

# FRANÇOIS BOUCHER

1703–1770

François Boucher was a member of an extraordinarily talented generation of artists born around 1700 who would dominate French painting for much of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Heir to the grand manner of seventeenth-century art, Boucher nevertheless created a style and repertory of subject matter that was perfectly compatible with the intimate scale and refined taste of the court of Louis xv (r. 1715–1774) and his *maitresse en titre*, the marquise de Pompadour (1721–1764). Lavishly patronized and showered with academic honors throughout his career, Boucher came under harsh criticism later in his life, when his ebullient rococo style was attacked as decorative and his gallant iconography condemned as trivial.

A native of Paris, Boucher learned the rudiments of painting from his father, Nicolas (1672–1743), a member of the Académie de Saint-Luc. In the early 1720s he studied for a short time with François Lemoyne (1704–1778), one of the leading historical painters of the day, who would later be appointed First Painter to the King. According to Boucher, this experience did not have a great effect on his art,<sup>2</sup> even if several early paintings bear the influence of Lemoyne (for example, *The Surprise*, c. 1723–1725, New Orleans Museum of Art).

Boucher won the Grand Prix in 1723, but there was no room for him at the French Academy in Rome, so his trip to Italy was delayed several years. He spent the intervening period painting (he exhibited several works at the annual Exposition de la Jeunesse in the Place Dauphine in 1725) and printmaking, which he learned while living in the household of the engraver Jean François Cars (1661–1730). This experience led him to the print publisher Jean de Jullienne (1686–1766), for whom he produced numerous etchings for the *Recueil Jullienne*, a multivolume compendium of prints after compositions by Jean Antoine Watteau (1684–1721, cats. 98, 99). As a result, Boucher gained what amounted to a second education as he immersed himself in the visual language and imagery of the great master of the *fête galante*. He finally traveled to Italy in 1728 at his own expense, although next to nothing is known about his activities there or whether the trip had any effect on his art. He was back in Paris by 1731. That same year he was admitted as a history painter into the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, gaining full membership three years later with *Rinaldo and Armida* (Paris, Musée du Louvre), a painting that still demonstrates the influence of Lemoyne.

From these auspicious beginnings followed an exceptionally successful career, as Boucher won a succession of important commissions from the French Crown and aristocracy. For Louis xv he produced many painted decorations for royal châteaux at Versailles, Bellevue, Choisy, and Fontainebleau while also participating in the decoration of aristocratic residences in Paris, such as the Hôtel de Soubise. Among his most innovative works were two pictures of exotic hunts, *La Chasse au Tigre* and *La Chasse au Crocodile*, painted for the king's private apartments at Versailles and now in the Musée de Picardie, Amiens. His prodigious oeuvre and the many engravings made after his works soon earned him an international reputation.<sup>3</sup> With Charles

Joseph Natoire (1700–1777) and Carle Van Loo (1705–1765) he was one of the principal exponents of the rococo, the ornate, colorful style of art associated with the reign of Louis xv. A tireless draftsman, Boucher made lyrical and often brilliant drawings that were widely collected, then as now, and disseminated through prints by such artists as Gilles Demarteau (1722–1776), who perfected a “crayon-manner” engraving technique that reproduced the soft textures of colored chalk.

Boucher is perhaps best known for his many mythological paintings, such as *Diana at the Bath* of 1742 (Paris, Musée du Louvre), and pastoral subjects, such as *Pensent-ils au Raisin* of 1749 (London, Wallace Collection). Generally idealized and lighthearted depictions of rustic life, these pastorals sometimes drew their imagery from the theater, such as the comic operas of Charles Simon Favart (1710–1792) and Jean Monnet (1703–1785), for whom Boucher designed stage sets in the 1740s and 1750s. A diverse artist, Boucher also produced religious paintings, some of them innovative, such as his devotional picture *La Lumière du monde* of 1750 (Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts), painted for Madame de Pompadour's private chapel at Bellevue; genre scenes (his *Le Déjeuner* of 1739 in the Musée du Louvre is one of his highest achievements in the category of the *tableau de mode*); landscapes; and portraits. This latter category, encountered infrequently in his oeuvre, nevertheless includes one of his greatest masterpieces, the monumental *Portrait of Madame de Pompadour* of 1756 (Munich, Alte Pinakothek).<sup>4</sup>

In addition to his many painted decorations and cabinet pictures, Boucher contributed designs for the Beauvais and Gobelins tapestry works, the Sèvres porcelain factory, and stage sets and costumes for the theater. He also produced numerous *chinoiseries*, fanciful and exotic images of the Far East (such as the oil sketches, now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Besançon, used as tapestry designs).<sup>5</sup> He was the favorite artist of Madame de Pompadour, for whom he painted some of his most impressive works, including *The Rising of the Sun* and *The Setting of the Sun* of 1753 (London, Wallace Collection), large canvases that were made as tapestry cartoons for Beauvais. Boucher's flourishing studio was the training ground for many young artists, the greatest of whom, Jean Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806, cats. 29–41), would surpass his master in invention and ingenuity if not in public renown. During the 1750s and 1760s Boucher's increasingly saccharine style and repetitive compositions came under attack from anti-rococo critics like Etienne La Font de Saint-Yenne (1688–1771) and Denis Diderot (1713–1784), who saw Boucher's lighthearted subject matter and fluid, coloristic style as frivolous and morally corrupt. Yet Boucher, in defiance of an increasing demand from theorists, critics, and public agitators, continued to exhibit his cheerful and sugary visions of pastoral bliss and mythological trysts at the biennial Salons. Indeed, his social connections and efficient careerism resulted in his appointment in 1765 as First Painter to the King and his election as director of the Académie royale. This final triumph was short lived, however, as Boucher died in Paris in 1770.

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### Notes

1. For a list of these artists, see Rosenberg, in New York, Detroit, and Paris 1986–1987, 51.
2. Mariette [1851–1860]1966, 1:165.
3. For a review of Boucher’s foreign clients, see Marandel, in New York, Detroit, and Paris 1986–1987, 73–88.
4. For a good analysis of this painting, see Laing, in New York, Detroit, and Paris 1986–1987, 267–271, no. 64.
5. Ananoff and Wildenstein 1976, 1: nos. 225–228; New York, Detroit, and Paris 1986–1987, nos. 41–44; Stein 1996b.

### Bibliography

- Goncourt 1880–1884.  
Ananoff 1976a.  
Ananoff 1980.  
Brunel 1986.  
New York, Detroit, and Paris 1986–1987.

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## *The Love Letter*

1750

oil on canvas, 81.2 × 75.2 (31<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 29<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>)

Timken Collection

### *Inscriptions*

Upper right on lintel beneath lion: f. Boucher / 1750

### *Distinguishing Marks and Labels*

Formerly on reverse of plywood backing: two rectangular labels, “EXHIBITION OF FRENCH ART / ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS / LONDON JAN TO FEB 1932 / JACQUES CHENUE, / Packer of Works of Art. / 10, GREAT ST ANDREW STREET, / LONDON, W.C.1”; in blue chalk, “90”; torn paper label, “...674...”; torn oval label, “Chenué / Emballeur...”; stamped into the wood, “Tachet Brevete A Paris”; rectangular label, “#68 / Date / Artist Boucher / Subject Les Deux Confidentes [*sic*] / Owner’s name W. R. Timken / Address \_\_\_\_\_”; two NGA labels

*Technical Notes:* 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 (fig. 1), 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.<sup>1</sup> 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”