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**Melissa Hyde**, *Making Up the Rococo. François Boucher and His Critics*. Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2006. 272 pp., 7 x 10 inches, 18 color and 53 b/w illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$ 49.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-89236-743-1.

Review by Elena Russo, Johns Hopkins University.

The French rococo in painting and decoration has most often been defined by his critics and detractors. An oppositional, ironic mode, it never saw itself as a coherent movement and never formulated a program: the name itself emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century from the circle of David, whose neo-classical aesthetics had contributed to bury it. If this fate may seem unfair, consider that of François Boucher (1703-70), the most successful rococo painter of his time, whose lifelong achievement was followed by a prolonged posthumous discredit. Represented as commercial, libertine and facile, his works were intended for an audience that was seen as decadent and effeminate fodder for the guillotine. Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, who never shied from paradox, waxed enthusiastic about Boucher's embodying the spirit of the eighteenth century, but they also pronounced that he had "a manner but no style" and that he was characterized by an "elegant vulgarity."<sup>[1]</sup>

In this engaging and stimulating book, Melissa Hyde examines on the one hand the art of Boucher against the background of the culture wars that propelled the neo-classical taste and the ideals of the Enlightenment into prominence and attempted to relegate the rococo to the realm of insignificance; on the other hand the reception of his work and the conceptions of genre and gender that informed it. She considers critically the claims of the anti-rococo detractors, such as Denis Diderot, Friedrich Melchior Grimm, La Font de Saint-Yenne, Charles-Nicholas Cochin, Louis-Petit de Bachaumont among others, and argues that their position was by no means coherent and univocal: critics of rococo aesthetics and cultural mode of being, such as Cochin, Bachaumont and even Diderot himself, admired and acquired Boucher's artworks; when Rousseau, the great detractor of aristocratic aesthetics was looking for an illustrator for *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, he thought first of Boucher. And even during the heyday of neo-classicism in the 1780s, rococo art was still very much in demand among art lovers and collectors.

Indeed, one of the merits of the book is to demonstrate how difficult it is to frame the debates on taste that raged in the eighteenth century along clearly-drawn ideological lines. As Thomas Crow has also argued, the alignments between politics and style were not at all coherent.<sup>[2]</sup> Moreover, Hyde rightly points out that the cultural politics that dominated the Enlightenment were by no means progressive: this is particularly true, she argues, in the realm of gender. Indeed, one may add, the aesthetic ideals of the *philosophes* were quite conservative; when it came to discussing taste and style, the *philosophes* believed in a much more rigid and hierarchic separation of genres and styles than rococo aesthetics had allowed; they were also convinced that the standard of taste was too important a matter to be left to the initiative of the public and the marketplace: it was better to monopolize aesthetic judgment among a few, enlightened minds and then pass it from the top down. By and large, the *philosophes* looked down on all forms of art that they saw as commercial, popular and merely entertaining, such as the theatrical productions of the fairgrounds and the Opéra-Comique, which, as Hyde demonstrates in chapter four, was a major source of inspiration for Boucher's pastorals (Boucher was influenced by the playwright Charles-Simon Favart, and he decorated the new theater of Jean-Louis Monnet at the *foire* Saint-Laurent in 1752).

Hyde argues that "the rococo represented an ongoing threat to a variety of hierarchies and classical

values: austerity, heroic grandeur, legibility,” as well to as the binary opposition between male and female (p. 19). Indeed, rather than focusing on discursive, pedagogical meaning, the rococo focused on the formal, plastic qualities of painting; as Diderot himself had acknowledged, Boucher was a painter’s painter. Hyde’s main point is that the rococo’s ironic and self-referential play with forms was seen as feminine: hence she demonstrates the relevance to Boucher of the motif of painting as makeup associated with feminine adornment, a theme that was once developed by Roger de Piles.<sup>[3]</sup> While Hyde contests the claim (made by most anti-rococo critics) that Boucher’s audience was predominantly feminine, or that any woman played a significant role in his career and in French art in general (p. 47), she also explores at length the close relationship of patronage and collaboration between Mme de Pompadour and Boucher; chapter three, “The Makeup of the Marquise” offers an original take on Boucher’s portrayal which focuses on Pompadour’s self-representation and mirroring [<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/b/boucher/2/index.html>].

In chapter five, Hyde shows the extent to which Boucher defied academic rules of propriety for the representation of the male and female bodies; the shepherds and shepherdesses in his pastorals are depicted in ways that “tend to complicate and even resist the imperatives of the male/female dichotomy” (p. 183). She argues that Boucher’s disregard for gender dimorphism not only reflected the elite’s taste for theatrical transvestitism (particularly at the Opéra Comique, which she explores in chapter four) but it also mirrored aristocratic society’s aesthetic ideal of gender ambiguity.

However, one cannot help but feel that the eighteenth century’s celebrated gender volatility has perhaps been somewhat overstated. Hyde takes the figures of the famous cross-dressers abbé de Choisy and the Chevalier d’Eon as cases illustrating a general tendency towards gender undifferentiation of which Boucher is the ultimate embodiment. But d’Eon’s experience with female drag was much more wretched than it is usually told. Based on what we can gather from his portraits and from contemporary descriptions of his behavior, the transvestite d’Eon must have appeared no more seductively androgynous than Dame Edna, or Walter Matthau when wearing a boa-trimmed bathrobe in *House Calls*. That a war hero, a diplomat and a spy could find it expedient to pass for a woman, only to bitterly revolt against his impersonation once the king officially declared him to *be* a woman, surely points to the existence of conflicts and oddities that cannot be entirely subsumed under the tale of a mutable, gender-fluid, pre-revolutionary society.<sup>[4]</sup> As a matter of fact, the implications of the extreme youthfulness of Boucher’s pastoral figures (especially that of boys) deserves to get at least as much attention as his gender ambiguity; one is struck by the presence of sexual symbols in the depiction of prepubescent boys and girls who, in the very midst of erotically-charged situations, still manage to appear more innocent and genteel than sensual; this strangely de-eroticized sensuality, together with its disregard for narrative and pathos, was one of the sources of Diderot’s incomprehension of Boucher’s pastoral and mythological scenes.

Hyde’s point about Boucher’s blurring of gender dichotomies is most convincing when she turns to a close reading of Boucher’s works. Chapter six, which is dedicated to the analysis of the *Jupiter and Callisto* paintings (there is a dozen of them painted between 1744 and 1769) is the most successful. In lust with Diana’s nymph Callisto, Jupiter borrows the guise of Diana in order to ravish her. Boucher’s portrayal of Jupiter’s transformation bypasses most of the marks that in other painters signal to the viewer that Jupiter may well appear like a woman, but that he is not truly one. Boucher, on his part, “offers an image of bi-gendered simultaneity that complicates the expected oppositions of sex” (p. 207). Contrary to Ovid’s text, where Jupiter is always designated by the pronoun *he*, and Callisto alone is duped by his disguise, here the viewer is as duped and seduced as Callisto herself (indeed, one may think of Honoré d’Urfé’s treatment of Céladon’s female disguise in the novel *L’Astrée*, an important source of Boucher’s aesthetics, in which syntax conspires to turn transvestitism into a metamorphosis as convincing to the reader as it is to the characters). Moreover, the motif of rape, obvious in Ovid and in Rubens’s own version of the myth (*Jupiter and Callisto*, 1613, fig. 48, p. 210) [<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/r/rubens/21mythol/13mythol.html>], is entirely lost in

Boucher.

Thus, departing from customary readings of Boucher which emphasize the consumability of female erotic figures for the exclusive profit of the male viewer, Hyde offers a more rewarding and perceptive reading in which the viewer--male or female--may identify with the seducing Jupiter both as viewing subject and as "objectified spectacle of desirable femininity" (p. 211). More important, the interlocking and reciprocal (some would say absorbed) gaze of both protagonists allows the viewer to be drawn into a scene which eschews all "dynamic of sexual aggression and subjugation;" he or she may participate to it without being confined to any role predetermined by the viewer's gender and sexual preference. Hyde points out that Boucher systematically thwarts our expectations and blurs the legibility of gender identity by situating the masculine symbols that make Jupiter's identity recognizable (the eagle, the bow and arrows) on the wrong side of the picture (that is, on Callisto's side), or by hiding them. This is a telling example of Boucher's liberties with symbols and of his preference for playful equivocation over easy legibility (another aspect of Boucher that infuriated the pedagogically inclined Diderot). In that sense, the reader may conclude that Boucher's Jupiter and Callisto paintings do not so much *reflect* a preexisting blurring of gender in elite society as they contribute to *producing* one in the seduced viewer. This is a fluently written and vivaciously argued book that grounds its interpretation of Boucher in cultural history and which brings into its readings an understanding of the literary sources that inspired the artworks.

#### NOTES

[1] *L'Art du XVIIIe siècle, 1859-1875* (<http://freresgoncourt.free.fr/>).

[2] *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

[3] See Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color, Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1993).

[4] See Gary Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman. A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

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