Jean-Baptiste, attests (fig. 1.2)—to convey the dignity of Boucher’s professional status. The portrait inscribes itself within a tradition of artistic representation that had originated in the late seventeenth century with Charles Le Brun, the first director of the Academy, who, in 1683, had himself painted by Nicolas de Largillière in sumptuous attire to signal not only his wealth and status but also the idea of distance between artistic creation and manual labor (fig. 1.3). This conceptual dissociation was at the core of the Academy’s mission, as Le Brun saw it, and thus also at the core of the academic artist’s self-image. Although clearly smaller in its scale and ambition, Lundberg’s likeness, painted as it was expressly for the Academy’s eyes, similarly suggested an artist operating at a distance from the material bases of his work. The work itself does not even appear in this image.

Boucher was indeed a prominent member and eventually even director of the Academy. He was also, like Le Brun, a court artist, gaining, if only late in life, the title of the First Painter to the King. More over, in art history, Boucher has come to epitomize a style, rococo, associated with the social elites of the Ancien Régime. His elegant pose and laced attire in Lundberg’s portrait, and the pastel brio of its delivery, evoke this association. Yet none of Boucher’s official functions could be said to have determined the character and importance of his output. Nor does rococo as a stylistic category describe the most salient aspect of his artistic enterprise. Extending from ambitious depictions of history and mythology to designs for porcelain cups and snuff boxes, Boucher’s aesthetic project is most striking in the sheer vastness of its scope and material diversity of its manifestations. By his own estimate he produced about ten thousand drawings and more than a thousand paintings, including oil sketches, without mention of his different design projects.

The exceptional productiveness of the painter has often been mentioned by his commentators, not without an occasionally depreciating comment about the ostensible facility of his brush. His inventiveness, too, was already noted by his contemporaries, one of whom declared outright that Boucher was “the most ingenious artist of our century.” Yet the notions of productivity and ingenuity do not allow us fully to grasp the significance of Boucher’s versatile art. What we need to consider are Boucher’s modes of making and operation as an individual artist that made possible the unusual abundance and
spread of his productions. Without rejecting exist-
ing institutional structures and traditional patronage, Boucher devised his own ways of artistic function-
ing, matched by his particular technical skills, which enabled him to extend his reach beyond the narrow precincts of ‘art’, onto the material world at large. It is in the expansiveness of his practice that the novelty and interest of Boucher’s approach resides, an approach that signals a new—and in a key sense modern—kind of artistic self-awareness grounded in the very materiality of the work, an approach through which Boucher was, in a sense, able to materialize himself.

Diderot once observed that Boucher’s style of execu-
tion was so much his own that it was instantly and unmistakably recognizable even in a fragment of a painting.1 This observation evoked a tradition of appreciating pictorial handicraft as the mark of the artist that went back at least to the seventeenth century, and the opposite to what, for example, he designed for abbé Le Blanc’s pamphlet pub-
lished in 1747 in response to La Font de Saint-Yenne’s criticism of the state of pictorial production in France, Boucher depicted an allegory of Painting besieged by the Graces in a good place; he painted Venuses and the Virgin after the nymphs of the coulisses, and the Virgins of Painting, while the mocking horde of harpies and trollops that surround her represent the critics as dejected, and seated by her canvas, personifies the textual hold on the art-historical understanding of Boucher’s work. It was something of a cliché during the eighteenth century has been seen as the originary language may be seen to speak of—or for—its producer, Boucher. What did it mean to say that, as Diderot asserted, his faire so evidently “belonged” to him? What relation between the artist and his work can be discerned in his so unfailingly identifiable manner? At stake in this consideration is, first of all, a better understanding of how Boucher’s painting and his work at large functioned as a material practice and how this practice could be seen, on the level I would call morphological, as Boucher’s “own.”

Such reconsideration of Boucher’s output raises a broader question of artistic identity and the means by which it was asserted and maintained in the early modern period. In one powerful model of analysis, the eighteenth century has been seen as the originary moment of artistic modernity, marking the advent of the public sphere, it shaped the formation of the public persona of the artist.2 Associated with the discourse and institutions of the Enlightenment, such as the Academy and the Salon, this view of moder-
ity has been reified by its producer, Boucher. As an example against which novel and innovative forms of theater and music, his relation to his patrons, especially Madame de Pompadour, his appro priate practice of exoticism, and his embrace of reproductive technologies.15

My discussion in this chapter seeks to expand and recast the definition of Boucher’s modernity by focus ing on the question of individuality. I am interested in the ways in which Boucher’s practice posed the problem of the individual, in a multiple sense: as a figure in his work, as the work’s addressee, and as the artist himself insofar as he can be seen to have manif ested himself—the key question being how—in his productions. It was something of a cliché during the artist’s lifetime that Boucher’s work reflected his personality. This association revolved around the idea of sensual pleasure that Boucher’s paintings were seen to produce and that tended to be identified as the painter’s own. “Born sensitive, likeable and voluptuous, he almost always saw himself drawn toward the Graces whose painter he was generally recog nized to be,” stated Antoine Brette, expressing a widely shared opinion in his obituary of the artist.4 The notion of the Graces evoked here had both aesthetic and social connotations; it referred to the female figure as a representation of a certain aesthetic ideal—that of grace—but also to specific kinds of women—actresses, dancers—associated with sensual or, more directly, sensual pleasure.5 The sensual pleasure con nection was explicit in Jean-François Marmontel’s state ment that Boucher, whom he knew from gath erings at the salon of Madame Geoffrin, “did not see the Graces in a good place; he painted Venuses and the Virgin after the nymphs of the coulisses, and both his language and his pictures bore the stamp of his models’ manners and the tone of his studio.”6 Whether dismissive or sympathetic, these commen taries were written under a reductive collapse of Boucher’s iconography onto his (presumed) biography.

What I am concerned with is the possibility of discerning a different kind of relation between the work and its maker, one that is irreducible to iconog raphy or biography. The central problem posed by Boucher’s practice has to do, in my view, with its remarkable visual or morphological consistency and its resulting recognizability, not only, as Diderot saw it, in painting, but also across different mediums. The question is how this remarkably consistent visual lan-
The appreciation of Boucher's outstanding pictorial skills was often expressed in terms of praise for his touch, which his contemporaries judged to have been invariably easy, light, elegant, and refined.23 Symptomatic of an increasing attention to the material aspects of painting, these were common enough terms for artistic excellence at the time. Lightness of touch, a quality that was expressly promoted by the renowned amateur, comte de Caylus, under the term of “la légèreté diétique,” referred to the capacity of the painter to convey effortless execution. The refined touch implied a knowing approach to technique, one that was both animated and self-aware.24 These expressions trickled down to the level of less specialized and deliberately coarse commentary exemplified by a comment about Boucher in a collection of verses on prominent artists published in 1734 by a minor poet and playwright, Ch. F. Panard. Playing on the literal meaning of Boucher’s name in French, Panard praised the painter’s skill by contrasting it with the brutal touch of a butcher. Although recognized for his exceptional manual dexterity, Boucher was not the only artist whose touch was then appreciated. Chardin, as we shall see in the next chapter, was just as renowned for his magic of execution.25 It was in fact his faire, rather than Boucher’s, that Cochin, for one, most consistently championed.26 What distinguished Boucher as an artist was, rather, a certain quality of touch that I will call tact.

The two notions, touch and tact, were not unrelated. In the eighteenth century the term “tact” was prevalently used in reference to the sense of touch, “(le sentiment du toucher),” which is the 1708 edition of Antoine Furetière’s Dictionnaire Universel succinctly defined it.27 It is precisely under “tact” that one could find the main entry on touch in Diderot and d’Alembert’s Encyclopédie, its very length reflecting the importance of this faculty in the materialist discussion of the body and the self.28 As the entry’s author, Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, specified, tact financial but also an aesthetic opportunity—and challenge—for the artists to reconceptualize their practices and to reimagine themselves. Boucher took this opportunity, and challenge, seriously. As Katie Scott has demonstrated, his creative involvement in the print trade was crucial for securing the artist’s reputation, exemplifying the key role of the market in the formation of artistic identity.29 I consider, more broadly, how the market informed the artist’s work in different mediums and how his multifarious practices, underpinned as they were by an economic self-awareness, contributed to the formation of Boucher’s artistic personality.

I am proposing that Boucher was a commercial artist in a particular, modern sense of the term, that is, someone whose entire output manifests, in different ways, an interpretative engagement with the market recognized as a defining condition of social, cultural, and artistic functioning. Boucher’s work was, in other words, a product of what I call a commercial imagination to account for the aesthetically creative mode in which the artist made sense of the economic conditions of his practice, but also to evade these conditions’ own partly imaginary status. For the market in Boucher’s time was not only an empirical reality but also a cultural construct.30 How the artist understood and processed its existence had to do not only with what it actually was and how it operated, but also with how it was imagined and—intensely—discussed in his time. The commercial imagination designates a particular kind of artistic responsiveness to the economic conditions discernible in Boucher’s works, a receptive mode of aesthetic functioning that, while mobilizing the faculty of imagination, produced specific material effects. This brings us back to Lundberg’s portrait. Although the portrait shuns the conception of the artist’s material engagement in pictorial production, it does allude to the importance of touch. Boucher’s manicured hand fondling his jabot, notwithstanding the distilled elegance of this gesture suggesting a distance from manual labor, points nonetheless to the importance of the hand as such, and through it, to what I call Boucher’s tact.

Boucher’s practice inscribes itself in this commercial context—and in the broader realm of commercial modernity—more deeply than has been realized.31 The commercial sphere has been acknowledged as one of the key components of early modern artistic culture.32 These new commercial establishments were not simply responsible for the economic well-being of artists, nor was the artistic market as such merely the site where financial fortunes of artists were made. Linked to collectors and patrons, these new institutions and the discourse they generated contributed to the social life of art, if in a circumscribed sense, by shaping the private—individual or collective—modes of its experience.33 The commercial sphere has been acknowledged as one of the key components of early modern artistic culture.

Modern literature, the responsiveness of his practice to the demands of the market has also been recorded largely, if not exclusively, in terms of financial gain.34 Scholars have noted how successful and prosperous the artist became as a result of his commercial savvy.35 We know for a fact that Boucher left a considerable fortune after his death, amounting to about 150,000 livres, more than half of which was obtained from the sale of his collection of art and curiosities.36 Boucher’s financial success is important—it is essential to have the exact sense of his wealth—but the commitment of his practice to the commercial and artistic context cannot be assessed in purely economic terms; it had other aesthetic and symbolic implications. As many social and cultural historians have argued, the growing importance of the commercial sphere in the eighteenth century had an impact not only on the life and material comfort of society but also on how society, and individuals, including artists, came to understand and imagine themselves.37 Coming to terms with the market was not solely a modern notion, but also a modern condition. As well as recognizing the role of the market in the formation of artistic identity, the appreciation of Boucher’s method as an aesthetic opportunity—and challenge—for the artists meant to reconceptualize their practices and to reimagine themselves. Boucher took this opportunity, and challenge, seriously. As Katie Scott has demonstrated, his creative involvement in the print trade was crucial for securing the artist’s reputation, exemplifying the key role of the market in the formation of artistic identity. I consider, more broadly, how the market informed the artist’s work in different mediums and how his multifarious practices, underpinned as they were by an economic self-awareness, contributed to the formation of Boucher’s artistic personality.

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BOUCHER’S TACT

refers not only to the sensory capacity of the whole body, but specifically to the inside surface of one’s fingers, “the true organ of touch.” (This is, we may note, precisely what Lundberg’s portrait evokes in representing the painter’s fingers grasping the lace of his jabot.) At the same time, “tact” was used also in another, figurative sense in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We find its briefest definition in the 1762 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*: "To have the feel that is keen, reliable, which is to say to judge keenly, reliably in the matter of taste." In this definition, tact amounted to a capacity for discernment that had moral, social, and aesthetic connotations. In his *Système de la Nature*, Baron d’Holbach spoke of the “moral tact” as a capacity for distinguishing between good and reprehensible acts, a capacity that, as he argued, was acquired, though it might seem innate. In a social context “tact” was often used to describe an ability to intuit or foresee. This is the meaning that informed the word’s common modern usage as referring to polite or pleasing behavior. As such, the notion of tact was caught up with a certain bodily skill, describing a mode of existence in the social arena that was fortuitous, appreciated by others, and also beneficial for the one who was tactful. Formally, in aesthetic terms, “tact” was often used as an equivalent to “taste,” something that may be developed through practice rather than learned from rules, or a matter of intuition rather than learning. Didot referred to it on many occasions, for example, when he scolded Baudouin, a genre painter and Boucher’s son-in-law, in his Salon of 1796 for his lack of it. Drawing on aspects of its eighteenth-century usage, I suggest a simultaneously broader and more specific notion of tact as an adaptive aesthetic conduct, a method (a tactic) of artistic accommodation to the demands of the other. In late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century manuals of honnêteté, the capacity to be accommodating vis-à-vis the needs and wishes of others was considered to be the most essential asset of a gentleman. As the renowned writer on honnêteté, Chevalier de Méré put it: “In order to become and be known as an honnête homme, the most important factor, in my view, is to discern in all things the best means of pleasing others, and to be able to put them into practice.” “Anyone who knows how to be accommodating can confidently hope to be pleasing,” agreed an author of another manual, Nicolas Faret. In order to acquire the skill of compliance one had to master the art of decoding hidden messages and unexplained desires, that is, to develop an almost magical capacity to “get inside the other.” “One has to pay attention to everything that happens in the hearts and the minds of the people one entertains,” explained Méré, “and to grow accustomed to divining their feelings and thoughts from almost imperceptible signs. This ability, which is dark and difficult for those who are not practiced in it, gradually becomes clearer and in the end easy.” The acquisition of such skill is like learning a foreign language, which one can master through love and study. But it is also comparable to sorcery; “for it instructs us in divination, which is how we discover a great many things that otherwise we would never know and that could serve us very well. . . . It requires that we penetrate people’s unspoken thoughts and, very often, their most closely guarded secrets.” Key for the acquisition of this magic skill were two strategies. The first was *souplesse* (suppleness, or adaptive flexibility of manner), for “the person . . . of an honnête homme . . . must transform itself as the occasion warrants.” The second, *insoumission*, was also of strategic importance according to many writers concerned with the ideal of honnêteté. In Mérid’s understanding, it amounted to the capacity to “work subtly beneath the surface of the other,” a term with physical and psychological resonances.
after his own painting to serve as a modello for his etching (fig. 1.2). Boucher used Watteau's original, but before he proceeded to etch it, he apparently retouched the sheet, which had been slightly damaged by incisions Watteau had made in order to transfer his work onto the copperplate. (Note in figure 1.5 the changes made in the areas around the mouth and eyes of the actor.) Moreover, the fidelity with which Boucher reproduced every aspect of the original drawing and the exact correspondence between the size of his etching and Watteau's own work, handling it daily, and, given the number and quality of the sheets he produced, and the pay of 24 livres per day he received (a reasonable wage in terms of the pay of 24 livres per day he received (a reasonable income), he was unlikely to have been doing much else.) For roughly five years, Boucher's artistic activity consisted, literally, of ”working subtly beneath the surface of the other,” the process of etching used by him encouraging such peculiar morphological intimacy. One aspect of etching that distinguished it from other reproductive techniques was its subtly deftness of the still young and relatively inexperienced artist with the etching needle. A comparison of Boucher's efficacy and skill in adapting himself to his task, Pierre Jean Mariette noted that "his light and lively touch seems to have been made for this job." Indeed, careful examination of Boucher's sheets reveals ample evidence of the deftness of the still young and relatively inexperienced artist with the etching needle. A comparison of Boucher's full-page etching of the Bust of a Woman under the Hood of Her Mantle with Watteau's original drawing of it (figs. 1.10 and 1.11) reveals the subtlety of the younger artist's treatment. With great delicacy Boucher translated Watteau's masterful handling of light on the woman's skin into a skein of traces wrapped around her face, including dark spots that in the hands of a...

