

Francois Boucher

At the age of 17 the young Boucher was apprenticed by his father, a designer of embroidery patterns, to François Lemoyne. However, after only 3 months, he went to work for the engraver Jean-François Cars. Within 3 years he had already won the Grand Prix de Rome, although he did not take up the ensuing opportunity to study in Italy until 4 years later. On his return in 1731, he was admitted to the Academy as a historical painter, becoming a member in 1734, then ever onwards and upwards in his brilliant career: from professor to Rector of the Academy, becoming head of the Royal Gobelins factory in 1755 and finally "Premier Peintre du Roi" (First Painter of the King) in 1765.

Drawing on the influence of Watteau and Rubens, Boucher's early work celebrates the pastoral and idyllic, depicting nature and landscape with great finesse. However, the eroticism of his shepherds and shepherdesses show very little of the traditional rural innocence, and his mythological scenes are amorous and sensual rather than traditionally heroic.

Boucher was the favourite painter of the Marquise de Pompadour (1721-1764), mistress of King Louis XV, whose name became synonymous with Rococo art, and it is in his portraits, particularly of her, that this style is clearly exemplified. Paintings such as "The Breakfast" of 1739 also show Boucher as a master of the genre scene in which he regularly used his own wife and family as models. However, such intimate family scenes are in contrast to the libertine style as seen in his "Odalisque" portraits, the dark-haired version of which prompted Diderot to claim that Boucher was "prostituting his own wife", and the "Blonde Odalisque" in which the extra-marital relationships of the King were evoked. Such private commissions for wealthy collectors gained Boucher his lasting notoriety and, after the censure of Diderot with his new morality, his final creative years his reputation came under increasing critical attack.

Boucher was not only a painter, he also designed theatre costumes and sets, and the amorous intrigues of the comic operas of Favart (1710-92) involving shepherds and shepherdesses, closely parallel his own style of painting. Tapestry design was also a major activity, together with his design activities for the opera and the royal palaces of Versailles, Fontainebleau and Choisy, all of which augmented his earlier reputation, resulting in many engravings from his work and even reproduction of his themes onto porcelain and biscuit-ware at the Vincennes and Sèvres factories.

As with that of his patron, Madame de Pompadour, Boucher's name became synonymous with the French Rococo style, leading the Goncourt brothers to write (with some exaggeration): "Boucher is one of those men who represent the taste of a century, who express, personify and embody it".

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