iconography of Friendship," *Art Bulletin* 50, no. 3 (Sept. 1968): 257, fig. 14.
- [22] D. G. Charlton, *New Images of the Natural in France: A Study in European Cultural History 1750–1800* (Cambridge, 1984), 20.
- [23] "Les Eglogues de M. de Fontenelle ont enrichi nos Pastorales d'une nouvelle espèce de Bergers, remarquables par la galanterie et les délicatesse de leurs sentiments. Ceux que M. Boucher a introduit dans la Peinture, joignant à tout le mérite des premiers cette simplicité et cette naïveté si précieuse que n'ont pas toujours ceux de M. de Fontenelle." Jean Bernard abbé Leblanc, *Observations sur les ouvrages de MM. de l'Académie de peinture et de sculpture, exposés au Salon du Louvre en l'année 1753....* (Paris, 1753), 17–18. On Boucher and the painted pastoral, see

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Alastair Laing, “Boucher et la pastorale peinte,” *Revue de l’Art* 73 (1986): 55–64.

- [24] For example, the *Four Seasons* (New York, Frick Collection), painted in 1755 for Madame de Pompadour. Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2: nos. 454–457.
- [25] Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt, *L’art du dix-huitième siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1880–1884), 1:147; translation by Robin Ironside in *French XVIII Century Painters* (New York, 1948), 67.
- [26] Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2: nos. 593–596.
- [27] For a survey of the critical response to Boucher’s later work, see Brunel, “Boucher, neveu de Rameau,” in *Diderot et l’art de Boucher à David: les Salons, 1759–1781* (Paris, 1984), 101–109.
- [28] For example, the subject of *The Interrupted Sleep* probably was inspired by a similar treatment by Lancret, known as *La Taquine* (The Teaser), in which the woman teases the man; see Georges Wildenstein, *Lancret* (Paris, 1924), nos. 135–136.
- [29] “M. Boucher a continué de ravir par les graces et les agrémens de sa composition...dans les dessus de portes faits pour Bellevûe.” Comte de Caylus, “Expositions des ouvrages de l’Académie Royale....” *Mercure de France* (Oct. 1753): 3.
- [30] “Ces deux morceaux caracterisent toujours mieux la vive et riante imagination de l’Auteur, qui met par-tout de l’esprit et des graces. Il s’est fait un genre qui lui est propre; et on est obligé de convenir qu’il y a réussi éminemment.” Anonymous [probably Père Marc Antoine Laugier], *Jugement d’un amateur sur l’exposition des tableaux, Lettre à M. le Marquis de V**** (Paris, 1753), in *Catalogue de la collection de pieces sur les Beaux-Arts* (Paris, 1881), 59:29–30.
- [31] For the tapestry, see Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2:18, fig. 928; the dog appears on a snuffbox in the Wrightsman Collection, New York (F.J.B. Watson and Carl Dauterman, *The Wrightsman Collection*, 5 vols. [New York, 1966–1973], 140–143); one of the Baudouins is in the Musée du Louvre, Paris (Schlichting Collection); another, on ivory, is in the Jones Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (see Oliver Brackett, *Catalogue of the Jones Collection*, 3 vols. [London, 1922–1924], 2:68, no. 588, repro., who lists other copies).
- [32] Paired with a picture called *The Shepherdess*; both paintings are oil on canvas, 125.5 × 89 cm (49 1/2 × 35 in.); J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, A71.P23/24; for numerous copies, see Alexandre Ananoff with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher* (Lausanne and Paris, 1976), 2:66–67.

[33] On the question of “narrative” in Fragonard’s cycle, see Donald Posner, “The True Path of Fragonard’s Progress of Love,” *Burlington Magazine* 114, no. 833 (Aug. 1972): 526–534; Mary D. Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago, 1990), 93–94.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric. The painting has been lined, and the tacking margins have been removed. Although the painting was intended to be viewed as a shaped composition, the original stretcher was not oval. The fabric was stretched as a rectangle from its inception. It is interesting to note that the pendant *The Interrupted Sleep*, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is painted on a similar fabric, and the shapes of the two compositions mimic each other precisely. At some point the corners were painted to extend the composition and turn it into a rectangular format. The ground layer is smooth, thick, and white. The relative density of materials in the X-radiographs suggests that the corners of the painting were prepared with a thinner layer or perhaps no ground at all, presumably because these areas were not intended to be painted. Air-path X-ray fluorescence showed some differences in the range of pigments used to paint the corners compared to those used to paint the main section, further indicating that the paint on the corners is a later addition. [1] The paint was applied in opaque layers with some thin, transparent glazes. There is application of wet-over-dry as well as wet-into-wet paint. Only in areas of more thickly applied white paint is there evidence of low impasto. Unlike *The Interrupted Sleep*, there are few pentimenti. *The Love Letter* also differs in technique from its pendant in that reserves were left for the figures, and the artist gave far more attention to details.

The painting is in good condition. There are a few scattered losses and some traction crackle. It was treated most recently in 1990 when it was removed from a plywood backing board, which had an impressed stamp on the back that read, “Tachet Brevete A Paris.” The painting was probably adhered to this panel in the early 1860s, because a newspaper clipping that referred to “le president Lincoln” was found between the laminates of the plywood. The painting was certainly attached to the plywood before 1872, when it was so described in the Péreire sale (Paris, March 6–9, 1872, no. 57). Also during the 1990 treatment, a discolored varnish was removed, and the painting was relined. Though the losses and traction crackle were inpainted, the spandrels were left with the old restoration untouched.

The varnish and inpainting applied at that time have not discolored.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The X-ray fluorescence analysis was conducted by the NGA scientific research department, July 12, 1990.

PROVENANCE

Painted for Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, marquise de Pompadour [1721-1764], and installed in the *chambre doré* on the first [i.e., second] floor of 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; (his estate sale, at his residence by Basan and Joullain, Paris, 18 March-6 April 1782 [postponed from late February], no. 17). (sale, Hôtel des Commissaires-Priseurs, Paris, 14-15 March 1842, no. 15). (anonymous sale ["Provenant du Cabinet de M. X***], Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 26 April 1861, no. 2). Emile [1800-1875] and Isaac [1806-1880] Pereire, Paris; (Péire sale, at their residence by Pillet and Petit, Paris, 6-9 March 1872, no. 57, as *Le Mouton chéri* or *Le messenger*); purchased by Sommier, possibly for Frédéric-Alexis-Louis Pillet-Will, comte Pillet [1837-1911], Paris.[1] (Wildenstein & Co., Inc., Paris, New York, and London); sold to William R. Timken [1866-1949], New York, by 1932;[2] by inheritance to his widow, Lillian Guyer Timken [1881-1959], New York; bequest 1960 to NGA.

[1] Alexandre Ananoff, with Daniel Wildenstein, *François Boucher*, 2 vols., Lausanne and Paris, 1976: 2:66, no. 364, list the painting as being in the collection of comte Pillet Will "c. 1906" (his name is more correctly comte Pillet, although the surname was Pillet-Will). However, the comte purchased other paintings at the Péreire sale, including Fragonard's *A Game of Horse and Rider* (NGA 1946.7.5), so it is possible he purchased this Boucher through Sommier at the same time.

[2] The Timkens lent the painting to a 1932 exhibition in London. Correspondence in the Duveen Brothers Records indicates that the Timkens were considering,

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reluctantly, selling the painting in 1937 (Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, accession number 960015, reel 235, box 380, folder 4; copies in NGA curatorial files).

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1753 Salon, Paris, 1753, under no. 181.

1932 Exhibition of French Art 1200-1900, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1932, no. 228.

1935 French Painting and Sculpture of the XVIII Century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1935-1936, unnumbered catalogue, pl. 29.

1940 Masterpieces of Art. European & American Paintings 1500-1900, New York World's Fair, 1940, no. 192.

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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- 1880 Mantz, Paul. *François Boucher, Lemoyne et Natoire*. Paris, 1880: 130 (possibly)
- 1906 Michel, André. *François Boucher*. Paris, 1906: no. 1438.
- 1907 Nolhac, Pierre de. *François Boucher: premier peintre du roi*. Paris, 1907: 157
- 1932 Wildenstein, Georges. "L'Exposition de l'art français a Londres: Le XVIIIe siècle." *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. 6th ser., vol. 7 (1932): repro. p. 63
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- 1976 Ananoff, Alexandre, with Daniel Wildenstein. *François Boucher*. 2 vols. Lausanne and Paris, 1976: 2:66, no. 364, repro.
- 1976 Bordeaux, Jean-Luc. "The Epitome of the Pastoral Genre in Boucher's Oeuvre: *The Fountain of Love* and *The Bird Catcher* from *The Noble Pastoral*." *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 3 (1976): 87, repro.
- 1978 Jean-Richard, Pierrette. *L'Oeuvre grave de François Boucher, dans la Collection Edmond de Rothschild*. Paris, 1978: 346.
- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 334, no. 444, color repro.
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- 1986 Brunel, Georges. *Boucher*. New York, 1986: 177, 247, 273, figs. 143, 227.
- 1992 *From El Greco to Cezanne*, Pincothèque Nationale Musée Alexandros Soutzos, Athens, 1992, under no. 27
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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. 2, 12-18, color repro.
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