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Melissa Hyde and Mark Ledbury, Eds., *Rethinking Boucher*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2006. xi + 289 pp. Figures, plates, notes, bibliography and index. \$55.00 US (pb). ISBN 0-89236-825-X.

Review by Dorothy Johnson, University of Iowa.

In this collection of essays, contributing editors Melissa Hyde and Mark Ledbury seek to change prevailing views concerning François Boucher (1703-1770) by proffering a plethora of perspectives from prominent scholars in the field that present the artist in the context of a broad artistic, aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual milieu. The book succeeds in its objectives. After reading the essays one can no longer view Boucher as an artist who essentially exemplifies the more ludic and sensual aspects of the rococo aesthetic, a court painter who catered to aristocratic indulgences and tastes. The essays present a more subtle and complex analysis of Boucher by examining his extensive involvement in theater, his literary culture, and the complexity of his iconography expressed in diverse categories including religious and mythological paintings, portraiture, historiated landscapes, and genre imagery.

In many of the essays, Diderot looms large as having the most perdurable impact on perceptions of Boucher during his own lifetime, a negative legacy that was perpetuated by historians and critics up through the twenty-first century. As Melissa Hyde and Martin Schieder emphasize in their essays, the Goncourt brothers also contributed to the historiographical legacy with their own nineteenth-century fashioning of Boucher as an artist exemplifying rococo decadence.

One of the earliest and most eloquent of art critics, Diderot viewed Boucher as a decadent artist in terms of choice of subjects as well as style. He believed that the overt sensuality of his paintings evinced moral depravity, and denigrated them for failure to imitate the truth of nature. Several authors in this volume question Diderot's motives and also point out passages in the Salons and in correspondence where Diderot views Boucher in a more positive light. Diderot's contradictory assertions concerning Boucher and his art are explored more extensively in René Démoris' essay on "Boucher, Diderot, and Rousseau." [1] Démoris points out that the reception of Boucher's work was mixed during his own lifetime. While Diderot generally denigrated the artist, particularly in the "Salon of 1765", others praised him for the beauty, grace and imagination found in his works. And the great self-styled moralist, Rousseau, chose Boucher to illustrate *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse*. Boucher also worked on the decor for the 1765 revival of Rousseau's pastoral opera, *Le devin du village*. Démoris emphasizes the differences between Rousseau's and Diderot's aesthetic positions: unlike Diderot, who asserted the imitation of and truth to nature as a principal objective of art, Rousseau was more interested in the truth of effects produced on the spirit of the beholder or reader.

Diderot also figures prominently in Martin Schieder's discussion of Boucher's religious imagery in "Between *Grâce* and *Volupté*: Boucher and Religious Painting." Diderot, like Marmontel and other critics of the day, criticized the artist's depictions of the Virgin for being far too sensual. Boucher began his career as a religious painter, a trajectory he later eschewed by turning to secular subjects in the 1730s. Schieder posits that this was due in part to Boucher's own development and interests, and not the result of negative reaction to the sensuality of his Madonnas. He does concede, however, that the church may have lost interest in offering him commissions owing to the eroticism of his early works, including his religious subjects. Schieder looks at some of the later religious paintings, done under the patronage of Madame de Pompadour, such as *The Light of the World* and *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* in which

Boucher 'humanized' sacred subjects and made them more accessible to a modern audience.

In "Painting for the Senses: Boucher and Epicurean Stoicism," Thomas Kavanagh takes up Diderot's severe criticisms of Boucher and seeks to present them in a positive light by revealing to us a different context for understanding Boucher's abundant images of love and sensuality. He explains that epicureanism and stoicism as defined by Diderot in the *Encyclopédie* formed part of the same continuum grounded in a materialist philosophy. According to this epistemology, the world is perceived through the senses, and those sensory perceptions penetrate the mind and remain in the soul. Kavanagh prefers the term he coins to use in this context—"epicurean stoicism"—to "libertinage," which is associated too closely with aristocratic licentiousness. He believes Boucher's art is more complex and should be related to the epistemology of desire. Through analyses of works such as *Landscape with Hermit*, an ostensibly licentious subject treated by Boucher in a modest or restrained manner, Kavanagh shows that the artist's paintings can be read in terms of Enlightenment ideas of desire and the psychology of perception in ways that have been hitherto overlooked.

Mark Ledbury, in "Boucher and Theater," explores the central role of theater in Boucher's oeuvre. He reminds us of the resurgence of the theater in Boucher's lifetime and explores the artist's familiarity and connections with theater as evinced in many of his works, including his illustrations of Molière and his contributions to stage design for the Académie royale de musique, the Opéra and the Opéra comique. Although these designs do not survive, Ledbury convincingly argues that we can observe traces of their picturesque effects in many of Boucher's paintings and prints.

A recurrent theme in the essays is the paucity of information that has come down to us regarding Boucher's biography. How could so little be known about such a celebrated court artist in an age which was fascinated by the cult of personality and honored the *grands hommes* of the cultural past and present? We can only imagine that Boucher did not cultivate celebrity for he succeeded in keeping his life's private history from posterity. Several of the authors seek to reconstruct aspects of the artist's life and artistic culture through a study of his works as primary documents. Boucher's choice of subjects and styles, their appeal to aristocratic clients as well as a broader public, reveal a great deal about the artistic, aesthetic and cultural proclivities of the period. In her essay, "Getting into the Picture: Boucher's Self-Portraits of Others," Melissa Hyde posits several possible self-portraits that appear in genre images, for example. She convincingly argues that although the artist never painted a conventional self-portrait (a very telling fact in itself that speaks to the artist's desire to avoid a public self-presentation in paint), he did insert himself into a number of his works. She discusses examples such as *The Landscape Painter* of 1733, who is depicted in the act of painting a Boucher landscape, and the drawing of *The Artist Inspired by Venus* of 1760.

Colin Bailey takes a very different approach in his essay on "'Details that Surreptitiously Explain': Boucher as a Genre Painter." Bailey eschews the biographical approach in favor of a close analysis of the iconographical elements in *Of Three Things, Will You Do One?*, and several rustic genre images that include the prominent use of cabbages, for example. Through this methodology, he reveals that the artist employed traditional symbolism, the emblematic tradition and the established conventions of genre painting to convey a multiplicity of meanings about contemporary culture. He also emphasizes that many of these images reveal Boucher's literary culture, facets of his life and personality stressed in the earliest biographies of the artist.

Much has been made in the art historical literature on Boucher of his rapport with his principal patron, Madame de Pompadour. The current volume de-emphasizes this relationship in favor of bringing to light lesser known facets of the artist's works and career. In her essay devoted to the patroness, "Pompadour's Dream: Boucher, Diderot and Modernity," however, Ewa Lajer-Burcharth investigates the possible influence of Pompadour on the artist's iconographical choices by analyzing two pendants that Pompadour commissioned for the King's bedroom in the Château of Bellevue, *The Setting of the Sun*

and *The Rising of the Sun*. Lajer-Burcharth interprets the paintings as Pompadour's dream of her union, fusion and separation from her former lover, Louis XV, expressed in a mythological-allegorical mode.

Essays by Katie Scott and Mary Sheriff focus on the range and importance of Boucher's reputation in the eighteenth century. In "Reproduction and Reputation: "François Boucher" and the Formation of Artistic Identities," Scott investigates the critical role of reproductive prints in establishing an artist's reputation. She compares the brief, conventional biographies written immediately after Boucher's death, which revealed little of the artist's life and work, to the vast corpus of prints which flooded the market in the eighteenth century. The large number of prints of the artist's works both illustrated the great variety and breadth of Boucher's compositions and helped to spread his reputation by making the artist widely known. Scott thus shows how the print market played an important role in commodifying the artist's identity and reputation.

In her essay on "Boucher's Enchanted Islands," Sheriff also addresses Boucher's eighteenth-century reputation, especially as the painter of erotic love. She demonstrates that in his *Voyage autour du monde, par la frégate du roi la Boudeuse et la flûte l'Etoile* of 1771, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville evoked Boucher's name and paintings to conjure a vision of the Tahitian Islands as *la nouvelle Cythère*, a place of enchantment, love and pleasure. Sheriff discusses some of the encounters described in the text between the French voyagers and the indigenous populations, their cultural misunderstandings, especially concerning sexual mores, and what this reveals about late eighteenth-century French masculine and feminine ideals. She relates Bougainville's *Voyage* to Fénelon's celebrated *Les aventures de Télémaque* which served as a source of inspiration for Bougainville, since it offered a model for a mythologized, epic journey to undiscovered countries that diverged greatly from one's native land. Ideals of masculinity and notions of success in life and love bring us back to Boucher, who expressed these ideals in so many of his compositions. Sheriff explores the theme of love and war, empire and sexual conquest, in Boucher's *Rinaldo and Armida* of 1734, an episode from *Jerusalem Delivered*, the celebrated epic by sixteenth-century Italian poet, Torquato Tasso. The tale of Rinaldo and Armida, that involves an enchanted isle and themes of cultural and territorial conquest as well as love, was popular in eighteenth-century France. Sheriff proposes that Tasso, like Fénelon, could also have served as a source for Bougainville. These literary paradigms might be expected in an account of a wondrous voyage to a new Cythera, but Boucher's visual paradigms are less expected, albeit just as influential, as Sheriff convincingly shows.

This volume of essays succeeds in its objective of guiding the reader to question assumptions and received ideas about Boucher and his art and to look anew at the great diversity, variety and breadth of his works. The authors demonstrate from their many differing perspectives that Boucher was a complex artist whose works are inflected with a literary and cultural richness that merits attention and study. Above all we need to rethink the Boucher inherited from Diderot's denigrations and come to terms with a superb artist whose work was profoundly imbued with the ideas and cultural developments of his time.

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Melissa Hyde, "Getting into the Picture: Boucher's Self-Portraits of Others"

Colin B. Bailey, "Details that Surreptitiously Explain': Boucher as a Genre Painter"

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NOTES

[1] Walter E. Rex explores the author's contradictions in his superb book, *Diderot's Counterpoints. The Dynamics of Contrariety in his Major Works* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998).

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